

CHAPTER III

AN ENCOUNTER

Mr. Heatherbloom, a few days later, sat one morning in Central Park. His canine charges were tied to the bench and while they chafed at restraint and tried vainly to get away and chase squirrels, he scrutinized one of the pages of a newspaper some person had left there. What the young man read seemed to give him no great pleasure. He put down the paper; then picked it up again and regarded a snap-shot illustration occupying a conspicuous position on the society page.

"Prince Boris Strogareff, riding in the park," the picture was labeled. The newspaper photographer had caught for his sensational sheet an excellent likeness of a foreign visitor in whom New York was at the time greatly interested. A picturesque personality--the prince--half distinguished gentleman, half bold brigand in appearance, was depicted on a superb bay, and looked every inch a horseman. Mr. Heatherbloom continued to stare at the likeness; the features, dark, rather wild-looking, as if a trace of his ancient Tartar ancestry had survived the cultivating touch of time. Then the young man on the bench once more turned his attention to the text accompanying the cut.

"Reported engagement of Miss Elizabeth Dalrymple to Prince Boris Strogareff ... the prince has vast estates in Russia and Russia-Asia ...

his forbears were prominent in the days when Crakow was building and the Cossacks and the Poles were engaged in constant strife on the steppe ... Miss Dalrymple, with whom this stalwart romantic personage is said to be deeply enamored, is niece and heiress of the eccentric Miss Van Rolsen, the third richest woman in New York, and, probably, in the world ... Miss Dalrymple is the only surviving daughter of Charles Dalrymple of San Francisco, who made his fortune with Martin Ferguson of the same place, at the time--"

The paper fell from Mr. Heatherbloom's hand; for several moments he sat motionless; then he got up, unloosened his charges and moved on. They naturally became once more wild with joy, but he heeded not their exuberances; even Naughty's demonstrations brought no answering touch of his hand, that now lifted to his breast and took something from his pocket--an article wrapped in a pink tissue-paper. Mr. Heatherbloom unfolded the warm-tinted covering with light sedulous fingers and looked steadily and earnestly at a miniature. But only for a brief interval; by this time Curly et al. had become an incomprehensible tangle of dog and leading strings about Mr. Heatherbloom's legs. So much so, indeed, that in the effort to extricate himself he dropped the tiny picture; with a sudden passionate exclamation he stooped for it. The anger that transformed his usually mild visage seemed about to vent itself on his charges but almost at once subsided.

Carefully brushing the picture on his coat, he replaced it in his pocket and quietly started to disentangle his charges from himself. This

was at length accomplished; he knew, however, that the unraveling would have to be done all over again ere long; it constituted an important part of his duties. The promenade was punctuated by about so many "mix-ups"; Mr. Heatherbloom accepted them philosophically, or absent-mindedly. At any rate, while untying knots or disengaging things, he usually exhibited much patience.

It might have been noticed some time later that Mr. Heatherbloom, retracing his footsteps to Miss Van Rolsen's, betrayed a rather vacillating and uncertain manner, as if he were somewhat reluctant to go into, or to approach too near the old-fashioned stiff and stately house. For fear of meeting some one, or a dread of some sudden encounter? With Miss Van Rolsen's niece? So far he had not seen her since that first day. Perhaps he congratulated himself on his good fortune in this respect. If so, he reckoned without his host.

It is possible for two people to frequent the same house for quite a while without meeting when one of them lives on the avenue side and flits back and forth via the front steps, while the other comes and goes only by the subterranean route; but, sooner or later, though belonging to widely different worlds, these two are bound to come face to face, even in spite of the determination of one of the persons to avert such a contingency!

Mr. Heatherbloom always peered carefully about before venturing from the house with his pampered charges; he was no less watchfully alert when he

returned. He could not, however, having only five senses, tell when the front door might be suddenly opened at an inopportune moment. It was opened, this very morning, on the third day of his probation at such a moment. And he had been planning, after reading the newspaper article in the park, to tender his resignation that very afternoon!

It availed him nothing now to regret indecision, his being partly coerced by the masterful mistress of the house into remaining as long as he had remained; or to lament that other sentiment, conspiring to this end--the desire or determination, not to flee from what he most feared. Empty bravado! If he could but flee now! But there was no fleeing, turning, retreating, or evading. The issue had to be met.

Miss Dalrymple, gowned in a filmy material which lent an evanescent charm to her slender figure, came down the front steps as he was about to enter the area way below. The girl looked at him and her eyes suddenly widened; she stopped. Mr. Heatherbloom, quite pale, bowed and would have gone on, when something in her look, or the first word that fell from her lips, held him.

"You!" she said, as if she did not at all comprehend.

He repaid her regard with less steady look; he had to say something and he didn't wish to. Why couldn't people just meet and pass on, the way dumb creatures do? The gift of speech has its disadvantages--on occasions; it forces one to insufficient answer or superfluous

explanation. "Yes," he said, "your--Miss Van Rolsen engaged me. I didn't really want to stay, but it came about. Some things do, you know. You see," he added, "I didn't know she was your aunt when I answered the advertisement."

She bent her gaze down upon him as if she hardly heard; beneath the bright adornment of tints, the lovely face--it was a very proud face--had become icy cold; the violet eyes were hard as shining crystal. To Mr. Heatherbloom that slender figure, tensely poised, seemed at once overwhelmingly near and inexpressibly remote. He started to lean on an iron picket but changed his mind and stood rather too stiffly, without support. Before his eyes the flowers in her hat waved and waved; he tried to keep his eyes on them.

"I had been intending," he observed in tones he endeavored to make light, "to tell Miss Van Rolsen she must find some one else to take my place. It would not be very difficult. It is not a position that requires a trained man."

"Difficult?" She seemed to have difficulty in speaking the word; her cold eyes suddenly lighted with unutterable scorn. If any one in this world ever experienced thorough disdain for any one else, her expression implied it was she that experienced it for him. "Valet for dogs!"

Mr. Heatherbloom flushed. "They are very nice dogs," he murmured. "Indeed, they are exceptional."

She gave an abrupt, frozen little laugh; then bent down her face slightly. "And do you wash and curl and perfume them?" she asked, her small white teeth setting tightly after she spoke.

"Well, I don't perfume them," answered Mr. Heatherbloom. "Miss Van Rolsen attends to that herself. She knows the particular essences better than I." A slightly strained smile struggled about his lips. "You see Beauty has one kind, and Naughty another. At least, I think so. While Sardanapolis isn't given any at all."

Can violet eyes shine fiercely? Hers certainly seemed to. "How," she said, examining him as one would study something very remote and impersonal, "did my aunt happen to employ--you? I know she is very particular--about recommendations. What ones did you have? Were they forged ones," suddenly, "or stolen ones?" The red lips like rosebuds had become straightly drawn now.

"No," answered Mr. Heatherbloom. "I didn't have any. I just came, and--"

"Saw and conquered!" said the girl. But there was no levity in her tone. She continued to gaze at him and yet through him; at something beyond--afar--"I don't understand why she should have taken you--"

"Shall I explain?"

"And I don't care why she did!" Not noticing his interruption. "The principal thing is, why did you want this position? What ulterior motive lay behind?" She was speaking now almost automatically, as if he were not present. "For, of course, there was some other motive."

"The truth is," observed Mr. Heatherbloom lightly, but passing an uncertain hand over his brow, "I had reached that point--I should qualify by saying I have long been at the point where one is willing to take any 'honest work of any kind'. I suppose you have heard the phrase before; it's a common one. But believe me, it was quite by accident I came here; quite!"

"'Believe you'," said the girl, as one would address an inferior for the purpose of putting him into the category where he belongs. "'Honest work!' When have you been particular as to that; whether or not"--with mocking irony in the pitiless violet eyes--"it was 'honest'?"

Mr. Heatherbloom started; his gaze met hers unwaveringly. "You don't think, then, that I--"

"Think?" said the girl. "I know."

"Would you mind--explaining?" he asked quietly. He didn't need any support now, but stood with head well back, a steady gleam in his look.

"What you--know?"

"I know--you are a thief!" She spoke the Words fiercely.

His face twitched. "How do you know?"

"By the kind of evidence I can believe."

"And that?" he said in the same quiet voice.

"The evidence of my own eyes!"

He was still, as if thinking. He looked down; then away.

"Why don't you protest?" she demanded.

"Protest," he repeated.

"Or ask me to explain further--"

"Well, explain further," he said patiently.

"Put your mind back three weeks ago--at about eleven o'clock in the morning. Where were you? what were you doing? what was happening?"

Mr. Heatherbloom looked very thoughtful.

"At the corner of"--she mentioned the streets--"not far from Riverside

Drive. We passed at that time in the car. Need I say more?"

His head was downbent. "I think I understand." His hand stroked tentatively his chin.

The silence grew; Beauty barked, but neither seemed to notice.

"Of course you can't deny?" she observed.

"Of course not," he said, without moving.

"You won't defend yourself; plead palliating causes?" ironically.

He picked at the ground with the toe of a shoe. "If I told you, on my honor, I am not--what you have called me just now, would you believe me?" he asked gravely.

"On your honor," said the girl with a cruel smile. "Yours? No!"

"Then," he spoke as if to himself, "I don't suppose there's any use in denying. Your mind is made up."

"My mind!" she answered. "Can I not see; hear? Can you not hear--those voices? Do they not follow you?"

He seemed striving for an answer but could not find it. Once he looked

into the violet eyes questioningly, deeply, as if seeking there to read what he should say, but they flashed only the hard rays of diamonds at him, and he turned his head slowly away.

"I see," she remarked, "you remember; but you do not care."

"I--you reconcile the idea of my being that very easily with--"

"It fits perfectly," said the girl, "with the rest of the picture; what one has already pieced together; it is just another odd-shaped black bit that goes in snugly. You appreciate the comparison?"

"I think I do," answered Mr. Heatherbloom. "You are alluding to picture puzzles. Is there anything more?" He started as if to go.

"One moment--of course, you can't stay here," said the girl.

"I had intended to go at once, as I told you," observed Mr. Heatherbloom.

"You had? You mean you will?"

"No; I won't go now. That is," he added, "of my own volition."

"You do well to qualify. Would you not prefer to go of your own volition than to have me inform my aunt who you are--what you are?"

He shook his head. "I won't resign now," he said.

"And so show yourself a fool as well as--" She did not speak the word, but it trembled on the sweet passionate lips.

He did not answer.

"Suppose," she went on, "I offer you the chance and do not speak, if you will go--immediately?"

"I can't," he answered.

Her brows bent; her little hand seemed to clench. But he stood without looking at her, appearing absorbed in a tiny bit of cloud in the sky.

"Very well!" she said, a dangerous glint in her eyes.

He looked quite insignificant at the moment; she was far above him; his clothes were threadbare, the way thieves' clothes, or pickpockets', usually are.

"If you expect any mercy from me--" she began.

But she did not finish; a figure, approaching, caught her eye--the handsome stalwart figure of a man; whose features lighted at sight of

her.

"Ah, Miss Dalrymple!"

Her face changed. "An unexpected pleasure, Prince," she said with almost an excess of gaiety.

He answered in kind; she came down the steps quickly, offering him her hand. And as he gallantly raised the small perfumed fingers to his lips, Mr. Heatherbloom seemed to fade away into the dark subterranean entrance.