POOR DOCUMENT

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THE POWERS AND MAXINE

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CHAPTER I.

Lisa Drummond's Part.

It had come at last, the moment I had been thinking about for days. I was going to have him all to myself, the only person in the world I ever loved.

He had asked me to sit out two dances, and that made me think that he really must want to be with me, not just because I'm the "pretty girl's sister," but because I'm myself, Lisa Drummond.

Being what I am,—queer, and plain, I can't bear to think that men like girls for their beauty; yet I can't help liking men better if they are handsome.

I don't know if Ivor Dundas is the handsomest man I ever saw, but he seems so to me. I don't know if he is very good, or really very wonderful, although he's clever and ambitious enough; but he has a way that makes women fond of him; and men admire him, too. He looks straight into your eyes when he talks to you, as if he cared more for you than anyone else in the world: and if I were an artist, painting a picture of a dark young knight starting off for the crusades, I should ask Ivor Dundas to stand as my model.

Perhaps his expression wouldn't be exactly right for the pious young crusader, for it isn't at all saintly, really: still, I have seen just that wrapt sort of look on his face. It was generally when he was talking to Di: but I wouldn't let myself believe that it meant anything in particular. He has the reputation of having made lots of women fall in love with him. That was one of the first things I heard when Di and I came over from America to visit Lord and Lady Mountstuart. And, of course there was the story about him and Maxine de Renzie. Everyone was talking of it when we first arrived in London.

My heart beat very fast as I guided him into the room which Lady Mountstuart had given Di and me for our special den. It is separated by another larger room from the ball room; but both doors were open and we could see pepple dancing.

I told him he might sit by me on the sofa under Di's book shelves, because we could talk better there. Usually, I don't like being in front of a mirror, because—well, because I'm only the "pretty girl's sister." But to-night I didn't mind. My cheeks were red, and my eyes bright. Sitting down, you might almost take me for a tall girl, and the way my gown was made didn't show that one shoulder is a little higher than the other. Di designed the dress.

I thought, if it wasn't pretty, I did look interesting, and original. I looked as if I could think of things; and as if I could feel.

And I was feeling. I was wondering why he had been so kind to me lately, unless he cared. Of course it might be for Di's sake; but I am not so queer-looking that no man could ever be fascinated by me.

They say pity is akin to love. Perhaps he had begun by pitying me, because Di has everything and I—nothing; and then, afterwards he had found out that I was intelligent and sympathetic.

He sat by me and didn't speak at first. Just then Di passed the far away, open door of the ball-room, dancing with Lord Robert West, the Duke of Glasgow's brother.

"Thank you so much for the book," I said.

(He had sent me a book that morning—one he'd heard me say I wanted.)

He didn't seem to hear, and then he turned suddenly, with one of his nice smiles. I always think he has the nicest smile in the world: and certainly he has the nicest voice. His eyes look very kind, and a little sad. I willed him hard to love me.

"It made me happy to get it," I went on.

"It made me happy to send it," he said. "Does it please you to do things for me?" I asked.

"Why, of course."

"You do like poor little me a tiny bit, then?" I couldn't help adding—"Even though I'm different from other girls?"

"Perhaps more for that reason," he said, with his voice as kind as his eyes.

"Oh, what shall I do if you go away!" I burst out, partly because I really meant it, and partly because I hoped it might lead him on to say what I wanted so much to hear. "Suppose you get that consulship at Algiers."

"I hope I may," he said quickly. "A consulship isn't a very great thing—but—it's a beginning. I want it badly."

"I wish I had some influence with the Foreign Secretary," said I, not telling him that the man actually dislikes me, and looks at me as if I were a toad. "Of course, he's Lord Mountstuart's cousin, and brother-in-law as well, and that makes him seem quite in the family, doesn't it? But it isn't as if I were really related to Lady Mountstuart. I was never sorry before that Di and I are only step-sisters—no, not a bit sorry, though her mother had all the money, and brought it to my poor father; but now I wish I were Lady Mountstuart's niece, and that I had some of the coaxing, 'girly' ways Di can put on when she wants to get something out of people. I'd make the Foreign Secretary give you exactly what you wanted, even if it took you far, far from me."

With that, he looked at me, suddenly, and his face grew slowly red, under the brown.

"You are a very kind Imp," he said. "Imp" is the name he invented for me. I loved to hear him call me by it.

"Kind!" I echoed. "One isn't kind when one—likes—people."

I saw by his eyes then, that he knew. But I didn't care. If only I could make him say the words I longed to hear—even because he pitied me, because he had found out how I loved him, and because he had really too much of the dark-young-Crusader-knight in him, to break my heart. I made up my mind that I would take him at his word, quickly, if he gave me the chance; and I would tell Di that he was dreadfully in love with me. That would make her writhe.

I kept my eyes on him, and I let them tell him everything. He saw; there was no doubt of that; but he did not say the words I hoped for. A moment or two, he was silent; and then, gazing away towards the door of the ball-room, he spoke very gently as if I had been a child—though I am older than Di by three or four years.

"Thank you, Imp, for letting me see that you are such a staunch little friend," said he. "Now that I know you really do take an interest in my affairs, I think I may tell you why I want so much to go to Algiers—though very likely you've guessed already—you are such an 'intuitive' little creature. And besides, I haven't tried very hard to hide my feelings—not as hard as I ought, perhaps, when I realize how little I have to offer to such a girl as your sister. Now you understand all, don't you—even if you didn't before? I love her, and if I go to Algiers——"

"Don't say any more," I managed to cut him short. "I can't bear—I mean, I understand. I—did guess before."

It was true. I had guessed, but I wouldn't let myself believe. I hoped against hope. He was so much kinder to me than to any other man ever took the trouble to be, in all my wretched, embittered twenty-three years of life.

"Di might have told me," I went gasping on, rather than let there be a long silence between us just then. I had pride enough not to want him to see me cry—though, if it could have made any difference, I would have grovelled at his feet and wet them with my tears. "But she never does tell me anything about herself."

"She's so unselfish and so fond of you, that probably she likes better to talk about you instead," he defended her. And then I felt that I could hate him, as much as I've always hated Di, deep down in my heart. At that minute I should have liked to kill her, and watch his face when he found her lying dead—out of his reach for ever.

"Besides," he hurried on, "I've never asked her yet if she would marry me, because—my prospects weren't very brilliant. She knows of course that I love her——"

"And if you get the consulship, you'll put the important question?" I cut him short, trying to be flippant.

"Yes. But I told you to-night, because I—because you were so kind, I felt that I should like to have you know."

Kind! Yes, I had been too kind. But if by putting out my foot I could have crushed every hope of his for the future—every hope, that is, in which my step-sister Dianna Forrest had any part—I would have done it, just as I trample on ants in the country sometimes, for the pleasure of feeling that I—even I—have power of life and death.

I swallowed hard, to keep the sobs back. I'm never very strong or well, but now I felt broken, ready to die. I was glad when I heard the music stop in the ball-room.

"There!" I said. "The two dances you asked me to sit out with you are over. I'm sure you're engaged for the next."

"Yes, Imp, I am."

"To Di?"

"No, I have Number 13 with her."

"Thirteen! Unlucky number."

"Any number is lucky that gives me a chance with her. The next one, coming now, is with Mrs. George Allendale."

"Oh, yes, the actor manager's wife. She goes everywhere; and Lord Mountstuart likes theatrical celebrities. This house ought to be very serious and political, but we have every sort of creature here—provided it's an amusing, or successful, or good-looking one. By the way, used Maxine de Renzie to come here, when she was acting in London at George Allendale's theatre? That was before Di and I arrived on the scene, you remember."

"I remember. Oh, yes, she came here. It was in this house I met her first, off the stage, I believe."

"What a sweet memory! Wasn't Mrs. George awfully jealous of her husband when he had such a fascinating beauty for his leading lady?"

"I never heard that she was."

"You needn't look cross with me. I'm not saying anything against your gorgeous Maxine."

"Of course not. Nobody could. But you mustn't call Miss de Renzie 'my Maxine,' please, Imp."

"I beg your pardon," I said. "You see, I've heard other people call her that—in joke. And you dedicated your book about Lhassa, that made you such a famous perosn, to her, didn't you?"

"No. What made you think that?" He was really annoyed now, and I was pleased—if anything could please me, in my despair.

"Why, everybody thinks it. It was dedicated to 'M.,' as if the name was a secret, so——"

"'Everybody' is very stupid then. 'M.' is an old lady, my god-mother, who helped me with money for my expedition to Lhassa, otherwise I couldn't have gone. And she isn't of the kind that likes to see her name in print. Now, where shall I take you, Imp? Because I must go and look for Mrs. Allendale."

"I'll stay where I am, thank you," I said, "and watch you dance—from far off. That's my part in life, you know: watching other people dance from far off."

When he had gone, I leaned back among the cushions, and I wasn't sure that one of my heart attacks would not come on. I felt horribly alone, and deserted; and though I hate Di, and always have hated her, ever since the tiny child and her mother (a beautiful, rich, young Californian widow) came into my father's house in New York, she does know how to manage me better than anyone else, when I am in such moods. I could have screamed for her, as I sat there helplessly looking through the open doors: and then, at last, I saw her, as if my wish had been a call which had reached her ears over the music in the ball-room.

She had stopped dancing, and with her partner (Lord Robert, again) entered the room which lay between our "den" and the ball-room. Probably they would have gone on to the conservatory, which can be reached in that way, but I cried her name, as loudly as I could, and she heard. Only a moment she paused—long enough to send Lord Robert away—and then she came straight to me. He must have been furious: but I didn't care for that.

I had been wanting her badly, but when I saw her, so bright and beautiful, looking as if she were the joy of life made incarnate, I should have liked to strike her hard, first on one cheek and then the other, deepening the rose to crimson, and leaving an ugly red mark for each finger.

"Have you a headache, dear?" she asked, in that velvet voice she keeps for me—as if I were a thing only fit for pity and protection.

"It's my heart," said I. "It feels like a clock running down. Oh, I wish I could die, and end it all! What's the good of me—to myself or anyone?"

"Don't talk like that, my poor one," she said. "Shall I take you up stairs to your own room?"

"No I think I should faint if I had to go upstairs," I answered. "Yet I can't stay here. What shall I do?"

"What about Uncle Eric's study?" Di asked. She always calls Lord Mountstuart 'Uncle Eric,' though he isn't her uncle. Her mother and his wife were sisters, that's all: and then there was the other sister who married the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, a cousin of Lord Mountstuart's. That family seemed to have a craze for American girls; but Lord Mountstuart makes an exception of me. He's civil, of course, because he's an abject slave of Di's, and she refused to come and pay a visit in England without me: but I give him the shivers, I know very well: and I take an impish joy in making him jump.

"I'm sure he won't be there this evening," Di went on, when I hesitated. "He's playing bridge with a lot of dear old boys in the library, or was, half an hour ago. Come, let me help you there. It's only a step."

She put her pretty arm round my waist, and leaning on her I walked across the room, out into a corridor, through a tiny "bookroom" where odd volumes and old magazines are kept, into Lord Mountstuart's study.

It is a nice room, which he uses much as his wife uses her boudoir. The library next door is rather a show place, but the study has only Lord Mountstuart's favourite books in it. He writes there (he has written a novel or two, and thinks himself literary), and some pictures he has painted in different parts of the world hang on the walls: for he also thinks himself artistic.

In one corner is a particularly comfortable, cushiony lounge where, I suppose, the distinguished author lies and thinks out his subjects, or dreams them out. And it was to this that Di led me.

She settled me among some fat pillows of old purple and gold brocade, and asked if she should ring and get a little brandy.

"No," I said, "I shall feel better in a few minutes. It's so nice and cool here."

"You look better already!" exclaimed Di. "Soon, when you've lain and rested a little, you'll be a different girl."

"Ah, how I wish I could be a different girl!" I sighed. "A strong, well girl, and tall and beautiful, and admired by everyone,—like you—or Maxine de Renzie."

"What makes you think of her?" asked Di, quickly.

"Ivor was just talking to me of her. You know he calls me his 'pal,' and tells me things he doesn't tell everybody. He thinks a great deal about Maxine, still."

"She'd be a difficult woman to forget, if she's as attractive off the stage as she is on."

"What a pity we didn't come in time to meet here when she was playing in London with George Allendale. Everybody used to invite her to their houses, it seems. Ivor was telling me that he first met her here, and that it's such a pleasant memory, whenever he comes to this house. I suppose that's one reason he likes to come so much.

"No doubt," said Di sharply.

"He got so fascinated talking of her," I went on. "He almost forgot that he had a dance with Mrs. Allendale. Of course Maxine had made a great hit, and all that, even then; but she didn't stand quite as high as she does now, since she's become the fashion in Paris. Perhaps she had nothing except her salary, then, whereas she must have saved up a lot of money by this time. I have an idea that Ivor would have proposed to her if he'd have thought her success established."

"Nonsense!" Di broke out, her cheeks very pink. "As if Ivor were the kind of man to think of such a thing!"

"He isn't very rich, and he is very ambitious. It would be bad for him to marry a poor girl, or a girl who wasn't well connected socially. He has to think of such things."

I watched the effect of these words, with my eyes half shut; for of course Di has all her mother's money, two hundred thousand English pounds; and through the Mountstuarts, and her aunt who is married to the Foreign Secretary, she has got to know all the best people in England. Besides, the King and Queen have been particularly nice to her since she was presented, so she has the run of their special set, as well as the political and artistic, and "old-fashioned exclusive" ones.

"Ivor Dundas is a law unto himself," she said, "and he has plenty of good connections of his own. He'll have a little money, too, some day, from an aunt or a god-mother, I believe. Anyway, he and Miss de Renzie had nothing more than a flirtation. Aunt Lilian told me so. She said Maxine was rather proud to have Ivor dangling about, because everyone likes him, and because his travels and his book were being a lot talked about just then. Naturally, he admired her, because she's beautiful, and a very great actress——"

"Oh, your Aunt Lilian would make little of the affair," I laughed. "She flirts with him herself."

"Why, Lisa, Aunt Lilian's over forty, and he's twenty-nie.

"Forty isn't the end of the world for a woman, nowadays. She's a beauty and a great lady. Ivor always wants the best of everything. She flirts with him, and he with her."

Di laughed too, but only to make seem as if she didn't care. "You'd better not make such silly remarks to Uncle Eric," she said, staring at the pattern of the cornice. "Aren't those funny, gargoyley things up there? I never noticed them before. But oh—about Mr. Dundas and Maxine de Renzie—I don't think, really, that he troubles himself much about her any more, for the other day I—I happened to ask what she was playing in Paris now, and he didn't know. He said he hadn't been over to see her act, as it was too far away, and he was afraid when he wasn't too busy, he was too lazy."

"He said so to you, of course. But when he spends Saturday to Monday at Folkestone with the aunt who's going to leave him her money, how easy to slip over the Channel to the fair Maxine, without any one being the wiser."

"Why shouldn't he slip, or slide, or steam, or sail in a balloon, if he likes?" laughed Di, but not happily. "You're looking much better, Lisa. You've quite a colour now. Do you feel strong enough to go upstairs?"

"I would rather rest here for awhile, since you think Lord Mountstuart is sure not to come," said I. "These pillows are so comfortable. Then perhaps, by and bye, I shall feel able to go back to the den, and watch the dancing. I should like to keep up, if I can, for I know I shan't sleep, and the night will seem so long."

"Very well," said Di, speaking kindly, though I knew she would have liked to shake me. "I'm afraid I shall have to run away now, for my partner will think me so rude. What about supper?"

"Oh, I don't want any. And I shall have gone upstairs before that," I interrupted. "Go now, I don't need you any more."

"Ring, and send for me if you feel badly again."

"Yes—yes."

By this time she was at the door, and there she turned with a remorseful look in her eyes, as if she had been unkind and was sorry. "Even if you don't send, I shall come back bye and bye, when I can, to see how you are," she said. Then she was gone, and I nestled deeper into the sofa cushions, with the feeling that my head was so heavy, it must weigh down the pillows like a stone.

"She was afraid of missing Number 13 with Ivor," I said to myself. "Well—she's welcome to it now. I don't think she'll enjoy it much—or let him. Oh, I hope they'll quarrel. I don't think I'd mind anything, if only I was sure they'd never be nearer to each other. I wish Di would marry Lord Robert. Perhaps then Ivor would turn to me. Oh, my God, how I hate her—and all the beautiful girls, who spoil the lives of women like me."

A shivering fit took me from head to feet, as I guessed that the time must be coming for Number 13. They were together, perhaps. What if, in spite of all, Ivor should tell Di that he loved her, and they should be engaged? At that thought, I tried to bring on a heart attack, and die; for at least it would chill their happiness if, when Lady Mountstuart's ball was over, I should be found lying white and dead, like Elaine on her barge.

I was holding my breath, with my hand pressed over my heart, to feel how it was beating, when the door opened suddenly, and I heard a voice speaking.

CHAPTER II.

Lisa Listens.

Someone turned up the light. "I'll leave you together," said Lord Mountstuart; and the door was closed.

"What could he mean?" I wondered. I had supposed the two men had come in alone, but there must have been a third person. Who could it be? Had Lord Mountstuart been arranging a tete a tete between Di and Ivor Dundas?

The thought was like a hand on my throat, choking my life out. I must hear what they had to say to each other.

Without stopping to think more, I rolled over and let myself sink down into the narrow space between the low couch and the wall, sharply pulling the clinging folds of my chiffon dress after me. Then I lay still, my blood pounding in my temples and ears, and in my nostrils a faint, musky smell from the Oriental stuff that covered the lounge.

I could see nothing from where I lay, except the side of the couch, the wall, and a bit of the ceiling with the gargoyly cornice which Di had mentioned when she wanted to seem indifferent to the subject of our conversation. But I was listening with all my might for what was to come.

"Better lock the door, if you please, Dundas," said a voice which gave me a shock of surprise, though I knew it well.

Instead of Di, it was the Foreign Secretary who spoke.

"We won't run the risk of interruptions," he went on, with that slow, clear enunciation of his which most Oxford men have, and keep all their lives, especially men of the college that was his—Balliol. "I told Mountstuart that I wanted a private chat with you. Beyond that, he knows nothing, nor does anyone else except myself. You understand that this conversation of ours, whether anything comes of it or not, is entirely confidential. I have a proposal to make. You'll agree to it or not, as you choose. But if you don't agree, forget it, with everything I may have said."

"My services and my memory are both at your disposal," answered Ivor, in such a gay, happy voice that something told me he had already talked with Diana—and that in spite of me she had not snubbed him. "I am honoured—I won't say flattered, for I'm too much in earnest—that you should place any confidence in me."

I lay there behind the lounge and sneered at this speech of his. Of course, I said to myself, he would be ready to do anything to please the Foreign Secretary, since all the big plums his ambition craved were in the gift of that man.

"Frankly, I'm in a difficulty, and it has occurred to me that you can help me out of it better than anyone else I know," said the smooth, trained voice. "It is a little diplomatic errand you will have to undertake for me to-morrow, if you want to do me a good turn."

"I will undertake it with great pleasure, and carry it through to the best of my ability," replied Ivor.

"I'm sure you can carry it through excellently," said the Foreign Secretary, still fencing. It will be good practice if you succeed, for—any future duties in the career which may be opening to you."

"He's bribing him with that consulship," I thought, beginning to be very curious indeed as to what I might be going to hear. My heart wasn't beating so thickly now. I could think almost calmly again.

"I thank you for your trust in me," said Ivor.

"A little diplomatic errand," repeated the Foreign Secretary. "In itself the thing is not much: that is, on the face of it. And yet, in its relation with other interests, it becomes a mission of vast importance, incalculable importance. When I have explained, you will see why I apply to you. Indeed, I came to my cousin Mountstuart's house expressly because I was told you would be at his wife's ball. My regret is, that the news which brought me in search of you didn't reach me earlier, for if it had I should have come with my wife, and have got at you in time to send you off—if you agreed to go—to-night. As it is, the matter will have to rest till to-morrow morning. It's too late for you to catch the midnight boat across the Channel."

"Across the Channel?" echoed Ivor. "You want me to go to France?"

"Yes."

"One could always get across somehow," said Ivor, thoughtfully, "if there were a great hurry."

"There is—the greatest. But in this case, the more haste, the less speed. That is, if you were to rush off, order a special train, and charter a tug or motor boat at Dover as I suppose you mean, my object would probably be defeated. I came to you because those who are watching this business wouldn't be likely to guess I had given you a hand in it. All that you do, however, must be done quietly, with no fuss, no sign of anything unusual going on. It was natural I should come to a ball given by my wife's sister, whose husband is my cousin. No one knows of this interview of ours: I believe I may make my mind easy on that score, at least. And it is equally natural that you should start on business or pleasure of your own, for Paris to-morrow morning; also that you should meet Mademoiselle de Renzie there."

"Mademoiselle de Renzie! exclaimed Ivor, off his guard for an instant, and showing plainly that he was taken aback.

"Isn't she a friend of yours?" asked the Foreign Secretary rather sharply. Though I couldn't see him, I knew exactly how he would be looking at Ivor, his keen grey eyes narrowed, his clean-shaven lips drawn in, the long, wellshaped hand, of which he is said to be vain, toying with the pale Malmaison pink he always wears in his buttonhole.

"Yes, she is a friend of mine," Ivor answered. "But——"

"A 'but' already! Perhaps I'd better tell you that the mission has to do with Mademoiselle de Renzie, and, directly, with no one else. She has acted as my agent in Paris."

"Indeed! I didn't dream that she dabbled in politics."

"And you should not dream it from any word of mine, Mr. Dundas, if it weren't necessary to be entirely open with you, if you are to help me in this matter. But before we go any further, I must know whether Mademoiselle de Renzie's connection with this business will for any reason keep you out of it."

"Not if—you need my help," said Ivor, with an effort. "And I beg you won't suppose that my hesitation has anything to do with Miss de Renzie herself. I have for her the greatest respect and admiration."

"We all have," returned the Foreign Secretary, "especially those who know her best. Among her many virtues, she's one of the few women who can keep a secret—her own and those of others. She is a magnificent actress—on the stage and off. And now I have your promise to help me, I must tell you it's to help her as well: therefore I owe you the whole truth, or you will be handicapped. For several years Mademoiselle de Renzie has done good service—secret service, you must undertsand—for Great Britain."

"By Jove! Maxine a political spy!" Ivor broke out impulsively.

"That's rather a hard name, isn't it? There are better ones. And she's no traitor to her country, because, as you perhaps know, she's Polish by birth. I can assure you we've much for which to thank her cleverness and tact—and beauty. For our sakes I'm sorry that she's serving our interests professionally for the last time. For her own sake I ought to rejoice, as she's engaged to be married. And if you can save her from coming to grief over this very ticklish business, she'll probably live happily ever after. Did you know of her engagement?"

"No," replied Ivor. "I saw Miss de Renzie often when she was acting in London a year ago; but after she went to Paris—of course, she's very busy and has crowds of friends; and I've only crossed once or twice since, on very hurried visits; so we haven't met, or written to each other."

("Very good reason," I thought bitterly, behind my sofa. "You've been busy, too—falling in love with Diana Forrest.")

"It hasn't been announced yet, but I thought as an old friend you might have been told. I believe Mademoiselle wants to surprise everybody when the right time comes—if the poor girl isn't ruined irretrievably in this affair of ours."

"Is there really serious danger of that?"

"The most serious. If you can't save her, not only will the Entente Cordiale be shaken to its foundations, (and I say nothing of my own reputation, which is at stake) but her future happiness will be broken in the crash, and—she says—she will not live to suffer the agony of her loss. She will kill herself if disaster comes; and though suicide is usually the last resource of a coward, Mademoiselle de Renzie is no coward, and I'm inclined to think I should come to the same resolve in her place."

"Tell me what I am to do," said Ivor, evidently moved by the Foreign Secretary's strange words, and his intense earnestness.

"You will go to Paris by the first train to-morrow morning, without mentioning your intention to anyone; you will drive at once to some hotel where you have never stayed and are not known. I will find means of informing the lady of what hotel you choose. You will there give a fictitious name (let us say, George Sandford) and you will take a suite, with a private sitting-room. That done, you will say that you are expecting a lady to call upon you, and will see no one else. You will wait till Mademoiselle de Renzie appears, which will certainly be as soon as she can possibly manage; and when you and she are alone together, sure that you're not being spied upon, you will put into her hands a small packet which I shall give you before we part to-night."

"It sounds simple enough," said Ivor, "if that's all."

"It is all. Yet it may be anything but simple."

"Would you prefer to have me call at her house, and save her coming to a hotel? I'd willingly do so if——"

"No. As I told you, should it be known that you and she meet, those who are watching her at present ought not to suspect the real motive of the meeting. So much the better for us: but we must think of her. After four o'clock every afternoon, the young Frenchman she's engaged to is in the habit of going to her house, and stopping until it's time for her to go to work. He dines with her, but doesn't drive with her to the theatre, as that would be rather too public for the present, until their engagement's announced. He adores her, but is inconveniently jealous, like most Latins. It's practically certain that he's heard your name mentioned in connection with hers, when she was in London, and as a Frenchman invariably fails to understand that a man can admire a beautiful woman without being in love with her, your call at her house might give Mademoiselle Maxine a mauvais quart d'heure."

"I see. But if she sends him away, and comes to my hotel——"

"She'll probably make some excuse about being obliged to go to the theatre early, and thus get rid of him. She's quite clever enough to manage that. Then, as your own name won't appear on any hotel list in the papers next day, the most jealous heart need have no cause for suspicion. At the same time, if certain persons whom Mademoiselle—and we, too—have to fear, do find out that she has visited Ivor Dundas, who has assumed a false name for the pleasure of a private interview with her, interests of even deeper importance than the most desperate love affair may still, we'll hope, be guarded by the pretext of your old friendship. Now, you understand thoroughly?"

"I think so," replied Ivor, very grave and troubled, I knew by the change in his manner, out of which all the gaiety had been slowly drained. "I will do my very best."

"If you are sacrificing any important engagements of your own for the next two days, you won't suffer for it in the end," remarked the Foreign Secretary meaningly.

No doubt Ivor saw the consulship at Algiers dancing before his eyes, bound up with an engagement to Di, just as a slice of rich plum cake and white bride cake are tied together with bows of satin ribbons sometimes, in America. I didn't want him to have the consulship, because getting that would perhaps mean getting Di, too.

"Thank you," said Ivor.

"And what hotel shall you choose in Paris?" asked the Foreign Secretary. It should be a good one, I don't need to remind you, where Mademoiselle de Renzie could go without danger of compromizing herself, in case she should be recognised in spite of the veil she's pretty certain to wear. Yet it shouldn't be in too central a situation."

"Shall it be the Elysee Palace?" asked Ivor.

"That will do very well," replied the other, after reflecting for an instant. And I could have clapped my hands, in what Ivor would call my "impish joy," when it was settled; for the Elysee Palace is where Lord and Lady Mountstuart stop when they visit Paris, and they'd been talking of running over next day with Lord Robert West, to look at a wonderful new motor car for sale there—one that a Rajah had ordered to be made for him, and died before it was finished. Lady Mountstuart always has one new fad every six months at least, and her latest is to drive a motor car herself. Lord Robert is a great expert—can make a motor, I believe, or take it to pieces and put it together again; and he'd been insisting for days, that she would be able to drive this Rajah car. She'd promised, that if not too tired, she'd cross to Paris the day after the ball, taking the afternoon train, via Boulogne, as she wouldn't be equal to an early start. Now, I thought, how splendid it would be if she should see Maxine at the hotel with Ivor!

The Foreign Secretary was advising Ivor to wire the Elysee Palace for rooms without any delay, as there must be no hitch about his meeting Maxine, once it was arranged for her to go there. "Any misunderstanding would be fatal," he went on, as solemnly as if the safety of Maxine's head depended upon Ivor's trip. "I only wish I could have got you off to-night; and in that case you might have gone to her own house, early in the morning. She is in a frightful state of mind, poor girl. But it was only to-day that the contents of the packet reached me, and was shown to the Prime Minister. Then, it was just before I hurried round here to see you that I received a cypher telegram from her, warning me that Count Godensky—of whom you've probably heard—an attache of the Russian embassy in Paris, somehow has come to suspect a—er—a game in high politics which she and I have been playing; her last, according to present intentions, as I told you. I have an idea that this man, who's well known in Paris society, proposed to Mademoiselle de Renzie, refused to take no for an answer, and bored her until she perhaps was goaded into giving him a severe snub. Godensky, is a vain man, and wouldn't forgive a snub, especially if it had got talked about. He'd be a bad enemy: and Mademoiselle seems to think that he is a very bitter and determined enemy. Apparently she doesn't know how much he has found out, or whether he has actually found out anything at all, or merely guesses, and 'bluffs.' But one thing is unfortunately certain, I believe. Every boat and every train between London and Paris will be watched more closely than usual for the next day or two. Any known or suspected agent wouldn't get through unchallenged. But I can see no reason why you should not."

"Nor I," answered Ivor, laughing a little. "I think I could make some trouble for anyone who tried to stop me."

"Caution above all! Remember you're in training for a diplomatic career, eh? If you should lose the packet I'm going to give you, I prophecy that in twenty-four hours the world would be empty of Maxine de Renzie: for the circumstances surrounding her in this transaction are peculiar, the most peculiar I've ever been entangled in, perhaps, in rather a varied experience; and they intimately concern her fiance, the Vicomte Raoul du Laurier——"

"Raoul du Laurier!" exclaimed Ivor. "So she's engaged to marry him!"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I have friends who do. He's in the French Foreign Office, though they say he's more at home in the hunting field, or writing plays——"

"Which don't get produced. Quite so. But they will get produced some day, for I believe he's an extremely clever fellow in his way—in everything except the diplomatic 'trade' which his father would have him take up, and got him into, through heaven knows what influence. No; Du Laurier's no fool, and is said to be a fine sportsman; as well as almost absurdly good-looking. Mademoiselle Maxine has plenty of excuse for her infatuation—for I assure you it's nothing less. She'd jump into the fire for this young man, and grill with a Joan of Arc smile on her face."

This would have been pleasant hearing for Ivor, if he'd ever been really in love with Maxine; but I was obliged to admit to myself that he hadn't, for he didn't seem to care in the least. On the contrary, he grew a little more cheerful.

"I can see that du Laurier's being in the French Foreign Office might make it rather awkward for Miss de Renzie if she—if she's been rather too helpful to us," he said.

"Exactly. And thereby hangs a tale—a sensational and even romantic tale almost complicated enough for the plot of a novel. When you meet Mademoiselle to-morrow afternoon or evening, if she cares to take you into her confidence, in reward for your services, in regard to some private interests of her own which have got themselves wildly mixed up with the gravest political matters, she's at liberty to do so as far as I'm concerned, for you are to be trusted. You may say that to her from me, if the occasion arises. I hope with all my heart that everything may go smooth. If not—the Entente Cordiale may burst like a bomb. I—who have made myself responsible in the matter, with the clear understanding that England will deny me if the scheme's a failure—will be shattered by a flying fragment. The favourite actress of Paris will be asphyxiated by the poisonous fumes; and you, though I hope no worse harm may come to you, will mourn for the misfortunes of others. Your responsibility will be such that it will be almost as if you carried the destructive bomb itself, until you get the packet into the hands of Maxine de Renzie."

"Good heavens, I shall be glad when she has it!" said Ivor.

"You can't be gladder than she—or I. And here it is," replied the Foreign Secretary. "I consider it great luck to have found such a messenger, at a house I could enter without being suspected of any motive more subtle than a wish to eat a good supper, or to see some of the prettiest women in London."

I would have given a great deal to see what he was giving Ivor to take to Maxine, and I was half tempted to lift myself up and peep at the two from behind the lounge, but I could tell from their voices that they were standing quite near, and it would have been too dangerous. The Foreign Secretary, who is rather a nervous man, and fastidious about a woman's looks, never could bear me: and I believe he would have thought it almost justifiable as drowning an ugly kitten, to choke me if he knew I'd overheard his secrets.

However, Ivor's next words gave me some inkling of what I wished to know. "It's importance evidently doesn't consist in bulk," he said lightly. "I can easily carry the case in my breast pocket."

"Pray put it there at once, and guard it as you would guard the life and honour of a woman," said the Foreign Secretary solemnly. "Now, I must go and look for my wife. It's better that you and I shouldn't be seen together. One never knows who may have got in among the guests at a crush like this. I will go out at one door, and when you've waited for a few minutes, you can go by way of another."

A moment later there was silence in the room, and I knew that Ivor was alone. What if I spoke, and startled him? All that is impish in me longed to see how his face would look; but there was too much at stake. Not only would I hate to have him scorn me for an eavesdropper, but I had already built up a great plan for the use I could make of what I had overheard.

(To be continued.)

One of the Season's Notable Sires of Colt Trotters.

TODD." PHOTO BY U.E.COLLINS

With a group of colt trotters like Cochato, 2.11 1-2; Douglas, 2.12 1-4; Kentucky Todd, 2.09, and Sir Todd representing him on the turf this season, the eight-year-old stallion Todd, 2.14 3-4, looms up as a rival to Moko and Axworthy, 2.15 1-2, among the sires of futurity winners. No less than seven fast three-year-olds by him are eligible to start in this year's Kentucky Futurity.

Todd was himself a fast youngster, having trotted a half mile in 1.04 or thereabout as a two-year-old, and he comes from a family of colt trotters. Bingen, 2.06 1-4, his sire, gained a record of 2.19 3-4 in his two-year-old form, and at three lowered the mark to 2.12 1-2, while Fanella, 2.13, the dam of Todd, was also the dam of the great three-year-old trotter Sadie Mac, that won the Kentucky Futurity in 1903, gaining a record of 2.11 1-2 at that age, and Fanella was by Arion, 2.07 3-4, whose two-year-old record of 2.10 3-4, made to a high wheel sulky in 1891, still stands unequalled. As Arion is a son and Bingen a grandson of Electioneer, Todd is closely inbred to the first great sire of colt trotters that figured in harness racing records. He was bred by J. Malcolm Forbes.