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Chapter 17 - A Gay Night In Paris

Mr. James B. Coulson was almost as much at home at the Grand Hotel, Paris, as he had been at the Savoy in London. His headquarters were at the American Bar, where he approved of the cocktails, patronized the highballs, and continually met fellow-countrymen with whom he gossiped and visited various places of amusement. His business during the daytime he kept to himself, but he certainly was possessed of a bagful of documents and drawings relating to sundry patents connected with the manufacture of woollen goods, the praises of which he was always ready to sing in a most enthusiastic fashion.

Mr. Coulson was not a man whose acquaintance it was difficult to make. From five to seven every afternoon, scorning the attractions of the band outside and the generally festive air which pervaded the great tea rooms, he sat at the corner of the bar upon an article of furniture which resembled more than anything else an office stool, dividing his attention between desultory conversation with any other gentleman who might be indulging in a drink, and watching the billiards in which some of his compatriots were usually competing. It was not, so far as one might judge, a strenuous life which Mr. Coulson was leading. He had been known once or twice to yawn, and he had somewhat the appearance of a man engaged in an earnest but at times not altogether successful attempt to kill time. Perhaps for that reason he made acquaintances with a little more than his customary freedom. There was a young Englishman, for instance, whose name, it appeared, was Gaynsforth, with whom, after a drink or two at the bar, he speedily became on almost intimate terms.

Mr. Gaynsforth was a young man, apparently of good breeding and some means. He was well dressed, of cheerful disposition, knew something about the woollen trade, and appeared to take a distinct liking to his new friend. The two men, after having talked business together for some time, arranged to dine together and have what they called a gay evening. They retired to their various apartments to change, Mr. Gaynsforth perfectly well satisfied with his progress, Mr. James B. Coulson with a broad grin upon his face.

After a very excellent dinner, for which Mr. Gaynsforth insisted upon paying, they went to the Folies Bergeres, where the Englishman developed a thirst which, considering the coolness of the evening, was nothing short of amazing. Mr. Coulson, however, kept pace with him steadily, and toward midnight their acquaintance had steadily progressed until they were certainly on friendly if not affectionate terms. A round of the supper places, proposed by the Englishman, was assented to by Mr. Coulson with enthusiasm. About three o'clock in the morning Mr. Coulson had the appearance of a man for whom the troubles of this world are over, and who was realizing the ecstatic bliss of a temporary Nirvana. Mr. Gaynsforth, on the other hand, although half an hour ago he had been boisterous and unsteady, seemed suddenly to have become once more the quiet, discreet-looking young Englishman who had first bowed to Mr. Coulson in the bar of the Grand Hotel and accepted with some diffidence his offer of a drink. To prevent his friend being jostled by the somewhat mixed crowd in which they then were, Mr. Gaynsforth drew nearer and nearer to him. He even let his hand stray over his person, as though to be sure that he was not carrying too much in his pockets.

"Say, old man," he whispered in his ear,--they were sitting side by side now in the Bal Tabarin,--"if you are going on like this, Heaven knows where you'll land at the end of it all! I'll look after you as well as I can,--where you go, I'll go--but we can't be together every second of the time. Don't you think you'd be safer if you handed over your pocketbook to me?"

"Right you are!" Mr. Coulson declared, falling a little over on one side. "Take it out of my pocket. Be careful of it now. There's five hundred francs there, and the plans of a loom which I wouldn't sell for a good many thousands."

Mr. Gaynsforth possessed himself quickly of the pocketbook, and satisfied himself that his friend's description of its contents was fairly correct.

"You've nothing else upon you worth taking care of?" he whispered. "You can trust me, you know. You haven't any papers, or anything of that sort?"

Then Mr. James B. Coulson, who was getting tired of his part, suddenly sat up, and a soberer man had never occupied that particular chair in the Bal Tabarin.

"And if I have, my young friend," he said calmly, "what the devil business is it of yours?"

Mr. Gaynsforth was taken aback and showed it. He recovered himself as quickly as possible, and realized that he had been living in a fool's paradise so far as the condition of his companion was concerned. He realized, also, that the first move in the game between them had been made and that he had lost.

"You are too good an actor for me, Mr. Coulson," he said. "Suppose we get to business."

"That's all right," Mr. Coulson answered. "Let's go somewhere where we can get some supper. We'll go to the Abbaye Theleme, and you shall have the pleasure of entertaining me."

Mr. Gaynsforth handed back the pocketbook and led the way out of the place without a word. It was only a few steps up the hill, and they found themselves then in a supper place of a very different class. Here Mr. Coulson, after a brief visit to the lavatory, during which he obliterated all traces of his recent condition, seated himself at one of the small flower-decked tables and offered the menu to his new friend.

"It's up to you to pay," he said, "so you shall choose the supper. Personally, I'm for a few oysters, a hot bird, and a cold bottle."

Mr. Gaynsforth, who was still somewhat subdued, commanded the best supper procurable on these lines. Mr. Coulson, having waved his hand to a few acquaintances and chaffed the Spanish dancing girls in their own language,--not a little to his companion's astonishment,--at last turned to business.

"Come," he said, "you and I ought to understand one another. You are over here from London either to pump me or to rob me. You are either a detective or a political spy or a secret service agent of some sort, or you are on a lay of your own. Now, put it in a business form, what can I do for you? Make your offer, and let's see where we are."

Mr. Gaynsforth began to recover himself. It did not follow, because he had made one mistake, that he was to lose the game.

"I am neither a detective, Mr. Coulson," he said, "nor a secret service agent,--in fact, I am nothing of that sort at all. I have a friend, however, who for certain reasons does

not care to approach you himself, but who is nevertheless very much interested in a particular event, or rather incident, in which you are concerned."

"Good!" Mr. Coulson declared. "Get right on."

"That friend," Mr. Gaynsforth continued calmly, "is prepared to pay a thousand pounds for full information and proof as to the nature of those papers which were stolen from Mr. Hamilton Fynes on the night of March 22nd."

"A thousand pounds," Mr. Coulson repeated. "Gee whiz!"

"He is also," the Englishman continued, "prepared to pay another thousand for a satisfactory explanation of the murder of Mr. Richard Vanderpole on the following day.

"Say, your friend's got the stuff!" Mr. Coulson remarked admiringly.

"My friend is not a poor man," Mr. Gaynsforth admitted. "You see, there's a sort of feeling abroad that these two things are connected. I am not working on behalf of the police. I am not working on behalf of any one who desires the least publicity. But I am working for some one who wants to know and is prepared to pay."

"That's a very interesting job you're on, and no mistake," Mr. Coulson declared. "I wonder you waste time coming over here on the spree when you've got a piece of business like that to look after." "I came over here," Mr. Gaynsforth replied, "entirely on the matter I have mentioned to you."

"What, over here to Paris?" Mr. Coulson exclaimed.

"Not only to Paris," the other replied dryly, "but to discover one Mr. James B. Coulson, whose health I now have the pleasure of drinking."

Mr. Coulson drained the glass which the waiter had just filled.

"Well, this licks me!" he exclaimed. "How any one in their senses could believe that there was any connection between me and Hamilton Fynes or that other young swell, I can't imagine."

"You knew Hamilton Fynes," Mr. Gaynsforth remarked. "That fact came out at the inquest. You appeared to have known him better than most men. Mr. Vanderpole had just left you when he was murdered,--that also came out at the inquest."

"Kind of queer, wasn't it," Mr. Coulson remarked meditatively, "how I seemed to get hung up with both of them? You may also remember that at the inquest Mr. Vanderpole's business with me was testified to by the chief of his department."

"Certainly," Mr. Gaynsforth answered. "However, that's neither here nor there. Everything was properly arranged, so far as you were concerned, of course. That doesn't alter my friend's convictions. This is a business matter with me, and if the two thousand pounds don't sound attractive enough, well, the amount must be revised, that's all. But I want you to understand this, Mr. Coulson, I represent a man or a syndicate, or call it what you will."

"Call it a Government," Mr. Coulson muttered under his breath.

"Call it what you will," Mr. Gaynsforth continued, with an air of not having heard the interruption, "we have the money and we want the information. You can give it to us if you like. We don't ask for too much. We don't even ask for the name of the man who committed these crimes. But we do want to know the nature of those papers, exactly what position Mr. Hamilton Fynes occupied in the Stamp and Excise Duty department at Washington, and, finally, what the mischief you are doing over here in Paris."

"Have you ordered the supper?" Mr. Coulson inquired anxiously.

"I have ordered everything you suggested," Mr. Gaynsforth answered, "--some oysters, a chicken en casserole, lettuce salad, some cheese, and a magnum of Pommery."

"It is understood that you are my host?" Mr. Coulson insisted.

"Absolutely," his companion declared. "I consider it an honor."

"Then," Mr. Coulson said, pointing out his empty glass to the SOMMELIER, "we may as well understand one another. To you I am Mr. James B. Coulson, travelling in patents for woollen machinery. If you put a quarter of a million of francs upon that table, I am still Mr. James B. Coulson, travelling in woollen machinery. And if you add a million to that, and pile up the notes so high that they touch the ceiling, I remain Mr. James B. Coulson, travelling in patents for woollen machinery. Now, if you'll get that firmly into your head and stick to it and believe it, there's no reason why you and I shouldn't have a pleasant evening."

Mr. Gaynsforth, although he was an Englishman and young, showed himself to be possessed of a sense of humor. He leaned back in his seat and roared with laughter.

"Mr. Coulson," he said, "I congratulate you and your employers. To the lower regions with business! Help yourself to the oysters and pass the wine."