

## CHAPTER IV

### FATE AT THE DOOR

Although Mr. Heatherbloom waited expectantly that day for his dismissal, it did not come. This surprised him somewhat; then he reflected that Miss Elizabeth Dalrymple was probably so absorbed in the prince--remembering her rather effusive greeting of that fortunate individual--she had forgotten such a small matter as having the dog valet ejected from the premises. She would remember on the morrow, of course.

But she didn't! The hours passed, and he was suffered to go about the even, or uneven, tenor of his way. This he did mechanically; he scrubbed and combed Beauty beautifully. With a dire sense of fate knocking at the door, he passed her on to Miss Van Rolsen, to be freshly be-ribboned by that lady's own particular hand. The thin bony finger he thought would be pointed accusingly at him, busied itself solely with the knots and bows of a new ribbon; after which the grim lady dismissed him--from her presence, not the house--curtly.

Several days went by; still no one accused him; he was still suffered to remain. Why? He could not understand. At the end of a long--seemingly interminable week--he put himself deliberately in the way of finding out. Coming to, or going from the house, he lingered around the area

entrance, purposely to encounter her whom he had heretofore, above all others, wished to avoid. A feverish desire possessed him to meet the worst, and then go about his way, no matter where it might lead him. He was past solicitude in that regard. He did at length manage to meet her--not as before in the full daylight but toward dusk, as she returned, this time on foot, to the house.

"Miss Dalrymple, may I speak to you?" he said to the indistinctly seen, slender figure that started lightly up the front steps.

She did not even stop, although she must have heard him; a moment he saw her like a shadow; then the front door opened. He heard a crisp metallic click; the door closed. Slowly with head a little downbent he walked out, up the way she had come; then around the corner a short distance to the stables over which he had his room.

It was a nice room, he had at first thought, probably because he liked horses. They--four or five thoroughbreds--whinnied as he opened the door. He had started up the dark narrow stairs to his chamber, but stopped at that sound and groped about from stall to stall passing around the expected lumps of sugar. After which all seemed well as far as he and they were concerned.

Only that other problem!--he could not shake it from him. To resign now?--under fire? How he wished he might! But to remain?--his situation was intolerable. He went up to his room feeling like a ghost; his mind

was full of dark presences, as if he had lived a thousand times before and had been surrounded only by hostile influences that now came back in the still watches of the night to haunt him.

He dreaded going to the house the next day, but he went. Perhaps, he reflected, she was only allowing him to retain his present position under a kind of espionage; to trap him and put him beyond the pale of respectable society. He remembered the cruel lips, the passionate dislike--contempt--even hatred--in her eyes. Yes; that might be it--the reason for her temporary silence; the house was full of valuable things; sooner or later--

"Are you quite satisfied, Madam, with my services?" said Mr. Heatherbloom that afternoon to Miss Van Rolsen.

"You seem to do well enough," she answered shortly.

He brightened. "Perhaps some one else would do better."

"Perhaps," she returned dryly. "But I'm not going to try."

"But," he said desperately, "I--I don't think they--the dogs, like me quite so much as they did. Naughty, in particular," he added quickly.

"I--I thought yesterday he would have liked to--growl and nip at me."

"Did he," she asked, studying him with disconcerting keenness, "actually

do that?"

"No. But--"

"Do I understand you wish to give me notice?" she interrupted sharply.

"Not at all." In an alarmed tone. "I couldn't--I mean I wouldn't do that. Only I thought you might have felt dissatisfied--people usually do with me," he added impressively. "So if you would like to give me--"

She made a gesture. "That will do. I am very busy this morning. The begging list, though smaller than usual--only three hundred and seventy-six letters--has to be attended to."

Thus the matter of Mr. Heatherbloom's staying or going continued, much to that person's discomfiture, in statu quo. It is true he found, later, a compromising course; a way out of the difficulty--as he thought, little knowing the extraordinary new web he was weaving!--but before that time came, several things happened. In the first place he discovered that Miss Dalrymple was not entirely pleased at the publication of the story of her engagement to the prince; her position--her family's and that of Miss Van Rolsen, was such that newspaper advertising or notoriety could not but be distasteful.

"I hope people won't think I keep a social secretary," Mr. Heatherbloom heard her say.

Yes, heard her. He was in the dogs' "boudoir"; the conservatory adjoined. He could not help being where he was; he belonged there at the time. Nor could he help hearing; he didn't try to listen; he certainly didn't wish to, though she had a very sweet voice--that soothed one to a species of lotus dream--forgetfulness of soap-suds, or the odor of canine disinfectant permeating the white foam--

"Why should they think you have a social secretary?" the voice of a man--the prince--inquired.

He had deep fine tones; truly Russian tones, with a subtle vibration in them.

"Because when such things are published about people their secretaries usually put them in," returned the girl.

He was silent a moment; Mr. Heatherbloom thought he heard the breaking of the stem of a flower.

"You were very much irritated--angry?" observed the prince at length, quietly.

"Weren't you?" she asked.

"I? No. It is a bourgeois confession, perhaps."

Mr. Heatherbloom sat up straighter; the water dripped from his fingers.

"I was pleased," went on the sonorous low voice. "I wished--it were so!"

There was a sudden movement in the conservatory; a rustling of leaves, or of a gown; then--Mr. Heatherbloom relaxed in surprise--a peal of merry laughter filled the air.

"How apropos! How well you said that!"

"Miss Dalrymple!" There was a slightly rising inflection in the man's tones. "You doubt my sincerity?"

"The sincerity of a Russian prince? No, indeed!" she returned gaily.

"I am in earnest," he said simply.

"Don't be!" Mr. Heatherbloom could, in fancy, see the flash of a white hand amid red flowers; eyes dancing like violets in the wind. He could perceive, also, as plainly as if he were in that other room, the deep ardent eyes of the prince downbent upon the blither ones, the commanding figure of the man near that other slender, almost illusive presence. A flower to be grasped only by a bold wooer, like the prince!

"Don't be," she repeated. "You are so much more charming when you are

not. I think I heard that line in a play once. One of the Robertson kind; it was given by a stock company in San Francisco. That's where I came from, you know. Have you ever been there?"

"No," said the prince slowly.

Dark eyes trying to beat down the merriment in the blue ones! Mr. Heatherbloom could, in imagination, "fill in" all the stage details. If it only were "stage" dialogue; "stage" talk; not "playing with love", in earnest!

"Playing with love!" He had read a book of that name once; somewhere. In Italy?--yes. It sounded like an Italian title. Something very disagreeable happened to the heroine. A woman, or a girl, can not lightly "play with love" with a Sicilian. But, of course, the prince wasn't a Sicilian.

"No," he was saying now with admirable poise, in answer to her question, "I haven't visited your wonderful Golden Gate, but I hope to go there some day--with you!" he added. His words were simple; the accent alone made them sound formidable; it seemed to convey an impregnable purpose, one not to be shaken or disturbed.

Mr. Heatherbloom felt vaguely disturbed; his heart pounded oddly. He half started to get up, then sank back. He waited for another peal of laughter; it didn't come. Why?

"Of course I should have no objection to your being one of a train party," said Miss Dalrymple at length.

"That isn't just what I mean," returned the prince in his courtliest tones. But it wasn't hard to picture him now with a glitter in his gaze,--immovable, sure of himself.

There was a rather long pause; broken once more by Miss Dalrymple: "Shall we not return to the music room?"

That interval? What had it meant? Mute acquiescence on her part, a down-turning of the imperious lashes before the steadfastness of the other's look?--tacit assent? The casting off of barriers, the opening of the gates of the divine inner citadel? Mr. Heatherbloom was on his feet now. He took a step toward the door, but paused. Of course! Something clammy had fallen from his hand; lay damp and dripping on the rag. He stared at it--a bar of soap.

What had he been about to do--he!--to step in there--into the conservatory, with his bar of soap?--grotesque anomaly! His face wore a strange expression; he was laughing inwardly. Oh, how he was laughing at himself! Fortunately he had a saving sense of humor.

What had next been said in the conservatory? What was now being said there? He heard words but they had no meaning for him. "I will send you



the second volume of The Fire and Sword trilogy," went on the prince. "One of my ancestors figures in it. The hero--who is not exactly a hero, perhaps, in the heroine's mind, for a time--does what he must do; he has what he must have. He claims what nature made for him; he knows no other law than that of his imperishable inner self. I, too, must rise to those heights my eyes are set on. It must be; it is written. We are fatalists, we Russians near the Tartar line! And you and I"--fervently--"were predestined for each other."

Mr. Heatherbloom had but dimly heard the prince's words and failed to grasp them; he didn't want to; his head was humming. Her light answer sounded as if she might be very happy. Yes; naturally. She was made to be happy, to dance about like sunshine. He liked to think of the picture. The prince, too, was necessary to complete it; necessary, reaffirmed Mr. Heatherbloom to himself, pulling with damp fingers at the inconsequential lock of hair over his brow. Of course, if the prince could be eliminated from that mental picture of her felicity?--but he was a part of the composition; big, barbaric, romantic looking! In fact, it wouldn't have been an adequate composition at all without him; no, indeed!

And something rose in Mr. Heatherbloom's throat; one of his eyes--or was it both of them?--seemed a little misty. That confounded soap! It was strong; a bit of it in the corner of the eyes made one blink.

The two in the conservatory said something more; but the young man in

the "boudoir" didn't catch it at all well. By some intense mental process, or the sound of the scrubber on the edge of the tub, he found he could shut a definite cognizance of words almost entirely from his sense of hearing. The prince's voice seemed slightly louder; that, in a general way, was patent; no doubt the occasion warranted more fervor on his part. Mr. Heatherbloom tried to imagine what she would look like in--so to say, a very complaisant mood; not with flaming glance full of aversion and scorn!

Violet eyes replete only with love lights! Mr. Heatherbloom bent lower over the tub; his four-footed charge Beauty, contentedly immersed to the neck in nice comfortably warm water, licked him. He did not feel the touch; the fragrance of orchids seemed to come to him above that other more healthful, less agreeable odor of special cleansing preparation.

Her accents were heard once more. Those final words sounded like a soft command. Naturally! She could command the prince--now! Mr. Heatherbloom heard a door close--a replica of the harsh click he had listened to when she had shut the front door so unceremoniously on him a short time before. Then he heard nothing more. He gazed around him as he sat with his hands tightly closed. Had it been only a dream? Naughty whined; Sardanapolis edged toward him and mechanically he began to brush him down until he shone as sleek and shining as his Assyrian namesake.