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dining-room like a being from another world.

Of whatever peculiarities the type of the Rathsherren consisted, the Prime Minister possessed none of them. He was a short, thick-set, determined-looking individual, with dark hair and a scrubby black moustache, and practically no neck at all. His nose was fully as aquiline as that of the Freiherr von Kraag, but it lacked the fine bridge-bone and the delicate curve of the nostrils. The one suggested the eagle, the other the crow.

No one rose or offered the slightest civility to the intruder.

"Do you desire to see me officially or unofficially, Herr Drechsler?" began the Freiherr coldly.

"I find you met in an unofficial gathering," replied the Prime Minister, "but I nevertheless come on an official errand. I am deputed by my colleagues to approach you on a matter of the highest importance."

"Pray continue."

"The Rathsherren will meet at four o'clock in the old Council Chamber in the Strafeburg," the Prime Minister went on. "It is not unnatural to presume that the decision which will be recorded at that official meeting may have been influenced by an unofficial discussion such as is now taking place at your lordship's board."

"Very possible," agreed the Freiherr, politely smothering a yawn.

"Well, then," resumed the Premier, "since the informal gathering may well be the more important of the two, I should like to place certain aspects of the situation before your lordships."

"You desire to offer us advice?" demanded the Freiherr, with a freezing sarcasm he knew so well how to employ.

The scowl that sat on Drechsler's brow deepened. He hated the nobles quite as much as they despised him, but being something of a patriot as well as a social democrat, he was not unwilling to do his share in straightening out of the tangle of the times.

"If the word 'advice' is unpalatable," he said, "we will substitute the expression 'suggest.' I am going to 'suggest,' then, that when the time comes for you to decide on the person who is to be Regent, you also decide that that person shall be someone who is agreeable to the people's elected representative."

"Herr Drechsler looked round at the seated herren to see the effect of his words. He might as well have gazed at a marble cliff, or a heap of boulders, for all the effect his words produced. Some of them were smoking, some were sipping, but the impassivity of their countenances was absolute. Despite the warmth of the room the poor Premier felt like an ill-clad wayfarer at sunset when the wind was blowing from the mountains. He was accustomed to speak in an assembly where friends shouted their applause, and foes bellowed their dissent. The frigid silence of restrained contempt was hateful and almost overpowering, but he went bravely on:

"The last time that a king of Grimland died, leaving his heir a minor, was in the year 1591," he said, "and on that occasion the Rathsherren elected a certain Hertzog Arnim von Grusis to the Regency. He was a hard man, who oppressed the people; he taxed the poor that he might live in greater luxury, he administered the laws according to the caprices of his own lust. The people bore it because he was powerful, and they were weak. But since then a great deal of snow, as the saying is, has fallen on the mountain-tops."

"A great deal of snow has fallen," agreed the Freiherr calmly, "and a great deal has melted. The average depths of the snow on the mountain-tops is probably much the same as it was in the year 1591."

Herr Drechsler permitted himself a gesture of impatience.

"You imply that nothing has changed?" he said.

"I imply nothing," said the Freiherr icily. "I merely press your metaphor to its logical conclusion."

Herr Drechsler folded his arms. The duty he had come to discharge was disagreeable enough, and a glance at the hard faces of his listen-

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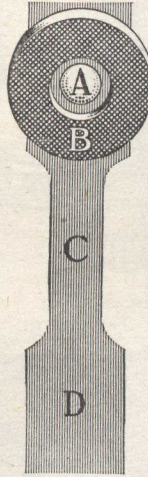
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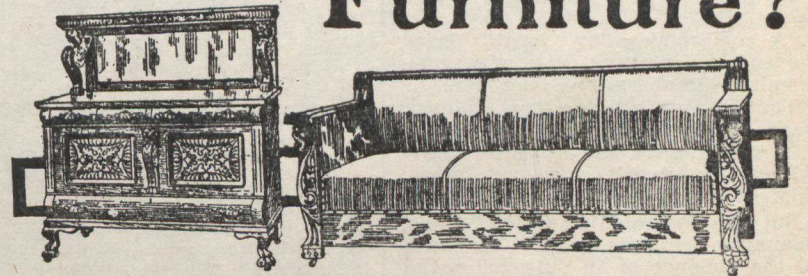
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