

## Chapter 15

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Nevertheless, Mr. Sabin lunched with discretion, as usual, but with no lack of appetite. It chanced that they were alone. Lord Camperdown was down in the Midlands for a day's hunting, and Helene had ensured their seclusion from any one who might drop in by a whispered word to the hail porter as they passed into the house. It seemed to her that she had never found Mr. Sabin more entertaining, had never more appreciated his rare gift of effortless and anecdotal conversation. What a marvelous memory! He knew something of every country from the inside. He had been brought at various times during his long diplomatic career into contact with most of the interesting people in the world. He knew well how to separate the grain from the chaff according to the tastes of his listener. The pathos of his present position appealed to her irresistibly. The possibilities of his life had been so great, fortune had treated him always so strangely. The greatest of his schemes had come so near to success, the luck had turned against him only at the very moment of fruition. Helene felt very kindly towards her UNCLE as she led him, after luncheon, to a quiet corner of the winter garden, where a servant had already arranged a table with coffee and liqueurs and cigarettes. Unscrupulous all his life, there had been an element of greatness in all his schemes. Even his failures had been magnificent, for his successes he himself had seldom reaped the reward. And now in the autumn of his days she felt dimly that he was threatened with some evil thing against which he stood at bay single-handed, likely perhaps to be overpowered. For there was something in his face just now which was strange to her.

"Helene," he said quietly, "I suppose that you, who knew nothing of me till you left school, have looked upon me always as a selfish, passionless creature - a weaver of plots, perhaps sometimes a dreamer of dreams, but a person wholly self-centred, always self-engrossed?"

She shook her head.

"Not selfish!" she objected. "No, I never thought that. It is the wrong word."

"At least," he said, "you will be surprised to hear that I have loved one woman all my life."

She looked at him half doubtfully.

"Yes," she said, "I am surprised to hear that."

"I will surprise you still more. I was married to her in America within a month of my arrival there. We have lived together ever since. And I have been very happy. I speak, of course, of Lucille!"

"It is amazing," she murmured. "You must tell me all about it."

"Not all," he answered sadly. "Only this. I met her first at Vienna when I was thirty-five, and she was eighteen. I treated her shamefully. Marriage seemed to me, with all my dreams of great achievements, an act of madness. I believed in myself and my career. I believed that it was my destiny to restore the monarchy to our beloved country. And I wanted to be free. I think that I saw myself a second Napoleon. So I won her love, took all that she had to give, and returned nothing.

"In the course of years she married the son of the American Consul at Vienna. I was obliged, by the bye, to fight her brother, and he carried his enmity to me through life. I saw her sometimes in the course of years. She was always beautiful, always surrounded by a host of admirers, always cold. When the end of my great plans here came, and I myself was a fugitive, her brother found me out. He gave me a letter to deliver in America. I delivered it - to his sister.

"She was as beautiful as ever, and alone in the world. It seemed to me that I realised then how great my folly had been. For always I had loved her, always there had been that jealously locked little chamber in my life. Helene, she pointed no finger of scorn to my broken life. She uttered no reproaches. She took me as I was, and for three years our life together has been to me one long unbroken harmony. Our tastes were very similar. She was well read, receptive, a charming companion. Ennui was a word of which I have forgotten the meaning. And it seemed so with her, too, for she grew younger and more beautiful."

"And why is she not with you?" Helene cried. "I must go and see her. How delightful it sounds!"

"One day, about three months ago," Mr. Sabin continued, "she left me to go to New York for two days. Her milliner in Paris had sent over, and twice a year Lucille used to buy clothes. I had sometimes accompanied her, but she knew how I detested New York, and this time she did not press me to go. She left me in the highest spirits, as tender and gracefully affectionate as ever. She never returned."

Helene started in her chair.

"Oh, UNCLE!" she cried.

"I have never seen her since," he repeated.

"Have you no clue? She could not have left you willingly. Have you no idea where she is?"

He bowed his head slowly.

"Yes," he said, "I know where she is. She came to Europe with Lady Carey. She is staying with the Duchess of Dorset."

"The Countess Radantz?" Helene cried.

"It was her maiden name," he answered.

There was a moment's silence. Helene was bewildered.

"Then you have seen her?"

He shook his head slowly.

"No. I did not even know where she was until you told me."

"But why do you wait a single moment?" she asked. "There must be some explanation. Let me order a carriage now. I will drive round to Dorset House with you."

She half rose. He held out his hand and checked her.

"There are other things to be explained," he said quickly. "Sit down, Helene."

She obeyed him, mystified.

"For your own sake," he continued, "there are certain facts in connection with this matter which I must withhold. All I can tell you is this. There are people who have acquired a hold upon Lucille so great that she is forced to obey their bidding. Lady Carey is one, the Duchess of Dorset is another. They are no friends of mine, and apparently Lucille has been taken away from me by them."

"A - a hold upon her?" Helene repeated vaguely.

"It is all I can tell you. You must suppose an extreme case. You may take my word for it that under certain circumstances Lucille would have no power to deny them anything."

"But - without a word of farewell. They could not insist upon her leaving you like that! It is incredible!"

"It is quite possible," Mr. Sabin said.

Helene caught herself looking at him stealthily. Was it possible that this wonderful brain had given way at last? There were no signs of it in his face or expression. But the Duchess of Dorset! Lady Carey! These were women of her own circle - Londoners, and the Duchess, at any rate, a woman of the very highest social position and unimpeached conventionality.

"This sounds - very extraordinary, UNCLE!" she remarked a little lamely.

"It is extraordinary," he answered drily. "I do not wonder that you find it hard to believe me. I - "

"Not to believe - to understand!"

He smiled.

"We will not distinguish! After all, what does it matter? Assume, if you cannot believe, that Lucille's leaving me may have been at the instigation of these people, and therefore involuntary. If this be so I have hard battle to fight to win her back, but in the end I shall do it."

She nodded sympathetically.

"I am sure," she said, "that you will not find it difficult. Tell me, cannot I help you in any way? I know the Duchess very well indeed - well enough to take you to call quite informally if you please. She is a great supporter of what they call the Primrose League here. I do not understand what it is all about, but it seems that I may not join because my husband is a Radical."

Mr. Sabin looked for a moment over his clasped hands through the faint blue cloud of cigarette smoke, and sundry possibilities flashed through his mind to be at once rejected. He shook his head.

"No!" he said firmly. "I do not wish for your help at present, directly or indirectly. If you meet the Countess I would rather that you did not mention my name. There is only one person whom, if you met at Dorset House or anywhere where Lucille is, I would ask you to watch. That is Mr. Brott!"

It was to be a conversation full of surprises for Helene. Mr. Brott! Her hand went up to her forehead for a moment, and a little gesture of bewilderment escaped her.

"Will you tell me," she asked almost plaintively, "what on earth Mr. Brott can have to do with this business - with Lucille - with you - with any one connected with it?"

Mr. Sabin shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr. Brott," he remarked, "a Cabinet Minister of marked Radical proclivities, has lately been a frequent visitor at Dorset House, which is the very home of the old aristocratic Toryism. Mr. Brott was acquainted with Lucille many years ago - in Vienna. At that time he was, I believe, deeply interested in her. I must confess that Mr. Brott causes me some uneasiness.

"I think - that men always know," Helene said, "if they care to. Was Lucille happy with you?"

"Absolutely. I am sure of it."

"Then your first assumption must be correct," she declared. "You cannot explain things to me, so I cannot help you even with my advice. I am sorry."

He turned his head towards her and regarded her critically, as though making some test of her sincerity.

"Helene," he said gravely, "it is for your own sake that I do not explain further, that I do not make things clearer to you. Only I wanted you to understand why I once more set foot in Europe. I wanted you to understand why I am here. It is to win back Lucille. It is like that with me, Helene. I, who once schemed and plotted for an empire, am once more a schemer and a worker, but for no other purpose than to recover possession of the woman whom I love. You do not recognise me, Helene. I do not recognise myself. Nevertheless, I would have you know the truth. I am here for that, and for no other purpose."

He rose slowly to his feet. She held out both her hands and grasped his.

"Let me help you, she begged. "Do! This is not a matter of politics or anything compromising. I am sure that I could be useful to you."

"So you can," he answered quietly. "Do as I have asked you. Watch Mr. Brott!"