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Chapter 16 - Concerning Prince Maiyo

The Duchess looked up from her writing table and nodded to her husband, who had just entered.

"Good morning, Ambrose!" she said. "Do you want to talk to me?"

"If you can spare me five minutes," the Duke suggested. "I don't think that I need keep you longer."

The Duchess handed her notebook to her secretary, who hastened from the room. The Duke seated himself in her vacant chair.

"About our little party down in Hampshire next week," he began.

"I am waiting to hear from you before I send out any invitations," the Duchess answered.

"Quite so," the Duke assented. "To tell you the truth, I don't want anything in the nature of a house party. What I should really like would be to get Maiyo there almost to ourselves."

His wife looked at him in some surprise.

"You seem particularly anxious to make things pleasant for this young man," she remarked. "If he were the son of the Emperor himself, no one could do more for him than you people have been doing these last few weeks."

The Duke of Devenham, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, whose wife entertained for his party, and whose immense income, derived mostly from her American relations, was always at its disposal, was a person almost as important in the councils of his country as the Prime Minister himself. It sometimes occurred to him that the person who most signally failed to realize this fact was the lady who did him the honor to preside over his household.

"My dear Margaret," he said, "you can take my word for it that we know what we are about. It is very important indeed that we should keep on friendly terms with this young man,--I don't mean as a personal matter. It's a matter of politics--perhaps of something greater, even, than that."

The Duchess liked to understand everything, and her husband's reticence annoyed her.

"But we have the Japanese Ambassador always with us," she remarked. "A most delightful person I call the Baron Hesho, and I am sure he loves us all."

"That is not exactly the point, my dear," the Duke explained. "Prince Maiyo is over here on a special mission. We ourselves have only been able to surmise its object with the aid of our secret service in Tokio. You can rest assured of one thing, however. It is of vast importance to the interests of this country that we secure his goodwill."

The Duchess smiled good humoredly.

"Well, my dear Ambrose," she said, "I don't know what more we can do than feed him properly and give him pleasant people to talk to. He doesn't go in for sports, does he? All I can promise is that we will do our best to be agreeable to him."

"I am sure of it, my dear," the Duke said. "You haven't committed yourself to asking any one, by the bye?"

"Not a soul," his wife answered, "except Sir Charles. I had to ask him, of course, for Penelope."

"Naturally," the Duke assented. "I am glad Penelope will be there. I only wish that she were English instead of American, and that Maiyo would take a serious fancy to her."

"Perhaps," the Duchess said dryly, "you would like him to take a fancy to Grace?"

"I shouldn't mind in the least," her husband declared. "I never met a young man whom I respected and admired more."

"Nor I, for that matter," the Duchess agreed. "And yet, somehow or other--"

"Somehow or other?" the Duke repeated courteously.

"Well, I never altogether trust these paragons," his wife said. "In all the ordinary affairs of life the Prince seems to reach an almost perfect standard. I sometimes wonder whether he would be as trustworthy in the big things. Nothing else you want to talk about, Ambrose?"

"Nothing at all," the Duke said, rising to his feet. "I only wanted to make it plain that we don't require a house party next week."

"I shan't ask a soul," the Duchess answered. "Do you mind ringing the bell as you pass? I'll have Miss Smith back again and send these letters off."

"Good!" the Duke declared. "I'm going down to the House, but I don't suppose there'll be anything doing. By the bye, we shall have to be a little feudal next week. Japan is a country of many ceremonies, and, after all, Maiyo is one of the Royal Family. I have written Perkins, to stir him up a little."

The Duke drove down to the House, but called first in Downing Street. He found the Prime Minister anxious to see him.

"You've arranged about Maiyo coming down to you next week?" he asked.

"That's all right," the Duke answered. "He is coming, for certain. One good thing about that young man--he never breaks an engagement."

The Prime Minister consulted a calendar which lay open before him.

"Do you mind," he asked, "if I come, too, and Bransome?"

"Why, of course not," the Duke replied. "We shall be delighted. We have seventy bedrooms, and only half a dozen or so of us. But tell me--is this young man as important as all that?"

"We shall have to have a serious talk," the Prime Minister said, "in a few days' time. I don't think that even you grasp the exact position of affairs as they stand today. Just now I am bothered to death about other things. Heseltine has just been in from the Home Office. He is simply inundated with correspondence from America about those two murders."

The Duke nodded.

"It's an odd thing," he remarked, "that they should both have been Americans."

"Heseltine thinks there's something behind this correspondence," the Prime Minister said slowly. "Washington was very secretive about the man Fynes' identity. I found that out from Scotland Yard. Do you know, I'm half inclined to think, although I can't get a word out of Harvey, that this man Fynes--"

The Prime Minister hesitated.

"Well?" the Duke asked a little impatiently.

"I don't want to go too far," his chief said. "I am making some fresh inquiries, and I am hoping to get at the bottom of the matter very shortly. One thing is very certain, though, and that is that no two murders have ever been committed in this city with more cold-blooded deliberation, and with more of what I should call diabolical cleverness. Take the affair of poor young Vanderpole, for instance. The person who entered his taxi and killed him must have done so while the vehicle was standing in the middle of the road at one of the three blocks. Not only that, but he must have been a friend, or some one posing as a friend--some one, at any rate, of his own order. Vanderpole was over six feet high, and as muscular as a young bull. He could have thrown any one out into the street who had attempted to assault him openly."

"It is the most remarkable case I ever heard of in my life," the Duke admitted, helping himself to a cigarette from a box which he had just discovered.

"There is another point," the Prime Minister continued. "There are features in common about both these murders. Not only were they both the work of a most accomplished criminal, but he must have been possessed of an iron nerve and amazing strength. The dagger by which Hamilton Fynes was stabbed was driven through the middle of his heart. The cord with which Vanderpole was strangled must have been turned by a wrist of steel. No time for a word afterwards, mind, or before. It was a wonderful feat. I am not surprised that the Americans can't understand it."

"They don't suggest, I suppose," the Duke asked, "that we are not trying to clear the matter up?"

"They don't suggest it," his chief answered, "but I can't quite make out what's at the back of their heads. However, I won't bother you about that now. If I were to propound Heseltine's theory to you, you would think that he had been reading the works of some of our enterprising young novelists. Things will have cleared up, I dare say, by next week. I am coming round to the House for a moment if you're not in a hurry."

The Duke assented, and waited while the secretary locked up the papers which the Prime Minister had been examining, and prepared others to be carried into the House. The two men left the place together, and the Duke pointed toward his brougham.

"Do you mind walking?" the Prime Minister said. "There is another matter I'd like to talk to you about, and there's nowhere better than the streets for a little conversation. Besides, I need the air."

"With pleasure," the Duke answered, who loathed walking.

He directed his coachman to precede them, and they started off, arm in arm.

"Devenham," the Prime Minister said, "we were speaking, a few minutes ago, of Prince Maiyo. I want you to understand this, that upon that young man depends entirely the success or failure of my administration."

"You are serious?" the Duke exclaimed.

"Absolutely," the Prime Minister answered. "I know quite well what he is here for. He is here to make up his mind whether it will pay Japan to renew her treaty with us, or whether it would be more to her advantage to enter into an alliance with any other European power. He has been to most of the capitals in Europe. He has been here with us. By this time he has made up his mind. He knows quite well what his report will be. Yet you can't get a word out of him. He is a delightful young fellow, I know, but he is as clever as any trained diplomatist I have ever come across. I've had him to dine with me alone, and I've done all that I could to make him talk. When he went away, I knew just exactly as much as I did before he came."

He seems pleased enough with us," the Duke remarked.

"I am not so sure," the Prime Minister answered. "He has travelled about a good deal in England. I heard of him in Manchester and Sheffield, Newcastle and Leicester, absolutely unattended. I wonder what he was doing there."

"From my experience of him," the Duke said, "I don't think we shall know until he chooses to tell us."

"I am afraid you are right," the Prime Minister declared. "At the same time you might just drop a hint to your wife, and to that remarkably clever young niece of hers, Miss Penelope Morse. Of course, I don't expect that he would unbosom himself to any one, but, to tell you the truth, as we are situated now, the faintest hint as regards his inclinations, or lack of inclinations, towards certain things would be of immense service. If he criticised any of our institutions, for instance, his remarks would be most interesting. Then he has been spending several months in various capitals. He would not be likely to tell any one his whole impressions of those few months, but a phrase, a

word, even a gesture, to a clever woman might mean a great deal. It might also mean a great deal to us."

"I'll mention it," the Duke promised, "but I am afraid my womenfolk are scarcely up to this sort of thing. The best plan would be to tackle him ourselves down at Devenham."

"I thought of that," the Prime Minister assented. "That is why I am coming down myself and bringing Bransome. If he will have nothing to say to us within a week or so of his departure, we shall know what to think. Remember my words, Devenham,--when our chronicler dips his pen into the ink and writes of our government, our foreign policy, at least, will be judged by our position in the far East. Exactly what that will be depends upon Prince Maiyo. With a renewal of our treaty we could go to the country tomorrow. Without it, especially if the refusal should come from them, there will be some very ugly writing across the page."

The Duke threw away his cigarette.

"Well," he said, "we can only do our best. The young man seems friendly enough."

The Prime Minister nodded.

"It is precisely his friendliness which I fear," he said.