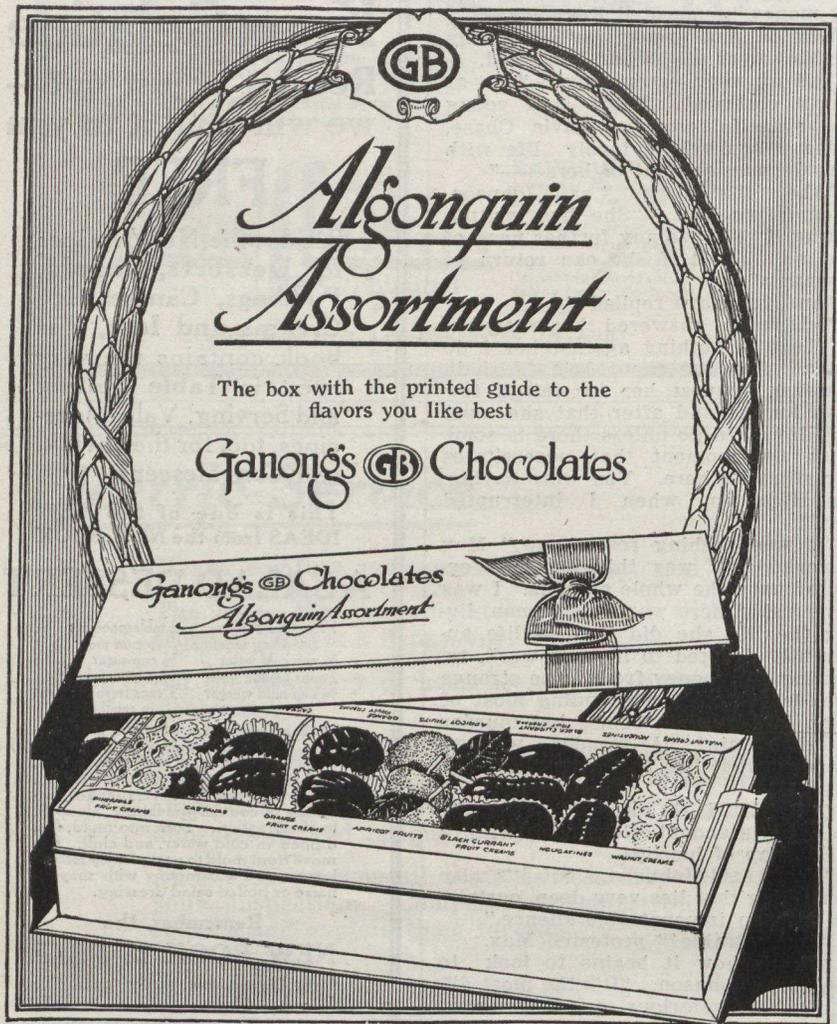


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the editor the gist of his conversation with Superintendents Johnson and Reynolds at Scotland Yard.

"It's a very strange business," remarked Beaumont, after Max had concluded what he had to say. "What was she paid that money for?" he asked. "That's the heart of the mystery."

One of the secrets of Beaumont's success both as a journalist and as managing editor of a great newspaper was the ability, the directness with which he seized and summed up a situation—the quality which is tersely described as grasp.

"When you pluck that out," he continued, "all the rest will, I fancy, follow. But it was not that case of which I wanted to talk to you, Max. It's about a much bigger thing—it's about the new gun. After your telling me that it was Captain Hollander who had mentioned the rumor that the Germans had got the plans of it, I said to you that I should make further inquiries. I have made them, and the result is that I'm afraid there is some truth in the report. From a secret source in Berlin I heard this afternoon in a cypher telegram that some drawings of the gun—just what they are, is not stated—are in the hands of the German Army Staff."

"DID you get any hint of the manner in which they were acquired by the Germans?"

"There is nothing about it in the message, Max. That's another question. The serious thing is that we must reckon on their knowing the mechanism of the gun, and they will take speedy advantage of it—we may be sure of that, for they don't let the grass grow under their feet. And as you are well aware, Max, the tension between us and Germany becomes more and more strained, more menacing day by day. We can no longer plume ourselves on having a superior weapon. Of course, nothing may happen; secrets something like this have been stolen before, there has been an outcry—and then all is quiet again. But I dislike the situation; it might become critical at any moment."

Max bowed assent, but kept silence, waiting for the editor to speak his mind fully; he knew Beaumont had not done so yet.

"It may be necessary for a member of the staff to go to Germany for the paper," Beaumont resumed, "and if the necessity does arise, you, Max, are the man. I must ask you to hold yourself in readiness to go to Germany at a moment's notice."

"That is all right," said Max, quietly. "I suppose I may continue working on this murder case for the present?"

"Certainly. But get ready for the other thing, Max, my boy. You may not have to go, but it's very much on the cards that you will—you understand."

"Perfectly," Max replied, and after some further talk he retired from Beaumont's room, pondering what he had just been told. Were the apprehensions of the editor likely to be realized? It might be so, and then he would have to go to Germany—his duty to his paper made it imperative. But then what about Peggy Willoughby, and the quest she had asked him to undertake? For the time being, however, he put these agitating and distracting questions aside, and devoted himself to his work—which consisted in describing the latest phase of the "Train Murder Mystery."

"It's the completest mystery there ever was," he said to himself, "but I suppose that it will be solved some day."

He wrote several pages of "copy," and read them over carefully before sending them in to the chief sub-editor. Then the thought of what the editor had said with respect to his going to Germany; he felt that, while in other circumstances he would have liked nothing better, he would prefer to continue the investigation of the murder, for his interest in it rather grew than diminished. Then there was Peggy!

About ten o'clock he rang up Peggy Willoughby, and learned that she was out for the evening.

"Please tell her I'll ring her up to-

morrow morning," he said to the voice at the other end of the line.

CHAPTER XV.

A Walk in Hyde Park.

THE routine of Max Hamilton's life while he was in London was such that he went to bed late very frequently, as the exigencies of journalism demanded, and did not get up early in the morning as a rule; when he was acting for his paper in the country or abroad, he had to divide his hours between working and sleeping as best met the requirements of the subject he had in hand, without any idea of pleasing or sparing himself, and therefore could follow no fixed rule.

On reaching his rooms after leaving the office of "The Day" he had a light supper which had been prepared for him by his manservant, and almost immediately afterwards retired—but not, as it turned out, to sleep. As a general thing his eyes closed in slumber as soon as his head was on his pillow, but that night hours passed before the blessing of sleep descended on him, for his mind was greatly agitated. First, there was the murder of Sylvia Chase, the growing mystery of which interested him more and more profoundly, and second, there was what Beaumont, his editor, had said with reference to Germany and his possible trip to that land.

Max, however, fell asleep at last, but with the result that when next morning Peggy Willoughby rang him up on the telephone, as he had requested her to do on the preceding evening, he was not awake. His man, however, aroused him, and he answered the 'phone, but somewhat tardily, a fact on which Peggy did not fail to comment in a teasing manner, until she had heard that he had had a "bad night."

"Why a bad night, Max?" she asked, and then without waiting for his answer, inquired, "Had it something to do with your wanting me to ring you up this morning?"

"In a way, yes," Max replied. "I wish to see you very much."

"In connection with poor Sylvia?" asked Peggy.

"To some extent."

"You are rather vague and a little mysterious, Max."

"Well, I'd rather not talk about it over the 'phone, Peggy. Can you see me this morning, say about twelve?"

"Can't you give me a hint what it's about? I am curious to know if there's anything important."

"It is important—or rather it may be so, Peggy."

"I see you won't discuss it now, Max. Yes; I'll meet you about noon at the Army and Navy Stores."

Max agreed with delight.

So it was arranged, in this apparently trivial way; how vitally significant their meeting was to be to both of them—with what far-reaching effect on their lives—neither of them foresaw. Fate is thus ever at work on the Looms of Life, but not often can be seen by mortal, short-sighted eyes the flashing of the threads, and still less often the patterns that are being woven by the flying shuttles, until the webs are all or nearly all spun.

Peggy having "fixed things up," as she would have expressed it, rang off. Max looked at his letters, none of which interested him particularly, and then glanced at the papers—every London journal and one or two of the provincial were represented on the table in his sitting room. Naturally he devoted most attention to "The Day," reading first the "copy" he had written on the "Train Murder Mystery" on the preceding night.

The mystery still occupied a prominent position in all these newspapers—in some of them the most prominent still—but in Max's own journal the first place had been given not to it, but to a comparatively short article consisting of four paragraphs, in treble-leaded type, headed in bold letters:

**"GREAT BRITAIN AND GERMANY
STARTLING RUMOUR.
REPORTED THEFT OF PLANS OF
THE NEW GUN."**

During the last day or two, the article stated, there had been current