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Chapter 35

The Prince crossed the hail and entered the morning-room. Felix was there and Raoul de Brouillac. The Duchess sat at her writing-table, scribbling a note. Lady Carey, in a wonderful white serge costume, and a huge bunch of Neapolitan violets at her bosom, was lounging in an easy-chair, swinging her foot backwards and forwards. The Duke, in a very old tweed coat, but immaculate as to linen and the details of his toilet, stood a little apart, with a frown upon his forehead, and exactly that absorbed air which in the House of Lords usually indicated his intention to make a speech. The entrance of the Prince, who carefully closed the door behind him, was an event for which evidently they were all waiting.

"My good people," he said blandly, "I wish you all a very good-morning."

There was a little murmur of greetings, and before they had all subsided the Duke spoke.

"Saxe Leinitzer," he said, "I have a few questions to ask you."

The Prince looked across the room at him.

"By all means, Duke," he said. "But is the present an opportune time?"

"Opportune or no, it is the time which I have selected," the Duke answered stiffly. "I do not altogether understand what is going on in this house. I am beginning to wonder whether I have been misled."

The Prince, as he twirled his fair moustache, glanced carelessly enough across at the Duchess. She was looking the other way.

"I became a - er - general member of this Society," the Duke continued, "sympathising heartily with its objects as explained to me by you, Prince, and believing, although to confess it is somewhat of a humiliation, that a certain amount of - er - combination amongst the aristocracy has become necessary to resist the terrible increase of Socialism which we must all so much deplore."

"You are not making a speech, dear," the Duchess remarked, looking coldly across the room at him. "We are all anxious to hear what the Prince has to say to us."

"Your anxiety," the Duke continued, "and the anxiety of our friends must be restrained for a few minutes, for there are certain things which I am determined to say, and to say them now. I must confess that it was at first a painful shock to me to realise that the time had come when it was necessary for us to take any heed of the uneducated rabble who seem born into the world discontented with their station in life, and instead of making honest attempts to improve it waste their time railing against us who are more fortunately placed, and in endeavours to mislead in every possible way the electorate of the country."

The Prince sighed softly, and lit a cigarette. Lady Carey and Felix were already smoking.

"However," the Duke continued, "I was convinced. I have always believed in the principle of watching closely the various signs of the times, and I may say that I came to the conclusion that a combination of the thinking members of the aristocratic party throughout the world was an excellent idea. I therefore became what is, I believe, called a general member of the Order, of which I believe you, Prince, are the actual head."

"My dear James," the Duchess murmured, "the Prince has something to say to us."

"The Prince," her husband answered coldly, "can keep back his information for a few minutes. I am determined to place my position clearly before all of you who are present here now. It is only since I have joined this Society that I have been made aware that in addition to the general members, of which body I believe that the Duchess and I are the sole representatives here, there are special members, and members of the inner circle. And I understand that in connection with these there is a great machinery of intrigue going on all the time, with branches all over the world, spies everywhere with unlimited funds, and with huge opportunities of good or evil. In effect I have become an outside member of what is nothing more nor less than a very powerful and, it seems to me, daring secret society."

"So far as you are concerned, Duke," the Prince said, "your responsibility ceases with ordinary membership. You can take no count of anything beyond. The time may come when the inner circle may be opened to you."

The Duke coughed.

"You misapprehend me," he said. "I can assure you I am not anxious for promotion. On the contrary, I stand before you an aggrieved person. I have come to the conclusion that my house, and the shelter of my wife's name, have been used for a plot, the main points of which have been kept wholly secret from me."

The Prince flicked his cigarette ash into the grate.

"My dear Dorset," he said gently, "if you will allow me to explain -"

"I thank you, Saxe Leinitzer," the Duke said coldly, "but it is beginning to occur to me that I have had enough of your explanations. It seemed natural enough to me, and I must say well conceived, that some attempt should be made to modify the views of, if not wholly convert, Reginald Brott by means of the influence of a very charming woman. It was my duty as a member of the Order to assist in this, and the shelter of my house and name were freely accorded to the Countess. But it is news to me to find that she was brought here practically by force. That because she was an inner member and therefore bound to implicit obedience that she was dragged away from her husband, kept apart from him against her will, forced into endeavours to make a fool of Brott even at the cost of her good name. And now, worst of all, I am told that a very deeply laid plot on the part of some of you will compel her to leave England almost at once, and that her safety depends upon her inducing Reginald Brott to accompany her."

"She has appealed to you," the Prince muttered.

"She has done nothing so sensible," the Duke answered drily. "The facts which I have just stated are known to every one in this room. I perhaps know less than any one. But I know enough for this. I request, Saxe Leinitzer, that you withdraw the name of myself and my wife from your list of members, and that you understand clearly that my house is to be no more used for meetings of the Society, formal or informal. And, further, though I regret the apparent inhospitality of my action, my finger is now, as you see, upon the bell, and I venture to wish you all a very good-morning. Groves," he added to the servant who answered the door, "the Prince of Saxe Leinitzer's carriage is urgently required."

The Prince and Lady Carey descended the broad steps side by side. She was laughing softly but immoderately. The Prince was pale with fury.

"Pompous old ass," he muttered savagely. "He may have a worse scandal in his house now than he dreams of."

She wiped her eyes.

"Have I not always told you," she said, "that intrigue in this country was a sheer impossibility? You may lay your plans ever so carefully, but you cannot foresee such a contretemps as this."

"Idiot!" the Prince cried, "Oh, the dolt! Why, even his wife was amazed."

"He may be all those pleasant things," Lady Carey, said, "but he is a gentleman."

He stopped short. The footman was standing by the side of Lady Carey's victoria with a rug on his arm.

"Lucille," he said thoughtfully, "is locked in the morning-room. She is prostrate with fear. If the Duke sees her everything is over. Upon my word, I have a good mind to throw this all up and cross to Paris to-night. Let England breed her own revolutions. What do you say, Muriel? Will you come with me?"

She laughed scornfully.

"I'd as soon go with my coachman," she said.

His eyebrows narrowed. A dull, purple flush crept to his forehead.

"Your wit," he said, "is a little coarse. Listen! You wish our first plan to go through?"

"Of course!"

"Then you must get Lucille out of that house. If she is left there she is absolutely lost to us. Apart from that, she is herself not safe. Our plan worked out too well. She is really in danger from this Duson affair."

The laughter died away from Lady Carey's face. She hesitated with her foot upon the step of her carriage.

"You can go back easily enough," the Prince said. "You are the Duke's cousin, and you were not included in his tirade. Lucille is in the morning-room, and here is the key. I brought it away with me. You must tell her that all our plans are broken, that we have certain knowledge that the police are on the track of this Duson affair. Get her to your house in Pont Street, and I will be round this afternoon. Or better still, take her to mine."

Lady Carey stepped back on to the pavement. She was still, however, hesitating.

"Leave her with the Duke and Duchess," the Prince said, "and she will dine with her husband to-night."

Lady Carey took the key from his hand.

"I will try," she said. "How shall you know whether I succeed?"

"I will wait in the gardens," he answered. "I shall be out of sight, but I shall be able to see you come out. If you are alone I shall come to you. If she is with you I shall be at your house in an hour, and I promise you that she shall leave England to-night with me."

"Poor Brott!" she murmured ironically.

The Prince smiled.

"He will follow her. Every one will believe that they left London together. That is all that is required."

Lady Carey re-entered the house. The Prince made his way into the gardens. Ten minutes passed - a quarter of an hour. Then Lady Carey with Lucille reappeared, and stepping quickly into the victoria were driven away. The Prince drew a little sigh of relief. He looked at his watch, called a hansom, and drove to his club for lunch.

Another man, who had also been watching Dorset Rouse from the gardens for several hours, also noted Lucille's advent with relief. He followed the Prince out and entered another hansom.

"Follow that victoria which has just driven off," he ordered. "Don't lose sight of it. Double fare."

The trap-door fell, and the man whipped up his horse.