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## Chapter 14 - An Engagement

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"Your rooms, Prince, are wonderful," Penelope said to him. "I knew that you were a man of taste, but I did not know that you were also a millionaire."

He laughed softly.

"In my country," he answered, "there are no millionaires. The money which we have, however, we spend, perhaps a little differently. But, indeed, none of my treasures here have cost me anything. They have come to me through more generations than I should care to reckon up. The bronze idol, for instance, upon my writing case is four hundred years old, to my certain knowledge, and my tapestries were woven when in this country your walls went bare."

"What I admire more than anything," the Duchess declared, "is your beautiful violet tone."

"I am glad," he answered, "that you like my coloring. Some people have thought it sombre. To me dark colors indoors are restful."

"Everything about the whole place is restful," Penelope said,--"your servants with their quaint dresses and slippers, your thick carpets, the smell of those strange burning leaves, and, forgive me if I say so, your closed windows. I suppose in time I should have a headache. For a little while it is delicious."

The Prince sighed.

"Fresh air is good," he said, "but the air that comes from your streets does not seem to me to be fresh, nor do I like the roar of your great city always in my ears. Here I cut myself off, and I feel that I can think. Duchess, you must try those preserved fruits. They come to me from my own land. I think that the secret of preserving them is not known here. You see, they are packed with rose leaves and lemon plant. There is a golden fig, Miss Penelope,--the fruit of great knowledge, the magical fruit, too, they say. Eat that and close your eyes and you can look back and tell us all the wonders of the past. That is to say," he added with a faint smile, "if the magic works."

"But the magic never does work," she protested with a little sigh, "and I am not in the least interested in the past. Tell me something about the future?"

"Surely that is easier," he answered. "Over the past we have lost our control,--what has been must remain to the end of time. The future is ours to do what we will with."

"That sounds so reasonable," the Duchess declared, "and it is so absolutely false. No one can do what they will with the future. It is the future which does what it will with us."

The Prince smiled tolerantly.

"It depends a good deal, does it not," he said, "upon ourselves? Miss Penelope is the daughter of a country which is still young, which has all its future before it, and which, has proclaimed to the world its fixed intention of controlling its own destinies. She, at any rate, should have imbibed the national spirit. You are looking at my curtains," he added, turning to Penelope. "Let me show you the figures upon them, and I will tell you the allegory."

He led her to the window, and explained to her for some moments the story of the faded images which represented one chapter out of the mythology of his country. And then she stopped him.

"Always," she said, "you and I seem to be talking of things that are dead and past, or of a future which is out of our reach. Isn't it possible to speak now and then of the present?"

"Of the actual present?" he asked softly. "Of this very moment?"

"Of this very moment, if you will," she answered. "Your fairy tale the other night was wonderful, but it was a long way off."

The Prince was summoned away somewhat abruptly to bid farewell to a little stream of departing guests. Today, more than ever, he seemed to belong, indeed to the world of real and actual things, for a cousin of his mother's, a Lady Stretton-Wynne, was helping him receive his guests--his own aunt, as Penelope told herself more than once, struggling all the time with a vague incredulity. When he was able to rejoin her, she was examining a curious little coffer which stood upon an ivory table.

"Show me the mystery of this lock," she begged. "I have been trying to open it ever since you went away. One could imagine that the secrets of a nation might be hidden here."

He smiled, and taking the box from her hands, touched a little spring. Almost at once the lid flew open.

"I am afraid," he said, "that it is empty."

She peered in.

"No," she exclaimed, "there is something there! See!" She thrust in her hand and drew out a small, curiously shaped dagger of fine blue steel and a roll of silken cord. She held them up to him.

"What are these?" she asked. "Are they symbols--the cord and the knife of destiny?"

He took them gently from her hand and replaced them in the box. She heard the lock go with a little click, and looked into his face, surprised at his silence.

"Is there anything the matter?" she asked. "Ought I not to have taken them up?"

Almost as the words left her lips, she understood. His face was inscrutable, but his very silence was ominous. She remembered a drawing in one of the halfpenny papers, the drawing of a dagger found in a horrible place. She remembered the description of that thin silken cord, and she began to tremble.

"I did not know that anything was in the box," he said calmly. "I am sorry if its contents have alarmed you."

She scarcely heard his words. The room seemed wheeling round with her, the floor unsteady beneath her feet. The atmosphere of the place had suddenly become horrible,--the faint odor of burning leaves, the pictures, almost like caricatures, which mocked her from the walls, the grinning idols, the strangely shaped weapons in their cases of black oak. She faltered as she crossed the room, but recovered herself.

"Aunt," she said, "if you are ready, I think that we ought to go."

The Duchess was more than ready. She rose promptly. The Prince walked with them to the door and handed them over to his majordomo.

"It has been so nice of you," he said to the Duchess, "to honor my bachelor abode. I shall often think of your visit."

"My dear Prince," the Duchess declared, "it has been most interesting. Really, I found it hard to believe, in that charming room of yours, that we had not actually been transported to your wonderful country."

"You are very gracious," the Prince answered, bowing low.

Penelope's hands were within her muff. She was talking some nonsense--she scarcely knew what, but her eyes rested everywhere save on the face of her host. Somehow or other she reached the door, ran down the steps and threw herself into a corner of the brougham. Then, for the first time, she allowed herself to look behind. The door was already closed, but between the curtains which his hands had drawn apart, Prince Maiyo was standing in the room which they had just quitted, and there was something in the calm impassivity of his white, stern face which seemed to madden her. She clenched her hands and looked away.

"Really, I was not so much bored as I had feared," the Duchess remarked composedly. "That Stretton-Wynne woman generally gets on my nerves, but her nephew seemed to have a restraining effect upon her. She didn't tell me more than once about her husband's bad luck in not getting Canada, and she never even mentioned her girls. But I do think, Penelope," she continued, "that I shall have to talk to you a little seriously. There's the best-looking and richest young bachelor in London dying to marry you, and you won't have a word to say to him. On the other hand, after starting by disliking him heartily, you are making yourself almost conspicuous with this fascinating young Oriental. I admit that he is delightful, my dear Penelope, but I think you should ask yourself whether it is quite worth while. Prince Maiyo may take home with him many Western treasures, but I do not think that he will take home a wife."

"If you say another word to me, aunt," Penelope exclaimed, "I shall shriek!"

The Duchess, being a woman of tact, laughed the subject away and pretended not to notice Penelope's real distress. But when they had reached Devenham House, she went to the telephone and called up Somerfield.

"Charlie," she said,--

"Right o!" he interrupted. "Who is it?"

"Be careful what you are saying," she continued, "because it isn't any one who wants you to take them out to supper."

"I only wish you did," he answered. "It's the Duchess, isn't it?"

"The worst of having a distinctive voice," she sighed. "Listen. I want to speak to you."

"I am listening hard," Somerfield answered. "Hold the instrument a little further away from you,--that's better."

"We have been to the Prince's for tea this afternoon--Penelope and I," she said.

"I know," he assented. "I was asked, but I didn't see the fun of it. It puts my back up to see Penelope monopolized by that fellow," he added gloomily.

"Well, listen to what I have to say," the Duchess went on. "Something happened there--I don't know what--to upset Penelope very much. She never spoke a word coming home, and she has gone straight up to her room and locked herself in. Somehow or other the Prince managed to offend her. I am sure of that, Charlie!"

"I'm beastly sorry," Somerfield answered. "I meant to say that I was jolly glad to hear it."

The Duchess coughed.

"I didn't quite hear what you said before," she said severely. "Perhaps it is just as well. I rang up to say that you had better come round and dine with us tonight. You will probably find Penelope in a more reasonable frame of mind."

"Awfully good of you," Somerfield declared heartily. "I'll come with pleasure."

Dinner at Devenham House that evening was certainly a domestic meal. Even the Duke was away, attending a political gathering. Penelope was pale, but otherwise entirely her accustomed self. She talked even more than usual, and though she spoke of a headache, she declined all remedies. To Somerfield's surprise, she made not the slightest objection when he followed her into the library after dinner.

"Penelope," he said, "something has gone wrong. Won't you tell me what it is? You look worried."

She returned his anxious gaze, dry-eyed but speechless.

"Has that fellow, Prince Maiyo, done or said anything--"

She interrupted him.

"No!" she cried. "No!" don't mention his name, please! I don't want to hear his name again just now."

"For my part," Somerfield said bitterly, "I never want to hear it again as long as I live!"

There was a short silence. Suddenly she turned towards him.

"Charlie," she said, "you have asked me to marry you six times."

"Seven," he corrected. "I ask you again now--that makes eight."

"Very well," she answered, "I accept--on one condition."

"On any," he exclaimed, his voice trembling with joy. "Penelope, it sounds too good to be true. You can't be in earnest"

"I am," she declared. "I will marry you if you will see that our engagement is announced everywhere tomorrow, and that you do not ask me for anything at all, mind, not even--not anything--for three months' time, at least. Promise that until then you will not let me hear the sound of the word marriage?"

"I promise," he said firmly. "Penelope, you mean it? You mean this seriously?"

She gave him her hands and a very sad little smile.

"I mean it, Charlie," she answered. "I will keep my word."