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## Chapter 11 - A Commission

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Mr. Robert Blaine-Harvey, American Ambassador and Plenipotentiary Extraordinary to England, was a man of great culture, surprising personal gifts, and with a diplomatic instinct which amounted almost to genius. And yet there were times when he was puzzled. For at least half an hour he had been sitting in his great library, looking across the Park, and trying to make up his mind on a very important matter. It seemed to him that he was face to face with what amounted almost to a crisis in his career. His two years at the Court of St. James had been pleasant and uneventful enough. The small questions which had presented themselves for adjustment between the two countries were, after all, of no particular importance and were easily arranged. The days seemed to have gone by for that over-strained sensitiveness which was continually giving rise to senseless bickerings, when every trilling breeze seemed to fan the smouldering fires of jealousy. The two great English-speaking nations appeared finally to have realized the absolute folly of continual disputes between countries whose destiny and ideals were so completely in accord and whose interests were, in the main, identical. A period of absolute friendliness had ensued. And now there had come this little cloud. It was small enough at present, but Mr. Harvey was not the one to overlook its sinister possibilities. Two citizens of his country had been barbarously murdered within the space of a few hours, one in the heart of the most thickly populated capital in the world, and there was a certain significance attached to this fact which the Ambassador himself and those others at Washington perfectly well realized. He glanced once more at the most recent letter on the top of this pile of correspondence and away again out into the Park. It was a difficult matter, this. His friends at Washington did not cultivate the art of obscurity in the words which they used, and it had been suggested to him in black and white that the murder of these two men, under the particular circumstances existing, was a matter concerning which he should speak very plainly indeed to certain August personages. Mr. Harvey, who was a born diplomatist, understood the difficulties of such a proceeding a good deal more than those who had propounded it.

There was a knock at the door, and a footman entered, ushering in a visitor.

"The young lady whom you were expecting, sir," he announced discreetly.

Mr. Harvey rose at once to his feet.

"My dear Penelope," he said, shaking hands with her, "this is charming of you."

Penelope smiled.

"It seems quite like old times to feel myself at home here once more," she declared.

Mr. Harvey did not pursue the subject. He was perfectly well aware that Penelope, who had been his first wife's greatest friend, had never altogether forgiven him for his somewhat brief period of mourning. He drew an easy chair up to the side of his desk and placed a footstool for her.

"I should not have sent for you," he said, "but I am really and honestly in a dilemma. Do you know that, apart from endless cables, Washington has favored me with one hundred and forty pages of foolscap all about the events of the week before last?"

Penelope shivered a little.

"Poor Dicky!" she murmured, looking away into the fire. "And to think that it was I who sent him to his death!"

Mr. Harvey shook his head.

"No," he said, "I do not think that you need reproach yourself with that. As a matter of fact, I think that I should have sent Dicky in any case. He is not so well known as the others, or rather he wasn't associated so closely with the Embassy, and he was constantly at the Savoy on his own account. If I had believed that there was any danger in the enterprise," he continued, "I should still have sent him. He was as strong as a young Hercules. The hand which twisted that noose around his neck must have been the hand of a magician with fingers of steel."

Penelope shivered again. Her face showed signs of distress.

"I do not think," she said, "that I am a nervous person, but I cannot bear to think of it even now."

"Naturally," Mr. Harvey answered. "We were all fond of Dicky, and such a thing has never happened, so far as I am aware, in any European country. My own private secretary murdered in broad daylight and with apparent impunity!"

"Murdered--and robbed!" she whispered, looking up at him with a white face.

The frown on the Ambassador's forehead darkened.

"Not only that," he declared, "but the secrets of which he was robbed have gone to the one country interested in the knowledge of them."

"You are sure of that?" she asked hoarsely.

"I am sure of it," Mr. Harvey answered.

Penelope drew a little breath between her teeth. Her thoughts flashed back to a recent dinner party. The Prince was once more at her side. Almost she could hear his voice--low, clear, and yet with that note of inexpressible, convincing finality. She heard him speak of his country reverently, almost prayerfully; of the sacrifices which true patriotism must always demand. What had been in his mind, she wondered, at the back of his inscrutable eyes, gazing, even at that moment, past the banks of flowers, across the crowded room with all its splendor of light and color, through the walls,--whither! She brushed the thought away. It was absurd, incredible! She was allowing

herself to be led away by her old distrust of this man.

"I remarked just now," Mr. Harvey continued, "that such a thing had never happened, so far as I was aware, in any European country. My own words seem to suggest something to me. These methods are not European. They savor more of the East."

"I think you had better go on," she said quietly. "There is something in your mind. I can see that. You have told me so much that you had better tell me the rest."

"The contents of those despatches," Mr. Harvey continued, "intrusted in duplicate, as you have doubtless surmised, to Fynes and to Coulson, contained an assurance that the sending of our fleet to the Pacific was in fact, as well as in appearance, an errand of peace. It was a demonstration, pure and simple. Behind it there may have lain, indeed, a masterful purpose, the determination of a great country to affirm her strenuous existence in a manner most likely to impress the nations unused to seeing her in such a role. It became necessary, in view of certain suspicions, for me to be able to prove to the Government here the absolutely pacific nature of our great enterprise. Those despatches contained such proof. And now listen, Penelope. Before the murder of poor Dicky Vanderpole, we know for a fact that a great nation who chooses to consider herself our enemy in Eastern waters was straining every nerve to prepare for war. Today those preparations have slackened. A great loan has been withdrawn in Paris, an invitation cabled to our fleet to visit Yokohama. These things have a plain reading."

"Plain, indeed," Penelope assented, and she spoke in a low tone because there was fear in her heart. "Why have you told me about them? They throw a new light upon everything,--an awful light!"

"I have known you," the Ambassador said quietly, "since you were a baby. Every member of your family has been a friend of mine. You come of a silent race. I know very well that you are a person of discretion. There are certain small ways in which a government can occasionally be served by the help of some one outside its diplomatic service altogether, some one who could not possibly be connected with it. You know this very well, Penelope, because you have already been of service to us on more than one occasion."

"It was a long time ago," she murmured.

"Not so very long," he reminded her. "But for the first of these tragedies, Fynes' despatches would have reached me through you. I am going to ask your help even once more."

In the somewhat cold spring sunlight which came streaming through the large window, Penelope seemed a little pallid, as though, indeed, the fatigue of the season, even in this its earlier stages, were leaving its mark upon her. There were violet rims under her eyes. A certain alertness seemed to have deserted her usually piquant face. She sat listening with the air of one half afraid, who has no hope of hearing pleasant things.

"It has been remarked," Mr. Harvey continued, "or rather I may say that I myself have noticed, that you are on exceedingly friendly terms with a very distinguished nobleman who is at present visiting this country--I mean, of course, Prince Maiyo."

Her eyebrows were slowly elevated. Was that really the impression people had! Her lips just moved.

"Well?" she asked.

"I have met Prince Maiyo myself," Mr. Harvey continued, "and I have found him a charming representative of his race. I am not going to say a word against him. If he were an American, we should be proud of him. If he belonged to any other country, we should accept him at once for what he appears to be. Unfortunately, however, he belongs to a country which we have some reason to mistrust. He belongs to a country in whose national character we have not absolute confidence. For that reason, my dear Penelope, we mistrust Prince Maiyo."

"I do not know him so well as you seem to imagine," Penelope said slowly. "We are not even friends, in the ordinary acceptance of the word. I am, to some extent, prejudiced against him. Yet I do not believe that he is capable of a dishonorable action."

"Nor do I," the Ambassador declared smoothly. "Yet in every country, almost in every man, the exact standard of dishonor varies. A man will lie for a woman's sake, and even in the law courts, certainly at his clubs and amongst his friends, it will be accounted to his righteousness. A patriot will lie and intrigue for his country's sake. Now I believe that to Prince Maiyo Japan stands far above the whole world of womankind. I believe that for her sake he would go to very great lengths indeed."

"Go on, please," Penelope murmured.

"The Prince is over here on some sort of an errand which it isn't our business to understand," Mr. Harvey said. "I have heard it rumored that it is a special mission entirely concerned with the renewal of the treaty between England and Japan. However that may be, I have sat here, and I have thought, and I have come to this conclusion, ridiculous though it may seem to you at first. I believe that somewhere behind the hand which killed and robbed Hamilton Fynes and poor Dicky stood the benevolent shadow of our friend Prince Maiyo."

"You have no proof?" she asked breathlessly.

"No proof at all," the Ambassador admitted. "I am scarcely in a position to search for any. The conclusion I have come to has been simply arrived at through putting a few facts together and considering them in the light of certain events. In the first place, we cannot doubt that the secret of those despatches reached at once the very people whom we should have preferred to remain in ignorance of them. Haven't I told you of the sudden cessation of the war alarm in Japan, when once she was assured, by means which she could not mistrust, that it was not the intention of the American nation to make war upon her? The subtlety of those murders, and the knowledge by which they were inspired, must have come from some one in an altogether unique position. You may be sure that no one connected with the Japanese Embassy here would be permitted for one single second to take part in any such illegal act. They know better than that, these wily Orientals. They will play the game from Grosvenor Place right enough. But Prince Maiyo is here, and stands apart from any accredited institution, although he has the confidence of his Ambassador and can command the entire devotion of his own secret service. I have not come to this conclusion hastily. I have thought it out, step by step, and in my own mind I am now absolutely convinced that both these murders were inspired by Prince Maiyo."

"Even if this were so," Penelope said, "what can I do? Why have you sent for me? The Prince and I are not on especially friendly terms. It is only just lately that we have been decently civil to one another."

The Ambassador looked at her with some surprise.

"My dear Penelope," he said, "I have seen you together the last three or four evenings. The Prince looks at no one else while you are there. He talks to you, I know, more freely than to any other woman."

"It is by chance," Penelope protested. "I have tried to avoid him."

"Then I cannot congratulate you upon your success," Mr. Harvey said grimly.

"Things have changed a little between us, perhaps," Penelope said. "What is it that you really want?"

"I want to know this," the Ambassador said slowly. "I want to know how Japan became assured that America had no intention of going to war with her. In other words, I want to know whether those papers which were stolen from Fynes and poor Dicky found their way to the Japanese Embassy or into the hands of Prince Maiyo himself."

"Anything else?" she asked with a faint note of sarcasm in her tone.

"Yes," Mr. Harvey replied, "there is something else. I should like to know what attitude Prince Maiyo takes towards the proposed renewal of the treaty between his country and Great Britain."

She shook her head.

"Even if we were friends," she said, "the very closest of friends, he would never tell me. He is far too clever."

"Do not be too sure," Mr. Harvey said. "Sometimes a man, especially an Oriental, who does not understand the significance of your sex in these matters, can be drawn on to speak more freely to a woman than he would ever dream of doing to his best friend. He would not tell you in as many words, of course. On the other hand, he might show you what was in his mind."

"He is going back very shortly," Penelope remarked.

Mr. Harvey nodded.

"That is why I sent for you to come immediately. You will see him tonight at Devenham House."

"With all the rest of the world," she answered, "but a man is not likely to talk confidentially under such conditions."

Mr. Harvey rose to his feet.

"It is only a chance, of course," he admitted, "but remember that you know more than any other person in this country except myself. It would be impossible for the Prince to give you credit for such knowledge. A casual remark, a word, perhaps, may be sufficient."

Penelope held out her hand. The servant for whom the Ambassador had rung was already in the room.

"I will try," she promised. "Ask Mrs. Harvey to excuse my going up to see her this afternoon. I have another call to make, and I want to rest before the function tonight."

The Ambassador bowed, and escorted her to the door.

"I have confidence in you, Penelope," he said. "You will try your best?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered with a queer little laugh, "I shall do that. But I don't think that even you quite understand Prince Maiyo!"