

## CHAPTER XVII

### IN WHICH THE BARON PAYS

“**E**XCELLENCY,” said Philip politely, “I have returned.”

“Ah!” said the Baron cordially, marveling somewhat at the forbidding glint in the young man’s eyes. He was to learn presently its portent.

Within doors, a few men chatted in the billiard room. A girl was singing. The Baron, however, was the only occupant of the comfortable porch-room with the green-shaded lamp, to which Philip had come, passing Themar, who had left a tray of ice and *crème de menthe* upon the table.

With his customary deliberation the Baron selected a glass, filled it with shaved ice, which he as carefully covered with green *crème de menthe*, and pushed the delectable result across the table to his secretary.

Philip accepted with a formal expression of thanks.

“I am delighted,” rumbled the Baron, sipping his iced mint with keen appreciation, “to see that you are fully recovered.”

“And Themar?” inquired Philip coldly.

“He was not injured so badly as I feared,” admitted Tregar slowly.

“His accident,” commented Philip quietly, “was to say the least coincidental—and convenient.”

“Just what do you mean?”

“Just why,” begged Philip icily, “did you wish me to intrude further upon the hospitality of Miss Westfall?”

“There was an errand,” reminded the Baron blandly. “Having discharged it myself, Poynter, I might—er—trust to you to report its consequences. There are possibilities of confidences over a camp fire—”

“You expected me to—spy upon Miss Westfall?”

“Even so.”

“Pray believe,” said Philip stiffly, “that any confidence of Miss Westfall’s would have been to me—as your own.”

“I am to understand then,” commented His Excellency suavely, “that you made absolutely no effort—”

“You are to understand just that,” said Philip quietly. “Moreover,” he manfully met his chief’s level glance with one of inexorable decision, “I sincerely regret that hereafter I shall be unable to discharge my duties as your secretary.”

The Baron stirred.

“I may be honored by your reasons, Poynter?” he inquired quietly.

"The duties of a spy," flashed Philip, "are peculiarly offensive to me. So is Themar."

"Themar!"

"Excellency," said Philip curtly, "to-night as I entered, the lamplight fell full upon the face and throat of your valet."

"Yes?"

"Themar's throat, Excellency, bears peculiar scars."

"My dear Poynter! Themar's fall injured him severely about the face and hands."

"I have not forgotten," insisted Philip grimly, "that Miss Westfall's servant sunk his terrible fingers into the throat of the man whose knife scar I bear. Whether or not his knife was meant for me, I can not say. Nor have I sufficient proof openly to accuse him, but of this much I am convinced. Themar's presence near the camp of Miss Westfall is, in the face of your peculiar and secretive errand, ominously significant."

The Baron sighed. There was frank hostility in Philip's eyes.

"Miss Westfall," added Philip hotly, "is the unsuspecting victim of a peculiar network of mystery of which I feel you hold the key. Her camp is constantly spied upon. Upon the night of the storm there were two men lurking mysteriously in the forest near her camp fire. The knife of one I was unfortunate enough to receive. The

other," Philip's eyes glinted oddly, "the other, Excellency," he finished slowly, "tried, I firmly believe—to kill Miss Westfall."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the Baron, greatly shocked.

"If I might know the nature of your peculiar interest in Miss Westfall," urged Philip bluntly, "I would have greater faith in your apparent surprise."

The Baron reddened.

"That is quite impossible," he regretted formally. "Pray believe that you have magnified its importance into exceedingly ludicrous proportions. I fear I am obliged to dispense with your faith in my integrity on the conditions you mention. Your resolution to leave me—that is final?"

"Entirely so."

"I am sorry," said the Baron simply. And, meeting his chief's eyes, Philip felt somewhat ashamed of one or two of his highly colored suspicions and reddened uncomfortably.

"It is at least—comforting," observed the Baron quietly, "to feel that whatever I may have said in confidence to you will be honorably forgotten."

"Excellency," said Philip with spirit, "though I may not speak to Miss Westfall of your interest or my suspicions, for reasons which need no nam-

ing among gentlemen, it is but fair to warn you that henceforth I shall regard myself as personally responsible for her safety."

"Gallantly spoken!" declared the older man, and watched his secretary, as he bowed and withdrew, with more regret than he had seen fit to express. Then, lying back in his chair he listened with unsmiling attention as Philip entered the billiard room with a laughing shot of abuse for Dick Sherrill which aroused an immediate uproar of welcome.

Watching the Baron's narrowed eyes, one might have wondered greatly. For Baron Tregar looked very tired and grim. At length, having smoked his cigar quite to the end, he went up to his room and summoned Themar.

"Ah, Themar!" said he softly, and laughed with peculiar relish.

Themar shifted restlessly.

"Excellency," he began, uncomfortably aware of unpleasant mockery in his chief's keen eyes.

The Baron matched the tips of his powerful fingers and studied them intently.

"Themar," said he acidly, "within a fortnight I have lost a car whose burned remains were found several miles from here, and a secretary whose friendship and invaluable service I prize more highly than your life. I feel that you can to some extent explain both of these disasters."

“Excellency knows,” reminded Themar glibly, “that the car was stolen from the Sherrill garage.”

“I have merely supposed so,” corrected the Baron coldly. And rising he inspected the curious scars upon his valet’s throat with interest. “Odd!” he purred, “that an aeroplane may simulate the marks of tearing fingers.” Swept by a sudden gust of terrible anger, he gripped Themar’s shoulders and shook him until the valet’s face was dark with fear.

“Why,” hissed the Baron, “did you lie? Why did you go to the Westfall camp and attack Poynter? Why did you swear these scars came from a disastrous flight in a stolen aeroplane? Why have you been spying upon Miss Westfall when I expressly forbade it?”

“Excellency,” choked Themar, horrified by the Baron’s unprecedented display of passion, “there was a blunder—I dared not tell.”

“Who blundered?” thundered his chief.

“I. Granberry, I thought, was to go to his cousin’s camp,” panted Themar quaking. “I heard Sherrill telephone—later he told some men—”

“You took the car—” prompted the Baron icily.

“I—I did not know it was Poynter until he

fell," urged Themar trembling. "Granberry and he are similar in build."

"Who attempted to kill Miss Westfall?" blazed the Baron, shaking his valet into chattering subjection.

"Excellency, I know not!" protested Themar swallowing painfully. "There was still another man—he dashed ahead and stole the car."

After all, reflected the Baron wryly, in this damnable muddle he must still use Themar. To antagonize him now would be foolhardy. Wherefore, with a civil expression of regret at his loss of temper and certain curt instructions, he dismissed Themar, sullen and chastened, and betook himself to an open window, where he sat smoking thoughtfully until the house grew quiet and one by one the lights in the valley faded out. In the web which had engulfed one by one, himself, Themar, Granberry Miss Westfall and Poynter, a murderous stranger was floundering. Who and what he was, it behooved His Excellency to discover.

"It would seem," reflected the Baron with grim humor as he thought of his car and his secretary, "that I am paying heavily for my part in a task not greatly to my liking."

In the adjoining room behind locked doors, Themar worked feverishly upon a cipher inscribed upon a soiled linen cuff.