

Goose Market. And even if his hands were clean they would be right to detest him. The man is a libertine; his daily life is an outrage against civilization. I know we are no saints in Grimland; I know that morality is not expected of the rich and nobly-born; but there are limits even to our tolerance. What of the Castle of Wolfsnaden? Is it a house of good fame and clean repute? I say that this man whom you name for the Regency is a man of ruined blood and withered conscience. I say that to put such a one at the head of the State is a blunder; to put him in charge of a lad of sixteen is a crime!"

The speaker paused, and to the intently listening Fritz the silence that followed was not the silence of contemptuous dissent, but the hush of men moved beyond their wont.

Then the speaker went on in quieter and more persuasive tones:

"And why not give Herr Saunders the Regency? No one questions his loyalty to the late King, or his staunch affection for the late King's heir. Saunders was a man who acted while Cyril hesitated, who endured hardships and dangers while Cyril feasted and drank, who, when the trouble was at end, preached mercy to the vanquished while Cyril slew the helpless. Saunders has the ideal qualities for this difficult post—a brain of ice, a physique of welded iron, and nerves of chilled steel. He will show favour to no party and no faction: he will serve the King and the State of Grimland. He is an honest man, a clean man, and my only fear is that if we ask him to accept this great honour he may refuse. But, my Lord President, let us at least see whether this be so. Before we take this irrevocable and vitally important step, let us see whether the one strong man whom Providence has set in our midst, will—stranger or no stranger—act for the just, honourable and wholesome government of the good country of Grimland."

As the speaker ceased, there was a slight but distinct murmur of approval. He had pleaded an impossible cause, but he had pleaded fearlessly and well. He had advocated an unthinkable procedure, but he had advocated it so eloquently that it had become at least thinkable. And to Fritz, "cribbed, cabined, and confined" in the narrow shell of his beer-barrel, it seemed that the impossible was going to happen, and that the wonderful Englander was going to be elected over the head of the noble and native-born Arch-duke. And strangely enough, Fritz, who ardently desired the Regency for himself, who would have grudged the post to moderate men like Tortenform or Grauberg, even to his own friends like General Meyer or von Bilderbaum, felt nothing but joy in the possibility of Saunders obtaining the coveted distinction. But it was not to be.

Saunders had a round dozen votes, and the Arch-duke Cyril over forty.

The last mentioned therefore was declared Regent-elect of Grimland, and all present were solemnly enjoined by the Freiherr to keep their decision a secret till the formal proclamation was made, a week later, from all public buildings throughout the country. Then the beer-cans were clinked, toasts were drunk, and chattering volubly the body of Councilors left the Chamber.

As soon as he heard the door shut, Fritz pushed up the lid of his barrel, and protruded his head cautiously above the summit of his cask.

To his utter amazement he saw another head similarly protruded from one of the barrels on the opposite side of the room.

CHAPTER X.

Question and Answer.

THE head that Fritz found himself gazing at was a sufficiently striking one, and the great candelabrum that hung from the coved ceiling shed ample light on its features.

The face was that of a man of about forty, and was crowned with a thicket of dark red hair. Beneath bushy eyebrows, and close-set against a long, fleshy nose, glowed two eyes of palest blue—the hard, cold blue that is fre-

quently seen on the eyes of great generals and great criminals, and is symptomatic of entire ruthlessness.

There was a brick-red moustache brushed fiercely upwards, as if to show the grimly drooping corners of the cruel mouth. There was a ruddy square-out beard, and below that there was nothing visible but the barrel which contained the body.

"Who are you?" demanded the head. The expression was menacing; the voice doubly so.

Fritz knew the head and the man it belonged to. Even if he had not known it he would have realized that he was face to face with a vehemently hostile personality. There was a world of savage strength and raw virility stamped on those unprepossessing features; but if there was an evil emanation suggestive of much sinning, the atmosphere bespoke the vigorous brute rather than the worn-out debauchee. But besides these indications of nature, Fritz knew his man, and the knowledge did nothing to allay his apprehensions. Apparently he himself was not known to his questioner, and he made up his mind not to reveal himself.

"If it comes to that," he returned politely, "who are you?"

The drooping corners of the mouth went up, and the resulting smile was even more sardonic than the previous scowl.

"I have not the least objection to answering your question," the head rejoined, with a courteousness almost equal to Fritz's, "though I gather from your asking it that you are a stranger to Grimland. I am the Arch-duke Cyril, hereditary Prince of Wolfsnaden-Oberstein."

"Then I congratulate you," said Fritz coolly, "on being Regent-elect of Grimland."

"I am much beholden to you, sir, and if you answer my questions quickly and truthfully I may congratulate you on having found me in an amiable mood. Who are you?"

"I am a gentleman."

"Your name?"

"Would not interest you."

Down went the corners of the mouth again, and the Arch-duke peered cautiously on all sides of him to make certain that they were alone. Then he protruded his shoulders and arms above the top of his barrel, and calmly presented a revolver at Fritz's head.

"I did not quite catch your name?" he said.

A wave of heat passed through Fritz's limbs. He was unarmed, and he knew that the man who threatened him was no respecter of human life. He did not wish to die, for life had become very interesting the last few days. Unwilling to yield information to his rival, and unwilling to goad him to extremities, he temporized.

"You did not catch my name," he answered, "because I did not mention it. The last time my name was asked for I gave myself the title of Herr Lugner."

The blue eyes hardened, and the cruel mouth set itself in even sterner lines.

"Young man, you are very near death."

Fritz knew that the simple words contained a vast and horrible truth. The hand that held the lethal weapon needed but a message from a remorseless brain, and he was blotted out from among the living things of the world.

"Kindly pay me the compliment of listening very intently to what I am about to say," pursued the Arch-duke. "I have asked you your name, and you have retorted with a foolish jest. That is a trifle, though it is a trifle which nearly sent a bullet crashing through the vacuum where your brain ought to be. What I must know, if you wish to leave this Chamber alive, is what you are doing here."

"I have been doing what you have been doing," Fritz replied, "listening to the proceedings of the Council from the concealment of a beer-barrel."

"So much I gathered," retorted the Regent-elect dryly. "Now for something which partakes of the nature of information. Who smuggled you in? Whose interests do you serve? Who are you?"

(To be continued.)

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