

The Quiet Game

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The driver of the hired carriage waited patiently in front of the entry to the cottage, aware of the importance of the trip to come. His client, a certain Barry Barrison, had a reputation for being somewhat demanding, but also for being someone who knew how to be generous. Higgins told himself that he had the opportunity to show how efficient his driving was. The driver secretly hoped to get a generous tip.

The door to the cottage on Essex Road finally opened and a man with fair skin, and of excellent height, wearing a fashionable suit, came out of it. He was leaning nonchalantly on a finely-crafted walking cane. He motioned to the driver with a nod, closed the door behind himself, readjusted his high hat and stepped toward the carriage. Higgins opened the door as he greeted his client.

“17 Regent Street, please,” said Barry Barrison, taking a seat in the carriage.

“Certainly, Sir,” Higgins answered.

After having closed the door, Higgins jumped onto his carriage seat and took up the reins of his team. The horses started with a trot toward Westminster. Seated comfortably at the rear, Barry began to reflect, his gaze lost in the distance, following God alone knew what thoughts. His blue-gray eyes shone with intense light, a sign that he was in deep thought. About forty, the aristocrat refused to accept the life of leisure that his good fortune had been able to bring him. He needed to keep his brain occupied, or he would die of boredom, according to his own words.

He placed his hat on the vacant seat beside him, and took out a letter from his inside pocket. He unfolded it and read the missive once again, stroking his thin mustache.

My very dear friend,

I know that your time is precious. I therefore wouldn't ask for your help if the situation were not of unusual urgency, at least in my opinion.

During the time that we have known each other, you know how logical I am by nature, and not prone to believe in all sorts of strange ideas, in whatever appearance they may be clothed. Frequently, during all those years we have known each other, you have only reinforced my inner conviction that the world is a logic and rational place. In all our conversations exchanged in the course of these last years, there is at least one obvious fact that stands out: You wouldn't be so often compared to the Great Detective himself if your deductive abilities were in the least questionable. You can also be sure that I wouldn't have revealed to you so many details about my business if I didn't have entire confidence in you. Finally, among all your superlative attributes, the one that irritates me the most is your excellence in the noble game of chess.

That said, I must now admit the unthinkable. I believe I am losing my mind. I can no longer remember certain facts. At Tarford Manor, Alfred, my butler, swore that he told me more than once certain facts of which I have no memory. At Tree's, my club, I had conversations, about which any details escape me. I have been seen by some of my neighbors taking my daily walk in Hyde Park, when I thought I was writing, alone, in my study. I find things in one place when I am sure I left them in another. And what can I say about doors that I find closed, when I am sure that I left them open.

In short, as I'm sure you will understand, I need your powers. Am I in the process of slowly stumbling into madness? Have I been struck by the same degenerative disease that afflicted my mother so long ago? Or worse still?

Whatever the truth, I must know it, in order to react appropriately. That's why I would be indebted to you if you could find some time to come to Tarford Manor so that we could discuss my problem in detail,

and you could give your verdict, whatever it may be, in confidence. There is no one else in the world that I trust more than you, not even myself. I am certain that your judgment will always be the best.

Your devoted,

Sir Henry Tarford

Barry folded the letter carefully and put it back into his pocket. From merely an acquaintance in his early days, Sir Henry had become one of his closest friends over the years. Their acquaintance had begun at a chess tournament organized by the Queen's Pawn, one of the best-known chess societies in London. Henry and he had found themselves the finalists after three whole days spent eliminating their respective adversaries, one after the other. The final game had been a memorable one. However, it had begun in a very conventional way. Barry played black. The opening with three knights was also known as *Giucco Piano*, or *The Quiet Game*.

Barry had been expecting an adversary of middle ability, who would have boned up on the basic theories of chess openings. Besides, he had begun the encounter in a very relaxed manner, raising his play at regular intervals between each move, chatting casually with the spectators, certain of his victory. But Henry hadn't wavered... Concentrating on the board, he had managed his opening perfectly, leaving Barry no opening.

Barry became aware of the strength of his opponent at the nineteenth move, when his opponent took more than seventy minutes before playing 19Ce3, which made the crowd break into applause. From that point on, Barry's entire attention was on the game. Taking his seat again, he concentrated harder on the contest that was taking place on the chessboard. And it was only after three hours of relentless battle that Henry retired his king, stood up, shook the hand of his adversary and gave him a warm smile of congratulation.

"Sir, we have arrived."

The coachman's voice drew Barry away from his thoughts. He passed his hand over his eyes, wondered how long he had day-dreamed. He picked up his hat. Higgins opened the door, letting him out of the carriage and into the street. Barry stretched his back and took out a pound note that he placed in the hand of the driver, who, after a moment of disbelief, managed to say, "Much obliged. Thank you, Sir."

Barry had just paid more than ten times the price of a usual drive.

"You're welcome, my friend," he responded as he approached the wrought-iron gate which led into Tarford Manor. "They are a little painful for the shoulders to open!" he continued, going through the gate and disappearing from the sight of the coachman.

Before the driver was able to reply, the elegant aristocrat was already on the little stone walk that wound across the perfectly kept lawn that surrounded the large building. Realizing it was too small for his carriage to enter, Higgins again mounted his sea and gazed at the high wrought-iron fence that encircled Tarford Manor. Imposing and elegant at the same time, it protected the property from the unwanted without disfiguring the area. He took his fob watch out of his vest pocket and gave it a rapid glance, then carefully placed the one-pound note at the bottom of his pocket. Satisfied, he then put his carriage in a slow trot. His day was over.

Barry arrived at the foot of the stairs which led toward the steps. As was his habit, he was careful to avoid the sixth step, damaged since Alfred had let a big tree fall down there several months before. He grasped the large forged-iron door knocker, sculpted in the image of a wolf's head, and knocked twice on the oak door. He turned around to take advantage of the view. The garden was magnificent. The roses were all pruned in the same fashion, no weed was left, and the grass was cut short, as it should be. It was rare to see such a large garden in the heart of London. If it had not been the proximity of Westminster, Barry would have believed himself in the country.

No one came to the door. Barry knocked again, louder, and wiped his hand with a handkerchief that he took from his pocket. After several seconds, the heavy door was finally opened, revealing the frail silhouette of the old butler.

"Sir Barry!" exclaimed an overjoyed Alfred. "I am very happy to see you! Please come in. Let me take your coat. I didn't hear you," he continued, adjusting the little square glasses pushed up on his

forehead. "I was in the kitchen, preparing a sauce for Sir Henry's dinner. I was at the point of peeling the onions..."

Barry smiled at the old butler, whose gray curls were becoming thin on his skull. However, Alfred still had that same sharp look that Barry had spotted in him years ago. His silhouette had become a little thinner, certainly, but the affability of the butler erased his apparent aging.

"Please, my dear Alfred," Barry answered in a happy voice, "I know how much you excel in the preparation of your culinary accomplishments. I apologize for having disturbed you."

"Not at all, I assure you. And you are too kind to me, Sir. But," Alfred continued, taking the overcoat and hat of his guest, "I assure you that I am not a little proud of my cooking."

He gave Barry a long look, adding, "And these days, God knows if Sir Henry needs good meals! He has almost stopped eating, you know. In spite of all my efforts, he almost never touches his meals."

He returned after having hung up his jacket and overcoat. His eyebrows were wrinkled and a frown had formed on his wrinkled face.

"I fear that Sir Henry is really not well," he continued.

Barry put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "I know, Alfred. Sir Henry has asked me for help."

Alfred's eyes became filled with barely controlled tears. "The day before yesterday," he continued, "I even believed that Sir Henry had lost his mind."

"What do you mean?"

"Sir Henry had asked me, at the beginning of the afternoon, to go get him a new kind of tea at Emily's Emporium. I did that and I returned just in time to prepare it for him at about six o'clock. After that, I got ready to take it to him. It seemed to me that I heard a rather loud conversation in his office, then a dull sound. I went to the coat hook to check if there were any clothes left by a visitor, but there was none. I remained mystified for a moment, asking myself what I should do. I went quietly down the corridor leading to the office. The voices continued, but were no longer but a soft whisper. I very quickly returned to the kitchen where I had left the tea and hurried again toward the office. I was nervous and my hands trembled so much that the saucer shook on the platter. I knocked. When I heard, '*Come in, Alfred,*' I admit that I let out a great sigh of relief."

The old man paused.

"I hurried to open the door, fearing to see Sir Henry in an excited state, but he was, on the contrary, quite calm, but with his gaze somewhat unfocused. He greeted me with a big smile and motioned for me to put the platter on his desk. That's what I did, without saying anything."

Alfred shook his head. "I admit that I was very concerned."

Barry had listened to the old butler's story with a great deal of attention. He smiled at the old man. "Have no fear, Alfred, everything will turn out well."

The old butler's face lit up; his expression full of hope.

"You know that Sir Henry is the only person that I have left in my life. I can't imagine what I would do if I were no longer in his service. For more than forty years, I have worked for the Tarfords; forty years of good and loyal service for a family that has always treated me with perfect courtesy. Even if I didn't have the honor of knowing Lady Tarford very long, she was a remarkable woman, very attentive and affectionate toward Sir Henry."

He swallowed painfully. "I don't know what has been troubling Sir Henry for several days now, but it's serious, I'm certain of it. I'm glad that he has called on you. If there is one person whom he trusts, it's you Sir Barry."

Barrison put his hand in that of the old butler. "Count on me, Alfred," he answered gently. "I'm going to talk with Sir Henry. Afterward, we will see what has to be done. But do as I ask, will you?"

"Of course!" the butler replied. "But why do you ask that?"

"Go rest; you need it very much."

"I, rest? But... why do you say that?"

Barrison winked at him: "Because I know; Alfred, I know."

And without giving the old butler time to answer, Barry started down the wide corridor which led to the main sitting room, filled with a diverse and varied collection of objects, some protected under glass.

Alfred watched him walk away. Putting his hand on his painful back, he was very happy that Barry Barrison was here. If there was one man who could get his master out of that situation, it was certainly he.