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Introduction

ONE WINTRY AFTERNOON in February 1891, three men were engaged in earnest conversation in London. From that conversation were to flow consequences of the greatest importance to the British Empire and to the world as a whole. For these men were organizing a secret society that was, for more than fifty years, to be one of the most important forces in the formulation and execution of British imperial and foreign policy.

The three men who were thus engaged were already well known in England. The leader was Cecil Rhodes, fabulously wealthy empire-builder and the most important person in South Africa. The second was William T. Stead, the most famous, and probably also the most sensational, journalist of the day. The third was Reginald Baliol Brett, later known as Lord Esher, friend and confidant of Queen Victoria, and later to be the most influential adviser of King Edward VII and King George V.

The details of this important conversation will be examined later. At present we need only point out that the three drew up a plan of organization for their secret society and a list of original members. The plan of organization provided for an inner circle, to be known as "The Society of the Elect," and an outer circle, to be known as "The Association of Helpers." Within The Society of the Elect, the real power was to be exercised by the leader, and a "Junta of Three." The leader was to be Rhodes, and the Junta was to be Stead, Brett, and Alfred Milner. In accordance with this decision, Milner was added to the society by Stead shortly after the meeting we have described.¹

The creation of this secret society was not a matter of a moment. As we shall see, Rhodes had been planning for this event for more than seventeen years. Stead had been introduced to the plan on 4 April 1889, and Brett had been told of it on 3 February 1890. Nor was the society thus founded an ephemeral thing, for, in modified form, it exists to this day. From 1891 to 1902, it was known to only a score of per-