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[Authors](#)
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[The Yellow Crayon](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 23

After all," said the Prince, looking up from the wine list, "why cannot I be satisfied with you? And why cannot you be satisfied with me? It would save so much trouble."

Lady Carey, who was slowly unwinding the white veil from her picture hat, shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear man," she said, "you could not seriously expect me to fall in love with you."

The Prince sipped his wine - a cabinet hock of rare vintage - and found it good. He leaned over towards his companion.

"Why not?" he asked. "I wish that you would try - in earnest, I mean. You are capable of great things, I believe - perhaps of the great passion itself."

"Perhaps," she murmured derisively.

"And yet," he continued, "there has always been in our love-making a touch of amateurishness. It is an awkward word, but I do not know how better to explain myself."

"I understand you perfectly," she answered. "I can also, I think, explain it. It is because I never cared a rap about you."

The Prince did not appear altogether pleased. He curled his fair moustache, and looked deprecatingly at his companion. She had so much the air of a woman who has spoken the truth.

"My dear Murie!" he protested.

She looked at him insolently.

"My good man," she said, "whatever you do don't try and be sentimental. You know quite well that I have never in my life pretended to care a rap about you - except to pass the time. You are altogether too obvious. Very young girls and very old women would rave about you. You simply don't appeal to me. Perhaps I know you too well. What does it matter!"

He sighed and examined a sauce critically. They were lunching at Prince's alone, at a small table near the wall.

"Your taste," he remarked a little spitefully, "would be considered a trifle strange. Sospennier carries his years well, but he must be an old man."

She sipped her wine thoughtfully.

"Old or young," she said, "he is a man, and all my life I have loved men, - strong men. To have him here opposite to me at this moment, mine, belonging to me, the slave of my will, I would give - well, I would give - a year of my life - my new tiara - anything!"

"What a pity," he murmured, "that we cannot make an exchange, you and I, Lucille and he!"

"Ah, Lucille!" she murmured. "Well, she is beautiful. That goes for much. And she has the grand air. But, heavens, how stupid!"

"Stupid!" he repeated doubtfully.

She drummed nervously upon the tablecloth with her fingers.

"Oh, not stupid in the ordinary way, of course, but yet a fool. I should like to see man or devil try and separate us if I belonged to him - until I was tired of him. That would come, of course. It comes always. It is the hideous part of life."

"You look always," he said, "a little too far forward. It is a mistake. After all, it is the present only which concerns us."

"Admirable philosophy," she laughed scornfully, "but when one is bored to death in the present one must look forward or backward for consolation."

He continued his lunch in silence for a while.

"I am rebuked!" he said.

There came a pause in the courses. He looked at her critically. She was very handsomely dressed in a walking costume of dove-coloured grey. The ostrich feathers which drooped from her large hat were almost priceless. She had the undeniable air of being a person of breeding. But she was paler even than usual, her hair, notwithstanding its careful arrangement, gave signs of being a little thin in front. There were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She knew these things, but she bore his inspection with indifference.

"I wonder," he said reflectively, "what we men see in you. You have plenty of admirers. They say that Grefton got himself shot out at the front because you treated him badly. Yet - you are not much to look at, are you?"

She laughed at him. Hers was never a pleasant laugh, but this time it was at least natural.

"How discriminating," she declared. "I am an ugly woman, and men of taste usually prefer ugly women. Then I am always well dressed. I know how to wear my clothes. And I have a shocking reputation. A really wicked woman, I once heard pious old Lady Surbiton call me! Dear old thing! It did me no end of good. Then I have the very great advantage of never caring for any one more than a few days together. Men find that annoying."

"You have violent fancies," he remarked, "and strange ones."

"Perhaps," she admitted. "They concern no one except myself."

"This Souspennier craze, for instance!"

She nodded.

"Well, you can't say that I'm not honest. It is positively my only virtue. I adore the truth. I loathe a lie. That is one reason, I daresay, why I can only barely tolerate you. You are a shocking - a gross liar."

"Muriel!"

"Oh, don't look at me like that," she exclaimed irritably. "You must hear the truth sometimes. And now, please remember that I came to lunch with you to hear about your visit this morning."

The Prince gnawed his moustache, and the light in his eyes was not a pleasant thing to see. This woman with her reckless life, her odd fascination, her brusque hatred of affectations, was a constant torment to him. If only he could once get her thoroughly into his power.

"My visit," he said, "was wholly successful. It could not well be otherwise. Lucille has returned to Dorset House. Souspennier is confounded altogether by a little revelation which I ventured to make. He spoke of an appeal. I let him know with whom he would have to deal. I left him nerveless and crushed. He can do nothing save by open revolt. And if he tries that - well, there will be no more of this wonderful Mr. Sabin."

"Altogether a triumph to you," she remarked scornfully. "Oh, I know the sort of thing. But, after all, my dear Ferdinand, what of last night. I hate the woman, but she played the game, and played it well. We were fooled, both of us. And to think that I -"

She broke off with a short laugh. The Prince looked at her curiously.

"Perhaps," he said, "you had some idea of consoling the desolate husband?"

"Perhaps I had," she answered coolly. "It didn't come off, did it? Order me some coffee, and give me a cigarette, my friend. I have something else to say to you."

He obeyed her, and she leaned back in the high chair.

"Listen to me," she said. "I have nothing whatever to do with you and Lucille. I suppose you will get your revenge on Souspennier through her. It won't be like you if you don't try, and you ought to have the game pretty well in your own hands. But I won't have Souspennier harmed. You understand?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Souspennier," he said, "must take care. If he oversteps the bounds he must pay the penalty."

She leaned forward. There was a look in her face which he knew very well.

"You and I understand one another," she said coolly. "If you want me for an enemy you can have me. Very likely I shall tell you before long that you can do what you like with the man. But until I do it will be very dangerous for you if harm comes to him."

"It is no use," he answered doggedly. "If he attacks he must be silenced."

"If he attacks," she answered, "you must give me twenty-four hours clear notice before you move a hand against him. Afterwards - well, we will discuss that."

"You had better," he said, looking at her with an ugly gleam in his eyes, "persuade him to take you for a little tour on the Continent. It would be safer."

"If he would come," she said coolly, "I would go to-morrow. But he won't - just yet. Never mind. You have heard what I wanted to say. Now shall we go? I am going to get some sleep this afternoon. Everybody tells me that I look like a ghost."

"Why not come to Grosvenor Square with me?" he leaning a little across the table. "Patoff shall make you some Russian tea, and afterwards you shall sleep as long as you like."

"How idyllic!" she answered, with a faint sarcastic smile. "It goes to my heart to decline so charming an invitation. But, to tell you the truth, it would bore me excessively."

He muttered something under his breath which startled the waiter at his elbow. Then he followed her out of the room. She paused for a few moments in the portico to finish buttoning her gloves.

"Many thanks for my lunch," she said, nodding to him carelessly. "I'm sure I've been a delightful companion."

"You have been a very tormenting one," he answered gloomily as he followed her out on to the pavement.

"You should try Lucille," she suggested maliciously.

He stood by her side while they waited for her carriage, and looked at her critically. Her slim, elegant figure had never seemed more attractive to him. Even the insolence of her tone and manner had an odd sort of fascination. He tried to hold for a moment the fingers which grasped her skirt.

"I think," he whispered, "that after you Lucille would be dull!"

She laughed.

"That is because Lucille has morals and a conscience," she said, "and I have neither. But, dear me, how much more comfortably one gets on without them. No, thank you, Prince. My coupe is only built for one. Remember."

She flung him a careless nod from the window. The Prince remained on the pavement until after the little brougham had driven away. Then he smiled softly to himself as he turned to follow it.

"No!" he said. "I think not! I think that she will not get our good friend Souspennier. We shall see!"