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Chapter 17

This little difference of opinion," the Prince remarked, looking thoughtfully through the emerald green of his liqueur," interests me. Our friend Dolinski here thinks that he will not come because he will be afraid. De Brouillac, on the contrary, says that he will not come because he is too sagacious. Felix here, who knows him best, says that he will not come because he prefers ever to play the game from outside the circle, a looker-on to all appearance, yet sometimes wielding an unseen force. It is a strong position that."

Lucille raised her head and regarded the last speaker steadily.

"And I, Prince!" she exclaimed, "I say that he will come because he is a man, and because he does not know fear."

The Prince of Saxe Leinitzer bowed low towards the speaker.

"Dear Lucille," he said, so respectfully that the faint irony of his tone was lost to most of those present, "I, too, am of your opinion. The man who has a right, real or fancied, to claim you must indeed be a coward if he suffered dangers of any sort to stand in the way. After all, dangers from us! Is it not a little absurd?"

Lucille looked away from the Prince with a little shudder. He laughed softly, and drank his liqueur. Afterwards he leaned back for a moment in his chair and glanced thoughtfully around at the assembled company as though anxious to impress upon his memory all who were present. It was a little group, every member of which bore a well-known name. Their host, the Duke of Dorset, in whose splendid library they were assembled, was, if not the premier duke of the United Kingdom, at least one of those whose many hereditary offices and ancient family entitled him to a foremost place in the aristocracy of the world. Raoul de Brouillac, Count of Orleans, bore a name which was scarcely absent from a single page of the martial history of France. The Prince of Saxe Leinitzer kept up still a semblance of royalty in the State which his ancestors had ruled with despotic power. Lady Muriel Carey was a younger daughter of a ducal house, which had more than once intermarried with Royalty. The others, too, had their claims to be considered amongst the greatest families of Europe.

The Prince glanced at his watch, and then at the bridge tables ready set out.

"I think," he said, "that a little diversion - what does our hostess say?"

"Two sets can start at least," the Duchess said. "Lucille and I will stay out, and the Count de Brouillac does not play."

The Prince rose.

"It is agreed," he said. "Duke, will you honour me? Felix and Dolinski are our ancient adversaries. It should be an interesting trial of strength."

There was a general movement, a re-arrangement of seats, and a little buzz of conversation. Then silence. Lucille sat back in a great chair, and Lady Carey came over to her side.

"You are nervous to-night, Lucille," she said.

"Yes, I am nervous," Lucille admitted. "Why not? At any moment he may be here."

"And you care - so much?" Lady Carey said, with a hard little laugh.

"I care so much," Lucille echoed.

Lady Carey shook out her amber satin skirt and sat down upon a low divan. She held up her hands, small white hands, ablaze with jewels, and looked at them for a moment thoughtfully.

"He was very much in earnest when I saw him at Sherry's in New York," she remarked, "and he was altogether too clever for Mr. Horser and our friends there. After all their talk and boasting too. Why, they are ignorant of the very elements of intrigue."

Lucille sighed.

"Here," she said, "it is different. The Prince and he are ancient rivals, and Raoul de Brouillac is no longer his friend. Muriel, I am afraid of what may happen."

Lady Carey shrugged her shoulders.

"He is no fool," she said in a low tone. "He will not come here with a magistrate's warrant and a policeman to back it up, nor will he attempt to turn the thing into an Adeiphi drama. I know him well enough to be sure that he will attempt nothing crude. Lucille, don't you find it exhilarating?"

"Exhilarating? But why?"

"It will be a game played through to the end by masters, and you, my dear woman, are the inspiration. I think that it is most fascinating."

Lucille looked sadly into the fire.

"I think," she said, "that I am weary of all these things. I seem to have lived such a very long time. At Lenox I was quite happy. Of my own will I would never have left it."

Lady Carey's thin lips curled a little, her blue eyes were full of scorn. She was not altogether a pleasant woman to look upon. Her cheeks were thin and hollow, her eyes a little too prominent, some hidden expression which seemed at times to flit from one to the other of her features suggested a sensuality which was a little incongruous with her somewhat angular figure and generally cold demeanour. But that she was a woman of courage and resource history had proved.

"How idyllic!" she exclaimed. "Positively medieval! Fancy living with one man three years."

Lucille smiled.

"Why, not? I never knew a woman yet however cold however fond of change, who had not at some time or other during her life met a man for whose sake she would have done - what I did. I have had as many admirers - as many lovers, I suppose, as most women. But I can truthfully say that during the last three years no thought of one of them has crossed my mind."

Lady Carey laughed scornfully.

"Upon my word," she said. "If the Prince had not a temper, and if they were not playing for such ruinous points, I would entertain them all with these delightful confidences. By the bye, the Prince himself was once one of those who fell before your chariot wheels, was he not? Look at him now - sideways. What does he remind you of?"

Lucille raised her eyes.

"A fat angel," she answered, "or something equally distasteful. How I hate those mild eyes and that sweet, slow smile. I saw him thrash a poor beater once in the Saxe Leinitzer forests. Ugh!"

"I should not blame him for that," Lady Carey said coldly. "I like masterful men, even to the point of cruelty. General Dolinski there fascinates me. I believe that he keeps a little private knout at home for his wife and children. A wicked little contrivance with an ivory handle. I should like to see him use it."

Lucille shuddered. This tete-a-tete did not amuse her. She rose and looked over one of the bridge tables for a minute. The Prince, who was dealing, looked up with a smile.

"Be my good angel, Countess," he begged. "Fortune has deserted me to-night. You shall be the goddess of chance, and smile your favours upon me."

A hard little laugh came from the chair where Lady Carey sat. She turned her head towards them, and there was a malicious gleam in her eyes.

"Too late, Prince," she exclaimed. "The favours of the Countess are all given away. Lucille has become even as one of those flaxen-haired dolls of your mountain villages. She has given her heart away, and she is sworn to perpetual constancy."

The Prince smiled.

"The absence," he said, glancing up at the clock, "of that most fortunate person should surely count in our favour."

Lucille followed his eyes. The clock was striking ten. She shrugged her shoulders.

"If the converse also is true, Prince," she said, "you can scarcely have anything to hope for from me. For by half-past ten he will be here."

The Prince picked up his cards and sorted them mechanically.

"We shall see," he remarked. "It is true, Countess, that you are here, but in this instance you are set with thorns."

"To continue the allegory, Prince," she answered, passing on to the next table, "also with poisonous berries. But to the hand which has no fear, neither are harmful."

The Prince laid down his hand.

"Now I really believe," he said gently, "that she meant to be rude. Partner, I declare hearts!"

Felix was standing out from the next table whilst his hand was being played by General Dolinski, his partner. He drew her a little on one side.

"Do not irritate Saxe Leinitzer," he whispered. "Remember, everything must rest with him. Twice to-night you have brought that smile to his lips, and I never see it without thinking of unpleasant things."

"You are right," she answered; "but I hate him so. He and Muriel Carey seem to have entered into some conspiracy to lead me on to say things which I might regret."

"Saxe Leinitzer," he said, "has never forgotten that he once aspired to be your lover."

"He has not failed to let me know it," she answered. "He has even dared - ah!"

There was a sudden stir in the room. The library door was thrown open. The solemn-visaged butler stood upon the threshold.

"His Grace the Duke of Souspennier!" he announced.