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Chapter 33

The greeting between the two men was cold, and the Prince almost immediately stepped between them. Nevertheless, Brott seemed to have a fancy to talk with Mr. Sabin.

"I was at Camperdown House yesterday," he remarked. "Her Ladyship was regretting that she saw you so seldom."

"I have been a little remiss," Mr. Sabin answered. "I hope to lunch there to-morrow."

"You have seen the evening paper, Brott?" the Prince asked.

"I saw the early editions," Brott answered. "Is there anything fresh?"

The Prince dropped his voice a little. He drew Brott on one side.

"The Westminster declared that you had left for Windsor by an early train this afternoon, and gives a list of your Cabinet. The Pall Mall, on the other hand, declares that Letheringham will assuredly be sent for to-morrow."

Brott shrugged his shoulders.

"There are bound to be a crop of such reports at a time like this," he remarked.

The Prince dropped his voice almost to a whisper.

"Brott," he said, "there is something which I have had it in my mind to say to you for the last few days. I am not perhaps a great politician, but, like many outsiders, I see perhaps a good deal of the game. I know fairly well what the feeling is in Vienna and Berlin. I can give you a word of advice."

"You are very kind, Prince," Brott remarked, looking uneasily over his shoulder. "But -"

"It is concerning Brand. There is no man more despised and disliked abroad, not only because he is a Jew and ill-bred, but because of his known sympathy with some of these anarchists who are perfect firebrands in Europe."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you," Brott answered hurriedly. "I am afraid, however, that you anticipate matters a good deal. I have not yet been asked to form a Cabinet. It is doubtful whether I ever shall. And, beyond that, it is also doubtful whether even if I am asked I shall accept."

"I must confess," the Prince said, "that you puzzle me. Every one says that the Premiership of the country is within your reach. It is surely the Mecca of all politicians."

"There are complications," Brott muttered. "You -"

He stopped short and moved towards the door. Lucille, unusually pale and grave, had just issued from the ladies' ante-room, and joined Lady Carey, who was talking to Mr. Sabin. She touched the latter lightly on the arm.

"Help us to escape," she said quickly. "I am weary of my task. Can we get away without their seeing us?"

Mr. Sabin offered his arm. They passed along the broad way, and as they were almost the last to leave the place, their carriage was easily found. The Prince and Mr. Brott appeared only in time to see Mr. Sabin turning away, hat in hand, from the curb-stone. Brott's face darkened.

"Prince," he said, "who is that man?"

The Prince shrugged his shoulders.

"A man," he said, "who has more than once nearly ruined your country. His life has been a splendid failure. He would have given India to the Russians, but they mistrusted him and trifled away their chance. Once since then he nearly sold this country to Germany; it was a trifle only which intervened. He has been all his life devoted to one cause."

"And that?" Brott asked.

"The restoration of the monarchy to France. He, as you of course know, is the Duc de Souspennier, the sole living member in the direct line of one of the most ancient and historical houses in England. My friend," he added, turning to Mr. Sabin, "you have stolen a march upon us. We had not even an opportunity of making our adieux to the ladies."

"I imagine," Mr. Sabin answered, "that the cause of quarrel may rest with them. You were nowhere in sight when they came out."

"These fascinating politics," the Prince remarked. "We all want to talk politics to Mr. Brott just now."

"I will wish you good-night, gentlemen," Mr. Sabin said, and passed into the hotel.

The Prince touched Broton on the arm.

"Will you come round to the club, and take a hand at bridge?" he said.

Brott laughed shortly.

"I imagine," he said, "that I should be an embarrassing guest to you just now at, say the Mallborough, or even at the St. James. I believe the aristocracy are looking forward to the possibility of my coming into power with something like terror."

"I am not thoroughly versed; in the politics of this country," the Prince said, "but I have always understood that your views were very much advanced. Dorset solemnly believes that you are pledged to exterminate the large landed proprietors, and I do not think he would be surprised to hear that you had a guillotine up your sleeve."

The two men were strolling along Pall Mall. The Prince had lit a large cigar, and was apparently on the best of terms with himself and the world in general. Brott, on the contrary, was most unlike himself, preoccupied, and apparently ill at ease.

"The Duke and his class are, of course, my natural opponents," Brott said shortly. "By the bye, Prince," he added, suddenly turning towards him, and with a complete change of tone, "it is within your power to do me a favour."

"You have only to command," the Prince assured him good-naturedly.

"My rooms are close here," Brott continued. "Will you accompany me there, and grant me the favour of a few minutes' conversation?"

"Assuredly!" the Prince answered, flicking the end off his cigar. "It will be a pleasure."

They walked on towards their destination in silence. Brott's secretary was in the library with a huge pile of letters and telegrams before him. He welcomed Brott with relief.

"We have been sending all over London for you, sir," he said.

Brott nodded.

"I am better out of the way for the present," he answered. "Deny me to everybody for an hour, especially Letheringham. There is nothing here, I suppose, which cannot wait so long as that?"

The secretary looked a little doubtful.

"I think not, sir," he decided.

"Very good. Go and get something to eat. You look fagged. And tell Hyson to bring up some liqueurs, will you! I shall be engaged for a short time."

The secretary withdrew. A servant appeared with a little tray of liqueurs, and in obedience to an impatient gesture from his master, left them upon the table. Brott closed the door firmly.

"Prince," he said, resuming his seat, "I wished to speak with you concerning the Countess."

Saxe Leinitzer nodded.

"All right," he said. "I am listening!"

"I understand," Brott continued, "that you are one of her oldest friends, and also one of the trustees of her estates. I presume that you stand to her therefore to some extent in the position of an adviser?"

"It is perfectly true," the Prince admitted.

"I, too, am an old friend, as she has doubtless told you," Brott said. "All my life she has been the one woman whom I have desired to call my wife. That desire has never been so strong as at the present moment."

The Prince removed his cigar from his mouth and looked grave.

"But, my dear Brott," he said, "have you considered the enormous gulf between your - views? The Countess owns great hereditary estates, she comes from a family which is almost Royal, she herself is an aristocrat to the backbone. It is a class against which you have declared war. How can you possibly come together on common ground?"

Brott was silent for a moment. Looking at him steadily the Prince was surprised at the change in the man's appearance. His cheeks seemed blanched and his skin drawn. He had lost flesh, his eyes were hollow, and he frequently betrayed in small mannerisms a nervousness wholly new and unfamiliar to him.

"You speak as a man of sense, Prince," he said after a while. "You are absolutely correct. This matter has caused me a great deal of anxious thought. To falter at this moment is to lose, politically, all that I have worked for all my life. It is to lose the confidence of the people who have trusted me. It is a betrayal, the thought of which is a constant shame to me. But, on the other hand, Lucille is the dearest thing to me in life."

The Prince's expression was wholly sympathetic. The derision which lurked behind he kept wholly concealed. A strong man so abjectly in the toils, and he to be chosen for his confidant! It was melodrama with a dash of humour.

"If I am to help you," the Prince said, "I must know everything. Have you made any proposals to Lucille? In plain words, how much of your political future are you disposed to sacrifice?"

"All!" Brott said hoarsely. "All for a certainty of her. Not one jot without."

"And she?"

Brott sprang to his feet, white and nervous.

"It is where I am at fault," he exclaimed. "It is why I have asked for your advice, your help perhaps. I do not find it easy to understand Lucille. Perhaps it is because I am not well versed in the ways of her sex. I find her elusive. She will give me no promise. Before I went to Glasgow I talked with her. If she would have married me then my political career was over - thrown on one side like an old garment. But she would give me no promise. In everything save the spoken words I crave she has promised me her love. Again there comes a climax. In a few hours I must make my final choice. I must decline to join Letheringham, in which case the King must send for me, or accept office with him, and throw away the one great chance of this generation. Letheringham's Cabinet, of course, would be a moderate Liberal one, a paragon of milk and water in effectiveness. If I go in alone we make history. The moment of issue has come. And, Prince, although I have pleaded with all the force and all the earnestness I know, Lucille remains elusive. If I choose for her side - she promises me - reward. But it is vague to me. I don't, I can't understand! I want her for my wife, I want her for the rest of my life - nothing else. Tell me, is there any barrier to this? There are no complications in her life which I do not know of? I want your assurance. I want her promise. You understand me?"

"Yes, I understand you," the Prince said gravely. "I understand more than you do. I understand Lucille's position."

Brott leaned forward with bright eyes.

"Ah!"

"Lucille, the Countess of Radantz, is at the present moment a married woman."

Brott was speechless. His face was like a carved stone image, from which the life had wholly gone.

"Her husband - in name only, let me tell you, is the Mr. Sabin with whom we had supper this evening."

"Great God!"

"Their marriage had strange features in it which are not my concern, or even yours," the Prince said deliberately. "The truth is, that they have not lived together for years, they never will again, for their divorce proceedings would long ago have been concluded but for the complications arising from the difference between the Hungarian and the American laws. Here, without doubt, is the reason why the Countess has hesitated to pledge her word directly."

"It is wonderful," Brott said slowly. "But it explains everything."

There was a loud knock at the door. The secretary appeared upon the threshold. Behind him was a tall, slim young man in traveling costume.

"The King's messenger!" Brott exclaimed, rising to his feet.