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It was dark as the proverbial pitch when my outstretched hand came upon a certain bit of female anatomy only notionally concealed beneath a sweep of sheer silk lingerie. I braced for some remonstrance, but heard only a sharp inhalation followed by an enigmatic moan.

“Is that you, Emmie?” I asked.

“Yes.... Yes, darling, it’s me,” she said breathlessly. “Go on back to bed and I’ll be with you shortly.”

I felt her face near mine; she planted a soft kiss on my cheek, her tongue pressing delicately against my flesh.

There were three strong reasons for suspecting this woman was not Emmie. First, Emmie had never in my presence used the word *darling*, breathlessly or otherwise. Second, the last time she’d donned nightwear of that nature, she was more than four years younger and four cocktails more suggestible. Third, this mystery woman bore a distinctive scent—subtle, but undeniably inciting. Emmie never wore scent. The truth is, I had only addressed her as Emmie to use my apparent misunderstanding as an excuse for having taken liberties with her certain bit of anatomy.

Nonetheless, the soft kiss and delicate tongue quite effectively extinguished these doubts—as well as all others not enumerated. If this woman was under the impression she was Emmie, her word was good enough for me. I felt my way back to our darkened room and into bed.

“Where were you?” Emmie asked.

“Out looking for you.” Just then, the light on her side of the bed came on. “Someone must have replaced the fuse.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I was, until the light went out.”

“Why would the light going out wake you up?” she asked, naively.

“Opportunity. You don’t like me to disturb your reading. I thought you’d turned it off. Where’d you go?”

“To see about the lights. I was in the middle of the last chapter.... But it was too dark to see, so I just came back to bed.”

“I don’t see how I missed you.”

“I needed to deliver a message to Señor Garcia—if you must know.”

This is Emmie’s preferred euphemism for the euphemism “to see a man about a dog.”

“Just so it wasn’t to a Frenchman,” I said, more or less under my breath.

“Captain Dumont? What are you talking about?”

“Let’s just say there are rumors.”

“Rumors? Don’t talk such nonsense, Harry.” She picked up her book, then set it down again. “I wonder what would have blown a fuse at one in the morning?”

“In this house, I’d be afraid to ask. Say, whatever happened to that silk negligee of yours?”

“Which one? The one I bought last week is in the wardrobe.”

Bought last week? Interesting she’d purchased a new silk negligee in December, and while she expected to be traveling alone.

“Why don’t you try it on for me?”

“Forget it, Harry. I’m going to finish my book. Good night.”

It wasn’t until late the next morning we learned the precise cause of the outage. It involved a frayed lamp cord, a precariously positioned pitcher of water, and a visiting member of the German aristocracy.

The death of the Count von Schnurrenberger und Kesselheim was every bit as suspicious—and almost as inglorious—as that of his uncle and immediate predecessor, an ill-omened soul who’d choked to death on a chicken bone concealed in his Charlotte Russe. That unfortunate accident had occurred five years earlier.

There were a number of other parallels as well. Both were proud men of military bearing who displayed qualities likely to provoke the passions in others—and not incidentally, the dueling scars to prove it. What’s more, each met his demise while residing in Washington, the latest count just a few days before Christmas 1906. Lastly, both had recently fallen out of favor with a certain former jewel thief, a petite woman with red hair and freckles, known in her criminal past as Madame B____, and, after marrying the previous count, simply as “the countess.” It was in her well-appointed home that Emmie and I were then staying and the count met his untimely end. But, as I mentioned earlier, we only learned of that tragedy late that morning.

Breakfast at the countess’s was an informal affair, laid out on the sideboard in the large dining room. When Emmie and I came down, Captain Dumont was seated by himself at one end of the long table. He rose when we entered and gave us, or Emmie at least, a slight bow.

I’d met the unctuous knave only the day before, on my arrival from Brooklyn—but the animus had come packed in my bag. He was an officer of engineers detailed to the French Embassy as an aide to the military attaché. He stood about six feet tall, and the uniform, I had to admit, fit him nicely. Why is it every suit of clothes seems tailored specifically for unctuous knaves?

He was probably about thirty, nearer to Emmie’s age. When we’d all sat down, the two of them began speaking in French. I only caught every third word or so, as I’m sure he expected. The conversation seemed to center on the outage and what might have been the cause. Then the talk veered to other topics, the nature of which I couldn’t comprehend. The only hint was that at the conclusion of some comment of Emmie’s, Captain Dumont glanced in my direction and inquired incredulously, “*Celui-là?*” Emmie shrugged, and almost stifled a laugh. He joined her, with no pretense of stifling. I conjectured the odds of successfully hiding a chicken bone in his eggs and made a mental note to bring one to breakfast on the morrow.

Suddenly, Sesbania entered the room—which seemed to be her manner in all things. She was a girl of ten or eleven who was staying with the countess while her parents were traveling in

Europe. Given my treatment at the table, I welcomed her company—guardedly.

“Would you like more coffee?” she asked me.

“That would be nice. Could you ask the maid?”

“Oh, yes. Provided...” She held up a tin can decorated in colorful paper and shook it so the coins inside jingled.

“Look,” I said. “I’ve been here less than a day and I’ve already contributed a dollar to Mrs. What’s-her-name’s defense fund.”

“Mrs. Bradley. And a dollar won’t go far in a murder trial.”

“Murder? You didn’t mention murder. Who’s she accused of killing?”

“A former senator. Mr. Brown of Utah.”

“And you’re convinced she didn’t do it?”

“Oh, she shot him, of course. But only because he refused to marry her.”

“And that amounts to justifiable homicide in the District of Columbia?”

“When a man uses a woman the way he did...” She slowly shook her head as she spoke.

“What would you know about that?”

“Well, there are children...” Now she raised her eyebrows, just in case I needed help in making the proper inference.

“You shouldn’t be allowed to read newspapers.”

“For goodness’ sake, Harry,” Emmie interjected. “Give the child a dime.”

“A quarter,” the little extortionist corrected. “Tradesmen may contribute a dime, but guests are generally happy to contribute a quarter, at the very least. Captain Dumont always contributes a whole franc.”

“You’ve been had. That’s just twenty cents in coin of the realm. And why should I give you a quarter to call the maid when I could go out and *buy* the coffee for a nickel?”

“Not in this neighborhood. And you’d likely find yourself contributing just the same. Suppose you needed help in finding your overcoat? *It’s awfully cold outside this morning.*”

“You hid my overcoat?”

“I may have done some straightening up of the hall closet. Mother made me promise I would help about the house.”

I tossed her a quarter. Before she’d even turned to leave, the maid arrived with a fresh pot of coffee. Her name was Geneviève. She smiled at me as she poured. I was comforted at having found one genuinely friendly face. The evening before she’d brought me a towel, then lingered to ask about my trip. A congenial girl.

At last, our hostess entered the room. Dumont rose and made another little bow. So then I had to rise as well—but I drew the line at bowing.

Emmie and I were well acquainted with the countess, having met her on a previous trip to the city around the time of her husband’s death. We’d met an even younger—but no less artful—version of Sesbania during the same visit. I’d come to Washington investigating several fraudulent insurance claims, a case that ultimately involved two murders—not even including the

ill-fated count's assignation with the chicken bone.

What name the dowager countess held originally, I can't say. The only hint of her past she'd disclosed in my hearing was the dubious assertion that her father was some sort of free-lance swineherd in Shropshire, an expert at raising very fat pigs. But the sum of her talents argued against so humble an origin.

She spoke several languages fluently and was the consummate conversationalist in each of them. Always witty, affable when she wanted, and even—though most rarely, and perhaps never sincerely—a dispenser of flattery, the lady had honed charm into a dangerous weapon. This—combined with an exquisite taste in wardrobe and accoutrement, and in spite of her modest stature—allowed the countess to easily dominate any gathering.

When she wanted to. For most remarkable of all, with a few slight changes in attire and deportment, she could just as easily recede into the crowd unnoticed. In this regard, she was quite chameleon-like. A useful talent for a woman of intrigue—or a master jewel thief.

She had been much younger than her former husband. Even now, five years after his death, she couldn't have been much over thirty. He had been attached to the German Embassy in Washington, and after his death, she stayed on. Her present home had been purchased from a popular hostess. That lady had used it to house an exclusive poolroom, a place where the elites of the capital could place bets on the horse races taking place in cities across the East. The countess had apparently discontinued that enterprise, but still entertained frequently and lavishly.

She had made clear on my arrival that I was admitted reluctantly. It was Emmie she had invited, ostensibly to begin work as her official biographer. She had made a similar offer five years earlier, only to withdraw it later when Emmie had proven insufficiently obsequious.

The rest of us sat in silence while the countess attended her newspaper assiduously and her breakfast indifferently. She was not one to squander her vivacity on the breakfast table.

I was about to excuse myself when we heard excited voices upstairs. A few moments later, Thomas—the countess's loyal factotum—descended and approached his mistress. He stood by attention until she eventually set down the newspaper and looked at him. He leaned down and whispered something in her ear, then resumed his upright pose as if awaiting instructions.

"Damn," his mistress expostulated. "How typically ungrateful of him."

"What is it?" Emmie asked.

"That fool, the count. Evidently, he electrocuted himself in his bed last night."

"*Il s'est électrocuté?*" the Frenchman asked.

"*Oui.*"

"But that's not possible...." Dumont told her.

"You'll have to argue that point with the corpse. I suppose we'll need to call a doctor."

"His valet suspects murder, madam," Thomas told her.

"How absurd. I never liked that shifty valet. Probably scheming to extort money from me somehow. Go and fetch Dr. Gillette, Thomas. Don't telephone, take the auto. Drag him here, if you have to. I think we can trust his discretion."

You may take it on faith she trusted his discretion only because she had evidence of some indiscretion on his part. The countess's objections to extortion were by no means categorical.

She glanced across the table at Captain Dumont. He wasn't looking nearly so smug as he had a little earlier. A little squeamish, I thought, for a military man. Then her eyes fell on me.

"Make yourself useful, Harry. Go up and look into it. You seem to have an affinity for corpses." It was the first time she'd called me by name since greeting me on my arrival. I say greeting, though cautioning would be closer to the mark.

"All right." I started on my way, but as I passed, she grabbed my sleeve and pulled me down beside her.

"I'd be most appreciative, Harry," she whispered, "if we can remove all doubt about it being an accident." She smiled at me, then, after releasing my sleeve, ran her slender fingers along the back of my hand.

I looked over at Emmie. She was fittingly nonplussed. Served her right.

"I'll come, too," she said.

"No," the countess told her. "You'll stay here with me."

Upstairs in the count's room, I found the valet on his knees. He'd unplugged the cord of a table lamp and was examining it.

"Frayed?" I asked.

"Yes, it is."

We introduced ourselves. Otto Kirsch was a fellow of medium height with a thin mustache and a thick accent. His master, the count, was slumped over in bed with a look of surprise permanently affixed to his face. The linen and his nightshirt were soaking wet. A glass pitcher was on the bed beside him, unbroken but empty. Lying on the floor was a small lamp. I could see at once that the bedside table they'd apparently been resting on sat unevenly.

"The count must not have realized how unsteady the table was," I said. "It wouldn't have taken more than a bump to cause the pitcher to spill. Then the frayed cord did the rest."

"If," the valet stipulated, "the table had been unsteady."

"You can see for yourself." I used a finger to shift it back and forth.

"Yes, but look down here."

I got down on my hands and knees beside him. Under the bed, about a foot away from the table, was a small square of wood. He slid it under the short leg of the table. It fit perfectly.

"Well, that just explains why he hadn't noticed before. Someone must have put that there as a fix. Then in bumping the table, the count knocked it off the shim."

"No, you need to look more closely."

He held up the block of wood. There was a thin silk string, like fishing line, attached to it. He handed it to me.

"Pull on it."

I did so, but though the silk line gave, it was only with some resistance. As if I was working against a spring.

“It leads along the floor to behind that chest of drawers.”

It took the two of us to slide it away from the wall.

“Look,” he said, pointing.

Attached to the back of the dresser were two pairs of pulleys. Between them hung a large weight, like that from a sash window. Two lines were attached to the weight, each drawing over two of the pulleys. The first led to the block of wood, and the other to a small door used by the servants. It was open and the valet closed it. This drew up the weight. Next he went over and positioned the block of wood under the shortened leg, then placed the pitcher atop the now steady table. He walked back and reopened the door.

As he did so, the weight descended, and as it did, it pulled the line connected to the block of wood supporting the table. Before the door was even half open, the pitcher had fallen back onto the bed.

“We must call the police, immediately,” he said.

As beguiling as I found the countess—all right, frightening—it seemed a rather tall order to refashion the scene into a convincing case of accidental death. Especially without the connivance of the valet. And he seemed that rare sort of servant who maintains a modicum of loyalty to his employer, even posthumously. Our own maid was probably absconding with our few valuables at that very moment, and we were merely out of town.

Still, I wasn’t looking forward to sharing my conclusion with the dowager herself. She was almost assuredly going to be of the opinion that I had failed her. And she was the type of woman who held vengeance in high regard. Just how ruthless she really was, I couldn’t say. But I did know that the French cook who had prepared the previous count’s Charlotte Russe was currently employed in her kitchen.

While I was mulling my predicament, Thomas arrived with Dr. Gillette. We exchanged greetings. He too had been involved with the case that prompted our visit back in 1901. He went over to the body and examined it thoroughly.

“There are no marks of any kind. I think we may assume he died of cardiac arrest.”

“Brought on by electric shock?” I showed him the frayed lamp cord.

“I see no evidence of that. There are no burns. It would take an autopsy to be definite.... And I don’t think the countess...”

“That will be for the police to decide,” the valet interjected.

“Police? But surely, even if electrocution were possible on so little current—which I don’t believe it is—it was a simple accident. The wet clothes... the frayed cord...”

The valet brought him over and pointed to the back of the bureau.

“Do you think that was created by accident, Doctor?”

Gillette looked at me nervously. He swallowed, then licked his lips.

“I... I know nothing of mechanics,” he said. Then he smiled, weakly. “I’m afraid I must leave it to you to explain this to the countess. She seemed rather adamant that it was an accident.”

A Christmas Most Shocking — Robert Bruce Stewart

“But certainly you must remain here until the police arrive,” Kirsch insisted.

“I would, of course... but old Mrs. Jenks... I was on my way there when summoned by the countess.... Can I get out this way?” Without waiting for an answer, he exited via the small door and scampered down the back stairs.

“Coward,” the valet concluded. “Come, we will inform the countess.”

I seriously considered following the doctor’s lead, but then noticed Thomas eyeing me as if he had read my thoughts.

~~ *end of sample* ~~

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