
Chapter 9

Mr. Fentolin, surrounded by his satellites, was seated in his chair before the writing-table. There were present in the room most of the people important to him in his somewhat singular life. A few feet away, in characteristic attitude, stood Meekins. Doctor Sarson, with his hands behind him, was looking out of the window. At the further end of the table stood a confidential telegraph clerk, who was just departing with a little sheaf of messages. By his side, with a notebook in her hand, stood Mr. Fentolin's private secretary - a white-haired woman, with a strangely transparent skin and light brown eyes, dressed in somber black, a woman who might have been of any age from thirty to fifty. Behind her was a middle-aged man whose position in the household no one was quite sure about - a clean-shaven man whose name was Ryan, and who might very well have been once an actor or a clergyman. In the background stood Henderson, the perfect butler.

"It is perhaps opportune," Mr. Fentolin said quietly, "that you all whom I trust should be present here together. I wish you to understand one thing. You have, I believe, in my employ learned the gift of silence. It is to be exercised with regard to a certain visitor brought here by my nephew, a visitor whom I regret to say is now lying seriously ill."

There was absolute silence. Doctor Sarson alone turned from the window as though about to speak, but met Mr. Fentolin's eye and at once resumed his position.

"I rely upon you all," Mr. Fentolin continued softly. "Henderson, you, perhaps, have the most difficult task, for you have the servants to control. Nevertheless, I rely upon you, also. If one word of this visitor's presence here leaks out even so far as the village, out they go, every one of them. I will not have a servant in the place who does not respect my wishes. You can give any reason you like for my orders. It is a whim. I have whims, and I choose to pay for them. You are all better paid than any man breathing could pay you. In return I ask only for your implicit obedience."

He stretched out his hand and took a cigarette from a curiously carved ivory box which stood by his side. He tapped it gently upon the table and looked up.

"I think, sir," Henderson said respectfully, "that I can answer for the servants. Being mostly foreigners, they see little or nothing of the village people."

No one else made any remark. It was strange to see how dominated they all were by that queer little fragment of humanity, whose head scarcely reached a foot above the table before which he sat. They departed silently, almost abjectly, dismissed with a single wave of the hand. Mr. Fentolin beckoned his secretary to remain. She came a little nearer.

"Sit down, Lucy," he ordered.

She seated herself a few feet away from him. Mr. Fentolin watched her for several moments. He himself had his back to the light. The woman, on the other hand, was facing it. The windows were high, and the curtains were drawn back to their fullest extent. A cold stream of northern light fell upon her face. Mr. Fentolin gazed at her and nodded her head slightly.

"My dear Lucy," he declared, "you are wonderful - a perfect cameo, a gem. To look at you now, with your delightful white hair and your flawless skin, one would never believe that you had ever spoken a single angry word, that you had ever felt the blood flow through your veins, or that your eyes had ever looked upon the gentle things of life."

She looked at him, still without speech. The immobility of her face was indeed a marvellous thing. Mr. Fentolin's expression darkened.

"Sometimes," he murmured softly, "I think that if I had strong fingers - really strong fingers, you know, Lucy - I should want to take you by the throat and hold you tighter and tighter, until your breath came fast, and your eyes came out from their shadows."

She turned over a few pages of her notebook. To all appearance she had not heard a word.

"To-day," she announced, "is the fourth of April. Shall I send out the various checks to those men in Paris, New York, Frankfort, St. Petersburg, and Tokio?"

"You can send the checks," he told her. "Be sure that you draw them, as usual, upon the Credit Lyonnaise and in the name you know of. Say to Lebonaitre of Paris that you consider his last reports faulty. No mention was made of Monsieur C's visit to the Russian Embassy, or of the supper party given to the Baron von Erlstein by a certain Russian gentleman. Warn him, if you please, that reports with such omissions are useless to me."

She wrote a few words in her book.

"You made a note of that?"

She raised her head.

"I do not make mistakes," she said.

His eyebrows were drawn together. This was his work, he told himself, this magnificent physical subjection. Yet his inability to stir her sometimes maddened him.

"You know who is in this house?" he asked. "You know the name of my unknown guest?"

"I know nothing," she replied. "His presence does not interest me."

"Supposing I desire you to know?" he persisted, leaning a little forward. "Supposing I tell you that it is your duty to know?"

"Then," she said, "I should tell you that I believe him to be the special envoy from New York to The Hague, or whatever place on the Continent this coming conference is to be held at."

"Right, woman!" Mr. Fentolin answered sharply. "Right! It is the special envoy. He has his mandate with him. I have them both - the man and his mandate. Can you guess what I am going to do with them?"

"It is not difficult," she replied. "Your methods are scarcely original. His mandate to the flames, and his body to the sea!"

She raised her eyes as she spoke and looked over Mr. Fentolin's shoulder, across the marshland to the grey stretch of ocean. Her eyes became fixed. It was not possible to say that they held any expression, and yet one felt that she saw beneath the grey waves, even to the rocks and caverns below.

"It does not terrify you, then," he asked curiously, "to think that a man under this roof is about to die?"

"Why should it?" she retorted. "Death does not frighten me - my own or anybody else's. Does it frighten you?"

His face was suddenly livid, his eyes full of fierce anger. His lips twitched. He struck the table before him.

"Beast of a woman!" he shouted. "You ghoul! How dare you! How dare you -"

He stopped short. He passed his hand across his forehead. All the time the woman remained unmoved.

"Do you know," he muttered, his voice still shaking a little, "that I believe sometimes I am afraid of you? How would you like to see me there, eh, down at the bottom of that hungry sea? You watch sometimes so fixedly. You'd miss me, wouldn't you? I am a good master, you know. I pay well. You've been with me a good many years. You were a different sort of woman when you first came."

"Yes," she admitted, "I was a different sort of woman."

"You don't remember those days, I suppose," he went on, "the days when you had brown hair, when you used to carry roses about and sing to yourself while you beat your work out of that wretched typewriter?"

"No," she answered, "I do not remember those days. They do not belong to me. It is some other woman you are thinking of."

Their eyes met. Mr. Fentolin turned away first. He struck the bell at his elbow. She rose at once.

"Be off!" he ordered. "When you look at me like that, you send shivers through me! You'll have to go; I can see you'll have to go. I can't keep you any longer. You are the only person on the face of the earth who dares to say things to me which make me think, the only person who doesn't shrink at the sound of my voice. You'll have to go. Send Sarson to me at once. You've upset me!"

She listened to his words in expressionless silence. When he had finished, carrying her book in her hand, she very quietly moved towards the door. He watched her, leaning a little forward in his chair, his lips parted, his eyes threatening. She walked with steady, even footsteps. She carried herself with almost machine-like erectness; her skirts were noiseless. She had the trick of turning the handle of the door in perfect silence. He heard her calm voice in the hall.

"Doctor Sarson is to go to Mr. Fentolin."

Mr. Fentolin sat quite still, feeling his own pulse.

"That woman," he muttered to himself, "that -woman - some day I shouldn't be surprised if she really -"

He paused. The doctor had entered the room.

"I am upset, Sarson," he declared. "Come and feel my pulse quickly. That woman has upset me."

"Miss Price?"

"Miss Price, d-n it! Lucy - yes!"

"It seems unlike her," the doctor remarked. "I have never heard her utter a useless syllable in my life."

Mr. Fentolin held out his wrist.

"It's what she doesn't say," he muttered.

The doctor produced his watch. In less than a minute he put it away.

"This is quite unnecessary," he pronounced. "Your pulse is wonderful."

"Not hurried? No signs of palpitation?"

"You have seven or eight footmen, all young men," Doctor Sarson replied drily. "I will wager that there isn't one of them has a pulse so vigorous as yours."

Mr. Fentolin leaned a little back in his chair. An expression of satisfaction crept over his face.

"You reassure me, my dear Sarson. That is excellent. What of our patient?"

"There is no change."

"I am afraid," Mr. Fentolin sighed, "that we shall have trouble with him. These strong people always give trouble."

"It will be just the same in the long run," the doctor remarked, shrugging his shoulders.

Mr. Fentolin held up his finger.

"Listen! A motor-car, I believe?"

"It is Miss Fentolin who is just arriving," the doctor announced. "I saw the car coming as I crossed the hall."

Mr. Fentolin nodded gently.

"Indeed?" he replied. "Indeed? So my dear niece has returned. Open the door, friend Sarson. Open the door, if you please. She will be anxious to see me. We must summon her."