

III. — IN WHICH A CERTAIN MOMENTOUS QUESTION IS ASKED

AT precisely ten o'clock, as the curtain came reefing slowly down upon the first act of *I Pagliacci*, Lady Dinsmore turned with outstretched hand to greet a newcomer who had just entered the box.

"My dear count," she exclaimed, "I am disappointed in you! Here I have been paying you really quite tremendous compliments to these young people—which for an old woman, you know, is very proper—and you show your complete indifference to me by committing the worst crime in the calendar!"

"I am desolated!" The stranger who was bowing over her hand, a trifle lower than an Englishman would have done, was slender and distinguished looking, faultlessly dressed, and wearing a bunch of Parma violets. He had a way of looking at one gravely with an air of concentrated attention, as if he were seeing through the words, into the very soul of the speaker. He was, indeed, a wonderful listener, and this quality, added to a certain boyish candour of temperament, accounted perhaps for Count Poltavo's popularity in society.

"Before I ask you to name the crime, Lady Dinsmore," he said, "or to inform me if the calendar is a lady's, permit me to offer my humblest apologies for my lateness."

Lady Dinsmore shook her head at him.

"You are incorrigible!" she declared. "But sit down and make your excuses at your leisure. You know my niece, and I think you have met Mr. Van Ingen. He is one of our future diplomats." The count bowed and sank into a chair beside his hostess.

Van Ingen, after a frigidly polite acknowledgment, resumed his conversation with Doris rather eagerly, and Lady Dinsmore turned to her companion.

"Now for the explanation," she exclaimed briskly. "I shall not let you off! Unpunctuality *is* a crime, and your punishment shall be to confess its cause."

Count Poltavo bent toward her with bright, smiling eyes.

"A very stupid and foolish business engagement," he replied, "which required my personal attendance. Shall I give you the details? I warn you in advance they will bore you frightfully! They did me."

Lady Dinsmore threw up a protesting hand.

"Pray spare me," she begged. "Business has no charms to soothe my savage breast! Grayson," she lowered her voice confidentially, "can talk of nothing else. When he was with me, he was forever telegraphing, cabling to America, or decoding messages. There was no peace in the house, by day or by night. Finally I made a stand. 'Gerald,' I said, 'you shall not pervert my servants with your odious tips, and turn my home into a public

stock-exchange. Take your bulls and bears over to the Savoy and play with them there, and leave Doris to me.' And he did!" she concluded triumphantly.

Count Poltavo looked about, as if noting for the first time the man's absence. "Where is he now?" he enquired.

Lady Dinsmore shrugged her shoulders.

"He is—ill! Frankly, I think he had a slight indisposition, and magnified it in order to escape. He hates music. Doris has been quite distraught ever since. The child adores her father."

Her companion glanced across to the subject of their remarks. The girl sat in the front of the box, slim and elegant, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. She was watching the brilliant scene with a certain air of detachment, as if thinking of other things. Her usual lightness and gay banter seemed for the moment to have deserted her, leaving a soft brooding wistfulness that was strangely appealing.

The count looked long at her.

"She is very beautiful," he murmured under his breath.

Something in his voice caught Lady Dinsmore's attention. She eyed him keenly. The count met her look frankly.

"Is—is she engaged to her young friend?" he asked quietly. "Believe me, it is not vulgar curiosity which prompts the question. I—I am—interested."

His voice was as composed as ever, but a slight pallor spread across his countenance. Lady Dinsmore averted her gaze hurriedly and thought with lightning rapidity.

"I have not her confidence," she replied at length in a low tone. "She is a wise young woman and keeps her own counsel." She appeared to hesitate. "She dislikes you," she added. "I am sorry to wound you, but it is no secret."

Count Poltavo nodded. "I know," he said simply. "Will you be my very good friend and tell me why?"

Lady Dinsmore smiled. "I will do better than that," she said kindly. "I will be your very good friend and give you a chance to ask her why. Cord," she bent forward and tapped the young man upon the shoulder with her fan, "will you come over here and tell me what your chief means by permitting all this dreadful war-talk with Japan. Is it true that you Americans are going to fight those pleasant little men?"

The count resigned his seat courteously, and took the vacant place beside the girl. A silence fell between them, which presently the man broke.

"Miss Grayson," he began gravely, "your aunt kindly gave me this opportunity to ask you a question. Have I your permission also?"

The girl arched her brows at him. Her lip curled ever so slightly.

"A question to which you and my Aunt Patricia could find no answer between you! It must be subtle indeed! How can I hope to succeed?"

He ignored her sarcasm. "Because it concerns yourself, mademoiselle."

"Ah!" She drew herself up and regarded him with sparkling eyes. One small foot began to tap the floor ominously. Then she broke into a vexed little laugh.

"I am no match for you with the foils, count. I admit it, freely. I should have learned by this time that you never say what you mean, or mean what you say."

"Forgive me, Miss Grayson, if I say that you mistake me utterly. I mean always what I say—most of all to you. But to say all that I mean.—to put into speech all that one hopes or dreams—or dares—" his voice dropped to a whisper—" to turn oneself inside out like an empty pocket to the gaze of the multitude—that is—imbecile."

He threw out his hands with an expressive gesture.

"But to speak concretely—I have unhappily offended you, Miss Grayson. Something I have done—

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"But to speak concretely—I have unhappily offended you, Miss Grayson. Something I have done or left undone—or my unfortunate personality does not engage your interest? Is it not true?"

There was no mistaking his almost passionate sincerity now, held in check by the man's invincible composure.

But the girl still held aloof, her blue eyes cool and watchful. For the moment her face, in its young hardness, bore a curious resemblance to her father's.

"Is that your question?" she demanded.

The count bowed silently. His lips were pale.

"Then I will tell you!" She spoke in a low voice surcharged with emotion. "I will give you candour for candour, and make an end of all this paltry masquerade."

"That," he murmured, "is what I most desire."

Doris continued, heedless of the interruption.

"It is true that I dislike you. I am glad to be able to say it to you, openly. And yet, perhaps, I should use another word. I dislike you and fear you in equal parts. I dislike your secrecy—something dark and hidden within you— and I fear your influence over my father." Her voice faltered over the last word, and she paused.

Lady Dinsmore's cheerful tones broke across the silence.

"Doris," she charged, "you are preaching to the count. He is looking quite sulky and bored."

He shook his head at her, smiling.

"My unfortunate face, it belies me. I was, in truth, deeply interested. Miss Grayson was speaking of her father." He turned back to the girl. "You will continue the—how you say—arraignment?" he asked gravely. "I would know the worst. I, influence your father for evil—but how?"

Doris looked at him sombrely.

"I don't know—exactly," she admitted. "But you are somehow connected with the—the scheme—a terrible illegal scheme," her voice was only just audible. "That I know to a certainty. Father spoke to me one day of you —"

Count Poltavo started.

"It was after he had decoded a telegram. He looked up and spoke of your brilliance and discretion. He said you had the mind of a Napoleon."

"It is true that I was able to do your father a service," he replied slowly. "I did him another to-night." He smiled with a certain mysticism.

"In truth, it was what delayed me. But as for your—ah—conspiracy, Miss Grayson, believe me, I know little. That a—a committee exists, with a president—"

"Baggin!" breathed the girl. Her eyes were wide with terror.

"Ah!" His face was immovable, but a gleam in his eyes betrayed him.

She turned upon him sharply. "You did not know?"

He shook his head. "I know nothing—certainly. I wish I did!" he added simply.

"That is true—you swear it?" She leaned toward him a little, her bosom heaving tumultuously.

He bowed his head in assent.

"If I could believe you!" she faltered. "I need a friend! Oh, if you could know how I have been torn by doubts, beset by fears—oppressions!"

Her voice quivered. "It is illegal, you know, and terrible! If you would help me. Wait. May I test you with a question?"

"A thousand if you like."

"And you will answer—truthfully?" In her eagerness she was like a child.

He smiled. "If I answer at all, be sure it will be truthful."

"Tell me then, is Mr. Baggin your friend?"

"He is my dearest enemy," he returned promptly.

She drew a deep breath of relief. "And my father?" The question was a whisper. She appeared to hang upon his reply.

The count hesitated. "I do not know," he admitted finally. "If he were not influenced by Mr. Baggin, I believe he would be my friend."

For the first time that evening Doris looked at him with warmth in her manner. "By that," she said, smiling faintly, "I know you have told the truth. My father likes you, but Mr. Baggin sways him completely." The smile deepened in her eyes and she laughed a little unsteadily. "You—you will be kind, and forgive my rudeness and—and my anger?" The coldness had departed from her face completely and she was charming.

The count looked hard at her. Her glance wavered, fell, and met his again for a long moment.

Her colour heightened, and her breath came more quickly. A cloud of passion was about them. It brushed them with invisible wings.

He broke the spell.

"I am happy to have convinced you of my—ah — sincerity," he murmured. "And you do, in truth, believe me?"

She laughed softly. "Yes."

"And will trust me?"

"Yes."

He bent nearer to her. His face was quite pale and his eyes burned like living things. "May I put my original question, then—my personality is not utterly displeasing to you?"

"My dear count," it was Lady Dinsmore's voice again, "it occurs to me that you are putting several hundred questions besides the one which I permitted you."

"It is I who am the culprit, auntie," exclaimed Doris gaily. "You see it was a game—taking down bottles off the shelf! Each one of us had ten questions which the other must answer truthfully. I finished mine first, and the count had just begun on his!"

"I see," said Lady Dinsmore drily. "I fear, then, that I interrupted."

Count Poltavo leaned toward her persuasively.

"There is just one more important question, dear Lady Dinsmore," he said, "and that I should like to ask you."

The little lady elevated her brows at him. "Insatiable youth!" she murmured. "What is your question?"

"It is a very small thing," he replied, "but it has been in my mind for several days. I should like you and Miss Grayson—and Mr. Van Ingen, if he can find the time," he bowed politely to the young American, "to visit my studio."

Doris clapped her hands. "Delightful!" she exclaimed. "And will you do a sketch of auntie with her head cocked a bit to one side, like a pert little robin, and that adorable crooked smile?"

Lady Dinsmore patted her hand with a tolerant smile. "It is you that the count wishes to paint, my dear, not a wizened old woman like me."

"If I might try both of you," the count replied. "Sometimes, with people who are my friends, the result is not so bad. The likeness, if it comes at all, comes quickly."

Lady Dinsmore laughed. "We will come, I promise you! Some afternoon—"

"Morning," he begged. "The light is better."

"Some morning, then," she agreed, "next week."

The curtain rose upon Nedda and Canio, who sang with love and bitterness and rage. Lady Dinsmore yawned behind her fan. At the end of the act she rose.

"Doris, my dear, I am going to follow the example of your father. This air is stifling, and we have a heavy day before us to-morrow. Cord, will you go for our things?"

It was the count who handed the ladies to their places in the unobtrusively elegant electric coupe, while Van Ingen stood doggedly at his elbow, awaiting a last word with Doris. He was bitterly jealous of his rival, who, to the boy's inflamed mind, seemed perversely lingering over his farewells. There was some colour for his anger. The count