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Chapter 29 - A Race

The Prince, on his way back from his usual before-breakfast stroll, lingered for a short time amongst the beds of hyacinths and yellow crocuses. Somehow or other, these spring flowers, stiffly set out and with shrivelled edges--a little reminiscent of the last east wind--still seemed to him, in their perfume at any rate, to bring him memories of his own country. Pink and blue and yellow, in all manner of sizes and shapes, the beds spread away along the great front below the terrace of the castle. This morning the wind was coming from the west. The sun, indeed, seemed already to have gained some strength. The Prince sat for a moment or two upon the gray stone balustrade, looking to where the level country took a sudden ascent and ended in a thick belt of pine trees. Beyond lay the sea. As he sat there with folded arms, he was surely a fatalist. The question as to whether or not he should ever reach it, should ever find himself really bound for home, was one which seemed to trouble him slightly enough. He thought with a faint, wistful interest of the various ports of call, of the days which might pass, each one bringing him nearer the end. He suffered himself, even, to think of that faint blur upon the horizon, the breath of the spicy winds, the strange home perfumes of the bay, as he drew nearer and nearer to the outstretched arms of his country. Well, if not he, another! It was something to have done one's best.

The rustle of a woman's garment disturbed him, and he turned his head. Penelope stood there in her trim riding habit,--a garb in which he had never seen her. She held her skirts in her hand and looked at him with a curious little smile.

"It is too early in the morning, Prince," she said, "for you to sit there dreaming so long and so earnestly. Come in to breakfast. Every one is down, for a wonder."

"Breakfast, by all means," he answered, coming blithely up the broad steps. "You are going to ride this morning?"

"I suppose we all are, more or less," she answered. "It is our hunt steeplechases, you know. Poor Grace is in there nearly sobbing her eyes out. Captain Chalmers has thrown her over. Lady Barbarity--that's Grace's favorite mare, and her entry for the cup--turned awkward with him yesterday, and he won't have anything more to do with her."

"From your tone," he remarked, pushing open the French windows, "I gather that this is a tragedy. I, unfortunately, do not understand."

"You should ask Grace herself," Penelope said. "There she is."

Lady Grace looked round from her place at the head of the breakfast table.

"Come and sympathize with me, Prince," she cried. "For weeks I have been fancying myself the proud possessor of the hunt cup. Now that horrid man, Captain Chalmers, has thrown me over at the last moment. He refuses to ride my mare because she was a little fractious yesterday."

"It is a great misfortune," the Prince said in a tone of polite regret, "but surely it is not irreparable? There must be others--why not your own groom?"

A smile went round the table. The Duke hastened to explain.

"The race is for gentlemen riders only," he said. "The horses have to be the property of members of the hunt. There would be no difficulty, of course, in finding a substitute for Captain Chalmers, but the race takes place this morning, and I am afraid, with all due respect to my daughter, that her mare hasn't the best of reputations."

"I won't have a word said against Lady Barbarity," Lady Grace declared. "Captain Chalmers is a good horseman, of course but for a lightweight he has the worst hands I ever knew."

"But surely amongst your immediate friends there must be many others," the Prince said. "Sir Charles, for instance?"

"Charlie is riding his own horse," Lady Grace answered. "He hasn't the ghost of a chance, but, of course, he won't give it up."

"Not I!" Somerfield answered, gorgeous in pink coat and riding breeches. "My old horse may not be fast, but he can go the course, and I'm none too certain of the others. Some of those hurdles'll take a bit of doing."

"It is a shame," the Prince remarked, "that you should be disappointed, Lady Grace. Would they let me ride for you?"

Nothing the Prince could have said would have astonished the little company more. Somerfield came to a standstill in the middle of the room, with a cup of tea in one hand and a plate of ham in the other.

"You!" Lady Grace exclaimed.

"Do you really mean it, Prince?" Penelope cried.

"Well, why not?" he asked, himself, in turn, somewhat surprised. "If I am eligible, and Lady Grace chooses, it seems to me very simple."

"But," the Duke intervened, "I did not know--we did not know that you were a sportsman, Prince."

"A sportsman?" the Prince repeated a little doubtfully. "Perhaps I am not that according to your point of view, but when it comes to a question of riding, why, that is easy enough."

"Have you ever ridden in a steeplechase?" Somerfield asked him.

"Never in my life," the Prince declared. "Frankly, I do not know what it is."

"There are jumps, for one thing," Somerfield continued,--"pretty stiff affairs, too."

"If Lady Grace's mare is a hunter," the Prince remarked, "she can probably jump them."

"The question is whether--" Somerfield began, and stopped short.

The Prince looked up.

"Yes?" he asked.

Somerfield hesitated to complete his sentence, and the Duke once more intervened.

"What Somerfield was thinking, my dear Prince," he said, "was that a steeplechase course, as they ride in this country, needs some knowing. You have never been on my daughter's mare before."

The Prince smiled.

"So far as I am concerned," he said, "that is of no account. There was a day at Mukden--I do not like to talk of it, but it comes back to me--when I rode twelve different horses in twenty-four hours, but perhaps," he added, turning to Lady Grace, "you would not care to trust your horse with one who is a stranger to your--what is it you call them?--steeplechases."

"On the contrary, Prince," Lady Grace exclaimed, "you shall ride her, and I am going to back you for all I am worth."

Bransome, who was also in riding clothes, although he was not taking part in the steeplechases himself, glanced at the clock.

"You are running it rather fine," he said. "You'll scarcely have time to hack round the course."

"Some one must explain it to me," the Prince said. "I need only to be told where to go. If there is no time for that, I must stay with the other horses until the finish. There is a flat finish perhaps?"

"About three hundred yards," the Duke answered.

"Have you any riding clothes?" Penelope whispered to him.

"Without a doubt," he answered. "I will go and change in a few minutes."

"We start in half an hour," Somerfield remarked. "Even that allows us none too much time."

"Perhaps," the Duke suggested diffidently, "you would like to ride over, Prince? It is a good eleven miles, and you would have a chance of getting into your stride."

The Prince shook his head.

"No," he said, "I should like to motor with you others, if I may."

"Just as you like, of course," the Duke agreed. "Grace's mare is over there now. We shall be able to have a look at her before the race, at any rate."

The opinions, after the Prince had left the table, were a little divided as to what was likely to happen.

"For a man who has never even hunted and knows nothing whatever about the country," Somerfield declared, "to attempt to ride in a steeplechase of this sort is sheer folly. If you take my advice, Lady Grace, you will get out of it. Lady Barbarity is far too good a mare to have her knees broken."

"I am perfectly content to take my risks," Lady Grace answered confidently. "If the Prince had never ridden before in his life, I would trust him."

Somerfield turned away, frowning.

"What do you think about it, Penelope?" he asked.

"I am afraid," she answered, "that I agree with Grace."

Two punctures and a leaking valve delayed them over an hour on the road. When they reached their destination, the first race was already over.

"It's shocking bad luck," the Duke declared, "but there's no earthly chance of your seeing the course, Prince. Come on the top of the stand with me, and bring your glasses. I think I can point out the way for you."

"That will do excellently," the Prince answered. "There is no need to go and look at every jump. Show me where we start and as near as possible the way we have to go, and tell me where we finish."

The course was a natural one, and the stand itself on a hill. The greater part of it was clearly visible from where they stood. The Duke pointed out the water jump with some trepidation, but the Prince's glasses rested on it only for a moment. He pointed to a clump of trees.

"Which side there?" he asked.

"To the left," the Duke answered. Remember to keep inside the red flags."

The Prince nodded.

"Where do we finish?" he asked.

The Duke showed him.

"That is all right," he said. "I need not look any more."

In the paddock some of the horses were being led around. The Prince noted them approvingly.

"Very nice horses," he said,--"light, but very nice. That one I like best," he added, pointing to a dark bay mare, who was already giving her boy some trouble.

"That's lucky," the Duke answered, "for she's your mount. I must go and talk to the clerk about your entry. It is a little late, but I think that it will be all right."

The Prince glanced over Lady Grace's mare and turned aside to join Penelope and Somerfield.

"I like the look of my horse, Sir Charles," he said. "I think that I shall beat you today."

"We both start at five to one," Somerfield answered. "Shall we have a bet?"

"With pleasure," the Prince agreed. "Will you name the amount? I do not know what is usual."

"Anything you like," Somerfield answered, "from ten pounds to a hundred."

"One hundred,--we will say one hundred, then," the Prince declared. "My mount against yours. So!"

He threw off his overcoat, and they saw for the first time that he was dressed in English riding clothes of dark material, but absolutely correct cut.

"I must go now and be introduced to the Clerk of the Course," he said. "Ah, here is Lady Grace!" he added. "Come with me, Lady Grace. Your father is seeing about my entry. I think that in five minutes the bell will ring."

Everything was in order, and a few minutes later the Prince came out. The mare was stripped, and the whole party gathered round to watch him mount. He swung himself into the saddle without hesitation. The mare suddenly reared. Prince Maiyo only smiled, and with loose reins stooped and patted her neck. He seemed to whisper something in her ear, and she stood for a moment afterwards quite still. Lady Grace drew a quick breath.

"What did you say to her, Prince?" she asked. "She is behaving beautifully except for that first start."

"Your mare understands Japanese, Lady Grace," the Prince answered, smiling. "She and I are going to be great friends. Show me the way, please. Ah, I follow that other horse! I see. Lady Grace, au revoir. You shall have your cup."

"Gad, I believe she will!" the Duke exclaimed. "Look at the fellow ride. His body is like whalebone."

The parade in front of the stand was a short one. The Prince rode by in the merest canter. The mare made one wild plunge which would have unseated any ordinary person, but her rider never even moved in his saddle.

"I never saw a fellow sit so close in my life," the Duke declared. "Do you know, Grace, I believe, I really believe he'll ride her!"

Lady Grace laughed scornfully.

"I have a year's allowance on already," she said, "so you had better pray that he does. I think it is very absurd of you all," she added, "because the Prince cares nothing for games, to conclude that he is any the less likely to be able to do the things that a man should do. He perhaps cannot ride about on a trained pony with a long stick and knock a small ball between two posts, but I think that if he had to ride for his own life or the life of others he would show you all something."

"They're off!" the Duke exclaimed.

They watched the first jump breathlessly. The Prince, riding a little apart, simply ignored the hurdle, and the mare took it in her stride. They turned the corner and faced an awkward post and rails. The leading horse took off too late and fell. The Prince, who was close behind, steered his mare on one side like lightning. She jumped like a cat,--the Prince never moved in his seat.

"He rides like an Italian," Bransome declared, shutting up his glasses. "There's never a thing in this race to touch him. I am going to see if I can get any money on."

Another set of hurdles and then the field were out of sight. Soon they were visible again in the valley. The Prince was riding second now. Somerfield was leading, and there were only three other horses left. They cleared a hedge and two ditches. At the second one Somerfield's horse stumbled, and there was a suppressed cry. He righted himself almost at once, however, and came on. Then they reached the water jump. There was a sudden silence on the stand and the hillside. Somerfield took off first, the Prince lying well away from him. Both cleared it, but whereas Lady Grace's mare jumped wide and clear, and her rider never even faltered in his saddle, Somerfield lost all his lead and only just kept his seat. They were on the homeward way now, with only one more jump, a double set of hurdles. Suddenly, in the flat, the Prince seemed to stagger in his saddle. Lady Grace cried out.

"He's over, by Jove!" the Duke exclaimed. "No, he's righted himself!"

The Prince had lost ground, but he came on toward the last jump, gaining with every stride. Somerfield was already riding his mount for all he was worth, but the Prince as yet had not touched his whip. They drew closer and closer to the jump. Once more the silence came. Then there was a little cry,--both were over. They were turning the corner coming into the straight. Somerfield was leaning forward now, using his whip freely, but it was clear that his big chestnut was beaten. The Prince, with merely a touch of the whip and riding absolutely upright, passed him with ease, and rode in a winner by a dozen lengths. As he cantered by the stand, they all saw the cause of his momentary stagger. One stirrup had gone, and he was riding with his leg quite stiff.

"You've won your money, Grace," the Duke declared, shutting up his glass. "A finely ridden race, too. Did you see he'd lost his stirrup? He must have taken the last jump without it. I'll go and fetch him up."

The Duke hurried down. The Prince was already in the weighing room smoking a cigarette.

"It is all right," he said smiling. "They have passed me. I have won. I hope that Lady Grace will be pleased."

"She is delighted!" the Duke exclaimed, shaking him by the hand. "We all are. What happened to your stirrup?"

"You must ask your groom," the Prince answered. "The leather snapped right in the flat, but it made no difference. We have to ride like that half the time. It is quite pleasant exercise," he continued, "but I am very dirty and very thirsty. I am sorry for Sir Charles, but his horse was not nearly so good as your daughter's mare."

They made their way toward the stand, but met the rest of the party in the paddock. Lady Grace went up to the Prince with outstretched hands.

"Prince," she declared, you rode superbly. It was a wonderful race. I have never felt so grateful to any one in my life."

The Prince smiled in a puzzled way.

"My dear young lady," he said, "it was a great pleasure and a very pleasant ride. You have nothing to thank me for because your horse is a little better than those others."

"It was not my mare alone," she answered,--"it was your riding."

The Prince laughed as one who does not understand.

"You make me ashamed, Lady Grace," he declared. "Why, there is only one way to ride. You did not think that because I was not English I should fall off a horse?"

"I am afraid," the Duke remarked smiling, "that several Englishmen have fallen off!"

"It is a matter of the horse," the Prince said. "Some are not trained for jumping. What would you have, then? In my battalion we have nine hundred horsemen. If I found one who did not ride so well as I do, he would go back to the ranks. We would make an infantryman of him. Miss Morse," he added, turning suddenly to where Penelope was standing a little apart. "I am so sorry that Sir Charles' horse was not quite so good as Lady Grace's. You will not blame me?"

She looked at him curiously. She did not answer immediately. Somerfield was coming towards them, his pink coat splashed with mud, his face scratched, and a very distinct frown upon his forehead. She looked away from him to the Prince. Their eyes met for a moment.

"No!" she said. "I do not blame you!"