

CHAPTER ONE

MY FIRST impression was that the stranger's eyes were of an unusually light blue. They met mine for several blank seconds, vacant, unmistakably scared. Startled and innocently naughty, they half reminded me of an incident I couldn't quite place; something which had happened a long time ago, to do with the upper fourth form classroom. They were the eyes of a schoolboy surprised in the act of breaking one of the rules. Not that I had caught him, apparently, at anything except his own thoughts: perhaps he imagined I could read them. At any rate, he seemed not to have heard or seen me cross the compartment from my corner to his own, for he started violently at the sound of my voice; so violently, indeed, that his nervous recoil hit me like a repercussion. Instinctively I took a pace backwards.

It was exactly as though we had collided with each other bodily in the street. We were both confused, both ready to be apologetic. Smiling, anxious to reassure him, I repeated my question:

"I wonder, sir, if you could let me have a match?"

Even now, he didn't answer at once. He appeared to be engaged in some sort of rapid mental calculation, while his fingers, nervously active, sketched a number of flurried gestures round his waistcoat. For all they conveyed, he might equally have been going to undress, to draw a revolver, or merely to make sure that I hadn't stolen his money. Then the moment of agitation passed from his gaze like a little cloud, leaving a clear blue sky. At last he had understood what it was that I wanted:

"Yes, yes. Er—certainly. Of course."

As he spoke he touched his left temple delicately with his finger-tips, coughed and suddenly smiled. His smile had great charm.

"Certainly," he repeated. "With pleasure."

Delicately, with finger and thumb, he fished in the waistcoat-pocket of his expensive-looking soft grey suit, extracted a gold spirit-lighter. His hands were white, small and beautifully manicured.

I offered him my cigarettes.

"Er—thank you. Thank you."

"After you, sir."

"No, no. Please."

The tiny flame of the lighter flickered between us, as perishable as the atmosphere which our exaggerated politeness had created. The merest breath would have extinguished the one, the least incautious gesture or word would have destroyed the other. The cigarettes were both lighted now. We sat back in our respective places. The stranger was still doubtful of me. He was wondering whether he hadn't gone too far, delivered himself to a bore or a crook. His timid soul was eager to retire. I, on my side, had nothing to read. I foresaw a journey of utter silence, lasting seven or eight hours. I was determined to talk.

"Do you know what time we arrive at the frontier?"

Looking back on the conversation, this question does not seem to me to have been particularly unusual. It is true that I had no interest in the answer; I wanted merely to ask something which might start us chatting, and which wasn't, at the same time, either inquisitive or impertinent. Its effect on the stranger was remarkable. I had certainly succeeded in arousing his interest. He gave me a long, odd glance, and his features seemed to stiffen a little. It was the glance of a poker-player who guesses suddenly that his opponent holds a straight flush and that he had better be careful. At length he answered, speaking slowly and with caution:

"I'm afraid I couldn't tell you exactly. In about an hour's time, I believe."

His glance, now vacant for a moment, was clouded again. An unpleasant thought seemed to tease him like a wasp; he moved his head slightly to avoid it. Then he added, with surprising petulance:

"All these frontiers . . . such a horrible nuisance."

I wasn't quite sure how to take this. The thought crossed my mind that he was perhaps some kind of mild internationalist; a member of the League of Nations Union. I ventured encouragingly:

"They ought to be done away with."

"I quite agree with you. They ought, indeed."

There was no mistaking his warmth. He had a large blunt fleshy nose and a chin which seemed to have slipped sideways. It was like a broken concertina. When he spoke, it jerked crooked in the most curious fashion and a deep cleft dimple like a wound surprisingly appeared in the side of it. Above his ripe red cheeks, his forehead was sculpturally white, like marble. A queerly cut fringe of dark grey hair lay across it, compact, thick and heavy. After a moment's examination, I realized, with extreme interest, that he was wearing a wig.

"Particularly," I followed up my success, "all these red-tape formalities; the passport examination, and so forth."

But no. This wasn't right. I saw at once from his expression that I'd somehow managed to strike a new, disturbing note. We were speaking similar but distinct languages. This time, however, the stranger's reaction was not mistrust. He asked, with a puzzling air of frankness and unconcealed curiosity:

"Have you ever had trouble here yourself?"

It wasn't so much the question which I found odd, as the tone in which he asked it. I smiled to hide my mystification.

"Oh no. Quite the reverse. Often they don't bother to open anything; and as for your passport, they hardly look at it."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that."

He must have seen from my face what I was thinking, for he added hastily: "It may seem absurd of me, but I do so hate being fussed and bothered."

"Of course. I quite understand."

I grinned, for I had just arrived at a satisfactory explanation of his behaviour. The old boy was engaged in a little innocent private smuggling. Probably a piece of silk for his wife or a box of cigars for a friend. And now, of course, he was beginning to feel scared. Certainly he looked prosperous enough to pay any amount of duty. The rich have strange pleasures.