

## CHAPTER V

### A CONTRETEMPS

More days passed and Mr. Heatherbloom continued to linger in his last position. It promised to be a record-making situation from the standpoint of longevity; he had never "lasted" at any one task so long before. Miss Van Rolsen, to his consternation, seemed to unbend somewhat before him, as if she were beginning--actually!--to be more prepossessed in his favor. These evidences that he was rising in the stern lady's good graces filled Mr. Heatherbloom with new dismay; destiny certainly seemed to be making a mock of him.

A week went by; two weeks--three, and still twice a day he continued to march to and from the park with his charges. The faces of all the nurse-maids and others who frequented the big parallelogram of green became familiar to him; he learned to know by sight the people who rode in the park and had a distant acquaintance with the squirrels.

He became, for the first time, aware one day, from the perusal of a certain newspaper he always purchased now, that the prince had returned to Russia. Although Miss Dalrymple refused to be interviewed, or to confirm or deny any statement, it was generally understood (convenient phrase!) that the wedding would take place in the fall at the old Van Rolsen home. The prince had left America in his yacht--the Nevski--for

St. Petersburg, announced the society editor. After a special interview with the czar and a few necessary business arrangements, the nobleman would return at once for his bride. And, perhaps, he--Mr.

Heatherbloom--would still be at his post of duty at the Van Rolsen house!

Since the day the prince had been with Miss Dalrymple in the conservatory, Mr. Heatherbloom had not seen, or rather heard, that gentleman at the house. But then he--Mr. Heatherbloom--belonged in the rear, and, no doubt, the prince had continued to be a daily, or twice, or three-times-a-day visitor to Miss Van Rolsen's elegant, if somewhat stiff, reception rooms. Now, however, he would come no more until he came finally to "take with him the bride--"

The thought was in Horatio's mind when for a third time he encountered her, face to face, on a landing, near a stair, or somewhere in the house, he couldn't afterward just exactly recall where, only that she looked through him, without recognition, speech or movement of an eyelash, as if he had been a thing of thin air! But a thing that became suddenly imbued with real life; inspired with purpose! She had permitted him to remain in the house, knowing his professed helplessness in the matter--she must have divined that--playing with him as a tigress with a victim (yes; a tigress! Mr. Heatherbloom wildly, on the spur of the moment, compared her in his mind to that fierce beautiful creature). He would force her to tell him to go; she would certainly not suffer him to remain there another day if he told her--

"Miss Dalrymple, there is something I ought to say. I could not help overhearing you and the prince, one day, several weeks ago, in the conservatory."

After he said it, he asked himself what excuse he had for saying it. If he had stopped to analyze the impulse, he would have seen how absurd, unreasonable and uncalled for his words were. But he had no time to analyze; like a diver who plunges suddenly, on some mad impulse, into a whirlpool, he had cast himself into the vortex.

She looked at him and there was nothing in nubibus to her about his presence now. The violet eyes saw a substance--such as it was; recognized a reality--of its kind! Before the clouds gathering in their depths, Mr. Heatherbloom felt inclined to excuse himself and go on; but instead, he waited. There was even a furtive smile on his lips that belied a quick throbbing in his breast; he thrust one hand as debonairly as possible into his trousers pocket. His attitude might have been interpreted to express indifference, recklessness, or one or more of the synonymous feelings. She thought so badly of him already that she couldn't think much worse, and--

"So,"--had she been paler than her wont, or had excess of passion sent the color from her face?--"you are a spy as well!"

His head shot back a little at the accent on the "well", but he thrust

his hand yet deeper into the pocket and strove not to lose that assumed expression of ease.

"I--a spy? I did not intend to--you--" He paused; if he wished to set himself right in her eyes, why should he have spoken at all? Mr. Heatherbloom saw he had not quite argued out this matter as he should have done; his bearing became less assured.

"Is there"--her voice low and tense--"anything despicable, mean, paltry enough that you are not?"

Mr. Heatherbloom moistened his lips; he strove to think of a reply, sufficiently comprehensive to cover all the features of the case, but not finding one at once apologetic and yet not so, remained silent. He made, however, a little gesture with his hand--the one that wasn't in the pocket. That seemed to imply something; he didn't quite know what.

She came slightly closer and his heart began to pound harder. A breath of perfume seemed to ascend between them; the arrows in her eyes darted into his. "How much--what did you hear?" she demanded.

"I--am really not sure--" Was it the orchids which perfumed the air? He had always heard they were odorless. The question intruded; his brain seemed capable of a dual capacity, or of a general incapacity of simultaneous considerations. He might possibly have stepped back a little now but there was a wall, the broad blank wall behind him. He

wished he were that void she had first seemed to see--or not to see--in him. "I didn't hear very much--the first part, I imagine--"

"The first part?" Roses of anger burned on her cheek. "And afterward?--spy!" Her little hands were tight against her side.

He hesitated; her foot moved; all that was passionate, vibrant in her nature seemed concentrated on him.

"I don't think I caught much; but I heard him say something about fate, or destiny, and men coming into their own--that old Greek kind of talk, don't you know--" He spoke lightly. Why not? There was no need of being melodramatic. What had to be must be. He couldn't alter her, or what she would think. "Then--then I was too busy to catch more--that is, if I had wanted to--which I didn't!" He was forced to add the last; it burst from his lips with sudden passion; then they curved a little as if to ask excuse for a superfluity.

She continued to look at him, and he looked at her now, squarely; a strange calm descended upon him.

"And that," he said, "is all I heard, or knew, until this morning, when I saw in the paper," dreamily, "he was coming back in the fall for--"

The color concentrated with sudden swift brightness in her cheeks. "You saw that--any one--every one saw--Oh--"

She started to speak further, then bit her lip, while the lace stirred beneath the white throat. Mr. Heatherbloom had not followed what she said, was cognizant only of her anger. Her eyes were fastened on something beyond him, but returned soon, very soon.

"Oh," she said, "I might have known--if I let you stay, through pity, you would--"

"Pity!" said Mr. Heatherbloom.

"Because I did not want to turn you out into the street--"

She spoke the words fiercely. Mr. Heatherbloom seemed now quite impervious to stab or thrust.

"I permitted you to remain for"--she stopped--"remembering what you once were; who your people were! What"--flinging the words at him--"you might have been. Instead--of what you are!"

Mr. Heatherbloom gazed now without wincing; an unnatural absence of feeling seemed to have passed over his features, making them almost mask-like. It was as if he stood in some new pellucid atmosphere of his own.

"Of course," he said, as half speaking to himself, "I must have earned

my salary, or Miss Van Rolsen wouldn't have retained me. So I am not a recipient of charity. Therefore,"--did the word suggest far-away school-boy lessons on syllogisms and sophistries--"I have no right to feel offended in that you let me remain, you say, 'through pity', when as a matter of fact it was impossible for me to tender my resignation, in view of--" He finished the rest of a rather involved logical conclusion to himself, taking his hand out of his pocket now and passing it lightly, in a somewhat dragging fashion, over his eyes. Then he gazed momentarily beyond, as if he saw something appertaining to the "auld lang syne", but recalled himself with a start to the beautiful face, the threads of gold, the violet eyes.

"You will see to it now, of course"--his manner became brisk, almost businesslike--"that I, as a factor, am eliminated here? That, I may conclude, is your intention?"

"Perhaps," said the girl, a sibyl for intentness now, "you would prefer to go? To be asked to! You would find the streets"--with swift discerning contempt--"more profitable for your purpose than here, where you are known."

"Perhaps," assented Mr. Heatherbloom. He spoke quite airily; then suddenly stiffened.

At his words, the sight of him as he uttered them, she came abruptly yet nearer; her breath swept and seemed to scorch his cheek.

"I should think," she said, "you would be ashamed to live!"

"Ashamed?" he began; then stopped. There was no need of speaking further for she had gone.