

that a bridegroom wears when he sees his bride coming up the aisle to the altar steps. But I have never seen a craver smile or a cooler demeanour than Fritz wore when I called him a coward before a room full of the foremost citizens of Weidenbruck. To refuse a challenge under such conditions was not cowardice; it was consummate heroism."

The Arch-duke uttered a big oath. "By the horns of Satan!" he cried, "I have powerful enemies. Meyer the Jew! If one could look through those slits of his half-closed eyes, what a maze of plot and counterplot could be seen seething in his Semitic brain!" "Meyer is a Jew, and Grimlander's do not love Jews," said the ex-Queen encouragingly. "His influence can never be paramount. Also he is an old man, and must soon be superannuated."

"SAUNDERS, the late King's favourite," said Cyril, unheeding her, "a strong, self-satisfied, complacent pig of an Englishman. A man of iron will, careful, shrewd, taking no unnecessary risks till the time comes for risking all, and then plunging into the contest with all the fire and recklessness of a madman."

"He is a foreigner," said Charlotte, "and therefore can never lead any national faction against you."

"And Fritz of Friedrichsheim," Cyril concluded, "a man who does not know fear!"

"Strong opposition should call forth strong action," said the ex-Queen. "Fritz must die!"

Cyril laughed bitterly. "You carry his photograph in your album," he said, "and a tender inscription adorns it, so it seems."

"Fritz is nothing to me now," said Charlotte. "He passed me in the street to-day without a glance of interest or understanding. He is dead to me, therefore his life is no longer any concern of mine."

Cyril laughed contemptuously. Then he turned to Major von Lacherberg. "You hear what Her Majesty says, Lacherberg? Fritz must die."

The Major was silent a moment, then he answered: "I am Your Highness's executioner. I can kill, but I must have precise instructions as to how the killing is to be performed."

"Curse it, man!" cried Cyril wrathfully. "Is it not enough to say to a soldier, 'Kill'? You wear a sword, and no one understands its use better than yourself."

"It takes two to make a duel, Highness. If a man refuses to fight—"

"He must take the consequences," interrupted the ex-Queen. "If he will not defend himself, let him die defenceless."

"Look here, Lacherberg," went on Cyril thoughtfully, "you know the slums and stews of Weidenbruck as well as any man. You know the purlieus of the Goose Market and the Ghetto, and the sort of fellows who live in the worm-eaten houses of the Morast. They are socialists, red-republicans, anarchists, and criminals of the most desperate kind. They would kill their own fathers or brothers for a dozen kronen; they would kill an aristocrat like the Baron of Friedrichsheim for the price of a vermuth. Move among them; ply them with drink; bribe them with gold; tell them what you want, and I guarantee that within three days Fritz's body will be found floating in the Niederkessel with the throat slashed from ear to ear."

The dragoon nodded thoughtfully. "A dirty business, Highness," he said dispassionately.

"Von Lacherberg is becoming tender-hearted," laughed Cyril bitterly. "Fritz must be a delicate piece of flesh if my old fighting dog hesitates to put his teeth into him."

"I did not say I hesitated, Highness: I said it was a dirty piece of work."

"I see, I see," said Cyril, taking the soldier by the arm with rough good-humour. "You want to be paid, eh, old friend? You have the misfortune to be a poor gentleman, whose only capital is his sword, and who therefore demands a high rate of interest if he is to make life tolerable. You are right. I am a generous master. The day you bring me news of Fritz's

decease I will write you a cheque for—"

The Major raised a stiff arm. "You call me a poor gentleman," he said. "You are mistaken. It is true I am poor, but I am not a gentleman. But I was one once, and because I was once I will take no money for what you bid me do. You command and I obey; that is the natural relation between a prince and his man-at-arms. But I take no blood money; that would make not a dirty piece of work but a foul and filthy crime."

Lacherberg's eyes looked straight in front of him without the slightest expression. His hand went up in a wooden salute. He turned on his heel in military fashion, and was gone.

Cyril laughed a little nervously. "I have never known Lacherberg so scrupulous," he said. "Assuredly Fritz of Friedrichsheim carries some mysterious charm about him if he can turn that debauched old swashbuckler into a human being with a conscience."

Charlotte approached the Arch-duke, took his hand and gazed up into his face.

"Courage, my good friend," she said. "For fifteen years you have lived a life of retirement, of pleasure and insignificance. Your enemies said you were a mere voluptuary, wedded to wine, indolence, and ignoble delights. Your friends said you were waiting, biding your time, seeking your opportunity. The time has come, the hour has struck, the old King is dead. You have emerged from your retirement; you have made clear your willingness to play your part in the State. The omens are favourable, the first step is won; you have been elected with scarcely any opposition to the great position of Regency. The battle is over; you have but to hold your own, and the game is yours."

Cyril looked shrewdly at the beautiful eyes which gazed up into his own. "Do you suppose that the Regency will content me?" he asked in slow, deliberate tones.

"What do you mean?" "I mean that I did not give up the delights of Wolfsnaden, the liberties of a private gentleman—which I assure you I value highly—in order to govern Grimland for the twelve months of young Karl's minority."

"But Karl, my boy Karl—" "You boy Karl, whom, by the way, you have not spoken to for about ten years, is delicate—"

"He has a splendid constitution," interrupted Charlotte.

"He is delicate—politically. It takes a strong man, not an inexperienced lad, to rule a country like Grimland. It would not be fair, it would not be humane, to let him essay such a task."

"Cyril! What do you mean?" "I mean, my little Charlotte, that the future King of Grimland stands before you."

THE ex-Queen released Cyril's hand, and gazed at him with bewilderment. "But my boy," she murmured.

"Is delicate."

"He is not delicate. He will live—" "He will live at Wolfsnaden," interrupted Cyril. "Weidenbruck is too damp for him. In my castle, under my fatherly eye, breathing the glorious air of my mountains and pine forests, he will live healthily, pleasurably if he is so inclined, and in peace. For his sake I will run the risks and perform the labours of kingship."

"But, Cyril, this is a revelation."

"It is to you, my dear, but not to my enemies. Do you suppose I should fear opposition to my claim to the Regency if I intended to play the Regent? No, it is because I am aiming high that I foresee trouble. Meyer, Saunders, and Fritz are not enemies to my Regency, but loyalists to the House of Karl."

"And am not I a loyalist to the House of Karl?"

Cyril took her strongly in his arms and kissed her.

"You are loyal to Cyril of Wolfsnaden," he said.

She returned the kiss, and clung to him.

"I am loyal to Cyril of Wolfsnaden," she repeated in a low voice.

(To be continued.)

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