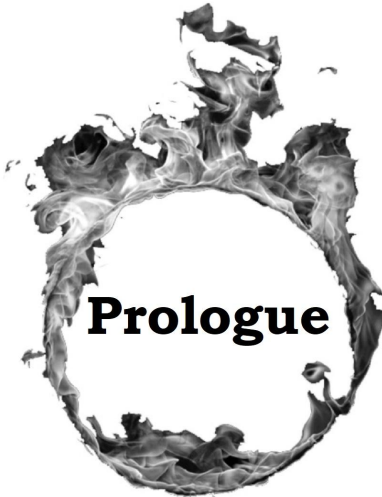


*“Man kills without ceasing,
to nourish himself;
but since, in addition,
he needs to kill for pleasure,
he has invented the chase!”*

- Guy de Maupassant

The Diary of a Madman, 1886



1924 - San Francisco

Those in power have always made the decisions that shape the world. They take society into their hands and mold it, bend it, and finesse it until it is as they believe it should be. They do it for themselves, in the interest of maintaining their positions of influence. And they do it right under our noses. Without even a hint of wrongdoing or impropriety, under the guise of “the greater good.”

But sometimes, the decisions they make spare the common folk. In those decisions ignorance truly is bliss. No one knew this better than William Randolph Hearst, unarguably, the most powerful man in America. At the age of 61, Hearst controlled the news and the news cycle in a way that makes modern cable news organizations pale by comparison and was, in many ways, the driving force behind American public awareness. If it wasn't in a Hearst newspaper, it probably didn't happen. And conversely, it *only* happened if it was reported in a Hearst newspaper; look no further than the Spanish-American war. Hearst's power was in his ability to

shape the narrative in a way that best suited him. Control what the public knows; control what they think. That's a power politicians only dream of.

Famously, even with the world at his fingertips, Hearst had an ever present insatiable need for more. It was a side of him no one, not even his wife or mistress, could understand. The life of a wealthy man has its advantages, yet power and influence do not necessarily fill a man's base needs. That's something all the money in the world cannot buy.

Hearst had friends, confidants, kindred spirits even, but these men were off building their own empires around the world and their interactions were limited at best. Hearst liked listing them in his head just to remind himself of how small, yet elite and driven, his circle was. There was Harold McCormick, making a name for himself in the airline business in Chicago. Sir John Ellerman, accountant turned fellow newspaperman across the pond, with a knack for recognizing, and exploiting, undervalued commodities. Samuel Insull, busily creating electric power grids and forging the path for giants like AT&T. Hearst never spoke about his friendship with Andrew Mellon, but having a friend rise to the office of Secretary of the Treasury was mutually beneficial. Then there was Pierre Wertheimer creating his own empire in fragrances with the help of a new partner named Coco Chanel in France. Frank Baumgartner was off in L.A. somewhere making millions in wines and spirits. There were those like Henry Ford who spent all their time making the country smaller by insisting we get places in a great hurry, if you asked Hearst, but who could complain where there was so much money to be made. And his list wouldn't be complete without Rockefeller, who was busy just being Rockefeller. After all, no one can stop an oil man.

Lately, nothing engaged Hearst's predominant sense of ennui; not his mistress,

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accommodating as she was, not his many children, not building upon his massive properties. His fortune gave him access to every door in the world, yet he felt like a jockey whose horse wouldn't leave the starting gate.

It was in late 1923 that Hearst took to his study, where he sat for days, breaking only for food and drink. Once he started putting words to paper, the idea erupted like a geyser, relentless and liberating, from his depths. Two days after completing his manifesto, after time to attend to business, his women, and logistical details, he pulled out a sheet of his highest quality embossed bond and wrote.

My friends -

The time has come to ask, What's next for the illustrious few--for the ones able, willing, and bold enough to step into the future by virtue of the right to the consummate freedom we have earned? Meet me at San Simeon on the 1st of March. Tell no one of your plans. Come prepared to be set free!

- WRH

He finished off each letter with his personal blue wax seal: a capital "H" encased in a circle. To Hearst's eye the smear of the wax on the paper resembled an ice-cold flame. He would be surprised if even one of the men declined his invitation. Friends or not, one accepted Hearst's "invitations" or suffered the consequences.

And so it came to pass that on the 1st of March, 1924, William Randolph Hearst set the stage. San Simeon's unfinished Doge's suite and balcony was the obvious choice for the meeting. Inspired by the Doge's Palace of Venice, once completed, Hearst's Doge's Suite would be like no other. Priceless works of art were set aside from his personal collection, including Tintoretto's portrait of Alvisius Vendramin from the late 1500s and Bernini's stone sculpture of Apollo and Daphne, dating back to 1619. The room would be decorated with the finest blue silk and a painted ceiling designed by the finest craftsman to emulate the ornate chambers of the Doge's Palace in Venice, Italy. Elegance, luxury, and decadence oozed from every carefully considered element from wall coverings to furnishings.

To welcome his guests, the 61-year-old magnate personally arranged nine leather chairs in a circular formation in the center of the room. In between each chair was a small wooden accent table. Each one catered to its specific guest; a personal humidior fully stocked with each guest's cigar of choice, a drinking glass, and a bottle of the man's preferred liquor. Next to each glass, a gold letter opener rested on top of an envelope sealed with the familiar blue wax "H," the name of each recipient scripted in beautiful calligraphy.

Hearst was not a patient man, nor one prone to nerves. Months of planning, researching, scheming, however, hung in the balance. Still, you don't get to be William Randolph Hearst if you didn't know how to direct the fluttering in your stomach to your advantage, to welcome the anticipation of something so revelatory, so revolutionary. So *right*.

He, William Randolph Hearst, was about to change the world.



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After Hearst's eight guests had been personally greeted and partaken in the exorbitantly priced champagne that was waiting for them, there was the usual repartee regarding life and business. Hearst's heart pumped with the exhilaration of knowing how difficult it was for each man to feign an air of indifferent curiosity. He was at the top of his game. Unstoppable.

Hearst waited for expectancy to reach the point of near irritation before picking up his champagne flute and tapping out an attention grabbing *clink* with his platinum ring, allowing the fine crystal to carry the sound for several seconds as the room quieted.

"Gentlemen," he began. If not for the fact that everyone in the room had heard Hearst's voice previously, they might have giggled aloud at its high-pitched incongruity. "Thank you for coming. I'm sure you are curious about the nature of this meeting, but have no fear. All will be revealed in due time." The eight men listened, attempting to hide their annoyance with respectful attention. They were not men who liked to be kept waiting or in the dark, and even Hearst would admit his theatrical cloak-and-dagger nonsense was bordering on childish.

Hearst extended his glass to the right. "Shall we retire to the Doge's Suite?"

William Randolph Hearst waited for no man. He strode from the room into the corridor, assuming they would follow.

The men did not look at each other as they exited the room, uncomfortable at being told what to do and preferring not to see that discomfort reflected in the eyes of the others. Inside the palatial suite, they automatically reached for their signature drinks and cigars. One reached for the gold letter opener as he sat down.

Hearst remained standing. "Enjoy your drink and your cigar, but please wait to open the

envelope,” he said, and waited for the man, whose face had creased in belligerence, to rein himself in and return the letter opener to its place of rest on the side table before continuing.

“What I have to say may shock, or even disturb some of you. But before I begin, I must insist that you agree to secrecy regarding the content of this meeting.” He looked at each man in turn until he received his nods of commitment, which were tinged with both interest and, now, distrust. These were not men used to committing to things they had not personally devised.

“I apologize, gentlemen,” said Hearst, sounding all but apologetic, “but I will require a verbal agreement from each of you.” He looked at Andrew Mellon to his left. “Andrew? Care to go first?” Andrew Mellon took a moment before saying, “I agree.” His statement seemed to loosen the tension and the rest of the men soon followed suit, ending with Harrold McCormack, on Hearst’s right.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Hearst said. “All of us have qualities in common, namely that we are incredibly wealthy, we are titans of our industries, and we have immense power as a direct result.”

There was some general shifting and preening at Hearst’s statement. It was well known that the more important the man, the more smoke he produced. Considering the clientele, the oxygen in the room was a commodity; like subjecting oneself to a relatively benign Cloquet fire.

“But,” Hearst continued, “what if I told you we each have one more thing in common? Something that ties us together--in a way, almost like family. Something only a handful of people outside this room could possibly understand. Certainly, very few could possibly know what it feels like to have the weight of the world on their shoulders. Corporations, employees, even whole governments, all depend on us to direct their lives. So I ask you: Where does that leave

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us?”

The question hung in the air for several uncomfortable seconds. “I’ll tell you where,” Hearst said, “Rich. Powerful. And alone. Because, as they say, gentlemen, it’s lonely at the top. Families, play things, all the little *asides*...while they have their place, who among us can say he is truly fulfilled? Who else but we, the chosen few, can truly grasp the raw need for purpose... excitement... the thrill of the chase?”

The silence in the room was uncomfortable. Hearst continued on. “Face it, gentlemen. We are an elite enclave that deserves more. More of everything we have built, owned, and controlled.” He looked at each man in turn. “In fact, what we really deserve is to feel alive again.”

Hearst waited for his words to sink in for a moment. The budding hunger in the room was palpable.

Finally, Rockefeller spoke. “Exactly what are you proposing, Hearst?”

Uncharacteristically, Hearst let the interruption slide. “What I propose, gentlemen, is that we do something daring. Something beyond bold, something we may each have secretly considered, but never spoken of aloud.” He paused until he felt tensions stretch to a breaking point. “And now, gentlemen, it’s time. You may open your envelopes.”



Each envelope contained one solitary piece of paper. On that paper was a list of names. Each name had a strange pseudonym next to it.

William Randolph Hearst - Mr. News

Mr. McCormick - Mr. Fly

Sir Jon Ellerman - Mr. Paper

Mr. Mellon - Mr. Treasure

Mr. Insull - Mr. Power

Mr. Wertheimer - Mr. Scent

Mr. Baumgartner - Mr. Vino

Mr. Ford - Mr. Motor

Mr. Rockefeller - Mr. Oil

“Gentlemen,” said Hearst theatrically. “Welcome to the Circle.”

The room buzzed. The men looked at the list, each other, and finally, back at Hearst, who waited for silence before speaking again.

“Listen carefully, gentlemen, for as of this moment your lives will never be the same. From this moment on, within the metaphorical walls of this organization I call the Circle you will go by the name that has been assigned to you. As you can see, my name is Mr. News. I expect you will each appreciate the care with which your name was selected to serve as homage to your lives of dedicated work.”

“Randolph,” sputtered Frank Baumgartner, “what is this? Another social club? I don’t have the time to join another damn club. I don’t even have time for the tennis club--for which I’m paying astronomical dues.”

“Mr. Vino,” Hearst said, his voice clipped. “Be assured. This is no social club. And please, I must insist you call me Mr. News.” Baumgartner rolled his eyes ever so slightly. Hearst

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noted it, but chose not to address it. As the men would soon see, any misgivings they had became irrelevant the moment they had agreed to be here. “The Circle will indulge our deepest desires. Again, it is obvious that we have all the money and power to buy whatever we want. So, what is the one thing we do not have?”

Several heartbeats passed. No man daring enough to break the silence.

“The ability to preside over life and death.”

The room stilled.

“That’s right, gentlemen. In the Circle, we do one thing. We hunt.”

“Bull,” said Samuel Insull gruffly. “I can go on safari any time I please.” He looked around. “We all can.”

“Have any of you heard of Richard Connell?” Hearst said. “No? Well, Mr. Connell has written a most intriguing and inspiring short story called *The Most Dangerous Game*. Allow me to read you a passage.” Hearst withdrew from his side table a copy of the novella. “*‘I wanted an ideal animal to hunt,’ explained the general,*” he read. “*‘So I said: ‘What are the attributes of an ideal quarry?’ And the answer was of course: ‘It must have courage, cunning, and, above all, it must be able to reason.’*”

He paused to scan the faces of his colleagues, waiting for light to dawn. Henry Ford was the first. “You’re not...you can’t be... serious?”

“No, Mr. Motor?”

“Just to be clear. You’re actually saying you want us to hunt...*people*?”

“That, Mr. Motor, is precisely what I am suggesting.”

Many of the men were aghast.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” said Ford, throwing down his letter, “but I’m done here. Hearst? You’re insane.”

Rockefeller and Baumgartner stood up as well as if to join him.

“That’s quite far enough, gentlemen,” said Hearst. “Please take your seats.”

The room stilled once again. Men used to running the world don’t take kindly to being ordered about.

“I said,” said Hearst. “Take a seat.”

Ford and Rockefeller shared a long silent glance. A mutual understanding that it was better to indulge Hearst than to cross him. Slowly the men sat. Baumgartner followed suit.

“What exactly are you suggesting, Hearst?” said Insull.

“Not suggesting. Stating,” said Hearst. “It’s all very clear, really. The beauty of the Circle is in its simplicity. It’s quite easy, really. We hunt. People who have lost their *raison d’etre*. The thing that drives us all to feel the true essence of life. Something we have lost simply by having everything we want. Members of the Circle want that excitement in their lives and will rejoice in the knowledge that they have lived to see another day. They will be grateful for the opportunity, rather than expect each day to follow another with the same bland palette of the day before.”

“Let’s just say we were interested,” Ford replied. “About whom, precisely, are you suggesting we hunt?”

Hearst looked at Ford, then around the room. “Why, I should think that would be obvious by now. Each other, of course.”

Instantly the room exploded in collective outrage. The men were at the door in seconds.

Hearst let them reach the locked door and benevolently gifted them with the time to

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assimilate the situation.

It was Mr. Baumgartner who spoke first, his face pale and cheeks blotchy. “You can’t be serious, Hearst. I insist upon leaving this instant.”

Hearst held open his hands. “That might not be your best option, Mr. Vino. Seeing as of the moment you leave this room you will no longer be the hunter, but the prey.”

Baumgartner sat back into his chair with a thud and re-lit his cigar with shaking hands.

“Wouldn’t you all like to know that your lives mean more than work? Wouldn’t you like to experience the thrill of the hunt and the glory of the kill? But not some unsuspecting animal, a man. A man that can challenge you, that can fight back.”

From the back corner, still in his seat, Wertheimer spoke up. “I’m in,” he said.

“You’re what?” said Andrew Mellon. “You’re actually agreeing to this...this...lunacy?”

Wertheimer did not rise to the bait. “Take a look at your life Mr. Treasure. Can you honestly tell me you are fulfilled by the average trappings of life? Your family? Your job? This is a chance to have purpose again. But,” he added, turning to Hearst. “Ground rules need to be established.”

“Of course, Mr. Scent. I have been working on that myself, but I’m listening,” Hearst replied.

“First of all, there would need to be more than nine of us, or this endeavor won’t change the world, it will just kill us off one by one.”

“Agreed,” Hearst conceded. “We’ll need to recruit additional members. Like-minded individuals like us.”

“That wouldn’t work,” Samuel Insull said. “We need members that *aren’t* like us.”

Common men. But why would any common man choose to risk his life to be a part of such an organization?”

“Why, wealth, of course, Mr. Power,” said Hearst. “Access to limitless wealth in exchange for their willingness to enter into our little game.”

The men that had remained standing gradually returned to their seats at this suggestion. A conversation ensued, a long conversation. Each member succumbed to their new monikers over the hours they spent discussing.

Over time, rules were established. Safe houses and furloughs were instituted. They debated late into the morning hours. Just before daybreak they reached an accord. Hearst stood and raised his glass, “To the Circle!” he announced.

“The Circle!” the men replied.

“To Hearst!” Wertheimer added. “To Mr. News!”

“To Mr. News!”

The sun rose on a new day. The dawning of the Circle had come.