

A MAKER OF HISTORY

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[CONTINUED.]

"With no one," the vicomte repeated impressively. "Not even, mademoiselle, if I may venture to mention a name, with your very persistent admirer, Sir George Duncombe, whom I saw here a few moments since."

She sighed, and the vicomte's face became one of pale anxiety.

"I have not been permitted to see him," she answered. "He was here a few minutes ago."

"It is wiser so, mademoiselle," the vicomte said. "I wonder," he added, "whether mademoiselle will pardon the impertinence of a purely personal question?"

"I will try," she answered demurely.

"This Englishman, Sir George Duncombe—are you perhaps—how you say, betrothed to him?"

A certain bluntness in the question and the real or affected anxiety of the young man's tone brought the color streaming into her cheeks.

"Monsieur," she exclaimed, "you really must not!"

"Ah, but, mademoiselle," he interrupted, "so much depends upon your answer."

"Absurd!" she murmured. "I really do not see why I should answer such a question at all."

"You will be merciful," he begged, lowering his tone.

"I will," she answered. "I hope you will appreciate my confidence. I am not engaged to Sir George Duncombe."

His sigh of relief was marvelous. She found it harder than ever to keep the laughter from her eyes.

"Mademoiselle," he declared, "it makes me happy to have you say this."

"Really, vicomte!" she protested.

"The situation, too," he said, "becomes less complex. We can very easily deal with him now. He shall annoy you no more!"

"But he doesn't annoy me," she answered calmly. "On the contrary, I should like to see him very much if I were permitted."

"Mademoiselle will understand well the indiscretion," he said earnestly.

She sighed a little wearily.

"I am afraid," she said, "that I find it a little hard to understand anything clearly, but you see that I trust you I will not see him."

"Mademoiselle is very wise," he answered. "Indeed, it is better not. There remains now a question which I leave you to ask."

"Well?"

"Mademoiselle did not by chance while waiting for her brother think of examining his luggage?"

She nodded.

"I did look through it," she admitted. "There was a paper there, which is missing now—a sheet of paper with writing on it—in German. It is not possible that mademoiselle took possession of it?" he demanded eagerly.

She nodded.

"That is just what I did do," she said. "I could read a few words, and I could not understand how it came to be in his bag. It seemed to be part of an official agreement between two countries."

"You have it now?" he cried eagerly.

"You have it in your possession?"

She shook her head.

"I gave it to some one to take care of," she said, "when I was over in England. I got frightened when we were nearly caught at Runton, and I did not want it to be found upon me."

"To whom?" he cried.

"To Sir George Duncombe!"

The vicomte was silent for a moment. "You believe," he asked, "that Sir George Duncombe would guard it carefully?"

"I am sure he would," she answered.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "this is very important. Your brother's luggage has been searched, and we came to the conclusion that the paper had been taken by those who had followed him here and may possibly be aware that he has it. If we can get possession of it it will be very much to the advantage of your country and mine. I scarcely dare say more. Will you give me a letter to Sir George instructing him to deliver it up to me?"

She leaned a little forward and looked steadily into his eyes.

"M. le Vicomte," she said, "I do not know you very well, and it is very hard indeed for me to tell who are my friends here. Can I trust you?"

"Mademoiselle," he answered, "I will not say 'like your brother,' for it is a relationship I have no wish to bear. Let me say like the person to whom your welfare is dearer even than his own."

Phyllis felt her lips curve into a smile. Despite his youth and manner,

which seemed to her a little affected, there was nevertheless undoubted earnestness in the admiration which he took no pains to conceal.

"Very well, M. le Vicomte," she said. "I will give you the letter."

CHAPTER XXX.

THEY came face to face in the hall of the Grand hotel. Duncombe had just returned from his call upon the marquise. Andrew was leaning upon the arm of a dark, smooth shaven man and had apparently just descended from the lift. At the sound of Duncombe's little exclamation they both stopped short. Andrew turned his heavily spectacled eyes in Duncombe's direction, but it was obvious that he saw nothing.

"You here, Andrew?"

"Yes! Why not?"

The tone was curt, almost discourteous. Duncombe understood at once.

"Let us sit down somewhere and talk for a few minutes," he said. "I did not expect you. You should have let me know that you were coming."

Andrew laughed a little bitterly.

"I scarcely see why," he said. "To tell you the truth, I see no advantage to either of us in any intercourse."

Duncombe took him by the arm and led him toward the smoking room.

"Andrew," he said, "perhaps I have behaved badly—at least from your point of view, but remember that I warned you. Let us sit down here. Who is your friend?"

"Never mind," Andrew answered. "You can say what you have to before him. He is in my confidence."

Duncombe glanced around. The man had taken the chair next to them and was evidently prepared to listen to all that was said. His clothes and bearing and quiet, unobtrusive manners all seemed to suggest truthfully enough his possible identity—an English detective from an advertised office. Duncombe smiled as he realized the almost pitiful inadequacy of such methods.

"Come, Andrew," he said, turning to his friend, "you have a small grievance against me, and you think you have a great one."

"A small grievance," Andrew murmured softly. "Thank you, Duncombe."

"Go on, then. State it," Duncombe declared. "Let me hear what is in your mind."

Andrew raised his brows slowly. Twice he seemed to speak, but at the last moment remained silent. He was obviously struggling to control himself.

"There is this in my mind against you, Duncombe," he said finally: "I sent for you as a friend. You accepted a charge from me as my friend, and you betrayed me."

Duncombe shook his head.

"Listen, Andrew," he said. "I want to remind you again of what I said just now. I warned you. No, don't interrupt. It may have sounded like nonsense to you. I meant every word I said. I honestly tried to make you understand. I came here. I risked many things. I failed. I returned to England. Up till then you had nothing to complain of. Then, heaven knows why, but the very girl whom I had gone to Paris to seek came to Runton in the guise at least of an adventuress."

Andrew lifted his head quickly.

"You admit it at last, then?" he cried.

"Yes, I admit it now," Duncombe agreed.

"You lied to me there—to me who had no eyes, who trusted you. What was that but betrayal, rank, inexcusable betrayal?"

"Listen, Andrew," Duncombe said. "She told me that she was not Phyllis Poynton. It was enough for me. I disregarded my convictions. Her word was my law. She said that she was not Phyllis Poynton, and to me she never was Phyllis Poynton. She was afraid of you, and I helped her to avoid you. I admit it. It is the extent of my falling in our friendship, and you were warned."

"And now?"

"I am here now," Duncombe said, a little sadly, "because I love her and because I cannot keep away. But she will not see me, and I am no nearer solving the mystery than ever. On the contrary, I know that I am in danger here. It is possible that I may be driven to leave Paris tonight."

"You know where she is now?"

"Yes."

Andrew leaned suddenly over, and his grip was on Duncombe's shoulder like a vise.

(Continued on Page Six.)

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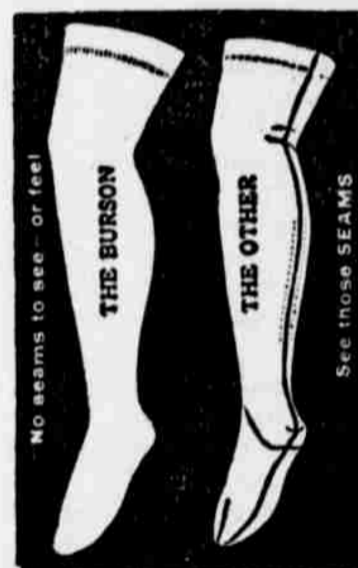
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