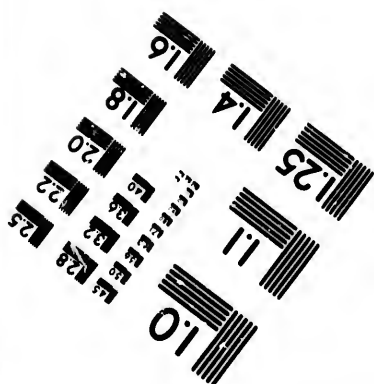
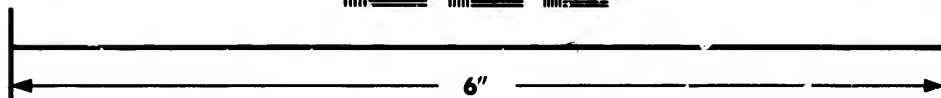
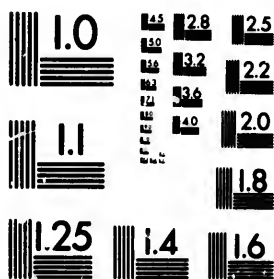


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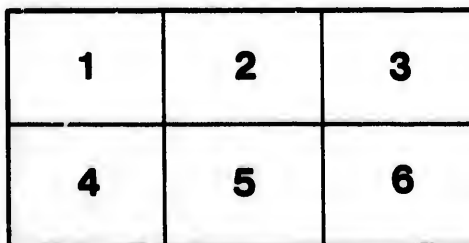
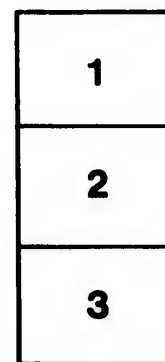
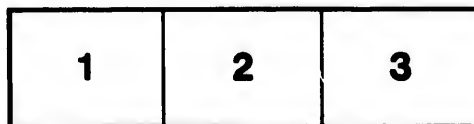
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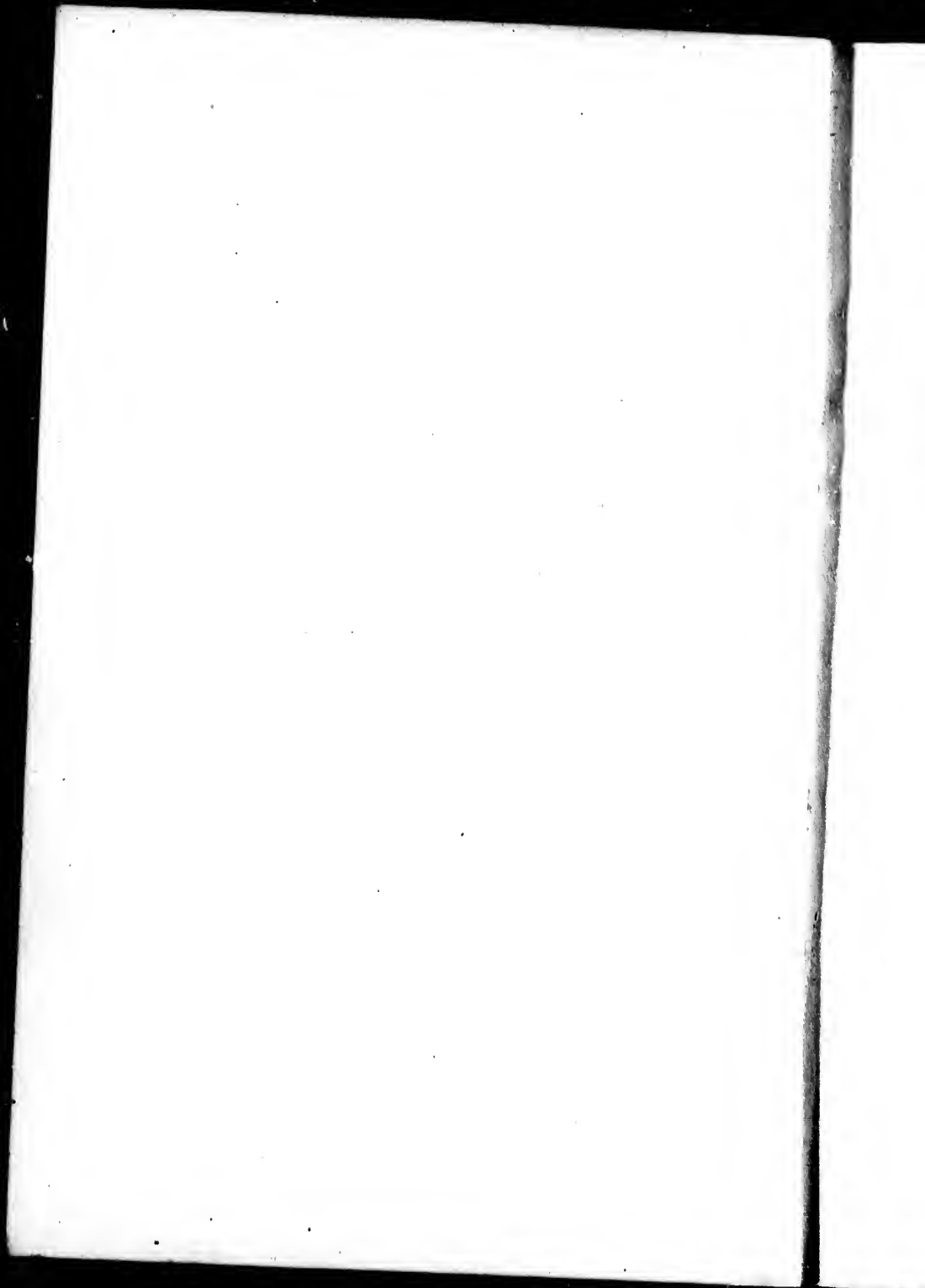
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THE RED CHANCELLOR



" You may be my friend in this place where I have no friends."
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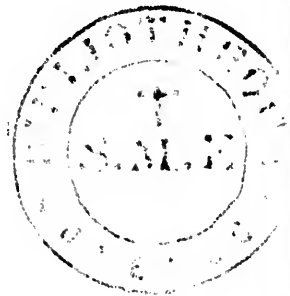
The Red Chancellor

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THE RED CHANCELLOR

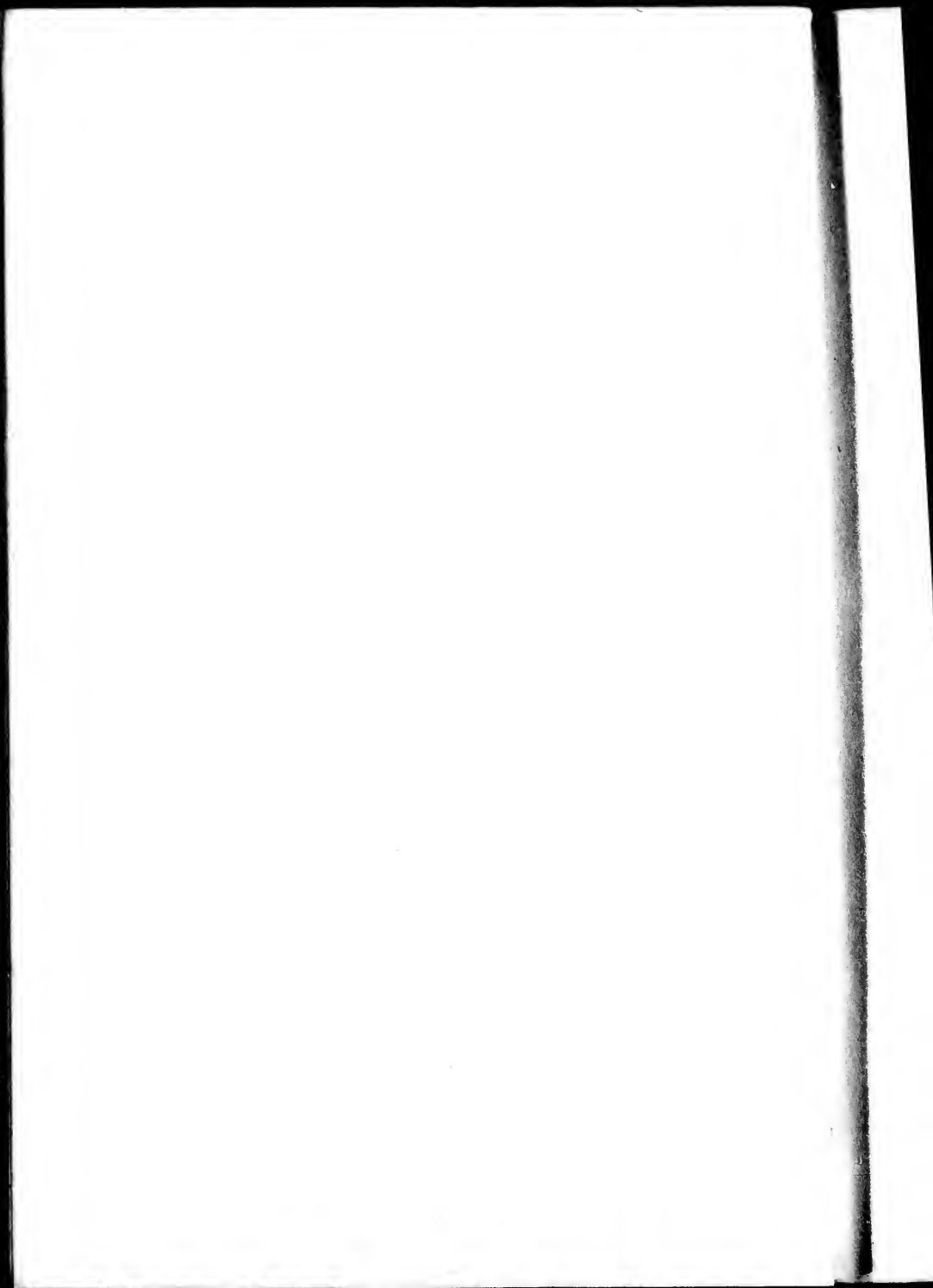
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THE RED CHANCELLOR

CHAPTER I

DUKE JOHANN'S CHAPEL

"VON ORSOVA is playing a dangerous game."

"He takes the risk."

"Of what?" It was I who asked the question, curious to hear what penalty attached to the handsome Rittmeister's temerity.

The three men gave glances at each other, as though inquiring which of them could answer. My friend Von Lindheim broke the pause, replying with a shrug—

"He is a Captain of Cavalry, Master of the Horse; a gentleman, noble, no doubt, by birth, but a simple, if magnificent, Rittmeister. The lady"—he glanced round towards the dark shadows of the trees, gave another shrug of caution and lowered his voice,—
"is what we all know. To couple their names is high treason; and, *a fortiori*, it is treason in a higher degree for the Bursche to aspire."

"We have not forgotten," another said, "the case of poor Steiner."

I saw they were not inclined to run risks by discussing State secrets under the very walls of the palace, so postponed the gratification of my curiosity until I should get Von Lindheim alone in my rooms or his house. We four had slipped out into the

gardens, to snatch ten minutes for a cigarette from the rather dreary formality of a State ball at the palace of Buyda. My three companions were guests in their official capacities, being attached to the bureau of the world-known Chancellor Rallenstein; I, Jasper Tyrrell, a mere traveller, through the friendly offices of Von Lindheim, to whom I had an introduction. I had gone abroad in a restless, roving frame of mind, ready for any adventure, and heartily sick of the monotony of inaction, forced inaction, very slightly relieved by the problematical fun of entertaining big shooting parties at my place in Norfolk. That seemed all I had to look forward to in the year, and the more I thought of my autumn programme the more restless and discontented had I grown. Even the temporary diversion of marriage, strenuously commended to me by certain not altogether disinterested friends, had failed to take hold on my fancy; amusements of that sort can be arranged at any time and at comparatively short notice. So one night at dinner, during which several friends and relations were good enough to map out a very pretty six months' programme for me—and themselves—my resolution was taken, and before I had got into bed that night my kit for an extended solitary ramble was packed. Next day I made a bolt of it, leaving to an astute aunt full authority, by letter, to carry on Sharnston in my absence, and after a month's desultory progress found myself at Buyda.

A generation ago there were, as every student of European diplomacy knows, some very curious political intrigues (we know more about them now) in several of the Courts of Europe. More or less secret acts of aggressive statesmanship were perpetrated which, had they not been diplomatically covered up or explained away, would have seemed to set the forces of civilization to right-about-face.

But the press, like speech, often serves, in some countries at any rate, to withhold rather than to give out information, while special correspondents are mostly acclimatized and often merely human.

Still, there was somewhere, in east central Europe for choice, a chance of seeing something of life a little more adventurous than the cricket field or the covert at home had to offer, and with young blood in one's veins, a perfect digestion, a muscular system second to none at Angelo's, the idea of a possible running into adventures is not displeasing. The dull smoothness and security of a well-policed community is monotonous to a man of spirit.

Such were the vague anticipations with which I set forth, but my imagination certainly never suggested such a series of adventures as that which I was to pass through before I got back.

I had purposely left my destination uncertain, even to my own mind. In the true spirit of adventure I would be bound by no fixed route, but let my fancy and the circumstances of the moment carry me whither they would. Only one indication of any sort of purpose did I take with me. That was a letter of introduction from an F. O. friend to an old school-fellow of his, Gustav von Lindheim, a rich young fellow who had been educated in England, and who now held a post in the Chancellory of his native State. It was in that corner of Europe that something of an adventure seemed most likely to be had, and it was there, to pass over my earlier wanderings, that I eventually found myself.

Through the half-open windows of the great ball-room came "Amoretentänze," thundered out with military swing and insistence by the resplendent Court band. In company with my three acquaintances I had strolled away from the illuminated portion of the gardens, and we were now pacing a dark

and comparatively secluded walk. Encouraged perhaps by the lessened probability of eavesdropping (for methods under Rallenstein, the dread Chancellor's rule, were mediæval, more or less), one of my companions remarked :

" Our Princess looks bewitchingly pretty to-night. The bold Rittmeister has indeed an excuse."

" And she also," Von Lindheim replied. " The fellow is the most splendid clothes-peg and wig-block combined that I know. He is magnificent, the sort of magnificence that does not live to see its grandchildren."

" He is a fool," one of the others said, " to snap his fingers so close to the Jaguar's snout."

" Orsova is a fool, my dear Szalay," Von Lindheim assented, " as I have just hinted."

" And the Jaguar is couched and ready to spring at the right moment."

" Our dear chief does not make a mistake or let another man make it against his policy."

" Or woman."

" Ah! He has a plan, and the Herr Rittmeister von Orsova forms no part of it."

" No use for him. Prince Theodor——" I began incautiously, when I was stopped by a subdued chorus of " Hush! "

" Secrets of State, my dear fellow," Von Lindheim said, laughing, but with a warning gesture. " You will get us into trouble. You Englishmen, with your excess of freedom, can't realize how circumspect we have to be. You have no Jaguar ever ready for the spring. You don't know our famous Red Chancellor—even by reputation."

Strolling and talking thus, we had passed through the gardens and struck into a path, skirting a little wood beyond the pleasaunce of the royal grounds. My companions stopped and turned.

"I'll just finish my cigar and follow you," I said. The Emperadore was too good to throw away for the sake of hurrying back to an entertainment of which, to tell the truth, the petty splendour rather bored me.

Nevertheless, we all turned back together. Suddenly Szalay halted, and pointed into the wood. "What is that?"

We all looked. A light was glimmering from the depth of the blackness; a light suggested rather than seen.

"That is Duke Johann's old chapel there, now used as a summer-house," Von Lindheim said.

"Yes; but what can any one be doing there at this time of night."

"We ought to investigate," the third man, D'Urban, said with official zeal.

"Come, then. We can get round this way again to the terrace, and perhaps——"

They had plunged into the wood, making for the light. I followed them a step or two, then stopped and regained the path, not seeing how the question of the irregular illumination could interest me. Enjoying my cigar I strolled on. The night was pleasant enough. A slight warm breeze drove the clouds slowly across a gibbous moon, giving a pretty play of light and shade. So I sauntered on in a frame of mind attuned to my present surroundings. I had become so far acclimatized as to take an interest in the Court intrigues which flourished in the air of that Chancellor-ruled kingdom. I had an idea of seeking a temporary commission in the State cavalry, that dazzling regiment with its picture-book cattle and its theatrical accoutrements. I was only awaiting to see whether there was any grit inside all that fur and brass and steel and bullion, not caring to ear-mark myself with a regiment of costumiers' dummies. This doubt made me take a peculiar interest in that

magnificent spectacular warrior, the Rittmeister von Orsova. Granted he was a fool, he might be a plucky fool. That the pretty Princess Casilde (and she was lovely) was in love with him, or something near it, was common gossip in the inner circle of Court officialdom. But the despotic Chancellor held other views and plans. Having made himself the foremost man in the State (for the King, with all his parade of authority, was notoriously under his thumb), he now nursed the one idea of the State's aggrandizement as the only way left of increasing his own power. And it was evident that that aggrandizement could best be attained by allying his master's house with the richer and more important state of which Prince Theodor was heir-apparent. Hence the projected marriage between that Prince and the Princess Casilde. Such was the state of affairs when I found myself in Buyda.

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CHAPTER II

THE FACE IN THE LIGHT

AFTER a while I turned in my walk. It was time to get back to the ball-room if I would not appear to slight the honour shown me in the invitation. I had rather lost my bearings in the wooded walk, and in returning had the choice of three paths without knowing which one to take. I chose that which seemed to lead directly towards the distant music, and walked on quickly. It soon appeared that it was not the path I had come by. It led me much deeper into the wood than I had been before; still, the music seemed to grow nearer, and I flattered myself it might be a short cut. Hurrying on, I suddenly came upon a clearing in the wood. In the middle of this stood a small building—Duke Johann's chapel, of which my companions had spoken. A quaint little edifice built, so far as the fitful light showed me, in a highly ornate style of Moorish architecture.

It was still lighted up dimly; a ray fell across the path at some little distance in front of me, evidently from one of the side windows. Neither the place, although it was romantic enough, nor the light particularly interested me. But as I went round towards the opposite side of the clearing, I was arrested by a curious sight.

The stream of light which I have spoken of became suddenly interrupted, then diffused and broken up, then it swept from side to side. I stopped and watched

it for a few seconds, then my eye followed the movement to its cause.

Just outside the window, half blocking the light and dispersing it, was a man's head. The body I could not see, as it was naturally in the deep shadow. But the face! It was peering into the chapel eagerly, its expression, illuminated into strong relief by the light which streamed upon it from the little window, was one I can hardly describe, but shall never forget. Perhaps I can best give an idea of it by likening it to the look of hungry ferocious expectation in the eyes of a tiger which has got to within striking distance of its quarry. The sight was so extraordinary that I must have stood for several seconds hardly drawing my breath, and looking at it half fascinated. Then something told me it would be better to walk on, taking no further notice. After all, I had a perfect right as a guest to be in the wood, and——. In the dark shadow of a buttress near the window there was a quick movement, but quite independent of the peering man. Next instant a form crossed the band of light; another man had come out of the darkness and accosted me.

His first words were rough and brusque. "What are you doing here?" Then, noticing his mistake, and concluding probably by my appearance that I was a gentleman, and one of the royal guests, he abruptly changed his tone and manner.

"Pardon! You are waiting here for some one, mein Herr, or wish to return to the palace?"

"I was taking the liberty of smoking a cigar," I answered, as politely as I felt inclined.

"Here? In the wood?" The question was put sharply, with a certain stern incredulity and insistence strangely at variance with the man's look. I scarcely knew whether to resent or laugh at it.

"Not till this minute." I replied, deeming it easiest

to be straightforward in that land of ceremonies and red tape. "I have been smoking outside the wood, and took this path back to the palace. Why? Is it forbidden?"

The man gave a shrug, but never relaxed his fixed gaze on my face.

"Under certain circumstances. You have not been to this spot till this moment, you say?"

"No."

"You were not here just now; three, four minutes ago?"

"I am not used to have my word doubted, sir," I returned, getting a little out of patience.

"Pardon." He changed his tone again, reverting to its first bluntness. "You are English. I may ask your name?"

I told him, adding, "I presume you have a right to ask it?"

"Pardon," he said again, but his manner was still offensive. "You have been here alone?"

"No. I have been smoking with three friends who hold official positions here. They have gone in."

"Pardon, sir,"—he spoke in English now—"we are obliged to be circumspect here; you in England may not comprehend our necessity. Excuse me if I ask a few questions, in no spirit of idle curiosity, I assure you."

I nodded and waited.

"Those gentlemen, your friends they left you here in the wood?"

"On the path outside it."

"You have not been in this wood before now tonight?"

"No."

"You have seen your friends since you parted from them down there?"

"No."

"No? Why did you walk this way?"

"Really, sir," I answered, getting somewhat exasperated, "I don't know why I should submit to this cross-examination."

He laughed, showing a set of cruel teeth. "Because you are an Englishman it is incomprehensible. May one inquire without offence your object in walking this way when the path to the palace is outside the wood?"

"If you must know, I took this path by mistake. I trust I have not transgressed any rule of your Court etiquette——"

"Oh, no, no, no," he broke in. "You say you did not speak with your friends again?"

"No. Is there any offence in that?"

I put the question in a bantering tone, and was rather surprised that he took it seriously.

"That I cannot tell. All depends on the subject of conversation. Let me see, Herren Szalay, Von Lindheim, and D'Urban; not so?"

"Yes. Is there anything more you wish to know?"

"At present, nothing. I thank you. Let me offer you my apologies and a piece of advice."

"Yes?"

"Be careful of your words. You are not in England here. Our master, the Herr Chancellor, has no—patience with chatterers. Good-night. That is your way."

CHAPTER III

THE JAGUAR

IN all an Englishman's wonder and impatience at so intolerable a system of surveillance, I made my way back to the palace.

The dance was in full swing again. In the crowd I could not for the moment see any one of my three friends. The King was on a dais chatting in animated fashion to a group standing round him. His daughter, the Princess Casilde, presently came out of the throng of dancers, and sat beside him, joining laughingly in the conversation. I saw the great cavalry swell, the Master of the Horse, Von Orsova, waltzing with a plain-looking girl, and was just wondering what sort of a soldier's heart beat beneath that glorious tunic, when Von Lindheim came up.

"Lindheim," I said, "a queer thing happened after you fellows left me just now."

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking grave, though he tried to smile.

"I was passing through the wood by the chapel when a fellow accosted me, and——"

He stopped me. "Hush, for Heaven's sake. Here! Come in here and tell me. How do you like the new decoration?" he went on in a louder tone, with a wave of the hand towards the ceiling and walls; "this is only the second time the Saal has been used since the scaffolding came down. It was closed all the spring."

His extraordinary change of tone and subject led me for a moment to wonder whether he had not been paying too assiduous court to the Royal champagne : then I concluded that it was a blind. Talking on commonplace subjects, we sauntered across the adjoining music-saal, thence to a deserted room, one of the great suite of state apartments.

"Now," he said, lowering his voice and speaking anxiously, "tell me what happened."

I told him. His face grew graver and whiter every moment. "What does it mean?" I said. "Is it officialism gone mad?"

"Worse than that," he replied. "I cannot tell you. Only for your life, for the lives of all of us, don't breathe a word of it—not even to yourself."

I looked at him inquisitively, and indeed my curiosity was greater than my concern. "Is there any danger," I asked, "in my inquiring the name of the fellow who honoured me with the cross-examination?"

"Do for Heaven's sake dismiss the whole affair," Von Lindheim answered impatiently. "Don't think we have done anything wrong," he added quickly; "it is less and yet worse than that. Our only chance is that we were not recognized."

They had been, of course, and it was on the tip of my tongue to say so, but I checked myself, thinking I would not add to his uneasiness, unreasonable as it seemed. There I made a great mistake, as the story will show.

"We had better get back to the ball-room," my friend said nervously. "Do you know there are said to be twenty thousand separate pieces in that great chandelier? It is one of the most elaborate specimens of glass work in the world."

My inspection of this interesting piece of work was cut short by Von Lindheim's directing my attention,

in an equally abrupt manner, to a specimen of Nature's handicraft far more engaging.

"Here," he said, "let me introduce you to Fräulein Asta von Winterstein. She is one of the Maids of Honour, and the most charming girl in Buyda."

The Fräulein's looks decidedly confirmed his words; a merry-looking girl, with a lovely face, and that air of youth and spirits which is so eloquent of the *joie de vivre*.

"You are fortunate in getting a dance with Fräulein von Winterstein," Lindheim said.

"I am only just off duty," she laughed, "and my card is a blank."

I was beginning a complimentary remark when my friend said, "Excuse my depriving you of five seconds of the Fräulein's society, my dear Tyrrell, but I have a message to give her."

They drew aside and I waited. Happening to glance at them I noticed that a cloud had come over the girl's face; both looked grave as they spoke in an undertone, then the girl's natural animation returned, and with a few laughing words to Von Lindheim, she left him and came to me. A swinging waltz was being played and we took several turns. When we stopped I remarked:

"Our friend, Von Lindheim, seems worried about something. I'm afraid he takes officialism too seriously."

"An Englishman cannot understand the peculiarities of our life here."

I was rather tired of being told that, albeit rather glad of my ignorance. Still, I did not mind the adage from this girl; she was breezy and sensible, and determined not to be too insular with respect to Buyda officialism.

"Don't you admire the Princess?" my partner asked.

"She is very pretty."

"Every one thinks her lovely."

"She is not the only belle in the room."

"Hush!—Luckily; for she is out of reach."

"Naturally. Herr Rittmeister von Orsova is a fine specimen of a man."

"You are the genius of indiscretion. A splendid fellow."

"I hope he is all through alike, and that the grit and pluck correspond to the spectacular part of the show."

"Why should you doubt it?"

"I don't for a moment. Only Nature does sometimes send out inferior goods in smart cases."

"He is as brave as he is handsome."

"Good! Oh, by——!"

"What is the matter?"

I had stopped in the waltz, with the result that the next couple cannoned against us severely. The reason of my sudden pull-up was something which in the whirl had passed my eye.

Bending over the dais in close conversation with the King was a man whom I had not observed there before. And that man's was the face I had seen peering into the chapel window. The expression was altered now, but the face was the same, one never to be mistaken or forgotten, a face curiously striking in its suggestion of immense power and indomitable will, yet ugly almost to repulsiveness.

"Who is that?" I asked eagerly. "That man talking to the King?"

The girl looked at me curiously. "Surely you know him, at least by sight. No? Why, that is our great Chancellor, Graf von Rallenstein."

CHAPTER IV

THE KING AND THE CHANCELLOR

I BEGAN to understand Von Lindheim's disquietude ; all the same, although the Chancellor's system of espionage was pretty notorious, I did not quite see what my friend had to be so afraid of. True, I was an Englishman, and we know the aphorism ; then he, too, was half English and a Rugby boy. Still, I suppose he counted as a native under the heel of the man known throughout Europe as the Red Chancellor, the man who never stood any nonsense.

" That Von Rallenstein ? "

" And you really never saw him before ? "

" Never before to-night ; not even his photograph."

" That is not extraordinary," she replied in a low voice. " He has never allowed himself to be photographed."

I began to speculate how this great statesman came to be in that undignified position outside the chapel window, and to marvel at the customs of the land in which I found myself. Then I recollected that my partner expected me to dance, not muse, and we whirled on.

The waltz came to an end. As we stopped I felt myself touched on the shoulder. A man, evidently one of the officers of the household, was at my side. He addressed me by name. " His Majesty desires to make your better acquaintance when the honoured Fräulein can spare you, sir."

It was of course a command, so I took my partner

to a seat and made for the daïs. The King and the Chancellor were still chatting confidentially as I approached. The former received me very graciously, and presented me to Von Rallenstein, who shook hands in a manner which was almost British. The conversation at once glided into a perfectly easy groove; the King was very affable, and courteously interested himself in my movements, asked me how I liked the country and city, how long I thought of staying, what part of England I lived in, was pleased to hear I had come over for sport; asked me several questions on horse-breeding, and said, as the subject was one in which he took peculiar interest, he should esteem it a great advantage to have the benefit of my advice and experience, and would go more fully into it at an early opportunity. All this was very pleasant; Von Rallenstein chimed in now and again with a pertinent remark or leading suggestion; he seemed agreeable enough, and I began to think Von Lindheim's bugbear was principally of his own making. Of course any one could see that the Chancellor was a strong man and a masterful, but, after all, he had a peculiar country to govern, and those were the qualities necessary to that end. Had I never seen that cruel, almost fiendish face at the window, I should have thought its owner a very good fellow—for his place. In this world of weaklings one does not admire a man less for his grit and power.

Presently the talk halted; and I understood from the King's manner that the interview was to close. He dismissed me very graciously, hoping I should enjoy myself both that evening and during the whole of my stay in his country. Von Rallenstein added a word or two, and I bowed myself off.

"How did you find the King, and, more particularly, the Chancellor?" Fräulein von Winterstein inquired when I rejoined her.

"Not very alarming. But then I am—an—'outsider.'"

A gorgeous being came up whose twinkling eyes were in ludicrous contrast to his fiercely brushed-up moustache.

"Ah, here is Herr Oberkammerer Eilhardt," exclaimed the girl, introducing us. "Herr Oberkammerer, our friend Mr. Tyrrell wishes to be acquainted with Herr Rittmeister von Orsova, whom I know to be a great friend of yours. Mr. Tyrrell is interested in the First Regiment of Cuirassiers."

The Herr Oberkammerer bowed with an energy begotten of Court life.

"It would charm me to be the medium of bringing our much-honoured guest into friendship with the Herr Rittmeister. My friend Von Orsova of a certainty comes to my rooms here to conclude the evening and drink a glass of wine. If Herr Tyrrell would honour me likewise?"

I thanked him and accepted.

"That will be capital," my partner said. "You can discuss arms and horses, and enflame your martial spirits over some of the Royal Steinberger Cabinet."

"I can answer for the quality of the wine," Eilhardt returned. "The dance is nearly at an end; we keep early hours in Buyda. I cannot leave until his Majesty retires. But if you will meet me here ten minutes after the King's departure, I shall do myself the honour to conduct you to my apartment."

I agreed, and with a flourish he left us, swaggering off towards the royal party.

"It is just as well to have a quiet chat with Von Orsova," Fräulein von Winterstein observed. "He is too fond of the dance to say many words to one here."

"To a man."

"*Bien entendu.* He is a perfect waltzer."

"Happy partners!"

"Take care."

"Why?" her manner made me ask. Then I followed her eyes and saw the reason of her whispered caution. The tall Rittmeister was waltzing with the Princess. They passed quite close to us. He was talking to her with an earnestness far beyond the usual ball-room trifling, or even flirtation.

"A serious affair."

"Mr. Tyrrell, you are hopelessly indiscreet. Ah!"

Suddenly the band stopped. The King had risen abruptly and was evidently about to retire. The musicians stood up and played the National Hymn. The Princess Casilde went quickly to her father, a procession was formed, and having interchanged bows with the company the royal party retired.

There was to be a dance or two more; and, as though relieved by the departure of royalty, every one seemed to become more animated, smiles were now laughter, and the excessive, almost oppressive decorum of the dance vanished.

My partner had hurried away with a bewitching "*Auf Wiedersehen!*" to join the royal party. Left alone, I betook myself to the corner of the ball-room where Herr Eilhardt was to find me.

CHAPTER V

THE DESERTED BALL-ROOM

IF this State ball did not degenerate exactly into a romp, it grew more free and easy as I sat watching it and waiting for the Oberkammerer. Von Orsova seemed to have had enough of dancing—he was evidently a good deal run after—and was now parading about with a dashing, middle-aged woman, corresponding to the skittish colonels' wives we see in our garrison towns. They passed me, she chattering and laughing, he rather bored, as it struck me, and strolled off towards the music-room. Then I noticed the two men, Szalay and D'Urban, who had been with Von Lindheim and me in the gardens. They were talking earnestly together. I wondered if they, too, took the same serious view of the situation as my friend.

Herr Eilhardt presently appeared and hurried to me with profuse apologies for having kept me waiting. The King was particularly exigent that night, he had most unwarrantably taken it into his head to discuss certain arrangements, as though any one could be expected to enter into such subjects at midnight after a dance. This he confided to me confidentially, and then proceeded to look round for his other guest.

Von Orsova was not to be seen in the thinning crowd. With renewed and quite unnecessary apologies the Oberkammerer sailed off in search of him. Only to return alone.

"The Rittmeister is nowhere to be seen. He has doubtless already gone to my apartment, not knowing I should return here. Shall we ascend?"

We ascended. Herr Eilhardt occupied a comfortable suite of rooms, shut off, like a flat, in a distant block of the great rambling palace. He was evidently a man of taste, from the quaint old furniture, the pictures and curiosities, with which his bachelor quarters were crammed.

"The Herr Rittmeister is already here, yes?" he inquired of his servant.

"No, Oberkammerer," the man answered, "the Herr Rittmeister has not yet arrived."

My host led the way into one of the most delightful dens I ever puffed smoke in.

"Shall we make ourselves comfortable? Von Orsova must be here directly. He said he should come. Adolph! The wine."

"You have a good time here," I remarked with a glance at my surroundings, almost too gorgeous for a bachelor official.

He laughed. He seemed to have thrown off his official manner, to have become more human and less of a marionette.

"We are in a groove," he replied; "and it is necessary to make that groove as comfortable as possible."

"Not only that," he proceeded with a frankness which rather surprised me: "in the artificial life of a Court it is good to keep up the illusion. One must take one's duties seriously; etiquette, forms and ceremonies are often in themselves ridiculous. If one allowed oneself to feel their absurdity one could never perform them properly. One's surroundings must be in keeping with one's life; it would be fatal to regard them from an outsider's point of view."

"You are rather a philosopher, mein Herr."

"I am a countryman of Heine. A philosopher I hope first, and an official afterwards."

"Certainly. I congratulate you. How few of us can say we accept our lot in the same spirit!"

There was a knock at the door. A servant in quaint livery entered and made two prodigious bows before delivering his message, which was to the effect that the King desired the Oberkammerer's presence.

"I attend His Majesty immediately."

The man bowed twice again almost to the ground and departed.

In a moment my host had resumed his professional manner of a mediæval master of the ceremonies. His apologies were unbounded. It was most unfortunate; the King did not require his attendance at this hour once in six months. That it should have happened on this of all nights was deplorable.

"It is a matter of duty," I said, holding out my hand, "no apology can be needed. I shall hope to have the pleasure of paying you another visit and of resuming our interesting conversation."

"I know not for how long his Majesty may require my attendance," he said regretfully. "His Majesty has lately been given to step outside his prescribed circle," which was one way of hinting at eccentricity. "And the Rittmeister von Orsova does not seem likely to honour me to-night. It is altogether unfortunate, but you will give me the pleasure of dining here, and I will ask Von Orsova to meet you. You will not stay now? I am horrified at the idea of turning you out."

I assured him that such violent emotion was unnecessary, and we left his rooms together, retracing our steps through the labyrinthine corridors and stairways of the old palace, my companion keeping up a string of explanations and apologies, which, of

course, I politely deprecated. I was disappointed at missing Von Orsova, but he evidently was not bound for the Oberkammerer's quarters that night.

Before a pair of emblazoned doors, guarded by a sentry, my host stopped and bade me good-night. "I must leave you here," he said, "as my time, you understand, is not my own. If you wait for a few moments I will send a man to show you the way out of the palace."

"It is quite unnecessary," I protested. "Please do not trouble. I have the bump of locality."

"The grand entrance will be closed, or your way would be simply down these stairs. As it is, your nearest way will be to go to the end here, then along the picture corridor on the right, pass through the last door, thence you will easily find your way down to the private entrance. The sentries will direct you. Good-night."

With a flourish he passed through the grand doors into the royal apartments, and I went on through the suite of anterooms. Beyond the last I found myself in a long corridor, panelled with portraits from that bygone world to which my late companion was so tenaciously clinging. "Go through the last door," he had said. But there were two, exactly facing each other, and as fate would have it I pushed through the left-hand one instead of the right.

I saw at once that I had made a mistake. I was in a curious room, something like a private box at the theatre, but on a very large scale. What light there was came through a half-closed window at the farther end. It was all so peculiar that my curiosity made me step forward and look through the window. A glance explained it. The little apartment overlooked the great ball-room where we had danced that evening, now in darkness save for the rays of a brilliant moon which streamed in full radiance through the row of

windows on the opposite side, and for one other light. A pair of candles in a massive silver holder were placed on a console table, and showed me an extraordinary scene. Two men standing in a recess by a window facing one another, and one pointing a pistol at his companion's breast. The light falling on the polished barrel showed it clearly and made me certain of that. But what astounded me most was my recognition of the two; the man with the pistol was the one who had accosted and questioned me in the wood that evening; I knew him in an instant; and the other was even less unmistakable—Von Orsova.

"What on earth are they doing?" I said to myself. "What fresh piece of tomfoolery is this?" For it looked childish enough; the two were so quiet and matter-of-fact that it might have been a rehearsal of a stage scene. After the Oberkammerer and his playing at mediævalism I was prepared for anything.

The men were talking, but in so low a tone that from the distance I could not catch their words. But the man still continued to cover Von Orsova's heart with his pistol; they were not two paces apart. I wondered how long they were going to keep up the attitude, which was not particularly heroic or effective from my point of view.

At last the murmur of their voices ceased; there was a movement, and one which sent a thrill through me. Not so much the action as the agonized look on Von Orsova's face as he threw up his hands with a gesture of despair, and, turning almost with a stagger to the wall, leaned against it with his head on his arm. The other never let the pistol drop—it was still pitilessly pointed at the Rittmeister. Then I realized that something serious was in progress. My idea was that the smaller man was trying to extort some-

thing from Von Orsova, having got him at a disadvantage. But I was wrong, at least in that my speculation did not go far enough.

After a few seconds Von Orsova turned again, facing the man and throwing out his hand in desperation.

"Is there——" he spoke louder, and by pushing the window a little way open I could hear him plainly say now—"is there no other way?"

The reply came coldly and uncompromisingly. "None."

"It is devilish, it is sheer murder," Von Orsova exclaimed bitterly; "and you, Count, you lend yourself to it."

"Most regretfully. But the State is before everything."

"The Chancellor, you mean."

"Pardon me, the State. Time is short, Herr Rittmeister. It would be a pity if I should be forced to pull the trigger."

"Ah!" Von Orsova gave a great sigh. "Let me take the alternative."

He turned to the console table and took up from it a small object which I could not distinguish. As he did so the other moved with him the corresponding distance, keeping the same space between them, and ever covering him with the pistol. Then they returned to their former positions. Von Orsova seemed to be manipulating the thing he held in his hand. "My offence does not merit this punishment," he said, almost coolly, so coolly that I began to wonder what the punishment was.

"The Chancellor judges otherwise," the Count returned. "You played a dangerous game, Herr Rittmeister, and must have known the risk you ran. But my orders are not to talk but to act; you understand?"

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Von Orsova raised the hand which held the small object. "This works quickly?"

"Instantaneously."

The soldier seemed to fumble with it, then he burst out, "This is horrible! I cannot—I am young and unready to die. Furello, my friend, let me escape; no one need ever know. I have rich relations and friends; I will buy my life with a fortune beyond—ah!"

The cry was one of despair, as the Count extended his arm to fire, and so cut short the other's pleading. It was appalling. As I realized what was going forward I broke out into a cold perspiration. My nerves are pretty firm, but I found myself trembling and almost paralysed, at least quite unable to decide on any line of action. The Count's reply fell on my ear, but my brain was only half conscious of it.

"I give you ten seconds. I am not a madman; and, if I were, escape would be impossible. Shall I fire?"

Von Orsova raised his hand. "I will spare you the trouble," he said, and then turned to the wall. I heard the murmuring sound of his voice, perhaps in prayer; then he raised his right hand to his head. Next moment he staggered from the wall and fell heavily backwards with an awful thud, his head almost striking the Count, who jumped back that it might clear him. So he stood for a few seconds watching the supine body, his pistol still pointing as though fearing a trick. Then he moved round, always keeping his face towards the body, took up the candles in his disengaged hand, and held the light so that it fell on Von Orsova's face. From the distance at which I was placed I could plainly see the features, livid and distorted. I realized then that the startling tragedy was over. By a curious reaction my nerves suddenly regained their normal

tension, and I could view the scene with as little excitement as though it were occurring on the stage, could look in mere curiosity to see what the Count would do next. It was dramatic enough. The great room was dark now (for the moon was obscured), save at one corner, where the candles flickered on the ghastly face of the dead Hussar, made more horrible by contrast with his gorgeous uniform; then the relentless black figure stooping over him.

Satisfied apparently with his inspection, the Count set the candelabrum on the floor, and kneeling down beside the body, proceeded to unfasten the tunic, and inserting his hand, kept it for a while upon the heart. He withdrew it, fastened the gilt button again, raised the dead hand and let it fall with a thud on the floor. Then he rose and took up the light, seemed to notice some small object lying near, which he pushed with his foot towards the body, held the lights above his head, and looked round the room.

Then he set down the candelabrum upon the table again, and went softly to the door.

I groped my way back into the corridor, pushed open the right door this time, and found my way without difficulty down to the private entrance of the palace. A soldier on guard there challenged me, but saluted and made way respectfully on my explaining that I had come from the Oberkammerer's apartments.

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CHAPTER VI

THE CAPSIZED BOAT

NEXT morning I could hardly persuade myself that what I had seen the night before had not been all a dream. In the bright sunshine and in the active work-a-day life of the city, the ghastly business seemed impossible. But the effect of my experience lay heavy on my mind. I felt I could do nothing. As a State affair it was no business of mine to interfere; I could not decide even whether I should tell Von Lindheim what I knew. I was to see him late that afternoon, and had the greater part of the day at my disposal. Thinking that exercise would be the best means of shaking off my depression, I determined to revert to an old sport of mine, rowing. Accordingly, after a late breakfast, I hired the lightest sculling boat I could find, and went for a pull up the river. A picturesque stream, the Narvo, when once you get clear of the wharves, mills, warehouses, and like unromantic accessories; but the worst piece of water for a steady pull that I had ever dipped oar into, and I had tried a good many, from the Wensum to the Danube. No sooner did I get into my swing and the craft began to slip along, than I had to hold her up for an eyot, or a patch of aggressive water lilies, varied by what answers in those parts for a weir, or a superfluous, if picturesque waterfall.

But the clearing of the obstacles was all in the day's work. I was not bound against time for the source of the river, so pushed, hauled, and punted

energetically, thinking the change of working muscles no bad thing. As a reward for my perseverance I presently got away from all signs of the town; the banks grew higher and, with their overhanging bushes, something like our Wye, shut out the hideous chimneys and other unromantic evidences of Buyda's commercial prosperity. As I pulled leisurely up a comparatively clear reach, my train of thought was snapped by the bow of my boat striking against some light object. I looked round and saw I had run against a floating scull. I took it into my boat, thinking some one might have let it slip and been unable to recover it, an awkward mishap not uncommon with duffers; then I rowed on, thinking to come across the owner before long. The sound of rushing water warned me that I was approaching another of the weirs, of which just then I was getting rather tired, since they meant haulage. Beyond a sharpish bend the river widened considerably, the current became stronger, and, looking ahead, I could see an obstacle, half weir, half natural waterfall, with the usual rotten posts and dilapidated rails. I pulled on, undecided whether to take the trouble of carrying my craft round or to return, when a stroke took me beyond, and so in sight of an object lying caught in the sedge outside the current.

A capsized boat.

I did not like the look of it. "That accounts for the scull," I said, and pulled round to examine her. No one was to be seen on the banks, which were flat and open here. I ran my boat alongside the overturned craft. With some difficulty I righted her. A row-boat, similar to mine, she was of course empty, except that, jammed under the thwarts was a walking-stick, an ordinary bamboo with a hook handle and the usual silver band. This I threw into my boat, and then got ashore. Not a soul was in sight. I

walked up a good way past the fall, giving an occasional shout, but there was no sign of any human being, dead or alive, and the one seemed now as much to be looked for as the other.

So I returned to my boat without having got nearer to the mystery, and now determined to pull homewards, for the river up higher did not promise much reward for my exertions. As I went back, however, I looked sharply about for any further evidences of a boating accident, but found none. It looked to me very much as though the boat had gone over the fall, and the walking-stick decidedly pointed to someone having been in her. But I came to the conclusion that even then if the fellow could swim and had kept his head he would probably have got off, with an extremely unpleasant ducking, as the fall was not great, and the water below clear of obstacles and fairly deep.

At the landing-stage I told my story, but the capsized boat did not belong to the owner of mine, and the subject consequently lacked interest for him. There had been accidents over the falls, he told me; but it was people's own fault and stupidity. One of his men, however, thought he had seen a gentleman rowing up earlier in the day, but did not recognize him, or know where the boat had been hired. That was all; so not seeing what more I could be expected to do, I went back to the hotel, calling, however, at the police office on my way to give information of what I had found. The officer in charge phlegmatically assured me that the matter should be looked into, and bowed me out.

Having changed my clothes, I went on to Von Lindheim's. He had not returned home, although it was past his usual hour, but shortly after my arrival he made his appearance. He seemed in better spirits, and I was glad to notice that the cloud of the

previous evening had passed away. He had been detained at the Chancellerie, he said, by extra work ; D'Urban was away, whether on leave or through illness he had not been able to find out.

"It was rather hard on me," Von Lindheim said, "but I had to stay over a stupid protocol, although I told Krause, our chief, that I was taking an English friend to the theatre. However, we have just time for a short dinner, and the coffee we can get between the acts."

We were going together *en garçon* to see Harff in Shylock, and accordingly sat down to a hurried meal.

It had been in progress scarcely ten minutes when word came in that Von Lindheim's friend and colleague, Szalay, was waiting to see him on most urgent business.

"I told the Herr you were engaged, sir," said the servant, "but he said he must see you without delay."

My friend looked grave, and jumping up with a word of apology to me, hurried from the room. I concluded that the visit had to do with the discovery of Von Orsova's death, and began to turn over in my mind whether I ought to say what I knew. But after all, I argued, it has nothing to do with these men ; I had better perhaps ignore a matter of which I have no right to be cognizant. In a few minutes Von Lindheim returned, followed by his visitor.

"You are a man of the world, my dear Tyrrell, and we have come to put a case before you."

I nodded assent.

"Szalay here has called to see me on a very serious matter indeed. He has been challenged to fight a duel."

I whistled. "Who's your man ?"

"A ridiculous little ass in the Royal Guard here ; a fellow who is always swaggering about full of his

own importance, a certain Captain Rassler de Hayn, or Hahn, as he is nicknamed."

"And the cause of the quarrel?"

Szalay broke in eagerly: "None that I can tell of. He sends a friend to me to say that I have spoken disrespectfully of him, and so insulted his uniform, his corps, the army, and the King. He will hear of no apology."

"Fire-eating little fool!" Von Lindheim ejaculated.

"But perhaps you have insulted him, and all the rest of it?"

"Not particularly. Everybody laughs at the little spit-fire, you understand; I have laughed with the rest. But not to his face; I have manners."

"De Hayn is a dead shot and a clever swordsman," Von Lindheim observed grimly. "These fools are not wanting in pluck."

"But why has he challenged me of all men?" Szalay cried, with a gesture of bewilderment.

Lindheim gave a shrug. "Who can account for the action of a conceited fathead? Szalay has come to ask me to act for him. Of course, the whole affair is ridiculous, still it may end seriously if we treat it as lightly as it deserves. I must go and see this Lieutenant Paulssen without delay. What line would you take?"

"You come to the worst man in the world when you put such a case to an Englishman," I answered, "for——"

"I know. You have no duels, and hold them supremely absurd. But as a man of the world——"

"Don't call me that, even in a complimentary sense," I returned. "But so far as my advice goes, it would be to see this Lieutenant Paulssen, assure him that your principal has no recollection of having spoken disrespectfully of his, far less of any intention to do so; that his man has been misinformed, and

generally to apologize for any careless word by which he may have unwittingly reflected upon that constructive list of institutions he is so jealous of. That's one way."

"And the other?"

"Well, are you good with the sword or pistol? I presume you, as the challenged, will have choice of weapons."

"My dear Tyrrell, fighting is out of the question. One man is a professional cut-throat; Szalay is a diplomat."

"I have not handled a sword since I left the university," his friend added.

"Naturally you don't want to fight, no sane man does, especially over such imbecility. Though, of course, if you could hit this little bouncer it would be doing society a good service."

"Well, I'll go and see Paulssen at his quarters within the next hour," Von Lindheim said, "and you shall know the result."

So Szalay went off, in no very easy frame of mind.

"The worst of this business is," my host remarked when we were alone, "that this Paulssen is himself a hot-headed young fool. He probably will not want this affair stopped, if he calculates on an opportunity for showing off. I must tell him he is only likely to make an exhibition of himself. Now, I'm sorry to hurry you. We may as well start together, and I will join you after the first act."

On our way I found that the news I had been all day expecting had burst upon the city. Newsvendors were crying the "terrible suicide of Herr Rittmeister von Orsova." The sudden announcement came as a shock to Von Lindheim, yet it did not seem to strike him as in any way unaccountable. I could see that he, like myself, knew more of the affair than he cared to tell. We bought a paper, and read it eagerly

in the street. Von Orsova had been found by a servant early that morning lying dead in a corner of the great ball-room of the palace. By his side was an empty phial containing hydrocyanic acid; the unfortunate Rittmeister had evidently taken his own life, but the reason for the act was, up to that time, enveloped in mystery.

My companion looked very grave as he folded up the paper.

"I am not surprised," he remarked simply, adding in a lower tone, "the game he was playing could scarcely end otherwise. Well, I must leave you here, and see this fellow. I will be at the theatre as soon as possible."

About the middle of the second act he dropped quietly into the seat beside me.

"What success?" I whispered.

He shook his head. "None. I fear Szalay must fight, and if he does——" He gave an expressive shrug.

When the act was over we strolled out for coffee and a cigarette.

"De Hayn means to fight," Von Lindheim said in answer to my inquiry. "Paulssen was instructed not to entertain any suggestion of an apology or explanation. Szalay is a dead man."

"Can't we have the affair stopped?" I suggested. "Surely it is not countenanced by the law."

"No; but winked at, and, in the army, permitted under certain circumstances. There is only one chance that I see. The Chancellor is against duelling; he thinks it retrograde, and he is all for progress. If I could contrive that he had wind of it——"

A smart young fellow had come up to us and clapped him on the shoulder.

"My dear Von Lindheim, the Baroness Fornbach has sent me to tell you that she has been trying for the

last half-hour to catch your eye. But you are full of secrets this evening. You are to come to her box without fail, and disclose them to her. No; seriously, she wants to see you. Of course bring your friend."

Von Lindheim introduced us, and we three went off to the Baroness's box.

"I hope you don't mind, old fellow; but I can't throw a chance away to-night. The Baroness is good style and great fun."

When we entered the box we found it occupied by two people. A man was in animated conversation with the Baroness. He had his back turned to me, and seemed to be finishing a good story, for they were both laughing as the man rose and made way for us. Von Lindheim presented me to the Baroness, a good-looking widow, still young, and evidently a woman of fashion. We shook hands, and she said a few graceful words to me, then, with a slight gesture, introduced me casually to her companion.

"Count, you know Herr von Lindheim? Mr. Tyrrell, Count Furello."

Turning to bow, I found myself face to face with the man who had accosted me by Duke Johann's chapel the night before, the man who had forced Von Orsova to his death. I knew him at once, despite the fact that both my former views of him had been imperfect; the feline eyes that glittered from the dark recess of the box were unmistakable. And a curious-looking man he was; a man whom at first sight and without my previous knowledge of him, one would hardly have known whether to set down as attractive or detestable, but certainly interesting.

He had a mass of straight chestnut hair brushed back from a high narrow forehead and falling in a thick even wall over the back of his head. His eyes were dark and alert, set a trifle too close together, his nose was long and thin, and his mouth drawn back by

what seemed an habitual muscular contraction into a set grin, making a straight slit across his face in no way hidden by the small reddish moustache which was turned upwards well away from it. No doubt he, too, recognized me ; however, he gave no sign of it, only made me a courtly bow with a few murmured words of compliment. I turned again as the Baroness spoke.

"Is it out of compliment to Mr. Tyrrell's nationality that you have been too much absorbed in Shakespeare to notice your friends in the house, Herr von Lindheim ?"

He made a—to me—obvious effort to throw off his worry, as he replied :

"No, indeed ; I cannot claim such ultra politeness. Harff is at his very best to-night."

"You are giving yourself a poor character as a diplomatist, Herr von Lindheim," said Count Furello, "in confessing that even the excitement of superb acting can blind you to the realities of life around you."

He said this very genially, almost banteringly, but the man's good-humoured tone and laugh were obviously a mask ; behind his easy manner and glib talk there was the suggestion of a sinister purpose ; it was a personality which in any case would have kept me on my guard.

CHAPTER VII

SUPPER AT THE BARONESS'S

THE Baroness asked us to supper at her house after the play, and would take no refusal.

"I did not stand out," Von Lindheim said afterwards, "as it will be a good opportunity of giving the Count a hint about this wretched duel. He is a sort of confidential aide of the Chancellor's."

"Not quite as easy-going as he looks," I suggested.

"No; Furello is not exactly a man to trifle with. He would be the last man for Rallenstein's purpose if he were. But I have always got on very well with him."

Some other men came into the box and we left; the Baroness making us renew our promise to sup with her. "I shall slip out after the Trial Scene," Von Lindheim said, as we returned to our stalls, "and report progress to Szalay. Poor fellow! I expect he is having an uncomfortable time. But I have hope yet of stopping this absurd affair. If I cannot get back here by the end of the play, we will meet at the Baroness's, Wiener Platz, No. 1, the large house at the corner."

We met there later on, for he did not return to the theatre.

There were about a dozen of us at supper, a merry party enough when the champagne had gone round once or twice.

"What an awful thing this is about poor Von Orsova," some one remarked.

"Ah, poor man!" the hostess said, "I dare not think of it. It is too horrible; to think that I was waltzing with him an hour before. To be dancing with an already half dead man,"—she gave a little affected shudder.

"He was to have been one of your guests to-night, was he not?" Furello asked.

"Oh, yes, indeed. Who could have suspected when he accepted my invitation that he knew he would be dead long before."

"Does any one know the reason he had for suicide?" a lady next him asked Furello.

The Count gave a shrug. "Nothing has yet transpired. But the motives for such an act are often impossible to ascertain. There is nothing so irresponsible and eccentric as the mind of a man who has a tendency to self-murder. A sudden impulse is enough to bring about the catastrophe. Who knows? I for one should be very sorry to insist on an adequate motive."

I looked at the man and wondered at his coolness. He spoke easily, without a trace of effort to suppress the truth. It was hard to recognize the grim executioner in the glib, urbane society man.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, let us change the subject!" the Baroness cried. "Life is quite miserable enough without dwelling on these horrors. The poor man is dead; what does it matter now? It is all shockingly sad; but what can we do? After all, life is for the living. Do all of you fill your glasses, and banish melancholy for an hour at least."

"I hope, Baroness," I said, for, as a foreigner, I occupied the place of honour, "you do not expect so soon a return?"

"Of wretchedness? My dear Mr. Tyrrell, it is a

trite saying, but if we could only see inside each other's hearts what a revelation some of them would be."

When supper was over, the ladies rose, and we were invited to smoke in an adjoining room. Now an infamous thing happened, which, by the greatest good luck, I chanced to see. When the ladies were gone, Von Lindheim went over and began to talk to Count Furello, with the object, as I was sure, of giving him a hint about poor Szalay's duel. I, of course, kept aloof, and was happy in finding myself next to a talkative young fellow, who had seen something of English life, and was very interested in our ideas of sport. We chatted away on this congenial topic, and I took no further notice of my friend. My young neighbour and I got on so well, that presently he insisted that we should drink a bumper of champagne together to our better acquaintance. Accordingly we rose and went towards a sideboard at one end of the smoking-room, where the wine and glasses stood in array. Von Lindheim and Count Furello were standing by talking quietly. In order not to interrupt them, we kept a certain distance away as we poured out our wine. We clinked glasses with true German fervour, drank with no less, and filled again. A morsel of foil from the neck of the bottle was floating in my wine. I turned to the light and fished it out with a spoon. In so doing, I faced a mirror, which, set at an angle, and combined with another at my back, enabled me not only to see over my shoulder, but showed me what was going on in front of the man whose back was turned to me.

And this is what I saw.

A peculiar, furtive action on the part of the Count caught my eye. He was leaning his left arm on the sideboard, presumably to screen from Von Lindheim what he did with his right. This hand moved quickly to an empty glass close by, and, resting over it.

tilted, as though pouring something into it. What the hand held I could not see. Had not my mind been full of murder and sudden death, or had the act been done less stealthily I should perhaps have thought little of it; many a man doctors his drink against gout or some other chronic ailment. Even here a doubt was in my mind; although I could not help an almost sickening feeling of something very like horror, and I determined to keep a strict watch. Taking a sip of my wine, I turned again to the sideboard, still talking and laughing with my new acquaintance, but keeping my eye carelessly on the Count. He took up a bottle, the cork was not drawn, and with a show of polite alacrity I handed him ours, which was but half empty. He placed another glass in a line with the first and filled them. As I expected and feared, he then pushed them forward in such a manner that the doctored glass came naturally nearest to Von Lindheim. My previous night's experience was enough to tell me of the fearful danger in which my friend stood. I was determined that he should not touch that glass, yet what was I to do on the spur of the moment? A happy thought struck me. "Let us all drink together," I cried, feigning a slightly elevated manner, at the same time slapping my young friend on the shoulder, then going quickly round to the other side of Von Lindheim. "We will drink together all four," I laughed.

Von Lindheim's glance indicated his opinion that I had taken as much champagne as was good for me; the Count showed his teeth in a tolerant smile. I leaned forward to the young fellow who was now separated from me by the other two men. "*Prosit!*" I cried.

Exactly what I had calculated upon happened. The Count was obliged to turn slightly in order to touch the other's glass with his own. At that in-

stant I struck Von Lindheim a sharp blow. He turned to me half startled. "Poison!" I dared only form the word with my lips, throwing all the horror I could into my expression as I nodded towards his glass.

"Don't drink for your life!" The words were not even whispered; happily Von Lindheim was sharp enough to comprehend the situation. He faced round to me, so that his back was turned upon the Count, and next moment our glasses had been changed. I leaned forward and touched with the other two men; Von Lindheim did the same, and at a nod from me he drank some of his wine at which he at first hesitated. I raised the glass to my lips and pretended to drink, then I contrived unseen to spill a portion of its contents over my pocket handkerchief, so that I could return to my former place, a little unsteadily, with my glass half empty. All the time my brain was raging as I realized the hideousness of the business. The intense pity I felt for my friend comes back to me as the sensation uppermost in my mind then. But in that desperate situation action was imperative, sentiment useless. I kept up my talk with the young sportsman, watching all the while for an opportunity of saying a word to Von Lindheim. Presently he left the Count and came to me. My companion turned at the moment to relight his cigar, which in his chattering he had allowed to go out.

"You had better smoke a cigarette," I said to Von Lindheim under my voice, "and then make an excuse to go. Say you feel unwell."

Then I laughed and brought the other man into the conversation. He and Von Lindheim began to chat, as the Count, throwing himself into a chair near us, opened a conversation with me.

We exchanged some commonplaces, the usual small talk between a visitor and a native. I could

tell he was a man of great tact, natural and acquired. He invariably said the right thing, passing from topic to topic with a pleasant, well-rounded comment upon each, such cut and dried talk as avoids all pitfalls of argument or contradiction.

He gave an occasional glance at Von Lindheim, but quite naturally, his manner never showing the least preoccupation. To all appearances he was a genial, sociable man of the world, a state official merely by accident. In his careless way, however, he put a good many leading questions to me, principally as to my friendship with Von Lindheim, which I, affecting the part of a simple-minded sportsman, answered with a great show of frankness. Presently my friend laid his hand on my shoulder. "Don't let me hurry you," he said, "but I think of going homewards."

"Already? It is not so late for you, Herr von Lindheim," Furello remarked almost chaffingly.

"I'm tired and feel out of sorts," he replied as naturally as one could wish. "Good-night, Herr Count. Many thanks for the good offices you have promised me."

"I'm a bird that goes to perch early. I'll come too," I said, bowing to the Count, who, to my disgust, held out his hand—the hand—which I was fain to take.

So we made our adieux and next minute were in the street.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEATING OF DEATH'S WINGS

WE had walked a hundred yards or more, and turned the corner of the street before either of us spoke. Then I said, "A narrow escape, my friend."

"Are you sure?" he asked, scarcely above his breath, and, as he turned towards me, his face looked ghastly under the lamp.

I told him exactly what I had seen.

"I'm a marked man," was all his comment as I finished my story, and he spoke the words in a tone of despairing conviction. "A marked man, Tyrrell, my good friend," he continued; "how can I thank you for having saved my life? Your presence of mind was wonderful, though I fear your services can only prolong my agony. I'm doomed, lost."

"Nonsense, Lindheim! For Heaven's sake don't let your nerves go now when you want them most."

He shook his head. "Nerves are of no avail against the powers here. You don't know—be thankful you don't. Furello is merely an instrument: one of many."

"Anyhow," I said cheerily, "I am going to stand by you and get you out of this business if it is as bad as you say. An Englishman doesn't let cowardly murder go on before his eyes if he can help it."

"It is splendidly kind of you, Tyrrell; but you had better leave me to my fate. If you interfere you will only share it."

I laughed. "Not I."
 "You don't know Rallenstein."
 "Don't I?"

He gave an apprehensive glance behind. "It is hardly worth while," he said, with an attempt at a laugh, "but we may as well be careful, as we are probably being watched."

"Of course, you are supposed to be ill; the poison is taking its effect," I returned. "You had better stagger and lean on me for the rest of the way."

It did not need much of an effort to make him look pretty ill. He went through some appropriate pantomime, dismal enough when one comes to think of it, and I pretended to help him along till we came to his house. As we turned in I certainly seemed to see the indistinct figure of a man some distance behind on the other side of the deserted street. Von Lindheim begged me to stay, and, indeed, I was unwilling to leave him, having seen enough on both that and the previous nights to realize that he might stand in considerable danger, although, had it not been for the evidence of my own eyes, I should probably have set down his own fears as rather childish.

In the house we found Szalay waiting, pacing the room in a perturbed state of mind.

"Well?" he inquired anxiously.

Von Lindheim flung down his hat. "We had better both make our wills, Szalay," he cried in desperation.

Szalay's face turned greenish grey. "You can't settle it, then?" he asked nervously.

"I have nearly settled myself in trying to," the other returned grimly. "I went to the Baroness's to give Furello a hint, with the result that, but for our friend here, I should have been carried home on four shoulders."

"Heaven! what do you mean?" Szalay's eyes

were almost starting from his head as he gasped out the question.

Von Lindheim related the story of his escape.

"My own idea is," he said in conclusion, "that the whole business, your challenge, and my invitation, are simply methods to get rid of us both."

Then there was silence, the silence of almost hopeless fear.

"What are we to do?" Szalay asked unsteadily.

Von Lindheim gave a shrug. Then, to relieve the tension, I spoke.

"Is it asking too much, as I mean to stand by you fellows, that you should tell me the reason of all this; what you saw last night?"

"Better not ask, my dear Tyrrell; the knowledge is fatal—too fatal, already. D'Urban is missing too," he went on, in a fresh access of despair. "Poor D'Urban, dead by now, probably. And Orsova, you know."

"I saw his death," I remarked.

"In the papers to-night, yes."

"No," I returned quietly; "I was present at his death last night."

"You?" they both gasped out.

"Assuredly. In the palace."

"Suicide? No?"

"Well, it was and it wasn't. Tell me what you saw, and you shall hear all about it."

Von Lindheim walked to the mantel and leaned against it. "We are doomed, Szalay. We are both dead men."

His colleague had turned away to hide, perhaps, the fear that was in his face.

"What did you fellows see?" I repeated.

"Enough," Von Lindheim answered, with a short laugh of desperation, "to make our lives forfeit. The devil must have led us to investigate that light."

"What did you see?"

"A sight for which we have now to pay," Szalay broke in bitterly.

"The little chapel was just dimly lighted by a pair of candles," Von Lindheim proceeded. "Through a light-coloured pane in the low window we could see a priest in vestments standing before what had once been the altar. It was curious. He seemed the only person in the chapel. Soon he looked up, as though at the entrance of some one, and opened the book in his hand. Three people, a man and two ladies, came quickly up the chapel and placed themselves before him at the altar. You may guess who two of them were. Von Orsova and the Princess Casilde. They had come to be married."

"Married! That accounts for everything."

"More than accounts for it," my friend continued grimly. "Well, when we realized what the scene meant, the spirit of caution took possession of us; we were chance spectators of what was practically an act of high treason."

"Accessories in effect," Szalay put in.

"There were two courses open to us," Von Lindheim went on. "To interrupt the ceremony, or to steal away and keep our own counsel. Our evil genius prompted us all three to choose the latter."

"The former was too dangerous," Szalay said. "We knew too much; even in that case we should have been marked men."

"Anyhow," the other proceeded, "we crept away from the window and hurried back through the wood to the palace."

"It was a mistake," Szalay said. "We should have run the other way."

"A fatal mistake. For we came plump upon two men hastening towards the chapel. One ran on, the other halted and scrutinized us, then followed

his companion. The Jaguar, and his striking paw, Furello."

"The two I saw," was my remark.

"Yes. Now you see the man, the fiend, and his methods," Von Lindheim said. "He did not strike at once, but watched the marriage to an end, that he might strike more surely and quietly. Now we have the whole story."

"So far. It is not ended," Szalay said gloomily.

"I fear it is I who have unwittingly betrayed you," I said. "Furello could but have guessed before he cross-questioned me."

"A guess is enough for Rallenstein. He makes sure."

"Anyhow, I feel guilty," I said, "and am determined to stand by you both if you will let me."

"Better start for England to-night," Von Lindheim replied gloomily, "before you share our fate."

I laughed. "Even your Chancellor will think twice before he murders a British subject."

"Murders? No. My dear Tyrrell, your death would be of the most deplorably accidental description. Rallenstein is above all things an artist."

"Well, I'm not going to desert you fellows, so please don't suggest it. Now you shall know what I saw last night."

Then I told them of the chance which had made me a witness of Von Orsova's death. Needless to say the recital did not tend to allay their fears.

"The Rittmeister has paid!" Szalay exclaimed, with a lugubrious jerk of the head.

"But you," I said, "what crime can there be in what you saw in that glance through the window? If that is motive enough for getting rid of you——"

"Motive enough," Von Lindheim returned. "If you knew what we could tell you, you would not be surprised. In this country a whisper, a shrug, a

laugh are, any one of them, enough to bring a man to his death. And the innocent have often to suffer for the guilty—to make sure."

"It is clear enough," Szalay added, pacing the room. "This *affaire* Orsova is likely to upset the Chancellor's plans. If it were to become a scandal, the alliance he has set his heart and the King's upon would never come to anything."

Some one was heard below, and Von Lindheim ran to the door.

"It is only Pabst," he said, coming back with a relieved face. "I had forgotten he was out."

There was a knock at the door and Pabst came in. He was Von Lindheim's housekeeper and factotum, a respectable elderly man. He looked perturbed.

"Pardon, meine Herren," he said. "I did not know Herr Szalay was here. He has doubtless brought you the bad news."

The two colleagues looked at each other in renewed fear. "What bad news?" Von Lindheim asked.

"You mean the death of the Herr Rittmeister von Orsova," I suggested.

"Pardon, mein Herr," Pabst answered, with a grave shake of the head, "it is nearer than that. Herr D'Urban——"

"Ah!" The terror in both men made them cry out simultaneously. But the good Pabst probably read nothing in their faces beyond ignorance, and concern for the fate of a colleague.

"He is most unhappily drowned," he said.

"Drowned?"

"They found his body in the river this evening near the Powder Mills. They say his mother, poor lady, is——"

"But D'Urban was a swimmer," Szalay cried.

"He could swim well," Von Lindheim said gloomily.

"But of what avail was that——"

"True, mein Herr," Pabst chimed in. "He has an ugly blow on his head. They say he must have been carried over the Tollert Fall, struck against a rock or pile, and so been stunned."

"His turn has come first," Von Lindheim observed grimly when the old servant had left the room. He seemed to be growing reckless now from the very hopelessness of his situation. "What are we to do?" he laughed.

"One thing is settled," I said. "You and Herr Szalay are going to face this danger, if it exists, and will not give up your lives without a struggle. Surely, Lindheim, there is some law, some authority to which you can appeal for protection."

He shook his head. "None."

"But in these days of civilization men are not butchered in cold blood without an appeal to law and justice."

"Civilization," he answered, "is a very pretty word for occasions. We are proud of it, in theory, but it is never allowed to stand in the way of political expediency. The head of all law and authority in this country is the Chancellor; the King himself is but his creature, and Rallenstein's methods are, when necessary, quite mediæval."

"But men in your position——"

"Bah! He would have the King poisoned tomorrow if it suited his purpose. We have no party government here, worse luck!"

"Then there is nothing to do but to find a way of escape."

"Escape? Outwit the Jaguar!" He laughed at the idea.

"We'll try, anyhow. Let us view the situation calmly. You are supposed to have drunk that dose of Furello's, and are dying. We have the start of them there."

He made an impatient gesture. "It comes to the same in the end; the agony is only prolonged. Better get it over."

"Nonsense. You have a chance, and a good one. I tell you both you must not be so mad and wicked as to throw it away."

Thus appealed to, and perhaps catching hope from my confident manner, they made an effort to look more cheerfully at the business.

"There may be half a chance," Von Lindheim said.

"There will be none," I said, "if you give up. We have three heads here, and we know our danger. You mean to fight for your life, eh, Herr Szalay?"

Szalay tried to smile, but could only achieve a ghastly grimace. "I am not yet tired of my life, and am ready to make an effort."

"Good!" I returned. "Now for our plans. We must hoodwink this autocratic butcher. Send for a doctor; the most stupid in the place, for choice. Who answers to that description?"

Von Lindheim thought a moment. "Doctor Rothmer, I should think, eh, Szalay? The man who killed the Reichsrath Lorenz by treating him for indigestion when he had peritonitis."

"A pompous idiot, eh? Just the man. Send for him at once, and turn into bed. Recollect you are poisoned; but don't tell the doctor that. All you know is that you have been supping abroad and are horribly ill."

I rang, and told Pabst to send for the doctor.

"And I? What am I to do?" Szalay inquired with almost ludicrous concern. "I am not poisoned."

"No. You have simply got to keep quiet and not be seen. Your second is taken suddenly ill and cannot act for you. I may be able to avert the meeting; at any rate to delay it. Anyhow, we must

work to throw our enemies off their guard. That's the vague plan I have at present."

Szalay brightened. My taking things so coolly seemed to give him confidence. The whole business was an eye-opener certainly ; and after what I had seen there was no room for doubt that the Chancellor and his people meant business. However, funk and flurry would do no good. Being somewhat involved in the affair, was prepared to see it through, and take my chance of trying any of the pleasant little ways the authorities seemed to have for disposing of awkward onlookers. Whether I had let these men in for the trouble or not I was resolved to get them out, and I thought I could do it.

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CHAPTER IX

THE DUEL

HE was a self-important, incompetent fellow ; I could see that, and so just the man for our purpose. I had impressed upon Von Lindheim that his life depended on his playing his part well, and I must say there was no fault to be found with his performance. He appeared to be in great agony, while Szalay and I, with a great show of excitement and distress, told the doctor a plausible tale of the sudden seizure. Finally, I laid stress upon the suddenness of the attack in perfect health, and suggested ptomaine poisoning.

"Assuredly," the fellow returned, well pleased at finding himself taken for rather more than even he pretended to be. "The symptoms certainly point to the presence of poisonous matter in the system, and we must, at all events, take measures to counteract it."

Accordingly he did take measures, which the patient in turn took good care to neutralize. The doctor was so fussy and stupid that we found no difficulty in contriving that he should not make an examination which might have betrayed, even to him, the real state of the case.

Presently he bustled off to prepare a draught. I offered to accompany him to his house, and hurry back with the potion, so that it might be given without delay. As I opened the door to go out a young fellow came up, an officer by his uniform, and asked

for Von Lindheim. I guessed at once that he was the second of the fire-eating Captain de Hayn, and rejoiced that he had arrived at that moment.

I saluted him punctiliously. "Herr von Lindheim has, I regret to say, been taken ill, dangerously ill. It is impossible for you to see him."

As I expected, the young fellow gave an incredulous smile.

"Really, sir? My—"

I cut him short. "Herr von Lindheim is the doctor, who will confirm what I tell you. You know Dr. Rothmer?"

He did not know Dr. Rothmer, but happily that good man's profession was unmistakable.

"It is indeed the case," he said pompously. "Herr von Lindheim is seriously ill. I cannot allow you to see him."

"If you will step in for a moment," I said, "I will tell Herr von Lindheim that you are here, and will follow you, doctor, directly." The professional was hustled off, and I took Lieutenant Paulssen into the dining-room.

"I presume you have called to see Von Lindheim about the affair in which he is acting for Herr Szalay. Von Lindheim has only just asked me to inform Herr Szalay of his illness, and to request him to find another second. But I hope, Lieutenant, your visit may be to say that it is unnecessary; that this deplorable, this absurd affair is at an end."

The young fellow seemed to bristle with resentful importance.

"Pardon!" he returned uncompromisingly; "that is by no means my mission. And I must request you, sir, to refrain from referring to an insult to our army as absurd."

I changed my tone to one of easy familiarity.

"Of course, Lieutenant, my expression absurd was very far from being applied to the honour of your

corps, which I am sure you, as a gallant soldier, hold above everything in the world. What I meant was the idea of poor Szalay measuring swords with so renowned a fighter as your principal."

He shrugged his epauletted shoulders. "It is unfortunate," he responded stiffly. "But Herr Szalay should have remembered that before uttering words of disrespect concerning Captain de Hayn."

"I understand he has no recollection of having done so; he is ready——"

"Pardon, mein Herr," he interrupted with a formality, brusque in its uncertain touch, "if I decline to discuss the matter with you."

I bowed. "You have every right to do so."

"We will stand no shuffling," he cried. "I swear I will not eat my breakfast till the affair has come off. If Herr von Lindheim is ill, then Herr Szalay must find another friend, or take the consequences."

"No doubt," I replied, "if Von Lindheim's illness continues, Herr Szalay will find another friend. But you can hardly expect him to do so by breakfast time."

He twirled his silly little moustache, and put on one of the most stupidly offensive looks it has ever been my fortune to see on a human countenance. "You, sir," he said blusteringly, "you seem to be at pains to champion Herr Szalay; what is there to prevent your acting as his friend?"

"Only the fact that he has not honoured me by asking me to do so."

"It is absurd, this attempt to play fast and loose," he spluttered. "We shall not permit it, that I swear. I am surprised that any one should counsel delay. Delay in an affair of this sort, sir, we hold as a coward's word. And if you have any regard for your friend's honour you will see that this business is settled at once. I shall not go to bed to-night, but

shall expect to receive Herr Szalay's friend. That is my last word ; I have a duty to perform. I have the honour, sir. Good evening "

He made me a bow which was meant, no doubt, to be the quintessence of military dignity, and clattered from the room. I let him go, seeing that an appeal to common sense was worse than hopeless. Then I went up, and gave the two men an account of my interview.

" Clearly," Lindheim said, " even if there had ever been a doubt about it, this ridiculous duel is simply a trick of the Jaguar's to get rid of our friend."

" I fear that is certain," I assented.

Szalay had sat in a gloomy silence, and, appreciating his feelings, I had taken little notice of him. He now rather astonished me by starting up and exclaiming, " I will fight ! I will fight this duel ! "

" Better not," I observed laconically.

" Yes, I will ! " he repeated, pacing the room in a state of nervous excitement. " Don't think me mad ; it is by far the most sensible course to take. I have got to die ; my life is forfeit ; the Jaguar never turns off from the prey he has marked down. Better a thousand times fall by a soldier's bullet in open day, when the chances are nominally equal, than be done to death in secret by one of Rallenstein's butchers. Yes, my friends, I am resolved ; do not try to turn me." For we had simultaneously began to exclaim against his decision. " Herr Tyrrell, if you will honour me by standing my friend, it would be a great favour, the last I shall probably ask of any man ; if you will see this Paulssen and arrange the meeting for as soon after daybreak as possible. I have the courage now and am in the mood ; who knows how long it may last ? "

" It is sheer suicide," I remonstrated ; " if this De Hayn is a dead shot, and you——"

He laughed. "I am to die assuredly within the next forty-eight hours."

"Not necessarily!" I objected.

"You are a tower of strength, Herr Tyrrell," he replied wistfully. "But even you cannot stand against our King Jaguar, and in any event you will have enough to do to save our friend here. Now will you go to Paulssen at once? I ask you as a friend."

He was not to be dissuaded, and perhaps both Von Lindheim and I had a secret feeling that, on his chances, the course he urged had something to commend it. So, after waiting for a comedy scene with the doctor, who paid us another fussy visit, during which he nearly succeeded in making his patient actually swallow a manifestly loathsome draught, I went off to Lieutenant Paulssen's lodgings and arranged preliminaries for the meeting which was to take place at daybreak. My pugnacious friend was sullenly gratified, receiving my communication with a significant, "It is well."

Having a pretty shrewd idea of the fellow's sense and capabilities, I wasted no time, but simply and curtly settled the necessary details of the meeting, and returned to Von Lindheim's.

The rest of the night I spent in coaching my poor principal in the use of his weapon. I had on his behalf naturally chosen pistols for the encounter, as giving a rather better chance; with swords he would have been as a sheep before a butcher.

The poor fellow attended to my instructions in a mechanical, half-dazed fashion; he was utterly without hope, indeed, clearly in the apathy of despair. But we did our best to cheer him, and I took pains to impress upon him one or two wrinkles which might possibly give a slender chance in his favour.

In the dull grey of a chilly dawn we set out for the place of meeting, and certainly it was the most dis-

agreeable errand on which I ever started. On the way my companion tried to talk on different subjects, even to jest on his situation and its almost certain issue ; but it was all so hideously forced as a cover to his despair, that it would have been far less painful to me had he kept silence.

The rendezvous was a short distance outside the city, the less frequented side of a common bordered by a plantation. Being before our time we were first on the ground, and I utilized the interval of waiting in reiterating the instructions I already had given Szalay ; but he was in such a piteous state of nervousness that to me, as the affair had to be gone through with, it was a relief when the other party appeared. They were three : De Hayn, Paulssen, and a professional-looking person, evidently the surgeon whom Paulssen had arranged to bring.

It seemed as though the sight of the trio and the approach of the critical moment had the effect of steadying Szalay's nerves somewhat.

" So they have brought the doctor," he laughed ; " it is just as well to do everything in order, even a murder."

" The chances are if he hits you it won't be in a vital part," I said to comfort him. " Now, mind ; take steady aim on the first sight and get your fire in before his, it's your best chance."

The account given of the fire-eating Captain de Hayn had not been over-coloured. It seemed impossible that five feet four inches of humanity could hold a greater quantity of truculent conceit than was manifestly compressed into his personality. A greater contrast between this business-like little butcher, with his bronzed—and brazen—countenance, and poor Szalay, trying to control his shaking nerves and keep a manly look on his grey face, could not be imagined. Principals and seconds saluted punctiliously, and

the doctor gave Szalay and me a bow, his expression being nicely differentiated as between the humane reserve towards a dying patient, and the grave announcement of a hopeless case to his friends.

Paulssen and I measured the ground, while the doctor, with professional glib deliberation, set out his case of instruments.

All was ready; we placed our men.

"Bring down your pistol with decision, and fire first," I again enjoined in a whisper.

If ever a man was sick at the irony and unfairness of life I was then, as I drew back from that poor fellow, already, as it seemed, half-dead. Indeed, I remember wondering how he contrived to keep so steady. I glanced at his dapper little opponent, standing in professional duellist's style, not the easiest of marks for a good shot; to my man practically invisible. Paulssen was to give the word; the usual One! Two! Three! Perhaps he had anticipated my instructions to Szalay as to firing if possible before his adversary: the usual advice given to a novice at the game. Anyhow, he made a deliberate pause between One! and Two! but none between Two! and Three!

The reports appeared to be simultaneous; next I heard Paulssen utter an oath as he rushed forward to his man, followed by the doctor. As fate would have it, the unexpected had happened. Szalay was untouched, while De Hayn, the victor in a dozen encounters, lay prone on the turf with a bullet through his heart.

CHAPTER X

AN ASYLUM

As may be imagined, we returned to Von Lindheim's in a very different state of mind from that in which we had set out. Our friend's surprise at seeing Szalay, whom he had already looked upon as a dead man, was only equalled by his delight. But we realized that Szalay's providential escape had only increased the danger of the situation. No time was to be lost now in forming a plan of escape. We agreed that it must be effected that morning, before Rallenstein might have time to set his emissaries of death on our track. Both the result of the duel and the pretence of illness would give colour to a precipitate move from Buyda. As a dying man, Von Lindheim was to be conveyed to a country house he had at Schönval, some twenty miles from the capital. And indeed, if he was really to die, he would prefer that the blow should fall there; and in that stronghold we felt we might turn at bay and at least gain time, if flight out of the country, too dangerous now, should subsequently seem feasible. Then came the question—what was to become of poor Szalay? He stood in equal danger. We could not, for humanity's sake, leave him to his fate. If we did he would most assuredly be a dead man within twenty-four hours. But how to get him away under the lynx eyes of Rallenstein and his creatures? After many plans we decided upon doing the best we could to disguise

him as a servant, and so taking him down to Schönval with us.

He was a fair-faced man with reddish hair and beard. We made him shave, blackened his hair and eyebrows, found some paint and gave his complexion a ruddy tinge; then we dressed him in an extra suit of Pabst's, and flattered ourselves the disguise would pass even under Count Furello's eye. Anyhow, when he finally saw himself in the glass he hardly recognized his own identity, and behind his effective mask began to take courage. But it was an anxious time for all of us. I was too concerned for the awful peril in which my friends stood to appreciate fully the adventurous side of the business. Fighting against these underhand methods of assassination was not quite to my taste. Still, the danger was real enough, and that had to be met.

Having come to a decision, we sent hastily for Dr. Rothmer. After our anxious vigil Von Lindheim looked pale and drawn enough to support his pretended symptoms. When we mentioned his desire to be taken to his country home, the doctor, as we foresaw, strongly objected to any such move. He was not going to lose fees if he could help it.

We appeared rather to fall in with his views, intending all the same to make a start when he had gone, and simply mentioning the matter for the sake of plausibility. Von Lindheim lay groaning with a stimulated quick respiration and signs of collapse in which we had coached him. The doctor looked grave, shook his head at the difficulty of combating ptomaine poisoning, and finally, having impressed upon us the patient's extremely critical state, went off, promising to send another draught, which might relieve the symptoms.

No sooner had he left us than we began to prepare for our flight. We had settled that the first part of

the journey should be made by road, for the reason that by railway we should be more open to observation. So we proposed driving to a country station about eight miles distant, and then catching a train to our destination.

The move was carried out successfully ; at least without hindrance. Half an hour sufficed to make our preparations and have a roomy carriage at the door ; our pseudo-invalid was borne out and laid in it, Szalay, in his new guise, helping in the work. So we started, leaving the faithful Pabst to answer inquiries ; our departure and manner of travelling being plausible enough.

So far as we could tell, our move had been quite unobserved. The street was comparatively deserted, as it would be at that early hour, and as we drove off and got clear of the city, we congratulated ourselves that, so far, we had given the slip to the Jaguar, and at least had a good start of any pursuit. It was a bright morning, and as we rolled along over the country roads lined with dew-sparkling hedges, the gloom of the situation seemed to have lifted with that of the night. The brilliancy of the day seemed to give the two despairing men a new zest for life, and with that came courage. Even poor Szalay could discuss his position calmly and more hopefully ; we could have laughed at the absurd alteration in his appearance but for the thought that he had taken a man's life that day. We presently slackened our pace, that we might arrive at the wayside station just when the train was due. This we hit off very successfully, and carried our invalid tenderly, with anxious faces, into an empty compartment. No other passengers were at the station, with the exception of a couple of old market women, and we felt sure they were genuine. An attentive guard found us a carriage and assisted us, rather officiously, it seemed ; but then first-class

passengers were rare at those little stations. At each stoppage he came to look after us, and at the end of the short but tedious journey, he helped us out and bustled about us with rather more assiduity than was agreeable. However, before we were able to leave the station for Schönval we had seen him whistle the train off and depart with it.

"I didn't quite like that guard," Von Lindheim said as we drove away.

I reasoned with him against his uneasiness.

"Ah, you forget," he answered, "our railways are state property. The man may very well be in the Chancellor's employ."

"Anyhow," I said, "he is miles away by this."

"And here we are at home," he exclaimed with a sigh of relief. "Safe so far."

CHAPTER XI

A COURT PHYSICIAN

SCHÖNVALHOF was an old grey stone house, standing not far from the foot of pine-covered hills. A substantial dwelling, its interior more comfortable and homelike than my first view of its somewhat rugged exterior led me to expect. It was, they told me, built on a part of the site of an old Baronial castle, some ruins of which still stood adjacent to the modern house. A couple of old family servants made us comfortable at the short notice, and we had decided that, for a time at least, Lindheim should continue his rôle of the sick man; Szalay that of his personal attendant. We felt it would be madness for either of them to venture out of doors just then, so the pretence of illness could be kept up without much deprivation.

For we were certain that we should be followed, and that attempts would be made to get quietly rid of the witnesses of that fatal marriage. How the next blow would be aimed, from what quarter it would come, we could not even conjecture. But that it was to be looked for we all were certain. If there was one quality which in Chancellor Rallenstein was distinguished above another, it was tenacity of purpose. To him a temporary baffling was but a provocative; the slightest hint of opposition at once banished all hesitation. So we had every reason to feel sure that he would draw the net round us. Still,

life was strong in the two marked victims, and the longer we could put off the stroke the more chance there might be of fate coming to our rescue. Nothing but that, they felt. Help from outside it was vain to look for. For in that small independent State the supreme power, that is, of the Chancellor, was a law unto itself. His authority was boundless and answerable to no one, and if the deaths of two or three of the King's subjects were necessary for motives of State policy, why, short of a revolution, Rallenstein had no reckoning to fear. My case, as a British subject, I felt was different; not that I could consider myself by any means outside the danger line. I was in the *galère*, or—what was more to the point—in the secret, and had little doubt that a “regrettable accident” was being prepared for me. Our one satisfaction was in the thought that the Jaguar would have to crawl warily and strike silently, knowing that a bungle would probably mean the publishing of the secret he was taking so much trouble to keep. And this was where I, vaguely enough, saw a ray of hope.

For two or three days we lived quietly without the smallest sign of molestation; no stranger, nothing abnormal was noticed about the place—and I kept a sharp look-out—till we almost began to fancy that we were to be let alone. A formal letter had been sent informing the authorities of Von Lindheim's illness as an excuse for his absenting himself from his duties, and of this a mere acknowledgment had been received. That was all. Of Szalay we said nothing, and we hoped Rallenstein's spies had no scent of his whereabouts. Certainly, it would not have been so easy to give a valid excuse for his absence.

So, as the days passed, we seemed to gain more confidence and hope from detecting no sign of danger;

at least, we got to look at the bright side of the business, till suddenly a rude awakening came.

But first of all, to take the history of those anxious days in order. Von Lindheim received one morning an official letter, inquiring as to his health, and saying, further, that the King had heard with concern of the serious and regretted illness of such an esteemed member of his royal service, and had graciously commanded that the Herr Hof-Artzt Beckmeister should pay the patient a visit on behalf of his Majesty, who trusted to receive a more favourable report of Herr von Lindheim's condition. This letter filled my friends with dismay. But the move was so obvious and natural that the only wonder was it had not been foreseen. I asked what manner of man the Court Physician was.

"He is a dandified old scoundrel; a humbug as a doctor, but no fool. And he has skill enough, acting upon a hint, to diagnose that I have nothing the matter with me. Of course it is obvious what he is sent down for. He is a creature of Rallenstein's, who, however, does not employ him when he himself is ill."

"We must do the best we can with him," I said, turning over in my mind various tricks to that end. "We can't keep him from seeing and examining you, and of course that means discovery that you are in more or less robust health."

"But they must think I drank the poison."

"Yes; that's in our favour. And that is the idea we must work. The dose was too small, and consequently only partly operative. The physical effects have now passed off, but they have left brain trouble, and your nerves are shattered. Herr Hof-Artzt Beckmeister is presumably no brain specialist nor an authority on the after-effects of certain, or rather uncertain, poisons. His stethoscope and thermometer

will tell him nothing to refute our story; he may have suspicions, but that is all."

So we planned the conduct of the interview, and I, at any rate, awaited with a certain amused curiosity the arrival of Herr Beckmeister.

He came next morning in a hired carriage from the station. A dressed-up, brushed-up villain, with diamond rings, studs and pin, a heavy gold watch chain, gold-rimmed eyeglasses, and gold-knobbed malacca stick. A crafty, sensual face, and a sharp eye that meant business. "Ah," thought I, "you've had your instructions, that's plain." But I received him with all the respect which would have been his due had he been the man he pretended, and possibly believed himself, to be.

His Majesty had graciously honoured him with a command to visit my friend. Herr von Lindheim was better to-day, he ventured to hope.

I thereupon described the illness, somewhat differently, perhaps, from the visitor's expectation. My friend and I had supped on such an evening at the house of a charming lady in Buyda—possibly well known to the Herr Hof-Artzt, the Baroness Fornbach. The Herr Hof-Artzt conveyed by a bow and a smirk that he was one of that lady's circle. "On the way home," I continued, "my friend was taken alarmingly ill. I got him with difficulty to his house; he was put to bed." I described his symptoms. "But he grew so much worse that we feared he would not live through the night, which was likewise the opinion of the doctor we called in."

"Who was that?"

"Doctor Rothmer."

The Herr Hof-Artzt groaned and gave a shrug.

"In the morning, however, my friend felt easier, but in oppressive fear of death. His one idea was to reach his home and die here. The desire seemed so

strong that I hastily procured a carriage and brought him hither in the hope that the change would restore him."

"And it has?" he asked expectantly.

"In a great, great measure. The alarming bodily symptoms have subsided, but, Herr Doctor, it seems as though a worse calamity had befallen us."

"Indeed?" He looked at me curiously, but I think could make nothing of my anxious, innocent manner.

"Yes. I fear his brain is affected. He is painfully nervous, and is under the impression that he has been maliciously poisoned. He rambles about enemies who are seeking his life, and all my reasoning cannot persuade him of his fallacy."

Again Herr Beckmeister looked sharply at me, so sharply that I wondered how much of the business he knew. Then he rose, and, pulling out just the watch I should have imagined him to carry, a showy monstrosity, with a gaudily enamelled device on each side of the case, suggested, as he wished to catch a certain train back, he should see the patient. As this was inevitable, I led the way with a great show of alacrity, even thankfulness, and showing him Von Lindheim's room, left them together.

We had planned that Von Lindheim should very vaguely, yet with a mad insistence, take the Doctor into his confidence, and by a long recital of supposed danger keep him from a too searching examination. Whether it succeeded or not we never knew. When, after a twenty minutes' interview, Beckmeister came out of the room, he would give nothing away.

"Your friend," he said to me, "seems in surprisingly good bodily health after what we have heard of his attack. You will understand, however, that

my report is for His Majesty's ear, and that etiquette forbids me to forecast it even to you."

So with another flourish of his abominable watch, and some vague expressions of sympathy, he bowed himself into the carriage and drove off.

CHAPTER XII

A MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE

NOTHING more happened for a day or two, except that Von Lindheim received a letter asking him to send word as soon as possible when he would be able to resume his duties, the Hof-Artzt having reported his opinion that the indisposition was only temporary. The letter concluded with a compliment to Von Lindheim's ability, and an expression of regret that the bureau should be deprived of his valued services at a time when their loss was being particularly felt.

"They want to entice me back," he said. "So much for their fair words. That is a stroke of the Jaguar's soft paw with the claws ready to spring out. I know him."

His impression was, that he had puzzled, if not quite deceived, Doctor Beckmeister. He flattered himself that he had played his part well.

"If they think I am really off my head they may treat me as a neglectable factor, and so give me a chance of escape."

Then there was the question of Szalay. We had no opportunity of learning how his disappearance had been taken. Of course his presence at Schönval was a distinct source of danger, inasmuch as it absolutely contradicted the part Von Lindheim was playing, if only it were known. This, however, we hoped was not the case. We had elaborated his disguise, and even the Chancellor's suspicious eye could hardly have recognized in the dark, sleek-looking attendant on the

invalid the red-haired, bristling, lively Szalay of our Buyda days. Our plan was to wait awhile, and then to take an opportunity of sending him out of the country to some friends who lived on the other side of the Alps.

But as every day safely passed was making us more hopeful of ultimate escape from those vicious claws, our hopes were dashed by an extraordinary occurrence which revived our worst fears, and which I will relate in detail.

It will be understood that I ignored all necessity for keeping myself a prisoner, as the others had to do. Personally, although at times I conceived it quite possible that Rallenstein might not be sorry for a plausible opportunity of putting me out of the way, I felt no fear, and went about the place as I felt inclined, merely taking the precaution of carrying loaded in my pocket the small revolver with which I always travelled. I walked about the village, rode over the country round, but never saw anything suspicious, nothing in which could be discerned the Jaguar's watching eye, until the evening I am about to speak of.

I had strolled out after dinner, as was my wont, in company with a favourite dog of Von Lindheim's, a fine wolf-hound, which I often took with me on my rides. My evening strolls were as much in the nature of a patrol as a constitutional, but, as I have said, I had never detected anything to warrant them. On this occasion I went across the garden, then through a belt of plantation, and so on to a long terraced walk, lined on either hand with conifers, and having on one side occasional gaps, giving on to an arable field sloping down to a road some quarter of a mile below. These openings had been made to afford passing glimpses of what was a charming view, with a small river winding its course on the other side of the road,

and, beyond, the pine woods stretching away in broken masses as far as the eye could reach. The land between our terrace and the road was divided into small fields by hedges running longitudinally, useless divisions, except that they broke up the stretch of furrow, and so improved the landscape. The fields were now green with springing wheat, and dotted here and there over them were dummy scarecrows, a very necessary, if feeble defence, against the multitudes of birds that were harboured in the woods beyond. I mention all these details as being necessary to the comprehension of what follows.

I strolled along the walk thinking of the situation, the dog running now behind now in front of me. We had been getting more hopeful; our plan now being that we should wait a little longer, and then all three make our way out of the country. The two men would take up their abode in Paris, or possibly go to England with me, not to return to their home until Rallenstein's power was at an end, or at least until the turn of political events gave them assurance that they could breathe their native air in safety.

I had taken a turn and a half along the terrace when a sharp, low bark of suspicion from the dog broke the silence round, and aroused my attention. "Hey, Fritz, old fellow! What's the matter?" I cried.

The dog was running to and fro with his nose to earth, growling and whining excitedly. I went through the opening to the edge of the field and stood watching him. It was now dusk, and nothing could be clearly seen beyond a distance of, say, fifty yards. The dog was evidently on the scent of something; on a strange scent, I thought; one, to judge by his manner, that aroused his instinctive suspicion. He was evidently trying to find where the scent led away, but in this for a while he was in fault. Suddenly,

however, he gave louder tongue and darted off. I went through the opening, and ran along the crest of the hill in the direction Fritz had taken. He had got some distance ahead, and I could see nothing of him in the gathering darkness. After going some way, I stopped and whistled. There was no response to that, but a few seconds after, as I was about to call again, there came a loud, angry bark, with a deep cry (I could not swear, but it seemed to me human), and the snarling growl of a dog in the act of seizure, abruptly stopping, then silence.

"By George, he has caught something!" I cried, and ran towards the point whence the noise had come. Nothing unusual was to be seen.

"Fritz!" I called, then whistled. No answer. Dead silence. Fairly puzzled now, I ran on. Then thinking that I had gone too far, I wheeled round and went back towards the terrace, walking slowly, and looking well about me. Suddenly in the semi-darkness I sprang forward with a cry of anger. The mystery of the silence at least was solved.

This is what I came upon.

An overthrown scarecrow, and Fritz lying stretched on the ground beside it. I called him, although something told me it was useless, he would never move again. So it was. There was a great wound in his throat, and his head lay in a pool of blood.

What had happened? I jumped up and looked round, pulling out my revolver. I listened intently. Not a sound. I ran down the field to the road, keeping as sharp a look-out as was possible. No one was to be seen. I broke through the hedge and searched the bank of the river, but with no greater result. Then returning to the sloping field, I beat the hedges that crossed it, but came across neither man nor beast.

So at last there was nothing for it but to abandon

the search, and take in the uncomfortable tidings to Von Lindheim, since there was no chance of hiding them from him, Fritz being his favourite companion. Both men were greatly perturbed.

"Don't let us alarm ourselves unnecessarily," I said. "Poor Fritz may have fallen a victim to one of his natural enemies—a boar from the forest. At the same time it might be wise for us to accept it as a sign of danger."

For I had little doubt in my own mind that the unfortunate dog's death-wound had been given by no boar's tusk, but by a human hand.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE STONE SARCOPHAGUS

FRITZ's death remained a mystery, at the solution of which we could only hazard various conjectures. But that it was a man's work I had little doubt. The death-wound in the throat was the clean stab of a knife or dagger. My idea was that the man, a spy, had been hiding in order to watch us, and being attacked by the dog had silenced him in the most effectual manner ; then before I could follow, making his escape under cover of the nearest hedge, which would hide his retreat right down to the road, whence, if he thought it necessary, he could cross the river, and get off into the woods, when pursuit would be hopeless.

But, whatever the explanation of the affair might be, it had happened so swiftly and so mysteriously as to cause a very uneasy feeling, a serious apprehension for my friends' lives, which I could not disguise from myself. Now I was indeed beginning to realize the malignant tenacity of Chancellor Rallenstein. All the same, this fresh evidence rather braced my determination to outwit him. I gave up my long rides in the country round, and confined myself to walking about the grounds and the village, keeping a sharper look-out than ever.

A very uncomfortable feeling is that of being secretly watched. And that we were under a stealthy observation we all instinctively felt.

It is annoying, putting aside the danger, and it plays the devil by the nerves. To wake up in the morning with the feeling that your actions that day will have mysterious eyes upon them, governed and directed with an inscrutable and determined will, ah ! it makes one pray for an open enemy. The tension was telling upon us ; on me probably least of all, since I had the nerves of a steeplechase rider, and fresh air and exercise kept me fit. But I felt things could not go on indefinitely as they were. As the days and weeks wore on, Rallenstein would scarcely be likely to rest content with merely keeping his marked-down quarry under observation. Our staying on at Schönval was simply waiting for the assassin's stroke that was being prepared. One side or other must force the situation. I therefore determined that we should risk it ; but, as it turned out, the forcing came from the other side.

I was walking near the village one afternoon, turning over certain plans in my mind, when I made a singular discovery. I ought to mention that the neighbourhood was rich in geological treasures. There had been, years before, a landslip, by which many hidden things of past ages had been brought to light. I had several times climbed about this region, more to explore its picturesque ruggedness than for any geological curiosity I possessed. On this day something prompted me to go through the landslip again. So I turned up the path behind the inn, which led along a wooded ascent to where the fissured rocks and tree-grown boulders lay in romantic confusion. At one point in the irregular acclivity there was placed at some twenty yards from the path an ancient stone sarcophagus, which had been unearthed at some time, and, its value being probably deemed less than the cost of removal, had been left there to form one of the attractions of the place, and, indirectly, of the inn

below. I had passed this before, but had never taken the trouble to turn off the path in order to examine it more closely. The present and future had been too absorbing to let one care about the past. But now I did so. I stepped aside and strolled slowly towards the object of my curiosity. As I approached, to my astonishment a head appeared above the edge of the stone coffer, and a girl's laughing face turned a sort of petulant inquiry towards me. Saturated as I was with mistrust, I hardly knew whether to be suspicious of this apparition or not. A village girl, perhaps, I thought, although she certainly did not look it. I resolved to find out.

"I beg your pardon," I said in German. "I am sorry to have disturbed you, but I was about to examine this old object, not thinking any one was inside it."

Her smile deepened into a laugh. "How should you?" she replied. "It is the last place you would expect to find at least a living person in."

I was German scholar enough to know that it was not her native tongue. She spoke it prettily, indeed, but ungrammatically, and with a foreign accent.

"I won't disturb you," I said. "Another day——"

She had risen, stepped on to the ledge of the great coffin, and now jumped down on the ground beside me.

"There! I won't disturb your scientific studies," she said. "You are English, are you not?" she added, in our language.

"I am. Like you."

"Am I?"

"I think so."

"A good guess."

"Hardly a guess. You could scarcely be anything else."

"By my bad German, or something worse?"

"By your good English."

"And my bad style?"

"Not at all."

I looked at her as she sat on the edge of the sarcophagus, kicking her feet to and fro and keeping her eyes quizzically on me. She seemed about nineteen; her manner rather older than that. It was sharp, and had a suggestion of a woman of the world. On the other hand, she was dressed quite girlishly; her skirt was short, she had on a simple straw hat with little trimming, and wore no ornaments save a plain gold bar fastening her collar.

"I hope you are not going to let me frighten you away," she said roguishly. "I can easily find a more comfortable seat, and science must be before everything, as I know to my cost."

"I cannot plead guilty to the charge of being scientific."

"That's a comfort. Why, then, do you want to examine this stupid old coffin? Curiosity, eh? All tourists are so curious. They will go miles to see a thing abroad they would not cross the road to look at at home."

"I cannot say that my curiosity has not been rewarded. Although not quite satisfied."

"How?"

"I should like, if not asking too much, to know what made you choose that gruesome relic for a resting-place?"

She looked at me queerly and laughed. "Your curiosity shall be satisfied. In the first place, it is more comfortable than it looks."

I wondered a little at that, but did not say so.

"In the second place it is novel, in the third it is cool, and in the fourth it is a wholesome reminder, what I suppose you would call a *memento mori*."

Her voice had changed so with the unexpected conclusion that I looked up at her sharply. The roguery

was now only flickering about her face, which was almost sad.

"*Memento mori!* Why, what have you to do with that?"

"No more, perhaps, than the rest of the world. I might not have thought of it but for this." She tapped the sarcophagus. "But life is uncertain enough for us all, and—perhaps it was a fancy as I lay there to imagine myself in the place of him or her who occupied it hundreds, or, as my father will tell me, thousands of years ago; and then to think of a day that is coming."

I had never before heard a girl talk like that, and no doubt my face showed it.

"Well," she continued, changing her tone, "that's enough of the doleful for one day. Now tell me; are you staying here? At the inn? No?"

"No. With friends. Are you?"

"We, my father and I, are staying at Eisenhalm, about four miles off. We came over here to hammer at the landslip."

"Oh!" I confess I was fairly puzzled by this girl, and could not make up my mind whether to be suspicious of her or not. I thought I would wait and see what the father was like.

"Your father is scientific; a geologist?"

"Rather. I have been brought up on fossils and pliocene fragments. You can hardly wonder at my taking naturally to this stone coffin as a summer-house," she said wistfully. "Science is very interesting and absorbing to a man who takes to it, but it is a horrible bore for his family. I am very, very dull, and my feelings towards this landslip are not fit to be expressed. Of course you have heard of my father, Professor Seemarth?"

I recognized the name as one I had often seen in the papers.

"Yes; I know your father well by repute. He lectures at the Royal Institution, does he not?"

"Yes; you have heard him?"

"I am ashamed to say no."

"Don't be ashamed. You may be a very creditable member of society and yet take no interest in old bones and old stones. Father is an authority on the flint age. A boy once broke his study window with a stone, and he was delighted. It was a paleolithic remainder. Nothing modern interests him in the very least. A knife and fork of to-day are to him an impertinence. Don't you pity me?"

"Is the daughter of so celebrated a man to be pitied?"

"Ah, I suppose that's what every one thinks. And I do so want to move on from this stupid place, and there's no chance of it, because father has lighted on an interesting cleavage and suspects flint remains. Five o'clock! He shall not grub any longer."

She gave me an off-hand nod, and moved away towards the landslip.

"May I come with you?" I asked. "I should like to see Professor Seemars at work."

She made no objection, so we strolled on together, chatting on indifferent subjects. I fancy our talk was intermittent; anyhow, I know I was preoccupied with turning over in my mind the possibilities of this strange meeting. It was, in a way, natural enough; and yet something seemed to put me on my guard. That was due to the occurrences of the past fortnight and the danger we were hourly expecting to show itself. Had it not been for these circumstances, I told myself, the meeting with this extraordinary girl would have been simply one of the queer episodes with which travel abounds.

We had not far to go. Fifty yards or so from the entrance to the landslip I heard the tapping of a

hammer, guided by which I looked up and saw a man on his knees busily at work, and my companion sang out, "Five o'clock, my flinty-hearted parent."

Professor Seemarsh turned round, gave an answering wave of the hand, proceeding to collect his specimens into a canvas satchel which he slung on his shoulder, and then clambered down from the ledge on the fissured rock.

I had told Miss Seemarsh my name, and she introduced us. Naturally, I took keen notice of the Professor. He was a learned-looking, untidy man of about fifty-five, with shaggy grey eyebrows and whitish hair, while his scrubby moustache and wisps of shaggy beard showed a lofty disregard for grooming. There was nothing remarkable in his face, except that behind his tinted spectacles the eyes seemed keen and restless. His dress was quite professional in its negligent absence of taste. A light tweed Norfolk jacket, a crumpled buff waistcoat, dark grey trousers, and a weather-beaten soft felt hat were all in accordance with the best traditions of science.

He bowed and shook hands jerkily, after the manner of men whose pursuits absorb them from society. He had a quick, short manner of speech as one who wishes to say what is necessary as soon as possible and then get to his work.

"You are staying here? At the inn? Wretched place, isn't it?"

I told him.

"Ah, I know. House on the site of the old castle. Must have been an interesting place. Ruins still exist, I believe?"

"Yes; very fragmentary."

He laughed. "I am used to fragments. They tell me all I want to know; though a mere sight-seer wants something more. You are scientific?"

"I am afraid not."

He drew in his breath sharply in pitying disappointment. "Uth! Well, you don't know what you miss. Most fascinating this sort of thing." He waved his hand comprehensively towards the rocks.

From behind him his daughter made a grimace at me.

To save a smile, I hoped politely he had had a good day's work.

"Very fair. But I am only on the outer crust as yet. The great fascination of my work is that one never knows when one may not come upon a unique find. These," he took up a handful of fragments from his bag, "these are interesting, but they tell us nothing we did not know before. That," he tapped a piece with his finger nail, "is tertiary. That's curious, the indentation was certainly made ten thousand years ago. Yes. I hope to come upon something better in a day or two." He threw them back, and buckled the satchel. I had never heard any one talk so fast and jerkily. It seemed as though all the words of each short sentence rushed out of his mouth at once.

"Well," he said, "we must say good-day. We have a long walk before us. My daughter has probably told you she is not geological. But being all day in the fresh air has set her up wonderfully. Perhaps, if you are staying on here, we may meet again, and I may be privileged to try and bring you under the spell of science. By the way, are the ruins of the old castle shown to strangers?"

It was rather an awkward question for me to answer without appearing churlish. I could hardly treat this man as a stranger.

"My host, Herr von Lindheim, is very ill just now," I said, "but I am sure he would be glad for you to see them. Perhaps in a few days when he is better. But there is really scarcely anything of interest to see."

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The Professor smiled. " Anyhow, my work will be here for some time to come. If I am disappointed in this, perhaps I may remind you of your kind words. The comparatively modern antique is so fast disappearing that one likes to see it while one can. Good-bye. Come, Gertrude."

He shook hands and went off. The girl, who had not spoken a word for some time, came up and gave me her hand in a shy manner, which was rather contradicted by a laugh in her eyes.

" Don't let father make you a geologist," she said archly. " There are quite enough of them in the world."

Then, without waiting for a word from me, she turned and ran after the Professor, linked her arm in his, and so they went off down the winding path.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROFESSOR IS MAIMED

I WENT back and told my friends of the afternoon's incident.

"I must confess to feeling a little doubtful about them," I said. "I can't make the girl out at all; she is a most queer young woman, but of course Professor Seemarth is a well-known man in England."

"You are sure you have heard of him?" Szalay asked.

"Oh, yes. I know the name well. After all, it is quite likely that he would be grubbing about here for specimens. These scientific fellows know of every likely place in Europe for a find."

A day or two passed, and I saw no more of my new acquaintances, for the reason that I did not walk that way. Miss Seemarth, it is true, rather provoked my curiosity by her strangeness, but not sufficiently to induce me to run after her. We had noticed nothing suspicious since the episode of poor Fritz, and the strain of apprehending the enemy's next move was rather trying. One afternoon I thought I would stroll down to the landslip and see if the Professor and his daughter were there. Action of some sort seemed absolutely necessary to keep one's nerves in order; although we had determined to make a dash within the next few days.

I had gone but a very short way towards the village when I saw coming towards me the pair whom I was

going to seek. "Hullo!" said I, "this is suspicious. What are they doing up here?"

As they drew near I noticed that the Professor carried his arm in a sling.

"I am so glad we have met you," Miss Seemarth exclaimed as we greeted each other. "My father has met with an accident. Tumbled over one of his beloved rocks yesterday, cut his hand and sprained his wrist. So he cannot quarry in the landslip, poor dear. And as he absolutely refuses to lose a day and be idle, we were coming up to ask if we might see the ruins of the old castle."

The request could hardly be refused, and we turned back together, in spite of a remonstrance on the Professor's part that he was spoiling my walk, and that he could see all he wished without dragging me back. But it need hardly be said, I was not likely to fall in with that suggestion.

"My work," the Professor said, in his quick jerky way, "is not by any means the easy-going business most people think it. I am sometimes hanging in a cradle for hours over a chasm perhaps a thousand feet deep. The best places for finds are often the sides of a perpendicular wall, which can only be reached by a rope above. The worst bit of this slip is comparatively child's play, although not free from a degree of danger, as I have proved."

We soon reached the house and had the Professor at work on the walls of the old castle.

"Very interesting remains, very interesting," he commented. "Of course your friend has a history of the old place? Yes? I should like to see it."

"These fragments do not tell you much?"

"Everything, up to a certain point. But scarcely the names and deeds of the early inhabitants."

When the inspection was over, and there was not much to see, it seemed to me the height of inhospita-

lity not to show some little civility to my own country folk. They had walked all the way from Eisenhalm, and were going to walk back. One could hardly omit to ask them to come in and rest; as for the danger, my suspicions, vague enough, were fast evaporating. When I asked them to come indoors, the Professor rather demurred. "Your friend is ill, you say. We had better not disturb him. Some other day, perhaps."

But I felt constrained to press the invitation, and the Professor yielded. The usual elaborate German tea was brought in, and I left the room to tell Von Lindheim of my visitors. He looked rather disquieted.

"They are all right," I assured him. "He is a well-known English savant, as I told you. And after all, supposing he is not, what can these two do against us. Come in. It will amuse you."

He came in. The Professor sympathetically inquired as to his health, and we sat for a good while chatting over our tea. Some of the Schönvalhof archives were produced to gratify our visitors' interest in the place. Miss Seemarsch asked all sorts of questions; how we liked being buried in the country, if we did not have many visitors to keep us in touch with the outer world, and how long we proposed to stay before returning to Buyda. All these very natural questions were interspersed with naïve comments and comparisons between such a life and that of a London savant of many engagements and an unquenchable thirst for investigation.

Suddenly something appeared to have gone wrong with the Professor's injured hand. He made an expression of pain, saying his wound had been troubling him for some little time. His daughter was full of a somewhat rueful solicitude.

"Oh, I do wish it would get well quickly," she

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half murmured to me. "It is a trial when father can't work. I would far rather it had been my own hand. Father, hadn't you better let me dress it for you again? I have brought the ointment and the bandages in my pocket." She pulled out a little parcel.

"If we might ask to have a little warm water taken into a dressing-room, Gertrude might make things more comfortable for me," her father said, holding the arm as though in pain.

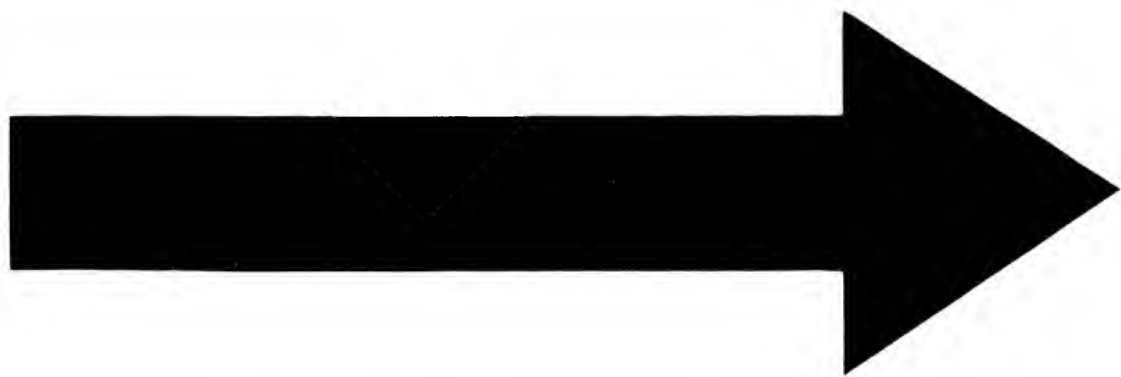
I jumped up and said I would see to it myself. So accustomed to suspicion was I that my watch over my friends had become almost automatic.

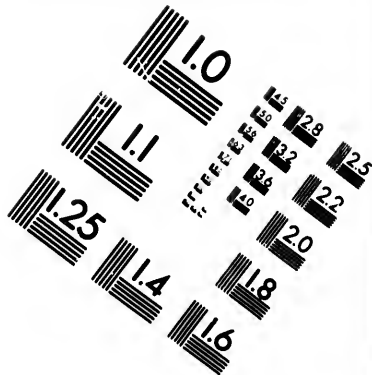
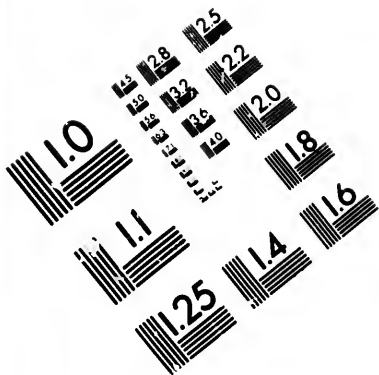
I led the way to a chamber, with a balcony commanding a lovely view across the valley.

I left them and waited in the hall till they should come down. After a while it struck me that it would, perhaps, be as well to warn Szalay that the strangers were near him. His room, where he spent most of his time, adjoined Von Lindheim's. We had done all we could to prevent his presence in the house being known to any one outside it, and I thought it just as well that he should keep close and not be seen even by these English people, who might be questioned by Rallenstein's spies.

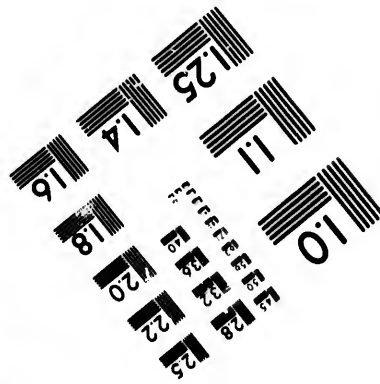
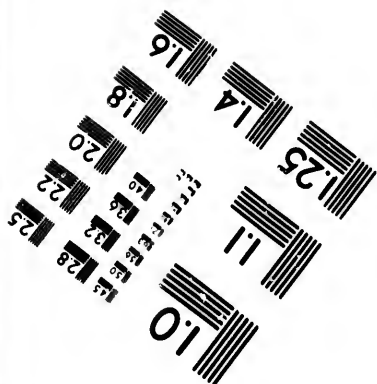
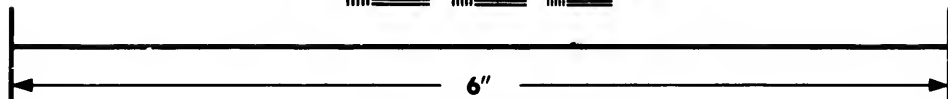
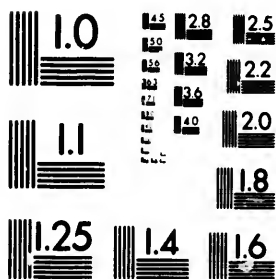
So I ran quickly upstairs. When I reached the corridor leading to the principal bedrooms, I was rather surprised to see the door of the room in which I had left the Seemarshes standing half-open. I knocked. No answer, I looked in; the room was empty. I went out to the head of the stairs; they were not to be seen. As I hurried along the corridor in search of them they came quickly round a corner and met me.

"Oh, there you are," cried the Professor. "You can guide us back. We mistook the turning to the stairs and lost our way. What a labyrinth this house is."



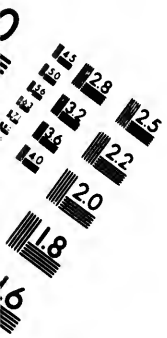


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It was not quite easy to see how the way downstairs could have been missed.

"I hope you are easier?" I said.

"Thank you, the fomentation and re-dressing have done wonders. It pains me very little now. I shall even hope to be at work on the slip again to-morrow. Will you come and learn the rudiments of a delightful science? It is all I have to offer in return for your kindness, but to me it is much, and I think I dare promise to interest you. No, thank you, we can stay no longer. We have already trespassed too much on your friend's hospitality. Now, shall we see you on the rocks to-morrow?"

"Yes, do come," the girl urged, and, more from curiosity than anything else, I promised.

CHAPTER XV

A LESSON IN GEOLOGY

THE next day was an eventful one. Its horrors come vividly back to me in writing of it. The curiosity which took me down to the rocks to learn a smattering of geology was at least completely satisfied, and in a way which in my most distrustful moods I little dreamt of. In a very open state of mind, I went off to the rocks. I can hardly tell my reasons, but, intuitively perhaps, I was rather more suspicious of the geologist and his daughter than I thought well to acknowledge to my friends. I kept telling myself that it was absurd.

Here was a well-known English geologist taking a hard-working holiday after the manner of his kind. And yet—the vague and unaccountable doubt in my mind pricked on my curiosity, and made me impatient to exercise my penetration in resolving the doubt into certainty one way or other.

I came upon Miss Seemarth sitting in a sheltered cleft of the rocks high above the path, reading a yellow-back novel. She gave me a free and easy nod. "You will find my father a little way on," she shouted, "in the next opening, I think."

I thanked her and went on. There was no difficulty in finding the Professor, who was kneeling on an overhanging platform of rock, hard at work. I clambered up beside him and congratulated him on his evident recovery from the effects of his accident.

"Ah! Still a little stiff and painful," he jerked,

"but my holiday is drawing to a close, and I cannot afford to lose more time."

"Then you must not let me interrupt you," was my natural response.

"Oh, you are not in the way, my dear sir. In fact you can, if you will, be of help to me."

I replied that I should be delighted if he would only show me how.

He took up a fragment of rock. "You see these streaks, those veins? They indicate tertiary fossils. If you will hammer off some pieces and just put aside all those that have a similar marking I shall be glad."

"Here," he continued, as I expressed my readiness, "let me put you on to a likely place. There is not much use in our both working together; besides, it is dangerous, as chips fly off."

Accordingly he took me across to another group of rocks, where, after we had ascended a steep path, he set me to work on an overhanging shelf of the cliff. The wielding of a geologist's hammer, when one is not especially keen on the science, is apt after awhile to become a source of fatigue and boredom. I soon got pretty tired of my work, particularly as I came across nothing that looked at all interesting. However, I stuck to it mechanically. At the same time, it was not what I bargained for; I was learning nothing of geology, since the man who might have instructed me was some hundred and fifty yards away; consequently, there was not a great distinction between my occupation and that of a breaker of stones on the roadside—a proverbially unexciting employment.

Anyhow, my work was not so absorbing but that my mind had room for other thoughts. Presently, in the midst of my hammering, it occurred to me—what if this setting me at stone-cracking should be but a trick to get me out of the way, and so leave the

two men at Schönvalhof defenceless? At the bare thought, I threw down my hammer, and had already run a considerable way down the sloping shelf, when the idea succeeded that I ran the risk of making a fool of myself. I stopped and listened. The sharp tap of the Professor's hammer from beyond the next bluff reassured me. About to return to my task, I just stayed to listen to the hammer's fall once more. What I heard though, was a great dull thud, followed by a crackling noise from the rock high above where I was standing. Then a terrific crash, as a great boulder came bounding down the rocky ledge towards me.

My situation was of course absolutely frightful. Escape was out of the question, with a wall of rock on one hand, sheer precipice on the other, and death, in the shape of tons of rock, crashing down the path to sweep me into eternity. Happily, the whole occurrence was so momentary that I had hardly time to realize my awful danger before it was past.

The great rushing mass was just upon me, when something, perhaps a projection from the rock or an unevenness in the path, gave it a slight outward bias. The result was, that before it came to me its course had begun to trend away from the wall; as it reached me, it was half over the edge on the other side, leaving a gap in which I stood unharmed; next instant it had overbalanced and gone down into the chasm, the noise of its fall reverberating in and out of the cliffs like thunder.

I can remember standing there leaning against the rock half-dazed with the shock of my danger, for the moment hardly realizing it and my miraculous escape. When I had pulled myself together and could look round, a great gap in the piled-up rock above where I had been working showed me whence the mass had been dislodged. My sudden suspicion and panic had

saved me, for had I remained up there I must have been crushed. Indeed, had I been surprised a couple of paces higher up the path it would have been all over with me.

I now made all haste to leave the dangerous spot ; scrambled down to the ravine below, passed what came so near being the engine of my death, the huge boulder now resting peacefully enough on the bed of the chasm, and so round the next corner of the rock in search of the Professor. It was rather surprising to me that I had not already seen him or his daughter hurrying to ascertain the result of the fall, which they must have heard. As I came out of the comparatively open space in front of the ridge, my surprise was increased by the sight of the father and daughter talking casually together. The Professor was leaning in a careless attitude against a rock with what looked like a smile on his face ; the girl stood by talking vehemently, it seemed, as I drew nearer, and he,—yes, I was sure of it—he laughed. So intent were they on whatever they were talking about, that neither noticed me till I was within fifty paces of them. It had further struck me as odd when the Professor began carelessly to play with the hammer, throwing it from one hand to the other in a way that argued either great fortitude in a man wounded as he professed to be, or an amazingly rapid recovery.

With a start he became aware of my approach. Even at that distance I could see that his face changed curiously twice : once to an involuntary, then to what I was sure was an assumed expression. Reading his looks the girl turned ; her face also was a puzzle ; startled at first, then relieved. The Professor dropped his hammer and came forward with alacrity.

“ My dear Mr. Tyrrell,” he exclaimed effusively, “ glad to see you safe. That was a nasty fall, and

we hardly dared wonder whether you had escaped. Heaven be thanked, it is all right, or I should never have forgiven myself for putting you to work there. But it seemed to me safe enough."

I was scarcely in the mood to take his fluent, if jerky, apologies in a very charitable spirit, particularly as I seemed to detect an indication of disappointment lurking beneath them; and my suspicion was rather strengthened by a sort of confused shame in the face of the girl, who said nothing.

"You did not seem particularly anxious as to my fate," I could not help remarking. "But for my providentially having moved from the place where you set me to work I must have been killed."

The Professor now looked grave and concerned enough for anything.

"Tut, tut! Is it possible! I shall never cease to regret having put you in such danger. I am so very, very sorry. Believe me, I would have staked my reputation against the chance of such an occurrence."

"I hope it will be a lesson to you, father," the girl said in a low voice.

He gave a quick half-glance at her, and I caught under his glasses an expression which was not exactly remorseful. "It will be indeed," he exclaimed, shaking his head up and down. "It is frightful to think of what might have happened, my dear friend; what a merciful escape!"

"Anyhow," said I coldly, "it has taught me a lesson: not to run gratuitous risks, even in the name of science."

"It is a mystery to me how that piece of cliff can have come down," he said, rather obviously ignoring my tone. "Erosion would hardly account for it up there, and——"

Out of all patience I cut him short. "The scientific

side does not interest me, and I take leave to doubt whether, had you stood in my place, it would have seemed of paramount importance to you. I fear we are hardly likely to take the same view of the affair, so I will wish you a good evening."

The affair was perplexing enough; and the more my vague suspicions of the Seemarshes advanced towards certainty, the greater puzzle did it become. But upon one thing I was resolved—to give them a wide berth in future. My narrow escape was not to be thought of without the irresistible suggestion of a sinister design. I, however, determined to keep my own counsel about it; Von Lindheim and Szalay being nervous enough as it was. But neither the Professor nor his daughter should be admitted into the house again if I could help it.

Such were my thoughts as I made my way from the rock valley to the village. The path, it will be remembered, descended upon and led past the inn. As I came round the corner of that house I happened, by the merest chance, to glance in at the window of the coffee-room. One man was in it, sitting half turned from the light, reading a newspaper. That casual glance sufficed for me to recognize him, then I sprang forward out of sight as he was about to look round.

It was Count Furello.

CHAPTER XVI

A BLOW IS STRUCK

I WAS not greatly surprised to find the Count in the village. The question which exercised my mind for the rest of the way to Schönvalhof was whether he had any connexion with Professor Seemarsh. I should have liked to have kept watch upon the wily Count, only it seemed much more necessary to lose no time in putting my friends on their guard, since the fellow's presence could mean nothing but danger. Thinking over the events of that afternoon I was half inclined to acquit the Professor of any sinister intention. The fall of rock might have been a pure accident, which no one could have foreseen : such displacements are of periodical occurrence, and chance had led me to the spot at one of the critical moments when Nature's alarum was set to strike.

As to the Professor's apparent callousness, why—perhaps the conduct of hide-bound scientists was not to be judged by that of other men. In the interests of their pursuit they are inclined to hold life cheap, brute or human, their own or any one else's. So I had still an open mind as to the Professor when I reached the house.

I told the men of my having seen Furello. They did not show as much alarm as might have been expected, having, perhaps, made up their minds to the worst.

" It is always a relief in an affair of this sort when

our opponent shows his hand. Now that we are forewarned we can take our measures accordingly."

"I suppose we may look for a visit from the Count any minute now," Von Lindheim observed.

"I wonder what his excuse for a call will be?" said Szalay.

"The Jaguar's emissaries need little excuse," the other returned gloomily.

"You had better leave *il Conte* to me," I suggested, "if he does call. You are too ill to receive him; and I will do my best to throw dust in his eyes. It is doubtful whether he knows that Szalay is here."

"The Chancellor knows everything."

"If he does it shall not be our fault. This amiable assassin will not see our friend if there is a hiding-place in the house."

We discussed our plan of defence, and then, feeling a strong desire to keep watch upon the Count, I went off again towards the village. Avoiding the road I struck into a wooded path, keeping as much under cover as possible. It was well that I did so. When about half-way to the village I caught sight of a well-known figure crossing a field. Furello. He was walking fast, hurrying it seemed, and smoking a cigar. From my screen within the fringe of a small wood I had a full view of him without the risk of being noticed. The ground he crossed was undulating. He ran down the little hills, and once or twice halted on the top of an ascent to look round. Presently, when he had gone a safe distance, I came out of my shelter and followed him. Knowing the country probably better than he, I was able to keep him in sight at no great distance, marking him from the other side of a straggling hedge. Soon he came in view of Von Lindheim's house, peeping out from the trees on the hill above us. He stopped a few moments looking at it, then glanced round, made a peculiar

gesture, perhaps of contempt, shaking his hand at the house, and hurried on.

"He is going to the railway station," I said to myself, and so it proved. Following him as closely as I dared, I was in time to see him get into a train and take his departure in the direction of Buyda.

"So far good," I exclaimed, turning back. "It is as well I saw my gentleman off, or we should have been worrying as to what had become of him. But what has he been doing here?"

Speculation on that head was manifestly futile. The two men were relieved to hear of his departure, although much exercised to know what agency he had left behind him. We dined and made ourselves as happy as our forebodings would allow. After dinner we opened a packet of newspapers which had arrived, and proceeded to post ourselves in the doings of the outside world. I was deep in a week-old *Times*, when a sudden exclamation from Von Lindheim made me look up.

"Tyrrell!" he cried, "what, in Heaven's name, does this mean?"

"What?"

"Listen." He read from the paper as follows:—

"Accident to an Englishman on the Alps. A party of Englishmen were ascending the Weisshorn on Tuesday last. While attempting to scale a difficult peak, one of the party, who were roped together, lost his footing, and, the rope being slack, the shock of his fall was communicated with violence to the rest of his companions. The whole party fell a considerable distance, but happily were saved from going to certain death by the strenuous exertions of their two guides, Jean Koller and Barthelmy Reiss. One of the party was the well-known Alpine climber, Professor Seemmarsh, of London, who sustained a broken collar-bone."

Szalay and I had by a common impulse sprung to our feet.

"Professor Seemarsh!" I snatched the paper and read the name for myself. "There is only one Professor Seemarsh. Then who is this man?"

Von Lindheim's answer was a hopeless shrug.

"On Tuesday last we know that Professor Seemarsh, the Alpine climber, or the man who calls himself by that name, was here in this village, hundreds of miles away from the Weisshorn. And whatever injury he may or may not have received, it is certainly not a broken collar-bone."

"It is as I have suspected," Szalay said gloomily.

For some moments neither of us spoke. All my suspicions now came back as certainties, and I could properly appreciate the escape I had had that afternoon. Von Lindheim laughed grimly. "To think that we have had the scoundrel in this very house. It is a wonder I am yet alive. He did not come here for nothing, you may swear."

"But for what?"

"Time will show, if we are only in a position to comprehend it."

"Let us at least be thankful," said I, "that chance has shown us our danger. We shall know our enemy now when we see him. You are right, Lindheim, about the Professor's accent. But we must confess they played their parts well. The girl! What a life! No wonder she occasionally breaks out into cynical bitterness that is almost startling."

Reviewing the conduct of the *soi-disants* Seemarshes, I now related how they had roused my suspicions when they pretended to have missed their way upstairs. Szalay, as he listened, looked uncomfortable, almost terrified.

"That accounts," said he blankly, "for something which happened yesterday, and which I could not

make out at the time. I was sitting in my room reading when the door suddenly opened. Naturally, I turned quickly to see who it was, but as I did so it was shut quickly again, not so quickly, though, but that I fancied I had caught a glimpse of a woman's dress. Imagining it had been Frau Pabst I thought little more of the matter, but now I know—it must have been that girl spy, and my whereabouts is no longer a secret."

"Then the sooner we make a move from here the better," said Von Lindheim. "It is sheer madness to stay waiting the assassin's blow. To-morrow morning—Tyrrell, will you come with us?"

Of course I would. We sat up late arranging our plans and making preparations for our journey. Our idea was to make, at all hazards, a rush for the frontier. The plan at the best was full of danger, but at least it was no worse than staying where we were, marked down by these secret enemies. Anyhow, it meant action, relief from the strain of suspense, which was becoming intolerable.

So we laid our plans for the morrow, little dreaming with all our apprehensions what the night would bring forth.

It was past midnight when we turned in, having had much to do in preparing for an early setting out to run the gauntlet of Rallenstein's myrmidons. Exciting as the day's events had been, I lay but a short time, being pretty tired, before going off into a sound sleep; to be awoke with a start, having a confused idea of a cry in my ears. It was just growing light. Hardly had I collected my faculties when the cry rang again through the house, again and again, kept up in a series of screams of terror. I sprang out of bed, snatching up my revolver. Before I could reach the door I heard Von Lindheim's voice calling my name.

Shouting "All right!" I dashed along the passage to his room, which was divided only by a small dressing-room from Szalay's. I met Von Lindheim at the door.

"What is wrong?" I cried.

He was in a terrible state of excitement. "Szalay," was all he could gasp. "Take me away before I go mad."

The poor fellow, I could see, was beside himself with something worse than fear. A strange noise came from Szalay's room, a horrible, inarticulate sound of a man struggling, as it were, to call out something. Thinking he was being strangled, I rushed in with my revolver ready.

To my astonishment he was alone, standing in the middle of the room, but so horribly altered that I hardly recognized him as the same man to whom I had bidden good-night a few hours before. His face was distorted, its colour changed, the sanguine, ruddy complexion being now a dark grey; the features seemed bloated, and the eyes glared with almost maniacal terror. The aspect of our poor friend was so appalling that the sight seemed to take all the strength from me as I stood before him under the thrill of this hideous experience. I would far rather have found the room full of armed cut-throats than containing this solitary pitiable victim.

"Szalay!" I cried at length. "What has happened?"

As he tried to answer a spasm seemed to catch his throat. He pointed with an unnatural, mad gesture to the open window, trying to talk, but the power of enunciation had failed him, he could produce only inarticulate gibberish. He threw up his hands in despair and shrieked again. I seemed to catch the words, "Dead man! Dead man!"

Then he rushed to the looking-glass. At the re-

flexion of his face he recoiled with a scream, and flung himself prone on the bed.

I went to the door and found Von Lindheim outside.

"What is this fearful thing? What has happened to him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I know no more than you," he said in a frightened whisper. "I heard him shriek, rushed in and saw"—he shuddered—"what you have seen. Those devils have got in and have done for him."

"You saw no one?"

"No. But they will come. They are here, Tyrrell. I am going to put a bullet through my brain. It is better than that."

"Don't be a fool," I said, and went back into the room.

Szalay was lying as I had left him. I spoke his name, but he returned no answer, made no movement. Nerving myself, I went up and lifted the outstretched arm. It was heavy and lifeless. I felt for the pulse; there was none. Then I went back to Von Lindheim and told him:

"He is dead."

CHAPTER XVII

THE JAGUAR'S DEN

I SPENT the ensuing hours in reasoning with Von Lindheim against his panic, and endeavouring to instil hope into him. Naturally, under circumstances which would have shaken the strongest nerves, it was not easy, but at length I succeeded in calming him, and he seemed to take a sufficiently resolute view of the situation to bring himself to discuss the best plan for relieving it.

I now determined to postpone our flight for a day, while I would go to Buyda, see the Chancellor, and remonstrate with him, pointing out how unnecessary and cruel these devilish precautions were.

Accordingly, having made Von Lindheim promise to do nothing rash in my absence, I had a horse saddled, and after an early breakfast rode off to Buyda, choosing that mode of travel rather than the railway, as being calculated to give any spies less indication of a prolonged journey.

I have often wondered since at my temerity in bearding the Jaguar in his den ; but in those days I was strong and confident ; even the ghastly business in the midst of which chance had thrown me had hardly shaken my nerves, and then, again, I did not imagine myself to be in such danger as the sequel showed to be the case. The morning was fair and bright after an early shower, and as I rode along with a winding sparkling river below me on the one hand,

and the dark blue masses of pine-clad hills on the other, I could not help contrasting Nature's tranquil beauty with the hideousness of man's cruelty. An old theme, but one that appealed to me very strongly that summer morning.

I arrived at Buyda before mid-day, and leaving my horse at the hotel made my way straight to the Chancellor's quarters in the palace. Having sent up my name with a request to have an audience of him on urgent business, a message was brought back that his Excellency was with the King, but that he would be happy to see me at a later hour in the afternoon. So I went back to the hotel and lunched. Afterwards, as I was preparing to go out for a stroll in the city to kill time, a precautionary measure occurred to me, which I proceeded to put into practice. I wrote down certain particulars, sealed them in an envelope, and then went to the office of the British Consul, with whom I had already a slight acquaintance. He was a very much bored man, for whom even the pleasantest side of life in Buyda had ceased to have any charm, and he was evidently, as a relief from the monotony, glad to see me.

"I am going to leave this letter with you, Mr. Turnour," I said. "If I don't come back or send for it before to-morrow morning, open it."

He opened his eyes. "And what then?"

"It will explain itself."

"My dear fellow," he said rather anxiously, "I hope you are not going to do anything rash, run into any danger."

I laughed. "I am not going to leave Buyda, if I can help it, before I come back for that letter."

"No?"

"No. What danger should there be here?"

"None to a British subject," he answered guardedly. "All the same, queer things do happen sometimes."

“ Under the enlightened rule of Chancellor Rallenstein ? ”

He looked grave, and as though he would like to say more to me than he dared. “ Rallenstein is a strong man ; one of the strongest brains in Europe, and ”— he sank his voice—“ he is not credited with an excess of scruples.”

I refrained from looking as though I could illustrate that opinion in highly coloured fashion, and rose to go. Turnour was a weak man—a good official, but a machine. Certainly not the man to take into an appalling confidence.

“ All right,” I said. “ I’ll take care of myself. Only, a stranger in an out-of-the-way place like this is easily lost sight of and never missed. I shall, no doubt, come back for that letter to-night.”

He locked it in a drawer, and after a few common-places I left him and went back through the city towards the palace. The place was busy and gay as usual ; people get used to living under the very frown of a despotic government as at the foot of a volcano.

At the hour appointed, I was ushered into Rallenstein’s presence. He received me with a smile which might almost be called genial, and apologized for having had to ask me to postpone my audience.

“ You have been in the country, Herr Tyrrell, *nicht wahr* ? You are looking well. Englishmen thrive best away from town life.” I wondered if there was a covert meaning in that. “ Now,” he added pleasantly, “ how can I have the pleasure of serving you ? ”

“ I have come from Herr von Lindheim.”

“ Ah, yes ? ” There was simply polite interest in his look and tone. The heavy face gave no evil sign as I spoke the name.

“ Not as an ambassador from him, but entirely on my own initiative.”

"Yes?" The tone was still polite, now almost verging towards boredom.

"Von Lindheim," I said, "is in fear of his life."

The thick eyebrows rose incredulously. "In fear of his life?"

I felt the man's power of will and character, and determined to stand up against it. "And with reason," I continued. "Your Excellency will, I am sure, not blame him for such a fancy when I tell you that within the last few days two colleagues of his have been secretly assassinated, and his own life has been attempted."

The face I was watching gave an incredulous frown. "My dear Herr Tyrrell, this is an extraordinary and astounding statement of yours. Two of Herr von Lindheim's colleagues assassinated and his life attempted! You can scarcely expect me to credit that."

"And yet," I rejoined boldly, "your Excellency should know these facts better than I."

At last a great gust swept over the mobile face. "What do you mean, sir?" he demanded, with a show of restrained displeasure.

"Only, that as both these gentlemen, these victims, had the honour to be attached to your Excellency's Bureau, you should be better informed of their fate than I."

"I am, naturally, well aware," he replied, "that Herr d'Urban was accidentally drowned the other day while boating, but," he added with a smile, "it can hardly be pretended that our service, advantageous as I venture to claim it is, confers immortality."

I returned his smile. "Rather the reverse just now, Herr Chancellor. The Secretary Szalay also has died suddenly."

"From natural causes?"

" I wish I could think so."

" You suggest foul play ? "

" I fear I must."

He laughed indulgently.

" Really, Herr Tyrrell, I have always given an Englishman credit for being the incarnation of common sense."

" I hope I am not less sensible than the average of my countrymen. And that quality would certainly lead me to the conclusion that foul play is at work."

He bowed, still sneeringly indulgent. " Perhaps you can suggest a motive."

" Simply that these unfortunate men are supposed to have knowledge of a dangerous secret."

He raised his eyebrows in contemptuous surprise.

" Mr. Tyrrell, this is too absurd ! You can hardly suggest or expect me to entertain such an inference seriously."

" It is a strange coincidence."

" If you had studied our German philosophers you would have ceased to find anything strange in mere coincidence."

" Perhaps so. It would need, however, a great deal of philosophy to refute my theory of foul play."

I began to understand the rampart of polite incredulity behind which Rallenstein had entrenched himself, and how hopeless it was for me either to break through or entice him from it. Nevertheless, I continued :

" There is no doubt that an attempt was made to kill Herr von Lindheim by poison."

" You have proof ? " The question was put almost carelessly, with just as much show of interest as politeness demanded.

" The proof of my own eyes."

" Not always the most trustworthy witnesses," he observed, with his cynical smile.

"Your Excellency," I said, "seems determined not to be interested in what has happened. So be it. My purpose in coming here to-day was to assure you of Herr von Lindheim's loyalty, and to beg you to use your authority to put a stop to the attempts against his life."

"You would seem to imply, sir," he replied, stroking his face with his hand, "that these attempts which you allege have a political motive."

"Assuredly."

"It is too ridiculous," he said, as though to himself. "My good sir, you have found a mare's nest."

I leaned forward. "Excellency," I said earnestly, "can we not come to an understanding? I make no accusations, I seek to know nothing; my interference is merely forced upon me by pity and a desire to clear up a misunderstanding. I ask you to remove this cloud of danger hanging over Herr von Lindheim's head. You can do it if you will, and I can assure you you will not repent it."

If I thought my entreaty would move him I was mistaken. I might as well have pleaded with the bronze statue of a warrior king that stood in the corner behind him. He waved me back.

"Your appeal involves an accusation which I utterly repudiate. You are a foreigner, Herr Tyrrell, and therefore I have heard you with an indulgence which your suggestion scarcely deserves. To ask me to give a pledge against a chimerical danger is more than absurd. I do not wish to make use of strong language, or I might point out in such that the object of your visit might easily be construed into a flagrant insult to his Majesty whose humble adviser I have the honour to be. If I might offer you a word of advice, it would be that so long as you choose to avail yourself of the hospitality of this country you should devote your time to sport or pleasure, and avoid

mixing yourself up in affairs which do not concern you. Even were this monstrous suggestion of yours in any way true, the interference of an outsider could serve no tangible end. You will do well to consider your position in the light of that common sense which is, I believe, the birthright of most Englishmen. That is all."

I rose. "I have then no comforting assurance to take Herr von Lindheim, Excellency?"

"Herr von Lindheim's life is in no more danger than your own."

A Delphic pronouncement truly! "I have no fear of that," I laughed.

"And yet," he rejoined, fox-like, "if your veiled accusations were correct, you might stand in some danger yourself."

The speech was tentative. I saw that, and determined not to be led into any admission.

"I have no fear," I said, "and can take care of myself."

"You are a bold man."

"To have come here?"

He laughed. And I understood better than ever why he was called the Jaguar. Though the flesh of the lower part of his face was loose and mobile, the skin over his forehead was drawn tight, his eyes were feline, and the lines of his mouth cruel. But when it suited him to put on a pleasant expression the stealthy cruelty of the face in a measure disappeared. Now there was the look it had worn glaring through the window at that fatal marriage, the look that had bent over the murdered bridegroom's face. But I maintained my dogged resolve not to be overawed by the man or the devil within him.

"My confidence in coming here," I answered coolly, "is due less to courage than the fact that I have left a letter, containing word of my intention, together

with several other pertinent matters, in the hands of a friend whom I can trust, and who will open it at a certain hour unless I am there to prevent him."

My words amounted almost to a threat, at least, to a defiance, and the look they called up into his Excellency's eyes was not a pleasant one. But he showed no other sign of annoyance; on the contrary, his next words were almost jocular.

"I trust, Herr Tyrrell, that you will take great care to avoid all accidents. For if anything should unfortunately happen to you while we have the honour to include you among our country's guests, I take it that the responsibility—or worse—of such misfortune would be laid at our door. So I do hope you will take care of yourself, my dear Herr Tyrrell."

"I will do my best," I replied, bowing, and moving towards the door. I turned as he spoke again. The man looked genial enough now; the evil print on the face was smoothed over, the lines of cunning no longer made the rest stand out in relief.

"And so far as your friend's fears are concerned," he said, "you may take him my assurance that they are groundless. Herr von Lindheim is doubtless out of health, his nerves are unstrung. He needs a holiday; he may take one."

"I have your assurance, Excellency?"

"You have my assurance. I trust you will both be careful."

He half rose to return my bow, smiling, though it seemed, from my last glance, that the smile was growing more feline and sinister. There was no more to be hoped for or said, and I left him.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WORD OF WARNING

I WALKED along the Königstrasse, the principal street of Buyda, reflecting on my interview, and wondering how far I could trust the assurance of the Chancellor's last words. His was one of those complex characters, so hopelessly difficult to understand, that I felt it an even chance whether his word was to be trusted or disbelieved.

Anyhow, I persuaded myself that my visit had done no harm, and there was just the likelihood that his purpose might relax with regard to Von Lindheim. How far I was justified in this idea the sequel will show. But chance certainly made the journey to Buyda one of the most momentous of my life.

My reflections were interrupted by a man who came quickly up from behind, touched his hat and addressed me. A man in livery. He said that the Baroness Fornbach would like to speak to me. She was in her carriage a few yards down on the other side of the street. After a moment's hesitation I followed the man. If I had my doubts and suspicions about the Baroness I was yet somewhat inclined, remembering her half confidences on the evening I had supped with her, to try whether I could get any information from her about the Chancellor. At the same time I resolved to walk warily.

The Baroness gave me a friendly greeting, asked as to my plans, where I had been, how long my stay in Buyda was to last, and on learning of my immediate

departure insisted on my accompanying her home for a cup of tea. As there was not much chance of my learning anything important in the open street and in the presence of a lady who was with her, I accepted the invitation and got into the carriage.

"I don't care for tea, but shall be delighted to have half an hour's chat with you," I said.

"That's well. I know you English are faddy about spoiling your dinners," she returned with a laugh as we drove off.

After tea the Baroness's companion disappeared, and I was free to begin my questions. As to whether they would be satisfactorily answered or not I was doubtful, but anyhow I would make the attempt.

"I am interested and puzzled by the fate of that poor fellow Von Orsova, whom I was to have met the very evening of his death. Can you throw any light upon it, Baroness? In the country one hears nothing but bare facts."

Affecting to speak more or less carelessly I was watching her narrowly, and saw that at my question she "clinched" a little. All that was meant for me to see, however, was a shrug as she answered:

"Who knows? No one precisely. But we all guess. A love affair is the most natural solution."

"With whom?"

She laughed. "My dear Herr Tyrrell, you know as much as I do."

"Of course, Baroness, if you choose to play the Sphinx——"

"It is safest."

"Can you not trust me?"

She smiled, this time a little bitterly. "I have long ago ceased to trust anybody. But, really, and truly, I know no more than you."

I bowed. "You shall not tell me a word more than you wish, only——"

"You are as curious as a woman."

"Curious? No. My feeling was more serious than that. Let me tell you our friend Von Lindheim is concerned at the deaths that have occurred among the staff of the Chancellerie."

"Naturally. They were friends of his."

"Not only that. He fears a like fate may strike him."

"His nerves are upset. He has been ill, has he not?"

"He is lucky to have been no worse," I said cautiously.

"He has never imbued you with his fears?" she asked in a tone of raillery.

"Not for myself, but for him. I have seen the Chancellor to-day."

"Yes."

"Ah!" thought I, watching her, "that is no news to you. He assures me," I continued, "that Von Lindheim's fears are groundless."

"Good! Then you are satisfied?"

I leant forward. "Baroness, tell me frankly. Do you think I may be satisfied?"

She lay back, and took up a small fan from the table at her hand.

"How can I tell? Why do you ask me? Can I guarantee his Excellency's word?"

"You may be my friend in this place where I have no friends, and advise me."

A peculiar expression came over her face, a look that I cannot describe, a look of inexpressible bitterness and regret, struggling as it were to get through the mask which her part obliged her to wear.

"I?"

"You, Baroness," I said significantly.

"I hope I am always your friend," she replied.

"And as a friend your advice is——"

"I have none to give—on that subject."

"What then?"

She looked swiftly, almost fearfully, round the room. She was holding the little black fan—I see her now—tightly in her clenched hands. She threw it down, and clasped her hands over her knees, leaning forward and speaking in her usual tone, but as low as a whisper.

"My advice to you, Herr Tyrrell, is to leave this country. You may be safe as yet. But you have been ill-advised in interesting yourself in other men's affairs. We are under an iron will here, and it makes sure."

"You brought me here to tell me that?"

To my intense surprise her eyes filled with tears. She looked away.

"Don't ask me that, don't ask me that," she returned passionately, but always in a low voice. "Be thankful that you are free to go, and pity us who are not."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes. I rose, and stood leaning my elbow on the mantelpiece. There was silence; a little clock by me chimed six. Then I said:

"I am sorry to have asked you a distressing question. The more that it was perhaps unnecessary. For I know——"

She rose quickly, stopping me by a gesture of her outstretched hand.

"Don't tell me! Don't tell me!" she cried under her breath. "Say you know nothing. Your life may depend upon it."

"Baroness!" I cried, almost appalled as I realized the truth of her position.

"I trust you," she went on with the same vehemence, intensified by the restraint she put upon her voice, "for I know you can be staunch and true;

you are as far above all the tricks and treachery in which we live here as heaven from hell—I trust you, Englishman, with my life. Yes. For if it were known that I had spoken to you like this I should share the fate of Asta von Winterstein.”

I started. “Asta von Winterstein?” Of course I remembered the girl, the favourite Maid of Honour to the Princess, and my fascinating partner at the State ball. She, naturally, had been in the secret, and when I recalled that lovely animated face, the girl’s merry laugh and overflowing spirits, I shuddered. “Has anything happened to her?” I scarcely dared put the question.

The Baroness looked at me in surprise. She was quite herself now, and spoke with her usual calm. “Have you not heard? It was in the papers. Fräulein von Winterstein was returning after dark from an excursion to Salenberg. The coachman missed his way, and overturned the carriage in the narrow pass above the river. It fell down the steep side into the water. The driver threw himself off the box and escaped by a miracle, but poor Asta went to her death.”

Her tone was quite impassive, as she would have related the occurrence at a dinner party. I felt a sensation almost of horror at the deliberate methods of this man-tiger, Rallenstein.

“Horrible! Horrible!”

“I believe the poor girl’s body has not yet been recovered,” she continued with the same repression of all feeling which, I could well understand and sympathize with. “The river is deep and swift in that gorge, and she may have been carried down for miles. Her mother is almost distracted, her father, General von Winterstein, is abroad, and the news will hardly have reached him. Poor man! He can do nothing.”

As she spoke the last words she looked at me

significantly. We understood each other. No more was needed.

"You may trust me," I said in a low voice.

Her hand touched mine. I was about to raise it to my lips when she snatched it away. "Hush!" she murmured warningly.

The door opened, and the other lady came in.

"Count Furello is here, my dear. I thought I would tell you."

The announcement was made in such a curious manner that I turned inquiringly to the Baroness. She gave just the suggestion of a shake of the head, and I barely caught the whisper, "Go, as soon as you can."

Next moment the Count was shown in.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FAN

COUNT FURELLO came in with a bow, then, advancing, bent low over the Baroness's hand.

"This is a surprise, Count," she said, quite herself again. "We heard you were away from Buyda."

"I have been travelling, and am here only till tomorrow. But I could not pass through without paying my respects to the Baroness Fornbach."

When he spoke the tightly stretched lips drew away, leaving the abnormally white teeth bare. He was most polite, but not pretty.

He then turned and bowed ceremoniously to me, apparently quite aware of my presence, although he had not seemed to look in my direction.

"You are still in Buyda, Mr. Tyrrell. We had an idea you had left us."

"For a time," I replied lightly. "As becomes a wandering devotee of sport."

"Sport! And you leave England?"

"For change."

"Ah! like so many of your countrymen you are hard to satisfy. You would rather go far and fare worse than stay at home. Well, enterprise at the possible expense of comfort is admirable. Dare one conclude that our city here temporarily pleases you?"

I looked at him sharply, uncertain whether his speech was mere polite small-talk or covert sarcasm. Not that I cared, except so far as it interested me to

note the various phases of the man's character. The peculiar expression of his face made a perfect mask, far harder to see through even than Rallenstein's impassiveness. There was, perhaps, the gleam of a sneer in the eyes—those unruly tell-tales, ever ready to contradict our words and betray us. But I was not certain, and answered simply :

" Yes, I enjoyed a few weeks' sojourn in Buyda extremely. For the last week or two I have been staying a short way out in the country with a friend."

Count Furello bowed in acknowledgment, as it were, of a piece of information which did not interest him deeply enough for words.

" You have not come, then, from the Geierthal, Count ?" the Baroness inquired.

" No ; I have been travelling. I hope to return home to-morrow."

Travelling ! On the devil's business, indeed.

The Baroness turned to me. " Count Furello has a most picturesque home, an ancient Monastery on an island, and in most lovely country."

The teeth gleamed. " Scarcely on an island, *gnädige Baronin*," he objected deferentially, " although practically it is so. The moat surrounding the Monastery has overflowed and enlarged itself to such an extent that the building seems to stand on an island in the midst of a lake."

" A very charming spot," the other lady observed.

" Is it far from here ?" I asked, affecting less interest than I felt.

" About forty miles."

I rose to take my leave. The Baroness gave me a little significant pressure of the hand, which I understood and returned.

" I should be charmed to show Herr Tyrrell the hospitality of the Geierthal, and to afford him a few days' sport," the Count said, a little stiffly and half-

heartedly, it seemed, for the man of such exuberant politeness. "We shall have a fair amount of game; but unfortunately just now I am only at home for a day on the business of my estate. If Herr Tyrrell could honour me in perhaps a month or two's time, it would be all that I could wish."

"I fear I shall have resumed my travels," I replied. "If I had been going to make a longer stay in your country, I should have been delighted."

"I regret," said he, bowing again, "that my enforced absence from home deprives me of so great a pleasure."

His manner was becoming almost oppressive; indeed, I was relieved when I had closed the door between us. Nothing else had passed between the Baroness and me; it was evident, that she regarded the Count as an object of fear; indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise.

* * * * *

Time had slipped away, and the summer evening was advanced when I turned towards my hotel. As it promised to be a fine moonlight night, I, after some hesitation, determined to dine at once and ride out afterwards to Schönval. While waiting for dinner, I got into conversation with mine host, a bustling, talkative fellow. I was not much in the humour for the chatter of the man in the street, still, it was rather a relief after the strain of the afternoon's critical fencing.

Presently I asked him, the matter being uppermost in my mind, about the drowning of Fräulein von Winterstein, and whether the body had been found.

"No," he said, "although they are searching the river for miles. But the task is not so easy, mein Herr. There are known to be great rocks in that part of the river's bed—the country is rocky there—and what so likely as that the poor lady, falling from

that height, never rose again, but was swept by the strong current under one of those rocks, where she may lie till the Day of Judgment. Well, it is a mystery we cannot understand—the chances of life and death. A greatly admired lady, mein Herr, young, beautiful, with a long and happy life before her, as we might think, one hour, and in the next gone in a moment into Eternity, no trace left, as one might say, to show she had ever existed. It is a great enigma, mein Herr, and, if you please, your dinner is ready.”

The solution of the enigma which I thought I held was not calculated to add relish to the meal. I made a bad dinner ; the bustle of the room only accentuating the contrast of the common-place life with its sinister background. I lighted a cigar, and ordered my horse to be brought round in ten minutes' time. Then, and only then, for other thoughts had been all-absorbing, I remembered the letter I had left with the Consul. “What a fool I am !” I exclaimed. “In another minute I should have gone off and forgotten that, probably remembered it towards my journey's end, and had to ride back for fear of complications.” So I sent word to have my horse kept in the stable against my return, and went off on foot to the Consul's.

He seemed rather relieved to see me, or, perhaps at not having to act on my instructions. “You have called for your letter ? I wondered how soon you would come back for it.” He unlocked the drawer and gave it me.

“I dare say you are glad to get rid of it. Don't think me eccentric, only I fancied I might be going to run a certain risk this afternoon, and the fact that word of my whereabouts had been left with you might have been a trump card to play.”

Turnour gave me a look of comprehension. “Won't you stay and smoke a cigar with me ?”

"No, thank you. I would, but am riding back to Schönval to-night."

He looked surprised. "A long ride."

"And a lovely night. I shall enjoy it. By the way, Turnour, do you know anything of Count Furello?"

He looked curiously at me and laughed gently. "You are not riding with him?"

"Oh, no. Why?"

"Nothing. He is a naturalized German. His father was an impecunious Italian Count, who came to these parts fortune hunting, and married a native heiress; at least, so we've heard. He has an estate in the Geierthal."

"Yes, I know. Anything more?"

"Nothing, except that he is a great friend, some say"—he lowered his voice—"some say a creature, an *âme damnée* of Rallenstein's."

"Ah! that's everything. I guessed as much. He is rather a character," I said guardedly.

"H'm! Yes. I don't presume to offer you advice, but were I in your place, I should not get too thick with *il Conte*."

I nodded, thanked him, and went off.

I have often wondered since at the reality of the fate or Providence which ordained that I should forget that letter till the last minute before my intended start. At the moment I was annoyed at having let it slip my memory, and so omitted to utilize in fetching it the time I wasted in waiting for dinner. And yet, had I done so, I should have missed the extraordinary series of adventures, and something more, which that chance forgetfulness threw in my way.

For as I was retracing my steps from the Consul's house to my hotel, a most startling thing happened.

It was now dark. The purely residential streets of the city were more or less deserted, and the houses

closed for the night. I walked through a square and into a tree-lined street of old houses leading out of it in the direction of the Königstrasse.

I hardly know what made me stop, hesitate and cross the road at a particular point about midway up the street. My mind was busy with thoughts and plans, and my steps seem to have taken me across the road mechanically, without any definite design. But considering the consequences of that trivial act, I have always set it down to something stronger and more occult than mere chance. I remember casually noticing that the house towards which I crossed was lighted up, one of the first floor windows was open, and from it came the sound of a pianoforte. As I reached the kerb I was startled from my thoughts by an object which fell with a sharp click upon the pavement at my feet.

A small white fan.

I picked it up and looked round. No one was near. Then up at the house before which I was standing. There was nothing to be seen at the windows to indicate where the fan had dropped from ; no shadow on the blinds, no movement to be seen within. Stepping back to look up, I noticed that one of the top windows was half-open, but there seemed no light in the room, and no sign of any one there. Then I looked at the fan in my hand. A plain but good one of white silk with ivory ribs. Too good at least to admit the suggestion that it had been deliberately thrown away as worthless. It had evidently been accidentally dropped out of the window, and I stood there momentarily expecting the door to open and a servant to come out and seek it. But no one came ; so, after waiting awhile, I went up to the door, and rang.

Standing there ready to give in the fan with a word of explanation, I began to open and shut it

carelessly, as, when waiting, one will fidget with the thing nearest to one's hand. As in doing this, the light from above the door fell upon it, my casual glance was arrested by something I had not noticed before. There was pencilled writing across the fan. As I turned and held it up closer to read the words, footsteps sounded within, and I had scarcely made out the purport of the writing when the door opened. Simultaneously by a quick movement I closed the fan and dropped my hand, so that it was hidden behind me.

"Does Herr Steinmetz live here?" I stammered, using the first name that came to my tongue.

"No, mein Herr," the servant answered, a dark, disagreeable-looking fellow, I thought, holding the door but a little way open and regarding me with manifest suspicion.

"You do not know which is the number? No? Thank you. I am sorry to have troubled you."

Next moment the door was shut with a slam and I was walking away down the street. At the second lamp I stopped, then took out the fan to read the words more carefully. They were these, scribbled as though in haste;

"I am in danger of my life. Help me. Asta von Winterstein."

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CHAPTER XX

THE LIVING DEAD

ASTA VON WINTERSTEIN !

I wondered for a moment whether I was not dreaming. I read the words over twice again, searched the fan for others, and finding none, thrust it into my pocket. Then I went back to the house, crossing the road the better to survey it from the other side of the street.

Asta von Winterstein ! But she was dead, killed in that premeditated accident on the Salenberg road. Or, perhaps, was this another trick of the Chancellor's, and was she alive after all ? Or had the attempt failed, and in place of the merciful swiftness of that rush into eternity had she escaped to endure the longer agony of the fear of a death sure, yet uncertain as to its time and manner ? I knew well enough from Szalay's and Lindheim's cases what that meant. I could believe anything of Rallenstein the Jaguar, anything. Nothing could surprise me, nothing seemed improbable.

I walked quickly along the street till I came to the portico of a great house at the end. Here, sheltered from observation, I took out the fan and re-read the fateful sentence. It fascinated me. I could not keep my eyes from it. The poor girl's face and form came back to my mind, vividly, now, as I had seen her at the dance. I hardly dared to think of the unspeakable agony that house might enclose. What could I do ? I was worse than helpless ; a stranger,

in a country where the government was a law unto itself. I went back to the house, looking eagerly for a sign that I might act upon. No one was to be seen at any of the windows, though the piano still sounded. Ugh! it set my teeth on edge. A waltz was being played softly; a dance of death, indeed! I walked up and down the street, not knowing what to do; realizing my utter helplessness, yet without being able to leave the spot. Since that night I have often thought how foolish it was of me thus to court suspicion, but at the time the horror I felt made me too reckless to care for that.

Presently as I passed there was a movement to be seen within the lighted-up room. A shadow came between the light and the window. Then the light was extinguished. I took my stand in the obscurity of a doorway and watched. The blind was drawn aside, then a figure appeared, a man, the fellow who had opened the door to me. He shut the window, withdrew, and all was darkness and silence, for the light in the hall was out.

I waited a while in my new position with my eyes fixed on the top window, whence it seemed the fan had been thrown out; but nothing rewarded my watch. It was getting late. In spite of the alarm my absence would cause Von Lindheim I determined to stay the night in Buyda. I could not bring myself to ride away, disregarding that appeal, though it was manifest how little it was in my power to arrest the approaching tragedy.

I quitted my corner and made my way with all speed to the hotel.

"I have changed my mind, I stay here to-night," I said to the landlord. "It may be some time yet before I turn in, but have a room ready for me."

Then I went round to the stables, and by the dim light of a lantern saw a fellow asleep on some sacks

in a corner. I was proceeding to rouse him when I saw that he was in livery; the coachman, possibly, of some other guest. A pair of great black carriage horses stood in the stalls beside my nag. The harness was on them; they were evidently going out again that night. I don't know what roused my curiosity and induced me to look closer. On the harness was a device, a coronet, and, underneath, a cypher, G.F. I went out into the yard. A roomy carriage stood under a shelter. Striking a match I examined the panels. On them was emblazoned a coat of arms, with the same coronet above and the same cypher below. Footsteps sounded on the cobbles of the yard. It was the ostler. I told him I should not want my horse that night; I was sorry to have kept him up.

"Oh," he said, "mein Herr, there is no bed for me yet. A gentleman's carriage going out at midnight."

"Ah! the horses I saw in the stable just now. They are splendid animals. Whom do they belong to?"

"To the Count Furello, mein Herr," the man answered with the importance of his kind over a distinguished customer. Somehow I was prepared for the answer.

"The Count travels late."

"Yes, mein Herr."

He moved off towards the stables and I let him go, judging there was not much information to be got out of him. But I resolved to try what under the circumstances was a pardonable piece of eavesdropping; so, after a feint of going into the hotel, I crept back and placed myself outside the stable window.

The ostler had evidently roused the sleeping coachman, and they were now rallying one another with rough pleasantries. Presently, "It's all the bed I shall get this night," the sleepy coachman exclaimed with

a yawn. "Five hours' hard driving to-day with scarce a minute for a schoppen of beer. Our Herr Bleisst can play the devil when he chooses, and the Herr Graf too."

"He drives at the devil's time, truly," the ostler laughed. "Midnight, through the woods. Poor Carl! I shall remember you when I am snug in bed. Ah! You will be ready for breakfast when you reach the Geierthal to-morrow morning."

They said nothing more to which I could attach any importance, but I had heard enough. It was only natural that I should connect this midnight journey with the message on the fan. One thing struck me as being particularly significant. At the Baroness's house that afternoon, Count Furello had said that he was going to his home in the Geierthal; but why was he travelling at night and by road?

According to his coachman, his carriage had posted up from the Geierthal that morning, with such haste as hardly to give the man time to get refreshment. That circumstance, coupled with what I knew of the Count, enabled me to conceive a likely idea of what was going on. I went into the hotel, had some supper, and at half-past eleven was back in the gloomy street, which I found was called the Neckarstrasse. The house was dark and silent as I left it. I lighted a cigar and walked up and down, waiting for midnight, when I felt sure something would happen. I was not wrong. It wanted but a few minutes to the hour, when, stopping to turn, I could hear at some distance the rumble of a vehicle approaching at a walking pace. At first I thought it could not be what I expected; but as it turned into the street I saw that my suspicion was correct. It was the carriage I had seen in the hotel yard; it looked almost funereal, coming along at a foot's pace, with its pair of big black horses. The slow rate of progression had the effect of making

very little noise ; if the carriage had dashed up to the door, probably half the street would have been roused. As it passed me, the light from a lamp fell on the rather flamboyant device on the panel, but I needed not that to make sure. It drew up at the door of the house whence the fan had come ; I had followed close behind, and as the carriage stopped, I slipped unnoticed into the portico of the next house ; a risky position to take up, but I was resolved, come what might, to see who the occupants of the carriage were to be. The coachman made no attempt to give notice of his arrival, but sat on his box motionless as I, leaning back in the shadow.

Presently, it may have been after ten minutes' waiting, the driver's head turned sharply towards the door, then I heard the click of the lock, and a man, the same who had opened the door to me, came out and looked up and down the street with an air of reconnoitring. Apparently satisfied, he spoke a few words in a low tone to the coachman and went quickly into the house again.

In a short time he reappeared with what seemed a basket and a travelling bag. These he placed inside the carriage. Then he brought out a valise, which, with the help of the coachman, he stowed away under the box. He now stood by the carriage door, waiting. I could hear people moving and speaking in a low tone. Then the man held the door open. I came forward, standing behind the pillar and leaning over the railing to get as good a view as possible. Two men came down the steps, conducting between them a lady so wrapped up and veiled that I could not have seen her face even from a nearer point of view. They were followed by a young woman, whom I seemed to recognize as she who had called herself Miss Seemars, but of this the darkness prevented my being sure. The man farthest from me I at once recognized as

Count Furello. His was not a face to forget. He got into the carriage first, next the veiled lady was handed in by the other man, after which the second lady entered, the man shut the door, and jumped up to the box beside the coachman, who turned the horses and drove slowly off in the direction he had come. The footman stood looking after them till they were out of the street, then went in, and I came out from my hiding-place.

"They are taking that girl off to her death," I cried, walking quickly after them; "nothing can be done by me to save her. But, hopeless as it may be, I will not leave her to these fiends without an effort to rescue her. Thank Heaven, I know their destination; if you are to die, my poor Asta, at least a friend shall be near you."

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CHAPTER XXI

A WASTREL

It was scarcely dawn when I rode out of Buyda on my way back to Schönvalhof. With a feeling of relief I struck the high road and entered the open country. Buyda, beautiful city though it undoubtedly was, had become hateful to me as a veritable net of sinister intrigue, with that great relentless spider sitting in the midst marking down his prey.

I reached Schönvalhof without incident, and before many people were astir. The house was closed, and I was considerably reassured (for I had my fears), after ringing a loud peal at the bell, to see presently Lindheim's face at the window. He seemed more relieved than even I, and ran down to let me in.

" A delightful night I have passed ! " he exclaimed. " I made sure when midnight came and you had not returned, that you had paid the penalty of your rashness. Well, what news ? "

I related the events of my day in Buyda ; my interview with Rallenstein, my visit to the Baroness and meeting with Count Furello, and lastly, the episode of the fan.

" You will not think me a broken reed, my dear Lindheim," I said in conclusion, " when you learn I have only called in here on my way to the Geierthal. That girl is in awful danger, is quite helpless in the hands of these villains, and I should be worse than a coward if, after having received that appeal, I should ignore it and make no attempt to save her."

"I quite agree with you," he said, "but fear you can do nothing. There is no law to which you can appeal, which is not at once over-ruled by the higher law of political expediency. Count Furello is, as we know, the Jaguar's paw. Although he holds a good position in his part of the country, they say Rallenstein knows enough against him to bring him to the scaffold to-morrow if he wished. No doubt he has been watching us here, superintending the work of his confederates, and has only left because he was wanted for this business, and his master sent for him. You will run a great risk, my friend."

"That is nothing," I replied; "any present danger is better than a life-long self-reproach. My only regret is that it involves my deserting you."

He laughed. "Not necessarily. For, if you are determined to go, I would ask you to let me come with you."

"You!" I thought a moment. "I am not sure that it would be a bad move for you. You cannot stay here much longer."

"Alone? no. It is nervous work enough with a friend. I have not slept all night. Let me come with you and meet my danger in the open if it has to be met."

"You don't value Rallenstein's assurance, then?"

"I am quite sure my life would not be worth twenty-four hours' purchase in Buyda."

"Then come, and the sooner we start the better. I fear there is not much to be done, but we shall at least be company for each other. How far is the Geierthal from here?"

"Not much more than thirty miles."

"Then I propose we make an early start, take a long rest by the way, and get to the place towards evening. We can best reconnoitre after dark."

After a substantial breakfast, we hurriedly made

preparations for having some necessary baggage sent to us under an assumed name at Carlzig, the nearest town to the Geierthal, provided ourselves each with a serviceable revolver and a bag of cartridges, and set out. Guns and fishing-rods were to be sent after us, our ostensible reason for the excursion being sport, which abounded in those regions.

On our way we turned aside to the house of the village priest, whom Lindheim requested to take in hand the arrangements for the funeral of poor Szalay. The priest had been an old friend of Lindheim's father, so could be trusted with the true explanation of Szalay's sudden death, and the necessity of our departure. He promised to receive any of the family as Lindheim's representative, and to act in the whole matter as his discretion might dictate.

This settled, we rode on ; but before leaving the village a suspicious curiosity impelled me to turn aside for a few minutes and to climb the rocks, the scene of my narrow escape two days before. With some difficulty I succeeded in mounting to the brow whence the great mass had been dislodged. For my idea now was that this fall had not been accidental, and it needed only a cursory glance to confirm that suspicion. The rock had evidently been bored, and the upper part cleft and hurled down by an explosive, a small charge having probably, from its over-hanging position, sufficed to effect its dislodgment. So sure of impunity had my would-be murderers obviously considered themselves, that they had not troubled in any way to remove the evidences of their design. My feeling now was almost one of indifference, since this was only another proof of what we knew well—the cunning, relentless malignity with which we were being pursued.

Thus satisfied, I quickly rejoined Von Lindheim, and we soon had left the village far behind us. After

that we slackened our speed, taking frequent rests, and, as we had planned, towards evening found ourselves in a little hamlet about a mile from the Monastery of the Geierthal. We were more lucky than we anticipated in finding a fairly comfortable roadside inn, where we took up our quarters and ordered dinner. While the meal was preparing I went out for a stroll along the valley to see if a glimpse was to be had of the Monastery.

After walking for about twenty minutes I came to a point where the pine-covered hills on one side opened out, falling away and leaving a great circle of flat country of, perhaps, a mile in diameter, after which they closed up again and the valley resumed its course. It was here in this lower ground that I rightly guessed the old Monastery must be; it was just such a spot as the monks were wont to choose for their dwelling-place, and the next turn in my path gave me a peep of a great house showing here and there between the trees which grew down to the edge of a broad band of water which encircled it. Remembering the Baroness's description of the Monastery on an island I needed no further guide. A few steps on brought me to a gate in a fence which evidently ran round the property. The path I had taken was, then, one leading to the Monastery.

"I won't trespass this side of dinner," I said; "but it is just as well to have got my bearings by daylight."

So after a good look round I turned and retraced my steps to the inn.

Von Lindheim met me with a rather perturbed face.

"More complications," he said; "fate is dogging me still. The Jaguar's long paw has already reached to the Geierthal."

"What do you mean? What has happened?"

"A stranger is at the inn already. An Englishman, or, at least, one who speaks English."

"Another spurious Professor—of what?"

"A sportsman this time."

"Speaking English?"

"Singing it."

"Oho! Let us investigate. I may be able to tell the genuine article better than you."

We went in. In the passage Lindheim touched me on the arm and I stopped. From the inner room came a man's voice, an Englishman's evidently, singing in a more or less burlesque fashion :

"The plighted ring he wore
Was crushed and wet with gore.
Yet ere he doied
He bravely croied
I've kept the vow I swore-hoa-hore,
I've ke-he-hept the vo-how-how I swore."

"An Englishman?" I asked the landlord who came to tell us our dinner was ready.

"Yes, an Englishman," he answered. "He shoots the birds and hares for miles."

"He lives here?"

"No, mein Herr. He lives up in the hills, a good step from here. But he always comes to my house when he is near for a schoppen of laager-beer or a glass of schnaps."

"Ah! Then he has been here for some time?"

"A month, two months, I think."

I nodded to Lindheim. "I think it is all right. But we will go in and see."

He was sitting at a table by the window and filling his pipe as we entered. An Englishman, certainly, I thought, and of a type not uncommon. A darkish, sunburnt complexion, fearless blue-grey eyes, a drooping moustache, and perhaps a trifle too much heaviness in the jaw; the sort of man you see scores

of in the West End during the summer months and very few in the winter, the type from which our best soldiers and sportsmen are drawn. He was dressed in a workmanlike if rather shabby shooting-suit, and his gun and cartridge-bag stood in the corner beside him.

On our appearance he looked up casually, and as his eye rested on me a slight beam of recognition came into it, such as one Englishman gives another when they meet abroad. I bowed, and we both seemed inclined to laugh.

"I think we are fellow-countrymen," I said. "Englishmen are apt to meet in out-of-the-way places."

"Ah, yes," he replied with a slight drawl. "Last place I expected to run against one in. Nothing to see; all nature and no art, and the nature not quite on the tourist scale."

"We are not exactly tourists."

"You know this part of the world?"

"No. We have come over to try and get sport of some kind."

"Good man! I've been blazing away for the last six or eight weeks. I'm shooting for a game shop in Carlzig. So much a head, with board and lodging and a decent cottage thrown in. Like our dealers' moors in England, only they do you better at home; prices are higher. Will you join me, sport or profit? As it is I am in danger of forgetting my mother tongue. Haven't heard the English language in all its native purity from any lips but my own for months."

I said we should be glad to have a day with him. Charged as I was with suspicion of everyone I met, I could not bring myself to think this man was not genuine; so far as his nationality went, he certainly was.

"My name is Strode," he said, "Hamilton Strode.

My people are Hampshire, but they've cut my painter and I'm adrift with one oar; 'tother slipped overboard and I couldn't be bothered to pick it up. Still, I'm keeping on with a certain amount of vim. I was in the Scots Fusiliers till the Hebrews became too oppressive and I got a hint. Our Colonel, old Lampton, said he didn't mind a Jew or two as a general thing; in a crack regiment it was to be expected, but when a man couldn't go into his officers' quarters without tumbling over the whole twelve tribes of Israel it was coming it too strong. People were beginning to make unkind remarks about the S.F.G.'s adding Houndsditch to their territorial designations, and he'd be pole-axed if the thing should go on. So I was run out, like many a better chap."

We expressed our sympathy.

"Now," he went on, "I dare say I am a queer member, a bad lot, and all that; but if you'll give me your company I can show you some sport, the best in these parts, and I'll give my parole not to try to borrow money of you."

"All right," I laughed, "we'll come."

And with that assurance he presently went off in great content.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LIGHT IN THE WOOD

AFTER dinner I left Von Lindheim, who was tired with his long ride after a sleepless night, and set out from the inn for a closer inspection of the Monastery. It was a good night for my purpose, being bright and obscure at intervals as great banks of drifting clouds passed over the moon. I soon arrived at the gate, which did not stop me this time. I went through and began to make my way more circumspectly on the private grounds through the thick belt of wood which encircled the moat. To the water's edge was but some two hundred paces, and coincident with my reaching it, the moon shone forth and gave me, like the withdrawing of a veil, a perfect view of the house and its surroundings. They were romantic enough. Imagine a grey, rambling pile with all the characteristics of mediæval fortified domestic architecture, toned by an ecclesiastical suggestion over all, standing insulated in the middle of a broad belt of water, surrounded again by wood growing down to its margin, and which, on two sides, after falling back for a short distance on almost level ground, rose abruptly to a considerable height, making a dark background opposite to where I stood.

Such was my general view of the place; I now proceeded to make a more detailed and practical observation. Keeping just within the obscurity of the trees I began to make my way round the moat,

principally to ascertain the difficulties of approach to the building. They soon showed themselves to be formidable enough. There was in fact only one legitimate way of entry, by a drawbridge, to meet which a pier ran out half-way across the wide moat. This drawbridge, which was pulled up, was worked from a massive square tower with portcullis gate, the usual gate-house tower of fortified buildings. Not much chance of getting over there, so I went on to see what facilities the other side might present. There were none. The band of water became no narrower as I had rather hoped, and as far as I could see (for the deep shadows made accurate observation impossible) the main portion of the building rose sheer from the water. I was rather surprised at this, for I had imagined that in modern times the motive of convenience would have led to the construction of a second means of access. But there was none, and I told myself that the only way of reaching the other side unobserved would be to swim for it. A prison indeed, I thought, for that poor girl, and a secure place of execution. The idea spurred me to leave no attempt at rescue untried; accordingly, I went round the edge of the moat, searching vainly for some indication as to the most likely place where I might swim over and discover her prison. It seemed almost hopeless. Was she, indeed, still alive? She and her captors would have arrived some time that morning, and much might have happened since then. Were they here after all? The journey to the Geierthal might have been a feint. No. I argued it out, and came to the conclusion that it was genuine enough. And what better prison or death-place could these authorized murderers have desired than this? The whole affair was a hideous puzzle to me; still, I was resolved to do what I could to rescue the girl. So I determined I would lose no more time in futile

speculations but would swim the moat and set to work to find her.

Now a strange thing came to my notice. I had begun to throw off my outer clothing preparatory to slipping into the water, and was stooping down on one knee unlacing my boots, when my eye came in line with a faint glimmer of light. My face was towards the wood, turned away for the time from the building, and this light, seen through the trees when I struck a particular line of vision, and lost again when I moved out of it, seemed to be some little distance, a hundred paces, perhaps, within the wood and close to the ground. I watched it for a while, and being quite unable to account for it, quietly put on my clothes again and crept warily towards the place for a closer inspection. Betokening, as seemed probable, the presence of persons in the wood, I was rather startled to find how near I had come to being discovered.

As I got closer, with fewer trees to intercept my view of the light, it puzzled me more than ever. For it appeared to rise from the earth and irradiate feebly the gaunt trunks of the surrounding trees. For a moment my mind went back to the fairy tales of the land, but any such fanciful suggestion was dispelled by a movement at the spot whence the glow proceeded. The light was intercepted for an instant by something which passed over it. An object rose from the ground, as though it were thrown up. This action was now repeated in fairly quick succession, and I could make a shrewd guess at the explanation. I crept nearer, the thick carpet of pine needles deadening my footsteps. When I had advanced as close as I dared I slipped behind a tree and watched for what next would happen. I could see quite clearly now what was before hidden by the shadow cast where the light did not reach. Earth was being thrown up.

Presently there was a pause in this operation, two objects appeared above the surface about three feet apart. The hands of a man in the act of stretching himself. Some one was there digging. What? A grave? The conjecture gave me a thrill. I felt sure now of poor Asta von Winterstein's fate, and this, merciful Providence! this unholy work was for her last resting-place. While her parents were vainly and sorrowfully searching for her body in the river fifty miles away, she had been quietly brought to this house of death and——. I was roused from my thoughts, maddening in the very sense of helplessness to avert the tragedy, by a movement of the light. An old-fashioned lantern whence it came was now raised and set upon the edge of the hole, out of which scrambled afterwards the figure of a man, thick set and so short as to be almost a dwarf. He looked round as though expecting somebody; then taking a pipe from his pocket he lit it from the lantern and sat down to smoke. His action convinced me that he was waiting for some one, perhaps—I shuddered—the bearers of the body to be buried there, and this gave me warning to be on my guard. Nevertheless, I was determined to see the affair out; indeed, had I wished, I could hardly have retreated now without attracting the man's notice. I had not long to wait. Behind me from the direction of the moat came a peculiar noise, indefinable, yet denoting an approaching presence. The man knocked out his pipe and set himself to rake together a heap of pine needles. I crouched down as close as I could get to the bole of the tree which hid me. A man came along slowly, passing me at a distance of about ten paces. He was half-dragging, half carrying some heavy object, which in the darkness I could not make out, and which I feared to see. As he passed between me and the light I could stand up and get a better view. The man was

dressed in a long hooded over-garment like a monk's cassock, and to my relief I saw that what he was carrying was merely a large hurdle. The other man came forward to meet him, and between them they laid the hurdle across the hole. Then they went off towards the moat, leaving the light, which was lucky, as had they carried it with them they might have seen me. As it was, the darkness was so impenetrable that I had little fear of detection if only they did not actually run against me.

In a few minutes they returned bearing two more hurdles. These also they placed across the grave, if such it were, so that, as I judged, it was completely covered over. Then the second man threw off his long cassock, and they both began to shovel earth upon the hurdles, and over that they carefully spread a layer of pine needles. Their faces, so far as the dim light allowed me to make them out, were villainous to a degree, but perhaps their surroundings, their occupation, and my own frame of mind did them less than justice. Anyhow, they were singularly repulsive.

When their work of concealment was finished, each put on his cassock, drawing the hood over his head, then they took up the lantern, the spades and mattock, and returned towards the moat.

So, I thought, the grave is ready, but it is not to be occupied to-night. In anticipation of their passing with the light I had retreated to a spot more removed from their path. When they were at a safe distance I began cautiously to follow them, which was rendered easy by the light, which told me of their whereabouts. When once they emerged from the wood to the water's edge I could see them clearly against the moonlight. They had put out the lantern, and from a clump of bushes proceeded to unmoor a boat. Then, getting in, these unholy familiars pulled across the

moat, landed at what seemed some steps by a small postern, made the boat fast in such a way that it lay hidden behind the steps, and silently disappeared through the door, which closed upon them.

Here, then, was my point of reconnaissance ; not a very promising one, it is true, but worth trying. The door was well contrived, for, in the shadow cast by a buttress, both it and its approach were secure from observation. Keenly as I had examined the wall, they had quite escaped my notice. From what I had seen I felt pretty certain that the grave in the wood was not to be visited again that night. So, after waiting a short while, I put into practice my interrupted plan of swimming across the moat for a closer examination. The water was fairly warm, and some twenty strokes landed me at the steps, which, as I had supposed, were formed on the outside of a small stone arch, the inside of which formed a boat-house. I crept up the steps and tried the door ; it was fast closed, and an examination of it convinced me that an entrance that way was practically impossible unless I should chance to find it left open. Satisfied of this, I next untied the boat, got in, and began a tour round the building, working myself warily along the wall, which rose sheer from the water. My search for any indication of the poor girl's prison was fruitless. The few barred windows I passed were dark and all silent within, neither in any part of the building could I see any sign of life. Presently, I came to the end of the wall, to a spot where I could land and examine the place from the other side. Very cautiously I made the boat fast and got out. Keeping well in the shadow of the walls I crept round the front of the Monastery. To my surprise all was dark on this side too ; not a glimmer at any of the windows ; the whole as silent as a ruin. Search as I would, nothing could be seen that gave me the

least hope of accomplishing my purpose. So at length my shivering limbs and the obvious futility of further effort told me I must abandon my effort at any rate for that night. It was saddening to think that perhaps even that moment the vile deed might be in course of perpetration, but what could I do with absolutely nothing to guide me? So, after a final scrutiny, I got back into the boat, returned the way that I had come, left it in its place, swam back huddled on my clothes, and ran at a swinging pace home to the inn by way of restoring my circulation.

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CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT WE SAW AT CARLZIG

ON the next day a strange thing happened, of which a mere chance, in the first place, gave me the explanation. I was, needless to say, very disheartened at what seemed the absolute impossibility of attempting to rescue poor Asta.

"I am afraid it is all over with her by this time," I said to Von Lindheim, when I had related what I had seen the night before. "At any rate, if she is still alive her sand is running very low."

"And we can do nothing."

"I can't stay here, indoors," I said; for the whole affair was on my nerves, and I felt almost suffocated in the little inn. "You had better not come with me; but I am going to have a look at that grave, and see if it is as they left it last night. After that we will go into Carlzig together."

Accordingly, I set off along the valley, skirting this time the boundary of the private wood until I came to a point about opposite to where the men had been at work. Here, by the aid of a tree, I climbed over the high wall and went cautiously through the wood leading down to the water. Happily, for my presence in the wood was risky, the distance was short, and when once I got sight of the Monastery, and could take my bearings from the little door, I had no difficulty in finding what I sought. The raised mass of earth

spread with pine needles was there ; the hurdles, covered in like manner, were in position. I lifted one and looked down with a shudder into what it covered. A grave, without doubt, though empty as yet. The place was evidently untouched since the men left it overnight. That was all I had come to see ; so far I was satisfied, and having replaced the hurdle, covered as I found it, I made my way with all speed out of the grounds, and so back to Von Lindheim. Then we set off together to Carlzig.

I was in rather a depressed state of mind, not seeing what I could do towards effecting the purpose that had brought me there. My feeling now was that the only thing to do was just to keep watch, in the faint hope that chance might show me an opening into that house of mystery and death. But the hope was so slender as to be scarcely more than despair, for I was convinced that the quiet, cold-blooded tragedy I dared not think about would be accomplished by that evening.

Beyond the man who had accompanied Count Furello from Buyda, and the two ruffians I had seen in the wood, I was ignorant of the strength of his household ; at the same time I realized that, even had I a dozen men at my back, to attempt to rescue Fräulein von Winterstein by force would be absurd. It would only make matters worse. There was no law to be invoked ; the whole force, moral and physical, open and secret, of the Government would be against me. If the poor girl's death were deemed necessary for State reasons, not even her parents could have a valid protest against it.

The walk into Carlzig took us, perhaps, two hours. It was through a picturesquely wild country, which, however, seemed to me that day dreary and gloomy in the extreme. Until within a mile or two of the town we saw scarcely a living soul ; no fitter locality

for the Hostel of St. Tranquillin (as we were told the Monastery was named) could have been chosen.

Carlzig we found a fair-sized town, duller even than such places at midday usually are. We looked up and claimed our baggage, and arranged for a carriage to drive back with it. Then, having made a few purchases, we went to the principal inn for luncheon. When this was over and we were paying our bill, I felt Von Lindheim touch my foot significantly under the table. I looked up quickly, following the direction of his eyes, with a half apprehension that I should see the man uppermost in my mind just then, Count Furello.

No.

The person he meant me to notice was a clean-shaven cleric, a round-faced, rather distinguished-looking man, whose general air and manner suggested that he had mistaken his profession. He had come into the room with a hand valise, as though from a journey, and was now refreshing himself with a bottle of wine, a bumper of which he poured down his throat in a style not quite becoming his cloth. But his face told me nothing more, and I glanced back inquiringly at my companion. He looked serious enough, but merely returned a slight frown to silence me. Then he rose; I followed. As we went out the priest looked up carelessly, but no sign of recognition passed between him and Von Lindheim. A waiting-maid bustling in with the man's dishes prevented any further notice with which he might have been inclined to favour us.

"Who on earth was that?" I asked directly we were in the street. "You don't imagine you saw *il Conte* under that disguise?"

"No," he answered shortly, and went on. After a few steps he stopped, as though to inspect a particularly uninteresting shop window, but, as I knew,

as an excuse for looking round. Then we walked on again, and he took my arm.

"Who do you think that was?"

"I haven't an idea."

"The man who married the Princess and Von Orsova."

"Whew!" I could only whistle in surprise.

"What in the world is he doing here?"

"That is what I am wondering."

"His cure may be near this place. But then, why does he travel with a bag?"

"And lunch at an hotel. A man of that sort would have had a meal before he started, or brought some *wurst* sandwiches in his pocket. I think he had come a long journey."

"And is not at the end of it?"

"Or why does he go to an inn?"

"You are right, Lindheim; it is suspicious. Shall we keep watch?"

There was a smaller inn nearly opposite to that in which we had lunched. We went in, called for coffee, and took up our position at the window commanding the street. For a long while we saw nothing of the priest, but at length, just as we were wondering whether we were not perhaps losing our time, a closed carriage rumbled along the street and drew up at some distance below our inn. A man alighted and appeared to give some directions to the coachman, who turned his horses and drove off the way he had come. The man walked up the street towards us; not a prepossessing fellow by any means, with his long nose, stubby black moustache, swarthy complexion, and restless way of looking about him. Something told me instinctively that he was making for the hotel opposite us. Such was the case; he went in, returning in a few minutes, as we felt certain he would, with the priest carrying his valise. They

went down the street in the direction the carriage had taken. When they had gone a safe distance we went out and followed them. The man who had fetched the priest kept looking round ; he was a fellow who, though far from being the salt of the earth, would have been turned into a good imitation thereof in the days of Lot. A suspicious curiosity was with him evidently second nature. However, we kept too far behind for him to be able to distinguish what manner of men we were, and we were careful to adopt a pantomime calculated to disarm suspicion.

On they went till they reached the outskirts of the town, and there, just beyond the bridge where the road crossed the river, we saw the carriage waiting. They got in, the priest first, his companion following after a good look round, which, however, we took care should not fall on us. Then they drove quickly off, the road they took being that which led to the Geierthal.

“ What does it mean ? ” Von Lindheim asked.

“ I can't tell. Except that I am certain they have gone to the Hostel. Who knows ? Perhaps those butchers are methodical enough in their trade to give their victims Christian burial. Ah ! it's horrible. Let us get back. I must see the end of it.”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MIDNIGHT BURIAL

DARKNESS had barely fallen when I was back again in the Monastery wood. Von Lindheim had offered to accompany me, but I had thought it better not to bring him. In the first place I anticipated little to be done except watching, and one pair of eyes would be as good there as two. Then if he came with me the chances of being discovered would be increased, since two men are easier seen than one. Beyond these there was a stronger reason for leaving him behind. I was convinced that pluckily as he fought against it, his nerve was seriously shaken. He had brightened up considerably since leaving Schönvalhof, still it is no joke—although, brave fellow that he was, he tried hard to treat it as one—it is no joke to go for weeks in hourly fear of secret assassination. It was manifest that he felt his utter helplessness to escape ultimately from Rallenstein's long arm, and indeed all the police in Europe cannot safeguard a man from foes who, cost what it may, are resolved on his death. Von Lindheim's nerves were hardly equal to his spirit, and certainly his life since the day he fled from Buyda had been depressing enough. So I dissuaded him from coming with me; his help might have been useful, even indispensable, but I thought the chances were rather the other way. So I left him with some literature we had brought from Carlzig and set off alone. The Monastery was as dark

and silent as ever. Indeed, the strange character of the place was its utter absence of any indication of life within. All the same, I could not but imagine it under that silent exterior to be full of active villainy. Yet the dark stillness of the place seemed to chill the nerves, and I felt glad Von Lindheim was not with me.

Now my plan was to keep watch near the grave, which I first of all ascertained was still as it had been left the night before. After some little searching in the dark wood I found a tree, with its trunk less bare than the rest, which I could climb and so command a view of the grave, to which it stood quite close, without much chance of being detected. I took pains to mark its exact position, so that I could find it at once, if in a hurry; then I went down to the moat and, taking my stand opposite the postern door, watched and waited.

My vigil was a long one; a light wind swept through the trees and just ruffled the placid water before me. A gentle shower fell, then the moon came out in her glory, making the house of death yet more sombre in its grey inscrutableness. Clouds drifted across the light, hour followed hour, the great house was as grim and hushed as ever; not a sound broke the stillness save the overhead rustle of the trees and the occasional "tw-hoo" of an owl. Still I waited on, content with the solace of my pipe, till at last my patience was rewarded.

My eyes, accustomed to the normal look of the objects before them, caught on the wall opposite a faint gleam of light, which I knew did not fall from the moon. It came from the point where I should have expected it, the door I was watching so keenly. I rose, slipped my pipe into my pocket, and stood in anxious expectation, ready to retreat to my hiding-place.

The light was now more noticeable, glancing to and

fro ; it was difficult, owing to the shadow of the buttress, to make out anything clearly, but I was certain that dark figures were moving about the door. Presently I just caught the faint sound of the grazing of the boat's side against the steps. They, the dark figures, were getting into it now ; the time they took and their movements assured me that they were bringing with them the dread burden I anticipated. In another moment they would push off, so I judged it time to make for my perch of observation. My last glimpse as I retreated was of the dark boat-load slowly advancing towards the point I had quitted. In a few minutes more I had climbed up the tree and swung myself into a secure position amid the thick branches.

If ever a man felt sick at heart I did then, perched there waiting for the last scene of that ghastly business. My imagination would picture the poor girl's death agony, almost a relief when it came to end that hopeless suspense. How had their vile work been done ? Was it poison, the knife, or perhaps that mysterious death-touch that had struck down poor Szalay ? My mind would run on the imagined scene till the approaching sound of men's feet drew my thoughts to actualities.

I could now see a light through the trees. The man who carried it in a lantern was followed by two others, bearing between them an improvised stretcher on which was no doubt a human body. Certainly as I had expected this, the sight made my heart give a great throb, and I trembled as I had never done before. The men set their burden down by the grave (it was wrapped round in some dark cloth or canvas), and then proceeded to remove the hurdles, the first man still holding the light. Once when he raised it to the level of his face I recognized him ; he was the same who had fetched the priest that afternoon from

Carlzig. Not a word was spoken by any one of the three, at least that I could hear. One of the hurdles was placed beside the body, which was then laid on it; two ropes were produced and passed underneath. One man, the dwarf, took the ropes at the foot, while the fellow who held the lantern came forward to help the other man. As he did so he stooped down, and lifting the covering from the dead face held the light to it. An irresistible fascination overcame my desire to avert my eyes, and it was as well it did so.

For with a great shock of something like relief I recognized not the face of Asta von Winterstein, but that of the priest we had seen that day in Carlzig.

CHAPTER XXV

VON LINDHEIM'S DEPARTURE

THE probabilities now were, that Fräulein Asta von Winterstein was still alive. Horribly shocked as I was by what I had seen, it was yet with a feeling of almost relief that, when the ghastly work was over, and the men had gone, I got down from my place of observation and went back to the inn.

One thing greatly annoyed me. That was the thought of the opportunity I had missed, while the men were engaged in the wood, of slipping into their boat and trying whether they had not left the little door unfastened. What I could have done towards rescuing the imprisoned girl, even had I gained entrance into the building, was very doubtful; still, had I imagined that it was not her body they were going to bury I should certainly have made the attempt. After all my life was in no greater danger than that of a soldier's in action, with, personally, a far more imperative reason for risking it. The relation of the night's deed had a bad effect on Von Lindheim, although he manfully strove to hide it.

"I am the only man left now," he said bitterly, "who saw that affair. Is it likely that I shall be allowed to live?"

I did my best to give him courage, making most of the Chancellor's assurance, and pointing out how different his case was from that of the priest who had actually performed the ceremony. But in the un-

strung state of his nerves my arguments made little impression, and, though he affected to take a hopeful view, I fear he went to bed in a miserable frame of mind.

Next morning Strode came over, and we prepared to go out shooting with him. There was a certain breeziness about my fellow-countryman that acted as a nerve tonic. I had been worrying about Von Lindheim during the night, and had come to the conclusion that the only thing for him was to slip away out of the country and put, if possible, a continent between himself and the ruthless Chancellor. The opportunity was apt, since, so far as we could tell, our whereabouts was not known. Still, any hour might bring us evidence of the contrary, and it seemed to me that the sooner my friend was on his way the better.

At breakfast I told him my idea, and was glad to notice that it seemed to jump with his own inclination.

"The only question is the detail," I said. "I am sorry that I cannot come with you, but I am bound to stay here, at any rate till I know the worst, and perhaps, after all, you will have a better chance by yourself, since, if Rallenstein's people are on the look-out, it will naturally be for us both together."

Strode's appearance at the inn put an idea into my head, which I thought out and communicated to him later in the day.

"I want your advice and your help, if you'll give it me," I said. We had walked some two or three miles from the Geierthal on to high ground along which ran a chain of woods well stocked with game. Von Lindheim was some little way from us, and I had shortened the regulation interval between Strode and myself to speaking distance.

He answered eagerly, rather surprised, it seemed, that any one should be found to ask help of him.

" My dear fellow, of course I will. What's the trouble ? "

" You will give me your word it shall go no farther ? " He nodded, and I felt I could trust him. " Our friend Von Lindheim is under a cloud. He is being hunted down for political reasons. Holds a dangerous secret, and his life is not worth twelve hours' purchase."

Strode whistled. " Bad as that ? "

" Yes ; you don't know what vindictive fiends these Government people are. Now, if he is to save his life he must get away out of the country."

" I should think so. I'm your man ; this is rather exciting. What can I do ? "

" You have a passport ? "

" Yes. Ah, I see."

" I have an idea if he travelled in your name it might put the bloodhounds off the scent. He speaks English perfectly, as you hear. It is but a chance, still I can't see a good fellow like that done to death in cold blood without an effort to save him. He ought to slip away quietly at once."

" Yes," he drawled, but I could see he was thinking it out. " We had better head for my diggings, potting what we can on our way. I've an idea an *Eilwagen* passes about a mile below the house between four and five. That might do for him. We can talk it over as we go."

Whereupon we called Von Lindheim and communicated the plan to him. The situation and his chances were discussed as we went ; details of his flight and the safest route were arranged. The cottage, a literal shooting-box, was soon reached, a curiously bare little place furnished simply with necessaries, and, with the exception perhaps of one armchair, none of the luxuries of life. Here Strode provided an excellent luncheon, considering the resources of the place, fish and game

and ham, with an assortment of *delicatessen* and a capital bottle of wine. Then we equipped Von Lindheim for his journey, making him as much like a travelling Briton as possible, towards which an old suit of Strode's went a long way. Everything that could be was changed, even down to the linen, which now bore the Englishman's name, proof positive of his identity. Then, furnished with the all-important passport, a travelling bag, a flask and sandwiches, he set off with us to intercept the *Eilwagen*, which was soon to pass through the valley below.

Both he and I were depressed at the thought of the parting, and I am sure our minds were full of darker forebodings than we cared to acknowledge; but Strode's dry humour and happy-go-lucky temperament kept up our spirits; carelessness of self is infectious, as every soldier knows.

We reached the spot where the *Eilwagen* was to pass, and after some twenty minutes' waiting it lumbered into sight. Thereupon we bade Von Lindheim God-speed and left him, thinking it just as well that he should appear alone. Still, in that wooded country we were able unobserved to see the last of him, and it was with satisfaction we noticed that the only passenger so far was an old market woman who sat beside the driver talking volubly. The accent of our friend's hail was worthy of a real Englishman; the jolting vehicle pulled up, he threw in his bag and took his seat. There was just time for a wave of the hand unseen by the other occupants, and a turn in the road shut him from our sight.

I must confess that it was with a good deal of relief that I saw Von Lindheim safely on his way. I had my doubts as to the probabilities of his ultimate escape, the more so as I mistrusted his nerve at a critical juncture. Still, something had to be done, he had the advantage of a good start, and I had arranged

that if there was no more chance of helping Fräulein von Winterstein I would follow him, it might be on the next day. But that was not to be.

I could not quite make up my mind whether it would be as well to tell Strode the real reason of my staying on at the inn in the Geierthal. His pluck, contempt of danger, and promptness of resource were all that I could wish ; he was, I felt sure, staunch enough ; yet I hesitated, and, although more than once on the point of doing so, said nothing that day of the imprisoned girl. We had plenty to talk of on our way back in the recital of the Chancellor's methods of securing secrecy. However, I did not tell Strode what the particular affair was that had brought these men to their death. We made an arrangement to meet and shoot on the morrow, and I went back alone to the Geierthal.

On reaching the inn I found the coffee-room occupied by a young fellow whose appearance was so curious that I gave him a second glance. He was poorly dressed, of a very dark complexion, his lip was fringed with a slight moustache, while a mass of untidy black hair fell over his collar and stood out in front from beneath his cap, almost veiling his eyes. By the side of his plate stood an old concertina. A tramping musician, I thought ; then looked again and, from habit, became suspicious. However, he had as much right there as I, so I ordered my dinner, explaining to the innkeeper that my friend was sleeping that night at the Englishman's cottage to be ready for an early shoot in the morning.

Presently the young man took up his concertina and went out. From the window I saw him seat himself on the bench in front of the house, roll a cigarette and lazily smoke it, playing the while softly on his instrument.

“ A travelling musician ? ” I asked the landlord.

He gave a shrug. "I think so. He says he came from Carlzig to-day. They sometimes pass this way, but not often ; there is not much to be picked up here. No people, no pence."

I thought it strange enough to be suspicious ; but when I went out a little later the musician was gone and I saw him no more.

CHAPTER XXVI

I SHOOT WITH THE COUNT

I RESUMED my watch that night, but all my vigilance and patience were without result. The Monastery was as dark and lifeless as ever. There was no more digging in the wood ; for that I was thankful, since now there seemed a good chance that Asta von Winterstein was alive. It seemed almost as though there were some reason for sparing her life, or why had a false report of her death been spread. But the whole affair was a puzzle at which I could but vaguely guess.

Next day, however, adventure began to loom again before me.

After breakfast I was in my room preparing an equipment for the day's sport when the inn servant announced that a gentleman was asking for me below. I naturally supposed it was Strode, who had come over instead of waiting at the appointed meeting-place. What was my surprise on running downstairs to find myself face to face with Count Furello.

Count Furello in sporting garb, a gun in his hand, and a dog at his heels. He greeted me effusively.

" My dear Mr. Tyrrell ! You ! This is unkind of you to keep me in ignorance of your being within reach of my hospitality. I hear to-day, by accident, that an Englishman is staying here. I hasten to offer my services, and I find—you ! Well, and how do you like our Geierthal ? Is it not picturesque

enough for you? I hope your stay will not be as short as most of your countrymen would make it."

With a flow of polite chatter he followed me into the coffee-room. I had recovered from the effect of his unexpected visit and was now on the alert.

"You, too, are for sport to-day," he continued, having declined my offer of refreshment. "You shall come with me to my preserves. I can promise you some sport. You can have found but rough shooting on the common land here."

Now, needless to say, my distrust of this man was absolutely unmitigated. I knew that his tone and his professions were utterly false; that the real object of his call was, in all probability, of a far more sinister nature than to show hospitality or afford me sport. Nevertheless, having no fear for myself and an intense desire to penetrate the mystery of Fräulein von Winterstein's fate, I rather welcomed the Count's appearance. It might at least give me a chance of action, of mere watching to no purpose I had had enough.

So after a moment's thought I resolved to accept Furello's invitation, a decision he received with a satisfaction which was assuredly the only genuine sentiment he had expressed during the interview. Under pretence of making a change in my clothes, I ran up to my room and scribbled a note of excuse to Strode, which the innkeeper undertook to have conveyed to him forthwith. I had my reasons for keeping Strode and Furello apart, at any rate for that day, and had I mentioned my engagement I thought the Count would have insisted on his joining us. Also it will be obvious that there was Von Lindheim's absence to be accounted for.

I changed my coat, rejoined Furello, and we set out. As I anticipated, he presently remarked, "You have a companion staying with you. Would he not care

to join us?" He stopped as though to turn back.

"He is away," I answered; "staying with a friend some distance from here."

"Ah!" We walked on. "Your friend is not a countryman of your own?"

"Oh, no," I returned in a tone of frank confidence; "it is our friend Von Lindheim, of Buyda. He has been dangerously ill, and we thought a change of air and scene would set him up again."

"No doubt."

I could not help thinking that my companion was turning over in his mind certain plans for neutralizing the vivifying effect of the Geierthal's air.

"Your friend returns soon? Yes?"

"I expect him to be with me in a day or two," was my disingenuous answer; pardonable, I hope, under the circumstances.

"In the meantime I shall hope to supply, however unworthily, his place of companion to you."

I seemed to catch a feline look in the face beside me, and thought that the unworthiness on which he had insisted so prettily might not be wide of the mark. We soon reached the private woods of the estate, and as the Count showed me the way and pointed out the view of the Monastery I wondered whether he knew how familiar I already was with it all. For I had come to be surprised at nothing in that network of spies and assassins.

Sport was plentiful; black game, ptarmigan, pheasants and hares fell in dozens before our guns. A pic-nic luncheon was brought out to us on the hills, and afterwards, when we had lighted our cigars, the Count chatted away gaily as though he had nothing more heinous than the death of a pheasant on his conscience. He explained how it was that his intended stay of but one day in the Geierthal had been prolonged. His sister, who lived at the Monas-

tery with him, had been ill, and did not like being left alone in that out-of-the-way spot.

"You as a bachelor, my dear Herr Tyrrell," he said, "are perhaps scarcely in a position to realize the subtle influence which womenkind exercise on our movements. Had I to choose men for a dangerous, a critical enterprise, I would take care to reject all those about whom I might suspect any feminine tie or entanglement. Most of the successful men who have made history have been those who either by nature or experience were able to take love as a mere episode, an interlude, to be swept off the stage when the scene was set for the next act of the real drama of their lives. Pardon me if I speak too strongly. You English are noted for a nice cultivation of the domestic virtues."

"And yet we have made history."

"True. But your greatest men would come under my category. And the very fact that Englishwomen are so domesticated shows that they have been kept in their proper place and not allowed to interfere in their husbands' or lovers' careers. You are men of action, and I fancy are often roused to it from a longing for change from the monotony of the very virtues on which you pride yourselves."

I laughed and did not contradict him.

"Now you, my dear friend," he went on, "your love of movement and adventure is, I venture to say, untinged by the thought of any woman."

The green eyes were on me. He was watching me narrowly.

"Naturally," I replied carelessly. "The age of knight-errantry is long past."

"Is it?" The mouth was drawn back and the eyes glittered with a vicious sneer, at least so it seemed to me.

"Is it not?" I rejoined with a laugh. "Are we

not all too full of commercial common sense now-a-days?"

"Even for an isolated case here and there, you think?"

"I have not heard of one. Perhaps your experience, Count, is more interesting than mine."

He gave a shrug. "I have seen curious things in my time."

"I can well believe you," was my mental comment.

"And," he continued in a tone of polite, but, to me, somewhat repulsive banter, "my imagination could easily construct of you, my young friend, a wandering knight seeking adventures."

"At least, it is on my own account," I laughed.

"Ah, yes. The motive now-a-days is less illogical than formerly, if quite as unprofitable. You, now, might be earning a name for yourself at home in one of the professions, but you prefer to wander about in out-of-the-way corners of Europe for what? For the pleasures of a roving life and the excitement of not knowing when you wake what the day may bring forth."

"It is preferable, at least, to the humdrum holiday of the ordinary tourist."

"Holiday!" He looked incredulous. "Scarcely a holiday in the sense in which most men understand the term. You are tied, I presume, by no limit of time or means; is it not rather the business of your life now to rove where you will, answerable to no one, cut off from all ties, your very family in total ignorance of your whereabouts?"

"Perhaps so," I answered unthinkingly, for the man's manner rather irritated me. "We English hate the idea of dependence and supervision; our freedom is absolute, in effect as well as in name."

I had reason before many hours were over to realize the rashness of that speech. But at the mo-

ment disgust for the hideous methods of a despotic government were so strong within me that I did not weigh the possible effect of my words, or see the trick which had led me to make the admission.

The Count rose. "I think, if you are rested, we may turn our faces homewards now. We have an hour's walk, and I wager shall flush some game on our way. I hope, Herr Tyrrell, that you will do me the honour of joining us at dinner. We dine *sans cérémonie* to-night, and in her state of health my sister will be glad if we all renounce full dress."

The invitation was, I felt, one which on the score of my personal safety it was madness to accept. But my great desire was to get inside the Monastery, since from without I could do nothing. It was for that I had spent the day with a man I loathed; to accept his hospitality was entirely repugnant to me; but I was fighting against odds to save a human life: I had to avail myself of every advantage I might get, and could not be squeamish. The risk, I knew, was fearful; no greater, though, to me a strong man than her danger to the imprisoned girl. I had my wits about me, my revolver in my pocket; I felt that the path here divided, and I had to choose between that of duty and that of cowardice. The chance I had prayed for had come. At the worst it was but another grave in the wood for a man who had done his duty.

I accepted.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DISH OF SWEETMEATS

As we drew near the Monastery my worthy host gave me a short sketch of its history. How it had fallen from the high position it occupied in mediæval times to be a Hostel of Mercy for the sick and dying (which, indeed, thought I, in one sense it is still) ; then how the property fell, by the changes and chances of time, into the hands of the State, from which, for sporting purposes and a love of the picturesque, he was induced to rent it. I had my doubts about a good deal of this plausible story, but accepted the statements for what they were worth.

“Two or three survivors of the Order of St. Truquillin,” he continued, “still live on the premises. I had not the heart to turn them adrift, and as they confine themselves to a distant wing of the building we see little or nothing of them.”

I thought of the grave-diggers and their cassocks and cowls. Pretty monks! A veritable house of mercy!

On our arrival at the pier, the drawbridge was let down. I saw that it would have been impossible to gain a secret entrance that way. We crossed the great courtyard, the door was thrown open, and at last I was under the roof of Asta von Winterstein's prison. If the exterior of the building was gloomy, it seemed positively gay compared with the interior,

which was dark, cold, gaunt, and depressing enough to make a sexton shiver. The great entrance hall, in spite of the faded tapestry with which it was hung, was inexpressibly bare and gloomy. What, I thought, must that poor girl's feelings have been when she was brought in? My own were such that it called for a strong effort of will to keep my nerves steady. The Count led the way to a passage leading from the hall, he opened a door and ushered me into a room which was furnished in a style of luxurious snugness, in cheerful contrast to its approach. As we entered, a lady rose, whom the Count made known as his sister. There was not much likeness, however, between them; still, it was hardly worth while to doubt the statement.

A handsome woman she must have been once, indeed was so still, but the lines of the face were hard, and about the eyes was a suggestion of a sad history. She looked at me curiously, the expression was but momentary; then she seemed to resume a mask which for that instant she had inadvertently let fall, and chatted pleasantly enough until the Count suggested our getting ready for dinner. He conducted me himself across the gloomy hall, thence upstairs to a well-appointed dressing-room, like the rest of the house charged with a chilling atmosphere of dreariness. Left alone, the sense of my great danger came strong upon me. Knowing what I did of the Count, it was, I told myself, sheer madness to touch food in his company. On the other hand I argued that he, or rather Rallenstein, his master, would think twice before attempting foul play with me. I might regard my host's polite attention more as a means of keeping observation on me and my movements than as a death-trap. It was hardly conceivable that they could have even an inkling of my being aware that Fräulein von Winterstein was alive and under that

very roof. Anyhow, I was committed to the adventure ; I had an object to gain in going through with it ; and must now trust to fate and to my own alertness to bring me safely out.

It was my purpose to note as much of the interior of the Monastery as I could. A glance out of the window explained the total darkness and silence of the house as seen from without. It was built in the form of a hollow parallelogram, round an open space on which, presumably, the windows of the principal inhabited rooms looked out. By keeping, then, the outer line of rooms dark and empty, no watcher from outside could have any idea of what was going on within, nor tell whether the place was deserted or occupied by a large household. The outlook upon this middle space was no less dismal than the rest of the building. The masonry was green from age and neglect, the lower windows were crossed and recrossed by rusty bars, and the more than usually hideous gargoyles did not detract from the cheerlessness of the aspect. I wondered if any one of these barred windows was that of Asta von Winterstein's prison. If so, a further scrutiny told me an attempt to rescue her by anything short of force was practically hopeless. Still, I resolved to keep my eyes on the alert for anything chance might have to show me ; it had so favoured me hitherto that I was inclined to hope more from it. My reflections were interrupted by the knock of a footman, who came to conduct me downstairs, an attention which, in my spying mood, I did not appreciate so much as I did its probable reason.

In what I suppose would be called the drawing-room the Count and his sister were waiting for me, he dressed in a dining-suit of dark blue velvet which rather accentuated his peculiar characteristics. As dinner was announced I discovered that we were not three, but four, as a man, whom, if he had been in the

room on my entrance, I had not noticed, came forward from behind me.

"Ah, let me present Herr Bleisst, my good friend and secretary," the Count said with a flourish. The good friend and secretary bowed low, and as he straightened himself his face suggested to me that whatever his merits as a secretary might be, those as a good friend to any one were at least problematical. Then I offered my arm to the hostess and we went in followed by the two men.

If I had any doubts as to a sinister motive behind the Count's hospitality they were now dispelled in startling fashion.

As we entered the dining-room the Count and Bleisst, walking behind us, separated, and for a moment turned their backs on us as each went towards his place at the table. My hostess let her handkerchief fall and we both by, as it were, a common impulse, stooped to pick it up. At this instant, our heads being close together, she whispered hurriedly, "Only pretend to eat the sweetmeats—for your life." As we rose she was thanking me, and apologizing for her carelessness, and we took our seats at the table.

I was inwardly not a little excited by her secret warning, but flattered myself I showed nothing of it to the Count's restless, vigilant eye. Before each of us was a gilt dish of sweetmeats, specimens of the most perfect dainties of the confectioner's art. At least, I should be able to eat the other dishes without fear—or was this a trick within a trick? I thought not, but resolved all the same to let my companions serve as tasters and to touch nothing they refused.

The dinner passed off with less dreariness than might have been expected, considering all things. It was not exactly a lively meal, but the Count had a fund of talk; he was, for such a scoundrel, a man of

considerable culture, and I even wondered how, amid the less innocent pursuits to which he was addicted, he had found time to become as well read, both in classical literature and the topics of the day, as he showed himself to be. He was certainly an amusing talker, and although some of his arguments were supported by reasoning shallow to the verge of flippancy, yet they were none the less entertaining, and that just then was everything. My appetite after a day in the keen air of the hills was so good that not even the sight of what I might call the second murderer of the establishment, that is, the man who had fetched the priest from Carlzig, could quite spoil it. This fellow glided in and out of the room occasionally, and seemed to combine the duties of major-domo with those of the functionary I have just mentioned. The two men who waited upon us I had never seen before, and from their faces I set them down as being comparatively virtuous, which is not saying much.

Another curious circumstance gave me food for thought in the midst of my host's showy apothegms. It was the somewhat remarkable silence of his good friend and secretary. Herr Bleisst sometimes nodded, occasionally shrugged, and often smiled, but it was not until dinner was more than half over that he contributed anything audible to the conversation. And even then he seemed to speak by mistake. The Count was favouring me with his opinion on the respective advantages of an autocratic and a democratic government, and supporting his preference for the former by his usual method of highly coloured argument. He even went so far as to assert that the autocratic rule gave greater freedom to the people than they could get by governing themselves.

"Now, in England," he said, "you think yourselves absolutely free, is it not so?" I bowed assent. "And yet," he proceeded, "a moment's reflection

should convince you that so far from this being the case, there is, if I may speak without offence, more slavery in England than in any other country. Take one section. What do you call a snob: is not that merely another name for a slave?"

"It is voluntary servitude," I suggested.

"Granted," he replied. "But none the less real and constraining. Then a stronger case is the liberty which your boasted freedom gives to one class of men to make slaves of another; to the strong to coerce the weak, the rich the poor. You smile! Surely you will not dispute that?"

My smile had been called up by the thought of a power used by the strong against the weak under a certain despotic government, which put the worst crimes of plutocracy into the shade. But it did not seem expedient just then to cite instances.

"At least the weak and the poor are at liberty to refuse to be enslaved," I answered by way of saying something. "In an autocratically governed country it is slavery or death, with not always the option of slavery."

The Count returned my smile with interest. "A very apt description of your sweating dens in London."

Then it was that Bleisst spoke, giving an extra clinch to his patron's argument.

"Where," said he, "does this liberty to refuse slavery lead? To the workhouse, which is undisguised servitude, with the prospect of a slave's only ransom, death."

The surprise with which I looked at the secretary was not occasioned altogether by the novelty of the remark from his lips, but from the impression that I had heard his voice before. Yes, it was beyond doubt familiar, and so preoccupied was I by the coincidence, that I fear I let my ingenious host carry off the honours of the argument against my country.

I was still puzzling over the identity of Herr Bleisst, and scrutinizing him as attentively as good manners allowed, when I was recalled to the exigency of the situation by the Count's inviting me to try some of the dish of sweetmeats before me.

"I have them sent weekly from Buyda," he said persuasively; "you know our metropolis prides itself on these fascinating trifles, and will not allow the superiority of even Vienna or Paris itself."

My hostess added a word of recommendation and pushed the dish towards me. Understanding her feint of pressing them upon me, I took several of the bon-bons on to my plate, and from time to time made a pretence of eating one, at the same time being loud in praise of their excellent flavour. A trick acquired in my school days of palming coins and cork pellets stood me now in good stead, and in a short time the sweets had left my plate and were safely stowed in my pocket.

The secretary, Bleisst, now began to join freely in the conversation, and every fresh remark he made confirmed my conviction that I had talked with him on some previous occasion, but certainly not under his present identity.

As his sister rose and left us, the Count came to me, and, laying his hand familiarly on my shoulder, told me he could not think of permitting me to turn out that night and go all the way to the inn.

"You must sleep here," he insisted. "I need not apologize to a man of your nerve for the gloom of our rooms. We have doubtless both had worse hunting quarters, and I can furnish you with everything you need to make you comfortable. So you must not say no."

I had all along expected this invitation, and had made up my mind to go through with the adventure at all hazards, leaving to chance the details of a vague

plan I had formed for discovering Fräulein von Winterstein's prison. Accordingly I thanked him and accepted.

"That is friendly of you," he said. "Bleisst, will you see that all arrangements are made for Mr. Tyrrell's comfort. I think the Prior's room will be most pleasant."

The secretary had come up to us, and now turned with a slight bow to go off on his errand. As he did so, some expression in his face, which I had not noticed before, gave me in a flash the clue to his identity. Then I knew who he was. The face was curiously, unaccountably changed; it was fifteen or twenty years younger; the man's expression and mode of speaking were different. Nevertheless, a tell-tale slip had betrayed him, and now, perfect as his disguise had been, I recognized in the smug, clean-shaven Herr Bleisst none other than the *soi-disant* Professor Seemارش.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE PRIOR'S ROOM

THE Count and I went back to the other room, where we found his sister playing with a great dog of curious breed, something between a wolf-hound and a blood-hound. Coffee was brought in, and the hostess begged we would smoke there. The dog came to me, treating my advances, however, rather suspiciously. I broke up a small cake and threw him morsels, which he devoured. Then something prompted me to try him with one of the sweetmeats in my pocket. Taking an opportunity when my worthy host was not favouring me with his attention, I threw the brute one, which, like the scraps of cake, he caught and swallowed. This, as it turned out, was no bad move of mine.

Presently I thought it well to appear drowsy and express a wish to retire. At that moment Bleisst glided in and announced that my room was ready for me. I bade good-night to my hostess, who seemed studiously to avoid meeting my eyes, then left the room with Bleisst, whom the Count desired to show me the way and see that I wanted nothing. On reaching my room I found it furnished with everything I could need, and was glad when the door was shut upon my conductor.

So the mystery of Professor Seemarsh was now cleared up beyond all doubt. After a few minutes'

review of the evening's events, I set myself to make a survey of the Prior's room.

And a gloomy chamber it was, although made as cheerful as possible by a profusion of wax candles. What seemed its ordinary furniture was old, gaunt, and dilapidated, but this was supplemented by some articles of a quite modern type. The bed was a great four-posted one with dark hangings, which added to the general sombreness. Near the other end of the room stood a massive square wardrobe of dark oak. I opened this. It was a somewhat elaborate piece of furniture, panelled and carved inside as well as out. A good roomy receptacle for clothes, fitted round with hooks, all empty save one, from which hung what seemed an old riding cloak. There was nothing else remarkable in the room with the exception of several large pictures which, framed in black wood, hung high on the walls. One of them particularly attracted my notice. It was a rather striking full-length portrait of a young man, in what seemed a student's dress of the last century. I don't know what there was remarkable about it, except that it was painted with strength, and was one of those portraits which, without having seen the originals, one feels sure must be spirited likenesses.

He, whoever he was, had evidently been a gay young fellow, a dandy probably among his compeers; he had large laughing eyes, which rather contradicted the sobriety of his attitude, assumed no doubt merely for the ordeal of the portrait painting.

Having finished my survey of the room, I began to consider as to the best way of passing the first hours of the night. I was supposed to be poisoned, or at least drugged; there was no doubt now that my life was sought, and my careless admission in the afternoon that my friends were ignorant of my whereabouts made my disappearance safe.

I wondered if at that moment the Count's familiars were digging a grave for me in the wood. Probably the unfortunate priest had had no friendly warning against the sweetmeats. The reason of mine was a puzzle about which I had then no time to speculate; my one thought had to be for action. The peril in which I stood quite removed any scruples I might have had with regard to letting anything stand in the way of my purpose. I looked carefully to my revolver, saw that the door of the room was fast locked, and set myself to wait until the night was further advanced.

It then occurred to me that as I, or any other victim of the Count's polite hospitality, might reasonably be expected to lock the door, there should naturally be some other means of admittance for those who came in to make away with their damnable work. Accordingly I took one of the candles and made a thorough search round the room. There was no sign of any secret door or sliding panel. I examined the floor all over, especially under the bed, but to no purpose. So at last I gave up the search, and fell to speculating how long it would be before they came to find me. Would they wait till the morning? They had certainly not done so in the case of that poor priest. Anyhow, thought I, they will have a somewhat astonishing reception when they do come. Some books had been placed on a shelf for me, two or three of the newest French novels, and an English booklet of light essays. I took up this last with the idea that reading would be more likely to keep my nerves steady than letting my imagination run on the chances of the night. So, extinguishing all the candles but two, I threw myself on the bed and began to read.

I had turned over a good many pages, when, a little weary of reading, I let the book fall, and lay on my

back wondering how best to fight against the drowsiness which, after a fatiguing day, was stealing over me.

Suddenly the problem was solved by a sight which put me keenly on the alert.

My eyes happened to be casually fixed on one of the carved wooden rosettes which extended at intervals round the frieze of the wall. The particular rosette in my line of sight was slowly revolving. My first idea was to regard this as an ocular deception; then, watching it attentively, I concluded that such was not the case; the rose was actually turning. It gradually receded, till it disappeared altogether, leaving in its place a dark, circular aperture; doubtless a spy-hole commanding the whole room. Prepared for this, I had turned over, bringing my head into a higher position where it would be hidden from the expected watcher by the fringe of the bed-canopy. Through a gap in this I could still, unseen, keep the peep-hole under observation, and could detect, at least so it seemed, a pair of malignant eyes glaring from its black recess.

So the time for action was at hand. I turned sleepily on my pillow, and blew out the lights. That would put an end to the watching, which was intolerable. Then I listened. Not a sound. The very silence showed me that my nerves were in order—not even imagination conjured up the slightest movement. After waiting a few minutes, I quietly slipped out of bed, and resumed such of my clothes as I had put off. I took my revolver, matches and a candle, and made ready to meet the danger I felt was coming. From what quarter it would appear I was quite ignorant, and not a little curious; anyhow, I was not going to stay where it would expect to find me. I crossed the room, and took my stand beside the square wardrobe, ready for a dash, and listening intently.

I had some time to wait, the most exciting suspense, perhaps, of my life. There I stood in pitch darkness, straining my ears for the sound I knew must surely be coming. But when? Whence?

I waited on grimly, revolver in hand, with every faculty on the alert, for the slightest indication that the room contained a living being beside myself. At last it came.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE COUNT'S HOSPITALITY

I HAVE said that my position was in a recess formed between the wall and the side of the wardrobe. Standing here, I suddenly became aware of a slight sound quite close to me, so slight that had I not been listening intently in that perfect stillness my ear would not have detected it. To determine exactly whence it proceeded puzzled me ; any one who has listened for a sound in intense darkness will understand my uncertainty. Something was moving—almost at my elbow, it seemed ; yet nothing that I could see or touch. Now again ! Louder. Something moving close beside me. Then suddenly the explanation flashed upon me. The noise came from the wardrobe. Some one was inside.

Scarcely had I realized this when, even in that darkness, I was aware of a black object in front of me. Instinctively I raised my revolver ; it knocked slightly against the wardrobe door, which was swinging slowly back upon me. So it had been unfastened and opened from the inside. Whoever had opened it was already in the room. I waited a few seconds, then, with revolver ready in one hand, I began quietly to push the door to with the other. When it was half-way closed I paused and listened. Some one was moving about the room in the direction of the bed. He was going, no doubt, to administer the *coup-de-*

grâce, or to see whether I was already beyond it. In another moment he would find the bed unoccupied. This certainly called for prompt action on my part. All the same, action was not easy in that pitchy darkness. I could scarcely move on account of having to listen constantly for that stealthy presence. But I guessed the man's first act on discovering I was not in the bed would be either to strike a light, or to return as he came to fetch others of the party. In the former case, I resolved to shoot him on the first spark of light; in the latter, which I hoped would happen, I intended to account for him in quieter fashion. For my only chance of accomplishing my ultimate purpose lay in wit, not force.

On the other side of the wardrobe stood a table on which I knew were a pair of massive silver candlesticks. I felt for one of these, seized it, took out the candle, and held it ready. For a few moments now I heard no sound in the room; then I became aware that, as I expected, the man was coming stealthily back towards the wardrobe. I slipped the revolver into my pocket, and grasping the heavy candlestick with both hands raised it above my head. The man came nearer, he was now quite close; I could hear, could feel, his breath. Then, just at the right moment, I brought down the weapon with all my force on his head. The blow, by good luck, fell absolutely true. With an exclamation—half gasp, half groan—the man collapsed at my feet.

So far good. I listened, but heard no indication that the alarm had been taken. I dared not strike a light, having regard to the peephole in the wall. I knelt down and examined, as well as I could by touch, the prostrate form. He was evidently wearing the same sort of rough cassock as those worn by the men who had buried the priest in the wood. With some difficulty I took this from him and put it

on myself. The fellow was breathing stertorously ; from the force of my blow there could be little doubt that his brain had suffered sufficient concussion to keep him still for some hours to come. So there was nothing to fear from leaving him as he was.

I now entered the wardrobe and ventured to strike a match. The light showed me a sliding door formed by one of the panels at the back, which unnecessary ornamentation was thus accounted for. I passed through this, and found myself in a narrow passage. Pulling the cowl over my head, I struck another light in order to see which way to turn. On the right a flight of wooden steps ran up to the roof. As there was no door or outlet of any sort up there it was evident that they were intended solely for the purpose of reaching the spy-hole in the frieze. I went on, groping my way for a certain distance, then striking a fresh light to see what was before me. I had two objects now : to discover, if possible, the prison of Asta von Winterstein, and to make good my escape from that house of murder—neither of them easy. After moving cautiously along for a considerable distance I came to a door, at what was evidently the end of the secret passage. Before this hung the arras with which the corridor into which it opened was lined. Luckily the passage, for obvious reasons, was carpeted with some soft material which deadened the sound of footsteps. From beyond the door came men's voices. I crept warily forward and peeped through the hangings. Across the corridor was a room of which the door was ajar and whence came the voices. A plan of action now occurred to me. Taking the opportunity when one loud-voiced fellow was speaking, I stole across and hid myself behind the hangings on the other side. My position now was close to the door of the room in which the men were ; their talk was plainly to be heard. They were

speaking of the dog. The sweetmeat had evidently had its effect, and they seemed considerably mystified thereby. The Count's tone (for he was there) was angry and querulous; he was blaming the other men for carelessness in having left the poison in the animal's way. This they vehemently denied, and the real solution of the mystery seemed to occur to none of them. Under less critical conditions I should have been amused by this confirmation of the Count's true character when his veneer of hyper-politeness was stripped off. His present tone was ludicrously in contrast to that which he adopted in company.

Presently, to end the recrimination, some one suggested that Paulus was a long time gone. My charming host laughed. "It takes much to kill an eel and an Englishman." Nevertheless, as the minutes passed without sign of their comrade's return, they proposed to go in a body to see what was wrong.

This was what I had calculated upon. They came out of the room, four or five of them, crossed the corridor and entered the secret passage. I waited till they should have gone a safe distance, then came out of my hiding-place, went quickly to the door and fastened it upon them. Thus I hoped, having the key of the Prior's room in my pocket, that they were nicely trapped, although, as it would not take them long to burst open the door I had just secured, it behoved me to lose no time in setting about what was to be done.

Lighting my candle, I found no difficulty in making my way to the great staircase, to the head of which, indeed, the corridor ran, and so down to the hall. The entrance door was barred and locked, but there was something else for me to think of before escaping; so, protecting the light with my hand, I hastened on, looking into every room, trying every door, in my

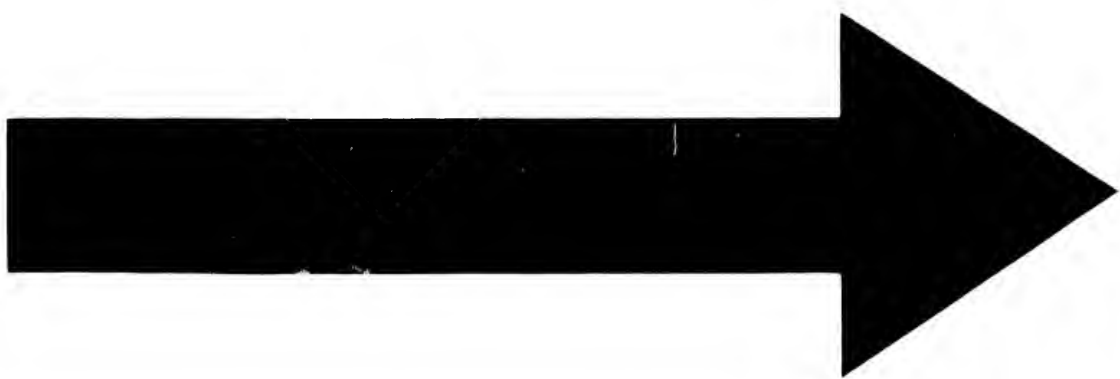
hurried search for Asta von Winterstein's prison. In vain. Every room I could find was deserted; nor did any show signs of having been occupied by her. During my search I came across the body of the great hound, stretched lifeless, or nearly so, on the stone flagging of an inner hall.

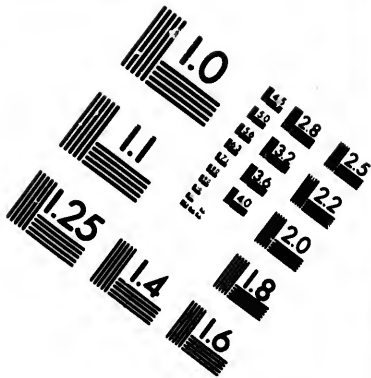
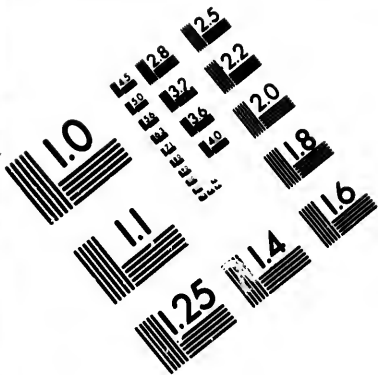
"A lucky thought of mine," I muttered; "that fellow prowling about the place would have spoiled my game, and probably cost me my life."

As the minutes went on my desperate eagerness to find the prisoner increased. Rushing here and thither I plunged into every opening in the passage that presented itself, but seemed now in the great rambling place to be getting farther away from all sign of human life. Thinking my search hopeless in that direction I came back to the great hall, and determined, sheer madness though it seemed, to make a quest upstairs.

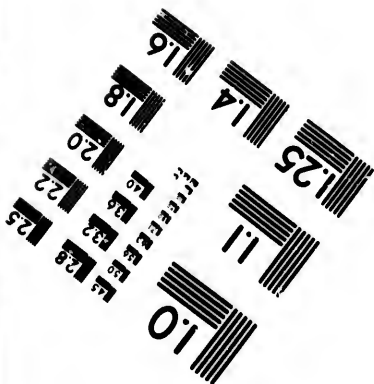
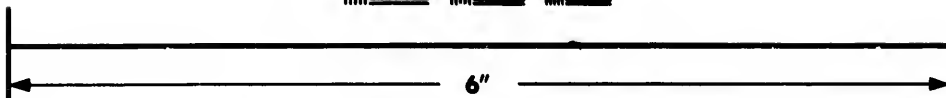
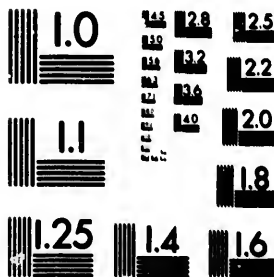
The utter foolhardiness of this resolve has since been accounted for in my mind only by the fact that the excitement of the adventure was now strong upon me. I felt absolutely in honour bound to attempt the girl's rescue at all hazards, and by the conviction that I should never have even such a chance as this again. So I made a dash upstairs.

I had hardly reached the top when I heard a cry, then a crash, followed by a shout and a sound of hurrying footsteps. I blew out my light. It was too late now. The men had broken out of the passage and were scouring the place for me. It was certain death if I did not take what small chance of escape was left to me. To rescue Asta von Winterstein that night, even if I had known where to find her, was out of the question. I set my teeth in grim disappointment and ran down the stairs again. To escape now by the front entrance was impossible; a flash of light told me the men were at the head of the stairs. But





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I had in my late search found and carefully noted the position of the postern door. This was led to by a short narrow passage opening out of another running at right angles across the end of the great hall. For this I made, finding it again without difficulty.

Here I was obliged to strike a light. It showed me to my dismay that my escape was cut off, the door was locked and no key to be seen.

I threw down the match and pulled out my revolver. There, with my back to the door, I could keep the narrow passage perhaps against odds, or at least make a good fight for my life. Any moment now my pursuers might come upon me. They seemed to be searching about the hall and the rooms adjacent to it. My discovery was a mere question of moments. I braced myself for the encounter and stood in readiness. I should be an easy target there if the ruffians had fire-arms, but even in that case I calculated I ought to be able to account for two or three of them before they could hit me.

At that critical moment, as a faint indication of light told of my enemies' approach, a noise close by attracted my attention. Some one was outside the door behind me. Feet could be plainly heard on the steps; one of the men was evidently coming in. Everything now hung on moments. If the Count and his men inside the house should come upon me before the door opened it would mean that I should be attacked from behind as well, and my desperate chance of escape would be absolutely gone. The suspense of those few seconds brings a shudder even now in the writing. To my great relief the key grated in the lock, it turned, the door opened, and, just as a light flashed into the passage and a man's shout proclaimed he had discovered me, I sprang from my crouching attitude behind the door upon the astonished incomer, dealt him a smashing blow in the face, knocking him

backwards down the steps into the moat, plunged in myself and began to swim my hardest, keeping along in the dark shadow of the walls.

I did not swim far thus, knowing they would pursue me in the boat, but after going a short distance, struck across to land. Luckily the night was dark with a drizzling rain, and it was not until I reached the bank that a cry told me I was seen. I fully expected a shot, if not a volley, but none was fired. Next instant I was in the wood and comparatively safe. I ran through to the boundary wall, climbed it, and then stayed to listen for sounds of pursuit. None were to be heard. After a while I ventured to make my way by a circuitous path to the inn, which I reached without becoming aware of any signs of my late host or his gang. With some difficulty I succeeded in rousing the landlord, made an excuse for my late return, threw off my wet clothes, and tumbled into an honest bed after a very pretty night's adventure.

CHAPTER XXX

A DISCOVERY

NEXT morning I sent a boy to the Monastery with a note.

“DEAR COUNT,—

“I regret to have to inform you that I was forced to leave your roof abruptly at an early hour this morning in consequence of the unwarrantable intrusion into my bedroom of a person who came, I fancy, with no very good intent. May I suggest that your present domestic arrangements are liable to cause your known hospitality to be misjudged. I return herewith the key of my room, having been simple enough to suppose that locking my door would secure privacy. Please make my apologies to my hostess for my unceremonious departure.”

I had scarcely dispatched the note when Strode came in. “Ah! I was just starting to look you up,” I said.

He nodded and sat down as I ordered some refreshment. “Lucky I just caught you,” he replied, “or we might have missed one another in the woods. I’m not one for keeping to the path.”

It was evident from his manner that he had something to tell me. When we were alone, he said:

“Lucky your friend, Von What’s-his-name, got off when he did. There was a fellow after him at my place last night.”

I had thought that not improbable, and asked him all about it.

"Chap loafed in, said he had lost his way; jaw enough to make a bagman sick, agreeable though, but a deuced scoundrelly cut to his jib."

"I ought to have warned you."

"Thanks, old fellow, it didn't matter. I totted him up and set him down, thereafter keeping an eye on him. Thinks I, my friend, you're on the track of Von T'other-chap, and I'll have some fun with you. So I made out I was worrying about a friend, a German friend, who was staying with me and who must have lost his way. That was just what my swivel-eyed Johnnie wanted, and he hung on for all he knew, gassing away enough to blow the windows out. Well, it struck me that was just what we wanted; to cross the scent and let our man get away while the hounds were at fault. So I let the fellow jaw away for all he was worth while I was all the time thinking out the best trick to play him. I asked the fellow if he'd have something to drink, slipped out under pretence of fetching it, gave the office to the boy who helps his grandmother, the old woman who keeps house for me, and in a few minutes he brought in a gun and a message from the Herr, that he was going to stay in Carlzig that night, and would join me in the morning. Now as our friend is making tracks in just the opposite direction from Carlzig that seemed good enough."

"Quite. You ought to have done him a good turn there, Strode."

"Hope so. Of course I shammed to be much relieved at hearing he hadn't come to grief, and, as I expected, my lippy friend suddenly discovered it was getting late. I put him on his road for Pattenheim, and then watched. No need to say when he thought he was out of sight he doubled back and went, stretched out, for Carlzig. That's all. Thought it might interest you."

"Very good of you, Strode. Now, shall we be

getting off? And on the way I will tell you my story."

We were just starting when, somewhat to my surprise, a reply to my note came from the Count. It was full of the most profuse apologies, with an explanation to the effect that an inmate of the Monastery had been suddenly seized in the night with a fit of insanity to which he was subject, and it was he who had so unfortunately disturbed me. The writer regretted that the expected arrival of a visitor prevented his waiting upon me at that moment to express his regrets in person, but he hoped to do so later in the day. A very pretty piece of humbug; the surprising part was that the Count should have given himself the trouble to compose it. But perhaps it was intended to serve for a diplomatic explanation.

I flung the precious note across to Strode. "Come along," I said, "and I'll tell you what it all means."

We shouldered our guns and set off towards his shooting ground. On the way I related the whole story, more particularly that part which concerned Asta von Winterstein. When I came to my adventure of the previous night he was greatly excited.

"By Jove! That was a tight corner. I shouldn't have kept my head as you did. I should have emptied my revolver among the scoundrels and then gone under."

"Chance stood my friend, as it has done all through," I said. "No doubt the fellow I knocked into the moat was the man who had been holding forth to you earlier in the evening, and was just home from Carlzig."

Strode laughed. "I envy you that drive. I could have throttled the brute as he sat jawing away at me; only that was not my line of country."

We then discussed the situation, and agreed that we were bound to do our utmost to help the im-

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prisoned girl. If only we could be sure she was there.

“ Perhaps we two may be able to make more of the business than one,” Strode said. “ Anyhow, if I’m not intruding, and you want me, I’m your man.”

I thanked him, and before parting that afternoon it was arranged that he should come over to the Geierthal after dusk, and we would survey the possibilities together. So I left him and took my way back alone through the wooded hills.

Now chance, that had been so faithful to me, was not to jilt me yet. There was plenty of time before the hour at which my dinner was ordered ; so to relieve my nerves by not taking matters too seriously, I strolled along the crest of the hills looking out for any shots that might come in my way. I brought off a good many, and after a while began to descend from the high ground towards the Geierthal, my path being now one leading eventually almost direct to the Monastery, that is to say, a good mile below my inn. With what I determined should be my last shot I knocked over a hare, but puss struggled up again and tried to make off. I ran after the animal to put it out of its pain, and, after some search and twistings, came up with her, threw down my gun, and catching up a handy stick gave her the *coup-de-grâce*. Then I turned to take up my gun. It was nowhere to be seen. I had not gone five paces away from it, yet now, to my utter astonishment, it had mysteriously disappeared. I could hardly believe my senses, for I was surely alone in that spot. Anyhow, the gun was not visible, and I thereupon began to search the place more closely, not without an uncomfortable feeling at the apparent mysteriousness of the thing. The ground was rough and broken. I carefully determined the spot where the gun must have fallen and proceeded to examine it methodically. Suddenly the explanation came to me in uncomfortable fashion.

My foot slipped unaccountably, slipped so far that I fell. Hastily picking myself up, the cause became apparent. There was an unnoticed cavity in the ground. I examined it and was relieved to find my gun, which had lodged a short way below the surface. But the hole itself was deep; it was more than a chance fissure in the earth. It was curious enough at least to call for further investigation. Clearing away with considerable trouble the earth and stones I enlarged the aperture sufficiently to be able to see what it really was. To my great astonishment I came presently upon a deep hollow space beneath. As it was quite dark I threw a stone in and listened. It struck and seemed to reach the bottom a few feet down. It was a passage, then.

Resolving to explore it, I worked away to enlarge the hole so as to afford some means of entrance, also of getting out again when I should be in. In about twenty minutes I had broken away enough round the hole for this purpose, and at once proceeded to let myself down.

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CHAPTER XXXI

THE DARK WAY

I HAD not been mistaken ; it was a subterranean passage that I had come upon. The floor seemed to be on a considerable incline, and on groping my way a few yards in the ascending direction I found a short flight of stone steps. Certain light-admitting fissures in the earth above enabled me to see that these steps led to a sort of trap-door formed by a stone flag, giving exit, no doubt, to the surface above. Had I but suspected this I might have saved myself half an hour's hard work ; however, it was done now, and I turned to begin the descent of the passage.

After passing my rough entrance I found myself faced, as the way ran deeper into the earth, by absolute darkness. Feeling in my pocket for my matchbox, I happily came upon the piece of candle which I had slipped into it the night before when the holder had served me so effectually for a weapon. This on being lighted seemed but to intensify the blackness in front of me, but at least it would keep my feet from pit-falls.

The passage, damp, mouldy, and foul-smelling from the confined atmosphere, led downwards, and then having reached a certain depth, its course became level. On and on I went, the candle burning dimly in the vitiated air. But the way was clear, and, putting aside the influence of the dismal surroundings one could walk on without much discomfort. The passage seemed never ending, yet the farther it led

me on, the higher was my curiosity raised to find the end of it.

Suddenly the ground began to dip again and a fairly long descent followed. This again was succeeded by a level stretch, but here the aspect of the tunnel changed. The roof and sides were covered with a slimy green ooze, the air became dank and chill, the darkness, if possible, more impenetrable. Clusters of nitre hung in fantastic shapes from the roof; the sensation of being buried alive was almost overpowering. But an idea which during my progress had gradually been taking shape in my head was now practically confirmed.

The mysterious passage I calculated led direct towards the Monastery. This was the only conceivable explanation of its existence. The reason of the sudden dive and the reeking walls was that it was now running under the moat. If so, and there was scarcely room for doubt, it must lead to some part of the Monastery. This thought spurred me on to pursue my way through about as abominable a bolt-hole as man ever devised.

But I was now at the end. The tunnel stopped abruptly at a winding flight of stone steps. Up these I climbed, laboriously enough, for no pains had been wasted on convenience; ascent was just practicable, and no more. When at length the top was reached I found my head against a wooden trap-door. I expected that this would be the end of that afternoon's exploration, but to my joy I found that it was not fastened. Very cautiously I pushed it upwards, the shower of dust which was dislodged being almost welcome after the damp, noisome air I had been breathing. I found myself emerging into what seemed a cellar, anyhow a good-sized room in the basement of the Monastery. Nothing was to be heard; so far I was safe enough. I came up out of the stairway and

set about discovering where it had landed me. I had judged it expedient to put out my candle, for only just enough remained to take me back again, and the light might betray me. So I had to grope about in semi-darkness. The first thing was to feel round the walls for an outlet, and presently my touch told me the door was reached. This yielded to a push and I passed through. I was now in a passage at the farther end of which a faint light shone. Very, very cautiously now I stole along, stopping between each long, wary step to listen. As I drew near the light I could see that it came from a doorway which opened upon the passage. My position seemed risky in the extreme; gradually I neared the light, scarce daring to breathe. Nothing was to be heard, anxiously as I listened.

At last I had crept to the doorway, and, after a pause, ventured to peep in. Then I saw that the light came through the barred window of an inner room. Having made certain of this and that the outer chamber was empty, I moved across till I could look through the window.

The first glance showed me a sight which amply repaid all my toil and danger.

CHAPTER XXXII

ASTA AT LAST

THE room into which I looked was furnished in a style surprisingly in contrast to its situation. The walls were hung with rich brocaded curtains, the furniture and ornaments in the apartment were those of a luxuriously appointed boudoir. There appeared to be no window in the room save that (and it was practically none) through which I was spying, but it was lighted by several delicately-shaded lamps, which added to its cosy appearance. On a couch a girl sat reading. I needed not to wait till she looked up to be certain that it was Asta von Winterstein. My heart gave a great throb of joy to find that after all she was alive ; but poor girl ! thought I, what a prison, what a fate !

There was hope, however, now that I had found her, and I longed to be able to communicate my hope to her. She looked pale, as was natural, but wonderfully beautiful ; there was a dignity about her expression now which had not been noticeable in the lively bantering girl I had danced with at Buyda.

My one thought now was how to attract her notice without jeopardizing the chance which fate had thrown in my way. Just as I had made up my mind to tap very softly at the glass between us, the girl suddenly raised her head and, following her glance, I saw a movement in the curtain at the further side of the room. Next moment it was pushed aside and another

girl entered—the girl whom I had known as Miss Seemarsh.

She brought in a tray with tea and dishes of cakes and confectionery. I thought of the Count's special bon-bons, and wondered whether Fräulein Asta was running the same risk. Perhaps not; they evidently had some object in keeping her alive, or why was the tragedy not already accomplished? Delay was certainly not one of the Jaguar's methods. The girl set down the tray on the table which she placed by the prisoner's side. They spoke a few words to each other, and then the girl began to move about the room, putting things tidy in a desultory sort of way, and occasionally making a laughing remark to Asta, who replied wearily. As she went about the room she took something out of a small dark box. Then turning round she seated herself carelessly on the arm of a large chair, and I could see that the object in her hands was a concertina. She held it up and played the first few bars of a lively operatic air. Then I shrewdly guessed her to have been also the pretended wandering boy musician I had seen at the inn. She had, no doubt, been sent to spy upon me and Von Lindheim, and her position in the Count's household was clear.

Her music evidently worried the other, for she said something to the girl, who at once left off playing, replaced the instrument, and shortly afterwards left the room.

It now seemed that a favourable opportunity had come of making my presence known to the prisoner. I tapped softly on the pane. The Fräulein, who had resumed her listless attitude of reading, raised her head in surprise and listened. I tapped again. She looked in my direction now almost in terror. Standing as I did in comparative darkness she could probably see nothing of me. I brought my face close to

the glass, and spoke her name. She must have seen me then, for she rose, laid down her book, and stood irresolute for a few seconds, seemingly between fear and joy. She went quickly to the door, drew aside the curtain which hung before it, and seemed to satisfy herself that no one was near. Then she ran towards me. I shall never forget the look on her face as she crossed the room. It was radiant. When she saw me, every trace of apprehension vanished. But the glass and the bars were between us; her face was as close to them on one side as mine was on the other. I put my hands round my mouth. "Can you open the window?" I said.

She heard me, for she examined the window and then shook her head. It was evidently not intended to open, the leaded glass having been put in apparently recently to cover what had been a bare aperture, open but for the bars. I took out my knife and proceeded to loosen one of the panes by easing the leaden frame away from its edges. The girl had made signs that she would keep watch by the door while my work was going on; in about five minutes I had the satisfaction of being able to take out the pane, and then she came back to me.

"I got your fan, Fräulein."

"You! That night in Buyda?"

"Yes. It fell at my feet."

"Heaven be thanked! And you have come to save me?"

"I hope so. I have worked to that end ever since I read your message."

"Ah, you are brave! But you do not know the dangers of this horrible place."

"Indeed I do, at least a few of them. But tell me, Fräulein, are you in immediate danger—of your life?"

She looked troubled. "I cannot tell. I am dead,

practically to the world. You are the only one, except these villains here, who know that I am alive. And so my life, being nothing in the world, hangs by a thread which any moment may be snapped."

"Fräulein, you must not despair. I will save you or give my life for you."

"Oh!" she cried miserably. "Why have you come? I had given up all hope. I was resigned to my fate. Now the sight of you, of a friend, has made me feel I cannot die. And yet there is no escape. These wretches are pitiless, and even if they were not, what are they but the creatures of him who never spares? The very air of this vile place is death. I had heard of the Hostel of St. Tranquillin in my happy days, but little thought I should spend my last hours here."

She was weeping in a piteous state of distress. I strove, in spite of natural misgivings, to comfort her, bidding her hope for a speedy escape.

"Ah, it is impossible!" she said when I had told her of the secret way. "If we should escape it would be but for a few hours which would bring us certain death. And yet to stay here may be worse than death."

She ran again to the door, listened, and returned.

"Shall I tell you," she said, "why I, who am mourned as dead, am permitted to live—if only for a little?"

"The Princess's marriage——"

"Ah, you know of that! Yes; that fatal escapade. We little thought how terrible its consequences were to be, how swiftly the Jaguar was to strike. He, Rallenstein, naturally determined on my death, but was shrewd enough to know that my father is powerful, so he would strike cunningly. I was to die two deaths, the first a false one, so that the Chancellor might see how my relations accepted it; and when he should

have nothing to fear from them, then I, already dead to the world, was to die in reality, like poor Von Orsova. That is why I am brought here. Probably Rallenstein already believes me dead, but this man, Furello——”

“ Ah ! ” I could guess the story now. “ He is in love with you ? ”

She nodded. “ He will spare my life if I will marry him. Marry him ! Ah, *mein Gott !* is it not horrible ? This murderer, this unspeakable villain. Be his wife ! And for how long ? He dare not let me live even if he should wish. Already they say he has killed one wife and is secretly married now.”

“ To a lady whom he passes off as his sister. She knows you are here ? ”

“ I cannot tell. What must her life be, poor woman ! ”

“ I fancy she suspects the truth.”

“ Ah ! ”

“ She saved my life last night by a timely warning.”

The girl's eyes filled with tears. “ And you risked it for me ! You shall not. It is not worth it. I am a dead woman. You must think of me no more. It was wicked, it was cruel of me to throw you my fan. But I was desperate, in deadly fear which is over now, and I little thought——”

“ That the fan would fall at the feet of one who would gladly give his life even in the most impossible attempt to save you,” I interrupted vehemently. “ *Fräulein*, I entreat you, do not give yourself up for lost while there is a beat left in my heart or your own. Mine is the worthless life, not yours. Let me give it for you if need be ; nay, I must, whether you will or not. If only time be yet on our side ! Let me not waste it now. What we have to do is to remove these bars and then the rest should be easy.”

I struck light and examined the extremities of the irons which crossed the window. They were simply secured to the sides by heavy screws ; nothing but a wrench would be needed to remove them. So that was hopeful enough. I told the prisoner, who had been on guard at the door, how easy her escape should be. But there was much to think of and plan before the attempt could be made. For if it failed her death would be logically certain.

She saw that. "As it is it may be too late," she said. "I am dead already to every one but these people and you." She made a little despairing grimace ; her natural liveliness still flickered, though nearly quenched by those gloomy and terrifying surroundings.

"You are very much alive to me, Fräulein," I returned warmly ; "and by the help of Providence shall be so soon to the rest of the world. But premature action would be fatal. You must make up your mind to another four-and-twenty hours in this place."

"If I dared hope—for twenty-four seconds——"

"You must call cunning to our aid. To bridge over the time in safety between now and freedom, life——"

"Ah !" she cried. "Herr Tyrrell, don't make me hope. It is cruel."

"Indeed, no, if we walk warily. You must temporize with the Count. Appear inclined to relent. I can leave that to your wit. Only keep things as they are till to-morrow evening, when I will return, not to leave without you. Now, I hate to go, Fräulein, but the risk to you in staying is too great. Keep a good heart ; above all do not let anyone see that you have hope, and trust me."

She gave me the sweetest little nod of courage and thanks and stretched her hand through the bars.

As I kissed it I felt I could never let it go. But prudence reasserted itself, and we parted.

I had little difficulty in finding my way back through the subterranean passage. The horrors of the place, its murkiness, the dripping roof and walls, the dank, unwholesome atmosphere were as nothing to me now. The vile way led from darkness to light; and by the time I had traversed it and reached the entrance and the open air my plans for the morrow's attempt were formed.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

AN OMINOUS VISIT

At the inn Strobe was waiting for me in some impatience, if not alarm, fearing foul play, from the delay in my return. After dinner we lit our cigars and strolled out. Then I told him the whole story, which indoors I had dared only hint at. I should have taken him into my confidence anyhow, situated as I was, and feeling quite certain of his staunchness and grit ; but, beyond that, I had come to the conclusion that his help would be absolutely necessary in the next night's most hazardous undertaking. This he readily promised, as I felt sure he would, and even with more alacrity than could have been counted on.

" I shall simply revel in being your comrade in this affair, or humble servant, if you like," he said heartily. " I'm sick of hanging and mooning about, taking pot-shots at birds and vermin, with an occasional wink at a stupid grinning peasant girl. Ah, my dear fellow, I've been in the swim, and know what it is ; slow enough, Heaven knows, at the best ; I've gone under through my own folly, and if you knew what the feeling is, the sense of failure and degradation, you wouldn't wonder that the excitement of a business like this is like brandy to a knocked-out man. I was thinking I'd have soon to get up a shine on my own account, but this will suit me far better ; we have the merit of a decent action at our backs and are not a pair of idiots joining in a scrimmage out of sheer

devilry. Why, hang it! man, there's a touch of the old-time chivalry about the racket, with brainwork thrown in. Yes; I'm your man, to see you through this little frolic, and be thankful for the chance."

We talked over the plan I had laid and the necessary preparations. The delay kept me in a disagreeable state of chafing and suspense, but we both voted it to be unavoidable. To have any chance of success, the attempt had to be made by night, and that night it was impracticable. Our walk had taken us near the entrance to the tunnel.

"I don't know what it is," I said, "but now the way is found, I feel I cannot keep from that poor girl's prison."

"You are going through?" Strode asked. "Will you let me come with you? I may as well get the hang of the place."

With the half-formed intention, I had provided myself with a supply of light. We let ourselves down into the passage and set forward towards the Monastery, scarcely purposing, perhaps, to reach the other end. But we groped on and on, Strode often making me smile by his characteristic comments and ejaculations. Neither of us suggested turning back, until some twenty minutes' uneasy progress brought us to the steps leading to the trap-door. Here we stayed awhile.

"So we are actually within the walls of that cursed den of iniquity, are we?" Strode observed. "Look here! We've got our revolvers; I'm game, if you are, to carry the place by surprise and hurry these hellish Johnnies to the warm quarters that are waiting for them."

I knew that was sheer madness, so checked his ardour. At the same time, however, this dare-devil ally of mine gave me a very pleasant feeling of confidence.

"Before we return," I said, "I have a good mind to run up and see that all is yet well. It is worth while as we are so near."

Strode laughed and nodded sagaciously. "All right, mein Herr. Can't say I see the utility of the move since you don't fall in with my suggestion, but then probably utility is not altogether your motive. I'll wait for you here. Don't make a fool of yourself, that's all."

I was already up the steps, and in a few seconds had passed through the trap-door. It was pitch dark, but the way was familiar now, and I found the passage without difficulty. If I expected to see the light at the farther end I was disappointed; all was dark. I groped my way along on tip-toe till the wall against my hand came to an end at the entrance of the room into which the prison window looked. All was dark here too. I crept to the window but could see nothing, hear nothing. If there had been a light in the room some indication would have been visible, even though the curtain were carefully drawn across the window. No. I was satisfied that the room was in darkness. And yet it was almost too early for the prisoner to have retired for the night. The darkness and silence might mean nothing, and yet they filled me with a horribly uncomfortable surmise. I stood for a while in a state of indecision. But I could not bring myself to turn back in that spirit of uncertainty. I was committed to the business, my whole heart and soul were in it now, and the risk was nothing to me. The idea that I had that afternoon perhaps missed a chance, even if ever so desperate, of rescuing the prisoner maddened me. Of course all might be well and my anxiety groundless, but looking at the situation as calmly as I could it was impossible, knowing Furello and his creatures, not to fear.

With no exact purpose except to look about for

what chance might show me, I made my way from the room and proceeded to explore the long passage further. It was an utterly rash and foolish move, but the impulse was strong upon me, and the very stillness of the place led me on. I ventured now to strike a light which showed me a distant door, towards which I hastened. Contrary to my expectations it was unlocked. I passed through it quietly; still all was darkness, and the same oppressive silence. Another lighted match showed me I was in a large basement room with a flagged floor, green with disuse. A door was opposite; I crossed and opened it. Darkness still. But another match revealed a flight of steps. I crept up and passed through yet another door. Then, by the aid of my light, I recognized my whereabouts. I was in a kind of inner courtyard on which I had lighted in my search the night before. To find my way to the great hall was now an easy matter, though risky enough.

Arrived there, I stood awhile and listened. The same death-like stillness pervaded the place. What light from without penetrated through the high, dark coloured windows was just enough to show me indistinctly the objects around. I took out my revolver and crept to the stairs, then suddenly I stopped, hearing voices. Men's voices, indistinct, and at some distance. I turned aside, drawing stealthily, yard by yard, nearer to the sound. I dared not waste time, fearing what rash thing Strode might do if I stayed too long. The hangings on the walls helped me now as they had done before; a man could, with care, move along behind them without much fear of detection. A little farther on I seemed quite close to the voices, and recognized the Count's; but the direction from which it came puzzled me, until I discovered a kind of grating or loophole in the door of the room from which the sound proceeded. I was preparing

to look through, when suddenly I started, thunder-struck. The Count's voice had ceased and another replied, a voice which I knew at once, the most dreaded in that kingdom—Rallenstein's. As I recovered from the momentary shock of something more than surprise, I looked through the grating. Yes; there he was, the terrible Chancellor, sitting back in a great easy chair, at his side a small table with wine and fruit, and before him Furello, standing with hands clasped behind him, the fingers, as I noticed, for his back was towards me, working as with passion or strong excitement.

If the Count's face (which I could not see) was ruffled, the Chancellor's was as impassive and inscrutable as ever.

"You will hardly persuade me, my dear Count," he was saying in that smooth masked voice which I knew so well, "that you have blundered through stupidity. You are no fool—or you would not be here—at all." The sinister significance with which he spoke the last words was indescribable. "And," he went on, "I tell you frankly, I am far from satisfied."

Furello drew himself up and spoke more quietly now. "In matters of this sort at least I am not fool enough to look for explicit instructions. Your Excellency has been accustomed to convey your wishes in hints. Acting on them I have done your work faithfully. There are words better left unsaid, wishes better——"

"Pfui, Count!" Rallenstein interrupted with a wave of the hand. "You are trifling. You should know well enough what my real instructions were. I told you expressly the girl might be wanted. That it might be necessary to produce her."

"At that time. But the time is past. Surely it was inconceivable that you really wished her kept alive. Who could have foreseen what you have just

told me, the secret marriage of Prince Theodor?"

"That is all no business of yours," the Chancellor returned, with a momentary lapse from his usual bland manner to a sneer that was almost brutal. "When I saved your neck from the gallows-rope, it was on the understanding that you should yield me implicit obedience, that the life I gave you was to do my will. You are not required to think for yourself, and you had best beware how you take upon yourself to do so. Let me remind you that that rope with the ugly knot in it still dangles. Enough! I do not trouble to concern myself with your motives—oh, do not protest"—for the other had made a deprecating gesture—"I am no fool either, and know men do not thwart my will for nothing—for nothing. So! And the girl is dead. She is dead?"

Such a searching look, so fierce, so threatening, so piercing, that I wondered how the Count had nerve to answer quietly. "Three days ago."

"Ha! And buried—where?"

"In the wood, by the grave of Herr Pfarrer Gersdorff. If your Excellency wishes to be satisfied——"

"I am satisfied, mein Graf," Rallenstein said sharply, "that you have played me a knavish trick; and I know not yet that it has been with impunity. Recollect that an unnecessary crime is the worst of blunders."

"Not so unnecessary, Excellency," the Count protested as the other tossed off a glass of wine as dismissing the subject. "One of my reasons for the haste by which I regret to have offended you was that our meddling Englishman has been here."

Rallenstein nodded. "I know it. Now there, my dear Count——"

There was significance enough in the aposiopesis to make me shudder. The Count laughed; he was evidently beginning to feel easier.

"We made a good attempt," he replied grimly. "But the fellow wriggled out of our hands somehow. Bleisst says he must be own brother to the devil himself."

The conversation, if flattering, had become less momentous. I had heard enough; and the thought of Strode urged me to retreat while I could do so with safety. I slipped back to the inner hall, and thence found my way to the entrance of the long passage. As I was hurrying along this, I suddenly came into collision with some one, and next instant was seized very prettily by the throat. Luckily the pressure left just room enough to allow me to get out the word "Strode!" when to my double relief the fingers relaxed, and the Englishman's voice said:

"A million apologies, my dear fellow, only I had to make sure. I was coming after you, as the love-scene appeared to have lasted long enough. Hope I haven't hurt you?"

It was no place for conversation, and it was not until we were safely through the trap-door that I stayed to tell what I had heard.

"You don't think the girl has come to any harm?" Strode inquired as we began to grope our way outwards.

"I have my fears about it. If this visit of Rallenstein's has taken the Count by surprise, there is no telling to what extremities panic may have driven him. On the other hand, he may simply have hidden her away more securely. He said she had been murdered three days ago."

"The black scoundrel!"

"Whereas, we know she was alive this afternoon. I have hope there."

"And that is the most likely thing to have happened. I'd stake my life on hers up to now. Only there is no time to be lost, if we have to take this devil's den by assault to-morrow."

"Let's hope force won't be necessary," I said. "It would be simple madness, however justifiable. Much will depend on the length of Rallenstein's stay."

"That won't be long," Strode replied confidently. "Put yourself in the old Jaguar's place and ask yourself how long you'd feel inclined to stay in that rural Chamber of Horrors."

So discussing the chances of the situation, we at length reached the entrance, and without further incident returned to our inn.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

WE OUTSTRIP OUR FORTUNE

NEXT morning I packed a small valise and paid the landlord, telling him we were going on a shooting expedition to a district some twenty miles off, whence the time of our return might be uncertain. Then we set off for Carlzig. Our first business there was to buy a carriage and a pair of fast horses. This was not an easy matter, and it was some hours before we found just what we wanted. But at last we got hold of two good strong-winded animals and a serviceable light carriage, somewhat like an old-fashioned *calèche*, our pretext being that we intended them for a driving tour through the country. We then laid in a stock of provisions, bought another revolver each, with a good supply of cartridges, and having provided ourselves with the necessary tools for the removal of the bars, we were ready. We had an early dinner, and afterwards drove quietly out of the town. Strode, who was going to be coachman, had mounted the box, and I drove inside so as to avoid observation as much as possible. By an indirect route and at an easy pace we made our way to a spot we had settled upon, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the entrance to the underground passage. Here, in a wild piece of woodland approached by a rough grass road, the carriage

could stay with very little chance of attracting attention even from the Count's spies. We had agreed that I should go through to the Monastery alone, for if the prisoner should be in the same room there would probably, unless we were interrupted, be no difficulty in my effecting her release single-handed; if, on the other hand, I could not find her, or any unexpected difficulty should arise, I was to hurry back for Strode.

It was now dusk—almost dark. I put the tools in my pocket and hastened impatiently to the entrance of the passage. I had bought a small lantern in Carlzig, and with this protection for my light was able to make much quicker progress, especially as the way was now familiar. I reached the steps and trap-door; left my lantern at the bottom and passed through. Then, as I drew near, a horrible fear came upon me that a few steps would show me the disappointment to which I might be doomed. I scarcely dared approach the doorway where my worst fears might in an instant be confirmed. The momentary weakness was overcome and I peered out into the passage. To my intense joy and relief a faint glimmer of light fell across it at half its length. In a few seconds I was by the window. Approaching cautiously, I heard no sound of voices; the curtains were drawn slightly apart, I peeped through and saw Fräulein Asta sitting there alone. A tap on the glass brought her joyfully to the window. In reply to my sign of inquiry she nodded that all was safe, so without delay I set to work on the screws that held the bars. They had evidently been recently put in and yielded readily to the wrench. One after another the bars were turned down while the prisoner kept watch by the door. In a few minutes every obstacle was removed; I beckoned, and the Fräulein ran to the window and opened it.

"Is all safe?" were my first words.

"Yes," she answered. "I do not think Telka will return, and the Count"—she gave a little shudder—"is away. Oh, I have feared!"

"And I too. But we will talk of that presently when you are safe. Quick, now; bring a chair. So. Now let me lift you through."

Her arms were round my neck, and I had little difficulty in drawing her through the open window. "So far good," I said; "let me replace the bars to throw them off the track."

The delay was risky, but I judged it worth while to prevent the prisoner's manner of escape from being too obvious. Pursuit would be certain in any case, and this precaution might gain us time.

The bars were soon in position. "Now, Fräulein, quick! Let me hold your arm and guide you. The way is not easy."

I led her along the dark passage and so to the trap-door. "Once down here I trust we shall be safe," I said, lifting it. The girl hesitated a moment—the descent was not inviting—then, holding my hand, crept down. I took up my lantern and went on in front, for there was no room for us to walk abreast. The dark, dripping, noisome gallery must have seemed horrible to the girl, but she kept bravely on at my heels, I guiding and encouraging her as best I could, considering how hurried our progress had to be. "We are nearly at the end now," I was able at length to say, and then we began the ascent which brought us to the entrance.

Bidding her stay a moment while I reconnoitred, I scrambled warily up till my head was just enough above ground to look about. All seemed safe, so pulling myself out of the hole, I lifted my companion after me, and we set off for the place where the carriage was waiting.

As we came in sight of Strode he waved his hand joyfully.

"This is better than I dared to hope," was his excited greeting.

The girl gave him a grateful nod and smile—there was no time for words as we hurried into the carriage—the good fellow sprang up and set his horses going as fast as he dared down the bumpy lane. In ten minutes, however, the jolting ceased; we had struck the high road, along which we began to bolt at a rare pace.

I now had time to notice that my companion was evidently feeling the unusual exertions and excitement she had just gone through. She lay back half-fainting. I hastily opened a flask of wine; this revived her. She was a plucky girl, and in a few minutes had so far recovered as to be able to laugh at her weakness and begin to chat.

"I was in the Monastery again last night," I said.

"Again! Why did you come?" she asked.

"I could not keep away. The feeling that you were in such danger was too strong for me, and I wanted, in case of accidents, to show Strode the way."

Perhaps she felt intuitively that there had been a more strongly impelling reason behind the others. Anyhow her look was more than grateful as she said:

"It was rash of you to venture again. If I had known you were there I should have been terribly anxious. For they took me away to a distant part of the building."

"You know why?"

"Rallenstein had come unexpectedly."

"I know."

"You know?" she cried in surprise.

"Yes. I saw him."

"Herr Tyrrell! What fearful risks you run."

"I admit, Fräulein, it was foolish, since it was scarcely fair to you. But at least I heard some interesting news."

"Tell me."

"That Prince Theodor cannot marry your Princess."

"Cannot?"

"For he is secretly married already. So it follows that these ghastly political murders have all been unnecessary. There is every reason now why you should live."

"Ah!"

"But unfortunately you died three days ago."

"I died—three days ago!"

"So Count Furello told his Excellency."

She thought a moment. "Ah, yes, I understand."

"So it seems to me, Fräulein, that now it is only the Count you have to fear."

She gave a little shudder. "And that is bad enough. But at least I would rather a million times have his hate than his love. Ah, I cannot bear to think of it, yet I must tell you. About half an hour after you had gone yesterday the Count came to my prison room. He told me that to let me live was as much as his life was worth. His own risk was so great that only upon one condition would he face it. Of course you guess the condition; that I would marry him; otherwise that day must be my last. 'Remember,' he urged in his smooth hateful voice, 'you are already dead in theory. The grave is dug for you in the wood outside; in ten minutes from the moment I give the word you will be lying in it. It is painful for me to have to tell you this, but my life is precious too; I cannot afford to risk it unless I have a stake to play for.'

"I pretended to be in great fear and distress,

which perhaps was not all pretence—but for your brave discovery what should I have felt? I begged for time; I could not die, I was too young for that, and yet—how could I love him at once? You see what a hypocrite I can be. He was rejoiced, when he saw signs of my yielding, at the success of his appeal. He went down on his knees and vowed he would gladly risk his life for one loving look from me, that he would be my slave—I need not recapitulate the hateful scene. Happily it was interrupted, just as I was beginning to fear I could not stave off his love-making without arousing his suspicions. The girl Telka came in; he turned upon her, furious at the interruption. She said to him under her breath, yet loud enough in her flurry for me to catch the words, ‘Rallenstein is here!’ He turned grey at the news, and his face changed to the index of the man he really is.”

“I can well imagine it,” I said. “It was a critical moment for you.”

“Yes. He turned upon me in panic with such a look in his eyes, a look in which fear, desperation, irresolution, cruelty, and what he would call love were all mingled. Ah! it was horrible. Then he took Telka out of the room, and the suspense of the next few minutes, when I was left alone, was so fearful that I almost fainted with terror. At last the door opened and Telka came back, followed by a wretch named Bleisst—.”

“I know. The Count’s head villain.”

“If you know him you will realize what my feelings were at the sight. Then, indeed, I was sure that my last moment had come. My heart almost stopped with terror; oh, it was awful, the thought of having to die like that, there in that horrible place, and just as the hope of life and liberty had come to me. Telka came close up and spoke to me. I was so sick and

beside myself with fear that at first I did not comprehend her words. I cried out in my agony for mercy, for the Count—fancy my wishing his presence! The girl spoke again, entreating more plainly, and I understood her then. I was to be removed to a hiding-place in another part of the Monastery, for the Chancellor was to suppose me dead. No harm would befall me unless he discovered my whereabouts; everything would depend upon my keeping quiet and obeying orders. I mistrusted them——”

“Naturally. No other feeling in that place could be possible.”

“No, And Bleisst is the very incarnation of treachery. Still I could only obey. He told me pleasantly he had orders to shoot me on the spot if I resisted. So I went with them, Telka leading the way, Bleisst following me, pistol in hand. I felt like a condemned prisoner on my way to the scaffold, but it was not to be as bad as I feared. We went on for a long while, through dark passages, across vault-like chambers, till at length we ascended to a room on an upper floor. Here Bleisst went to the fire-place and unscrewed one of a row of knobs in the woodwork. Into the hole thus discovered he inserted a key. On turning this the jamb of the mantel revolved, disclosing a narrow aperture just wide enough for a person to pass through. Telka entered this, bidding me follow. I went in and found myself in a small chamber not much larger than this carriage.

“‘You are to stay here till the Chancellor is safely gone,’ Telka said. ‘We shall bring you your meals as usual. It is uncomfortable, but it is necessary, and you have nothing to fear.’

“I had a great deal to fear; my imagination told me that this might be my living grave. What better way to get rid of me than to leave me here to starve

and die ? The girl went, warning me that any attempt to escape would seal my fate. She is an extraordinary creature, of a nationality unknown even to herself; the daughter of a spy ; she seems to have lived everywhere and to know everything. I have always thought she has hated me under her pretence of sympathy. So the door shut upon me and I was left alone with my thoughts ; you may fancy how anxious and bitter they were."

" In the idea that our plan was rendered futile."

" Yes ; I thought of you, and of all your courage, and the danger you had faced, and how they were to go for nothing. But there I was, helpless, well-nigh hopeless again. I would have given anything to have been able to send you a message, but that was impossible. Here was a prison within a prison. I stayed there in darkness for a long while—hours, it seemed ; at last the muffled sound of the slowly opening door brought my terrors back to me. It was Telka with a lantern and some refreshments. The sight of this rejoiced me as evidence that the fear of starvation was groundless. I could even eat a morsel and drink some wine.

" ' His Excellency is still here,' she said. ' Directly he is well on his way you shall be released.'

" She gave me one of her cunning smiles and disappeared.

" So I passed the night trying to get sleep on some rugs which had been provided for my bed. In the morning Telka brought my breakfast.

" ' Courage !' she said. ' His Excellency is about to start, and your release will come soon. It is lucky he did not suspect you were lying here so snug.' She laughed, and left me without another word. But in about an hour she returned and beckoned me to come out. Bleisst was waiting, and they conducted me back to my former prison room. My joy at getting there

with the hope of escape was so great that I feared Telka's sharp eyes might notice it. I feigned to be so upset and ill by the night I had passed that I could only go to bed. By this I hoped to avoid a visit from the Count, and certainly I was left to myself all day. Towards evening Telka came in and told me that the Count had accompanied Rallenstein from the Geierthal that morning, but was expected back that night. I still pretended to be very ill, and could see that the girl was quite unsuspecting of any idea of escape being so near at hand. I kept her with me for some time, then, as the critical hour approached, begged her to leave me for a good long sleep. Left alone I made ready for my departure, and the rest you know. Ah, those terrible days! Can I ever thank my preserver enough for all you have risked for me?"

In listening to her story I had not noticed that for some time past a storm had been gathering. It now burst over us with a violence peculiar to those regions of mountainous woodland. The words deprecating her gratitude, which was, however, delightful enough to me, were drowned in a terrific thunderclap which burst over us. The rain came down so violently, the wind swept round us in such gusts, that we became concerned for Strode's welfare, exposed as he was to their full fury. But he returned a cheery, "All right! Don't worry about me," to my entreaty that he would come into shelter. There was one thing, however, that the plucky fellow could hardly battle with, and that was the intense darkness that had enveloped us. Not to be stopped altogether, he jumped down from his seat, ran to the horses' heads and led them on as well as he could. Our progress was now necessarily slow, but it was something to keep moving at all, and Strode was resolved that we should not stop. We watched anxiously for some indication

of a break in the storm, but its fury continued unabated, indeed it seemed to increase.

"This is madness, Strode!" I shouted. "Make the horses fast and come inside."

Not he. The rain would not melt him, he was determined to get us across the frontier by the morning, and we were yet miles from the little town where we had planned to change horses. So we went on for a while in the full pelting of the storm. Suddenly a great flash of lightning seemed to sweep the road just in front of us. The horses reared in terror, then swerved, and, before Strode could prevent it, one side of the carriage sank into a ditch at the roadside.

"Sit still!" Strode cried. But I had jumped out to lighten the vehicle. Each taking a horse's head, we soon had the carriage on the level again. "We can't go on in this," I expostulated. As I spoke another great flash showed us a house standing near the road a few yards farther on. I called Strode's attention to it, and insisted that we should seek refuge there till the storm was over; and, as the result proved, it was lucky I overruled him. Between us we led the horses up to the building, which proved to be a deserted and dilapidated wayside lodge.

"At least there is perfect shelter here," I said as I assisted the Fräulein to alight and hurried her into the tumble-down place.

A ruinous shed stood beside the house and this afforded some sort of shelter for the horses. We gave them corn and made them as comfortable as we could. Then I took some food and a bottle of wine from the carriage, and ran back to the house. By the aid of the lantern we were just preparing to make the best of our wretched quarters when Strode rushed in with a more perturbed look than I had

thought him capable of. He caught up the lantern and extinguished it, checking my exclamation with,—

“Quick! Help me to bar the door. They are after us! Hark! They are outside!”

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CHAPTER XXXV

THE ATTACK

I RUSHED with Strode to the doorway, and for a moment could discern nothing in the intense darkness. But just as I was beginning to hope it might be a false alarm a flash of lightning showed me a man on horseback in the road some twenty yards away. It was hardly probable that he saw us in the same instant; anyhow, we could hear no voice above the raging of the storm. Without another moment's delay we set ourselves to close the door, which hung to its post by a single hinge.

"Stay, for Heaven's sake!" Strode cried suddenly. "The pistols and cartridges are in the carriage. Without them we are dead men."

In another instant he had forced the door a little way open again and dashed out. It was an anxious twenty seconds for me, but in that time he was back with our second revolvers and the ammunition bags.

"Now," he said, "take the Fräulein upstairs while I barricade this as well as I can."

She had heard him, and, as I turned, was already climbing the crazy steps that led to the upper floor.

"It is terrible," she said, trying, as I could see, to master her agitation, "if all you have done for me is to end in failure."

"Let us hope not," I replied. "Strode may be mistaken. It is hardly conceivable——"

My words were cut short by a shout and a loud beating on the door. I ran to the window of the front upper room and looked down. The storm was now gradually passing away; the intense darkness was relieved sufficiently for me to be able to make out the forms of several men standing before the house. That they were Count Furello and his followers there could be now little doubt. How they had tracked and overtaken us so quickly was surprising; but there they were, and we could only be thankful that an accident had given us a shelter in which to stand at bay. Had we remained in the carriage a few minutes longer they would have surrounded us and we should not have had a chance.

As I drew back from the window I heard the Count's voice cry:

"Come out, you foul Englishman, before I fetch and hang you."

This pleasant invitation had scarcely left his lips when a shot rang out followed by a cry. In the hope that the leader of the gang had been accounted for, I sprang to the window only to hear to my disappointment the same hateful voice giving order to his men to fall back.

"Settled one of them, Tyrrell!" Strode called up to me. "We'll have some rare sport here."

I was glad to think our enemies were one the fewer, and I sent a chance shot on my own account after them to hasten their retreat to a respectful distance.

But I could not remain there leaving Strode the impossible task of defending all the weak spots in the lower floor.

"You will not be afraid to stay in this room alone, Fräulein," I said, with probably more confidence than I felt. "I must back up Strode downstairs. Between us there is little doubt we can keep

these ruffians out and drive them off, but Strode cannot do it alone. You will trust us and not fear?"

She shook her head with a little shudder. I had, in the stress of the moment, laid my hand on her shoulder. Suddenly, before I could turn to leave her she flung her arms impulsively round my neck and kissed me twice. "Darling! my own darling!" she cried, her voice trembling with excitement and fear. "If you are to die for me you shall know that I am grateful, that I love you."

Her cheek was pressed to mine. I whispered back my love in her ear, the love I had known, but had not dared to show. Strode called me.

"I must go now," I said. "If I am to die I have lived my life in this minute."

We kissed again, as though it were the last kiss on earth, and I ran down to Strode, my head whirling with joy. Perhaps to him, who had rather anticipated the situation, my delay in coming to his call was not surprising.

"If you don't look alive," he said reproachfully, "we shall be taken and strung up, or whatever your friends' favourite method may be of getting rid of people who annoy them. I dropped one of the brutes and they have drawn off in consequence. Their obvious line now is to attack us on two or more sides, flank and rear; our game is to pick them off one by one till they are not more than two to one. I am only praying for the chance of a pot-shot at that scoundrelly Count."

All the time he was muttering thus to me we were busily examining the ground floor of the cottage and noting its vulnerable points. Luckily the place was small and plainly built. A narrow passage ran from the front door to the back, having on its one side simply the outer wall and the staircase, on the

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other the two lower rooms. As luck would have it, the rusty key was in the door of the front room. This with some little difficulty we were able to lock on the outside; consequently all fear of an entry through the front window was obviated. We had now simply to guard the two entrances and the window of the back room.

So we stood, back to back, a revolver in each hand, grimly waiting the enemy's next move. There was little doubt that an attempt would be made at the back this time. We could not be certain how many men were with the Count; the danger was that a combined rush might be made and a simultaneous entry effected through door and window. From our stand in the doorway of the room we should probably account for at least two of our assailants, but after that numbers would tell at close quarters and our chance would not be worth much.

Realizing this, I made a whispered suggestion to Strode that we should abandon our present position and hold the staircase against them.

"No," he answered, "we must keep them out as long as we can. We might hold the upper floor for a week, but once let these devils get into the place and the odds would be on their setting fire to it. They can't do that from outside, thanks to the rain."

I saw at once the likelihood of that danger, and what an excellent stroke it would be to end Furello's difficulty. Presently Strode touched me, and I turned, on the alert.

He only nodded towards the window. Something was moving; we could only guess what. Strode covered it with his revolver and waited. Then he fired. His shot seemed to be the signal for a regular volley which was poured into the room, but without touching us in our cover. "Look out!" Strode

whispered. "They are bound to come now. Keep the passage!"

Sure enough, as the words were spoken there was a rush from both window and door. We blazed away, each with both weapons, right and left, since anything like deliberate aim was impossible. Our fire was returned; then our assailants seemed to fall back, but we could tell nothing clearly. In the midst of my excitement I heard Strode ask:

"Are you hit?"

"No," I replied.

"I am," he said, "but it is not much. We can't hold this; the fun's all right but too risky for the girl. We must take to the upper regions and chance it."

He was slipping in fresh cartridges as he spoke. "Now," he said, "bang away, and make a rush for it. Once up the stairs we are safe."

Through the hanging smoke in the passage nothing could be seen. I sent a shot through it and made a spring for the stairs. Strode was on my heels; our fire was not returned, and we gained comparative safety. As we reached the landing we saw Asta rush back to the room in terror, locking the door.

"It is all right, Fräulein," I cried. "We are both safe so far."

At my voice the door was unfastened, and my love stood before me.

"Thank Heaven!" she said. "I have been nearly mad with fear. I felt sure all must be over with you both. It is terrible that you should go through all this for me."

"Asta!" I whispered reproachfully. "It is only for you we fear, dearest."

Strode had evidently heard her. "We like it," he observed with a pre-occupied cheeriness, for he

was hanging over the rails of the staircase keeping a sharp look-out. "It suits me exactly. If only we could get you, Fräulein, away snugly, it might go on till this time to-morrow, eh, Tyrrell?"

I went to him. "Your wound, Strode?"

"Hush, don't bother about it," he answered. "It is only a graze on the shoulder. Now, what are these devils about?" he muttered, "I can't see them, can you?"

Neither could I, so I went back to reconnoitre from the windows. At the back of the house, in what had been once the garden, a movement was perceptible. Men were stirring, but so cautiously that nothing more was to be made out. I told Strode of this, and he suggested my sending a shot or two at them.

"It can't do any harm, with our stock of cartridges, and you might bring one of the brutes down, the Count for choice, if that isn't too much to hope for."

I returned to the window and promptly acted on this advice. My second shot I had reason to think took effect, for something like a smothered cry reached my ears. Then the Count's voice gave an order, upon which, so far as I could see, four men made a stealthy rush towards the house.

"Look out!" I called to Strode. "They are upon us!"

He sprang back to the top of the stairs as I joined him. For some seconds we heard nothing; then a slight noise, a foot accidentally striking against some object, gave warning that the enemy was near. Strode waited a little, then cautiously leaned forward and sent down a shot. It was returned.

"Blaze away, man! They are on the stairs," he cried; and we did blaze away into the unseen.

A dead silence followed. Peering round into the darkness we waited for the next move. Then

we heard men stirring beneath. The slight noise of stealthy movement went on for some time; occasionally we could detect a whisper, that was all. Suddenly there came a glimmer of light, but it showed us nothing. Instead of dying away as I expected, it increased, and then we knew what we feared was about to happen.

"Are they firing the place?"

A crackle of burning wood gave the answer; the light increased and spread. The danger now was critical.

"We can't stand this," I said. "The old place will burn like matchwood. We must make a rush for it."

Strode muttered something between his teeth—a not very flattering comment on Count Furello and his methods.

"If we hadn't to think of her," he said, jerking his head towards the room with the closed door, "we could sally out and meet these beasts, taking our chance. But with her we can't. Stay here, while I go and see what I can do. Nonsense! I'm the man to take the risk, not you." For I had begun to hold him back and demur.

He threw me off and crept down the stairs. He stayed looking over the rail for a while, then came back to me.

"I think," he said, "with fair luck I can put the fire out. There's not much alight, and our friends seem to have drawn off to see the fun. One chap is lying dead down there, so what with the others we've peppered there can't be many left. Anyway, if I come across them there will be at least one fewer, if next moment is my last. I'm no good, so don't bother about me. Think of the girl; it is our duty to get her out of this at any cost."

So saying, he stole down again. At the bottom of the staircase he stayed a moment, then, darting forward, disappeared from my sight. Next I heard a banging, as though he were trying to beat out the flames; then two pistol shots in rapid succession, followed by a laugh of exultation from Strode. Doubtful whether this should betoken good luck or bad, I called down to know if he was all right.

"Very much all right!" was the cheering answer. "I guess we're safe now."

On that I ventured to leave my post, and ran down to him. He was kicking and stamping out the remains of the nearly extinguished fire. The old wood-work had been set alight in several places, and the door was half consumed.

"I don't fancy the Herr Graf will trouble us much more to-night," he laughed. "Pity I missed him, though. Anyhow I put a bullet through some tender part of that other scoundrel's anatomy, if howling goes for anything. I say! Our potshots have gone home much better than we could have hoped. Strikes me we've tucked up most of them."

"Our luck——" I began, when, crack! a bullet whistled between us and went through the partition wall with a sharp plug.

"Whew! That was handy!" Strode laughed, as by a common impulse we dropped on our hands and knees below the line of fire. "Look to the passage," he whispered; "don't let them cut us off."

I crept to the door and sent a couple of haphazard shots out into the night. Strode crawled to the window and fired. Then, detecting no sign of the enemy, it occurred to me that I ought to keep an eye on the floor above. Scarcely had the thought passed through my mind when I heard a cry, the

door of the upstairs room flung open, and Asta calling me. I rushed up, meeting her on the stairs, and on into the room.

"They are climbing to the window," she said, as I passed.

The room was empty. I ran to the window and looked out. No one was to be seen; it was now pitch dark again. In the pauses of the wind I fancied I could hear a movement in the shrubs between the house and the road. I did not hesitate to send a shot in that direction. As the report died away, a laugh followed and a voice called out with startling unexpectedness.

"Well aimed, Herr Engländer!"

It was Furello. I made no reply, but waited. Then out of the darkness came the vile voice again.

"Herr Tyrrell! Herr Tyrrell!" it cried.

"Good-evening, Count!" I replied mockingly.

"Good-night, Herr Tyrrell," he returned. "My compliments. You are a clever fellow, for an Englishman. But you will need to be much cleverer when next we meet. So look to yourself and make the most of the few hours of life we leave you. *Auf wiedersehen!*"

The metallic voice had rung out so that not a word escaped me. Then the wind dying fitfully away let me hear the sound of retreating hoofs, and I knew that for the time we were safe. I turned to find Asta standing behind me.

"Victory! The attack is repulsed and the siege raised," I cried exultingly.

Her animated face showed that she had caught something of my confident spirit. But now that the immediate danger was past she was more reserved, and my respect bade me be content with simply the token of love and gratitude that her eyes gave me. It was not for me to profit by a

moment of exaltation, when life and death trembling in the balance had hurried an avowal to lips which a few seconds might have closed for ever.

I half expected to see that Strode had followed me; as he did not appear I shouted to him, but to my surprise got no answer. In alarm I ran down, to find him stretched insensible on the floor where I had left him.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

RESTORATION

My distress and grief at the sight were beyond description. That the brave fellow who had been such a tower of strength and to whom we owed certainly our lives should have fallen in the moment of victory caused me the keenest grief I had ever felt. But happily it was not so bad as I feared. He was alive, his pulse was distinctly beating, so I rushed upstairs for a light and the brandy. On returning with Asta we found that poor Strode's coat and shirt were saturated with blood. The sight, though alarming enough, gave me hope that he had merely fainted, and this proved to be the case. The wound in his shoulder, which he had in those critical moments laughed off as a mere graze, was deep if not serious, and had bled profusely. The man's pluck and grit had been wonderful to enable him to fight on as he did, laughing and jesting, under such pain and weakness. In a few minutes our efforts at restoration were successful, and I think the most gratifying sight of my life was that of those brave grey eyes slowly opening.

"It's all right, Strode, dear fellow! Why didn't you say you were hurt?"

For answer he laughed and tried to rise, but the weakness was too great. "I'm all right directly,"

he murmured. "Don't worry about me. The Fräulein——"

She was busy contriving a bandage for his wound. "We are all quite safe," she said cheerily. "You must keep quiet. Mr. Tyrrell is going to drive now and you will finish the journey in the carriage with me."

He smiled. "What are the brutes doing? Hope you hammered them?"

I told him how they had been beaten off, and the news seemed to do him even more good than the brandy I was giving him.

We washed and dressed his wound to the best of our skill; then, as haste was everything, I went out to prepare for our departure. I had taken but a few steps outside the house when I stumbled over the body of a man. He was evidently dead, and from the shortness of his stature I judged him to be the one who had dug the grave in the wood.

I went on to the shed where we had left our carriage and horses. As I expected, our pursuers had done their best to deprive us of the means of flight by shooting our poor animals. The intention had, however, been very imperfectly carried out. Both horses lay on the ground, dead, as I thought, but it turned out that only one had been killed. The other on my approach began to kick and struggle. When released from the harness which kept it down beside its dead companion it struggled to its feet whinnying with terror. I did my best to soothe it while looking for its wound. None was to be seen and I soon convinced myself that by some lucky accident the animal was practically unhurt. So far good; still, one horse would not be of much use on those rough heavy roads. I wondered whether our pursuers had left any of their own steeds behind them; there would assuredly be more than one with no

rider to carry back to the Geierthal. I ran into the house, explained the situation, and told them I was going to hunt about for a second horse.

I argued that when the party dismounted to advance and attack us they would naturally have tied up their horses at the roadside near by, and it was just probable that thereabouts one might be found. The common horses of those parts, such as the Count's men would ride, were hardly valuable enough for their loss to be any great consideration, and if Bleisst had really been wounded, his chief would have enough to do to get him home without the trouble of trying to lead three or four horses as well. No doubt they would have been turned loose, but I might get hold of one for all that. My conjecture proved correct. I had gone but a short distance in my search when suddenly there was the noise of a rush just in front of me, and a great dark object sprang up into the road. It was an exciting moment, with the full suspicion of a trap in my mind. With my revolver ready I stood still and watched. The horse had trotted off nervously; he now stopped and gave a low neigh. Feeling pretty sure that he was alone I went forward cautiously. It was risky, but as it turned out I was safe enough. Having been used to horses all my life I knew how to give this fellow confidence and get hold of him. Then I led him to the carriage, put on him the dead one's harness, and all was ready for a start.

Fräulein Asta was greatly relieved when I returned with an account of my success, since every moment we delayed obviously increased our danger. Happily, poor Strode seemed much easier and was in quite high spirits. Between us we bore him out to the carriage, making him as comfortable as pos-

sible; then I led the horses to the road, mounted the box, and we resumed our journey.

I have often thought since that it would have been some satisfaction to have found out how many of the Count's ruffians we really did send to their account, and no doubt had not my love been with us I would have risked a ten minutes' search to satisfy myself. As it was we had to be content with the inference that the leader would not have abandoned the attack had not the party been well-nigh annihilated.

The fear of immediate pursuit was now removed, still no time was to be lost, and I kept my oddly-matched pair swinging along at the best pace I could get out of them, resolved that nothing but dire necessity should cause another halt before we cleared the frontier. That—the nearest road out of the country—was all we could think of then; it would be time enough to determine on our after destination when we were once safe beyond the limit of the Jaguar's spring.

So we pushed on through the night, on and on till blackness turned by imperceptible degrees to grey, dark at first, then lighter and lighter till the red streaks of dawn at length made the landscape clear. On and on we rattled, through still sleeping villages, becoming more wakeful as we and time went on, past yawning peasants driving forth their primitive ox-wains and ploughs, on and on, every mile making our hearts lighter and raising our hopes as it brought us nearer to the frontier. Stode was bearing the rough journey better than we could have hoped; a simple wound to a man in good health and spirits is not, after all, a very serious matter.

At length, while the morning was yet young, we came in sight of the town of Bradenfort, which we knew to be but five or six miles from the frontier.

Our jaded horses were now at the last stage of fatigue, and I made up my mind that we must risk a stoppage to procure fresh ones. After all, that danger was less than the otherwise inevitable one of a breakdown, and the time we should lose over the business would be made up afterwards on the road. Accordingly, after entering the town in sorry fashion, we pulled up at a likely inn, where I made an exceedingly bad bargain for a new pair of horses, leaving the others as a part—a very insignificant part—of the price. But we were now able to bowl out of the town in refreshing style, and knew that, bar accidents, we were safe. In a short hour we were at the frontier, had safely passed the barrier, and, with intense relief, found ourselves beyond the jurisdiction of his grim Excellency the Chancellor Graf Rallenstein; although, if what I had learned at the Monastery were true, we had less to fear now from him than from Count Furello. Still, strong wills do not love to be successfully thwarted, and even statesmen who live for their country are not always above the vindictive passions of a bolder man.

We now made more leisurely for the nearest town, where we could rest and decide on our next move. Moreover it was high time that we should put Strode into the hands of a surgeon. By noon we were comfortably quartered in the best rooms of the Adler-Hof at Rannsdau; the doctor had pronounced the loss of blood the greatest inconvenience that Strode's wound was likely to cause him, and we could reflect with restful satisfaction upon a good night's work.

The problem now was to communicate with Asta's parents, and this was a business which in several ways might be fraught with danger, more particularly to the Fraulein herself. It was, on the other hand, clearly my duty to restore her to her

family with as little delay as possible ; but it seemed for the moment difficult to take any steps in that direction without again courting the danger she had just escaped. But the difficulty was solved, and most happily as it turned out, by a feasible suggestion made by Asta herself.

We were now within a comparatively short distance of the Italian frontier. At Verona an aunt of hers lived. She might find a pleasant asylum there until her parents had been communicated with. The idea was a happy one, and a few hours found us on our way to Verona. Poor Strode we were obliged to leave behind us, but I was fortunate enough to hear of an English clergyman in the place, whom I sought out and to whose good offices I commended my friend. Not exactly the companion, perhaps, the devil-may-care Strode would have chosen, but at least he would have some one to chatter English with.

On our arrival at Verona we agreed that Asta should remain for awhile at the hotel while I went on alone to tell her aunt the great news. I hardly know why we determined on this course, but it was well that we did so. For, on being ushered into the Signora Reballi's drawing-room, I was brought face to face with two people in deep mourning, who, to my embarrassment, were made known to me as General and Madame von Winterstein, Asta's parents. As I recovered from my surprise I bowed and said how fortunate I was to meet them, as I had lately come from Buyda, and the very reason of my visit was to acquaint the Signora with certain facts connected with the fate of Fräulein Asta von Winterstein.

My words had naturally a great and not altogether happy effect on her parents, and the General asked me, in some surprise, with a tinge of suspicion,

how I came to know anything about it, and particularly Signora Reballi's relationship to his daughter. To fence his question was idle, to blurt out the truth would have been dangerous, so I asked him to let me first of all speak a word to him in private. To this he acceded with an increasing suspicion and led the way to another room.

"You are sure," I began, "that your daughter was killed in a carriage accident on the Salenberg road?"

"Unhappily; although——"

"The body has not been found. That in itself should leave room for doubt."

He looked at me so strangely that I began to fear the effect of the news.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely. "Tell me what you have to say."

"That there is no need to abandon hope."

"Ah!" he cried. "You have reason to doubt? No! no! In Heaven's name, speak, monsieur. What do you mean?"

"There is," I said, "great doubt."

Then he seemed to see intuitively what I was aiming at. By what must have been an intense effort he restrained his excitement and said quite quietly, "You have come to tell me that my daughter is alive?"

I smiled, and at my smile he broke down and turned away.

"It is a long and extraordinary story," I said, "but the end of it is that Fräulein Asta is alive and in Verona."

"Thank God!" he half sobbed. "Thank God! I must see her. Let me——"

"I will bring her to you. But Madame von Winterstein——?"

"Ask my wife to come to me here," he said

the fever of excitement getting stronger hold of him every moment. "She must hear the good news from my lips. Ah, God be thanked! My Asta comes back to us from the grave."

I did as he wished, then drove off for Asta. In less than half an hour mother and father were kissing with tears of joy the daughter whose tragic fate they had mourned with such bitter sorrow.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST MEETING

THE days that followed were some of the happiest of my life. There was, as may be imagined, more than ordinary delight in having been the instrument of that marvellous change from sorrow to joy, and such joy, the like of which it has been few men's luck to witness. Then came the happiness of my betrothal, and the sunny days seemed to glide by with scarcely a cloud on our horizon. And, as though everything conspired to complete our happiness, one that did seem in our graver moments to threaten, was suddenly dispersed. One morning I saw in an Italian newspaper a paragraph to the effect that the Count von Rallenstein had on the previous day been seized with a paralytic stroke, and that the famous Chancellor's state of health gave occasion for considerable anxiety.

Under the circumstances we could hardly pretend to take as anything but good fortune the news that the ruthless, vindictive autocrat's power for harm was practically at an end. From Von Lindheim, now safe in Paris, I had received news; the end of the Chancellor's reign would make all the difference to him; for, however matters might have otherwise changed (as by the failure of Rallenstein's marriage scheme), he would never have dared to risk a return to his native country under the old régime. I sent the good news to my friend, with a suggestion that he should

join us at Verona. Strode, now well again, was expected ; naturally Asta's parents were most anxious to make his acquaintance and thank him personally for the indispensable part he had taken in the rescue. We were going to be a very happy and merry party ; but the night before our friend's arrival a startling event happened which showed me on the brink of what an awful danger we were trifling.

That night we were invited to a rather grand reception at the Guacini Palace. Naturally the rooms were crowded, so crowded that Asta and I made our way from the crush, and finding a little room leading out of one of the salons we sat there cosily, out of touch, yet in sight of the restless crowd just beyond.

"What a change," Asta remarked, "in my hopes, in my life, from only a few days ago. Think of me in that dismal room, a prisoner expecting every time the door opened that death would enter. Could I ever have dreamt to have seen the world again like this ?"

"You must not let your mind run on that gloomy time now that it is so happily past," I remonstrated, clasping the hand which was slid into mine. "We have now only joy to look forward to, for it shall not be my fault if the future does not compensate for all you have gone through. It is hard, but you must try, dearest, to dismiss it all as a hideous dream."

"We are going to be so happy," she said lovingly, "that I am sure as time goes on I shall think less of those terrible days. But can I forget them without ignoring a certain dear brave Englishman who——"

I stopped her. "Asta, I wish you would forget that part of our acquaintance. I don't want you to love me for that."

She laughed. "For that only, you mean, sir. But as to forgetting one little incident—no ; not if by that I might have no recollection of my terror and sufferings. And now all is life and joy again. A few

days ago I had nothing before me but the choice of death—or worse.” She shuddered. “Of becoming the Countess Furello ; the wife of a murderer. Can I ever thank you, ever love you enough ? It is so hot here,” she said, after a pause which was not altogether blank ; “let us come and see whether we can find our way to the garden.”

As we rose I noticed that a jewel in her hair had become disarranged and was in danger of falling out. She turned to a great mirror on the wall and made the ornament fast. Suddenly, as she turned again, she gave a little half-gasping cry. I thought she must have hurt her head with the pin of the ornament, but soon saw that her cry had been called forth by something much worse than that, for she clasped my hand convulsively, and for some moments seemed speechless for very terror. At length she could answer me, in a frightened whisper :

“Furello ! I saw him there as I turned from the glass. His face there, looking in at us. He is here.”

“Here !” I echoed incredulously, though with an uneasy feeling that the thing was quite possible.

“Here, yes ; I saw the hateful face in the doorway, I tell you. He looked into this room, only for a moment. Jasper, my darling, you will save me from him, will you not ?”

I reassured her as best I could, both on that point and on the likelihood of her being mistaken. “Your mind is full of the man,” I argued. “Some one resembling him looked in, and your nerves not having quite recovered made you think it was he.”

But she insisted ; she was sure. “Do you suppose I could ever be mistaken in that face ?” she said. “It was Count Furello.”

“But what should he be doing here ?” I reasoned. “Here in one of the most exclusive gatherings in Verona. His evil reputation is such that no decent

countryman of his own would know him. Of that you may be sure. And to think that Prince Guacini would admit him across his threshold is absurd."

Reason as I would, nothing would shake her conviction that it had been Furello and none other that she had seen. It was distressing to me to see the mortal fear into which the sight, fancied or real, had thrown my darling.

"I will settle this at once," I said. "Come back to your father while I search the rooms. If the Count is here I will find him. But I think it far more likely I shall light on the double who has frightened you."

She clung to me as we made our way through the crowd to where her parents were sitting. So far no one in the least like Count Furello came under my notice, though I kept a sharp look-out on all sides. I gave General von Winterstein a hint of what had happened, and with a word of encouragement to Asta went off on my search.

It was vain. The thorough scrutiny I made in the rooms and all likely and unlikely places in the palace showed me no Count Furello or any one resembling him closely enough to have deceived Asta. One man, indeed, I pitched upon as being perhaps sufficiently near to the Count's general appearance to have suggested that arch villain, especially when seen casually for a moment. But upon my pointing him out to Asta she was quite convinced that he was not the man she had seen, and that it had indeed been Furello.

The episode, mysterious and disquieting enough, seemed suddenly to plunge us from an unclouded happiness and confidence into fear. Not that there was any danger of open violence there. It was quite certain that if Furello was really among the guests, a word to the Prince would be enough to have him

turned out not only of the palace but probably of the country. The worst part of it was, though, that the Count's methods were essentially cunning and secret ; had he been an open enemy there would have been little ground for fear.

I was inclined, however, to regard the whole affair as the effect of Asta's unstrung nerves. Rallenstein was now practically *hors de combat*, and it was scarcely likely that the Count would have ventured to follow us with any sinister purpose on his own account. The idea in my mind was that he was somewhat of a coward who required the impelling will of a stronger man behind his fell enterprises.

For the rest of the time I stayed at the palace I did not cease to look about for the man ; had he been there I certainly must have lighted upon him. The report of my fruitless search at last reassured Asta a little, and when I parted from her at her aunt's house I was glad to see that she seemed to have got over the worst of her fear. We had arranged to meet Strode next day, and I turned towards my hotel full of pleasant anticipations.

When I arrived there it was past midnight ; a sleepy porter let me in, and I went straight to my apartment, which consisted of a sitting-room, with a bedroom, *en suite*. Here I found a long letter awaiting me from Von Lindheim. Tired as I was, I lighted the candles on my table and began to read it, being eager to know what his plans were. This was the first letter of any length I had received from him ; it was closely written, and contained an account of the incidents of his long journey, including some narrow escapes he had had from being detected and falling into the hands of Rallenstein's emissaries. I had drawn a chair to the table and sat down to study the closely-written pages, when, in turning over one and raising my eyes to the beginning of the next, they caught on the opposite wall

an arresting movement, a stirring of the shadow thrown by a full moon on the opposite wall. My back was to the window, and the phenomenon betokened that the drawn curtains behind me were being stealthily moved apart. Realizing this, I raised the letter to the level of my eyes, as though it were difficult to decipher. Looking over the paper, I watched the wall before me. Slowly the streak widened, and in the middle there appeared a shadow—the form, unmistakably, of a man's head, framed, as it were, in the aperture.

Then, with a thrill, I knew that a crisis, the most desperate of all, had come. Assuredly nothing but sheer presence of mind was between me and death. This thought nerved me; every moment now was critical. A suspicious movement on my part would mean a bullet through me; before I could turn I should be a dead man. My one chance lay in taking my concealed enemy by surprise.

"Tchut! I do wish, my dear friend, you would write legibly," I said aloud. "Was there ever such a fist! I shall have to get a reading-glass to you, mein Herr. Let's see, there was one on this table."

Muttering thus, always distinctly enough for my words to be heard, I moved away quickly and crossed to a little writing-table that stood in the corner of the room. By this I was somewhat out of that uncomfortable direct line of fire. The bell was at the other side of the room; to have attempted to reach it would have been madness. Making a pretence of seeking the glass among the nick-nacks on the writing-table I was able to get out my revolver, which events had now taught me never to be without.

"Ah, here it is!" I said, going back as to my chair.

Next instant, by a quick movement, I had turned and flung aside the curtain, my revolver covering the place where I knew the intruder must be.

"Count Furello!" I cried. "Come out and show yourself, you cowardly villain!"

I do not know why my revolver hung fire, for I had resolved to shoot him on sight. But the moment's hesitation as I brought the Count—it was he—to view, showed him to me standing against the window with dropped hands, and none of the expected signs of attack. I could not shoot, even him, like that; if only he had made the slightest aggressive movement I would not have hesitated. As it was I stayed looking at him. He stood there quite motionless, his arms by his side, and, so far as I could see, with no weapon in his hand. His face looked absolutely white, the mouth was drawn behind the bristling moustache into the suggestion of an ugly grin, not reflected in the eyes, which glittered with repressed viciousness.

I think we must have stared at one another for some seconds before I spoke.

"What are you doing here, Count?"

The grin deepened. "A scarcely necessary question. You are going to shoot. Please don't delay. I am ready to pay the penalty of my rashness and your superior—luck."

The hatred with which he spoke the last words was indescribable.

"You will have to pay the penalty," I said, trying to bring myself to press the trigger. His face was calm now except for the gleam of desperation in his eyes. My better judgment told me to send a bullet through that scoundrel's heart, yet I paused, perhaps in the very certainty that the heart was covered by my pistol.

"We are rivals, it seems," Furello said calmly. "May we not settle our differences in the approved fashion?"

"Rivals! you and I!" was my scornful answer. "Was that your intention, Count?"

He gave a shrug and a look of devilish mockery. "I had not made up my mind. I have not an Englishman's good fortune. But it is plain that the time for one of us has arrived."

In talking to me like this he must have felt pretty confident of the difference between my nature and his own; had the positions been reversed, little time would he have given me for parley, except, perhaps, as a cat prolongs a mouse's agony. I had evidently taken him by surprise, and so at a disadvantage; no chance was left for him but to calculate upon my sense of chivalry. Chivalry with that murderous reptile! I wonder how I allowed such a consideration to influence me; but somehow it seemed hard to pull the trigger in cold blood.

"Will you give me a chance, my dear Tyrrell?" he demanded again, but without the ugly grin. "Or are you going to shoot me here as I stand defenceless? If so, for Heaven's sake be quick about it."

Instead of taking him at his word, I, like a fool, began to retort. The thought of Asta and all this loathsome brute had made her suffer came to my mind with the recollection of the pitiable state of fear she had shown that evening.

"Chance!" I cried. "What chance did you mean to give me when you pressed me to eat poisoned sweetmeats at your cursed table? What chance was I to have in that assassin's room you gave me to sleep in? What chance did you give that poor priest whom you decoyed to your devil's den—the man who, three hours after, was lying in his grave in the wood. You talk to me of—ah! you——!"

He had suddenly stooped and made a desperate rush at me. Perhaps he saw that I was working myself up to do what I should have done long before. No doubt my vehemence had relaxed my alertness. His move was a clever one, for in his stooping position,

he offered a much worse mark for a shot, and greatly reduced the certainty of a mortal wound. In that one fierce crouching spring he was upon me and at close quarters, while my advantage was almost gone. I must have fired, but have no recollection of the shot. I only know that each seized the other's right wrist with the left hand. So he was safe from my revolver, and I from something I could see shining in his grasp.

I think the feeling uppermost in my mind at that supreme moment was one of bitter disgust at my own folly ; but, after the first pang of discomfiture there was no room for any thought but of mastering the human hyena that had fastened on me. It was evident to me that I was the stronger and more athletic man, but then my adversary had the strength of desperation : he had gained the first advantage, and would naturally fight like a demon.

It was scarcely a violent struggle at first. We stood for a while wrestling warily, confining our efforts almost entirely to the arms. I can see now Furello's horrible face close to mine ; it was as though in those critical moments every evil passion of his life, every crime, every knavery, sprang its index into his countenance. If ever the Devil looked out of a man's eyes, there he was in that glare of desperate vicious hatred and rage. Soon I put forth a greater effort, and to my relief it confirmed the idea that my adversary's strength was less than my own. I forced him backwards step by step till I held him against the wall. Suddenly he pressed himself close against me, struggling furiously to force towards me the hand I held. In it was an object which scarcely suggested a weapon. A short metal instrument, square at the butt and tapering to a very fine point. I could not tell what it actually was, but the fact of the Count's using it was enough to give me a shrewd idea of its purpose. At any rate I thought I would make trial of its effectiveness on its owner.

So, holding away from the sting-like point, I forced Furello round from the wall, then against the table, then backwards upon it, where naturally he was at my mercy. Then I set myself to force down the hand with its mysterious weapon upon him. As he realized my intention he, even at the disadvantage of that almost helpless position, struggled with such convulsive fury that for a time he baffled my purpose. Then gradually my greater strength told, the point was forced down till it entered his cheek.

"A——h!"

Such a cry, as the stylet dug into the flesh. The grip on my revolver hand relaxed so that with a sharp wrench I could release it. The fingers of the Count's other hand still rigidly clutched the strange weapon. I had now the pistol free and pressed to his temple.

"Let go!" I said, "or I'll blow your brains out!"

"Shoot!" he cried. "Shoot! I defy you, cursed Englishman! You dare not!"

He raised his head and tried furiously to bite my hand. I beat his head back with the revolver and drove by sheer weight the stylet into his neck. He screamed and wriggled like a wounded animal, but I had no pity for him, only heartily wishing the part I was forced to play had fallen to another man's lot. As I held him there an idea crossed my mind and determined me to get from him the murderous little weapon which he held so tenaciously. After a sharp struggle I succeeded in unloosening the nervous fingers, and, obtaining possession of the instrument, flung it to the farther end of the room.

The Count now lay absolutely still, except for his heaving chest. Suspicious of his further power for mischief I began to feel for any weapon he might have about him. There was a revolver in a pocket of his coat. I took it out, and then drew a little away,

contenting myself with watching keenly for any suspicious movement.

He lay quite passive on the table just as I had forced him down : on his back with his legs dangling, his feet scarcely touching the floor. It seemed as though all the fight was beaten out of him. The situation was a hideous one for me, and I began to speculate how long it would last and how it would end, when suddenly a convulsive shudder seemed to run through the man as he lay before me. His hands opened and clenched thrice, then another convulsion shook him and he called me by name.

"Shoot me!" he gasped in a voice thick and hardly recognizable. "If you are a man send a bullet through me and put me out of my agony."

The conjecture in my mind now became a certainty ; I returned no answer ; simply waited in silence.

Another spasm seemed to madden him.

"Shoot me! Shoot me, curse you!" he cried, breaking out into a string of hideous imprecations.

I said nothing, and sat quite still.

"Tyrrell!" he screamed, and then, by what seemed a terrible effort, sat upright.

I sprang from my chair in horror. The face, which had been hidden from me as he lay, was now dark purple, almost black. The blazing eyes protruded from their sockets, the swollen lips, jet black were drawn back into a frightful grin ; the man was a human being no longer ; it seemed as though he were already a devil, as hideous as the imagination of man ever conceived. The sight brought back to me poor Szalay's appearance in his death agony, but the effect of the poison here was indescribably more fearful.

For the first time in that perilous half-hour I felt fear—sickening fear. The thing opposite to me was so unutterably loathsome that the very idea of his breath reaching me was horrible. I recall that in sheer

panic, I raised my revolver, but before I could fire, the Count, with a sound of words which the tumid tongue would not utter, fell back. I could endure the terrible sight no longer, but rushed from the room, locking the door behind me. When I had roused the hotel people and the door was opened again, Count Furello lay still on the table—dead.

* * * * *

So perished this villain by the horrible means he had prepared for me. When I think of that hideous death, the idea of my narrow escape sends a shiver through me. When we came to examine the lethal instrument which inflicted it, we found it to be a hollow stiletto with a collapsible handle, this forming a receptacle for the virulent poison with which it was charged. A slight prick, as it must have been in the case of poor Szalay, would be enough to cause death, and the venom acted so rapidly that a remedy was out of the question. A very pretty and effective implement of the great Chancellor's vaunted statecraft!

It appeared that the Count had taken a room on the same floor, whence it had been easy for him to slip into mine and await my return. But Von Lindheim's letter saved me.

There was, of course, an inquiry into the facts of that strange and appalling tragedy. Happily for me, all the circumstances confirmed my straightforward story, which was further corroborated by the dead man's antecedents. It appeared that before he quitted Italy several mysterious deaths of the same character as this one had occurred, with which he had seemed closely connected; but nothing beyond strong suspicion had been fastened upon him.

But at last the terribly appropriate retribution had overtaken him; and surely no man had ever greater cause than I to be thankful for the gift of a strong arm and an athletic frame.

With that night the story of my series of adventures ends. I had certainly had my fill of them, and ever since then my appetite for that sort of thing has been considerably less keen. But apart from the more selfish advantage I derived, the winning of a most charming wife, it has always been a satisfaction to me to reflect that what I did served a useful purpose in ridding the world of a gang of precious villains. I have since visited the Monastery of St. Tranquillin in the Geierthal ; it is now the innocent abode of a prosperous farmer, who occasionally entertains stray sportsmen in rather different fashion from his predecessors, and is, happily, ignorant of what lies beneath the ground he plods over, or the dark history of the rooms in which his children play.

After the death of Count Rallenstein the rule of the Jaguar was known no more, and Von Lindheim, after spending several months with us in England, was able to return to his estate, there to live in peace and safety.

From the subsequent marriage of the poor Princess Casilde there sprang, as every student of European affairs knows, the consort of one of the most illustrious rulers ; but the keenest and most diligent of students has never found the name Von Orsova in her family tree, and yet that was undoubtedly the Princess's name before her marriage. Still, I have made a journey, more than once, to lay a wreath on the grave of the handsome Rittmeister von Orsova, the man whose fate, though it brought terror and death to others, yet gave supreme happiness to me.

THE END

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