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Chapter 25

He peered forward over his desk at the tall graceful figure whose entrance had been so noiseless, and whose footsteps had been so light that she stood almost within a few feet of him before he was even aware of her presence. Then his surprise was so great that he could only gasp out her name.

"You! Lucille!"

She smiled upon him delightfully.

"Me! Lucille! Don't blame your servant. I assured him that I was expected, so he allowed me to enter unannounced. His astonishment was a delightful testimony to your reputation, by the bye. He was evidently not used to these invasions."

Brott had recovered himself by this time, and if any emotion still remained he was master of it.

"You must forgive my surprise!" he said. "You have of course something important to say to me. Will you not loosen your cloak?"

She unfastened the clasp and seated herself in his most comfortable chair. The firelight flashed and glittered on the silver ornaments of her dress; her neck and arms, with their burden of jewels, gleamed like porcelain in the semi-darkness outside the halo of his student lamp. And he saw that her dark hair hung low behind in graceful folds as he had once admired it. He stood a little apart, and she noted his traveling clothes and the various signs of a journey about the room.

"You may be glad to see me," she remarked, looking at him with a smile. "You don't look it."

"I am anxious to hear your news," he answered. "I am convinced that you have something important to say to me."

"Supposing," she answered, still looking at him steadily, "supposing I were to say that I had no object in coming here at all - that it was merely a whim? What should you say then?"

"I should take the liberty," he answered quietly, "of doubting the evidence of my senses."

There was a moment's silence. She felt his aloofness. It awoke in her some of the enthusiasm with which this mission itself had failed to inspire her. This man was measuring his strength against hers.

"It was not altogether a whim," she said, her eyes falling from his, "and yet - now I am here - it does not seem easy to say what was in my mind."

He glanced towards the clock.

"I fear," he said, "that it may sound ungallant, but in case this somewhat mysterious mission of yours is of any importance I had better perhaps tell you that in twenty minutes I must leave to catch the Scotch mail."

She rose at once to her feet, and swept her cloak haughtily around her.

"I have made a mistake," she said. "Be so good as to pardon my intrusion. I shall not trouble you again."

She was half-way across the room. She was at the door, her hand was upon the handle. He was white to the lips, his whole frame was shaking with the effort of intense repression. He kept silence, till only a flutter of her cloak was to be seen in the doorway. And then the cry which he had tried so hard to stifle broke from his lips.

"Lucille! Lucille!"

She hesitated, and came back - looking at him, so he thought, with trembling lips and eyes soft with unshed tears.

"I was a brute," he murmured. "I ought to be grateful for this chance of seeing you once more, of saying good-bye to you."

"Good-bye!" she repeated.

"Yes," he said gravely. "It must be good-bye. I have a great work before me, and it will cut me off completely from all association with your world and your friends. Something wider and deeper than an ocean will divide us. Something so wide that our hands will never reach across."

"You can talk about it very calmly," she said, without looking at him.

"I have been disciplining myself," he answered.

She rested her face upon her hand, and looked into the fire.

"I suppose," she said, "this means that you have refused Mr. Letheringham's offer."

"I have refused it," he answered.

"I am sorry," she said simply.

She rose from her chair with a sudden start, began to draw on her cloak, and then let it fall altogether from her shoulders.

"Why do you do this?" she asked earnestly. "Is it that you are so ambitious? You used not to be so - in the old days.

He laughed bitterly.

"You too, then," he said, "can remember. Ambitious! Well, why not? To be Premier of England, to stand for the people, to carry through to its logical consummation a bloodless revolution, surely this is worth while. Is there anything in the world better worth having than power?"

"Yes," she answered, looking him full in the eyes.

"What is it then? Let me know before it is too late." "Love!"

He threw his arms about her. For a moment she was powerless in his grasp. "So be it then," he cried fiercely. "Give me the one, and I will deny the other. Only no half measures! I will drink to the bottom of the cup or not at all." She shook herself free from him, breathless, consumed with an anger to which she dared not give voice. For a moment or two she was speechless. Her bosom rose and fell, a bright streak of colour flared in her cheeks. Brott stood away from her, white and stern. "You - are clumsy!" she said. "You frighten me!" Her words carried no conviction. He looked at her with a new suspicion. "You talk like a child," he answered roughly, "or else your whole conduct is a fraud. For months I have been your slave. I have abandoned my principles, given you my time, followed at your heels like a tame dog. And for what? You will not marry me, you will not commit yourself to anything. You are a past mistress in the art of binding fools to your chariot wheels. You know that I love you - that there breathes on this earth no other woman for me but you. I have told you this in all save words a hundred times. And now - now it is my turn. I have been played with long enough. You are here unbidden - unexpected. You can consider that door locked. Now tell me why you came."

Lucille had recovered herself. She stood before him, white but calm.

"Because," she said, "I am a woman."

"That means that you came without reason - on impulse?" he asked.

"I came," she said, "because I heard that you were about to take a step which must separate us for ever."

"And that," he asked, "disturbed you?"

"Yes!"

"Come, we are drawing nearer together," he said, a kindling light in his eyes. "Now answer me this. How much do you care if this eternal separation does come? Here am I on the threshold of action. Unless I change my mind within ten minutes I must throw in my lot with those whom you and your Order loathe and despise. There can be no half measures. I must be their leader, or I must vanish from the face of the political world. This I will do if you bid me. But the price must be yourself - wholly, without reservation-yourself, body and soul."

"You care - as much as that?" she murmured.

"Ask me no questions, answer mine!" he cried fiercely. "You shall stay with me here - or in five minutes I leave on my campaign."

She laughed musically.

"This is positively delicious," she exclaimed. "I am being made love to in medieval fashion. Other times other manners, sir! Will you listen to reason?"

"I will listen to nothing - save your answer, yes or no," he declared, drawing on his overcoat. She laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Reginald," she said, "you are like the whirlwind - and how can I answer you in five minutes!"

"You can answer me in one," he declared fiercely. "Will you pay my price if I do your bidding? Yes or no! The price is yourself. Now! Yes or no?"

She drew on her own cloak and fastened the clasp with shaking fingers. Then she turned towards the door.

"I wish you good-bye and good fortune, Reginald," she said. "I daresay we may not meet again. It will be better that we do not."

"This then is your answer?" he cried.

She looked around at him. Was it his fancy, or were those tears in her eyes? Or was she really so wonderful an actress?"

"Do you think," she said, "that if I had not cared I should have come here?"

"Tell me that in plain words," he cried. "It is all I ask."

The door was suddenly opened. Grahame stood upon the threshold. He looked beyond Lucille to Brott.

"You must really forgive me," he said, "but there is barely time to catch the train, Brott. I have a hansom waiting, and your luggage is on."

Brott answered nothing. Lucille held out her hands to him.

"Yes or no?" he asked her in a low hoarse tone.

"You must - give me time! I don't want to lose you. I - "

He caught up his coat.

"Coming, Grahame," he said firmly. "Countess, I must beg your pardon ten thousand times for this abrupt departure. My servants will call your carriage."

She leaned towards him, beautiful, anxious, alluring.

"Reginald!"

"Yes or no," he whispered in her ear.

"Give me until to-morrow," she faltered.

"Not one moment," he answered. "Yes - now, this instant - or I go!"

"Brott! My dear man, we have not a second to lose."

"You hear!" he muttered. "Yes or no?"

She trembled.

"Give me until to-morrow," she begged. "It is for your own sake. For your own safety."

He turned on his heel! His muttered speech was profane, but inarticulate. He sprang into the hansom by Grahame's side.

"Euston!" the latter cried through the trap-door. "Double fare, cabby. We must catch the Scotchman."

Lucille came out a few moments later, and looked up and down the street as her brougham drove smartly up. The hansom was fast disappearing in the distance. She looked after it and sighed.