

BARONESS

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RUDOLPH. I don't feel at all comfortable. I hope I'm not doing a foolish thing in getting married. After all, it's a poor heart that never rejoices, and this wedding of mine is the first little treat I've allowed myself since my christening. Besides, Caroline's income is very considerable, and as her ideas of economy are quite on a par with mine, it ought to turn out well. Bless her tough old heart, she's a mean little darling! Oh, here she is, punctual to her appointment!

Enter BARONESS VON KRAKENFELDT.

BARONESS. Rudolph! Why, what's the matter?

RUDOLPH. Why, I'm not quite myself, my pet. I'm a little worried and upset. I want a tonic. It's the low diet, I think. I am afraid, after all, I shall have to take the bull by the horns and have an egg with my breakfast.

BARONESS. I shouldn't do anything rash, dear. Begin with a jujube. (*Gives him one.*)

RUDOLPH (*about to eat it, but changes his mind*). I'll keep it for supper. (*He sits by her and tries to put his arm round her waist.*)

BARONESS. Rudolph, don't! What in the world are you thinking of?

RUDOLPH. I was thinking of embracing you, my sugarplum. Just as a little cheap treat.

BARONESS. What, here? In public? Really you appear to have no sense of delicacy.

RUDOLPH. No sense of delicacy, Bon-bon!

BARONESS. No. I can't make you out. When you courted me, all your courting was done publicly in the Market Place. When you proposed to me, you proposed in the Market Place. And now that we're engaged you seem to desire that our first *tête-à-tête* shall occur in the Market Place! Surely you've a room in your Palace—with blinds—that would do?

RUDOLPH. But, my own, I can't help myself. I'm bound by my own decree.

BARONESS. Your own decree?

RUDOLPH. Yes. You see, all the houses that give on the Market Place belong to me, but the drains (which date back to the reign of Charlemagne) want attending to, and the houses wouldn't let—so, with a view of increasing the value of the property, I decreed that all love-episodes between affectionate couples should take place, in public, on this spot, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, when the band doesn't play.

BARONESS. Bless me, what a happy idea! So moral too! And have you found it answer?

RUDOLPH. Answer? The rents have gone up fifty per cent, and the sale of opera glasses (which is a Grand Ducal monopoly) has received an extraordinary stimulus! So, under the circumstances, *would* you allow me to put my arm round your waist? As a source of income! Just once!

BARONESS. But it's so very embarrassing. Think of the opera glasses!

RUDOLPH. My good girl, that's just what I *am* thinking of. Hang it all, we must give them *something* for their money! What's that?

BARONESS (*unfolding paper, which contains a large letter, which she hands to him*). It's a letter which your detective asked me to hand to you. I wrapped it up in yesterday's paper to keep it clean.

RUDOLPH. Oh, it's only his report! That'll keep. But, I say, you've never been and bought a newspaper?

BARONESS. My dear Rudolph, do you think I'm mad? It came wrapped round my breakfast.

RUDOLPH (*relieved*). I thought you were not the sort of girl to go and buy a newspaper! Well, as we've got it, we may as well read it. What does it say?

BARONESS. Why—dear me—here's your biography! "Our Detested Despot!"

RUDOLPH. Yes—I fancy that refers to me.

BARONESS. And it says—Oh, it can't be!

RUDOLPH. What can't be?

BARONESS. Why, it says that although you're going to marry me to-morrow, you were betrothed in infancy to the Princess of Monte Carlo!

RUDOLPH. Oh yes—that's quite right. Didn't I mention it?

BARONESS. Mention it! You never said a word about it!

RUDOLPH. Well, it doesn't matter, because, you see, it's practically off.

BARONESS. Practically off?

RUDOLPH. Yes. By the terms of the contract the betrothal is void unless the Princess marries before she is of age. Now, her father, the Prince, is stony-broke, and hasn't left his house for years for fear of arrest. Over and over again he has implored me to come to him to be married—but in vain. Over and over again he has implored me to advance him the money to enable the Princess to come to me—but in vain. I am very young, but not as young as that; and as the Princess comes of age at two to-morrow, why at two to-morrow I'm a free man, so I appointed that hour for our wedding, as I shall like to have as much marriage as I can get for my money.

BARONESS. I see. Of course, if the married state is a happy state, it's a pity to waste any of it.

RUDOLPH. Why, every hour we delayed I should lose a lot of you and you'd lose a lot of me!

BARONESS. My thoughtful darling! Oh, Rudolph, we ought to be very happy!

RUDOLPH. If I'm not, it'll be my first bad investment. Still there *is* such a thing as a slump even in Matrimonials.

BARONESS. I often picture us in the long, cold, dark December evenings, sitting close to each other and singing impassioned duets to keep us warm, and thinking of all the lovely things we could afford to buy if we chose, and, at the same time, planning out our lives in a spirit of the most rigid and exacting economy!

RUDOLPH. It's a most beautiful and touching picture of connubial bliss in its highest and most rarefied development!

BARONESS

279

BARONESS. Is this Court Mourning or a Fancy Ball?

LUDWIG. Well, it's a delicate combination of both effects. It is intended to express inconsolable grief for the decease of the late Duke and ebullient joy at the accession of his successor. I am his successor. Permit me to present to you my Grand Duchess. (*Indicating JULIA.*)

BARONESS. Your Grand Duchess? Oh, your Highness! (*Curtseying profoundly.*)

JULIA (*sneering at her*). Old frump!

BARONESS. Humph! A recent creation, probably?

LUDWIG. We were married only half-an-hour ago.

BARONESS. Exactly. I thought she seemed new to the position.

JULIA. Ma'am, I don't know who you are, but I flatter myself I can do justice to *any* part on the very shortest notice.

BARONESS. My dear, under the circumstances you are doing admirably—and you'll improve with practice. It's so difficult to be a lady when one isn't born to it.

JULIA (*in a rage, to LUDWIG*). Am I to stand this? Am I not to be allowed to pull her to pieces?

LUDWIG (*aside to JULIA*). No, no—it isn't Greek. Be a violet, I beg.

BARONESS. And now tell me all about this distressing circumstance. How did the Grand Duke die?

LUDWIG. He perished nobly—in a Statutory Duel.

BARONESS. In a Statutory Duel? But that's only a civil death!—and the Act expires to-night, and then he will come to life again!

LUDWIG. Well, no. Anxious to inaugurate my reign by conferring some inestimable boon on my people, I signalized this occasion by reviving the law for another hundred years.

BARONESS. For another hundred years? Then set the merry joybells ringing! Let festive epithalamia resound through these ancient halls! Cut the satisfying sandwich—broach the exhilarating Marsala—and let us rejoice to-day, if we never rejoice again!

LUDWIG. But I don't think I quite understand. We have already rejoiced a good deal.

BARONESS. Happy man, you little reck of the extent of the good things you are in for. When you killed Rudolph you adopted all his overwhelming responsibilities. Know then that I, Caroline von Krakenfeldt, am the most overwhelming of them all!

LUDWIG. But stop, stop—I've just been married to somebody else!

JULIA. Yes, ma'am, to somebody else, ma'am! Do you understand, ma'am? To somebody else!

BARONESS. Do keep this young woman quiet; she fidgets me!

JULIA. Fidgets you!

LUDWIG (*aside to JULIA*). Be a violet—a crushed, despairing violet.

JULIA. Do you suppose I intend to give up a magnificent part without a struggle?

LUDWIG. My good girl, she has the law on her side. Let us both bear this calamity with resignation. If you must struggle, go away and struggle in the seclusion of your chamber.