

CHAPTER XV.

A Murderous Attack.

WHEN Dick Emberson, in pursuance of his plan of covering his friend's retreat by drawing off the enemy (or rather the enemy's scout), placed himself with grim, determined face right in the path of Aram Kalfian's servant and spy—the very man who on a previous occasion had tried to rob him, he had no preconceived plan of action, beyond the fixed resolve that the latter should not be allowed to interfere in any way with young Alston's movements.

To his astonishment, Tigram touched his cap politely, exclaiming in his broken English:

"Ah, I was looking for mister. I recognize him just now."

"The recognition was mutual—quite a pleasant surprise," remarked Dick ironically. "Perhaps you will scarcely be surprised to hear I was looking for you also, not to speak of your precious master?"

"Dat is good."

"Oh, is it? So glad you are pleased!" was the dry retort.

Dick at this juncture turned and walked slowly down the platform—Tigram keeping pace with him. "And what, may I ask," continued the young man, "was your particular business with me?"

"My master—he wish ver' much to see you."

"The devil he does!" ejaculated Dick. "And," continued Tigram, in his old, spluttering speech, "'e bid me say, 'e much sorry to have missed you in London, and would be ver' much obleeged if you would be so ver' good as to pay him little vjst at 'is hotel—den 'e will explain."

"Your master only anticipates my wishes," replied Dick, secretly wondering what trick this polite invitation cloaked; but thinking it wiser to affect, at all events, a readiness to comply with it. "Where does he put up?"

The man mentioned the name of a hotel; but as young Emberson had never been in Vienna before it conveyed little or nothing to him.

"I can show, mister, the way now if 'e like; it ver' good 'otel; mister, 'e will be just in time for dinner," insinuated Tigram, with his head on one side and a would-be ingratiating leer.

"Will you walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly?" murmured Dick under his breath.

"What you say? I not quite catch—I not understand de English ver' well."

"I said that I might just see my bag through the Customs," replied the young man, giving the light Gladstone he carried a careless swing; and then I shall be glad to avail myself of your kind offices."

"Mister—not know dis fine city?"

"No, I have never been here before."

The announcement evidently afforded Tigram much gratification, for he grinned from ear to ear.

A few minutes later the strangely assorted couple passed out of the station together.

"Is it far, this hotel at which your master is staying?" inquired Dick, pausing on the threshold, and dubiously surveying the various vehicles drawn up, whose owners at once, like a pack of hounds, broke into a yelling, excited chorus of invitation for him to mount into their particular conveyance. The prospect of being shut up in one with his present companion, whom he profoundly mistrusted, was distinctly unpleasant to him.

"No, no; not far—ver' leetle way; we go on foot quite easily."

"All right, go on then!"

Needless to say, young Emberson had not the slightest intention of paying a visit to Aram Kalfian, or of putting up in that gentleman's hotel. His adversary was evidently playing a deep game; one which he personally was unable to fathom. It behooved him, then, to step warily. Yet, if he betrayed any reluctance to meet the man he had up till now been hotly pursuing, he would immediately arouse the latter's suspicions, and bring about, perhaps, the very danger he would avoid—premature discovery of the exchange made. His aim was to gain time. It would be easy enough, he told himself, when they had arrived at their destination to make some excuse for deferring the interview for, say, a couple of hours. He would have some

dinner in a private room, and then slip quietly away.

Thus mentally arranging his plan of campaign, he tramped along without holding any further speech with the man who slouched by his side. The latter's shifty eyes flashed furtively now right, now left; now, with head held low, obliquely up into his companion's face, only to be sharply averted again as if their owner feared to be caught in the act of observation.

They had traversed some considerable distance in this way, for Tigram walked like one in haste, and the other mechanically regulated his pace by him; gradually the streets they passed through had changed from fine, wide thoroughfares into narrow winding alleys, dirty and deserted except for a few children playing about—evidently one of the older and poorer quarters of the gay city. Dick Emberson, suddenly awakening to consciousness of the nature of the locality into which he had been brought, came to an abrupt halt.

"You are playing tricks," he said harshly. "Where have you brought me? There can be no respectable hotels in such a quarter! We must be miles away from the station, and you said it was quite close."

Tigram humped his back obsequiously, and gave an apologetic wave of the two hands, palms outwards.

"I am sorry, ver' sorry," he exclaimed cringingly. "I tink I take mister short cut, and I find myself in wrong turning."

"You'll find yourself in the wrong box, my friend, soon," interposed Dick, tureatingly.

"But it is right now—all right! I know; de hotel is just round de corner—one street—two street, we are dere."

"You may go alone then," said Dick resolutely. "I was a fool to trust myself so far with you. Tell your master I will wait upon him later in the day, that is, supposing him to be really at the address you have given me. And, if not—why, still, he need not fear but what I shall know how to find him. He will be clever if he gives me the slip a second time."

It did not occur to young Emberson that in thus playing a game of bluff he was seriously endangering his own safety, that by uttering threats he had not the least intention of carrying out, he was challenging not one single individual, but a whole circle of desperate men bound together by mutual aims, by mutual crimes, and, strongest link of all, by mutual fears. Himself fearless by nature, and possessing his full share of the national weakness of underrating his enemy, had he realized it, he probably would still have acted in the same fashion; his one idea being that he must give Alston time to escape by keeping up his role of avenging pursuer.

He was satisfied now, however, in his mind that when the inevitable hour of discovery came suspicion would fall on him, and not on his friend; and that sufficed him. He would no longer affect to be the dupe of this shabby scoundrel, he said to himself contemptuously, who, it was pretty certain, had been sent to lure him into danger of some description; he would retrace his steps until he came across some respectable pedestrians, who would direct him. The more he surveyed the locality in which he stood, the less he liked its aspect. "A cut-throat sort of a hole!" he mentally stigmatized it, and fixing his gaze searchingly upon his companion, he saw the obsequious grin gradually fade out of his face and a lurid light creep into his eyes, as he faced him, half-crouching, like a wild beast prepared to spring.

In a trice Dick had whipped out his revolver and covered him, saying grimly:

"I advise you to play no further tricks with me; you see, I am prepared for emergencies."

The sound of a footstep rapidly advancing in the distance caught the ears of both men at this juncture, causing them instinctively to turn their heads that way. Dick hopefully—Tigram with a snarl closely resembling that of the aforesaid wild beast when disappointed of his prey.

Seeing a tall, well dressed man advancing in their direction, Emberson, forgetful of caution, turned to meet him. As he did so, quick as lightning a knife flashed in the air; swiftly and sharply Tigram struck downwards, and with a smothered groan Dick fell forward upon his face.

(To be continued.)

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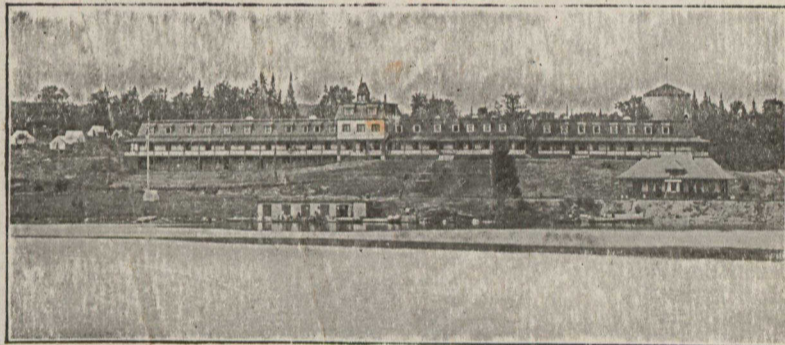
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