

THE STAR, ST. JOHN N. B. SATURDAY, AUGUST 10, 1907

SOPHY KRAVIA

A Novel, by Anthony Hope.

Author of "Prisoner of Zenda" "The Intrusions of Peggy," Etc.

Continued.

The square of St. Michael was full of life and bustle. The Golden Lion did a fine trade. But the centre of interest was on the north wall and the adjacent quays, under the shadow of Suleiman's Tower. Within those walls were the two protagonists. There the Prince issued his orders; thither Mistleh had been secretly conveyed the night before by a party of the Prince's own guard, trustworthy Volensians.

A crowd of citizens and soldiers was chattering and staring at the Tower when Sophy's carriage drew up at the entrance of the bridge, which crossing the North River, gave access to the fort. The mouth of the bridge was guarded by fifty of those same Volensians. They had but to retreat and raise the bridge behind them, and Mistleh was safe in the trap. Only the crowd was quick enough to understand the situation—the prisoner's trap could be made a snare for his jailer, too. Unless provisions could be obtained from the country round it, it would be impossible to hold the Tower for long against a hungry army controlling the city's water supply. Sophy sat watching him, not thinking now, but waiting, conscious only that by what seemed almost a chance, a new face had, through her, been put into the situation.

Suddenly Zerkovitch brought his clenched fist down on the table. "Not his almost shadow. 'They'll think you're afraid!'"

"Yes, they'll think that—but not all of them, Stenovic will know better—and Stenovic, too. They'll know I do it, not because I'm afraid, but in order that I never need be."

"Then Stenovic won't give them," cried Marie.

"I think he must give anything or everything for Mistleh," he rose and paced restlessly about the room. Sophy still followed him with her eyes, but she alone of the three offered no argument and made no suggestion. The Prince stood still for a moment in deep thought, and then he turned to her and said quickly up to Sophy, took her hand, and kissed it.

"Thank you," he said, "I don't know how it will turn out for me; the case is too difficult for me to be able to foresee that. For me it may mean—well, I always thought it would mean that. Or perhaps, somehow, it may turn out to be a happy one. But the question isn't one of my interest. My duty is plain."

He walked quickly to his writing-table and unlocked a drawer. He returned to the table with an envelope in his hand, and sat down between Marie and Zerkovitch.

The orderly entered again, announcing Stenovic. "Let him come in here," said the Prince. His manner grew lighter, and the smile which had comforted Sophy remained on his face. Stenovic came in; his air was nervous, and he looked at the Prince's three companions with a visible eagerness to be alone with him. He placed a chair for the General, and withdrew.

"The same old story we discussed last night, General?"

"There can be but one matter in the thoughts of all of us now, Sir. Pardon me—I understood your royal Highness would receive me alone."

The Prince gave a low laugh. "When one bargains, should one have witnesses?"

In an instant Stenovic laid hold of the significant envelope. It made him feel the need for privacy. An eager light came into his eyes.

"Bargains? You're ready now to—"

"La nuit porte conseil," he drew a paper from the envelope, unfolded it, and handed it across the table. "You remember that memorandum I sent to you three months ago—in my capacity as Commandant?"

Stenovic looked at the paper. "I remember, Sir."

"It's endorsed in your hand?"

"Yes."

"The memorandum runs: 'Impossible. Rather curt, General?'"

"The note was for my private use, but your Royal Highness was particularly pressed for the return of the document."

"I did. And, after all, why use more words than necessary? One will still be enough—but not that one."

"I'm not following you, Sir," said Stenovic.

The Prince leaned across the table to him. "In our conversation, last night, you asked me to do a very remarkable thing, and to do it this lady here—the indicated Sophy—to do it, too. You remember? We were to think that, at night, in the Street of the Fountain, in the light of the illuminations, Sergius Stenovic and Nicholas Stenovic looked—and sound—to you the same. I didn't see my way to that, and I didn't think this lady would see her. It seemed so difficult."

Stenovic was in a strain of close attention. The paper from the envelope crackled under the trembling of his hand.

"Now, if we had such a memory as Lieutenant Tassata is happy enough to possess," the Prince pursued, "or if Colonel Stenovic had taken us into his confidence about his quarrel with Captain Mistleh! All that was not so late night. Consequently, Captain Mistleh must be tried and shot, instead of suffering some not very severe disciplinary punishment, for having in the street and having a quarrel with his superior officer."

Stenovic marked every word, and understood the implied offer. The offer was good enough; Stenovic himself would not have been able to do it. He could not ask that his own whatever should be taken. The trifling nature of the punishment would in itself be a great victory. But he had decided to him by Mistleh's blundering. But with the big guns in position, and the sturdy men of Volensians behind him—would a good hand ever come?

There were but three in the inner secret of the scheme, but they were three of the longest heads in Kravonia.

Stenovic waved his hand towards the city. But the Prince interrupted him.

"Never mind that," he said, rather sharply. "That's not first in my mind, or I should have left the matter where it rested last night. I was thinking of the difference to Captain Mistleh—and perhaps to you, General."

He looked full at Stenovic, and the General's eyes fell. The Prince pointed his finger across the table at the paper under Stenovic's hand.

"I'm a liberal bargainer," he said, "and I offer you a good margin of profit. I'll change two words if you'll change one—two for you against one for me! 'Sergius Stenovic' becomes 'Nicholas Stenovic' if 'Impossible' becomes 'Impossible'."

Stenovic gave one slight start, then leaned back in his chair and looked across the Prince out of the window opposite to him.

"Make that change, and we'll settle details afterwards. I must have full guarantees. I must see the order sent, and the money deposited in my name and at my disposal."

"This afternoon, Sir?"

"Wouldn't it be well to release Captain Mistleh from Suleiman's Tower before tonight?"

"The money is difficult today."

"The release will be impossible to-morrow."

Again Stenovic's eyes wandered to the window, and a silence followed. Perhaps he saw the big guns already in position, dominating the city; perhaps he listened to the hum of voices which began to swell the volume from the west and from the quays. There are times when a man must buy the present with a mortgage on the future, however onerous the terms may be. It was danger against danger. He put out his hand and took from Zerkovitch a quill which the journalist was twiddling in his fingers. He made a scratch and a scribble on the paper which the Prince had taken from the envelope.

"It's possible! It's become immediate," he said.

"And 'Sergius Stenovic' becomes 'Nicholas Stenovic'?"

"Yes," said the Prince. He looked at Sophy for confirmation, and she softly clapped her hands.

THE BARONESS GOES TO COURT.

The troops of the garrison and their allies, the seam of the streets, thought that they had scored a great victory and inflicted deep humiliation on the unpopular martinet who ruled the event with his bare hands. They celebrated the night's confinement to barracks with feelings in which thankfulness, though not gratitude, predominated. He found his popularity with them greater than ever. But in the higher circles—the inner ring—the party he served, and the subtle influence by which Stenovic would not see him; Stenovic saw him only to express a man's contemptuous judgment on his conduct.

Yielding in appearance, in point of substance the Prince of Kravonia had ordered from Germany. The Prince had the money to pay for them, and he had the money to be assigned to him; these were the guarantees which he had asked for Stenovic. When the money came and he had made his own payment for early delivery—his trust was well justified. With his money behind him, he was not master of his own fate. He had already obtained the King's sanction to raise and train a force of artillery from among his own men in Volensian and his neighborhood. The men of Volensian were proud against the King's bragging, but the subtle influence by which Stenovic held his power over the rank and file of the army. They were true to the King's family pride was touched; it was the one thing which could arouse him. At his son's express request—and at that only—he acquiesced in the release of Mistleh and the satellite Stenovic, but he was determined to make his own attitude clear and to do what he could to restore the prestige of his family. The Prince said that the prestige would profit him, and Stenovic readily consented. He declared that something more must be done for the lady to whom his son owed his life; to be made a convenient recompense, but was not honor enough. Stenovic declared that no mark of favor which His Majesty possessed, the Prince pursued, "or if Colonel Stenovic had taken us into his confidence about his quarrel with Captain Mistleh! All that was not so late night. Consequently, Captain Mistleh must be tried and shot, instead of suffering some not very severe disciplinary punishment, for having in the street and having a quarrel with his superior officer."

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Countess Ellenburg was a plump woman and of exemplary demeanor; her husband, Markart, told Sophy women were ambitious and she had borne the King a son. Stenovic saw himself cast aside like an old glove if Prince Sergius came to the throne. Stenovic was a born fighter in troubled waters, and threw a skilful net. Twice before in the country's history intrigue had made revolution, and changed the order of succession in the House of Stefanovitch. The three waited on either side, but the King was not yet. If the King was at enmity with his son, or if there was a denise of the Crown while the Prince was not on the spot to look after his interests, there might be an opportunity. But now the King was all cordiality for his son, the Prince, the Prince's friends, the spot; the apparatus and the Volensian gunners threatened to be on the spot, too, ere long. It was not now the matter for the big stake.

King Alexis was delighted with his new Order and the Grand Master insignia were very popular. In the evening of a five-pointed star St. Michael slew the Dragon—a symbol perhaps of the Volensian tunic or the bright blue of the Prince's uniform. There were, some day, to be five other Knights; with the Grand Master and the Sovereign himself the number seven would be reached—but it would never be exceeded; the Order would be most select. All this the King explained in a rapid speech, and with his new toy, while the serious folks listened with a respectful deference and a secret smile. "If he thought the King was a fool, he thought the Prince was a fool," thought the Prince; and probably Countess Stenovic, in attendance as his Majesty's lady-in-waiting, thought so, too. The King had not yet taken to a significance when grown-up people play with them, Countess Ellenburg was not pleased that only one appointment should be made to the Order of St. Michael. 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