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Chapter 23 - On The Trail

Inspector Jacks studied the brass plate for a moment, and then rang the patients' bell. The former, he noticed was very much in want of cleaning, and for a doctor's residence there was a certain lack of smartness about the house and its appointments which betokened a limited practice. The railing in front was broken, and no pretence had been made at keeping the garden in order. Inspector Jacks had time to notice these things, for it was not until after his second summons that the door was opened by Dr. Whiles himself.

"Good morning!" the latter said tentatively. Then, with a slight air of disappointment, he recognized his visitor.

"Good morning, doctor!" Inspector Jacks replied. "You haven't forgotten me, I hope? I came down to see you a short time ago, respecting the man who was knocked down by a motor car and treated by you on a certain evening."

The doctor nodded.

"Will you come in?" he asked.

He led the way into a somewhat dingy waiting room. A copy of the FIELD, a month old, a dog-eared magazine, and a bound volume of GOOD WORDS were spread upon the table. The room itself, except for a few chairs, was practically bare.

"I do not wish to take up too much of your time, Dr. Whiles," the Inspector began,--

The doctor laughed shortly.

"You needn't bother about that," he said. "I'm tired of making a bluff. My time isn't any too well occupied."

The Inspector glanced at his watch,--it was a few minutes past twelve.

"If you are really not busy," he said, "I was about to suggest to you that you should come back to town with me and lunch. I do not expect, of course, to take up your day for nothing," he continued. "You will understand, as a professional man, that when your services are required by the authorities, they expect and are willing to pay for them."

"But what use can I be to you?" the doctor asked. "You know all about the man whom I fixed up on the night of the murder. There's nothing more to tell you about that. I'd as soon go up to town and lunch with you as not, but if you think that I've anything more to tell you, you'll only be disappointed."

The Inspector nodded.

"I'm quite content to run the risk of that," he said. "Of course," he continued, "it does not follow in the least that this person was in any way connected with the murder. In fact, so far as I can tell at present, the chances are very much against it. But at the same time it would interest my chief if you were able to identify him."

The doctor nodded.

"I begin to understand," he said.

"If you will consider a day spent up in town equivalent to the treatment of twenty-five patients at your ordinary scale," Inspector Jacks said, "I shall be glad if you would accompany me there by the next train. We will lunch together first, and look for our friend later in the afternoon."

The doctor did not attempt to conceal the fact that he found this suggestion entirely satisfactory. In less than half an hour, the two men were on their way to town.

Curiously enough, Penelope and Prince Maiyo met that morning for the first time in several days. They were both guests of the Duchess of Devenham at a large luncheon party at the Savoy Restaurant. Penelope felt a little shiver when she saw him coming down the stairs. Somehow or other, she had dreaded this meeting, yet when it came, she knew that it was a relief. There was no change in his manner, no trace of anxiety in his smooth, unruffled face. He seemed, if possible, to have grown younger, to walk more buoyantly. His eyes met hers frankly, his smile was wholly unembarrassed. It was not possible for a man to bear himself thus who stood beneath the great shadow!

So far from avoiding her, he came over to her side directly he had greeted his hostess.

"This morning," he said, "I heard some good news. You are to be a fellow guest at Devenham."

"I am afraid," she admitted, "that of my two aunts I impose most frequently upon the one where my claims are the slightest. The Duchess is so good-natured."

"She is charming," the Prince declared. "I am looking forward to my visit immensely. I think I am a little weary of London. A visit to the country seems to me most delightful. They tell me, too, that your spring gardens are wonderful. What London suffers from, I think, at this time of the year, is a lack of flowers. We want something to remind us that the spring is coming, besides these occasional gleams of blue sky and very occasional bursts of sunshine."

"You are a sentimentalist, Prince," she declared, smiling.

"No, I think not," he answered seriously. "I love all beautiful things. I think that there are many men as well as women who are like that. Shall I be very rude and say that in

the matter of climate and flowers one grows, perhaps, to expect a little more in my own country."

An uncontrollable impulse moved her. She leaned a little towards him.

"Climate and flowers only?" she murmured. "What about the third essential?"

"Miss Penelope," he said under his breath, "I have to admit that one must travel further afield for Heaven's greatest gift. Even then one can only worship. The stars are denied to us."

The Duchess came sailing over to them.

"Every one is here," she said. "I hope that you are all hungry. After lunch, Prince, I want you to speak to General Sherrif. He has been dying to meet you, to talk over your campaign together in Manchuria. There's another man who is anxious to meet you, too,--Professor Spenlove. He has been to Japan for a month, and thinks about writing a book on your customs. I believe he looks to you to correct his impressions."

"So long as he does not ask me to correct his proofs!" the Prince murmured.

"That is positively the most unkind thing I have ever heard you say," the Duchess declared. "Come along, you good people. Jules has promised me a new omelet, on condition that we sit down at precisely half-past one. If we are five minutes late, he declines to send it up."

They took their places at the round table which had been reserved for the Duchess of Devenham,--not very far, Penelope remembered, from the table at which they had sat for dinner a little more than a fortnight ago. The recollection of that evening brought her a sudden realization of the tragedy which seemed to have taken her life into its grip. Again the Prince sat by her side. She watched him with eyes in which there was a gleam sometimes almost of horror. Easy and natural as usual, with his pleasant smile and simple speech, he was making himself agreeable to one of the older ladies of the party, to whom, by chance, no one had addressed more than a word or so. It was always the same--always like this, she realized, with a sudden keen apprehension of this part of the man's nature. If there was a kindness to be done, a thoughtful action, it was not only he who did it but it was he who first thought of it. The papers during the last few days had been making public an incident which he had done his best to keep secret. He had signalized his arrival in London, some months ago, by going overboard from a police boat into the Thames to rescue a half-drunken lighterman, and when the Humane Society had voted him their medal, he had accepted it only on condition that the presentation was private and kept out of the papers. It was not one but fifty kindly deeds which stood to his credit. Always with the manners of a Prince--gracious, courteous, and genial--never a word had passed his lips of evil towards any human being. The barriers today between the smoking room and the drawing room are shadowy things, and she knew very well that he was held in a somewhat curious respect by men, as a person to whom it was impossible to tell a story in which there was any shadow of indelicacy. The ways of the so-called man of world seemed in his presence as though they must be the ways of some creature of a different and a lower stage of existence. A young man whom he had once corrected had christened him, half jestingly, Sir Galahad, and certainly his life in London, a life which had to bear all the while the test of the limelight, had appeared to merit some such title. These thoughts chased one another through her mind as she looked at him and marvelled. Surely those other things must be part of a bad nightmare! It was not possible that such a man could be associated with wrong-doing--such manner of wrong-doing!

Even while these thoughts passed through her brain, he turned to talk to her, and she felt at once that little glow of pleasure which the sound of his voice nearly always evoked.

"I am looking forward so much," he said, "to my stay at Devenham. You know, it will not be very much longer that I shall have the opportunity of accepting such invitations."

"You mean that the time is really coming when we shall lose you?" she asked suddenly.

"When my work is finished, I return home," he answered. "I fancy that it will not be very long now."

"When you do leave England," she asked after a moment's pause, "do you go straight to Japan?"

He bowed.

"With the Continent I have finished," he said. "The cruiser which His Majesty has sent to fetch me waits even now at Southampton."

"You speak of your work," she remarked, "as though you had been collecting material for a book."

He smiled.

"I have been busy collecting information in many ways," he said,--"trying to live your life and feel as you feel, trying to understand those things in your country, and in other countries too, which seem at first so strange to us who come from the other side of the East."

"And the end of it all?" she asked.

His eyes gleamed for a moment with a light which she did not understand. His smile was tolerant, even genial, but his face remained like the face of a sphinx.

"It is for the good of Japan I came," he said, "for her good that I have stayed here so long. At the same time it has been very pleasant. I have met with great kindness."

She leaned a little forward so as to look into his face. The impassivity of his features was like a wall before her.

"After all," she said, "I suppose it is a period of probation. You are like a schoolboy already who is looking forward to his holidays. You will be very happy when you return."

"I shall be very happy indeed," he admitted simply. "Why not?" I am a true son of Japan, and, for every true son of his country, absence from her is as hard a thing to be borne as absence from one's own family."

Somerfield, who was sitting on her other side, insisted at last upon diverting her attention.

"Penelope," he declared, lowering his voice a little, "it isn't fair. You never have a word to say to me when the Prince is here."

She smiled.

"You must remember that he is going away very soon, Charlie," she reminded him.

"Good job, too!" Somerfield muttered, sotto voce.

"And then," Penelope continued, with the air of not having heard her companion's last remark, "he possesses also a very great attraction. He is absolutely unlike any other human being I ever met or heard of."

Somerfield glanced across at his rival with lowering brows.

"I've nothing to say against the fellow," he remarked, "except that it seems queer nowadays to run up against a man of his birth who is not a sportsman,--in the sense of being fond of sport, I mean," he corrected himself quickly.

"Sometimes I wonder," Penelope said thoughtfully, "whether such speeches as the one which you have just made do not indicate something totally wrong in our modern life. You, for instance, have no profession, Charlie, and you devote your life to a systematic course of what is nothing more or less than pleasure-seeking. You hunt or you shoot, you play polo or golf, you come to town or you live in the country, entirely according to the seasons. If any one asked you why you had not chosen a profession, you would as good as tell them that it was because you were a rich man and had no need to work for your living. That is practically what it comes to. You Englishmen work only if you need money. If you do not need money, you play. The Prince is wealthy, but his profession was ordained for him from the moment when he left the cradle. The end and aim of his life is to serve his country, and I believe that he would consider it sacrilege if he allowed any slighter things to divert at any time his mind from its main purpose. He would feel like a priest who has broken his ordination vows."

"That's all very well," Somerfield said coolly, "but there's nothing in life nowadays to make us quite so strenuous as that."

"Isn't there?" Penelope answered. "You are an Englishman, and you should know. Are you convinced, then, that your country today is at the height of her prosperity, safe and sound, bound to go on triumphant, prosperous, without the constant care of her men?"

Somerfield looked up at her in growing amazement.

"What on earth's got hold of you, Penelope?" he asked. "Have you been reading the sensational papers, or stuffing yourself up with jingoism, or what?"

She laughed.

"None of those things, I can assure you," she said. "A man like the Prince makes one think, because, you see, every standard of life we have is a standard of comparison. When one sees the sort of man he is, one wonders. When one sees how far apart he is from you Englishmen in his ideals and the way he spends his life, one wonders again."

Somerfield shrugged his shoulders.

"We do well enough," he said. "Japan is the youngest of the nations. She has a long way to go to catch us up."

"We do well enough!" she repeated under her breath. "There was a great city once which adopted that as her motto,--people dig up mementoes of her sometimes from under the sands."

Somerfield looked at her in an aggrieved fashion.

"Well," he said, "I thought that this was to be an amusing luncheon party."

"You should have talked more to Lady Grace," she answered. "I am sure that she is quite ready to believe that you are perfection, and the English army the one invincible institution in the world. You mustn't take me too seriously today, Charlie. I have a headache, and I think that it has made me dull." . . .

They trooped out into the foyer in irregular fashion to take their coffee. The Prince and Penelope were side by side.

"What I like about your restaurant life," the Prince said, "is the strange mixture of classes which it everywhere reveals."

"Those two, for instance," Penelope said, and then stopped short.

The Prince followed her slight gesture. Inspector Jacks and Dr. Spencer Whiles were certainly just a little out of accord with their surroundings. The detective's clothes were too new and his companion's too old. The doctor's clothes indeed were as shabby as his waiting room, and he sat where the sunlight was merciless.

"How singular," the Prince remarked with a smile, "that you should have pointed those two men out! One of them I know, and, if you will excuse me for a moment, I should like to speak to him."

Penelope was not capable of any immediate answer. The Prince, with a kindly and yet gracious smile, walked over to Inspector Jacks, who rose at once to his feet.

"I hope you have quite recovered, Mr. Inspector," the Prince said, holding out his hand in friendly fashion. "I have felt very guilty over your indisposition. I am sure that I keep my rooms too close for English people."

"Thank you, Prince," the Inspector answered, "I am perfectly well again. In fact, I have not felt anything of my little attack since."

The Prince smiled.

"I am glad," he said. "Next time you are good enough to pay me a visit, I will see that you do not suffer in the same way."

He nodded kindly and rejoined his friends. The Inspector resumed his seat and busied himself with relighting his cigar. He purposely did not even glance at his companion.

"Who was that?" the doctor asked curiously. "Did you call him Prince?"

Inspector Jacks sighed. This was a disappointment to him!

"His name is Prince Maiyo," he said slowly. "He is a Japanese."

The doctor looked across the restaurant with puzzled face.

"It's queer," he said, "how all these Japanese seem to one to look so much alike, and yet--"

He broke off in the middle of his sentence.

"You are thinking of your friend of the other night?" the Inspector remarked.

"I was," the doctor admitted. "For a moment it seemed to me like the same man with a different manner."

Inspector Jacks was silent. He puffed steadily at his cigar.

"You don't suppose," he asked quietly, "that it could have been the same man?"

The doctor was still looking across the room.

"I could not tell," he said. "I should like to see him again. I wasn't prepared, and there was something so altered in his tone and the way he carried himself. And yet--"

The pause was expressive. Inspector Jacks' eyes brightened. He hated to feel that his day had been altogether wasted.