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Chapter 11 - Professor Sinclair's Dancing Academy

Mr. Sinclair, or as he preferred to be called, Professor Sinclair, waved a white kid glove in the direction of the dancing hall.

"This way, ladies and gentlemen!" he announced. "A beautiful valse just about to commence. Tickets, if you please! Ah! Glad to see you, Miss Cullingham! You'll find--a friend of yours inside!"

There was a good deal of giggling as the girls came out from the little dressing room and joined their waiting escorts, who stood in a line against the wall, mostly struggling with refractory gloves. Mr. Sinclair, proprietor of the West Islington Dancing Academy, and host of these little gatherings--for a consideration of eighteenpence--did his best, by a running fire of conversation, to set everyone at their ease. He wore a somewhat rusty frock coat, black trousers, a white dress waistcoat, and a red tie. Evening dress was not DE RIGUEUR! The money at the door, and that everyone should behave as ladies and gentlemen, were the only things insisted upon.

Mr. Sinclair's best smile and most correct bow was suddenly in evidence.

"Mademoiselle Violet!" he exclaimed to a lady who came in alone, "we are enchanted. We feared that you had deserted us. There is a young gentleman inside who is going to be made very happy. One shilling change, thank you. Won't you step into the cloak room?"

The lady shook her head.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Sinclair," she said, "I would rather keep my hat and veil on. I can only stay for a few minutes. Is Mr. Richardson here, do you know? Ah! I can see him."

She stepped past the Professor into the little dancing hall. A young lady was pounding upon a piano, a boy at her side was playing the violin. A few couples were dancing, but most of the company was looking on. The evening was young, and Mr. Sinclair, who later on officiated as M.C., had not yet made his attack upon the general shyness. The lady known as Mademoiselle Violet paused and looked around her. Suddenly she caught sight of a pale, anemic-looking youth, who was standing apart from the others, lounging against the wall. She moved rapidly towards him.

"How do you do, Mr. Richardson?" she said, holding out her hand.

He started, and a sudden rush of color streamed into his cheeks. He took her hand awkwardly, and he was almost speechless with nervousness.

"I don't believe you're at all glad to see me!" she remarked.

"Oh! Miss Violet!" he exclaimed. He would have said more, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Can we sit down somewhere?" she said. "I want to talk to you."

There were one or two chairs placed behind a red drugged curtain, where adventurous spirits led their partners later in the evening. They found a place there, and the young man recovered his power of speech.

"Not glad to see you!" he exclaimed almost vehemently. "Why, what else do you suppose I come here for every Thursday evening? I never dance; they all make game of me because they know I come here on the chance of seeing you again. I'm a fool! I know that! You just amuse yourself here with me, and then you go away, back to your friends--and forget! And I hang about round here, like the silly ass that I am!"

"My dear--George!"

The young man blushed at the sound of his Christian name. He was mollified despite himself.

"I suppose it's got to be the same thing all over again," he declared resignedly. "You'll talk to me and let me be near you--and make a fool of me all round; and then you'll go away, and heaven knows when I'll see you again. You won't let me take you home, and won't tell me where you live, or who your friends are. You do treat me precious badly, Miss Violet."

"This time," she said quietly, "it will not be the same. I have something quite serious to say to you."

"Something serious--you? Go on!" he exclaimed in excitement.

"Have you found another place yet?"

"No. I haven't really tried. I have a little money saved, and I could get one tomorrow if--"

She stopped him with a smiling gesture.

"I don't mean that--yet," she said. "I wanted to know whether it would be possible for you to go away for a little time, if someone paid all your expenses."

"To go away!" he repeated blankly. "What for?"

Mademoiselle Violet leaned a little nearer to him.

"My mistress asked me yesterday," she said, "if I knew anyone who could be trusted who would go away, at a moment's notice, on an errand for her."

"Your mistress," he repeated. "You really are a lady's maid, then, are you?"

"Of course!" she answered impatiently. "Haven't I told you so before? Now what do you say? Will you go?"

"I dunno," he answered thoughtfully. "If it had been for you, I don't know that I'd have minded. I ain't fond of traveling."

"It is for me," she interrupted hastily. "If I can find her anyone who will do what she wants, she will make my fortune. She has promised. And then--"

"Well, and then?"

Mademoiselle Violet looked at him thoughtfully.

"I should not make any promises," she said demurely, "but things would certainly be different."

The young man's blood was stirred. Mademoiselle Violet stood to him for the whole wonderful world of romance, into which he had peered dimly from behind the counter of an Islington emporium. Her low voice--so strange to his ears after the shrill chatter of the young ladies of his acquaintance--the mystery of her coming and going, all went to give color to the single dream of his unimaginative life. Apart from her, he was a somewhat vulgar, entirely commonplace young man, of saving habits, and with some aptitude for business, in a small way. He had been well on his way to becoming a small but successful shopkeeper, thereby realizing the only ideals which had yet presented themselves to him, when Madame Violet had unconsciously intervened. Of what might become of him now he had no clear conception of himself.

"I'll go!" he declared.

Mademoiselle Violet's eyes flashed behind her veil. Her fingers touched his for a moment.

"It is a long way," she said.

"I don't care," he answered valiantly.

"To--America!"

"America!" he gasped. "But--is this a joke, Miss Violet?"

She shook her head.

"Of course not!" America is not a great journey."

"But it will cost--"

She laughed softly.

"My mistress is very rich," she said. "The cost does not matter at all. You will have all the money you can spend--and more."

He felt himself short of breath, and bereft of words.

"Gee whiz!" he murmured.

They sat there in silence for a few moments. A promenading couple put their heads behind the screen, and withdrew with the sound of feminine giggling. Outside, the piano was being thumped to the tune of a popular polka.

"But what have I go to do?" he asked.

"To watch a man who will go out by the same steamer as you," she answered. "Write to London, tell me what he does, how he spends his time, whether he is ill or well. You must stay at the same hotel in New York, and try and find out what his business is there. Remember, we want to know, my mistress and I, everything that he does."

"Who is he?" he asked. "A friend of your mistress?"

"No!" she answered shortly, "an enemy. A cruel enemy--the cruelest enemy a woman could have!"

The subdued passion of her tone thrilled him. He felt himself bewildered--in touch with strange things. She leaned a little closer towards him, and that mysterious perfume, which was one of her many fascinations, dazed him with its sweetness.

"If you could send home word," she whispered, "that he was ill, that anything had happened to him, that he was not likely to return--our fortunes would be made--yours and mine."

"Stop!" he muttered. "You--phew! It's hot here!"

He wiped the perspiration recklessly from his forehead with a red silk handkerchief.

"What made you come to me?" he asked. "I don't even know the name of your mistress."

"And you must not ask it," she declared quietly. "It is better for you not to know. I came to you because you were a man, and I knew that I could trust you."

Her flattery sank into his soul. No one else had ever called him a man. He felt himself capable of great things. To think that, but for the coming of this wonderful

Mademoiselle Violet, he might even have been furnishing a small shop on the outskirts of Islington, with collars and ties and gloves designed to attract the youth of that populous neighborhood!

"When do I start?" he asked with a coolness which surprised himself.

She drew a heavy packet from the recesses of the muff she carried.

"All the particulars are here," she said. "The name of the steamer, the name of the man, and money. You will be told where to get more in New York, if you need it."

He took it from her mechanically. She rose to her feet.

"You will remember," she said, looking into his eyes.

"I ain't likely to forget anything you've said tonight," he answered honestly. "But look here! Let me take you home--just this once! Give me something to think about."

She shook her head.

"I will give you something to hope for," she whispered. "You must not come a yard with me. When you come back it will, perhaps--be different."

He remained behind the partition, gripping the packet tightly. Mademoiselle Violet took a hasty adieu of Mr. Sinclair, and descended to the street. She walked for a few yards, and then turned sharply to the left. A hansom, into which she stepped at once, was waiting there. She wrapped herself hastily in a long fur coat which lay upon the seat, and thrust her hand through the trap door.

"St. Martin's Schoolroom!" she told the cabman.

Apparently Mademoiselle Violet combined a taste for philanthropy with her penchant for Islington dancing halls. She entered the little schoolroom and made her way to the platform, dispensing many smiles and nods amongst the audience of the concert, which was momentarily interrupted for her benefit. She was escorted on to the platform by a young and earnest-looking clergyman, and given a chair in the center of the little group who were gathered there. And after the conclusion of the song, the clergyman expressed his gratification to the audience that a lady with so many calls upon her time, such high social duties, should yet find time to show her deep interest in their welfare by this most kind visit. After which, he ventured to call upon Lady Barrington to say a few words.