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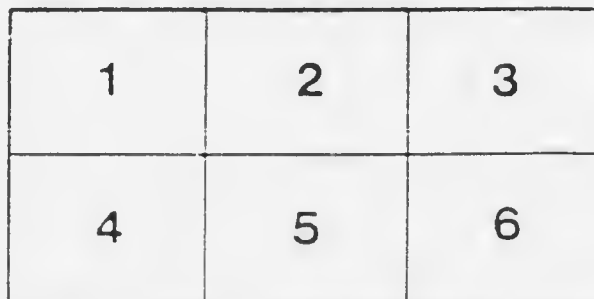
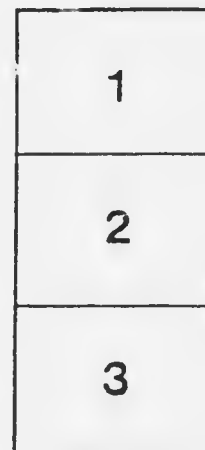
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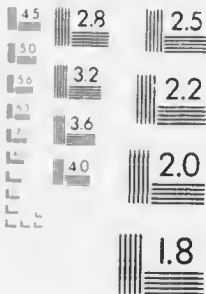
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THE MAN WHO STOLE THE EARTH.



CO

W. HOLT-WHITE



THE MAN WHO STOLE THE EARTH







THE MAN WHO STOLE THE EARTH

BY
W. HOLT-WHITE

AUTHOR OF
"THE EARTHQUAKE"

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THE MAN WHO STOLE THE EARTH

CHAPTER I

MR MONTGOMERY JONES

FLUP!

The bullet peeled away the bark of the beech tree beneath which Mr Montgomery Jones was leaning and shot across his face.

But being forewarned by suspicion, Mr Jones was forearmed, and he lounged back just in time.

He lounged back languidly, almost gracefully, but none the less quickly, and he had time to note that in the motor-launch on which he had kept such careful watch were two men. One of them sat by the tiller, and his dark eyes were upon Mr Jones. The other occupant of the little craft leant against the gunwale, and his eyes, too, were upon Mr Jones.

"Air-gun," said Mr Jones to himself, as he heard the soft flup of the spinning bark from the tree, and he edged further round the trunk.

The launch went on its way up the Thames, making for Cookham. The hour was high noon.

Mr Jones, however, was not minded to let the launch go far without his active interference. Like a flash, his hand went to his hip-pocket, and he drew out a Smith and Wessen with a long nose. His left hand shot up to his right to steady it, and in a second he had laid a careful train upon the launch. There was a report, and the man in the launch who had been leaning over the side of the boat fell forward with a small purple

patch on his forehead. A heavy air-gun dropped from his hand with a splash into the stream.

The other man in the launch swooped forward and lifted the dead man back into the boat. As he did so the launch swung round and shot over towards the opposite bank, but with a turn of his wrist he put her course dead up-stream again. The boat ran up beyond the bend of the river and disappeared.

Mr Montgomery Jones replaced his revolver in his pocket and sat down beneath the tree which had at once been the means of his sure defence and the cover of his deadly attack. He sighed softly to himself.

Not that he was in any way disturbed. He sat still like a man waiting for the fulfilment of pre-arranged events. He was calculating to a nicety exactly what would happen. In this mathematical optimism he was to a great extent justified. For an hour he had watched the apparently innocent manœuvres of the motor-launch which had lain just down-stream. He had watched these manœuvres with a vast amount of interest, for Mr Jones was possessed of a sense passing rare in men, but extremely common in women—the sense of keen, unsleeping suspicion.

In women this sense is called intuition; in men it is accounted reprehensible. None the less, history can be called to prove it has made most great men great. So let us call the sense that dominated Mr Montgomery Jones suspicion or intuition, as you will. It does not do away with the fact that he had a vague foreboding about the natty little steam-launch that hovered, wasp-like, just down-stream.

He had perceived it first as he sat among the rhododendrons in his garden by the river. It had gone by him swiftly, but not so swiftly that in the interval which came between taking his cigar from his mouth and replacing it, he had noted two pairs of keen, watchful, and, as he thought, antagonistic eyes, observing every detail of his appearance and every detail of his surroundings.

It is astonishing what an amount of intuition a guilty conscience will give one.

And Mr Montgomery Jones had a guilty conscience passing the dreams of most criminals.

His self-possession, however, was enormous, and therefore, though apprehensive, he had deliberately watched the passing of the launch up-stream while he enjoyed the quiet satisfaction derived from an exceedingly fine cigar. Out of sight, beyond the bend of the river, this launch had turned about. At all events, it came swishing past him again more slowly, and nearer the bank. Then, a couple of hundred yards or so down-stream, it had turned about once more to lie on the face of the water restful and seemingly innocent.

But to Mr Montgomery Jones it was passively menacing. His conscience—or perhaps, to be more just, his knowledge of himself and his affairs—made him exceedingly alive to danger. For Mr Montgomery Jones possessed a mental attribute which in greater men than he has gone to account for courage. The world thinks that a brave man looks forward to know the worst. That is a fine motive, perhaps, but the student of human nature knows the same motive impels the burglar to look over the fence to see if the constable is on the other side. The motive, by another name, is caution.

And, paradoxical though it may seem, it was the lesser degree of this motive that prompted Mr Montgomery Jones openly to court danger.

He had gone down to the edge of the water, and sat upon the bank smoking his cigar with the apparently satisfied aplomb of the manager of a travelling theatre who has lured a village audience to its gratification and the benefit of the box-office. Mr Jones, indeed, was altogether a self-complacent-looking man. He was tall and plump; his black hair and drooping black moustache were sleek. He wore his eye-glasses with a calm that amounted to dignity.

Not once did he glance in the direction of the launch.

He sighed and he puffed, and he puffed and he sighed. The ash from his cigar fell crisply on the dried leaves at his feet.

At last the launch got under way again, and came quietly up-stream. Mr Montgomery Jones yawned, rose up, stretched himself, and leaned carelessly against the tree beneath which he had waited.

Then came the sudden movement in the launch which caused him to draw back—the shot that sent the bark flying past his face, and his swift, decided, and deadly answer to the attack. Then also arose a circumstance which was to make Mr Jones one of the centrepieces of a drama which was to utterly transform all the methods of the peace and warfare of the world.

For as the launch had passed by Mr Montgomery Jones' resting-place among the rhododendrons, there had come out from a low-built and tiny bungalow on the further shore a young man who could never have passed through life unnoticed, if only by reason of his extraordinary stature. He stood at least six feet three inches, and was heavily built, having the round, wide shoulders of the natural born boxer—the round, wide, sweeping shoulders one expects to find in a man who, if he is not a puncher of other men, or a feller of trees, or a boiler-maker, may at least be counted as a "hustler."

Yet John Strong, son of Sir John Strong, Bart., descendant of more baronets than one can count fingers on both hands, had so far never "hustled" in the body. Up till then, indeed, he had never "hustled" either in spirit or in mind. None the less, he had the shoulders of a man who fights hard in this world's dealings. And it is just as well to cast an eye over a man's shoulders as it is to glance into his face when one desires to read his character.

John, as a matter of fact, was nonchalant, which is only a polite way of saying he was lazy because he had no work to do. His face was remarkably handsome, being of that square-set, big-boned type which comes

under the category of strong. This peculiar strength of feature alone saved him from being ridiculously good-looking, for his eyes were big and blue, and his hair brown and curly. To have carried out his appearance he should have done nothing but lounge through life as the hero of sweet little love-tales, in which one act of obstinacy, of self-assertiveness, or self-denial wins a maiden possessed of a face and figure like no other face or figure in the world.

Now, from this it is easy to see that John Strong was unutterably self-sufficient. He was, but it was a self-sufficiency to be excused later because of a spirit of dominion that was to upset the reckonings of a self-satisfied civilisation.

When Strong came out of his bungalow, however, there was no promise of this genius for domination, except perhaps the almost tigerish glint of his strong, white teeth, which he showed in a broad grin between a pair of lips so bold and beautifully chiselled that they would have satisfied a sculptor of ancient Greece.

Strong possessed the Heaven-sent gift of never being surprised, which only comes to those born of a long lineage; an attribute which is quite understandable when one considers that as a rule such persons must be bred in an atmosphere of perpetual wonderment as to why they were born at all. He was genially and genuinely amused by what he saw. It struck him as being surpassingly inappropriate, and therefore marvellously amusing, that one man should fire on another with an air-gun on the Thames in the sunshine of a May morning; and that the man who was so shot at should destroy his enemy was more diverting still. For Strong had seen the glint of the air-gun as it was levelled, had caught the sharp passage of the flying bark of the tree-trunk, the quick but wicked gleam of the revolver of the man behind the tree, and the soft, sickly pitch forward of the dead man in the launch.

He was interested—interested in the vague, superior way of a virtuous person who stands in a crowd to see a

drunken man arrested. Moreover, up to then, he was innocent of any sin against his fellow-men, and therefore without fear. He was brave because he was devoid of any little qualm of conscience, a blessed state of being which makes for the greatest bravery of all.

So interested was he that he stepped with a gently inquiring air from the bank into a punt, and with a few deft strokes thrust the square-nosed craft across the water.

Meantime, Mr Jones, beneath the beech tree, had resumed the quiet investigation of his excellent cigar. Strong put the punt inshore and wedged it between bank and pole.

He grinned affably in a wide and childish way that Mr Jones misread, and thereafter rued the misreading of.

"A bit careless, surely," Strong suggested, "to let that other fellow get away up-stream with a dead man."

Mr Jones came down to the water's edge, took his cigar from his mouth, and surveyed with an apparently affectionate solicitude the hot, red glow of the smouldering ash.

"No," he said thoughtfully and with mild assurance, "not in the least. He will come back."

CHAPTER II

AN AMERICAN MONARCH

Mr JONES looked Strong quickly but thoroughly up and down. He read in his appearance an English gentleman who was quixotically sportsmanlike; an Englishman who in any case would do a friend the best turn he could, keeping silence as to the method of doing it, and afterwards laugh away all thanks.

This in any case would have been sufficient for the quietude of mind of Mr Montgomery Jones. But his was the brain of the business man which possesses the faculty of seizing on every detail and using every opportunity to his own advantage. And he knew that Strong, bare-armed and brave, and apparently impressionable, had been flirting with his daughter in a lazy though well-bred spirit of chivalry that would suffice to keep him silent in matters of vital importance to a possible father-in-law, even though silence involved a doubtful secret. And his secret was a heavy one.

For Mr Montgomery Jones was a great deal more than the ordinary man he seemed to be. He passed on the Thames for a wealthy, independent, and somewhat casual American millionaire. And the inhabitants of the Thames valley, never making inquiries beyond the limits of a man's purse-strings, did not suspect that the complacent American with the endless supply of ready-money was indulging in that luxury of the excessively wealthy, or the unusually exalted, commonly known as an *incognito*.

There were very many who could have stripped away the *incognito* of Mr Jones. The Embassy of every Great Power kept a by no means easy eye upon his neat creeper-trimmed villa.

Mr Montgomery Jones was in reality the very centre of that perpetual human volcano which keeps the statesmen of Europe watchful and open-eyed even in the most piping times of peace. It has been, for Heaven knows how long, a tradition among war correspondents that soon "there will be trouble in the Balkans," and, in a callous way, more than one war correspondent built hopes on Mr Montgomery Jones, whose alias—if a police-court term may be used when speaking of monarchs—was King George II. of Balkania.

Of course, as king of this minor, though tiresome, little state, he could not lay claims to American citizenship. At the same time, he was more American both in appearance and in spirit than he was Balkanian. This, for the reason that his father, George I., had accomplished the hitherto unheard-of feat in a monarch of taking unto himself an American bride, and successfully establishing her as a real and recognised queen. Miss Cynthia Montgomery Jones—for such had been the maiden-name of the King of Balkania's bride—was a lady of almost incalculable wealth, unblushing American patriotism, and a force of character which is essential to the making of a multi-millionaire. And her son George, the present King of Balkania, known in holiday-time by his mother's maiden name of Montgomery Jones, had inherited most of his American parent's characteristics. They were characteristics which were accentuated by the fact that an education at Yale had been followed by a stern training in finance at the hands of a Wall Street broker, a training which his mother had considered as necessary if her son were not to be counted among the more or less bankrupt minor monarchs of Europe.

Therefore it came about that when King George I. of Balkania was followed to the grave by his masterful American Queen, George II. found that if his kingdom were small his fortune and his influence were vast; and he imbued his Balkanian ministers and financial magnates with some of his strong, and to a certain

extent unscrupulous, business spirit. As a result, Balkania, in spite of its romantic past and its picturesque population and surroundings, became an essentially modern and a financially paying concern.

This was a state of affairs which reduced the neighbouring monarch of Sylvania to impotent frenzy. He was jealous and envious of his neighbour's financial prosperity, and yet disgusted with what he regarded as the unpardonable Americanisation of a decent and religious, if mediæval, people. But for his fear of the Czar on one hand and the Kaiser on the other, the hot-headed old Prince of Sylvania would long before have set his army on the march against "the American Kinglet" across the border.

His rage and his spite were not lessened by the fact that his son, Prince Ludwig, had fallen in worship before the shrine of the distasteful American monarch's daughter.

It was indeed a perplexing situation for the savage old man, for while his cupidity urged him to further what he regarded as a disgraceful *mésalliance*, his pride and his envy spurred him to oppose it.

At length, in his senility he hit upon a vicious and cowardly compromise. Officially he gave his sanction to his son's desires. Then, to avenge the sacrifice, he plotted and schemed, with all the craft of his wicked and preposterous old mind, the assassination of his son's potential father-in-law. But his senile craft was quite transparent to the wide-awake King of Balkania. George II. had no overweening love for the dark-browed and too gushing prince who came openly courting his daughter. But the King of Balkania, in the capacity of Mr Montgomery Jones, was a business man, and business men, unless they happen to supply the munitions of war, commonly desire peace. Therefore, for the sake of peace, the King of Balkania was prepared to accept the suit of the gallivanting young Prince Ludwig.

But Princess Diana, the bronze-haired and golden-eyed, the gay and the petulant, the proud and the

candid, was of quite another mind. When the matter came up for discussion, as a matter of state, she had likened Ludwig to a monkey and then flung out of the room. And Mr Jones, King of Balkania, though masterful in most matters, shrugged his shoulders in submission when Diana banged the door.

This increased the Prince of Sylvania's anger, and he sought a further revenge in laying other and deeper plans for the assassination of the King of Balkania. But this did not particularly disturb the semi-American monarch. He had been born and bred to take risks, and another risk or so did not weigh much with him. However, he was watchful, and it was this watchfulness which had made him so quick to detect mischief brewing in the launch. It was, too, the long necessity of having to deal with sudden crises which made him so swift and cool in action.

It was, moreover, his knowledge of the motives of men and of monarchs that left him quite undismayed when the launch with its dead had rushed past him up-stream. He saw at once that the man who handled the tiller was an emissary of the Prince of Sylvania, and that he would not dare to disclose his plight to the police. He knew very well that it would be better for him to return and ask the aid of the man whose life he had sought than to have any dealings with the slow and exacting officials of Scotland Yard.

It was this that made Mr Jones so confident when he said to Strong: "He will come back."

The accident of Strong's introduction to the incident was, of course, annoying; but Mr Jones felt quite sure of his silence, and saw no need for disclosing the cherished secret of his identity. Here, however, he made a miscalculation, for Mr Montgomery Jones' secret was quite well known to Strong.

It was this knowledge, indeed, which to some extent had made the flirtation with Miss Diana Montgomery Jones so inexpressibly sweet. It is not every day that one can dally with a princess in disguise.

For this strange young man possessed a certain element of romance, which, if it is present in men of action, produces great results. And romance is after all only imagination, which John Oliver Hobbes said she had found more keenly developed in men of affairs than in poets.

And Strong, though at that time no one ever dreamed it, was essentially a man of affairs. He was for the time a dreamer—a lazy troubadour waiting to be stung into action by necessity; and when the sting that produces action comes to the man of imagination the world is apt to know of it.

So Mr Montgomery Jones and Strong played at slightly cross-purposes; and while they were crossing purposes they were crossing swords, little thinking then that they were to cross the swords of all the countries of the world.

In the meantime Mr Montgomery Jones was not too proud to admit to himself that he needed Strong's assistance, for silence, come to think of it, is the greatest assistance people can render to one in this world. And it is assistance that is rarely given.

Strong, however, was quite prepared to give it solely from the motive of curiosity. So the two men sat in silence beneath the beech tree waiting for the fulfillment of Jones' prophecy that the launch would return.

CHAPTER III

BESIDE THE CUPID

As Mr Jones was not communicative, and appeared quite decided as to the immediate future, Strong pulled a briar pipe from one trouser pocket, a tobacco pouch from the other, and carefully prepared for a comfortable smoke. Seeing no necessity for asking permission, he sat himself down under the beech tree, and his pipe and Mr Jones' cigar kept each other excellent company for several minutes.

Strong's attention was aroused by a slight movement on the part of Mr Jones. He glanced up-stream, and observed the launch coming back—just as Mr Jones had declared it would. The launch came slowly in-shore, and, with half a score of bubbles at its stern, lay still.

The young man at the tiller, obviously a gentleman, raised his cap and glanced with a somewhat uneasy smile at Mr Jones. He was patently a foreigner, but with a foreigner's adaptability he suited himself to his surroundings.

"I am afraid, sir," he said in English with a faint foreign accent, making a little inclination towards Mr Jones, "that we both need each other's assistance. This will excuse my intrusion."

Mr Jones surveyed the launch, the living man at the tiller, and the huddled dead in the bottom of the boat, with a leisurely serenity.

"I suppose," he remarked, "it is a case of let the dead bury their dead?"

The young man in the launch shrugged his shoulders.

"It would certainly be convenient," he agreed.

Mr Jones flicked away the ash from his cigar.

"The undertaking business," he said, "is not possible without a spade; but I am under the impression that such an instrument may quite well be found without much trouble. If you will have the kindness to wait, I will go and see if I can find one. In the meantime I would suggest that you should make fast. My friend"—here he indicated Strong—"will assist you."

Without a further word Mr Jones rose to his feet and sauntered away through the rhododendrons.

The young man in the launch raised his eyebrows at Strong in polite inquiry and gazed at him a little pathetically, as though he desired to ascertain if he were a friend.

Strong, however, did nothing but grin in a somewhat unkindly way and hold out his great brown hands to receive the launch's painter. Together they made the launch fast, working in silence as men do who are perfectly acquainted with the task they have in hand. Then Strong stood by the water's edge with one foot on the launch's gunwale and smoked placidly, while he waited for the return of Mr Jones. And it was not long before Jones came strolling back with a shovel under his arm.

He let the blade of the shovel fall to the earth, and leant upon it as he might have done upon a walking-stick.

"I have discovered an ideal place for the ceremony," he remarked. "Yesterday I had to put up a statue of Cupid about a dozen yards from here. The earth about the base is disturbed, and I fancy that no one, not even my exceedingly tyrannical gardener, will discover if it is disturbed a little more. The funeral shall be a labour of love. It will be a fitting interment to take place beneath the feet of Cupid."

Strong's was one of those essentially animal natures, which, as yet unawakened to any finer feeling, regard life and death and all the niceties of both extremely lightly. And so he only flashed his big white teeth in unconcerned amusement at Mr Jones' ghastly pleasantry

The man in the launch was a little white about the gills, but he only licked his lips under his waxed moustache and drew himself a little straighter. He was not in the position to object to jokes of even the most offensive kind.

Mr Jones went down to the water's edge and surveyed the dead man.

"If my friend takes him by the head," he said, "and you by the feet"—and here he nodded to the man in the launch—"the burden should not be heavy in spite of the weight upon our consciences. I will confine my own exertions to pointing out the way."

The very callousness of the whole proceeding increased Strong's interest, and it was without a qualm that he stepped into the launch and raised the shoulders of the dead man. He did not even flinch when the corpse's head sagged sullenly against his knee.

The man in the launch, however, shuddered as he lifted up the dead man's feet.

The bearers of the dead man stepped ashore. Jones, careful even now of the stump of his cigar, led the way through the blithely blooming rhododendrons.

The way was not a long one. In a little clearing, a gaudy plaster Cupid, apparently petrified in the midst of a gambol, poised on a white-washed leg on a painfully suburban pedestal. The earth around the pedestal was broken.

"Put him down," said Jones. And they laid the dead man down, his eyes staring and his mouth gaping at the bright blossom of the rhododendrons above him. It was very quiet, and the blackbirds piped in the bushes.

Jones leant the spade against the plaster Cupid, and Strong proved himself a man of action by immediately seizing it, and, without a word, beginning to throw up the wet earth.

Only those whose lot it has been in peace or war to dig a grave can know the labour of it and the time that labour takes.

Strong dug steadily for some ten minutes, and then handed the spade to the Sylvaniaian, who had stripped off his coat and stood waiting.

Jones plastered the end of his cigar under his heel, then pulled off his coat. He rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and Strong perceived that the King of Balkania possessed arms that would not have disgraced the traditional village blacksmith.

For the next two hours the three men dug turn and turn about, sweltering in the warmth of an abnormally hot May afternoon.

While they worked none of them spoke. It was quite unnecessary, for they had nothing to say but that which they saw they had better keep to themselves.

Strong, however, was thinking fairly deeply for him. He was thinking not of Jones' secret, but of his own secret, which lay across the river, behind his little bungalow. He was thinking of his friend, Joe Langley, the weird, uncouth, lanky brother-undergraduate, whose genius for mechanical invention had assuredly marked him out to be one of Oxford's greatest scholastic failures. That Langley, however, would be a failure in life was impossible. Devoted in a dog-like way to Strong, he had attached himself to his friend's more decided personality with a pertinacious affection and blind faith of which only women and inventors are capable. And his invention was one of which the world had long been dreaming, long expecting, long hoping for in a somewhat scared way.

Langley had contrived an invention which secured the conquest of the air. It was not a piece of fanciful impertinence, nor yet a half-baked appliance which only tantalised by its immature perfection.

The machine which Langley had devised was a real and live thing. It had done what men had almost given up as the impossible. It could, with its own machinery, lift itself from the earth, and then follow whatsoever course its inventor chose to give it.

Langley was of that timid breed which left him rather

terrified of his own discoveries. When alone, he felt somewhat in the position of Frankenstein. He was afraid of his own monster. It was his, for he had made it; but he needed the nerve, the laughing disregard of danger, which was the happy attribute of Strong.

Together they had put the machine to every test that was compatible with secrecy. The airship, which was not larger than a yacht's cutter, barely held them both. It had been cautiously wheeled out on dark nights and set in motion. Its apparatus was so simple and so silent in the working that in the hours which come immediately after midnight, when in the country no one is abroad, its soft, smooth course had been unnoted as Strong steered it in a circle round the paddock which lay beyond their river dwelling.

Langley desired to give his secret to the world; but Strong, held back by the business instinct of waiting for opportunity, kept the inventor's zeal in check. Strong was not slow to see the enormous possibilities of the concern; but he desired to seize the opportunities that were the greatest.

Now, as he alternately dug and watched the other men dig, he cast about in his mind a use to which Langley's airship might be put to achieve his darling wish. He sought to discover how the airship might reduce to practicability the desire of a commoner to wed a princess. For he was now determined to speak to Jones immediately. He felt that the curious work in which he was engaged entitled him to inform Mr Jones that he knew very well he was in reality King of Balkania.

It occurred to him that to use his knowledge of the day's events to his own advantage might be a shade unscrupulous. But Strong's scruples, truth to tell, were few and far between. He had that overbearing, masterful outlook on life which excused in himself things which he would never have pardoned in others.

That Mr Jones in his capacity of King of Balkania would reject his suit as a piece of preposterous impu-

dence he had not the faintest doubt. It was the certainty of this which had kept him silent till now. He had been searching for a lever with which to move that immovable man. The lever, as he plied his spade, seemed to have fallen into his hands.

That Jones would surrender his daughter as the price of silence Strong did not believe. He quite appreciated the fact that a man so situated and so entirely callous would, if necessary, secure silence by more efficacious means. But the necessity of his silence was, after all, an asset, an asset which, multiplied by the possession of the airship, produced a weight of argument that appeared almost irresistible.

The point was to what extent he could divulge Langley's secret—how far it would be safe to tell Jones of the power in his hands.

Strong was still debating on this when Jones broke in with the remark that the grave was deep enough. The three men picked the body up, and lowered it as far as they could into the opening, and then let it fall. They shovelled in the earth without more ado, Jones, with characteristic thoroughness, so distributing the surplus mould that the ground lay smooth and even beneath the smirking Cupid.

The sun was by this time going down; the men had replaced their coats, pulled themselves together, and, rather from embarrassment than any other cause, glanced simultaneously at the Cupid. Next moment they were startled to hear an evidently soprano voice singing in a mock contralto, and the words they heard were:—

“Down among the dead men,
Down among the dead men,
Let him lie.”

The three turned as one man, and glanced behind them, to see, forcing her way through the bush-grown path, a girl in a white dress. Her eyes were dancing and her red-gold hair was tumbling about her face.

The men stepped back to give her access to the clear-

ing. She leant one small hand against the plaster pedestal, and looked laughingly at the disconcerted group. At the stranger she frowned a little, at Strong she smiled a little, to her father she made a little bow. She waved her other hand at him.

“In the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love,” she cried, and curtsyed to the Cupid.

Her father came forward and planted his feet firmly on the newly-filled-in grave.

“Curiously enough, my dear,” he said placidly, “we were contemplating the mysteries of death.”

CHAPTER IV

DIANA INTERVENES

AT Mr Montgomery Jones' mention of the mysteries of death Diana's eyes hardened a little. She detected the irony in his voice, and knew passing well that her father's irony was wont to cover a multitude of crimes.

Her father's methods, indeed, were drastic, and the particular State over which he ruled was placed in a sufficiently convenient quarter of the map to allow of his combining the business thoroughness of the West with the total disregard for other people's lives and feelings that is the dominating characteristic of rulers of the East.

However, she laughed. It is impossible to live in a state of perpetual protest against one's father's habitual disregard for the duties imposed upon humanity. Diana had, in fact, grown a little callous, and held intrigue and duplicity and the shedding of blood in a great deal less abhorrence than it was good for a girl of her age to do. No girl of nineteen should hold life cheap, but it is difficult to resist an almost daily demonstration that the lives of other people count as nothing as compared with the priceless value of one's own. And the King of Balkania held his own existence as a jewel beyond value.

Diana, at her father's light talk of death, instinctively glanced at John. And at the sight of him a little fear crept into her heart. Her father might reckon Strong's existence as worthless, but to her it was even then of some account.

"Perhaps," she said with a gravity that was all the more marked because of its suddenness, "I am intruding in a matter of business?"

She was apt to stumble across the ramifications of her father's strange and dangerous business enterprises at unexpected times and in most inappropriate places.

Mr Jones settled his gold-rimmed glasses more firmly on his overbearing nose.

"As a matter of fact you are," he said with a slow smile. "But I am sure these gentlemen will excuse the interruption."

John laughed outright, while the Sylvania drew his heels together and made a formal bow.

"The interruption, at anyrate," said Diana, "shall not be great. I am going back to the house."

She made a grave inclination of the head to the stranger. At John she flashed a smile. Her father she flicked lightly and delicately on the nose with the little finger of her right hand. This was a strange demonstration of affection, but one on which she placed great reliance. For some unfathomable psychological reason Mr Jones greatly appreciated this queer mark of regard, and Diana, knowing this, used the fact to advantage.

Though diplomatists did not guess it, Diana's flick of her father's nose had often-times changed the tide of international politics. Different things happen to different countries according to a monarch's good or bad temper, and Diana's little flick had frequently restored the intolerant King of Balkania from a state of evil-mindedness to a condition of good-humour.

As it was, the king smiled. In his capacity of Mr Jones, however, he said:

"Very well, my dear, run along. Dinner is at 7.30, and judging from your appearance you will need the help of a maid."

Diana smoothed her tumbled white skirt and frowned.

"I suppose so," she said, "but it is rather hard to expect me at my age, and especially in this weather, to everlastingly live up to one's meals."

The ceremony of dinner was Mr Jones' greatest fetish.

"Never mind," he replied, "the training is excellent."

Diana laughed and turned away up the path. And again, as she swung her hat from the ribbons, she sang:—

"Down among the dead men."

Mr Jones turned to the Sylvaniaian.

"I will not offer you my hospitality," he said, "as it might be somewhat unwelcome. Allow me to show you to your launch."

And he walked away towards the river.

Again the Sylvaniaian clicked his heels and motioned to John to precede him. John smiled at him blandly, nodded his head, and followed in the footsteps of Mr Jones. The Sylvaniaian fell in behind him, and so they walked in single file to the bank. There, without more ado, the Sylvaniaian got into the launch and busied himself with the engine.

Mr Jones surveyed him with a benign calm from the bank.

"Another time," he said to the man in the launch, "I shall be very charmed to see you if you happen to be calling. By the way, when you return give my kindest regards to the king, and tell him how sorry I am one of his most promising young men should lose"—here he heaved a theatrical sigh—"should have met with so melancholy an end."

Strong, lounging in the background, and still inhumanly amused, smiled a wider smile than ever.

That Mr Jones' speech was cruel and insulting, abominably insulting, there could be no question at all. An angry flood of colour tinged the Sylvaniaian's face, but he lifted his cap with the greatest politeness, and, starting the launch, slid away quickly down stream.

It was then that John straightened himself and drew his mouth with a snap over his strong, white teeth. His part of the business was beginning.

Mr Montgomery Jones turned towards him with an easy air and a certain amount of courtesousness.

"I am sorry I cannot ask you to dinner to-night," he said, "but I am dining *en famille*, and I must ask you to excuse me. Early asparagus is a delicate thing, and in these matters I am entirely in the hands of my *chef*. I have been assured," he added with a fine touch of his chronic irony, "I have been assured I must not be late."

He turned away from Strong without one word of thanks. He turned away without so much as touching on the extraordinary incident of the afternoon. He turned away with an air that suggested the thing that had been had never happened, or, at least, that the help which Strong had given him did not count in the very least.

This indifference annoyed Strong, and Strong was hard to annoy. He possessed that excessive good-nature and keen sense of humour which accept pleasantly a vast amount of casual treatment. But, as is the case with every person of this type, there is a limit to good nature, and when that limit is reached the border between a smiling complacency and vindictive anger is sudden and strongly marked.

Now, in a moment, Strong's face and form and manner were completely changed. His eyes no longer laughed. They grew hard with the hardness of a brace of blue and shining stones. His whole body was rigid, and his manner icy. When he spoke his words sounded clean-clipped and cold.

"I regret," he said, "to detain you. I am profoundly sorry to keep you from that young asparagus, but I feel that the present occasion is the most opportune that could present itself for my speaking to you on a certain matter. If I am not mistaken, you already foresee the possibility of my speaking of a thing that is distasteful to you, and I can quite imagine you would obviate the necessity of having to discuss it with me if it were in any way possible."

Mr Jones' eyes, too, grew cold behind his glasses, but he still held to his manner of easy unconcern, and thoughtfully began to smooth his moustache.

"Yes?" he suggested.

"Yes," said Strong, "most decidedly yes."

He paused a little, then he said "Yes" again.

"Yes, I want to speak to you about Diana."

Mr Jones smiled at him with the air of a kindly elder.

"Surely," he protested, "you are a little precipitous. Really, I think it would be better if you were to refer to my daughter as Miss Jones."

"Perhaps," said Strong, shortly. "It is such a romantic name, is it not—Miss Jones?"

Mr Jones sighed. "What's in a name?" he murmured, and he surveyed the placid evening with placid eyes.

"Cannot you realise," said Strong, his voice dangerously quiet, "that there is a time when even jesting will not avail the jester? You are at perfect liberty to sneer or to laugh as you please, but I do not propose to allow you to evade the point."

"Ah," said Mr Jones, thoughtfully, "you do not propose to allow me."

"No," said Strong, shortly, "I do not. My purpose in detaining you—and the matter can be put in a nutshell—is this. I want to marry Miss—er—Jones."

"Do you?" inquired Mr Jones with apparently delighted unconcern.

"I do," said Strong.

Mr Jones tipped himself on to his toes, and then carefully let his heels drop to the earth again. He took out his handkerchief and began with an abstracted air to polish his finger-nails. As he polished them he remarked without looking at Strong—

"I am afraid your most flattering request is in vain. Charmed as I might be in some circumstances to accept you as a son-in-law, the situation at present renders it absolutely impossible for me to receive you into the bosom of the Jones family."

"Dead men tell no tales," said Strong, "unless they happen to be disinterred."

"So?" said Mr Jones, softly. "We are coming to threats? I had never realised," he added, and his tone was bitter, "that blackmail was part of a gentleman's constituency."

"Personally," rejoined Strong, "I unfortunately regard myself as above the suggestion."

"Hoity-toity!" said Mr Jones, but his eyes narrowed. This was a shade more dangerous than he had expected. Up to then he had laughed at the young man who laughed.

He swung round quickly and looked with a cold haughtiness up into the big young man's face.

"My name," said he, "is here known as Jones. But if you think you are speaking to a mere Mr Jones, you are mistaken. You do not know what you ask any more than you know who I am."

"Ah, but I do," said Strong, softly. "I am asking your Majesty for the hand of her Royal Highness."

CHAPTER V

STRONG DECIDES TO STEAL THE EARTH

THAT Strong was acquainted with his royal identity did not disturb Mr Jones in the least. Rather it served to reassure him.

"Really, young man," he said, "you greatly relieve my mind. You cannot blackmail kings, and blackmail is, I should imagine, your only hold upon me. Your own position in this matter would, I should imagine, be somewhat inexplicable to the police should you ask them to make inquiry. But even if inquiry were made, I doubt if very much would be heard of it."

"Unless," said Strong, "you are thinking very tenderly of that young asparagus I should like to say something else, and it is this—that it is not very creditable to yourself that you should think so badly of me as to suppose for a moment I should blackmail you to the extent of asking your daughter's hand in marriage. Permit me also, as an English gentleman, in spite of your unpleasant insinuation, to say that, at any rate from my point of view, that a prospective baronet of Great Britain is not so very much outweighed in the social scale by a minor monarch whose immediate forbears came, I believe—at least on one side of the family—from Chicago, or was it New York?"

Mr Jones still surveyed Strong in mild wonderment.

Strong moved again to the attack, and the method of his doing so was so swift and so unexpected that it took the King of Balkania aback.

"Are you ambitious?" asked Strong.

The King of Balkania looked into the face of the big young man before him and read in his eyes the bright

and steady light of an absorbed enthusiasm. At the aspect of that light he was to some extent reassured. He had found that, as a rule, enthusiasts are not extremely difficult people to deal with.

"My dear boy," he answered, and his tone was quite friendly, "ambition is solely a matter of greed. Perhaps I am a little more egotistical than the average man, though probably not more self-confident than the average monarch. I may say that I regard myself as quite able to take charge of the business of the whole world."

"Then," rejoined Strong, "if that be so, there must come times to you when you lie awake at night dreaming how you may accomplish that lordly ambition."

"Yes," agreed Mr Jones, looking a little surprised at the turn the conversation was taking, "I do not disguise from you that such moments do occur to me."

"Very well," said Strong, quietly, "if you wish to accomplish your dreams, you must permit me to marry your daughter, commoner though I be. If you will allow me, I can place the whole world at your feet. If you don't permit me to marry your daughter, I shall be compelled to place the world at my own feet first and marry your daughter afterwards."

The King of Balkania looked up quickly. He was used to what in America is called "bluff," and this struck him as being about the "coldest bluff" with which he had ever had to deal.

But there was no bluff in Strong's eyes, nor was there madness, so Mr Jones, in his capacity of King of Balkania, felt distinctly ill at ease. His quick mind was searching in all directions for the solution of the problem of this young man's bold and entirely confident statement that he proposed to steal the world, for this was practically what his threat amounted to.

However, his Majesty by no means lost his self-possession.

"Very interesting, I am sure," he remarked, "and

may I inquire how you propose to accomplish this stupendous task?"

Strong raised a mighty forefinger and sawed it through the air. The king glanced in an interested way at the heavens.

"I am going to steal the world, by way of the air," said Strong.

His Majesty's face had certainly expressed no particular concern, but the smile in which he now indulged was one of distinct relief.

"And a very pretty scheme, too," he said, "one I have often heard of—one that has been perplexing and engrossing the majority of the statesmen and scientists of the civilised world for some time. I suppose for some years past every country has lived in absolute terror of its neighbour at last discovering the way to the conquest of the air. But this sort of thing has been going on long enough to show that no man can invent a flying-machine which is really efficient and really capable of making offensive warfare, without the fact very speedily becoming known to all the rest of the world.

"No, my dear boy," he went on, "it is too late in the day to persuade me that such an invention has been discovered and is actively dangerous. The complete fighting air-machine—which, I grant you, when it comes will dominate the earth—will only creep on us by degrees. Such things do not come in a night."

"The thief comes in the night," said Strong, "and I propose to commit theft on the largest possible scale. It is my fixed intention to steal the earth."

"There is no reason," he went on, in quick, even tones, "why I should play into your hands by telling you the power of which I am possessed. To begin with, you would not believe me; in the second place, it would be exceedingly unwise, nor do I expect you to take this statement on trust. I didn't suppose before, and I don't suppose now, that what must sound like a very bold boast would influence you in the least.

I knew you would refuse to allow me to marry your daughter. I don't expect you to consent now. The lack of consent, indeed, rather relieves me; it sets me at liberty to prove to you that the words which I have spoken to you are true."

The King of Balkania looked at Strong thoughtfully for some seconds, and as he looked at him he grew a shade uneasy. The big boy who laughed had disappeared. In his place there stood a man, a strong man, a daring man, a callous man, a relentless man, and a man who, without some influence to soften him, would breed much sorrow in the world.

The King of Balkania was no philanthropist, nor was he even convinced. He turned away, and then he turned sharply back again to Strong and asked this unexpected question: "Do you play poker?"

Even this out-of-place query, however, did not disconcert Strong. If a man is sufficiently engrossed it is impossible to disturb him. He nodded his head.

"Then I'll call your 'bluff,'" said Mr Jones. "I am going back to the asparagus."

Strong laughed, the light, buoyant laugh of the as yet unbeaten prize-fighter climbing through the ropes into the ring. He realised that from the first he had meant to do battle with Mr Montgomery Jones, only love, being eager, is apt to take the line of least resistance, and so for a while the desirableness of Diana had prompted him to attempt a compromise with her father. The compromise was now impossible, and so he contemplated the coming campaign with joyousness of heart.

He stepped into the punt and sent the squat-nosed craft skimming over the water. At the further bank he stepped ashore, and walked briskly across the strip of grass between the ditch and the straggling shanty which was, by courtesy, termed "The Bungalow."

Here he leant one of his great shoulders against a prop of the verandah so that it creaked under his weight, and bellowed rather than called—

"Here, Joe, I want you." He then swung round, sat himself with a crash on the verandah steps and pulled his faithful briar from his pocket.

With laughing eyes, but with a wry smile, he turned his gaze to the path on the farther bank, up which he could still see the retreating figure of Mr Jones.

Joe came shuffling out of the bungalow. He almost dragged his length to Strong's side and perched gingerly on the rickety steps. He was as tall as Strong, but gawky. He was one of those men who seem to be always growing out of their clothes, even when they are octogenarians. A hawk-like nose dwarfed the other features of his pale, thin face, except that a pair of immense and ruddy ears stood out from the sides of his head like sails. The hawk-like nose supported large, gold-rimmed spectacles, the curving frames of which were securely anchored round his ears. He glanced sideways at Strong in a mild, inquiring way.

"Seen anything?" asked Strong.

Joe shook his head. He seldom saw anything, except the mechanical detail with which for the time being he was engaged.

"Heard anything?" asked Strong.

Again Joe shook his head. He never heard anything at all, unless he were roughly roused from his concentration on his studies.

"Match," said Strong.

Joe routed in the pockets of his ragged Norfolk jacket and produced a packet of decidedly dilapidated wax-vestas.

Strong sniffed at the dingy contents of the match-box, but used them to light his pipe.

"Just give your mind to me," he said to Joe, "and I'll tell you something that will make your ears flop."

Joe grinned, and with a lank forefinger settled his glasses on the bridge of his nose. This was a habit of his when he was making an effort to appear interested.

"Our neighbour across the river," said Strong, "by

the name of Mr Jones, is a sort of ultra-modern and ultra-romantic Jekyll and Hyde. Mr Jones, I may inform you, combines in his person the Yankee millionaire with the King of Balkania."

Joe Langley smiled feebly. He was sufficiently interested in mundane affairs to realise that it was unusual for a real monarch to be masquerading on the Thames as a common person.

His only concern with regard to his neighbour across the water up till then, however, had been the surpassing beauty of his daughter—a beauty which Langley admired from the respectful distance necessitated by the width of the river. That beauty, too, he strongly suspected—rather enviously suspected—accounted for the otherwise sociable Strong making unwonted and apparently lonely expeditions at all hours of the day and evening.

"Yes," said Strong, "Mr Jones is a real, live king, and although you mayn't believe it, some friends of his, or rather enemies, tried to pot him this afternoon. But Jones was too quick, and shot his man, and I helped to bury the corpse under a plaster Cupid."

Even the wandering interest of Langley was now firmly fixed. He stared at Strong with as much concern as though his friend had been stating that the formula for water was not H_2O , or had made a declaration that was equally impossible and vain.

Strong saw his awakened wonderment and laughed aloud.

"Quite true, my boy," he said. "It is perfectly true, as you will soon discover. For when we buried the dead it occurred to me to ask for Miss Jones' hand in marriage, in quite the orthodox and old-fashioned way. But Miss Jones, you see, is a princess, and, therefore, not for the likes of me, and Papa Jones was rude, and so was I—and now it is war to the knife."

Strong leant back and stretched himself. His whole aspect was entirely serene and pleasant. He looked as happy as a schoolboy who had just determined to in-

dulge in an afternoon's enjoyment, such as only a school-boy can derive from the playing at highwaymen or pirates.

Langley turned his gig-iamp gaze on Strong.

"But you can't go to war with kings," he grumbled.

"Of course I can," cried Strong. "And, what's more, I'm not going to make war on one king, I'm going to make war on many. I am going to do a great deal more than that. I am going to become a king myself. I am going to become the biggest thing in the way of a crowned 'boss' that ever anyone imagined. Future generations of poor little wretches swotting over history books will hate me and my wars more than Julius Cæsar, or Alexander the Great, or Frederick of Potsdam, or even Napoleon. I tell you, I will die great." Strong rose to his feet and clutched the supports of the verandah in his great hands as if he were Samson about to pull down the pillars of the temple. "I am going to be the most wholesale Napoleon that even I myself could imagine. And my imagination is large—proportionately as large as my fist." He closed his right hand and surveyed its gigantic proportions with supreme satisfaction.

Then he opened his hand and caught Joe a sounding thwack on the shoulder, which brought Langley to his feet, with an air of apologetic protest. "And you," Strong shouted, "are going to help me! You are the man who is going to give me the power! Yours are the brains that will really enable me to live up to all these boasts!"

"I!" said Joe, his mouth open.

"You!" said Strong. And he dug a mighty fore-finger into Joe's ribs with a little laugh of kindly derision. "Does not that blessed air-ship of yours work?" he asked. "Haven't we proved its capacities up to the hilt? Couldn't it be turned into the most ghastly weapon of offence and destruction that man ever devised to make other men miserable?"

"Oh, but you can't," said Joe, in a worried voice; "you can't possibly. I never meant it for things like

that. I don't quite know what I did mean it for, but I wasn't inventing an engine of destruction when I got that air-ship right. I don't quite know what I did mean it for—I don't think I quite know now how it may be used, only somehow, Strong"—he laid a hand as tender as an appealing woman's on Strong's forearm—"I had a sort of vague idea that it might do some good. I had a sort of notion that it would provide a means of transit so cheap and so easy that it would enable every one to get all over the world, and somehow, by a system of visits of friendships between nation and nation, might pave the way to an international *entente*."

"Yes, you sleepy old dreamer," said Strong, "you are so full of the milk of human kindness that you are after the millennium, but all the writers and all the theorists are against you. They never reach the millennium, except by way of Armageddon, and I am going to be the maker of Armageddon. I want Diana, and Armageddon is the only way."

Joe gazed at Strong almost beseechingly through his glasses.

"But you can't love Diana," he urged, "or you wouldn't think of anything so horrible." He came nearer to Strong and looked into his face earnestly, almost wistfully. "Love," he said, "should lead one to gentleness and not to the battle and murder and sudden death that you are talking about so callously. Doesn't Diana lead you to any feeling of gentleness?"

A shadow of trouble gathered in Strong's eyes. "Yes," he said slowly, "yes. Diana does lead me to gentleness. I hate what I must do, but do it I must. It is the only way. With Diana for an inspiration, I can give peace to all the world. Without her, I can do nothing. And I can only win her through war. But it will be a war which leads to peace and to happiness."

The shade of trouble left his eyes, and he laughed again. "Meantime," he cried, and there was no softness in his voice now, "let's go and have another look at our flying tin-kettle. I am going to steal the earth!"

CHAPTER VI

LOVE AND AN AIRSHIP

STRONG led the way into the bungalow, which was constructed in three parts. On the right of the entrance lay John's sleeping-room, and on the left, Langley's. The main portion of the building was, by a flight of imagination, called the "sitting-room." On either side of the fireplace, which contained a pocket edition of a range, designated as the "cooker," were two easy-chairs. In the direction of Langley's sleeping cabin was a litter of wood shavings and metal strips. Here a lathe was the principal article of furniture, but upon the walls were ranged neat rows of bottles containing chemicals of various kinds. That portion of the room which obviously belonged to Strong was merely a jumble of stout boots, tennis racquets, and spare oars.

For since these oddly assorted friends had come down from Oxford they had lived the simple life *in excelcivis*.

Langley lived it because he was acquainted with no other mode of existence and was far too wrapped up in the darling scheme of his heart to trouble much about his material surroundings.

Strong lived the uncivilised life in the midst of civilisation because he enjoyed its freedom, and it was the logical corollary to his friendship with Joe.

Possessed of an income sufficient to enable him to lounge gracefully through life, with headquarters at the Albany, Strong was far too lazy to adopt the busiest of all rôles—that of the man about town who does nothing.

Clubs bored him, dances bored him, girls bored him; and the girls' mothers terrified him.

He hated boiled shirts, he loathed intricate food; he detested the necessity of always presenting an appearance suggestive of the barber and the manicurist, and altogether abominated the cult of the tailor.

Just as he was too lazy to play on the line laid down by society, so he was infinitely too lazy to work on the lines prescribed by business men or the exigencies of life in the Colonies or abroad.

He was inordinately selfish. He lived to loaf, and to loaf is easy; and so it had seemed to him that there was no spot more fitted for this entirely self-centred mode of existence than the shanty-looking bungalow on the banks of the Thames in which Langley was conducting his really momentous experiments.

When they had removed the bungalow from the charge of an extremely grateful house-agent the year before, Strong had sufficient faith in Langley's mechanical genius to register a vow that he would remain beside him till his experiments were complete.

Langley was the only human being for whom, till then, he had ever held any regard, and Langley only appealed to him as a child would have done, because of his innocence of this world's ways, his entire ignorance of the machinations of enemies which were certain to encompass him the moment his secret became noised abroad, and because his heart instructed him to some extent to take care of this silent, timorous and docile gawk.

True, the entirely dog-like devotion which Langley yielded to Strong in some measure brought about the establishment of the queer bachelor *ménage*. Strong had an insatiable craving for the dependence of other persons upon his own extraordinary mental and physical strength. He knew perfectly well that should he care to put forth that overpowering strength of his, the strongest men he met would have inevitably surrendered to his rule. But this was far too much trouble, and so Strong contented himself with the silent and willing worship of his inventive friend.

The household which they established answered extremely well. Langley did not care where he laid his lank bones so long as he could sleep. Strong held delicate surroundings in abhorrence, and even the camp bed that he purchased for the bungalow seemed a ridiculous luxury.

A certain community of spirit, too, simplified the matter of diet. Langley cared not in the least what he ate. Strong was in no way exacting, except in his passion for meat. In this respect he bordered very closely on the animal. He ate beef for breakfast, he ate beef for lunch, he ate beef for dinner—ate it half-raw, cooked by fire, over the little stove. Tea he looked upon as essentially the attribute of a too nice, and too dainty, and too womanish age. Beer—home-brewed beer—he regarded as at all times sufficient for the needs of man.

Thus these two men, who were shortly to become the terror of a complex and, as Strong held, a too effeminate generation, lived their self-absorbed, though really blameless, lives beside the Thames.

Then had come the arrival of Mr Montgomery Jones, and all Strong's simple spirit had risen in horror at the sight of what he considered the profligate luxury of the American millionaire.

But then there was the sight of Diana—Diana the wayward and the frivolous; Diana the slangy and imperious; Diana the perplexingly, the staggeringly beautiful, who was saved by sheer force of character from being shallow; for Diana, though her eyes were wells of unfathomable and mysterious beauty, was apparently without soul. She was outwardly as gorgeous as her surroundings, and within, apparently, just as sound, though meaningless.

Diana had stood among the rhododendrons on the river's bank when Strong had gone by in his skiff.

When he had passed, Strong became suddenly conscious that a new thing had befallen him. So he had turned the skiff about and pulled back. Diana

was still on the bank, her eyes shining and her lips smiling.

Then a sudden impulse took hold of Strong. He put the boat to shore and stepped on to the bank, blissfully unmindful of the fact that he was trespassing—and trespassing without consideration for the *convenances* or even that politeness which is due to a lady.

He had stood on the bank in complete silence and surveyed Diana of the red-gold hair and the golden, dancing eyes with new and profound and completely engrossed rapture.

And Diana of the golden eyes had surveyed his enormous bulk and that face of his—which would have been so ridiculously good-looking but for its ominous and big-boned strength—with a new admiration for the human species.

They found each other entirely wholesome and beautiful to behold. They were attracted instinctively, each by the outward glory of the other. Their hearts were light, their digestions perfect, their cares nil.

It was not by any means love at first sight which so completely mastered their senses from the first. Both rejoiced in their own health and their own strength and their own beauty, and they rejoiced the more because of the counterpart of that health and that beauty and that strength which they beheld also in each other.

Strong was colossally conceited; Diana was unutterably vain. Strong relied on his strength; Diana defied the world with her beauty; and both were perfectly conscious of the egotistical quality which gave them each their own particular and yet so similar outlook on life.

Strong had been invited to the millionaire's house. He lunched there, and he dined there; and he detested the gorgeous rooms and all the petty details of a restraining refinement which was wholly distasteful to his strength and really half-savage nature. He liked the open best, where the sun shone or the wind blew or

the rain fell; he liked the good earth and the good water and the good wind. He could rejoice in his strength there, and there he could best appreciate the radiant personality of Diana. For Diana—as he first knew her, Diana Jones—was just as much a goddess of the open air as was the old Diana of the Silver Bow.

The accidental discovery, made by a diplomatic friend who was spending a weekend with Strong, that Jones was no less a person than the King of Balkania, and Diana, the Princess Diana, had not displeased Strong in the least. Socially, it set her far above him; romantically, it drew her nearer; and Strong possessed the dual capacity for romance and business that makes the daring and successful man.

It is hard to say what he would have done but for Langley, or rather Langley's invention, which he had so carefully sheltered from the public gaze and so successfully schemed to turn to his own advantage. It is, however, unnecessary to speculate upon that point, because facts are facts, and the reliability and reality of Langley's perfect airship was a patent and indisputable fact.

At the outset Strong had been innocent of any idea of turning Langley's inventive genius to his own ends. That purpose, the purpose which became a peril to other people because of Strong's necessities, had only come with the advent of Diana. Then he learnt that it would enable him to encircle the world; he knew that it would enable him to play the part of a destroyer or a maker of men; and that part he was now fully prepared to play, since he had boldly and blindly asked for the hand of Diana, and been refused by her astute and dangerous parent.

Thus it was with a new sense of coming activity and power that he preceded the shuffling Langley into the shed at the back of the bungalow, where was housed the concern which was to alter the face of civilisation.

It was growing dusk by now, and the silver symmetry of the airship gleamed in the shadows.

It had taken a year to build, bit by bit. It had been Strong who, in his caution, had drawn skilled mechanics from different parts of the country to complete each section of the machine.

These mechanics, keen-eyed men with grubby hands, had done their work in ignorance of what they were doing. They had worked alone in the little outhouse, under the directions of Langley, and the money, which was handed to them with an apparently over-generous hand by Strong, was sufficient to lull any suspicions that they might have harboured.

So now the airship stood perfect, and beautiful in its perfection. Its length was about fifteen feet, and its shape the shape of a cigar. It was decked at either end, as a life-boat is decked, and in the centre rose a small conning tower of a shape that one is familiar with on submarines. Just aft of the midships was a well, which would comfortably seat two persons. In the centre of the well was a little table, and arranged in a neat row on an aluminium slab, a succession of bright ivory buttons. Four shafts, hinged at the bases so that they could be lowered like the funnels of a Thames steamer, rose to the height of twelve feet, two in the bows and two in the stern. They were surmounted by curiously wing-shaped aluminium propellers—indeed, in appearance they were rather like large electric fans.

At the fore and stern of the craft were two other wing-like propellers fixed to horizontal steel shafts that could be run in and out like the bowsprit of a sailing boat.

The engines, infinitely compact, occupied a space not much larger than is enclosed by the bonnet of a good-sized motor-car. They were worked by electricity, and a neat row of batteries was housed in an aluminium-framed, glass-sided, glass-topped case.

For fully five minutes Strong and Langley stood apart, looking at this beautiful piece of handiwork, each man dreaming his own dream.

At last Strong turned to Langley and linked his arm through his.

"Look here, old chap," he said. "Have I your leave to do as I want to do with this airship?"

"I suppose so," said Langley, and he did not take his eyes off the machine. It did not occur to him to dispute Strong's will or to query Strong's motives.

"I am entirely dependent on you," said Strong, and his voice was strangely confident for a man who pleads dependency. "I need this invention of yours to win Diana. I confess even that motive does not seem at the moment particularly worthy, and yet, and yet, I feel—oh, hang it all! I can't exactly explain to you why—that it will be a worthy motive some day."

Now Langley from afar off had beheld through his gold-rimmed spectacles the astounding radiance of Diana. The rays of her dazzling personality had fallen on him, but only so faintly that he found Diana herself was unattainable. She had, indeed, not swayed him sufficiently to allow her to outweigh the devotion which he felt was due to Strong. Strong it was to a great extent who had inspired him; Strong it was who had cheered him in his long task; Strong it was who had sheltered him and protected him from intrusion in the work to which he had given his life. Langley was grateful with a gratitude passing the love of women, and oblivious of the fact that the sacrifice which he was making was altogether too great. He surrendered everything to Strong.

"If she will help you win Diana," he said, nodding in the gloom at the airship, "you can do whatever you like; only," he added, falteringly, after the manner of the woman who makes a concession against her will, "only—I will look to you to see us through the trouble that you are bound to make."

"Trouble!" said Strong. "Troubles, my dear chap, are only made to be surmounted. I am looking for trouble now. I want to find it. Trouble is the only way to Diana. Trouble and I shall be friends."

"To-night," he went on, "we will put the thing to one last test, and we will give it a name worthy of the cause. We will call our airship the 'Di.'"

"And the die is cast," said Langley. He tittered; it was seldom he made jokes.

"Then out with her—out into the dark and let us see what we can do," cried Strong, and he laid his great hands on the gunwale and bent his body forward to run the airship down the slips on which she rested.

Slowly the little vessel got under way. Then the two men, without a word, clambered in. Langley pressed the button marked "A," and the wing-like propellers at the bows and the stern of the aluminium craft slowly began to revolve.

The slips ran down a little, and then up a slight incline, fashioned somewhat after the manner of a switchback.

As they came to the limits of the slips, Langley pressed the button "B."

Overhead the wing-like propellers on the uprights began to revolve swiftly.

With a sickly little plunge the "Di" drifted off the end of the slips and rose quietly and silently into the cool, fresh air of the summer night.

CHAPTER VII

A FLIGHT BY NIGHT

THE rush of air on his face brought out Strong's latent forces to the full.

"Shift over a bit, sonny," he said, "and let me have the buttons. If you think she'll stand it, we'll play a tune on the 'Di' to-night that we have not done before."

"All right," said Langley, and he shuffled his lanky body to make way for Strong.

"First of all," said Strong, "we'll test her in the paddock."

The paddock lay beneath them, about two acres in extent, and was really only a rough clearing cut in a thick wood of young pine trees.

Strong put his finger on the button "S," which stood for "Slow," then on the button "L," which stood for "Lower." They dropped softly down a few feet above the ground.

Strong sat with his feet on the pedals which turned the airship to port and starboard—to left and right.

He turned her in against the trees, and then brought her head round again silently and softly, at about five miles an hour. They circled round the paddock.

"The best thing, I think," said Strong, at length, "would be to take her in the middle and then let her jump. I suppose she will jump all right?"

"Try her," said Langley. His thin smile was drawn nearly to his ears. His eyes glistened with affectionate pride behind his gold-rimmed spectacles.

Strong brought the "Di" round again and put her head due north. With an ease born of long practice on a dummy keyboard, he placed his thumb on "Up."

The "Di" quivered, and then the earth rushed away from them.

The "Di" appeared to be stationary in the dark, soft air, while the world fled from beneath them.

The key of the recorder before them was working slowly round.

"Two thousand," said Strong, and placed his fingers on "Steady." The "Di" hovered, quivering like a hawk poised. The simile seemed to strike him.

"By gad, old man!" he cried, "this is a new feeling. We are birds to-night—birds of prey."

"Not yet, I hope," said Langley, and he glanced over the edge of the little craft. The surface of the earth could be dimly seen in the darkness, lying flat and still.

"Good, so far," said Strong; "more than good—excellent! Now to see what we can do. The moon is young, the wind east, and so we will wait till it's a bit darker—and for the rain."

He pointed westward, and Langley saw a cloud-bank crawling slowly over the far horizon of the distant world.

So they hung there, two thousand feet above the bungalow, for nigh upon an hour. Above them the propellers whirred with no more noise than that of the purring of some great cat.

The little air-craft was not entirely still, and so what they could see of the earth beneath them quivered quickly like the film of a cinematograph in full play. Far away to the eastward the lights of London shone, like the faint glow of a distant prairie fire. Here and there below them they could discern a few feeble lights. Thus they waited for the cloud-bank to steal nearer and nearer, until at length it interposed itself between them and the earth like a soft, diaphanous curtain.

When the curtain had been entirely drawn across between them and the world, Strong put his pipe back into his pocket and braced himself to once again play the tune which he had threatened on the bright ivory buttons.

"Now for the world," he cried.

Four minutes' swift flight brought them to where Whitebrook runs into the Thames. They skirted the wood by the river, and dropped in the field beside the roadway. The "Di" stood on her four legs.

The rain-mist had lifted, and the moon, which had risen steadily, now shone full and clear, throwing a silver light over the meadow and making the high road gleam white as though it were frosted.

Langley was a shade nervous. "Surely," he said, "we are a little bit close to the high road, and can be seen."

"That is the beauty of it," said Strong. "Now is the time to test the dear, delightful 'Di' if anybody comes along. Provided we keep a bright look-out, we cannot conveniently be spotted. We can see for half a mile either way, and we can 'jump' her before any man's eyes can follow us."

"Yes," said Langley, "but what about a car?"

His words appeared to carry with them a prophecy, for at that moment they caught from the south the steady but distant hum of a racing motor.

"There you are!" said Strong. "There's your car. Now for the jump."

He put his finger on the button which should have made them rise; but the button declined to be depressed.

The hum of the approaching motor grew louder. Strong, with one of his wild and sudden impulses, had a desire to smash the button down. In lieu of this, he applied a steady but gentle pressure; but the button held fast.

The hum of the coming car grew louder. Strong tried to wriggle the button to and fro between his fingers, but it would not move. The head-lights of the car came dancing wickedly down the road.

Strong turned to Langley. "If you can't manage this better than I can," he said, "we're spotted, for certain sure."

Langley took charge of the button, but it still held fast. The car was now upon them, and went by with

a rush. On the near side was seated a man with his head huddled in his coat. A shaft of light from the powerful acetylene lamps glinted for a moment on the "Di," and the aluminium shell of the craft sent back a bright ray of light. The man in the car caught the beam and turned his head sharply. It was so near to the roadway that Strong and Langley caught sight of the features of his face. It was "Mr Montgomery Jones."

The car went by with the roar of a pilot-engine running free.

Langley turned to Strong and peered into his face in the gloom. "Jones," he said, "and he saw us."

"Yes," said Strong. "He saw us all right, and he will be back in a minute. Now," he added, with a little laugh, "get to work with the button. We're up against the real thing now, and if the 'Di' fails us we're in for a hot time. Jones is not the kind of man to be over particular about putting us out of the way quietly while he has the opportunity."

Langley's thin hands were shaking. He bent over the buttons, and his fingers ran with tremulous and swift affection above them and below them and around them.

Strong sat quietly by, lighting his pipe. "Don't hurry, old man," he said, "but he's coming back."

He had heard the grating of the changed speed and the grinding of the brakes on the car. There was a gur-r-r-umph, and the motor came sliding swiftly back along the moonlit roadway.

"All right," said Langley, "we've got clear. Quick! Quick! or we'll never jump her."

He stepped into the airship as he said this, and Strong jumped in after him. The "Di" rose slowly at first, and then faster and faster. The car rushed by them and beneath them with a rattle and a roar.

Strong, kneeling on the floor of the "Di," craned over the side and laughed down into Jones' staring, upturned face. The airship was rising so swiftly that

he had not much time for speech, so he made a wide circle with his right arm.

"The Earth!" he yelled, defiantly.

Below them Strong saw a bright spit of flame. Hard after the spit of flame came a dull thud on the bottom of the airship which made the "Di" jump like a live thing which is hit. The bullet ploughed through the aluminium bottom of the car, crashed through the glass casing round the batteries, and went upwards nicking a chip out of one of the now swiftly whirling propellers.

"Gad!" said Strong, still straining over the car, "but Mr Montgomery Jones is what they would call on the other side of the water 'hot stuff.'" He laughed aloud.

The "Di" had now risen so high that it was only just possible to observe the bright lights of the car beneath them.

"Steady her," said Strong. "They may be able to see us, but I doubt it. At any rate, we can see them."

The lights from the car's lamps shone like fixed beacons for a few moments. Then they saw the lights shoot forward and dance round the turning of the road.

"Home, coachman!" cried Strong.

"Home?" echoed Langley.

"Home—yes, home, you stupid old chump!" said Strong.

"And what then?"

"What then? We will see. They can't do very much. Fortunately I spotted the man who was driving, but it wasn't a servant or anyone who'll blab. It was Ludwig—his Royal Highness Prince Ludwig of Sylvania the accredited *fiancé* of Princess Diana of Balkania, a charming lady who, however, is destined for another man—myself, the man who will steal the earth, his Imperial, Terrestrial, and Universal Majesty, John the First of All the Earth and All the Heavens!" He laughed up at the stars.

"There's just one other thing, however," Strong

continued, "that we've got to put to the test. It is a thing we haven't tried yet, and I would not have tried to-night, if it could have possibly been helped, but we have really got to see whether this blessed airship of yours will take to the water like the duck you say she is.

"Now, don't let us have any mistake this time," he went on, "about the mechanism of the thing. While we are running along, just try the false keel. If she jams when we touch the water, I'm afraid our chances of keeping this cockleshell upright are not particularly great."

Without a word, Langley bent forward and touched the inevitable button. Slowly from the centre of the craft there sank down to the depth of three feet a thin but hollow false keel. Three times he lowered the keel and three times he fetched it up.

"Good," said Strong. "Now, my boy," he added, "make for the bank, right opposite the bungalow, and into the water we go."

They went down, down, down, so swiftly that they caught their breath, so swiftly that they had a sense of falling through space as though they would never stop. Then, suddenly, with the same sickening feeling of rising rapidly to a great height, which overcomes people descending the shaft of coal mines when the speed of the descending cage is slackened, the "Di" came to a standstill just above the river bank.

"Now get her into the water," said Strong.

The "Di" dropped into the river with a slight hiss and a swish, and the sheen of the aluminium was dimmed by the water's touch. But she bore her baptism well, the keel sliding down easily and swiftly. She rocked a little, and then floated still and quiet upon the placid water. The propeller in the bow was brought up at the angle of a clipper ship's jib-boom.

Then the shaft of the propeller at the stern was drawn in till the propeller itself lay close against the "Di's" stern.

Langley let the propeller have a couple of turns, which proved that the aluminium craft could keep her station against the outgoing tides.

A triangular steel rudder, very cunningly devised, took a few seconds to adjust beyond the slowly-turning propeller. In a trice the airship was transformed into one of the nattiest launches that ever ripped a river into ripples.

"Put her in alongside the bank by the bungalow," Strong ordered. "Keep her in under the willows. Shove her right in so that we are screened. I don't suppose that Mr Jones will show himself, but he might. At any rate, we can watch from there."

The "Di" crept into the bank, slowly and quietly, and bobbed to a standstill under the trees. Strong and Langley sat in silence, staring with straining eyes at the further bank.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KING BEGINS THE WAR

PRESENTLY Strong turned sharp round to Langley in the gloom, and there was excitement in his face. From his pocket he drew a six-shooter and put it into Langley's hands.

"Remember," he said, "that your life and mine, and perhaps Diana's, will very shortly hang on this craft of ours; so you are here on sentry-go, my boy, and don't forget your duty. Meantime," and here he laughed a queer little laugh, "I am off to the trysting-place. So long!"

He hoisted his enormous body gently over the side of the launch and dropped with the faintest splash into the river.

Without another word he began to swim quietly away. With affectionate, frightened, and utterly dumfounded eyes, Langley watched Strong's head bobbing through the black water—a little black patch that showed only just blacker than the black stream itself.

Strong trod the water and let the tide carry him down the stream. He was in no mind to land opposite the bungalow, for there he knew he would be received with the open arms of enmity. Therefore, he drifted down towards Maidenhead for three hundred yards or so. Then he landed, wrung the water out of his dripping canvas trousers and out of his shirt, pulled his belt one hole tighter, and braced himself for his prowling back through the bushes to Mr Jones' house.

First he walked straight away from the water, afterwards making a detour round to the back of the building.

Somewhere close at hand a dog yapped; a voice cursed the animal. Again there was silence, and Strong

threaded his way past the stables, and so came to the left wing of the low-built, straggling dwelling-house.

Diana's room, he knew, was on the north side. Beneath her window ran a path, bordered by a wide box-hedge. He crept along the further side of the hedge until he came opposite to the light which he was seeking. He crept into the thickness of the hedge, and lay there for a little while, the myriads of little dry leaves among which he crouched drying the water from him.

A verandah ran entirely round the house, the roof of it forming a balcony. A Virginia creeper, trained from the ground to the roof, served as a thin screen between the windows and the balustrade of the balcony. From his hiding-place in the box-hedge Strong hooted feebly like a young owl. Strong had hooted before, and knew that Diana would understand.

The light went out, and presently his eyes, by this time accustomed to the dark, could discern a white figure, half-hidden, behind the tracery of the creeper.

Thrusting his head out of the hedge to look to the right and left, Strong gave a quick, comprehensive glance all over the face of the building. Everything was very still, and there was no sign of any movement.

He stepped quickly across the path and sheltered as much as he could in the shadows of the verandah. Then, craning upwards, he called "Di!" so softly that his voice only just carried to the balcony above.

A rumpled head was thrust through the creepers, and in the gloom Strong caught a glint of Diana's white teeth bared in a wide smile.

"Hush!" she whispered from above him.

"Listen!" said Strong, though there was no occasion to use the word. "Listen! I want to speak to you quickly on a matter which is urgent."

His tone was cold, almost dictatorial.

"Another lecture, I suppose," breathed Diana, "from the man who steals the earth! Oh yes! I've heard about it from father. And there you are, the conqueror of the universe, unable to reach your lady's bower."

She laughed lightly, and again the dog by the stables yapped.

"We will see," said Strong, pulling a voluminous handkerchief from his pocket and tying it breast-high around the pillar of the verandah. With the loose ends he made a loop; a second later he had shinned up and got his right foot firmly fixed in the impromptu stirrup. With a swift, silent jump he was astride the balustrade. Gently he climbed over and drew near to Diana in the darkness.

"Who says that I cannot reach my lady's bower?" he asked.

"Yes," said Diana, "but not boldly or openly. I don't know that I want a knight who steals upon me like a thief."

The patter of the water dripping from Strong's clothes arrested her attention. She peered at him, and then put out her hand and touched him.

"Why, you are wringing wet," she whispered.

"I know," said Strong; "I swam here."

"Surely you know," continued Strong, "that your father's 'hired assassins,' or whatever he calls his retainers, arrived here to-night, were summoned here by telephone, and are swarming in the garden now. Well, I am too young, and life is too sweet, for me to appreciate the feel of cold steel in my ribs."

Again Diana laughed, and the callousness of laughter at such a time wounded Strong not a little.

"It is rather funny, isn't it," he said, with a change of bitterness, "to think that I must come here like a thief and run the risk of murder?"

But Diana only mocked him. "Surely," she taunted, "the man who steals the earth is not afraid of that?"

"Di! Di!" cried Strong, "let us stop this foolery and be serious. This is the beginning of serious things."

"For you or for me?" asked Diana.

"For both, dear, for both. I am in for it now up to the hilt, and therefore you are in it too."

"So!" purred Diana. She made a little curtsy.

Strong caught her hand. "Am I not to be your knight?" he asked, "even if I steal you?"

"My dear boy," answered Diana, "you have got a great deal of theft to perpetrate first. There's the earth, you know."

"Yes, yes," said Strong. "All in good time. If Rome was not built in a day, you can't steal the earth in a week. If I did steal it, would you—would you then stop laughing, for once, and marry me?"

"Well, yes," said Diana. "I think if you accomplished anything so colossal as that, I really would, and yet I don't see how—unless you propose to make papa abdicate or rob him of his kingdom and get yourself crowned in his place—that the match will be possible at all."

"What utter nonsense all this is!" she continued. "Here you stand, talking of monarchs and kings and stealing the world and a few other small matters, as if such things were trifles to be got through between breakfast and lunch. Why, I haven't even seen that airship of yours yet, and unless it is wonderful indeed, all your pretty scheming must fall with a bump to the ground—like your airship, I should think."

Strong drew nearer to Diana in the darkness, as near as he dared on account of the wetness of his clothes. He had it in his mind to cry out that his heart was very tender and very hungry, and that Diana's words hurt him beyond measure; but then his pride took hold of him, and he forbore. It was perhaps well for him that he did.

But on the other hand he was bound to speak of what he had in mind. His desire in this direction was too strong for him. He felt that it might weigh against him if he led Diana to think his end was in any way mean or small.

"Look here," he said slowly, "I feel you may not believe me; I realise that, looking at me, my ideas, my dreams, may seem absurd, but none the less they are dreams and ideas which I intend to put into concrete form. I hate this horrid old world as it is. I hate the misery, born of misunderstanding, the torture of human beings because the whole world lives from hour

to hour, week to week, and year to year, under a terrible dread of war. I propose to make one last war. It will be the sharpest, shortest, and perhaps the cruellest war on record. That is not my fault. But whereas I shall kill thousands, if things drift on as they are drifting, the nations of the world will, in the end kill, not their thousands or hundreds of thousands, but their millions. You may say it is somewhat paradoxical for me to wish to bring about universal peace by universal war. But that is my conception of what I must do. I cannot be dictator of the millennium if I am not first dictator of Armageddon."

For a few moments Diana stared at him in great wonderment.

It seemed to Strong's hungry eyes that she was about for once to look on the serious side of things and share his great ideals.

His hopes, however, were thrust back on him. First he saw Diana smile, and then laugh. And it hurt him that she did not understand.

So he changed his ground, and, falling in with Diana's mood, began to laugh himself. "Seeing is believing, I suppose," he said, "and therefore you shall see. I tell you what, Di, I tell you what—I will get back now, and then come back again—if you will wait. I will go back and fetch the airship, and if you will just stay here you shall behold me—master of the situation and master of the air, hanging around your balcony in a species of aerial motor-omnibus.

"But it will be tricky work. It means dodging back through your father's men below and then another swim. But that will do me good, for, upon my soul, when one's wet the summer night is not so warm as one thinks it is." He shivered a little.

Diana was looking out across the garden. "If you are cold," she said, "it seems to me that there is a good-sized fire over there at which you will be able to warm yourself."

Strong followed her pointing hand, and from the

other side of the river he saw rising a red, steady glare. Even as he looked long tongues of flame shot up above the red haze.

"Good Lord!" he cried. "The devils! Oh, the devils!"

Diana had half a mind to rebuke him for his forgetfulness of her presence, but, beholding the amazement and the anger on his face, she remained silent. Then she asked, in a hard voice, as Strong still stared, fascinated by the blaze—

"Am I to suppose that this is my father's work?"

"I'm afraid it is, my dear," said Strong. "I am very much afraid it is. In any case, it needs my immediate attention. Some pleasant person is evidently trying to burn my bungalow down, or, at anyrate, the shed."

"And the airship?" asked Di.

"The airship," said Strong. "Oh, that is safe enough for me to fulfil my promise of coming back to you. But this is where I cease love-making and get to work."

The prospect of the struggle across the water had brought back his good humour. He encased one of Diana's little hands in his own huge grasp, lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed them. Then he scrambled lightly over the balustrade and slid down the post. He was quite methodical, and did not forget to unloose the handkerchief which he had bound about the pillar of the verandah. When he had unloosed it he waved it lightly to Diana and plunged through the boxwood hedge.

A moment later, regardless of the many risks he might be running, he was racing down the path through the bushes towards the plaster Cupid, and so on to the river bank.

As he approached the clearing, his quick eye, though he was running at top speed, caught a shifting shadow in the gap about the Cupid. It was a shadow that retracted suddenly and disappeared beyond a clump of bushes.

Strong swerved to the right to give the retracted

show as much space as he could. The way was narrow, but there was no other course open to him.

As he drew abreast of the opening in the bushes a figure leaped at him. Strong stopped in his flight, spun round, and stood square. The man, who was on him now, his head thrust out from his body, with an ugly snarl on his face, leaped back a step. Strong struck first with his left and then with his right hand, full and fair on either side of the man's jaw. He felt the flesh burst on his knuckles, but he had the gratification of hearing the man's teeth rattle and shake, and then his assailant, with a yell of agony, fell back into the bushes.

Strong, mechanically rubbing the blood from his hand against his shirt, ran on to the river's bank. On the edge of it stood two men staring across the water at the blaze.

Of them Strong took no heed, but jumped into the water and begun to swim with a strong, steady breast stroke. Even in his haste he had the wisdom to choose this method of swimming, knowing that it left his body less exposed than if he were swimming with a side stroke. He suspected, and suspected rightly, that the men on the bank would recognise him and appreciate the reason for his swim, and would not be slow to stop him if they could.

He was right.

There came a crack from behind him, and something splashed the water beside his face. There was another crack, and the water splashed into his eyes. That time the mark had been overshot. Again there was a crack, and a third bullet went singing past his ears, and, ploughing into the stream an inch or so before his face, sent up a shower of water that half-blinded him.

Strong even then turned his head and laughed as he swam on. No more shots came, and he reckoned himself safe.

He climbed like an otter up the further bank, and went bursting into the bungalow and out into the space

behind it. As he had guessed it would be, the shed was enveloped in flame.

Langley, with a white face, was standing beside the water-butt, swiftly baling out pail after pail of water and dashing it frenziedly into the fire before him.

Strong, without a word, wrenched the bucket from his hand. "That's no good, my boy," he shouted. "Not the least good in the world. Let her burn—there's nothing in it now that matters. I suppose the 'Di' is all right?"

"Under the willows," said Langley.

"Then get back to her, you cuckoo, and sit tight, and, mark you, if men come trespassing at night in this country with intent to do your property any harm, they can't complain if they get hurt. You understand what I mean?"

He smacked a hand on to Langley's hip and felt the outline of the six-shooter which still was there.

Langley nodded, and without more ado began to run along the bank towards the willows.

The heat from the burning shed was so fierce that Strong felt the scorch of it even where he stood, against the wall of the bungalow; but in spite of the heat he began to throw pail after pail of water against the sides and over the roof of the bungalow to prevent the little building catching fire.

He worked like a demon for five minutes, and then noted that the glare and the heat were less intense. The shed was burning out.

He took one last look at the remains of the shed, which was now only a fitfully smouldering jumble of wood, and set off to join Langley beneath the willows. When he reached the "Di" he was in an entirely reckless mood.

"It makes me cross," he said to Langley, "to think that I must waste another half-hour or so, but although I propose to run risks, I do not propose to be so foolhardy as to go abroad again till Mr Jones is safely within doors; and I fancy that this last affair will

satisfy him to-night. He thinks that I am beyond mischief now, and with that over-weening confidence of his he will call his fellows off. Jones is not the man to let other people's worries keep him from his bed, however many sleepless nights he may have spent in seeking his own ends."

Strong took his pipe from his pocket, forgetful that it was sodden with water. Finding it would not light, he bit on the stout vulcanite mouthpiece till it split between his teeth. Langley, pale and ill at ease, sat beside him cracking his long fingers.

After twenty minutes or so of this somewhat gloomy waiting Strong began to smile again.

"Pull out mid-stream," he said. "Can you 'jump' her from the water? That is a thing we haven't tried yet, and I forget how much you say the 'Di' can do and how much she can't."

"She'll rise all right," said Langley; and so they put off.

From mid-stream they "jumped" the airship about fifty feet or so, and through the air Strong steered the "Di" above the same ground which he had traversed on foot some hours before.

To Langley's amazement, Strong cast all discretion to the winds, circled round the stables slowly, and so close to the roofs that he could just touch the edges of the buildings. He turned the corner sharply and put the "Di," her propellers purring softly, along the balcony.

To Strong's astonishment Diana was still there, closely wrapped, and huddled against the balustrade.

She peered out at him between the creepers, and when she beheld the airship she drew back with a sharp cry. Then she leant forward again and peered at Strong with a white, strained face.

Neither of them said a word, but Strong, kneeling in the little craft, reached out and took her hands and kissed them, and let them go again.

Then he sent the "Di" flying upwards into the night.

CHAPTER IX

STRONG MAPS OUT HIS CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE WORLD

OUT of sheer joy of freedom Strong put the "Di" up to five thousand feet, and there let her hover.

Langley peered at him glumly in the darkness. "Where are we off to?" he asked.

"Oxford," said Strong, shortly. "We'll hand over the 'Di' to old Bill. He's as safe as houses and will say nothing. Then we will pick up Arbuthnot."

Old Bill was a boatman and Arbuthnot an undergraduate.

It was growing light when Strong ordered Langley to drop the "Di" into the Isis, a couple of miles from Oxford. A countryman on his way to work saw her drop. He was frightened and told a policeman going home to bed; and the policeman told his sergeant. The sergeant telephoned the news to his chief at Oxford. The chief, when he remembered the information in the morning, mentioned it casually to a reporter on a local newspaper; and the reporter promptly wired it up to town.

Strong, having left the "Di" in charge of old Bill, took up his quarters at the Mitre with Langley. Arbuthnot and John James Vannistart Verulam Bellingham, fourth Earl of Bellingham, and contemporary of Strong's at the 'Varsity, happened to be in Oxford at the time, so they joined the luncheon party.

Arbuthnot, a very large young man with enormous muscles and a fair amount of brain, and Bellingham, who affected an eye-glass and who was invariably tired, listened with incredulous interest to Strong's story of the "Di" and the Princess Diana.

Throughout the recital Langley sat twitching with

anxiety on his chair. Once or twice he tried to cut short the strenuous stream of Strong's narrative; but Strong bade him be silent.

"Here endeth the first lesson," chanted Arbuthnot, solemnly, when Strong had finished his story.

"The first lesson if you like," Strong rapped back, "but the second lesson is beginning and, believe me, it will be a deal more exciting than the first."

"Gad!" he cried, "if those reporter chaps downstairs only knew that I was the man who had brought them all helter-skelter from London, wouldn't they be pleased! And why not tell them?" he added. "Why not? By Jove! I will."

He made for the door, and Langley hung on to his coat sleeve.

"For Heaven's sake, man, think what you are doing," he protested. "I don't want those fellows on my track if you do."

But Strong only shook him off and marched downstairs. In the hall were twenty or thirty men, whom Strong intuitively took for journalists. He surveyed them quickly and was not pleased with them. In the group Strong's quick eye fell on a girl. She was a tall girl and dark, with black hair and level brows above a pair of pale blue eyes full of light and intelligence. Her nose was of the snub order, her chin strong, and her mouth humorous. She was the kind of girl that Strong immediately set down as being a "good fellow." He looked at her again and decided, moreover, that she could be trusted.

This was exactly the case. Miss Dora Hunt was at once the envy and the admiration of Fleet Street. She did a man's work in a woman's way, which is in reality to accomplish far more than a man ever does. She had the record of what is technically known as "never falling down on a story." In plain language, she invariably accomplished that which she was set to do.

Strong beckoned to her and she came forward. "Are you a journalist?" he asked.

"I am," said Miss Hunt, crisply.

"What do you represent?"

"The *Daily Wireless*."

The men were crowding forward but Strong waved them back.

"It is useless your being eager, gentlemen," he said, "I have nothing to say to you. I am the man who brought the airship to Oxford and I am going to tell this lady why I did it. I am going to tell my story to her and to no one else."

The men protested. They argued that the matter was a public one and that they were as much entitled to the news as was Miss Hunt.

Strong laughed at them and drew Miss Hunt away. In the room in which he had been lunching with Langley, Bellingham and Arbuthnot, he introduced the girl to his friends. Then, without a word of apology, he told his story all over again. Miss Hunt listened as Bellingham and Arbuthnot had listened, with incredulous interest.

Strong told Miss Hunt of the shooting of the man in the launch, of the fire at the bungalow, and of his farewell to the princess.

"And that," he continued, "is not the end of it, but only the beginning."

"Now," he went on, "I have other things to say—things, Miss Hunt, that I have not yet told to Lord Bellingham and Mr Arbuthnot. Perhaps," he added, "they will be kind enough to give me their attention."

Strong, with a quick eye, had noted that Bellingham's eye-glass was bent with more than necessary interest upon the pleasant countenance of Miss Hunt.

"Langley," here Strong clapped a huge hand with a scounding thwack on Langley's shoulder, "is not merely the inventor of an airship, but of a wireless instrument which is far in advance of any that has yet been made."

"Don't—" cried Langley, starting forward; but Strong only thrust him on one side and picked up from the floor a little box about a foot long and nine inches

deep and broad. It had the appearance of an ordinary hand-camera. At one end was a small ivory button, while let into the top was a little circular disc of glass about the size of a half-crown. Strong began to tap quickly on the button and tiny sparks began to flash from the disc in the lid. Bellingham, Arbuthnot and Miss Hunt leaned forward eagerly.

"You see," said Strong, easily, "the affair is exceedingly simple. I tap dots and dashes on this button and the dots and dashes can be reproduced by flashes in the disc of a similar instrument a thousand miles away.

"So much for that," he continued, and he set the little box on one side. "Now we come to explosives. Mr Langley has invented and patented an explosive of a very terrible order. It is in liquid form and can be poured into shells the size of a golf ball. One of these dropped from a height will destroy any building on which it falls."

Langley writhed on his chair, biting his nails.

"Now the joke of it all is," Strong went on, "that the dear, simple inventor of all these things cannot see that the three appliances—the airship, the wireless instrument and the shells—can all be applied to one purpose. And that purpose is mine—to steal the earth!"

Miss Hunt gave a little gasp, and Bellingham laughed lazily.

"Oh, yes!" cried Strong, "you can laugh if you please, but I am afraid, my dear Bellingham, that you are booked for the same enterprise as myself. Don't you see, Miss Hunt, what I am driving at?"

"I am beginning to," said Miss Hunt.

"Of course you are," answered Strong. "I have taken you into my confidence and I am trusting you completely. Any word of this would destroy the whole of my plans. I am going to build an airship that will carry a score of men, and fill her as full as she will hold with the steel shells which will enable me to lay waste

any city in the world I please. But there is only one city I am aiming at as yet, and that is Bomberg, the capital of Balkania!

"And, by God, I will have that city if I lay it in ashes before I take it!" he shouted. "I will be King of Balkania first and dictator of the world afterwards! In spite of all the governments on earth I will marry the Princess Diana!"

Strong's face, as he shouted these words, was extremely evil to look on. His eyes were hard, and burnt with a steady blue fire; his lips were drawn back in a snarl across his strong white tigerish teeth. It was almost the face of a madman. Neither Bellingham, Arbuthnot nor Miss Hunt dared say anything. The silence in the hotel sitting-room became tense and painful.

It was broken by Strong, who began to laugh gaily, and Miss Hunt was amazed to see how, on an instant, his expression had become boyish and irresponsible. A strange man, she thought to herself, and in her heart she feared him.

"Now I daresay, Miss Hunt," Strong said pleasantly, "you wonder why I called you up here to tell you this; I assure you that my purpose was a business one. I want to see your editor and arrange with him to organise an intelligence department for myself.

"Of course," he went on, seeing a troubled look on Miss Hunt's face, "you don't believe me, and I don't blame you for that. But seeing is believing, and you shall see to-night. You shall come for a spin in the 'Di.'"

Strong made good his word, and at two o'clock in the morning, after the most amazing experience of her life, Miss Dora Hunt left for London by motor car. A few hours later she wired to Strong, giving him an appointment with Mr Sharp, editor of the *Daily Wireless*, at three o'clock that afternoon.

The *Daily Wireless* rejoiced in its name for the simple reason that it was the only paper in London which had

availed itself of a complete service of wireless telegrams for the gathering of news. This was a fact that counted in Strong's favour. He would be able to interest Mr Sharp in at least one of Langley's inventions.

When he entered Mr Sharp's room at the *Daily Wireless* Strong was somewhat surprised to see that the editor was a youngish-looking man, possessed apparently of all the buoyancy of youth. Mr Sharp had a pair of quick, shrewd eyes, and a ready smile. But then it is the privilege of those who look upon the doings of the world from behind the scenes to smile.

"This is a very wonderful story of yours, Mr Strong," he began as he shook hands. "So wonderful, indeed, that but for the faith I have in Miss Hunt I should certainly doubt its veracity."

"I take it," said Strong, plunging at once into business, "that Miss Hunt has told you everything from beginning to end, so far as the end has been reached."

Miss Hunt, who was present, nodded her head primly. "I have been very careful," she said.

"That being the case," said Strong to Mr Sharp, "I will proceed to my proposals, and mind you, Mr Sharp, this boast of mine that I intend to steal the earth is no idle one. Consider the resources at my command. With an airship such as I shall soon possess, packed with shells of enormous power, and an intelligence department worked by wireless, I don't see how anything can stop me."

"Only one thing," said Mr Sharp, his eyes alight with amusement and suspicion, "and that is a base. You can hardly operate against the world from England."

"I don't propose to try," said Strong, shortly. "As a matter of fact I was coming to that when you interrupted me. As you may possibly know, my father, Sir John Strong, is an indefatigable mountaineer. Last year he was tramping in the Carpathians and

did his best to penetrate the secret of the Ring of Nissa. The Ring of Nissa, as you may also know, consists of a vast circle of glaciers. From the outer edge of them the ascent is easy in two or three places, but on the further side they fall so sheer that it is impossible to make any descent. Within this outer ring of glaciers there is an inner ring of glaciers, and that inner ring no man has ever pierced.

"The legend goes that within this second ring of glaciers there is a pleasant valley. Whether the legend has any justification no man can say; but my father, who is considered to be somewhat of an authority on geographical matters, sees no reason why the story should not be true.

"As soon as my large airship is ready I shall make straight for the inner ring of Nissa, and if the legend is based on fact I shall make my headquarters there, encircled by those impenetrable hills. There I shall be at liberty to repair and refit, and no man will be able to touch me."

Strong's voice was so full of conviction and sincerity that even the suspicious Mr Sharp found the wild scheme plausible. "Go on," he said with a smile, "go on. It is all mighty interesting, but really I don't quite see your point in coming to me."

"My point in coming to you," replied Strong, "is that I require assistance, in return for which I am prepared to give you what I believe you call scoops."

Mr Sharp wrinkled his eyebrows.

"For instance," Strong continued, "I want you first of all to detach Miss Hunt from her regular work in order that she may study the subject with which I hope she will have a great deal to do later on. When I actually start on my campaign it will be necessary for me, if I am bottled up in the Ring of Nissa, to know what the world is doing and thinking. I shall rely on Miss Hunt for that information, and I think if she were to make her headquarters in Vienna she would, by means of the wireless instrument with which I will

supply her, be able to keep me well posted with news of events.

"That is the assistance I ask. On the other hand, I will undertake to give to Miss Hunt, by wireless, full details of all my intentions. For example, if I propose to hold up Monte Carlo, or to bombard Paris, I will give you due notice of what is coming; and I fancy that with news of that sort at your disposal the circulation of the *Daily Wireless* should go up by leaps and bounds."

"It would, indeed," said Mr Sharp with an ironical smile.

"Of course," said Strong, "I know that you place no faith in my boasts. Frankly, I may say that I don't care in the least whether you do or do not, but at any rate to-night I am going to give you some good 'copy.' Every journalist in London is looking for me, but I propose to give my story to you. I want Miss Hunt to write exactly what I have told her. I want her to publish my plans and to say that I propose to start my campaign against the world three months from to-day.

"You, of course, need accept no responsibility for my statements. Indeed, if you choose you can denounce me for a visionary or a madman, and if you require it I will give you my permission to do so in writing.

"On the other hand," Strong went on, "I want Miss Hunt to do me a service. I understand that Mr Jones, or perhaps as we had better call him, the King of Balkania, has taken fright and carried off the Princess Diana to Bomberg.

"Now, as I am counting on the princess as an ally, I want to convey to her one of Mr Langley's wireless instruments. To dispatch a man on such an errand would be to create suspicion at once, but Miss Hunt can go to the princess as a journalist seeking an interview. Whether the interview is obtained or not I don't care so long as the instrument reaches its destination in safety.

"Will you do this for me in return for the interview I am giving you to-night?"

Mr Sharp raised his eyebrows and glanced at Miss Hunt.

"I should like to go," she said quietly, and so that matter was settled.

"Now," said the editor, "we come to an extremely awkward point, and I am presuming, of course, that you will make good your boasts about the airship. I want you to clearly understand, Mr Strong, that while I am prepared to make great sacrifices to obtain exclusive news, I will not make any concessions to you which will in any way jeopardise this country. Putting all cant on one side, I want you to understand that this newspaper is the servant of the British Empire, and that no temptation will induce us to place this country or any portion of her possessions in peril. You see," he added, with a smile, "I am already taking it for granted that you will fulfil all your remarkable threats."

Strong laughed. "Your sentiments," he said, "are very much in accord with my own. No doubt you personally would, if you possessed my airship, give the benefit of it to your own country, but you do not happen to be under the necessity of winning the Princess Diana of Balkania. And therefore your case is not entirely on all-fours with mine.

"However, I will at once set your mind at rest by assuring you of the fact that this country and all her possessions will be entirely ruled out of my arrangements, and Europe will be much too busy looking after me to think of attacking Great Britain while I am stealing the world.

"Of course, if this country should be roped in to an alliance against me, the matter would be serious. It would, however, not affect the issue in the least. My own people could do nothing against me, and even though they tried, I should not think of harming them. You have my word on that point."

The editor took up a paper-knife and balanced it on his forefinger. He looked at Strong steadily.

"I have your personal assurance," said he to Strong, "but what is my guarantee?"

"Your guarantee should consist in the fact that my personal safety will, to a large extent, lie in your hands. Without the information for which I should in return give you my news, my movements would be sadly hampered. You will therefore see that while you are relying much on me I am also relying much on you."

"Very well," said the editor, "we will let it go at that."

"Of course," said Strong, with quiet confidence, "I am perfectly aware that as soon as I begin to make myself felt the whole world will rise in arms against me." He smiled a placid and confidential little smile, and Mr Sharp looked at him with growing astonishment.

"When the world wakes up to find that I am really a menace, and that I can do whatsoever I will, then they will take joint action against me.

"Then," continued Strong, "we shall come to Armageddon. Not that I desire it—indeed, I will do all in my power to avert it. You are, of course, a man of the world and, I should judge, fairly easy-going and fairly cynical. You only see me in my worst aspect. It makes me ashamed to tell you that I possess a heart, and that I possess a brain that is filled with no unkind thoughts towards my brother men."

Mr Sharp looked at Strong thoughtfully, almost seriously.

"I tell you, Mr Sharp," Strong continued, "that I have, tucked away in my brain, ideas for the betterment of this world which few men have dreamed of yet. And I mean to put them into execution, even if I have to lay waste a small portion of the earth to do so. Meantime print the interview. I'll be back at eleven o'clock to look at a proof; and I am always punctual. Till then, good-bye."

When he had gone the editor turned to Miss Hunt, and his face wore a frankly worried and puzzled look.

"Can you tell me, Miss Hunt," he asked, "what is the meaning of all this?"

Miss Hunt looked Mr Sharp squarely in the eyes.

"I can only give my own impression, and I believe I am right.

"I believe it is the beginning of the end. I have seen more of Mr Strong than you have. I have been in the 'Di,' and have proof positive that she is the most wonderful invention imaginable. I have become acquainted with Mr Strong's extraordinary notions, and also with his extraordinary power, and I believe that he is the most wonderful man existing.

"I believe that he is perfectly capable of not only starting, but finishing Armageddon. And if that is the case, the arrangement which we have made with him ought to be extremely advantageous. In any case there is not the least cause for concern on our part, because we have nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"Quite true," said Mr Sharp, nodding his head. "Quite true. So let us hope for the best—or, perhaps, I should say, for the worst," and he turned again to his work.

That night the great printing machines of the *Daily Wireless* whirred and roared till long past the small hours. The interview which Strong had sanctioned was a revelation even to Mr Sharp, and he saw that in the morning there would be a woeful shortage of copies of the *Daily Wireless* if excessive precautions were not taken.

"If this sort of thing goes on," he said to himself, as at two o'clock he left the office with the roar of the machinery in his ears, "we shall have to lay down a new plant."

He looked up and down Fleet Street. "If, indeed," he added to himself, "Mr Strong fulfils his prophecy, it seems to me that a great many of our rivals in this

district will have to close their doors. Well, good luck, Mr Strong, even if it brings Armageddon."

The effect on London by the publication of the interview with Strong can only be described as staggering. Up till noon the great machines of the *Daily Wireless* were still whirring and roaring, and cart after cart left Shoe Lane, their axles groaning with the weight of the papers that they carried.

For once such topics as the weather were forgotten. The one thing on everybody's lips was the extraordinary interview in the *Daily Wireless*.

This extraordinary story was repeated and flashed across every Continent, and beneath every sea, and the whole world was puzzled.

There was a certain quality of sincerity, and a certain overwhelming quality of confidence about Strong's statements that held people from laughter. The letter giving the editor permission to brand him as a lunatic only served to puzzle people more. One half of the people declared Strong to be mad. The other, that there might have risen a man who was quite capable of changing the face of the earth.

CHAPTER X

A BLOW IN THE DARK

THE journalists of Great Britain, Europe and America raged up and down looking for Strong, but Strong, calling himself "Mr Smith," hid away in a small hotel in Bond Street. He was a nine days' wonder, and then for a time he was forgotten.

But though the public ceased to take an interest in him, Mr Smith of Bond Street was exceedingly busy. Miss Hunt successfully achieved her mission to Bomberg, and thereafter she frequently attended at the little conferences which Strong held with Langley, Arbuthnot and Bellingham.

It was not hard to persuade the authorities at the Crystal Palace to allow Langley's airship to be constructed there, and the secret of the vast shed which covered Strong's activities was well kept. With the assistance of Miss Hunt it was put about that the great edifice merely sheltered a new form of amusement for the public, which was as yet only in an experimental stage.

Time passed quickly, and towards the end of August the "Victor," for so Strong christened the new airship, was nearing completion.

To Langley, as he fitted the parts of the "Victor" together, the days passed like a dream. She was modelled on the same lines as the "Di," only, of course, on a much larger scale. She was 200 feet in length and her beam was 30 feet at the widest part. She tapered in the same cigar-like way as the "Di." All the space required to navigate her and make use of her as a fighting machine was centred in the well, which took the place of the conning-tower in a battleship.

Like the "Di" the "Victor" was built of aluminium, her hull being immeasurably strong, because it was held together by a network of triangular wires; and triangles, as the merest schoolboy knows, are the hardest things to break.

On either side of the well were a series of pigeon-holes, in each of which was stored a small round shell about the size of a man's closed fist, filled with a high explosive which was Langley's secret.

The process of fighting for which the "Victor" had been designed was intensely simple. It was one of those simple things which occasionally "stagger humanity."

The main fighting power of the "Victor" lay in her capacity for navigating through the air. The mode of attack consisted merely of taking one of the small shells and dropping it overboard. And Langley estimated that the velocity given by the drop, plus the power of the explosive contained in the shells, would be sufficient for one of these pilule-like weapons of offence to spread disaster far and wide wherever one might fall.

Forward in the hull of the airship space was devoted to stores. Aft was a cabin just sufficiently large to hold bunks for five men, two on either side and one across the decks.

On 28th August Langley saw to the fitting of the engines. Then he wired to Arbuthnot to bring the other men who had been chosen to participate in the colossal theft which Strong was planning.

They arrived at Langley's lodgings two nights before the day set aside for the ascent.

One of them was by name Wildney, a fellow-undergraduate of Arbuthnot's. A short, stocky man he was, with dark hair and a strong jaw tinged blue by a strong growth of beard.

The other was Pelham, who, like Wildney, was a fellow-undergraduate of Arbuthnot's. He was a tall, sparely-built young man, with shrewd blue eyes and fresh-complexioned face invariably wreathed in smiles.

Of the air he, of course, knew nothing, but he was a good sailorman and Arbuthnot had chosen him because of his extraordinary daring on the water.

Strong had now decided that in case the legend of the Ring of Nissa should not be true it would be necessary to provide an absolutely trustworthy base. This he found in the shape of Bellingham's steam-yacht, the *Aphrodite*, and Bellingham sailed from Cowes to lie off Lagos Bay until such time as Strong informed him by wireless that he had need of him.

With Bellingham went Thurston, a young engineer into whose charge was given a mass of appliances, which Langley judged might be necessary for repairing purposes if the "Victor" met with any disaster.

Bellingham, for his part, went with a bad grace, for though Strong's enthusiasm had now a great hold on him, the volatile and impressionable earl had conceived an almost comical attachment for the prim and determined Miss Hunt.

Three days before the date fixed for the ascent of the "Victor," the *Daily Wireless* appeared with a column which was repeated by cable to every part of the globe. It reiterated Strong's apparently wild threats, and gave in outline details of his daring scheme. It was, of course, laughed at.

Yet while men laughed they were puzzled. Would or would not Strong's airship achieve all that he claimed for it?

That was the only point they considered. That a man could be so foolish as to boast he could steal the earth was a matter which they either disregarded or scoffed at.

Search was made high and low for Strong, but "Mr Smith," the quiet guest at the quiet hotel in Bond Street, hid himself by day, and by night paid surreptitious visits to Langley, while London went half crazy with thwarted curiosity.

On the night before the ascent all the men gathered in Langley's rooms at Sydenham and Strong indulged in one of his exceedingly humorous harangues.

"Gentlemen," he cried, raising his glass, "I propose the toast of the 'Victor.' It is the most modest toast that I can propose, seeing that the person whose health should really be drunk is myself.

"To-morrow we take our lives into our hands. For this I have to thank you. But I do not thank you in too overwhelming terms, because unless a man is prepared to do this a man is not a man at all.

"Upon what we propose to do after the ascent is made it is unnecessary to dwell. I have been perfectly frank with you as to the object of this enterprise. You have done me the honour of placing your lives and your reputations at my disposal. I shall not betray the trust. I have perfect confidence in Mr Langley, and he has perfect confidence in me.

"For obvious reasons there cannot be any trial of the 'Victor.' When we make the ascent to-morrow the ascent is made for good or evil. Did we descend in civilised parts an inspection of the 'Victor' would follow, which would only prove conclusively that our motives in ascending at all were not of the most peaceful.

"To-morrow afternoon, therefore, we shall, in the words of an old popular song, 'sail away.' We shall sail away on a mission which I presume most people would regard as criminal. But if you magnify crime sufficiently it becomes heroic. Our crime, or perhaps I should say my crime, is so stupendous that it can only be regarded as heroic in the last degree.

"Alexander the Great—I allude to the soldier, and not to the estimable tailor—dreamed great dreams and achieved much. But, though I say it myself, I imagine that no man ever before contemplated undertaking the task of stealing the whole earth.

"I drink to the success of my theft."

On a sudden Strong dropped his flippant manner.

"All of us," he said, looking round the table at the men who were gazing at him, their lips parted in laughter, "are in reality pioneers—pioneers of a new era of peace."

At this they might have laughed again, but for the intense earnestness of Strong's face. All suspicion of mirth or cynicism had vanished from it. He gazed straight before him with the clear eyes of a man who sees a sure and certain vision.

"We," he continued—"though our beginning may be sullied by blood—are in reality the makers of history. I am going to see to it that all of you help me in my desire for a better and kinder reign on earth. We may be forced to perpetrate a few injustices, but justice towards the human race is in reality the end I have in view.

"Don't laugh at me," he concluded lamely and very boyishly, "if you think I am setting myself up for a great man, but I mean none the less to leave my little mark on this world, and that mark will be for good."

After this he sat apart smoking, and later held a short conversation with Miss Hunt. At the risk of overcrowding the "Victor" it was decided that Miss Hunt should accompany them.

After dinner Miss Hunt had of necessity to return to town from Sydenham, and Strong saw her off from the low-level station. Then he turned his steps in the direction of the Crystal Palace, and was, on revealing his identity to the manager, allowed to pass into the grounds.

As he strolled up through the glass-covered vinery he met the last of the night's visitors straggling out.

When he had climbed up the hill he turned and made for the shed. There was only one entrance to this, and seeing the necessity of preserving the secret of the "Victor" up to the last moment, Arbuthnot was there on guard. It had been arranged that Strong himself should take up sentry-go at nine.

Even Arbuthnot did not seek to detain Strong in conversation as he drew near the shed. Strong's manner did not encourage any comradeship just then. He nodded to Arbuthnot as he reached the door and, opening the lock with a Yale key, passed in.

Strong walked down to the end of the shed and turned on an electric switch.

As he stood leaning against the pillar Strong noted carefully every detail of the "Victor," and even in the gloom she was beautiful to behold, her long shining hull standing out boldly. The aluminium lifting proppers on their tall slim shafts looked almost aggressive in the half light.

Strong gazed at the "Victor" for a long time, and his black mood at last fell from him.

"God bless you, my dear 'Victor,'" he said, under his breath, "you will give me Diana."

Then he looked upwards and became conscious of a flickering shadow on the roof of the shed. It was a long, black, sharp-edged shadow in the shape of a scythe. It drew back and advanced, advanced and drew back. Strong wondered what the object which cast that curiously-shaped shadow might be.

The shadow advanced and became more elongated than before. And Strong could scarcely keep himself from starting as he observed that at one end of the strange shadow there came into prominence against the light on the roof a clasped human hand.

For a moment Strong stood rigid against the pillar. He saw the shadow turn sharply back, and then he judged it the moment to leap. He leaped aside quickly, and a second later heard the rasp of steel on the iron pillar. A body shot forward, blundered, and, evidently impelled by some great force, crashed against the pillar, and then fell to the earth.

In a flash Strong had dropped on his knees upon the fallen figure. But there was no need for force or any struggle. The figure, in falling, had struck its head against the iron support of the shed, and the man beneath Strong's knees lay still.

Looking about him, Strong saw lying a few feet away a long, curved, sharp-pointed knife.

"Oh, ho!" he said to himself.

Then he took his knees from the prostrate man beneath him and rolled him over.

He peered down into the man's face, and drew back with a start. It was Ludwig.

He surveyed the gaping jaws and the staring open eyes with disgust.

He slipped his hand into Ludwig's clothing against the prostrate man's heart.

"Only knocked out of time for a bit," said Strong, and then he rose up and strode over to the door. "Arbuthnot," he called.

Arbuthnot came in, and, glancing at Strong's face, saw that there was something amiss.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Just about as dirty a piece of work," said Strong, "as you could possibly conceive."

He walked over and picked up the knife.

"It is only by the mercy of Heaven that I have not got this between my shoulder blades now." He strode over to the senseless man and stirred his body slightly with his foot. "And the author of the attempted murder, I may inform you, is his Royal Highness Prince Ludwig of Sylvania."

Arbuthnot whistled.

"The best thing," said Strong, "is to get the beggar to; to get him away without any fuss. Fetch me a bucket of water from the tap"—water had been laid on to the shed—"I will see about that. Then get up to the palace and 'phone through for a taxicab. This gentleman must be removed without any fuss. We have had quite as much advertising as we need—indeed, I think, rather more than we want—and an incident of this sort won't improve matters to-morrow."

"Yes," said Arbuthnot, "I agree with you, but there's only one of the attendants here now, and I don't like to leave you."

"Pshaw," said Strong, "do you think I am afraid of this?" and he again stirred the insensible man with his foot.

"Not of that," said Arbuthnot, "but there may be others."

Strong laughed. He was faced with danger once again, and therefore regaining his spirits.

"Let 'em all come," he cried. "Hurry up, like a good chap."

Arbuthnot nodded and walked away.

Strong soused Ludwig's face with water, and soused his body too. He was in no mood to spare him any attention that he could lavish upon him.

After a while Ludwig moved from his death-like sleep, shuddered, and opened his eyes.

Strong looked into his face grimly.

Ludwig shuddered again, and let his head, which he had lifted a little from the ground, fall back.

Strong sat himself on a packing-case that lay handy and lit his pipe. To Ludwig he said no word at all. And Ludwig was hardly in a position to force conversation.

Presently Arbuthnot came back, and with him came two of the palace attendants bearing a stretcher.

"Pop him on to it," said Strong; and the men, perplexed but dumb, obeyed his instructions.

Ludwig had never spoken a word, and did not speak now. They carried him up to the entrance of the palace and then laid him once again on the ground.

The men stood too much in awe of Strong to say anything, and Arbuthnot had too much sense to make any comment. Strong stood by and smoked his pipe till the taxi-cab arrived.

He then walked over to Ludwig and scrutinised him closely.

At the end of his deliberate inspection of the prostrate man he saw that it was quite possible to move Ludwig.

He bent down and grasped Ludwig's shoulders in his great hands and lifted him to his feet by sheer force. When he had got him upright he shook him a little to rouse him the more.

He looked down into Ludwig's face, and Ludwig shrank from his gaze.

"Allow me to inform your Royal Highness," he whispered in his ear, "that a vehicle is awaiting you."

He then transferred his grasp of Ludwig's shoulders to the prince's coat-collar, and practically lifted him into the cab. He kicked the door to after him.

Then he leaned into the vehicle and gazed at Ludwig in a manner which the prince never forgot—a manner, indeed, that made him a nervous man from that moment.

"Murder is all very well," said Strong, "but stabbing in the back is another thing—that is the act of a cur."

He said no other word, but turned to the chauffeur. "Drive this person," he ordered, "to the Sylvania Legation in Grosvenor Gardens."

The man touched his cap, and the cab whirred away. Strong turned to Arbuthnot.

"I fancy," he said, "that the excitement is over for the night, but I think I will spend the remaining hours of our watch in the shed myself. A repetition of this incident is hardly likely, but goodness only knows what these brutes may be up to."

He and Arbuthnot then walked back to the shed.

When they reached it Strong told Arbuthnot to keep the door, but himself went within, and, climbing into the "Victor," sat down in the well.

The hours passed slowly, but presently dawn broke, and then there shone into the shed the light of a bright autumn day. At nine o'clock Langley came.

To him Strong said never a word of what had taken place. Arbuthnot, however, informed him in hurried whispers, cautioning him, however, to say nothing to Strong.

Later came Pelham and Wildney, and Strong ordered breakfast to be brought to them in the shed.

By now he was his old light-hearted self, and he laughed and chatted of all things in the world except the great expedition which was before them.

CHAPTER XI

STRONG STARTS TO STEAL THE EARTH

THE announcement that Strong's mysterious airship was to attempt her flight at three o'clock had for a week been bruited everywhere. Flaming placards announced the fact at every street corner. Black type flaunted it in the newspapers. The news was on everybody's lips.

By noon the slopes of the palace grounds were alive and black with people. Taking every precaution, the authorities at the palace had mustered an extraordinary force of police, and these held, two deep, the ropes which enclosed the great green open space in front of the shed. On the east and west, on the north and the south, grand stands had been built. At one o'clock these were crowded to their utmost capacity.

The terrace of the palace was thick with people. The windows of the restaurant were jammed with them. So far down as the old polo ground every square foot was occupied by men, women and children, who, after the manner of great crowds gathered together, swayed gently to and fro.

About the ring the constables were hot, flurried and half exhausted. The pressure against them was immense.

At half-past one it was necessary to telephone urgently for a reinforcement of police—not only a reinforcement, but large reinforcements.

Never indeed in the memory of any man, never indeed in the record of English public events, could such a crowd be remembered. The roads leading to the palace had been blocked with vehicles for hours; the railway officials were in despair. Trains were jammed to bursting. People sat on the racks, on each other's knees, and stood ten deep in the centre of the compartments.

And still the people came.

A hundred fresh constables came streaming down the slopes and fought their way through the crowd to the ropes. To a certain extent this relieved the strain on the constables who had been there all the morning, and they succeeded in thrusting back the crowd a little.

Strong, standing bare-headed and debonnair on the lawn, turned to Miss Hunt, who was by his side.

"Do you know, Miss Hunt," he said, "this reminds me of that memorable scene in *Alice in Wonderland*, where the Oyster went for a walk with the Walrus and the Carpenter. 'And thick and fast they came at last, and more, and more, and more.'"

Miss Hunt looked anxiously about her. Even with the added force of constables the police were having an extremely unenviable time. Slowly but surely the crowds around the ropes were forcing the constables back.

"If they don't look out," said Strong, surveying the harassed policemen, "it will be a case of 'Charge, Chester, charge!'—with batons."

He glanced at his watch. "If we wait for the appointed time," he continued, "we shall be squeezed to death. Those fellows cannot hold out much longer. I am sorry to break my arrangements with the management of the Crystal Palace, but I propose to consider the safety of the 'Victor' and our own precious lives first.

"It is a quarter past two, and if we are not off before the half-hour it will be too late. We will get the ship out now."

He turned about and gave his orders. The doors of the shed were thrown open, and the "Victor" was run through on slips very similar in construction to those from which the "Di" had been launched at the back of the bungalow at Cookham.

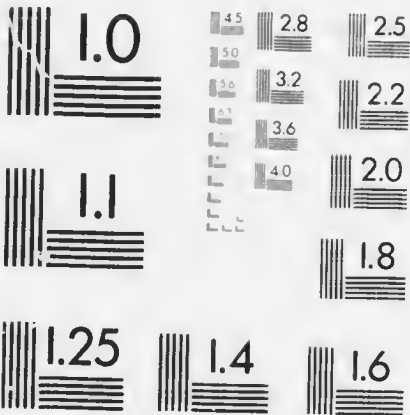
As the shimmering hull of the "Victor" was run out into the sunlight a great roar burst from three hundred thousand throats.

The crowd swayed backwards and forwards, and



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then swayed forward again. The great wave of humanity struck and shook the hollow square of constables. The policemen reeled and then braced themselves, and with almost their last gasp forced the crowd back again.

Yet still over the hill and up from the valley were streaming thousands upon thousands of late arrivals.

Strong jumped into the "Victor," and, climbing to the after-deck, looked quickly all about him.

"It is a question of minutes," he called to Arbuthnot—"of seconds. Into the ship with you, Langley, into her quick! And you other fellows, climb in too.

"Now, Miss Hunt, come along."

He leant over the side, and taking Miss Hunt by the arms literally lifted her from her feet into the "Victor," and set her gently down in the well.

"Arbuthnot, sit here. Pelham and Wildney, get forward."

Strong looked quickly over the airship and her passengers. Then he turned to Langley.

"All clear?" he asked.

"All clear," said Langley.

Langley, for his part, sat with the sweat running down his face, and his eyes blinking wildly behind his gold-rimmed glasses. His hands, pale and trembling, hovered over the keyboard waiting to release the "Victor."

Strong slapped him on the back. "Pull yourself together, old man," he said, "or those big ears of yours will flop off."

Once more Strong looked at his watch and took one more rapid look about him.

"It's impossible to hang out till three."

He pocketed his watch, and the time was twenty-five minutes past two.

"By Heavens!" he cried, "we are in for it."

The line of constables ahead of them was broken. Half-a-dozen policemen were lying on the ground, and the crowd came surging over them.

"Up!" he shouted to Langley, "up!"

Langley's hands flew to the levers.

The great propellers at the stern and at the prow of the "Victor" began to whirr softly, and she ran up the switchback-like slips.

Overhead the propellers began to whizz, cutting the air with the noise of a thousand rapiers flourishing to the salute.

"Up, up—for Heaven's sake, up!" shouted Strong.

The crowd now had broken in, not only before them, but on either side of them. Screaming women and shouting men were hurled against the sides of the slips. The constables were but as broken reeds.

Strong and the others felt the "Victor" quiver as the crowd surged round. With a shudder Miss Hunt heard the sickening scunch of human bodies being squeezed to pulp against the slips. Then they went up, up, up, up swifter than any bird.

Langley alone kept his eyes at the keyboard, the others hung over the sides of the airship. They saw the crowd crash together in the space which they had leapt from, and heard the cries of the wounded men and wounded women as they were crushed and ground against the sharp steel of the "Victor's" cradle.

Below them the roar of half a million voices sounded like the roar of breakers on Chesil Beach.

With a rather grim look Strong took Miss Hunt gently by the shoulder and drew her back from the side of the ship.

"Don't look," he whispered; "we shall have enough of this sort of thing before the end of the chapter. It is not very nice to see, but there will be worse."

Miss Hunt turned about and looked him full in the eyes. Her face was pale and scared.

She stood for a moment or two clenching and opening her hands.

"Mr Strong," she said, "this is horrible. I suppose I did not quite understand, when I undertook this business, what I should have to see. It is horrible."

Strong looked at her closely. He had never possessed much faith in women. Would this particular woman fail him now?

"I am sorry," he said gently, "but these things, you know, must be."

Miss Hunt spread her hands wide apart.

"But is it right?" she asked. "It seems to me that you are going to bring immense misery on great numbers of people, and, so far as I know, with no definite object in view."

"So far as I can see at present," said Strong, "you are quite right. I am not quite sure what the definite object will be, except one thing—and that is the Princess Diana."

He paused, and then added, "I think she will show me the way out."

"At anyrate," he went on, "I am convinced that I am right. There is not an incident in the whole progress of the world which did not ultimately result in good where men saw their purpose and carried it through."

Miss Hunt looked at him with wide eyes. "Yes," she said, "I think it is quite true."

"Anyway," said Strong, with one of those smiles which brought him allegiance wherever he went, "do you think I am such an unutterable villain that I am not to be trusted if I start my campaign with the loss of a few lives?"

Miss Hunt looked into his face and sighed. "Yes," she said, "I think you are to be trusted."

Strong shook himself and took out his watch. It was half-past two.

"What do you reckon," he said to Langley, "that you can get out of her?"

"Two hundred miles an hour," murmured Langley.

"Which means that if we go as the crow flies we shall get to Lagos—when?"

"As the crow flies," said Langley, speaking as one recites a formula, "the distance is one thousand and forty miles—say five and a half hours."

"Five and a half hours," said Strong, more to himself than to Langley, and he ticked off the time on his watch. "That means that we shall pick up Lagos at 7.30. An hour's run due west will bring us to the *Aphrodite*. That is half-past eight."

Then he spoke aloud to Langley. "My dear boy," he said, "that is much too early. If we pick up the *Aphrodite* at half-past eight we shall certainly be observed.

"I do not mind for myself, but we cannot possibly incriminate Bellingham. I suppose we shall have to indulge in the novel occupation of hanging about the clouds?"

All this time Langley had kept the airship stationary dead above the Crystal Palace. The earth spread below them like a map, quivering with the shaking of the "Victor" caused by her whirling propellers.

Then Arbuthnot broke in.

"Tell you what, Strong," he cried, "let's pick up Paris on the way. It's a bit off the route, but it seems to me that we have time to spare, and as those jokers down below see now that we have started, there is no reason why Paris should not see us too. Paris is the centre of the earth so far as I am concerned, and who is to say what route we may take from there?"

"I am afraid," said Strong, "that we are not counting on the telegraph. If we are seen going south-west we shall be presumed to be *en route* for the south-west, and that will create suspicion.

"But I will tell you what we can do," he added; "we can take a run round Paris and then jump out of sight—at anyrate, as far as human observation is concerned."

Langley looked up at Strong. "Is that what you want?" he asked.

"It will do," said Strong, "go ahead."

Once more Strong looked over the side. They were at an altitude of 3000 feet, and the world below them was dim and distant. None the less, the uproar at the

Crystal Palace came up distinctly and rang unpleasantly in their ears.

"South-west be it," said Strong.

The "Victor's" bow and stern propellers began to whizz, and they plunged forward.

Now this was entirely different travelling to ballooning, where the wind never smites one, because the balloon must go with the wind.

The wind was to the south-west, and they were cutting into it. The force of it brought tears into Miss Hunt's eyes as she faced it squarely.

The wind, indeed, was whistling past them like a hurricane. Strong cast an anxious eye at the steel supports which held the lifting propellers.

"You had better slow down a bit," he said, "or we shall carry away, and then there will be an end of us and all our hopes."

He cast a glance over the side, and the waters of the English Channel lay beneath them smooth as any lake.

"Let's go down," he said, "and have a look at things."

The "Victor," under Langley's guidance, dropped almost like a stone. Gazing over the side, Miss Hunt gave a startled cry. It seemed that in a moment or two the waters of the Channel would swallow them up. Then as Langley set the "Victor" steady there came that sinking sensation which one experiences when an express lift is stopped suddenly.

The English Channel lay only 500 feet or so beneath them, and the day being Saturday, the Downs were full of craft.

Immediately below them the evening mail packet ploughed her way through placid waters.

They could hear the cries of those on board as they were observed.

And then came to them a new sense—a sense that in their present situation the world was of no account.

The world to which Strong and his friends had before

been held captive by the laws of gravitation became on the sudden a plaything.

An expression of the general feeling came from Pelham.

"Good Heavens!" he cried, as he gazed downwards, "we can waltz all round the blessed old globe."

By some common instinct Miss Hunt and Strong looked at each other. Miss Hunt looked at Strong because she wondered if he realised the position which Pelham had put into words. Strong looked at her because he had realised the possibility, and wondered if Miss Hunt could see that he appreciated it.

Their eyes met, and they looked away.

They were over dry land again now, skimming across the roads at the back of Dieppe.

Langley, without any guidance, started for Rouen.

"Just for a joke," said Strong, "let's steer round the cathedral."

They dropped again, and Langley slackened speed. They skimmed closely over the high-peaked roofs of the old houses of Rouen.

They almost scraped the towers of the cathedral, and a roar of wonder from the town came up to them, and they could see the crowd in the market-place sway to and fro in bewilderment.

They shot out again across the Seine. Another hour and they were over the outskirts of Paris.

"Dear old Paris," said Arbuthnot, looking over the side. "Dear old Paris, I'd like to stop and have a stroll along the Rue de Rivoli and over Pont Neuf to the Latin Quarter."

"I daresay you would," said Strong, "but such a stroll is not for you to-night."

Then Strong had a sudden idea.

"To-day," he cried, "is the 1st of September; in four days' time Bomberg shall capitulate. When I am master of the world Paris shall be one of my headquarters. The Arc de Triomphe shall bear the record of

my victories. And I'll chalk one of them up now, by George! I'll chalk it up now!"

Langley, at the steering-wheel, looked at him as though he did not entirely comprehend.

"Arbuthnot," said Strong, "shall be our guide. Get the speed down to twenty miles and drop the 'Victor' just above the housetops.

"Where," added Strong to Arbuthnot, "is the Bois de Boulogne?"

Arbuthnot indicated the Hyde Park of Paris with his forefinger.

"Now, my friend," said Strong to Langley, "give me a trick at the wheel."

"Have a care," said Langley, "for though she works like the 'Di' she is a bit more sudden in action."

"All right," said Strong, "sit close beside me and we'll see what we can do."

CHAPTER XII

ACROSS THE WORLD

STRONG let the "Victor" down at an angle, making for the Bois de Boulogne. The Arc de Triomphe rose up at them.

They could discern a great hubbub in the Champs Elysées. Vehicles of every kind were drawn up sharply. The be-sworded policemen stayed their chatter; children ceased in their play beneath the chestnut trees. Every Parisian who observed the "Victor" stood stock still and stared upwards.

Remembering the difficulty of boarding a building Strong had seen to it that the "Victor" was fitted with fenders; but these were not the ordinary kind of fenders such as a steamship carries. They were broad and long, and more like mattresses than anything else.

Strong ordered Pelham and Wildney to hang them over the starboard side. Then he brought the "Victor" slowly up against the parapet of the Arc de Triomphe.

As they drew alongside they observed only one man on the platform of the famous arch.

Of him Strong took no account.

He was certain the effect his appearance would produce, and, handing over to Langley the management of the "Victor," he stepped on to the ledge of the Arc de Triomphe.

With a face white to the lips, and with staring eyes, the man on the roof of the arch fell back before him. He retreated to the top of the staircase and then fled.

Strong drew a penknife from his pocket, and, opening it, began to scratch on the edge of the parapet, while Langley, Miss Hunt and the others gazed at him in wonder.

With a smile across his face, Strong scratched vigorously and quickly the following inscription:--

"THE BATTLE OF BOMBERG WON SEPTEMBER 4, 1909, BY THE MAN WHO STOLE THE EARTH."

With remarkable unconcern he was still chipping a full-stop after the boastful, and as yet unestablished, "record" when a rush of people came through the opening leading to the staircase. The mob that surged up was led by a couple of policemen with drawn swords.

Strong jumped back and leaped into the "Victor."

"Up!" he cried to Langley, and up they went.

"*Au revoir!*" he cried, "*au revoir!*"

A few seconds later the "Victor" was 500 feet above the roof, and Strong, craning over, could see the policemen brandishing their swords far beneath him.

Suddenly he became grave.

"This," he said, "is enough foolishness for one day, though it may have served its purpose inasmuch as it fulfils my bit of brag. I shall have to exert myself to the utmost for the next few days. Now for Lagos."

Langley set the "Victor" south-west again, keeping her at an elevation of 1000 feet. Soon they left the twin spires of the Cathedral Chartres looking like two tiny blobs far beneath them. They crossed the Loire above Orleans, and made south across the Chartreuse country, and so for Angoulême.

All were curiously silent. All had leapt so suddenly into a new existence.

They sped over Bordeaux, and once again had the sea beneath them, Langley taking a short cut as he made for the mountains between Bilbao and San Sebastian.

Strong had now become bored with the excitement of the day, and he ordered Langley to put the "Victor" up to a higher altitude. So, practically beyond human vision, they made across the interior of Spain for the mountains of Sierra de Gredos, and then across Caceres and over the famous battlefield of Badajos, and on, above the deserted strip of Portugal, to the coast.

Lagos, with its palm trees and its white-faced houses and narrow, tortuous streets, was reached by about seven o'clock. The evening sunshine lit up the white-walled town and set the waters in the famous bay dancing.

"Now," said Strong, "as we have picked up our bearings, let us get up higher."

The "Victor" went soaring skywards, and the air grew chill and dank, though the sun still shone with great brilliancy.

Presently the sea became only a blue mist below them.

"If we pick up the *Aphrodite* by half-past nine," said Strong, "that will be good enough, so go slow, Langley, my friend, and don't overstep the mark."

Up to then there had been but little conversation. All were so oppressed by the novelty of their surroundings that they had been unable to find their tongues.

But now they regained their voices and were loud in their marvellings of the powers of the "Victor."

They hung for a little while in space, while Strong stood holding a quick debate with himself as to the precise course that he should now pursue.

Presently he got out the wireless instrument and made a click on the buttons. He watched for a long time before there came an answering flash.

"Who's there?" said the sparks.

"The 'Victor,'" was the answer. "And the operator is Strong."

"Good," was the reply. "I am Bellingham, and I congratulate you on your achievement. I am dying to hear what has happened. When are you people coming down?"

Strong made answer that Bellingham would have to content his soul in patience, explaining to him as briefly as possible that there was really no need to descend. The "Victor," he continued, was in excellent sailing order, and they had all they needed. He asked Bellingham to anchor off Lagos till he should hear from him again, either by wireless or by overland cable.

Bellingham was evidently as yet not an expert on

the wireless instrument, and his part of the conversation was flashed very slowly. However, he was sufficiently master of the instrument to declare that his heart was broken and that he was tired of so much waiting and watching.

In return, Strong implored him to hang on a little longer, and outlined his immediate plans. In conclusion he ticked this message:—

“I have every faith that we shall find a haven within the ring of Nissa. If that be so, I shall simply rest there and then move straight to the attack on Bomberg. The sooner we have a permanent base where we can effect repairs the better.”

“All right,” answered Bellingham through space, “but don’t be longer than you can help. If I keep my men dawdling about much longer there will be an open mutiny.”

“If you have trouble,” answered Strong, “let me know, and I will come and deal with it.” He added: “*N.B.*—This is a joke,” and then “Good-night, old chap.”

“Good-night, old chap,” came the answer, and the flashes ceased.

It was now about eleven o’clock and immensely dark. They were wrapped in a cloud-bank, and the air was unbearably cold and damp. The powerful lights with which the “Victor” was fitted scarcely penetrated the gloom, and even in the small space of the well of the “Victor” Strong had to search and call for Langley. When he found him he sat down by his side and took quiet counsel with him.

“How far do you reckon it is,” he asked, “to Nissa?”

“As far as I can judge,” said Langley, “it is 1700 miles.”

“That, of course,” said Strong, “is as the crow flies?”

“Naturally,” said Langley, “when you take to airships you take to short cuts.”

Strong made a quick mental calculation; then he asked: “Can she keep up to 200 miles an hour throughout the night, seeing that the wind is now behind us?”

"Throughout the week," said Langley. "In fact, I am not at all sure that, from the way she went this afternoon, I have not underestimated her speed. I believe 250 would be near the mark for an average run with a fair breeze."

"Good Heavens!" said Strong, "that means that, starting now, we can be over Nissa by six or seven tomorrow morning?"

"True, O King," said Langley.

"Then let's get at it. I believe you worked the course out?"

Langley brought the head of the hovering "Victor" round, and pointed to the needle of the compass, which swung on its axis amid a glare of electric light.

"That's the course," said he, "and if you will give me the word I will let her rip."

"Is that dead sure?" asked Strong.

"Can't miss it," said Langley. "Keep on that course and you can't miss it."

"Who understands this tin kettle," asked Strong, "besides yourself and me?"

Langley looked round doubtfully.

"Arbuthnot knows pretty well," he said, "but, of course, we don't want to take too many risks at first."

"Then let Arbuthnot take first trick," said Strong. "You can take middle watch, and I will come on at dawn—for, mind you, none of us has seen Nissa, and it may be a place which will take some picking up."

"All right," said Langley, "if that is the case I will stow myself away at once. Frankly, I am dead tired."

At two o'clock Langley, who could wake at will as though he had hidden in his mechanism an unfailing alarm-clock, roused Arbuthnot and took the wheel in charge.

Arbuthnot, who had found the glare from the compass exceedingly trying to the eyes, and was, moreover, dog-tired, practically rolled from his seat at the side of the "Victor" and instantly fell asleep.

Langley passed his hands lovingly about the

machinery to be sure that all was in good trim, and then setting the course dead straight, wedged his knee into one of the spokes of the steering wheel and leaned back. From time to time he stooped forward to assure himself that the "Victor" lay true on her course, and then leaned back again. The rush of the air past his face, the faint glimpses of the moon, and the dank blanketing of clouds gave him a sensation like that of a dream.

At 5.30, therefore, he called Strong, and Strong, fresh as though he had slept the clock round, emerged from his blankets and struggled up to his place at the wheel.

"Before you turn in, old man," he said to Langley, "put her down a bit. I don't mind in the least if anybody sees us, because I am now perfectly certain that no man can touch us, and I want to have a look at the land. Have you got the maps?"

Langley let the "Victor" drop for a couple of thousand feet so that the earth showed up plainly beneath them in the morning sunlight. Then he fetched the maps and spread them out, made a few calculations, and decided that if the course he had followed were a true one they should soon be over Balaton Lake.

He went forward and looked over the side and uttered a little cry.

"We are dead on it," he said, "dead on it. That water beneath us must be Balaton. Another hour and a half, or, at the worst, two hours, should bring us over the Carpathians.

"I have laid our track dead across Budapest from here, but to pass over that city you must put her a couple of points north."

Strong mechanically put the wheel over. "And then?" he asked.

"Then," said Langley, "keep her perfectly straight ahead. I'd like another nap, but when we come to the hills call me and I will play navigating officer once again."

"All right," said Strong.

Langley turned in, and Strong took his station at the wheel. Presently he put the "Victor" down a little closer to the earth, and, leaning sideways and craning over the side of the "Victor," he could see barren country streaming past beneath them. Soon there rose up ahead of him the spires and walls of a great city. Strong put the "Victor" down lower still. Soon they were rushing over the suburbs of Budapest.

Men going to work in the fields looked up, and, beholding the course of the "Victor," fell on their knees.

But Strong had little time to note these manifestations of terror on the part of the men so far beneath him. He shaped the course of the "Victor" dead across Budapest.

Again he dived, and the city rushed up at the airship. But almost before he had rid himself of the sensation that the airship and the roofs of the city must meet in a fearful impact, Budapest was streaming away from under them. His attention was too much given to the navigation of the "Victor" to note much, but he could see that even at that early hour men and women stood stock still in the half-empty streets of Hungary's capital and stared upwards.

Then Strong put the "Victor" up another 1000 feet and left the city far beneath. It was now about half-past seven o'clock, and he set about rousing the other members of the party. After a little while Miss Hunt came out into the open and inquired where they were.

"Ask the navigating officer," said Strong, indicating Langley.

Langley took the jest seriously, and once more applied himself to his maps and calculations. "That river on the right," he said, "is the Theiss. Ahead of us is Tokay. Half an hour's run beyond that will bring us over Unghvar. Then it is the hills, and when it comes to the hills I leave the business to Strong."

"Where's Sambor?" said Strong.

"A good bit north from Unghvar," said Langley.

"Well, steer for Unghvar, and then lay her course

for Sambor. According to my father, I understand it is just a little to the south, and midway between the two, but we cannot miss it very well, for the ring of glaciers is what guide-books would call 'an outstanding feature of the landscape.'

"Meantime," he went on coolly, "I'm pretty hungry, and I think we had better get breakfast and clear the things away before we start tackling mountains. By George!" he added, "this air makes one as hungry as a horse."

Miss Hunt laughed and turned to the laying of the breakfast things. She was fitting very quietly and unostentatiously into the new life of the "Victor."

Strong watched her as she busied herself with the enamel mugs and plates. His ideas of table furniture were as primitive as his notions of food, and when the more civilised Arbuthnot had suggested crockery-ware for the airship he had laughed the suggestion to scorn. As, however, he watched Miss Hunt arranging the crude vessels he was surprised by a sudden thought.

"Good Heavens!" he said to himself, "I shall have to lay in something a little better than these things before Diana comes aboard. And, with luck, I shall have her here in a week."

The party ate their breakfast in silence. They were beginning to find that flying through the air at a great altitude was not productive of much conversation. The air, indeed, was beginning to have the same effect on them as the winter atmosphere of Russia does upon the Russians; and the Russians are a silent people in the winter time because it is too cold to talk.

By-and-by Strong went forward with a pair of glasses and began to spy out the land. After ten minutes or so of intent scrutiny of the smaller hills beneath them and the greater hills ahead of them, he gave a great cry.

"By George!" he shouted, pointing with one of his great forefingers, "there she is. There's Nissa."

CHAPTER XIII

IN AERO

"GENTLEMEN," said Strong, with the air of one accomplishing a mock introduction, "behold the Ring of Nissa."

Langley nodded to Strong from the wheel.

"I may be navigating officer," he said, "but I'm hanged if I am a pilot. This is your business, and if you want to steer into the Ring of Nissa you will have to take charge yourself."

Strong walked aft and assumed control of the "Victor." He brought her down a thousand feet or so until the white sides of the glaciers rose up like a wall against them.

"Nothing like investigating the outside of the house before you explore the interior," said Strong, "so the best thing we can do is to take a little cruise round. I have worked it out more or less, and I think that the circle of the hills, as we shall take it, is about 150 miles in circumference."

He put the helm of the "Victor" half over and brought her round. Then by periodic little movements of the wheel he kept her racing along the outside edge of the great ring of glaciers.

Far beneath them, below the snow line, they here and there picked out tiny villages. Now and again a church spire of some small town showed up against the greenery of the plain.

Strong slowed the "Victor" down to about fifty miles an hour, so that they could note as they passed any particular features of the Ring of Nissa.

But there were few. The prospect, indeed, was as monotonous as it was forbidding. Here a great black

rock precipice rose sheer up for a thousand feet. There was a snow slide, and there again the uneven surface of the mountain-side was covered in everlasting ice.

As they passed along the edge of the Ring of Nissa Strong pointed to a deep gully that looked about as narrow as a bootlace, but which must have been at least half a mile in width. This gully wound up the face of one of the mountains till it was lost in a crevice of the rocks.

"That," said Strong, "must have been the road by which the only attempt to solve the mystery of Nissa was ever attempted." He brought the "Victor" to a stand and steadied her.

"I don't think," he said, "we could hit upon a better way of getting inside the Ring than by following the course of that ravine."

He put the "Victor" straight for the place in which the bootlace-like gully ended.

Half a mile above that point he jumped the "Victor" up again and then sent her forward. She travelled on close above the snow plain across which, apparently, those adventurers, who had made the only ascent of the Ring of Nissa on record, had ploughed their enterprising way.

The snow plain came to a sudden end with a sheer drop of 1500 feet or so. Hovering above this, Arbuthnot, with the aid of glasses, reported a deep-cut ravine through which a wild torrent of snow water was racing at express speed. On either side of the gully the rocks rose sheer up again to the snow line; above that were jagged peaks surmounted by snow and ice-fields.

Strong put the "Victor" up once again, and she passed over the jagged edge of the Ring of Nissa.

And then Pelham, who was hanging over the bows, uttered an exclamation.

The "Victor" ran on, and all except Strong, who was at the wheel, craned over the side.

They could now see that they were apparently in the centre of a vast crater, the upper portions of

which were snow and ice bound, and the depths of which were lined with thick woods. Further still beneath them they could see a green and pleasant valley, through which ran a torrent.

"So my father was right," said Strong. He let the "Victor" drop gently down, and as the airship dipped and hovered, and dipped and hovered again, all the members of her crew busied themselves with taking observations of the haven which by such good fortune they had found.

As they descended lower and lower between the pine woods, the better they could see how utterly wild, and yet not altogether barren, was the valley. Along the edge of the racing river the pines grew less thickly on the hillside, and where the ground was not carpeted with the dried needles from the trees a coarse grass grew in rank profusion.

Beyond the coarse grass and pines they could discover no signs of vegetation.

The boiling river roared at them in the silence, and the noise, confined as it was within a comparatively narrow space, was all-pervading. It came up to them like the roar of a Niagara Falls.

Langley indicated a natural glen almost in the centre of the valley.

"It seems to me," he said, "that will be the best place for pulling up the 'Victor.'"

Strong nodded, and put the airship gently down.

Then, as was the case with the "Di," the "Victor" mechanically shot out four great telescopic legs, and with a little scrape and a little jar, and the grind of the spiked feet of the legs on the pine needles, came to a standstill.

Strong threw over the wooden-runged rope ladder with which the "Victor" was supplied and climbed out.

Strong's first action on setting foot on earth again was to turn and pat the aluminium sides of the "Victor" as he might have patted a horse.

"Dear old girl!" said he. "Dear old 'Victor'! This is better even than I had hoped for."

Strong's resourceful brain had forgotten little that was needed. Bringing his Canadian experience to bear on the choice of materials for camp, he had decided that the Red Indian's tepees were the best kind of tents they could have, because of their simplicity and their great protection from weather. To make that protection all the greater he had furnished waterproof sheets. And under his direction Arbuthnot and the rest got to work and pitched camp.

They had three tents in all. One of these Strong allotted to Miss Hunt, and in the second he put Arbuthnot, Pelham and Wildney. The third he kept for himself and Langley.

When the tents had been built and the small cooking range of the "Victor" transferred from the airship to the space in the centre of the tents, Strong looked about him.

"Well," he said, "I wonder if Providence will supply us with any game?"

He looked around him with the searching eyes of the experienced hunter, but he could observe no trace of animal life whatsoever. There was no cry of any bird, nor the sight of any living creature. There was only the silence that was no silence because of the roaring of the water of the river over the rocks in the bed of the stream.

"Does not seem to be anything to be scared of," said Strong. "But, all the same, we will take no risks."

He climbed into the "Victor" and brought out a couple of rifles.

"The only thing that suggests itself to my mind that is likely to disturb us," he said, "is a bear. And if only Bruin would come along I should be pleased. If we are to be hung up in this place for any length of time we shall feel the need of fresh meat."

The camp was now beginning to look ship-shape, and Miss Hunt busied herself attending to those minor

details which always fall to the lot of woman. More or less domestic arrangements have to be made when a woman chances to be present.

The party lunched in good spirits. The experiences of the past day and night had exhilarated rather than fatigued them. All were rejoicing in a new-born sense of strength and independence.

Lunch over, Strong got to business again and called the little council in his own tent.

"The hardest part of all at the present moment," he said, "is going to fall on Miss Hunt."

He turned and looked at her kindly.

"Do you think," he asked, "that you will be able to stand further days of excitement and adventure?"

"I never felt better in my life," she said.

"That being the case," said Strong, "I am going to ask you to go to Budapest to-night."

"Is not that a rather tall order?" said Miss Hunt, waving her hands at the encircling hills.

"Don't think I am going to ask you to walk," said Strong. "We will take you there in the 'Victor'—you and Langley."

"I?" said Langley. "It sounds as if you were about to get rid of me."

"I am," said Strong, "and I will tell you why. I want you to go back to England and fetch the 'Di.'"

"Good gracious," said Langley. "Is not the 'Victor' enough for you?"

"No," said Strong, "it is not—for this reason."

He paused and looked at the eager faces about him.

"We might rush into the business of stealing the earth at breakneck speed and succeed in breaking our necks. I may appear reckless on occasions, but I am far from being careless, and there is a great deal I want to know about Bomberg and the lie of the land there before I take the city by storm.

"Moreover," he went on—"and I feel sure you will sympathise with me in this—I want to see the Princess

Diana at the palace before I call on his Majesty to capitulate.

"Now, that would be an impossible achievement with the 'Victor.' Secrecy is impossible if one travels in an airship her size, but the 'Di,' as we know, can come and go with practically as little risk of observation as a bird. There is risk, of course, but that we shall have to meet.

"For instance," continued Strong, "when we set out for Budapest we shall have to do so under the cover of darkness. I have no desire to land Miss Hunt and Langley into difficulties from which they could not extricate themselves by setting them down in Budapest in broad daylight with what would practically mean the eyes of the world upon them.

"If I did that, I fear Langley might never come back with the 'Di,' and the part which I want Miss Hunt to play would be rendered practically impossible. I suggest," he added, "that she and Langley should go back to London together, and that on their arrival there Miss Hunt should give the *Daily Wireless* a message which I will prepare for her.

"In the meantime, Langley can go down to Oxford and secure the 'Di,' over which, I hope to goodness, old Bill has been keeping careful watch and ward.

"Then," Strong continued, "they can start for this place together, though I do not propose that Miss Hunt should come back here. She will have to cut short her journey at Budapest and there remain with the outside world; otherwise, you see, though we shall be perfectly safe here, we should be practically lost to everything else that is going on in the world—a state of affairs which wouldn't do at all, especially as I intend as soon as possible to open up negotiations with the King of Balkania."

Strong rose to his feet. "In the interval," he continued, "there is nothing to do except to roam about and explore a little."

"May I make a suggestion?" asked Miss Hunt.

"Certainly," said Strong. "Please do!"

"What are we going to call this place?" asked Miss Hunt, and she swept her hand round and indicated the heights of the Ring of Nissa.

"By Jove!" said Strong. "I hadn't thought of that. What's a good name?"

He looked about him.

"It's a bit of a responsibility," said Pelham, "to find a name for an unknown country."

"I have it," said Strong. "I think I have exactly the name we need, seeing that from this place we are practically going to remodel the face of the world—we will call it Aero."

Miss Hunt applauded with her hands. "Excellent," she cried.

"Gentlemen," said Strong, gaily, "I will now put the question. Those in favour of calling this place 'Aero' please hold up their hands. All those to the contrary—none at all. Miss Hunt, I beg to inform you that our retreat is duly christened 'Aero.'"

CHAPTER XIV

STRONG DEALS THE WORLD A BLOW

THE rest of the day was spent in idleness, for the camp of its rough kind was almost perfect, and there was neither work nor sport to claim anyone's attention. Langley, it is true, fussed about the "Victor" during the afternoon, seeing that the parts of her strong and yet delicate machinery were all in working order.

So deep was the hollow in the hills that the sun vanished behind the towering crest of the glaciers at about half-past three in the afternoon. And then the darkness fell on them swiftly, so that by four o'clock the gloom in Aero could be almost felt.

They unshipped some of the powerful lights from the "Victor" and kept them going from the batteries in the airship.

At five o'clock it was extraordinarily dark and cold.

Arbuthnot, growing restless, suggested that it would be soon time to depart. But Strong reminded him that whereas they were sitting in darkness the plains to the westward of the glaciers were probably still bathed in the evening sunshine.

"In any case," Strong said, "I do not propose to start till ten o'clock or so. Even then we should be outside Budapest before midnight if we do not make the trip in still shorter time."

Two of the men gathered dried and dead branches that had fallen from some of the decaying pines about them and built a great fire.

The flames shot up and cast a great glare over the racing river and upon the rocks immediately about them; but the glare only served to intensify the dark,

uncaanny darkness which shut them in like a wall on every side.

At ten o'clock, leaving the camp as it stood, Strong ordered the party into the "Victor," and in a few minutes Langley got the airship under way. She went sheer up at a great rate, and as they emerged from the gloom of the hills and came into the bright breadth of the starlit heavens Langley heaved a little sigh of relief.

"An hour does it," said Strong, as he laid the "Victor's" course north-west and pulled the switches over that gave her all the power she was capable of.

It was intensely cold, and the party, huddled in blankets, sat in the well of the "Victor" without talking. Only once Strong roused Langley with his foot and asked if he was sure he had laid the course correctly.

"Perfectly," said Langley, "and if you look over the port bow I fancy you will see the lights of Budapest ahead of you."

Strong looked, and sure enough there rose from far beneath them the ruddy haze such as comes from an illuminated city at night.

The moon was hidden, and the brightness of the night had greatly diminished; there was, therefore, little fear of the "Victor" being discovered.

To the north-west of the town along the river, the country was thickly wooded and thinly dotted with villages. Still keeping at as low an altitude as he dared, Strong, using his night-glasses, did his best to make out the lie of the land beneath him.

"I think I have got it," he said at last. "Kamoff must lie behind that bit of pine wood. Yes, there can be no doubt of it. That must be Kamoff. Now, all stand by," he said, turning back to the controlling board, "for a sudden dive. There will be no time for hesitation in this business."

The "Victor" swooped like a hawk, and Strong brought her down to the edge of the high road beside the wood which he had descried some minutes before.

"Now, Miss Hunt," he said briskly, "I have got

to hustle you. I am sorry, but this is no time to stand on ceremony."

Miss Hunt shook herself clear of her wraps and climbed over the side of the "Victor." As she went over the side she stretched out her hand to Strong, who took it and grasped it warmly.

"Good-bye," he said, "God bless you! May you get safely to London town and safely back to us! I know you will not fail us."

"Good-bye," said Miss Hunt. "You can rely on me to perform my small share of your big task. Good-bye."

She stepped down on to the ground, and Langley followed her. To him Strong said nothing at all, nor did Langley speak to him. They shook hands in silence.

Then without more ado Strong put the "Victor" up again, and Pelham and Arbuthnot, hanging over the side, watched the two little black figures on the long black highway growing smaller and more indistinct till they were but smudges, which were finally wiped out by the night.

Strong was in a silent mood, and said nothing to the other men in the "Victor." He put her about and made straight again for the Ring of Nissa. But instead of pausing there he went straight on, making for Bomberg.

Arbuthnot, conscious that they had passed the glaciers which sheltered their forsaken camp, tapped Strong lightly on the knee.

"You have overshot the mark, old man," he said.

Strong, who was not in even a civil temper, answered him shortly.

"When I overshoot the mark," he said, "I shall probably know it myself."

He said no more, but let the "Victor" race on for another half-hour or so; then he let her drop a couple of thousand feet and kept her hovering above the long black stretch of plain.

From the cabin Strong brought out one of Langley's

wireless instruments and placed it on the seat beside him.

He pulled out his watch and looked at it, and found the hour was close on midnight. "The witching hour," he said to himself. "The witching hour; Diana's own words and own choice of time. We will see if she is on the watch."

He began to tick-tack on the little instrument, and he tick-tacked and tick-tacked for some five minutes before there came an answering flash.

The flashes said: "Who's there?"

Now Strong, delighted at the success of his first experiment with the instrument, was of a mind to jest. For one second his spirit of mischief prompted him to say "Miss Hunt," but a second thought told him that such jesting would be perhaps a little unfair; so instead he tapped out a query:—

"Is that Diana?"

The answer came: "Yes; who is that? Strong—the man who steals the earth?"

Strong was no expert with the instrument, and he did not tick with the facility of a first-class operator. However, he contrived to tick off his share of the conversation at a moderate speed.

"I have already stolen a bit of it," he answered. "I have found a fastness in the Carpathians which will puzzle the whole world to dig me out of. From that spot I am coming to see you and tell you exactly what I have done and what I am going to do. Is it all well with you?"

Diana answered: "Not too well. Papa is in a horrible state of mind. The news of your ascent reached him last night, and since then he has been unapproachable. He cabled for Ludwig at once, and the dear young man should be here some time to-morrow evening. Shall you come to Bomberg first or wait for his arrival?"

"Are you laughing?" said Strong.

"No," came the answer, "I am not laughing. I am almost serious."

"Can you go on ticking?" asked Strong. "Is it safe?"

"For a few minutes, yes; but my father is so suspicious of me that I am practically under guard. There is a sentry in the passage, and papa himself may come up to my rooms at any moment. When will you come to see me?"

"Not to-night, my dear," said Strong, "nor to-morrow, nor the day after. I cannot come in the 'Victor'; she is too big for such a visit. But Langley has gone to England for the 'Di,' and with luck he should be back with it at Aero—that is the name by which I have christened my headquarters—on Friday night. If you will watch for me at midnight I will be there. How I shall come, whether by the 'Di' or by the front gate, I cannot tell; but I shall be there."

"Very well," Diana answered; "I will watch for you. I am beginning to believe in you. Good-night!"

Miss Hunt's report in the *Daily Wireless* of the voyage of the "Victor" and the discovery of Aero staggered London. An hour or so later it was staggering the earth.

Since the "Victor" had made her ascent from the Crystal Palace amid wild scenes of excitement and disorder there had been the greatest speculation as to where the extraordinary craft had gone.

It was frankly recognised that an airship that had leapt up as the "Victor" had and then sailed away at a terrific rate at an altitude of several thousand feet was a power to be reckoned with.

The world grew almost weary of declaring over and over again that at last the conquest of the air had been attained. That it had been attained, however, in such an unlooked-for and extraordinary manner produced not only sensation, but dismay.

Strong's bold boasts that he meant to steal the earth were recapitulated times without number. These threats, it is true, were not regarded as entirely serious,

but none the less it was admitted that a reckless man, such as Strong appeared to be, might easily become a pirate of the air and a menace to the world's peace.

The question, therefore, upon the lips of the five continents was whither had the "Victor" gone. There were strange and exaggerated stories of its visit to Paris and the episode at the Arc de Triomphe.

The course of the "Victor" was traced with more or less accuracy over Spain, and the last available details of the airship's amazing flight were cabled to London and the ends of the earth from Lagos.

But what had become of her after that? She had disappeared high over the Atlantic Ocean.

Every ship fitted with wireless telegraphy that could be reached received budget after budget of questions asking for information as to the whereabouts of the "Victor." But no ship reported her; she had apparently vanished into space.

Some held that she was making for the United States at an altitude which precluded observation. Others propounded the theory that, after all, she might be making for some secret refuge. And as the hours went on, and at such a time every hour seemed like a day, the perplexity grew more complete and the theories and the guesses more wild.

Then came the utterly staggering news from the pen of Miss Hunt of the finding of Aero, and the machines of the *Daily Wireless* pounded and whirred, not only till breakfast time, but all through the forenoon, and had not ceased their output of the wonderful story when evening came.

Mr Sharp was beside himself with joy, and even the placid Miss Hunt was in the seventh heaven of journalistic delight. Never in the annals of journalism had such a "scoop" been known.

The astonishment and excitement were also increased tenfold by the fact that the *Daily Wireless* announced that it would continue to publish particulars of the career of Mr Strong, who on every hand was

already called, either in jest or half-seriously, "The Man Who Stole the Earth."

The people of London were so thrown off their balance that the streets of the West End recalled Mafeking night. Why the people gathered in scores of thousands along the Strand, down the Mall, and round Buckingham Palace, and eastwards round the Mansion House, no man, not even the psychologists, could say.

But there they were, eager and shouting, and excited as Londoners had never before been excited. They had nothing to do, very little to say, and practically nothing to think of except the mysterious and vanished personality of the man who swore that he would steal the earth.

The effect on the United States was scarcely less, and Europe was moved as though by some great catastrophe.

In every capital the different Embassies were exchanging messages with headquarters, while the heads of the different States held hurried councils of war. They were nervous, and yet entirely ashamed of their nervousness; for as yet there was no real cause to imagine that the world stood in any peril.

But Strong's threats, coupled with his actual performance, to some extent justified the anxiety.

In Bomberg, the King of Balkania was completely taken aback, and on receipt of the news he cabled to Prince Ludwig to return to Balkania at once.

In his own businesslike room the king sat hour after hour smoking cigar after cigar, turning and twisting and weighing the whole affair in his mind.

Once he suffered almost a little pang of fear, and he rose from his chair, straightened himself, and went over to the window and gazed out.

Could it be that, after all, he himself, the most iron-nerved man of his acquaintance, was losing his old spirit of callous indifference—an indifference which practically amounted to a sublime courage?

The king prided himself on being his own counsel. He had never taken any man's advice, nor turned to any

man for assistance in time of trouble. He had always stood apart and alone, confident in himself and treating those responsible for his country's safety, under himself, as the merest pawns in his game. Therefore he would discuss with no man the thing which had come to pass. And the only sign of anxiety which his Court could detect in him was the increased coolness in his manner.

To Ludwig, of course, he would be compelled to speak, and therefore for Ludwig he waited.

Ludwig came on the evening of the second day, and was shown up at once to the king's room.

As he passed into the bare, formal apartment, the prince's knees shook under him; for he was really a coward at heart, and the look on the king's face was sufficient to strike terror into him.

The king swung round in his chair, drummed his fingers on his roll-top desk, and in an icy tone uttered an interrogatory "Well?"

"I came as soon as I could," said Ludwig.

It was the wholly unnecessary excuse of a frightened man.

"Did you bring a copy of the *Daily Wireless* with you?" asked the king. For reply Ludwig placed that paper on the table.

The king, methodical as ever, settled his eyeglass on his nose, turned to the front page, and then, tracing the lines with a well-manicured finger, read the whole amazing story through from beginning to end. And all the while he read Ludwig stood shuffling from one foot to the other.

When he had finished reading the king looked into Ludwig's face.

"This is clear enough," he said, "but have you anything to suggest?"

Ludwig was still shuffling his feet and knotting his hands.

"Well, yes," he said, "I have a distinct suspicion, but I hardly like to suggest it to your Majesty."

"Never mind about that at the present moment," said the king; "be kind enough to say exactly what you think. Even fools can be of help at times."

He eyed the prince in the most unpleasant way.

"Well, my idea is this," Ludwig stammered; "but again I would assure your Majesty that I dislike to mention it. But it is just possible that Strong may have smuggled a wretched wireless apparatus into the palace. In which case he may, in the past two or three days, have been in communication with the princess!"

The king leapt to his feet and brought his fist down with a crash on the table.

"Good God!" he cried, "why did I not think of that?" He looked round at the prince. "When that woman, Miss Hunt, was here from the *Daily Wireless* she went driving to the Morning Hills, and Diana went driving out there too, and there the two girls had some conversation together, though I had expressly forbidden it. I was indebted to Captain Kowchoffski for that piece of information. But they came back on horseback, so, as far as that goes, could have brought nothing with them. However, it is certainly a matter worth investigation. I can only call myself an ass for neglecting to think of Diana."

The king glanced at the clock, which pointed to close on midnight.

"If the princess has not already gone to bed," he said, "I will speak to her on this matter. You had better accompany me."

He swung out of the door so quickly that he startled the sentry stationed without.

At the end of the corridor his Majesty got into one of the many lifts with which the exceedingly up-to-date palace was fitted.

He told the attendant to go up to the princess' suite, and the man set the lift in motion.

Two floors up the lift was stopped, and the king stepped out, and, followed by Ludwig, walked down the great corridor which ran along the whole length of the

north side of the palace. It was lighted from the south side by windows that looked into the courtyard.

Outside the great double doorway, in the centre of the corridor which led to the Princess Diana's rooms, there was posted a sentry, who saluted as the king and Ludwig approached.

The king lifted his hand and rapped with his knuckles on the door which led direct into the princess' favourite sitting-room. His Majesty knew that if the princess herself were not within there would at least be a maid or a lady-in-waiting, for some attendant of the princess was always present in this room both by day and night.

But no answer came to the king's knock. He knocked a second time, louder than before, and still there was no reply. A third time he knocked, battering his signet-ring against the panels; but still there was no answer.

The king took the handle of the door, determined to enter without further ceremony, only to find that the door was locked. He shook the door fiercely, till the bolts which secured it top and bottom rattled loudly; then he paused and pressed his ear against the wood-work.

From within came the sound of a little cry, followed by a few sharp words uttered in low tones by a man's voice.

CHAPTER XV

DIANA CALLS

THE day of Langley's return to Aero with "Di" was spent in idleness. The arrangements were all so complete that there was nothing left to do but loiter through the time that divided them from the appointed hour for action.

True, in the afternoon Strong called Langley on one side, and together they spent a couple of hours poring over maps and charts, and making little calculations with the aid of the compasses in their respective notebooks. The result of their labours was to lay out a complete set of routes between Aero and all the capitals of Europe.

When they had finished their work Strong stretched himself and yawned.

"I think that will do for the present," he said. "We can leave the rest of the four continents alone for a while."

Langley shook his head in doubt as to their ability to deal adequately with even one continent. He was not even then sure that Strong had not, to use one of his own expressive phrases, "bitten off more than he could chew."

Darkness came down on them quickly at about four o'clock, and after that the men spent their time sitting round the fire reading by the light of the flaring logs or occupied with their own thoughts.

At seven o'clock Strong fetched out one of the wireless instruments and placed it on the ground beside him. He began to tick a query in the hope that by some means or another he might attract the attention of Diana at Bomberg. In these efforts he was persistent

because he saw that if he failed to attract her attention till midnight it would mean another day wasted at Aero.

Presently his heart leapt with pleasure as he detected through the glass of the instrument an answering flash, and there came the usual question of "Who's there?"

"Strong," was the reply. "Who is that?"

The answer was: "Diana."

"Then," ticked Strong, "is it safe for me to continue?"

"Yes," was the reply.

A sudden suspicion crossed Strong's mind. It might not in reality be Diana who was answering him.

So he ticked off this question: "What did you say to me on the banks of the river at Cookham when I saw you that morning with the gun?"

The answer reassured him. "I am on guard against the man who steals the earth."

"Are you still on guard, and do you still defy me, or are you ready to be my ally?"

"Not an ally as yet," was the answer, "but a friend."

Strong ticked away busily. "To-night," he said, "I propose to come and visit you, but it will be a greater difficulty for me to get into the palace at Bomberg than it was for me to visit you at Park Street. May I rely on you for help?"

The answer which the sparks flashed out was aggravating. "Does the man who steals the earth need help?"

Strong answered: "He does on this occasion. Have you a friend in the palace whom you can trust?"

There was a pause, and then the answer, "I think so."

"His name?"

"Captain Petroff."

"Then to-night I will come to you in the guise of a peasant. If my purpose is queried I shall be bringing with me a piece of quartz which I am convinced con-

tains ruby, which I desire to lay at the feet of the Princess Diana."

The only answer was: "Loud laughter."

Strong rapped sharply on the instrument. "This is not the time for jesting. Will you assist me or will you not?"

The answer was "Yes."

"Unfortunately I have no peasant's clothes, and my girth is considerable; moreover, I do not wish either to steal the garments or murder a man for his clothes on the way to Bomberg. Can you get Petroff to meet me at some appointed place outside the town with the clothes I need?"

The answer was: "I will see what can be done."

"Promise me that it shall be done?"

"Very well, I promise."

"Now for the place of meeting," rapped Strong. "I have studied the map of Bomberg and its environs carefully, and I find that three miles outside the north gate there is a little eating-house on the high road to the Morning Hills. If Petroff will be there with a horse at about a quarter-past eleven o'clock I will be there waiting for him. He had better bring a spare horse for me—a rough country horse by choice—driving a carriage would be ridiculous on such an errand, and one cannot trust the people who own carts."

"You do not give me much time," urged Diana.

"Time enough, my dear, for people in a hurry," tapped Strong.

"Very well, I will arrange it."

"Have you nothing more to say?" asked Strong.

"Nothing at all," was the answer, "except that I shall be glad to receive you. *Au revoir*."

"*Au revoir*," tapped Strong, "and it will not be my fault if we are compelled to be constantly bidding each other *au revoir* in the future."

The flashes in the instrument ceased, and Strong leant back against a tree-trunk. The roar of the river was in his ears, and he could observe nothing but the

light of the fire and the figures of the men crouched about it.

"Upon my soul," he said, looking about him at the black darkness, "I feel more or less like a tiger in his lair before he sets out to look for prey. The simile is unpleasant, but, I fear, more or less correct. Until I can begin things on a more colossal scale I shall continue to feel somewhat like a criminal."

At ten o'clock Strong roused Langley, and together they made the few arrangements that were necessary for their voyage in the "Di."

As they climbed into the little airship and started off the other men waved their hands to them, but said nothing.

The everlasting roar of the river and the silence of the hills and the blackness of the pit in which they were encamped were gradually breeding in them a spirit of taciturnity.

Strong breathed quicker, and his face lit up with animation as he watched the clear sky above them. He set the "Di" running over the Morning Hills at a fairly brisk speed. Presently they slowed up, fearing that they might reach their destination too soon.

He avoided Bomberg itself, lest by any chance some gazer at the heavens should observe them. He hung so high aloft, indeed, that it was a little difficult to make out the ground beneath them, but by-and-by he could pick out the line of the Morning Hills, and dropping towards the left, he discovered a lane running down them to the city.

The land on either side of the road was flat and uncultivated, and half a dozen clumps of pine trees afforded an opportunity of alighting without interference.

Strong, who had briefly recapitulated to Langley his conversation with Diana, looked at his watch. It was just past eleven o'clock, and if he were to be at the appointed place at the hour he had specified he had need for haste.

Strong therefore turned to Langley.

"As soon as I am on earth again," he said, "put the 'Di' up, and keep her up at as great an altitude as you can. I have laid the course from here to the palace, so that you can hardly miss it; at anyrate, you could easily find it by dropping down a little. The window from which you will have to pick me up lies along the north wall, and is on the third storey. You will not, I think, have much difficulty in discovering which window it is. I shall be there waiting for you on the stroke of midnight."

Langley brought the "Di" down, but did not trouble to put out her legs. He kept her hovering over a few feet above the ground, and Strong, hoisting himself over the edge, dropped softly on to his feet.

He watched the "Di" jump clear again, and then set off for the inn, which he could now see quite plainly about a quarter of a mile distant. He walked down the high road for a couple of hundred yards or so, and then turned over prairie land, making a slight detour so as to reach the stables at the back of the guest-house.

As he drew near he could see two horses tethered under a tree, while a cloaked figure stood impassively beside them.

Strong walked towards them with long, quick strides. As he drew near the man in the cloak came forward and peered at him, keen-eyed, from beneath a kepi.

"Mr Strong?" he asked in German.

"The same," answered Strong, "at your service."

The other gave a slight laugh. "If you will permit me to say it, the boot seems to be on the other leg."

"Never mind," said Strong, smiling back at him, "I am fond of being polite. You will understand how suave I am when we come to know each other better. I presume you are Captain Petroff?"

"The same," answered the captain, lifting his hand towards his kepi in a half-salute, "and very much at your service indeed."

"Do not let us quarrel on that point," said Strong,

laughing, "let us both call ourselves at the service of the princess."

"Nothing could please me better," said Captain Petroff.

"Now," said Strong, his voice taking on a sharper tone, "we must get to work. Have you brought the clothes?"

The captain indicated the bundle lying at the horse's head.

"And the quartz?"

"Even that," said the captain. "I have not forgotten." He stooped and brought out of the bundle a very ordinary-looking piece of granite.

"Excellent," cried Strong. "And where am I to perform my toilet? I do not object to changing my clothes in view of the stars or in the chilliness of the night, but I have no desire to allow people to wonder what I am doing by changing my kit in the open."

Captain Petroff laughed. He liked Strong. He was a man after his own heart.

"All that," said he, "is arranged for, but I am afraid that the part you have been cast to play is a somewhat strange one for a man of your inches."

He stepped up to Strong, placed his hand on his arm, and laughed at him in the darkness.

"You may not believe it, my dear sir," he said, "but as a matter of fact you are my lady-love. You are the one girl I passionately adore. The elopement is fixed for 11.20, and I have already engaged the interests of the serving-maid at the inn. She is all flutter and romance, and I believe that she would lose her soul, or even her job, to further my flight with the girl of my heart."

"Oh, oh!" said Strong, "so that's it. That accounts for the horses tethered under the tree. This is the trysting-place."

Captain Petroff chuckled.

"Yes," he said, "that is it. Not a bad game either, but now let's get into the cow-shed, where you can change."

Captain Petroff took up a stable lantern from the

ground and made his way across the filthy yard that occupied the space between the inn and the low-built, straggling stables.

When they came to the door Petroff thrust it open with his foot, walked in, and set the lantern down. He threw the bundle of clothes to the ground and motioned to Strong to enter.

"It is not very savoury," said Petroff, sniffing the reeking atmosphere of the cow-shed, "but I presume the place will suffice. While you are changing I will mount guard at the door. I suppose there is no necessity to urge on you the expediency of haste?"

"None," said Strong.

Strong then blundered into the cow-shed, and, opening the bundle, picked out its contents.

"I was told you were a big man," said Petroff, "so I got what I believe hosiers call the 'out-size' in all the garments I could collect."

"I will get into them somehow," said Strong.

He then began to divest himself of his own clothes and array himself in the baggy trousers, decidedly unclean shirt, and fusty jacket with which Petroff had furnished him.

The captain meantime stood at the door, smoking a cigarette.

Strong was just completing his queer toilet when he heard voices at the door. He heard a girl's voice speaking in low tones and rapidly, with a slow, soft accent.

Strong groaned to himself. "If she catches sight of my face," he said, "I am afraid it's all up with Captain Petroff's romance."

The voices went on in earnest whispers, and Strong paused in the midst of struggling into the all-too-tight jacket to listen.

"Ah!" the girl was saying, "do let me see her—let me see her, Altesse—let me kiss the lady's hand. Believe me, I understand these matters of the heart."

He heard Petroff's voice urging gentle remonstrance at the intrusion.

Then Strong made up his mind.

He never feared any woman, because his one method of dealing with them was to fling himself on their mercy. He knew very well that if an honest man flings himself on a woman's mercy he is never betrayed.

Therefore, with one last wriggle, he struggled into the tight-fitting jacket and strode over to the door.

He walked out of the door into the darkness, and the gigantic silhouette of his figure cast by the rays of the stable lamp behind him caused the girl to draw back and utter a little scream.

"Have no fear, *fräulein*," said Strong, "for I am Captain Petroff's lady-love."

The girl came forward in the gloom and pressed her hand against her bodice.

"Oh," she said, "surely the noble captain did not lie to me? He was not really and truly in love—he did not wait for his lady?"

"The captain," said Strong, laughing and stumbling along in his German, "is a bad, sad romancer. It is not he who waits for his lady, but I—at least, I do not wait for her, I am about to go to her. Surely that is just as good?"

"Or better," said Petroff.

The girl crept a little nearer, and looked up, wide-eyed, into Strong's face.

"Yes," she said slowly, and almost to herself, "perhaps it is even better."

Petroff laughed, a short little laugh. This man Strong was the very deuce with the ladies.

Strong reached out and caught one of the waiting girl's hands.

"My dear girl," he said, "I see that it is utterly impossible to deceive you; moreover, to deceive you would be unkind. And so I tell you the truth. This is really an affair of the heart—a large heart."

He touched his chest and sighed.

"I am forbidden the light of the countenance of my lady, yet our hearts beat as one. I am dying to

behold her, and the success of my desire rests entirely with you."

The girl was still bending forward with wide opened eyes.

"Look at me. I am disguised as a peasant. I shall go to her in this dress and enter her father's house by the back door. It is the only way open to me now. My dear," he went on, and he still held her hand, "I will not hide from you that I am a most important person in the eyes of several people in Bomberg. They expect me—though not in this guise; they are waiting for me; they are watching for me.

"Should any careless words escape your lips I should be caught. Then—well, then, my dear," he continued, in a low-pitched and persuasive voice, "then it will be a question of an extremely sudden death and a very quiet burial—a burial so quiet that even you will never hear of it. And so I ask you as a lady to hold your tongue, to say nothing about this meeting; not for always," he added, laughing, "because I would not be so unreasonable as to make such a request of any lady, but just for an hour. One hour will enable me to see my lady; one hour will enable me to escape."

He bent his head so that the girl should not observe the laughter in his eyes, and dropped on one knee and leant his face over her hand.

"I beg you," he urged, "as I might beg a princess, to grant me this one favour."

"Your Highness," said the girl, "how can I refuse you?"

Strong kissed her rough hand, and rose again to his feet.

"I trust you," he said, "and so I will be going."

Petroff went over to the horses and unhitched them, throwing the bridles back over their heads on to their necks.

The girl followed them, and in the darkness tried to search Strong's face.

Strong climbed into the saddle of the small rough:

horse that was scarcely up to his riding weight. The girl stood by his stirrup.

"There is one thing else I would ask you," he said.

"It is this—hide the clothes I have left in the shed."

"I promise," said the girl.

Petroff was already ambling towards the highroad, and Strong, digging his heels into the horse's flanks, moved after him.

Once he turned and waved to the girl, who stood at the door of the shed looking after them.

They rode down the high road to the city in silence. Petroff made for the North gate, which was then only a gate in name. There was no longer any sentries to pass.

They ambled along together through the struggling outskirts of the town, made a detour in order to reach the main street from a by-way, and then climbed up the hill.

Again Petroff branched off, and so worked by devious paths to the back of the palace. In the deep shadows of a narrow lane he brought his horse to a halt.

"Mr Strong," said the captain, "I fear you will have to wait here for about half an hour. We cannot go to the palace together, and it will be necessary for me to be there when you arrive."

Strong raised no word of objection to this, but he asked a question: "Which is the way?"

Captain Petroff pointed up the lane with his riding-whip.

"Turn to the left at the top," he said, "and then to the right. When if you go straight on you will come to the gate. Give me half an hour and you will find me there."

"Good," said Strong.

CHAPTER XVI

WITHIN THE ENEMIES' GATES

PETROFF nodded to him in the darkness, and Strong nodded back. Then the captain drove his spurs home, and his horse jumped forward.

For five-and-twenty minutes Strong sat patiently on his horse, smoking cigarettes and marvelling at the quiet of the place.

Now and again a man passed him and looked up curiously at the tall horseman; but Strong's rough, almost ragged, peasant's clothes shielded him from any overwhelming curiosity.

When five-and-twenty minutes had passed he dug his heels again into his horse's lean flanks and moved up the lane. He followed the course Petroff had set for him, and in a few minutes came to a pair of old iron gates which swung on massive hinges set in dull grey stone gate-posts.

On the left-hand side of the gateway was a little lodge, and in the light cast from the window Strong could see Petroff waiting.

He came forward as Strong approached and asked: "Are you the man from Mogda?"

Strong bowed himself to double in his saddle, and then, throwing his long right leg over his shaggy steed's withers, slipped down to the ground.

He played his part well.

From the bosom of his soiled shirt he drew the piece of quartz. He mumbled almost below his breath as if he were fearful any eavesdropper should detect the strangeness of his accent.

"The princess will see you," said Captain Petroff.

Again Strong bowed almost to his knees; then he followed the captain, dragging and shuffling his feet.

When they came into the glare of the side entrance-hall, Strong allowed his jaw to drop in wonder, and he rolled his eyes about him as a man unaccustomed to such magnificence. He hugged the precious lump of quartz to his heart.

Without a word Petroff led the way down the passage to the lift. Strong, playing his part to perfection, uttered a little scream of terror as the lift shot up. The attendant grinned behind his hand.

Breathing hard and muttering to himself, Strong shuffled after Petroff down the corridor leading to the princess' rooms.

The sentry outside the door saluted as Petroff approached, and the captain knocked at the door.

Strong tightened his hold on the lump of quartz as he heard Diana call "Come in!"

The captain opened the door and made a movement of his hand commanding Strong to enter. He walked in after him and closed the door.

In a far corner Diana was seated on a couch, and when she beheld Strong's strange figure she began to laugh. She laughed unrestrainedly because of her perfect confidence that, however loudly she laughed, a princess could not be accused of vulgarity.

Strong strode over to a table, deposited the quartz on it with a thud, and flung his greasy cap into a corner. Then he walked over to Diana, dropped on his knee, and seized her hand quite regardless of Petroff's presence.

But Diana only laughed, and Strong, catching the humour of the situation, began to laugh too. He buried his face in Diana's hands, and laughed loud and long.

But this outburst of merriment on his part brought Diana to her senses.

"'Sh," she said,

She thrust Strong a little away from her, and rose to her feet.

"We forget the sentry, I think," she said. "Captain Petroff, you may leave us."

Captain Petroff saluted.

"Your Royal Highness," he said, "even though she remembers the sentry, does not think of him quite enough. There will be a deal of talk in the palace if I leave your Royal Highness alone with a peasant from the hills. I cannot go out through the door by which I entered."

"True," said Diana. "Pass through my rooms until you come to the end of the corridor. Then I think you had best disappear to the ante-room."

She walked up to him and looked at him with gratitude.

"You have done me great service this night, and believe me, I will not forget it. If this brings trouble on you, you may rely on me."

She held out her hand to Petroff, who clicked his heels together, bowed, and kissed her fingers. Then he straightened himself, saluted, and clanked away through the long succession of the princess' rooms.

Diana turned to Strong, and they stood for some seconds and looked at each other with grave eyes.

Diana was the first to speak.

"After all," she said, "is not this rather a mad business?"

The colour rushed to Strong's face.

"Nothing," he said, "is too mad or too bad which enables me to see you."

Diana sighed, laughed a rather tired little laugh, and walking over to the couch, reseated herself. She looked very weary now.

"If these clothes do not offend you too much," said Strong, "I will sit beside you."

He did not wait for any objections, but sat down.

Again Diana looked at him long and rather wistfully.

"What does it all mean?" she said. "Where is it all leading us?"

"To happy days," he said. "Sweetheart," he went on, taking her hands, "this little interlude should not cast you into gloom, but delight you."

"You always were egotistical," said Diana.

"My dear," said Strong, "I have not much time to discuss philosophy with you, but the ego is the thing. The only way is to have sufficient ego to swamp the other people's."

"Even when one has to resort to disguises of this sort?" suggested Diana.

"Even then," said Strong.

He looked away for a moment, and then back at Diana.

"I came," he said, "to ask you a direct question. Whatever the answer may be, it will make no difference to what I shall achieve, but it will make a difference to the method. I shall steal the earth with a glad heart, and good will be the outcome of it, or I shall steal the earth in a savage mood and evil will befall many. It depends upon your answer. Do you love me?"

Diana looked at him rather sadly. At last she said:

"Yes, I am afraid I do."

Strong jumped to his feet and took half a dozen turns up and down the room. Then he came back and stood squarely before her. Steoping, he caught her hands, drew her up from her seat.

"If that be so," he said, "then everything is settled. I suppose it sounds a little paradoxical to say that I am going to introduce the millennium by way of battle, murder, and sudden death--but there is no other way.

"I am going to rob you of your kingdom," he went on, "only to give it you back. Within a few weeks I shall be crowned King of Balkania, and you shall be my queen."

Diana laughed again.

"And what of papa?" she asked.

"Papa will capitulate gracefully, or will be, to put it vulgarly, 'turfed out.' I will certainly give him the choice."

"That's kind of you," said Diana.

"Di, Di," said Strong, "when you are in such a mood as this you perplex me more than any thing or any person in the world. I feel that your heart is mine, and yet you laugh at me—always laugh at me."

"One always laughs at threats," said Diana. "It's an accomplishment which is to be treated seriously."

"Diana," said Strong, earnestly, "the accomplishment is coming very soon. Believe me, very soon indeed. But I came to ask you this—will you trust me and leave Bomberg now? Will you return with me here as a queen already crowned?"

"No," said Diana, "I will not."

"Why not?" said Strong.

"My dear boy," said Diana, "I am an inveterate reader of ladies' magazines, and I find in the advice accorded to persons who are threatening matrimony that it is laid down as an invariable law that if a woman cannot induce a man to some course of action before marriage she will not succeed in persuading him to that course of action afterwards."

Strong took the jest gravely.

"Then," said he, "you really wish me to steal the earth?"

Diana's face grew scarlet.

"When you have stolen," she said, "even so much as this kingdom I am willing to be this kingdom's queen."

Strong caught her to him, and as Diana's face was buried against his breast he kissed her hair again and again.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed the midnight, and Strong started and put Diana quickly away from him.

"My dear," he said, "you make me forget that if I do not leave here within the next few minutes I shall probably never leave here at all."

He went over to the window and looked out. The time was now due for Langley's advent in the "Di," but there was no sign of the "Di" as yet.

It was then that Diana heard a knocking at the door and said "Hush!"

Strong whipped round quickly. "What's that?" he whispered.

The knocking came again and yet again. Diana's face was very pale and sad. Then through the heavy woodwork came the king's voice calling for admission.

Strong went over to Diana and took her by the arm.

"Dearest," he said, "this is where you must leave matters to me." Even then he laughed. "In the language of your American ancestors, I should advise you to go 'way back and sit down.'"

He led her gently over to the couch, and Diana sank upon it and sat quiet and rigid.

They could hear the king's voice raised on the further side of the door.

Strong went over to the window again and looked out. Directly overhead he heard the soft whirr of the "Di's" propellers. He caught sight of Langley's pale face peering down at him.

"Quick!" cried Strong.

Behind him came the crash of the butt-ends of rifles on the door.

Strong looked and saw Di, with a face as pale as ashes, staring straight before her.

Langley brought the "Di" down to the level of the sill, then stretched out a hand and kept the light craft steady against the ledge.

Strong ran lightly and quickly over to Diana, raised her face up in his hands and kissed her on the mouth.

"Courage, my maid," he said. "I feel a coward to leave you, but I have no other course. To-morrow I shall return."

Then he lifted up her hands and kissed them, and even as he did so the door began to give and splinter.

Strong rushed over to the window and climbed quickly into the "Di."

"Up!" he shouted to Langley.

As they shot upwards Strong saw the door of Diana's room give way with a crash and half a dozen soldiers come tumbling in.

The soldiers came tumbling into the room and sprawled upon the floor. They picked themselves up, drew themselves to attention, and looked stupidly about them.

After them came the king, picking his way daintily across the *débris* of the broken door. Ludwig, jerking his head and twitching his face, shuffled after him.

His Majesty did not pause, but moved straight across the room, turning his head only once to take a swift look at Diana. It seemed that he guessed precisely what had happened. The window was still wide open, and the king walked over to it.

By this time the "Di" had leapt clear by a thousand feet or so, and as she carried no lights the king, though he glanced up, could not detect the shape of her against the blackness of the sky.

His Majesty therefore found himself in the maddening situation of being able to do nothing—at any rate so far as Strong was concerned. But he did it remarkably well. He turned coolly from the window and ordered the soldiers out of the room. Then he posted them in the corridor, where they were out of earshot, and beckoned Ludwig to approach.

Ludwig, his white face still twitching, shuffled into the centre of the room.

"Madam," said the king, turning to his daughter, "it is only reasonable that I should ask for an explanation."

Diana's face, which had been white, now flushed.

"It seems to me, sir," she said, "that it is I who might reasonably ask for an explanation from you."

"We will waive that point," said the king, "seeing that on this occasion I propose to insist on a prior claim."

Diana shrugged her shoulders.

"That," she said, "is insulting enough. Do you intend to increase the insult by asking me for an explanation before this person?"

She waved her hand towards the shuffling Ludwig.

"Yes," said the king, "I do. In view of the proposals I have already made it is absolutely necessary."

Again Diana changed her mood. Now she laughed.

"If you insist," she said, "you shall hear what you desire to know. But I rather fancy that when the explanation has been made you will wish that it had been made privately."

The king looked at his watch.

"The hour," he remarked, "is growing late."

"Excuse me for one moment," said Diana, and swept out of the room. She returned immediately, carrying a small square box.

"This," she said, placing it on the table, "is a gift from Mr Strong, with Mr Strong's compliments—and mine."

The king looked at the object coldly.

"I suppose it is hardly necessary," said Diana to the king, "to inform you that Mr Strong was here to-night."

She coloured a little.

"Mr Strong came in the first place to see me, but in the second place to ask me to give you this. It is, I may inform you, a wireless telegraphic instrument, through which, at one o'clock, Mr Strong will dictate to your Majesty the terms on which he proposes you should surrender the kingdom of Balkania."

The king tightened his mouth and smiled a trifle grimly under his moustache.

"Indeed," he said.

"You were pleased," said Diana, "to look at your watch just now, and therefore I presume you will not object to my looking at the clock. It is now a quarter to one, and as my explanation will take fully fifteen minutes, I would beg of you not to interrupt me."

She sat down quite calmly and collectedly on the

couch. She was in as cold and bitter and as sarcastic a mood as her father.

She began in low and hurried accents to recount the incidents which had led up to Strong's visit.

"And so I trust your Majesty will see," she concluded, "that Mr Strong is scarcely indulging in idle boasting. The fact that he was able to visit me here to-night, and is now in the perfect safety of the sky, should, I think, be sufficient proof of that."

"A gallant lover, indeed," said the king, bitterly, "to leave you in such a manner."

Diana's face went scarlet. "He has not left me for long, your Majesty," she said.

"And when," asked the king, "am I to hear from the romantic and remarkable Mr Strong?"

"I think," said Diana, "that he is endeavouring to communicate with you even now."

A sharp clicking noise as that of a typewriter in active operation came from the box. Diana rose and walked over to the table. The king instinctively followed her gaze. Through the little circle of glass in the lid of the box came flash after flash.

Strong was calling on the name of Diana.

CHAPTER XVII

TO STEAL A THRONE

WHEN the "Di" shot up Strong mechanically said, "One thousand feet." At one thousand feet they hovered.

Strong turned to Langley.

"My boy," he said, almost gravely for him, "I feel like one of those despicable heroes in the problems which appear from time to time in weekly papers headed 'Hard Case No 1. What shall he do?'"

Langley blinked a query at Strong from behind his glasses.

"For the first time in my life," Strong continued, "I feel distinctly like a cur and a coward." He sat for a moment opening and clenching his hands. "But I had no other course," he went on. "I suppose it is a hard thing to say, and a bitter one, but if one plays a game of this sort, and a woman elects to play with one, she has to be treated as part of the mechanism of the whole. Heaven knows that if Diana were not of this venture, or even against us, I would not have left her as I did. She will not find it an over-pleasant task to face her father."

"I rather think," said Langley, quietly, "that her Royal Highness will be quite equal to the occasion."

"She will," said Strong. "Otherwise I would not have left her. I rely on her. I rely on her so much that sometimes I wonder whether I do not set her tasks beyond her power."

He was silent for a few moments, and then broke out again.

"It is all very well," he cried, "for you and I to be up here out of all danger and out of the range of all insult. But it is another thing for 'the girl I've left behind me.'"

He broke off in his customary inconsequential way and whistled a few bars of the soldier's song.

Then he burst out savagely:

"I am almost beginning to hate this business. It entails so much waiting—and waiting is a woman's part. Which I suppose," he went on, "means that I have not got the stamina of a woman. I want to be up and doing. I loathe this hanging about. And it must be harder for Diana. She has more waiting to do than I have."

He took out his watch and thrust it almost fiercely into the light which illumined the compass.

"Another five minutes must pass," he said, "before it is practicable to make any sign."

He sat on, watching the second-hand jerk its way through the minutes.

He was scrupulously careful in his recording of the time. It was to the second of the five minutes which he allowed himself that he took out the wireless instrument and began to click a query.

After a few seconds there came an answering flash.

"Who is that?" he asked.

He knew well enough, but asked the question automatically. It was a custom bred of the telephone.

"Diana," was the answer.

"Your father?"

"Is here."

Strong ticked savagely at the button.

"You are prepared?" he asked—and a certain amount of business-like precision was imparted into his ticking—"to act as my plenipotentiary?"

Then came the monosyllabic answer: "Yes."

The tick-tick conversation proceeded as follows:

"I will ask you to inform his Majesty of Balkania that I require him to capitulate—to surrender me the city and his person at 6 a.m. If his Majesty refuses I shall shell the town. I await his Majesty's answer."

There was a long pause, and three times Strong ticked a query before he got an answer. Then it came:

"The reply is 'No.'" Then: "This is private; I trust that you do not mean what you say."

Strong wondered in his own mind whether this was an inspired hope, but he simply ticked back: "I do."

Then came the answer: "The king bids you proceed."

Strong replied: "The bombardment will begin at six."

He waited for a few moments gnawing his nails, still impatient at the delay. He put in another query, but no answer came.

He turned to Langley. "Aero," he said.

The "Di" shot north of north-east.

"Sounds rather like instructing one's coachman to drive to an A.B.C. shop," remarked Strong.

And then he remained silent until the "Di" dropped into the shadows of the crater of the Ring of Nissa.

Arbuthnot and the rest were waiting for them.

Without a word, Strong climbed out of the "Di" and made for the "Victor."

"Langley," he said, "will come with me on this trip, with Arbuthnot and Pelham."

Then he turned to Wildney.

"You don't mind being left alone?" he asked.

Wildney laughed. "To tell the truth," he said, "I shall feel rather like a nervous man who is left alone in a house which he has searched for burglars and found empty."

Strong smiled. "So long as you can laugh," he said, "you are all right." And he climbed into the "Victor."

Langley took his seat at the switchboard, blinking through his glasses. Once he yawned.

Strong smiled again.

"It is wonderful how soon excitement can become monotonous," he said. Then he added: "Bomberg," and the "Victor" leapt up.

They were back over Bomberg at five o'clock.

"Five hundred feet," said Strong

And at five hundred feet they remained, while Pelham busied himself with preparing breakfast.

They ate in silence.

Whether we shall dine to-night in the palace or not," said Strong, "I do not know. But we will trust to luck. At least, we will make the most of our last fresh meat." Again he pulled out his watch. It pointed to a quarter to six.

Then he took out the wireless instrument once more and ticked; to his surprise he received an answer.

"Poor little Diana," he said to himself, "still up. At least, I have shaken his Majesty's nerves a bit or they would not be on the lookout for signals."

He ticked the question: "Has his Majesty further reconsidered the matter?"

There was a pause, and in his mind's eye Strong could see Diana debating with her father.

Then came the answer: "No."

"I will wait five minutes," Strong replied, "and if at the end of that time the king has not reconsidered his decision the bombardment will begin."

There was another pause, and then came the answer quick and pat: "There will be no reconsideration."

Strong sat with his watch in his hand and waited till the clocks in the town below struck the hour of six.

The airship was lying so near to the town that its appearance had been noted by men on their way to work. They had called other men; and women, who always flock to behold what men look at, came running into the streets.

Glancing over the side, Strong saw that the Grand Avenue was thick with people, as though the hour were high noon instead of six in the morning.

His face had grown very white and his manner formal.

"Gentlemen," Strong said to the men in the "Victor," "this is a bad business. My conscience holds me back; my pride bids me go on. My conscience has never yet stood in the way of my pride. I shall continue." He paused, and then said curtly, "Put the

first blood shall be shed by me. If we must lay murder to our charge, at least I will be the chief criminal."

He turned to Langley. "Get down above the station and follow the line of the main street."

The other men in the airship looked at one another. They had known all along that the shedding of men's blood must be the outcome of their journey, but while the prospect of this had been distant from them, they had set the matter on one side. Now they were face to face with the problem.

Langley, with a haggard face, set the "Victor" above the station and turned the airship about.

"Slowly, if you please," said Strong.

Langley nodded, and the sweat dropped from the dead-white flesh above his temples.

When they were above the Grand Avenue Strong picked up one of the little shells that were the size of a man's fist, leant over the side of the "Victor," and deliberately dropped it. He dropped it dead into the street, opposite the doors of a bank.

It fell like a stone. The crash, ascending, almost deafened them as the shell struck the asphalt paving of the street. Then it seemed as though the little cloud of smoke which arose contained a hell of shrieking humanity.

Strong raised his hand. "Stop her," he cried.

The men in the "Victor" craned over the side and with white faces waited for the smoke to clear away. There were awful noises in the street beneath them.

The force of the explosion had torn away the face of the bank, which fell outwards in a deadly hail upon the people in the road below.

The smoke cleared away still more and drifted lazily up to the airship.

The morning was bright, and the sun shone full upon the white asphalt beneath them, and upon the white asphalt lay hideously mangled bodies.

Strong looked up the length of the street and saw a small section of the crowd rush down to the spot where

the explosion had taken place. Elsewhere the crowd had vanished, but a dozen heads were thrust from nearly every window.

The cloud of smoke drifted entirely away, and there was a complete silence, except for the screams of the wounded beneath them.

"Great God!" cried Strong. Then he shook himself, and the blood surged back to his face.

"Not my fault—not my fault," he said to himself fiercely. "O God! Thou knowest that I cannot help these things." And then he slammed the door on the last touch of conscience. "At last," he yelled, "I have broken the ice."

He looked along the airship and picked up the eyes of each man.

"I presume," he said, almost coldly, "that you will continue what I have begun?"

The men who met his eyes nodded.

"Then get up the hill," said Strong, turning to Langley, "and stop over the palace. The king has a full view of the city from his window, and if he sees we are in earnest he may relent. If not—then Heaven help Bomberg."

In silence Langley put the "Victor" under way, and fetched up above the palace.

Strong busied himself with the wireless instrument.

"Have you had enough?" he asked.

There was a pause. The answer was "No."

Beads of perspiration stood out on Strong's forehead.

"Heaven forgive me," he said, "for making that girl hold such a parley as this."

But again the blood came back to his face and he set his mouth. His jaw stood out like a rock.

"A hundred yards east," he said crisply to Langley, "to the barracks of the Guards. Put the 'Victor' over there. I will not destroy women if I can help it."

Then Arbuthnot broke silence. "At present," he said, "I think no women have suffered."

Strong looked at him almost gratefully.

"I hope so, at least," he said. "I picked on the clearest spot I could."

They were now over the barracks.

"One of us is enough for this business," said Strong, "and I will attend to it myself."

He took a shell in either hand and leant over the side of the car. He let them fall from his hands.

Once more there came up a great cloud of smoke and the screams of wounded men.

By now Strong's face was that of a sphinx. He took up shell after shell and let them drop without pity and without remorse on to the building beneath him. The way might be rough, but it was the way to the millennium. In five minutes it was a mass of blazing *débris*.

From the "Victor" they could see men crawling out from the ruins—men who dragged and trailed shattered limbs after them—men who lifted up their faces to the "Victor" and raised their hands and shook their fists. They could hear curses shrieked at them from below. Half a dozen horses broke from the stables and careered up the street and tore madly past the palace.

Then Strong beheld a sight that made his heart stand still for so long that he felt his legs giving way beneath him.

The king was on the balcony of the palace gazing upward through his glasses. Diana, pale as death, but quite quiet, sat beside him with the wireless instrument upon her knees.

She was waiting for a message from him.

Strong whipped out his own instrument and ticked a message.

Then looking over the side again he saw a battery of artillery galloping into the city from one of the suburbs.

"Fifteen hundred feet," he said to Langley

And the "Victor" moved up.

Strong manœuvred the airship until she was over the western wing of the palace.

Then he ticked out a further ultimatum.

"Will his Majesty of Balkania condescend to hold parley with me?"

To his astonishment the answer was still "No."

Strong replied: "I shall destroy the west wing of the palace."

The answer was: "You dare not."

Strong's answer to that challenge was instantaneous. He took another shell, which fell from his hand straight through the roof of the palace's western wing.

Then he ticked, "And now?"

"His Majesty will parley if Mr Strong will condescend to call."

There was mockery even in this admission of defeat. The irony of it roused Strong.

"There will be no parley," he rapped out, "unless the king meets me at the tea-house on the Morning Hills at noon."

"That is impossible," was the answer.

"I pledge my word as a gentleman," said Strong, "to respect his Majesty's safety and to allow him, whatever the result of the interview, to return without harm to the palace at Bomberg."

The answer was: "It cannot be done."

Strong took another shell and let it fall into the ruins of the already demolished wing of the palace.

He waited with one eye trained upon the little glass slide of the instrument.

There came the answer which he expected:

"The king agrees—the tea-house on the Morning Hills at noon."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TREACHERY OF A KING

STRONG turned to Langley and laughed. Then he made a wry face.

"Another of these infernal waits!" he said.

"Yes, my boy," said Langley, "and I am afraid that in your impetuosity you have forgotten that there may be other waits as well. It is all very well," he continued, "to bring out a new thing like the 'Victor' and race her up and down the earth, tax her to the utmost successfully, find an apparently mythical place, and yet be without means of repair and all resources."

Strong turned to him sharply. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," said Langley, "that you are going just a little bit too fast. If the slightest thing gets out of order we have nothing to put it right, and unless you can bring Bomberg to its knees this afternoon, it means that we must go back to the *Aphrodite* to fetch workmen and the necessary instruments to help us out, should we fall into difficulties."

Strong grunted impatiently.

"It is all very well," said Langley, quite energetically for him, "but you can't expect to continue at this pace without a check of some kind, and I say," he added raising his voice, "that it is absolutely imperative that we should not be foolhardy."

For a moment or two Strong sucked in his lips. Then he heaved a sigh.

"Very well," he said, "if our mechanical appliances are not up to our spirit so much the worse for us. But, still, I suppose, it cannot be helped."

For some time he sat and thought. In his own mind

he had conceived it quite possible to reduce Bomberg to civility before evening fell; but he saw that that could only be carried out by a most colossal bluff, and it was such a bluff that the risk was hardly worth the while. Any failure on the part of the "Victor" would leave him and his companions cornered in Bomberg as rats might be in a trap.

At last he spoke again.

"None the less," he said, "if I can arrange the capitulation of Bomberg I shall."

Langley shrugged his shoulders. "That is up to you," he said.

The hours that passed were long and heavy. They had put out over the Morning Hills, and the city was too far distant for them to observe its life. Strong was in no mind to go back and witness the possibilities of an action which he was unable to enter into. So the morning was dragged through, and when noon came Strong had grown irritable, and, for him, ill at ease.

Shortly before twelve o'clock his spirits rose again. He could see, climbing up the long winding hill from the city, a speck that he guessed, rightly enough, was the King of Balkania's motor-car.

The speck on the distant road grew in size, and the shape of the car became quite plain to the watchers in the airship. With a grimace Strong noted that Ludwig was at the steering-wheel.

"Why on earth a man like the king should care to trot about such a criminal fool as Ludwig passes my understanding," Strong said.

Langley had lost his temper. There had risen suddenly in his mind the thought that Strong was not merely unjust, but ungrateful.

"Even fools," he said shortly, "have their uses."

"What do you mean?" demanded Strong. He knew perfectly well, and anticipated the answer that Langley gave.

"There is myself," snapped Langley.

The car came up the hill at a good speed, and at a

hundred yards or so beyond the tea-house stopped dead.

In the tonneau was an officer of the Guard. Strong picked up the glasses and looked keenly about him. He knew quite enough of the king to suspect treachery, and his suspicions were correct, only they were a little premature, for, at that moment, nothing showed either on the plain beneath him or on the horizon that could give him any cause for thought.

With a more satisfied air he turned to Langley.

"Now," he said, "for the hard high road." And Langley, without a word, put the "Victor" down and brought her gently to a standstill.

Strong climbed over the side of the little airship, and walked towards the car in which the king awaited his approach. Apparently from some motive of courtesy his Majesty descended and walked down the road to meet Strong.

A few occupants of the tea-house were standing along the parapet of the terrace gazing, open-mouthed, at the extraordinary spectacle before them.

As the two men drew near together they lifted their hats. The king by this time had for Strong a respect that was born of dread. Strong had that respect for the king which a man has for an adversary whom he has not yet beaten.

The king was the first to speak, and his smile was pleasant and his manner calm.

"This is the first time in my life, Mr Strong," he said, "that I have ever been dictated to by any man."

"Presumably," said Strong, who was in a savage mood, "because none of your larger neighbours have condescended to interfere with you."

Colour flooded the king's face. "Even if I have come to discuss business," he said, "it is hardly necessary for you to be insolent."

Strong waved his hand as though to brush such trivialities of discussion aside. "I have come," he said, "to demand in person your Majesty's abdication, and

the assurance that I myself shall, before to-morrow, reign in your stead."

The king shrugged his shoulders.

"Unfortunately," he answered, and his tone was a trifle sarcastic, though the sarcasm was at his own expense, "kings cannot settle the affairs of their countries as they please. I represent the affairs of a nation, and it is for the nation, I presume, to decide such a matter as that."

"Very modest of your Majesty," said Strong, "but your argument is mere sophistry. You know perfectly well that the matter rests entirely in your own hands."

"So you say," said the king.

"I not only say it, but I am prepared to deal with you on these lines. If you do not capitulate here and now, I shall reduce Bomberg to ashes before this evening."

The king pushed out his under lip with his tongue. It was the surest sign that he was obstinate.

"Mr Strong," he said, "I am, I admit, at your mercy. It is possible, of course, that you may lay violent hands on me here, and your companions could certainly very easily demolish my motor car-and my party within a very few seconds. But is that worth the risk?"

"No matter," he continued, "what you achieve afterwards, this would be such a murder as would always be remembered against you. It would entirely destroy all your chances of permanent success, even if you achieved your immediate object."

"I am perfectly aware of that," said Strong, "and I can only regard your suggestion as insulting. I have already given you my word that your Majesty will leave this place in perfect safety. You have, so far as your person is now concerned, nothing to fear from me."

"As a matter of fact," said the king, with a rather tired sigh, "I don't care whether I have or whether I have not. The whole thing is becoming rather wearisome."

Strong's eyes brightened. "You are admitting,"

he said, "that I am more troublesome than you had even dreamed I could be."

"Yes," said the king, "that is perfectly true."

"But all this," Strong burst out, "is utterly beside the point. I am simply asking you now, by word of mouth, what I asked you by wireless telegraph this morning. Will you abdicate or will you not? You have simply to say 'Yes' or 'No.' The course of conduct which I shall map out for myself depends upon your answer."

"Then the answer," said the king, "is 'No.' It is 'No' now, just as it was this morning, just as it will be to-night, and just as it will be to-morrow."

"If," said Strong, grimly, "to-morrow dawns for you again."

The king shrugged his shoulders. "That," said he, "is perfectly immaterial."

"It should not be," said Strong. "You have a daughter."

The king winced.

"Yes," said Strong, with cruel softness, "it is through your daughter that I shall defeat you."

The king opened his mouth and his face was ugly to look at. There was an insult on his lips, but he forbore to speak. He remained standing in grim silence.

"Yes," continued Strong, now in a quite casual mood; "the subject may be distasteful to you, but Princess Diana is more to me than the Kingdom of Bomberg, and more to me than the Kingdom of the Earth."

"Even now," he went on, "I am prepared to make you a perfectly fair offer. I will allow you for the term of your natural life to continue the control of Bomberg's destinies, but at your death I intend to succeed you, and my consort will be the Princess Diana."

Said the king, "You make an entire mistake." For a moment he was shaken out of his customary calm.

"Understand me quite clearly," he continued, his

voice full of passion, "that on that point I am adamant. You may do what you like with me; you may do what you like with the city; you may do what you like with the country; you may kill me if you choose—that is a matter of no moment to me at all; but I warrant you this, that if you destroy me you shall also destroy the princess. The king is obeyed even when he is dead, and I will see to it that the Princess Diana shall never fall to the lot of an adventurer such as you."

This roused Strong to anger. "That is a matter," he said, "which simply pits my brain against yours. If you have absolutely made up your mind, there is nothing more to be said. I am not in honour bound to respect your safety after you have reached the confines of the city, and by this afternoon I will raise more hell about you than even your own particularly fiendish mind could possibly conceive."

Again the king shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands in that Continental manner which particularly aggravated Strong.

"Is that all?" asked his Majesty.

"Absolutely all," said Strong.

"Then," said the king, "I have the honour to wish you good-morning, and to request you to do your worst."

He turned without so much as a salute and strolled towards his car. Ludwig sat over the steering-wheel, pale and bent, his nervous feet shuffling as was their wont.

Strong watched them go. He watched every movement of the king with care. He read in his back the aspect of an obstinate man.

He watched the king climb into the car, which had already been turned about. The motor-car shot forward, and Strong watched it growing small as it slid down the hill.

He stood dreaming, but his dream was of short duration, for close over his head he heard a screech-like whistle that caused him to look up.

Something passed over him at such a speed that he could not follow its passage. About a hundred yards or so down the mountain-side there came the noise of a great explosion.

Then came another long-drawn whistling noise, and Strong realised in a flash that he was under shell-fire.

He gathered himself together and raced for the "Victor."

And all the way he cursed softly to himself.

He had run short of breath and short of invective when he gained the "Victor."

He climbed over the side with a face that frightened Langley. It frightened him more than the shells, which were now whistling about them.

Langley needed no word from Strong; he put the "Victor" up. There was a pause in the firing. Apparently the gunners were choosing a fresh range; then, for a second or so, the shells whistled below the hull.

But the "Victor" had risen to such a height that no shell-fire could reach them.

Strong steadied the airship and searched the country with his glasses.

A battery of field artillery was posted on the ridge of the Morning Hills about a mile above the tea-house.

He scrutinised the position closely, and began to swear again beneath his breath. He finished up by saying: "The dirtiest piece of work I ever hope to know! I will wipe them out."

"It's not their fault," urged Langley. "If you go tilting against the earth, you must expect to get some knocks."

"The people who give me knocks," cried Strong, "will be knocked back. What I am about to do is more in the shape of a moral lesson than because of revenge."

"Are you sure?" said Langley.

Strong made no answer.

They kept the "Victor" above the range of the guns and made for the battery posted on the hill.

The officer in command was watching the airship with the aid of a pair of glasses that hovered nervously in his agitated hands.

From the airship Strong could see the artillerymen below him limbering up and the horses being hitched to. But he was over them before they had time to make a start.

He sat by the edge of the airship and directed its movements. Then he picked up a couple of shells and dropped them.

The effect of the explosion was awful. One shell fell straight through a gun-carriage and sent the pieces flying.

Men torn to shreds, and mangled horses, strewed the ground.

Strong dropped another shell and another. Three shells sufficed to wipe the battery out.

"Now," shouted Strong, "we will leave them to what peace they can enjoy—and we will make for Aero."

Langley fetched the airship round and put her on her top speed.

The "Victor" raced along for about five minutes, until Strong gave a yell and called on Langley to hold hard.

Langley, with wonder in his eyes, brought the "Victor" to a standstill.

Strong's face was passionate and scarlet.

"You may preach caution as much as you like, Langley," he said, "but caution and I part here. If the "Victor" will not let us steal the earth to-night—no matter. I have a better plan. I will steal Diana."

He jumped to the wheel himself, put the airship about, and went racing back to the Morning Hills.

Far beneath them on the long white, dusty road they could see the king's motor-car making for the city.

"You brute!" yelled Strong, cursing the king below him. "I will suffer at your hands no more."

The wind stung his face like hail as he set the "Victor" at two hundred miles an hour in the direction of the palace.

Pelham, hanging over the side, called out to Strong: "They have seen us, and are putting on full speed."

"Let them do their best!" shouted Strong, who was now almost beside himself with rage, "but they will have to be quick if they out-distance—ME!"

So great was the pace at which they were travelling that the incidents which next befell them occupied but a few seconds. Bomberg rushed up at them, and the city was full of hubbub. They could hear the crisp notes of bugles and, in spite of the rushing of the wind, the sound of tramping feet. Between the houses they could see regiment after regiment marching up the hill to the palace, and, while the regiments marched, the children ran with the soldiers, shouting. Women were screaming things in high-pitched voices and men yelled curses as they passed.

Strong paid not the slightest heed to the tumult beneath him.

One quick glance he flung behind him, and saw he had now outpaced the king's car.

From the bow of the "Victor" Pelham called that the sentries of the palace had observed them, and that the guard had been called out.

The "Victor" dropped like a stone for a thousand feet or so, and then Strong stopped her downward course so quickly that Pelham was vilely sick.

On the balcony above the great doorway Strong could see Diana leaning against the parapet and stooping towards the city.

The wide main thoroughfare was blocked with people, but through the press, steadily marching up the hill, came regiment after regiment.

Again Strong put the "Victor" down, bringing her to the level with the balcony.

Diana stepped back, pressing her hand against her heart.

Strong called to the men to hang out the fender, and then, very swiftly and deftly, he put the "Victor" alongside the balcony on which Diana stood quite alone.

CHAPTER XIX

KIDNAPPING A PRINCESS

As the "Victor" grated along the balcony Diana again stepped back still further. Then she came forward again.

She pointed with shaking finger down the long main street. "What does it all mean?" she whispered.

"I haven't time to explain now," said Strong, shortly. "I have returned to ask you to go with me to Aero."

"I refuse," said Diana.

"Dearest," cried Strong moving towards her and holding out his hands, "you had better come with me before it is too late."

Diana drew her own hands behind her back. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"I mean that you hate bloodshed as much as I do, and if you wish to avoid it, you will come with me."

Diana still looked at him with puzzled eyes. "That is no explanation," she said.

"And this," said Strong, hotly, "is no time for explanation. I tell you that it is a matter of a few minutes. Your father, with his car, is already in the town, and if I am not gone before he arrives, it is a question of his life or mine."

"That," said Diana, quietly, "is a matter for you and my father to decide. It does not concern me."

Strong grew impatient and ceased to plead, even to argue.

"I must ask you to get into the "Victor," he said.

Diana shook her head and the colour flamed in her cheeks. "I shall do nothing of the kind," she cried. "My duty lies here."

"You have no duty," said Strong, angrily, "towards such a man as your father. After my last experience of his methods I am convinced that he deserves no consideration at all."

"That," said Diana, "is a matter which remains to be proved."

The soldiers were now streaming into the palace yard, and among the officers who led them there was great agitation and chatter. They talked in high voices and waved at the balcony alongside which the "Victor" still hung. Strong, glancing over his shoulder, took in the danger of the situation. The officers in the square could not see him, nor could they see the princess. Therefore they were likely to shoot.

From within the palace there came sounds of a great hubbub.

Strong stretched out his hand and caught Diana by the arm and led her gently to the parapet.

"If you wish to prevent a scene, and an incident which you would always regret," he said, "you had best show yourself to your people."

Diana moved to the parapet and looked down on the troops below, and there came up from the officers a murmur of wonder and alarm.

Strong leant as far over the parapet as he dared, and looked to the right, and now he could see the king's motor-car coming at full speed up the hill. It was only a question of seconds.

Once more he turned to Diana, and there was pleading in his voice.

"If you still refuse to go with me," he said, "it may possibly cost me my life."

"What is that to me?" cried Diana. But her eyes gave her words the lie.

Then Strong made up his mind. He stooped, caught Diana in his arms and lifted her up. For a second only he was conscious of any movement of her body in his grasp. When Diana felt the strength of him she knew that it was of no avail to struggle.

He carried her over to the "Victor," and still holding her in his arms, climbed into the airship.

"Get up," he yelled to Langley, and he set Diana gently down on the seat in the "Victor's" well.

Ludwig brought the motor-car into the palace square with a rush, and pulled up short beside the cluster of officers. Strong even at that moment snatched a second in which to observe that the king's face was livid.

His Majesty leaped from the car and shouted an order to the officer in command of the troops. There was a ripple of movement and a rattle of steel as a hundred rifle-butts were brought up to a hundred shoulders.

Meanwhile the "Victor" was rushing upwards.

There was a sheet of flame in the palace square, and bullets whistled round and even through the airship. Then she went up beyond the range of the gun-fire.

Langley set her head for Aero, and then looked round at Strong. He was in no mind to sit by and hear any conversation between him and the princess.

Strong caught his meaning and went over and took the wheel. The other men, by some common instinct, went forward and crouched in the "Victor's" bows.

Strong was in too mad a mood even to glance at Diana. Her attitude had annoyed him, and he had acted on a sudden impulse. He was now rapidly mapping out in his mind the course which he had best adopt.

He reflected that, just as woman will insist upon the last word, so she naturally insists upon the first. He expected that if he left Diana sufficiently alone she would be the first to speak. And in this he was right.

Some twenty minutes went by, and the icy peaks of the Ring of Nissa were already looming up in the mist before them, when Diana spoke to Strong; and her voice was dry and hard.

"You really mean to take me to Aero?"

Strong turned and nodded his head.

"It is an outrage," she cried, "an outrage which I

greatly resent, and one which is hardly likely to bring you any good."

Strong stopped the "Victor." He then turned about again and sat himself beside her.

"Listen, dear heart," he said, "while I tell you something. Chivalry, I suppose, should keep me silent, but I am not feeling particularly chivalrous at the present time. I regret," he went on, "I regret very much to be forced to tell you what I am about to say. But it seems to be the only method by which I can alter your mind.

"I shall always be sorry," he continued, "that I was compelled to inform you that your father is a dishonourable man—but he is dishonourable to the point of murder.

"As you know, I gave him my word if he would only meet me in the Morning Hills and discuss matters, that I would guarantee his safety. He also gave me his word that no harm should happen to me.

"I kept to my part of the bargain; but he, if you please, orders up a battery of artillery, posts them on the hills above us, and when I leave him, starts pounding away at me with shells. I don't call that honourable—indeed, I call it dishonourable to a degree."

"Is that true?" asked Diana.

"I give you my word," said Strong, "that it is absolutely true."

Diana sat in silence with stony face.

Strong bent his head to hide the shadow of a smile, and put the "Victor" racing on again.

In half an hour they dropped into the shades of Aero.

Wildney was waiting for them, and he raised his eyebrows as he saw the figure of the girl in the car; but to Strong he said nothing at all. He looked into Strong's face and dared not.

When Strong spoke to Diana next his manner was formal.

"I trust that it will not be necessary to detain you here for long," he said. "Meantime I would suggest,

princess, that it would be better if we were to hold a little council of war, or, let us say, a friendly chat, as to what had best be done."

He led the way to the tent which had been occupied by Miss Hunt and bowed Diana in.

When the princess entered the tent she looked about her with quick, curious glances, and Strong smiled at her puzzlement.

"I am afraid," he said, "that there are no chairs, not even a couch to offer you. Since we have been here we have got in the habit of sitting on piles of rugs." He stooped, folded up three or four rugs, and placed them in a heap.

"A poor throne," he said, "to honour the princess, but it is the only throne I have—at present."

Diana had by this time lost some of her curtness of manner; she even smiled in a way that led Strong to hope she might, to some extent, enter into the spirit of the time. Nor was he disappointed.

"And now, your Majesty," she said, with a laugh and a shrug of her shoulders, "what do you propose to do with your captive?"

"There are several things," said Strong, "which I don't propose to do, and I will explain them to you at once. First of all, I should count it mean on my part to hold you as hostage. I shall also refrain to the utmost of my power from bringing pressure to bear on you in any way. Also, as soon as we have discussed matters, I will promise to take you back to Bomberg as soon as ever you please.

"In the meantime," he continued, "I look upon you as a counsel—a counsel endowed with considerable wisdom, and I shall feel grateful for your advice."

"I cannot give you advice," said Diana, "until I know what you propose to do. If you will tell me your immediate plans, I shall be glad to criticise them. Criticism," she added, with a little laugh, "is one of my foibles."

Strong thought for a few moments, then took her

hand. "I think it will be best," he said, "if I begin by telling you my own idea. It is this:

"I shall return to Bomberg this afternoon to take the town by storm. Your father must see that it is hopeless to hold out. If he refuses to capitulate decently and abdicate in my favour, then I shall lay the city in ashes round about him."

"Is that all?" asked Diana.

"Then, having secured the city of Bomberg," Strong went on, imperturbably, "I shall capture the entire State. Following that, I shall immediately proceed to build several other airships similar to the 'Victor.' The world will then be mine."

"If," said Diana, slowly—so slowly that her words sank into Strong's mind one by one—"if you pursue that course—even if you gain the whole earth—you will never win me."

"And why?"

"Because it is simply a course of wholesale murder, and I decline to have my name handed down to future generations as a murderess."

Strong shut his jaws with a clash. The ominous lines of his mouth widened and deepened. The blood leapt into his face, and then receded from it, leaving it ashen. He used his will to shut out of his heart every vestige of love for Diana.

"Princess," he said, and he spoke almost as slowly as she had done, "believe me that I would not embark on such a course if there were any other way."

He paused and looked at her rather sadly.

Two bright spots of colour flamed in Diana's cheeks. "You are a strong man," she said, "but you are a fool."

A shrug of Strong's shoulders answered the remark.

"Has it not occurred to you," she cried, "that you might easily achieve with diplomacy what you now propose to secure by force?"

"In what way?"

"You have given ample proof," said Diana, "of your powers. If I am not very much mistaken, the

world by to-morrow morning will be scared as it has seldom been scared before.

"And after what you have told me," she went on, "I should be as glad as you would be to see my father robbed of his throne. Believe me, consideration for him no longer holds me back. I even think," she went on, almost gently, "that with a little guidance you might prove a just and good king."

"And your suggestion?" asked Strong.

"My suggestion is that you should, either direct from Aero or through the medium of the *Daily Wireless*, make proposals to Europe. You should demand the abdication of my father and the placing of yourself as the head of Balkania."

"It will be a tiresome business," said Strong. "It will mean an elaborate course of negotiations which would probably be as futile and as acrimonious as a Hague Conference."

None the less," said Diana, "it is a course which I advise you to pursue."

"There is one difficulty," said Strong, "which you do not appreciate. I have given my word to the editor of the *Daily Wireless*—and I never break my word—that England shall be ruled entirely out of this business; and it is impossible for any conference of the Powers to be held from which Great Britain is excluded."

Diana laughed a little. "Really," she said, "I believe that I am a better diplomat—better versed in the affairs of Europe than you are. The Powers, believe me, will be only too thankful to have England ruled out altogether. I suggest that your best course will be to deal directly with the Kaiser. I do not care myself what happens to Sylvania, Roumania, or any of the other Balkan States, but His Imperial Majesty would be only too thankful to have a say in their affairs.

"It would surely be possible for you," she continued, "to offer him certain advantages which would leave you in possession of your new-found kingdom and the rest of the world at peace."

"You forget, I think," said Strong, irritably, "that I have yet to fulfil my boast that I shall steal the world."

Diana leant towards him and placed her hand on his arm. "If," she said, "you are determined to carry out that threat, then I decline to any longer have any dealings with you. If, however, you will compromise, I will help you in every way I can."

"A compromise," said Strong, "is a compromise. A compromise means to give and take. If I promise to give up my theft—if I surrender my idea of universal theft—will you give me yourself?"

"Yes," said Diana, "I will."

Strong took her hands. "And if I fail in these negotiations," he asked, "what then? If I fail, you must remember that I shall be forced to fight for my life—that it will not be a question of even desiring conquest, but an absolute necessity of achieving conquest in order to secure my existence. If I fail, I shall become an outlaw throughout the length and breadth of the world."

"I trust to your honour," said Diana, "to do the best you can—to do the best you can, and still fail. Then I will be an outlaw with you."

Strong laughed and caught her to him. "Even if I have to steal the earth?" he asked.

"Even if you have to steal the earth."

CHAPTER XX

STRONG'S ULTIMATUM TO THE WORLD

IT was now growing dark, and Strong went out to call for lights.

At the door he turned and looked back.

"I must leave you for a little while," he said, "because I want to think. It is just as well to think, even if one is in a hurry."

Strong walked back to the edge of the torrent and seated himself on the crown of a great boulder.

He buried his face in his hands and concentrated all his thoughts on his immediate course of action.

After a while he rose, shook himself, and grumbled a little beneath his breath.

"It would be maddening," he said to himself, "to be brought up sharp; to be compelled to wait for people's decisions."

Presently he walked back to Diana, and to his heart's contentment found her in a softer mood.

They spent the afternoon amid the gloom of the hills, gradually threshing out together Strong's next step; and, to his joy, Diana found his plans good.

At eleven o'clock at night they picked up Miss Hunt, who was still at Budapest, by wireless, and soon it became apparent there was something very much amiss.

In brief, Miss Hunt told him she had received an urgent message from the editor of the *Daily Wireless*, saying he must decline to be any further a party to Strong's proceedings, unless he had definite assurance that his actions would not imperil England's peace.

Strong made up his mind on the instant. He would go to London himself and settle this matter with the editor of the *Wireless* once and for all. It would take time, but in the end it would be the quickest way. He

ticked his decision to Miss Hunt and went back to Diana by the fire.

At noon on the following day, therefore, Strong started in the "Di" with Langley. He judged it better to take him than any of the other men, for the simple reason that considerable knowledge of the airship's mechanism would be necessary to effect a safe landing on the Thames.

The other men he left without so much as a word. It did not seem to him necessary to make any explanation.

Even to Diana, indeed, he was not overcommunicative.

He merely kissed her hands and said:

"For your sake, I will do my best for peace. *Auf wiedersehen.*"

And then the "Di" went up

It was nightfall when Langley dropped the little craft down by the bungalow at Cookham, and Strong set out to walk to Maidenhead, whence he travelled up to town by train.

When he reached the office of the *Daily Wireless* Strong was in a slight dilemma. He was fearful to give his name lest his presence in London should become known. He therefore scribbled a private note to Mr Sharp, explaining the reason for his return.

Though resolutely determined not to be astonished at anything, Mr Sharp nearly jumped out of his chair when he received Strong's note. He told the commissioner to show him up at once.

When Strong entered the room, Mr Sharp went over to meet him and shook hands warmly.

"Really," he said, "you are the most surprising thing I have ever known in the course of a long experience of surprising events. You see you make it foolish for me to ask you whether you have dropped from the sky, because I know you have."

Strong laughed and sat down.

"Look here, Mr Sharp," he said, "my visit must of necessity be short. If I fail to catch the last train back

to Maidenhead I shall never get clear of England to-night, so we have only twenty minutes in which to discuss this business."

Mr Sharp nodded his head and waited for Strong to continue.

"I suppose," Strong said, "that you have got news of our doings at Bomberg, and also of what I suppose I might term the theft of Princess Diana?"

Again Mr Sharp nodded.

"Now I may tell you that the princess is extremely angry at what I have done—or, rather, *was* extremely angry—and upon her advice I am going to adopt a policy of conciliation towards the earth.

"She suggests I can achieve by diplomacy what I proposed before to achieve by force. She hopes that by bringing a little gentle pressure to bear upon the Powers, I can secure the abdication of the King of Balkania and the guarantee that I shall reign in his stead."

"One thing I can tell you," said Mr Sharp, "and that is this—that you have simply frightened the whole world out of its wits. No man knows what is coming next. We have received several excited emissaries from the Government during the day who have practically demanded that we shall deliver you up to them. For some extraordinary reason, they seem to think I keep you in my pocket. I have assured them that the matter is entirely the reverse, but they refuse to be convinced.

"They have warned me very solemnly," Mr Sharp went on, "that, if by any means I drag this country into the turmoil in which Europe has already been plunged, I shall have to suffer for it dearly. The matter, indeed, is most serious, and therefore, to protect myself and the interests of the paper, I was compelled to refuse to receive further messages from you. And I must continue to do so unless you can assure me positively that you will not bring any harm upon this country."

"Mr Sharp," said Strong, rather abruptly, "I have already given you my word on that score, and I have no intention of breaking my bond. I can only assure you of my good intentions again, and ask you to print the document which I have already drawn up. You will see when you have read it that it covers the whole ground and absolutely exculpates you from all possible blame. It is short, but it is to the point."

He laid the document on the desk, and Mr Sharp's eyes almost bulged out of his head as he read it. It ran as follows:—

AERO, *Sept. 4.*

I, JOHN STRONG, hereby declare that the *Daily Wireless* is merely chosen as a medium through which I can communicate with the world. The proprietors and editor of that paper have nothing whatsoever to do with me, and do not control my actions in any way.

I have no quarrel with the earth, although it is my intention to be master of it. My immediate quarrel is with the King of Balkania, the hand of whose daughter I seek in marriage. I have called upon his Majesty to abdicate in my favour, but he has refused. Hence my initial bombardment of the city and my removal of the princess from his Majesty's care.

If the Powers of Europe—**GREAT BRITAIN BEING EXCEPTED FROM THIS BUSINESS**—choose to bring such pressure to bear on his Majesty as shall result in the achievement of my ambition, I will undertake to leave the world otherwise undisturbed.

I am willing to do this because, should such an arrangement be possible, the princess has promised to share the kingdom of Balkania with me. And this I consider more than compensation for the surrender of my desire to steal the earth.

The princess, indeed, has counselled me to adopt a course of diplomacy rather than a course of bloodshed, and if the Powers of Europe can be persuaded to meet me on this matter, I shall be entirely satisfied.

I will allow the Powers of Europe forty-eight hours in which to come to a decision. If at the end of that time the answer is unfavourable to me, I shall at once proceed to take action. I will not after the lapse of time which I allow take such drastic measures which would result in wide-spread misery. I will confine myself at first to a demonstration of my ability to achieve my own ends.

Failing, therefore, a favourable reply, I shall, on the morning of September 7—to be precise, at high noon—raid and remove from Monte Carlo the sum of £50,000 from the Casino.

I desire it to be understood most clearly that neither at the present moment nor at any time in the future will Great Britain or her possessions be in any way interfered with by myself. Nor will I even treat with the other Great Powers, including the United States of America, unless they agree to leave Great Britain out of this affair.

As it is necessary for me to have an Ambassador and a mouthpiece through which I can communicate with the various Powers, I hereby appoint the Editor of the *Daily Wireless* my Ambassador.

(Signed) JOHN STRONG.

When he had finished reading this amazing document, the editor of the *Daily Wireless* leant back in his chair and whistled.

“Upon my soul,” he said at length, “this really—really—”

“Takes the cake,” suggested Strong.

Mr Sharp laughed in spite of himself.

“The manner in which you blend the sublime with the ridiculous is almost beyond belief.”

Then he took up a pencil, as was his wont, and balanced it carefully upon his finger.

Strong watched the points of the pencil, which was sharpened at both ends, bob up and down, and wondered what the reply of Mr Sharp might be.

"Very well," said Mr Sharp, after a considerable pause, "I will print this."

Then he laughed.

"You know, Mr Strong, you are really making our fortunes for us, and at present I do not see what I can do for you in return."

"You can print that document," said Strong. "That will be more than return enough."

Then he rose from his chair.

"So that is agreed upon?" he asked.

"Quite."

"Then I will be off," said Strong, "as I have to catch my train. Now I have only to ask you one thing more. Provided that there is every evidence to show that this country will not be embroiled by my actions, will you continue to print my edicts?"

"You seem pretty sure," said the editor, "that you will be in a position to scatter edicts broadcast."

"In a few days," said Strong, quietly, "the world will be anxiously waiting to hear what I instruct it to do next."

The editor could find nothing to say. There was, indeed, nothing to be said. A week before he would have imagined he was dealing with a lunatic, but actual facts now precluded an opinion such as that.

He merely shook hands and watched Strong walk quickly out of the room.

Strong caught his last train to Maidenhead, picked up Langley by the Bungalow, and started in a blithe mood for Aero.

On the return journey he turned things over in his mind, and if he were determined to honourably abide by his compact with Diana he was none the less secretly convinced that a policy of conciliation and diplomacy must fail.

He foresaw perfectly well that the great powers of Europe were hardly likely to be coerced into bringing pressure to bear upon one poor little state because it was threatened by a danger which did not affect them

up to then, and they might reasonably suppose was not of any grave importance.

He judged that they might possibly make a naval demonstration off Monte Carlo, but even of this he was doubtful.

At midday he was back in Aero.

But while he was still sailing high over middle Europe the deluge came. From St Petersburg to Cape St Vincent, and from Brest to Constantinople, his proclamation was denounced as the grossest piece of folly and the grossest piece of impertinence of any age.

At Bomberg the king ground his teeth, and an anxiety which he could not fight off slowly but surely took possession of him. He was conscious that his people murmured against him, that his authority had been lessened, and there was abroad a spirit of unrest which was already beginning to work his kingdom evil.

Not that he had overmuch time for solitary thought. Strong's impudent message was immediately cabled to every empire in Europe, and while Strong was hurrying back to Aero, diplomat after diplomat drove up the hill to the palace at Bomberg to call upon his Majesty.

The king saw the utter futility of endeavouring to deal with them in detail, and therefore appointed a time at which to meet them all.

When, however, the representatives of the different Powers duly assembled in the Throne Room of the palace at Bomberg, there was practically little to do except discuss the matter. It was obvious that, while the different Governments had been considerably disturbed, they still declined to take Strong and his meteoric appearances and disappearances too seriously. Even the slaughter at Bomberg and the theft of the princess were not sufficient to plunge them into any particular alarm.

The discussion which arose was more or less tentative in nature. For instance, it was put forward as a hypothesis by the French Minister that, should Strong continue to make himself a nuisance, and ultimately

become a real peril to the earth, it might be necessary to consider the question of the King of Balkania's abdication as the price of peace.

But to this the King of Balkania returned an unhesitating reply. He was prepared, he said, to see his city and his country laid in ruins; he was prepared to suffer the united pressure of the Powers of Europe; but nothing short of superior force, he declared, should drag him from his throne.

They were bold words, and certain of the Ministers were not disposed to treat them altogether seriously.

It was felt, indeed, that the crisis had not yet fully come. They felt a little sheepish at exhibiting even the concern they did over the doings of a man whom they still called a lunatic.

As the Russian Minister pointed out, it was impossible for the Powers to lower their dignity to the extent of making reply to a pirate through the medium of a newspaper published in a country which had been ruled out of the controversy by the pirate himself. "Therefore, gentlemen," he said, "it will be necessary for each of us to make some report to headquarters. And this report, I propose, should be made separately and not jointly.

"In view of this fellow's ridiculous ultimatum," the Russian Minister continued, "the most interested person should be the Prince of Monaco; but he, of course, unfortunately is not represented. It remains to be seen whether our respective Governments will treat the matter as one of sufficient gravity to demand the presence of a naval force off Monte Carlo."

CHAPTER XXI

THE ROBBING OF MONTE CARLO

AT AERO Strong poured out to Diana the result of his interview with the editor of the *Daily Wireless* and the ultimatum which he had delivered to Europe.

And Diana was content. She had forgiven Strong for taking her captive by force, and indeed had even come to believe that in the grim business on which he had set his heart she might be his good genius, and so save not only him but many people from great disaster and great misery.

At midnight they picked up Miss Hunt in Vienna by wireless, and learnt from her that the Austrian capital was seething with excitement; but for this Strong cared little.

"And this is only the beginning," Strong said to himself. "Before the end of the chapter the papers devoted to statistics will place me at the head of the list of the great personages of this earth who receive mention in the Press. Oh, sweet are the uses of advertisement, and not merely the uses, but the enjoyments attached to it!" Strong learnt further that the Press of Europe was calling for his instant capture and annihilation. The newspapers, however, were careful not to lay down any means by which his much-desired apprehension could be effected.

Tickling back to Miss Hunt, he asked if there were as yet any news as to what steps were likely to be taken to frustrate him at Monte Carlo, but up to that hour there was no news of any projected campaign against the man who threatened to steal the earth.

Strong therefore went to bed in good spirits and

slept the sleep of a child. He was up early, and throughout the forenoon busied himself in seeing to the arrangements made for the "Victor's" expedition on the morrow. It was decided that he should go alone in the "Di," and that Arbutnot, Langley and Pelham should man the "Victor." It was necessary to take both airships, because it would be impossible to descend at Monte Carlo unless the larger vessel could by her shell-fire cover the descent of the smaller one.

That night they again picked up Miss Hunt by wireless, and she was able to inform them that France, Italy and Spain were sending warships to Monaco. Germany, it appeared, had no craft in the Mediterranean at the moment, but two cruisers had been despatched post haste from Kiel. The news disturbed Diana's heart greatly, but Strong's heart sang within him.

"At least," he said, "we are going to have some fun."

It was still dark within the Ring of Nissa when he rose in the morning, and, walking over to Diana's tent, roused the princess from a troubled sleep.

When she came out a little later to join the camp at breakfast Strong's face was wreathed in jubilant and boyish smiles.

"Really," said Diana, with a queer little laugh, "it almost makes me hate you to see you so delighted with yourself and things in general. Indeed, I envy you. You at least have something to do, but until you return I must sit here and wait."

"I know," said Strong, "and that is the only thing which saddens me."

At six o'clock, when it was still dark in the crater, Strong prepared to start. Diana came down to the side of the "Victor" to bid him good-bye.

"Don't," she implored, "leave me without news longer than it is necessary, for I shall be very anxious, and I don't suppose that it will be safe to ask Miss Hunt how things are going."

"Better not," said Strong. "But be of good cheer. The whole affair will be over by half-past one or two

o'clock at the outside, and if I can get a message through to you before then I will."

"And you will do your best for peace?" said Diana.

"I give you my word," said Strong, "that I will do everything I can." He kissed Diana's hand and climbed into the "Victor," and with rather misty eyes Diana watched the airship leap to the ridge of the glaciers and then disappear from sight.

Wildney had been left as her guardian, but she was in no mood to talk, and Wildney stood in much too great an awe of her to begin a conversation uninvited.

When the "Victor" had jumped to 4000 feet Strong got out the little pocket-book in which he and Langley had laid out the various courses which they were likely to require when running between different points about the earth. He put the chart before Langley, who nodded, and brought the wheel over a couple of points.

"I love punctuality," said Strong, "but I think that 150 miles an hour should see us on the right side of time."

The morning was bright and fresh and the "Victor" travelled well. The world rolled beneath them. It was as if they hung in space and watched the earth turning upon its axis. They were still ahead of their time, and crossed the Adriatic shortly before ten.

Half an hour more and the blue of the Mediterranean, flecked with white where the waves broke, came into view beneath them.

They swept along just to the north of Florence and steered their course for Monaco. And as they rapidly picked up with the rocky promontory Strong ordered a drop of a thousand feet. Then he brought the "Victor" to a standstill.

In the bay there was quite a small armada. A careful scrutiny through the glasses revealed to Strong the fact that at least half the available ships of Toulon must be flying the tricolour of France beneath him. A

battleship and three cruisers flew the colours of Italy. Spain had sent a couple of cruisers and a gun-boat. He breathed a little more freely as he saw that the white ensign of England's navy was not flying down below.

Strong knew well enough that the mixed fleet was to begin the attack. They would wait for him to give them an opportunity. He therefore ordered the "Victor" a thousand yards above the battleships of France, and then, on his own instrument, picked up the wireless apparatus of the ships beneath him.

"Understand," he ticked in the French code, "that if there is so much as one shot fired from one of the vessels here assembled I shall immediately sink you. I will not have any interference with my landing at Monte Carlo."

The ship returned no answer.

He then put the "Di" close aboard the "Victor," and gave Langley full instructions as to his duties.

Without further ado he turned with the "Victor" in his wake and stood over Monaco.

He was near enough to the surface of the earth to witness the sensation which the appearance of the airships had caused.

The Season had not yet begun, but still the hotels contained many guests, and these were gathered in the streets.

To his surprise he saw that a regiment of French soldiers was drawn up before the palace. But he smiled as he saw in the Place du Palais the old and effete guns long ago presented to the Principality by Louis XIV.

There was a vast crowd, still and very silent, on the steps of the cathedral. Before this Strong saw there was drawn up a regiment of the French line.

Slowly he turned the "Di" about and made for Monte Carlo, and though the hotels were by no means full there were heads at almost every window of the Paris, the Grand and the Windsor.

The streets, on the other hand, were strangely deserted; though there were little knots of excitedly-

talking people at every door. To his relief, Strong observed that the terrace to the south of the Casino was quite deserted, nor was there any sign of life on the pigeon-shooting grounds on the other side.

The "Victor" again drew near to the "Di," and Strong shouted further orders.

Langley shouted back. "Take care," he called, "that you are not ambushed. The Casino looks deserted enough, but if those fellows below have any pluck there will be men inside."

Strong brought the "Di" a little nearer to the "Victor."

"If there are," he said, "we will rout them out. I myself will indulge in the first bombardment, and then I shall go down. If I do not come out of the Casino in five minutes you have your orders. Pound the town to ashes and then sink the warships."

"And after that?" asked Langley.

"After that," said Strong, "nothing matters. For me, it will be finished. Return to Aero, restore the princess to her father, and make the best peace you can with the world."

Langley nodded.

Strong then put the "Di" down to within a couple of hundred feet above the Casino, and deliberately dropped a shell overboard. It split the roof in twain, and there rose up a hurricane of broken plaster and wood-work.

Peering through the smoke, he could see half a dozen men dash down the Casino steps. They were French troops, and fully armed.

He smiled rather grimly to himself, and once more ticked off a message on his wireless instrument.

Briefly, in the French code, he informed the flagship of the French squadron of what had happened. He addressed himself to the Commodore of the French ships because he now realised that he was dealing, not with the authorities of Monaco, but with the French.

Therefore he warned the Commodore that he regarded the incident as a piece of treachery and want of good

faith. At the back of his mind he settled with himself that before he left Monaco he would sink a French ship—not out of an, spirit of revenge, but merely as a wholesome lesson.

Then he pulled out his revolver, satisfied himself it was in working order, and let the “Di” gently down to the avenue of palms on the Casino terrace.

Strong left his tiny airship without a qualm.

He knew that, should any man be rash enough to interfere with her, he could at least set her adrift, and that the “Victor” hovered like a careful mother overhead.

Now it had been arranged that when he should first alight in Monte Carlo the “Victor” should drop a further shell, simply by way of admonition.

And this the “Victor” did. The great airship swung a little to the south and dropped a shell among the small craft moored beside the quay.

They sank like broken egg-shells.

Then the “Victor” came swinging back, and once more took station over the Casino.

Strong walked unconcernedly up the broad, white steps. No one challenged him. He passed into the great entrance hall, and the vast building was silent and deserted. He looked round him on every side with quick, searching glances. He stood stock still and listened but there was not a sign of any life. Passing straight on, he went into the first of the gaming-rooms.

The long tables, with their long expanse of baize, were quite forsaken. The carved and gilded high-backed chairs, usually occupied by gamblers, were drawn up in long, forlorn rows. The echo of his own decided footfalls was the only sound that greeted him.

Strong paused beside one of the tables, and then came to a stand-still and laughed. He laughed at himself because he had forgotten a very obvious thing.

It was hardly likely that, being forewarned, the authorities of the Casino, to whom every cent is of value, would leave scattered abroad for him the sum which he had said that he would remove.

A foolish thing indeed it was to have forgotten, and one that annoyed Strong although it amused him. Yet his annoyance did not ripen into anger, because the object of his visit was not for the purposes of gain alone.

"For the first time in my life," he said to himself, "I shall have to leave a boast unfulfilled."

He passed on and made his way, which he knew well enough, to the director's room.

There he surveyed the great safes with irritation.

It was decidedly galling to be compelled to return without that which he had come to take.

"Certainly," he said again to himself, "it is a question of 'check.' However, no matter. Whether I take a few paltry pounds or not does not matter. At least I have held up Monte Carlo."

Suddenly there came to Strong in the silence the sound of distant guns, and quick as thought he turned about and ran full speed through the deserted rooms and out on to the steps of the Casino.

He was in time to see a puff of smoke drifting lazily away from the side of a French battleship.

He looked to the right, and to his surprise saw advancing, four deep, a column of red-trousered soldiery.

And although the sight was to a certain extent menacing, it filled him with a mad joy.

"This," he thought, "should at least prove to Diana the futility of fighting these people on fair and square lines."

He ran down the steps into the bright sunshine and stood beside the "Di."

He knew the troops could not fire until they halted, and he watched their oncoming without concern.

Glancing up he saw that the "Victor" had now dropped to within a couple of hundred feet or so off the ground, and was being manœuvred over the advancing column.

He watched the airship keenly for a second or so, and then quite clearly saw a shell drop over the side. There came an explosion, and Strong turned away from the shambles that he knew must follow.

He climbed quickly into the "Di" and put her up, and when he had steadied her opposite the "Victor" he looked down on the havoc beneath him. The whole of the vanguard of the regiment had been blown to atoms.

He shouted to Langley to "get up" and the airships rose side by side to five thousand feet. Then, in the stillness of the upper air, Strong spoke his mind. And his language was far from pleasant. "I have done," he called to Langley, "with trying to make these people understand. I have finished with even trying to make them behave as gentlemen. Their blood be upon their own head."

"Will you warn them again?" called Langley.

"Never again," cried Strong. "I will put alongside you, and we will swap places. I shall go down and wipe those brutes out."

Langley said never a word. He knew that at such times it was futile to argue with Strong, and so, when the airships had been brought together, he quietly exchanged places with his friend.

"Stay where you are," said Strong. "There is no need for you to descend. I am going back to punish them." He had now passed from a hot rage to a cold one, and Arbutnot and Pelham turned from the sight of his face as he let the "Victor" drop a couple of thousand feet.

First he put the airship over the Casino, and with his own hands dropped shell after shell into the building till scarce a stick or stone of it remained standing. With the mangled troops he did not interfere.

The guns of the fleet beneath him were now trained as nearly as they could be upon the airship, but they were entirely incapable of touching the "Victor."

"My quarrel," he said, more to himself than to the other men, "is with the Commodore, and on him I will take vengeance." He steered for the fleet, and hung over the great bulk of the battleship. He looked over the side and grinned; and his grin was cruel as he

dropped a shell full on to the quarter-deck. Steel plates and planking spurted up like water; the sides bulged.

A hundred screams of agony and fear came up to him from the stricken ship. Strong's smile vanished and he looked down gravely on his handiwork.

He could see excited figures dancing on the navigating bridge, and men running hither and thither on the decks. Some worked like fiends about the davits, seeking to lower the boats; others, without hesitation, leaped into the sea and swam.

And then the ship sank.

Strong swung the "Victor" round and stood over the second vessel in the line.

"I will destroy no more men," said he, "but I will put the fear of God into those scoundrels down below." He dropped a second shell into the sea, and there arose a great cloud of water and of spray.

And then the second ship of the line lowered the tricolour at her stern.

"By Heaven!" cried Strong, "they have struck—the cowards have struck." Now of a sudden he had jumped back from his cold rage into a hot one, and his face was scarlet. "I have half a mind," he shouted, "to go down and take possession of the ship."

Arbuthnot said, almost roughly, "Don't be a fool!" And that brought Strong to his senses.

"You are right," he said gravely. Then he added, in a bitter voice, "I have almost forgotten that I have to be a diplomat. But one cannot be a diplomat with rats."

"Isn't this enough?" asked Arbuthnot.

"Yes, it is enough," said Strong. "We will go back to Aero — back to Diana and Diplomacy. "Oh, and I am a fool to do it," he cried. "I hate the slaughter, but it is the quickest and the more merciful way."

CHAPTER XXII

DIANA AND DIPLOMACY

LANGLEY, however, braved Strong's black wrath to remind him of poor Bellingham still waiting in the *Aphrodite*. He also urged the absolute necessity of acquiring the means to effect repairs. In the end Langley had his way, and towards nightfall they picked up the yacht off Lagos.

Then Strong chose Bellingham for his fellow-traveller back to Aero, and putting him into the "Di" started for the crater.

It was intensely dark when the airships reached the Ring of Nissa, and Langley was doubtful as to the possibility of descent. Strong, in his impatience, however, would not hear of delay.

Langley protested, seeing that it would be the simplest matter in the world to wreck the "Victor" among the pines on the hillside of the crater. They were, indeed, at so great a height, and the air was so thick with mist, that they could not even observe the camp fire below them which Strong, before he left Aero, had ordered Wildney to keep going.

Langley implored him to allow him to remain up through the night in the "Victor," and to this Strong at last consented. Langley had argued that while he did not mind risks, he objected to foolish ones. And Strong was in some way convinced of the force of the argument by the fact that so difficult was the light the airships had nearly bumped each other while he and Langley spoke.

Strong, however, determined to go down, and he let the "Di" drop, first of all pretty quickly, and then at a slower rate of speed.



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In the mist he miscalculated, and it was only just in time that Bellingham's warning shout prevented their falling into the branches of the fir trees on the hillside. Now, however, the fire below shone up, and Strong stood for that, and a few minutes later brought the "Di" to earth.

Diana, wrapped in rugs, was sitting at a little distance from the blaze, watching the "Di's" descent.

There was so much of the zest of life in Strong's eyes as he strolled over to speak to her that she smiled back in a happier manner than she had done for many days. Strong's beaming face, indeed, deceived her into the belief that he had met with more success than he had let her know of by wireless.

He threw himself on to the ground beside her, and, looking down, laughed gaily into her face. But his first words disillusioned her.

"My dear," he said, "we've failed—hopelessly, miserably failed." Then he poured out a stream of narrative and explanation. "Still," he said, in conclusion, "I suppose you want me to continue trying. Now, you know, my dear," he went on, "that I more or less trust to you in this matter. That is to say, I more or less rely upon your suggestion. I am no hand at diplomacy. Hammering people till they give in is more to my mind."

"That seems to me," said Diana, "somewhat of a confession of small brain power. Do you really mean to tell me that since this afternoon you have been unable to think of any other scheme whereby you may achieve by peace what you propose to win by war?"

"To tell you the truth," said Strong, "I have; and, ruling England out of it for the time being, I see but one way. Excepting England, there is in Europe at the present time only one man who really counts—only one man who is a real man, only one man who is a real leader of men. I mean the Kaiser. Now, it goes against the grain for me to do it, but the scheme which I have thought out is this: I will offer my services

to his Imperial Majesty Billy of Germany in return for the kingdom of Balkania. He might subsequently require me to make war on France, keep Russia in order, or to coerce Italy. But these are matters which can be dealt with when the time comes. I fancy for the present he would be quite content with a little friendly coercion in a few directions which would give him an immense pull over his neighbours. Of one thing I am certain, that, of all people in the world, he will best appreciate the advantages of having such an airship as the 'Victor' at his disposal. So I propose to go and see him. At anyrate, I am more worthy of consideration than Koepenick."

Diana's face shone ruddy in the light of the fire, and now it was almost a happy face. She was even tempted to allow herself to fall into Strong's headlong, hurrying, heedless ways. But she held herself in check, remembering that she must be, for a time at least, a drag upon the all-too-rapid wheel of his many movements.

"When?" she asked slowly, though her heart was pounding.

"To-morrow at ten o'clock," Strong said. "I learn from Miss Hunt that his Majesty is off on naval manoeuvres to-morrow night and I don't want to let him get away to sea before I pick up keel. In that case we might have several hours' dancing up and down the German Ocean, and even then not find his Imperial Majesty's High Sea Fleet before dark. And so," he added, "I think you had better go to bed. There is a busy day before us."

"For you, yes," said Diana, "but for me—" She shrugged her shoulders and spread out her hands.

Strong looked at her very kindly. He realised the immense sacrifice that she was making, and how entirely irksome to her energetic nature must be these prolonged and tiresome waits.

"If only," he said, "you would wholly throw in your lot with mine, things might be very different. Then you and I could go together into the hurly-burly."

"Don't you value me a little lightly?" asked Diana.

Strong only laughed. "Don't you understand my ability a little?" he asked, by way of answer. "You would be just as safe and free from harm on board the 'Victor' as you would be here, and things would certainly be a shade more exciting."

"Yes," said Diana, slowly, "and I fear a little more heartbreaking." Diana closed her eyes and gave a shudder. "I am thinking of Bomberg," she said.

Strong drew in his breath sharply and made no reply. Presently, however, he broke silence again. "I cannot make you see it," he said almost wearily. "I cannot make you see it. If you would only realise how great, how really glorious is the end I have in view, you would think more lightly of the little incidents which pave the way for the goal."

"And you," said Diana, "I am afraid would think a little more lightly of me."

Again Strong made no answer, for in his heart he knew that Diana was right. He left her, and made the other men turn in, telling them almost roughly that they must be astir betimes in the morning, as the day's work was likely to be arduous. Then he rolled himself up in a blanket and slept dreamlessly beside the fire.

At six o'clock he and Langley got to work by the light of the "Victor's" electric lamps and thoroughly overhauled her machinery. Strong saw to the stowing of the ammunition, of which they had brought a good supply from the yacht. Churston was set to work to fill the empty shells.

At about nine o'clock they all sat down to breakfast on the boulder beside the torrent, which they had selected as a sort of open-air dining-room. Fortunately the weather still held fair.

As the hour for departure drew near Diana took Strong on one side. She looked up into his face and besought him with her eyes.

"Remember," she said, "what you have promised me."

"Dear heart," said Strong, "I have given you my word that if there can be peace it shall be peace. Not one single life shall be taken by my hand if I can possibly avoid it; but, of course, I hold myself open to protect myself from attack or even to reply to hostilities."

"If you are careful," said Diana, "there should be none."

Strong laughed a little bitterly.

"I promise you I will be positively urbane; but if the Kaiser proceeds from words to deeds, and tries a little target practice on the 'Victor' with his very much vaunted guns, then I warn you solemnly that I shall not have the slightest compunction in the world in sinking the whole of his fleet if I am able to do so."

Diana's eyes sparkled.

"And if his Majesty," she said, "were to resort to such tactics, I don't think I should hold you much to blame if you were to make some reply."

Strong took off his cap as he stood before her at the moment of parting. He looked hungrily in her eyes, but he realised that it would be a most unmanly thing at such a time for him to betray the uppermost thought in his mind.

So he contented himself with what had now become his habit when meeting and parting from Diana. He raised her hand and kissed it, before the gaze of the other man, and he did so without any feeling of embarrassment, or, indeed, causing the slightest shade of annoyance to Diana. For there was in this grave little salute no more display of emotion than would have been betokened by any ordinary act of homage.

Diana sat alone among the broken meats of the breakfast on the great boulder, and for the third time watched the "Victor" leap away with Strong.

And Strong's heart was gloomy enough till he had crossed the glaciers and felt the sting of the keen air on his face, and, putting the "Victor" west, had sensed the tide of battle surging in his veins.

This instinct was good—almost as good as the

instinct of a woman; and he knew that in spite of every reasonable argument, in spite of any check that he might set upon his tongue, the mission on which he sailed was doomed to failure. He knew, just as surely as the sun shone above him and the wind battered on his face, that he would hear the sound of guns before nightfall came.

With the "Victor" went Langley, Strong and Pelham. Arbuthnot, Strong decided, should take the "Di," and Arbuthnot, declaring that he cared nothing for loneliness, went alone.

Bellingham, Strong had suggested, should remain with Diana. But Bellingham, although by no means insensible to the princess's charms, was of another mind. His heart was in Vienna with Miss Hunt, and, moreover, he had spent enough days of weary waiting to satisfy even his amazing patience.

The men had by now grown so used to swift passage through the air, and to watching country after country stream past them, that they took but little heed of the panorama of the world as it rolled swiftly away below them. When, however, they drew near to Berlin the boredom of the long, swift trip instantly vanished.

Pelham suddenly sang out from above: "Airship ahead!"

Strong snatched up the glasses, and looking westward, saw sailing over the roofs of Berlin the greatly prized airship of the Germans. It was about a thousand feet from the earth, and was moving, at least as they judged it, slowly.

Strong dropped the "Victor" a thousand feet, letting her fall slightly towards the German craft. Then he brought the "Victor" to a standstill, and he and his companions watched the ridiculously-laboured movements of the German airship.

The wind was whistling from the north through the housetops of Berlin, and it was obvious that the officers of the German airship had some difficulty in navigating her against the breeze.

Her great, full, cigar-shaped balloon quivered as

they forced her into the teeth of the wind; and then, when they had brought her into the eye of the breeze, Strong could see through the glasses that it required two men to keep her from falling away. Moreover, the progress which she made was very slow. Langley judged it at about twelve miles per hour.

"Tell you what," cried Strong, "we must show these fellows just what we can do."

"Five hundred feet down!"

The "Victor" dropped like a stone.

"Starboard!" said Strong.

She answered to the helm like a racing yacht in the stiff breeze, and they shot across the bows of the German airship almost within hailing distance.

"Starboard again, and stop!"

Langley brought her head round, and they fetched up within hailing distance of the lumbering concern which was now upon their level.

Strong picked up a megaphone and shouted through it, "*Wie gehts?*"

He had the megaphone at his mouth and the glasses at his eyes, though these were scarcely necessary, so little was the distance between the two airships.

He could see a couple of much gold-braided officers speak hurriedly to each other.

It was rude, and he knew it; it was distinctly and uncommonly rude, but he once more shouted, "How are you?"

The Prussian officers stared at him in stony silence. Silence is commonly supposed to be the attribute of the wise, but in spite of this general belief it is usually the refuge of the man without an argument.

And Strong laughed aloud as he realised that the latter was the case with the two officers of the German war balloon. So, with the insolence born of conscious superiority, he waved his hat to them, and ordered Langley to put the "Victor" up three thousand feet.

Then they rushed northwards again.

By three o'clock they were over Kiel, and, reducing

the altitude two thousand feet, Strong was able to take in the whole of the formation of the German battle fleet, which at the time was setting out to sea.

A crowd of torpedo-boats went ahead. Then he saw a double column of battleships, numbering fourteen in all, while a second crowd of torpedo-boats followed in their wake.

On either side of the battleships, at a distance ranging from three to twelve miles, were half a score of cruiser scouts. It was a great fleet.

Langley, looking down, took in the whole scene at a glance. "When do we start?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Strong. "Let them get out to sea. The further we are away from shore the better I shall be pleased, and the more they will be troubled. Give them sea room enough and they will hang themselves—or perhaps be blown up."

He ordered the "Victor" to stop, and sat down alone in the stern. A thousand different ideas, aims and plans flashed rapidly through his mind. Gradually he attuned them all to the fact that he had given his word to Diana that if there could be peace, peace there should be.

He was content to let the "Victor" remain stationary while the fleet steamed ahead. The ships had become mere patches the size of match-heads in the ocean when he ordered the "Victor" under way again.

Though he had allowed the fleet below him so long a start, it only took the "Victor" twenty minutes to pick them up again. Then Strong ordered a thousand feet drop.

They went down, and the glasses soon revealed the fact that the *Hohenzollern*, from which the Admiral's flag was flying, signifying that the Kaiser was on board, led the starboard column of the battleships.

And here it may be said that during all the waits that had hung so heavily upon Strong and Diana's hands, Langley had busied himself with experiments as to the tuning of his wireless instruments, and these

experiments he had brought to such a successful issue that he could tune them practically to the instruments of any state or any company.

Langley, too, thoughtful, careful and methodical as ever, had not only laid to heart the international code which was commonly used for general matters, but also the codes of Germany and France and the United States. It was the German code that he now called into use.

The message which he sent under Strong's instructions was short and to the point. It was this:

"Mr Strong desires to speak to his Imperial Majesty the German Emperor."

There was no answer.

Twice and more did Langley repeat the message, but again there was no reply. Then Strong instructed him to speak to the German fleet.

"Mr Strong makes no threat, delivers no ultimatum, contents himself with a suggestion. He realises that his Imperial Majesty is not to be coerced, but at the same time respectfully informs him that he has a right to parley, and if such parley is not given within the space of five minutes he will prove that right."

Then he sat with his watch in his hand, counting the seconds passing by. It wanted five seconds to the five minutes when the answer came.

"What has Mr Strong to say?"

"Mr Strong merely desires to discuss the international situation with his Majesty."

There was more delay before the answer came back.

"The Emperor will grant the interview."

"Before I come down to his Majesty," Strong replied, "I must request his word of honour that I shall be treated as an ambassador is treated, even though I call on my own behalf. In return I give him my word that no harm shall befall his Majesty or his Majesty's fleet."

The reply when it came was business-like.

"His Majesty consents to the proposal, but this

compact is only to hold good while Mr Strong is on board the *Hohenzollern*."

Strong ticked back: "It must hold good until Mr Strong has rejoined his airship."

There was again a little pause, and then came the reply: "The Emperor is agreed."

Strong signalled to the "Di" to approach, and Arbuthnot having gingerly brought her alongside the "Victor," Strong stepped into the smaller craft.

He left the navigation of the "Di" to Arbuthnot, telling him to put her alongside the *Hohenzollern's* gangway, which he could now see being lowered, as the whole of the fleet, in answer to signals from the flagship, was coming to a standstill. That is to say, only sufficient way remained on the battleships to keep them in station.

As they swooped slowly down Strong kept a careful watch on the *Hohenzollern*, and it was obvious that severe discipline was being maintained on board; for beyond the sentries on the quarter-deck not a single member of the crew was to be observed.

The Emperor was still on the bridge with two of the officers, whom Strong judged to be an admiral and a navigating lieutenant.

Beyond the presence of these officers and the sentries there was no sign of any life.

Arbuthnot dropped the "Di" gently to the water, and set her alongside the gangway.

A couple of seamen then appeared from under the bridge and ran down the steps to make the "Di" fast.

A quartermaster had followed them, and saluted as Strong stepped on board.

When they had gained the deck the quartermaster led the way aft and Strong walked beside him.

Glancing back over his shoulder Strong could see the Kaiser following in his wake. Then the quartermaster stood aside and motioned to Strong to pass through the hatch.

CHAPTER XXIII

TWO STRONG MEN

At the moment Strong was considerably surprised at his invitation to the Kaiser's saloon. A second later he reflected that this surprise was probably only born of suspicion. Obviously the Emperor would not agree to discuss the matter on deck.

At first, finding himself face to face with the German Emperor, he suffered to some extent a sense of disappointment. The Emperor's uniform sat on him loosely; his face was pallid with the pallidness of a man who suffers from liver, and his famous moustaches, which were brushed up into his eyes, suggested an atmosphere of caricature rather than of real ferocity.

But the Kaiser's eyes were strange and wonderful. They were cold, masterful eyes, which at once invested all the outwardly insignificant attributes of the Emperor with commanding dignity.

The Kaiser swept a hand towards a chair, and himself took a seat at the table. Then he spoke.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough, Mr Strong," he said, "to tell me precisely why I am indebted to you for this visit."

The two men looked at each other. It seemed to Strong that they were like fencers waiting for an opening. However, realising that it was he who had first moved to the attack, Strong decided to put the Emperor on his defensive.

"I have come," he said, "to suggest to your Majesty that the ownership, or at any rate the control, of two such airships as I possess would be a tenfold increase of your Majesty's power."

"I don't know," said the Emperor, "that I particularly wish it increased."

"You must excuse my speaking plainly," said Strong, "but that is a statement which I presume is suggested from a spirit of diplomacy rather than your actual state of feeling. In any case, we will allow it to pass. Now I fear that I shall have to bore you to some slight extent in order that I may explain my position. However, I will waste no words. It amounts to this, that, with the assistance of these airships, I intend to seize the kingdom of Balkania. Owing to the intercession of Princess Diana, I have agreed not to resort to force unless force be necessary, but rather to seek my aims through diplomatic channels. With this end in view, therefore, I have now approached your Majesty, and the proposition which I put to you quite simply is this: If you will see to it that the King of Balkania abdicates and I myself reign in his stead, and will guarantee me perfect liberty to conduct the affairs of Balkania in my own way, I will place my two airships at your Majesty's disposal, for you to employ them as you will. I only make one stipulation," continued Strong, "that Great Britain and all her possessions shall be considered outside the scope of any operations which you may wish to conduct."

The Kaiser laughed. "The suggestion, from your point of view," said he, "may be an excellent one, but to me it is simply preposterous. I do not traffic with adventurers, and do not traffic with outlaws. I am the head of a great civilised State, and I altogether decline to treat with a man who sets international law at defiance."

The Emperor's voice was cold and cut like a knife, and Strong, bitterly resenting the insult conveyed both by the tone of the Emperor's voice and his actual words, was not slow to wrath. Remembering Diana, however, he made one last effort in the cause of peace.

"Believe me, your Majesty," he said, "that however you may regard me I am not to be despised. To

use a term which is applied to such things as telephones and motor-omnibuses, I 'have come to stay.' The question for you to decide is whether I shall stay with you or against you."

"That," said the Emperor, "is already decided. I have now something else to say which will probably annoy you distinctly. When, in your insolence, you demanded to visit this vessel, I gave you my Imperial word that you should rejoin your own craft in safety, but beyond that I have promised you nothing, and I may as well inform you that I simply regard you as an outlaw, a pirate, and a pest to society, and I shall issue instant orders to my officers to destroy you and your airships."

Strong laughed aloud. "You are at perfect liberty, your Majesty, to please yourself in the matter. However, I warn you that the consequences may be exceedingly serious for you. As you have done me the honour of receiving me on this occasion, and also are apparently about to keep your word that I shall rejoin my airship in safety, I will not harm you at present. I will not, indeed, do so because I fancy that in the near future your Majesty may be exceedingly useful to me. It will be very necessary for me before many days," Strong continued, "to possess a powerful ally in Europe who will assist me in dealing with the rest of the Powers as I see fit. Until that moment arrives—but it will, I assure you, not be long in coming—I will bid you good-bye."

The Englishman picked up his cap from the table and prepared to leave the saloon. Then he turned and faced the Emperor once more.

"I will also warn you," he said, "of one thing further. Should you make any attempt, should you so much as fire one shot, with the intention of injuring either me or my airships, I will sink or disable every craft that fires a shot."

The Kaiser's face was livid with anger; but even at that moment of intense rage there was something very much akin to admiration in his eyes.

"You are a bold man, Mr Strong," he said, "but I think that on this occasion you will meet with a great deal more than your match."

"That," said Strong, "remains to be seen."

"It will be seen," said the Emperor, "within the next five minutes."

Strong, without another word, stalked out of the saloon, and marched up the stairs and out on to the deck. He took one quick look about him, and realised that by a piece of really masterly tactics the Kaiser had laid an exceedingly awkward trap for him.

The *Hohenzollern* was now without any immediate companionship from the other vessels of the fleet. The line of double column ahead had been broken, and now the fourteen battleships lay in a wide circle some fifteen miles across, of which the *Hohenzollern* was the centre. The cruisers and torpedo craft were scattered and steaming over the horizon in every direction, the purport of which Strong grasped at once. It was obvious that the Kaiser was determined to take big risks and make an effort to smash him.

The "Victor" was hovering overhead at an altitude of about 1500 feet, and Strong, to his dismay, saw that Langley could not have realised what the strange manœuvring of the German fleet portended. But Strong understood very well, and, seeing danger all about him, determined to face it without a second's delay.

At the gangway the Kaiser, who had followed him, called to him to stop before he went down the steps.

Strong, not loth to ease his mind with hot words, faced round and spoke fast and warmly. "Oh, yes," he said, "I can see what your Majesty's little game is, and I can even guess what you propose to say. You are going to tell me that the moment my airship has risen from 500 feet to 1000 feet I shall be in a cross-fire of several score of guns that have already been carefully trained. You imagine that the prospect of this will terrify me to such an extent that I shall listen to what

you presumably would call reason, which means that I should be fool enough to surrender myself and my airships. Allow me to inform your Majesty that you are very much mistaken. There are more ways of escape for me than you possibly imagine, and one, I warn you, which you would find very unpleasant. In five seconds' time," he went on, speaking loudly and rapidly, "I could be directly over the *Hohenzollern* and drop enough shells into you to send you to the bottom like a stone; but as I have already guaranteed the safety of your Majesty I will not adopt that method unless you attack me from this ship. If you do that, then I promise you that the *Hohenzollern* will be the first victim of your own folly."

Without another word Strong ran quickly down the gangway and jumped into the "Di." Five seconds later he was going up, and even while he ran down the gangway steps he had made up his mind. He saw that if he rose a couple of hundred feet or so and then made in one direction or another he would leave the "Victor" unwarned, and therefore exposed to what in all probability would be a deadly fire. Moreover, to effect his own escape, he would have to pass through the zone of fire.

He therefore decided to take the bolder course, leap straight up, warn the "Victor," and risk the consequences.

A thought flashed through his mind. The *Hohenzollern*, it was true, might take no active part in the coming conflict, but in all probability it was from her that the rest of the fleet would get the signal. So he put the "Di" back and down and came to within hailing distance of the quarter-deck, on which the Kaiser still stood.

He leant out of the little craft and yelled through his megaphone at the Emperor. "I have come back to lay one more restriction on you," he cried. "If you so much as signal from the *Hohenzollern* to the fleet I shall consider that an act of hostility, and you will have to take the consequences. I mean what I say."

And the Emperor, looking up and catching sight of Strong's face, knew full well that, even if it cost him his life, Strong would keep his word.

The "Di" went up again.

Strong was too busy now to look over the side, but had he done so he might have seen the Kaiser stamping first with one foot and then with the other, as he bit savagely at his nails. For Strong had guessed precisely what his Majesty had intended to do, and though he had decided to take desperate measures in dealing with Strong, the Kaiser was not prepared to risk the sinking of the *Hohenzollern*.

In a few seconds the "Di" was on a level with the "Victor," and Strong shouted to Arbuthnot to get up.

He was only just in time. The second in command of the fleet, failing to observe any signals from the *Hohenzollern*, and realising that in a few moments more both airships would be out of range, had taken the initiative into his own hands, and from a distant point across the water there came a flash from one of the battleships. The flash was followed by a roar, and then spurts of flame gleamed in the daylight from every point of the compass. The "Victor" and the "Di" were encased in a ring of fire.

It was about as hazardous a piece of work as could well be imagined, for though the firing from the circle of battleships would leave the *Hohenzollern* scatheless, there was considerable risk that falling shells from one battleship might hit a sister vessel on the other side of the circle.

For Strong and the other men the next three seconds were an eternity of terror. At least a hundred shells converged upon them simultaneously.

Strong could hear the shells whistling and shrieking below him, above him, and past him. One of them screamed a passage clean between the "Di's" upright propellers, and, whistling on, just missed the hull of the "Victor."

The wind from the shell struck Strong like a blow

and knocked him on to his back, and as he lay on the floor of the "Di" he could see shell after shell flashing past above him like so many silver streaks.

He picked himself up and rushed to the steering gear, for the "Di" was still leaping up. The shrieking of the shells was growing faint beneath him, and he saw, to his joy, that the "Victor" was now well out of range above him.

And then the feared and the expected came. The last shell that could have reached him just grazed the shaft of the after-part of the upright propeller on the starboard bow, but though the shell only grazed it lightly, it snapped it in half like a reed, and the falling propeller crashed against the side of the "Di" and stove in her flimsy hull.

The airship quivered like a bird hit in flight and then dipped with a nasty list to starboard.

Three other upright propellers were still working, as were the propellers ahead and astern, but it only took Strong one glance at the indicator to show that the "Di" had slowly begun to drop.

He gave her all the power he could, but still the indicator showed that, though only slightly, the "Di" was drifting down.

The "Victor" was now beyond the range of Strong's voice, even through the megaphone, and he wondered what course Langley would pursue. It was the first time he had left him to independent command in a tight place, and his reflections as he sat and watched the indicator were far from pleasant. All his hopes and all his plans seemed drifting down to the sea. "If only," he thought to himself, "I had not listened to Diana."

But that reflection struck him as being disloyal, though his loyalty was sorely tried. He was as helpless as a rat in a trap. There was nothing, at anyrate, that he himself could do to save himself.

However, he did his best by putting the "Di" full speed ahead for the coast. She made poor progress.

With every second as he drifted down he knew he

was becoming a better and better target for the warships which were already closing in upon him.

Then he saw that his plight had been recognised from the "Victor," for she had put about and was now almost directly overhead.

Had it been possible for him to do so, he would have warned her against descending and told them to leave him to his fate. He would have been far more content to perish in the sea or from the German guns than to live and suffer the utter shame of defeat.

The gun-fire was now becoming furious again, and though it was evident that the gunners in the warships had lost their range, still the shells whistled and shrieked uncomfortably near him.

"A stray shot does it," Strong said to himself.

As he could not communicate with the "Victor" he prayed that Langley might be quick, for two more shells came nearer than the rest and warned him that at least one of the warships was finding the lost range.

Then the "Victor" swooped, and a few seconds later had fetched up beside him.

Langley, though his face was pale as ashes, did not falter at his task. He brought the "Victor" alongside the "Di" to such a nicety that Strong, stretching out, caught the "Victor's" gunwale and drew his own smaller craft beside the larger one.

Then came another long screech from a shell, and another streak of silver passed through the upright propellers of the "Victor."

"What is to be done?" asked Arbuthnot. "Shall we leave her or salve her?"

But here Langley cried out in protest: "Leave her!" he said. "Never! I have brought her down on the side where the list is. Make her fast, keep her going, and with the 'Victor's' assistance we will get her up."

The shells were still whistling about them, but they set to work with great will, and in the space of about a minute had made the "Di" fast to the "Victor's" side.

Langley put the "Victor" gently up, and together

the two airships rose slowly but surely for another thousand feet.

They were now well out of range, and Strong had time to breathe and wipe the sweat from his forehead. He took Langley's hand and wrung it.

"That is about the nearest squeak we have had yet," he said. "Langley, you're a brick. Very few men would have been so self-sacrificing as to come back for a lame duck like me. You are a real live hero, my boy, and heaven bless you for it. When I reign in Balkania I will strike a medal equivalent to the Victoria Cross, and you shall be the first to have one."

"Oh, rats!" said Langley, shortly.

"And now," said Strong, "we have got to make up our minds what we are going to do with those gentlemen down below. Personally, I hardly think it was playing the game, though certainly I deserved all I got for taking no precautions. It has been an excellent lesson. You may bet that it will be a long time before I despise the enemy again."

"Don't you think," suggested Langley, "that we had better put back for Aero while there is time, before more damage is done?"

"Not before I have had a smack at some of those beggars below," said Strong.

"What about the *Hohenzollern*?" asked Arbuthnot.

"Out of the question, unfortunately. I gave my word to leave her alone, but there is nothing to protect the other fellows. I don't think in our present condition we had better go far out of our course. Let us stand from the coast and take what comes *en passant*."

Langley brought the two airships round and made for the distant shore. The "Victor" was sadly hampered by the wounded "Di," but none the less they made good speed.

Ahead of them was a giant battleship rolling slowly with the tide.

"Three thousand feet," said Strong, "is rather too far to make sure of dropping one's shell straight."

"Look here," said Langley, "I don't like to dispute your authority, but I may tell you, regretfully but respectfully, that unless you take me from the charge of the 'Victor' by force I will never consent to go down while we are in this condition."

"All right," said Strong, "have it your own way, but keep as dead over the battleship below us as you can."

Langley was so accurate in his calculations that a plumb-line dropped from the "Victor's" side must have fallen on to the bridge of the battleship beneath them.

It was then that Strong, setting his mouth, picked up two of the larger shells and dropped them one after the other full and square on to the battleship's decks.

An immense cloud of smoke spurted up and mercifully hid from Strong the sight of his own handiwork. But they could hear the long grinding wrench of timber and steel torn asunder and the sharp cries of stricken men.

Langley put the "Victor" ahead again after a few moments. When the smoke had rolled away a little they could see that the battleship was in sore straits. Men, looking no larger than the size of ants, were swarming on the decks, busy at the davits of such boats as had not been splintered into matchwood.

"Good heavens!" said Bellingham, "she's going down by the stern." He was greatly agitated, and Strong put his hand on his shoulder to console him.

Bellingham, however, declined to be comforted. "This is a hideous business," he cried. But Strong, whose face wore about as much pity or remorse or kindness as the countenance of the Sphinx, merely shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe," he said, "but just as a stitch in time saves nine, so this small piece of destruction may prevent wholesale bloodshed." Then he sighed. "Poor Diana!" he said to himself, and he set the "Victor" for Aero.

CHAPTER XXIV

BOMBERG CAPITULATES

STRONG'S mood was black, so that when he reached Aero Diana could read disaster in his face.

He flung his story at her with hot words, nor when he had made an end of his narrative would he be soothed or listen to reason. "I have done with diplomacy for ever!" he cried. "It's war now, red war!"

Diana's suggestion that he should approach King Edward of England in the interests of peace, Strong laughed to scorn.

It was then that Diana herself flared up. "You don't want peace," she cried. "You won't try for it. You have broken your pact with me and I shall return to my father."

"By heaven, you shall!" shouted Strong. And he walked away, cursing himself in his heart for a cad. Then he threw himself beside the fire and fell asleep from weariness.

While he slept Diana sobbed her soul out. In Bomberg King George II. hurried on his fatuous plan of building dirigible balloons.

On the morrow Strong was all humbleness, but Diana's mood was hard. Also her mind was set on the return to Bomberg that she might once more plead the cause of peace with her father.

Strong had little doubt what the result of that last pleading would be, but let Diana have her way. He bore her back to Bomberg and waited with what patience he could summon for the king's decision.

Towards noon little flashes came from his wireless instrument.

"His Majesty declines in any way to consider Mr Strong's proposals," ticked Diana. "Mr Strong is at liberty to take what steps he pleases."

"That is official," Strong answered. "Now, what of yourself?"

"I have still hope," said Diana, "and I wish that you would give me time."

Strong answered: "I cannot. There has already been time enough spent. I shall move to the attack at once. But you, what of you?"

"I shall remain here," said Diana. "Obviously I cannot return now, but when it is all over I will come back. If it must be war, I would rather be with you."

Strong's heart leapt in his body. "God bless you," was the message he sent her.

After Diana had put the instrument away she made one more appeal to the king.

"Father," she urged, "I trust that you realise what this means? I appeal to you for the sake of peace. If you will not give us peace, then it is not only war but Armageddon."

"Then Armageddon let it be!" he said.

As he gave his answer there flashed through his mind the words of Disraeli on a similar occasion. And so, not above imitation where he could score a point, he added, "Let us go to lunch."

It was only a few seconds after the king's callous decision that it should be Armageddon that Strong received Diana's message, which amounted to the effect that he must wage war against the world. And the prospect did not disconcert him in the slightest. He was aglow. The joy of battle was in his veins. The long waits had only made him the more eager to claim his own. He looked down from the "Victor" and surveyed the little patch of earth that was bounded by the far-encircling horizon.

"Mine!" he cried.

For a little while he lay back in his seat and thought. He thought of all the horrors that must come, of all the

action and all the battle. But he saw also the outcome of it all, and realised that his motive and his end were at least glorious. Though he wielded the sword now, he would in the end bring the last great peace to the world.

With half a dozen chosen friends he hovered above the world alone in space. The earth lay beneath him at his mercy. Every fetter had now fallen from him; he was at liberty to choose precisely what he should do. So great, indeed, was the prospect opened up, so great, indeed, were the fields to conquer, that the subjection of Bomberg and Balkania seemed a little thing. Yet it was the first step, and though he was now compelled to take the first step, it seemed tiresome.

Then Strong roused himself. On the principle that sufficient for the day is the evil thereof, he at once decided that he must deal with details. And Bomberg was the immediately objective detail.

He ordered the "Victor" to follow the line of the main street as he had followed it a few days before, till the palace came in sight.

And when he drew near, just about 500 yards overhead, his heart was melted within him. For, upon the terrace of the palace, Diana sat alone with her father.

The king was looking over the town. The troops were massed in the square.

Diana sat apart with her hands still folded, just as Strong had seen her sit with folded hands in the motor-car which had borne her from him.

And with the melting of his heart came the desire to make one final effort for conciliation.

Though he was compelled to swallow his pride to do so, he ticked out the query: "Is his Majesty's answer final?"

From above he could see Diana bend over the little instrument in her lap as it received his message. He could see her turn and speak to the king. He saw the king nod his head.

Strong made for the forts to the westward of the

city and laid them in ruins. He was compelled to look down upon shambles which he never forgot. But by now he was cold in his resolution, and, having laid the western forts in ashes, he sailed across the palace eastwards. And there also he demolished the forts.

Then again he put back above the palace and ticked a further message. But the answer was still the same. The king remained unrepentant.

The afternoon was wearing on, and Strong decided that he must settle with Bomberg before dark.

It was, therefore, without mercy that he put over the main street of the town. Just down the hill, beside the hotel in which Miss Hunt had stayed when she came on her fruitless mission to Bomberg, he dropped a shell. The havoc was dreadful to look on.

The sides of the hotel split open, and the front of it was scattered in the street. There poured out of the building a torrent of wounded humanity and demolished furniture.

Here Strong stayed the course of the "Victor."

He had in his mind that he was perpetrating a horrible thing. It also seemed to him that, should he fail to appreciate to the full what he was doing, he would be shirking his responsibilities. This was why he deliberately stayed the course of the "Victor" and searched narrowly through his glasses to see the evil he had done, and every detail of it lived ever afterwards in his memory.

Nor was he certain that he could quite, even by urging his necessity and the greatness of his motive, quiet his conscience to the horror that he had brought about. For from below him came, not merely the cries of wounded men, but the screams of stricken women.

The incidents, indeed, that followed on the dropping of that one shell were many; but so vivid that in after-times he could call them all to mind.

For the moment, however, he was only conscious of the mass of mangled and bleeding humanity that was scattered in the roadway.

The hall-porter, gorgeous in gold lace and brass buttons, picked himself up from the midst of the wreckage and rushed over to a lady who had been literally blown from the entrance-hall into the street.

And Strong felt an insufferable coward when he saw the blood drip from the woman's head and heard her crying in the distance beneath him.

It sickened him to see three children crawl from the *d'bris*. He loathed the sight of a chambermaid, stunned and white and dazed, gathering herself up from the wreckage.

The cries of the people whom he had injured rang in his ears. A boy wept beside his small dead sister; the mother sat like an idiot rocking herself to and fro.

The powder to which the explosion had reduced much of the masonry rained like fine hail upon the living and the dead, making a sharp pattering noise as it descended on the dead, the dying, and the inanimate.

But Strong had steeled his heart. He had hardened it just as Pharaoh hardened his long ago. His need was pressing and his time was short; and yet, he argued jesuitically with himself, that out of the evil which he had done would spring good. He even sought to comfort himself by recalling a thousand tales of history to illustrate his point. And because he argued with himself he knew that he was wrong. And because he knew that he was wrong he was stricken with a double shame. But still he hardened his heart.

He put the "Victor" down along the street and dropped another shell and another. As they fell into the roadway the houses on either side were rent asunder. It seemed a pitiful thing that the patient work of years, the conceptions of great minds, the labour of many workmen should be brought to an end so remorselessly and so swiftly.

But Strong realised that this was no time for sentiment if he meant to gain his great end. So again he tried to comfort himself with the reflection that the bitter end was great.

Slowly the "Victor" drifted down the long main street, and it was Strong who, with his own hands, dropped shell after shell until the magnificent thoroughfare, which had been the pride of Bomberg, was laid in ruins.

Not that the ruins mattered in the least to Strong. He argued in his own mind that things which had been built by man, and which man had destroyed, could by man be rebuilt again.

It was the burning thought of the human lives he had taken that possessed his soul.

Again his sophistry came to his aid. He argued that by taking these lives he was laying in blood the foundation-stone of everlasting peace. Thus again did he harden his heart.

The men in the airship were huddled together. Langley sat by the steering gear, more dead than alive. His face was grey, and the sweat poured from his forehead down his cheeks. His mouth was quivering, although it was tightly closed. The other men sat bunched together, sullen and silent. They did not look at Strong nor did Strong glance at them. For Strong realised that they regarded what he had done as murder. They did not look on it as war.

And now he was in some perplexity. From the castle to the station he had laid the main thoroughfare in ruins. The streets were full of the dying and the dead—full of the wounded who screamed and the unharmed who wailed.

The sight of these struck terror to his heart. Would it ever be possible, he wondered to himself, to placate the people whom he had treated thus? Would it be possible to persuade them that he had done them this frightful injustice, this horrible evil, for their ultimate good.

He saw that there was no course but to go forward, and, if the people revolted against him, to subdue them by force. They must be on his side or he must wipe them out. His heart was as stone by now, and his jaws

were clenched together like a steel trap. He shut out from his calculation the ruin and bloodshed which he had wrought, for he found himself in the position of a Napoleon with a tender heart.

So he decided to forget and to kill his tender heart save one little corner—the corner which held Diana—the little corner which should prove his salvation and hers, and the salvation of the ruin beneath him.

Now he swept the whole city very carefully with his glasses. Upon the terrace before the palace he could see that the troops were restless—a sure indication that they were murmuring.

The king had gone from the balcony, and, thank heaven! Diana was no longer there. The troops who had lined the streets beneath them were now centring amid the wreckage of the main thoroughfare and heroically getting to work among the wounded and the general destruction.

From the hills on the west of the town he could see that the army corps encamped there were beginning to move. He judged that they were marching on the town. And when he realised their defencelessness he felt a coward.

He felt ashamed. It was like fighting children. He looked down from the "Victor" at the men who were with him. They were gentlemen, all of them, and he could see that they were sick and ashamed of the business on which they had embarked.

Strong, too, was sick and sorry and ashamed, but there was no course of action to follow but to continue what he had begun.

It is only fair to say of Strong that he would even then have surrendered the whole bad business, and would have delivered himself into the hands of the authorities of some neutral Power for them to take justice upon him. At such a moment his own life seemed cheap. This, however, was not the only consideration. He had upon his soul not only the lives that he had taken, but the lives he still held in the hollow of his hand.

He realised that to surrender in a moment of remorse would be to surrender the lives of Langley, Arbuthnot, Wildney, and the other men who had served him so well and so truly. And, in a moment of ungovernable rage, he judged their lives dearer than the lives of all the men and women he had destroyed, and all the men and women he might be called upon to destroy.

He would at least save the friends whose lives his ungovernable ambition had forfeited.

But as he looked at their white and sullen faces he realised that he might be saving them in spite of themselves. His resolve, therefore, was adamant. He would go on. He would take Bomberg. He would take Sylvania. He would steal the earth. He would save his friends.

Strong, however, moved towards his determination with a desire to deal as gently as he could with the people who lay at his mercy. The "Victor" drifted down over the Ministry, and when summoned, M. Stalvan, the premier, came trembling to the wireless instrument.

The carnage was more than he could bear.

Strong put a certain question to him. He asked the shaking premier if he were satisfied that he held the whip-hand. Strong was brutal in his language. Even at that moment a certain savage humour took hold of him.

"After all," he said to himself, "I am only cruel to be kind."

M. Stalvan replied that the affair was no concern of his—that so long as the king held out he could say nothing.

"But you are a Constitutional Government," urged Strong.

"Perhaps," was the answer, and Strong could almost feel that the premier was shrugging his shoulders and making a polite little gesture.

Instinctively Strong grimaced at the air.

This was no time for gentleness nor for indecision;

it was the time for that brutality which was meant to be kind.

So his reply to the premier was clear-cut and decisive. "If you do not take the matter out of the hands of the king before nightfall," he said, "your city and your state are lost. If I cannot deal with him I shall deal with you. You will know yourself before evening how matters go. If it devolves on you to surrender Bomberg, you can do so by hoisting a blue flag by daylight or by showing a blue light by night above the Ministry. Since you cut me off in this manner, I have nothing more to say. I shall make one more effort to communicate with the palace, but if I fail in that I shall simply proceed to lay waste the town."

No answer came from the instrument in the Ministry.

Strong was persistent. He demanded to know, should the Premier be in a position to deal with the affair himself, whether the little code which he had devised would be acceptable or not.

There was a pause, but finally the answer came that such would be the case.

Strong swung the "Victor" round, and made up the length of the main street in which the troops and the doctors were now at work.

The artillery in the palace square stood silent by their guns. The situation was a mockery. They could not injure Strong, yet Strong could injure them. Over the whole city, indeed, after the screaming outburst which had come so short a time before, there was now a great hush.

The light was already beginning to wane, but no artificial lights showed themselves. True, from the "Victor" there could be seen men and women moving hurriedly through the highways and byways of the city, but they walked in the swift silence of people sore afraid.

At least, Strong had robbed Bomberg of all pleasure. Indeed, there reigned in the place of Bomberg's ordinary busy, cheerful life a great and dreadful fear.

Though there were troops stationed on the terrace

of the palace, and on the hills to the north of it, and in the gardens on either side of it, there was, none the less, a great silence, and the palace itself was as a house of the dead.

Only here and there on the great length of its dull, grey face there showed a light. It was as though its glory had already departed. And the effect of despair and desolation it gave was increased by the dismal masses of the western and eastern wings which had already been destroyed.

In the chill of the late afternoon upper air Strong once again endeavoured to enter into communication with the silent palace by means of his wireless instrument.

Though he ticked again and again, allowing a generous time for delay on the part of those he sought to summon, there came no answer. The palace was more than ever the palace of the dead.

Now Strong, with the intuition that was his, realised that the desolation and the silence with which he was now confronted was to a great extent artificial. He had a knack of placing himself in other men's shoes, and therefore he understood very quickly and clearly that it was all to the advantage of the king to take no heed of his callings; that it might at any rate be gaining a short respite to leave the enemy in doubt as to what was happening in the threatened palace.

And when Strong saw this, hot anger rose in his heart, but he could find no outlet for his rage; his hand was stayed because the deserted and half-ruined palace sheltered the one being in the whole world for whom he had any thought or love. His anger grew as he realised that the king was trading upon that fact.

"The hound," said Strong from between his teeth, "feels himself safe because he knows that I dare not strike lest I should hurt Diana."

For a while he hung over the palace, turning things over in his mind. It seemed an appalling thing to still further desolate and destroy the already stricken city,

yet setting aside all feeling of humanity, and looking only to the larger aim, it was the only thing to do. Then darkness came down.

The only lights in the main streets were those of gas flares, and by the light of these the living were still searching for the dead. Nor in the other parts of the city was there much light, and the signs of life were few.

The city, indeed, lay like a dumb animal waiting for the hand that should deal death.

And once more Strong decided that he must of necessity deal death.

But where should he strike? It would be inhuman to further mangle the already shattered portion of the town. It struck him as even more inhuman to mangle the streets hitherto untouched.

Then it came home to Strong that possibly what might create the most terrifying impression in the official mind would be to destroy the official buildings.

The "Victor" swung round again, and set over the great square, round which were ranged the different Ministries.

Strong made a detour of them, and as the "Victor" passed slowly over the roofs of Ministry after Ministry so he dropped shell after shell.

As he dropped the shells there arose beneath him a perfect hell on earth. In the daytime the fires which had been started by the shell-fire had been a comparatively easy matter to overcome, but now in the darkness it was difficult to cope with them. From the three sides of the square round which the Ministries were ranged there began to rise sheets of flame.

It was very difficult to say precisely what was happening, for the clouds of smoke were dense and the flames so bright that they largely blotted out Strong's view.

At last there came the sound of bugles and the noise of tramping feet, and there came up also through the still air the sound of fire-engines racing over the cobbles of the by-streets.

So blinding, indeed, were the flames and so dense was the smoke that Strong was compelled to put the "Victor" up another five hundred feet, and then, just as distance lends enchantment to the view, so distance now lent a sense of irresponsibility. The burning heart of the city appealed to Strong only as the bonfire appeals to a boy on Guy Fawkes night.

None the less, through his night-glasses he took a very careful survey of the town. The gilded dome of the House of the Representatives of the People stood out clearly in the light.

It was not for Strong to know, but all the afternoon the representatives of the people had sat there holding the most important conclave of their lives. And in the debate there had sprung up a great clamour for surrender. The new terror was more than they could bear.

Though they had nominally enjoyed perfect liberty and constitutional rights, the king none the less had been the dominating figure at all their debates, and it was he who, in reality, shaped all their ends.

But now things were otherwise. Two miles of wrecked and desolate streets divided them from the seat of authority. And the king, like Achilles, sulked in his tent. His Majesty was silent in the palace.

From time to time, through M. Stalvan, they applied for aid and advice, but there came no answer except a rude uncompromising message that the city was at the moment under martial law.

Certainly the town swarmed with troops, for the army, which had been massed to the westward to face the King of Sylvania's hosts, had been ordered back to Bomberg.

But, after all, the message that the city was under martial law was merely a matter of words, and tactics spoke a great deal louder. All through the afternoon the Ministry had conferred as to what had best be done; and the Ministers, as must be the case with all assemblies of men who consider the needs of their nation without taking any personal outlook on a matter, were finding

it hard to take the view that it would be best to surrender to the foreigner.

The representatives of the other Powers remained within doors exchanging hurried messages. Of them, indeed, Strong had not thought for one moment. It was through no design of his that one of the shells that he had dropped overboard had plunged through the roof of the house that sheltered the Minister of Germany and had laid what should have been a neutral residence in ruins.

But upon this accident there hung greater issues than he had contemplated. It was indeed the beginning of the end. Just as birds of a feather flock together, so did the representatives of the Great Powers gather together now, for they regarded an insult or an injury to one of them more or less as an insult or an injury to them all.

Thereby had M. Stalvan's difficulties been immensely increased. The Ministers had been to him and impressed upon him the necessity of not surrendering, arguing that the cause of Balkania was now the cause of all the civilised world. But M. Stalvan was a man in whom humanity was uppermost. He thought only of the people whom he nominally represented.

It took him many hours to decide what course of action he should pursue, but when he at last made up his mind he was resolved to see that his point of view was respected.

And he decided to surrender.

Some hotheads there were in the House of Representatives of the People who murmured against his decision; but the Ministry was at his back, and he stood firm.

In spite of the glare of the burning houses, in spite of the dense cloud of smoke that now hung above the city, Strong, towards eleven o'clock, detected a blue light flare up from M. Stalvan's official residence.

Bomberg had surrendered.

CHAPTER XXV

CIVIL WAR IN BOMBERG

“THANK God! thank God!” Strong cried, for he was sick of the carnage.

The blue flame was perfectly visible at the palace, and, from the communications which M. Stalvan had made to the king during the debate, his Majesty was perfectly acquainted with what the blue flare meant. And, observing it from the palace, he cursed Strong roundly.

Thereupon began civil war.

For his part, though he was profoundly thankful that M. Stalvan had come to see the way of peace, Strong none the less wondered how he was to enter into peaceable possession of the city. The glare thrown from the burning houses was still so bright that it was quite possible to understand the spirit in which the city and the troops welcomed the blue light of surrender. It was obvious, too, that the populace and the soldiery were perfectly well aware of what the blue light signified. And from his position in the sky Strong could read in what was passing beneath him an excellent lesson in the power of personality.

For while the troops about the Ministry cheered, making no secret of their joy as they took their helmets from their heads and hoisted them upon their rifles, the troops stationed halfway up the main street were sullen in their demeanour.

Strong put the “Victor” over the palace, and here there were no signs of surrender. Scarcely five minutes, indeed, after the showing of the blue light over the roof

of the Ministry the troops about the palace began to move.

The men stationed on the palace roof were withdrawn. The artillerymen in the courtyard began to limber up. The regiments of infantry, which had been massed in the gardens on either side of the palace, were falling in. The troopers of the two regiments of cavalry which had been hidden in the old portion of the city behind the palace were ordered to their horses. For a few minutes Strong wondered what this might mean; then the motive of the movement became perfectly clear. M. Stalvan was not to defy the king or pursue his own way unchallenged.

So here was a pretty problem set out. For, while Strong practically remained master of the town, yet he was unable to enter into possession of it. M. Stalvan, as representative of the people, desired to lay down his arms. The king, while any troops remained loyal to him, refused to surrender.

With the idea of avoiding further bloodshed, especially the bloodshed caused by a civil war, Strong made several efforts to get into communication with the palace. In this he was unsuccessful for some time.

After a while, however, there came a faint flicker in answer. He asked who was there.

The reply was "Diana."

"Whereabouts are you?"

"In my own room a prisoner."

"What is your father about to do now?"

"I cannot tell, but I believe he is going to move against the Ministry with a view to compelling M. Stalvan to withdraw his surrender."

"He can only do that," Strong answered, "by taking his troops along the Grand Avenue, in which case they will be exposed to my fire. If your father attempts that I shall destroy him."

"No," came the answer, "you will not. You dare not do that. My heart is breaking now. That would break it altogether."

"Very well," Strong made answer, "but you must understand that it is none of my wish to spare him, though I will spare him for your sake. I would come to you now, but that is impossible. It would mean certain death to approach the palace—death not only for me, but for you. You see, I cannot shell the palace without imperilling you, and if I approach it without shelling I shall be riddled with bullets. Most of the troops have been withdrawn from the roof, but there are enough men there to account for a score of 'Di's' provided they were unprotected. However," he went on, ticking away busily, "even if I have to spare your father, I shall not spare his men."

"If you take more lives than is necessary," came the answer, "you will anger and alienate the people."

"I have no other way," answered Strong.

"There is another way," said Diana, "and we had best adopt it. Let them fight it out. If my father wins you can at least restore the fortunes of M. Stalvan and those who desire peace. If he fails, then peace is doubly secure. Leave them to fight it out."

"A good idea," Strong answered, "and God bless you for it. If the worst comes to the worst, I shall fetch you away from Bomberg."

"You will never do that," said Diana, "until you are king."

Strong laughed to himself as he got this message. He sought to get into communication with Diana again, but he received no answer but "Good-bye."

He tried once more to persuade Diana into conversation, but there was no answer, and so, somewhat anxious for her safety, somewhat anxious lest she should have been prevented from holding further conversation with him, Strong ticked: "Good-bye, heaven bless you," and swung the "Victor" about again.

So great had been the glare beneath them up to this point that it had been quite unnecessary for the "Victor" to use her searchlights. Now, however, there came occasion for their use. For from the back of the palace,

on a spur of the Morning Hills, came the spit of flame, and shells went screeching a couple of feet beneath the "Victor's" hull.

"Anyway," said Strong to himself with an appreciative nod, "his Majesty is game. It is not every man who would fight a losing fight so boldly."

He put the "Victor" up beyond the range of guns and then searched the hills for the battery which had attacked him. It was masked, but he soon located it. He was now half a mind to make for the hills and destroy the battery.

He suggested this plan to Arbuthnot, but Arbuthnot said no, arguing that it would be folly to destroy brave men, who, before the day was out, would be enrolled in Strong's service. So the battery on the hill was left in peace.

By now there was a great movement below them, and, to his astonishment, Strong saw the king, dressed in the uniform of a general, come out of the main entrance of the palace. His Majesty did not deign so much as to glance upwards. The eyes of his troops and his people were upon him, and he guided his men entirely without fear. He acted, indeed, as though the sky did not hold the "Victor," as though his now implacable enemy did not exist.

Slowly the king walked down the steps, taking the salutes of his officers placidly, as though it were a parade. His charger was led up to him, and he mounted. It was the king himself who gave the orders in a sharp, decisive voice, and there began, as Strong readily perceived, a masterly movement of troops. The two regiments of cavalry were placed in the van of the column, which began to move down the hill towards the Ministry. Then came the battery of artillery and three regiments of foot behind. From the airship the aides-de-camp could be seen galloping about, and within a short space of time the troops stationed in the main thoroughfare were withdrawn and posted at convenient distances in side streets.

From the eastern side of the city two regiments of cavalry and three regiments of foot, together with three batteries of artillery, detached themselves from the army corps encamped there, and began to move in a wide detour to the back of the Ministry. It was apparent that the king, counting upon opposition, was not prepared to take any unnecessary risks, and that he was practically hemming the Ministry in.

And now about the Ministry itself there arose a great bustle and clamour, too. The white-haired, white-bearded M. Stalvan came out into the forecourt of the great building, and, frock-coated and top-hatted, mounted an officer's charger. A very tall old officer, with a white moustache drooping almost to his breast, followed him solemnly and gravely.

Strong put the "Victor" down a little closer that he might observe the tactics of the old gentleman beneath him.

In the space between the different Ministries there was posted a regiment of dragoons, and it was these that M. Stalvan, his white beard streaming over his shoulders in the night breeze, first approached. At the outset he gathered the colonel and officers of the regiment about him and spoke hot words to them. At the end of his harangue they saluted. Then they fell apart, and the white-haired old Minister faced the troops alone. He raised himself in his stirrups, and, letting the bridle fall upon his horse's neck, plunged into a passionate speech.

What he said Strong could not catch, but it was obvious that he was working upon the troopers' feelings, for from time to time during the old man's address they forgot their discipline and cheered. Strong could see him waving his hands as he made a final appeal.

Then the officers of the dragoons closed about the premier again, and there happened a strange thing. The colonel shouted certain commands, and M. Stalvan, placing himself at the troopers' head, led them at a slow trot across the vast square.

At different points about this space were stationed four regiments of infantry, and to all of these M. Stalvan spoke with what must have been a great flood of warming words, for regiment after regiment cheered him.

Meantime the long cavalcade was coming slowly down the hill from the palace. Then it was that M. Stalvan and the colonel of the dragoons held counsel together. They held counsel together, and one of the regiments of infantry was drawn up four deep across the entrance to the square.

The clash soon came.

Seeing their fellow-countrymen drawn up against them, the officer leading the king's detachment halted his men.

A staff officer riding forward ordered the other troops to give way, but he met with a defiant answer.

Then word was taken to the king, and his Majesty set out himself to the scene of mutiny—for mutiny it was. He rode forward alone, right up to the men ranged against him. He spoke to them at first curtly and coldly, only to meet with sullen silence. Then he spoke to them in anger, until murmurs rose from them. He cursed them, and they cursed back. He swept aside and rode back up the hill. The operations which followed were swift and disastrous. The cavalry wheeled outwards and cleared the main thoroughfare by taking to the side streets. That left the opposing infantry facing the king's guns. Even in the great width of the Grand Avenue it was a little difficult to wheel them about. But they came along with a crash, and the men began to unlimber.

From the line of troops by the Ministry the tall old officer rode forward and harangued the gunners. But they worked sullenly on. He implored them not to shoot down their countrymen, but at their backs was the king, giving his orders in his cold, masterful voice; and the men still feared the king at their backs.

At last the tall old officer threw up his arms in

despair, wheeled his horse, and cantered back to the line of troops behind him. They opened up to let him through. He gave his orders clearly and quickly, and there was a long shivering rattle of steel as the men fixed bayonets. The order was given to fire, and a sheet of flame flashed across the roadway. The gunners wilted under the fire, but the king, who was without fear, rode in among them, and such as were not wounded stood fast by the guns. The guns spoke, and the troops which fired upon the gunners were mowed down by the hail of shrapnel. After the second round there remained nothing but a mass of mangled men strewing the roadway.

A bugle rang out, and the cavalry came galloping up from the narrow side streets, swept into the main thoroughfare before the guns, and charged. Their horses plunged over the dead and dying infantrymen, and then swept up into the square.

Seeing how the battle went, M. Stalvan had mustered the other infantry regiments on the steps of the Ministry and stationed them in the Ministry itself. From the roof, and from the windows, and from the long terrace which ran the whole length of the great building, there came a thousand spurts of flame.

CHAPTER XXVI

STRONG MAKES A SPEECH

THE cavalry rode up to the steps of the Ministry, only to be received by a hail of shot. They quivered, wavered, and then wheeled and made back across the square.

But now the artillerymen were at work again pounding shell after shell at close range into the Ministry itself. All the front of the great building was soon a ruin and in flames.

Then the guns were silent, and a mass of infantry moved forward. There was desultory firing on both sides, cruel work with bayonets on the steps of the Ministry, and then comparative silence. The Ministry had fallen.

To Strong, hanging over the fallen Ministry in the "Victor," the position was grim, but not without its humours. It was not a pleasant thing to be compelled to realise, but it had to be realised all the same, that the people of Balkania were fighting out their destiny not only for themselves, but for him. They were against him and for him and against each other, and for a while those who were against him had triumphed. But for how long?

The audacity of the king amazed Strong. He could call to mind no instance in which a man had more recklessly faced death.

True, of course, the king was trading upon Strong's human nature. His Majesty had previously come to the conclusion that whatever atrocity Strong might commit, he would at least be innocent of attempting the life of a possible father-in-law, and the boldness of

this move delighted Strong. He laughed a little to himself to think of it, and cudgelled his brains for the proper word for father-in-law-side.

It was impossible that the king would remain in the Ministry for long. He would be compelled to come back to the palace, returning by a road which exposed him to instant death. And when he had left the Ministry, what then?

Would M. Stalvan once more open up negotiations, or would the king have filled him with a greater fear than Strong had struck into him? It was a question which the next half hour would decide.

But the more Strong turned the matter over in his mind the better he realised that his was a winning hand although he had met with a check.

The king might go back to the palace if he chose and leave his troops to hold the Ministry, but "out of sight out of mind," was a saying which Strong felt pretty sure would hold good in the present instance. It was doubtful if the Balkanian troops were likely to quietly suffer themselves to be exterminated at the bidding of an absent monarch.

The fires were now to some extent got under, but they still cast a lurid glare, and the smoke hung like a pall over the city, to a great extent blotting out the movements of the troops below. It was possible at last to approach a little nearer to the earth in absolute security.

This Strong now did, and, having waited for a little longer at the elevation of about a thousand feet, he presently heard a movement in the space beneath him. And then the king came stalking down the shot-riddled steps of the Ministry as cool and collected, as solitary and as morose as ever.

With the aid of his glasses Strong could see the old premier, white-haired and shaking, follow the king to his horse, and even at that great height it was possible to understand that his Majesty was raining bitter words upon the premier's aged head.

His Majesty mounted his charger and moved across the square, his staff and the cavalry falling in behind him; so they clattered across the open space and up the long main street.

The troops were then withdrawn from the Ministry and piled arms in the square. The wounded had been removed, and but for the bustle about the burning buildings the city was more or less still.

The cordon of troops had been extended so that the centre of the town was practically isolated, and if in the minor streets of it and on the edge of it people ran frenziedly up and down, jabbering and waving their hands and screeching, that did not in any way affect the general situation.

Strong nursed the patience he had for half an hour; then he once more picked up the wireless instrument and endeavoured to enter into communication with the Ministry, which had first of all surrendered to him and afterwards defied him at the bidding of the king. He ticked for some time without response, but at last an answer came.

Strong demanded shortly what M. Stalvan proposed to do.

The answer that M. Stalvan gave staggered him.

"I have," was the answer, "instructions from his Majesty to surrender the Ministry to you in half an hour's time. His Majesty laid no restrictions upon my course of action after sixty minutes should have elapsed from the time of his departure. Thirty minutes have now gone by."

Strong was taken aback by this reply, and to gain time he ticked as follows:

"You have already surrendered the city and the country once."

And while he still puzzled, the answer came back. "I regret that the first submission should not have been final. It was none of my seeking that it was of a temporary nature."

Strong allowed so many minutes to elapse without

making any answer to this, that he himself received a query as to whether he were still attending to the instrument.

He had still been able to form no understanding of what this latest move portended, but, realising that action was an imperative necessity, he demanded to know in what manner the city and the state were to be surrendered to him.

Again the reply amazed him.

"Our submission," M. Stalvan answered, "is complete. The Ministers and the deputies of the House of Representatives of the People—such, indeed, as remain of them—are gathered here with me. We shall be prepared in half an hour's time to receive you in the Chamber of Deputies, where we shall, of course, be compelled to accept whatever terms you make."

Now this, again, was perplexing.

Strong wondered to what lengths M. Stalvan's patriotism might carry him. Was it a lure, this move, designed to entrap him?

True, he could descend in the "Di," leaving the "Victor" to cover his movements, but at the same time M. Stalvan and the rest of the deputies might be quite prepared to face death in their determination to capture him.

In his perplexity, therefore, Strong ticked off a statement as follows:

"It would ill become me to stipulate for my personal safety, because, were I to do so, it would be casting reflections upon your honour. At the same time, I would make it perfectly clear to you that in visiting the Chamber of Deputies and receiving from you the reins of government, I am relying absolutely upon your personal honour and the honour of your Ministers and the other representatives of the people to respect to the utmost my personal safety. Again, while it would ill become me to make threats of any description, I would none the less point out that should any evil befall me, my friends will have strict orders to destroy every

man, woman, and child in Bomberg. If I myself fail in my attempt to steal the earth, there are those remaining who will see to it that my work is not left uncompleted."

The answer which came was, "We have an entire understanding of the situation."

Strong, therefore, busied himself with perfecting his immediate plans; but first he gave a glance over his person. Drawing his face across his hands, he discovered that he was blackened with smoke. His clothes were disordered, and his general appearance, indeed, did not suggest that of a conqueror about to enter into his own. It struck him as being rather delightful that he should come down and take possession of a kingdom in a weather-beaten cap and soiled clothes and with hands that were unquestionably grimy.

He decided to take Arbuthnot with him, deeming it better to entrust the "Victor" to Langley.

Presently it became plain that the news of M. Stalvan's decision was being communicated to the troops, for those regiments which remained in the open space below were formed in a hollow square, and the old, grey-haired officer who had defended the Ministry against the king rode into the centre and addressed the men.

At the conclusion of his address there drifted up to the "Victor" the sound of cheers; then the men were marched back to their stations.

After that there came streaming out from the Ministry several score of apparently prosperous gentlemen, top-hatted and frock-coated. They were discussing matters with animation among themselves, and, as they walked briskly across from the Ministry to the Chamber, they repeatedly glanced upward through the smoke which still hung heavily over the town to take stock of the "Victor."

Last of all came M. Stalvan, active, but evidently broken by the night's events. He leaned heavily upon the arm of an officer in uniform.

Strong allowed another ten minutes to elapse before he ordered Arbuthnot to bring the "Di" alongside the "Victor." Then he turned and spoke to the other men.

He informed them briefly of what he was about to do, and expressed confident belief that all would go well. "At the same time," he concluded, "it is just possible that M. Stalvan may play me false. In that case, I should like to know what you propose to do."

He looked swiftly at every man, but at the last he kept his gaze fixed on Langley.

There was no fear in Langley's face, but his hand was shaking as he stretched it out to Strong.

"If any other man," said Langley, "had been guilty of the acts which you have committed this night, I don't suppose that any one of us here would have forgiven him—but we forgive you. Moreover—and I think I speak for all of us—we are as much devoted to your cause as ever. Should any harm befall you, should you fail to reappear within half an hour, you may leave the rest to us. I promise you that there shall not remain one stick or stone upon another in Bomberg before night comes down again."

"And the princess?" said Strong.

"For the princess," said Langley, "you need have no fear. We will see, at least, that the palace remains untouched, and if there is any attempt made to wreak vengeance on the King of Balkania and his family, we will defend him from all attacks even at our own peril."

"Thank you," said Strong, quite simply, and having shaken hands with Langley, he nodded to the rest of the men, and stepped into the "Di."

He and Arbuthnot went down.

It was evident that a great change had been wrought in the spirit of the troops below them.

Strong's actions through the night had been ruthless in the extreme, but the very thoroughness of their brutality had brought him the admiration of the men who had vainly struggled against him. It was evident

that the star of the king was setting, and that they welcomed Strong as a man who, if he had treated them cruelly and without pity, would be at least a great asset to the state. They could not fight against him, and therefore they thought it better to have him on their side.

As the "Di" floated down to the steps of the Chamber, there arose cheering from every side.

To Arbuthnot Strong gave certain sharp orders, and then, stepping out of the "Di," he walked up the broad stone steps. Two officers met him and saluted. Then they led the way within, and Strong was conducted through the vast hall, lighted by hundreds of little electric lights, which gleamed against the gilding of the dome.

The two officers led him through a further passage until they came to the doors of the Chamber itself, and there they bowed and stood on one side to allow him to pass. And so Strong, with a little jerk of his head which was his habit when he found himself forced to face danger, passed into the Chamber alone.

The Chamber was a vast circular place round which were set several score of desks. At these, on leather-covered seats, sat the deputies. On the farther side from which Strong entered was a raised dais, on which stood M. Stalvan and a gentleman who was presumably the President of the Chamber.

Behind the dais was the throne. A dozen wide, crimson-carpeted steps led up to it, and on it was set, beneath a canopy, a great gold-legged and gold-backed chair.

There was a great hush over the place as Strong entered, and all the deputies rose up in silence to receive him.

Strong cast a quick glance about him, stepped forward, and walked on till he came to the centre of the Chamber. There he stood for a moment and bowed to M. Stalvan.

M. Stalvan moved down from the dais and walked to

meet him. He carried his hat in his hand and bowed repeatedly as he approached Strong.

Then, in a very pleasant, level voice, speaking in French, he requested Strong to follow him.

He led the way to the throne, and for a moment Strong had half a mind to hang back. To ascend that throne seemed to be the climax of audacity, although it was the thing for which he had been so strenuously fighting during the past few days.

Strong was conscious that several hundred pairs of curious, envious, angry, scornful and suspicious eyes were bent upon him. The representatives of the people of Balkania were closely watching him to see what his appearance and his manner might be.

And for a moment it was necessary for Strong to thrust away from him the recollection of his unwashed face and hands and his weather-beaten clothes. Then his pride and his arrogance and his easy scorn of all men except himself came back to him, and he marched forward with the quick, firm stride of a man who knows that he has won.

He mounted the steps of the throne without further hesitation, and, turning about, bowed to the right, straight before him and to the left of him, and then took his seat on the gold-legged, gold-backed chair.

And, in spite of his battered appearance, the size of him, the strength of him, and the majesty of him overawed the men before him.

Strong was thinking of nothing now save his purpose, and that thought wiped out from his big-boned face any expression save one of cold cruelty.

There was a great silence, and all the deputies remained standing. M. Stalvan, with his white beard, fluttered at the foot of the steps of the throne.

Then the old man turned about, and the pleasantness of his voice was lost in his effort to make himself clearly heard in every corner of the vast building.

"Gentleman," he cried, "it is my duty to introduce to you M. Strong, the man who has battered and blud-

geoned us into accepting him as our ruler. His Majesty the King of Balkania has not abdicated, and declines to abdicate.

"On the other hand, he is conscious that it would be laying a burden upon this country greater than it could bear if he were to deny us the right of making peace with M. Strong. M. Strong, I am sure, will not take it amiss when I say that naturally we cannot regard him with very friendly feelings. We are his beaten enemy. That we should have been his enemy was none of our seeking. We were not consulted in the matter; and when we attempted to urge our claims, our claims were steadily ignored.

"Our unhappy country," the old man went on, "has been made the cockpit of the world, and I confess that I, for my part, can see no end to our trouble as yet. It seems to me, however, that it would be useless to any longer deny the right, born of might, which M. Strong has gained to dictate our destinies. M. Strong has proved that single-handed he can defeat the state, and though we may not welcome him as a ruler, at least for our own sakes, for the sake of our peace, for the sake of our homes, for the sake of our men, for the sake of our women, and for the sake of our children, it appears best that we should put from us our pride and accept him as the man who shall put us right with the Powers of the earth.

"I therefore ask you, gentlemen, in the name of my country, disregarding all action which his Majesty may take, to consider M. Strong as Dictator of Balkania."

This speech was heard to the end in complete silence. And not one word or action of applause broke the silence now.

Strong felt the chill of the silence and shook himself. Then he rose up to speak, and he also chose, as M. Stalvan had done, to speak in French.

"M. Stalvan and gentlemen," he said, "probably no man in the history of the world ever found himself in a more extraordinary position than this. I confess

that for many months now it has been my fixed intention to stand here. The reasons which compelled this decision are, I believe, now public property, and it is needless for me to dwell on them. I regret for your sakes that it should have been necessary for me to possess myself of the kingdom, but, having the means whereby to achieve that end, I saw no reason why I should hold my hand. I have not held my hand. I have not spared you, and if there should arise in the future anyone who disputes my authority, I will not spare you again. You have suffered much, and I cannot expect you, as M. Stalvan has pointed out, to regard me with very friendly feelings, I have laid waste your city, and I have killed your fellow-countrymen. It may sound a poor thing to say that I will make amends. None the less, I pledge my word that I will not only make amends, but great amends. Just as I have made myself Dictator of Balkania, so I will make Balkania Dictator of the world. For months I have been laughed at for my boast that I would steal the earth, but now the peoples of the earth no longer laugh.

"I will," Strong continued in louder tones, "steal the earth, but I will only steal it to give it into your hands—but not into your hands alone. For—and this must be my greatest plea for your consideration—I purpose to make an alliance with the Princess Diana, which I sincerely trust may to some extent soften your hearts towards me, and enable me in the end to atone for what I admit is the great wrong I have done you. Yet, when the history of Balkania comes to be written I trust that it will be conceded that the wrong was not so great as it now appears. I have no desire to shed blood; I have no desire to destroy life; I have no desire to lay waste even the smallest and the humblest of dwellings. We are told that out of evil shall come good. Out of this great evil I will see to it that there shall come great good. When I have made you masters of the world it shall be my first business to see that the world lays down its arms, and that from the

scenes of carnage which have seared your hearts and minds this night, there shall arise a spirit of peace which shall enfold the earth."

As Strong finished his speech he bowed once more to the left of him and to the right of him, and then resumed his seat.

But even now the silence of the deputies was unbroken. Still, there arose not one murmur of either approval or dissent. The deputies were as men who had been numbed.

So Strong sat facing the deputies for some five seconds, and then the end of the silence came.

One of the deputies on the left dashed forward from his seat, shrieking, "You are a despoiler of my country!" Before any hand could be raised to stay him, he drew a revolver from his pocket and fired almost point-blank at Strong. The bullet sang past Strong's ear and buried itself in the draperies of the canopy.

Strong never flinched. Half a dozen hands seized the deputy and bore him back, and it is doubtful if some ill would not have befallen the shrieking man if Strong had not cried, "Let him be—it is nothing."

M. Stalvan stood at the foot of the throne waving his hat to and fro and uttering a flood of exclamation. But it was not on him that Strong's gaze was fixed.

At the great door on the further side he saw Arbuthnot—Arbuthnot, with news written large upon his face. He halted and looked about him for a second, as if hesitating to disturb Strong's parley with the deputies. But his hesitation was only momentary. He came on again, crossed the Chamber at a dog-trot, and, disregarding the angry glances and the murmurs that greeted him, ran up the steps of the throne and whispered into Strong's ear.

CHAPTER XXVII

A KING IN FLIGHT

STRONG's message to Diana in the midst of battle had come to her as a little ray of hope, and she was very hopeless. The duty which she had set herself to do—the duty of persuading her father that discretion was the better part of valour, not merely for himself, but for his country—was irksome—irksome because her plea for peace was not regarded, as a duty-prompted suggestion, but as a piece of mere impertinence.

The stress of the past few days had worn her father's courage down, until at last his weakness stood exposed; and in his weakness he avenged his humiliation and defeat upon those who were weaker than himself. Nor was his daughter the least of these.

The king treated Diana only as a brute could have treated her. He caged her in her rooms and set soldiers, not only in the corridor, but in her apartments. Above all, and this was the crowning insult to Diana, he set the oily and offensive Kowchoffski in command of her guards.

So Diana chafed as a prisoner, a prisoner of her father, who, she was slowly coming to realise, had no claim on her affections or her duty.

True, the king left her the little wireless instrument, but that was not for her sake, but for his. He knew that should anything arise which would make negotiations of the slightest avail, he would be dependent on Diana for the conduct of them. But Strong was not to know this, and, with the exception of the one brief message, she received no news.

Apart from his ignorance of this matter, however, Strong's hands were too full to deal much in useless messages.

From her rooms at the back of the palace Diana could hear the noise of the conflict in the city, and as night came she could clearly see the glare which had followed on the almost constant explosions. It was indeed a most horrible and hopeless situation to be in. The only means of assistance, the only consolation that she could find lay in prayer. From time to time she prayed a little.

Meantime the king had hedged himself about with an icy rage. It was easy for him to see, as he paced about the palace, that even his court was no longer on his side. Only the savageness of his manner, indeed, prevented active demonstrations of the ill favour in which he was now held. As the night wore on he could see defeat encompassing him on every side, and he knew well enough that he was a beaten man before he made the sortie; but he decided for two reasons on retaking the Ministry which had surrendered to Strong.

First he desired to gain breathing space, and, second, he was planning a certain way of escape; for he could no longer blink the fact that flight was the only way which now was open to him.

It was, indeed, with this idea at the back of his mind that he had stipulated with M. Stalvan in the battered Ministry that he should wait for another hour before finally surrendering to Strong. The mortification which his Majesty suffered in making even this stipulation was great—so great that a little portion of his brain seemed to be becoming numb with sheer hate and anger.

But he comforted himself in some degree with the trite reflection that "He who fights and runs away may live to fight another day"; and he saw that, even if he were compelled to leave the reins of government to his enemy, at least he would be free to intrigue, and that so long as he retained breath he would be able to set Europe by the ears and keep the world in a state of bewilderment, unrest and war.

When, therefore, he came back from the Ministry

he stalked straight up to Diana's room, ordering Ludwig to follow him. He entered Diana's sitting-room without so much as the formality of a knock. He would not even have ordered the guards to withdraw but for the necessity of keeping what he had to say between himself and his daughter.

He spoke to her roughly, almost coarsely, treating her as an enemy rather than a girl who had sought to do her best for him.

"I should be a fool," he said, "if I did not admit that for the time your dear friend, Mr Strong, has triumphed. Though I come near to choking on the words, I have to confess that it is necessary for me to leave Bomberg."

Diana stared at him with a white face and feverish eyes.

"But," the king went on, "it will not be by the way in which Mr Strong hopes, for the war balloon, thank Heaven! is sufficiently far advanced for us to make a flight before dawn. And the war balloon shall fly."

Diana still stared at him in silence and her silence nettled him. "You do not ask," he said. "You do not care whither we may be forced to go."

"I have nothing to say," said Diana.

"I presume, of course," the king went on, "that you, with your wonderful sense of duty, will see fit to accompany me? Even now I should be regretful to use force, but if you will not come with me voluntarily, then I shall be compelled to use other means."

Diana only sighed and shrugged her shoulders apathetically.

"Further than this," the king went on, "I do not intend to tell you anything, although I may say this—that it is possible we may come to grips with Mr Strong in mid-air. I will now beg you to accompany me."

Diana rose like one in a dream and walked a little unsteadily after her father.

Ludwig was hanging about the end of the passage, and he followed the king and his daughter down the stairway, his Majesty leading the way into one of the many side corridors. He made for an entrance in the courtyard at the rear of the palace, where was the lodge in which Strong had waited on the night when Captain Petroff had brought him to Bomberg. Here, just without the gates, was one of Bomberg's ordinary ramshackle cabs.

The king opened the door and motioned to Diana to enter. Then he stepped in himself and called to Ludwig to follow, and immediately the cab, drawn by a swift horse from the king's stables, began to rattle over the cobbles of the smaller streets of the town. They made a wide detour and, judging only by the position of the fires, which were still starting up into the night, Diana guessed they were working their way round the back of the Ministry to the outer edge of the southern part of the town.

In this she was right.

She began to wonder what their destination might be, when she realised with a slight shock that the rough cobbles had been exchanged for grass, and that they were in fact now travelling across the sward of the Bomberg balloon ground.

The cab halted, and the king assisted Diana to alight.

A soft glow as of dawn illuminated the ground, but the actual light came from the many fires still raging in the city.

As the king turned about Diana became aware of the presence of a man whom she particularly detested. This was a certain Colonel Conrad, a tall, dark man whom she always suspected of villainy, but who, to her invariable astonishment, seemed to carefully, not to say unctuously, walk in the paths of rectitude and duty.

This forbidding-looking officer saluted the king without a flicker of surprise upon his face, and Diana guessed that Colonel Conrad expected them.

When her eyes had grown accustomed to the new

half-light, she perceived that there was a thin cordon of troops stationed round the balloon ground. Moreover, the gates were strongly guarded. In the centre of the ground lay the great ellipse-shaped basket of the balloon, the completion of which the king had been hurrying forward for the last forty-eight hours, and above the basket the huge, cigar-shaped gas-bag was slowly filling.

To her surprise, Diana noticed that at either end of the elliptical basket had been fastened a small gun, and her knowledge of military affairs was sufficient to tell her that they were Maxims.

As the king drew near, the men engaged upon the task of filling the balloon ceased from their work and stiffened to a salute. His Majesty bade them fall to again upon their labours. The men worked on in silence.

The king never said a word, and Ludwig occupied himself by shuffling from one foot to the other. Diana, who was very weary, sank down on a little coil of rope to rest.

From wobbling, the great silk bag took to shivering, and then to quivering, until at last the gas had done its work so well that the vast bag was taut and swayed to and fro uneasily in the morning air.

The dawn was now coming up red and angry in the east, and the red light of the morning fought for mastery with the dying fires in the city.

But still, under the direction of the morose Colonel Conrad, the men worked on. So great was the pull on the balloon that the basket was hung thickly with sand-bags. Presently it became obvious even to Diana that the balloon was ready for flight. Then a strange and disturbing incident came to pass.

Foremost among the men who had laboured had been a great shock-headed giant who had worked with a sort of savage joy, as though every ounce of energy he extracted from himself gave him a real and keen delight. But though he had worked on to the end with energy and skill, Diana had noted that his face had

begun to assume, first an air of doubt, and then an aspect of active and resentful suspicion. Suddenly he drew on one side and called the other men to him, and they clustered about him as those used to obeying the call of a leader.

While the king and Ludwig looked on, not a little disturbed, and Colonel Conrad stood rubbing his blue, shaven chin with his fingers, the shock-headed man spoke fierce and rapid words to his fellow-workers.

Then, discipline still upon him, he stepped up to Colonel Conrad, clicked his heels together, and saluted.

"Colonel," he said, "my mates and I work for the good of the Fatherland. We have worked because his Majesty has assured us that this balloon with its guns must defeat the airship of the Englishman, who has only shells with him. We desire to see the Englishman defeated, and we wonder how the battle will be fought, and how it will go. But we wonder more than this—we wonder why"—and here the man saluted again—"why the Princess Diana is present."

"Yours," said Colonel Conrad, sharply, "is not the business of wondering but the business of doing. Get to your work."

"Yes," cried the shock-headed man, "I would go to my work gladly; but, as I have said, we work for the Fatherland, and we work no more until we have assurance that his Majesty intends to do battle and not to fly."

The king, having heard the conversation, stepped forward and spoke in tones of cold command. "You have a right to ask," he said to the shock-headed man, "but you and your fellow-workers are fools. I have pledged my word to fight, and I shall fight. I shall fight to the bitter end. If you wonder why I have brought the princess here, I see no reason why I should not tell you, though it is insolent of you to doubt me. The princess is here because, obviously, if I go in mid-air to fight the Englishman I cannot leave my daughter in

the palace. She is safer here in your keeping, in the charge of Colonel Conrad, than she would be exposed in the citadel of our country, which must presently fall under the shells of the foreigner."

The shock-headed man was a little disconcerted. He bowed in a clumsy way, twisting his cap in his hands.

"Pardon me, your Majesty," he said, "pardon me."

And the men fell to upon their work again.

Now the king turned to Diana and lied.

"I am determined," he said, "that Strong's sovereignty, both of Bomberg and the air, shall not go undisputed, and there is no man better fitted to fight him than I. I have brought you here for the purpose of safety. You will remain here in the custody of Colonel Conrad till I return. Of course," he added, with a sour and bitter smile, "I may not return, but that will affect you little."

"Oh, father!" cried Diana.

"Tut-tut," said the king. "This is no time for sentiment. The day is already coming up, and the hour which I gave Stalvan to hold off Strong is drawing to its close. This is the moment for action." His Majesty then went forward and took command of the operations himself.

The balloon was fitted with a petrol engine, which drove a propeller both at the bow and at the stern.

Ludwig, whose motoring instincts had stood him in good stead during the building of the balloon, was curtly ordered by the king to take his seat in the car and assume control of the engine and of the huge rudder which stretched out like a sail at the stern of the car.

Two men, who were specially picked expert gunners, the king also ordered into the basket. Then he stood beside the balloon and superintended the removal of the sandbags which held her down. As the bags decreased in number, so the men on the ropes which held the balloon to the ground were multiplied, and

now the balloon swayed gently on the ground, held only to the earth by the men hauling on the ropes.

It was then that the king stepped into the car himself and, leaning over the edge, beckoned to Diana to approach. She drew near, wondering what her father might have to say.

He took her by the hands and drew her face close to his, and, to her utmost surprise, kissed her on the forehead.

“Good-bye, little girl,” he said, “for a while.”

Then he released one of her hands and cast off a couple more of the bags. The balloon lifted slowly from the ground.

The men were still hauling on the ropes, and the shock-headed man stood by Colonel Conrad with a puzzled face.

The balloon rose another two inches. Then the air gripped her, and she began to lift slowly but surely.

The men on the ropes were struggling for foothold, deeming it necessary still to keep the balloon down, seeing that the king retained one of Diana's hands.

But the balloon lifted again, and then, swift and strong as a panther, the king leant over the side, and, with a snarl, drew Diana to him, caught her under the arms, and lifted her from her feet.

The shock-headed man dashed forward with a cry, and the other men, startled, relaxed their hold on the ropes, so that the balloon rose nearly a yard.

By sheer force the king lifted Diana from her feet bodily over the edge of the car and set her down.

The shock-headed man now had his hands on the rim of the basket, and was howling blasphemies over the edge of the car.

The king, however, did not hesitate for a second. He hit the fellow square between the eyes, and the man dropped like a log. There arose a great outcry from the men at the ropes.

Diana's additional weight brought the car down a few inches, and seeing that the men still held fast—all

the faster because they were black with rage—he drew that long-nosed Smith and Wesson, which had accounted for his enemy on the Thames, and deliberately fired at the foremost man who held the ropes at the stern of the balloon. So short was the range that the man fell with his face half battered in, and his companions, with sharp cries, released their hold upon the ropes.

The men at the bow fought like fiends to keep the balloon to earth, but with as little hesitation as he had fired the first shot the king fired a second, and again the foremost man fell away, yelling with pain and rage.

Although the other men were eager to keep the balloon to earth, they were not minded to be shot like dogs, and they, too, loosed their hold on the ropes, so that the balloon swayed unsteadily upwards.

Diana had sat as one in a stupor, but now she roused herself and leapt into the cordage, with the intention of jumping over the side to the earth.

Her father seized her by the arm, and with a face beautiful in its horror-stricken anger she turned about and spoke to him as she had never spoken to him before.

“You coward!” she cried. “You coward! Though you are my father, you are a coward. Let me go. I prefer to stay with the man who steals the earth.”

But now Ludwig had seized her too, and together the men dragged her back struggling into the car.

The balloon shot up, and it was as she rose, amid the chorus of curses from the men below, that Arbuthnot ran up the steps of the throne in the Chamber of Deputies and whispered into Strong’s ear.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

It took Arbuthnot but half a dozen sentences in which to tell Strong of the King of Balkania's escape. Arbuthnot himself had received the news from the "Victor" by wireless.

In his surprise he could have whistled, but he reflected that it was hardly dignified for a newly-fledged ruler to indulge in that particular form of astonishment; and he forbore in time.

The deputies stood mute, but curious. M. Stalvan glanced anxiously at the foot of the throne, wrinkling his brows in silent appeals for enlightenment.

It took even the nimble-minded Strong several moments to decide what he should say, but when he had made up his mind he made the deputies another little bow and began to speak again in rapid French.

"M. Stalvan and gentlemen," he said, "I regret to inform you that the late King of Balkania has decided to leave his kingdom. I am informed by my friend here, for whose obtrusion into the chamber I must apologise, that his Majesty is even now escaping in the dirigible balloon which, I believe, he gave every one to understand would be the means of Balkania's salvation."

There were exclamations of surprise and disgust, which Strong instantly quietened with an uplifted hand.

"Gentlemen," he continued, "it is quite unnecessary for you to indulge in any remarks upon the late king's behaviour. His actions concern you no more. But they concern me, and therefore they concern the State, and it is my immediate duty to pursue his Majesty, and, if possible, bring him back. It will be unfortunate

if this man is permitted to stalk the earth stirring up strife when our hands are already full." Strong was already beginning to use the word "we" with ease. "For a while, therefore," he went on, "I must leave you, but my absence, I trust, will be short. I am convinced that till I return the administration of the country will be most ably carried on by M. Stalvan and his *confrères*. I therefore beg your leave to withdraw."

He walked quickly down the steps of the throne and took M. Stalvan lightly by the arm. Together the old man and the young man walked across the Chamber of Deputies, followed by Arbutnot.

On the steps of the chamber Strong turned and spoke to M. Stalvan hurriedly. "First," he said, "you will put the city in order as best you may. So long as there is no revolt against my rule during my absence there will be no reprisals on my part. But if any unruly members of the Government should take it as a maxim that 'when the cat's away the mice may play,' they will find it an extremely bad proverb on which to found a course of action. Any liberties that are taken will be duly dealt with on my return. How long I shall be away it is not, unfortunately, possible for me to inform you at the present moment. It may be a few hours, or it may be a few days. In any case, I shall expect implicit obedience from you and the other members of the Government to my instructions by wireless.

"Apart from the restoring of the city to order, I desire the whole of the army to be mobilised and concentrated on Bomberg.

"Any representations made from other Powers must be referred to me, and if an answer is pressed for you must reply that you can take no steps till my return."

M. Stalvan bowed and sighed a little.

Then Strong gripped the premier's trembling hand in his own great fist and walked out into the sunshine. For it was already broad day.

Arbuthnot and he climbed into the "Di" and in a few seconds they were alongside the "Victor."

Strong got into the larger airship without a word, and, picking up his glasses, proceeded to search for the dirigible balloon. Langley pointed it out to him in silence. It had already risen to the height of about 2000 feet, and, thanks to a strong easterly wind, was about ten miles distant.

It was not possible, even with the aid of glasses, to make out what was happening on board the balloon, and Strong, having given Arbuthnot certain instructions as to keeping the "Di" over Bomberg, turned the "Victor" about and made after his disappearing enemy.

It took them but a short time to pick up the balloon, but in the interval Langley informed Strong of all that they had seen happen on the balloon ground.

Of course, it had not been possible to overhear any conversation, but when Strong heard of Diana's struggle with her father the blood surged up into his face.

"At least," he said to himself, "I will teach that scoundrel manners."

When they had come to within a mile or so of the balloon Strong realised that, although he held the upper hand so far as mechanical advantage went, that advantage availed him little. For while he could sail round the balloon he could practically do nothing to arrest her flight.

He put the "Victor" down to the airship's level, and set out for her at a good speed; but when they had come within about 500 yards of her, Strong could see the men busy at her stern, and to his astonishment observed them bring the Maxim gun round and train it on the "Victor."

Then he took up the wireless instrument and called on the king to surrender, but he received no reply. Diana sat amidships in the balloon, with her face buried in her hands.

Ludwig was at the steering gear, and the king was aft superintending the training of the Maxim.

But the menace of the gun did not disconcert Strong. He watched the loading of the piece and watched the men making their aim more certain.

He brought the "Victor" down to a rate of progress no faster than that of the balloon, and he kept the airship zigzagging in her course as best he could in order to destroy the certainty of the Maxim's aim.

It was then that Langley jogged Strong's elbow. "Don't be a fool," he said quickly. "Just consider what you would do if you were in that balloon. If they fire we shall be swept by a hail of bullets. They may cripple us or they may not, but in any case there is a very excellent chance of you or I, or any of us, being killed, and an absolute certainty of having the hull riddled with shot."

Strong was still staring at the balloon through his glasses, although they were now so close and the glasses magnified so much that he could watch every shade of expression on the men's faces.

At last it was perfectly obvious to him that they were about to fire, and, realising the force of Langley's argument, he suddenly sent the "Victor" up.

It was none too soon. The bullets from the Maxim passed in a shrieking stream just beneath them. The gun at the stern of the balloon was lifted still more, and it was only the speed at which the "Victor" was ascending that saved them from disaster.

Strong set his jaw and put the "Victor" dead over the balloon, so that the great silk bag intervened between the airship and the occupants of the king's car. Then he went aft and sat down and endeavoured to puzzle out what he had better do.

For assuredly the king held the trump-card. He held Diana; and once again Strong realised with anger that his Majesty was using his daughter as a shield.

It was all very well to inveigh against the king for a coward, but at the same time it was a matter of tactics, and Strong was forced to admit that the king's tactics were masterly and complete. True, a shell

would have settled the whole matter; and had not Diana been in the balloon, it is quite certain that Strong would have dealt with the king once and for all. But, as it was, to drop a shell was impossible.

Strong wondered if he dare fire into the gas-bag and so bring the balloon to earth. But he was ignorant as to the possible effect of this, and Langley was unable to enlighten him, and therefore for a while all that he could do was to sit in more or less moody silence and admire the clever devilry of the man below him.

The Balkanian frontier had now been passed, and Austria was slipping away beneath them, and Strong, for the moment, being unable to find any solution to the difficult problem with which he was confronted, fell to wondering for what place the King of Balkania might be making.

With Langley he worked out the course which they were now pursuing, and, drawing a line dead across the map of Europe, Strong discovered with a start that they were making a straight course for Paris. Was that the destination of the king? If so, then his Majesty was doing a daring thing, for about sun-up on the morrow he would be compelled to cross the Alps.

Could the balloon hold out? Should the smallest leak be sprung then it was patent that she could never make the passage of the mountains. She could not even make the passage at all at her present altitude, and Strong wondered if they carried sufficient ballast the discarding of which would give them the necessary elevation.

He reckoned that, while the balloon had gone direct with the wind, she had been making some forty to forty-five miles an hour, but now that she had the wind upon her quarter the speed had been considerably reduced, and, according to the instruments in the "Victor," she was not making more than thirty.

If Paris were their objective it would take them some fifty hours to make the trip. It was then Tuesday, which meant that if Paris were the goal the capital of

France could not be reached till about noon on Thursday, and then only if the wind did not veer round to the west.

The thought of Paris became a dread to Strong, for he would be unable to follow the king's movements there without the assistance of the "Di." That would leave Bomberg unwatched. Still, there was no help for it. Strong sent for the "Di" by wireless, and shortly afterwards the little craft leaped up from the horizon.

Lying above at a convenient distance, Strong was well able to observe what passed in the balloon. Towards the afternoon the king, Colonel Conrad and Diana had made a sort of picnic meal in the stern. And it made Strong's heart ache to see that Diana ate but little.

As seven o'clock drew near the light began to fade, and Strong judged that they were then just north of the Turkish frontier and Croatia. Darkness came down swiftly, and for the first time that it had been necessary to use it, the searchlight of the "Victor" played upon the balloon below. Strong saw that its intense light dazzled the occupants of the balloon, and out of consideration for Diana he lifted the light a little so that it only gleamed upon the great cigar-shaped gasbag.

Towards ten o'clock he let the light down again upon the car and saw that Diana lay wrapped up in rugs and apparently asleep. The king was still awake, smoking. So they went on through the night, and Strong chafed greatly at the delay.

In a freshening breeze the balloon laboured pretty heavily, but, thanks to the powerful propellers and the capacity of the steering gear, she hung well on to her course, which once again Strong satisfied himself must make Paris if it were continued long enough.

It was impossible that if Paris were the objective they could all of them keep awake during the fifty hours or so which the journey would occupy. So he arranged the men in watches, taking the first trick himself, and ordering Langley to rouse him an hour past midnight.

When Strong crawled out of his blanket at about

twenty minutes to one on the Wednesday morning he held a short consultation with Langley as to the position of the earth beneath them. They judged that they were just to the south of Carniola.

And here Strong was curious to see whether the balloon beneath them would be able to rise to a sufficient altitude to clear the mountains. But, sure enough, before long she floated up towards them, making the ascent easily, but still lumbering clumsily forward.

It was the most distracting and tiresome run that Strong ever remembered, nor was it altogether an easy one, for towards eleven o'clock they were encompassed in a great belt of clouds, and for a little while they lost sight of the balloon.

But an hour later Strong, still having hung to the old course and kept the "Victor" down to about thirty miles an hour, found the balloon was quite close to them when the clouds lifted.

The air was icy cold above the glaciers, but of this they took little heed. What astonished Strong more than anything was that the balloon had risen almost to the level of the "Victor," and he estimated that the king must have denuded the balloon of most of its ballast.

The clumsy concern, however, forged ahead steadily, if comparatively slowly, and at about one o'clock in the afternoon was sailing practically due north-west, mid-way between Zurich and Lucerne.

The second night was passed much as the previous night had been. The search-light of the "Victor" continued to play on the bag of the balloon. Diana lay huddled up in blankets and apparently asleep. Strong admired the iron constitution of the king, which enabled him to sit from day to day silently smoking in the stern sheets of the car.

At seven o'clock the next morning the position of affairs was much the same as ever, and the utter helplessness of his situation cut Strong to the quick. With her helm jammed down the balloon still lumbered on

with her nose half into the wind, making surely and steadily for Paris.

And so hour after hour he was compelled to hover above the king's course, wondering what might be his Majesty's goal and how he could reach Diana when the balloon finally fetched up.

Shortly before seven in the evening the balloon passed over Basle. The day was wet and squally, and from time to time the "Victor" lost sight of the enemy, but as the clouds cleared they picked her up again. So they moved on to the gathering darkness.

The night set in thickly, and Strong found it necessary to keep in as close touch as he could with the balloon. But at times, in spite of the powerful searchlight of the "Victor," they lost their quarry. It was indeed a night which required the alertness and attention of all. The watch and watch system had to be abandoned. From dark to dawn Langley sat at the steering gear, while Strong and the rest of the men searched the blackness, fearful lest they should lose track of the balloon.

At sun-up the clouds lifted and the day broke clear and fine. And shortly after six o'clock Strong guessed that the town over which they were passing was Chatillon.

As though to aid the king, the wind had shifted still more to the northward, and the balloon was making good speed, so that shortly after nine o'clock Strong, through his glasses, was able to observe the dim mass of Paris in the distance.

At about ten o'clock Ludwig put the balloon up into the wind a little, and it became apparent to Strong that the king was making for the northern boundaries of the French capital. But it was not till close on noon that he realised that their precise destination must be the Bois de Boulogne.

Paris awoke to its latest sensation.

Strong and the other men, however, were too busy to waste time in peering through their glasses at any

commotion their appearance might cause below. They realised that the journey must have come pretty nigh to an end when they floated over the Allée de Long-champs.

Here the balloon's helm was put up a trifle so that she might cross the lake, and then it was obvious that the long chase was at an end, for the balloon was put right-about and head into the wind above the clearing which lies between the lake and La Murette.

Slowly they put her down, the "Victor" hanging hawkwise overhead.

Then it was that Wildney uttered a little cry. For through his glasses he had detected a big red motor-car creeping along the Allée des Fortifications, the occupants of which were patently interested in the occupants of the balloon.

Strong swore a little under his breath. He said aloud, "If that car is for his Majesty, we shall have the very deuce in tracking them."

As he spoke the balloon fell quivering to the earth. A crowd of people who had been rapidly gathering rushed towards her, and the motor-car shot forward and turned up towards the clearing.

"That car," said Strong, with conviction, "will take them into Paris, and our only hope of following their course through the streets lies in the 'Di.'" So he signalled to Arbuthnot to put alongside the "Victor."

Even while Strong climbed from the "Victor" into the "Di" a hundred hands pulled the balloon down and held her fast, and there rose from the Bois a hubbub of voices.

Strong sat with Arbuthnot in the "Di," watchful and alert. His glasses never left his eyes, and he was forced to admire the delightful calm of the king.

Even from that height Strong could see that his Majesty left the answers of all queries and all the practical details which arise on the descent of a balloon to Colonel Conrad.

CHAPTER XXIX

PARIS AND SOME PERILS

THE king himself helped his daughter out of the basket and forced his way through the press to the car.

He bundled Diana into the motor-car, then, entering the tonneau himself, slammed the door. Men, women and children gathered round and hurled a thousand questions at him; but the king paid no heed. He merely leant forward and whispered in the chauffeur's ear. The chauffeur nodded, and the car shot forward, scattering the people right and left as it made for the Porte de la Muette.

Strong was after the car like an owl after a mouse; but it was he who was to be the blind one in the chase.

The car dashed down the Avenue Henri Martin, and, keeping at about 200 feet overhead, it was easy enough to follow the course of the king, though the passage of this wide thoroughfare to the Place du Trocadéro occupied but a few seconds.

But here the car turned sharply to the left, making up the Rue Boissière, and for a moment Strong, checking the "Di" above the Musée Guinet, lost sight of the king. Thinking, however, that his Majesty was not doubling back for a serious purpose, but merely trying to mislead him, Strong jumped the "Di" up and caught sight of the car turning to the right down the Rue de Lubeck. And his suspicions were confirmed when the car turned to the right again, shooting down the Rue Freycinet and subsequently turning into the Rue Pierre Charron.

Apparently his Majesty thought that by twisting through these comparatively narrow streets he would

throw Strong off the scent, for the car went at a more moderate pace until it reached the Avenue des Champs Elysées.

The car dawdled on until they came to the Place de la Concorde. It shot across this, and unfortunately Strong was bound to reveal his whereabouts, because it was necessary to hang as closely overhead of the car as possible.

The king, looking up, perceived that the "Di" was hot upon the scent, and he turned up the narrow Rue Cambon.

In his anxiety to follow, Strong shot ahead so fast that he lost the king when the car turned suddenly to the left up the Rue Duphot. He was now in the position of a huntsman who had lost the scent, and he decided to make a cast.

So, checking the "Di," he put her up another hundred feet, when, to his intense joy, as he hung above the Madeleine, he saw the red car skim across the Rue Royale and make for the Boulevard des Capucines. Strong was perplexed as to the spot for which the king was aiming. At his present rate of progress he would soon be in Montmartre. Strong did not imagine that his Majesty could be intent on hiding there.

Evidently believing that he had lost Strong, the king's great red car ran easily along into the Place des Capucines and turned into the courtyard of the Grand Hotel.

A drop of rain splashed on to Strong's face.

"Hullo!" he said, and glanced upwards.

The fine weather, which had held good for three days, was breaking. Great storm-clouds were rolling up from the west.

Arbuthnot, cocking a sailor's eye at them, muttered something about a dirty night; and Strong made answer that, as far as he could see, it would be a dirty afternoon. Then he brought the "Di" to a standstill and lung over Paris that he might think the matter out.

The commotion below them was tremendous. The

traffic in the streets was at a standstill. There were heads at every window, and a sea of upturned faces in the Place de la Concorde, over which they were then stationary.

A careful scrutiny through the glasses satisfied Strong that the arrival of the great red motor-car at the Grand Hotel was not as yet associated in the popular mind with the appearance of the airships.

The "Victor" was slowly picking its way through the sky from the Bois de Boulogne, and she drifted lazily up while Strong took counsel with himself.

He saw that it would be eminently necessary not only to see Diana before he returned to Bomberg, but to establish over her a sufficiently careful watch to prevent the king removing her from Paris and hiding her where it would be hard to trace her. But how?

Certainly nothing could be done till night came, and what could be done then?

The king probably still exerted sufficient authority over his Legation in Paris to be sure of support and friendship in the French capital.

With Strong it was another matter. True that he had friends and acquaintances in Paris, but for the moment he could think of no one who could be relied on to afford him the assistance he required.

Suddenly, however, stumbling through the memories of Paris which he was calling up, he remembered Jimmy Cloud.

"By George!" he said to himself. "Jimmy is the very man!" For Jimmy Cloud was a man very much of Strong's build and temperament, and quite as remarkable in his mode of life.

Though he was barely twenty-six years of age, he elected to live by himself, with an old man-servant, in one of the small, old-fashioned houses in the Rue de Ranelagh—that quiet street, which reminds one so much of St John's Wood, that runs down from the Bois to the river. Here he surrounded himself with books and dumb-bells, living a life of mixed pedantry and athletics, and

occasionally making a startling raid upon his aristocratic acquaintances in the more fashionable quarter of the town. Ordinarily, Jimmy Cloud was content to clothe his body in extremely British flannel trousers and an old Norfolk jacket. But when he did condescend to put on evening dress he became a person of great magnificence.

"Yes," said Strong to himself, "Jimmy's the man for me."

Slowly he evolved a plan for getting to see Diana, but this for the time he kept to himself. He rather enjoyed puzzling his companions.

Therefore he put the "Di" alongside the "Victor" and, finding that Arbuthnot did not object to being left alone, he stepped into the larger airship with no other remark except that he was extremely hungry; and so, while they hung overhead and all Paris stared upwards, they lunched as sumptuously as they could on what remained of their stores.

When the distinctly frugal repast was finished, Strong amazed the men by suddenly ordering Langley to start the "Victor" and make for the coast.

Langley nodded, but wrinkled his eyebrows at Strong's instructions, but Strong offered no explanation.

Strong let both airships drive westward till night fell. At eight o'clock he ordered them about and made east again till in pitch darkness the "Victor" and the "Di" hung once more above the Bois de Bologne.

Strong then ordered the "Di" alongside the "Victor" and stepped into the smaller airship, leaving certain instructions with Langley. These instructions amused Langley to such an extent that he laughed for quite a while, and Strong joined in the laughter. For the notion which he had conceived vastly amused him too.

He then cried "So long!" and put away from the "Victor," and as the little craft drove into the stiff breeze Strong uttered an exclamation of "Thank Heaven for the rain!"

He left Arbuthnot at the steering-gear, while with a lantern he searched the map of Paris, and endeavoured, as they dropped downwards, to pick up the geography of the city by the comparative brightness of its different stretches of lights.

Strong, however, had not far to go. He crossed the Seine to the west of the Auteuil Bridge, and brought the "Di" up sharp over the manœuvring field of Issy.

They were now only about 500 feet above the surface of the earth, and Strong turned to Arbuthnot and said, "Now, my boy, stand by for a rush. This has got to be quick work. The moment I set foot on land, get up as quickly as you can and rejoin the 'Victor.' You will know within an hour whether all is well with me or not. Supposing, however, that you do not hear by the end of that time, don't get alarmed. Give me at least till midnight. If you don't hear from me by then, Langley will know what to do. If I get into a fix I am trusting to you fellows to get me out of it."

"You need have no fear of that," said Arbuthnot, and he stretched out his hand.

They went down very swiftly, and the "Di" shivered as she touched the ground. Strong jumped out, nodded to Arbuthnot in the darkness, pulled the collar of his coat up round his ears, and walked quickly away.

When he had gone a dozen steps or so he turned, and again thanked Providence that the night was so thick that even then he could not discover any trace of the "Di." She had apparently leapt up out of sight.

It was a long time since he had been on the manœuvring ground of Issy, but his sense of location was so finely developed that even after the absence of years, and in spite of the intense darkness which hedged him in, he made no mistake.

He was of no mind to undergo scrutiny at the fortifications, and so he prepared for a goodish walk, and, stepping out briskly to the southwards, soon came up with the Boulevard du Point du Jour. He walked

up this till he reached the Rue du Vivier, when he turned to the right and went rapidly on till he came to the Station des Moulineaux. Here he took the train.

When he reached Champ de Mars he alighted, and, doubling back a little, crossed the Pont de Passy. Then he walked down the Quai de Passy, and three minutes later was in the Rue de Ranelagh.

The old man who opened the door of Cloud's house to him looked up into his face with a pair of blue eyes full of British suspicion of rough-looking visitors who call at night.

So he said: "Don't you know me, Johnson?"

"I know that voice, sir," said Johnson, and he came out on to the doorstep and peered up into Strong's face with evident curiosity.

"Bless my soul!" he cried, after a careful scrutiny, "it's Mr Strong," and, with that inoffensive familiarity allowable in old servants, he drew Strong into the hall.

"Tell me," said Strong, briskly, for he was in haste, "whether Mr Cloud is at home."

"Mr Cloud, sir," said the old man, "is at this very minute just a-finishing his coffee."

"Good," said Strong. "I'll have some too." He shivered a little, for he was cold and wet.

The old man shuffled down the passage and knocked at the door of the great room at the back of the house which had once been a studio, but which Jimmy called his "workroom."

A casual voice called "Come in!" and Strong, turning the handle of the door, walked quickly into the "workroom." It was a large place, partially roofed with glass, and was certainly the most untidy apartment that Strong had ever beheld.

Everywhere there were books—books piled on tables, books piled on chairs, books flung carelessly on shelves, books on the mantelpiece books in the grate, books even in the coal bucket. Apart from the books, however, there was very little furniture. In the corner was slung a hammock, and opposite one of the windows

was a large writing-desk. Beyond this and a litter of dumb-bells and developers there was practically nothing in the room except a pair of horizontal-bars and three or four armchairs. In the depths of one of these was a young man uncommonly like Strong, both in face and in figure.

For Jimmy Cloud was a very large young man indeed, with the same air of insolent ease that was Strong's principal characteristic when he was not engaged in anything that required activity.

Even when Cloud beheld Strong he did not rouse himself; he merely stretched out his hand and said:

"Great Scott! It's the man who's after the earth. Hang it, but I'm not sure that you're a creditable visitor. But how in Heaven's name did you get here?"

Strong told him, tersely, crisply, even brilliantly. Jimmy laughed with delight.

"And now," said Strong, in conclusion, "as I'm going a-courting the princess at the Grand Hotel I want your co-operation. I want a bath, a dress suit and an overcoat."

"Go ahead, my cavalier," cried Jimmy, "you shall have Johnson to dress you."

Half an hour later Strong re-entered Cloud's room. He had shaved himself, and his hair looked as though it had been dealt with by the most brilliant of tonsorial artists. Cloud's evening-dress clothes fitted him as though they were his own, and the fur coat with which Johnson had provided him completed an entirely immaculate toilet. Strong was, moreover, satisfied in his mind, for he had held converse on the wireless with Langley.

Cloud looked up from his book and said: "Behold the Dook!"

"You insult me," said Strong. "I am not a duke—I am a Dictator—Dictator of Balkania and prospective Dictator of the world!"

He picked up the little box which held the wireless instrument, nodded to Cloud and walked out.

CHAPTER XXX

A LITTLE LOVE

STRONG reached the American bar in the Place de l'Opera by a roundabout route. There calling for a cocktail, he nibbled at a biscuit, for he had had no food since mid-day, and was beginning to feel hungry. He picked up an evening newspaper and spent ten minutes or so of quiet enjoyment reading the highly ornate descriptions of his exploits over Paris. The enterprising Parisian journalists had already discovered that the gentleman who had alighted from the balloon in the Bois de Boulogne was the King of Balkania, and his Majesty's presence in the Grand Hotel was already well known. It appeared, indeed, that once in Paris the king had made no effort towards disguise, and was staying at the great hostelry by the Opéra in his own name.

Every interviewer who had called seemed to have been accorded an audience, and over the contents of these interviews Strong chuckled with delight.

It appeared that his Majesty was bombastic, and also that he was talking for the benefit of his recent subjects in Balkania, for the different papers contained different and long-winded excuses for his Majesty's flight.

From this Strong went on to read of the manner in which he himself had vanished with the "Victor" and the "Di." There were even telegrams from the coast, declaring that both the airships had driven into the teeth of a stiff gale and had fought their way out of sight across the Atlantic.

When he read of this, Strong was so tickled that he laughed aloud, and the bar-tender lounged across the

marble slab and asked him in English if he were reading of the exploits of Mr Strong.

Strong nodded, remarking that Mr Strong appeared to be a person with a sense of humour.

"Perhaps," said the bar-tender. "I tell you, Paris has gone crazy about him. I do not know which is the bigger hero of the two, Mr Strong or the King of Balkania. Anyway, I can assure you of one thing—that they would much rather Mr Strong were on the side of France than up against them. He seems to be able to scare people pretty considerably."

Having finished his cocktail, Strong strolled out and made for a telephone. At the exchange he rang up the Grand Hotel and asked if the King of Balkania were in. He was answered courteously enough that his Majesty had left about an hour before and was believed to be dining at the Balkanian Legation.

Strong congratulated himself upon this stroke of luck, and without further hesitation he walked round the corner to the hotel. His passage across the courtyard was scarcely noted, and the gorgeous major-domo who stood at the top of the steps bowed ceremoniously as he entered. He turned to the inquiry office and asked, easily enough—though at the same time he felt that a hundred eyes were endeavouring to probe his secrets and discover his identity—whether the king were at home, and the reply was the same as that which he received when a few minutes before he had rung up on the telephone.

"That is tiresome," he said. "The princess, has she also gone out?"

To this query the reply was in the negative, and Strong thereupon requested paper and pencil that he might write her a note.

He simply scrawled:—

"Do not on any account be alarmed or show any nervousness. But I am here, and if you can spare me a few moments I should be grateful. I beg the privilege

of a little interview for the sake of your safety and of mine."

Strong then lit a cigarette and sat down in the lounge, and years seemed to pass before the brass-buttoned page-boy returned with the request that he would go upstairs. Fortunately for Strong, he had never made the Grand his quarters during his spasmodic visits to Paris, but he was rather disconcerted when he saw the lift attendant eyeing him attentively. He looked at the man coldly and the man looked away. And Strong recognised him as one of the porters who had known him at the Scribe.

The king's rooms were on the third floor looking on to the Boulevard des Capucines, and Strong was shown into a sitting-room, stiffly magnificent and exceedingly hotel-like in its luxury. Two or three minutes passed before the door leading from another room opened and Diana came in. Her face was white and her eyes shone like stars. It was obvious that since she had left Bomberg she could have slept but little, and that she had suffered much. For there were about her eyes and mouth little lines of anxiety and pain which had no right to be there. She came running up to Strong much as a child runs to meet an elder, and Strong opening his arms, she fell into them and let her head fall against his breast. Strong held her to him very tightly, and was greatly moved, for it was the first time that he had ever seen Diana betray any great emotion. It was the first time that he had really seen her shaken out of her customary brave, high spirits and slightly cynical flippancy. He held her to him, and he felt her shaking with sobs. He pressed her head a little closer to him with his hand and let her weep as she would. By-and-by, when she had grown calmer, he wiped her tears away and led her to a sofa. Bidding her be seated, he sat down beside her, still holding her against him.

And soon Diana seemed to gain a little of Strong's unflinching strength. Soon, indeed, she was smiling as he

chaffed her very kindly in a low voice about the troubles of the times. She hung on to his hand, and looked at him as a child might look. She looked at him in a pleading way, and her eyes began to contract with pain again. "And you," she cried, "you have no right to be here. My father is dining at the Legation, but I do not know when he will return. I fancy it will not be till very late, for there are all kinds of things on foot, and I know some time to-night there is to be a big meeting, when everything will be discussed, for papa is to see the President to-morrow. But still there is always the chance that he may come back sooner than I expect him, or Ludwig, who will hardly be summoned to the council, might return alone, and then, and then—"

"And then, my dear," said Strong, "I suppose you think I should be caught and held captive, and possibly guillotined, and Heaven knows what." He patted her head with great tenderness. "Do not worry your silly little pate about that," he said. "It would not matter to me if I were taken ten times over. I hold the upper hand, and, after all, there is always a way of escape. I do not suppose they would consider my life was as valuable as the lives of the citizens of Paris, and if," he continued, his voice growing a little harsh, "there is any nonsense of that description, Paris will be treated even as Bomberg was."

"No, no," cried Diana, "not that. I cannot bear that."

"Dearest," said Strong, "I do not mean to be unkind. I do not mean to laugh at you. I simply want to present to you an argument. Would you rather bear that or bear the loss of me?"

"It is all so horrible," said Diana. "I do not know. I cannot think about it."

Strong looked at her in rather a troubled way. "My dear little girl," he said, "if you are going to be so distressed and unhappy as all this I shall have to take you away. I cannot let you stay here to be worried and harassed in this manner. I cannot leave you a victim

to the awful anxiety which you seem to endure. Don't you think," he went on, "that you might trust me a little more? Surely I have done enough to prove that you should have some faith in me. I do not make idle boasts, and when I say now that I am prepared to face anything with the utmost confidence, and that whatever happens I shall be able to come out of things scathless, surely you might believe me, and surely you might to some extent relieve your mind by the reflection that at least I am safe."

Strong's voice rose. "I feel," he cried, "that I shall always be safe. Ah! do not laugh at me when I say that I feel I have a great work to do. I will bring peace to the world at the last. Do not fear! I shall be safe."

"Yes," said Diana, in a very low voice, "I believe that you would be safe."

Her tone puzzled Strong, and he bent down. Taking her chin in his hands he peered into her face. "You are not only anxious about me," he said. "Tell me what you are hiding. What is it that is weighing you down like this? Come along now and out with it. I insist on knowing the real truth. It is very foolish of you not to fully confide in me."

Diana jumped up from the sofa and flung her arms apart. Her eyes were wide and full of terror, and she swayed a little on her feet. Strong took a step forward and caught her to him again.

"Tell me," he cried, "tell me what it is. For Heaven's sake, tell me what is the matter."

Diana began to laugh hysterically.

"I am mad," she said. "I am mad, quite mad!"

Strong looked at her with concern. At the moment she really did look as though the storm and stress of the past week had been too great for her, and that for a while her mind had given way. But when he looked again he saw that it was not real madness shining in her eyes now, but a great and dreadful fear.

"What do you mean?" he repeated.

"My father wants to get rid of me," she cried. "He

has already been taking means to put me away from him. He says that my mind is unhinged, and that I must go to some quiet place and be under the restraint of doctors and nurses. Two medical men were sent for this afternoon. I was dreadfully frightened when they came, because both of them were Balkanians. They saw me up here, and my father said that I was not responsible for my actions, and they asked me a number of foolish questions. Naturally, they did not tell me what their verdict was, but at anyrate my father has given it out in the hotel that I am mad."

Strong clenched his fists.

"That settles it," he said, "that settles it for good and all. You shall not be left here. You shall come back with me."

He broke off and thought for a few moments. He wondered whether it would really be a waste of time to pursue such a course. Men are only human, and it was quite possible that Balkania had by now repented of its surrender, and that M. Stalvan would not receive him with the submission which he had promised. Then things would certainly be extremely awkward. He would have to leave Diana in Aero before he returned while he reduced Bomberg to ashes for the second time. However, his speculations on this score were cut short by Diana, who looked at Strong with almost defiance in her eyes.

"No," she said, "I will not come with you. I will not go back to Bomberg until you are really master of the country and the real Dictator. Besides, I am determined not to give way like this. Please forgive me, but I was horribly upset. But you have given me back my strength, and I can endure now to the end."

She glanced with terror at the clock, for the hour was growing late. "Listen," she said to Strong. "We are being very foolish people. We have taken no heed of the time, and my father may return at any moment, and it is necessary that we should be warned. I will send for Felice."

"And who," asked Strong, as Diana rang the bell, "is Felice?"

"Felice," said Diana, "is my old nurse, whom my father has very unwisely appointed to be my dragon for the time being. For Felice, bless her old heart! will do anything in the world for me, even, I think, the most foolish of things. Ah! here she is."

A very broad, middle-aged Frenchwoman bustled into the room. Her face was round and sleek and smiling. She was the very embodiment of good-nature. She bowed and bobbed to Strong and took one of Diana's hands. "The poor little one," she said, "the poor little one, so unhappy, so distracted."

"Now, Felice," said Diana, "I am not distracted any more. This gentleman has come to see me. I will tell you who he is later."

Felice spread out her fat fingers. "No need, my dear little princess," she said, "no need. I know at once who the gentleman is—it is Mr Strong."

Strong laughed, held out his hand to Felice, and said: "I see I shall have to introduce myself."

Felice took his hand, and bowed and bobbed over it until Diana plucked her by the sleeve.

"Felice," said Diana, "you must run away or you will make me jealous. I want you to do something for me. Go down to the hall and wait there until my father returns. Be near to the telephone, so that you can be switched through to this room the moment he enters the hotel and give me warning."

Felice again took one of Diana's hands and patted it kindly. "It shall be done, my little princess, it shall be done," she said, and she bobbed and bowed and bustled out of the room.

When the door closed on her Strong laughed and turned to Diana. "What a delightful person," he said.

"She may save us," said Diana, simply. "She is the soul of faithfulness. When will you go?"

"To-morrow morning," said Strong, "at ten o'clock."

He thought for a few moments and then said: "Look here. Could you bear to see me go, or would you rather not?"

"I don't understand," said Diana.

"It's simply this, that when I leave Paris I shall leave it publicly and in the full sight of the city. I am going to leave Paris by way of the Eiffel Tower."

CHAPTER XXXI

MELODRAM AS AN AID TO EXIT

DIANA laughed, but her laughter was a little wild, for she was still a shade hysterical. "Really," she said, "I am almost unable to judge whether I am taking part in a colossal comedy or a very dreadful tragedy."

"Personally," said Strong, "I do not believe it is either. So far as I can see, it is sheer melodrama of the best Surrey-side order, which in its way is an excellent thing, because it leaves you an opportunity of taking two points of view. Either you can be thrilled or you can laugh. Seriously," he continued, but he got no further, for at that moment the telephone bell began to ring in a diffident though eager way. Strong was on his feet in a moment, and a second later had the receiver at his ear. Then he heard the fat, pleasant voice of Felice saying, "The king has entered the hotel with Prince Ludwig."

Strong hung up the receiver quickly and turned to Diana. "Dearest," he said, "there is no time for further talk. I must get out of this place at once."

Again he held out his arms to her, and she ran into them, and without saying any word he kissed her very tenderly. Then he put her from him and walked swiftly out of the room.

The king, he judged, would ascend by the lift, and he ran at top speed down the corridor. Casting a quick glance down the elevator shaft, he saw that the lift was ascending, and so he ran up the stairs as though he were making for the floor above. At the break in the staircase he paused, waited for the lift to stop, and then over its gilded top watched the king and Ludwig walk round

the corner and along the corridor to the princess' rooms. No sooner had they disappeared from view than Strong ran down the stairs and called to the lift attendant. But the lift was already shooting down. It was now a question of whether he had better walk down the three flights of stairs that still intervened between himself and safety or ring for the lift. And fortunately he estimated that it would be better for him to trust to the swiftness of his own legs. So he began to run down the stairs very quickly but lightly, but he had not gained the first floor before he heard the bell in the elevator ringing sharply and persistently. He guessed what that meant and ran on. As he crossed the hall he heard the tinkle of the telephone bell in the porter's lodge, and imagined, quite rightly, that the bell was ringing on his account. At the foot of the stairs he paused for a moment and drew his cigarette case from his pocket. It was a question of seconds, but he knew that it was better to leave the hotel with some *sang froid* than to rush out of it at the speed which his necessity demanded. He placed the cigarette between his lips, but did not delay to light it. Then he walked out of the swing doors and down the broad steps. The major-domo who watched his exit bowed low to him. The drivers of the fiacres in the courtyard raised their whips in polite and silent invitation for him to take a cab. But Strong, pausing in the middle of the courtyard to pull out his matchbox, merely shook his head. But he never lit that particular cigarette, for as the match flickered in the shelter of his hand he heard a shout behind him, and, turning his head quickly over his shoulder, saw that in the hotel there had suddenly arisen a great commotion, and through a little knot of excited people the King of Balkania was striding towards the steps.

Then Strong cast aside his dignity, and with the knowledge that if, even in his untrained condition, he were pitted in a quarter of a mile race against any man likely to pursue him the victory would be his, he broke into a double and dashed out of the courtyard into the

Place de l'Opéra. Fortunately for him the rain had to a great extent cleared and the streets were full of people. It would therefore have been folly on his part to continue running. It was much easier and far more simple to pull up and lose himself in the crowd.

Soon he zigzagged back to Passy.

Jimmy Cloud laughed hugely at Strong's story of a chase from the Grand Hotel. "Excellent!" he cried. "And now I suppose that you have come back for further assistance?"

Strong laughed and nodded.

"You have only to command me," said Cloud. "Anything that I possibly can do I will, though I really think it is somewhat disgraceful that the quiet and respectability of a lone bachelor's house should be rudely upset in this manner."

"All I want," said Strong, ignoring Cloud's badinage, "is to lie down on a couch somewhere and snatch a few hours of sleep—as many hours, indeed, as I can manage, for I have not slept much during the past week. Then if you will tell Johnson to call me at eight I shall be glad. Also, I want to be furnished with some morning clothes. My own are hardly respectable, and I cannot walk abroad to complete my adventures in Paris in borrowed evening dress."

"Good," said Cloud. "That shall be just as you wish. In the meantime, if you are not too sleepy, I wish you would sit down and tell me a little of your past—I mean the past since I saw you at Cookham. It seems to have been exciting, and you appear to have become quite a notable person. Indeed," he went on, "I am not sure quite how I should address you. Tell me, do you wish me to hail you as 'your Majesty'?"

"Not yet," said Strong, quite gravely, "not till I have been crowned, which I hope will be in a few days."

"Then you are going back to Bomberg?"

"Yes," said Strong, "almost immediately. And if you will take the trouble to get up at eight o'clock and

come out with me to the grounds of the old exhibition you shall see me depart."

"Another dramatic exit before the gaze of thousands?"

"Exactly," said Strong. "There is nothing like advertisement." For half an hour he chattered on, and to some extent satisfied Cloud's curiosity as to his doings at Bomberg. Then, rising from his seat, Strong yawned prodigiously, and was shown up to bed by the ever urbane Johnson.

At eight o'clock he was called and dressed himself in one of the many well-cut morning suits that Cloud seldom wore. The two men took their coffee and rolls together, and after breakfast walked down the Rue de Ranelagh, over the bridge, and along the Champ de Mars. On the way they bought all the morning papers they could lay hands on, and, as Strong had suspected, these journals contained highly-coloured accounts of his escapade at the Grand Hotel. Further than that, however—and this threw him into a violent rage—he found that the King of Balkania had not hesitated to brand the Princess Diana as insane. It appeared that Paris had been searched the whole night through for the audacious Mr Strong, and one journal declared that he had had the additional impudence to dine at the Café de Paris.

This set Strong thinking, for if the city were roused to such an extent, then certainly it was high time to leave Paris. For a moment he even regretted that in a second of bravado he should have decided to make his exit from so unconventional a jumping-off place as the Eiffel Tower. However, there was no time to repent of that now. As they walked along they saw that nearly every one was looking skywards searching for the "Victor" and the "Di," which, from the roof of Cloud's house, Strong had taken the precaution to assure himself were still hovering above the Bois. He had allowed himself none too much time to keep his rendezvous with Langley, and he saw that it would be

both unwise and unfair to associate Cloud with him in this his latest reckless venture. So he bade that nonchalant young man farewell at some distance from the tower.

Strolling on, he found himself at the gates of the exhibition a little before the time at which the public are admitted to the tower itself, but the discreet donation of a couple of francs overcame the objections of the gatekeeper.

The lift-man was routed out, and that official, hurriedly struggling into his coat and jamming his gold-edged cap on to his head, went forward to attend to the requirements of the eccentric Englishman who desired to make the ascent of the Eiffel Tower at such a ridiculous time of day.

He looked sharply at Strong, and Strong felt just a shade uncomfortable beneath his gaze, for he was conscious that pictures more or less resembling him were now being widely circulated in Paris. However, with a pleasant smile and a word of chaff, he fished a ten-franc piece from his pocket and bestowed it on the gratified attendant.

"It isn't often," Strong said to him, "that I take the trouble to rouse myself so early, but when a compatriot of mine is giving a free exhibition of himself over Paris I feel that it is only my duty to obtain the best possible view of him."

The man grinned. "And no better view for that, monsieur," he said, "than from the Eiffel Tower."

"Exactly what I thought," said Strong as they went up in the lift.

Arriving at the little platform from which they could see all Paris spread out beneath them, Strong deposited his wireless instrument on a seat. The man glanced at it curiously, and Strong, desirous even then of allaying all the suspicion that he could, made haste to remark that his companion had probably never beheld a camera of that description.

At that moment the lift bell began to ring, and

saying that he would be back directly the attendant hastened to descend.

This was precisely as Strong desired it, and while the lift was going down he made haste to tick out a message to the "Di," which he could see was already under way.

The reply came almost immediately, and Strong ticked "Come at once." Then he shut the little box and glanced down the well of the lift. He had foreseen the emergency that now arose, and quickly made his preparations.

From his pocket he took a stout dog-chain, on which Cloud at times kept his faithful bull terrier, and gave the chain a double twist round the cable of the lift. He fixed it securely in such a manner that it would be impossible for the attendant to get the lift up again so long as the chain held.

The "Di" was now sailing towards him at a pretty fair pace, but Strong kept his gaze fixed on the lift below him, and he saw that there had arisen a tremendous commotion at the gates of the lift.

He heard a whistle, and two policemen ran across the exhibition grounds, and, after an excited altercation with some persons whom Strong could not catch sight of, they began to tear up the steps of the tower as fast as their stubby legs could carry them.

Langley had evidently been afraid to rouse too much suspicion by closing in too near upon the tower, and as the policemen reached the first stage and paused to take breath the "Di" was hovering over Neuilly.

Strong made a slight calculation as to whether the "Di" or the policemen were likely to win the race. Then, opening his instrument, he ticked out an imperative message to Langley to make all the speed he could.

He saw the "Di" turn about and make for the tower, but she had some way to come, and the two *gendarmes* were already at the second landing-stage.

Strong took his six-shooter from his hip-pocket and mounted guard over the narrow stairway. The "Di"

was still a couple of hundred yards off, and the *gendarmes* were close upon him. Yet he was loth to shoot. There were enough lives to his account already, and he had no desire to shed the innocent blood of these two fussy little officials. He called on them to halt, and the two men, closing up together as if for mutual protection, leant panting against the rails of the staircase and glared up at him.

The leader drew his sword and yelled at Strong to surrender. "You are our prisoner!" he cried.

"And what a prisoner, too!" shrieked the other. "We have at our mercy the redoubtable Mr Strong!"

Then it was that Strong brought his hand from behind his back and deliberately trained the nose of his six-shooter upon the men beneath him.

CHAPTER XXXII

LOST MISS HUNT

"ONE step further," Strong said, "and you will go to the bottom a great deal faster than you came up."

The leader of the two men was a man of mettle, and he drew his own revolver from the pouch of his belt so quickly that before he realised that he was being shot at Strong heard the bullet ping past his head and go with a soft splash against the metal-work behind him.

"A good aim," he said to himself, "and quick, too."

Then he sighed, and his finger tightened on the trigger. It was a good shot, perhaps the finest shot that he ever made. For the man who had fired at him leapt into the air with a scream. The revolver clattered on to the metal staircase, and the man sank in a heap with his hand half shot away.

But his companion, after all, was a man too, for, shouting a few boisterous Parisian curses at Strong, he drew his own revolver and dashed on up the stairs.

Strong called to him to stop, but the man came on. He let him approach still nearer, knowing that at the pace he was coming his aim would not be very good. It seemed, indeed, that the man was too excited to fire, for, though he brandished his revolver aloft, he made no sign of using it. So Strong waited till the man had to take a turn in the twist of the staircase beneath him, when he winged him neatly in the foot. The man fell with a crash, and Strong heard the "Di" scraping along the balcony behind him. Strong had no time to see what damage he had done. The man lay huddled up on the iron steps, motionless. The scraping of the "Di" along the balcony was music to his ears, and the sharp call of Langley as the voice of an angel. He

whipped round, and without a word jumped into the "Di" and bade Langley "shove off."

As they started away from the Eiffel Tower, and a tumult of shouts rose from beneath them, Langley raised his eyebrows at Strong in customary silent interrogation.

"'Victor,'" said Strong.

Langley put alongside the "Victor," where Strong ordered Arbuthnot and Wildney to take their places in the "Di."

"Bomberg!" Strong shouted, and the two airships swung east and raced across Paris.

The time was about ten o'clock, and Strong estimated that if all went well with both the "Victor" and the "Di" they would make Bomberg about five in the afternoon.

And, fortunately, all went well. The world streamed away beneath them. They crossed the borders of France, scurried over the southern portion of Germany, plunged across Austria, and as the autumn afternoon was drawing to its close the towers of Bomberg and the hills beyond the city rushed up at them from the east.

Strong set the "Victor" over the Ministry, and bade Langley call up M. Stalvan on the wireless. And as Langley ticked away Strong made a rapid inspection of the city through his glasses, and even in the little while he had been absent a great deal appeared to have been done. The three army corps which had been called into the field to meet the forces of Sylvania were encamped on the northern side of the town. The *débris* in the streets had been cleared away, trams were running up the long main thoroughfares as was their wont, and the people appeared to be conducting their ordinary business amid the wrecked streets.

True, as the airship shot over the city there arose from the people of the town a murmur which, even though it drifted up but faintly, Strong took as a murmur of acclamation. At any rate, the attitude of the people in the streets below was vastly different to

what it had been on his previous visit. There arose no panic and no disorder. The crowds were simply curious.

In other respects, too, Strong noted that the town had been reduced to comparative order. The roads were well patrolled by troops, and the people were apparently following their customary avocations.

There was scarcely time for him to observe all these satisfactory signs when an answer came to the instrument on the "Victor," and Langley rapidly translated to Strong the message that M. Stalvan, in the name of the Balkanian people, welcomed him to Bomberg.

This message was reassuring enough in its way, but Strong was determined to take no risks. There lay within his grasp the means of demonstrating to the people of Balkania, in a far more terrible way than any he had yet attempted, the scope and the grip of his power. Fortunately it was a way not unlikely to commend itself to the people whose destinies he had now taken into his keeping. On the northern frontier of Balkania were massed the troops of the old King of Sylvania, before whose advance the Balkanian army had been forced to fall back, and Strong determined, before he again set foot in Bomberg, to at least relieve Balkania from that menace.

On the brief message to the premier, therefore, he turned the "Victor" about and stood for the north. What happened when he found himself above the invading army was brief and bloody. The shattered hosts of Sylvania straggled back to their base. And still Strong salved his conscience with the thought that he worked for the millennium.

Strong allowed time for the news of this astounding and ruthless victory to sink into the minds of his new subjects before he returned to Bomberg. When he did so he descended in the "Di" to the Ministry without a shadow of uneasiness. Indeed, as he afterwards drove from the Ministry to the palace with the aged premier, the people in the streets hailed him as a hero, almost a god. Strong took up his quarters in the palace at once,

and slept there that night, conscious that the presence of the "Victor" in the sky immediately overhead was productive of more than a sufficiently moral effect to ensure his safety.

One of Strong's first thoughts when he had installed himself at the palace was of Diana, and he despatched Churston to Paris by way of London with a wireless instrument for Jimmy Cloud. To Jimmy he wrote a letter instructing him to keep careful watch over Diana's movements, and immediately to report to him if the ex-king removed her from Paris.

The wiping out of the Sylvaniaian army roused the whole of Europe. Austria, Germany, Italy and Russia began mobilising armies on a huge scale. Then, thanks to the exertions of the ex-king, a conference of the Powers was summoned to the Hague. Bomberg's plight was for a time wretched, and the unfortunate people knew not which the most to dread—Strong and his airships, or the armies of Europe, who were already on the march against them.

Meantime, Strong had lost not a moment in setting to work on the building of other airships. Langley was lodged on the balloon ground, and there, with the best engineers that Strong could procure—some at his bidding came from England—he pushed forward at top speed the construction of three more airships exactly on the model of the "Victor." The work was comparatively simple. It was only a question of duplicating the different parts of which the "Victor" was composed, and Strong felt pretty confident that the three ships would be ready within a fortnight.

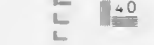
Daily the "Victor" sailed overhead, and her presence acted as a constant reminder to the people of Bomberg, and of Balkania in general, of the unlimited power which Strong wielded; and so any desire to defy him was gradually worn down. At the last, indeed, the people even accepted him as a man on whom they had best rely.

His life at the palace was simple in the extreme.



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He rose early and went to bed late. He worked both by day and by night, strengthening his resources and generally placing Balkania in a position to withstand the shock of battle which must come when the hosts of Europe moved to the attack. Fortunately, the Powers were frightened, for the armies lingered on the way. They were strengthened and re-organised, and strengthened again, and still the hosts of Europe hung in sullen masses just beyond the frontier. Obviously, until some better means of meeting Strong could be devised, they regarded it as sheer folly to move to the attack. And Strong was not surprised at the delay, for two or three days before information had come to him from Berlin that the Kaiser was there building four great aeroplanes, which it was believed would be an improvement on any kind of airship that had yet been made.

When he first heard this Strong chuckled to himself, and decided instantly that it would be merely necessary to detach the "Di" and send her to Berlin to completely destroy the airships in building. But the Kaiser's preparations were clever to an extreme. It appeared that great pits had been dug in the vast barrack-square of the Guards Regiment, and that the aeroplanes were being built beneath armoured shields which even the explosives carried by the "Di" would be unable to pierce.

Even when he heard this Strong did not lose heart. "After all," he said, in explanation to those officers who rubbed their chins doubtfully as they discussed the matter with him, "they are but as so many rats in a trap. We can watch till they are ready, and then, when they are about to leave their hole, we can catch them as they come out." The officers were a little reassured, though the news of the building of the airships of the Kaiser created almost a panic in the city.

Meantime, in spite of his business, Strong had not neglected Miss Hunt. He had sent her message after message to Vienna, with the result that the editor of

the *Daily Wireless* spent his days and half his nights chuckling with delight over "scoop" after "scoop."

Indeed, upon receipt of the news that the Kaiser was building airships in Berlin, Strong had instructed Miss Hunt by wireless to leave Vienna and go at once to Berlin. And there, disguised as a humble governess, and living in cheap rooms, she was seeking an engagement, which she was always careful not to find, while she picked up all the information she could and tapped it off with regularity every night from Berlin.

At last came a message from Berlin that she had met Ludwig face to face in Unter den Linden and that she feared her movements were watched. She reported at the same time a rumour to the effect that Great Britain was joining the conference of the Powers at the Hague. This was serious news, and at Strong's request Miss Hunt left for Holland.

Days passed but no tidings came from her. Strong was worried and Bellingham half crazy with anxiety. Finally, at his own request, Bellingham started in search of the lost Miss Hunt. Four days later Strong got news by wireless that Bellingham had discovered that, while at the Hague, Miss Hunt had been lured on the Russian Government yacht the *Boral*. On the next day came the still more disquieting news that Bellingham had established beyond all doubt that Miss Hunt was now imprisoned in the fortress of St Peter and St Paul, the great political gaol of St Petersburg. Bellingham returned post-haste to Bomberg, and Strong listened with serious face to his story. At the end of it he got up and said: "I will go back to the balloon ground and hustle things up. I don't intend to lose any time. I would rather have my new-found kingdom vanish away from me than fail Miss Hunt at this moment. She has behaved like a perfect heroine, and I should be the meanest man on earth if I were to leave her now."

Bellingham insisted on accompanying Strong and Arbuthnot to the balloon ground. Here, thanks to

Langley, the place was as light as day, for great arc lamps suspended on wires between tall poles illumined the entire field. Work, indeed, was being carried on both by day and by night. Strong was of no mind to let the Prussians get ahead of him in the building of their airships. One air-craft, indeed, had been already completed, and stood on her rests beside the "Victor," and the two airships were so alike it was hard to distinguish one from the other.

"I thought it better," Strong explained to Bellingham, "to have one ready for patrol duty. Our present trip will mean the absence from Bomberg not only of the 'Victor,' but of the 'Di,' and while we are away our new airship will have to mount guard over the town. I am sorry to say I am not even now so popular as I thought I should be." He smiled a little grimly to himself.

"When do you start?" asked Bellingham.

"My dear fellow," said Strong, "did you ever know me let the grass grow under my feet? We are off to-night."

"You are sure it is safe?" asked Bellingham.

"Perfectly," said Strong. "Hertz has been invaluable. I have got about me now a score of young officers, and I think I may boast that they at least are quite devoted. At anyrate they are gentlemen and perfectly straight and honourable. Wildney will take charge of the new airship, which we have christened 'The State.'"

"Rather a good name, I think, that. It is something like backing a horse both ways. It suggests an Empire or Republic, just as you please. And with the present condition of public opinion it is just as well to give people a choice."

Langley, in jean overalls and grimy face and spectacles misty from sweat, ambled up at this particular moment.

"Is she going up all right?" asked Strong.

"She is going up like a bird," said Langley as he

wiped his forehead with a bit of waste. "What I propose to do," he went on, "is to take her up, see how she goes, make a trip round the town, and come back. And then," he added, looking at Strong keenly, "I shall have to return to my work. We must get the other airships ready as quickly as we can."

"No St Petersburg for you?" asked Strong.

"No St Petersburg for me," said Langley, "until I am finished here."

Strong nodded, and let Langley go about his work, and in a very few minutes Langley had his crew of Balkanian officers aboard "The State." Strong left the ordering of things to Wildney, thinking it best that he should get his hand in in the way of commanding while he could.

A great crowd surged round "The State" as the last preparations were made for her ascent. The engineers and workmen gathered about her, and those officers who had sworn allegiance to Strong grouped themselves near the new dictator.

When all was ready Langley nodded to Strong, climbed aboard "The State," and said, "Let her go!"

The two or three hundred men assembled drew in their breath as the propellers on the upright shafts began to whizz, and they sighed with a great relief as "The State" slowly lifted herself from the ground. She sailed up like a bird, but Strong's face betrayed no emotion. He was conscious that at the moment the newly-completed airship had lifted for her first trip, the eyes of every man present were turned upon him, and his dramatic spirit prompted him to assume a mask of complete indifference.

They watched "The State" go up into the night and disappear, and then Strong, Bellingham and Arbuthnot fell into a desultory chat as they waited for her to return. Within half an hour she was back and came down to earth with the precision and neatness of the "Victor."

"I never thought," said Strong to Bellingham

"that we had much to fear. After this I am certain we have nothing to dread at all. Now for St Petersburg."

The "Victor" had already been victualled and laden as far as was possible with warlike stores, and, having shaken hands with Langley, Strong turned to Bellingham. "You and Pelham," he said to Bellingham, "will have to go in the 'Di,' because, after all, you see it is you who will have to rescue Miss Hunt."

Bellingham nodded and climbed into the "Di" with Pelham, and the two airships went up into the night.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ST PETERSBURG AND PANIC

By noon of the following day they were over St Petersburg, and from the "Victor" Strong could see that a great panic reigned in the town. Sleighs were scurrying in all directions over the snow-strewn roads. A babel of cries came up from beneath them as people scurried for shelter.

The guard outside the palace stood to their posts stolidly. Bugles rang out from the great barracks on the Nevsky Prospect. Then the mounted guards came clanking out from their quarters by the Cathedral of St Nicholas, and tore at a gallop along the quay to the palace.

Strong laughed grimly to himself to watch the bustle. His plan was cut and dried. He knew that the Admiralty building was fitted with wireless, and so he stayed the "Victor" above the gilded galleon perched on its vane above the dome of the Ministry of Marine. He took out the wireless and ticked a query, and he was not surprised to receive an almost immediate response; for though the Russians are a slow people they are quick enough when faced with danger.

Strong's message was brief and business-like, if somewhat pompous. "I am Strong, the Dictator of Bomberg," he ticked. "And I am here on what, I hope, is an errand of peace. I will destroy no lives nor destroy any property if the Englishwoman, Miss Hunt, now imprisoned in the fortress of St Peter and St Paul, is instantly surrendered to me. If any harm has come to the lady, or should come to the lady, I shall take a vengeance which St Petersburg will not appreciate."

Soon there came back, ticked to him in the Continental code, this statement: "We can do nothing at the Ministry of Marine. This is a question for the palace."

Strong answered: "Then be quick and obtain an answer from the palace."

The "Di" hovered near to the "Victor," and Strong, looking across at her, could see Bellingham, white and silent, biting his nails in the stern of the smaller airship.

"Perhaps," said Strong to himself, "Bellingham will now understand what I have gone through at times and must go through yet."

Far below them they saw a sleigh drawn by two black horses clatter out from the Ministry gates and plunge along the white road beside the Neva up to the gates of the red-walled palace. It dashed into the covered courtyard and disappeared from view.

Half an hour or so passed without any further message from St Petersburg. Then came a brief notice:

"This matter has been placed in the hands of his Imperial Majesty the Czar of All the Russias, and his Imperial Majesty declines to move in the matter. Miss Hunt has been justly imprisoned in the fortress of St Peter and St Paul, and the guardians of the peace of Russia are not disposed to deliver her up at the bidding of Mr Strong."

Strong was getting rather bored with the inevitable progress of events on such occasions. He knew that he had only to create sufficient panic in order to secure his end, and it was with rather a wearied little sigh that he prepared to achieve that end now.

"I am watching my instrument," he answered, "and at the slightest sign of relenting I will stay my hand. In the meantime I shall destroy first the barracks of the Guards, secondly the gates of St Peter and St Paul, and lastly, if these measures are ineffective, I shall destroy the palace itself."

There was no answer.

Strong allowed a few minutes to elapse, and then ticked again: "Is there any reply?"

And again there was no answer.

So he set the "Victor" over the barracks, and dropped shell after shell into them. He was sick of the quick carnage which he could produce, and did not even look at the result of his attack. He simply watched the instrument, from which no answer came. And as there was still no answer, he turned the "Victor" about and put across the frozen river to the fortress of St Peter and St Paul, where was lodged Miss Hunt. Here he dropped three shells into the outer portion of it, and wholly demolished the massive towers between which swung the heavy gates.

And still there was no answer.

Strong, watching the instrument for the reply which did not come, put the "Victor" about and stood over the palace. Here, indeed, he was in some perplexity. It was no wish of his to kill any man, much less any member of the Czar's family. But he had set his mind to the freeing of Miss Hunt, and was determined to go on with his resolve, no matter what the cost. His knowledge of St Petersburg, however, enabled him to locate the stables, and into these he dropped two shells.

Again he waited for some answer, and after the space of about five minutes the long-sought answer came. It was a very humble and apologetic answer, too.

"If Mr Strong will be kind enough to say at what place he will receive Miss Hunt, Miss Hunt shall be delivered up to him."

Strong picked up a megaphone, and shouted across to Bellingham: "We have won. Miss Hunt is to be given up to us."

The "Di" was not lying so far away that Strong could not see the colour come back with a rush to Bellingham's face.

Then Strong turned to the wireless again and telegraphed: "On the trotting ground within an hour."

The reply was: "It shall be done."

Turning the "Victor" about once more, Strong made for the trotting ground, on which he had spent so many merry afternoons in winter-time, and put the "Victor" down to about sixty feet above the grand stand. The "Di" hung above the earth just ahead of him.

Forty-five minutes passed, and there was no sign of any life on the desolate ground beneath them, and they were not sufficiently high in the air to be able to observe what was passing in St Petersburg itself. But when fifty minutes had passed, Strong heard Bellingham shout, and, moving the "Victor" gingerly towards the smaller airship, Strong saw a troika coming at a great pace along the road from St Petersburg. An officer galloped ahead and four Cossacks followed behind.

Strong snatched up a glass and made out the figure of Miss Hunt sitting huddled in the sleigh.

Five minutes later the queer little cavalcade came dashing through the gates of the trotting ground, and Strong yelled across to Bellingham: "Go down and pick her up!"

He had no fear of foul play. He knew that the Cossacks were powerless against them, and that they knew that as well as he did.

The "Di" sailed down, and Bellingham leapt over the side and rushed towards the sleigh. The Cossacks were drawn up in a little group, silent and wondering.

The officer had the grace to lift his sword and salute as Bellingham dashed up.

Miss Hunt was dazed and staggered as she rose to her feet. Bellingham put his arm about her and half lifted her across to the "Di." Wildney had to assist him in lifting her into the airship.

With a brutality unworthy of the distinguished officer who perpetrated it, Miss Hunt had been hurried out of the fort of St Peter and St Paul without a word of explanation; and to be bidden suddenly to enter a three-horsed sleigh with an officer for a companion and

a handful of Cossacks for escort, was sufficient to break down the nerve of most women.

Throughout the drive Miss Hunt sat so numb with cold and with fear that even when St Petersburg was left behind she kept her eyes tightly closed, dreading, indeed, to look ahead lest she should see the beginning of the end. It was a shock, therefore, when, as the sleigh came to a standstill, she opened her eyes and saw Bellingham rushing across the snow towards her. And her heart leaped with joy when, instinctively glancing up, she caught sight of the hovering "Victor."

To Bellingham as he seized her hands she said, in a dull voice: "What does it mean?"

"It means that you are free—as free as I am," said Bellingham.

So exhausted was she that she gave a little sigh and sank back into the sleigh again. And she sat there, unable to move; but Bellingham put his arm about her and lifted her to her feet, and then half carried her to the "Di."

When she was in the airship the "Di" went up, and she sat for some minutes shivering and sobbing. She could scarcely realise what had come to pass.

Strong's first impulse was to make straight back for Bomberg, but as the "Victor" and the "Di" rushed south-west, and St Petersburg grew dim behind them, he reflected that he could make his visit to Russia useful if he could produce a still greater effect upon the Russian people. So he turned to Pelham and ordered him to steer due south. Pelham looked at him in some wonder, but obeyed; and Strong, thinking it better to make his object clear, explained the motive for his change of course.

"St Petersburg," he said, addressing all the men in the "Victor," "is the chief city of the Russian state. Moscow is the chief city of the Russian people. We have done good work in St Petersburg. The heads of the Russian state will now think twice, I imagine, before they set their armies on the march against

Balkania. The lesson I intended to read to them was that if they violate the frontiers of my new kingdom, I shall lay St Petersburg in ruins. News, however, travels very slowly in this country," he continued, "the more slowly because the Press is practically in the hands of the Government, and if St Petersburg can prevent it, Moscow will not learn much of what has happened this morning. And so we will go to Moscow. We will give the people there a little ocular demonstration of what we are able to do, and, if possible, inform them of what has happened at St Petersburg this morning."

The men nodded at him, and Strong fell into silence again, turning over in his mind the different means whereby he could increase the force of the lesson he desired to teach Moscow. It was bitterly cold, the wind sweeping in no half-hearted way from the north over the endless snow-plains beneath them. Only here and there a pine-forest sprang up to relieve the dead monotony of the snow-covered prairie land.

Strong did not travel too fast, because he desired to reach Moscow at about two o'clock, an hour at which he knew most of the population would be abroad bent on their Sunday pleasures. Presently they passed over Tver, and Strong slackened speed still more to let the presence of the airships sink into the minds of the workers of that grimy city. And then they went south again.

Soon the minarets and gilded domes of Moscow's Asiatic-looking churches peeped above the horizon.

Strong put the airships down and kept them at a little distance above the long main road which, just outside Moscow, was thick with motor-cars and sleighs, for all Moscow that can afford to drive takes a daily airing on the long broad road that lies between the city of the churches and grimy Tver.

The effect of the presence of the airships was electrical. Strong was vastly amused, although he had the grace to be ashamed at the unkindness of his humour. After

all, it is not good to see the panic of a people, and the people beneath him were certainly in a panic now.

Strong, indeed, grew angry as he observed the panic becoming cowardly. Motor-cars and sleighs had wheeled about, and were making for the city helter-skelter, and so fast and furiously did the different vehicles drive under the impulse of fear that the road became jammed with scurrying horses and hooting motors, and there began a series of accidents.

Now Strong, to the best of his lights, made war legitimately, and he had no desire to see lives lost and injury befall those with whom he had no quarrel.

Therefore, he ordered the "Victor" to be put up, and followed by the "Di," left the course of the main road.

This move of his to a great extent allayed the panic, and, calling the people whom his mere presence had terrified all manner of cravens, Strong sailed on towards the summit of the city.

The "Victor" was now travelling slowly, and as he passed over the great wall from which Ivan the Terrible used to watch the most fiendish executions known to history, Strong looked westward across the plain over which Napoleon had trailed his broken army while Moscow was alight. Strong was gigantic in his vanity and perfectly natural in his conceit. "Burning the city will avail them nothing on this occasion," he reflected, "nor will my passage from Moscow be marked by the bitterness of Napoleon's when I return to claim the city as my own."

Then his mind wandered to the coming struggle with Europe, and at the thought of the Russian army hanging on Balkania's frontier, he grew suddenly angry with himself for having dealt so lightly with the Government in St Petersburg.

More than that, he doubted if he had been wise in dealing so gently with the captors of Miss Hunt. Surely it would have been possible when in the Russian capital to have taken steps which would have ensured

the withdrawal of the Russian troops. Surely it was not too late now. He urged to himself that it would, as a matter of fact, mean the saving of many lives and the saving of much time if he were to put back to St Petersburg and make immediate terms with the Government there.

"And the Government," said Strong to himself, "means the Czar."

With this idea in his mind he ordered the "Victor" about again, and presently they met the "Di" holding to a straight course for Bomberg. Strong slackened speed for a sufficient length of time to order Pelham into the "Di" and take Miss Hunt and Bellingham aboard the "Victor."

Miss Hunt had now quite recovered from the shock of the morning, and Strong shook hands with her warmly. "My dear young lady," he said, "you must not think that I was rude or intended to be unkind, by neglecting to speak to you or greet you this morning. You see, we were in a pretty tight place, and were engaged on a piece of work where every second was of importance. But let me thank you now, and, believe me, I do thank you from the bottom of my heart. I think you are simply splendid."

"So do I," said Bellingham. "So do I."

Miss Hunt looked from one man to the other, then laughed a little, and blushed.

"And now," said Strong, "we are going back to it again. That is why I want you and Bellingham in the 'Victor,' and our next call at St Petersburg, which will be in two or three hours, will not mean the child's play that we indulged in this morning."

"Child's play!" cried Miss Hunt. And she gave a little gasp.

Strong gave her a kindly little pat on the hand. "Ah!" he said, "you see I am always selfish. I was thinking of the part we played, not of the part you played. We were simply picnicking while you were a real heroine."

Miss Hunt blushed again, but this time it was with pleasure.

"And now," said Strong, "chat away to Bellingham as much as you please. I am sorry to say it, but it is necessary for me to think. And I assure you it requires some thinking to discover a plan whereby I can remove the Russian army from our frontiers by the exercise of a little gentle persuasion in St Petersburg." He smiled, but his smile was somewhat grim. For the next two hours he sat and smoked in silence, turning over plan after plan in his mind.

He kept on saying to himself, "The Czar! the Czar!" in order that he might keep the most vital point of his mission in view.

"And what can I do with the Czar?" he thought to himself. "Kidnap him? That would be a delightful experience, and it is quite a charming idea, but I do not see that it would help me to any great degree. The Czar is one of those simple-minded and honourable gentlemen who would certainly not be coerced. He would probably bid me sacrifice his life and the lives of all the men of his house rather than allow me to dictate the policy of Russia."

"The Czarina! Ah!" A way out had leapt into Strong's mind. "But I do not make war on women," he said to himself.

Then, hard after the first inspiration, there flashed into his brain a second, so daring that he instinctively drew in his breath at his own audacity.

"The Czarevitch!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE STEALING OF THE CZAREVITCH

THE blood rushed to his face, and then receded again. "No," he said to himself slowly, "I cannot do that. War on men is one thing, but war on women and children is another." Then he fell to reasoning with himself, and, as was customary with him, he argued his conscience down. He proved that the end justified the means. He satisfied himself that in kidnapping the Czarevitch he would be justified, inasmuch as it would in reality be the saving of immense bloodshed and the saving of immense treasure which would otherwise be spent on war. None the less, it seemed a heartless and cold-blooded thing to do. To steal the baby Czarevitch, the boy for whose birth there had been offered up a million prayers, the boy on whom was centred the hopes and happiness of one of the greatest rulers of mankind. It was a ruthless plan. It is a hard thing for a father to lose a son. It is infinitely harder for a king to lose an heir; though this is a fact sometimes lost sight of by ordinary folk. Yet he would do it! He would do it! Strong shut his teeth on it. He would be as gentle as he could in the matter. He would see to it that there was no unnecessary cruelty—but it must be done. Once the Czarevitch was in his possession, the rest would be simple. The armies of Russia would melt away from his frontiers, and if the armies of Russia melted away, so would the armies of France in like manner disappear. That left only Germany to be reckoned with.

It was an astonishing thing, but true, that a baby would hold the balance of the world's war or peace. It

was an astonishing thing, but very human; and one that on the imaginative side appealed to Strong immensely. Yet he argued his conscience steadily down—it seemed a cowardly thing to do. It was like hitting below the belt. But he argued with himself the more, and killed entirely the last scrap of lingering scruple. The question now was in what manner the daring theft should be accomplished. And here his knowledge of the life of St Petersburg came readily to his aid.

It was Sunday, and he could be in St Petersburg within an hour. In an hour's time the Czar's children, dressed in white furs, would be taking their Sunday drive along the bank of the Neva. A thousand eyes would watch their progress. At every yard there would be a policeman in disguise—men in civilian dress with revolvers in their pockets. Some way ahead of the sleigh carrying the royal children there would be three Cossacks. Three Cossacks would ride behind. But there would be a convenient distance between the Cossacks and the sleigh. The Russian Government system has an eye to effect. The children's drive was to a large extent engineered with a dramatic purpose. It looked so safe, so childlike, so entirely bland. And yet, while the poor little mites drove up and down the bank of the Neva on a Sunday afternoon, two royal parents suffered an agony of fear, and the minds of the greater officials in the capital of the Russian empire were ill at ease. It was possible, of course, that as Strong had been in St Petersburg in the morning, the drive would be cancelled. But this was doubtful, because of Russian officialdom's necessity for restoring confidence.

From that standpoint it would be a magnificent thing to send the children, all unconscious of the risks they ran, upon their Sunday drive, in order to reassure the public mind. It occurred to Strong, however, that his progress back to St Petersburg was in all probability being watched and reported on to the capital by the police below. On the instant, therefore, he ordered an

elevation of ten thousand feet, because, looking overhead, he saw that ten thousand feet would mean complete obscurity in a long, wind-driven bank of clouds.

Strong instructed Pelham to get as close alongside the "Victor" as he could and to drive the little craft to the utmost of her capacity. He had great need to get to St Petersburg soon.

They rushed on, keeping in touch by wireless, through a blinding snowstorm. Strong reckoned that snow must be falling in St Petersburg, but yet not so thickly as to disturb the people's Sabbath perambulations, for snow counts for little in the capital of the Czar. It is silk hats and women's feathers that keep streets empty in snowtime, and in a city where princes and princesses wear goloshes and fur-caps snow has little terror for anyone.

Presently Strong, calculating that he must now be on the borders of St Petersburg, dropped two thousand feet, and the town showed up blurred and vague beneath them. It was then that he stayed the progress of the "Victor."

He gave certain orders to Pelham, and, calling the "Di" alongside, stepped into her, choosing Arbuthnot and Churston for his companions. What had to be done had to be done quickly and with some boldness. The instructions which Pelham received were simple. He had only to follow the "Di" and cover her. There were shells and Winchester rifles in the "Victor." Strong always carried rifles with him.

Then he swooped like a hawk over the Admiralty building, and in a second was rushing past the palace on the quay, on a level with the first-floor windows. He thanked Providence, to whom he had no right to be grateful, that the snow was thicker than he had anticipated.

The "Victor" swung after and just above him, dangerously near. But risks had to be run. And then his luck held good, for, while the people cried out in astonishment at his sudden reappearance, and stood

stockstill on either sidewalk, three Cossacks riding at a great pace dashed beneath by him.

Strong stopped the "Di" dead and went down. He was at the controlling board himself, but so suddenly did he stop the little airship and ground her that, as her supports skidded in the snow, she listed, and but for a saving lift that Strong gave her would certainly have capsized. By a miracle he had set her fair and square across the road just as the sleigh bearing the royal children came rapidly along the quay.

Strong, with that extraordinary intuition of his, which at crises stood him in such good stead, had foreseen almost down to minute details what would happen. He had even instructed Arbuthnot and Churston to act as though the unknown circumstances with which they were about to grapple had been carefully mapped out for them.

With a sharp cry the driver of the sleigh reined in his horses till they slithered on their haunches through the snow. Their noses almost touched the side of the "Di."

Strong, Arbuthnot, and Churston were over the side in a twinkling, and rushed forward, not at the sleigh, but beyond it, for they expected the Cossacks. And the Cossacks came. Each of them carried a rifle, and as the horsemen came up with a clatter, Strong, Arbuthnot, and Churston, as had been arranged, fired into the breasts of the animals. The horses dropped. What followed was quick and horrible. A second discharge of the rifles settled the unhorsed men. Half-a-dozen citizens stood on the pavement, paralysed with fear. Two men in civilian dress dashed forward, revolvers in their hands. These were the police, whom Strong had expected. They came on only to die.

Strong had reckoned the Cossacks of the vanguard would, upon hearing the uproar, make back for the sleigh. And in this he was right. But he had counted on the "Victor" to settle them, and the shooting from the "Victor" was sure. But not so sure as it might

have been. Only two of the three men dropped. The third, a great man on a great horse, swooped round the corner of the "Di," and, spear in hand, swept down on Strong.

The man was right upon him, but Strong straightened himself, and, bringing the muzzle of his rifle up sharply, caught the horse under the nose. The beast reared and gave a great jump. Arbuthnot and Churston dealt with the man.

Quick as thought, Strong glanced about him. The way was clear. "Into the 'Di'!" he yelled. And, hurling their rifles in ahead of them, Churston and Arbuthnot jumped like wild cats into the little airship.

It was Strong who rushed to the sleigh where the children sat, in their white furs, looking like so many white mice, not terrified—Strong thanked heaven for that—but only wide-eyed and wondering. The nurse in charge of them had spread out her arms as a hen spreads her wings to cover her chicks. Strong's only thought was for the boy. He reached forward and picked the child up and caught him to him. The child cried out and doubled his fists, and with his tiny strength beat at Strong's face savagely.

While the child was still in his arms Strong heard a warning shout from the "Di," and whipped round in time to behold another man hard upon him. His rifle, of course, he had thrown away, and he had only one arm with which to defend himself. But as the man came on he dodged and dealt him a swinging blow behind the ear. Huge as the man was, he fell like a log beneath Strong's blow.

And a moment later Strong was in the "Di," and the "Di" was flying up. The "Victor" followed, and Strong steered alongside the bigger airship.

His face was white to the lips as he held the struggling child from him and reached out to Miss Hunt.

"This," he said in a choked voice, "must be your work." He placed the boy in her arms.

Strong was of no mind to remain near the earth.

He had no desire to behold the frenzy of the people or the terror of the children whom he had robbed of their brother. For the first time in his life he was entirely shaken out of himself. He was indeed half-hysterical. He sat down in the stern of the "Victor" and bowed his face in his hand and cried like a child.

The boy was to some extent comforted in Miss Hunt's arms, and clung to her, sobbing. The men gathered forward, dazed and somewhat scared at what they had done.

After five minutes or so Strong raised his head, and, openly and unashamed, wiped away his own hysterical tears. He had come back to his own quiet self again. He made no excuse for himself, made no explanation, made no comment on what had happened. He merely gave the curt order: "Back to the Admiralty."

The "Victor" put back.

Strong then took up the wireless and ticked a query, and he was sufficiently collected now to smile to himself at the promptitude with which that query was answered. Obviously constant watch had been set over the instrument since he had delivered his ultimatum in the morning.

"You will understand, if you please, that I wish to deal on a matter of important business with his Majesty the Czar himself. At the present moment the Czarevitch is in my possession, and I am not ashamed to use that possession as a lever."

The answer came: "All communications from you will be instantly repeated by telephone to the palace."

"Then you know the news?" said Strong.

"We are aware of the facts," was the answer.

There was a little pause, and then the sparks in the instrument began to play again. "His Imperial Majesty the Czar is waiting," was the message.

Strong smiled, a rather unpleasant little smile, to himself. "I'll bet," he said, "it is not very often that his Imperial Majesty has waited."

Then he ticked: "Inform his Majesty that I hold

the Czarevitch as hostage. If his Majesty will consent to withdraw the Russian troops from the frontier of Balkania, the Czarevitch shall be restored to him. But, though much is done in the name of the Czar which is in reality the work of his officials, I decline to deliver up the Czarevitch until those troops have been actually withdrawn."

The reply was short and dignified. "Please understand that his Imperial Majesty will in no way agree to any such arrangement even though he loses his son. He believes that even Mr Strong cannot afford to risk being branded as inhuman by the world, with the people of which he is now playing."

Strong rapped back: "This is no question of play. If every man's hand is against me, so must my hand be against every man. Believe me, indeed, that I regret—I cannot say how greatly—the necessity for what I know must be regarded as a blackguard act; but I have no choice in the matter. After all, the kidnapping of Miss Hunt was not much less cowardly."

He waited for an answer to this, but no answer came. He sent word that he was waiting for a reply.

The reply was: "There is nothing more to be said."

"Am I," asked Strong, "to consider this answer final?"

"It must be considered final until the Czar has held the great Council of State. This is more a matter for Russia than for the Czar himself."

"So be it," Strong made answer, "but in the meantime I should like to assure his Majesty that, no matter what I have done or how he may regard me, I am at least a man and a gentleman. I am prepared to risk much to prove this, and I am prepared to trust his Imperial Majesty if he will trust me. My suggestion is this: while it is yet light I will descend in the smaller of my airships to the garden of the Imperial palace, and there meet the Czar, and I shall be glad if the Czarina will accompany him. I am sufficiently human in feeling to desire to assure them that their boy shall be treated

with every consideration, that he is in reality as safe with me as with them. Moreover, should they desire it, I will bring the boy with me that they may see him and bid him good-bye for the little time I hope it will be necessary for me to keep him."

After this there was a great pause, and Strong concluded, justly, that this was woman's work. In spite of his pride, in spite of his high principles, the Czar would at least consult the Czarina on such a point as this.

A quarter of an hour went by before there came an answer. Then the instrument flashed out: "The Czar agrees. He pledges his sacred word that Mr Strong's safety shall be respected on condition that the safety of the Czarina and himself shall be respected in turn by Mr Strong."

Strong answered: "I desire nothing better."

Covered by the "Victor," Strong therefore put down in the "Di," holding the now greatly comforted child in his arms.

Strong also had an eye for effect, and therefore he took Miss Hunt with him. "And I hope," he said to himself somewhat bitterly, "that it may help to comfort mamma."

It had been quite unnecessary for Strong to point out how truly defenceless the Czar and Czarina would have been under the guns and shells of the "Victor." He knew that that had been well considered before the reply had been made to him. It was now growing dark, and still snowing, as Strong climbed over the side of the "Di," and, turning about, reached up his hands for the Czarevitch.

He took the child quite tenderly, and looked round him in the gloom. Two pathetic figures approached him.

The Czar walked like a broken man; his head drooped and his face was haggard. A little joy and a little relief crept into his ghastly countenance as he beheld his son. He gave a sharp cry and stretched out

his arms, and let them fall again nervelessly to his side.

But the Czarina was a brave and queenly figure. She came on as one having great confidence in herself and in others; and her face was proud, but kindly. Strong said never a word, but gave the child into her arms.

She bowed her face over him and held him tightly in silence.

Strong pulled off his cap and stood bare-headed in the snow.

"Madame," he said, and the distress in his voice made the Czarina glance up at him. "Madame, I cannot tell you how I regret being compelled to behave so brutally."

He said no more, but it sufficed. The Empress looked up at him again with a slow, strange smile. She looked at him long and thoughtfully. "Yes," she said, as one who catches at a far-off meaning, "I believe that in reality you only mean to be kind."

The words of the Empress and her expression touched Strong to the quick. He would have spoken again, but the words would not come to his lips. He hated to stand in the presence of so much agony of spirit.

It was the Empress who spoke first. "I realise," she said, "that time is short both for you and for us. You have trusted us as a man. I will trust you as a woman—as a mother. I do not surrender my son to you as a hostage. I give him into your charge as a child needing protection." She kissed the boy, and then held him out to his father, who covered his baby face with kisses. Then he turned away, and by the heaving of his shoulders Strong knew that the Czar of All the Russias was quietly sobbing.

The Empress kissed the boy herself, and without another word gave him back to Strong.

He, overcome by the dignity of her grief, would gladly have fallen on his knees and kissed her hand. But he reflected quickly that even this tribute to her

sorrow would be unwelcome, and therefore he made a little bow over the baby's body, and without a word turned and held the boy up to the outstretched arms of Miss Hunt.

The Empress drew a step nearer, and, stretching up her hand touched Miss Hunt's fingers lightly. "You will be good to him—you will be good to my baby?" said the Empress, wistfully.

"Yes," said Miss Hunt, gravely, "I will. I promise it."

And then the "Di" went up, and Strong looked fixedly ahead, unable to bear any longer the sight of the two pathetic figures standing mournfully and dejectedly together in the dusk.

CHAPTER XXXV

A LULL BEFORE THE STORM

THE "Victor" and the "Di" reached Bomberg about midnight and Strong ordered all the party straight to bed.

On the morrow he summoned General Martel and M. Stalvan and received their reports. The city, it appeared, had settled down into almost complete confidence in the existing state of affairs, and for the first time since Strong had entered into possession of his new kingdom the people were following their ordinary avocations.

Going to the telephone, he spoke to Langley on the balloon ground, who reported that all three airships were now practically complete. Strong also got the good news that in the few spare moments he could snatch Langley had succeeded in applying his latest improvement to the wireless, so that they could now get messages through to London direct. So with his heart a great deal lighter, for the reason that all was going well, Strong went along the corridor to the spacious room, which had hastily been converted into a nursery, where he found the youthful Czarevitch gambolling with Miss Hunt. Miss Hunt was on her knees, with her hair tumbled about her face, and the future Czar of All the Russias was obviously under the impression that she was a bear which must be slaughtered. She scrambled up as Strong entered, and walked towards him with flushed cheeks. The baby grabbed at her skirts and hid his face in them when he beheld Strong. For Strong was the bad wicked man who had taken him away from his mamma the day before. The small boy

indeed would have howled but for the fact that Miss Hunt picked him up and instantly comforted him.

"You seem to be getting on very well with the youngster," he said.

"Yes," said Miss Hunt, "we are the best of friends. Indeed, I am privileged to call him Nicky."

Then Strong's face grew grave. He was now compelled to ask the question which he had deliberately put off from asking until he had cleared up the business that called for his first attention. "I suppose," he said, "that you have no news from Cloud about Diana?"

"None whatever," said Miss Hunt.

"If you don't hear from him to-day," she added, "what shall you do?"

"I don't know," Strong answered slowly and thoughtfully.

Strong said no more on the matter that night, but on the following day, as he still failed to receive any news of Diana, he grew anxious, and in the course of the morning sought out Miss Hunt.

Miss Hunt saw the anxiety on his face and guessed what troubled him. "You have heard no news of the princess?" she said.

"None," said Strong. Then, for him, he looked a little awkward and uncomfortable, and again Miss Hunt guessed his thoughts.

"You want me to go and look for her?" she said.

Strong smiled. "You are a good mind reader," he said. "To tell you the truth, I had some such idea, but I do not think it would be fair. I do not see how I could ask you to go through any more tribulation for my sake."

"I will not do it for your sake," said Miss Hunt, quite simply, "but for Diana's."

"You do not mean," said Strong, eagerly, "that you would risk again what might be your life and go back to Paris now?"

"I do," said Miss Hunt.

"Then, my dear girl," he said, "you are most certainly the bravest of the brave!"

As it was impossible to land Miss Hunt anywhere in Europe, it was decided she should go direct to England in the "Di," and in the care of Bellingham and Arbuthnot she left in the course of the afternoon.

After the departure of Miss Hunt Strong suffered an agony of uneasiness. He regretted deeply that it was necessary to send that long-suffering girl into peril once again; but the other girl to whose rescue she went stood, he was sure, in greater peril still—and the other girl was Diana.

He got news from the *Daily Wireless* of the safe arrival of the "Di" in England, together with the unwelcome information that Miss Hunt was ill. The message added that it would be some days before the girl could go on to Paris in search of Jimmy Cloud.

Strong, cursing Cloud in his heart and wondering why he still got no news of him from Diana, sought to drown his anxiety by setting his new-found kingdom in order.

There was much to be done, especially in the tuning of the wireless instruments. Langley indeed was found to relax his work on the airships, out of the fear that the messages which they were now constantly sending and receiving between London and Bomberg might be tapped.

There was all the more fear of the wireless messages between London and Bomberg being tapped because their own instruments carried well to the Admiralty of St Petersburg, and all the afternoon following Miss Hunt's departure Strong was in negotiation with the Russian authorities.

He gave the Russian Government ample assurance as to the safety of the Czarevitch, and, reading between the lines of the messages he received, he felt pretty sure that the Czar himself was making every effort towards the withdrawal of his troops from the Balkanian

frontier. But it appeared there were difficulties, difficulties mainly placed in the way by Germany, and to some extent raised by France. France was in an extremely uncomfortable position. For her part she had for the moment nothing to fear from Strong; but she was anxious lest, by giving offence to Germany, she should precipitate a European war, which would render the Powers all the less capable of dealing with the common enemy.

Hence the negotiations were not of much avail. The Russian Government would only say that they could take no steps without the consent of their allies, because the dictates of policy would not permit them to break the terms of their alliance.

All this afforded considerable satisfaction to Strong. It was, at least, of some comfort to know that the Powers were quarrelling among themselves, for the more they quarrelled the less were their chances of success. So for a few days at least there was little to be anxious about, seeing that in any case the armies of Europe would not move against him until such time as the airships being built for the Kaiser were in fighting trim.

Strong had to debate with himself the tactics which he should adopt, and, acting upon the Napoleonic principle that the best defence is the best attack, he decided that he would not wait for an onslaught to be made upon his frontiers; he would carry war into the camp of the enemy. It was then that his sense of fair play and his desire to behave at least as a sportsman led him to choose a course which was by no means the most easy and by no means the most safe.

He realised that were he to content himself with keeping two of his airships over the barrack ground in Berlin, he could, with the greatest ease, destroy the aeroplanes of the Kaiser as they emerged from the steel-protected sheds. But, though this seemed the obvious thing to do, Strong reflected that it was not always the most obvious course that was the wisest. And it appeared to him that the wisest thing in this case

was at least to give the Germans a sporting chance. He knew that the issue would not, in the long run, be affected, and the Germans, when he had reduced them to submission, even as he had reduced Balkania to surrender, would be far more likely to accept his edicts and fall in with his wishes for the remodelling of their country than if he had merely adopted the policy of hitting a head wherever he saw it.

In his own heart he had not the slightest doubt what must be the issue of a battle; but, at the same time, generosity is inevitably appreciated, and he felt certain that the generosity of his enabling the Germans to put up a fight at all would in the long run weigh in his favour. A personal motive, too, also inclined him towards this decision. Massacre did not appeal to him, whereas the prospect of battle always nerved him to his best work. And so he chose fair and square battle, and it was in that happy mood which always possessed him before going into action that he made his way to the quarters of the baby Czarevitch. By now the child had lost his dread of him, and came running with his small arms outstretched as Strong entered the room.

Strong caught the boy and tossed him high in the air again and again, while the future Czar of All the Russias crowed and chuckled at his dearest foe. Strong romped with the boy until he was well nigh exhausted. And the child was tired, too, and content enough to nestle half drowsily in his arms while Strong sat before the nursery fire. And the strange humour of the situation appealed forcibly to Strong. So greatly did it appeal to him that he sat for quite an unnecessary time dwelling over the irony of the circumstances.

In his arms he held the baby who was a hostage for a great people's peace. Within a few days it would be necessary for a Government controlling the lives of one hundred and fifteen million people to decide whether they should accept the law of Strong, or whether they should defy him and lose their ruler's heir, or whether they should accept the law of the stranger and receive

back the baby in whose small person their destinies were bound up. Presently the boy went to sleep, and Strong tiptoed with him to his cot and there laid him down.

The old peasant woman who had taken up the duties of nurse, which Miss Hunt, much against her will, had been forced to relinquish, smiled and nodded at the Dictator as he stood by the baby's bed still pondering over all that depended on the safety of that tiny specimen of humanity. From the nursery he walked back to his bare study, and there received the news that the airships were now ready for their flight. And Strong smiled a smile of almost childish satisfaction to himself, because he realised that in those four instruments of warfare he held the power of life and death over the whole world.

True, he recognised that many years must pass before he would be able to enforce his will in every country, but mundane things being possible when the forces of civilisation are united on a point, he realised that in the end he must emerge triumphant, because nothing could prevent his mastery over Europe being complete within the next few months.

Ringling up Langley on the telephone, he congratulated him warmly on his work, and urged him to come up to the palace with all the speed he could. Then he summoned General Martel, M. Stalvan, Hertz, Pelham, Wildney, and those Balkanian officers who had stood by him when his fate was still being weighed in a trembling balance.

When all were assembled he made them a plain and simple speech.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have asked you to gather here because I want to establish among you all the friendship and co-operation that I can. It is necessary to gain my end, that my will should be absolutely law, but at the same time I desire it to be obeyed out of affection rather than out of fear. I hope that even the most fearful man in this country will recognise to-night that Balkania is now insured against attacks of Europe.

I trust, too, that it will see, within the next few days, that, far from being at the world's mercy, the world lies at our feet, and that, from being numbered among the smaller and less important States of the civilised earth, we shall suddenly have become the only world Power."

There would have been some slight outburst of applause, but Strong held up his hand to check the faintest demonstration, and briskly turned from one man to another, quickly giving his orders for the morrow.

He decided to issue a proclamation that night, stating what had been accomplished and what would soon be achieved. And in that proclamation he included an order for a general holiday to be held on the following day.

Soon the newspapers of Bomberg announced that on the morrow Balkania's aerial fleet would make an ascent at noon. Further, they called upon the people to honour the event by gathering on the Morning Hills to cheer their aerial navy.

Then, under Strong's directions, the papers went on to explain that it would be necessary for them to watch the ascent from there, because not one tithe of the population of Bomberg could possibly hope to see anything of the ascent from the balloon ground itself. Having seen to this, Strong next turned his attention to the ordering of the troops. The army on the frontier he did not disturb, but one-third of the Bomberg garrison, numbering 10,000 men, he had posted round the balloon ground, lest in their eagerness to see the airships the populace should attempt to break through the barriers.

Twenty thousand men were, at ten o'clock in the morning, to be marshalled on the plain at the west of the town, where was to be conducted the most remarkable review ever conceived in a soldier's mind. For the saluting base was to be, not a royal standard, but an airship, stationed sufficiently close to the earth to enable every soldier marching past to clearly behold the face of his Dictator.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ON THE WAY TO ARMAGEDDON

FROM the bustle of all this business Strong turned away to a sadder task—the almost hopeless attempt to communicate with Miss Hunt by wireless. Two full hours he spent that night between eleven and one o'clock in the morning ticking busily away query after query to Paris. But no answer came, and his heart grew fearful for what might be Diana's fate. He was indeed of half a mind to make a rapid descent on Paris, but he saw that his approach would inevitably be known, and that, with such a crafty enemy to deal with as the fugitive king, Diana would be placed beyond the possibility of even his discovering her. Moreover, he had the utmost faith in Miss Hunt, as he had every right to do, so he was content to wait another twenty-four hours. Should he not hear from her by then he decided it would be time to act.

In spite of his anxiety he slept well, and, rising early on the morrow, began shortly after six o'clock to deal with a mass of business that demanded his attention. This occupied him until eleven o'clock, when he walked down to the forecourt, where a glittering staff waited to receive him. With the exception of Hertz, he was practically without a personal friend as he mounted his horse for the ride to the balloon ground. Four of the Englishmen were with the airships, and General Martel was with the troops outside the city.

In spite of the proclamation urging them to concentrate upon the Morning Hills, the press of people in the streets was great.

For the first time since he had entered Bomberg,

Strong was cheered by the people themselves. And he was cheered not half-heartedly, but with great fervour. They had begun to recognise at last that he was a man in whom they could put their trust.

The notice of the public holiday had been short, but, none the less, attempts at decoration had been made in nearly every street, and the long thoroughfare leading from the palace to the Ministry was gay with flags and bunting as Strong clattered down the hill with his jingling retinue trotting hard behind him.

From the Ministry square to the balloon ground itself the road was kept by mounted troops, while round the barriers of the ground the infantry were hard put to it to keep the people back.

Feeling the joy of a coming conflict in his veins, Strong rode his horse blithely, and his face was pleasant and brave to look on, and the cheering grew and grew in volume and continued long after the iron gates of the balloon ground had been closed with a crash behind the new Dictator.

In the balloon ground itself everything was business-like and in order. Langley had marshalled the workmen in military fashion in a hollow square, and into this Strong rode alone. He looked about him with a smile, and doffed his military helmet, and, standing in his stirrups, bareheaded, in the sunshine, he cried: "Men, I thank you all for the great service that you have rendered to Balkania and myself!"

It was Langley who led the cheering, and then Strong, dismounting, made for the "Victor." For he was still true to his first love of the airships.

The "Di" having returned, Arbuthnot assumed control of the "State," while Langley and Bellingham were placed in charge of the remaining airships, which had been christened the "Balkania" and the "Princess." Churston took the "Di," and, at a signal given by gunfire, the four great airships and their little comrade rose simultaneously in the air. They went gently up to a

height of two thousand feet, so that they could be discerned by all the city, and, as he hung above the balloon ground, Strong's heart swelled within him to hear the cheers rising from the black crowds upon the Morning Hills and from the troops stationed in the plain.

With Langley he had worked out a series of simple evolutions, much on the lines of those followed in naval tactics, and, with the "Victor" leading, the airships circled slowly round the city. Then they dropped to a lesser elevation and made across the plain on which the troops were stationed. They hung with scarcely a tremor some thirty feet above the earth, in a well-dressed line, and then at the firing of a battery stationed above the crowds on the Morning Hills the troops began to march. Led by General Martel and the staff which had followed Strong to the balloon ground, they slowly moved across the plain just beneath the "Victor's" bows.

General Martel rode, grim and silent, at their head, merely lifting his sabre to the salute as he passed the airship. But the men, having seen the power of Strong, and drunk with a sense of the enormous power that had suddenly come to them, were not to be bound by discipline, and as rank after rank of infantry passed the saluting base, the men tore their helmets from their heads and hoisted them upon their rifles, and cheered and cheered again. It was indeed only by the almost superhuman efforts of their officers that they were kept marching.

When the last man had passed, Strong put the airships up with a jump, and for half an hour or so drove the people of Bomberg into a frenzy of delight over the evolutions which they performed.

Before making his ascent, Strong had left with Hertz a further proclamation, stating that he proposed that very day to proceed to Berlin.

Strong was not minded, however, to leave Bomberg entirely without defences, or, for that matter, run the slightest risk of breeding again a spirit of rebellion, and

so he had detailed the "Balkania," under the charge of Bellingham, to remain over the city during his absence.

It was too late in the day to make for Berlin then, so he remained in mid-air all through the afternoon and all through the night. And all through the night the searchlights from the airships played about the city, giving the people there an enormous sense of security and peace.

At five the searchlights were extinguished, and Strong steered a straight course for Berlin, leading the way in the "Victor." The "Princess," with Arbuthnot, followed, and then came the "State" and the "Di."

It was high noon when they reached Berlin, and above the city they could see—her huge bulk shaking and quivering in a stiff breeze—the unwieldy war balloon, the "Deutschland."

Then Strong's heart smote him. It seemed so unfair, so miserably mean to take such a defenceless vessel. But with the plan that he had at the back of his mind it was necessary to destroy even the feeble "Deutschland." He was determined, however, to do the business in as sportsmanlike a spirit as he could, and he telegraphed to Churston in the "Di" to say that to him would fall the task of either destroying or capturing the enemy single-handed.

Now, Churston was merely a lad, and being enormously healthy, grinned delightedly to himself at the prospect of coming to grips with the Germans; and while the three great airships hung in a line overhead he descended on a level with the "Deutschland" and signalled her to surrender. He was careful, however, not to approach too close, for he saw that the "Deutschland" carried six men, and that those men were armed. And he knew that one stray bullet getting home would suffice, not merely to destroy him, but to set the "Di" adrift, and thereby lessen Strong's chances.

Strong, indeed, had done an exceedingly risky thing in selecting the "Di" for battle. The "Di" was the

smallest and most mobile of the craft, and therefore it was upon the "Di" that he relied for making the rapid ascents and descents which he had planned for himself in Berlin. He had, however, immense faith in Churston, and, moreover, he desired to see for himself as a very practical experiment how such an airship as the "Di" would shape in battle with a war balloon such as the "Deutschland."

And so, though it was with just a pang of anxiety that he loosed the "Di" on the Germans, he was none the less sure in his mind that he was choosing the better way.

The Germans stolidly ignored the signal calling on them to surrender. Four of them stood squarely at their posts, each man with his rifle, while two of them wrestled with the cumbersome mechanism of the great dirigible in a vain endeavour to bring her on a level with the "Di." But as they rose, so did the "Di," and then, more or less as a demonstration of his powers, Churston began to rapidly circle above them, as vultures circle above a carcase before they swoop to their foul meal. Some minutes were spent in these exercises, when Churston, not desiring to receive peremptory instructions from Strong, which would practically signify that he was not conducting the battle as he should, decided that if the "Deutschland" would not surrender, and that the difference in his resources and those of the enemy prevented a fair fight, it would be necessary to sink her. So, rising first to a considerable height in order to escape the range of their rifles, he placed himself immediately overhead, and then rapidly descended until he was within a couple of hundred yards above the "Deutschland's" enormous gas-bag.

It was perfectly impossible for the enemy to reach him with rifle fire, whereas they lay at his mercy. So pitifully, indeed, did they lie at his mercy that it was with some hesitation that he took up one of the little hand shells of Langley's contriving, and dropped it fair and square into the "Deutschland." There was a

blinding flash as the shell exploded in the gas, and the flames leaped up so high that Churston could feel the warmth of them. But the balloon of the "Deutschland" was constructed in air-tight compartments, so that only a portion of the bag was torn away. But the flames set up a fire that began rapidly to devour the gas-bag, and the "Deutschland," amid a continuous succession of explosions and puffs of flame, began slowly to drift earthwards. From the "Victor" Strong had been noting the sensation in the town beneath, and if ever a city were in a panic, Berlin was in a panic now. Every strip of street was black with people, gazing upwards with white, tense faces, as their first hope of safety sank slowly but surely towards the city over which Strong hung.

He observed with great admiration that the Germans stuck pluckily to their posts, and in spite of the fact that cell after cell in the balloon was burning and exploding, and that, therefore, bit by bit of her chances of keeping afloat was rapidly diminishing, the men in charge of her were doing their utmost to struggle towards the barrack ground at the back of the Central Station, in which the Kaiser's aeroplanes were building.

But Strong, while he admired the Germans' pluck, was by no means pleased to think that they should escape him. He desired to capture them if he could. But could he?

Signalling to the "State" and the "Princess" to remain stationary, he made a sudden swoop, and came on a level with the rapidly-sinking "Deutschland." He then put towards her at a fair rate of speed, signalling to her to surrender, and threatening her that if she would not haul down her flag he would order the "Di" to dash her to destruction.

The stolid Germans worked bravely on, paying not the slightest heed to his signals, and Strong, in a sudden outburst of rage, which scattered his discretion, made a sudden dash over the "Deutschland." But the men on her were heroically steady. As the "Victor" came

on they lined the side, and five rifles went to five shoulders. There was a puff of smoke from the five guns, and only a swift finger on the controlling board saved the "Victor" from being riddled.

This steadied Strong, and he cast about for some means to capture the "Deutschland," which was now sinking faster and faster towards the barrack ground. But he had to let her go—there was no help for it. The Germans saw their advantage, and used it to the full.

Therefore Strong waited. The balloon drove slowly down until it grated along the steel roof of the underground sheds in which the airships were being built. As the "Deutschland" descended, the barrack square swarmed with troops, and Strong decided to leave them to their work.

He then put up to the level of the other airships, and made across the few hundred yards or so that divided him from the Chancellerie, where he knew the wireless was installed.

From the Chancellerie Strong got into communication with the castle, and demanded an instant parley with the Kaiser, but he was informed that the Kaiser was at Potsdam, and that in any case it would be impossible to communicate with him.

"I will see about that," Strong ticked back. "Berlin is swarming with people—people, I presume, that it is the desire of the Prussian Government to protect. But if you fail to place me in communication with the Kaiser direct, I shall have no scruple in laying this city in ruins, to the best of my ability."

He had no intention of doing any such thing, but the threat told. The easy manner in which he had dealt with the "Deutschland" had struck fear into the official mind.

Presently there came an answer that the Kaiser would communicate with him if he so pleased.

Strong was so pleased.

He was given to understand that any message which

he now repeated would be passed on by telephone to Potsdam. Strong did not spare the Kaiser.

Adopting a conversational tone, he twitted the Emperor on the past. "You see, I have come back, your Majesty," he ticked, "even as I said I would. Now I require your presence in Berlin."

The answer was: "The Kaiser remains in Potsdam."

Again Strong uttered his threat of destruction of Berlin, and the reply came this time in amended form: "His Majesty, seeing that duty calls him to the post of danger, has decided to return to Berlin at once, and if Mr Strong chooses he can have parley with him there."

Strong so chose.

It was a full two hours, however, before any further communication came, and, hovering above Unter den Linden, he was able to note the furious passage of the Kaiser's car from the gates of the Thiergarten, up the double avenue, across the bridge over the Spree, and to the castle.

It was the Kaiser who made the first overture, and a message was sent asking whether Strong would elect to have a personal interview with his Majesty.

Strong ticked back: "To-day is Saturday. I can conceive of no more pleasant method of enjoying his Majesty's society than that he should be my guest for the week-end at Potsdam. As, however, it is inconvenient for me that the Kaiser should call to-night, I am graciously disposed to postpone his visit to the morrow. I shall therefore expect him at noon."

The reply which he got was that it was impossible for his Imperial Majesty to consent to any such proposal.

"Potsdam is the Kaiser's, and not Mr Strong's, and Potsdam will remain the residence of the German Emperor."

All that Strong made answer was: "We shall see." And he shut off the instrument.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE WAR LORD FINDS A MASTER

EARLY as it was in the afternoon, the light was already beginning to wane, and Strong had no desire to let night fall about him before he had accomplished the capture of Potsdam. He was conscious that after he had set the wireless instrument down there came continuous little flashes through the glass side, but to these he paid no heed, thinking that it would be just as well if his Majesty were made to suffer the experience of waiting.

In the "Victor" he went straight to Potsdam, knowing the distance was so small that he could conveniently re-open negotiations with the palace *via* the Chancellerie the moment it became necessary so to do. Berlin, he was satisfied, was in a salutary state of panic. He rather chuckled to himself to think of the effect that his visit had already created—not because it pleased him to disturb the security or the pleasures of the people, but because of the delightful political tangle that he knew must follow on his appearance. In the presence of a danger greater than the Prussian Government had ever been forced to face before, Strong guessed pretty shrewdly that the Social Democratic organs, utterly regardless of the cause of their country, would not scruple to use the opportunity of making themselves felt.

That would be an additional thorn in the side of the Kaiser, and the more thorns that Strong could plant there the better he would be pleased.

In a quarter of an hour's time the four airships were over Potsdam. Then Strong halted to make an investigation of what was happening below.

From all quarters came the sounds of bugles, and it

was apparent that the troops were being rapidly moved from their barracks and massed in the streets and squares. In front of the palace, sitting stolid and silent on their horses, were the white-coated troopers of the Guard, while regiment after regiment of blue-coated infantry were massed in almost every street. The Potsdam garrison was a strong one.

All this bustle and movement and preparation rather amused Strong than displeased him. He knew how utterly impotent were the forces paraded beneath him, and his only disquieting thought was that the Kaiser might be sufficiently obstinate to necessitate the massacre of brave men. This, however, he was determined to prevent if by any means he could do so. Therefore, picking up the wireless instrument once more, he proceeded again to tick-tack inquiries to the Chancellerie.

His ticking met with a prompt response, and he was assured, upon his asking it, that he was practically in direct communication with the Emperor himself.

"You will be good enough," he rapped, "to inform his Majesty that I desire the garrison of Potsdam to be withdrawn forthwith."

He uttered no threats as to what would happen if his instructions were not obeyed. He realised that it is always the weaker way to give reasons when one issues a command.

The answer came: "His Majesty declines to do anything of the sort."

Strong ticked back: "His Majesty is exceedingly foolish, and I have no hesitation in telling him of the fact. I trust his Majesty will see that it is utterly useless to deny me, and that to dispute my authority will simply result in disaster to his troops."

There was no answer.

But Strong, anxious lest he should give the impression that he was in any way hesitating, continued his monologue on the machine as follows: "So long as it is possible for me to do so, I shall respect the lives of the Emperor's

soldiers and subjects in general, but as it is absolutely necessary for me to enter into possession of Potsdam before dark, I shall immediately proceed to demolish all the various buildings, which, I presume, his Majesty would prefer to keep intact. I may add," he ticked on. "that the demolition of buildings will continue until such time as I receive information from his Majesty that he has had enough of the fruits of his obstinacy." It occurred to Strong, immediately after he had ticked this message, that fear on the part of the operators on the instrument at the other end and the officers charged with the duty of transmitting his messages to the palace might result in the softening of his words, and so he demanded to know whether his messages were being repeated word for word as he rapped them out to the Kaiser himself.

On this score he was very promptly assured by the Chancellor himself, and Strong indulged in a small chuckle, inasmuch as he was pleased to think that he was in a position to be impudent to Emperors.

Once more, before he proceeded to action, he demanded if the Kaiser had any reply to make.

The instrument remained silent.

So, ordering the "State" and the "Princess" to remain with the "Di," he himself proceeded in the "Victor" across Sanssouci Park to the famous windmill, the miller of which defied even the great Frederick himself.

Now Strong had visited Sanssouci Park before, and was of sufficiently a romantic temperament to regret the necessity of destroying a monument so venerable and so picturesque. But even the quaintness and the history of the windmill did not disturb his purpose to the slightest degree, and in less than three minutes the windmill was a blazing mass of ruins.

Strong peeped into the glass of the wireless instrument, but still there were no signs of any sparks, and he went forward again with the necessary work of destruction.

Before, however, he put the "Victor" on he debated

with himself as to whether it would not be better to next destroy the Orangery or the palace. With a view to the fact that he must subsequently return to Potsdam as victor of Europe, he was half inclined to leave the palace intact.

He saw, however, that to carry out his purpose of staying the week-end in Potsdam itself it would be far easier for him to sleep in the Orangery than in the palace.

Without any further scruples he proceeded to drop shell after shell into the palace, until the flames spurted up and the great mass of building was rapidly in the grip of an unextinguishable fire. He was operating from such an altitude that, with the aid of glasses, he could easily observe the movements of the troops of all arms of the paraded garrison beneath him. And the garrison was powerless.

Strong had noted during his previous observations that, whereas all the cavalry and infantry that could be mustered had been called hurriedly to arms, there had been no signs of artillery; and so, while the palace blazed, he determined with the aid of shell to investigate the mystery of the missing guns.

His old-time knowledge of Potsdam enabled him to easily pick out, even from the height at which he was, the long line of the artillery barracks, and towards these he moved, and, when he hung over them, carefully dropped a shell fair and square through the roof of the building which he knew housed the guns. The effect was immediate. Where all had been silence and desolation a few moments before, there now was a scene of animation which amounted to confusion.

Bugles rang wildly. From their quarters the artillerymen in parade uniform dashed to the stables, and in a few seconds, with marvellous precision and speed, the guns were horsed and came clattering out of the sheds. Once in the broad, open roadway they fell into line, and, at a brisk trot, jangled towards the parade ground beyond the barracks of the Guards.

Strong laughed a little to himself to think how easily

he had disturbed the hornets' nest, and laughed all the more when he considered how utterly impossible it was for the moving engines of destruction beneath him to harm him in any way.

At this moment Strong was conscious of flashes within the disc of the wireless, but to these he turned a blind eye.

Quickly and easily he set the barracks of the artillery alight from end to end, and then moved above what he knew full well was the magazine.

To Strong's eye, already experienced in detecting the motives of manœuvring troops, it was obvious that his position and movements were being carefully watched and accurately reported to whomsoever might be commanding the army below. For, as he swung over the magazine, other bugles rang out, and such troops as were still stationed in the immediate neighbourhood began to move away at the double.

This made it abundantly apparent to Strong what must be the effect if he dropped a shell from the "Victor" into the magazine itself.

He consulted telegraphically with Langley, however, only to be assured that at the altitude at which he then was the exploding of the magazine could do him no damage. Overboard, therefore, went a shell, and there came a blinding sheet of flame and a report which made the "Victor" quiver. The cloud of smoke which followed the explosion was so dense that a quarter of an hour elapsed before the air had cleared sufficiently for Strong to observe the effect of his last shell.

When at last the smoke had rolled away, even Strong was astonished at the effect of the blowing up of the magazine.

The barracks opposite were in ruins, while all the windows in Potsdam had been shivered to atoms. Under the cover of the smoke the troops had been concentrated on the plain beyond the railway station at the southern edge of the park. The whole garrison of Potsdam was now drawn up as though for some gigantic review.

Till then he had been too busy with various matters to look at the wireless, but, glancing at it now, Strong observed that flashes under the glass disc were coming quick and fast. Evidently someone was in a panic—possibly the Emperor feared that from the destruction of property Strong might proceed to taking lives, and, as he had no wish to be forced into this, Strong began to pick up the thread of the urgent messages with which he was being bombarded.

The ticking from the Chancellerie was rather wild and Strong had some little difficulty in reading the message. It was to the effect that the Kaiser, for the sake of peace, and in the interests of his subjects, was prepared to surrender Potsdam to Mr Strong if he would consent to take no further action against the capital.

Strong ticked back that he accepted the surrender of Potsdam, but would accept no conditions attached to such a surrender. Nor would he consider the surrender complete until he had seen the whole garrison march into Berlin.

“And, Heaven knows,” he added, “that the Kaiser will need the flower of his troops if he continues in this folly.”

There was a little pause, and then he received this curiously terse message, which he felt sure came from the Emperor himself. It was: “A triumph such as this cannot endure for long.”

Strong immediately made answer: “‘Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof,’ and it were better for his Majesty if, instead of attempting to enter into a philosophical discussion, he would grasp the essential facts of the case and order the withdrawal of the garrison.”

To his immense relief Strong received back the message that Potsdam capitulated, and that without further delay the whole garrison would be ordered back to the capital.

It was now growing dusk, and Strong intimated to the Chancellerie that he would supervise the withdrawal of the garrison with the aid of searchlights,

"And, mark you," he continued to tap, "that while it pains me to suggest that his Majesty could possibly be guilty of treachery, I would warn him against taking any desperate risks. If his Majesty, in the hope of overwhelming me in the night, proposes to leave a small body of volunteers behind to attempt to encompass my destruction, his last state will be worse than his first. I want it to be clearly realised, not only by his Majesty but by all his subjects, that if any harm befalls me, the harm that will afterwards befall the earth will be the most appalling catastrophe that the world has ever suffered. What now becomes of me is of practically small account. The work that I have begun will be carried on by those I leave behind. I have placed the small kingdom of Balkania in the possession of a power such as no other kingdom has ever known, and even though, by some accident or treachery, I cease to be Dictator of the Earth, there will remain behind those who will chastise the world with scorpions for the wrong done to me."

For answer came the message: "His Majesty objects to Mr Strong's tone."

Strong made reply: "I am adopting the most convenient tone possible. The sooner his Majesty realises that it is my privilege to adopt whatsoever tone I choose, the better for him and the better for his people. It is not for him to argue, but to obey. If," he went on, "there is any further dispute upon this point I shall proceed to further destruction."

He paused for a few moments, waiting for some answer. But the wait that followed was long and ominous.

"Really," said Strong to himself, with rather a bitter little smile, "I feel like a bullying husband, who, to reduce his household to order by force, resorts to the gentle occupation of smashing china until all opposition has been quelled."

He saw that he had been somewhat severe with the Emperor, and to some small extent desired to make

amends, and, thinking it better, while he could not deal with his Majesty personally, to appeal to his sense of honour, he ticked again as follows:

“ Personally, I would rather trust to his Majesty’s sense of honour and to his discretion than to any force of threats on my part. Be kind enough, therefore, to inform his Majesty that I am about to trust him. I shall sleep in Sanssouci to-night in the Orangery, under the cover of shells of my airships, and I rely upon the Emperor’s honour to see that no attempt will be made upon my safety or my comfort.”

In a little while the answer came that Strong might trust his Majesty, and this emboldened Strong to make a further request.

“ Naturally,” he ticked, “ some servants of his Majesty will have been left at Potsdam. I require but few—a couple of cooks and three footmen will suffice me—but as I have had enough of campaigning for the present, and wish to enjoy a small amount of comfort, I shall take it as a favour if his Majesty will issue instructions that servants shall be left at the Orangery for my convenience. In making this request I do so without any threat behind it, and if it is refused I shall not extort a condition. I ask it as a favour, preferring, for this night at anyrate, to regard myself as his Majesty’s guest rather than his Majesty’s enemy.”

This Strong knew would appeal to the chivalrous and hospitable side of the Emperor’s nature, and he was not mistaken, for, after a comparatively short delay, he received assurance that the servants he asked for would be left at his disposal in the Orangery.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE PARLEY OF POTSDAM

Soon it became apparent that the Kaiser was fulfilling his promise by issuing orders to the commandant at Potsdam, and by the aid of the searchlights Strong watched the garrison march out.

First came a great cloud of horsemen, then the bulk of the infantry, followed in their turn by the gunners, and, last, a second great host of horsemen.

When the tail of the column had disappeared, Strong received a further message from the Chancellerie.

"You will understand," he read, "that while the Emperor guarantees your safety so far as he is concerned, and will fulfil his word absolutely and entirely, his Majesty cannot guarantee Mr Strong's reception at the hands of the Potsdam populace."

Strong rapped back: "If I have nothing to fear from the Kaiser's troops, then I should have nothing to fear from his civilian subjects. At least, the risk is mine."

This, for that night, concluded all the communication with the Prussian authorities, and Strong immediately set about making the arrangements for his descent.

It was now quite dark, but the rays of the combined searchlights of the airships illumined the whole of the Sanssouci Park.

Strong therefore decided, for mobility's sake, that he would descend in the "Di," and with him he took Arbuthnot and three of the Balkanian officers upon whom he knew he could rely.

The weight of the five men made the navigation of the "Di" a little perilous, but not so perilous as to prevent Strong from determining to make only one descent.

To the commanders of the three airships he left ample instructions. They were to lie only fifty feet above the Orangery Palace in a triangle. Their lights were to be kept going throughout the night, so that any movement or any treachery—although Strong did not expect any—could be instantly detected, and in such a position that any onslaught on the Orangery could be resisted not only by shell-fire, but by rifles.

Strong then put down to the open space before the doors of the pavilion, and was the first to set foot in the grounds. Churston he ordered to remain in the "Di," thinking it unwise to leave the airship without a guard.

Then he and the three Balkanian officers ascended the steps of the pavilion, and on the threshold were met by two obsequious servants, all of whom, greatly to Strong's relief, though somewhat to his astonishment, spoke English.

The servants received him as they might have done any honoured guest, and a most British-looking butler asked Strong to follow him into a little sitting-room on the right.

"I thought, sir," he said, by way of explanation, "that you and the other gentlemen would be more comfortable here than in the larger apartments."

Strong nodded.

"I have received instructions," the man went on, "that you will require dinner at about eight o'clock. Dinner will be ready, and will be served in the dining-room. In the meantime, if you will allow me, and if such is your wish, I will conduct you to your sleeping apartment."

Strong drew in a long breath and looked quickly about him. He had on an instant to decide whether this complete surrender to him of the pavilion meant that the Kaiser was disposed to show him every courtesy, unwelcome though he might be, or whether he were simply being politely lured into a trap from which he could not escape.

In his own mind he felt pretty confident that he might completely trust the Kaiser, but at the same time he resolved to take every precaution. So, turning to the man, he said, "I am very much obliged to you for following out the instructions of his Majesty the Emperor. I am indeed so gratified by the arrangements that have been made that I scarcely like to doubt that everything is not as it should be. However, as I am not here as a guest in time of peace, but as an enemy in time of war, you will understand that before I go any further I desire to have the premises searched from roof to cellar."

The man made a low bow, possibly to cover his disgust, but he said nothing except that if Mr Strong would be good enough to issue his instructions he would be pleased to do all he could.

Strong thereupon ordered Captain Zermat and Captain Wetter to follow the butler and make a complete search of the building. While they were away he sat down and talked easily and almost jauntily to Arbuthnot of the day's doings and the prospects of the morrow.

After half an hour Zermat and Wetter returned, and, saluting, reported that, having entered every apartment in the building between roof-tree and foundation, they could find nothing amiss and nothing suspicious.

Upon this Strong expressed himself satisfied, and ordered dinner to be served. But first he went up to the really splendid room which had been prepared for him and removed as best he could the stains of the day's work. Change of clothes he had none. As he entered the dining-room, Strong had one unworthy and short-lived fear lest the food which was being served might be poisoned. But he reflected instantly that, whatever faults he might possess, the Kaiser at least was not a poisoner. So he sat down in confidence and glanced at the faces of the three officers who were with him, and apparently they, too, had had some such suspicion as

had floated across the mind of Strong, for they looked doubtfully at their soup and waited until Strong had taken several spoonfuls before they fell to themselves. The dinner was indeed excellent, being both elaborate and well served. The wine also was good, so that when dessert came Strong and the Balkanian officers were all in a quite sanguine and contented frame of mind.

Even after this, however, Strong decided it would be unwise to relinquish any precautions, and in this he considered he was fully justified, inasmuch as he was practically in the enemy's camp, although a truce might have been temporarily declared. He therefore allotted the room on either side of him to two of the officers, while the third he posted on duty in the corridor. His own room was directly over the portico, so that Churston in the "Di" was immediately beneath.

For once in his life, Strong, partly with an eye to effect, resolved not to take any part in the night's vigil. He divided the watches equally between the three Balkanian officers and Churston. Two of the men were to remain on duty—one in the "Di" and one in the pavilion—till three, when the other two men were to relieve them. Thus the night was spent, and in the morning Strong rose refreshed and considerably relieved in mind that no incident had disturbed his peace.

At ten o'clock he got into communication with the Chancellerie by wireless, and extended a polite invitation to the Kaiser to lunch with him at mid-day.

To this he received a curt intimation that his Majesty could not possibly accept an invitation of so insulting a kind.

Now the pavilion was so entirely cut off from the rest of the world that no news, not even a rumour of what was passing in Berlin, could possibly reach Strong, and before pressing the matter further he desired to ascertain what was happening in the Prussian capital.

To this end he despatched Aulthnot in the "Princess" to reconnoitre Berlin and immediately report what was moving there, and while he awaited

the return of the "Princess" he strolled, with the sense of a man walking in complete security, about the grounds of Sanssouci.

First he walked across the grass beneath the cedar trees towards the palace, the ruins of which were still smoking or fitfully blazing. Continuing his walk, he passed by the ashes of the windmill, and was academically regretful at the destruction of a place of such antiquarian interest. The grounds were very silent in the winter sunshine, and Strong hung over one of the little bridges spanning the twisting stream by which the park is intersected, half regretful that, having put his hand to the plough, he must still continue to stir up so much strife and so much unquiet over the face of the world. But, shaking this feeling off, he straightened his back again and marched with a brisker step back to the pavilion, and as he reached the entrance, the "Princess," fresh from her mission to Berlin, swung by overhead.

Strong signalled to her to descend, partly because he was curious to see how she would take the earth, and partly because he was too impatient to learn what was afoot to be bothered with a long wireless conversation. The "Princess" came down easily enough, and Arbuthnot shouted his report over the side.

It appeared that Berlin was in a panic, that the whole of the garrison, in addition to the troops that had marched into the city from Potsdam, was paraded in the streets, and that, in spite of this enormous force, the soldiers were having considerable difficulty in holding back the surging crowds from invading the precincts of the palace.

It was apparent, too, that meetings were being held in every quarter of the town to consider the situation, and, although it was impossible to make sure of this, it was fairly obvious that great pressure was being brought to bear on the Government to come to terms with Strong.

This was all that Strong desired to learn, and, enter-

ing the pavilion, he immediately began to open up fresh negotiations with the Chancellerie. It seemed a little cowardly to do so; it seemed rather like hitting a man when he is down; but, none the less, he was forced to take again to threats. Therefore he rapped out very sharply to the Chancellerie a further formal invitation to the Kaiser to lunch.

Again it was refused.

Strong, without a moment's hesitation, then declared that, should the Kaiser not change his mind, he would take the airships over Berlin and immediately demolish the palace.

To this he knew that the Kaiser could make no adequate reply. Berlin lay at his mercy, and, for that matter, had he been so desirous, he could easily have destroyed the aeroplanes in spite of their bomb-proof sheds.

Some minutes elapsed before the final answer came and then, even as the Czar had changed his mind at the last moment, so did the Kaiser. The reply he got was "Very well, his Majesty will be in Potsdam at one o'clock."

Chuckling to himself, Strong went within doors and set about making the best preparations he could for his Majesty. He summoned the entire staff of servants, and, distributing sufficient *largesse* among them to give them a little better impression of his autocratic self, he followed up his gifts by demanding the very best luncheon that the pavilion could supply.

Fortunately the housekeeper, who had been left in charge, had understood the Kaiser's orders in their broadest sense, so while Strong himself stood and watched the preparations, there grew up before him an excellent proof that the meal would by no means be a meagre one.

Next Strong set about preparing to give the Emperor as imposing a reception as he could. But, after all, in spite of his power, there was little he could do in that direction. The larger of the airships he placed in line, withdrawing two of his officers from each, and these he

marshalled in the pavilion, with instructions that they were to be upon the steps to receive the Emperor when the Emperor came.

From the stables Strong ordered a couple of horses, and as one o'clock drew near he mounted one of them and ordered Arbuthnot to take the other. Then together the two men trotted down to the gates of the park, where there remained only the old lodge-keeper. For, though sentries had been offered to him, Strong had declined their services, thinking that sentries were more likely to add to his danger than to his safety.

The Kaiser was punctual. At about five minutes to one Strong saw a smart cavalcade coming at a quick pace along the main thoroughfare of the town.

Two Uhlans rode before a couple of high-hung landans, each drawn by four horses, mounted by postillions.

The Emperor evidently intended to signify that his visit was one of state.

Strong's quick eye soon counted the muster of men, and he read in the fact that there were but four troopers, one mounted officer, and three members of the Kaiser's suite, one driving with the Emperor in his carriage, and the other gentlemen in the carriage which followed, that his Majesty wished to ease his enemy's mind to the best of his ability.

Realising this, Strong was grateful for the Emperor's consideration, and rode out through the gates to meet him.

The Uhlans saluted him as he passed them, and drew up beside the Emperor's carriage.

Even at that moment Strong found time in which to feel a little delighted at the study of expression which the Kaiser's face afforded. Its lines were as stern and set as ever, yet there was a suspicion of a smile beneath the Emperor's moustache and a little sparkle in his eyes, more suggestive of admiration than of antagonism.

Having no desire to meet with a rebuff, Strong did

not extend his hand, but contented himself with raising his hat.

The Kaiser, however, leaning out of the carriage, held out his own hand to Strong, and, feeling that it would be discourteous, not to say foolish in the extreme, to refuse the greeting, Strong reached out his own hand too.

"The retinue which I have brought," said the Kaiser, speaking in English, "is, as you will observe, not a large one. I had no wish to embarrass you by numbers, in spite of your omnipotence." The Kaiser laughed a short, little laugh.

Strong was about to offer a free passage to the entire party when the Kaiser interrupted.

"It will not be necessary," he said, "for the troopers to accompany the carriages. They have been instructed to remain at the gates. Although, of course, I come here against my will, I realise that I shall be treated as a gentlemen, and it will content me if the officers whom I have brought with me may be included in the luncheon party which you have so generously arranged." Again the Kaiser laughed his short, little laugh.

"Your Majesty," said Strong, "I have not the slightest desire to exclude your troopers. Believe me, they will be very welcome to Potsdam."

The Kaiser glanced at Strong quickly, but a shade of annoyance crossed his face. "No," he said sharply, "I shall not intrude to that extent. I prefer to visit you, as I might call it, unarmed."

"Just as your Majesty pleases," said Strong, making a little bow.

The troopers falling back, the carriages rolled on, Strong riding by the Emperor's side.

Arbuthnot, Churston and Wildney, with the Balkanian officers, were on the steps to greet them, and as the Emperor's carriage drew up they all saluted with drawn swords. It was, indeed, a not imposing little demonstration.

The Kaiser alighted, and the Chancellor followed him. Then, at Strong's invitation, they walked after him into the pavilion.

Lunch was served immediately, and in the course of it Strong spoke no words of politics or business. They discussed matters of general interest, such as the latest installation of wireless, the theatre, and the like. At the conclusion of luncheon Strong toasted the Emperor with a few simple words, making no reference to the great matter which had drawn him to Potsdam.

In turn the Kaiser lifted his glass to Strong.

Finally Strong rose from his seat and said to the Emperor: "If your Majesty will allow me to suggest it, I propose that we should leave these gentlemen here and discuss a cigar and other matters in my private room."

When they were alone, and Strong had seen to it that the Kaiser was comfortably seated, he politely offered the Emperor one of his own cigars, saying, with a pleasant though slightly ironical laugh, "I have the best reason for assuring your Majesty that these cigars are really excellent."

Strong then dropped his bantering air and, leaning forward in his seat, spoke to his Majesty earnestly. "You will forgive me," he said, "if I monopolise the conversation, but I have a good deal to say, and must say it quickly. First of all, let me thank you for the manner in which you have behaved towards me. I, for my part, desire to do nothing which would cause you unnecessary humiliation. I do not suggest, for the present at least, that you should inform your subjects of the real state of the case, which is that you are absolutely in my power. You are aware, of course, of the steps which I have taken to secure the withdrawal of the Russian troops from my frontiers. It will also be necessary for me to take steps to secure the cessation of hostilities on the part of France and yourself. Now with France I can easily deal, but with you it is another matter. I assure you, without desiring to flatter you

that I have always entertained the most sincere regard for you and the utmost admiration. It is only that which is responsible for my really earnest desire to save you all unnecessary pain. I am, therefore, about to make a proposition to you, which I give you my word of honour shall be regarded as a secret compact between ourselves. I feel—speaking as a sportsman—that what I have already achieved has been too easy in the achievement. And I feel this all the more as a practical man because the very fact that I have not had to fight hard for my existence will not in the end secure me that measure of universal popularity which I desire. So I propose, after to-night, to leave Germany severely alone, provided I have a guarantee that your troops do not cross the frontier until your aeroplanes have met my airships and the issue has been definitely decided, either in your favour or mine.”

The Kaiser drew in a sharp breath, and a gleam shot into his eyes. Strong saw quickly enough that his Majesty was hoping still.

“You are building three airships of the aeroplane description. I already possess four airships of whose powers I think you have had quite sufficient proof. I do not desire to use my weight of numbers, I am prepared to await the completion of your airships, and then detail three of mine to meet three of yours. We will abide by the result of the conflict. My reason for making this proposition is not wholly one-sided. I do it in the interests of peace, and for the sake of saving human lives.

“If you launch your armies against my frontier,” Strong continued, “I shall simply be compelled to wipe them out by means of my airships. And you, as a soldier, must see how events will go then. And I do not think you are a man of the same craven spirit as Napoleon. You would not send thousands of men to what you knew must be certain annihilation. When your aeroplanes are ready I shall take the air myself, and I propose that you—for, after all, your stake will be no greater than mine—should command your own

aeroplanes. And we will fight the thing out as fairly and squarely as we can, and each of us, for the sake of the rest of the world, shall abide by the result."

The Kaiser rose from his seat, and it was obvious to Strong that he was greatly agitated.

"You need say no more, Mr Strong. You need say no more. I will apologise to you for anything I may have said. I realise your abilities. I realise your power, and I am prepared to meet you in the way that you propose, on an equal footing. Believe me, though I am perhaps one of the proudest of men, it gives me an infinite amount of pleasure to acknowledge you as an equal and to extend you my right hand of friendship."

Strong gripped the Kaiser's hand.

"Good," he said, "I am delighted to hear your Majesty say that. I feel that I have at last met a foe-man worthy of my steel.

"And when it is all over," Strong added, "and both of us should happen to be alive, I give you my word that, whether conqueror or vanquished, I will as gladly shake hands with you then as I shake hands with you now."

Once more the Kaiser shook Strong by the hand, and immediately afterwards drove back to Berlin.

CHAPTER XXXIX

DIANA FLOUTS HER FATHER

THE heroic mood in which Strong left Diana soon flowed her like an ebbing tide—left her weak and with a sense of utter helplessness. But reaction followed reaction, and after her first misery at his departure, she became to a certain extent her own strong self again. But the days were long—how long she never knew until afterwards—and the trials sore and many.

The king, her father, seemed to have lost all sense of love and even honour. He set about in the most cold-blooded and casual way playing a fiendish game with Diana's health and sanity. It was necessary to his purpose that she should be regarded as mad. It was to his ultimate good that she should remain sane, and it required great subtlety of thought and action to balance the real sanity against the prompted madness.

Following on Strong's escape, the king brought again to the hotel the two doctors who, at his bidding, had certified Diana as without her senses. They were sleek and urbane men, as is the way with some rogues, and they conveyed to Diana herself just sufficient suggestion of her mental derangement to breed in her mind a doubt of her own senses.

When, indeed, they left her she fell once more into a state of hysteria for which no one could blame her. So prolonged was it, and so passionate, that even the king was alarmed, and he saw that if he were to play an exceedingly dangerous game with success he must at least leave Diana her one consolation, the old woman Felice.

It was to her that Diana had clung, and upon her breast that Diana had sobbed and cried, and in her arms at last that Diana had found calm and afterwards sleep.

The king wagged his head to himself as he thought of the matter afterwards, and dubbed Felice the safety-valve of Diana's feelings. In this he was right. Indeed but for Felice it is doubtful if Diana could possibly have borne the strain of the days that were to come.

The king left for the Hague—left Diana to the care of two sleek doctors, a woman attendant, and Felice. Ludwig went with the king, grumbling and reluctant. In her tense state of nerves that was at least something, but after his departure there was nothing but infinite dulness.

She was for twenty-four hours the ninth wonder of the Parisian world. Crowds stood outside the hotel watching her windows, in comparative silence for a Parisian multitude. Those people at least she could see; of her more immediate neighbours she knew comparatively little. Had she been able to know more, the hardship of the watching might have been lessened, for it is always interesting to know that people are interested in oneself.

Twice a day Diana went driving—driving from Paris to Passy, and then to the Bois de Boulogne. Felice, she insisted, should go with her, and so the old, fat Frenchwoman sat smiling silently by her side, while one or other of the doctors, with a sleek, gloomy face, always perched on the opposite seat.

Jimmy Cloud did his best to cast off his callousness to all about him. Out of friendship for Strong he haunted the Grand Hotel a great deal more than pleased him, and at least satisfied himself that all was well as far as Diana's physical being went. Had he been a man of a shade more gentle feeling he would have realised the mental stress to which Diana was put. But all his comprehension lay in his pleasure in physical endurance and the subsequent physical effects. He did not under-

stand the anguish of mind which Diana was suffering. His method, indeed, was that of the comfortable warder, who, charged with the superintendence of the condemned man, contents himself with seeing that the criminal's stomach is filled.

Though Diana was allowed books, she was denied papers, and therefore, though Paris hummed with the news of Strong's exploits, with the news of the cantankerous Conference at the Hague, and with the news of the movements of the troops of Europe, she would, but for Felice, have known nothing of what was passing.

Day by day Diana felt her girlhood slipping from her, until at last she found herself a woman with only the task before her of being strong to endure, and she set her mind to the most heroic task in the world—the task of waiting.

After several days the king came back from the Hague. He put the doctors through a severe cross-examination, and he plied even the servants of the hotel with searching questions in his desire to discover what the princess might know and of what she was in ignorance.

He was, however, shrewd enough to see that so long as Felice remained with Diana, so long would Diana to a certain extent be acquainted with what was happening.

For a while, indeed, he was half persuaded to rob Diana of the consolation of Felice. But, rather more for his own sake than for his daughter's, he decided that to dismiss Felice would be the last straw beneath which Diana's brain must break.

Therefore he sought for means whereby he could retain his daughter's sanity and yet destroy her knowledge of events. It was then that he decided to rent a forlorn, forsaken, weather-beaten and mouldy mansion at Chatou.

Diana never forgot the journey. It was like going into the world again to witness the surprise and the anxiety and the interest of the crowd in the vestibule

of the hotel as she was hurried through the throng to the motor car which was to convey her to her prison.

In the hall the king turned to her and said, "Felice will follow us."

Now Diana had brains. She had divined, in the long intervals that she had for thought, the sinister design of her father. And she played upon the insanity that he planned for and the madness that he dreaded.

"If," she said to her father, very fiercely, under her breath, "you leave me without Felice, I will not go."

"You will have to," said the king.

Diana raised her voice a little. She was conscious that the eyes of many were upon her and her father. She knew that the power to win what she desired lay within her grasp.

"If," she said again to her father, "you will not let Felice accompany me, I will not accompany you. You understand?" She raised her voice a little more. "If you refuse me I shall scream."

Now the king hated scenes. He looked at his daughter keenly through his glasses, and then, removing them from his nose, polished them thoughtfully in his silk handkerchief. He replaced them and said, "I refuse."

Diana raised her voice to half a shriek. "I will have Felice," she cried.

The king cast one quick, uneasy glance about him and became conscious of the fact that the concentrated gaze of many was distinctly hostile.

"Felice shall go," he said.

It was with the consciousness of victory that Diana swept through the doors of the hotel. Her father followed her with puzzled brows. She had won, and yet she had lost to the extent of not knowing whither she was bound or what would be the outcome of her departure. She had won—and yet she never forgot the ride to Chatou.

Felice sat beside her, and she clung to Felice tremb-

ling. Opposite in the car her father sat, morose and silent. One of the slink-eyed Balkanian doctors faced her. The other, for lack of room in the motor, was forced to travel beside the chauffeur.

Till they passed the fortifications of Paris Diana felt the eyes of the world upon her and upon her father. She was not vain, but it seemed to her that the battle of the world centred upon her.

They came to Chatou—a pleasant village enough beside the Seine—and reached the large and forbidding villa which the king had hired to house his daughter.

It was one of those plain, square-built old mansions of France, with long, slit-like windows covered by green shutters and bounded at each corner by a round, red-tiled tower, which are as familiar landmarks in the country of France as are wooden-sailed windmills in Kent.

Throughout the journey Diana had thought that at the end of her drive she would at least find peace. But this was not to be.

True, she and Felice were allowed to go to the rooms which had been set apart for them, but they had scarcely time in which to make their necessary little feminine arrangements before one of the doctors knocked peremptorily at the door and informed Diana that the king desired to see her.

Before she turned to go, Diana clung for a moment to Felice. The old Frenchwoman patted her kindly on the arm.

“You will be strong,” said the old nurse, “because you have need to be.”

And Diana nodded, though her eyes were blinded with tears. She knew that she had to be strong. She knew that she had to wait.

Just as she had anticipated, and just as she had feared, Ludwig was shuffling uneasily from foot to foot behind the king's straight-backed, cane-seated chair in the formal dining-room of the villa. Just as she had

imagined, just as she had feared, the king spoke to her, not as a father speaking to his daughter, but as a man speaking to a subordinate.

He waved his hand towards a chair, and Diana mechanically sat down upon it.

"There has been," said his Majesty, slowly, "enough of this tomfoolery."

"More than enough," said Diana.

"What I told you in London, and what I told you in Bomberg, I repeated in Paris and must repeat here. It is necessary, absolutely necessary that you should be at once married to Prince Ludwig."

Ludwig shuffled more uneasily than ever from foot to foot behind his would-be father-in-law's chair.

Diana gathered all her strength within her. "Repetition," she said, "is vain. You may journey round the world and repeat that to me in place after place, but my answer will always be the same."

A little colour crept into the king's pallid face. "I do not agree with you," he said coldly. "I do not wish to be vulgar, but I would represent to you the fact that the game is up. The perfectly impossible person, Mr Strong, on whom, as an exceedingly foolish girl, you have wasted your affection, is now beyond all hope. From the latest information which I have received I am able to tell you that his airships are of no effect, and that the kingdom of Balkania, of which he has possessed himself—a kingdom which, I might add, should be yours—is hopelessly surrounded and cut off.

"I do not wish to be hard on you," the king went on, "but, at the same time, I would remind you that it is most degrading for a daughter of mine to still profess allegiance to an adventurer such as this man Strong. I admit that he has destroyed the peace of the world for the moment, but that peace can easily be restored—the more easily and the more quickly if you will only have the grace to fall in with my wishes."

Then Diana became angry. "I will never fall in

with your wishes!" she cried. "Never! It is monstrous to suggest that I should. You may sneer at Mr Strong as much as you please—but if you have to sneer at him, you will have to sneer at me. Personally, I care nothing for the peace of the world, because I am selfish. I do not think that the world would require a peace if it thought that I would be sacrificed in its interests.

"It remains to be seen," she went on, "whether Mr Strong's airships are of no effect. Personally, I believe they are more than sufficient for one's needs. In any case, understand me, I definitely refuse to marry—that!" And she pointed a finger of scorn at the shuffling Ludwig.

The king, taking his glasses from his nose, polished them, as was his wont in times of difficulty, with a silk handkerchief. Then he replaced them and said, "That is useless protestation. I insist.

"And to show you how much I insist," his Majesty continued, "I will see that the ceremony is gone through here and now."

He touched the bell, and a somewhat blear-eyed and wondering-looking priest was conducted into the room.

Diana cast a glance at him, and then, turning to her father, said: "Do you suppose that I am going to surrender myself to such a creature as that?" She pointed to Ludwig.

The priest cast a side-long glance at her and drummed with his long fingers on the king's writing-table.

It was then Diana took her courage in both hands. "You may still call yourself a king," she cried, "but you are no king. Such a performance as this would have been ridiculous even in Balkania. Here it is impossible! I can produce a score of persons to prove that you have declared me insane. The marriage of insane persons is not valid, and therefore you cannot proceed. But, apart from that, I decline altogether to be a party to this business. You are not a father—you are a fiend!"

She then turned quickly about and made towards the door.

The king jumped from his seat and motioned to Ludwig to intercept Diana. But Ludwig fell back before the blaze in her eyes.

"Understand me," she cried, as she stood holding the door on the swing, "I say this marriage is impossible! I tell you now, and I do not care who hears it, that I will marry no man except Mr Strong."

White with rage, the king leaped forward and called on his daughter to stay. But Diana had closed the door behind her with a most decided bang.

Diana shut herself in her room and made a fastness of it. She altogether declined to see her father.

For two days the King, who had lost his old self-control, remained in the villa at Chatou fretting and fuming.

But Diana refused to leave her rooms, even to the extent of walking in the garden, and so Ludwig, though he haunted the staircase and the corridors, never so much as caught a glimpse of her face.

On the third day most urgent business drew the king once again to the Hague. He went in the great car, in which he now made all his journeys, and Ludwig went with him as driver.

Thereafter Diana left her rooms to wander in the dismal garden, which was surrounded on all sides by an eight-foot wall.

At first one or other of the Balkanian doctors dogged her footsteps, but this irritated her to such a degree that she sent for them and told them frankly that if they did not cease their espionage she would refuse to go out. Upon this the two doctors took counsel together, for their position was awkward in the extreme.

They feared the wrath of the king should the princess by any means contrive to escape. For they knew that his Majesty was not the man to let the law stand in the

way of his revenge. And they feared all the more because they themselves had by their dexterity and unscrupulousness inquired into more than one violent and sudden death.

On the other hand, it was obvious that the princess was growing more and more hysterical. It was indeed a marvel, seeing all that she had gone through, that she bore up so well. For just as the constant dropping of water wears away a stone, so was her sanity gradually being worn away beneath the constant and relentless persecution to which she was subjected.

They decided, therefore, to let Diana have her way, and she walked henceforth unmolested in the garden—but there were guards stationed at the gates and without the walls.

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CHAPTER XL

JIMMY TO THE RESCUE

DIANA was unaware of this, for the simple reason that she had almost ceased to care. The time, indeed, hung heavily on her hands, and at the end of ten days, being still sufficiently collected to think of her peril, she became alarmed at the mental apathy into which she was falling.

All one forenoon, therefore, she reasoned with herself, pitting her sense against her inclinations, and her pride against her better judgment. She had told Strong that she would not go back to Bomberg until she returned as queen. From what scraps of news she could gather from Felice, whose mind was hardly of the order to follow the running of political events, she knew that Strong was rough-hewing his way to the throne he had promised her. But the difficulties and the dangers with which he was beset were many, and she saw that it must mean a week, or perhaps a fortnight, or possibly even a month, before he fulfilled to the uttermost his boast of stealing the earth.

Could she endure for so long? While her spirit had cried out that she could, the sense of her growing mental and physical debility told her that she could not. Moreover, though her vanity was now dead, she saw that if she failed to endure it would mean the end of Strong's new-found dominion of the earth.

So she set aside her pride and resolved to humble herself to the extent of calling on him for help, and returning to Bomberg before the dawn of Armageddon.

She was puzzled, however, to discover means of com-

municating with Strong, for the king had taken away the wireless instrument which had been her one consolation in tribulation.

It was then that she thought of Jimmy Cloud.

Accordingly she called Felice to her and told her briefly—almost curtly—of the decision to which she had come. The old woman clung to her and kissed her and sobbed, while she volubly assured Diana that she had come to a right determination.

So fat and so placid, and so altogether comfortable was old Felice that the two doctors had never regarded her with that suspicion which it would have been well for them to exercise. Without let or hindrance Felice walked out of the villa, and, making her way on foot to the railway station, booked through to Paris.

Diana was anxious, so anxious that she had no intention of allowing Felice to waste any time or run any risks. And, therefore, following her instructions the old nurse drove straight to Passy to the bachelor establishment of the redoubtable Jimmy.

That young man, having been endeavouring to soothe his feelings in time of stress, was just emerging from a bout of reading, and as a corrective had taken to a violent course of physical culture. When Felice arrived in the Rue de Ranelagh he was attired in flannel trousers and a sweater, and held a dumb-bell in each hand.

The advent of Felice vastly disturbed him. He knew she would not have come to Paris unless Diana's needs were urgent. Casting the dumb-bells with a crash to the floor, he bundled the greatly flustered old lady into a chair.

Felice was voluble to the extent of incoherency, and Cloud could not very well understand the drift of her remarks. One thing, however, stood out so plainly that it called him to immediate action.

The Princess was in peril, and if he could not take such means as would secure her safety before the return

of the king, then he would have to make a very lamentable account of his doings to a vengeful Strong.

Indeed, it struck Jimmy that he had shamefully neglected his duty. After having vainly tried to get into communication with Bomberg over the wireless for several days, he had, as a matter of fact, abandoned his efforts. He was even now fearful lest the instrument might not be in working order, and it was in some trepidation that he fetched it out, having first ordered Felice to be still.

To his joy, however, after some half-hour's labour, he succeeded in attracting the attention of the station at Bomberg, and he asked to be immediately placed in communication with Strong.

It so happened that Strong was absent from the palace. Jimmy therefore set about turning over in his mind half a dozen plans to rescue Diana. But difficulties bristled at every point. He knew from what Felice had told him that the villa was so watched at night that it would be practically impossible to fetch Diana after dark. On the other hand, broad daylight presented many perils, and an escape would almost inevitably mean a chase and possibly a recapture.

At last Strong got to the instrument at Bomberg, and Jimmy found that he had to deal with an exceedingly angry man. As fast as he could set fingers to the keys Strong poured on Cloud's head a heap of reproaches and a host of demands for an explanation.

Jimmy could only plead, weakly plead, a breakdown in the instrument, express his contrition, and affirm his determination of making up for past neglect.

Then he was faced with the plain question, "What do you propose to do?"

He paused for some time, still groping wildly for some way of escape. He could find none. He could only tick back to Strong the hopeless confession that he did not know.

Strong's reply was furious.

"If I had known," he tapped, "upon what a broken reed I was relying I would never have asked you to lend a hand in this business. I will not mince words with you. You have behaved throughout like a fool and a sluggard, and if any harm comes to the princess I tell you frankly I shall not scruple to make you suffer for it. In the meantime, though you have proved yourself throughout an incapable fool, I am compelled to rely on you. At the best I cannot reach Paris before to-morrow night, and in the meantime much may happen. I may arrive too late. One thing, however, is imperative. I do not mind what refuge you seek, but you must remove Diana from the villa before to-morrow evening, because I am afraid that the king is now on the way back to Paris. And, failing other advisers, I would suggest that you should consult with Felice as to the best means to this end. I will wait here by the instrument until I receive your reply."

Jimmy ran downstairs into his untidy study, in which he had left Felice. The old woman sat with clasped hands, rocking herself to and fro, but nevertheless she wore a fiercely determined expression.

"Felice," cried Jimmy, "you are my only hope—you are the princess's only hope! I have been in communication with Mr Strong, and he tells me that it is a case of now or never. Do you see any means of rescuing the princess?"

Felice lifted herself heavily and grumblingly from her chair, and for a few seconds she wrung her hands. "To-night, monsieur, to-night it is impossible. We are watched. We are always watched night and day. There is only one chance, one hope—you must go when the princess is in the garden to-morrow."

Jimmy felt his courage ebbing away from him as he realised the risk attendant on this delay. "You are sure," he urged. "You are perfectly sure that it is impossible to do anything to-night?"

Felice could only moan that it was utterly impossible.

Jimmy pulled himself together, and now, faced with the absolute necessity of thinking out an immediate plan of campaign, did his best to solve the problem. "Very well," he said, "if it is out of the question to do anything to-night, we must of course postpone things until to-morrow. You had better return to Chatou. I will see for my part that my car is in perfect working order. I will be at the villa to-morrow afternoon at half-past three o'clock. I will be at the main gates."

"There is always a man at the gates," wailed Felice.

"A fig for the man!" cried Jimmy. "I do not mind if there are three or four. All I ask of you is that you will be there with the princess, that you will both keep your heads, and that when I give the word you will obey it, whatever the order may be."

"Monsieur," said Felice, "I am in the hands of the princess."

"The princess," said Jimmy, "I regret to say, is in my hands. But tell her that she need not fear—that before dusk to-morrow she will, at least, be out of Chatou. Tell her, too, that I think the quietest and safest place in which to await instructions from Mr Strong will be here, in the Rue de Ranelagh. This is no time to observe conventions."

Then he bundled Felice out of the house, fearing that if she were to be longer absent from the villa inquiries might be made as to her whereabouts. It would be exceedingly awkward if the Balkanian doctors made inquiries that night.

Felice had to some extent recovered her usual placid state of being when she reached the railway station, and all the way back to Chatou she said to herself, "I must be brave for the sake of my princess."

She found Diana sitting alone, pale, but very quiet.

Felice ran to her, and falling on her knees beside her, poured out to her the wonderful events of the afternoon.

"Monsieur Cloud," she cried, "he will be here to-

morrow at half-past three at the gate. We must not fail him."

Diana glanced at the clock and gave a little sigh. So long had been the waiting, and so bitter, that she could not bear the thought of waiting even until the morrow.

She turned to Felice again. "Did he say no word of Mr Strong?" she asked. Felice was taken aback.

"Why, yes," she said. "He did indeed. He had a conversation with Mr Strong upon the wireless."

"And Mr Strong sent no message?" asked Diana, and her heart was sick within her.

"Yes, he did," said Felice, "but I forgot. He said, 'Please believe that I am doing my best.'"

"His best." Diana wondered to herself what that might mean, and her anxiety was increased by wondering. A message such as that was unlike him.

"He did not say that he was coming himself?" she finally asked Felice.

"No," said Felice.

"Are you sure?" asked Diana.

"Yes, my dear," said Felice, "I am sure."

She was perfectly right, because Jimmy Cloud, in his foolishness, had forgotten to tell Felice that Strong would be in Paris on the following night.

After Felice had left him Jimmy Cloud suffered an agony of self-reproach and anxiety. He feared Strong's return to Paris, and yet rejoiced that his coming again was so near. Twenty-four hours at least would see him out of his difficulties. He was so distressed in mind that he made himself as busy as he could. He pulled on his coat and walked round to the garage to see whether his car were in sufficient working order to satisfy the demands which he would have to make on it on the morrow.

At the garage he found his English servant quite confident of the car's powers. Jimmy could not, of course, tell the man for what purpose he required it, and merely left word that he was to be in the Rue de Ranelagh shortly after noon on the next day.

He was so disturbed in mind that he went home, dressed, and did his best to forget his anxieties in the gaieties of the Casino de Paris and Maxim's.

It was late when he reached home, and he went to bed at an hour which few men would have chosen who had much to do upon the following day. But Jimmy slept so much and kept himself in such a magnificent condition that he felt that a short night's rest would act as a tonic.

He was up betimes, and, when he was dressed, reproached himself for rising so early, for the morning dragged wearily away and Jimmy chafed at its delays.

Jimmy had no intention of running unnecessary risks by fast travelling, and so at about half-past twelve he started out for Chatou, driving the car himself and going cautiously along the broad and comparatively deserted road beyond the fortifications.

Even at this pace he was in danger of reaching his destination too soon, and seeing that any suggestion of waiting about the villa would arouse suspicion he slowed down and spent a miserable hour in speculating as to whether he would or would not be able to achieve the rescue of Diana.

At last he went on slowly, and just as the clocks in the village were striking half-past three he pulled up outside the main gates of the villa.

Leaving the chauffeur in the car Jimmy walked towards the gates on foot. He approached them casually, and with a cigarette between his lips, thinking it better to arouse as little comment as he could by appearing curious or uneasy.

Peeping through the bars of the high iron gates, he saw Diana and Felice coming slowly towards him across the grass. It was then that he suddenly made up his mind and pulled the bell that clanged dismally in the little lodge on the right-hand side of the entrance. From the lodge there shuffled out an old man, who,

catching hold of the railings in his aged fingers, thrust his face against the bars and dismally inquired the purport of Jimmy's visit.

Jimmy cast a glance ahead and saw that Diana and Felice were still a little way distant, and so to gain time in order to allow them to approach he feigned ignorance of the French tongue. In English he demanded instant admission to see the king.

The old man shrugged and gibbered at him from behind the gates, until at last, as though by some sublime effort, Jimmy Cloud said, "Son Majesté."

At this the old man made pretence to smile, though he looked exceedingly doubtful, but, coming to the conclusion that Jimmy Cloud was quite a respectable person, he slowly and fumblingly undid the locks of the gate and held it on the swing.

Diana came quietly on with Felice, and when she was quite close to him Cloud took a quick look about him. So far as he could see no one watched him from the roadway, nor were any guards in sight in the gardens.

"Listen," he cried to Diana, "I am now going to act. See that you follow my instructions quickly. I will do no harm to the old man, but the moment I have pushed the gate open, jump into the car; the door is open."

Without another word he swung open the gates upon the old man, who staggered back. In a trice he was inside and had hold of the old fellow by the neck. A second later he had bundled him into the lodge and had slammed the door behind him.

Diana, quick to grasp Jimmy's motive, was already in the car, and the chauffeur, who had received some curt orders from Cloud, had closed the door after them.

In a flash Jimmy was back and at the steering-wheel. The car shot forward, and there came a shout from behind them.

Turning his head for a second, Jimmy saw the Balkanian doctors racing across the grass, while just

ahead of him, tearing down the roadway, was one of the watchers whom he had feared.

But Jimmy let the car leap on.

As it passed him the man drew a revolver and aimed it point-blank at Cloud. But the pace of the car was too swift for him to make sure of his aim, and there only came a crash of splintering glass behind Jimmy's back.

He heard Felice utter a little cry, but a turn of his head sufficed to assure him that neither the princess nor Felice had been hurt. He drove on furiously.

Racing back to Paris he reflected that he had been unwise—in these days he seemed to be fatally unwise—to make no further provision for escape.

The doctors, he was certain, could not catch him, and it was exceedingly doubtful if his whereabouts would ever be discovered could he reach Paris in time; but there was the telephone—and he wondered whether the Balkanians would use the telephone.

Utterly heedless to aught else except the imperative necessity for speed, he drove the car on at a terrific pace.

Then in the distance, coming towards him, he saw another car—a great red car—driven with an open exhaust. It passed him with a rush and a rattle. But Jimmy, though his work was cut out to steer clear, had time to note as the other car flashed by him that the man at the wheel was Ludwig.

CHAPTER XLI

THE PRINCESS IS IN DANGER

SUCH, however, was the speed and the necessity of reaching Paris quickly that Jimmy had no time to speculate as to what might mean the presence of Ludwig in Paris. He could only be grateful that the car he drove had a hooded body, and that the pace at which he was driving must inevitably have prevented even the lynx-eyed Ludwig from discovering the identity of the passengers he carried.

Ludwig, indeed, passed the other car all unsuspecting. It was not till he reached the villa a few moments later that he learned Diana had escaped. His rage then knew no bounds. Confident that the two doctors were implicitly to be trusted, the king had remained in Paris, but Ludwig, for some reason, had felt uneasy, and had decided to journey on to Chatou at once. He cursed the doctors like a madman, and dealt the guard who had betrayed his watch a blow which sent him reeling against the garden wall.

Then, for once, Ludwig's brain worked quickly, and, checking his first impulse, which was to turn the car about and pursue the fugitive Diana, he raced across the lawn for the villa, knowing that, even though he drove quickly, a message by telephone would travel faster still. Those in charge of the exchange knew well enough who were the occupants of the villa, and without a demur—indeed, with all the speed they could contrive—they put Ludwig through to the Prefecture in Paris.

At first the authorities there were a little incredulous

at his tale, but Ludwig spoke with such authority, urging them, moreover, to ring up the Grand Hotel, and take counsel with the king, that the Prefecture set to work, and M. le Prefect himself assumed control of things.

This, of course, Jimmy was not to know, but he guessed what would probably happen as he kept his own car on top speed and rushed at a perfectly appalling pace towards the fortifications. But swift as he had been, he had not been swift enough.

A very cleverly engineered barrier of traffic necessitated his slackening his pace. Indeed, so complicated was the jam of traffic by the Port de Neuilly that he was compelled to bring the car to a standstill.

As he did so, a very polite little old gentleman, wearing a sleek top-hat and a well-fitting frock-coat, approached him with a dandified air.

The old gentleman lifted his hat politely. "I see," he said, "that monsieur carries most distinguished passengers."

Jimmy gathered his courage and his senses together, and, though the old man's words had struck him like a blow, managed to say in a fairly polite and even voice: "I was not aware of the fact."

"If that is so," said the little old gentleman, "I fear I must make an introduction. May I ask you to alight?"

"You will forgive me," said Jimmy, "but I have to proceed."

"Ah, pardon me," said the little old gentleman, laying a delicately gloved hand upon the car, "but that I cannot permit."

"You cannot permit it!" cried Jimmy, and his eyes flashed.

"No," said the little old gentleman, "I cannot permit it."

Jimmy had his hand on the wheel to send the car on again, but at a signal from the polite old gentleman two

men in civilian dress leapt on to the car and held Jimmy like a vice.

"I think," said the polite old gentleman, "that you will find it better to surrender at discretion."

"Very well," said Jimmy, easily, "I will. I presume you are M. le Prefect."

"I am," said the Prefect, urbanely, "and though I have never had the pleasure of meeting her before, I must now pay my respects to the Princess Diana of Balkania."

"Will you permit me to ask," said Jimmy, with a calmness borne of complete despair, "how you discovered the identity of the princess?" He saw that further denial of the princess' acquaintance was impossible.

"Certainly," said the Prefect. "I have not the slightest objection to telling you. It was by 'phone."

"Look here," cried Jimmy, quickly, "may I make a suggestion? I am sure that you do not wish to trouble a lady, and I give you my word that I will follow whatsoever instructions you are pleased to give, provided you can prevent a scene. What can I do?"

"Well, now," said the little old gentleman, smiling blandly, "there you place me in a slight difficulty, for I am merely waiting orders, the orders of his Majesty of Balkania."

"Or the orders of the Prince Ludwig?" suggested Jimmy.

"Precisely," said the Prefect, and he made another little bow.

"And then?" said Jimmy.

"Well, then," said the Prefect, "I think the best thing you can do is to drive me slowly, together, of course, with two of my attendants, back along the road to Chatou."

"Very well," said Jimmy, "I will do it."

The Prefect climbed on to the front seat of the car, ordering Jimmy's servant to stand down.

Jimmy nodded to his servant, and the man, getting out of the car, stood forlornly in the roadway.

"You will understand," said the Prefect, "that my only reason for driving back towards Chatou is to escape the crowd."

"I understand perfectly," said Jimmy.

They had, however, gone but a very short distance when, far ahead of them on the road, they observed a second motor approaching them at a great pace.

"We will stop, I think," said the Prefect, "for I imagine that this is the car which I expect."

The second car came on, and drew to a standstill with a squealing grind of its brakes. Ludwig stepped down and approached the Prefect. "I congratulate you," he said.

"A very simple business," said the Prefect. Ludwig drew the little old gentleman on one side, and Jimmy for once seized an opportunity.

He leaned into the car and spoke rapidly to Diana, who sat with a face as pale as ashes. "This, princess," he said, "is merely a check. If you follow my advice, you will return quietly to Chatou. It is now merely a question of hours, for Mr Strong is on his way to Paris."

A little colour crept into Diana's face. "Is that true?" she asked, "or are you merely seeking to reassure me?"

"I give you my word," said Jimmy, "that it is true. In the meantime," he went on, "if I am allowed to do so, I will get into communication with Mr Strong and bid him make all speed."

"I do not think," said Diana, a little proudly, "that it will be necessary for you to do that."

It was then that the Prefect observed Jimmy and the princess in conversation, and, whipping round, he intervened with his inevitable urbanity.

"I am sorry to part you from monsieur your friend," he said, "but it is, I regret to say, your Royal Highness, absolutely necessary."

"And what of me?" asked Jimmy.

"Of you, monsieur, I think small attention need be paid. You can return to your home or your hotel, wherever your abode may be; but you will, of course, understand that two of my officers must accompany you."

"Very well," said Jimmy, cheerfully, "if you insist, of course it must be so."

Other policemen in plain clothes had now come up, and two of these the Prefect deputed to accompany Jimmy home. Jimmy, having kissed the princess' hand, climbed back into his own car.

Arrived in the Rue de Ranelagh, Jimmy decided to accept defeat as gracefully as possible.

"Since I have been placed at your disposal, gentlemen," he said to the police officers, "or you at mine, I imagine the best course is to offer you every hospitality." The detectives smiled and followed Jimmy into his untidy study, and gazed about them with considerable wonder at the mixed litter of dumb-bells and books.

"Now," said Jimmy, "I am far from comfortable. I dislike wearing collars, so if you gentlemen will excuse me for a few minutes I will run upstairs and change my clothes."

"It is unfortunate, monsieur," said one of the officers, "but it is impossible for us to let you leave our sight."

"Why?" laughed Jimmy. "Do you suppose I am about to commit suicide in a dramatic fashion or even inconveniencing myself by escaping?"

The senior of the officers shrugged his shoulders. "Such things are always possible," he said.

"Gentlemen," cried Jimmy, with a smile, "I give you my word of honour that I will neither attempt to

escape nor attempt to take my life. Will that satisfy you? You see, I am British, and am, therefore, somewhat diffident about performing my toilet in public." So entirely happy was Jimmy's countenance that the officers smiled and bowed acquiescence to his wishes.

Bounding upstairs, Jimmy immediately got to work on the wireless, and after four or five minutes' effort succeeded in picking up Strong. As rapidly as he could he told Strong what had happened, and the silence which followed his explanation was ominous.

Then came the message: "I calculate that I shall be over Paris at nine o'clock to-night, which means that I shall succeed in rescuing Diana before ten o'clock at the latest. I shall return with her to Bomberg immediately. You have been so lax in this matter that a little energy will not harm you now, therefore I shall not attempt to offer you any assistance."

Jimmy was rather nettled at this, and rapped back: "Thanks, I will take care of myself. I may have been negligent, but I have done my best to make amends. At least, I have done what I could for the princess to-day."

But to this there was no reply, and Jimmy knew full well that Strong's wrath was great.

The drive back to Chatou was like a nightmare to Diana. She sat with clenched hands praying that her deliverance might be soon.

Ludwig drove on in stolid and gloomy haste. There was a frightened group of men by the gates when they regained the villa, but without noticing the men at all, Ludwig turned into the garden and made up the long avenue to the hall door. There he leapt quickly to the ground and assisted Diana to alight, and she was so much in a dream that she scarcely noticed his assistance.

When she gained the hall she became conscious of his hand upon her arm, and she drew back sharply and roused herself sufficiently to challenge him.

"I do not know by what right you have brought me back here," she cried.

"The right of might," said Ludwig, grimly.

"There is a might greater than yours, Prince Ludwig," said Diana, "and if I am not mistaken you will experience the force of it before long."

Ludwig shivered a little, for he was fearful.

Diana went straight to her rooms and declined to leave them even for dinner, which Ludwig ate alone. He drank far more than was good for him, and as he rose somewhat unsteadily from the table shortly after nine he was full of a false courage. He had been brooding over Diana's offhand manner of treating him; and, realising in a half-drunken, but none the less poignant way, that the end of his hopes and ambitions was rapidly approaching, he resolved on one last desperate cast of his fortune's dice.

Blundering up the stairs he rapped sharply on the door of Diana's drawing-room. It was opened by Felice, and, without so much as asking permission, Ludwig brushed the old nurse on one side and strode into the room.

Diana, who was sitting in a melancholy attitude over the fire, started at his entrance and turned to him with blazing eyes. "How dare you," she cried, "insult me by this intrusion?"

Ludwig realised that he had gone too far, and his fear as to what the consequences might be, steadied him immediately.

"I must ask your pardon," he said, "but I have received an urgent message from the king."

It was a lie, and Diana did not for a moment believe that he spoke the truth. "Oh!" she said; and there was a world of unkind wonderment in her voice.

"Yes," said Ludwig, slowly and a trifle thickly;

"I have received a message from the king—a message which, unfortunately, I must deliver to you in private."

"I decline to allow Felice to leave the room," said Diana.

Ludwig laughed coarsely and rudely. "Is your Royal Highness afraid?" he sneered.

"No" said Diana, coldly, but with a dangerous ring in her voice; "her Royal Highness is not afraid. Felice, do me the kindness of leaving me for a few moments with this—this gentleman."

Ludwig winced and watched the departure of the old nurse. Felice was most unwilling to leave the princess. At the door she hesitated, but Diana waved her away.

When the door closed Diana turned to Ludwig. "And now," she said, "perhaps you will be kind enough to deliver me that message."

"First," said Ludwig, "let me ask you to be seated."

Diana sat herself down in her former seat by the fire. Ludwig came over and stood beside her.

"It is," he said, "the old, old message. His Majesty bids me once again pay my addresses to you without delay, and to urge upon you the necessity of our immediate marriage. It is the only way, he says, in which to counteract the successes of the man Strong."

"I fancy," said Diana, very coldly, "that you will find it very hard to counteract those successes. Personally, I do not mean to be a party to such an attempt. I am neither for you nor even for my father. I stand wholly and solely for Mr Strong. He has won, and were I married to you a thousand times over it could not affect the issue. I know," she went on just as quietly, "when I meet a coward and when I meet a man—and Mr Strong is a man."

This stung Ludwig into anger. For a moment it seemed as though he would blaze out into a passion of words. But he restrained himself.

Again Diana taunted him. "Within an hour," she said, with mockery in her voice, "these silly little efforts of yours will be of no effect. I am expecting Mr Strong to-night."

"There is still an hour," said Ludwig, and there was an evil light in his eyes.

He swayed for a moment to and fro from his heels to his toes and back again, as though irresolute. Then he plunged forward and threw himself on his knees beside Diana's chair.

"Listen," he cried, and his voice shook. "It is impossible for us to continue any longer as we have been going on. You know I love you—you know I have always loved you. It is disgraceful that a man of Strong's description should be allowed to come between us. I care nothing for what he has done. I care nothing for his threats of what he may do. I care only for you, and for you alone."

Diana leapt from her seat and would have spoken, but Ludwig, who had now lost all control of himself, tried to catch her in his arms.

Diana's anger blazed up, and she struck him full and fair in the mouth.

He reeled back, but recovered himself quickly.

And then the end came.

There was a noise of a terrific explosion, and, though the room was brilliantly lighted, there came a flash which half-blinded them. The house trembled, and Ludwig and Diana, each of them shaken out of the passions which had gripped them a moment before, stood looking with mute inquiry into each other's eyes.

It was Diana who recovered herself first, and with a glad cry rushed to the window. She tore it open and ran out on to the balcony.

Ludwig, upon whom drunkenness seemed to have suddenly descended, staggered after her.

The garden was flooded with light, as though it were

day. Just overhead hovered the "Victor," while the "Di" stood at rest on the lawn beneath the window.

Craning over the balcony, Diana saw Strong, Bellingham and Arbuthnot rushing for the door.

Ludwig saw them, too, and pulled a revolver from his pocket.

CHAPTER XLII

BACK IN BOMBERG

“CURSE him!” yelled Ludwig; “but he shall never have you.”

There came the sounds of shouts and the report of firearms below, and the noise of pounding feet.

Ludwig turned unsteadily and levelled the revolver at Diana.

But old Felice, who had heard the sound of the explosion, came running back into the drawing-room, and, so out on to the balcony, and with a swing of her arm sent the revolver spinning from Ludwig’s hand.

Ludwig almost hurled himself upon the old woman, who screamed as she felt the grip of his hands upon her neck.

Diana, quick to action, picked the revolver up and turned it upon Ludwig. “Hands up, you coward!” she cried. “Hands up or I will fire!”

Ludwig, stricken utterly with terror, held up his hands.

The door of the drawing-room opened with a crash, and Strong came rushing in. He looked round him, saw the little group on the balcony, and was beside Diana in an instant.

Diana let the revolver drop, and fell against Strong. He, for his part, did not hesitate a moment. He lifted her into the hollow of his left arm and then walked over to the foolishly staring Ludwig.

“If it is necessary,” he said to the prince, “I will deal with you later. For the present, it is hardly worth while wasting one’s energies upon such a creature as yourself. However, I will leave you a little present

which will keep you quiet for an hour or so." And while he still held Diana in his left arm he dealt Ludwig two swift, open-handed blows across the face.

Ludwig fell in a heap against the parapet of the balcony, and, striking his head heavily, lay still.

Arbuthnot had now come on to the balcony, and stood looking quietly on.

Felice was half-hysterical, and Strong said to Arbuthnot: "Look after the nurse. I have Diana to see to." He marched towards the door, and Arbuthnot followed him, half-carrying the old woman.

When they reached the landing Strong said sharply across his shoulder: "Is it all well below?"

"Yes, for us," said Arbuthnot, quickly; "but it has been rather bad for the other fellows."

"You mean?" said Strong.

"I mean," said Arbuthnot, "that it had to be done. See that the princess does not look about her as we pass out."

Strong took Diana's head very gently in his right hand and pressed her face into his shoulder as he ran quickly down the stairs and made across the hall. There were four men spread out on the parquet work, and all of them lay very still.

Strong then passed out into the flood of light, and, running across the lawn, placed the princess in the "Di." Arbuthnot helped the old nurse into the little airship.

Bellingham came out from the house smoking a cigarette. "Yes," he said, in answer to Strong's unspoken query, "the work has been complete."

Strong made a little grimace, for it never pleased him to see men's lives taken.

"After all," said Bellingham, by way of consolation, "it had to be done."

The house which they had left was hushed. Dead men tell no tales—neither do they see. And most of the king's men were dead.

Strong, therefore, put the "Di" up at once, and without so much as a word to Diana or to Felice, transferred them to the "Victor."

He took Arbuthnot with him, leaving Bellingham to navigate the "Di." He settled Diana comfortably in the stern, and then gave the order for Bomberg. But Diana, rousing herself from the stupor into which she had fallen, murmured the words: "Miss Hunt!"

Strong's heart and conscience smote him, for, truth to tell, in the hurry of the descent on the villa and in his anger against Cloud for his carelessness and neglect, he had forgotten the girl who had served his cause so faithfully and so well.

He was very undecided for a moment, although he saw that it was imperative that Miss Hunt should be removed beyond the possibility of harm.

In his perplexity he turned an inquiring face to Diana, who quickly said: "Don't you think you would find her at Jimmy Cloud's?"

Strong made a grimace of disgust. Jimmy had done well at the outset, but had fallen short of his estimation of him since, and it did not please him to be compelled to render any succour to the house in the Rue de Ranelagh.

The suggestion, however, was a sound one, and so, signalling to the "Di," he put about and made quickly from Chatou for Paris.

Strong did not spare either of the airships, and in a few minutes they crossed the fortifications, rushed over the Bois de Boulogne, and hung above the quiet little street in Passy, in which he hoped to find Miss Hunt.

So quick had their passage been that he calculated that Ludwig would not have sufficiently recovered his senses to telephone to the Prefecture of Police, and as the night was dark—so dark that the passage of the airships could not possibly have been observed, he counted on the probability that his return to Paris would be unknown.

He was loth to leave the "Victor" himself, not because he was averse to rendering all the assistance he could possibly give to Miss Hunt, but because he did not wish to behold Jimmy until his anger had cooled.

He signalled across to Bellingham and the Balkanian officer in the "Di" that they must descend and search for Miss Hunt.

Bellingham knew Jimmy's abode, and put the "Di" quickly down into the quiet little street. He prayed that no police might be about, and his prayer was answered. The Rue de Ranelagh was utterly deserted.

In response to his pull at the bell the door was opened by one of the detectives who had Jimmy under surveillance.

Bellingham guessed the man's identity, but paid no heed to him; he brushed past him, walked quickly down the passage, and, without pausing to knock at the door, hurried into Jimmy's study.

There he found that dilatory young man kneeling beside an armchair in which was seated a very tired and over-wrought—Miss Hunt.

The girl sprang up with a cry as she beheld Bellingham, and ran towards him with outstretched hands. Bellingham clasped them, then, turning to Cloud, he said quickly: "We have come for Miss Hunt. Do you propose to accompany us to Bomberg?"

For a moment Jimmy hesitated, then smiled a little bitterly. "If I am wanted," he said.

"There is still work for you to do," said Bellingham.

"I will come," said Cloud. "The only difficulty is to give these fellows the slip. There are two of them, and one, as you see, declines even to allow me out of his sight for a moment."

From the man's puzzled expression Jimmy realised that he did not understand English; he said to Bellingham: "Go out and settle the man at the door. I think I can manage this person."

Then, so swiftly that the police-officer had no time for retaliatory measures, Jimmy drew a revolver from his pocket and covered him.

"Monsieur," he said in excellent French, "you will have the kindness to remain here while I withdraw with the young lady."

The man was too utterly taken aback to do anything but gape, and Jimmy, keeping him covered with the revolver, drew Miss Hunt from the room, and, passing down the passage, found Bellingham in somewhat angry altercation with the detective at the door. The police-officer in the study was so completely dumbfounded that he made no attempt to follow, and Jimmy transferred the attentions of his six-shooter from the first man to the second.

No word was spoken as Bellingham, Miss Hunt, and Jimmy ran across the roadway and climbed as quickly as they could into the "Di."

Strong, who sat with straining eyes watching the little house, nodded approval, and immediately gave the order for the return to Bomberg.

He put both the airships up an elevation of five thousand feet, and hour after hour they rushed on through the darkness.

It was a pitilessly wet night, and they pierced cloudbank after cloudbank. Such was the speed of the "Victor" that the "Di" was left hopelessly behind; but, as Strong's need for quick travelling was great, he paid no heed to that.

Hour after hour he sat without saying a word, while Diana, utterly exhausted with the weeks of struggle and waiting, rested, with as little self-consciousness as a child, against his shoulder, sleeping a better and more peaceful sleep than she had known for months.

When the sun came up she roused herself and moved a little away. Strong possessed himself of one of her hands, and she did not make any attempt to rid him of it.

A thousand thoughts were beating in Strong's brain. For the most part he was thinking of the struggle—the last great fight for the Dictatorship of the world—that would come on the morrow. But interspersed with his general idea was the continuous thought of thankfulness for the recovery of Diana. He knew what it must have cost her to sacrifice her pride.

By ten o'clock it was fine, and Bomberg lay placid and pleasant in the sunshine as they came over the city. The three other airships were slowly sailing round the borders of the town.

Strong made directly for the forecourt of the palace, and, putting down the "Victor" there, helped Diana to alight.

The princess went straight to her old rooms, and Strong went to his work. There was much to be done, for he learned by wireless that the Kaiser's airships were expected on the following day.

Strong made every preparation that he possibly could for the safety of the town. All the available reserves were mobilised, and while half were sent to join the army on the northern frontier, the other half were utilised for police purposes. By this time Strong had not the slightest fear of any revolt breaking out. The hold which he had upon the people was now too great for that; but he looked for joyful turmoil and excitement.

Though Bellingham, Arbuthnot and his other immediate friends were aware of his purpose in meeting the Kaiser on as equal a footing as he could, Strong was careful not to let his decision become public. He knew that doubt would be roused in the people's mind if he were to announce the fact that he proposed to surrender some of his advantages. He had every confidence in the Kaiser's good faith, and still more confidence in the Kaiser's good sense. It seemed to him idle to suppose that, should his Imperial Majesty's airships meet with disaster, the emperor would pile defeat upon defeat by

seeking to retrieve misfortunes in the air by a *debtacle* on land.

To Strong, indeed, the complete overthrow of the Kaiser was already as good as an accomplished fact and therefore the way lay clear for him to complete his plans for the total subjugation of the world. Russia, by his possession of the Czarevitch, he held in the hollow of his hand; Germany on the morrow would be his willing ally; France could not afford to stand alone; the strict neutrality of Great Britain was assured.

That left only the United States to be considered, and Strong, for the time, ruled them out of the question. When he had enforced on Europe the general *régime* of peace and reform which he was slowly evolving, it would be time to see that America fell into line with the rest of the civilised world.

By three o'clock in the afternoon Strong had completed all his arrangements, and towards four o'clock M. Stalvin, General Martel and Arbuthnot gathered in his room for a brief consultation before each man went to his post.

Even at that busy time Strong did not forget his debt of gratitude to the editor of the *Daily Wireless*, and, sending for Miss Hunt, he gave her the outline of his campaign, with full permission to use it as she chose.

He knew that it could not be cabled back to Germany until too late to serve any useful purpose there. Long before Strong's final announcement on the affairs of the world could reach the Kaiser, the Kaiser would be at grips with him above Bomberg.

There was a certain uneasiness about the town, for rumours had got abroad as to the approach of the Germans. To allay, as far as possible, all public anxiety, Strong towards nightfall issued a proclamation calling on the people to put their trust in him and to remain tranquil during the coming conflict.

The proclamation explained that the engagement would be short, sharp, and decisive, and that at the

close of the coming battle Balkania would, under his dictatorship, be at the head of the affairs of the world.

Strong even thought it as well to take the people into his confidence to the extent of telling them that the battle could well be watched from the Morning Hills. This he did with the desire to drain the city of its population as much as he could in the morning, for the reason that the fewer people there were in Bomberg the easier he would be able to deal with them from a disciplinary point of view.

As dark set in he sent to the princess' rooms, asking her permission for a few minutes' interview, and directly afterwards the messenger returned saying that Diana would be glad to receive him.

Diana, being utterly worn out, had spent nearly the whole of the day in slumber; now she looked rosy and refreshed.

As she came to meet him, Strong felt a little embarrassed. There was much that it was necessary to say and a good deal that required some delicacy of expression. He took her hand, led her to a sofa, and seated himself beside her.

"You must not think, dearest," he said, "that if I am compelled to mention certain matters I do so with a desire to be unkind—much less do I desire to triumph over you. Unless I were forced to do so, I should not recall your defiance of me or the fact that you declared that you could not possibly return to Balkania until you returned as queen. I know that it sounds rather like splitting hairs, but, at the same time, I really think the best way out of the difficulty is for you to regard me more as your servant than as the man who has stolen your kingdom from you. To-morrow I meet the Kaiser face to face, and I trust that before nightfall we shall have settled the whole of this bad business; and then, strong, because of the knowledge of our strength, we shall be able to set to work upon righting the many



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wrongs and lessening the many evils with which this poor old world is troubled.

"In that work," Strong continued earnestly, "it will be no exaggeration to say that I shall ever be your servant. I am looking to you very largely for direction, so that, after all, you see, you will be the real ruler."

Diana turned upon him a face that was both proud and glad. "I will help you," she said, quite simply.

"As soon as the fight is all over," said Strong, "I must be crowned; and if it is still your wish, it is my darling desire that we should be married on the same day, and that you should be proclaimed my consort."

Diana made him a mock bow, and smiled the first gay smile for many weeks.

"I am quite agreed, your Majesty," she cried.

"It is rather hard," said Strong, "that I should have to leave you so soon after finding you again, but unfortunately I must. I must be with the airships in less than half an hour."

He rose from his seat. Diana rose too, and looked into his face long and wistfully.

"Supposing," she said, "that you should not return?"

Strong laughed aloud.

"Dearest," he cried, "there is not the slightest fear of that. My only anxiety at the present moment is to make it a sufficiently fair fight to escape being called a bully by the world. When I met the Kaiser at Potsdam I found him not only such a splendid man, but such a splendid gentleman, that it really makes me feel regretful that I should have to shatter his power and his majesty. Of course, it is difficult in an affair of this sort to gauge altogether accurately what will happen, but my own impression is—and it is an impression which is shared by Langley and Arbuthnot—that the battle will be over in less than a quarter of an hour."

Diana drew a little nearer, and placed a hand upon

his arm. "Is it not possible even now," she asked, "to avoid a battle?"

"No," said Strong, "it is not. Even if I could come to terms with the Kaiser without fighting, it would be most inadvisable to do so. The fact of shattering the greatest military power on earth will give me prestige and authority which I could not otherwise hope to gain."

Strong paused, and then caught Diana to his arms. He held her close against his breast, and kissed her tenderly on eyes and mouth. Then, without another word, he hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XLIII

ARMAGEDDON LIMITED

THE city was full of life. People thronged the long main thoroughfare from the palace, every window of which was illuminated, down to the buildings of the different Ministries on the grand square.

So great, indeed, had been the effect of the proclamation which Strong had issued in the afternoon, that the populace of Bomberg was celebrating beforehand the great victory which they felt confident would soon be theirs.

It was an extraordinary change to have been brought about in so short a space of time. In a few weeks Strong had lifted Balkania up from being one of Europe's petty states to the pinnacle of the world's power. And with this great change in the state had come a complete alteration of the people's character. No longer hedged about by little petty quarrels, no longer living in fear of Russia on the one hand and Germany on the other, relieved from the tangle of intricate European politics in which they had dwelt so long, the citizens of Bomberg had won to a larger point of view. They dreamt of World-Empire such as a nation had never dreamt of before.

But while Strong fostered this notion of world dominion for policy's sake, he had not the slightest intention of pursuing the wild and exaggerated dreams of conquest which the more enthusiastic clamoured for.

He had calculated the matter almost to a nicety, and saw that he was far more likely to achieve great results, when at last he had the great world-nations at his feet, if, instead of abusing his tremendous powers, he were to

guide the countries gently into the path which he would have them follow.

After all, he only made war to achieve peace. He meant to march steadfastly on from Armageddon to the Millennium. It was with this great thought in mind, and the cherished hope that in his work for the world's welfare he would, while life lasted, have Diana beside him both to guide him and inspire him, that he put the airships up for the final struggle.

As the "Victor" rose slowly and majestically he looked across the city to where the lights of the palace shone in the distance, and on the balcony he beheld through his glasses a solitary and wistful figure pressing against the parapet.

It was Diana.

"How many times," thought Strong, "have I seen Diana there and in what different circumstances."

Strong had now to map out for the commanders of the different airships the stations which they should keep during the night, and the tactics which they should follow in the morning. Unfortunately, owing to lack of scouts, Strong was unable to move far from Bomberg, for he knew that he would be dealing with the most masterly tacticians of the Kaiser's army, and, even if it delayed him in coming to grips with the enemy, he saw that it was very doubtful if the Kaiser would descend directly on Bomberg from Berlin.

Strong therefore ordered all lights to be put out and the airships to keep station at an elevation of ten thousand feet directly over the city.

The "Di" he detached, ordering her to sail at top speed in a circle round the city at a distance of fifty miles. In this way he hoped he might by chance detect the approach of the Kaiser's airships, though he realised that the odds were against him in this respect.

At six o'clock the dawn was only beginning to show up, and Strong estimated that, even if all had gone well, the German air fleet could not make Bomberg

before another hour; and that did not provide for any detour which the Kaiser might make in order to plan a surprise. On the other hand, he knew that the Kaiser would rather hasten than delay, in order, if possible, to come upon Strong before it was fully light.

But to the last Strong's luck held good, for towards seven o'clock he received a message from the "Di," which was then to the westward, that Churston had observed four aeroplanes approaching at a great speed.

Strong ordered Churston to continue cruising in his circle until he had fetched up behind the larger airships. Then the Dictator commanded the "Victor" and her sister airships to move rapidly towards the oncoming aeroplanes.

Within ten minutes Strong could see the enemy approaching, and then what happened came about so swiftly that Strong, in after days, was hard put to it to remember all the details of the fight. He had felt pretty certain when the Kaiser had acquiesced at Potsdam to the arrangement which practically amounted to settling the affairs of the world by single combat, that his Majesty must place great reliance on the capacities of the airships with which he proposed to dispute Strong's dictatorship.

But though he had foreseen this, Strong was for a second utterly taken aback by the forces which were suddenly arrayed against him. In the twinkling of an eye he realised that the aeroplanes were sailing as fast as if not faster than his own air craft. They came on with a curious rising and dipping and rising motion, suggestive of the flight of a swallow.

Strong signalled fifteen thousand feet, and the "Victor," the "State," the "Balkania," and the "Princess" rose like rockets. And so great was the pace of the oncoming aeroplanes that they shot past beneath them. There had been no time to steer so that the airships could be manœuvred above the aeroplanes, and they

passed each other harmlessly by without so much as an exchange of shot.

As the aeroplanes rushed past beneath him Strong ordered his own airships to stop dead. Through the glasses he took a rapid survey of the foe.

The aeroplanes were of a description which he had never expected to see. Each of them had three sets of wings, fashioned like the wings of a swift, which apparently worked easily backwards and forwards, and up and down from pivots placed in the body.

The bodies were of immense length—Strong guessed about three hundred feet—while the wings, from tip to tip, must have been five hundred feet across.

Strong watched their flight keenly, to ascertain the best means of meeting them, and he saw at once that his own forces were at any rate superior in mobility.

For though the Kaiser's aeroplanes were steady and turned about, they turned cumbrously and heavily, whereas Strong could turn his airships in their own length.

But what followed the turning of the aeroplanes was so sudden and so astonishing that Strong was for the moment disarmed. The aeroplanes began to climb swiftly into the sky until they had reached some fifteen thousand feet.

Strong decided not to put up his own airships until he had been able to grasp the motive of the extraordinary elevation of the enemy, for he recognised that to have put his own airships up would be to challenge the Germans to a trial of endurance. It would simply have been a question of whether he or the Kaiser could reach the greater elevation.

Perplexed, and momentarily anxious, Strong watched and waited for the cessation of the aeroplanes' ascent.

The enemy's aeroplanes were about five miles distant, and appeared as dots in the sky. Then they were quickly tilted to an obtuse angle to the earth, and

descended towards Strong, who was then at an elevation of about ten thousand feet.

They came hurtling down through space like boats on a water-chute, only at a velocity which made Strong hold his own breath to think in wonderment that mortal man could dive at such a speed through space.

There was little time, however, for astonishment; for scarcely before he understood their intention the aeroplanes were upon him.

Strong ordered the airships to dive in the opposite direction to the oncoming aeroplanes. And just in the nick of time the "Victor" and her sister airships swept beneath the hurtling aeroplanes.

Looking astern, Strong saw the angle of the aeroplanes altered, and watched them come hurtling up into the sky again until once more they were at a distance of about five miles, looking like so many flies on a ceiling.

Then he realised that unless he took some quick and decided action, this game of dip and rise might continue for many hours without a blow being exchanged. He was astonished at the Kaiser's methods, and the only conclusion forced upon him was that his Majesty had deliberately chosen the course of battering down the airships by sheer force in lieu of mere distant gun-fire fighting.

There was so little time for signalling that Strong put alongside the "State" and shouted to Langley through the megaphone to know what he made of it.

Langley shouted back that he judged the Kaiser's idea was to sink the airships at all costs, knowing that such was the construction of his own aeroplanes that, even if hard hit, no greater disaster could overcome them than to fall gently to the ground.

At this Strong suddenly saw the way. He saw that the aeroplanes were limited in their flight by the fact that they could merely rise to a height corresponding to

the elevation from which they had dipped. Of this, therefore, he decided to take full advantage.

Through his glasses he observed them preparing to dip once more, and realised that while he could not beat them in speed as they were dipping, he could beat them in speed as they were rising, and so he signalled instructions that his airships were to clear the dip of the aeroplanes and then to follow them in their rise. They were to follow and beat the aeroplanes in elevation, and, while the winged machines hovered again for the dip, smash them while they could.

Strong knew that this would mean quick work, and work demanding enormous coolness; but he relied on his men.

The aeroplanes came hurtling down again, and just in time the four airships rose above them, turned easily, and pursued the aeroplanes on their upward flight.

They were so hard upon them that they could see the men working beneath them. So close indeed were they upon them that Strong and his companions stood in peril of being hit by the riflemen of the aeroplanes below. But marksmanship at such a speed could be of small effect. As they rushed up through the air Strong saw that he gained upon the enemy.

Up and up they went till breathing became difficult and blood began to trickle from more than one man's nose and ears. The end was close at hand.

The aeroplanes beneath the airships shook and quivered as they reached the climax of their ascent. The airships were sailing easily above them.

Strong signalled "Shells."

Each airship made for its corresponding aeroplane, and the rain of shells was short and sharp.

By a coincidence Strong found himself above the aeroplane in which was the Emperor himself.

He had signalled that the shots were to be dropped upon the wings of the aeroplanes and not into the bodies,

seeing that if the wings were shattered the aeroplanes could not possibly remain afloat.

The effect of the shells differed widely. The shells from the "Princess" tore ragged holes in the wings of the aeroplane beneath her, so that the stricken machine began to drift slowly earthwards. And this was also what came to pass in the case of the aeroplane attacked by the "Balkania."

But the shells from the "State" fell more or less by chance on that section of the aeroplane where the wings and the body were joined together. Two wings on the starboard side of the aeroplane were blown away, and the stricken craft turned turtle and fell like a stone through space.

Strong alone held his hand. He held his hand deliberately for the set purpose of discovering the effect of the shell-fire on the enemy.

He learned it only just in time. Already the aeroplane beneath him was turning for a downward flight, when, to a hair's-breadth, he manœuvred the "Victor" so as to enable Bellingham to drop the little grenades plump through the enemy's wings.

The Kaiser's aeroplane straightway drifted downwards in the same slow, gentle fashion towards the earth as had been the fate of the aeroplanes placed out of action by the "Balkania" and the "Princess."

Strong drew in a deep breath of relief and murmured a quick, but none the less fervent, little prayer of thankfulness to Heaven.

Still, his thoughts were of Diana, and as he followed the now rapidly sinking aeroplane, he picked up the wireless and ticked a query to the palace.

The answering sparks in the instrument, which he held in his shaking hands, told him that Diana was once again waiting on the balcony.

So Strong merely ticked "We have won!" and threw the instrument aside, for he had much to think of.

They went down, down, down at a faster and faster

rate. So great, indeed, was the speed at which they were descending that he was for a few moments fearful lest the aeroplane bearing the Kaiser should be dashed to pieces on the ground below.

But as the earth rushed up to them, Strong saw the aeroplane tilt once again, and for a second he wondered whether, stricken though he was, the Kaiser was hoping to attempt another ascent, and continue the struggle single-handed. But this thought had no sooner flashed into Strong's mind than he was satisfied on that score. The tilt had merely been made in order to serve as a brake. The aeroplane alighted gently on the ground.

Arbuthnot and the Balkanian officers would have raised a cheer, but Strong was in time to check that demonstration with uplifted hand. He would not have any outward triumphing over a gallant but defeated foe.

So completely did he now trust the Kaiser that, despite the fact that the men in the aeroplane outnumbered his own companions, Strong put the "Victor" down, and, stepping out of her, walked alone towards the enemy. As he approached he lifted his cap, and marched bare-headed towards the Kaiser, whom he saw coming to meet him alone across the field on which the victor and vanquished had alighted.

The Emperor's face was very grey. He looked old and worn and sad. Half his Imperial masterfulness had dropped away from him. He looked to Strong an utterly broken man.

Strong stood still, somewhat awkwardly awaiting the Emperor's approach. With all his resource, with all his tact, he was a little doubtful as to how to greet his Majesty.

This difficulty was solved by the Emperor himself. As he drew near he held out his hand in a most frank and friendly fashion to Strong.

Strong grasped it gladly.

"Mr Strong," said the Emperor, "it is true that

I have been defeated. Nothing can prevent your ascendancy over the world now—it is simply a question of a little time and a little money for you to so increase your fleet that you have the world completely at your mercy. And I am glad to have been defeated by you. At least, I shall go down to posterity as the only man who was able to even put up fight against you. And that," he added, "is only due to your generosity."

"Your Majesty," said Strong, "please do not continue to embarrass me by so much chivalrous kindness. Now, if you will permit me to suggest it, we will return to Bomberg at once."

The Kaiser looked a little hopelessly about him. "We seem to be in a rather forsaken spot," he said, "and I see no means of transport."

Strong laughed. "You forget the 'Victor,'" he said.

The Kaiser flushed. It was not until that moment that he realised how complete the victory had been.

On arriving at the palace, Strong put the "Victor" down in the forecourt, swung easily over the side, and then turned to assist the Emperor to reach the ground.

Diana, all pride, all small sense of dignity cast to the winds, came running down the steps and threw herself into Strong's arms. For full half a minute she cried upon his breast.

The troops were paraded in the square, but of these Strong took no heed. Very gently he wiped Diana's tears away until she laughed at the very tenderness of his action.

And when she laughed, Strong laughed too, and said, "Allow me to introduce my most gallant friend, the Emperor of Germany."

The Kaiser, with a very courtly air, took Diana's hand and raised it to his lips. Then all three together walked into the palace.

In the hall Strong looked the Kaiser full in the face. "I think," said he, "I can explain my motives more

clearly if you will accompany me for a few minutes upstairs."

The Kaiser made a little bow.

Strong, therefore, led the way to the nursery, where they found Miss Hunt playing with the infant Czarevitch. For a moment the Kaiser looked surprised.

Strong laughed aloud. "I see your Majesty does not recognise a very puissant prince," he said. "The baby is the Czarevitch."

There was silence for some moments, and then Strong spoke again. "Hard things have been said of me, your Majesty, and most of them were undeserved. I boasted that I would steal the earth, and I really think I have fulfilled my boast. Ever since I met the princess," and he quietly took Diana's hand, "I have resolved to do all I could to mitigate suffering in this world. Unfortunately, the only way lay through war. England, because of my own nationality, I was compelled to rule out of the conflict. I feared no opposition save from Russia and from yourself. It may have been a dreadful thing to do, but I stole the Czarevitch for a good purpose. To-morrow Russia will be my friend, just as I hope Germany may be mine."

"Germany is your friend," said the Kaiser, simply.

"Your Majesty," said Strong a little sharply, "I thank you for that expression of goodwill, but you will, of course, understand that the way of Germany is my way."

"It shall be your way," said the Kaiser with a ring of sincerity in his voice, "because I think your way is inspired."

Strong lifted Diana's hands and kissed them. "And here," he said, "is the source of my inspiration. With Russia to support me, and with Germany as my ally, I have nothing more to fear. The world is mine to do as I bid it, and my bidding will be for the best, inasmuch as, Dictator of the World though I may be, I shall in turn be ruled by love."

Again the Emperor held out his hand. "Mr Strong," he said—"I am still forced to call you Mr Strong—if you will allow me, I will remain in Bomberg till you have been crowned Dictator. And if I may suggest it, on that same day the princess should be crowned Queen."

Then he turned with a very pleasant smile to Diana. "Madam," he said, "I am getting an old man—consider me as a father. Grant me the favour that at your wedding I may be permitted to give you away to 'The Man Who Stole the Earth!'"

THE END

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