



DIGEST.

Weidenbruck is the capital city of Grimland and the residence of Karl XXII., who is ill unto death. Fritz, Baron of Friedrichsheim, the finest monarchist in the realm, is wasting his time with "women and wine." When the young king comes to the throne, Fritz joins with Max Stein, General Meyer, and Herr Saunders to maintain the succession. About this time Mrs. Perowne and her daughter, Phoebe, arrive in Weidenbruck and meet Fritz, who describes himself as Herr Lugner. Saunders intercepts a letter to the Ex-Queen of Grimland which reveals a plot. The plot is the conception of Cyril of Wolfnsaden, who aspires to the Regency, and by probably violent methods. Stein, Meyer and Saunders plan to circumvent this by working to have Fritz, Baron of Friedrichsheim, promoted to the Regency. Fritz consents to the plot. Under the leadership of the Freiherr of Kragg, the "blue blood" declare in favour of Cyril as Regent, despite deputations from the people urging them to proclaim Fritz. Saunders buys the support of the mayor. Fritz secretes himself in a barrel in the Council Chamber and hears the choice of the Council fall on the Regent. He also was secreted in another barrel.

CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

A GAIN the tingling flame of heat flickered through Fritz's limbs, only this time its passing left him icy cold.

"I have given you my answer," he replied. "It is an answer which conveys little information, but explains much. I said I was a gentleman."

A look of absolute amazement crept into the Arch-duke's eyes. He was face to face with a man of honour—an almost unique experience.

"A thousand devils!" he growled. "I can see that. You have the brow of an aristocrat, and the obstinacy also, it appears. That, I suppose, is why I have spared you so long. But you are playing with fire, my handsome fellow, and my patience is not notoriously great. Who are you, and who sent you here?"

Fritz was conscious of fighting a hopeless battle. He had no objection to flight as an alternative to surrendering his principles, but flight was clearly impossible. To duck his head beneath the rim of the tub was to take shelter behind a penetrable shell of wood, and to offer a certain inducement to the Arch-duke to riddle him with bullets. He debated the policy of giving the required information, nearly acquiesced in it, and then a sudden storm of disgust and rage at his incipient disloyalty mastered him. "I will not tell you who I am, or who sent me," he said between his teeth.

The Arch-duke's jaw fell in a gasp of absolute bewilderment. Here was a man, handsome, well-born, in the springtime of life, ready to die for a principle! The thing was absurd, preposterous, unbelievable. He was so amazed that he forgot to be angry. He felt that he ought to slay, but with all his truculence he was something of a sportsman, and a man who has something of a sportsman in him has one corner of his heart that is not altogether vile.

Then he spoke, suavely, and in measured tones.

"You are the most extraordinary man I have ever met," he said. "I would rather not kill you, not because I have any admiration for folly, but because you are a freak, and it is a pity to destroy rarities. But you must play the game. I have a trump card in my right hand, and you must lose the trick. No one will blame you for yielding to the inevitable."

But the white fire was dancing in Fritz's brain, the singing flame that burns up all sense of fear, and makes a man a madman or a hero.

"You have had my answer," he said. "I definitely refuse you your information, and you will get no more illuminating response from my dead body."

The Arch-duke called anger to his aid to help him destroy this comely fanatic, but amazement possessed him altogether, leaving no room for wrath.

Then a fresh suspicion crossed his mind.

"You must be armed," he said, voicing the only explanation of what was well-nigh inexplicable.

"I am unarmed," was the cold retort.

"Then put your hands above your head."

Mechanically Fritz obeyed, and as he raised his arms his right hand came into contact with the electric switch that controlled the central candelabrum. The impact sent a wave of hope and excitement singing through his being. He had a fighting chance! The horror of utter helplessness was dispersed; the nightmare of impotence was lifted from him like an evil burden; and his brain cleared as the moral problem became merged in the possibility of physical action. And because his nerves were drawn and tightened, because his young vigorous life had been brought very near the terror of great darkness, his action was extraordinarily rapid. A mere turn of the wrist, a flick of the fingers, and the room was in total darkness.

How he leaped from the confinement of his barrel he knew not, nor did he ever remember crossing the narrow space that divided him from his grim foe. He knew only that the strength of a giant was in his arms, that he seized the Arch-duke's barrel with its human burden as though it were an empty shell of lightest pith; that he rolled it over on its side, panged it against the yielding door of the hatchway, and sent the hereditary Prince of Wolfnsaden-Oberstein hurtling down the inclined plane to the snow-carpeted desolation of Herr Neumann's botling-yard.

CHAPTER XI.

Appearances.

WONDERING vaguely what would be the result of his rotary journey on the unfortunate Arch-duke, Fritz dashed from the Council Chamber by the same door through which the Rathsherren had taken their departure. Now that the tension was removed a great reaction took possession of him. He was light-headed, intoxicated almost, with the joy and relief and the singing gladness of life preserved. Indeed, for all intents and purposes he was a man partially drunk. There was a crowded exaltation of the brain, leaving the body and limbs drained of vitality; the nerves, which had stood by him so bravely in the face of deathly peril, were limp and unresilient like bands of perished rubber. He blundered hurriedly down an ill-lit corridor, joying in his escape, but also, it must be confessed, with a palpable sense of dread that the Arch-duke might recover himself and pursue him. Fritz was no coward, and he had done many brave things; but nothing he had ever done had quite tested him like that nightmare episode in the Council Chamber. A brave man does not mind risks; to certain types of bravery the risks scarcely appear, but no man to whom life means anything enjoys facing the absolute certainty of destruction. And Fritz, that evening had faced what he believed certain death, had made the deliberate choice between life and honour, and he had chosen well. Some fate had rescued him when all seemed over, and it is no slur on his physical bravery to admit that with the transport and rapture of relief was mingled an irrational and hysterical dread of pursuit. And if the possibility of such pursuit was too unreal to conquer his exaltation, he yet quickened his footsteps at the mere thought of the infuriated Cyril searching for him with a loaded revolver through the misty corridors of the labyrinthian Strafeburg.

And so, light of head and heavy of limb, childish joy mingling with childish dread, he sped breathlessly and blunderingly on, upstairs and downstairs, along passages that led to other passages, and along passages that led to nowhere; in and out of ghostly, dismantled rooms, trying locked doors, opening musty cupboards, utterly lost, perspiring freely yet still maintaining his delirious joy in his spared life and his laughable terror of an unseen pursuer. Finally he came to a dark, steep stairway, and descending its gloomy depths he found himself in a stone-flagged passage which was entirely devoid of light. Stumbling helplessly in the dark, his extended fingers touched a door-handle. He turned it, the door yielded to his pressure, and he found himself in a brilliantly illuminated gallery. The sudden transmission from utter darkness to intense light bewildered his senses, and he stood blinking in the beams of the arc lamps like an owl in strong sunshine. When objects began to present themselves normally to his sight he perceived that he was in a gallery of a public museum which contained innumerable pictures, some fine suits of armour, and what was more important, a number of presumably law-abiding citizens.

Standing thus, taking his bearings, a voice came to his ears, a vaguely familiar voice, though one which for the moment escaped identification.

"It is so kind of you, Mrs. Saunders," the voice said, "to tell us all the inner history of the political situation. It makes our visit to Grimland so much more interesting when one is permitted to see beneath the surface of things."

Fritz saw what he wondered he had not seen before—three ladies seated on a bench close to him, with their backs towards him. One was Mrs. Perowne, who had just spoken, and the other two were Mrs. Saunders and Miss Perowne. His entrance had been unnoticed, and some influence chained him, listening, to the spot.

"Grimland's politics are painfully interesting to me," Mrs. Saunders replied, "because my husband takes an active part in them. He was devoted to the late King, and it is dangerous work being unselfishly attached to anyone in this country."

"And to think that even at this moment, and somewhere in this building," Mrs. Perowne went on, "the Council of the Rathsherren may be making their momentous choice of a Regent."

Mrs. Saunders consulted a tiny watch. "They will have made their choice by now," she returned. "I expect my husband will shortly be in possession of their decision."

"But I thought the decision was not to be announced for a week," objected Mrs. Perowne, "and that the Rathsherren were the most secretive of people."

MR. SAUNDERS laughed softly. "Someone is spying on this Council," she said.

Miss Perowne showed a sudden interest at these words. She had been terribly bored with the pictures and the armour, and hitherto not particularly enlivened by Mrs. Saunders' political disquisition. The human touch however, roused her.

"Spying," she ejaculated. "That is a dangerous game, isn't it?"

"Very," affirmed Mrs. Saunders. "But our spy is the bravest man in Grimland."

"Who is he?" asked Mrs. Perowne. "Needless to say," said Mrs. Saunders, "all I am saying and have said is an absolute secret."

She got a hurried reassurance from both her companions and lowering her



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