

CHAPTER XV

JOKAI OF VIENNA

IT WAS insolent music, a taunt in every note. Carl laid aside his flute and inspected his prisoner with impudent interest.

"You *are* the most difficult person to entertain!" he accused softly. "Here Hunch has strained a sinuous spine performing our beautiful native dances, the tango and the hesitation, and I've fluted up all the wind in the room and still you glower."

"Monsieur," broke forth the prisoner, goaded beyond endurance by the stifling heat and the stench of Hunch's pipe, "is it not enough to imprison me here without reason, that you must taunt and gibe—" he choked indignantly and stared desperately at the boarded windows.

"Let your voice out, do!" encouraged Carl. "We dispensed with the caretaker days ago, fearing you'd feel restricted."

The other's face was livid.

"Monsieur!" he cried imperiously, his eyes flashing. "Take care!"

"I know," said Carl soothingly, "that you have deep, dark, sinister possibilities within you—dear, yes! You tried something of the sort on the

Ridge Road. That's why your august head's so badly bruised. But why aggravate your blood pressure now when it's so infernally hot and you've work ahead. Hunch," he added carelessly to the admiring henchman who had once dealt away successive slices of his inheritance, "go get a pitcher of ice water and rustle up another siphon of seltzer and some whiskey. Likely His Nibs and I will play chess again to-night."

Hunch rose from a chair by the window where he had flattened his single good eye against a knot hole, and slouched heavily to the door.

The face of the prisoner slowly whitened. Every muscle of his body quivered suddenly in horrible revulsion. Nights of enforced drunkenness had left his nerves strained to the breaking point.

"Monsieur," he panted, greatly agitated, "the whiskey—the thought of it again to-night—is maddening."

Carl merely raised ironical eyebrows.

"You are not a man," choked the other, shaking. "You are a nameless demon! Such hellish originality in the conception of evil, such singular indignities as you have seen fit to inflict, they are the freaks of a madman!"

"Thank you," said Carl politely. "One likes to have one's little ingenuities appreciated."

"I—I am ill—and the room is stifling."

"If I do not mind it," said Carl in aggrieved surprise, "why should you?"

"You are a thing of steel and infernal fire. I am but human."

"There is a way to stop it all," reminded Carl, lazily relighting his cigar. "Why not give me a logical reason for your presence in America?"

"I have done so. Have I not said again and again that I am Sigimund Jokai, of Vienna, touring in America?"

"You have said so," agreed Carl imperturbably, "but you lie. There was an empty chamber in your revolver, you were perilously close to my cousin's camp. Why? Is it not better to tell me than foolishly to waste such splendid nerve and grit as you possess?"

The prisoner moistened his bloodless lips and shrugged.

"Monsieur," he accused coldly, "you tinge commonplace incidents with melodrama."

"Days ago—er—Jokai of Vienna," went on Carl thoughtfully, "I dispatched a formal communication to your country. Why has it been ignored? Why did my first inkling of its effect come in the sight of your face in suspicious territory? And why, Monsieur," purred Carl softly, "did you seek to kill me by a trick?"

"Monsieur, you delayed me. I am hot of temper—"

“And kill whoever angers you? My dear Jokai, that’s absurd. As for your singular indifference to the burning car — that’s easy. You’d stolen it. But why?”

He smiled slightly and picked up his flute. With infinite softness a waltz danced lightly through the quiet room. To such a fanciful, eerie piping might the ghost of a child have danced. Then without pause or warning it swung dramatically into a stirring melody of power and dignity.

The wretched man by the table buried his face in his hands and groaned.

“Ah!” said Carl softly. “So Monsieur has heard that tune before? That in itself is illuminating.”

With a leer Hunch entered and deposited a tray upon the table. Carl poured himself some whiskey and pushed the decanter toward his guest with a significant glance. Jokai of Vienna poured and drank with a shudder of nausea.

“We’ve a new chessboard,” said Carl. “It’s most ingenious. Hunch spent a large part of his valuable morning shopping for it. The board and chessmen are metal and I myself have added one or two unique improvements. Help yourself to some more whiskey — do.”

“Monsieur,” faltered Jokai desperately, “I — I can not.”

"Hunch," said Carl softly. "His Nibs won't drink."

Instantly from the wired metal points of Jokai's chair a stinging electric current swept fiendishly through his body. Last night it had goaded him unspeakably. To-night, with every tortured nerve leaping, it was unbearable. Shaking, he poured again and drank—great drops of sweat starting out upon his forehead. Where the rope bound his ankles the flesh was aching dully.

"Mercy!" he choked. "I—I can not bear it."

"There is a way to stop it!" reminded Carl curtly. "The ivory chessmen for me, Hunch. And whenever he refuses to drink—start the current."

With the metal chessboard before him, Carl idly arranged his ivory men. Jokai touched a metal pawn and shuddered violently. The metal board was wired. Thenceforth every move in the game he must play with the metal men would complete the circuit and send the biting needles through his frame. It was delicately gauged, a nerve-racking discomfort without definite pain, a thing to snap the dreadful tension of a man's endurance at the end.

"Ah! Monsieur!" cried Jokai wildly. "It is inconceivable—"

"Play!" said Carl briefly. White and grim his guest obeyed.

In terrible silence they played the game through to the end.

“Let me pour you some more whiskey,” insisted Carl with infernal courtesy. “Let us understand each other. Whenever I drink, I expect you to do the same. As for you, Hunch, you’ll kindly stay sober!”

Jokai gulped the nauseating torture to the end. He was faint and sick. By the end of the third game, every move had become convulsive. The insidious bite of the current was getting horribly on his nerves. Still with desperate will he played on. Drunk and dizzy — his veins hot and pounding, he stared in fascinated horror at the face of his merciless opponent. Through the film of smoke it loomed vividly dark, impudent, ironic, the mobile mouth edged satirically with a slight smile.

“Are you man or devil?” he whispered.

Carl laughed. His hand, for all his drinking, was calm and steady, his handsome eyes clear and cold and resolute.

“Hunch,” he said curtly, “if you touch that bottle again, I’ll break it over your head. You’re drunk now.”

To Jokai his voice trailed off into curious nothingness. Somewhere he knew in a room stifling hot and hazy with the fumes of vile tobacco there was a voice, musical, detached and very far away.

“Monsieur,” it was saying, “there are still the questions.”

With shaking hand Jokai touched a metal king and screamed. The heat and the hell-board hard upon his days and nights of enforced drinking were too much. With a strangled sob, Jokai of Vienna pitched forward upon the board unconscious.

Carl swept the metal men away with a shrug.

“Poor devil!” he said pityingly. “All this hell sooner than answer a question or two. By to-morrow night, with another dose of the same medicine, he’ll feel differently. Likely I’ll run up to Connecticut to-night, Hunch, to see my aunt. I’ll be back by noon to-morrow. Tear off the window boards and give him some more air. You can move him to another room in the morning.”

Hunch obeyed, and presently as the street door slammed behind his chief, Hunch’s single eye roved expectantly to the forgotten whiskey on the table. Jokai lay in a motionless stupor by the window. It would be morning before the hapless drinker would be quite himself again. With brutal, powerful arms, Hunch bore his charge to an adjoining room and consigned him disrespectfully to a bed. Then with a fresh bottle of whiskey in his hand, he returned to the open window, leered pleasantly at the dizzy glare

of city lights beyond and henceforth devoted himself to getting very drunk. Having gratified this bibulous ambition to the uttermost, he fell asleep. The morning sunlight flaming at last on his coarse, bloated face awoke him to resentful consciousness. Glowering at the bright, warm light with his single eye, Hunch rolled away into the shadow and went to sleep again.

Below on the porch, with an outraged caretaker's letter in her hand bag, Aunt Agatha turned her latchkey resolutely in the lock.

"I just will not have it!" reflected Aunt Agatha defiantly. "I certainly will not. And I'd have been here yesterday if Mary hadn't insisted upon my spending the night with her. Well do I remember how Carl installed himself here last year with a Japanese servant and invited that good-looking Wherry boy to come and scratch the furniture. I don't suppose Carl invited him for that purpose," added Aunt Agatha fairly, "but he did it, anyway. I can't for the life of me see why it is that young Mr. Wherry is perpetually making scratches where his feet rest. And I'm sure he left his footprint on the piano and thundered through every roll on the player, for they're all out of place, and the Williston caretaker heard him, though like as not it was Carl for that matter. He's a Westfall, and he'd do

it if he felt like it, dear knows! Though I must say Carl detests bangy music."

Still rambling, Aunt Agatha, having fussed considerably over the extraction of the key, halted in the hallway, appalled by the utter loneliness of the darkened rooms. Beyond in the library a clock boomed loudly through the quiet. Somewhere upstairs a dull, choking rasp broke the soundless gloom. Aunt Agatha began to flutter nervously up the stairway.

"It's Carl of course!" she murmured in a panic. "I just know it is. I've never known him to even gurgle—much less snore in his sleep. Like as not his windows are still boarded up and he's suffocating. Only a Westfall would think of such a thing."

Puffing, Aunt Agatha halted at her nephew's door. That and the one adjoining were locked. There was a den beyond. Making her way to a door of which Hunch was ignorant, Aunt Agatha opened it and gasped. Fully clothed, a man whose feet and hands were securely bound, lay muttering upon the bed, his jargon incomprehensibly foreign.

"God deliver us from all Westfalls!" wept Aunt Agatha. "Carl's kidnapped an immigrant!"

With unwavering determination in her round, aggrieved eyes, she swept majestically to the bed and shook the sleeper severely.

“My good man,” she demanded, “what do you mean by lying here on a lace spread with your feet tied and your head scarred?”

Jokai of Vienna stirred and moaned. Aunt Agatha fumbled for her smelling salts and administered a most heroic draft. Sputtering, Jokai awoke from his restless stupor and stared.

From the room adjoining came again the dull, choking rasp of Hunch’s heavy slumber. Fluttering hurriedly to the doorway, Aunt Agatha stared in horror at the littered room and Hunch, the latter no reassuring sight at his best, and thence with fascinated gaze at Jokai of Vienna. With wild imploring eyes Jokai glanced at his hands and feet. Miraculously Aunt Agatha understood. After an interval of petrified indecision, during which she trembled violently and made inarticulate noises in her throat, she fluttered excitedly from the room and returned with a pair of scissors. Urged to noiseless activity by Jokai’s fear of the sleeper in the farther room, she cut the ropes which bound him and led him stealthily to the hall below.

“You poor thing!” whispered Aunt Agatha in hysterical sympathy. “You’re as pale as a ghost. I don’t wonder—”

But Jokai of Vienna was already bolting wildly through the street door and down the steps. Aunt Agatha burst into aggrieved tears.

"I don't in the least know what it's all about," she sniffed, greatly frightened, "but what with the immigrant bolting out of the house in his shirt sleeves without so much as a word of thanks—such a nice distinguished fellow as he was, too, for all he smelt of liquor!—and Carl nowhere in sight—and a fat young man, with a hairy chest exposed, sleeping on a whiskey bottle and snoring like a prisoner file, it does seem most mysterious—that's a fact! And my knees have folded up and I can't budge. Mother's knees used to fold up this way, too. God bless my soul!" wept the unfortunate lady. "I do wish I were dead."

With a desperate effort Aunt Agatha unfolded her knees sufficiently to bear her weight and turning, screamed wildly. Hunch Dorrigan was stealing catlike down the stairs, his bloated vicious face leering threateningly at her over the railing.

"You old she-wolf!" roared that elegant young man. "Where's His Nibs?"

Aunt Agatha moistened her dry lips and, gurgling fearfully, fainted. When at length she became conscious again, Hunch, glowering fiercely, was returning from a futile chase. With a resentful flash of brutality he towered suddenly above her and began to curse. Aunt Agatha, bristling, sat up.

"Don't you dare speak to me like that after

breathing vulgar liquor fumes all over my niece's house and tying up that nice foreign gentleman," she quavered weakly. "Don't you dare! I live in this house, young man, and Carl will see to it that I'm protected. He always has. He's very good to me."

Hunch glowered sullenly at her, fearful, in the face of her relationship to Carl, of committing still another unforgivable offense.

"I once knew a stout young man with a glass eye," she gulped with increasing courage, "and he was hanged by the neck until he was dead—quite dead—and then they cut his body down and his relatives took it away in a cart and on the way home it came to life—"

Aunt Agatha halted abruptly, vaguely conscious that this somewhat felicitous ending to the tragedy, as an object lesson to Hunch, left much to be desired.

"Leave the house!" she commanded with shrill magnificence, for all her hair and dress were awry, and her round face flushed. "Leave the house."

Hunch shrugged and obeyed. It was nearly noon and there was no single east-side acquaintance—no, not even Link Murphy, the terrible—whom he feared as he feared Carl Granberry.

Weeping, Aunt Agatha watched him go.