

stood facing the rough carousing soldiers, as a messenger from another world might regard things of a lower sphere wherein she had no part. The immediate effect of her entry was silence; the laughter quavered to an uneasy guffaw and was still.

"You sent for me," she said, addressing the Arch-duke. "What is it you want?"

"Call him 'Your Highness,'" muttered Hugo thickly.

"Highness!" repeated the Red Virgin quietly but with a world of scorn. "I cannot so abuse the meaning of words. Cyril of Wolfsnaden, what do you want?"

Cyril was studying the girl carefully. The force of her strange personality appealed to him, but it only appealed to his lowest instincts. He was dimly conscious that he was face to face with something rare, but he thought that the rarity was of the body rather than the spirit.

"I want to offer you a glass of wine," he said cordially. "You look pale."

"I have drunk wine enough to-day," was the quiet response.

"His Highness commands—" began Hugo, but the Arch-duke silenced him roughly.

"I do nothing of the sort," said Cyril. "I merely ask a favour. Will the queen of the Morast drink with me?"

The answer when it came—which was not for several moments—surprised all parties. The Arch-duke expected a ready acquiescence; von Lacherberg expected a scornful refusal.

What the Red Virgin said was: "Not here."

"And why not here?" asked Cyril in mystification.

COLOUR was beginning to come back to the pallid cheeks; a sort of graciousness informed the severe lines of her tall figure; a strange smile bent the corners of her thin lips.

In those moments of hesitation a long train of thought had been pursued, a strong resolve taken. The Red Virgin was not in the least afraid, for she had nothing to fear. She had but to call out, and there were half a hundred desperate men below who would have rescued her from the very mouth of hell. Neither his rank nor the swords of his satellites would have saved Cyril from a terrible death, if the Red Virgin had called out that she was in danger of violence. But she had been asked by Saunders to help in rescuing the captured Karl from the Arch-duke's grip. The request had flattered such little vanity as was in her composition, for it admitted her power. It was made by the one man who, in her eyes, was utterly different from other men, a man who, even when rejecting her love, had not rejected her assistance. What her intentions had been when leaving the Neptunburg she knew not, for they were unformulated. Wearied in body, more wearied still in spirit, she had staggered heedlessly and almost instinctively back to the disreputable tavern that was a kind of second home to her. Here she had been received with a kindness that touched her, but her rest had been broken by the startling news that the Arch-duke was upstairs and demanding her presence. Surely the workings of Providence, in whom she was beginning to believe, were here. The admiration of a dissolute royalty was in itself a loathsome insult calling for the bitterest contumely, but something—a wave of sharp intelligence, a burning desire to serve the man she adored, even, if necessary, by her own shame and degradation—checked the instinct of her speech and bade her temporize. The mysterious powers of Fate had decreed that she should meet Cyril of Wolfsnaden face to face, and furthermore that the Arch-duke should bow to the new-born womanliness that softened the severity of her mien.

"Why will you not drink here?" repeated the Arch-duke.

"You called me the queen of the Morast," she retorted. "Is a queen to drink in a pot-house?"

"Unfortunately," said Cyril, "our choice is limited. I happen for the moment to be an outlaw, and outlaws cannot take their meals at the best restaurants. If the 'Three Cats' is

good enough for a royal duke, surely it—"

"It is good enough for me?" interrupted the Red Virgin. "That may be your opinion but it is not mine."

"Then where on earth are we to go?" said Cyril. "I came here because my friend von Lacherberg knows the patron, who would instantly warn us of danger, should the occasion arise. If you know any place equally safe and less primitive, I'll take you there."

"Where are you staying to-night?" she asked.

"Somewhere in the Krippe-Thor."

"Let us adjourn there?"

"It's a pigsty of a place, not fit for—for the queen of the Morast."

"I will be judge of that. It is not, at any rate, a low tavern."

"There are reasons why I cannot take you there," maintained Cyril.

"Then there are reasons why I cannot drink wine with you," was the unyielding rejoinder.

CYRIL banged on the table, and rose from his seat—his patience was exhausted.

"What do you mean, girl?" he demanded fiercely.

"Exactly what I say. No more, no less."

Cyril passed his hand through his red tangle of hair.

"Am I always to be defied?" he asked in amazement. "Is it because I am an outlaw that you flout me?"

The Red Virgin laughed softly.

"What a question to put to me!" she retorted. "Me, whose whole life is a protest against law! But you have your caprice and I have mine. Your caprice is to drink wine with the Red Virgin, to—" she hesitated, and went on with a slow provoking smile—"to kiss lips never yet kissed by man. My caprice—" again she hesitated, and her smile grew more subtly alluring—"is to let you do it—but not here."

The Red Virgin had suddenly developed into an actress, so good an actress that no one suspected it, except perhaps Lacherberg, and he was by no means sure.

As for the Arch-duke, he was like a man intoxicated. Sensualist though he was, he had hitherto forced his passions to subserve his interests. Now a fire had sprung up that burned away his prudence, and blasted his self-control.

"And if I take you to the Krippe-Thor?" he asked excitedly.

"If!" she repeated, with alluring confidence. "There is no 'if.' Of course you will take me there."

"And those lips that no man has kissed—?"

She dropped her eyes in mock modesty.

"Those lips will be yours for the asking," she murmured.

"By Bacchus, by Venus, by all the merry gods of Greece and Rome! I'll take you there."

"Highness," broke in von Lacherberg. "You forget the Queen Mother!"

"Curse you for an old croaker," cried Cyril excitedly. "To the devil with the Queen Mother!"

"She is an important person, nevertheless," maintained the dragoon stubbornly. "She is also a woman, and there is one form of insult a woman does not forgive."

"Then go on ahead to the Krippe-Thor, and get her out of the way before I return," said Cyril.

"But common prudence—" began Lacherberg.

"To the devil with prudence! To the devil with the Queen Mother! To the devil with everybody and everything except the Red Virgin and myself!"

The reckless outburst evoked a shout of approval from most, and a perfect yell of enthusiasm from Hugo of the Artillery.

Von Lacherberg rose to his feet stiffly.

"Where am I to conduct Her Royal Highness, the Queen Mother?" he asked.

"Did I not say 'to the devil'?"

"You did, Highness, but I should like a more definite address."

"My good and faithful friend," said the Arch-duke irritably, "you do not fall in with my present mood. Those

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