

yell of triumph went up from the defenders. But it was no time for exultation. Ashamed of their temporary lapse, maddened by the fall of their leader, the aggressors hurled themselves forward in a press of irresistible fury. It was a moment of bitterness and impending disaster.

The ammunition of the defenders was exhausted. Everything serviceable as a missile had been hurled from the once well-stocked counter. It was close-quarter work now, thrust hew, slash and stab, grappling of man with man; savage intertwining of limbs, thumbs searching for eyes, knees for stomachs, teeth for anything. Numbers and the weight of numbers told. There were gaps in the defence. Men were pulled down from their points of vantage, and went under, fighting like maniacs against the throttling, trampling fiends who pressed them like grapes in the crimson vintage of death.

For Phoebe the excitement and the splendour had gone out of the battle; there remained nothing but horror and vileness. In despair she looked where others looked, to Saunders. Actually he was smiling. It was the smile of a man who had done his best, and whose best has been very good. But it was the smile of defeat, nevertheless. His revolver was empty, and because his right arm was useless, he could not reload it. Yet he could smile! Assuredly the hall-porter had found the right epithet for such a man when he had called him "redoubtable." Assuredly the complacent self-satisfaction which he wore, as a dandy wears a new suit of clothes, was not a garment with which he was unjustified in robbing himself. And assuredly there was a deeper pathos in that smile than in all the tortured strivings and turgid blasphemies with which the dwindling band of defenders defied fate, agony, and obliteration.

Phoebe thought of her mother and choked. She thought of the helpless Herr Lugner, and her heart was twisted with agony. She thought of herself and prayed—but not for mercy on earth. That was unthinkable. One might as well expect mercy from a pack of starving wolves as from these blood-maddened fiends. Death was very near, and its coming very bitter. The nightmare of it was intolerable. Her torture of spirit was killing her—and then, as if a thick curtain had been lowered between her and the final tragedy, the noise of the contest ceased. And the cessation was so abrupt, so absolute, so apparently meaningless, that she felt that she had been experiencing one of those terrible dreams wherein the culminating horror is anticipated but never realized. She expected to wake up, but the power to rouse herself was in abeyance. Saunders was still smiling, only his smile was a shade broader. The remnant of the defence still stood on the bar counter, but they no longer defended themselves, for there was no longer any attack.

Then a clear voice came ringing through the room: "Peace, my children!"

Phoebe clambered with trembling limbs on to the counter to see who it was who called "Peace" like a god, so that the fiercest hearts obeyed, and the bloodiest hands sheathed their knives.

It was the Red Virgin.

#### CHAPTER XVII.

#### The Stricken Field.

THE Red Virgin walked down the centre of the hall, her strange eyes alight with pity, horror, and offended majesty.

Strong men shrank from her gaze like little children who have done wrong and dread reproof. On she came, emaciated, meanly clad, yet more triumphant in her progress than any queen who ever rode through the streets of a conquered city.

Her glance lighted on fallen forms with limbs awry and hideous wounds, and the pity deepened in her green eyes to a mighty sorrow and made piteous inquiry first from one side then from the other. But no one answered her. Men turned away from her like foul things conscious of

some holy presence, or hung their heads in abysmal shame.

She stopped before the bar counter where Saunders was standing, and addressed him. He alone could meet her glance, and a smile still played about his lips.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

"Ask Major Lacherberg," said Saunders.

"He is dead," said a "night-wolf."

"I think not," said Saunders coolly. "I have had my eye on him for some moments, and he has moved twice."

The man who had spoken raised the Major's head. He was alive; he was not even unconscious, but he had been shot through both cheeks, and the bullet had dislodged several teeth in its progress. Under the circumstances he was not communicative.

"Well, if he won't speak, I will," Saunders resumed in a clear voice. "We have been attacked. Lacherberg was the aggressor. Who was behind him in his aggression, or who was the object of his attack, it is not necessary to mention. There is no need to shout big names aloud in an affair like this. But for the blood that has been shed to-night we are in no wise responsible. This counter has been our rampart, and the presence of those ladies proves that we came in no expectation of strife."

The Red Virgin looked round, as if to see if any could answer these words. No one spoke.

"It seems you are right," she said to Saunders, "and that you are not the aggressors. If so," she went on in tones of growing bitterness, "it is that officer who is to blame for all this shedding of blood, and by all the laws of justice he shall die. Boris Stark!" A "night-wolf" stepped forward. "Ludwig Aarons!" A young Jew presented himself. "Johann Schwartz!" A sallow anarchist, prominent in the late attack and bleeding from an open wound on the forehead, stood forward. "Take this soldier-devil and hang him to a pillar."

THE men, one of whom at least had lately fought on von Lacherberg's behalf, proceeded to obey with unquestioning alacrity.

"One moment," interjected Saunders, in quiet but penetrating tones, "I don't like the idea of hanging a wounded man."

"Why not?" she asked.

"I am not prepared with reasons. I have a prejudice against it, that's all. Let him alone, Aarons and you others."

"Do you think they will obey you?" asked the Red Virgin scornfully. "If I told them to hang their own mothers they would not question my commands."

"Then tell them to leave old Lacherberg alone."

"Why? He is your enemy. He is guilty of treachery. He has sinned against my people."

"He is an infernal scoundrel," said Saunders, "but I have put a bullet through him, and when I have shot a man I always feel a kind of brotherly feeling towards him. After all, he has been punished and death has had a sufficiently rich harvest to-night."

The Red Virgin peered at Saunders for a silent minute. Her eyes had that deep look of incomprehension one sees in a child's eyes when it is utterly mystified. When she spoke it was in a troubled voice.

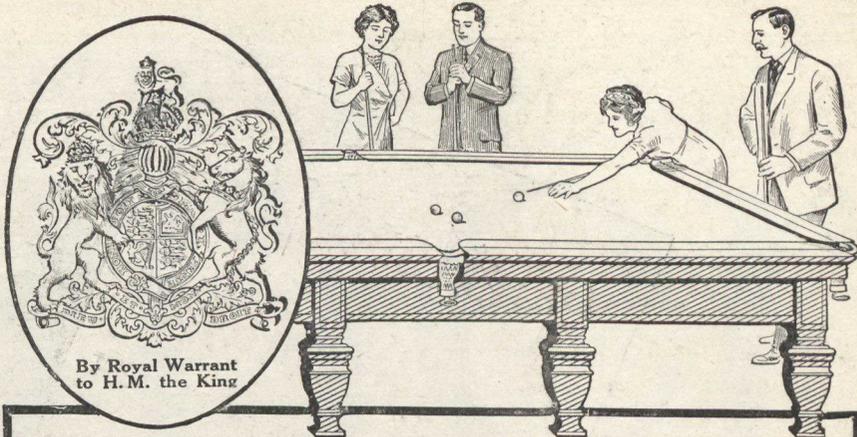
"I do not understand you, Herr Saunders," she said. "Nevertheless, you are right in one matter. Death had fed full to-night in the 'Persian Vaults.' It is enough. Leave the man alone."

"Thank you, Red Virgin," said Saunders simply.

"You are a strange man, Englander," said the Red Virgin in lower tones, and with a certain pathetic bewilderment. "I found you facing certain death with a smile on your lips. Yet when I desire to hang your enemy, lo! the smile vanishes, and you plead for his life."

(To be continued.)

A Bit Confused.—Nervous Assistant (to purchaser of grand piano)—"Can we send it for you?"—Punch.



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