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J. D. Beresford and Kenneth Richmond, *Howard and Son*, 1916

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HOWARD & SON

BY

J.D. BERESFORD

&

KENNETH RICHMOND.

1.

HOWARD & SON.

(THE SCENE IS SIR ANTHONY HOWARD'S PRIVATE OFFICE IN AUSTIN FRIARS. SOLID, COMFORTABLE FURNITURE: A 'PEDESTAL' WRITING DESK L. WITH TELEPHONE EXTENSION INSTRUMENT ETC. ANOTHER R. UP STAGE, SWEEPED BARE OF ITS PARAPHERNALIA – SOME MEMBER OF THE FIRM IS NOT NOW WORKING IN THE OFFICE. A CLIENT'S EASY CHAIR L.C. NEAR TO THE FORMER TABLE. ONLY ONE ENTRANCE R.C. THROUGH WHICH, WHEN THE DOOR IS OPENED, SUGGESTIONS OF AN OUTER OFFICE CAN BE SEEN.)

(AS THE CURTAIN RISES CHARLES ENTERS WITH THE MORNING MAIL, TOPPED BY A FEW TELEGRAMS. HE LAYS THE BUDGET ON THE TABLE L. AND ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTERWARDS SIR ANTHONY ENTERS. YOU HEAR HIS "GOOD MORNING, GENTLEMEN" TO THE CLERKS IN THE OUTER OFFICE, AND THEIR RESPONSE, CHARLES HAVING LEFT THE DOOR OPEN. SIR ANTHONY IS A TALL, ARISTOCRATIC MAN BETWEEN FIFTY AND SIXTY. CLEAN SHAVEN, GREY HAIR; HE HAS A GENTLE, COURTEOUS MANNER WITH NO SUGGESTION OF POMPOSITY, SUCH A BECOMES A MAN WHO IS CONSCIOUS OF A PERFECTLY CLEAN RECORD AND WHO HAS NEVER HAD TO ASK A FAVOUR. CHARLES IS BETWEEN SIXTY AND SEVENTY, WHITE HAIR, CLEAN SHAVEN; HE IS A LITTLE APT TO IMITATE SIR ANTHONY.)

(SIR ANTHONY TAKES OFF HIS COAT, TOP HAT AND GLOVES, AND GOES TO HIS SEAT AT THE TABLE L.; CHARLES IN ATTENDANCE, AS OF ROUTINE.)

SIR ANTHONY. (GLANCES AT THE LETTERS AND THEN PUSHING THEM ASIDE WITH A GESTURE OF IMPATIENCE SAYS) Nothing from Beeleys, eh, Charles?

CHARLES. No, Sir Anthony.

2.

SIR ANTHONY. And you haven't heard anything more, personally?

CHARLES. (CHEERFULLY) Nothing, Sir

SIR ANTHONY. You think that in this case no news is good news.

CHARLES. I certainly do, Sir.

SIR ANTHONY. I daresay. Sit down a moment, Charles.

(HE POINTS TO THE CLIENT'S CHAIR, WHICH CHARLES TAKES WITH AN EVIDENT HESITATION. SIR ANTHONY PUSHES BACK HIS OWN CHAIR, CLEARS HIS THROAT AND THEN WITH A GESTURE MEANT TO CONVEY THAT HE MUST FACE THE WORST, HE SAYS)

I suppose you realise what will happen if Beeley & Co. suspend payment?

CHARLES. (UNEASILY) I know that they owe us a very large sum, Sir Anthony – close on a hundred thousand pounds

SIR ANTHONY. Yes. And the loss would break us, at this moment.

CHARLES. (HALF RISING) You can't mean, Sir, that

SIR ANTHONY. (GETTING TO HIS FEET AND PACING THE ROOM) Just that, Charles, just that. Get the idea well into your head; it's no time to mince matters between you and me. (PAUSING AND LOOKING AT CHARLES WHO HAS ALSO GOT TO HIS FEET AND IS STANDING BY THE DESK) the old firm of Howard & Son will break, be wound up (DELIBERATELY TORTURING HIMSELF) will vanish out of existence after flourishing for over a century. And our dissolution will be just one more trivial incident, one more little negligible effect of the great war.

CHARLES. I can't realise it, Sir Anthony.

SIR ANTHONY. Ah! We never think that death, or any final disaster such as this can really touch just our own selves.

CHARLES. (TREMBLING SO THAT HE HAS TO SIT DOWN TO CONTROL HIMSELF) I've been with the firm for nearly fifty years

SIR ANTHONY. Which is why I'm telling you the plain truth this morning, Charles. We've got to face the facts. We are on the verge of bankruptcy. We've been losing trade for twelve months. Two of our largest creditors have gone under. And now, if Beeleys go ... (HE SHRUGS HIS SHOULDERS. THEN WITH A QUICK, ABRUPT MOVEMENT, HE FACES CHARLES AGAIN AND SAYS) But there'll be no disgrace, Charles. Howard & Son will pay twenty shillings in the pound, if it takes every penny of my private fortune.

CHARLES. You would sink your private fortune, Sir Anthony?

SIR ANTHONY. (SMILING) I should. If Howard & Son as a firm must go out of existence, it shall go honourably.

CHARLES. I suppose Mr. Basil would stay in the Army, Sir?

SIR ANTHONY. (WITH A LONG RESIGNED SIGH) I'm afraid that will not be possible.

CHARLES. (ANXIOUSLY) Not possible?

SIR ANTHONY. (WITH GREAT SELF-CONTROL) He is among the wounded, Charles. He is – I have been informed – very severely wounded.

(CHARLES BOWS HIS HEAD AND HIDES HIS FACE IN HIS HANDS.)

(WITH AN EFFORT OF SELF-RECOVERY) Charles, we must face these things. We old men, who can't fight, must play our part by keeping a stiff front. We must never admit that we're beaten.

CHARLES. (PULLING HIMSELF UP) No, Sir Anthony. But to think that Mr. Basil

SIR ANTHONY. At least he has not been killed, Charles, and I hope we shall soon have my boy home again. I must admit that that knowledge is a relief to me. At the same time (HE PAUSES AND LOOKS THOUGHTFULLY AT CHARLES.)

CHARLES. Mr. Basil may be an invalid, perhaps?

SIR ANTHONY. Perhaps a permanent invalid ... and I, Charles, may be a pauper.

CHARLES. I can't believe it, Sir Anthony.

4.

SIR ANTHONY. (SQUARING HIS SHOULDERS) Charles, Charles, we – must face – the possibility. And I tell you that nearly everything depends upon Beeleys.

(HE WALKS BACK TO HIS DESK AND SITS DOWN AS HE SAYS THIS AND THEN TOUCHES HIS LETTERS AGAIN, OPENS ONE OF THE TELEGRAMS WHICH HE CARELESSLY DROPS INTO THE WASTE PAPER BASKET AS HE CONTINUES)

Nearly everything. There are a few minor chances. Hm! (OPENS SECOND TELEGRAM AND READS) Jerrolds regret contract impossible. That I expected. (HE THROWS AWAY SECOND TELEGRAM, THEN SWAYS HIS CHAIR AROUND AND FACES CHARLES TO SAY) What do you know about George Biggin, Charles?

CHARLES. Mr. George Biggin, the financial agent, Sir?

SIR ANTHONY. Yes; he has somewhat extended the scope of his operations since the war. Well? What do you know about him?

CHARLES. (A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE) Er – it is not – not what we should call - a first class firm, Sir.

SIR ANTHONY. (IRRITABLY) Perhaps not, perhaps not. But, just now, we can't allow prejudice to stand in our way.

CHARLES. (SADLY) No sir, I suppose not.

SIR ANTHONY. (STILL MORE IRRITABLY) Conditions are altered, entirely altered. And you still refuse, it seems, to face the facts I put before you.

CHARLES. (GETTING UP) It isn't for me to express an opinion, Sir.

SIR ANTHONY. (TRYING TO JUSTIFY HIMSELF) Don't be so confoundedly proud, Charles. We – we can't afford it.

CHARLES. (SADLY) No, Sir Anthony.

SIR ANTHONY. (STILL IRRITABLE) We've got nothing against Biggin. And, confound it, Charles ... (HE SUDDENLY CHANGES HIS TONE AND GOES ON) Oh! Try and realise, man, that I must do something for my boy. I can't let him

come home, probably a permanent invalid – to face absolute poverty. If I can save the firm, I must. And after all, as I said, we know nothing against Biggin; except, perhaps, that he's looked upon as a little shady. (HOPEFULLY) And he gave £5,000 to the National Fund. We may be misjudging him.

CHARLES. (WITH FORCED CHEERFULNESS) Yes, Sir, of course we may. Is it a big deal, Sir?

SIR ANTHONY. I've no particulars, yet. I'm expecting him now, any minute.

CHARLES. And of course, Beeleys may hold out.

SIR ANTHONY. Certainly, certainly. (WITH NEW ALACRITY) Beeleys probably will hold out. But, in any case, I must see Biggin, and hear his proposition.

CHARLES. Of course, Sir Anthony.

SIR ANTHONY. Well, well, that's settled. Now (HE TURNS AGAIN TO HIS MAIL AND HAS JUST TAKEN UP THE THIRD TELEGRAM WHEN THE HOUSE TELEPHONE BELL RINGS) Ah! (AT TELEPHONE) Yes? Mr. Biggin? Very good. I will see him in one minute.

CHARLES. Shall I go and bring him in, Sir Anthony?

SIR ANTHONY (HESITATES A MOMENT AND THEN SAYS WITH A SLIGHT EMBARRASSMENT) I have taken you into my fullest confidence this morning, Charles.

CHARLES. You have indeed, Sir.

SIR ANTHONY. And I think I should like you to be here while I talk to Biggin.

CHARLES. Yes Sir.

SIR ANTHONY. A – a witness might be invaluable.

CHARLES. (WITH A SIGH OF RELIEF) I am greatly honoured by your confidence, Sir Anthony.

SIR ANTHONY. (WITH A SMILE, AND PUTTING HIS HAND ON CHARLES'S ARM) You're a good fellow, Charles. And – and to be honest, I want your support this morning. I am - a little shaken, upset. I'm afraid Charles, afraid of myself.

CHARLES. You have so much at stake, Sir. I have nothing.

SIR ANTHONY. You have, Charles, you have – you have this wonderful pride of yours, your pride in Howard & Son.

CHARLES. Nothing could shake that, Sir.

SIR ANTHONY. (SETTING HIS LIPS AND SQUARING HIS SHOULDERS) Better poverty for my boy than any kind of disgrace, eh?

CHARLES. (QUIETLY) Yes, Sir. Mr. Basil, if he were here, would say the same, I know.

SIR ANTHONY. Of course he would. And – and we're a couple of old fools to be in such a tremble. Beeleys is sound enough. I'm quite confident that Beeleys will weather the storm.

CHARLES. And even if they don't, Sir

SIR ANTHONY. (RESOLUTELY) They will, I tell you, Charles. They must. (AT TELEPHONE) Ask Mr. Biggin to come in, will you. (TO CHARLES) I shall keep my faith in Beeleys. I – I can't face the alternative this morning.

(BIGGIN ENTERS BRISKLY FROM THE OUTER OFFICE. HE IS A SMALL, CONFIDENT MAN, VERY SMARTLY DRESSED, WITH A RATHER FRANK, SLIGHTLY HUMOROUS MANNER THAT CARRIES EVERY NOW AND THEN A SUGGESTION OF APOLOGY. HE LOOKS QUICKLY FROM SIR ANTHONY TO CHARLES AS HE COMES TOWARDS THE DESK AND SAYS)

BIGGIN. Ah! Good morning, Sir Anthony. This is very good of you. To tell you the truth I was half afraid you wouldn't condescend to deal with such small fry as us.

(SIR ANTHONY RISES AS BIGGINS COMES OVER, BUT DOES NOT MOVE FROM HIS DESK, ACROSS WHICH THEY SHAKE HANDS AS BIGGIN SPEAKS.)

7.

(CHARLES HAS MOVED UP STAGE AND STANDS DEFERENTIALLY IN THE BACKGROUND, BUT KEEPS HIS EYES SUSPICIOUSLY ON BIGGIN'S FACE.)

SIR ANTHONY. (RATHER STIFFLY) Er – not at all, Mr. Biggin. Er – delighted to meet you. Won't you sit down.

BIGGIN. (PUTTING HIS HAT AND STICK DOWN ON THE FLOOR, AND SETTLING HIMSELF INTO THE CLIENT'S CHAIR) Thanks, yes. Fact o' the matter is, I've been fortunate enough to make money out of this terrible war. Most of it goes back to the Government, of course, some in taxes – and the rest in subscriptions

SIR ANTHONY. (FORMALLY) I have seen you name figuring – er – very generously, on subscription lists.

BIGGIN. Well, one can't do less, and I'm glad to feel that I'm doin' somethin' to help the old country. However, that's not what I've come to talk about.

(HE LOOKS UP ENQUIRINGLY AT CHARLES, AS IF WAITING FOR HIM TO BE DISMISSED.)

SIR ANTHONY. You have some proposition to make to us?

BIGGIN. A small affair for you, Sir Anthony! I can wait. You finish giving instructions. (WITH A WAVE OF HIS HAND TOWARDS CHARLES.)

SIR ANTHONY. (WITH JUST A SHADE OF NERVOUSNESS) This is my confidential clerk and – and old friend, Mr. Biggin. He knows all the business of the firm.

BIGGIN. Ah! (NODDING IN A FRIENDLY WAY TO CHARLES) Delighted to meet you. (TO SIR ANTHONY) But if I might have a few words with you alone, first, Sir Anthony. Fact of the matter is: you see, I'm not at all sure that you'll care to bother with my little proposition. Maybe a bit infra dig, you know, for Howard & Son. In which case, of course

SIR ANTHONY. You may regard Charles as – practically – a partner, Mr. Biggin.

8.

BIGGIN.

Ah! I see.

(HE JUMPS SUDDENLY TO HIS FEET AND WALKS SLOWLY ACROSS TO FIREPLACE R. TURNING HIS BACK ON THE OTHER TWO. HIS FACE SUGGESTS THAT HE IS DAMNING CHARLES, BUT WHEN HE TURNS AND FACES SIR ANTHONY AGAIN, HE LOOKS AS COCKY AND PLEASED AS EVER.)

Well, just as you like, Sir Anthony. To tell you the truth, all I really want is the name of the firm on a consignment.

CHARLES.

The name of the firm is our most valuable property, Mr. Biggin.

(SIR ANTHONY NODS GRAVELY.)

BIGGIN.

That's so. I know it. And the name of Howard & Son isn't to be bought for cash. But the fact o' the matter is, Sir Anthony, this deal of mine has a patriotic side that will appeal to you.

SIR ANTHONY.

(WITH RELIEF) I'm very glad to hear that, Mr. Biggin. Very glad.

BIGGIN.

(KEEPING HIS EYES AWAY FROM THE SUSPICIOUS FACE OF CHARLES)
Well, every honest export sent to a neutral country at this time, is helping to pay for the war, I take it.

SIR ANTHONY.

Certainly, certainly.

BIGGIN.

And I suppose you couldn't have a more honest export than the sale of foundry castings to Sweden.

SIR ANTHONY.

(PLEASANTLY) No, no, I quite agree with you, and is that what you wish us to frank for you, Mr. Biggin?

BIGGIN.

(COMING BACK TO HIS CHAIR AND SPEAKING CONFIDENTIALLY) It's a little thing, I admit, to bring to you, Sir Anthony – But to tell you the truth (SITTING) there's a German firm – better not mention names – that has got a spite against me. (LEANING BACK WITH A PLEASED

SMILE OF REMINISCENCE) To be quite honest, I did 'em a bad turn at the beginning of the war, and I'm proud of it.

SIR ANTHONY. (INTERESTED) Well, I'm not going to blame you for that. We are all somewhat in the mood for reprisals, I think.

BIGGIN. Just so; just so. Well, to put the thing briefly, I don't want to go to any second class firm, just now.

SIR ANTHONY. I perfectly understand, Mr. Biggin. Perfectly. And you just want us to undertake the consignment of these castings – er – iron castings ...?

BIGGIN. Steel, steel – machine beds.

SIR ANTHONY. These steel castings to a Swedish firm. There should be no difficulty about that, eh, Charles?

CHARLES. Not so far as I can see, Sir. Perhaps Mr. Biggin has got a manifest with him?

BIGGIN. (WITH GREAT ALACRITY, PRODUCING A BUNDLE OF PAPERS AND SELECTING A BULKY FOLDED SHEET, WHICH HE HANDS TO SIR ANTHONY) I brought a copy of the manifest, of course. Don't expect Howard & Son to buy a pig in a poke. There, Sir, is a detailed description of the proposed cargo; all ready for examination by the Customs House. Goods to be shipped at the Port of London.

CHARLES. (AS SIR ANTHONY EXAMINES THE MANIFEST) And open, I suppose, sir, to our own inspection?

BIGGIN. Aye! You can go down and try your teeth on 'em, if you want to.

SIR ANTHONY. (FLUTTERING THE PAPERS) M – yes, I see, I see. (WITH EVIDENT DISAPPOINTMENT) As you say, Mr. Biggin, this is quite a small affair – er – from the point of view of our commission.

BIGGIN. (WITH A SHADE OF EMBARRASSMENT) Well, yes, Sir Anthony. In peace time, the thing wouldn't be worth bothering you about. But prices for labour and freight being what they are

SIR ANTHONY. (SETTING HIS FACE TO THE SOLEMN BUSINESS EXPRESSION OF ONE WHO MEANS TO MAKE A HARD BARGAIN) There have been advances, of course, but even so

(DURING THIS AND THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATION CHARLES EXAMINES THE PAPERS LYING ON THE DESK BETWEEN HIM AND SIR ANTHONY.)

BIGGIN. I can well afford to be generous, Sir Anthony. To tell you the truth, I'm willin' in this particular deal to cut my own profit for the sake of getting' the consignment through. You see I'm expectin' very considerable further orders from the same agents in Sweden.

SIR ANTHONY. Ah! Yes, indeed.

BIGGIN. Now, let's come to figures.

(HE GETS UP AGAIN AND GOES ACROSS TO HEARTHrug AND THEN TURNS AND WATCHES SIR ANTHONY'S FACE WITH KEENEST ATTENTION.)

SIR ANTHONY. Certainly, certainly.

BIGGIN. I understand that this affair's a bit out of your line ...

SIR ANTHONY. If it were not for the war

BIGGIN. You wouldn't be bothered with it. I quite see that, Sir Anthony. The point is just what would tempt you.

SIR ANTHONY. Precisely.

BIGGIN. And as I've explained the circumstances are peculiar. Well, now, with certain contingencies - (HE LOOKS KEENLY AT SIR ANTHONY AND REPEATS) with certain contingencies this deal might mean, well, let me see, very likely a matter of ... twenty ... or even twenty-five thousand pounds to your firm.

(SIR ANTHONY'S FACE SHOWS HIS INTENSE SURPRISE AND HE DOES NOT ATTEMPT TO DISGUISE HIS ASTONISHMENT AS HE SAYS)

11.

SIR ANTHONY. You amaze me, Mr. Biggin. Why, the cargo itself is not worth so much.

BIGGIN. Ah! Come now; don't jump down my throat like that, Sir Anthony. I daresay this particular cargo isn't worth that, but I haven't mentioned the contingencies yet.

SIR ANTHONY. (HOPEFULLY) Which are?

BIGGIN. Well, as I said, this is probably only a first consignment.

SIR ANTHONY. You want us to engage ourselves to transmit the others?

BIGGIN. (NODDING FERVENTLY) To tell you the truth I do, Sir Anthony.

SIR ANTHONY. (STILL A TRIFLE PUZZLED) Well, I cannot see that there would be any objection to that.

BIGGIN. (RUBBING HIS HANDS) Very well then; we're comin' in sight of clinchin' the bargain, eh?

SIR ANTHONY. I don't see why not. Come and sit down, Biggin; let's just go over the conditions.

CHARLES. (AS BIGGIN COMES OVER TO DESK) If I might ask a question or two, Sir Anthony.

SIR ANTHONY. (A LITTLE COLDLY) Certainly, Charles.

CHARLES. (TO BIGGIN) Are these English castings, Mr. Biggin?

BIGGIN. Does that matter? You're not guaranteeing the quality of the goods.

SIR ANTHONY. Not English then, Biggin?

BIGGIN. Now, now, why ever should you say that? I've said nothin' of the kind.

(CHARLES POINTS OUT SOME ITEM ON THE MANIFEST TO SIR ANTHONY.)

SIR ANTHONY. But the goods are invoiced to you from Price & Mansfield who are only shipping agents, not manufacturers.

12.

BIGGIN. Well, well, to tell you the truth, Sir Anthony, the castin's were done in America. They are re-exports; but that doesn't affect the fact that

English firms like yourselves, and us, and Price & Mansfield, are getting' paid in Swedish money.

SIR ANTHONY. Quite so. I have no objection to the deal on that account.

CHARLES. (TO BIGGIN) And could you tell us, sir, why the American firm could not deal direct with Sweden?

BIGGIN. Because I placed the order.

CHARLES. (SHAKING HIS HEAD) It isn't straight, Sir Anthony.

(BIGGIN MAKES A GESTURE AS IF HE WOULD SPEAK BUT SIR ANTHONY SAYS TESTILY)

SIR ANTHONY. Why not, Charles? Why not?

CHARLES. Why, Sir, should Mr. Biggin be willing to pay us £25,000 for transmitting goods on which he can't be making a half-penny profit. There is nothing to prevent Sweden dealing with America direct; how can Mr. Biggin outbid the American firms when he has to pay two more profits ...our own to the tune of twenty-five thousand ... and the other agents?

BIGGIN. (ANGRILY) I don't know what you are hinting, Mr. Charles.

CHARLES. I'm hinting at nothing, Mr. Biggin. I am asking questions.

SIR ANTHONY. (PUTS HIS HANDS ON HIS DESK AND PUSHES BACK HIS CHAIR WITH A DEEP SIGH) I must agree, Mr. Biggin, that the business is not quite clear to me.

BIGGIN. (BLUFFING) Well, we'll say no more about it. (HE PICKS UP HIS HAT AND STICK AND GETS TO HIS FEET) I don't fancy I'll have much difficulty in placin' the business elsewhere.

SIR ANTHONY. (STANDING) If you could have explained why the Swedish firm could not deal direct with America

BIGGIN. (SHRUGGING HIS SHOULDERS) There have been difficulties.

13.

SIR ANTHONY. (SUSPICIOUSLY) Only in cases where the goods were contraband of war.

BIGGIN. (A LITTLE CONFUSED) well, to be quite honest, this American firm is under suspicion; and although there is nothin' whatever against 'em, they are consigning to me, in future. They're workin' full time, now that all the English firms are makin' munitions, and they can't afford the delay ... simply can't afford the delay.

SIR ANTHONY. (QUIETLY BUT WITH GREAT EMPHASIS) George Biggin, I'm afraid you are a scoundrel.

BIGGIN. (WITH A COOL GRIN) How's that, Howard?

SIR ANTHONY. You are attempting to get contraband into Germany.

BIGGIN. (STILL JAUNTILY) That's a highly libellous statement, Howard.

SIR ANTHONY. I deeply regret that it may be a true one. And it is my duty, Biggin, to see that these goods of yours do not leave the Port of London, until they have been fully examined by the authorities.

BIGGIN. Indeed.

(HE PUTS HIS HAT ON AND TWIRLS HIS STICK. CHARLES, WITH EVIDENT RELIEF, CROSSES TO THE DOOR WHICH HE OPENS. BIGGIN SLOWLY CROSSING THE ROOM AFTER HIM.)

Indeed! (AT DOOR) Ah! By the way, I've a bit of news for you, Howard. Beeley & Co. have gone under. They closed their doors this morning. They won't pay a shillin' in the pound, I'm told.

(SIR ANTHONY STANDS WITH A FIXED STARE, HOLDING ON TO HIS DESK FOR SUPPORT.)

And from what I hear there'll be another big firm goin' in the course of a week or so.

14.

SIR ANTHONY. What firm is that?

BIGGIN. Old-established firm. Highly respectable. Name of Howard & Son.

(SIR ANTHONY DROPS SUDDENLY INTO HIS CHAIR. CHARLES STANDS AWE-STRICKEN, STILL HOLDING THE DOOR.)

BIGGIN.

(RETURNING ONE STEP INTO THE ROOM) Great pity, in my opinion. But there you are! Comes of bein' too old-fashioned, and too suspicious.

(SIR ANTHONY IS LEANING FORWARD WITH HIS HEAD ON HIS HANDS.)

And 'pon my soul I'm sorry, Howard All this business clean put the thing out of my head ... I see your son's name is in the casualty lists, this mornin's. Sad thing that, very sad.

(CHARLES LOOKS AT SIR ANTHONY, GIVES A LITTLE CHOKING SOB AND THEN GOES OUT, LEAVING THE DOOR OPEN.)

(BIGGIN TURNS AND CAREFULLY CLOSES IT BEHIND HIM.)

(BIGGIN, COMING BACK INTO THE ROOM, PUTS HIS HAT AND STICK ON THE MANTLEPIECE, STANDS LOOKING ACROSS AT SIR ANTHONY WHOSE FACE IS STILL COVERED.)

(AFTER A SHORT PAUSE) now look here, Howard. Let's be perfectly honest about this.

15.

SIR ANTHONY.

(LOOKING UP WITH A START WHEN BIGGIN SPEAKS; WITH GREAT CONTEMPT) Honest!

BIGGIN. Tchah! There's no dishonesty about the deal. It's just a matter of sentiment emotion. We don't talk about Sir Francis Drake's dishonesty! Or Dampier's. Or Morgan's. Or any of those other old pirates.

SIR ANTHONY. What is this cargo, Biggin?

BIGGIN. Copper Nicely packed in thin steel casings which are well painted. You couldn't spot the copper without a drill. It's as safe as the Bank.

SIR ANTHONY. For Germany?

BIGGIN. Not that I know of. I'm sellin' to Sweden. I can't ask what they're goin' to do with the stuff when they've got it.

SIR ANTHONY. You know that the copper is meant for Germany, Biggin.

BIGGIN. I tell you I don't, Howard.

SIR ANTHONY. (SHRUGGING HIS SHOULDERS) There's no reasonable doubt about it.

BIGGIN. (DOGGEDLY) I'm sellin' the cargo to Sweden and I'll defy you or anyone to prove that I'm not bein' diddled by the Yankee firm.

SIR ANTHONY. Then why do you come to me?

BIGGIN. Simply because I can't be too safe. With your name the thing's a dead cert.

SIR ANTHONY. (RESOLUTELY) you know I couldn't touch a deal like that, Biggin.

BIGGIN. I know you've got to touch it, or go phut.

SIR ANTHONY. I don't think our ideas of being businesslike are quite the same.

BIGGIN. Oh, well, well – if there's no getting over your scruples there's no more to be said.

SIR ANTHONY. (WITH A SIGH HALF OF RELIEF, HALF OF REGRET) Nothing.

BIGGIN. And when your son comes home again?

SIR ANTHONY. He is unlikely to be fit for any active work.

16.

BIGGIN. Even for business, eh?

SIR ANTHONY. I had hoped, perhaps, that he might

BIGGIN. If there's any business for him to come to?

SIR ANTHONY. (STUNG) You needn't touch on that, Biggin.

BIGGIN. Why not? Isn't that just the point we ought to touch on?

SIR ANTHONY. My son would think as I do upon this matter.

BIGGIN. He need never know. Look here , Howard. Why not keep your scruples to yourself? Why worry him?

SIR ANTHONY. What do you mean?

BIGGIN. The truth is, you're a bit upset – bad news this morning, and all that. You can't get things into perspective. Once the thing's done it's all right.

SIR ANTHONY. (STIFFLY) I don't follow you.

BIGGIN. Why need the boy know anything about it? You sacrifice your scruples for the sake of saving the firm and your son's future ... it'd be a fine sacrifice.

SIR ANTHONY. It would be a disgrace.

BIGGIN. Disgrace? What about the disgrace of goin' bankrupt? What about the disgrace of lettin' your son down, after what he's done for the old country?

(SIR ANTHONY GETS UP AND PACES THE ROOM. BIGGIN, STILL SITTING, BLANDLY FOLLOWS UP HIS ARGUMENT.)

He's got a right to be kept comfortable, hasn't he?

SIR ANTHONY. Do you know what it is to have a conscience, Biggin?

BIGGIN. Yes. Damned uncomfortable. But can't you put up with a little discomfort, for the boy's sake?

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SIR ANTHONY. Biggin, you're a devil.

BIGGIN. That's more like it. You can call me anything you like.

SIR ANTHONY. But what am I to call myself?

BIGGIN. Call yourself a good father That's enough for you or any man.

SIR ANTHONY. Call myself a traitor.

BIGGIN. Bosh!

SIR ANTHONY. If I do this thing I'm going to look it in the face.

BIGGIN. Well, look it in the face. If you insist on thinking the deal's crooked Which it isn't You can nurse the guilty secret for your son's sake.

(SIR ANTHONY PAUSES AT THE FIREPLACE, R., HIS HEAD ON HIS FOREARM, AGAINST THE MANTEL-PIECE.)

(BIGGIN RISES, TAKES OUT HIS POCKET-BOOK AND EXTRACTS A PAPERWHICH HE SPREADS OUT ON THE WRITING TABLE.)

Here's the contract note. I've filled in the amount of your commission as £25,000.

(HE SPREADS THE PAPERS UPON SIR ANTHONY'S TABLE, AND THEIR ATTRACTION DRAWS SIR ANTHONY OVER TO LOOK AT THEM.)

(BIGGIN TURNS HIS BACK AND GOES UP STAGE.)

((SIR ANTHONY SITS AND BEGINS TO EXAMINE THE PAPERS.))

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SIR ANTHONY. I must have twenty-four hours to consider this.

BIGGIN. (SHARPLY) Not twenty-four minutes. I can't afford to wait.

(HE COMES DOWN TOWARDS SIR ANTHONY WITH A BRISK DETERMINED MOVEMENT.)

SIR ANTHONY. (IN DESPAIR) How can I decide?

BIGGIN. Very well! Don't! Only give me back the papers. I can see you in Carey Street, Howard, still holding your head and wondering whether you ought or ought not to have had a little more pluck. 'Pon my soul, I should like to see you telling the story to your son, when he comes back

SIR ANTHONY. (INTERRUPTING) That will do, Biggin.

(THE TWO MEN LOOK AT ONE ANOTHER FOR A MOMENT AND THEN BIGGIN SMILES, SLOWLY WALKS ACROSS TO THE FIREPLACE AND STANDS WITH HIS BACK TO SIR ANTHONY.)

(SIR ANTHONY DROPS HIS HEAD, HANDLES THE PAPERS ETC. AND THEN HALF-AUTOMATICALLY PICKS UP THE TELEGRAM WHICH HE HAD BEEN IN THE ACT OF OPENING WHEN BIGGIN ENTERED. HE OPENS IT NOW, AND LOOKS AT IT WITHOUT REALISING THE CONTENTS. HIS MIND IS EVIDENTLY OCCUPIED BY OTHER THOUGHTS. THEN SOME WORD IN THE TELEGRAM CATCHES HIS ATTENTION. HE STIFFENS, PULLS THE PAPER TAUT WITH A SHARP, CRACKLING REPORT, AND STARES AT IT WITH HORRIFIED INCREDULITY. THEN HIS WHOLE BODY RELAXES, HIS HEAD DROOPS, ETC.)

BIGGIN. (TURNING AND SEEING SIR ANTHONY'S ATTITUDE DRAWS HIS OWN CONCLUSIONS. COMING BACK TOWARDS THE DESK AND SPEAKING SOFTLY) Well, well, now the thing's done, to be quite honest, Howard,

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is there any need to worry your conscience about it? (AS SIR ANTHONY DOES NOT LOOK UP) Come, you know, even if the stuff was for Germany, what's it amount to? A bit of blockade running. Gosh!

There is a damned sight too much sentimentality about patriotism these days.

(SIR ANTHONY PUSHES THE PAPERS TOWARDS HIM.)

(PICKING THEM UP) And now the thing's done (HE LOOKS AT THE PAPERS PREPARATORY TO PUTTING THEM BACK IN HIS POCKET BOOK, THEN SAYS WITH A START) Here! You haven't signed them, Howard!

SIR ANTHONY. (GETS UP AND FACES HIM) No, I have not signed them.

BIGGIN. Well, aren't you going to?

(SIR ANTHONY DOES NOT ANSWER. HE LOOKS AT BIGGIN AND THEN TAKES A COUPLE OF STEPS UP THE ROOM.)

(IMPATIENTLY) To tell you the truth, Howard

SIR ANTHONY. (QUICKLY) Ah! Now let me tell you the truth, Biggin. You are a scoundrel; and but for the grace of God I might have become a scoundrel, also. I had begun to deceive myself – to think that I could accept your abominable juggling with the truth, and lend myself, and the honour of my firm, to a base treachery. But you know and I know, what your great deal means – the deal that was to save the honour of my firm. It means selling the honour of my firm – selling it to the enemy. It means sending out copper for the German arsenals – copper for shells – shells that would blast the lives of our brave men into eternity, while men like you and I sit at home and count over our profits – count over the price of blood!

BIGGIN. If we don't someone else will. And it saves the honour of an old firm ...

SIR ANTHONY. There's an older firm than Howard & Son. There's an old firm called England; and the honour of England is not saved, but lost, if men like

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you and I are found plotting to sell the pass for our own advantage. No! The honour of England is saved by men like my own son, who go out to fight and die for their country.

BIGGIN. They don't all die. Some of 'em come back. Fellers like your own son, for example. And what's he comin' back to?

(SIR ANTHONY GRIPS AND CRUMPLES THE TELEGRAM WHICH IS STILL IN HIS HAND, THEN RAISES IT, OPENS THE TELEGRAM AND READS IT AGAIN, AS THOUGH TO ASSURE HIMSELF OF THE TRAGIC REALITY. THEN HE CRUMPLES IT AGAIN AND FLINGS IT FROM HIM.)

SIR ANTHONY. My son is never coming back. He died in base hospital yesterday afternoon.

(BIGGIN OPENS HIS MOUTH AS IF TO SPEAK AND THINKS BETTER OF IT. HE PICKS UP HIS HAT AND STICK, GLANCES ONCE AT THE SET FACE OF SIR ANTHONY, AND THEN MAKES HIS WAY TO THE DOOR. AS HE GOES OUT LEAVING THE DOOR OPEN BEHIND HIM, SIR ANTHONY TREMBLINGLY MAKES HIS WAY BACK TO THE DESK AND SITS DOWN. AS HE DOES SO, CHARLES APPEARS AT THE DOORWAY.)

CHARLES. (ANXIOUSLY) Is it all right, Sir Anthony?

SIR ANTHONY. (STEADILY) It is all right, Charles. Come in. We have much business to attend to. The firm of Howard & Son is dead – but it has died honourably, in the service of a great cause.

CURTAIN.
