

Literature.org:
[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Illustrious Prince](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 25 - Hobson's Choice

There were some days when the absence of patients seemed to Dr. Spencer Whiles a thing almost insupportable. Too late he began to realize that he had set up in the wrong neighborhood. In years to come, he reflected gloomily, when the great building estate which was to have been developed more than a year ago was really opened up, there might be an opportunity where he was, a very excellent opportunity, too, for a young doctor of ability. Just now, however, the outlook was almost hopeless. He found himself even looking eagerly forward every day for another visit from Mr. Inspector Jacks. Another trip to town would mean a peep into the world of luxury, whose doors were so closely barred against him, and, what was more important still, it would mean a fee which would keep the wolf from the door for another week. It had come to that with Dr. Whiles. His little stock of savings was exhausted. Unless something turned up within the course of the next few weeks, he knew very well that there was nothing left for him to do but to slip away quietly into the embrace of the more shady parts of the great city, to find a situation somewhere, somehow, beyond the ken of the disappointed creditors whom he would leave behind.

Mr. Inspector Jacks, however, had apparently no further use, for the present at any rate, for his medical friend. On the other hand, Dr. Spencer Whiles was not left wholly to himself. On the fourth day after his visit to London a motor car drew up outside his modest surgery door, and with an excitement which he found it almost impossible to conceal, he saw a plainly dressed young man, evidently a foreigner and, he believed, a Japanese, descend and ring the patients' bell. The doctor had dismissed his boy a week ago, from sheer inability to pay his modest wages, and he did not hesitate for a moment about opening the door himself. The man outside raised his hat and made him a sweeping bow.

"It is Dr. Spencer Whiles?" he asked.

The doctor admitted the fact and invited his visitor to enter.

"It is here, perhaps," the latter continued, "that a gentleman who was riding a bicycle and was run into by a motor car, was brought after the accident and treated so skilfully?"

"That is so," Dr. Whiles admitted. "There was nothing much the matter with him. He had rather a narrow escape."

"I am that gentleman's servant," the visitor continued with a bland smile. "He has sent me down here to see you. The leg which was injured is perfectly well, but there was a pain in the side of which he spoke to you, which has not disappeared. This morning, in fact, it is worse,--much worse. My master, therefore, has sent me to you. He begs that if it is not inconvenient you will return with me at once and examine him."

The doctor drew a little breath. This might mean another week or so of respite!

"Where does your master live?" he asked the man.

"In the West end of London, sir," was the reply. "The Square of St. James it is called."

Dr. Whiles glanced at his watch.

"It will take me some time to go there with you," he said, "and I shall have to arrange with a friend to treat any other patients. Do you think your master will understand that I shall need an increased fee?"

"My master desired me to say," the other answered, "that he would be prepared to pay any fee you cared to mention. Money is not of account with him. He has not had occasion to seek medical advice in London, and as he is leaving very soon, he did not wish to send for a strange physician. He remembered with gratitude your care of him, and he sends for you"

"That's all right," Dr. Whiles declared, "so long as it's understood. You'll excuse me for a moment while I write a note, and I'll come along."

Dr. Whiles had no note to write, but he made a few changes in his toilet which somewhat improved his appearance. In due course he reappeared and was rapidly whirled up to London, the sole passenger in the magnificent car. The man who had brought him the message from his quondam patient was sitting in front, next the chauffeur, so Dr. Whiles had no opportunity of asking him for any information concerning his master. Nor did the car itself slacken speed until it drew up before the door of the large corner house in St. James' Square. A footman in dark livery came running out; a butler bowed upon the steps. Dr. Spencer Whiles was immensely impressed. The servants were all Japanese, but their livery and manners were faultless. He made his way into the hall and followed the butler up the broad stairs.

"My master," the latter explained, "will receive you very shortly. He is but party dressed at present."

Dr. Spencer Whiles came of a family of successful tradespeople, and he was not used to such quiet magnificence as was everywhere displayed. Yet, with it all, there seemed to him to be an air of gloom about the place, something almost mysterious in the silence of the thick carpets, the subdued voices, and the absence of maidservants. The house itself was apparently an old one. He noticed that the doors were very heavy and thick, the corridors roomy, the absence of light almost remarkable. The apartment into which he was shown, however, came as a pleasant surprise. It was small, but delightfully furnished in the most modern fashion. Its only drawback was that it looked out upon a blank wall.

"My master will come to you in a few minutes," the butler announced. "What refreshments may I have the honor of serving?"

Dr. Whiles waved aside the invitation,--he would at any rate remain professional. The man withdrew, and almost immediately afterwards Prince Maiyo entered the room. The doctor rose to his feet with a little thrill of excitement. The Prince held out his hand.

"I am very pleased to see you again, doctor," he said. "You looked after me so well last time that I was afraid I should have no excuse for sending for you."

"I am glad to find that you are not suffering," the doctor answered. "I understood from your servant that you were feeling a good deal of pain in the side."

"It troubles me at times," the Prince admitted, drawing a chair up towards his visitor,--"just sufficiently, perhaps, to give me the excuse of seeking a little conversation with you. You must let me offer you something after your ride."

"You are very good," the doctor answered. "Perhaps I had better examine you first."

The Prince rang the bell and waved aside the suggestion.

"That," he said, "can wait. In my country, you know, we do not consider that a guest is properly treated unless he partakes of our hospitality the moment he crosses the threshold. The whiskey and soda water," he ordered of the butler who appeared at the door. "We will talk of my ailments," the Prince continued, "in a moment or two. Tell me what you thought of that marvellous restaurant where I saw you the other morning?"

The doctor drew a little breath.

"It was you, then!" he exclaimed.

"But naturally," the Prince murmured. "I took it for granted that you would recognize me."

The doctor found some difficulty in proceeding. He was trying to imagine the cousin of an Emperor riding a bicycle along a country road, staggering into his surgery at midnight, covered with dust, inarticulate, pointing only to the wounds beneath his cheap clothes!

"Nothing," the Prince continued easily, "has impressed me more in your country than the splendor of your restaurants. You see, that side of your life represents something we are altogether ignorant of in Japan."

"It is a very wonderful place," the doctor admitted. "We had luncheon, my friend and I, in the grillroom, but we came for a few minutes into the foyer to watch the people from the restaurant."

The Prince nodded genially.

"By the bye," he remarked, "it is strange that my very good friend--Mr. Inspector Jacks--should also be a friend of yours."

"He is scarcely that," the doctor objected. "I have known him for a very short time."

The Prince raised his eyebrows. The whiskey and soda were brought, and the doctor helped himself. How curiously deficient these Westerners were, the Prince thought, in every instinct of duplicity! As clearly as possible the doctor had revealed the fact that his acquaintance with Inspector Jacks was of precisely that nature which might have been expected.

The Prince sighed. There was but one course open to him.

"Now, Dr. Whiles," he said, "I will tell you something. You must listen to me very carefully, please. I sent for you not so much on account of any immediate pain but because my general health has been giving me a little trouble lately. I have come to the conclusion that I require the services of a medical attendant always at hand."

The doctor looked at his prospective patient skeptically.

"You have not the appearance," he remarked, "of being in ill health."

"Perhaps not," the Prince answered. "Perhaps even, there is not for the moment very much the matter with me. One has humors, you know, my dear doctor. I have a somewhat large suite here with me in England, but I do not number amongst them a physician. I wanted to ask you to accept that position in my household for two months."

"Do you mean come and live here?" the doctor asked.

"That is exactly what I do mean," the Prince answered. "I am thankful to observe that your apprehensions are so acute. I warn you that I am going to make some very curious conditions. I do not know whether money is an object to you. If not, I am powerless. If it is, I propose to make it worth your while."

The doctor did not hesitate.

"Money," he said, "is the greatest object in life to me. I have none, and I want some very badly."

The Prince smiled.

"I find your candor delightful," he declared. "Now tell me, Dr. Whiles, how many patients have you in your neighborhood absolutely dependent upon your services?"

The doctor hesitated, opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Not one!" he declared.

Once more the Prince's lips parted. His smile this time was definite, transfiguring.

"I find you, Dr. Whiles," he announced, "a most charmingly reasonable person. I make you my offer, then, with every confidence, although I warn you that there will be some strange conditions attached to it. I ask you to accept the post of private physician to this household for the space of one--it may be two months, and I offer you also, as an honorarium, the fee of one thousand guineas."

The doctor sat quite still for a moment. He was in a condition when speech was difficult. Then his eyes fell upon his tumbler of whiskey and soda still half filled. He emptied it at a draught.

"A thousand guineas!" he repeated hoarsely.

"I trust that you will find the sum attractive," the Prince said smoothly, "because, as I have warned you before, there are one or two curious conditions coupled with the post."

"I don't care what the conditions are," the doctor said slowly. "I accept!"

The Prince nodded.

"You are the man I thought you were, doctor," he said. "The first condition, then, is this. You see the sitting room we are now in--a pleasant little apartment, I think,--books, you see, papers, a smoking cabinet in which I can assure you that you will find the finest Havana cigars and the best cigarettes to be procured in London. Through here"--the Prince threw open an inner door--"is a small sleeping apartment. It has, as you see, the same outlook. It is comfortable if not luxurious."

The doctor sighed.

"I am not used to luxury," he said.

"These two rooms will be yours," the Prince announced, "and the first condition of our arrangement is that until two months are up, or our engagement is finished, you do not leave them."

The doctor stared at him blankly.

"Are you in earnest, sir?" he asked.

"In absolute earnest," the Prince assured him. "Not only that, but I require you to keep your whereabouts, until after the period of time I have mentioned, an entire secret from every one. I gather that you are not married, and that there is no one living in your house to whom it would seem necessary to disclose your movements. In any case, this is another of my conditions. You are neither to write nor receive any letters whilst here. You are to figure in the neighborhood from which you came as a man who has disappeared,--as a man, in short, who has found it impossible to pay his way and has preferred simply to slip out of his place. At the end of two months you can reappear or not, as you choose. That rests with yourself."

The doctor smiled faintly. To make some sort of disappearance had been his precise intention, but to disappear in this fashion and make his return to the world with a thousand guineas in his pocket, had not exactly come within the scope of his imagination. It was a situation full of allurements. Nevertheless he was bewildered.

"I am to live in these two rooms?" he demanded. "I am to let no one know where I am, to write no letters, to receive none? My duties are to be simply to treat you?"

"When required," the Prince remarked dryly.

"I suppose," the doctor asked, "my friend Mr. Jacks was speaking the truth when he told me your name?"

"My name is Prince Maiyo," the Prince said.

Mechanically the doctor helped himself to another whiskey and soda.

"You are to be my only patient," he said thoughtfully. "May I take the liberty of feeling your pulse, Prince?"

The Prince extended his hand. The doctor felt it and resumed his seat.

"There is, of course, nothing whatever the matter with you," he declared. "You are, I should say, in absolutely perfect health. You have no need of a physician."

"On the contrary," the Prince protested, smiling, "I need you, Dr. Whiles, so much that I am paying you a thousand guineas--"

"To remain in these two rooms," the doctor remarked quietly.

"It is not your business to think that or to know that," the Prince said. "Do you accept my offer?"

"If I should refuse?" the doctor asked.

The Prince hesitated.

"Do not let us suppose that," he said. "It is not a pleasant suggestion. I do not think that you mean to refuse."

"Frankly, I do not," the doctor answered. "And yet treat it as a whim of mine and answer my question. Supposing I should?"

"The matter would arrange itself in precisely the same way," the Prince answered. "You would not leave these rooms for two months."

The doctor leaned back in his chair and laughed shortly.

"This is rather hard luck on Inspector Jacks," he said. "He paid me ten guineas the other day to lunch with him."

"Mr. Inspector Jacks," the Prince remarked, "is scarcely in a position to bid you an adequate sum for your services."

"It appears to me," the doctor continued, "that I am kidnapped."

"An admirable word," the Prince declared. "At what time do you usually lunch?"

The doctor smiled.

"I am not used to motoring," he said, "or interviews of this exciting character. I lunch, as a rule, when I can get anything to eat. The present seems to me to be a most suitable hour."

The Prince nodded, and rose to his feet.

"I will send my servant," he said, "to take your orders. My cook is very highly esteemed here, and I can assure you that you will not be starved. Please also make out a list of the newspapers, magazines, and books with which you would like to be supplied. I fear that, for obvious reasons, my people would hardly be able to anticipate your wants."

"And about that examination?" the doctor remarked.

"I shall do myself the pleasure of seeing you every day," the Prince answered. "There will be time enough for that."

With an amiable word of farewell the Prince departed. The doctor threw himself into an easy chair. His single exclamation was laconic but forcible.