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## Chapter 12

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After all," Lady Carey sighed, throwing down a racing calendar and lighting a cigarette, "London is the only thoroughly civilized Anglo-Saxon capital in the world. Please don't look at me like that, Duchess. I know - this is your holy of holies, but the Duke smokes here - I've seen him. My cigarettes are very tiny and very harmless."

The Duchess, who wore gold-rimmed spectacles, and was a person of weight in the councils of the Primrose League, went calmly on with her knitting.

"My dear Muriel," she said, "if my approval or disapproval was of the slightest moment to you, it is not your smoking of which I should first complain. I know, however, that you consider yourself a privileged person. Pray do exactly as you like, but don't drop the ashes upon the carpet."

Lady Carey laughed softly.

"I suppose I am rather a thorn in your side as a relative," she remarked. "You must put it down to the roving blood of my ancestors. I could no more live the life of you other women than I could fly. I must have excitement, movement, all the time."

A tall, heavily built man, who had been reading some letters at the other end of the room, came sauntering up to them.

"Well," he said, "you assuredly live up to your principles, for you travel all over the world as though it were one vast playground."

"And sometimes," she remarked, "my journeys are not exactly successful. I know that that is what you are dying to say."

"On the contrary," he said, "I do not blame you at all for this last affair. You brought Lucille here, which was excellent. Your failure as regards Mr. Sabin is scarcely to be fastened upon you. It is Horser whom we hold responsible for that."

She laughed.

"Poor Horser! It was rather rough to pit a creature like that against Souspennier."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"Horser," he said, "may not be brilliant, but he had a great organisation at his back. Souspennier was without friends or influence. The contest should scarcely have been so one-sided. To tell you the truth, my dear Muriel, I am more surprised that you yourself should have found the task beyond you."

Lady Carey's face darkened.

"It was too soon after the loss of Lucille," she said, "and besides, there was his vanity to be reckoned with. It was like a challenge to him, and he had taken up the glove before I returned to New York."

The Duchess looked up from her work.

"Have you had any conversation with my husband, Prince?" she asked.

The Prince of Saxe Leinitzer twirled his heavy moustache and sank into a chair between the two women.

"I have had a long talk with him," he announced. "And the result?" the Duchess asked.

"The result I fear you would scarcely consider satisfactory," the Prince declared. "The moment that I hinted at the existence of - er - conditions of which you, Duchess, are aware, he showed alarm, and I had all that I could do to reassure him. I find it everywhere amongst your aristocracy - this stubborn confidence in the existence of the reigning order of things, this absolute detestation of anything approaching intrigue."

"My dear man, I hope you don't include me," Lady Carey exclaimed.

"You, Lady Muriel," he answered, with a slow smile, "are an exception to all rules. No, you are a rule by yourself."

"To revert to the subject then for a moment," the Duchess said stiffly. "You have made no progress with the Duke?"

"None whatever," Saxe Leinitzer admitted. "He was sufficiently emphatic to inspire me with every caution. Even now I have doubts as to whether I have altogether reassured him. I really believe, dear Duchess, that we should be better off if you could persuade him to go and live upon his estates."

The Duchess smiled grimly.

"Whilst the House of Lords exists," she remarked, "you will never succeed in keeping Algernon away from London. He is always on the point of making a speech, although he never does it."

"I have heard of that speech," Lady Carey drawled, from her low seat. "It is to be a thoroughly enlightening affair. All the great social questions are to be permanently disposed of. The Prime Minister will come on his knees and beg Algernon to take his place."

The Duchess looked up over her knitting.

"Algernon is at least in earnest," she remarked drily. "And he has the good conscience of a clean living and honest man."

"What an unpleasant possession it must be," Lady Carey remarked sweetly. "I disposed of my conscience finally many years ago. I am not sure, but I believe that it was the Prince to whom I entrusted the burying of it. By the bye, Lucille will be here directly, I suppose. Is she to be told of Souspennier's arrival in London?"

"I imagine," the Prince said, with knitted brows, "that it will not be wise to keep it from her. It is impossible to conceal her whereabouts, and the papers will very shortly acquaint her with his."

"And," Lady Carey asked, "how does the little affair progress?"

"Admirably," the Prince answered. "Already some of the Society papers are beginning to chatter about the friendship existing between a Cabinet Minister and a beautiful Hungarian lady of title, etc., etc. The fact of it is that Brott is in deadly earnest. He gives himself away every time. If Lucille has not lost old cleverness she will be able to twist him presently around her little finger."

"If only some one would twist him on the rack," the Duchess murmured vindictively. "I tried to read one of his speeches the other day. It was nothing more nor less than blasphemy. I do not think that I am naturally a cruel woman, but I would hand such men over to the public executioner with joy."

Lucille came in, as beautiful as ever, but with tired lines under her full dark eyes. She sank into a low chair with listless grace.

"Reginald Brott again, I suppose," she remarked curtly. "I wish the man had never existed."

"That is a very cruel speech, Lucille," the Prince said, with a languishing glance towards her, "for if it had not been for Brott we should never have dared to call you out from your seclusion."

"Then more heartily than ever," Lucille declared, "I wish the man had never been born. You cannot possibly flatter yourself, Prince, that your summons was a welcome one."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall never, be able to believe," he said, "that the Countess Radantz was able to do more than support existence in a small American town - without society, with no scope for her ambitions, detached altogether from the whole civilized world."

"Which only goes to prove, Prince," Lucille remarked contemptuously, "that you do not understand me in the least. As a place of residence Lenox would compare very favourably with - say Homburg, and for companionship you forget my husband. I never met the woman yet who did not prefer the company of one man, if only it were the right one, to the cosmopolitan throng we call society."

"It sounds idyllic, but very gauche," Lady Carey remarked drily. "In effect it is rather a blow on the cheek for you, Prince. Of course you know that the Prince is in love with you, Lucille?"

"I wish he were," she answered, looking lazily out of the window.

He bent over her.

"Why?"

"I would persuade him to send me home again," she answered coldly.

The Duchess looked up from her knitting. "Your husband has saved you the journey," she remarked, "even if you were able to work upon the Prince's good nature to such an extent."

Lucille started round eagerly.

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"Your husband is in London," the Duchess answered.

Lucille laughed with the gaiety of a child. Like magic the lines from beneath her eyes seemed to have vanished. Lady Carey watched her with pale cheeks and malevolent expression.

"Come, Prince," she cried mockingly, "it was only a week ago that you assured me that my husband could not leave America. Already he is in London. I must go to see him. Oh, I insist upon it."

Saxe Leinitzer glanced towards the Duchess. She laid down her knitting.

"My dear Countess," she said firmly, "I beg that you will listen to me carefully. I speak to you for your own good, and I believe I may add, Prince, that I speak with authority."

"With authority!" the Prince echoed.

"We all," the Duchess continued, "look upon your husband's arrival as inopportune and unfortunate. We are all agreed that you must be kept apart. Certain obligations have been laid upon you. You could not possibly fulfil them with a husband at your elbow. The matter will be put plainly before your husband, as I am now putting it before you. He will be warned not to attempt to see or communicate with you as your husband. If he or you disobey the consequences will be serious."

Lucille shrugged her shoulders.

"It is easy to talk," she said, "but you will not find it easy to keep Victor away when he has found out where I am."

The Prince intervened.

"We have no objection to your meeting," he said, "but it must be as acquaintances. There must be no intermission or slackening in your task, and that can only be properly carried out by the Countess Radantz and from Dorset House."

Lucille smothered her disappointment.

"Dear me," she said. "You will find Victor a little hard to persuade."

There was a moment's silence. Then the Prince spoke slowly, and watching carefully the effect of his words upon Lucille.

"Countess," he said, "it has been our pleasure to make of your task so far as possible a holiday. Yet perhaps it is wiser to remind you that underneath the glove is an iron hand. We do not often threaten, but we brook no interference. We have the means to thwart it. I bear no ill-will to your husband, but to you I say this. If he should be so mad as to defy us, to incite you to disobedience, he must pay the penalty."

A servant entered.

"Mr. Reginald Brott is in the small drawing-room, your Grace," he announced. "He enquired for the Countess Radantz."

Lucille rose. When the servant had disappeared she turned round for a moment, and faced the Prince. A spot of colour burned in her cheeks, her eyes were bright with anger.

"I shall remember your words, Prince," she said. "So far from mine being, however, a holiday task, it is one of the most wearisome and unpleasant I ever undertook. And in return for your warnings let me tell you this. If you should bring any harm upon my husband you shall answer for it all your days to me. I will do my duty. Be careful that you do not exceed yours."

She swept out of the room. Lady Carey laughed mockingly at the Prince.

"Poor Ferdinand!" she exclaimed.