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Chapter 15 - Penelope Explains

Once more Penelope found herself in the library of the great house in Park Lane, where Mr. Blaine-Harvey presided over the interests of his country. This time she came as an uninvited, even an unexpected guest. The Ambassador, indeed, had been fetched away by her urgent message from the reception rooms, where his wife was entertaining a stream of callers. Penelope refused to sit down.

"I have not much to say to you, Mr. Harvey," she said. "There is just something which I have discovered and which you ought to know. I want to tell it you as quickly as possible and get away."

"A propos of our last conversation?" he asked eagerly.

She bowed her head.

"It concerns Prince Maiyo," she admitted.

"You are sure that you will not sit down?" he persisted. "You know how interesting this is to me."

She smiled faintly.

"To me," she said, "it is terrible. My only desire is to tell you and have finished with it. You remember, when I was here last, you told me that it was your firm belief that somewhere behind the hand which murdered Hamilton Fynes and poor Dicky stood the shadow of Prince Maiyo."

"I remember it perfectly," he answered.

"You were right," Penelope said.

The Ambassador drew a little breath. It was staggering, this, even if expected.

"I have talked with the Prince several times since our conversation," Penelope continued. "So far as any information which he gave me or seemed likely to give me, I might as well have talked in a foreign language. But in his house, the day before yesterday, in his own library, hidden in a casket which opened only with a secret lock, I found two things."

"What were they?" the Ambassador asked quickly.

"A roll of silken cord," Penelope said, "such as was used to strangle poor Dicky, and a strangely shaped dagger exactly like the picture of the one with which Hamilton Fynes was stabbed."

"Did he know that you found them?" Mr. Blaine-Harvey asked.

"He was with me," Penelope answered. "He even, at my request, opened the casket. He must have forgotten that they were there."

"Perhaps," the Ambassador said thoughtfully, "he never knew."

"One cannot tell," Penelope answered.

"Did he say anything when you discovered them?" the Ambassador asked.

"Nothing," Penelope declared. "It was not necessary. I saw his face. He knows that I understand. It may have been some one else connected with the house, of course, but the main fact is beyond all doubt. Those murders were instigated, if they were not committed, by the Prince."

The Ambassador walked to the window and back again.

"Penelope," he said, "you have only confirmed what I felt must be so, but even then the certainty of it is rather a shock."

She gave him her hand.

"I have told you the truth," she said. "Make what use of it you will. There is one other thing, perhaps, which I ought to tell you. The Prince is going back to his own country very shortly."

Mr. Harvey nodded.

"I have just been given to understand as much," he said. "At present he is to be met with every day. I believe that he is even now in my drawing rooms."

"Where I ought to be," Penelope said, turning toward the door, "only I felt that I must see you first."

"I will not come with you," Mr. Harvey said. "There is no need for our little conference to become the subject of comment. By the bye," he added, "let me take this

opportunity of wishing you every happiness. I haven't seen Somerfield yet, but he is a lucky fellow. As an American, however, I cannot help grudging another of our most popular daughters to even the best of Englishmen."

Penelope's smile was a little forced.

"Thank you very much," she said. "It is all rather in the air, at present, you know. We are not going to be married for some time."

"When it comes off," the Ambassador said, "I am going to talk to the Duchess and Miss Morse. I think that I ought to give you away."

Penelope made her way into Mrs. Blaine-Harvey's reception rooms, crowded with a stream of guests, who were sitting about, drinking tea and listening to the music, passing in and out all the time. Curiously enough, almost the first person whom she saw was the Prince. He detached himself from a little group and came at once towards her. He took her hand in his and for a moment said nothing. Notwithstanding the hours of strenuous consideration, the hours which she had devoted to anticipating and preparing for this meeting, she felt her courage suddenly leaving her, a sinking at the knees, a wild desire to escape, at any cost. The color which had been so long denied her streamed into her cheeks. There was something baffling, yet curiously disturbing, in the manner of his greeting.

"Is it true?" he asked.

She did not pretend to misunderstand him. It was amazing that he should ignore that other tragical incident, that he should think of nothing but this! Yet, in a way, she accepted it as a natural thing.

"Is it true that I am engaged to Sir Charles Somerfield," she answered.

"I must wish you every happiness," he said slowly. "Indeed, that wish comes from my heart, and I think that you know it. As for Sir Charles Somerfield, I cannot imagine that he has anything left in the world to wish for."

"You are a born courtier, Prince," she murmured. "Please remember that in my democratic country one has never had a chance of getting used to such speeches."

"Your country," he remarked, "prides itself upon being the country where truth prevails. If so, you should have become accustomed by now to hearing pleasant things about yourself. So you are going to marry Sir Charles Somerfield!"

"Why do you say that over to yourself so doubtfully?" she asked. "You know who he is, do you not? He is rich, of old family, popular with everybody, a great sportsman, a mighty hunter. These are the things which go to the making of a man, are they not?"

"Beyond a doubt," the Prince answered gravely. "They go to the making of a man. It is as you say."

"You like him personally, don't you?" she asked.

"Sir Charles Somerfield and I are almost strangers," the Prince replied. "I have not seen much of him, and he has so many tastes which I cannot share that it is hard for us to come very near together. But if you have chosen him, it is sufficient. I am quite sure that he is all that a man should be."

"Tell me in what respect your tastes are so far apart?" she asked. "You say that as though there were something in the manner of his life of which you disapproved."

"We are sons of different countries, Miss Penelope," the Prince said. "We look out upon life differently, and the things which seem good to him may well seem idle to me. Before I go," he added a little hesitatingly, "we may speak of this again. But not now."

"I shall remind you of that promise, Prince," she declared.

"I will not fail to keep it," he replied. "You have, at least," he added after a moment's pause, "one great claim upon happiness. You are the son and the daughter of kindred races."

She looked at him as though not quite understanding.

"I was thinking," he continued simply, "of my own father and mother. My father was a Japanese nobleman, with the home call of all the centuries strong in his blood. He was an enlightened man, but he saw nothing in the manner of living or the ideals of other countries to compare with those of the country of his own birth. I sometimes think that my mother and father might have been happier had one of them been a little more disposed to yield to the other I think, perhaps, that their union would have been a more successful one. They were married, and they lived together, but they lived apart."

"It was not well for you, this," she remarked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Do not mistake me," he begged. "So far as I am concerned, I am content. I am Japanese. The English blood that is in my veins is but as a drop of water compared to the call of my own country. And yet there are some things which have come to me from my mother--things which come most to the surface when I am in this, her own country--which make life at times a little sad. Forgive me if I have been led on to speak too much of myself. Today one should think of nothing but of you and of your happiness."

He turned to accept the greeting of an older woman who had lingered for a moment, in passing, evidently anxious to speak to him. Penelope watched his kindly air, listened to the courteous words which flowed from his lips, the interest in his manner, which his whole bearing denoted, notwithstanding the fact that the woman was elderly and plain, and had outlived the friends of her day and received but scanty consideration from the present generation. It was typical of him, too, she realized. It was never to the great women of the world that he unbent most thoroughly. Gray hairs seemed to inspire his respect, to command his attentions in a way that youth and beauty utterly failed to do. These things seemed suddenly clear to Penelope as she stood there watching him. A hundred little acts of graceful kindness, which she had noticed and admired, returned to her memory. It was this man whom she had lifted her hand to betray! It was this man who was to be accounted guilty, even of crime! There came a sudden revulsion of feeling. The whole mechanical outlook upon life, as she had known it, seemed, even in those few seconds, to become a false and meretricious thing. Whatever he had done or countenanced was right. She had betrayed his hospitality. She had committed an infamous breach of trust. An overwhelming desire came over her to tell him everything. She took a quick step forward and found herself face to face with Somerfield. The Prince was buttonholed by some friends and led away. The moment had passed.

"Come and talk to the Duchess," Somerfield said. "She has something delightful to propose."

