

CHAPTER XXVI

AN ACCOUNTING

THE KEY clicked in the lock. Kronberg, huddled in a corner, stirred and cunningly hid the flimsy coverings of chintz he had unearthed from an ancient trunk. For three days he had not spoken, three days of bitter, biting cold, three days of creaking, lonely quiet, of mournful wind and shifting lights above the glass overhead, of infernal visitations from one he had grown to fear more than death itself. With heavy chills racking his numb body, with flashes of fever and clamping pains in his head, his endurance was now nearing an end.

Bearing a tray of food, Carl entered and closed the door.

"I'm still waiting, Kronberg," he reminded coolly, "for the answers to those questions."

For answer Kronberg merely pushed aside the tray of food with a shudder. There was a dreadful nausea to-day in the pit of his stomach.

"So?" said Carl. "Well," he regretted, "there are always the finger stretchers. They're crude, Kronberg, and homemade, but in time they'll do the work."

Kronberg's face grew colorless as death itself

as his mind leaped to the torture of the day before. A clamp for every finger tip, a metal bar between—the hell-conceived device invented by his jailer forced the fingers wide apart and held them there as in vise until a stiffness bound the aching cords, then a pain which crept snakelike to the elbow—and the shoulder. Then when the tortured nerves fell wildly to telegraphing spasmodic jerkings of distress from head to toe, the shrugging devil with the flute would talk vividly of roaring wood fires and the comforts awaiting the penitent below. Yesterday Kronberg had fainted. To-day—

Carl presently took the singular metal contrivance from his pocket, deftly clamped the fingers of his victim and sat down to wait, rummaging for his flute.

The tension snapped.

Choking, Kronberg fell forward at his jailer's feet, his eyes imploring.

"Mercy," he whispered. "I—I can not bear it."

"Then you will answer what I ask?"

"Yes."

Carl unsnapped the infernal finger-stretcher and dropped it in his pocket.

"Come," said he not unkindly and led his weak and staggering prisoner to a room in the west wing where a log fire was blazing brightly in the fireplace.

With a moan Kronberg broke desperately away from his grasp and flung himself violently upon his knees by the fire, stretching his arms out pitifully to the blaze and chattering and moaning like a thing demented. Carl walked away to the window.

Presently the man by the fire crept humbly to a chair, a broken creature in the clutch of fever, eyes and skin unnaturally bright.

"Here," said Carl, pouring him some brandy from a decanter on the table. "Sit quietly for a while and close your eyes. Are you better now?" he asked a little later.

"Yes," said Kronberg faintly.

"What is your real name?"

"Themar."

"When you took service with my aunt in the spring, you were looking for a certain paper?"

"Yes."

"Did you find it during your ten days in the town-house?"

"No."

"How did you discover its whereabouts?"

"One night I watched you replace it in a secret drawer in your room. Before I could obtain it, the house was closed for the summer and I was dismissed. I had succeeded, however, in getting an impression of the desk lock."

"You went back later?"

“Yes. It was a summer day — very hot. The front door was ajar. I opened it wider. Your aunt sat upon the floor of the hall crying —”

“Yes?”

“I spoke of passing and seeing the door ajar. She recognized me as one of the servants and begged me to call a taxi. I assisted her to the taxi and went back, having only pretended to lock the door.”

“And having disposed of her,” supplied Carl, “you flew up the stairs, applied the key made from the impression — and stole the paper?”

“Yes.”

“Beautiful!” said Carl softly. “How cleverly you tricked me!”

Themar shrugged.

“It was very simple.”

Carl smiled.

“Where is the paper now?” he inquired.

Themar’s face darkened.

“When later I looked in the pocket of my coat,” he admitted, “the paper had disappeared utterly. Nor have I found it since. It is a very great mystery —”

“Ah!” said Carl. “So,” he mused, “as long as the paper was in my possession, my life was safe, for you must watch me to find it. Therefore I was not poisoned or stabbed or shot at during your original ten days of service. Later,

even though you could not lay your own hands upon the paper, things began to happen. Knowing what I did, I had lived too long as it was."

"Yes."

"Suppose you begin at the beginning—and tell me just what you know."

It was a halting, nervous tale poorly told. Carl, with his fastidious respect for a careful array of facts, found it trying. By a word here or a sentence there, he twisted the mass of imperfect information into conformity and pieced it out with knowledge of his own.

"So," said he coldly, "you thought to stab me the night of the storm and stabbed Poynter. Fool! Why," he added curtly, "did you later spy upon my cousin's camp when Tregar had expressly forbidden it?"

It was an unexpected question. Themar flushed uncomfortably. Carl had a way of reading between the lines that was exceedingly disconcerting. His information, he said at length after an interval of marked hesitancy, had been too meager. He had listened at the door once when the Baron had spoken of Miss Westfall to his secretary. A housemaid had frightened him away and he had bolted upstairs—to attend to something else while they were both safely occupied. Rather than work blindly as he needs

must if he knew no more, he had sought to add to his information by spying on her camp.

It was unconvincing.

"So," said Carl keenly, "Baron Tregar does not trust you!"

—Themar's lip curled.

"The Baron knew of your ten days in my cousin's house?"

Again the marked hesitancy—the flush.

"Yes," said Themar.

"You're lying," said Carl curtly. "If you wish to go back—"

Themar moistened his dry lips and shuddered.

"No," he whispered, "he did not know."

"Why?"

Themar fell to trembling. This at least he must keep locked from the grim, ironic man by the window.

"You're playing double with Tregar and with me," said Carl hotly. "I thought so. Very well!" Smiling infernally, he drew from his pocket the finger-stretchers.

"Excellency!" panted Themar.

"Why did you serve in my cousin's house without the knowledge of the Baron?"

"If—if the secret was harmful to Houdania," blurted Themar desperately, spurred to confession by the clank of the metal in Carl's hand, "I—I could sell the paper to Galituria!"

The nature of the admission was totally unexpected. Carl whistled softly.

"Ah!" said he, raising expressive eyebrows.

"My mother," said Themar sullenly, "was of Galituria. There is hatred there for Houdania—a century's feud—"

"And you in the employ of the rival province hunting this to earth! What a mess—what a mess!"

Followed a battery of merciless questions punctuated by the diabolic clank of metal.

Themar had been deputed solely to report to Baron Tregar—

"And murder me!" supplemented Carl curtly.

"Yes," said Themar. "Under oath I was to obey Ronador's commands without question. But he did not even trust me with the cipher message of instruction. That was mailed to the Baron's Washington address written in an ink that only turned dark with the heat of a fire. I too was sent to Washington. Ronador knew nothing of the Baron's trip to Connecticut."

By spying before he had sailed, Themar added, at a question from Carl, he had learned of the cipher.

"You read the paper of course when you stole it from my desk?"

"There was a noise," said Themar dully, his face bitter; "I ran for the street. Later the paper was gone."

“What were Tregar’s intentions about the paper?”

Themar chewed nervously at his lips.

“His Excellency spoke to me of a paper. He said that I must discover its whereabouts, if possible, but that none but he must steal it. Anything written which you would seem to have hidden would be of interest to him. He bound me by a terrible oath not to touch or read it.”

“And you?”

“After a time I swore that I had seen you burn it—”

“Clumsy! Still if he believed it, it left me, in the event of Miss Westfall’s complete ignorance of all this hubbub, the sole remaining obstacle.”

But Themar had not heard. He was shaking again in the clutch of a heavy chill. Presently, his sentences having trailed off once or twice into peculiar incoherency, he fell to talking wildly of a hut in the Sherrill woods in which he had lived for days in the early autumn, of a cuff in a box buried in the ground beneath the planking. For weeks, he said, he had vainly tried to solve its cipher, stealing away from the farm by night to pore over it by the light of a candle. It was fearfully intricate—

“But you—you that know all,” he gasped painfully, “you will get it and read and tell me—”

Moaning he fell back in his chair.

Carl rang for Mrs. Carmody. It was young Mary, however, who answered, her round blue eyes lingering in mystification upon the fire Carl had built in the deserted wing.

"Mary," said Carl carelessly, "you'd better phone for a doctor and a nurse. Kronberg has returned and I fear he's in for a spell of pneumonia."

Later in the Sherrill hut, Carl ripped a board from the floor and found in the dirt beneath, a box containing a soiled cuff covered with an intricate cipher.

"Odd!" said he with a curious smile as he dropped the cuff into his pocket; "it's very odd about that paper."