

## CHAPTER X

### A NEW-FOUND THEORY

"No; the prince isn't coming back to America, and she--Miss Dalrymple--isn't going to marry him!"

Jane's voice, running on rather at random, suddenly with unusual force penetrated Mr. Heatherbloom's consciousness.

"Not going--isn't--What are you talking about?" The young man's wavering attention focused itself on her now with swift completeness. He had hardly heard her, until a few moments before, when her conversation had first drifted to that ever fascinating feminine topic of foreign lords and American heiresses, then narrowed down, much to his inward disapproval, to one particular titled individual and one particular heiress "But you are mistaken, of course!" he said brusquely.

"Oh, am I?" she retorted. "I suppose you believe everything you read in the newspapers?"

Mr. Heatherbloom did not answer now; he was staring out of the window. Against the sky the jutting lines of buildings seemed to waver; new extraordinary angles and jogs seemed to assert themselves. His gaze had a glittering brightness when it turned. "Have you any better authority?"

His tone was a challenge. "I heard her tell him so myself," she said succinctly. "That she could never marry him and that he must never come back."

Mr. Heatherbloom's hand crumpled the newspaper; then mechanically he folded it and put it in his pocket. His look was once more bent outward; tiny specks, that were big steamboats going very fast, seemed motionless on the sparkling surface of the water afar. His thoughts scattered; he tried to collect them, to realize where he was, how he happened to be there; the identity of the speaker and what she had been saying! Certain preconceived, fixed ideas and conclusions had been toppled over, brushed aside in an instant. Was it possible?

"I was waiting to trim and fill the lamps," said Jane. (Miss Van Rolsen clung to oil lamps for reading.) "The prince and she were in the library. He has a loud voice, you know."

The young man did. "But why--"

"Search me!" Vivaciously. "He was the very pick of the whole cargo of dukes and the like. There isn't another girl in New York would have done it."

"But surely," scarcely hearing her last words, "no newspaper would dare to announce such a thing without--"

"Oh, wouldn't it? When it called up the house every day, almost, and got: 'There is nothing to say'? Didn't I answer the 'phone once or twice myself? 'Miss Van Rolsen declines to be interviewed concerning her niece. She has nothing to say.' I think I once giggled, the man's voice at the other end was so aggressive. He said he was the city editor himself. Is that very high up?"

Mr. Heatherbloom did not seem to hear. He scarcely saw his companion now; nevertheless, he was conscious of a desire to be alone, in order to concentrate, consider, reach for light and find it. But where could he discover a safe spot; his problem was a dual one; primarily, he must consider himself; he must not forget his own desperate situation and danger. The train, beginning to slacken, brought the sense of it once more poignantly to mind. His companion hadn't reached the station yet but he suddenly rose. The car stopped with a jerk; Mr. Heatherbloom murmured something hurriedly and dived for the door.

On the street he breathed deeply, standing as in a daze while the thunder of iron-rimmed wheels surrounded him. He was cognizant principally of certain words humming in his brain: The prince and she were not engaged! The nobleman not returning to America in the fall! Never coming back!

But that item in fine print in the newspaper he had in his pocket--what did it mean? Nothing, of course, beyond what it said; still--

Some one bumped into Mr. Heatherbloom; whereupon he suddenly realized that he was standing on one of the busiest corners and had been making himself as conspicuous as possible. Hastily he moved on. To what destination? He glanced toward a convenient saloon; it looked hospitable and inviting. Then he remembered they--man-hunters, in general--always searched the saloons first for criminals.

He started toward a side street but paused, reasoning that he was more prominent on comparatively isolated thoroughfares than on the swarming ones. A stream of women flowing into a big department store, exercised an odd attraction for him. Safety lay, perhaps, among numbers; at least, for the time, until he could devise a course of action. If he could conceive of one! If--

He must; he would. Every nerve in his body seemed to respond. Had he not embarked before this on desperate adventures; had he not fought in the face of overwhelming odds, and managed to hold his head up? A peculiar little smile played around the corner of his thin lips; it was like the flash of light on a blade. He joined the inflowing eddy.

Bargain day! He was crushed and crumpled but found himself ultimately on a stool in the rear of the store. No; he didn't want any marked-down collars or cuffs; he conveyed an impression to the solicitous clerk of some one waiting for some one. Patiently, uncomplainingly! With an unseeing eye for the hurrying and scurrying myriads! Time passed; he

remained oblivious to the babble of voices. Timon in the wilderness, Diogenes in his tub, could not have been mentally more isolated from annoying human consociation than was at the moment Mr. Heatherbloom, perched on a rickety stool amid a conglomeration of females struggling for lingerie.

Suddenly he stirred. "Have you a book department?" he asked an employee.

"Straight across; last aisle to the left."

Mr. Heatherbloom got up; his tread was slow; a somnambulistic gleam appeared in his eye. Yet he was very much awake; he had never felt more keenly alert. He reached the book section.

Did they have any Russian fiction? Oh, yes; what kind did he want, nihilistic or psychological? The Fire and Sword kind, whatever that was; the second volume of the trilogy, if they had it in stock? Sure they had; but had he read the first volume? No; he didn't want that; he would begin in the middle of the trilogy. He always read trilogies that way.

The young lady in charge looked what she thought as she handed him the book. He paid her; unfortunately it cost more than the popular novels of the day. He rather gravely contemplated the few small bills he had left; the amount of his capital would not carry him very far, especially if unusual expenses should occur. Miss Van Rolsen still owed him a little

money but he didn't see how he could collect that now.

Mr. Heatherbloom, armed with his book, sought a different part of the store--- a small reception-room, where customers of both sexes were at liberty to read, write, or indulge in mental rest-cure, after bargain purchases. There he perused hurriedly, and by snatches, the volume; there was plenty of fire and plenty of sword in it; human passions bubbled and seethed. Suddenly he sat up straight and a suppressed exclamation fell from his lips; he closed the book sharply.

One or two old ladies looked at him but he did not see them. His vision, clairvoyant-like, seemed to have lifted, to traverse broad seas, limitless steppes. His hands opened and closed, as if striving to reach and clutch something beyond flame of battle, scenes of rapine.

He got up dizzily. As he stepped once more into the street, the shadows had lengthened; twilight was falling. He stopped at a pawnbroker's, purchased a revolver and cartridges. He might need the weapon now more than ever. And money--he needed far more of that than he had. He spread in his palm the little wad of greenbacks he took from his pocket; counted them and a few silver pieces. Then seeking a ticket office, he made a few casual inquiries; a shadow rested on his countenance as he emerged from the place.

Next door to it a pile of gold pieces in a bank window shone mockingly before his eyes. So near--with only the plate-glass between him and the

bright discs! Mechanically he began to count them, but suddenly turned from that profitless occupation and stood with his back to the window.

What availed resolution without dollars? His purpose might be strong, but poverty, a Brobdingnagian giant, laid its hand on his shoulder, crushing him down, holding him there, impotent, until the stocky man and his cohorts of the private detective office should come over and get him--to send him to the little island he had thought of when crossing the bridge to Brooklyn!

He fell back into a doorway. More money!--he must get it; must! He folded his arms tight over his breast. To think that this should be his one great, crying need--his!

Above, he heard footsteps descending the stairway at the foot of which he stood; Mr. Heatherbloom slipped out of the passage to the sidewalk and moved on. Chance took him back the way he had come; he had no choice of direction. Now he looked once more at the window of the pawnbroker, where he had stopped a short time before. He regarded the unredeemed pledges; seal-rings, watches, flutes, old violins; what not? If he only had something left; but all had gone--long ago.

All? He started slightly; considered; walked on. But he turned around, hesitatingly, and came slowly back. As he approached the door, his step grew more resolute. He walked briskly in. Without giving the proprietor time to come to the front of the shop, Mr. Heatherbloom moved at once to

the back where the other sat behind his dusty glass cases.

"Here I am once more." He spoke with forced gaiety.

"What you want to buy now?"

"I don't want to buy anything; I want to sell something."

The pawnbroker's interest in the visitor at once departed.

"I have everythings! Everythings!" he grumbled. "Nearly every one wants to sell. I have no room for noddings more. Good night!"

"But I've something special," said Mr. Heatherbloom. As he spoke he took from an inner pocket a little parcel in pink tissue-paper; he fingered it a moment, removing an ivory miniature from a frame, passed the paper quickly about the picture once more, and returned it to his pocket. Then he handed the frame, over the case, to the pawnbroker. "What do you think of that, my Christian friend?" he said with a show of jocularly that didn't ring quite true.

The pawnbroker bent his dull face close to the article; it was gold. A pretty trinket, set with a number of brilliants, it might have come from the Rue Royale or the Rue de la Paix.

"Cost about five hundred francs," observed Mr. Heatherbloom, watching



the other closely. "One hundred dollars, without the duty."

"Where'd you get it?"

"None of your business." With a smile.

The man moved toward a telephone at his back. "Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"I am curious."

"Phone the police."

"Is that an invitation for me to depart? If so--" Mr. Heatherbloom reached for the little gold frame.

"Oh, no," said the man, retaining the graceful article. "The police will find out who this belongs to."

"Tut! tut!" observed Mr. Heatherbloom lightly. Something on the edge of the showcase pointed over it; the hand the proprietor professed to raise toward the telephone fell to his side; he seemed about to call out.

"Don't!" said the visitor. "It's loaded; you saw me put in the cartridges yourself. Your little game is very passe; I had it worked on me once before, and placed you in your class--a fourth-rater, with a crib for loot!"

The other considered; this customer's manner was ominously quiet and easy; he didn't like it. A telepathic message that flashed from the gleaming gaze above the shining tube suggested an utterly frivolous indifference to tragic consequences. The proprietor moved away from the telephone.

"Fifteen dollars," he said.

"Twenty," breathed Mr. Heatherbloom insinuatingly.

The man put his hand in his pocket and counted out the money. The caller took it, said something in those same blithe significant accents about what would happen if the other made a move in the next two or three minutes, then vanished from the store. He did not keep to the busy thoroughfare now, but shot into a side street. Would the pawnbroker hide the frame and then call the police? It was quite possible he might thus seek to get into their good graces and revenge himself at the same time. Mr. Heatherbloom turned from dark byway to dark byway. He knew there was a possibility that he might keep going throughout the night without being taken; but what would he attain by so doing, how would that profit him?

He had to get back to New York at once, and as speedily as possible!

The shining face of a street clock that a short time before he had looked at, admonished him there were no moments to spare, if he would

carry out his plan, his headstrong purpose--to verify or disprove a certain wild theory--which would take him where, lead to what? No matter! Above, between black shadows of tall buildings, he saw a star, bright, beautiful. Something in him seemed to leap up to it--to that light as frostily clear as her eyes! A taxi passed; he hailed it.

"How much to Jersey City?" he asked in feverish tones.

The man approximated a figure; it was large, but Mr. Heatherbloom at once got in.

"All right," he said. "Only let her go! I've a train to catch."

"You don't want to land us in the police court, do you?" asked the chauffeur.

Mr. Heatherbloom devoutly hoped not.