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Chapter 22 - A Breath From The East

Inspector Jacks was a man who had succeeded in his profession chiefly on account of an average amount of natural astuteness, and also because he was one of those favored persons whose nervous system was a whole and perfect thing. Yet, curiously enough, as he sat in this large, gloomy apartment into which he had been shown, a room filled with art treasures whose appearance and significance were entirely strange to him, he felt a certain uneasiness which he was absolutely unable to understand. He was somewhat instinctive in his likes and dislikes, and from the first he most heartily disliked the room itself,—its vague perfumes, its subdued violet coloring, the faces of the grinning idols, which seemed to meet his gaze in every direction, the pictures of those fierce-looking warriors who brandished two-edged swords at him from the walls. They belonged to the period when Japanese art was perhaps in its crudest state, and yet in this uncertain atmosphere they seemed to possess an extraordinary vitality, as though indeed they were prepared at a moment's notice to leap from their frames and annihilate this mysterious product of modern days, who in black clothes and silk hat, unarmed and without physical strength, yet wielded the powers of life and death as surely as they in their time had done.

The detective rose from his seat and walked around the room. He made a show of examining the arms against the walls, the brocaded hangings with their wonderful designs of faded gold, the ivory statuettes, the black god who sat on his haunches and into whose face seemed carved some dumb but eternal power. Movement was in some respects a solace, but the sound of a hansom bell tinkling outside was a much greater relief. He crossed to the windows and looked out over the somewhat silent square. A hurdy-gurdy was playing in the corner opposite the club, just visible from where he stood. The members were passing in and out. The commissioner stood stolidly in his place, raising every now and then his cab whistle to his lips. A flickering sunlight fell upon the wind-shaken lilac trees in the square enclosure. Inspector Jacks found himself wishing that the perfume of those lilacs might reach even to where he stood, and help him to forget for a moment that subtler and to him curiously unpleasant odors which all the time became more and more apparent. So overpowering did he feel it that he tried even to open the window, but found it an impossible task. The atmosphere seemed to him to be becoming absolutely stifling.

He turned around and walked uneasily toward the door. He decided then that this was some sort of gruesome nightmare with which he was afflicted. He was quite certain that in a few minutes he would wake in his little iron bedstead with the sweat upon his forehead and a reproachful consciousness of having eaten an indiscreet supper. It could not possibly be a happening in real life! It could not be true that his knees were sinking beneath the weight of his body, that the clanging of iron hammers was really smiting the drums of his ears, that the purple of the room was growing red, and that his veins were strained to bursting! He threw out his arms in a momentary instinct of fiercely struggling consciousness. The idols on the walls jeered at him. Those strangely clad warriors seemed to him now to be looking down upon his discomfiture with a satanic smile, mocking the pygmy who had dared to raise his hand against one so jealously guarded. Clang once more went the blacksmith's hammers, and then chaos! . . .

The end of the nightmare was not altogether according to Inspector Jacks' expectations. He found himself in a small back room, stretched upon a sofa before the open French-windows, through which came a pleasant vision of waving green trees and a pleasanter stream of fresh air. His first instinct was to sniff, and a sense of relief crept through him when he realized that this room, at any rate, was free from abnormal odors. He sat up on the couch. A pale-faced Japanese servant stood by his side with a glass in his hand. A few feet away, the man whom he had come to visit was looking down upon him with an expression of grave concern in his kindly face.

"You are better, I trust, sir?" Prince Maiyo said.

"I am better," Inspector Jacks muttered. "I don't know—I can't imagine what happened to me."

"You were not feeling quite well, perhaps, this morning," the Prince said soothingly. "A little run down, no doubt. Your profession—I gather from your card that you come from Scotland Yard—is an arduous one. I came into the room and found you lying upon your back, gasping for breath."

Inspector Jacks was making a swift recovery. He noticed that the glass which the man-servant was holding was empty. He had a dim recollection of something having been forced through his lips. Already he was beginning to feel himself again.

"I was absolutely and entirely well," he declared stoutly, "both when I left home this morning and when I entered that room to wait for you. I don't know what it was that came over me," he continued doubtfully, "but the atmosphere seemed suddenly to become unbearable."

Prince Maiyo nodded understandingly.

"People often complain," he admitted. "So many of my hangings in the room have been wrapped in spices to preserve them, and my people burn dead blossoms there occasionally. Some of us, too," he concluded, "are very susceptible to strange odors. I should imagine, perhaps, that you are one of them."

Inspector Jacks shook his head.

"I call myself a strong man," he said, "and I couldn't have believed that anything of the sort would have happened to me."

"I shouldn't worry about it," the Prince said gently. "Go and see your doctor, if you like, but I have known many people, perfectly healthy, affected in the same way. I understood that you wished to have a word with me. Do you feel well enough to enter upon your business now, or would you prefer to make another appointment?"

"I am feeling quite well again, thank you," the Inspector said slowly. "If you could spare me a few minutes, I should be glad to explain the matter which brought me here."

The Prince merely glanced at his servant, who bowed and glided noiselessly from the room. Then he drew an easy chair to the side of the couch where Mr. Jacks was still sitting.

"I am very much interested to meet you, Mr. Inspector Jacks," he remarked, with a glance at the card which he was still holding in his fingers. "I have studied very many of your English institutions during my stay over here with much interest, but it has not been my good fortune to have come into touch at all with your police system. Sir Goreham Briggs—your chief, I believe—has invited me several times to Scotland Yard, and I have always meant to avail myself of his kindness. You come to me, perhaps, from him?"

The Inspector shook his head.

"My business, Prince," he said, "is a little more personal."

Prince Maiyo raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed?" he said. "Well, whatever it is, let us hear it. I trust that I have not unconsciously transgressed against your laws?"

Inspector Jacks hesitated. After all, his was not so easy a task.

"Prince," he said, "my errand is not in any way a pleasant one, and I should be very sorry indeed to find myself in the position of bringing any annoyance upon a stranger and a gentleman who is so highly esteemed. At the same time there are certain duties in connection with my every-day life which I cannot ignore. In England, as I dare say you know, sir, the law is a great leveller. I have heard that it is not quite so in your country, but over here we all stand equal in its sight."

"That is excellent," the Prince said. "Please believe, Mr. Inspector Jacks, that I do not wish to stand for a single moment between you and your duty, whatever it may be. Let me hear just what you have to say, as though I were an ordinary dweller here. While I am in England, at any rate," he added with a smile, "I am subject to your laws, and I do my best to obey them."

"It has fallen to my lot," Inspector Jacks said, "to take charge of the investigations following upon the murder of a man named Hamilton Fynes, who was killed on his way from Liverpool to London about a fortnight ago."

The Prince inclined his head.

"I believe," he said amiably, "that I remember hearing the matter spoken of. It was the foundation of a debate, I recollect, at a recent dinner party, as to the extraordinarily exaggerated value people in your country seem to claim for human life, as compared to us Orientals. But pray proceed, Mr. Inspector Jacks," the Prince continued courteously. "The investigation, I am sure, is in most able hands."

"You are very kind, sir," said the Inspector. "I do my best, but I might admit to you that I have never found a case so difficult to grasp. Our methods perhaps are slow, but they are, in a sense, sure. We are building up our case, and we hope before long to secure the criminal, but it is not an easy task."

The Prince bowed. This time he made no remark.

"The evidence which I have collected from various sources," Inspector Jacks continued, "leads me to believe that the person who committed this murder was a foreigner."

"What you call an alien," the Prince suggested. "There is much discussion, I gather, concerning their presence in this country nowadays."

"The evidence which I possess," the detective proceeded, "points to the murderer belonging to the same nationality as Your Highness."

The Prince raised his eyebrows.

"A Japanese?" he asked.

The Inspector assented.

"I am sorry," the Prince said, with a touch of added gravity in his manner, "that one of my race should have committed a misdemeanor in this country, but if that is so, your way, of course, is clear. You must arrest him and deal with him as an ordinary English criminal. He is here to live your life, and he must obey your laws."

"In time, sir," Inspector Jacks said slowly, "we hope to do so, but over here we may not arrest upon suspicion. We have to collect evidence, and build and build until we can satisfy any reasonable individual that the accused person is guilty."

The Prince sighed sympathetically.

"It is not for me," he said, "to criticize your methods."

"I come now," Inspector Jacks said slowly, "to the object of my call upon Your Highness. Following upon what I have just told you, certain other information has come into my possession to this effect--that not only was this murderer a Japanese, but we have evidence which seems to suggest that he was attached in some way to your household."

"To my household!" the Prince repeated.

"To this household, Your Highness," the detective repeated.

The Prince shook his head slowly.

"Mr. Jacks," he said, "you are, I am sure, a very clever man. Let me ask you one question. Has it ever fallen to your lot to make a mistake?"

"Very often indeed," the Inspector admitted frankly.

"Then I am afraid," the Prince said, "that you are once more in that position. I have attached to my household fourteen Japanese servants, a secretary, a majordomo, and a butler. It may interest you, perhaps, to know that during my residence in this country not one of my retinue, with the exception of my secretary, who has been in Paris for some weeks, has left this house."

The Inspector stared at the Prince incredulously.

"Never left the house?" he repeated. "Do you mean, sir, that they do not go out for holidays, for exercise, to the theatre?"

The Prince shook his head.

"Such things are not the custom with us," he said. "They are my servants. The duty of their life is service. London is a world unknown to them--London and all these Western cities. They have no desire to be made mock of in your streets. Their life is given to my interests. They do not need distractions."

Inspector Jacks was dumfounded. Such a state of affairs seemed to him impossible.

"Do you mean that they do not take exercise," he asked, "that they never breathe the fresh air?"

The Prince smiled.

"Such fresh air as your city can afford them," he said, "is to be found in the garden there, into which I never penetrate and which is for their use. I see that you look amazed, Mr. Inspector Jacks. This thing which I have told you seems strange, no doubt, but you must not confuse the servants of my country with the servants of yours. I make no comment upon the latter. You know quite well what they are; so do I. With us, service is a religion,--service to country and service to master. These men who perform the duties of my household would give their lives for me as cheerfully as they would for their country, should the occasion arise."

"But their health?" the Inspector protested. "It is not, surely, well for them to be herded together like this?"

The Prince smiled.

"I am not what is called a sportsman in this country, Mr. Inspector Jacks," he said, "but you shall go to the house of any nobleman you choose, and if you will bring me an equal number of your valets or footmen or chefs, who can compete with mine in running or jumping or wrestling, then I will give you a prize what you will--a hundred pounds, or more. You see, my servants have learned the secret of diet. They drink nothing save water. Sickness is unknown to them."

The Inspector was silent for some time. Then he rose to his feet.

"Prince," he said, "what should you declare, then, if I told you that a man of obvious Japanese extraction was seen to enter your house on the morning after the murder, and that he was a person to whom certain circumstances pointed as being concerned in that deed?"

"Mr. Inspector Jacks," the Prince said calmly, "I was the only person of my race who entered my house that morning."

The Inspector moved toward the door.

"Your Highness," he said gravely, "I am exceedingly obliged to you for your courteous attention, and for your kindness after my unfortunate indisposition."

The Prince smiled graciously.

"Mr. Inspector Jacks," he said, "your visit has been of great interest to me. If I can be of any further assistance, pray do not hesitate to call upon me."