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## Chapter 21

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Lady Carey suddenly dropped her partner's arm. She had seen a man standing by himself with folded arms and moody face at the entrance to the ball-room. She raised her lorgnettes. His identity was unquestionable.

"Will you excuse me for a moment, Captain Horton," she said to her escort. "I want particularly to speak to Mr. Brott."

Captain Horton bowed with the slight disappointment of a hungry man on his way to the supper-room.

"Don't be long," he begged. "The places are filling up."

Lady Carey nodded and walked swiftly across to where Brott was standing. He moved eagerly forward to meet her.

"Not dancing, Mr. Brott?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"This sort of thing isn't much in my way," he answered. "I was rather hoping to see the Countess here. I trust that she is not indisposed."

She looked at him steadily.

"Do you mean," she said, "that you do not know where she is?"

"I?" he answered in amazement. "How should I? I have not seen her at all this evening. I understood that she was to be here."

Lady Carey hesitated. The man was too honest to be able to lie like this, even in a good cause. She stood quite still for a moment thinking. Several of her dearest friends had already told her that she was looking tired and ill this evening. At that moment she was positively haggard.

"I have been down at Ranelagh this afternoon," she said slowly, "and dining out, so I have not seen Lucille. She was complaining of a headache yesterday, but I quite thought that she was coming here. Have you seen the Duchess?"

He shook his head.

"No. There is such a crowd."

Lady Carey glanced towards her escort and turned away.

"I will try and find out what has become of her," she said. "Don't go away yet."

She rejoined her escort.

"When we have found a table," she said, "I want you to keep my place for a few moments while I try and find some of my party."

They passed into the supper-room, and appropriated a small table. Lady Carey left her partner, and made her way to the farther end of the apartment, where the Prince of Saxe Leinitzer was supping with half a dozen men and women. She touched him on the shoulder.

"I want to speak to you for a moment, Ferdinand," she whispered.

He rose at once, and she drew him- a little apart.

"Brott is here," she said slowly.

"Brott here!" he repeated. "And Lucille?"

"He is asking for her - expected to find her here. He is downstairs now, looking the picture of misery."

He looked at her inquiringly. There was a curious steely light in her eyes, and she was showing her front teeth, which were a little prominent.

"Do you think," he asked, "that she has deceived us?"

"What else? Where are the Dorsets?"

"The Duchess is with the Earl of Condon, and some more people at the round table under the balcony."

"Give me your arm," she whispered. "We must go and ask her;"

They crossed the room together. Lady Carey sank into a vacant chair by the side of the Duchess and talked for a few minutes to the people whom she knew. Then she turned and whispered in the Duchess's ear.

"Where is Lucille?"

The Duchess looked at her with a meaning smile.

"How should I know? She left when we did."

"Alone?"

"Yes. It was all understood, wasn't it?"

Lady Carey laughed unpleasantly.

"She has fooled us," she said. "Brott is here alone. Knows nothing of her."

The Duchess was puzzled.

"Well, I know nothing more than you do," she answered. "Are you sure the man is telling the truth?"

"Of course. He is the image of despair."

"I am sure she was in earnest," the Duchess said. "When I asked her whether she should come on here she laughed a little nervously, and said perhaps or something of that sort."

"The fool may have bungled it," Lady Carey said thoughtfully. "I will go back to him. There's that idiot of a partner of mine. I must go and pretend to have some supper."

Captain Horton found his vis-a-vis a somewhat unsatisfactory companion. She drank several glasses of champagne, ate scarcely anything, and rushed him away before he had taken the edge off his appetite. He brought her to the Duchess and went back in a huff to finish his supper alone. Lady Carey went downstairs and discovered Mr. Brott, who had scarcely moved.

"Have you seen anything of her?" she asked.

He shook his head gloomily.

"No! It is too late for her to come now, isn't it?"

"Take me somewhere where we can talk," she said abruptly. "One of those seats in the recess will do."

He obeyed her, and they found a retired corner. Lady Carey wasted no time in fencing.

"I am Lucille's greatest friend, Mr. Brott, and her confidante," she said.

He nodded.

"So I have understood."

"She tells me everything."

He glanced towards her a little uneasily.

"That is comprehensive!" he remarked.

"It is true," she answered. "Lucille has told me a great deal about your friendship! Come, there is no use in our mincing words. Lucille has been badly treated years ago, and she has a perfect right to seek any consolation she may find. The old fashioned ideas, thank goodness, do not hold any longer amongst us. It is not necessary to tie yourself for life to a man in order to procure a little diversion."

"I will not pretend to misunderstand you, Lady Carey," he said gravely, "but I must decline to discuss the Countess of Radantz in connection with such matters."

"Oh, come!" she declared impatiently; "remember that I am her friend. Yours is quite the proper attitude, but with me it doesn't matter. Now I am going to ask you a plain question. Had you any engagement with Lucille to-night?"

She watched him mercilessly. He was colouring like a boy. Lady Carey's thin lips curled. She had no sympathy with such amateurish love-making. Nevertheless, his embarrassment was a great relief to her.

"She promised to be here," he answered stiffly.

"Everything depends upon your being honest with me," she continued. "You will see from my question that I know. Was there not something said about supper at your rooms before or after the dance?"

"I cannot discuss this matter with you or any living person," he answered. "If you know so much why ask me?"

Lady Carey could have shaken the man, but she restrained herself.

"It is sufficient!" she declared. "What I cannot understand is why you are here - when Lucille is probably awaiting for you at your rooms."

He started from his chair as though he had been shot.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "She was to - "

He stopped short. Lady Carey shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, written you or something, I suppose!" she exclaimed. "Trust an Englishman for bungling a love affair. All I can tell you is that she left Dorset House in a hansom without the others, and said some thing about having supper with some friends."

Brott sprang to his feet and took a quick step towards the exit.

"It is not possible!" he exclaimed.

She took his arm. He almost dragged her along.

"Well, we are going to see," she said coolly. "Tell the man to call a hansom."

They drove almost in silence through the Square to Pall Mall. Brott leaped out onto the pavement directly the cab pulled up.

"I will wait here," Lady Carey said. "I only want to know that Lucille is safe."

He disappeared, and she sat forward in the cab drumming idly with her forefingers upon the apron. In a few minutes he came back. His appearance was quite sufficient. He was very pale. The change in him was so ludicrous that she laughed.

"Get in," she said. "I am going round to Dorset House. We must find out if we can what has become of her."

He obeyed without comment. At Dorset House Lady Carey summoned the Duchess's own maid.

"Marie," she said, "you were attending upon the Countess Radantz to-night?"

"Yes, my lady."

"At what time did she leave?"

"At about, eleven, my lady."

"Alone?"

"Yes, my lady."

Lady Carey looked steadily at the girl.

"Did she take anything with her?"

The girl hesitated. Lady Carey frowned.

"It must be the truth, remember, Marie."

"Certainly, my lady! She took her small dressing-case."

Lady Carey set her teeth hard. Then with a movement of her head she dismissed the maid. She walked restlessly up and down the room. Then she stopped short with a hard little laugh.

"If I give way like this," she murmured, "I shall be positively hideous, and after all, if she was there it was not possible for him - "

She stopped short, and suddenly tearing the handkerchief which she had been carrying into shreds threw the pieces upon the floor, and stamped upon them. Then she laughed shortly, and turned towards the door.

"Now I must go and get rid of that poor fool outside," she said. "What a bungler!"

Brott was beside himself with impatience.

"Lucille is here," she announced, stepping in beside him. "She has a shocking headache and has gone to bed. As a matter of fact, I believe that she was expecting to hear from you."

"Impossible!" he answered shortly. He was beginning to distrust this woman.

"Never mind. You can make it up with her to-morrow. I was foolish to be anxious about her at all. Are you coming in again?"

They were at Carmarthen House. He handed her out.

"No, thanks! If you will allow me I will wish you good-night."

She made her way into the ball-room, and found the Prince of Saxe Leinitzer, who was just leaving.

"Do you know where Lucille is she asked.

He looked up at her sharply. "Where?"

"At the Carlton Hotel-with him."

He rose to his feet with slow but evil promptitude. His face just then was very unlike the face of an angel. Lady Carey laughed aloud.

"Poor man," she said mockingly. "It is always the same when you and Souspennier meet."

He set his teeth.

"This time," he muttered, "I hold the trumps."

She pointed at the clock. It was nearly four. "She was there at eleven," she remarked drily.