

Chapter 13

He had been kept waiting longer than usual, and he had somehow the feeling that his visit was ill-timed, when at last she came to him. He looked up eagerly as she entered the little reception room which he had grown to know so well during the last few weeks, and it struck him for the first time that her welcome was a little forced, her eyes a little weary.

"I haven't," he said apologetically, "the least right to be here."

"At least," she murmured, "I may be permitted to remind you that you are here without an invitation."

"The worse luck," he said, "that one should be necessary."

"This is the one hour of the day," she remarked, sinking into a large easy-chair, "which I devote to repose. How shall I preserve my fleeting youth if you break in upon it in this ruthless manner?"

"If I could only truthfully say that I was sorry," he answered, "but I can't. I am here - and I would rather be here than anywhere else in the world."

She looked at him with curving lips; and even he, who had watched her often, could not tell whether that curve was of scorn or mirth.

"They told me," she said impressively, "that you were different - a woman-hater, honest, gruff, a little cynical. Yet those are the speeches of your salad days. What a disenchantment!"

"The things which one invents when one is young," he said, "come perhaps fresh from the heart in later life. The words may sound the same, but there is a difference."

"Come," she said, "you are improving. That at any rate is ingenious. Suppose you tell me now what has brought you here before four o'clock, when I am not fit to be seen?"

He smiled. She shrugged her shoulders.

"I mean it. I haven't either my clothes or my manners on yet. Come, explain."

"I met a man who interested me," he answered. "He comes from America, from Lenox!"

He saw her whiten. He saw her fingers clutch the sides of her chair.

"From Lenox? And his name?"

"The Duke of Souspennier! He takes himself so seriously that he even travels incognito. At the hotel he calls himself Mr. Sabin."

"Indeed!"

"I wondered whether you might not know him?"

"Yes, I know him."

"And in connection with this man," Brott continued, "I have something in the nature of a confession to make. I forgot for a moment your request. I even mentioned your name."

The pallor had spread to her cheeks, even to her lips. Yet her eyes were soft and brilliant, so brilliant that they fascinated him.

"What did he say? What did he ask?"

"He asked for your address. Don't be afraid. I made some excuse. I did not give it."

For the life of him he could not tell whether she was pleased or disappointed. She had turned her shoulder to him. She was looking steadily out of the window, and he could not see her face.

"Why are you curious about him?" she asked.

"I wish I knew. I think only because he came from Lenox."

She turned her face slowly round towards him. He was astonished to see the dark rings under her eyes, the weariness of her smile.

"The Duke of Souspennier," she said slowly, "is an old and a dear friend of mine. When you tell me that he is in London I am anxious because there are many here who are not his friends - who have no cause to love him."

"I was wrong then," he said, "not to give him your address."

"You were right," she answered. "I am anxious that he should not know it. You will remember this?" He rose and bowed over her hand.

"This has been a selfish interlude," he said. "I have destroyed your rest, and I almost fear that I have also disturbed your peace of mind. Let me take my leave and pray that you may recover both."

She shook her head.

"Do not leave me," she said. "I am low-spirited. You shall stay and cheer me

There was a light in his eyes which few people would have recognised. She rose with a little laugh and stood leaning towards the fire, her elbow upon the broad mantel, tall, graceful, alluring. Her soft crimson gown, with its wealth of old lace, fell around her in lines and curves full of grace. The pallor of her face was gone now - the warmth of the fire burned her cheeks. Her voice became softer.

"Sit down and talk to me," she murmured. "Do you remember the old days, when you were a very timid young secretary of Sir George Nomsom, and I was a maid-of-honour at the Viennese Court? Dear me, how you have changed!"

"Time," he said, "will not stand still for all of us. Yet my memory tells me how possible it would be - for indeed those days seem but as yesterday."

He looked up at her with a sudden jealousy. His tone shook with passion. No one would have recognised Brott now. In his fiercest hour of debate, his hour of greatest trial, he had worn his mask, always master of himself and his speech. And now he had cast it off. His eyes were hungry, his lips twitched.

"As yesterday! Lucille, I could kill you when I think of those days. For twenty years your kiss has lain upon my lips - and you - with you - it has been different."

She laughed softly upon him, laughed more with her eyes than with her lips. She watched him curiously.

"Dear me!" she murmured, "what would you have? I am a woman - I have been a woman all my days, and the memory of one kiss grows cold. So I will admit that with me - it has been different. Come! What then?"

He groaned.

"I wonder," he said, "what miserable fate, what cursed stroke of fortune brought you once more into my life?"

She threw her head back and laughed at him, this time heartily, unaffectedly.

"What adorable candour!" she exclaimed. "My dear friend, how amiable you are."

He looked at her steadfastly, and somehow the laugh died away from her lips.

"Lucille, will you marry me?"

"Marry you? I? Certainly not."

"And why not?"

"For a score of reasons, if you want them," she answered. "First, because I think it is delightful to have you for a friend. I can never quite tell what you are going to do or to say. As a husband I am almost sure that you would be monotonous. But then, how could you avoid it? It is madness to think of destroying a pleasant friendship in such a manner."

"You are mocking me," he said sadly.

"Well," she said, "why not? Your own proposal is a mockery.

"A mockery! My proposal!"

"Yes," she answered steadily. "You know quite well that the very thought of such a thing between you and me is an absurdity. I abhor your politics, I detest your party. You are ambitious, I know. You intend to be Prime Minister, a people's Prime Minister. Well, for my part, I hate the people. I am an aristocrat. As your wife I should be in a perfectly ridiculous position. How foolish! You have led me into talking of this thing seriously. Let us forget all this rubbish."

He stood before her - waiting patiently, his mouth close set, his manner dogged with purpose.

"It is not rubbish," he said. "It is true that I shall be Prime Minister. It is true also that you will be my wife."

She shrank back from him - uneasily. The fire in his eyes, the ring in his tone distressed her.

"As for my politics, you do not understand them. But you shall! I will convert you to my way of thinking. Yes, I will do that. The cause of the people, of freedom, is the one great impulse which beats through all the world. You too shall hear it."

"Thank you," she said. "I have no wish to hear it. I do not believe in what you call freedom for the people. I have discovered in America how uncomfortable a people's country can be."

"Yet you married an American. You call yourself still the Countess Radantz ... but you married Mr. James B. Peterson!"

"It is true, my friend," she answered. "But the American in question was a person of culture and intelligence, and at heart he was no more a democrat than I am. Further, I am an extravagant woman, and he was a millionaire."

"And you, after his death, without necessity - went to bury yourself in his country."

"Why not?"

"I am jealous of every year of your life which lies hidden from me," he said slowly.

"Dear me - how uncomfortable!"

"Before you - reappeared," he said, "I had learnt, yes I had learnt to do without you. I had sealed up the one chapter of my life which had in it anything to do with sentiment. Your coming has altered all that. You have disturbed the focus of my ambitions. Lucille! I have loved you for more than half a lifetime. Isn't it time I had my reward?"

He took a quick step towards her. In his tone was the ring of mastery, the light in his eyes was compelling. She shrank back, but he seized one of her hands. It lay between his, a cold dead thing.

"What have my politics to do with it?" he asked fiercely. "You are not an Englishwoman. Be content that I shall set you far above these gods of my later life. There is my work to be done, and I shall do it. Let me be judge of these things. Believe me that it is a great work. If you are ambitious - give your ambitions into my keeping, and I will gratify them. Only I cannot bear this suspense-these changing moods. Marry me-now at once, or send me back to the old life."

She drew her fingers away, and sank down into her easy-chair. Her head was buried in her hands. Was she thinking or weeping? He could not decide. While he hesitated she looked up, and he saw that there was no trace of tears upon her face.

"You are too masterful," she said gently. "I will not marry you. I will not give myself body and soul to any man. Yet that is what you ask. I am not a girl. My opinions are as dear to me in their way as yours are to you. You want me to close my eyes while you drop sugar plums into my mouth. That is not my idea of life. I think that you had better go away. Let us forget these things."

"Very well," he answered. "It shall be as you say." He did not wait for her to ring, nor did he attempt any sort of farewell. He simply took up his hat, and before she could realise his intention he had left the room. Lucille sat quite still, looking into the fire.

"If only," she murmured, "if only this were the end."