

tral Meat Market, and however dubious might be the sway of earthly sovereigns over that unstable monarchy, there was no disputing the supremacy of King Frost over those central European highlands. The temperature was degrees below zero in the shade; the snow was many feet deep on the hill-sides; and the rush and music of torrents and cascades were crystalized into silence and rigidity by the chemie power of intense cold.

But the sky was cloudless, and the sun's rays penetrated the thin dry air with no uncertain force, making the sway of the Frost King as genial, health-giving and delightful as it was paramount.

At a bend of the road, as the track entered a narrow valley whose sides towered skywards in walls of fleckless white, the driver reined in his horses.

The reason for the halt was not apparent, for the gradient was still an easy one, and there was no sign of human habitation which could afford refreshment for man or beast. The coachman, however, dismounted and removed the bell-collars from the necks of his horses, put them carefully on his pile of mail-bags, and proceeded on his journey at a walking pace. The sun still shone brightly from the unclouded sky, and the scenery became, if anything, more beautiful than before, but no guttural noises urged the horses to a more vigorous speed; no cheerful folk-songs issued from the hirsute throat, no whip shook the frosty air with its staccato pistol shots.

Max Stein—for that was the driver's name—had entered that portion of his route which bore the sinister title of the "Schlect Weg," the evil way!

This nomenclature was gained by reason of its great liability to snow subsidences, the dreaded shlaglawinen, to stroke-avalanches, which deal certain death to all who stand in the way of their predestined course.

A snow avalanche is one of the most terrible things in nature, perhaps, excepting a typhoon or a volcanic eruption, the most terrible thing.

When an avalanche is ripe to fall it is started by the least thing: the tones of the human voice, the cracking of a whip, or the thud of a horse's hoof. When it is started no earthly power can check it. A huge mass of snow, gathering speed and bulk and momentum every foot of its descent, hurls itself in a thundering mass of debris from the cornice of the mountain-side to the sunless depth of the valley. Anything that stands in its path, be it pine or rock, man or beast, is engulfed in its demon embrace, and is absorbed, and crushed, and obliterated to the crashing symphony of the re-echoing hills.

This was why Max Stein had taken the bell-collars from his horses' necks; this was why his whip was relegated to inactivity, and why song and light-heartedness had given place to silence and preoccupation. Suddenly he saw the figure of a man on horseback galloping rapidly down the road towards him.

He cursed under his breath, and then crossed himself, for the galloping hoofs were making dangerous music in that sinister region, and he was angry with the horseman for unnecessarily exposing them to the nameless perils of the lawine. When the rider drew near to the post he reined in his steed, and occupied the centre of the way with upraised hand.

Stein had a vision of a very big man on a very large black horse. The man wore a woollen cap pushed back from a high, domed forehead. Beneath well-marked eyebrows, a pair of grey, small eyes burned with a steady, strong, persistent flame. A small moustache, less wide than the rather large mouth, pushed a scrubby growth from the upper lip. The chin was big, cleft, and masterful. The face was neither handsome nor ugly, but it was intensely virile. It bespoke attributes absolutely ideal for one in the prime rather than the youth of life: strength, command, a grim sense of humour, resource, calmness bordering on cynicism. Stein scarcely noted the physiognomical traits or the iron frame of the matured athlete. He merely perceived that the traveller was not wearing uniform,

and authority divorced from uniform is an idea that has difficulty in penetrating the recesses of the Grimland mind.

"Gott in Himmel!" he growled surlily, "you are stopping His Majesty's post."

"What Majesty?" retorted the stranger blandly, in an accent that was not precisely that of a Grimlander.

"His Majesty King Karl XXII.," replied Stein, raising his hat.

"His Majesty King Karl XXII. died at five o'clock this morning," said the stranger, also raising his hat. "Therefore you see it is not his post I am stopping."

Stein crossed himself, and ejaculated another "Gott in Himmel!" Then reflecting that the next argument lay with him, he pursued: "But if Karl XXII. is dead, and if so, God rest his soul, Karl XXIII. is King, and you are stopping his post."

"You are strangely ignorant of the constitution of your own country," rejoined the horseman. "The late Karl's son is a minor, and, according to the law of Grimland, he cannot be crowned till he is seventeen, which is not for another twelve months. In the meantime the country will be governed by a Regent, who will be appointed by the Council of Nobles, the ancient body of the Rathsherren."

Stein scratched his head. He was anything but an authority on Constitutional Law, but he was an obstinate man.

"Then you are stopping the Regent's post," he said at length.

"The Regent will not be chosen before next Wednesday," retorted the stranger, with a polite smile.

"Thunder and lightning! Then you are stopping my post," cried Stein angrily.

"That is more like it, my good man," laughed the horseman; "and since I am stopping the post of a very humble individual I am not doing anything particularly violent or terrible. And I stopped your picturesque conveyance because I want a certain letter you are bearing from Wolfsnaden."

"You—a civilian, a foreigner perhaps—want a letter out of my sealed post-bags!"

"That is so."

"Mein Gott! If I were not afraid of starting a shlag-lawine I should laugh."

"I recognize that merriment might be dangerous, but even at the risk of provoking it I must insist on having the letter."

"Why?"

"First, because I want it. Secondly," continued the horseman, producing a Mauser pistol from under his cloak, "because I mean to have it."

Stein's astonishment nearly caused him to fall off the box. This man was not in outward appearance a brigand, he was not an official, and he demanded a letter with threats of violence.

"And if I refuse?" he managed to get out.

"I shall put a little extra pressure with my first finger on the hair trigger," said the horseman, airily, aiming point-blank at the driver's head. "That is all."

Stein's face was a study. Fear had penetrated his soul, but he would not yield till he had played his last card.

"If you fire your pistol," he said, "you will kill me; but you also bring down an avalanche, and we and our horses will all perish together."

"Then you will not compel me to extremities," rejoined the other, with his impassive calm.

Despite the frost Stein felt the perspiration trickling on his forehead. Stubborn though he was, he realized that he was face to face with someone inexorable as fate.

"Who are you?" he asked, after a pause.

"My name is Saunders."

"Herr Saunders!" ejaculated Stein, mentioning an Englishman whose name had been interwoven with some of the country's most violent history. "Gott in Himmel! Why did you not say so before? I am only a poor man; I cannot browbeat your Excellency. You want a letter; take as many as you please."

(To be continued.)

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