

*The*  
**COUNCIL OF SEVEN**

BY  
**J. C. SNAITH**

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*The*  
**COUNCIL OF SEVEN**

# I

AT FIVE o'clock of a September evening, Helen Sholto left the office, as usual, and went to her club. Opposite the tube lift in Dover Street, London, out of which she came, was a bookstall. Clamoring across the front, a newsbill at once caught the eye of an informed modern woman:

## BRITAIN AND AMERICA

AMAZING SPEECH BY

JOHN ENDOR, M.P.

She bought a copy of the *Evening Press*. Looking it quickly through, she found in the column for late news a blurred, hastily-inserted paragraph

## THE ANGLO-AMERICAN SITUATION

Speaking to-day at Blackhampton Town Hall at a luncheon given in his honor, John Endor, M.P., said that this country's relations with America were bound to prove a source of continual and growing anxiety. Dangerous, subterranean influences were at work on both sides of the Atlantic. In many things of vital

importance the two nations would never see eye to eye. Let the people of these islands always stand ready. Personally, he believed in the Sword.

Helen gasped. The words were like icy water thrown in the face. And the sensation of having had all the breath taken out of her body was increased by the knowledge that a second purchaser of the *Evening Press*, a rough-looking workman, standing by her elbow, had given a savage exclamation. Moreover, in the act of so doing, by that process of telepathy beyond whose threshold Science has yet to peer, he caught the distracted eyes of the particularly attractive-looking girl who was folding up her own copy of the paper.

“Does for him, I reckon!” And the man spat savagely.

Helen turned abruptly away, and walked slowly along Dover Street. A thousand imps were loose in her brain. Space, quiet, solitude were needed in which to quell them, to bring them under control. Almost it was as if the bottom had fallen out of the world in which she lived.

## II

THE Helicon Club was at the end of the street. Women interested in literature, the arts, in social and public affairs could lunch, dine, entertain their friends in this oasis. Its pleasant rooms were large and cool, and, crowning boon in the very heart of modern Babylon, they offered even a measure of isolation. For the members' roll did not respond too readily to the length of "the waiting list."

A nook of the "silence" room enabled Helen to think her thoughts with the help of a well-earned cup of tea. And a second look at the evening paper cast one ray upon the darkness. "I believe in the Sword." The phrase hurt like a blow, yet somehow it forced the conclusion upon her that the speech could not have been reported accurately. Knowing John Endor so well, she could not bring herself to believe that those were the words he had used. It hardly seemed credible that without some hint beforehand he should go back on all that he stood for in political life.

Bent on setting doubt at rest, she went presently to the telephone and rang up John's chambers in Bury Street. She was informed that Mr. Endor had not yet returned from Blackhampton, but that he was expected home about half past seven. Thereupon she left a message, asking him, if not otherwise engaged, to come and dine with her, adding the little feminine proviso that "he was not to dress."

It was then a quarter to six. Two hours slowly passed. Helen had letters to write, a book deeply interesting to look at. Much was said, all the same, for her mental habit that, with a grim specter in the outskirts of her mind, she could yet dragoon her will to the task of putting it away.

A few minutes before eight John arrived. She went to him at once. The glow of her greeting masked a tumult of feeling. None could have guessed from such *entrain* that she was facing a crisis upon whose issue her whole life must turn.

“What a piece of luck that you were able to come!”

The eyes and the laugh of a man deeply in love proclaimed this happy chance to be even more than that.

With no other preface, Helen led the way to the dining room. Before one question could be put to a hard-driven politician he must be fed. No matter what her own emotions might immediately dictate, she had a sense, almost masculine, of the rules of the game. Hers was a powerfully disciplined nature. A terrible phrase seared her like an acid, but for the time being sheer stoicism allowed her to bear the pain.

A table had been commandeered without difficulty in a favorite corner. Only a few of the Club habitués were dining, but John Endor brought a new interest into the room. It was no more than the emotion he was accustomed to excite. He leapt to the eye of every assembly. A force, a magnet, the lines of a rare personality made an effect of positive beauty. Nearly all women were attracted by him.

Well over six feet high, thin almost to emaciation, pale with the cast of thought, his high cheek-bones seemed to accentuate the hollows beneath them. The poise of the head and the features exquisitely bold might have been lures for the chisel of Pheidias; the deep eyes with their in-striking glances were those of a seer. Moving with freedom and grace, he had the look of a man who has seen a vision of the eternal. Nature at last seemed to have come near that which through the centuries she had been in search of. In the mind and mansion of John Endor her only concern was ultimate things.

As he crossed the wide room, intense curiosity tinged in some cases by an open admiration, was in the gaze of the other diners. Yet this did not apply to all. The curiosity was universal, but in one or two instances there was also a steady, level-lidded hostility. Helen was conscious of this as she piloted him to their table, perhaps because it was to be expected; but in this rising politician who had Gladstone's power of arousing strong yet diverse emotion wherever he went there was an apartness which lifted him far beyond the plane whereon friend gives the countercheck to foe.

It was a good dinner. And the guest, for all his air of other-worldliness, had none of that rather dubious breeding which holds itself indifferent to what it eats and drinks. He complimented his hostess upon a modest sole Colbert and a poulet en casserole—the Club chef he assured her had nothing to learn from Saint James's Street and Pall Mall; to the claret he rendered all the honors of a vintage wine; in a word, John Endor's look of high ascetism did not taboo the minor arts of life.

It was this zest in everything which made him such a lovable companion. The seer, the visionary, was a man of the world. In spite of his dedication, in spite of the inward fire of the prophets of old, he had that subtle appreciation of the human comedy which is one of the final graces of a liberal education.

This evening, as always, he was charming. Helen could not help yielding to his attraction, no matter how strict her guard against it; she could not help being fascinated by his mental outlook and being lulled, even a little dangerously, by the personality of the man she loved. Listening to him now made it seem almost tragic that one should have to put the question she had summoned him to ask.

Delays are perilous. Twice before the enchanted meal was through she was at the point of sending for the evening paper, so that she might learn the truth. The fallibility of the newspaper press was still her hope. But while he talked as only he could, it seemed an act of barbarism to open the case so crudely. While his fancy and his humor played upon a hundred things how could one sidetrack him with such a doubt? There was some absurd mistake. High faith in this hero bade her take care.

Almost before she knew that she had let a precious moment go, she found herself bitterly rueing the fact. One of his odd, quick, unforeseen turns brought her up dead against an impasse she would have given much to avoid.

Plunging an impetuous hand in his coat, he suddenly produced a half sheet of notepaper, and tossed it over the table into her

lap. "High time," he laughed, "we let the dear old *Morning Post* into our *secret de Polichinelle*."

She unfolded the slip of paper and read with a pang of dismay:

An engagement is announced between  
John Endor, only son of the late Myles  
Endor, Wyndham, Middleshire, and  
Lady Elizabeth Endor, and Helen Mary,  
eldest daughter of James Lee Sholto and  
Mrs. Sholto of Longmore, Richmond,  
Virginia, U. S. A.

"Will it meet the case?" The question was whimsically direct, even without the enforcement of his amused eyes.

The blood burned slowly vivid in her face. Happily the quality or absence of quality in the electric light prevented his seeing it.

"Don't you think?"—in a gay whisper.

There was no escape. "One shrinks——" Her will cut the phrase in two. To have completed it would have been to say too little or too much.

"Everybody's secret," he laughed.

As she felt the knife edge of the irony lurking in the situation, she gave a little gasp. There was only one thing for her now. She must harden her heart.

"I hadn't realized," she said, in her soft voice, a delicious blend of the Old World and the New, "that your speech to-day was going to be so important."

“Quite the last word for it,” he said, lightly. “A heart-to-heart talk, don’t you know, with a few friends and constituents. For some dark reason they insisted on giving me a lovely bit of old Sheffield plate—and a scroll. One mustn’t forget the scroll. Perhaps the birds have been talking. Anyhow, the Chairman thought the salver would look very nice on the dining-room sideboard of a newly married couple!”

He waited for her laugh, but only one tiny segment of her mind was listening.

“It fills the entire placard of the *Evening Press*.” She dare not look at him. There was a clutch at her heart.

“What! My jawbation! Shade of the sea serpent and the giant gooseberry!”

She felt the beat of her heart strike upwards. Her throat was filled by it. He sounded hardly more than a laughing, irresponsible boy. And yet the hour was surely near when even his lighter grace notes must prove organ tones in the strained ear of the time.

### III

THE fates were at her elbow. As she sent for the *Evening Press*, she realized that fact to the full. Afraid to turn again to her occupation of the last three hours, the weighing of her love for John Endor, she was yet unable to escape the challenge of a dire event. Truly a woman, yet beyond all things she was an American citizen. No matter what his spells, she could never marry a man of these ideas. Her country must stand first.

The *Evening Press* arrived. Folding back the sheet, the rather unpretty sheet with its crude headlines and blurred ink, she placed a finger on the fatal paragraph.

While he read she watched him. But his face was hidden by the paper and it was not until a slow perusal was at an end that it came again into view. So great was the change that it struck her almost with fear. The allure was gone; such a depth of pallor had the look of death itself. But the eyes were blazing and the large, mobile orator's mouth was clenched in a vain effort to control its emotion.

"Blackguards!" he gasped. She saw that in his eyes were tears. Her brain was numb, yet the glow racing through her veins was sheer joy. The question was answered; every doubt was laid. So much for the woman. And in that moment the woman was paramount. But in the balanced mind, delicately poised, acutely commonsensible, was now a concern beyond the personal. What was the meaning of it all?

"I knew of course ... I felt ... that you had been ... misrepresented."... Her words were tentative, inadequate. Painfully watching the man opposite she knew only too well that the John Endor of three minutes back might never have been. The play, the interplay, of changing lights upon his face and in his eyes were beyond her ken. Almost for the first time she began to have a real perception of the infinities within him, of that central power which could sweep a great audience off its feet.

Of a sudden he sprang fiercely from his chair. "It's devilish!" His voice was hoarse. "Absolutely devilish!"

Hardly had he used the words when the pain in her eyes reined him back. Abruptly as he had risen, he sat down again at the table. "I beg your pardon!" he said. "But, you see, it's a stab in the back—from the world's most accomplished assassin."

She saw that his lips were white and that his face was drawn.

"Mayn't it be just a mere accident?" Courage was needed to say anything. To say that called for much.

He laughed harshly. The gay irresponsible boy might never have been. "Accidents don't happen to the Universal Press."

"But why shouldn't they—once in a while?" Her voice had a maternal caress in it.

"The U. P. is the most efficient machine ever invented. It lives for and by efficiency—damnable word! That's the talisman with which it sways five continents. God help us all! No accident here."

"Can you really be sure?"

“Internal evidence. The few casual, cut-and-dried phrases I used, hardly more than a formal returning of thanks, have been so twisted round that they are the exact opposite of what was meant.”

“Perhaps there’s been a confusion of names.”

“No! no! Much too circumstantial—John Endor—luncheon—this afternoon—Blackhampton Town Hall. There’s no excuse. And the trick is so simple, so easy, once you condescend to its use. Take that final phrase, ‘I believe in the Sword.’”

Helen waited eagerly.

“Knock out the first letter of the last word and you have the phrase I used.”

She was blinded for a moment by the flood of light let in by this concrete instance. It went far to prove that his suspicions, which by nature he was the last man in the world to harbor, were not without warrant. Such a rebuttal of the charge against himself was complete, final; at the same time Helen Sholto had a very strong reason of her own for declining to accept all the implications that now arose.

In a sense she herself was an employee of the Universal Press. For nearly two years she had been one of the private secretaries of Saul Hartz, the master spirit of the U. P.—its organizer of victory. Moreover to the Colossus, as he was playfully called, she had a deep sense of loyalty. To her he had always seemed a truly great man. Moving up and down the intensive London world, it was no new thing to hear harshly criticized the mighty organization of international newspapers

of which he was the head. More than once she had heard its motives impugned, but she had shrewdly perceived that so great a force in the life of the time could be wielded only at a price. To Helen Sholto the Colossus stood forth the *beau idéal* of a considerate, almost princely, employer. His foes were many, but none denied his genius. And in the sight of Helen he was so considerable a man, the admiration he excited was so keen, her sense of gratitude was so lively and so deep, that it was almost *lèse majesté* to traverse his political acts.

It had always been the aim of the Colossus to keep as much as possible in the background of affairs. None the less, in his own despite, he was becoming known as the secret power which propelled many a great movement of the time. It was said that he created and directed public opinion on more than one continent—to such an extent that he made and unmade governments; enforced and canceled treaties; in a word, he and the International Newspaper Ring that he controlled had become a menace to the world. But Helen Sholto in all her dealings with this man had never had reason to suspect that he claimed for himself these plenary powers.

Sensitive as she was for John Endor and jealous for his growing reputation, it now became her clear duty to defend Saul Hartz. She believed him to be an honest man. Had one doubt infected her mind she could not have served him. But in the immediate presence of her fiancé's terrible indictment she lost the power to marshal her ideas. Womanlike she grew a little wounded by such a condemnation of the Colossus and all his works.

Granted that the blow had shaken John to the foundations and making allowance for a vivid temperament, she could have

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