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Chapter 24 - Prince Maiyo Bids High

Inspector Jacks was in luck at last. Eleven times he had called at St. Thomas's Hospital and received the same reply. Today he was asked to wait. The patient was better--would be able to see him. Soon a nurse in neat uniform came quietly down the corridor and took charge of him.

"Ten minutes, no more," she insisted good-humoredly.

The Inspector nodded.

"One question, if you please, nurse," he asked. "Is the man going to live?"

"Not a doubt about it," she declared. "Why?"

"A matter of depositions," the Inspector exclaimed. "I'd rather let it go, though, if he's sure to recover."

"It's a simple case," she answered, "and his constitution is excellent. There isn't the least need for your to think about depositions. Here he is. Don't talk too long."

The Inspector sat down by the bedside. The patient, a young man, welcomed him a little shyly.

"You have come to ask me about what I saw in Pall Mall and opposite the Hyde Park Hotel?" he said, speaking slowly and in a voice scarcely raised above a whisper. "I told them all before the operation, but they couldn't send for you then. There wasn't time."

The Inspector nodded.

"Tell me your own way," he said. "Don't hurry. We can get the particulars later on. Glad you're going to be mended."

"It was touch and go," the young man declared with a note of awe in his tone. "If the omnibus wheel had turned a foot more, I should have lost both my legs. It was all through watching that chap hop out of the taxicab, too."

The Inspector inclined his head gravely.

"You saw him get in, didn't you?" he asked.

"That's so," the patient admitted. "I was on my way--Charing Cross to the Kensington Palace Hotel, on a bicycle. There was a block--corner of Pall Mall and Haymarket. I caught hold--taxi in front--to steady me."

The nurse bent over him with a glass in her hand. She raised him a little with the other arm.

"Not too much of this, you know, young man," she said with a pleasant smile. "Here's something to make you strong."

"Right you are!"

He drained the contents of the glass and smacked his lips.

"Jolly good stuff," he declared. "Where was I, Mr. Inspector?"

"Holding the back of a taxicab, corner of Regent Street and Haymarket," Inspector Jacks reminded him.

The patient nodded.

"There was an electric brougham," he continued, drawn up alongside the taxi. While we were there, waiting, I saw a chap get out, speak to some one through the window of the taxi, open the door, and step in. When we moved on, he stayed in the taxi. Dark, slim chap he was," the patient continued, "a regular howling swell,--silk hat, white muffler, white kid gloves,--all the rest of it."

"And afterwards?" the Inspector asked.

"I kept behind the taxi," the youth continued. "We got blocked again at Hyde Park Corner. I saw him step out of the taxi and disappear amongst the vehicles. "A moment or two later, I passed the taxi and looked in--saw something had happened--the fellow was lying side-ways. It gave me a bit of a start. I skidded, and over I went. Sort of had an idea that every one in the world had started shouting to me, and felt that I was half underneath an omnibus. Woke up to find myself here."

"Should you know the man again?" the Inspector asked. "I mean the man whom you saw enter and leave the taxi?"

"I think so--pretty sure!"

The nurse came up, shaking her head. Inspector Jacks rose from his seat.

"Right, nurse," he said. "I'm off. Take care of our young friend. He is going to be very useful to us as soon as he can use his feet and get about. I'll come and sit with you for half an hour next visiting day, if I may?" he added, turning to the patient.

"Glad to see you," the youth answered. "My people live down in the country, and I haven't many pals."

Inspector Jacks left the hospital thoughtfully. The smell of anaesthetics somehow reminded him of the library in the house at the corner of St. James' Square. It was not altogether by chance, perhaps, that he found himself walking in that direction. He was in Pall Mall, in fact, before he realized where he was, and at the corner of St. James' Square and Pall Mall he came face to face with Prince Maiyo, walking slowly westwards.

The meeting between the two men was a characteristic one. The Inspector suffered no signs of surprise or even interest to creep into his expressionless face. The Prince, on the other hand, did not attempt to conceal his pleasure at this unexpected encounter. His lips parted in a delightful smile. He ignored the Inspector's somewhat stiff salute, and insisted upon shaking him cordially by the hand.

"Mr. Inspector Jacks," he said, "you are the one person whom I desired to see. You are not busy, I hope? You can talk with me for five minutes?"

The Inspector hesitated for a moment. He was versed in every form of duplicity, and yet he felt that in the presence of this young aristocrat, who was smiling upon him so delightfully, he was little more than a babe in wisdom, an amateur pure and simple. He was conscious, too, of a sentiment which rarely intruded itself into his affairs. He was conscious of a strong liking for this debonair, pleasant-faced young man, who treated him not only as an equal, but as an equal in whose society he found an especial pleasure.

"I have the time to spare, sir, certainly," he admitted.

The Prince smiled gayly.

"Inspector Jacks," he said, "you are a wonderful man. Even now you are asking yourself, What does he want to say to me--Prince Maiyo? Is he going to ask me questions, or will he tell me things which I should like to hear? You know, Mr. Inspector Jacks, between ourselves, you are just a little interested in me, is it not so?"

The detective was dumb. He stood there patiently waiting. He had the air of a man who declines to commit himself.

"Just a little interested in me, I think," the Prince murmured, smiling at his companion. "Ah, well, many of the things I do over here, perhaps, must seem very strange. And that reminds me. Only a short time ago you were asking questions about the man who travelled from Liverpool to London and reached his destination with a dagger through his heart. Tell me, Mr. Inspector Jacks, have you discovered the murderer yet?"

"Not yet," the detective answered.

"I have heard you speak of this affair," the Prince continued, "and before now I expected to read in the papers that you had put your hand upon the guilty one. If you have not done so, I am very sure that there is some explanation."

"It is better sometimes to wait," the detective said quietly.

"The Prince bowed as one who understands.

"I think so," he assented, "I think I follow you. On the very next day there was another tragedy which seemed to me even more terrible. I mean the murder of that young fellow Vanderpole, of the American Embassy. Mr. Inspector Jacks, has it ever occurred to you, I wonder, that it might be as well to let the solution of one await the solution of the other?"

Inspector Jacks shrugged his shoulders.

"Occasionally," he admitted reluctantly, "when one is following up a clue, one discovers things."

"You are wonderful!" the Prince declared. "You are, indeed! I know what is in your mind. You have said to yourself, Between these two murders there is some connection. They were both done by the hand of a master criminal. The victims in both cases were Americans.' You said to yourself, First of all, I will discover the motive; then, perhaps, a clue which seems to belong to the one will lead me to the other, or both?' You are not sure which way to turn. There is nothing there upon which you can lay your hand. You say to yourself, I will make a bluff.' That is the word, is it not? You come to me. You tell me gravely that you have reason to suspect some one in my household. That is because you believe that the crimes were perpetrated by some one of my country. You do not ask for information. You think, perhaps, that I would not give it. You confront me with a statement. It was very clever of you, Mr. Inspector Jacks."

"I had reason for what I did, sir," the detective said.

"No doubt," the Prince agreed. "And now, tell me, when are you going to electrify us all? When is the great arrest to take place?"

The detective coughed discreetly.

"I am not yet in a position, sir," he said, "to make any definite announcement."

"Cautious, Mr. Jacks, cautious!" the Prince remarked smilingly. "It is a great quality,--a quality which I, too, have learned how to appreciate. And now for our five minutes' talk. If I say to you, Return home with me,' I think you will remember that unpleasant room of mine, and you will recollect an important engagement at Scotland Yard. In the clubs one is always overheard. Walk with me a little way, Mr. Jacks, in St. James' Park. We can speak there without fear of interruption. Come!"

He thrust his arm through the detective's and led him across the street. Mr. Inspector Jacks was only human, and he yielded without protest. They passed St. James' Palace and on to the broad promenade, where there were few passers-by and no listeners.

"You see, my dear Inspector," the Prince said, "I am really a sojourner in your marvellous city not altogether for pleasure. My stay over here is more in the light of a mission. I have certain arrangements which I wish to effect for the good of my country. Amongst them is one concerning which I should like to speak to you."

"To me, sir?" Inspector Jacks repeated.

The Prince twirled his cane and nodded his head.

"It is a very important matter, Mr. Jacks," he said. "It is nothing less than a desire on the part of the city government of Tokio to perfect thoroughly their police system on the model of yours over here. We are a progressive nation, you know, Mr. Jacks, but we are also a young nation, and though I think that we advance all the time, we are still in many respects a long way behind you. We have no Scotland Yard in Tokio. To be frank with you, the necessity for such an institution has become a real thing with us only during the last few years. Do you read history, Mr. Jacks?"

The Inspector was doubtful.

"I can't say, sir," he admitted, "that I have done much reading since I left school, and that was many years ago."

"Well," the Prince said, "It is one of the axioms of history, Mr. Jacks, that as a country becomes civilized and consequently more prosperous, there is a corresponding growth in her criminal classes, a corresponding need for a different state of laws by which to judge them, a different machinery for checking their growth. We have arrived at that position in Japan, and in my latest despatches from home comes to me a request that I send them out a man who shall reorganize our entire police system. I am a judge of character, Mr. Jacks, and if I can get the man I want, I do not need to ask my friends at Downing Street to help me. I should like you to accept that post."

The Inspector was scarcely prepared for this. He allowed himself to show some surprise.

"I am very much obliged to you, Prince, for the offer," he said. "I am afraid, however, that I should not be competent."

"That," the Prince reminded him, "is a risk which we are willing to take."

"I do not think, either," the detective continued, "that at my time of life I should care to go so far from home to settle down in an altogether strange country,."

"It must be as you will, of course," the Prince declared. "Only remember, Mr. Jacks, that a great nation like mine which wants a particular man for a particular purpose is not afraid to pay for him. Your work out there would certainly take you no more than three years. For that three years' work you would receive the sum of thirty thousand pounds."

The detective gasped.

"It is a great sum," he said.

The Prince shrugged his shoulders.

"You could hardly call it that," he said. "Still, it would enable you to live in comfort for the rest of your life."

"And when should I be required to start, sir?" the Inspector asked.

"That, perhaps," the Prince replied, "would seem the hardest part of all. You would be required to start tomorrow afternoon from Southampton at four o'clock."

The Inspector started. Then a new light dawned suddenly in his face.

"Tomorrow afternoon," he murmured.

The Prince assented.

"So far as regards your position at Scotland Yard," he said, "I have influential friends in your Government who will put that right for you. You need not be afraid of any unpleasantness in that direction. Remember, Mr. Inspector, thirty thousand pounds, and a free hand while you are in my country. You are a man, I should judge, of fifty-two or fifty-three years of age. You can spend your fifty-sixth birthday in England, then, and be a man of means for the remainder of your days."

"And this sum of money," the detective said, "is for my services in building up the police force of Tokio?"

"Broadly speaking, yes!" the Prince answered.

"And incidentally," the detective continued, glancing cautiously at his companion, "it is the price of my leaving unsuspected the murderer of two innocent men!"

The Prince walked on in silence. Every line in his face seemed slowly to have hardened. His brows had contracted. He was looking steadfastly forward at the great front of Buckingham Palace.

"I am disappointed in you, Mr. Jacks," he said a little stiffly. "I do not understand your allusion. The money I have mentioned is to be paid to you for certain well-defined services. The other matter you speak of does not interest me. It is no concern of mine whether this man of whom you are in search is brought to justice or not. All that I wish to hear from you is whether or not you accept my offer."

The Inspector shook his head.

"Prince," he said, "there can be no question about that. I thank you very much for it, but I must decline."

"Your mind is quite made up?" the Prince asked regretfully.

"Quite," the Inspector said firmly.

"Japan," the Prince said thoughtfully, "is a pleasant country."

"London suits me moderately well," Inspector Jacks declared.

"Under certain conditions," the Prince continued, "I should have imagined that the climate here might prove most unhealthy for you. You must remember that I was a witness of your slight indisposition the other day."

"In my profession, sir," the detective said, "we must take our risks."

The Prince came to a standstill. They were at the parting of the ways.

"I am very sorry," he said simply. "It was a great post, and it was one which you would have filled well. It is not for me, however, to press the matter."

"It would make no difference, sir," the detective answered.

The Prince was on the point of moving away.

"I shall not seek in any case to persuade you," he said. "My offer remains open if you should change your mind. Think, too, over what I have said about our climate. At your time of life, Mr. Inspector Jacks, and particularly at this season of the year, one should be careful. A sea voyage now would, I am convinced, be the very thing for you. Good day, Mr. Jacks!"

The Prince turned towards Buckingham Palace, and the Inspector slowly retraced his steps.

"It is a bribe!" he muttered to himself slowly,--"a cleverly offered bribe! Thirty thousand pounds to forget the little I have learned! Thirty thousand pounds for silence!"