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THE MAN FROM THE CLOUDS

J. STORER CLOUSTON

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THE MAN FROM THE CLOUDS

BY

J. STORER CLOUSTON

AUTHOR OF "THE SPY IN BLACK,"
"THE LUNATIC AT LARGE," ETC.

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE MAN FROM THE CLOUDS

PART I

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THE MAN FROM THE CLOUDS

PART I

I

IN THE CLOUDS

"MY God," said Rutherford, "the cable has broken!"

In an instant I was craning over the side of the basket. Five hundred feet, 700 feet, 1000 feet, 2000 feet below us, the cruiser that had been our only link with the world of man was diminishing so swiftly that, as far as I remember, she had shrunk to the smallness of a tug and then vanished into the haze before I even answered him.

"Anything to be done?" I asked.

"Nothing," said he.

It had been growing steadily more misty even down near the water, and now as the released balloon shot up into an altitude of five, ten, and presently twelve thousand feet, everything in

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Heaven and earth disappeared except that white and clammy fog. By a simultaneous impulse he lit a cigarette and I a pipe, and I remember very plainly wondering whether he felt any touch of that self-conscious defiance of fate and deliberate intention to do the coolest thing possible, which I am free to confess I felt myself. Probably not; Rutherford was the real Navy and I but a zig-zag ringed R.N.V.R. amateur. Still, the spirit of the Navy is infectious and I made a fair attempt to keep his stout heart company.

"What *ought* to happen to a thing like this?" I enquired.

"If this wind holds we might conceivably make a landing somewhere—with extraordinary luck."

"On the other side?"

He nodded and I reflected.

It was towards the end of August, 1914. We were somewhere about the middle of the North Sea when the observation balloon was sent up, and I had persuaded Rutherford to take me up with him in the basket. Five minutes ago I had been telling myself I was the luckiest R.N.V.R. Sub-Lieutenant in the Navy; and then suddenly the appalling thing happened. I may not give away any naval secrets, but everybody knows, I presume, that towed balloons are sometimes used at sea, and it is pretty obvious that certain accidents are liable to happen to them. In this case the most obvious of all accidents happened; the

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cable snapped, and there we were heading, as far as I could judge, for the stars that twinkle over the German coast. At least, our aneroid showed that we were going upwards faster than any bird could rise, and the west wind was blowing straight for the mouth of the Elbe when we last felt it—for, of course, in a free balloon one ceases to feel wind altogether.

Neither of us spoke for some time, and then a thought struck me suddenly and I asked:

"Did you notice what o'clock it was when we broke loose?"

Rutherford nodded.

"I'm taking the time," said he, "and assuming the twenty knot breeze holds, we might risk a drop about six o'clock."

"A drop" meant jumping into space and trusting one's parachute to do its business properly. I felt a sudden tightening inside me as I thought of that dive into the void, but I asked calmly enough:

"And assuming the breeze doesn't hold?"

"Oh, it will hold all right; it will rise if anything," said he.

We had only been shipmates for a week (that being the extent of my nautical experience), but I had learned enough about Rutherford in that time to know that he was one of the most positive and self-confident men breathing. One had to make allowance for this; still, that is the kind of

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company one wants in an involuntary balloon expedition across the North Sea through a dense fog.

"And where are we likely to come down?" I enquired.

"We might make the German coast as far south as Borkum or one of the other islands, or we might land somewhere as far north as Holstein."

"Not Holland or Denmark?"

He shook his head positively. "No such luck."

Though this was a trifle depressing, it was comforting to feel that one was with a man who knew his way about the air so thoroughly. I looked at our map, judged the wind, and decided that he was probably right. The chances of fetching a neutral country seemed very slender. Curiously enough the chances of never reaching any country at all had passed out of my calculations for the moment. Rutherford was so perfectly assured.

"And what's the programme when we do land?" I asked.

"Well, we've got to get out of the place as quickly as possible. That's pretty evident."

"How?"

"You know the lingo, don't you?"

"Pretty well."

"Well enough not to be spotted as a foreigner?"

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"I almost think so."

"First thing I ever heard to the credit of the diplomatic service!" he laughed. "Well, you'll have to pitch a yarn of some kind if we fall in with any of the natives. Of course we'll try and avoid 'em if we can, and work across country either for Denmark or Holland by compass."

"Have you got a compass?" I asked.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, and for a few moments a frown settled on his bull dog face. Then it cleared again and he said, "After all we'll have to move about by night and the stars will do just as well."

He was never much of a talker and after this he fell absolutely silent and I was left to my thoughts. Though I had fortunately put on plenty of extra clothes for the ascent, I began to feel chilly up at that altitude enshrouded in that cold white mist, and I don't mind admitting that my thoughts gradually became a little more serious than (to be quite honest) they usually are. I hardly think Rutherford, with all his virtues, had much imagination. I have a good deal—a little too much at times—and several other possible endings to our voyage besides a safe landing and triumphant escape began to present themselves. Two especially I had to steel my thoughts against continually—a descent with a parachute that declined to open, whether on to German or

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any other soil, or else a splash and then a brief struggle in the cold North Sea. I am no great swimmer and it would be soon over.

And so the hours slowly passed; always the same mist and generally the same silence. Occasionally we talked a little, and then for a long space our voices would cease and there would be utter and absolute quiet,—not the smallest sound of any sort or kind. We had been silent for a long, long time and I had done quite as much thinking as was good for my nerves, when Rutherford suddenly exclaimed,

"We are over land!"

He was looking over the edge of the basket, and instantly I was staring into space on my side. There was certainly nothing to see but mist.

"I can smell land," said he, "and I heard something just now."

"At this height!" I exclaimed.

"We are down to well under six thousand feet," said he.

I wanted to be convinced, but this was more than I could believe.

"The smell must be devilish strong," I observed. "And I'm afraid I must have a cold in my head. Besides, it's only five-thirty."

As I have said, poor Rutherford was the most positive fellow in the world. He stuck to it that we were over land, but I managed to persuade him to wait a little longer to make sure. He

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leap from it too was the one thing that kept my spirits anyways up to the mark. The prospect of even the most desperate action was better than interminably facing that clammy void.

Though the chance of making land seemed to me infinitesimally remote by this time, yet in case I had such almost inconceivable luck, it was well to make some preparations for having a run for my money in an enemy country. I took off my uniform coat, transferring everything I wanted to keep from its pockets to those of my oilskin. I then put this on and buttoned it up, and of course I took off my cap.

And then I smoked another pipe and watched the aneroid and tried not to think at all, till with a start I realised we were considerably less than a thousand feet above—the land or the sea? Heaven knew which, but we were falling fast and there was no more time to lose. I hitched the parachute on to my leg, got on the edge of the basket, and then—well, I all but funked it. I remember my last thought was a horrible simile of a man jumping off a tree with a rope round his neck, and then somehow or other I forced myself to let go.

Concerning the next few seconds I can give no statistics, whether as to height or pace. I only know that when I first became conscious of anything, I was drifting like a snow flake down through the mist, and that I could fill several pages with my thoughts in the course of that drift.

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It seemed to me that there was hardly an incident in my life which didn't fly through my brain like a cinema being worked at lightning speed. Some of the most vivid incidents were the last three balls of the over in which I topped the century in the 'Varsity match, my interview with my poor dear uncle when I broke the news that I had to face the official receiver and chuck the diplomatic service, and the first night of "Bill's All Right" when I made my début on the stage. A brilliant career! And very swiftly reviewed, for just as I had reached the theatrical episodes, there was an extraordinary change in the light, and my thoughts very abruptly shifted from my past misdemeanours.

It had been evening when I dropped from the clouds, but the mist kept the light very white though rather dim. Now a sudden blackness seemed to rise up underneath my descending feet, and at the same moment the mist thinned out till I could see for a space all round below me. This space was green and almost before I realised what the greenness meant I was sitting in a field of clover.

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II

THE MAN ON THE SHORE

THE breeze that had been driving the balloon along high overhead was evidently an upper current only, for it was almost quite still in that clover field. What between the falling of evening and the thin mist, my vision was limited to a radius of about a quarter of a mile or so, but I can assure you I studied that visible space more intently than I have ever studied anything in my life. It seemed to be an almost flat country I had landed in, all cultivated but very bare. I was within fifty yards or so of a low rough stone wall, and on the further side of that lay a field of corn. On every other side other fields faded into the evening and the mist, and that was all there was to be seen. I saw no sign of a house, or of a tree, or of a hedgerow, and I heard not a sound but the cry of a distant sea bird.

In the gay days when I was attaché at Berlin I had acquired a fair general acquaintance with Germany, and I instantly put down the place I had landed in as some part of the flat wind-swept country not far from the North Sea coast. In

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fact the crying seagull suggested that the shore was fairly close at hand. This so exactly fitted in with our calculations that I made up my mind definitely and at once to start with it as a working hypothesis and behave accordingly.

But how precisely was one to behave accordingly? In which direction should I turn? What should I aim at? Should I look for a house or a native and trust to my German still being up to its old high water mark, or should I lie low for the night? I simply stood and wondered for some minutes, and then I decided on one prompt and immediate deed. The parachute must be hidden, so far as that countryside was capable of hiding anything.

I packed it up as neatly as I could, and then started for the low wall. My first steps on the firm ground with its soft mat of clover and grasses gave me an extraordinary sensation of pleasure. Merely to be alive and on the earth again seemed to leave nothing to wish for. Close to the wall a peewee rose suddenly from my feet and flapped off into the dusk with one melancholy cry after another. "Peewee! Peewee!" I shall never hear that sound without thinking of that lonesome misty field. I stopped and looked round me anxiously, but not a living thing besides had been disturbed, and presently I was stowing the parachute away in a bed of high rank grass and docken just under the wall.

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Then I stood still and listened again. Once more a distant sea bird cried and I decided to make for the sound on the chance of finding the coast line and getting at least one bearing. I followed the line of the wall, crossed another low wall and another field of thin rough grass, and then I realised that I was almost on the brink of the sea. The wash of the swell on rocks met my ear and the dull misty green of the land faded into the misty grey of wide waters.

I stepped over yet another of those low tumble-down walls and now I was on the crisp short grass that fringes coasts, with rocks before me and the sea quite visible about thirty feet below. So I had just made land and no more! Poor Rutherford; I guessed his fate at once.

A little aimlessly I set out to the left. Somehow or other I had got it into my head that I was nearer the Dutch than the Danish border and my idea was to head for a neutral country. The coast line swung inland round a cove and at the same time dipped sharply, and hardly had I turned to follow it when a figure seemed to spring up out of the dip.

Whether the man had been squatting down, or whether it was the slope of the ground that suddenly revealed him, I know not, but there he was not ten paces away. I could see that he wore an oilskin and sou'wester and judged him at once as a fisherman.

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"Good evening!" I cried genially in my best German. "It's a fine night!"

"Good evening!" said he, also in German and quite involuntarily it seemed, for the next instant he spoke again in a very different key, and *in English.*

"My God! Are you insane?" he said in a low intense voice and with a distinct trace of guttural accent. "Don't speak German here! Have you no other language? Don't you speak English?"

I don't know whether you could have literally knocked me down with a feather, but a stout feather would certainly have come pretty near doing it. I simply gaped at him.

Again he spoke; this time in German, but almost in a whisper.

"Do not speak German here so loudly! Do you not know any English?"

A dim perception of the almost incredible truth began to dawn on me and I did my best to grapple with the situation. I had to account for my astonished stare; that was the first thought that flashed through my head.

"Of course I speak English," I said, and by the favour of Heaven I found myself instinctively saying those words in the very accents of the German waiter in "Bill's All Right" (my first offence on the professional stage), "but I thought

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you were Hans Eckstein. I could hardly believe my own eyes!"

"Hans Eckstein? Who is he?" demanded my new acquaintance, and I was pleased to observe no suspicion in his voice, merely a little astonishment.

"A friend," I answered glibly, "one of us."

He looked at me for a moment, very narrowly, and in those seconds of silence I began to realise more exactly what must have happened. The upper current of air had been blowing *westwards* —not eastwards as the wind blew on the surface. The good land under my feet was assuredly not Germany; almost certainly it must be part of my own blessed native island, or why this insistence on my speaking English, rather than, say, Dutch or Danish? And then the man I was speaking to, what must he obviously be? There was only one answer possible.

I may add that I had the presence of mind not to stare blankly at him while I thought these thoughts. I let him do the staring while I fished my pipe out of my oilskin pocket and began to fill it.

"So!" he murmured, and I thought he seemed satisfied enough, especially as he asked with manifest curiosity but without any apparent suspicion in his voice, "And how did you get here?"

Yet when I looked up from my pipe-filling to answer him I could almost swear that he had

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done something to make his features less visible —pulled his sou'wester further down and sunk his chin into the high collar of his oilskin, it certainly seemed to me. As I had gathered a very insufficient impression of him before, this was a little provoking. Still, I told myself that our acquaintance was only beginning. How to ripen it —that was the problem. I tried the effect of merely winking and saying with a cool, knowing air:

"The usual way. Do you have to ask?"

He looked sharply up and down the rocks and out to sea and I saw instantly what was in his mind.

"Impossible! There was no signal. I have been looking out all the time," said he.

I merely laughed.

"How else do you think I could have come?"

"So!" he murmured again, and then he asked a curious question.

"Do you know if there are many sheep on this island?"

So I had landed on an island! That was the first and chief deduction I drew from this enquiry. The second was that the man's English must be a little weak. Obviously he meant something rather different from what he said.

"Sheep?" I said with a laugh. "No, my friend, I have something else to do than count sheep."

Again he looked at me for a moment, his face

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now almost completely hidden by the peak of his sou'wester. If by any chance he were still doubting me the best thing seemed to be a touch of candour and an appeal he could scarcely resist.

"See here," I said, lowering my voice, "I want to stop in this island to-night. In fact those are my orders. Now where can you find me a safe place?"

He lowered his voice too. In fact he seemed to reciprocate my confidence very satisfactorily.

"We must be very careful. I must see that the coast is clear first. Just you sit and wait here for ten minutes. I will be back."

He nodded at me to enforce his injunctions and added as he turned away,

"Keep sitting down. Mind that!"

I sat down, finished filling my pipe, lit it, and waited. And as I waited I frankly confess I fairly hugged myself. Never before was there such a bit of luck, thought I. That that vagabond balloon should actually bring its passenger back to his native land instead of dropping him in the sea or landing him in Germany was fortunate almost beyond belief, but that he should then stumble on a German spy and actually convince the man that he was a confederate and lead him straight into the net already spreading for him, surely showed that after a considerable run of ill luck (and, I must confess, ill guidance), the passenger had suddenly become Fortune's prime favourite.

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Several very eligible and commodious castles were constructed in the night air by that lonely shore as I sat and smoked.

And then I heard a cautious but distinct whistle, and up I jumped and looked all round me. There was no one to be seen, but the sound came from the right—the way I had come, and I set off through the thickening dusk in that direction. But the odd thing was that I walked considerably further than the sound of the whistle could have carried and never a sign of human being or of house did I see—nothing but that desolate grassy sea-board and the faintly gleaming waters.

I stopped and began to wonder, and then I heard the whistle again. It was still ahead of me, so on I walked and once more the same thing occurred. This time I paused for at least another ten minutes, but nobody appeared and nothing whatever happened. There I was, utterly alone once more, with the land growing black and the sea dim and not a sound now even from the sea gulls.

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III

ALONE AGAIN

THE man has suspected me!" I said to myself.

It was an unpleasant conclusion, but the more carefully I thought over every little circumstance the more certain I felt it was the true one. To begin with, there was the way in which he kept his face concealed after the first few sentences we exchanged. Then there was that curious question about the sheep. It must have been a password—I saw that now, and I could have kicked myself for not seeing it sooner. Of course I had no idea of the proper answer, but I might at least have replied with some equally cryptic sentence and tried to bluff him into thinking I was using a different code. As it was, I had made it perfectly obvious that I had missed the point absolutely.

Finally there was his conduct in slipping away and leaving me stranded like this. Surely it was the very last trick to play on an accomplice. In fact it settled the matter. But why then did he whistle—and, moreover, whistle twice?

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For a few minutes I was utterly puzzled, and then an explanation flashed upon me. He wished to lead me in this particular direction! And why? Evidently because he himself was living or hiding in the other. I tried to put myself in his shoes and think what I would do myself, and if I had had the wit to think of it, that would obviously be the soundest thing. So obvious did it seem to me that I decided to set to work on that assumption.

First of all I walked a little further to see if I could test this theory, and in a minute or two I saw dimly ahead of me houses near the beach. I stopped and thought again. Could it possibly be that this was the refuge he was providing and that he did not suspect me after all?

"In that case," I said to myself, "would any man in his senses use such a vague and misleading method of conducting a friend, especially when a mistake might be—and probably would be—fatal to his schemes? Obviously not!"

On the other hand, these houses fitted excellently into the theory that he wanted me to take shelter there simply because they were well removed from his own lair.

"And then what's the fellow doing himself all this time?" I thought. "Evidently scuttling back in the opposite direction!"

So back I turned and set out on a very cheerless and solitary walk. There was no sense of

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immediate action ahead now, no anticipation of any further excitement this night, and, the more I came to think of it, not one chance in a thousand of stumbling upon the man again even though I were really heading towards him.

As I walked along that dark shore, I tried to think out all the possibilities of the situation.

"Is the man living on this island?" (assuming it is an island, and as the sheep weren't real sheep it may not be a real island) I asked myself. "Or has he simply landed from a submarine or some other enemy craft, and by this time is hurrying off again?"

I recalled our conversation, especially his words when I said I had arrived in "the usual way." "Impossible! There was no signal. I have been looking out all the time," he had answered. Surely that implied he was living here on shore, and indeed his very presence alone by himself and his whole attitude and behaviour were consistent only with that theory.

"What conclusions has he come to about me?" was my next question, and as I debated this problem my spirits began to rise a little.

"Hang it, he must be puzzled!" I said to myself confidently, and I do think justly. "For supposing I were on his job in Germany and an entire stranger suddenly sprang up out of nowhere, hailed me in excellent English, and then (even if he didn't know the particular riddle I

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used as pass-word) conducted himself like a confederate, made no attempt to arrest me or interfere with me, and spoke German with a distinct English accent, what would I think?"

I debated the answer for some minutes and then it came to me involuntarily and inevitably.

"I'd be dashed if I'd know what to think! And that's just exactly the hole this fellow must be in. I may be a fellow Hun and I may be an enemy, and he has got to make up his mind which. So far I'm quite certain he hasn't enough evidence either way."

The obvious corollary to this was that he must be presented with evidence which would make him think me a fellow Hun. Of course this assumed that he would have some means of getting news of my doings and my movements and forming conclusions from what he heard. But I thought it a pretty safe assumption to make. Confederates the man must have, and he would certainly tell them of the mysterious stranger, and the whole gang as certainly would make it their business to learn everything about me.

"What would a fellow Hun do in my place?" I said to myself. "Knowing the breed as I do, he would certainly overdo the patriotic John Bull business, he would be a little too polite to everybody, and he would eat like a hog."

This then should be my rôle, and I may as well confess honestly that the last item appealed to me

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particularly. I kept on smoking till my head reeled in the hope of forgetting my hunger, but between pipes I felt ready to chew my oilskin. Of course I should also keep up a touch of the German waiter accent, and if this programme failed to lead either to my arrest or to my friend coming to my rescue, I felt that my reputation both as an ex-diplomatist and a rising young actor would be seriously tarnished.

And then all at once a light seemed to be extinguished in my brain. I ceased to be able to think any longer and my knees felt shaky as I walked. It was the reaction after what had really been a pretty long strain of one kind and another. Looking back, it seems now inevitable enough, but at the time I felt desperately ashamed of myself. Perhaps I might have been able to pull myself together had I chanced to fall in with that oilskinned figure again, but I thought at the moment I had become utterly useless and I felt inclined to throw myself down on the grass and go to sleep and forget everything. In fact I very soon should have, when I saw at last some farm buildings close ahead. They stood on the edge of a small cove and the ground dipped down to them so that they were not against the sky line, and I had nearly walked straight into the wall of an out-house before I saw a sign of them.

And then I remember rather hazily knocking

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at a door and presently finding myself in a low kitchen with a peat fire burning on an open hearth and what seemed to be dozens of people sitting round it. I probably counted each of them three or four times over.

They gave me a huge bowl of milk and a pile of oat cakes and cheese, and the one item of my programme I carried out faithfully was to eat like a famished animal. I believe I put some sort of an accent into the few words I murmured, but most of the time my mouth was too full for much conversation. I know that I never attempted any explanation of how I got there, and that night nobody asked me, and I certainly postponed the patriotic John Bull business.

When I finished my supper I felt better, but still a little dazed. There now seemed to be fewer in the family, but my eyes must still have been multiplying them for I thought there were three or four rather pretty girls, presumably daughters, with high pink cheeks, when there actually turned out next morning to be only two; and two poor idiots, presumably sons, with unpleasant stares and stubbly beards and open mouths, when daylight revealed only one. In fact the father of the household and his wife were the only people I counted accurately.

And then I remember being led to the barn, and seeing a vast pile of soft hay and throwing

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myself into the midst of it; and there my recollections of that day end. I actually had not even enquired into what part of the world I had dropped.

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IV

THE SUSPICIOUS STRANGER

THERE seem to be two distinct kinds of dreamers; to judge at least from their confessions next morning. There is the superior kind which dreams a condensed novel and remembers it distinctly to retail at breakfast, and there is the inferior kind which only carries away a vague impression of having vaguely striven to stride out and escape from some nebulous horror, or of trying to purchase a pound of golf balls at a counter which would persist in turning into a couple of parallel bars or a roll-top writing desk. Personally I belong to the inferior species, and I cannot even swear that I really had a dream at all that night. I only know that when I woke up at last I found that my oilskin was unbuttoned and thrown back, whereas I thought I had gone to sleep with it buttoned up; and that when I noticed this, I then began to have a confused memory of a dream wherein I was seized by some one or something and struggled violently to free myself.

I sat up in my bed of straw and looked round

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me. The sunshine was streaming through a small window and under the door, but the door was closed, the bar was very still and quite empty save for my own presence, and the crowing of a cock and the clucking of hens were at first the only sounds that reached me from outside. Then I became conscious of a soft and regular "swish," rising and falling constantly and perpetually, and I remembered the sea close at hand, and a shiver of gratitude ran through me to think how narrowly I had escaped having that heaving surface fathoms over my head.

I have often wished since that I had lain there for a little while and tried to remember the dream, and whether I had actually gone to sleep with my oilskin buttoned, while the circumstances, such as they were, were fresh in my memory. When I thought of them afterwards I could swear to nothing and finally concluded the whole thing was probably fancy.

But if by any chance it were not, then evidently *some one* had tried to search me in the night, and who would it be likely to be but my vanished acquaintance on the shore, or his confederates? And in that case one of them must have been lurking very close at hand. However, when I tried to piece my recollections together afterwards it was too late to make anything of them at all.

I only know for certain that I missed nothing from my pockets, and that as a matter of fact I

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had actually carried nothing in them that would have given me away—so far at least as I could judge.

These, as I say, were my subsequent reflections. What I did at the time was not to think about the matter any further, but jump up, open the barn door and walk out into the sunshine. It was now about ten o'clock on a flawless August morning, and not easily shall I forget the picture of that blue sea gently heaving far out to a bright horizon, and the semi-circle of white sand fringing the little cove, and the glimpse of green and smiling inland country, and the group of low grey farm buildings just out of reach of the wash of the waves. Whatever part of the world it might be, I felt entirely satisfied with it.

I stood for a few minutes gazing absently out to sea and rehearsing in my mind my plan of campaign. My voice, manners and conduct must be such that if by some stroke of luck I actually fell in with my friend of last night or one of his confederates they would assume I was a friend and at least give me a nod, wink, password, or something to test me—and I vowed I would overlook nothing suspicious this time.

If, however, as was unfortunately far more likely, I met mere honest folk, they would quickly spread the news that a suspicious stranger was in the neighbourhood, and surely the report would reach at least one of the gang (for I confidently

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assumed a gang), and they would make it their business to seek me out. Finally I decided I had no time to waste, for several reasons. Through the clucking hens I strolled across to the dwelling house and there in the kitchen I found the mother, one of the pink-cheeked daughters, and the idiot son. They set about getting me some breakfast, and a few minutes later in came the father and another son, a strapping fellow not in the least resembling the idiot, and shortly afterwards appeared the other daughter.

I gave them my proper name, Roger Merton, since it was just the sort of ultra English name which a disguised Hun would adopt, and I learned that theirs was Scollay:—Peter Scollay, the father, Mrs. Scollay, Peter, the younger, Maggie, and Jane; besides Jock, the idiot. I was excessively affable, and they were not openly cool, but I noticed with satisfaction that they were far from demonstrative, with the marked exception of Jock who burst into several very loud and friendly laughs on extremely small provocation. He was horrid to look at, but I could not help feeling rather friendly towards the only member of the household who exhibited a glimpse of geniality, even though I was doing my level best to chill them.

As for the others, Peter Scollay the senior was a big tawny-bearded fellow, undeniably handsome despite one small defect. His eyes were a

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trifle too hard and cautious, and in one of them was a distinct cast. Curiously enough, his wife also had a slight cast, and so it was not surprising to see a trace of this in Peter junior and his red-cheeked sisters. Jock, however, seemed to have been endowed with imbecility instead of a cast. Apart from him, they were all good-looking, despite the family defect; and they were all very reticent this morning. I seemed indeed to trace the father's wariness as well as the cast in each pair of eyes that furtively studied me.

"And your very beautiful island," I enquired, in guttural accents that would have made me flee for the police instantly, had I been in their shoes, "so pleasantly situated in the sea—what is its name?"

They looked a little astonished, as well they might, and then in dry accents the father replied, "Ransay."

"Ransay?" I repeated, and then all at once I realised where I was. Ransay was one of the northern isles of that not unknown archipelago which at the present moment it is safer to leave unnamed. Or perhaps for purposes of reference one may call it The Windy Isles. Somewhere in the same archipelago, twenty or thirty miles to the south'ard, was a particularly important naval base and I began to realise what I had stumbled up against.

In those early days of the war one heard a

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great many tales of spies and spying, but many of them were so palpably absurd and there was as yet such a total lack of evidence to support any one of them, that I—like a good many other people—felt sceptical of the whole thing. The distinguished General in German pay, the well known member of the Cabinet in hourly communication with the Kaiser, the group of German strategists working in the cellars of a West End London mansion, and all the rest of the early legends had made even the very moderately sensible extremely chary of believing anything we heard. But I thought very hard and seriously now. A real spy—seen and heard—actually living in the Isle of Ransay, in the back premises, so to speak, of that all important base, with Heaven only knew what means of the information concerning matters to the south'ard, and in immediate touch with any marauders who might tap gently at the back door on a dark night; here was something to sober even a bankrupt ex-light-comedian.

I kept my mouth very full while I thought these thoughts and conscientiously made the typical German chewing noise, and by the time my lips were cleared for action again a beaming smile enwreathed them.

"Do you have many ships which pass this way?" I enquired.

The question was a great success. Jock laughed

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with vacant glee and the rest of the family exchanged glances.

"No' very many," said Mr. Scollay warily.

Now I decided to give them the John Bull turn.

"No German ships I am sure!" I cried through a mouthful of porridge. "They are cowards! They will not venture *here*—no fears! They fear our brave sailors too much! Aha! We know that, eh?"

They agreed as coldly as I could wish. Evidently I was producing a thoroughly bad impression. At the same time nobody broke into whispered German, or made any comment that could conceivably be taken for a pass-word. I thought I would try giving them one myself.

"Are there many sheep in this island?" I asked.

Jock emitted another blast of genial laughter and Mr. Scollay as cautiously as ever replied,

"A good few."

But there was no sign of any secret understanding of my words, and reluctantly I began to come to the conclusion that neither my friend of last night nor any of his confederates were here. It is true that the position of the house fitted my theory, and that its lonely situation on the very edge of the sea was ideal, and quite possibly these people might know more than they ought, they might in fact be abettors of treason and con-

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cealers of traitors, but that they were not the principals seemed evident enough.

Still, in any event it seemed to me of prime importance to disseminate a report of a suspicious stranger as widely and quickly as possible, so I selected the middle of another mouthful as the moment of enquiring,

"This pretty farm, my friend, does it belong to you?"

"No," said my host, "the island a' belongs to Mr. Rendall."

"So!" said I. "And this Mr. Rendall, where does he live—in London?"

"Not him!" said Mr. Scollay, "he bides in Ransay."

I pricked up my ears at this, and my spy-hunt seemed suddenly a much more promising venture. Some of the difficulties of playing a lone hand had already become apparent. But with some one I could confide in, some one who would know everybody in the island and a good deal about them, and who could advise and abet me, it seemed heavy odds against my vanished friend evading me for long.

"I think perhaps I ought to pay my respects to Mr. Rendall," I said in a doubtful ruminating way, as though I were debating whether it were quite a safe move.

"You'll find him at home," was all the comment my host made.

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But now that there was a prospect of losing their suspicious visitor, the family all at once set about extracting some information regarding the manner of his arrival in their midst.

"You'll no have been long in Ransay?" began my hostess.

"Oh no, just a short time," I beamed.

"You'll not have come by the boat," pronounced my host.

"Not *the* boat, but surely I must have come by *a* boat!" I smiled. "I cannot swim from Aberdeen!"

I don't know exactly why I mentioned Aberdeen, but it seemed to have a distinctly sedative effect.

"You'll not be a dealer?" enquired my host.

Here was a simple solution thrust into my hand. For a moment I thought of confessing I actually was a dealer and had got too drunk last night to remember how I arrived. But then I feared the tale might sound too credible and the reports of a suspicious stranger be stifled at their birth.

"Well," I said, "I do deal in some things."

I could see that suspicion had revived and I thought it better to leave it at that, and be off. With a little difficulty I made my hosts take payment for my night's lodging, and then asked for directions to the laird's mansion.

"You'll no can miss it," said Mr. Scollay.

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"It's the big house. Just keep along the road and you'll see it afore you."

So off I set through this unknown isle, still hatless and buttoned up in my oilskin, but smoking a peculiarly soothing pipe and thoroughly enjoying my adventure. The prospect of an ally ahead was delightfully cheering.

"Provided Mr. Rendall isn't an utter ass, we ought to have these fellows sitting!" I said to myself.

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V

THE DOCTOR'S HOUSE

THE rough road from the shore kept gently mounting and I soon stood high enough to get a very good general idea of the island of Ransay. It was a green, low-lying, undulating fragment of the world, set that morning in a sea of sapphire blue, open to the horizon on the one hand and strewn with sister isles on the other. The Scollay's house stood near the northwest end, and beyond it there seemed to be little save sea-turf and rocks, but in the direction I was walking one small green farm followed another for what I guessed to be four or five miles, and from side to side perhaps a couple of miles or less. There was only one rise in the land that could be called a hill, and that only by courtesy; elsewhere nothing but green undulations with a small reedy loch or two tucked away in their gentle folds.

Far to the south'ard, on other isles, higher hills, brown and blue, broke the horizon, but apart from these one saw nothing but a green and blue plain lying beneath an immensity of white and blue

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sky. With sea birds hovering and crying and larks mounting and singing over this, and the sun shining, and a northwest breeze that tasted like dry champagne, and myriads of wild flowers, yellow, blue, white, red, pink, and purple, underfoot, I felt almost too light-hearted. In fact I actually started singing, and only stopped when I bethought me that it was a trifle inconsistent with the character of a man slinking about in fear of his life, looking for a fellow miscreant to befriend him.

But it was quite impossible not to feel elated. Now that I realised the limited size of the place and its open surface, it was obvious that no man could lurk there unknown to the inhabitants. He must live in a house and pass for one of themselves. It seemed then impossible to believe (especially with an ally in prospect) that a spy whom I had actually seen and talked with (and knew moreover to have a foreign accent) could escape my clutches. And, apart from patriotic motives, of what a lift that would give to my tarnished character!

"Let me recall the fellow carefully," said I to myself, "and get his face and voice well into my head against our next meeting."

I tried to reconstruct our first meeting exactly as it had happened, to see again that dark figure rise in my path, and look into the face beneath the sou'wester. I shall not say precisely that this

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endeavour shook my confidence, but it certainly made me realise that I should have to set to work very warily to trap the man, for the harder I tried to see in my mind's eye that face distinctly, the less distinct it grew. I could certainly swear to a moustache, and I felt pretty sure there was a beard as well, but not absolutely certain. He was of middle height, say between 5 feet 6, and 5 feet 10; but that was a fairly wide margin. In fact all I could positively swear to was that he was neither an obviously tall nor an obviously short man.

As to his build, he seemed thick-set and sturdy, but then who does not in an oilskin coat? It would take a very slight figure indeed to look slender in an oilskin. So here again I could only say that he was neither a remarkably stout man nor a remarkably thin man. And this was really all I could swear to in the matter of his outward appearance; though I told myself confidently enough that if I actually fell in with him again I should recognise him fast enough.

"He can't disguise his voice anyhow," I said to myself.

And then here again I began to realise a small difficulty; though nothing, it seemed to me very serious. After his first involuntary reply to me in German, the man had spoken in low, half-whispered tones. In ordinary conversation, especially if he were on his guard, he would speak

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quite differently. But could he eradicate his distinct touch of foreign accent? No; I thought decidedly that was beyond him.

I was so immersed in my thoughts that I had become quite oblivious to everything outside them. Beyond the fact that I had struck a hard macadamed road and was striding down it, I realised nothing else, till of a sudden I looked up and noticed a large house close before me, and at that I stopped dead and awoke from my reverie.

That it was Mr. Rendall's mansion I never doubted. I saw now that it was not a really big house, but it was large compared with the small farm houses, and its utterly bare situation and the way in which it was set on a slight rise in the ground made it seem obviously the "big hoose" I was looking for. But somehow or other at the sight of it my spirits were instantly damped. Indeed I never saw a chillier, less inviting looking habitation, or one that seemed to repel confidence in it more subtly.

The road ran straight at it and then curved round the low wall that bounded the domains. And these domains consisted of absolutely nothing more than a rough grass paddock with a short straight drive leading from an open and dilapidated iron gate in the wall just where the curve began. There was no ivy, or any sort of creeper on the walls, but, instead, a sort of grey-green

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damp hue, broken only by a very few staring windows. I passed through that dilapidated gate with no temptation at all to sing.

The drive was covered with an infamous species of large pebble, so uncomfortable to walk on that I chose the grass at the side and I only stepped on to this apology for gravel when I was quite close to the house; approaching the front of it, I may say, at an angle. My footsteps made a noise like a cart and horse, and instantly down went the blind of the nearest window of the ground floor.

I stopped dead instinctively and looked at this bleak mansion narrowly. At the angle from which I had approached the front, I could see the blind go down quite plainly, but it was impossible to get even a glimpse into the room behind it.

"What the devil!" I murmured.

And then I told myself that I was really getting too suspicious. It must be a lady's bed-room obviously. The ground floor near the front door seemed an odd place for such an apartment. Still, one never knows what a lady's fancy may be. In any case there was nothing to be achieved by standing there staring, so I resumed my resounding progress across the pebbles.

I was at the front door and just going to ring, when round the corner of the house, right ahead of me, appeared a gentleman, and my spirits fell

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still further. I can't exactly say that his was a face I disliked, but it was decidedly not one I took to. He had eyes set somewhat close together, a well trimmed short black beard, and an expression in which I seemed to read impudence and certainly read suspicion. He stopped at the sight of me and looked me up and down at least as curiously as I studied him. Only I trust I conducted my inspection less obviously.

"Mr. Rendall?" I enquired, and though I had come here meaning to confide in him, I found myself instinctively putting in a touch of accent; not with a wet brush as I did for the Scollays' benefit, still I threw in a little, and, as I say, quite without intending it.

Curiously enough I saw his face clear the moment I spoke.

"Oh," said he, with an air of relief, "it's the doctor you're wanting, is it? Well, he's at home. Come in."

So the laird was a doctor? Of which sort, I wondered; medical, theological, or what?

"I'm Mr. O'Brien," added my new acquaintance as he opened the front door for me. "You're quite sure it's not me you're wanting?"

I had noticed more than a trace of accent in his own voice when he spoke, and there was no doubt now what it was; a very palpable Irish brogue. As he asked this question he looked at me with a curious mixture of humour and defiance. It

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