

[The Yellow Crayon](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

Chapter 16

Mr. Brott and Mr. Sabin dined together - not, as it happened, at the House of Commons, but at the former's club in Pall Mall. For Mr. Sabin it was not altogether an enjoyable meal. The club was large, gloomy and political: the cooking was exactly of that order which such surroundings seemed to require. Nor was Mr. Brott a particularly brilliant host. Yet his guest derived a certain amount of pleasure from the entertainment, owing to Brott's constant endeavours to bring the conversation round to Lucille.

"I find," he said, as they lit their cigarettes, "that I committed an indiscretion the other day at Camperdown House!"

Mr. Sabin assumed the puzzled air of one endeavouring to pin down an elusive memory.

"Let me see," he murmured doubtfully. "It was in connection with -"

"The Countess Radantz. If you remember, I told you that it was her desire just now to remain incognito. I, however, unfortunately forgot this during the course of our conversation."

"Yes, I remember. You told me where she was staying. But the Countess and I are old acquaintances. I feel sure that she did not object to your having given me her address. I could not possibly leave London without calling upon her."

Mr. Brott moved in his chair uneasily.

"It seems presumption on my part to make such a suggestion perhaps," he said slowly, "but I really believe that the Countess is in earnest with reference to her desire for seclusion just at present. I believe that she is really very anxious that her presence in London, just now should not be generally known."

"I am such a very old friend," Mr. Sabin said. "I knew her when she was a child."

Mr. Brott nodded.

"It is very strange," he said, "that you should have come together again in such a country as America, and in a small town too."

"Lenox," Mr. Sabin said, "is a small place, but a great center. By the bye, is there not some question of an impending marriage on the part of the Countess?"

"I have heard - of nothing of the sort," Mr. Brott said, looking up startled. Then, after a moment's pause, during which he studied closely his companion's imperturbable face, he added the question which forced its way to his lips.

"Have you?"

Mr. Sabin looked along his cigarette and pinched it affectionately. It was one of his own, which he had dexterously substituted for those which his host had placed at his disposal.

"The Countess is a very charming, a very beautiful, and a most attractive woman," he said slowly. "Her marriage has always seemed to me a matter of certainty."

Mr. Brott hesitated, and was lost.

"You are an old friend of hers," he said. "You perhaps know more of her recent history than I do. For a time she seemed to drop out of my life altogether. Now that she has come back I am very anxious to persuade her to marry me."

A single lightning-like flash in Mr. Sabine's eyes for a moment disconcerted his host. But, after all, it was gone with such amazing suddenness that it left behind it a sense of unreality. Mr. Brott decided that after all it must have been fancy.

"May I ask," Mr. Sabin said quietly, "whether the Countess appears to receive your suit with favour?"

Mr. Brott hesitated.

"I am afraid I cannot go so far as to say that she does," he said regretfully. "I do not know why I find myself talking on this matter to you. I feel that I should apologise for giving such a personal turn to the conversation."

"I beg that you will do nothing of the sort," Mr. Sabin protested. "I am, as a matter of fact, most deeply interested."

"You encourage me," Mr. Brott declared, "to ask you a question - to me a very important question."

"It will give me great pleasure," Mr. Sabin assured him, "if I am able to answer it."

"You know," Mr. Brott said, "of that portion of her life concerning which I have asked no questions, but which somehow, whenever I think of it, fills me with a certain amount of uneasiness. I refer to the last three years which the Countess has spent in America."

Mr. Sabin looked up, and his lips seemed to move, but he said nothing. Mr. Brott felt perhaps that he was on difficult ground.

"I recognise the fact," he continued slowly, "that you are the friend of the Countess, and that you and I are nothing more than the merest acquaintances. I ask my question therefore with some diffidence. Can you tell me from your recent, more intimate knowledge of the Countess and her affairs, whether there exists any reason outside her own inclinations why she should not accept my proposals of marriage?"

Mr. Sabin had the air of a man gravely surprised. He shook his head very slightly.

"You must not ask me such a question as that, Mr. Brott," he said. "It is not a subject which I could possibly discuss with you. But I have no objection to going so far as this. My experience of the Countess is that she is a woman of magnificent and effective will power. I think if she has any desire to marry you there are or could be no obstacles existing which she would not easily dispose of."

"There are obstacles, then?"

"You must not ask me that," Mr. Sabin said, with a certain amount of stiffness. "The Countess is a very dear friend of mine, and you must forgive me now if I say that I prefer not to discuss her any longer."

A hall servant entered the room, bearing a note for Mr. Brott. He received it at first carelessly, but his expression changed the moment he saw the superscription. He turned a little away, and Mr. Sabin noticed that the fingers which tore open the envelope were trembling. The note seemed short enough, but he must have read it half a dozen times before at last he turned round to the messenger.

"There is no answer," he said in a low tone.

He folded the note and put it carefully into his breast pocket. Mr. Sabin subdued an insane desire to struggle with him and discover, by force, if necessary, who was the sender of those few brief lines. For Mr. Brott was a changed man.

"I am afraid," he said, turning to his guest, "that this has been a very dull evening for you. To tell you the truth, this club is not exactly the haunt of pleasure-seekers. It generally oppresses me for the first hour or so. Would you like a hand at bridge, or a game of billiards? I am wholly at your service - until twelve o'clock."

Mr. Sabin glanced at the clock.

"You are very good," he said, "but I was never much good at indoor games. Golf has been my only relaxation for many years. Besides, I too have an engagement for which I must leave in a very few minutes."

"It is very good of you," Mr. Brott said, "to have given me the pleasure of your company. I have the greatest possible admiration for your niece, Mr. Sabin, and Camperdown is a thundering good fellow. He will be our leader in the House of Lords before many years have passed."

"He is, I believe," Mr. Sabin remarked, "of the same politics as yourself."

"We are both," Mr. Brott answered, with a smile, "I am afraid outside the pale of your consideration in this respect. We are both Radicals."

Mr. Sabin lit another cigarette and glanced once more at the clock.

"A Radical peer!" he remarked. "Isn't that rather an anomaly? The principles of Radicalism and aristocracy seem so divergent."

"Yet," Mr. Brott said, "they are not wholly irreconcilable. I have often wished that this could be more generally understood. I find myself at times very unpopular with people, whose good opinion I am anxious to retain, simply owing to this too general misapprehension."

Mr. Sabin smiled gently.

"You were referring without doubt - " he began.

"To the Countess," Brott admitted. "Yes, it is true. But after all," he added cheerfully, "I believe that our disagreements are mainly upon the surface. The Countess is a woman of wide culture and understanding. Her mind, too, is plastic. She has few prejudices."

Mr. Sabin glanced at the clock for the third time, and rose to his feet. He was quite sure now that the note was from her. He leaned on his stick and took his leave quietly. All the time he was studying his host, wondering at his air of only partially suppressed excitement.

"I must thank you very much, Mr. Brott," he said, "for your entertainment. I trust that you will give me an opportunity shortly of reciprocating your hospitality."

The two men parted finally in the hall. Mr. Sabin stepped into his hired carriage.

"Dorset House!" he directed.