

CHAPTER VII

THEMAR

THE door which led into the Baron's bedroom from his own was slightly ajar. Philip, about to close it, fancied he heard the stealthy rustle of paper beyond and swung it noiselessly back, halting in silent interest upon the threshold.

Themar, the Baron's Houdanian valet, was intently transcribing upon his shirt-cuff, the contents of a paper which lay uppermost in the drawer of a small portable desk.

Catlike, Philip stole across the room. Themar's hand was laboriously reproducing upon the linen an intricate message in cipher.

"Difficult, too, isn't it?" sympathized Philip smoothly at his elbow.

With a sharp cry, Themar wheeled, his small, shifting eyes black with hate. They wavered and fell beneath the level, icy stare of the American. Philip's fingers slipped viselike along the other's wrists and Philip's voice grew more acidly polite.

"My dear Themar," he regretted, falling unconsciously into the language of his chief, "I must spoil the symmetry of your wardrobe. The hieroglyphical cuff, if you please"

Themar's snarl was unintelligible. Smiling,

Philip unbuttoned the stiff band of linen and drew it slowly off.

“A pity!” said he with gentle, sarcastic apology in his eyes. “Such perfect work! And after all that infernal bother of stealing the key!”

Philip lightly dropped the cuff into the pocket of his coat.

“And the key, Themar,” he reminded gently, “the key to the Baron’s desk? . . . Ah, so it’s still here. Excellent! And now that the drawer is locked again—”

The hall door creaked. Simultaneously Themar and Philip wheeled. The Baron stood in the doorway.

Philip smiled and bowed.

“Excellency,” said he, “Themar in an overzealous desire to rearrange your private papers has acquired your private key and I have taken the liberty of confiscating it, knowing that you prize its possession. Permit me to return it now.”

“Thank you, Poynter!” said the Baron and glanced keenly at Themar. “It is but now that I had missed it.”

“Excellency,” burst forth Themar desperately, “I found it this morning on the rug.”

“But,” purred the Baron, “why seek a key-hole?”

Themar’s dark face was ashen.

Philip, with a wholesome distaste for scenes, slipped away.

"Excellency," burst forth Themar passionately as the door closed, "it is unfair—"

The Baron raised his hand in a gesture of warning.

"Permit me, Themar," he said coldly as the sound of Philip's footsteps died away, "permit me to remind you that my secretary is quite unaware of our peculiar relations. He is laboring at present under the necessary delusion that your arrival here was entirely the result of my fastidious distaste for the personal services of anyone but a fellow countryman. Presumably I had cabled home for you. I prefer," he added, "that he continue to think so."

Themar's eyes flashed resentfully.

"Excellency," he said sullenly, "it is unfair that I am denied the knowledge of detail that I need. That is why I sought to read the cipher."

"And yet, Themar," said the Baron softly, "I fancy Ronador has told you—something—enough!" He shrugged, his impenetrable eyes narrowing slowly. "But that I need you," he said evenly, "but that your knowledge of English makes you an invaluable ally—and one not easily replaced—I would send you back to Houdania—disgraced! As it is, we are hedged about

with peculiar difficulties and I must use—and watch you.”

He glanced significantly at the desk drawer and thence to Themar's dark, unscrupulous face, resentful and defiant.

“Now as for the cryptogram which tempted you so sorely,” went on the Baron smoothly. “Its chief mission, as I have repeatedly assured you, was to convert my journey of pleasure in America into one of immediate—hum—service. I have spoken to you of a certain paper—”

“There was more,” said Themar sullenly.

“Merely,” smiled the Baron with engaging candor, “that you are fully equipped with definite instructions which I am to see are fulfilled.”

“There is a girl,” said Themar bluntly.

The Baron stared.

“What?” he rumbled sharply.

“I—I learned of her and of the cipher in Houdania!” stammered Themar.

“You know something more of detail than you need to know,” said the Baron dryly. “Moreover,” he added icily, “you will confine your professional attentions to the other sex. You are sure about the paper?”

“Yes.”

“Your trip to New York last night was—hum—uneventful?”

“Yes.”

“You will go again to-night?”

“It is unnecessary. Granberry is at the Westfall farm.”

“Ah!”

“But, Excellency,” reminded Themar glibly, “there is still the girl—” Deep, compelling, Tregar’s eyes burned steadily into menace.

“Must I repeat—”

“Excellency,” stammered Themar blanching.

“You may go!” said the Baron curtly.

There had been no word of the scribbled cuff, Themar remembered. And surely one may steal away one’s own.