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## Chapter 18

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There was for the moment a dead silence. The soft patter of cards no longer fell upon the table. The eyes of every one were turned upon the newcomers. And he, leaning upon his stick, looked only for one person, and having found her, took no heed of any one else.

"Lucille!"

She rose from her seat and stood with hands outstretched towards him, her lips parted in a delightful smile, her eyes soft with happiness.

"Victor, welcome! It is like you to have found me, and I knew that you would come."

He raised her fingers to his lips - tenderly - with the grace of a prince, but all the affection of a lover. What he said to her none could hear, for his voice was lowered almost to a whisper. But the colour stained her cheeks, and her blush was the blush of a girl.

A movement of the Duchess recalled him to a sense of his social duty. He turned courteously to her with extended hand.

"I trust," he said, "that I may be forgiven my temporary fit of aberration. I cannot thank you sufficiently, Duchess, for your kind invitation."

Her answering smile was a little dubious.

"I am sure," she said "that we are delighted to welcome back amongst us so old and valued a friend. I suppose you know every one?"

Mr. Sabin looked searchingly around, exchanging bows with those whose faces were familiar to him. But between him and the Prince of Saxe Leinitzer there passed no pretense at any greeting. The two men eyed one another for a moment coldly. Each seemed to be trying to read the other through.

"I believe," Mr. Sabin said, "that I have that privilege. I see, however, that I am interrupting your game. Let me beg you to continue. With your permission, Duchess, I will remain a spectator. There are many things which my wife and I have to say to one another."

The Prince of Saxe Leinitzer laid his cards softly upon the table. He smiled upon Mr. Sabin - a slow, unpleasant smile.

"I think," he said slowly, "that our game must be postponed. It is a pity, but I think it had better be so."

"It must be entirely as you wish," Mr. Sabin answered. "I am at your service now or later."

The Prince rose to his feet.

"Monsieur le Due de Souspennier," he said, "what are we to conclude from your presence here this evening?"

"It is obvious," Mr. Sabin answered. "I claim my place amongst you."

"You claim to be one of us?"

"I do!"

"Ten years ago," the Prince continued, "you were granted immunity from all the penalties and obligations which a co-membership with us might involve. This privilege was extended to you on account of certain great operations in which you were then engaged, and the object of which was not foreign to our own aims. You are aware that the period of that immunity is long since past."

Mr. Sabin leaned with both hands upon his stick, and his face was like the face of a sphinx. Only Lucille, who knew him best of all those there, saw him wince for a moment before this reminder of his great failure.

"I am not accustomed," Mr. Sabin said quietly, "to shirk my share of the work in any undertaking with which I am connected. Only in this case I claim to take the place of the Countess Lucille, my wife. I request that the task, whatever it may be which you have imposed upon her, may be transferred to me."

The Prince's smile was sweet, but those who knew him best wondered what evil it might betoken for his ancient enemy.

"You offer yourself, then, as a full member?"

"Assuredly!"

"Subject," he drawled, "to all the usual pains and privileges?"

"Certainly!"

The Prince played with the cards upon the table. His smooth, fair face was unruffled, almost undisturbed. Yet underneath he was wondering fiercely, eagerly, how this might serve his ends.

"The circumstances," he said at last, "are peculiar. I think that we should do well to consult together - you and I, Felix, and Raoul here."

The two men named rose up silently. The Prince pointed to a small round table at the farther end of the apartment, half screened off by a curtained recess.

"Am I also," Mr. Sabin asked, "of your company?"

The Prince shook his head.

"I think not," he said. "In a few moments we will return."

Mr. Sabin moved away with a slight enigmatic gesture. Lucille gathered up her skirts, making room for him by her side on a small sofa.

"It is delightful to see you, Victor," she murmured. "It is delightful to know that you trusted me."

Mr. Sabin looked at her, and the smile which no other woman had ever seen softened for a moment his face.

"Dear Lucille," he murmured, "how could you ever doubt it? There was a day, I admit, when the sun stood still, when, if I had felt inclined to turn to light literature, I should have read aloud the Book of Job. But afterwards - well, you see that I am here."

She laughed.

"I knew that you would come," she said, "and yet I knew that it would be a struggle between you and them. For - the Prince - " she murmured, lowering her voice, "had pledged his word to keep us apart."

Mr. Sabin raised his head, and his eyes traveled towards the figure of the man who sat with his back to them in the far distant corner of the room.

"The Prince," he said softly, "is faithful to his ancient enmities."

Lucille's face was troubled. She turned to her companion with a little grimace.

"He would have me believe," she murmured, "that he is faithful to other things besides his enmities."

Mr. Sabin smiled.

"I am not jealous," he said softly, "of the Prince of Saxe Leinitzer!"

As though attracted by the mention of his name, which must, however, have been unheard by him, the Prince at that moment turned round and looked for a moment towards them. He shot a quick glance at Lady Carey. Almost at once she rose from her chair and came across to them.

"The Prince's watch-dog," Lucille murmured. "Hateful woman! She is bound hand and foot to him, and yet - "

Her eyes met his, and he laughed.

"Really," he said, "you and I in our old age might be hero and heroine of a little romance - the undesiring objects of a hopeless affection!"

Lady Carey sank into a low chair by their side. "You two," she said, with a slow, malicious smile, "are a pattern to this wicked world. Don't you know that such fidelity is positively sinful, and after three years in such a country too?"

"It is the approach of senility," Mr. Sabin answered her. "I am an old man, Lady Muriel!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You are like Ulysses," she said. "The gods, or rather the goddesses, have helped you towards immortality."

"It is," Mr. Sabin answered, "the most delicious piece of flattery I have ever heard."

"Calypso," she murmured, nodding towards Lucille, "is by your side."

"Really," Mr. Sabin interrupted, "I must protest. Lucille and I were married by a most respectable Episcopalian clergyman. We have documentary evidence. Besides, if Lucille is Calypso, what about Penelope?"

Lady Carey smiled thoughtfully.

"I have always thought," she said, "that Penelope was a myth. In your case I should say that Penelope represents a return to sanity - to the ordinary ways of life."

Mr. Sabin and Lucille exchanged swift glances. He raised his eyebrows.

"Our little idyll," he said, "seems to be the sport and buffet of every one. You forget that I am of the old world. I do not understand modernity."

"Ulysses," she answered, "was of the old world, yet he was a wanderer in more senses of the word than one And there have been times - "

Her eyes sought his. He ignored absolutely the subtlety of meaning which lurked beneath the heavy drooping eyelids.

"One travels through life," he answered, "by devious paths, and a little wandering in the flower-gardens by the way is the lot of every one. But when the journey is over, one's taste for wandering has gone - well, Ulysses finished his days at the hearth of Penelope."

She rose and walked away. Mr. Sabin sat still and watched her as though listening to the soft sweep of her gown upon the carpet.

"Hateful woman!" Lucille exclaimed lightly. "To make love, and such love, to one's lawful husband before one's face is a little crude, don't you think?"

He shook his head.

"Too obvious," he answered. "She is playing the Prince's game. Dear me, how interesting this will be soon."

She nodded. A faint smile of bitterness had stolen into her tone.

"Already," she said, "you are beginning to scent the delight of the atmosphere. You are stiffening for the fight. Soon - "

"Ah, no! Don't say it," he whispered, taking her hand. "I shall never forget. If the fight seems good to me it is because you are the prize, and after all, you know, to fight for one's womenkind is amongst the primeval instincts."

Lady Carey, who had been pacing the room restlessly, touching an ornament here, looking at a picture there, came back to them and stood before Mr. Sabin. She had caught his last words.

"Primeval instincts!" she exclaimed mockingly. "What do you know about them, you of all men, a bundle of nerves and brains, with a motor for a heart, and an automatic brake upon your passions? Upon my word, I believe that I have solved the mystery of your perennial youth. You have found a way of substituting machinery for the human organ, and you are wound up to go for ever."

"You have found me out," he admitted. "Professor Penningram of Chicago will supply you too with an outfit. Mention my name if you like. It is a wonderful country America."

The Prince came over to them, fair and bland with no trace upon his smooth features or in his half-jesting tone of any evil things.

"Souspennier," he said, holding out his hand, "welcome back once more to your old place. I am happy to say that there appears to be no reason why your claim should not be fully admitted."

Mr. Sabin rose to his feet.

"I presume," he said, "that no very active demands are likely to be made upon my services. In this country more than any other I fear that the possibilities of my aid are scanty."

The Prince smiled.

"It is a fact," he said, "which we all appreciate. Upon you at present we make no claim."

There was a moment's intense silence. A steely light glittered in Mr. Sabin's eyes. He and the Prince alone remained standing. The Duchess of Dorset watched them through her lorgnettes; Lady Carey watched too with an intense eagerness, her eyes alight with mingled cruelty and excitement. Lucille's eyes were so bright that one might readily believe the tears to be glistening beneath.