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[The Illustrious Prince](#)

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

Chapter 8 - An Interrupted Theatre Party

Seated upon a roomy lounge in the foyer of the Savoy were three women who attracted more than an average amount of attention from the passers-by. In the middle was the Duchess of Devenham, erect, stately, and with a figure which was still irreproachable notwithstanding her white hair. on one side sat her daughter, Lady Grace Redford, tall, fair, and comely; on the other, Miss Penelope Morse. The two girls were amusing themselves, watching the people; their chaperon had her eye upon the clock.

"To dine at half-past seven," the Duchess remarked, as she looked around the ENTRESOL of the great restaurant through her lorgnettes, "is certainly a little trying for one's temper and for one's digestion, but so long as those men accepted, I certainly think they ought to have been here. They know that the play begins at a quarter to nine."

"It isn't like Dicky Vanderpole in the least," Penelope said. "Since he began to tread the devious paths of diplomacy, he has brought exactness in the small things of life down to a fine art."

"He isn't half so much fun as he used to be," Lady Grace declared.

"Fun!" Penelope exclaimed. "Sometimes I think that I never knew a more trying person."

"I have never known the Prince unpunctual," the Duchess murmured. "I consider him absolutely the best-mannered young man I know."

Lady Grace smiled, and glanced at Penelope.

"I don't think you'll get Penelope to agree with you, mother," she said.

"Why not, my dear?" the Duchess asked. "I heard that you were quite rude to him the other evening. We others all find him so charming."

Penelope's lip curled slightly.

"He has so many admirers," she remarked, "that I dare say he will not notice my absence from the ranks. Perhaps I am a little prejudiced. At home, you know, we have rather strong opinions about this fusion of races."

The Duchess raised her eyebrows.

"But a Prince of Japan, my dear Penelope!" she said. "A cousin of the Emperor, and a member of an aristocracy which was old before we were thought of! Surely you cannot class Prince Maiyo amongst those to whom any of your country people could take exception."

Penelope shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"Perhaps," she said, "my feeling is the result of hearing you all praise him so much and so often. Besides, apart from that, you must remember that I am a patriotic daughter of the Stars and Stripes, and there isn't much friendship lost between Washington and Tokio just now."

The Duchess turned away to greet a man who had paused before their couch on his way into the restaurant.

"My dear General," she said, "it seems to me that one meets every one here! Why was not restaurant dining the vogue when I was a girl!"

General Sherrif smiled. He was tall and thin, with grizzled hair and worn features. Notwithstanding his civilian's clothes, there was no possibility of mistaking him anywhere, or under any circumstances, for anything but a soldier.

"It is a delightful custom," he admitted. "It keeps one always on the QUI VIVE; one never knows whom one may see. Incidentally, I find it interferes very much with my digestion."

"Digestion!" the Duchess murmured. "But then, you soldiers lead such irregular lives."

"Not always from choice," the General reminded her. "The Russo-Japanese war finished me off. They kept us far enough away from the fighting, when they could, but, by Jove, they did make us move!"

"We are waiting now for Prince Maiyo," the Duchess remarked. "You know him?"

"Know him!" the General answered. "Duchess, if ever I have to write my memoirs, and particularly my reminiscences of this war, I fancy you would find the name of your friend appear there pretty frequently. There wasn't a more brilliant feat of arms in the whole campaign than his flanking movement at Mukden. I met most of the Japanese leaders, and I have always said that I consider him the most wonderful of them all."

The Duchess turned to Penelope.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

Penelope smiled.

"The Fates are against me," she declared. "If I may not like, I shall at least be driven to admire."

"To talk of bravery when one speaks of that war," the General remarked, "seems invidious, for it is my belief that throughout the whole of the Japanese army such a thing as fear did not exist. They simply did not know what the word meant. But I shall never forget that the only piece of hand-to-hand fighting I saw during the whole time was a cavalry charge led by Prince Maiyo against an immensely superior force of Russians. Duchess," the General declared, "those Japanese on their queer little horses went through the enemy like wind through a cornfield. That young man must have borne a charmed life. I saw him riding and cheering his men on when he must have had at least half a dozen wounds in his body. You will pardon me, Duchess? I see that my party are waiting."

The General hurried away. The Duchess shut up her lorgnettes with a snap, and held out her hand to a newcomer who had come from behind the palms.

"My dear Prince," she exclaimed, "this is charming of you! Some one told me that you were not well,--our wretched climate, of course--and I was so afraid, every moment, that we should receive your excuses."

The newcomer, who was bowing over her hand, was of medium height or a trifle less, dark, and dressed with the quiet exactness of an English gentleman. Only a slight narrowness of the eyes and a greater alertness of movement seemed to distinguish him in any way, as regards nationality, from the men by whom he was surrounded. His voice, when he spoke, contained no trace of accent. It was soft and singularly pleasant. It had, too, one somewhat rare quality--a delightful ring of truth. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why Prince Maiyo was just then, amongst certain circles, one of the most popular persons in Society.

"My dear Duchess," he said, "My indisposition was nothing. And as for your climate, I am beginning to delight in it,--one never knows what to expect, or when one may catch a glimpse of the sun. It is only the grayness which is always the same."

"And even that," the Duchess remarked, smiling, "has been yellow for the last few days. Prince, you know my daughter Grace, and I am sure that you have met Miss Penelope Morse? We are waiting for two other men, Sir Charles Somerfield and Mr. Vanderpole."

The Prince bowed, and began to talk to his hostess' daughter,--a tall, fair girl, as yet only in her second season.

"Here comes Sir Charles, at any rate!" the Duchess exclaimed. "Really, I think we shall have to go in. We can leave a message for Dicky; they all know him at this place. I am afraid he is one of those shocking young men who entertain the theatrical profession here to supper."

A footman at that moment brought a note to the Duchess, which she tore open.

"This is from Dicky!" she exclaimed, glancing it through quickly,--"Savoy notepaper, too, so I suppose he has been here. He says that he may be a few minutes late and that we are not to wait. He will pick us up either here or at the theatre. Prince, shall we let these young people follow us? I haven't heard your excuses yet. Do you know that you were a quarter of an hour late?"

He bent towards her with troubled face.

"Dear Duchess," he said, "believe me, I am conscious of my fault. An unexpected matter, which required my personal attention, presented itself at the last moment. I think I can assure you that nothing of its sort was ever accomplished so quickly. It would only weary you if I tried to explain."

"Please don't," the Duchess begged, "so long as you are here at last. And after all, you see, you are not the worst sinner. Mr. Vanderpole has not yet arrived."

The Prince walked on, for a few steps, in silence.

"Mr. Vanderpole is a great friend of yours, Duchess?" he asked.

The Duchess shook her head.

"I do not know him very well," she said. "I asked him for Penelope."

The Prince looked puzzled.

"But I thought," he said, "that Miss Morse and Sir Charles--"

The Duchess interrupted him with a smile.

"Sir Charles is very much in earnest," she whispered, "but very very slow. Dicky is just the sort of man to spur him on. He admires Penelope, and does not mind showing it. She is such a dear girl that I should love to have her comfortably settled over here."

"She is very intelligent," the Prince said. "She is a young lady, indeed, for whom I have a great admiration. I am only sorry," he concluded, "that I do not seem able to interest her."

"You must not believe that," the Duchess said. "Penelope is a little brusque sometimes, but it is only her manner."

They made their way through the foyer to the round table which had been reserved for them in the centre of the restaurant.

"I suppose I ought to apologize for giving you dinner at such an hour," the Duchess remarked, "but it is our theatrical managers who are to blame. Why they cannot understand that the best play in the world is not worth more than two hours of our undivided attention, and begin everything at nine or a quarter-past, I cannot imagine."

The Prince smiled.

"Dear Duchess," he said, "I think that you are a nation of sybarites. Everything in the world must run for you so smoothly or you are not content. For my part, I like to dine at this hour."

"But then, you take no luncheon, Prince," Lady Grace reminded him.

"I never lunch out," the Prince answered, "but I have always what is sufficient for me."

"Tell me," the Duchess asked, "is it true that you are thinking of settling down amongst us? Your picture is in the new illustrated paper this week, you know, with a little sketch of your career. We are given to understand that you may possibly make your home in this country."

The Prince smiled, and in his smile there seemed to be a certain mysticism. One could not tell, indeed, whether it came from some pleasant thought flitting through his brain, or whether it was that the idea itself was so strange to him.

"I have no plans, Duchess," he said. "Your country is very delightful, and the hospitality of the friends I have made over here is too wonderful a thing to be described; but one never knows."

Lady Grace bent towards Sir Charles, who was sitting by her side.

"I can never understand the Prince," she murmured. "Always he seems as though he took life so earnestly. He has a look upon his face which I never see in the faces of any of you other young men."

"He is a bit on the serious side," Sir Charles admitted.

"It isn't only that," she continued. "He reminds me of that man whom we all used to go and hear preach at the Oratory. He was the same in the pulpit and when one saw him in the street. His eyes seemed to see through one; he seemed to be living in a world of his own."

"He was a religious Johnny, of course," Sir Charles remarked. "They do walk about with their heads in the air."

Lady Grace smiled.

"Perhaps it is religion with the Prince," she said,--"religion of a sort."

"I tell you what I do think," Sir Charles murmured. "I think his pretence at having a good time over here is all a bluff. He doesn't really cotton to us, you know. Don't see how he could. He's never touched a polo stick in his life, knows nothing about cricket, is indifferent to games, and doesn't even understand the meaning of the word Sportsman.' There's no place in this country for a man like that."

Lady Grace nodded.

"I think," she said, "that his visit to Europe and his stay amongst us is, after all, in the nature of a pilgrimage. I suppose he wants to carry back some of our civilization to his own people."

Penelope, who overheard, laughed softly and leaned across the table.

"I fancy," she murmured, "that the person you are speaking of would not look at it in quite the same light."

"Has any one seen the evening paper?" the Duchess asked. "It is there any more news about that extraordinary murder?"

"Nothing fresh in the early editions," Sir Charles answered.

"I think," the Duchess declared, "that it is perfectly scandalous. Our police system must be in a disgraceful state. Tell me, Prince,--could anything like that happen in your country?"

"Without doubt," the Prince answered, "life moves very much in the East as with you here. Only with us," he added a little thoughtfully, "there is a difference, a difference of which one is reminded at a time like this, when one reads your newspapers and hears the conversation of one's friends."

"Tell us what you mean?" Penelope asked quickly.

He looked at her as one might have looked at a child,--kindly, even tolerantly. He was scarcely so tall as she was, and Penelope's attitude towards him was marked all the time with a certain frigidity. Yet he spoke to her with the quiet, courteous confidence of the philosopher who unbends to talk to a child.

"In this country," he said, "you place so high a value upon the gift of life. Nothing moves you so greatly as the killing of one man by another, or the death of a person whom you know."

"There is no tragedy in the world so great!" Penelope declared.

The Prince shrugged his shoulders very slightly.

"My dear Miss Morse," he said, "it is so that you think about life and death here. Yet you call yourselves a Christian country--you have a very beautiful faith. With us, perhaps, there is a little more philosophy and something a little less definite in the trend of our religion. Yet we do not dress Death in black clothes or fly from his outstretched hand. We fear him no more than we do the night. It is a thing that comes--a thing that must be."

He spoke so softly, and yet with so much conviction, that it seemed hard to answer him. Penelope, however, was conscious of an almost feverish desire either to contradict him or to prolong the conversation by some means or other.

"Your point of view," she said, "is well enough, Prince, for those who fall in battle, fighting for their country or for a great cause. Don't you think, though, that the horror of death is a more real thing in a case like this, where a man is killed in cold blood for the sake of robbery, or perhaps revenge?"

"One cannot tell," the Prince answered thoughtfully. "The battlefields of life are there for every one to cross. This mysterious gentleman who seems to have met with his death so unexpectedly--he, too, may have been the victim of a cause, knowing his dangers, facing them as a man should face them."

The Duchess sighed.

"I am quite sure, Prince," she said, "that you are a romanticist. But, apart from the sentimental side of it, do things like this happen in your country?"

"Why not?" the Prince answered. "It is as I have been saying: for a cause which he believed to be worthy, there is no man of my country worthy of the name who would not accept death with the same resignation that he lays his head upon the pillow and waits for sleep."

Sir Charles raised his glass and bowed across the table.

"To our great allies!" he said, smiling.

The Prince drank his glass of water thoughtfully. He drank wine only on very rare occasions, and then under compulsion. He turned to the Duchess.

"A few days ago," he said, "I heard myself described as being much too serious a person. Tonight I am afraid that I am living up to my reputation. Our conversation seems to have drifted into somewhat gloomy channels. We must ask Miss Morse, I think, to help us to forget. They say," he continued, "that it is the young ladies of your country who hold open the gates of Paradise for their menkind."

He was looking into her eyes. His tone was half bantering, half serious. From across the table Penelope knew that Somerfield was watching her closely. Somehow or other, she was irritated and nervous, and she answered vaguely. Sir Charles intervened with a story about some of their acquaintances, and the conversation drifted into more ordinary channels.

"Some day, I suppose," the Duchess remarked, as the service of dinner drew toward a close, "you will have restaurants like this in Tokio?"

The Prince assented.

"Yes," he said without enthusiasm, "they will come. Our heritage from the West is a sure thing. Not in my days, perhaps, or in the days of those that follow me, but they will come."

"I think that it is absolutely wicked of Dicky," the Duchess declared, as they rose from the table. "I shall never rely upon him again."

"After all, perhaps, it isn't his fault," Penelope said, breathing a little sigh of relief as she rose to her feet. "Mr. Harvey is not always considerate, and I know that several of the staff are away on leave."

"That's right, my dear," the Duchess said, smiling, "stick up for your countrymen. I suppose he'll find us sometime during the evening. We can all go to the theatre together; the omnibus is outside."

The little party passed through the foyer and into the hall of the hotel, where they waited while the Duchess' carriage was called. Mr. Coulson was there in an easy chair, smoking a cigar, and watching the people coming and going. He studied the passers-by with an air of impersonal but pleased interest. Penelope and Lady Grace were certainly admirable foils. The latter was fair, with beautiful complexion--a trifle sunburnt, blue eyes, good-humored mouth, and features excellent in their way, but a little lacking in expression. Her figure was good; her movements slow but not ungraceful; her dress of white ivory satin a little extravagant for the occasion. She looked exactly what she was--a well-bred, well-disposed, healthy young Englishwoman, of aristocratic parentage. Penelope, on the other hand, more simply dressed, save for the string of pearls which hung from her neck, had the look of a creature from another world. She had plenty of animation; a certain nervous energy seemed to keep her all the time restless. She talked ceaselessly, sometimes to the Prince, more often to Sir Charles. Her gray-green eyes were bright, her cheeks delicately flushed. She spoke and looked and moved as one on fire with the joy of life. The Prince, noticing that Lady Grace had been left to herself for the last few moments, moved a little towards her and commenced a courteous conversation. Sir Charles took the opportunity to bend over his companion.

"Penelope," he said, "you are queer tonight. Tell me what it is? You don't really dislike the Prince, do you?"

"Why, of course not," she answered, looking back into the restaurant and listening, as though interested in the music. "He is odd, though, isn't he? He is so serious and, in a way, so convincing. He is like a being transplanted into an absolutely alien soil. One would like to laugh at him, and one can't."

"He is rather an anomaly," Sir Charles said, humming lightly to himself. "I suppose, compared with us matter-of-fact people, he must seem to your sex quite a romantic figure."

"He makes no particular appeal to me at all," Penelope declared.

Somerfield was suddenly thoughtful.

"Sometimes, Penelope," he said, "I don't quite understand you, especially when we speak about the Prince. I have come to the conclusion that you either like him very much, or you dislike him very much, or you have some thoughts about him which you tell to no one."

She lifted her skirts. The carriage had been called.

"I like your last suggestion," she declared. "You may believe that that is true."

On their way out, the Prince was accosted by some friends and remained talking for several moments. When he entered the omnibus, there seemed to Penelope, who found herself constantly watching him closely, a certain added gravity in his demeanor. The drive to the theatre was a short one, and conversation consisted only of a few disjointed remarks. In the lobby the Prince laid his hand upon Somerfield's arm.

"Sir Charles," he said, "if I were you, I would keep that evening paper in your pocket. Don't let the ladies see it."

Somerfield looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"To me personally it is of no consequence," the Prince answered, "but your womenfolk feel these things so keenly, and Mr. Vanderpole is of the same nationality, is he not, as Miss Morse? If you take my advice, you will be sure that they do not see the paper until after they get home this evening."

"Has anything happened to Dicky?" Somerfield asked quickly.

The Prince's face was impassive; he seemed not to have heard. Penelope had turned to wait for them.

"The Duchess thinks that we had better all go into the box," she said. "We have two stalls as well, but as Dicky is not here there is really room for five. Will you get some programmes, Sir Charles?"

Somerfield stopped for a minute, under pretence of seeking some change, and tore open his paper. The Prince led Penelope down the carpeted way.

"I heard what you and Sir Charles were saying," she declared quietly. "Please tell me what it is that has happened to Dicky?"

The Prince's face was grave.

"I am sorry," he replied. "I did not know that our voices would travel so far."

"It was not yours," she said. "It was Sir Charles'. Tell me quickly what it is that has happened?"

"Mr. Vanderpole," the Prince answered, "has met with an accident,—a somewhat serious one, I fear. Perhaps," he added, "it would be as well, after all, to break this to the Duchess. I was forgetting the prejudices of your country. She will doubtless wish that our party should be broken up."

Penelope was suddenly very white. He whispered in her ear.

"Be brave," he said. "It is your part."

She stood still for a moment, and then moved on. His words had had a curious effect upon her. The buzzing in her ears had ceased; there was something to be done—she must do it! She passed into the box, the door of which the attendant was holding open.

"Duchess," she said, "I am so sorry, but I am afraid that something has happened to Dicky. If you do not mind, I am going to ask Sir Charles to take me home."

"But my dear child!" the Duchess exclaimed.

"Miss Morse is quite right," the Prince said quietly. "I think it would be better for her to leave at once. If you will allow me, I will explain to you later."

She left the box without another word, and took Somerfield's arm.

"We two are to go," she murmured. "The Prince will explain to the Duchess."

The Prince closed the box door behind them. He placed a chair for the Duchess so that she was not in view of the house.

"A very sad thing has happened," he said quietly. "Mr. Vanderpole met with an accident in a taxicab this evening. From the latest reports, it seems that he is dead!"