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[The Illustrious Prince](#)

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This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 31 - Goodbye!

The Prince on his return from the library intercepted Penelope on her way across the hall.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I could not help overhearing some sentences of your conversation with Sir Charles Somerfield as we sat at dinner. You are going to talk with him now, is it not so?"

"As soon as he comes out from the dining room."

He saw the hardening of her lips, the flash in her eyes at the mention of Somerfield's name.

"Yes!" she continued, "Sir Charles and I are going to have a little understanding."

"Are you sure," he asked softly, "that it will not be a misunderstanding?"

She looked into his face.

"What does it matter to you?" she asked. "What do you care?"

"Come into the conservatory for a few minutes," he begged. "You know that I take no wine and I prefer not to return into the dining room. I would like so much instead to talk to you before you see Sir Charles."

She hesitated. He stood by her side patiently waiting.

"Remember," he said, "that I am a somewhat privileged person just now. My days here are numbered, you see."

She turned toward the conservatories.

"Very well," she said, "I must be like every one else, I suppose, and spoil you. How dare you come and make us all so fond of you that we look upon your departure almost as a tragedy!"

He smiled.

"Indeed," he declared, "there is a note of tragedy even in these simplest accidents of life. I have been very happy amongst you all, Miss Penelope. You have been so much kinder to me than I have deserved. You have thrown a bridge across the gulf which separates us people of alien tongues and alien manners. Life has been a pleasant thing for me here."

"Why do you go so soon?" she whispered.

"Miss Penelope," he answered, "to those others who ask me that question, I shall say that my mission is over, that my report has been sent to my Emperor, and that there is nothing left for me to do but to follow it home. I could add, and it would be true, that there is very much work for me still to accomplish in my own country. To you alone I am going to say something else."

She was no longer pale. Her eyes were filled with an exceedingly soft light. She leaned towards him, and her face shone as the face of a woman who prays that she may hear the one thing in life a woman craves to hear from the lips she loves best.

"Go on," she murmured.

"I want to ask you, Miss Penelope," he continued, "whether you remember the day when you paid a visit to my house?"

"Very well," she answered.

"I was showing you a casket," he went on.

She gripped his arm.

"Don't!" she begged. "Don't, I can't bear any more of that. You don't know how horrible it seems to me! You don't know--what fears I have had!"

He looked away from her.

"I have sometimes wondered," he said, "what your thoughts were at that moment, what you have thought of me since."

She shivered a little, but did not answer him.

"Very soon," he reminded her, "I shall have passed out of your life."

He heard the sudden, half-stifled exclamation. He felt rather than saw the eyes which looked at him, and he hastened on.

"You understand what is meant by the inevitable," he continued. "Whatever has happened in the matters with which I have been concerned has been inevitable. I have had no choice--sometimes no choice in such events is possible. Do not think," he went on, "that I tell you this to beg for your sympathy. I would not have a thing other than as it is. But when we have said goodbye, I want you to believe the best of me, to think as kindly as you can of the things which you may not be able to comprehend. Remember that we are not so emotional a nation as that to which you belong. Our affections are but seldom touched. We live without feeling for many days, sometimes for longer, even, than many days. It has not been so altogether with me. I have felt more than I dare, at this moment, to speak of."

"Yet you go," she murmured.

"Yet I go," he assented. "Nothing in the world is more certain than that I must say farewell to you and all of my good friends here. In a sense I want this to be our farewell. Leaving out of the question just now the more serious dangers which threaten me, the result of my mission here alone will make me unpopular in this country. As the years pass, I fear that nothing can draw your own land and mine into any sort of accord. That is why I asked you to come here with me and listen while I said these few words to you, why I ask you now that, whatever the future may bring, you will sometimes spare me a kindly thought."

"I think you know," she answered, "that you need not ask that."

"You will marry Sir Charles Somerfield," he continued, "and you will be happy. In this country men develop late. Somerfield, too, will develop, I am sure. He will become worthy even, I trust, to be your husband, Miss Penelope. Something was said of his going into Parliament. When he is Foreign Minister and I am the Counsellor of the Emperor, we may perhaps send messages to one another, if not across the seas, through the clouds."

A man's footstep approached them. Somerfield himself drew near and hesitated. The Prince rose at once.

"Sir Charles," he said, "I have been bidding farewell to Miss Penelope. I have had news tonight over the telephone and I find that I must curtail my visit."

"The Duke will be disappointed," Somerfield said. "Are you off at once?"

"Probably tomorrow," the Prince answered. "May I leave Miss Penelope in your charge?" he added with a little bow. "The Duke, I believe, is awaiting me."

He passed out of the conservatory. Penelope sat quite still.

"Well," Somerfield said, "if he is really going--"

"Charlie," she interrupted, "if ever you expect me to marry you, I make one condition, and that is that you never say a single word against Prince Maiyo."

"The man whom a month ago," he remarked curiously, "you hated!"

She shook her head.

"I was an idiot," she said. "I did not understand him and I was prejudiced against his country."

"Well, as he actually is going away," Sir Charles remarked with a sigh of content, "I suppose it's no use being jealous."

"You haven't any reason to be," Penelope answered just a little wistfully. "Prince Maiyo has no room in his life for such frivolous creatures as women."

The Prince found the rest of the party dispersed in various directions. Lady Grace was playing billiards with Captain Wilmot. She showed every disposition to lay down her cue when he entered the room.

"Do come and talk to us, Prince," she begged. "I am so tired of this stupid game, and I am sure Captain Wilmot is bored to tears."

The Prince shook his head.

"Thank you," he said, "but I must find the Duke. I have just received a telephone message and I fear that I may have to leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" she cried in dismay.

The Prince sighed.

"If not tomorrow, the next day," he answered. "I have had a summons--a summons which I cannot disobey. Shall I find your father in the library, Lady Grace?"

"Yes!" she answered. "He is there with Mr. Haviland and Sir Edward. Are you really going to waste your last evening in talking about treaties and such trifles?"

"I am afraid I must," he answered regretfully.

You are a hopelessly disappointing person," she declared a little pitifully.

"It is because you are all much too kind to me that you think so," he answered. "You make me welcome amongst you even as one of yourselves. You forget--you would almost teach me to forget that I am only a wayfarer here."

"That is your own choice," she said, coming a little nearer to him.

"Ah, no," he answered. "There is no choice! I serve a great mistress, and when she calls I come. There are no other voices in the world for one of my race and faith. The library you said, Lady Grace? I must go and find your father."

He passed out, closing the door behind him. Captain Wilmot chalked his cue carefully.

"That's the queerest fellow I ever knew in my life," he said. "He seems all the time as though his head were in the clouds."

Lady Grace sighed. She too was chalking her cue.

"I wonder," she said, "what it would be like to live in the clouds."