The Garden of Lies

By Justus Miles Forman

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CHAPTER III.—Continued.

But the Princess seemed not greatly impressed or even interested.

"Oh yes," she admitted, "all that sounds very political and desperate and shivery but still I don't see why you couldn't have left your friends to do that for you. Now if I'd recently married a girl and she was terribly ill, in danger of her life, indeed, I think I'd manage to leave politics for a while and go to her. Of course I don't know what Pan-Slavists are, and why Bulgaria and Roumania aren't just alike, but it seems to me they might have been civil enough to wait till you could come back."

"Oh Lord!" groaned Mallory in despair. "Commend me to a woman for an appreciation of practical affairs! Politics, Eleanor? Politics! Do you think this thing is a New York municipal election? Do you know what would happen if I were to lose down there? It would be war, war! There'd be a small detachment of Russian troops quietly hustled over the border; that Pavelovitch swine would be set in my seat and I'd be—buried with my fathers. You'd make an interesting widow, Eleanor."

But the princess gave a little cry of alarm and her eyes were very wide and round.

"Oh, is it so serious as that?" she demanded. "Ah, forgive me, Karl! I—I didn't know—I didn't realize what it meant. War?—and you killed? Ah, be careful, Karl, don't run risks unless you have to. You've some one else to think of now, you know."

"Yes, God bless her," said young Mallory. "And I'm thinking of her always, Eleanor, but I've my country to think of first, you know. I must do what I was brought into the world to do, cost what it may. Did you think I stopped down there away from you because I wanted to? Novodnia comes first, because I'm a ruler—a man afterward.

"'Yet this inconstancy is such,' he quoted, laughing a little, '"As thou too shalt adore. I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not—loved I——"' And he paused, stammering, and turned his face away with sudden fierce passion of hatred for all this contemptible deception, storming within him.

"'Loved I not honor more,' said the Princess Eleanor softly. "Ah, that's like you, Karl! 'Loved I not honor more.' Honor's first, isn't it? I'd not hold you back when honor called you. I'd not even wish you back, for I know that your honor is the dearest thing in the world to you—you're that sort of man, thank God. You'd never fail in a duty, nor take an unfair advantage nor play a man or a woman a low trick. See how much I've learned of you in an hour, my prince!"

But young Mallory sprang to his feet, teeth and hands clenched.

"By my faith, Eleanor!" he cried in an agony, "I won't let you think such things of me! I won't have you so impos——"

"Karl!" said the Princess Eleanor, and young Mallory bit his words in two. She rose to her feet and came around to face him, putting a hand upon his breast.

Her great eyes met his, clouded a little, anxious and pained, full for an instant of a trembling doubt, but she shook her head, smiling confidently into his face, and dropped the hand by her side.

"Don't frighten me, Karl," she said. "I—I'm not quite strong enough yet, you know, and my nerves have a nasty way of giving out at times. It's like you to think poorly of yourself, but don't think too poorly, for that's as bad as the other extreme. Come and take a little walk, mon prince; I'm cold, just the least bit, from sitting still. We'll walk around the gravel path under the walls."

Mallory shook his head as if he would free himself from some load that was there, and squared his shoulders.

"Forgive me, Eleanor," said he. "Did I startle you? I mustn't do that, must I? For you're not well, yet, not by a good deal. That makes a great difference, doesn't it?" He spoke somehow as if he were arguing with himself. "Come, we'll walk. We shall have a carpet of lilac blossoms to walk over instead of gravel. See how fast they are falling!"

Indeed, as they walked, they walked in a rain of tiny lavender blossoms. A puff of breeze from over the wall's coping, the touch of an elbow to a slender branch, brought a fragrant shower.

"My hair is loaded with petals," cried the Princess Eleanor. "It's like confetti on Mi Careme. Brush them out, Karl." She bent her head to him with a sudden little gesture like a child having its hair done. Indeed, despite her height and regal bearing, she was full of little unexpected childish tricks, infinitely dear.

Mallory's fingers did their bidding but ill. They lingered in the soft bronze waves, touched them caressingly, but trembled there, helpless. And he drew his hand away with a quick exclamation.

"Ah, Eleanor!" he cried, "I—I can't!"

The princess moved past him quickly, her head still bent very low. When he came up behind her, her cheeks were flaming.

They passed under the one little window in the wall, at the base of the garden, the window in Mallory's studio. He glanced up at it instinctively. Eager faces gleamed through the parting of the curtains, arms waved, fingers beckoned.

"What the deuce is up?" wondered young Mallory.

Then aloud:

"MacKenzie said I was to keep you out but a little while to-day, Eleanor; I suppose you ought to be going in. It's growing a bit cooler. We mustn't forget that you're not strong, must we?"

"Ah, no," said she, "we mustn't forget that—though I shall be strong as ever soon. Yes, I suppose I must go in. Will you come to the door with me, Karl? O, hasn't it been a beautiful day! And isn't our garden perfect! You'll come to-morrow, won't you? I—I shall be waiting for you. Why, here's Jess! My Cousin Jessica, you know—of course you do know, though. You must have met her at Newport at our—our—— O, Karl, Karl, our wedding!"

The dark-haired young girl, waiting under the gray gothic porch, gave Mallory her hand, and said, "O, yes, of course, they had met at Newport," but she looked into his eyes very gravely, questioningly, as if she would measure him.

"She knows," said Mallory to himself. "She's in it, too, then." The girl moved close to his side as the princess passed up the steps.

"They're waiting for you in your rooms," she whispered. "Go there at once!"

Mallory went quickly down through the garden and stood again under the window. MacKenzie, von Aladorf and I were waiting above, and I reached out an arm to pull him up to the ledge. Then the four of us sat down about the room and stared into one anothers' faces. Three of us, I know, were very pale and a bit breathless. Young Mallory looked tired, worn, as if he had been through some great strain, and had come into its consequent relaxation. He seemed not particularly to notice our excitement or indeed our presence.

MacKenzie made a motion of his hand to Colonel von Altdorf and that gentleman turned to young Mallory.

"Now, God help us all, Mr. Mallory," said he, "for Prince Karl has—Heaven knows how—eluded his officers and gentlemen and is on his way to Paris—do you hear, man? The prince is on his way to Paris!"

CHAPTER IV.

"Ah?" said young Mallory absently. I suppose he had heard the words, but upon my faith I don't believe they had conveyed to his mind anything at all. He rose from the board divan where he had been sitting, and moved over to the little Turkish table littered with pipes and cigarette boxes and tins of tobacco, and he chose a battered old briar which he filled and lighted with great deliberation.

"Look you, gentlemen," said he, facing us at last, pipe in hand, "before this—this enterprise of ours goes any further, I wish to correct the footing upon which we—upon which I stand. Last evening I agreed to do my part for—a money consideration. I didn't realize as well as I do now, what the thing implied. I was even—intoxicated. I wish you clearly to understand that there is to be no question of money between us. God knows the trick we play is low enough without soiling it further. I play my hand in it because it seems to me there is nothing else to be done. The trick must be played, but let there be no money about it."

I caught von Altdorf's eyes searching for mine. They were very bright, and he nodded his head and smiled. I I thought of his words of the night before, under the awning of the Cafe d'Alencon, when I had said that I wished I'd shaken hands with Mallory. "You'll wish that more heartily still before the last card's played. Yonder's a man."

But our immediate and pressing danger made everything else seem of little moment.

"Aye, aye, lad!" cried old MacKenzie, impatiently. "As ye like! But God in heaven, have ye not heard? The prince is comin' to Paris and can't be stopped!"

Young Mallory dropped suddenly into a chair and his teeth shut with a click. All his face seemed to sharpen, whiten, grow in an instant fierce and ready.

"The prince—coming—to Paris?" he said in a slow whisper. The first white fierceness of his face passed, the animal at bay and ready to fight, and he seemed to be thinking deeply. I learnt to know that pose later on, body sprawled out over the chair, knees apart, hands clasping and relaxing, chin on breast, and those deep eyes of his wide and staring out into vacancy under level brows.

But presently his lips twitched and curved from their hard line into a smile, and he sprang to his feet, laughing as if something amused him beyond words. By my faith there was little humor that the rest of us could see in the situation.

"Why, now!" he cried, laughing still, "why that's more like it! Now it's to be a game, by heaven! not just deceiving a helpless girl." He looked about the circle of our glum faces and burst into a roar of laughter, stretching his arms up over his head as if he saw the struggle before him and gloried in it.

"Like old times, by Jove!" he cried. "Aye, it's to be a game! A game worth playing. Come, come, gentlemen, have you all lost your last dear relative on earth? Buck up, buck up!" He clapped von Altdorf upon the shoulder gaily.

"Come, Colonel," said he, "you in the mourning party too? Faith, it's a funeral! Come, have we two sat at our ease before the fire all our lives that we should turn pale and groan over a danger? Leave that to our friend the Birthday Knight and the light o' society here. What have we fought and schemed and plotted for all our lives, Colonel, if we're to lie down at the first hint of difficulty? Think of it! A game to play! We've played before, eh Colonel? Man, man, doesn't it make your blood tingle? Where's your spirit?"

He stuck the old briar pipe in one corner of his mouth and puffed great clouds from it. His face beamed through the smoke. His eyes were wide and joyous. I'd never seen them quite the same.

And, as I live, there was von Atledorf on his feet too, tugging at his grizled moustache, as was his way when excited. His eyes twinkled and he put out his hands upon young Mallory's shoulders and shook him bently.

"Aye," said he. "Aye, I've fought and schemed a bit in my time, and I've a drop of blood left to jump on occasion. Aye, we've played before, we two. I wish we'd played together, for by my faith in God you're a man after my own heart. Let Karl come if he likes! Saints above! His wife sha'n't see him till she's able, if I have to carry him back to Novodania under my arm!"

Old MacKenzie scowled and twisted in his chair.

"That's all very well, ye two blood-thirsty conspeerators," said he. "But what's to be done? When ye're through with your heroics maybe ye'll condescend to look at the danger we're in."

As for me I held a sulky silence. I hadn't relished being called a light of society.

Mallory dropped into a chair and shook his head at the Scotsman with a humorous sigh.

"You've no blood in your body, man," said he, "though I'm not denying that you've sense in your head. And now to business! Will the prince come alone or shall we have a half dozen to deal with?"

"Oh, he'll come alone," said von Altdorf. "Never you fear—though, for all that, it wouldn't surprise me if half a dozen should follow to spy out what he's doing."

"And they'll be——?" queried Mallory.

"They'll be enemies, Russian jackals, the czar's playthings, damn them!" snarled von Altdorf, "only waiting their chance to seat their George where Prince Karl sits now or should be sitting. God's name! he's mad to leave the country at such a time, mad!"

"He's mad for love of his wife," said I, "and who's to blame him? Haven't we all seen her? Wouldn't any one of us leave a throne for her?"

Von Altdorf struck his knee a resounding thwack.

"Love!" he cried. "Love! Shall love stand before the welfare of a nation, man? Shall love wreck a state? Is there no such thing as a ruler's honor and duty? I say he's mad to come here! God knows I'm full enough of pity for the loveliest woman I ever saw, but I serve the Novodnian crown, and I'd serve it ill to countenance Prince Karl's leaving his throne for a woman who can ever sit by his side there."

"Yet she's his princess, right enough," said I stubbornly.

"She's his wife," said von Altdorf. "Princess by courtesy, if you like. Yet another princess there must be in time, as you know, or the crown goes to that swine George and his litter."

"But what's to happen eventually?" I persisted. "We're curing a present ill—or trying to, but what's to happen when madame, here, regains her health and is told the trick we've played upon her? She'll be the prince's wife still."

Von Altdorf threw up his hands.

"God knows," said he. "It's out of our hands. We can't see beyond our present business. There might be a divorce arranged—even against the prince's will. Madame might be brought to see the necessity of it. Or it's just possible that she might be ennobled—though that's almost out of the question. Don't worry us, man. The future's the future, and its problems haven't to be met till to-morrow. To-day's dangers are enough to busy our hands. Heaven knows it would have been simpler if madame had never recovered from her hurts, though I've no heart for saying it. What's before us now, is to keep the prince from seeing her, for both their sakes—and to get him back to Novodnia as soon as ever we may."

(To be Continued To-morrow.)

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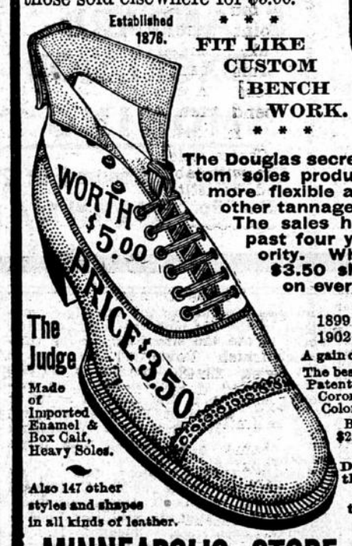

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