

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE PRINCESS SUITE

A House maid, some time later that night, moved noiselessly over the heavy rugs in the boudoir of the princess suite, next to armory hall on the second story of Strathorn House. Glancing nervously about her from time to time, the woman trimmed a candle here and set another there; then lifted with ponderous brass tongs a few coals and placed them on the smoldering bed in the delicately tinted fireplace. After which she stood before it in the attitude of one who is waiting though not with stolid and undisturbed patience.

A clock ticked loudly on the mantel; she looked at it, around her at the shadows of two beautiful marbles on pedestals of malachite. Moving into the bedroom beyond, she took from a wardrobe of old French workmanship a rose dressing-gown; this, and a pair of slippers of like color she brought out and placed near the fire. As she did so, she started, straightened suddenly; then her expression changed; the voice of Lord Ronsdale without was followed by that of Jocelyn Wray.

"Never fear! They'll get the fellow yet," my lord had said.

Jocelyn answered mechanically; the door opened; the maid caught a glimpse of Ronsdale's face, of the cold eyes that looked the least bit

annoyed.

"Although it was most bungling on their part to have permitted him to get away!" he went on. "I hope, however, this little unexpected episode won't disturb your rest." An instant the steely eyes seemed to contemplate her closer. "Many going away to-morrow?" he asked, as if to divert her thoughts from the exciting experience of the evening before leaving her.

"Only Captain Forsythe and--Mr. Steele."

Did he notice the slightest hesitation, on her part, before speaking the last name? My lord's eyes fell; an odd expression appeared on his face. He murmured a few last perfunctory words; then--"They'll get him yet. He can't get away," he repeated. The words had a singular, a sibilant sound; he bowed deferentially and strode off, not toward his own chamber, however, but toward the great stairway leading down to the first story.

As the door closed behind her young mistress, the maid came quickly forward. "Did you learn anything more, Miss Jocelyn, if I may be so bold as to ask, from the police agent? Who the criminal was, or--"

"The police agent only said he was an ex-convict, no ordinary one, who had escaped from London and was making for the sea. They got word he was at the village and followed him there but he managed to elude them and

they traced him to Strathorn House park, where he had taken refuge. The police did not acquaint Sir Charles, Lord Ronsdale or any one with their purpose, thinking not to alarm us needlessly beforehand. And--I believe that is all."

A moment the woman waited. "I--shall I--"

The girl looked before her; tiny flames from the grate heightened the sheen on her gown; they threw passing lights on the somewhat tired, proud face. "I shall not need you, Dobson," she said. "You may go. A moment." The woman, who had half-turned, waited; Jocelyn's glance had lowered to the fire; in its reflection her slim, delicate fingers were rosy. She unclasped them, smoothed the brocade absently with one hand. "One or two are leaving early to-morrow. You will see--you will give instructions that everything is provided for their comfort."

The maid responded and left the room; Jocelyn stood as if wrapped in reverie. At length she stirred suddenly and extinguishing all but one dim light, sank back into a chair. Her eyes half closed, then shut entirely. One might have thought her sleeping, except that her breathing was not deep enough; the golden head remained motionless against the soft pink of the dressing-gown; the hand that dropped limply from the white wrist over the arm of the chair did not stir. Around, all was stillness; time passed; then a faint shout from somewhere in the gardens, far off, aroused her. The girl looked around; but immediately silence again reigned; she got up.

Leaning against the shaft holding one of the marbles, she regarded without seeing a chaste, youthful Canova, and beyond, painted on boards and set against satin, a Botticelli face, spiritual, sphinx-like. Her brows were slightly drawn; she breathed deeply now, as if there were something in the place, its quiescence, the immobility of the lovely but ghost-like semblance of faces with which it was peopled that oppressed her. She seemed to be thinking, or questioning herself, when suddenly her attention was attracted again by a sound of a different kind, or was it only fancy? She looked toward a large Flemish tapestry covering one entire end of the room; behind the antique landscape in green threads she knew there was a disused door leading into armory hall. Drawing back the heavy folds she stepped a little behind them; the door was locked and bolted; moreover, several heavy nails had fastened it, completely isolating her suite, as it were, from that spacious, general apartment.

Again the sound! This time she placed it--the creaking of the giant branch of ivy that ran up and around her own balcony. The girl paused irresolutely, her hand on the heavy ancient hanging. Leaning forward she waited; but the noise stopped; she heard nothing more, told herself it was nothing and was about to move out again when her gaze was suddenly held by something that passed like a shadow--a man's arm?--on the other side of the nearest window, between the modern French curtains, not quite drawn together.

In that inconsiderable space between the silk fringes she was sure she

had seen it, and anything suggestive of *\_dolce far niente\_* disappeared from the girl's blue eyes. The window opened wider, noiselessly but quickly; then a hand, strong, shapely, pushed the curtains aside. Had the intruder first satisfied himself that the room was vacant? He acted as one certain of his ground; now drawing the window draperies quickly together behind him as if seeking to escape observation from any one below, he stepped out into the room.

Something he saw seemed to surprise him; a low exclamation fell from his lips; his eyes, searching in the dim light his surroundings, swiftly passed from the rich furnishings, the artistic decorations, to the bright-colored robe, the little slippers before the fire. Here they lingered, but only for a moment! Did the intruder hear a sound, a quick breath? His gaze swerved to the opposite end of the room where it saw a living presence. For a moment they looked at each other; the man's face turned very pale; his hand touched the back of a chair; he steadied himself.

"I thought--to enter armory hall--did not know your rooms were here," he managed to say in a low tone, "at this corner of Strathorn House."

She did not answer; so they stood, silently, absurdly. Her face was like paper; her hair, in contrast, most bright; her eyes expressed only incomprehension. The man had to speak first; he pulled himself together. The bad fortune that had dogged him so long, that he had fought against so hard, now found its culmination: it had cast him, of all places,

hither, at her feet.

So be it; well, destiny now could harm him little more! His eyes gleamed; a reckless light shone out, a daredevil luster. He continued to look at her, then threw back his head.

"I had hoped you would never know; but the gods, it seems," he could even laugh, "have ordained otherwise. '\_Fata obstant\_.'" Still that startled, uncomprehending look on the girl's white face! He went on more quickly, like a man driven to bay. "You do not understand; you are credulous; take people for what they seem,--not for what they are; or have been."

He stopped; a suggestion of pain creeping into her expression, as if, behind wonderment, she was conscious of something being rudely torn, wrenched in her inmost being, held him. His face grew set; the nails of his closed fingers cut his palms. But the laugh returned to his lips, the luster to his eyes.

"Or have been!" he repeated. "A good many people have their pasts. Can you imagine what mine may have been?"

But she scarcely followed his words; she did not think, she could not; she seemed to stand in a hateful dream! Looking at him--the torn evening clothes!--his face, pale, different! Listening to him!--to what--?

"A convict!" said the man. "Yes; that's what I was. Had been in jails, jails! And was sent out of the country, years ago, transported. But time went by and the convict thought he might safely come back--boldly--with impunity. The years and--circumstances had altered him--wrought great changes. He felt compelled to return--why, is of no moment!--believed himself secure in so doing--and was--until chance led him out of his accustomed way--to new walks--new faces--where lay the danger--the ambush, into which he, who thought himself strong, like a weak fool, walked--or was led--blindly." He caught himself up with a laugh. "But what is this to you? Enough, the convict found himself recognized, his identity thoroughly established."

He waited; still she was silent; the little hands clasped tightly the heavy drapery that moved as if she were putting part of her weight on it. Her expression showed still that she had not yet had time to comprehend; that for her what he said remained, even now, but words, confused, inexplicable. A strange sequel to a strange night, a night that had begun with such gaiety and blitheness; that had been interrupted, after he had left her, by the shouting and rough voices from the garden! She seemed to hear them anew, and afterward, the explanation of that odd little person, the police agent, his apologies for breaking in upon the cotillion. But he had said--?

The blue eyes bent like stars now on this man in her room, standing before her with bold, mocking face, as if his dark eyes read, understood every thought that passed through her brain.

"You!--then it was you--John Steele--that they--"

"The convict they tried to arrest? Yes."

"You? I don't--" Her voice was almost childlike.

"I will help you to--understand!" An ashen shade came over his face, but it passed quickly; his voice sounded brusque. "For months, since a fatal evening all light, brilliancy, beauty!--the convict has been trying to hold back the inevitable; but the net whose first meshes were then woven, has since been drawing closer--closer. In the world two forces are ever at work, the pursuers and the pursued. In this instance the former," harshly, "were unusually clever. He struggled hard to keep up the deception until he could complete a defense worthy of the name. But to no avail! He felt the end near; did not expect it so soon, however, this night!--this very night--!"

The man paused; there was a strange gleam in the dark eyes that lingered on her; its light was succeeded by another, a fiercer expression. For the first time she moved, shrank back slightly. "I'm afraid I used a few of them roughly," he said with look derisive. "There was no time for soft talk; it was cut and run--give 'leg bail,' as the thieves say." Did he purposely relapse into coarser words to clench home the whole damning, detestable truth? Her fine soft lips quivered; it may be she felt herself awakening--slowly; one hand pressed now at her breast. In



the grate the fire sank, although a few licking flames still thrust their fiery tongues between black lumps of coal.

"But it was a close call, out there in the garden! They were before the convict in the woods; he must needs double back to the shadow of the house! At the bottom of a moat he looked up to a balcony overhead, small as Juliet's---though I swear he thought it led to armory hall, not here; had he known the truth, he would have stayed there first, and--But, as it was, he heard voices around the corner; afar, men approaching. The ivy at Strathorn House is almost as old as the house itself, the main branches larger than a man's arm. It was not difficult to get here, though I wish now--" he dared smile bitterly--"they had come on me first."

The breeze at the window slightly shook the curtain; it waved in and out; the tassels struck faint taps on the sill.

"But why--?" she began at length, then stopped, as if the question were gone almost as soon as it suggested itself.

"--did I return here,--reenter Strathorn House?" he completed it for her. "Because there seemed nothing else to do; it was probably only temporizing with the inevitable--but one always temporizes."

She moved slowly out into the room; his face was half-averted; all the light that came from the grate, rested now on hers. At that instant she

seemed like a shadow, beautiful, but a shadow, going toward him as through no volition of her own. The thick texture on the floor drowned the sound of her steps; she paused with her fingers on the gilded frame of a settee. He did not turn, although he must have known she was near; with his back toward her he gazed down at the soft, bright hues of the rug, and on it a white thing, a tiny bit of lace, a handkerchief that some time before had fluttered to the floor and had been left lying there.

"But--" she spoke now--"you--you who seemed all that was--I can't believe--it is impossible--inconceivable--"

His features twitched, the nerves seemed moving beneath the skin; but he answered in a hard tone. "I have told you the truth; because," the words broke from him, "I had to! Must I," despite himself there was an accent of acutest pain in his voice, "repeat it?"

"No!" said the girl. "Oh, no."

"You guessed I was going away. I was going so that you might never learn what you know now."

"I--guessed you were going? Ah, to-night--on the balcony!"

Did he divine what her words recalled, could not but bring to mind? A tint sprang to her white face; it spread even to the white throat. The

blue eyes grew hard, very hard; the little hand he had so short a while before held in his, closed; the slender figure which had then seemed to waver, straightened. He read the thought his words had evoked, did not meet her eyes now.

"You tell me what you have--And yet you have come--dared to come here--under this roof--?"

It may be she also recalled his look when first he had entered this room, and, turning, had seen her; that her mind retained the impress of a bearing, bold, mocking.

"Oh," she said, "it was infamous!"

The word struck him like a whip, lashed his face to a dull red; the silence grew.

"I would not presume to dispute or to contradict any conclusion you may have reached," he spoke at length in a low, even voice. "I had not, as I said, intended this last, this most inexcusable intrusion. You have now only one course to pursue--" His gaze turned to the long silken bell-rope on the wall. "And I promise not to resist."

Her glance followed his, returned to his face, to his eyes, quietly challenging. She took a step.

"Well?" he said.

She had suddenly stopped; in the hall voices were heard approaching; he too caught them.

"That simplifies matters," he remarked.

Her breast stirred; she stood listening; they came nearer--now were at the door. A measured knocking broke the stillness.

"Jocelyn!" The voice was that of Sir Charles. "Are you there?" She did not answer. "Kindly unlock the door."

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