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Chapter 39

Saxe Leinitzer returned to the morning-room, and taking the key from his pocket unlocked the door. Inside Lucille was pale with fury.

"What! I am a prisoner, then!" she exclaimed. "How dare you lock me in? This is not your house. Let me pass! I am tired of all this stupid espionage."

The Prince stood with his back to the door.

"It is for your own sake, Lucille. The house is watched."

She sank into a low chair, trembling. The Prince had all the appearance of a man himself seriously disturbed.

"Lucille," he said, "we will do what we can for you. The whole thing is horribly unfortunate. You must leave England to-night. Muriel will go with you. Her presence will help to divert suspicion. Once you can reach Paris I can assure you of safety. But in this country I am almost powerless."

"I must see Victor," she said in a low tone. "I will not go without."

The Prince nodded.

"I have thought of that. There is no reason, Lucille, why he should not be the one to lead you into safety."

"You mean that?" she cried.

"I mean it," the Prince answered. "After what has happened you are of course of no further use to us. I am inclined to think, too, that we have been somewhat exacting. I will send a messenger to Souspennier to meet you at Charing Cross to-night."

She sprang up.

"Let me write it myself."

"Very well," he agreed, with a shrug of the shoulders. "But do not address or sign it. There is danger in any communication between you."

She took a sheet of note-paper and hastily wrote a few words.

"I have need of your help. Will you be at Charing Cross at twelve o'clock prepared for a journey. - Lucille."

The Prince took the letter from her and hastily folded it up.

"I will deliver it myself," he announced. "It will perhaps be safest. Until I return, Lucille, do not stir from the house or see any one. Muriel has given the servants orders to admit no one. All your life," he added, after a moment's pause, "you have been a little cruel to me, and this time also. I shall pray that you will relent before our next meeting."

She rose to her feet and looked him full in the face. She seemed to be following out her own train of thought rather than taking note of his words.

"Even now," she said thoughtfully, "I am not sure that I can trust you. I have a good mind to fight or scream my way out of this house, and go myself to see Victor."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"The fighting or the screaming will not be necessary, dear Countess," he said. "The doors are open to you. But it is as clear as day that if you go to the hotel or near it you will at once be recognised, and recognition means arrest. There is a limit beyond which one cannot help a wilful woman. Take your life in your hands and go your own way, or trust in us who are doing our best to save you."

"And what of Reginald Brott?" she asked.

"Brott?" the Prince repeated impatiently. "Who cares what becomes of him? You have made him seem a fool, but, Lucille, to tell you the truth, I am sorry that we did not leave this country altogether alone. There is not the soil for intrigue here, or the possibility. Then, too, the police service is too stolid, too inaccessible. And even our friends, for whose aid we are here - well, you heard the Duke. The cast-iron Saxon idiocy of the man. The aristocracy here are what they call bucolic. It is their own fault. They have intermarried with parvenus and Americans for generations. They are a race by themselves. We others may shake ourselves free from them. I would work in any country of the globe for the good of our cause, but never again in England."

Lucille shivered a little.

"I am not in the humour for argument," she declared. "If you would earn my gratitude take that note to my husband. He is the only man I feel sure of - whom I know can protect me."

The Prince bowed low.

"It is our farewell, Countess," he said.

"I cannot pretend," she answered, "to regret it."

Saxe Leinitzer left the room. There was a peculiar smile upon his lips as he crossed the hall. Brott was still awaiting for him.

"Mr. Brott," he said, "the Countess is, as I feared, too agitated to see you again for the present, or any one else. She sends you, however, this message."

He took the folded paper from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to the other man. Brott read it through eagerly. His eyes shone.

"She accepts the situation, then?" he exclaimed.

"Precisely! Will you pardon me, my friend, if I venture upon one other word. Lucille is not an ordinary woman. She is not in the least like the majority of her sex, especially, I might add, amongst us. The fact that her husband was living would seriously influence her consideration of any other man - as her lover. The present crisis, however, has changed everything. I do not think that you will have cause to complain of her lack of gratitude."

Brott walked out into the streets with the half sheet of note-paper twisted up between his fingers. For the first time for months he was conscious of a distinct and vivid sense of happiness. The terrible period of indecision was past. He knew now where he stood. Nor was his immediate departure from England altogether unpleasant to him. His political career was shattered - friends and enemies were alike cold to him. Such an act of cowardice as his, such pitiful shrinking back at the last fateful moment, was inexplicable and revolting. Even Letheringham was barely civil. It was certain that his place in the Cabinet would be intolerable. He yearned for escape from it all, and the means of escape were now at hand. In after years he knew very well that the shadow of his broken trust, the torture of his misused opportunities, would stand for ever between him and the light. But at that moment he was able to clear his mind of all such disquieting thoughts. He had won Lucille - never mind at what cost, at what peril! He had won Lucille!

He was deeply engrossed, and his name was spoken twice in his ear before he turned round. A small, somewhat shabby-looking man, with tired eyes and more than a day's growth of beard upon his chin, had accosted him.

"Mr. Brott, sir. A word with you, please."

Brott held out his hand. Nevertheless his tone when he spoke lacked heartiness.

"You, Hedley! Why, what brings you to London?"

The little man did not seem to see the hand. At any rate he made no motion to take it.

"A few minutes' chat with Mr. Brott. That's what I've come for."

Brott raised his eyebrows, and nodded in somewhat constrained fashion.

"Well," he said, "I am on my way to my rooms. We can talk as we go, if you like. I am afraid the good people up in your part of the world are not too well pleased with me."

The little man smiled rather queerly.

"That is quite true," he answered calmly. "They hate a liar and a turn-coat. So do I!" Brott stopped short upon the pavement.

"If you are going to talk like that to me, Hedley," he said, "the less you have to say the better."

The man nodded.

"Very well," he said. "What I have to say won't take me very long. But as I've tramped most of the way up here to say it, you'll have to listen here or somewhere else. I thought you were always one who liked the truth."

"So I do!" Brott answered. "Go on!"

The man shuffled along by his side. They were an odd-looking pair, for Brott was rather a careful man as regards his toilet, and his companion looked little better than a tramp.

"All my life," he continued, "I've been called 'Mad Hedley,' or 'Hedley, the mad tailor.' Sometimes one and sometimes the other. It don't matter which. There's truth in it. I am a bit mad. You, Mr. Brott, were one of those who understood me a little. I have brooded a good deal perhaps, and things have got muddled up in my brain. You know what has been at the bottom of it all.

"I began making speeches when I was a boy. People laughed at me, but I've set many a one a-thinking. I'm no anarchist, although people call me one. I'll admit that I admire the men who set the French Revolution going. If such a thing happened in this country I'd be one of the first to join in. But I've never had a taste for bloodshed. I'd rather the thing had been done without. From the first you seemed to be the man who might have brought it about. We listened to you, we watched your career, and we began to have hopes. Mr. Brott, the bodies and souls of millions of your fellow-creatures were in the hollow of your hand. It was you who might have set them free. It was you who might have made this the greatest, the freest, the happiest country in the world. Not so much for us perhaps as for our children, and our children's children. We didn't expect a huge social upheaval in a week, or even a decade of years. But we did expect to see the first blow struck. Oh, yes, we expected that."

"I have disappointed you, I know, you and many others," Brott said bitterly. "I wish I could explain. But I can't!" "Oh, it doesn't matter," the man answered. "You have broken the hearts of thousands of suffering men and women - you who might have led them into the light, have forged another bolt in the bars which stand between them and liberty. So they must live on in the darkness, dull, dumb creatures with just spirit enough to spit and curse at the sound of your name. It was the greatest trust God ever placed in one man's hand - and you - you abused it. They were afraid of you - the aristocrats, and they bought you. Oh, we are not blind up there - there are newspapers in our public houses, and now and then one can afford a half-penny. We have read of you at their parties and their dances. Quite one of them you have become, haven't you? But, Mr. Brott, have you never been afraid? Have you never said to yourself, there is justice in the earth? Suppose it finds me out?"

"Hedley, you are talking rubbish," J3rott said. "Up here you would see things with different eyes. Letheringham is pledged."

"If any man ever earned hell," Hedley continued, "it is you, Brott, you who came to us a deliverer, and turned out to be a lying prophet. 'Hell,' he repeated fiercely, "and may you find it swiftly."

The man's right hand came out of his long pocket. They were in the thick of Piccadilly, but his action was too swift for any interference. Four reports rang suddenly out, and the muzzle of the revolver was held deliberately within an inch or so of Brett's heart. And before even the nearest of the bystanders could realise what had happened Brott lay across the pavement a dead man, and Hedley was calmly handing over the revolver to a policeman who had sprang across the street.

"Be careful, officer," he said, "there are still two chambers loaded. I will come with you quite quietly. That is Mr. Reginald Brott, the Cabinet Minister, and I have killed him."