



CHAPTER XXIII.—(Continued.)

"MORAL courage—the courage of your ancestor who beat back the Turks from the breaches at Kraag—can overmount all these obstacles."

"Impossible. The die is cast. Acting with my consent, on my advice almost, Cyril has taken violent possession of young Karl's person. He has by now reached Wolfsnaden with his royal prisoner. If, as you say, you value human life, it is you and your friends who will make terms with the Regent, and show the moral courage to bow to the fait accompli."

"Unfortunately," said Saunders slowly, "the fait accompli is not an accomplished fact."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that Cyril has not reached Wolfsnaden with his royal prisoner." The Freiherr's countenance became exceedingly grave.

"You know this?" he demanded.

"It is my business to know things. I know, for instance, that the abduction prospered till the ducal sleigh reached a point in the Schlet Weg. Then, I am informed, Providence or its representative—it is immaterial which—dispatched a fine avalanche directly in front of the abducting conveyance."

"Incredible! But Cyril is not the man to be stopped—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Saunders. "Cyril is a man, and therefore, like the best of us, a pygmy in the face of natural forces."

"But he will never abandon his project," persisted the Freiherr. "He is a man of ruthless determination and the fiercest energy. He has staked all on the cast. Checked in one direction he will strike all the harder in another."

"Still, he has failed," said Saunders. "Does not that tend to modify your resolve?"

"It tends to harden it," retorted the Freiherr grimly. "I have pledged my honor, and I will support a man in difficulties more willingly than a successful one."

Saunders rose deliberately. He realized that his mission had failed. It had never had a chance. The Rathsherren and their President must go.

His eye wandered over the great mantelpiece with its marble pride and pomp of heraldry, and unconsciously he echoed the Freiherr's words spoken earlier in the evening: "A pity—a very great pity."

Then aloud he said, "I must bid you good night, Freiherr, and I thank you for your courtesy."

The Freiherr was about to reply when there came a confused sound of voices and footsteps from the hall outside. A second later the door was burst open. The first man to enter was the Arch-duke; the second was Major von Lacherberg; behind were three officers of the Field Artillery.

Saunders stood motionless, save that his left hand dipped unostentatiously into his overcoat pocket. The Freiherr remained seated, frowning, but scarcely turning his head.

"This is luck indeed," cried Cyril, who held a revolver. "We came to you to report, Freiherr, and we learn from your man that one of the big rats has entered the trap."

"WILL you please ask one of your friends to close the door," said the Freiherr impassively, "I am sitting in a draught."

The Arch-duke was surprised into giving the necessary order.

"News first and then action," he said. "All went well with our little expedition till we got to the Schlet Weg, and then—"

"Then," interrupted the Freiherr, "the Schlet Weg justified its title."

"Body of the fiend! How do you know?"

The Arch-duke's savage glance roamed in inquiry till it rested on Saunders' hatefully calm face lit by a slight but intensely scornful smile. Then he uttered a still coarser oath. O, it was your handiwork, was it, Schwein-hund? You must play the Deus ex machina, must you, and save the tender youth from the clutches of the wicked cousin? I thought it was the devil fighting against me, but it was someone even more damnable."

"The devil does not fight against you, Arch-duke," said Saunders quietly. "Why should he? Your interests are identical."

"Sneering fool! You did an idiot's work in bringing me back to Weidenbruck, as you will learn all too soon."

"I am all attention."

"If our scheme had come off," went on Cyril, "if I had got young Karl and his mother to Wolfsnaden, my position would have been secure. With such hostages no one could have questioned my rights to the Regency. The Grimlanders, who like their rulers to be strong and fearless, would have applauded. The situation would have solved itself; there would have been peace."

Saunders shrugged his shoulders.

"The peace of Cyril of Wolfsnaden," he said. "How beautiful."

"More beautiful perhaps than war, Englander. And it's war now. You've forced my hand. If I were the veriest coward in Grimland, I must strike hard now or go under myself."

"Where is Karl?" broke in Freiherr.

"Karl and his mother are in a house in the Krippel-Thor," replied the Arch-duke.

"The Krippel-Thor" repeated the Freiherr in amazement. "That's where the anarchists live."

"Exactly; we have strange allies, Freiherr, and I don't fancy I could have got a securer hiding-place for our royal couple. They are being well guarded."

"AND having deposited your guests there you came here?" went on the Freiherr.

"By no means. We had to strike blows in all directions. I collected a few blades and raided Fritz's house in the Gerade-strasse. He had been wounded in a brawl last night and could only put up a moderate defence. I was for killing him there and then, for I have an old score to settle, but Lacherberg here turned womanish and would not let us make a clean job of it. So we sent him off stunned and bleeding, to join his friends in the Krippel-Thor."

"And then?" asked the Freiherr, not without a look of disgust.

"Then we had a failure," said the Arch-duke. "We visited Meyer's house in the Peter-strasse. But the General's butler, a white-haired old thing, by some devil's instinct was looking out of the window when we approached. When we rang the bell a piece of paper was pushed underneath the door. On it was written: 'General Meyer is at home, but is not receiving. The next person who rings will be shot through the head from the best bedroom window, which commands the portico.'"

"And then?" said the Freiherr again, with a little smile.

"Then we came here, little thinking that our failure would be so handsomely compensated for."

"As how?" asked the Freiherr.

"As by securing the person of so important an antagonist as Herr Saunders."

The Freiherr slightly raised his eyebrows.

"But you have not secured his person," he objected.

"We have got him dead or alive,"

said Cyril, "and I am not sure that we have not secured a richer prize than if we had Meyer's blood on our sword blades."

"You forget one important detail," said the Freiherr, "and I must remind you of it. Herr Saunders is my guest."

"What in the name of sin has that to do with it?"

The Freiherr shrugged. "Simply everything," he returned.

"You mean—?"

"That the guest of the Freiherr of Kraag is a privileged person."

"HEAD of a martyr!" cried Cyril.

"Was there ever such madness? We have declared war—civil war, which is bloodier, more utterly ruthless than any other kind of strife—and you say that this man, this foreigner, this arch-enemy of our cause, is your guest. It is his life or ours, I tell you."

"Maybe, but it is not his—in my dining-room."

"Freiherr," cried Cyril, in almost pitiful vexation, "you are squandering our chances. Was ever man so hampered by his friends as I? Lacherberg refuses to put his sword through Fritz of Friedrichsheim—why, God only knows. And now you—"

"I," said the Freiherr, "have an old-fashioned objection to offering a man a glass of wine one minute and death the next."

"Then I will not listen to your objection," cried Cyril, losing all patience and raising his revolver.

"Your Highness!" thundered the Freiherr, rising to his feet, pale with intense emotion. "You burst into my dining-room armed and unannounced. That I can forgive, for the times are troublous. Now you raise your weapon against a man who has the sacred protection of my roof. It is too much. If I were armed, I tell you deliberately you would act at your peril. But I am unarmed, and all I can say is this: if you violate the sanctity of my home, if you kill my guest before my eyes, if you put this black shame upon me, I shall not survive it. The Freiherr of Kraag has neither wife nor child to mourn him, and he will go to his God like a gentleman."

An intense silence followed this speech. The Arch-duke was gasping with amazement. For the second time in his life he was face to face with a man who set principles above personal safety. The thing frightened him because it was so incomprehensible, and his superstitious notion that he was struggling against Fate itself recurred to him with chilling conviction.

"You would kill yourself—?" he muttered.

"A nobleman can always die," said the Freiherr with dignity, "and no hand is more honorable than his own for the purpose. If, however, you think my life valuable to your cause—"

"Valuable! It is indispensable," said Cyril.

"Then lower your weapon," said the Freiherr, "and give this gentleman safe conduct to his house."

The Arch-duke's answer was to dash his revolver on to the floor, and grind his teeth in bitter impotence.

Saunders walked slowly to the door. His scornful smile had never left his lips. As he passed von Lacherberg he nodded genially to him. For some reason the old soldier's face was beaded with drops of perspiration, and his breath was laboring like that of a man who has just performed a heavy physical exercise.

Saunders turned when he reached the door. "Freiherr," he said, "I believe I saved your life yesterday. This evening you have repaid the debt



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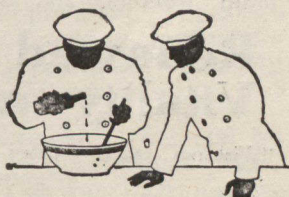
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