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FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER

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THE WEB

A NOVEL

BY

FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER

NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1919

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TO
MY SMALL SON
FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER, Jr.
THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY
DEDICATED

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CHAPTER I

"MR. HOFFMAN," said the man across the table, "you are expected to carry out whatever instructions may be given you, to the letter. Are you ready to do so?"

Bob Hoffman hesitated for the fraction of a second, then nodded.

"I am ready," he replied. "What are the instructions?"

"You will communicate, at once, without the least delay, any military information of which you may become possessed, to the German secret service authorities." The speaker bent upon the man before him a pair of intensely brilliant grey eyes.

He was a short, thickset man, somewhat bald, with a closely cropped grey moustache that accentuated, rather than hid, the firm, determined lines of his mouth and chin. He spoke slowly, deliberately, as one possessing authority, regarding the young man opposite him with grave imperturbability.

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The latter, tall, slender, yet of muscular build, met his companion's gaze without betraying the least emotion. He was a handsome man, clean-shaven, with an indefinable something about his lean square jaws that suggested the American.

"In what way am I to obtain the military information of which you speak?" he presently asked.

"I will tell you. You are, I believe, well acquainted with Vice Admiral Lord Brooke, of the Admiralty Naval Staff?"

"Lord Brooke!" This time the young man was shaken out of his composure. "Of course I am. He is my brother-in-law. He married my sister."

"Precisely. And you are a frequent visitor at his house!"

"I am."

"Very well. Lord Brooke is given to talking, at times. He will be indiscreet. He will occasionally let fall information of the greatest value. That information you will make use of, as I have indicated."

"But—my own brother-in-law!" Hoffman exclaimed, with troubled eyes.

"I should perhaps have informed you," remarked his companion, "that it is because of your relationship to Lord Brooke that you

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have been selected for the work in hand."

The young man mastered his hesitation with an effort.

"How am I to convey the secrets of which you speak to the German authorities?" he asked.

His companion shrugged his shoulders.

"That information will be furnished you by those you will meet upon the Continent."

"Upon the Continent?" Hoffman asked, surprised.

"Yes. You will proceed to Rotterdam in the morning, and call upon the German consul there. Explain to him just what you propose to do. He will instruct you as to your future movements."

"I see." The young American tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace, and rose. He seemed uneasy, uncertain of his ground.

"To take advantage of Lord Brooke's friendship, of his relationship to me," he remarked, coldly, "will be rather a shabby trick."

"Please remember," replied his companion quickly, " that you have sworn to carry out your orders, without questioning them. Vast interests are at stake. Everything depends upon your obedience, your devotion. I realize that the part you are called upon to play is distasteful to you. It would be distasteful to any

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man of honor. But the interests involved are too great, too important, to admit of any hesitation. You must remember your oath, and obey blindly. Do you understand?" In the gravity with which the older man invested his words there was a note almost of menace.

"Further," he continued, "I feel that I should point out to you that the smallest error on your part is almost certain to cost you your life. Treachery *we* will never forgive—mistakes will be no less promptly punished by our enemies. Do I make myself clear?"

Hoffman nodded gravely, with a sudden realization of the dangers of the course upon which his blind love of adventure had embarked him. The information just imparted to him had been so startling, so unexpected, that his brain whirled.

"Before you go," his companion remarked, "you will give me your thumb-prints." He took a small inked pad and some paper from one of the drawers of the table and pushed them toward Hoffman. "It is a necessary precaution, and may prove valuable to you, in case you have occasion to communicate with us at this end. Sign any such communications with the impression of your right thumb, but write nothing unless absolutely necessary. In work of this sort, verbal messages are the only safe ones." He

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folded the sheet upon which Hoffman had left the print of his thumbs, and placed it in his pocket. "Do not forget that, in England, you will be known, not by name, but by the number 424. Fix this number carefully in your mind. In the mission upon which you are embarking, there can be no mistakes, no failures. Your wits must be keen, your nerves of steel. For the rest, obey your instructions implicitly, and without question. I think that is all." He rose, and went toward the door. "Permit me to wish you good-day."

Hoffman left the room, his brain in a tumult. During the six weeks he had spent in London, he had grumbled unceasingly, because nothing had happened. Now, at the beginning of the seventh he felt that he had small reason to complain on that score.

Six weeks before, he had arrived in England, with a firm determination to proceed at once to the front, and from there write a series of articles about the war for one of the magazines, which articles, by reason of their brilliancy, their truth, would make him famous. And instead of going to the front, he had been obliged to sit idly about London, fuming and fussing, because his requests to the war office for permission to visit the trenches had been met with polite but none the less definite refusals.

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He had supposed that, coming to London as the brother-in-law of Lord Brooke, he would at once be permitted to proceed to the firing-line, but he found himself as far removed from the goal of his literary ambitions, now that he was in the English capital, as he had been in New York. The guns, the men, the fighting, along the Yser, the Aisne, seemed, if anything, even more remote, now that he was a scant hundred miles away from them, than they had seemed when separated from him by the full width of the Atlantic. England, it appeared, had no use for the free-lance correspondent. Lord Kitchener wanted no literary deadwood in the trenches, no leaks, however innocent they might appear, through which news of Britain's vast preparations might reach the enemy. As a result, Hoffman had been reduced to such uninspiring pursuits as reading the bulletin boards, and drinking tea with the Brookes, two occupations very far removed from the great purpose which had brought him across the ocean. He longed to go to France, to Germany, to see actual fighting, to witness at first hand the terrific cataclysm that was rocking the foundations of the world. For six weeks nothing whatever had occurred, and then had begun the remarkable series of incidents which had culminated in the interview through which he had just passed.

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That very morning, he had been approached, in the lobby of his hotel, by a blond young man, whom he had met occasionally about the corridors, and to whom he had from time to time complained, concerning his inability to overcome the objections of the war office to correspondents at the front. The man, who claimed to be an American, exhaled a decidedly foreign atmosphere, in spite of his Anglo-Saxon name of Sedgwick. He came up, proposed a drink, and a little later suggested that Hoffman and he have luncheon together.

The latter, in a state of desperation, had consented. He was always ready to air his grievances, and had found Sedgwick a ready listener.

During the course of the meal, Sedgwick had exhibited a most amazing knowledge of his companion's personal affairs, of his hopes, his feelings regarding the war, the state of his finances, his friends both in England and in America, almost of his very thoughts. Then, when Hoffman's astonishment was at its height, he had suddenly announced that if the latter really wanted to go to the war zone, the matter might possibly be arranged.

"There is one way in which it might be accomplished," he had said, at length. "It is an oportunity that would not occur again in a lifetime."

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"I 'll take it," Hoffman laughed, without regarding the matter very seriously. "Anything to get out of my present situation and see some actual fighting. I 've almost decided to enlist—on either side, if it would result in my running this war to earth."

"The opportunity of which I speak," Sedgwick replied gravely, "is far from being a joke. On the contrary, it is likely to involve the greatest danger. Death would never be very far from your elbow."

"What of that? It is a chance any man must take. Plenty of Americans have already been killed, even in the Red Cross work. I 'd take my chances quick enough. What would I have to do?"

"I cannot tell you exactly. Someone else will have to do that. But this much I will say. Certain interests in this country find it necessary to send information, of a peculiar sort, to persons in Germany. These interests have investigated your affairs thoroughly, and they realize that there are reasons why you are peculiarly fitted for the work in hand. You are a neutral, a writer. You could pass back and forth, without exciting suspicion. You have courage, intelligence, a certain standing, passports, credentials of various sorts—in fact, you occupy an ideal position for undertaking the

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work. We believe you to be a man who would carry out his orders blindly, implicitly, without regard for the consequences; realizing that those consequences are in the hands of others, playing a game you could not understand. I regret that I cannot speak more frankly. Signify your willingness to accept my offer, and the matter will be explained to you in greater detail."

"Do you wish me to obtain information, to act, in other words, as a spy?" Hoffman asked, flushing.

The man shook his head.

"Not that, exactly. Rather to give information, than to obtain it. But I cannot go further into the matter, without violating my instructions. All I can say is, that an opportunity is offered you to render certain interests a great service. You can take advantage of this opportunity or not, as you please. We do not urge it upon you. But I must have your answer at once."

"If what I am to do involves nothing dishonorable," Hoffman replied, fearful lest this chance to reach the front might be snatched from him, "I will go."

"Very well. Suppose we see my superior at once. If you find anything in the undertaking that violates your sense of what is honorable, I

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advise you not to attempt it. You alone must be the judge."

An hour later, Hoffman was closeted with the grey-eyed man whose instructions he was now about to follow. The task this gentleman had outlined to him had been so bold, so amazing in its ramifications, that he listened to it in astonished silence. Only after he had given his consent, and sworn himself to absolute secrecy, did he realize the nature of the service in which he was now enrolled. The prospect of what was to come alternately pleased and terrified him. He returned to his hotel, not quite sure, as yet, whether he was in reality fully awake.

On his arrival, a letter was handed to him. He recognized Lady Brooke's crest, upon the seal. His sister suggested, quite informally, that he drop in that afternoon for tea.

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CHAPTER II

"BAD news!" exclaimed Alan Brooke, as he went up to his wife. "Good God! I should say so!"

"What is it, Alan?" asked Lady Brooke, a quick pallor replacing the color in her cheeks. "Not—Herbert?"

Her husband nodded, and flung himself into a chair. "Yes—Herbert."

Lady Brooke glanced across the table, and met the eyes of the young man who was seated opposite her, pretending to be interested in a book. He was a tall man, with clear grey eyes, and a smile, whimsical, yet determined, very like her own.

"Can Bob know?" she asked, turning to her husband.

Alan Brooke looked up quickly. The young man put down his book and rose.

"If you two want to be alone"—he began.

"Nonsense. Sit down, Bob. No reason why you should n't hear what I have to say to Nelly. It will all be in the papers, by morning, anyway. Cradock's squadron, in the Pacific, you know, has been defeated by the Germans. My

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younger brother, Herbert, was Lieutenant on the flagship, *Good Hope*. She was sunk, with all on board. I 've just come from the Admiralty."

Lady Brooke gave a sudden cry.

"Alan!" she gasped. "How awful."

The young man beside the table extended his hand to Lord Brooke, but he did not say anything at all. His handclasp, the look upon his face, fully expressed his feelings.

"God—what a day for England!" Lord Brooke exclaimed, rising, and beginning to stride up and down the room.

"I can't believe it," the young man said, at length. "I understood reinforcements had been sent—the battleship *Canopus*."

Lord Brooke turned with a look of interrogation.

"How did you know the *Canopus* had gone out?" he asked quickly.

"Why—you told him so yourself," interposed Lady Brooke. "I remember it distinctly. You need have no fears about Bob. He does n't talk."

"I have n't any fears about him, Nelly," observed Lord Brooke. "Not in the sense you mean, at least. But Bob is a writer, and it 's his business to tell the public anything he knows, or can find out, about the movements of our

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fleet. I need scarcely say, old chap," he continued, turning to the other, "that anything you may happen to learn, here"—he glanced about the splendidly furnished drawing-room—"is not to be given to the public."

Hoffman flushed, and straightened his shoulders.

"I quite understand," he replied, his mind going back to the instructions given him but a few hours before. Well, at least he had no intention of publishing anything he might learn.

Lord Brooke observed the young man's embarrassment, and hastened to relieve it. Going up to him, he threw his arm about his shoulders.

"Sorry, Bob," he exclaimed, with a smile. "This damned business has completely upset me. Think of Cradock, gone! And Herbert." He looked helplessly at his wife. "Who 's going to tell Patricia?"

Lady Brooke went up to him, her eyes heavy with tears.

"Let us go to her together," she said. "Patricia will be brave. Herbert died for his country. That is as you, as all of us, would have wished. And as *he* would have wished, too. You 'd better wait, Bob. Patricia will want to see you." A moment later she and her husband had left the room.

Hoffman tossed his cigar into the fire and

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began to stride up and down the hearth-rug. Patricia—he had almost forgotten her in the startling events of the day. And yet, Patricia Brooke had been almost as constantly in his thoughts, during the past few weeks, as his desire to go to the Continent, and that was saying a great deal.

Patricia was twenty-two, and considered a great beauty. Hoffman thought her so. In fact, he was half convinced that he was in love with her. He would have been fully convinced, had he dared, but so far no word or action on the girl's part had given courage to his convictions. She seemed far too deeply occupied, bringing in slackers, bolstering up the courage of the timid, living and breathing a vivid patriotism, to have time for such matters as love. At least so Hoffman thought. And now, her brother Herbert, whom he had never seen, but whom he well knew Patricia adored, had been taken from her. The agony that this loss would bring to the girl's heart lay close to his own.

Now, however, all was changed. He had embarked on strange waters. He hesitated to imagine what Patricia would think of him, could she have heard the instructions given him that morning—instructions that at any moment he might be called upon to carry out. The whole thing became horribly distasteful to him, and

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yet there were reasons why he must not draw back. He waited impatiently for his sister to return.

After what seemed to him an interminable time, someone came through the doorway behind him. Hoffman turned, thinking it to be Lady Brooke. It was Patricia.

The girl stood for a moment, silhouetted against the gold and green brocaded curtains that hung in the doorway. Her eyes, glowing with a fine fire, were quite free from the tears that Hoffman had expected to see in them. Even the pallor of her face was relieved by the glow from the log fire, the amber tints from the silk-shaded lamp. Her hair, somewhat disarranged, her defiant carriage, her detached expression, reminded him vaguely of a picture he had once seen of Joan of Arc. He bowed, unable to do more than utter her name—her first name, since his sister had, immediately on his arrival in London, made him one of the family.

She came toward him with a firm and confident step.

"How do you do, Bob?" she said, very quietly. "Nelly tells me you know about Herbert and—and the fleet." The disaster to the nation seemed to affect her even more than her personal loss.

"It—it is terrible," Hoffman murmured. "I

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did not know your brother, but I do know what he meant to you."

The girl sank into a chair.

"Herbert died as he would have wanted to die," she said, quietly. "It is a bad day for England. Someone has blundered."

"Admiral Cradock," Hoffman ventured.

"No. Not Cradock. He lived up to the traditions of the service. The fault is at the Admiralty. His ships were outclassed. His reinforcements were sent too late. That 's the trouble with us. We do everything too late. This war can't be muddled through. Our people ought to know that, by this time. Now we must have revenge. Admiral von Spee's squadron must be hunted out—destroyed."

"Like looking for a needle in a haystack," Hoffman observed.

"It will be found—and sunk," the girl replied. "Let us speak of something else. Have you received any encouragement from the War Office?"

"Not the least. They refuse to let me go to France—as a correspondent, at any rate. I might try the Red Cross, or enlist." He spoke rather lightly, and the girl observed it.

"I should think even that would be better than sitting about doing nothing." Her eyes sparkled. "A good many of your fellow-

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countrymen are driving ambulances in France. Some are in the Foreign Legion. I should think that either might give you the opportunity for seeing things first hand that you want."

The implied reproach in her words sent the blood to Hoffman's cheeks. He straightened his shoulders and his eyes met the girl's defiantly.

"I had hoped to write a series of articles for one of our magazines at home," he said. "I could not do that, I am afraid, if I were to enlist, or even to drive an ambulance, although you may be quite sure that I should prefer either to sitting about London doing nothing."

Patricia rose and went up to him.

"I did not mean to reproach you, Bob," she said, gently. "Forgive me, if what I have said has hurt you. I am so accustomed to speaking to our own young men in that way, that I quite forgot, for the moment, that you are a neutral."

Hoffman flushed at her words. He felt that he was very far from being a neutral. He was leaving London in the morning, but he could not tell her so. Absolute secrecy as to his movements, his plans, had been most rigidly demanded of him. He regarded his companion with a look of helpless annoyance.

"I know it." She put out her hand, and Hoffman took it eagerly.

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"If *you* thought for a moment, Pat, that I was a coward," he exclaimed, "it would break my heart." It was more perhaps than he intended to say, less than he would have liked to say. The momentary pause which followed his words was embarrassing. Then Patricia spoke.

"I know you are not a coward, Bob," she whispered. "Don't be angry with me. This has been such a terrible day." Her lips trembled, she sank into a chair and nervously lit a cigarette. Hoffman saw that the strain had begun to tell on her.

"Never mind about my affairs," he said. "They are not very important. It 's *you,* I 'm worried about, now. Alan and my sister had asked me to dinner, but, in the circumstances, I think I had better not stay. Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Nothing." She shook her head. "But I see no reason why you should not stay for dinner, as you had intended. You know how I loved my brother. Nelly has told you. But this is not a time for personal griefs. We are fighting, all of us, for an ideal. If we have to give one man in every ten, if every family in England wears mourning, we must still go on until we have won our fight."

Hoffman, undecided whether to go or stay, watched her eager face. A moment later the

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curtains before the doorway were thrust aside, and Lord and Lady Brooke came into the room. Patricia spoke at once of Bob's wish to leave.

"I have told him not to think of it," she concluded.

"Quite right," said Lord Brooke, quickly. "I insist upon your remaining, Bob. We can have a talk, after dinner. Will you?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," Hoffman replied, glancing at Patricia.

It seemed to him that she thanked him with her eyes.

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CHAPTER III

WHEN dinner was over, the two men retired to coffee and cigars in the library. Lord Brooke seemed able to talk of nothing but the disaster to the fleet.

"Think of it," he said. "Cradock and all the others, drowned like dogs. I can't believe it."

"I confess," said Hoffman, "that I cannot either. I understood, from what I have seen in the papers, that the flagship carried nine-inch guns. That should have given her the range of the Germans. Von Spee's vessels carried nothing above an eight."

"It is true," Lord Brooke replied, "that the *Good Hope* had nine-inch guns in her main battery, but there was nothing aboard any of the other ships of our squadron of larger calibre than six-inch. The two German cruisers, the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*, are able ships, and very fast. Our squadron must have been out-manœuvered, and battered to pieces by the enemy's eight-inch guns, without being able to bring their shorter range batteries into action. England has got to face the bitter truth. Our Pacific squadron has been defeated."

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Hoffman nodded. The instructions of the morning crowded into his brain. Lord Brooke, the man with the keen grey eyes had said, was at times apt to be indiscreet, to talk. He seemed on the point of doing so, now.

"I suppose you will send out a new squadron, and hunt down the enemy's vessels," Hoffman remarked, carelessly.

"Yes," his companion assented. "That must be our object, of course. But it is easier said than done. We have plenty of vessels available, older battle cruisers, of the *Inflexible*, the *Invincible* type, with both the guns and the speed to make short work of von Spee's squadron, but the problem is to find him. The chase may lead around the world. We know that the German admiral is off the coast of Chile, at present, but where will he be next week, the week after? Even without facilties for docking, for replenishing fuel, the enemy's ships are very fast. A stern chase, you know, is a long one. And after all, we have no knowledge as to which way they will go. They may turn north, and strike the San Francisco-Yokohama route. Or they may turn south, round the Horn, and be half-way to the African coast, before our squadron could reach the south Atlantic. What orders shall we give our commander—to find von Spee? I confess that, were I to put to sea

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with such instructions I should be at a loss to know what to do." The Englishman gazed into the fire, his ruddy face wrinkled in thought. Hoffman said nothing. The truth of what his companion had told him was self-evident.

"The worst thing of all," Lord Brooke went on, "would be to have the Germans separate. They would be wise to do so, for in that way they would be able to play havoc with our commerce at any number of widely separated points, and it would take months to hunt down each ship separately. The Naval Staff has been considering the problem all the afternoon, from every possible angle. I am tired out." He lay back in his chair, and puffed nervously at his cigar.

Again Hoffman hesitated to speak, although the opportunity was such a golden one. Lord Brooke, it appeared, wanted to talk, to confide his difficulties, his problems, to someone's ears. Hoffman emptied his demi-tasse.

"Did you arrive at any conclusion?" he asked, hating himself for the words.

"Yes. In a way. It has been decided to send out a fast battle-cruiser squadron under Vice Admiral Sir Frederick Sturdee. His flagship will be the *Inflexible*. He will set sail a week from tomorrow, to find von Spee."

Hoffman listened to the words in amazement. The importance of the information so carelessly

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confided to him was evident. The nature of the pursuing fleet, the name of the flagship, of the officer in command, the date of departure, were all in his hands. Priceless information indeed, to be flashed from Berlin, by devious stretches of cable and wireless, to the German squadron off the Chilean coast. Perhaps the result of this knowledge, on von Spee's part, would be an order for his vessels to scatter, the very action most feared by the British naval authorities. Hoffman fixed the words Lord Brooke had uttered clearly in his memory. When he reached the continent, he would have something of value to report.

A moment later, Lady Brooke and Patricia came in. Both seemed to have put the loss of Herbert Brooke out of their minds. Patricia was full of a tragedy that she had observed, earlier in the day, in one of the poorer sections of the city, not far from Whitechapel. She had been doing missionary work to aid the volunteer enlistments, addressing small gatherings of idle men, urging upon the slackers the dangers which threatened the empire.

A young man, who might have been a waiter, had paused for a moment, on the outskirts of the crowd. Under one arm he carried a cylindrical package, wrapped in newspaper. A chance word to one of the bystanders had re-

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vealed, by means of a slight accent, his Teutonic origin. Someone pointed to the package under his arm, and suggested that it might be a bomb. The man, frightened by the demonstration, started to run, dropping the package as he did so. One of the crowd picked it up, stripped off the wrappings and disclosed what appeared to be a metal cylinder, with a screw cap at one end. The bystanders, convinced that it was a bomb, rushed after the fellow with loud cries, caught him, and before the police could intervene he had been badly beaten. In fact, but for the arrival of the police, he would certainly have been killed. The metal cylinder, Patricia said in conclusion, turned out to be nothing but a somewhat battered vacuum bottle, containing hot coffee. She mentioned the matter to show how bitter the feeling was against spies and the like.

"If the crowd had had three minutes more, the man would have been torn to pieces," she said. "Yet, in spite of the terrible danger, it is well known that London is filled with German secret agents. Even the movements of the fleet, the crossing of transports, the location of training camps, aircraft defenses, munition works, are known, and reported in some mysterious way to the enemy. It is certain that there are several German wireless stations along the

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southeast coast, and news of the most intimate character, involving even the decisions of the Army and Navy staffs, is constantly being transmitted by means of them. No one knows how this news gets out, and yet it does. It 's scarcely safe to trust anyone, nowadays."

Hoffman felt the blood rising to his cheeks. How simple, after all, were the means of which the girl spoke. He glanced at Lord Brooke, wondering if Patricia's words would cause him to remember that he himself had, not ten minutes before, been guilty of the very sort of indiscretion of which his sister now complained. The nobleman, however, seemed singularly placid and unmoved. He puffed with contentment at his cigar. One might have supposed that his confidence of a few minutes before had passed completely from his mind.

And yet, Hoffman argued, his complacency arose, no doubt, from a firm belief that he had no cause to doubt the honesty and good faith of the members of his own family. It was a silent compliment that made the young man squirm. Only an amazing bit of knowledge, that he alone, of all those in the room possessed, served to bolster up his courage. He would go through with what he had undertaken, even if it cost him not only Patricia's friendship and respect, but his life. There were conditions, in

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the oath he had taken, that gave to his determination the strength of steel. Scarcely even to himself could he admit what those conditions were.

Patricia spoke again, her face flushed, her eyes shining.

"I would rather be cut to pieces with knives or thrown into boiling oil, than be a spy," she burst forth. "Nothing in the world could be more despicable."

"And yet," Lord Brooke remarked, after a moment's silence, "there are English spies, as well, my dear, and they risk their lives, just as those of the enemy do, a thousand times a day, in the service of their country."

This aspect of the case seemed not to have occurred to the girl. She turned to Lord Brooke with a look of chagrin.

"I 'm wrong, I suppose," she exclaimed. "Everything is fair, they say, in love and war. But I would rather serve my country in some other way."

"And yet," her brother went on, with a quiet smile, "I am sure, Patricia, that if you were to learn, tonight, that the German fleet had left Wilhelmshaven, to attack our transport service to France, you would not hesitate an instant, to deliver that information to the war office. In fact, I fancy, you would take a positive pleasure

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in doing so." He smiled, and patted his sister's hand. "Instead of condemning spies, I only wish we had a few more, as efficient, as unscrupulous, as daring, as those of the enemy. But let us talk of something else. These war discussions are becoming tiresome."

Hoffman, when the conversation turned to his unfulfilled desires to go to the front, found himself unable to join in the discussion. He was leaving in the morning, yet found his lips sealed. What would Patricia, what would they all think, when they learned of his departure? He determined to write to the girl, from Rotterdam, and give her some plausible explanation of his sudden disappearance. Forbidden, by his instructions, to speak in advance of his movements, there existed no reason, he argued, why he should not refer to them, in retrospect. A little later he took his leave, pleading as his excuse some letters that must be dispatched by the morning's post.

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CHAPTER IV

BOB HOFFMAN found no difficulty in effecting his passage to Rotterdam. His passports, his credentials, his luggage were examined with the usual care, but the journey, via Harwich and the Hook of Holland, was made pleasantly, and without interruption or incident of any sort. The boat was not very well filled; the passengers for the most part apparently Dutch merchants, Americans of various sorts, and a number of indescribable persons about whom Hoffman speculated vaguely, wondering just what their mission on the Continent might be. Spies, like himself perhaps, he thought, then dismissed the idea from his mind. He was travelling as a magazine writer, a war correspondent, and refused to think of himself in any other light. Certainly, he argued, he was not a spy, since he came to give information, not to obtain it.

In Rotterdam he proceeded at once to the Victoria Hotel, and having secured a room, and disposed of his luggage, set out for his interview with the German consul.

His thoughts were of Patricia, more than they

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were of the work before him. The girl had been so constantly in his life, during the past few weeks. He had seen her almost daily. Now that he could see her no longer, he realized, with a sinking heart, how much she meant to him, how barren the world would seem to him, without her.

It was in this frame of mind that he reached the entrance to the building that had been pointed out to him as the one he sought. He was by no means sure that he would find the consul in his office; the hour was late, the street lamps already glowed softly through the gathering darkness. He ascended the steps, and entered the door which led to the offices of the consulate.

A room of fair size was before him, about which, in chairs, sat a number of men and women, all apparently waiting to see the official he sought. Behind a high counter, on a stool, sat a young man, with bristling blond hair, and a pink and white complexion.

Hoffman advanced, and addressed him in German.

"I want to see the consul," he said.

The young man mechanically pushed a pad and pencil toward him.

"Your name and business, please," he replied.

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Hoffman wrote his name upon the pad. His business he could not describe, so he wrote the word "Personal." The blond young man tore the slip from the pad, and retired to an inner room, motioning to Hoffman to take a seat. Presently he came back again, but said nothing. Hoffman resigned himself to a long wait.

One by one the occupants of the outer room passed the barrier of the high desk, to return no more. After almost an hour, Hoffman's turn arrived. He followed the clerk into an inner office, plainly furnished, in which sat an elderly man, heavily bearded, ruddy, stout.

The latter glanced up, on Hoffman's entrance and spoke in English.

"Mr. Hoffman?" he interrogated. "What can I do for you?" His manner was neither cordial nor abrupt. He spoke almost mechanically, as though repeating a formula.

Hoffman took a chair without being asked, and fixed his gaze upon the face of the man before him.

"I am an American, a magazine writer," he said.

The consul nodded wearily.

"Yes?" he said, with a rising inflexion.

"I have come to make you a proposition."

If the consul's interest was aroused, he did not betray the fact. He merely nodded.

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"My sympathies," Hoffman went on, hurriedly, "are all with the Central Powers. I am of German descent. I think I am in a position to give you—your government—some valuable information."

"So?" The German's eyes betrayed a trifle more interest. "What sort of information?"

"My sister, in London, is married to Lord Brooke, who is connected with the Admiralty. From time to time I learn, through him, valuable secrets connected with the movements of the British fleet. These secrets I am ready to furnish to your government."

"Why?" The word came, dry and quick, like the snapping of a whip. Hoffman realized that his sincerity was in question.

"Because I need the money," he flashed back. "If I furnish information of value, I expect to be paid for it."

"Ah!" The consul breathed the word significantly. "What is the information you wish to sell?"

The trap was too palpable. Hoffman refused to be caught in it.

"When I have arranged, with the proper officials, for my price, I will disclose the information I have. Not otherwise."

The consul gave him a quick glance, then drew a sheet of paper toward him, and wrote a few

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