

14 VIGOROUS DAUNT: BILLIONAIRE

"A re-establishment of fresh methods of the frontier garrisons, and an enormous increase of defensive and offensive artillery. Half the navy vote has been applied to this purpose."

"France prepares herself, it would seem. But what has all this to do with me?"

"Much; you are an Englishman, but you speak French perfectly."

"I was born in Paris."

"So much the better. You are also an engineer. I wish you at once to set out and obtain for me sketches of the outer works of all major fortifications between Sedan and Belfort; also the number of garrisons, the position and weight of guns."

"A large order, Baron."

"You will be well paid."

"But what if I am caught?"

"You would probably be shot; certainly imprisoned."

I stroked my moustache. "You would not object to the plans being coloured?"

"No, but why?"

"I daub. I could pose as an artist. What are your terms?"

"Four thousand francs down, ten times that amount if you are successful. What do you say?"

"Not much; I know a man in Paris who would give me four thousand francs for a report of this conversation."

Baron Hochstuhl surveyed me with a fierce stare. "Yesterday, you were starving," he said icily.