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Title: Trusia: A Princess of Krovitch

Author: Davis Brinton

Illustrator: Walter H. Everett

Release Date: March 6, 2010 [EBook #31518]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Barbara Tozier, Bill Tozier and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TRUSIA: A PRINCESS OF KROVITCH ***



CARRICK WAS FAR BEHIND

TRUSIA

A PRINCESS OF KROVITCH

By

DAVIS BRINTON

With Illustrations by WALTER H. EVERETT

PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON GEORGE W. JACOBS AND COMPANY

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To A. M. P. this volume is gratefully inscribed

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I

A WAGER IS MADE

After the termination of a three months' struggle on the floor of 'Change, resulting in the rout of his adversaries, who had counted on an easy acquisition of his heritage in the P. & S. system, Calvert Carter was grateful for that particular armchair in the reading-room of the Racquet Club.

"Those gentlemen, in banking on my inexperience in manipulations," he chuckled audibly, "evidently forgot that I had been a campaigner in Cuba. Even though I didn't learn much there about Wall Street or tickers, I did gather some very valuable knowledge of human nature. I guess that counts a little in deals, after all." His thoughts, released from the pressure of financial altercations, were a trifle tumultuous and wandering. They went bounding back now, at the mere mental suggestion of Cuba, to that tropic island, the scene of his stirring military experiences.

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Event followed event on the lightened screen of reminiscence. He recalled with a quick surge of pulse the fervor of El Caney and the tide that swept San Juan Hill by the chivalry of American manhood. There, too, was Santiago where his mastery of men had resulted in his being appointed Provost Marshal of the conquered Spanish citadel. Then his mind inconsequently turned to the man who had passed through so many crises with him.

"Carrick came through it all, too," he mused. "The veteran is now the valet. Poor chap, his life has been a strange one." He recalled the story the fellow had told of his past—a tale which had won for him the friendship and aid of the man who had been his captain and was now his employer.

It had occurred in the white stuccoed house on the Plaza which had been his official quarters as Provost.

The picture of it, with its stately old-world balconies where violet shadows nested lovingly, arose before his memory's eyes with a strange yearning. The recollection of those striped awnings in the white light of mid-day had potency to cool, even now, the fever of his thoughts. The barren dignity of Carrick's story had contrasted vividly with the tropical colorings in which its recital had been inspired.

Prompted by a kindly interest in his orderly's career and ambitions, he had asked the man as to his past in general and his future in particular. He was totally unprepared for the undammed flood of confidence which had burst from the lips of the habitually taciturn Carrick. The tattered rags of the fellow's humble past were spread before him in all their pathetic squalor. He saw, as though a living thing, the barren, inarticulate childhood. He heard, under compulsion, the tale of youth's indefinable longings, with the meagre story of a love which lacked not its own shabby tragedy. The delicacy of a gentleman, who had intruded where he had no right, had caused him to draw back with an apology; but the orderly had insisted on telling him. He could almost see the raw, quivering heart in Carrick's breast.

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"I wonder," he pondered, "what that medal was he wore under his shirt? He said it was an heirloom. It looked devilishly like an order of nobility." He referred to an incident in the man's narrative, when the latter had drawn from beneath the blue army blouse what had at first appeared to be a Star of the Bath. It had been solemnly handed to him for inspection, with the information that the trooper's father had also worn it.

It was old. The circular scroll, which at one time had doubtless borne an inscription, was smooth save for a few dimples which indicated faintly where words had been. The centre was a slightly raised disc about an inch and a quarter in diameter. Upon this, of blue enamel, cracked and chipped with age and usage, was the figure of a lion rampant, a royal crown upon its head. From the central disc, intersected by the scroll, radiated points of equal length, making a star of the whole. Something also had been said about papers. Supposing that Carrick had meant insurance policies, he had paid but passing heed to the allusion.

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Carter's ideas were growing patchwork, he confessed. He felt he was unable, in his weariness, to sustain much connected thought. The mental trend was all one way, however,—pointing to a desire to escape the enforced ennui, which was sure to be consequent upon his recent exhausting contest. Nor was he particularly anxious to meet any one until he had eased up the terrific pace which his nerves had set him.

Hearing a couple of his friends enter, he determined to wait until they should discover him before he would make his presence known. Aware that no one would choose that room for confidential chats, he had no fear of eavesdropping. As he was yielding to drowsiness the words of one of the men back of him caused him to sit up alertly. It was Billy Saunderson, one of the pair who had just entered, who was speaking.

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"I tell you, Lang," Saunderson was saying to Langdon of the Diplomatic Corps,— "I tell you that there'll be war. It isn't going to be any police-clubbed riot this time. It'll be the real thing." Carter felt a personal affront in Langdon's sceptical laugh at this assertion.

"How do you figure that, Saunderson?" the government man queried.

"Immigration statistics of the last ten years prove to any sane man that the natives are returning to their fatherland in unprecedented numbers. Read for yourself." The pause that followed, broken only by the rustling of papers, was evidently devoted to a perusal of documents. Then Langdon's voice again took up the theme.

"All right, Billy, but what do you expect to prove by the fact that eighty thousand men came here from Krovitch in the last ten years and sixty thousand return this year?"

"By the fact that it is *men* that are going back—not women or children; that Krovitzers don't love Russia well enough to return as volunteers against Japan; by the fact that ten thousand are trained soldiers."

"How do you know the last?"

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"Private information." Billy's tone was significant. "War Department; don't repeat. Their enlistment up with Uncle Sam, these men have asked for their discharges. All first-class soldiers and non coms."

"Hm," Langdon commented, partially convinced; then, as a new objection struck him, his tone was once more argumentative. "They can't fight without a backer," he continued. "Banking houses to-day control peace and war as immutably as Christianity should. I don't believe that any one would back them."

"Here comes Jackson, he'll know," Saunderson said as the door opened to admit another man who instantly joined them.

"What's that you are leaving up to me, Billy? Do I hold the stakes?" Carter recognized the voice as that of one of his bitterest opponents in the stock battle.

"Saunderson says that there will be real fighting in Krovitch," said Langdon. "What does the money mart say?" Appealed to unexpectedly on this topic, Jackson laughed a trifle consciously.

"Well, in strict confidence," he replied, "I'll tell you that I am in a pool to finance things over there. That coup of Carter's pretty nearly dumped me on it, too."

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Not desiring to become the butt of overheard personalities, Carter arose at this juncture, and, bowing to the trio, left the room. After his departure, the eyes of the first comers turned to Jackson, as one who had just felt the mettle of Carter's steel. The half smile which had been on Carter's face Jackson was perfectly willing to misinterpret.

"Gloating over our downfall," he remarked with reference to the day's happenings on the Street.

"Not that kind of fellow," replied Saunderson, coming to the defense of the absent. "You were caught dancing; he simply made you pay the piper."

"He's hard as nails," retorted Jackson, gloomily; "not a particle of sentiment in him."

"Look here, Jackson," said Langdon at this juncture, "you are dead wrong there. Carter's record is different. He went out to Cuba for what we discount nowadays—patriotism. While there he picked up a poor devil of a Cockney and made more of a man of him than the fellow had ever dreamed of becoming. Literally picked him out of the gutter—drunk. That man of his,—Carrick,—I think that's his name."

"Right," assented Saunderson. "Then look what he did for Marian Griggs when Jack's western bubble burst carrying her fortune with it. Jack blew his brains out, leaving her and the kids sky high. Though they had absolutely no claim on him other than disinterested friendship, Cal, in the most delicate manner in the world, fixed things so that they should never want. The girl told me herself. Sentiment? Why, man, he's chock full of it. He's the sort that, when he hears of this coming scrap in Krovitch, will throw himself body and soul into it, as his forbears have done from Marston Moor to date, just because it's likely to be a lost cause. He's always for the under dog—and I honor him for it. I'm willing to bet he'll go to Krovitch when he hears."

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"A thousand?" inquired Jackson with speculative ardor. Saunderson narrowed his eyes, as he looked judiciously at the broker. He flicked the ash from his cigarette before replying.

"Too much. What's the use?" he said. "Make it even money at a hundred and I'll go you. On any other man I'd ask odds. With Carter, though, when it comes to war, to women, or to any one needing help, he's right there with the goods. He's in a class by himself. Do you take the bet?"

"Certainly," answered Jackson as he handed the money over to Langdon as stakeholder. "Word of honor, Billy, that you will not urge him on?"

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"Word of honor, Jackson. Keep your hands off, too." The two shook hands gravely, while Langdon made a memorandum of the wager.

Before he had reached the corner, the subject of this speculation had forgotten, for the nonce, all about Krovitch and her troubles. His wearied mind—like a recalcitrant hunter at a stiffish fence—had thrown off the idea as too much weight to carry. A week later he was to be reminded of the episode at the club. Its effects led him far afield into a tale of romance, intrigue, war and women. Intrigue, war and women are inseparable.

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II

"STRANGE COUNTRIES FOR TO SEE"

In the soul of Calvert Carter arose a vague unrest. A voiceless summons bade him, with every April stir of wind, to shake off the tale of common things and match his manhood and keen intelligence in Nature's conflict, the battle of the male. Six years past had found him in Cuba. In that brief campaign against Spain, his entire military career, each day so crowded with anticipation or actual battle, had been laid the foundation for this *wanderlieb*; this growing appetite for excitement and hazard. Occasional trips to Europe and even forays after big game had failed to satisfy him. Without realizing it, his was the aboriginal's longing for war,—primitive savage against primitive savage, and—his life lacked a woman.

He paced about his library as in a cage.

He strove desperately to understand the elusive impulse which urged him to go forth running, head up, pulses flaming; on, on, out of the reeking city to the cool, clean woods; on, on, to the heart of the world where all brutes and mankind strove in one titanic fight for supremacy. Conventions held him fast. He must go somewhere, however. Where? Was there in Old or New World an unbeaten track his feet had not trodden, a chance for adventure—man-strife? Manchuria! It would not do. His was not the mood for the porcelain, perfect politeness of Nippon. He was no beast to revel in the stupid orgies of the Slav!

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The door opened and Carrick entered. It was not the Carrick of yesterday, but one who, though unable to eradicate all the traces of his earlier environments, had nevertheless succeeded in achieving externally and mentally a much higher plane than that on which Carter first found him. When he spoke, seeing his master was in some perplexity, there still lingered in his accent the unmistakable evidence of his Whitechapel origin.

"What is it, sir?"

Carter turned to him with a troubled countenance.

"Carrick," he said, "do you ever feel as if you wanted to be back on the fighting line?"

The fellow smiled guiltily.

"Yes, Mr. Carter, when I 'ave the go-fever as I call it! Then you see," he explained apologetically, "I was allus a sort of a tramp before you took 'old of me, sir. Don't think it's because the plyce don't suit—no man ever 'ad a better, thanks to you. Sometimes I think, though, as 'ow all men get the feelin' in spells. Do you ever feel that wye?"

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"I'm chock full of it now, Carrick. I must get away from the manacles of cities. Hand me that atlas—I'll study the map of Europe again. Thanks. This is about the tenth time." Carter bent over the plotted page anxiously while his man stood at his elbow.

"Germany won't do," said Calvert. "I hate the very sight of a wasp-waisted, self-sufficient Prussian subaltern. They're everywhere. Imperial arrogance seems to pervade even their beer gardens." His voice trailed off into silence again, as in a preoccupied manner his finger wandered over the map. It stopped suddenly as he leaned closer to study the pink plot on which it rested. "Krovitch; Krovitch!" he muttered, "now where the devil have I heard of Krovitch? Russian province it seems but that doesn't give me any clue. I'm stuck, Carrick," he said with a frank laugh as he looked up to meet the man's responsive smile.

"Can I 'elp you, sir?" He leaned over Carter's shoulder.

"What is there about that little spot to set me guessing?" His finger kept tapping the indicated locality perplexedly.

His man studied a moment as if some old memory were awakened. "Can't sye, sir; but wasn't Count Zulka, of the Racquet Club, from there, sir?" he hesitatingly suggested. "Seems as if I remember 'is man saying as much."

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"Now we are getting at it, Carrick. Certainly. Zulka is a Krovitzer. Has a mediæval castle at Schallberg. Capital, I think it is. Saunderson the newspaper fellow let fall a hint that there was going to be a big fight over there. That was after Zulka went abroad so suddenly. They're going to try and restore the ancient monarchy or something. Hand me that volume of the Encyclopedia—'H-o-r' to 'L-i-b' I think will cover it. I'll look up Krovitch. Thanks," and he was soon deeply engrossed in the desired information.

A copy of the Almanac de Gotha lay at his hand. Having avidly absorbed the meagre narration of the country's history from the pages of the encyclopedia, his inquiring mind sought enlightenment as to the present personnel of the house who had ruled the ancient race.

The almanac disclosed no descendant of Stovik. Apparently the dynasty of which he was the head had ceased with his deposition. "Humph," he ejaculated, "here is something interesting. 'Sole descendant of Augustus. Girl, twenty-two, name—Trusia.' Pretty, poetical—Trusia! I like it. Seems to me I'll be repeating that name a good deal. I wonder what she's like."

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He looked up again, his face glowing with enthusiasm. "Carrick," he said indignantly, "that country ought to be free. Russia stole it by a shabby trick. Two hundred years ago the reigning king of Krovitch was a chap called Stovik. The head of another royal family there named Augustus was his rival for the crown. Not being able to arouse much of a following among a loyal people, Augustus sought aid of his namesake, the Czar of Russia, to help in his contest. Knowing that Augustus would be easily disposed of once they got a foothold in Krovitch, the Russ, who had only been waiting for some such pretext, gladly espoused his cause and threw an army of veterans across the length and breadth of the devoted land. Stovik was deposed and Russia put her dupe upon the throne. Europe stood by and let that nation, which, single handed, had time and again saved them from Moslem invasions, be annexed by the government at Moscow. I'm going there. I'll look up Zulka and get him to have me counted in if there's any fight going to occur."

"And me too, sir," answered Carrick, standing like a stag who from a peak challenges his kind.

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Carter looked at the man with evident appreciation and a pleased smile animated his face.

"It will be the old days over again. I warn you, Carrick, you'll have to hustle to beat me up another hill."

The Cockney laughed in the free masonry of their mutual reminiscences. "All right, sir, forewarned is forearmed. How soon do we start?"

"Just as soon as you can get our camp kits ready. We'll board the next steamer for Danzig. I think I'll take the big auto along, too. It may come in handy."

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III

A DUEL—OF WITS

Russian affairs had reached the climax anticipated by the world as the result of her persistent encroachments in the Orient.

Precipitated by a fiery aggression from Nippon the gasping Slav had been pushed back across the Yalu. His ships around Port Arthur had been crippled and destroyed. The astonished nations, Russia included, awoke to a grim realization of war.

Not only the home staying Japanese, but millions of Russian subjects joined in the universal acclaim that hailed these first victories of the war, presaging that the Banners of the Rising Sun were well able to cope with the armed hordes which held Manchuria in the name of the Great White Czar.

First grumbling murmurs, next spasmodic disturbances defying police discipline, afterward outbreaks of thousands of workmen even in the larger cities, followed by armed and desperate uprisings in different provinces, demonstrated with seismic violence that an appreciable portion of domestic sympathy was with the enemies of the Empire.

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The autocracy had been feared only while it had been able to assert universal invincibility.

Plots and counterplots added to the general uneasiness; failing to soothe them, more than one minister had been dismissed in disgrace.

In the Imperial Palace a war conference had been called with reference to a new and startling development. A map lay spread upon the table. A white-haired grand duke arose and placed a finger on the spot indicating the Russian capital.

"Here is St. Petersburg," he said dogmatically, "while away off here is Krovitch just across a little river from Germany and Austria. While those greedy neighbors may be held back now, you could not restrain them a moment after revolt broke out in that border province. For two centuries those Krovitzers have been a defiant and stiff-necked race in spite of every corrective measure adopted to suppress them. Unless immediate action is taken to anticipate and abort any movement of theirs, it may mean the utter destruction of your present southern frontiers. I am convinced that they will take advantage of the present disturbances to attempt their independence."

A wan and tolerant smile on the imperial countenance apprised him his appeal had been in vain. A suppressed buzz of incredulity brought a flush of resentment to his cheek.

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"We are not ungrateful for your loyal advice, Your Grace, and will give it our future consideration." This imperial acknowledgment dismissed a matter which apparently was promptly forgotten in the discussion of events in Manchuria. But the apparition of Krovitch, in arms, would not so easily down in the minds of the thoughtful present, even though an autocrat had dismissed the notion as frivolous.

Never having been kind, now was the moment when the least sign of relaxation would be interpreted by the watchful millions as an evidence of weakness. Therefore the blows of the knout should be redoubled and prisons be enlarged the better to maintain hierarchical

supremacy.

Provinces, conquered and made subject by the ancient strength of Russian arms, were becoming restless. Whispers of what a year earlier would have been avoided by the many in terror were now changed into shouts of defiance and publicly bruited in the daily papers. On all sides an oppressed country crouched tiger-like, ready for revolt should the whip be laid aside for even an instant.

Krovitch once having had a king, a *patrie* of her own, stubbornly and persistently kept alive her national feeling, language, and traditions in spite of imperial *ukase*. Naturally she caused considerable uneasiness among those who were the real rulers of Russia. [Pg 27]

Persistent reports from their apprehensive agents alarmed those who, standing in the shadows of a toppling throne, feared an outbreak of the Krovitzers more than they despised the ultimate valor of the Japanese.

An ambitious minister, listening attentively to the warning against Krovitch, determined to put a quietus on that province, which once and for all time would blight her hopes of independence. He wired many questions and voluminous suggestions to his agent in Paris, Casper Haupt, who was a sub-chief of the White Police. This ardent subject of Nicholas II had cabled back immediately:

"Have here only one man who can. Must have free foot."

A reference to a portfolio biography disclosed the operator's name to be Josef Kolinsky.

The conversation resulting in this cabled information to the minister had taken place in a private room of the Russian consulate in the French capital between the sub-chief and Kolinsky.

One plan after another had been suggested by the superior only to be torn into threads by the operator. Finally in desperation the sub-chief had demanded that Kolinsky furnish a more practical scheme. [Pg 28]

A pause followed, in which, with elbows on the table, and flushed, indignant visage, the Russian leaned forward waiting for the compliance of his subordinate. Kolinsky, with a sphynx-like face, sat gazing steadily at a point on the floor slightly beyond his extended feet. His principal sought in vain to penetrate the pale, smiling mask which he was beginning to acknowledge held a more subtle mind than his own. He would have given much to have seen the galloping, tumultuous thoughts, which, chaotic at first, became as orderly as heaven at their master's wish.

Impatient at a silence promising to be interminable the Russian agent coughed suggestively.

Kolinsky, with leisurely indulgence, looked up while the sneering smile deepened the lines about his mouth.

The face of his *vis-à-vis* brightened.

"Well," the chief asked breathlessly.

"First, monsieur, if my plan is adopted, do I, alone, unaided, have free foot to work it out? Otherwise I'll not tell you a word of it."

Indignant for a moment that an underling should impose conditions, the Russian determined to resort to censure, but when he looked into the culprit's eyes he was puzzled at his own acquiescence. [Pg 29]

"You may have a free foot," he said, "now your plan."

Kolinsky shifted his chair close to that of the other man to whisper long and earnestly in his ear. His auditor evidently endorsed his suggestion, judging by his grunts of applause and the grinning display of teeth.

"It is good, fine, superb," he said as Kolinsky concluded and leaned back comfortably in his chair the better to appreciate the approval displayed in his chief's countenance. He was not to view these flattering symptoms for long, however. His superior as though discovering a fatal weakness in the completed structure, said in renewed despair: "while you have the right man, it won't do."

"Why, Excellency," asked Josef with no diminution of that glacial smile. It was as though he held his superior in hardly concealed contempt.

"The papers," said Haupt. "They can't be forged. We have no precedents to follow. Those chaps over there will know the thing by rote and probably would recognize the signatures more quickly than their own."

"Why not use the originals?" [Pg 30]

"Where are they? We have so much time to find them." The sarcasm was crushing. "They probably were lost or destroyed years ago." He concluded temporizingly, under the compelling eyes gazing coldly at him.

"Documents of that kind are never lost or destroyed," Josef announced dogmatically.

"Where are they then? In Krovitch?" The sub-chief sneered.

"No." The reply was so positive that the Russian agent leaned forward intently. He was growing

suspicious, therefore becoming cautious.

"You have seen them, I suppose." This was thrown off casually.

"Oh, certainly. That's what suggested the plan." Josef smiled like a cat who has enclosed a cup of cream.

"Then you have seen them recently." He only half waited for the assenting nod as he queried, "They are in Paris?"

"Yes." Kolinsky smiled at the other's undisguised astonishment that he would admit so much.

The sub-chief drew himself together, then turned sternly to his subordinate.

"See here, Kolinsky, that's impossible. I've been head of this bureau for ten years, and if documents of such importance had come into the possession of the French or any other government, I would have known about it. If they had been turned into this office I would have remembered."

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"Nevertheless, Excellency, they are in Paris."

There was another long pause. The Russian lighted a cigarette, while he sought in silent meditation to unravel the mystery which seemed not only a challenge to his acuteness, but also an impeachment of his régime. With a casual movement that he hoped was unnoticed, he drew back into a shadow where he could note Kolinsky's face while his own avoided scrutiny.

"Kolinsky, how long have you been a member of the White Police?"

"Twelve years, Excellency."

"Two years before I came here, eh?" In a flash he had solved the enigma. "It is as I imagined. Have you the papers with you?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"May I see them?"

"They are my personal property, remember."

"How long ago did you get them?"

"Fifteen years ago the eighth of August. That was before I joined the secret police. The owner had died and it took some clever work to gain possession of them."

"How did you know of their existence?"

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"It was an accident." Kolinsky answered haltingly.

"And your candidate for the crown?" asked the Russian in a slight tone of derision.

"Is a Parisian artist. A good-natured fool." Kolinsky's tone of voice echoed the other's, whose hand was held out hesitatingly across the table for the papers. Deliberately Josef drew a bundle from his inside pocket and opened it before his chief.

The parchments were old and the Latin was in an ancient cramped hand while the impression of the seal was well-nigh obliterated. When sufficient time had elapsed for the Russian to make a complete mental note of their appearance, Josef drew the papers away from him, refolded them carefully and replaced them in his pocket.

"Kolinsky, you know what will happen should you desert us when once in Krovitch?"

Josef was standing near the door. He smiled with supreme indifference.

"Do I get the mission, Excellency?" was the only reply he vouchsafed.

"Y-e-s." The superior's single acquiescence was prolonged into three syllables, urged by the acknowledged supreme ability of Kolinsky and restrained by a fear of apprehended duplicity.

Aware of this struggle the clever fellow turned back in the doorway to laugh at the other's perplexity.

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"Really, Excellency, you have only one thing to fear." His chief started up suspiciously.

"What is that?" he asked tersely.

"That I may decide to claim the throne of Krovitch myself," Josef replied, as with his habitual smile he softly closed the door and hurried from the house.

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IV

THE GRAY MAN

"Do you realize, Carrick, that three weeks have passed since I proposed this trip to Krovitch?" They were whirling along a badly kept road in that province of Russia as Calvert Carter made the above remark which was also an interrogation. The place of their debarkation had been an unusual one—Danzig—chosen because it had been the more accessible to the Russian frontier. Slowing down the automobile for obvious reasons, Carrick turned a ruminating expression in the direction of his master.

"Seems yesterday, sir."

"How's the go-fever? Still working?"

Carrick laughed. "Overtime, sir. Hundred miles an hour till we get there wouldn't be too fast for me." He turned his attention again to the machine and the rutty way before him.

The other drew out a road map which he consulted with trained eyes that correctly approximated both locality and distances. Slowly refolding it he replaced it in an inner pocket. Being in a mood that anticipated much at the end of the journey, he was not loath to break into his chauffeur's taciturnity. [Pg 35]

"Well, cheer up. Even at this rate we ought to make Schallberg by sunset. It's eight o'clock now."

"Seems more than an hour since I 'ad my breakfast."

"I know, but no man's stomach is a safe timepiece, Carrick. On the road I could name at least six meal times by that organ of mine."

For a few miles the jolting of the machine over rough places punctuated their progress with a conversational hiatus.

The rarely occasional peasants working in the fields or plodding along the way, paused in their occupations to regard the novel vehicle with stolid wonderment.

"Seems odd, sir," hazarded Carrick when a comparatively smooth piece of road permitted more than monosyllabic profanity, "seems odd that we've seen ten women to one man so far. These are all 'has beens.' No young chaps workin' in the fields. What do you make of it, sir?"

"The ones not already drafted for Manchuria are dodging Russian conscription most likely."

"Think so, sir?" Carrick's tone raised a question.

"Why? Don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir. They've all taken it on the run for some reason or other. Maybe the Krovitch army is already mobilized." [Pg 36]

"Egad, Carrick, that *is* a possibility. I never thought of that. Suppose I expected them to wait for us. We don't want to miss the opening gun. Hump her up for all she's worth. Full speed and never mind the jolts."

The chauffeur bent readily to the task and their further advance into the country of their hopes was such that boded ill to any bewildered fowl that might recklessly seek to cross in front of them. The dial indicated seventy miles an hour.

"Suppose this were Fifth Avenue." Carter bent over to assure himself of the speed as he spoke.

"Umph. We won't go into that, sir. Too 'arrowing to think of. You'd have to mortgage everything to pye the fines. Any'ow you'd go into bankruptcy after you'd bailed me out." Carrick paused to view the route before them. "That's a pretty steep 'ill a'ead, sir. Mybe we'd better stop at the top and reconnoitre a bit. We ought to get a good view from there. It looks too bloomin' rocky for this rate any'ow."

"Where are the glasses?" inquired his companion with unconcealed eagerness, fumbling about in the locker beneath the seat. "Never mind, I have them," he said, producing the binoculars. [Pg 37]

At the crest of the Here they stopped to view the panorama of the Beyond.

From the height on which they halted, they looked out upon a wilderness of which they had no previous conception, for the hill they had just ascended had masked it from view.

Below them, at a distance of about two miles, as far as the eye could see from left to right stretched a black and dense forest of unknown antiquity. Behind and beyond it at increasing distances peak upon lofty peak, mountain after mountain, like Babel, reached upward for the sky. Of these the one nearest and directly in front of the knights errant claimed attention.

"Looks like a giant coal scuttle, sir," said Carrick the trite. The description was apt, for the freak of nature which confronted them. Towering high above its neighbors this mountain was unusual. Some outraged Titan in his ire had, in some long-forgotten æon, apparently seized and turned upon its head the top-heavy crest, whose form roughly speaking was of a reversed truncated cone. Upon the wide plateau at the top, with battlemented walls and towers outlined against a turquoise sky, stood a high pitched castle whose topmost turrets seemed suspended from the heavens above them.

"Can you myke out the flag, sir?" Carrick asked anxiously, seeing that his master was viewing the [Pg 38]

donjon critically through the glasses.

Much depended on the nationality of the standard, which, hardly visible at that distance, was only discernible as a blur upon the blue of the otherwise immaculate sky. The castle undoubtedly commanded that highway on the far side of the wood along which they must pass. Carter had descended into the road and was eagerly adjusting the focus for a better view.

"Can't make it out exactly. It's not Russian for one thing. Field's red. Device is blue. Dragon or something. Have to take a chance till we get a nearer look."

Carrick, meanwhile, was peering intently down the road ahead of him where it disappeared into the midnight gloom of the forest. His alert eyes had noted two or three objects emerge from among the trees and stop.

"Look there, sir," and his outstretched arm indicated the direction while Carter swung his glasses around to the place.

"Videttes," he exclaimed without looking up. "Sizing us up through glasses, eh?"

"Russians?" The chauffeur's excitement was manifest, for he was frowning in a vain endeavor to discern the distant specks.

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"I don't know. We're in sort of a fix," was the answer as Carter looked up at Carrick with a frank laugh. The dilemma was not causing him much alarm. "If they are," he continued, "we're dished unless we can get by them. I'll take a chance anyhow. We won't stop to investigate. Right through the woods as if the devil was after us," with which instructions he leaped into the machine.

Carrick grinned. Such orders were just to his taste. A touch on the lever and the automobile shot down the hillside at a speed more rapid than Terror's own. Nearing the scattered outposts, whose frightened horses flattened themselves against adjacent fences, the occupants of the touring car were greeted by a shower of bullets, all of which went wide owing to the disconcerted aim of the sentries, who seemed to fly by the autoists in phantom shapes as the wood was safely gained. Once in its tree-protected road they never relaxed speed until five miles had been placed between them and possible pursuit.

"That's done with, anyway," remarked Carter jubilantly. He turned and faced his comrade whom the hum of bullets had exhilarated.

"Were they Russians? Did you notice anything?"

Carrick laughed outright. Peel followed peel before he could control himself. "I just saw one 'oss, sir. 'E was bally well scared. I'll never forget 'is look,—eyes bulging and mouth open as if 'e was going to swallow a whole hyrick. After spying 'im I couldn't 'ave looked at 'is rider if I 'ad tried."

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"Well, they'll have trouble overtaking us anyhow if they were children of the Czar. Look, Carrick," he continued, indicating the wider and more frequent patches of sunlight flecking the road, "it's lighting up. We'll soon be out of the woods."

"Better not halloa till we are, Mr. Carter."

"Gad, that's a prophecy all right. Our way is blocked." The machine came to an abrupt halt.

Not far distant the exit from the forest disclosed to plain view an extensive segment of open country to the southward.

"Not less than a thousand in that bunch," commented Carrick with gloomy reference to a dense throng of men along the road outside the forest. "Mixed troops. 'Ow many more there are we can't see for these bloomin' trees."

"Certainly are cavalry and infantry. But they don't appear to be paying much attention to this end of the road. They're all looking the other way. That black and gold hussar uniform beats the gray and silver of the foot. I don't believe they're Russians," Carter concluded with a joyful start. "Those uniforms! Since we can't go back, we'd better go ahead."

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With apparent unconcern they boldly emerged from the woodland.

To their left, about fifty yards back from the highway, stood a quaint old inn built against a sheer cliff face which in the air seemed to bend over the puny habitation. To the right stretched fields under cultivation, but beaten hard under the feet of ten thousand men in the uniform already noticed.

A little group of officers, well mounted, stood together in the commons before the hostelry. They caught but the momentary attention of the interlopers, which, as by some hypnotic influence, was drawn to one of three men quietly conversing on the stone porch of the inn.

He was short and spare of figure, lean and colorless of face, while about him hung an atmosphere of grayness.

As the puffing automobile drew up to the steps he turned quietly to survey its occupants, vividly contrasting the surprise displayed by his two companions. One of these was evidently the innkeeper from the professional air of deference which tempered even his amazement, while the other, square of jowl and deep of eye, was a peasant.

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These latter could divert attention for but the moment from the gray man, their companion, whose face seemed set in a habitual, cynical smile, the intent of which was inscrutable. The deep creases running from the corners of the mouth to the narrow nostrils showed the expression was habitual and without the saving grace of mirthfulness. Without a doubt he was of those who gain the dislike of the class from which they are derived and usually not more than the tolerance of those with whom they are thrown in daily contact. Carter admitted after a critical survey that the Gray Man, as he mentally dubbed him, was an exception to this rule. Though he bore every external evidence of being of the upper servant class, there were power and masterly cunning disclosed in every line of the set face. He was of those who, in times of great crises, if they do not attain to power always pass through dangers which engulf nobler men, to emerge with profit if not with honor from even a nation's downfall. That behind the grinning mask lay a wide knowledge of the working of the human mind, Carter saw, as the Gray Man's crafty eyes weighed the repugnance he knew he had inspired. As their glances met, uncontrollably, a challenge gleamed in that of the autoist which was answered by a cold defiance on the part of the elder man.

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Meanwhile the boniface, who had achieved a partial composure, hurried forward to greet the travelers.

"I am sorry, messieurs," he said in excellent French, "that every bed, every table, in my inn is engaged. I am overwhelmed. The 'Lion' doubtless loses noble guests," and he fetched a fat sigh as his keen little eyes apprised the worldly stations of the two strangers. Evidently revolving some question in his mind he hit upon, to him, a happy solution to it.

"The castle," he said, with a significant wink accompanied by an upward jerk of a pudgy thumb, "the castle, messieurs, is but two miles further along this road. Perhaps, if milords have friends there, they can find accommodations."

"While I admit, Monsieur of the Lion," said Carter, "that I would like few things better than a good square meal just now, I would forego that gratification for information regarding the whereabouts of a gentleman of these parts."

The Gray Man drew nearer as this was said. A subtle change flickered across the wide expanse of the innkeeper's face, while a tinge of suspicion added a chill to his immediate inquiry.

"Monsieur would pay well doubtless?" He eyed the tourist narrowly. "Who is it, monsieur?"

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"I'd give ten golden florins to know where to find Count Paul Zulka. Do you know him?"

The boniface gasped and grew apoplectic. "I never heard of him," he said, which, in the face of his perturbation, was manifestly a lie.

The Gray Man stepped to the fore at this juncture.

"In the public squares of Schallberg, monsieur will doubtless gather much information," he said ironically and with a covert meaning at that moment not appreciated by Carter. "Monsieur must travel that way. He should not turn back," and with a nod of his head he indicated a troop of cavalry guarding the way along which the travelers had approached.

The significance of this was not lost on Carter who was now convinced that this was an army of Krovitzers and that his innocent inquiry had brought him under some sort of suspicion. Though he was burning up with curiosity to learn if it was the patriotic army, he wisely refrained from asking. With a short laugh he turned back to the Gray Man.

"I never turn back," he said. "The road toward Schallberg is better, I hope?"

"It is easier traveling, monsieur," the fellow replied insolently with an unchanging smile.

Carter was satisfied from this that if he used discretion he would be permitted to reach Schallberg or the army probably investing it. He gave the necessary orders to Carrick and without undue haste while in the vicinity of the inn the automobile proceeded on its quest.

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When out of earshot of the hostelry, the Cockney, who had been a silent observer of the controversy, gave a prodigious sigh of relief.

"I wouldn't trust that grinning ape with a dead pup. 'E's a sly one. 'Opes we don't run into 'im again."

"I don't like him, either. I have a feeling, though, that we'll meet him again soon and like him less."

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V

I AM THE LADY TRUSIA

"I hope she's not dead," Carter said fervently as he bent over the unconscious girl. He beckoned to his chauffeur. "You can't catch her horse, Carrick. No use trying. Just hand me my flask."

As he forced the brandy through the pale lips he inwardly cursed his own lust for speed which had been the cause of the possibly fatal catastrophe.

Tempted by a bit of road, straight and smooth, full power had been put on in a feverish desire to interpose as much space as possible between the automobile and the Gray Man at the inn, repugnance for whom seethed in Carter's soul. As the touring car had neared a turn in the way, its two occupants had been horrified to see a spirited black horse, ridden by a beautiful girl, swing at a sharp gallop directly in their path. A rare presence of mind on Carrick's part had prompted an instant application of the brakes which had undoubtedly prevented a collision although it had very nearly hurled him and his companion from their seats. The steed for a fraction of a second had been petrified with fear. Then it had reared violently, thrown its rider, and panic-stricken, had turned and fled in the direction of its coming.

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Carter, kneeling, gently placed the girl's head against his shoulder, while he passed an arm around her the better to support the relaxed body. He looked helplessly at the Cockney.

"Wasn't there some one with her?" he inquired, with the memory of a meteoric vision of another rider fleeing back along the road on a plunging, squealing steed.

"Yes, Mr. Carter, a young chap in uniform. 'Is 'oss bolted too, sir. 'E stuck on all right though. We've certainly 'ad a bad day for a start, don't you think, sir?"

Calvert did not answer; he was bending anxiously over the still face, praying for a sign of life. He was appalled by the girl's beauty and a twofold fear possessed him. He feared she was dead. Scarcely less than this, if fortunately she was alive, he dreaded the necessity that would require his laying desecrating masculine hands upon her for her better resuscitation.

"Is she dead, sir?" asked Carrick, bending above them as he noted Carter groping blindly for her pulse. "She looks like a queen," he added in a voice husky with the awe inspired by the marble stillness of her face.

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Hesitatingly Carter's finger rested on her wrist. A lump leaped to his throat, he could have shouted with joy as he found that the pulse still stirred.

"She is not dead," he said in a voice vibrant with thanksgiving. His eyes sought the Cockney's for a responsive gleam of gratitude.

His trembling fingers awkwardly loosened the habit about the round white throat. The unavoidable contact with the satiny skin caused his head to whirl and his face to crimson. Finally controlling himself he began to watch patiently for the sign of returning consciousness. During the ages it appeared to take, he inventoried the beauty of the face, the perfect ensemble of which had impressed him as she rode into view.

A shapely little head of wavy black hair lay in the crook of his elbow. The loosened strands breeze-blown against his cheek seemed light as the sheen of a spider's craft. These waved to the rhythm of beauty above a low white forehead veined in an indefinite tint of blue. The eyebrows were fine and daintily arched. Black lashes long and up-curling swept the unexplainable curve of her cheek, at the present time apparently masking eyes too rare for the vision of man. The nose, thin and ever so slightly bridged, was an epitome of aristocracy.

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The mouth, just beginning to quiver with reanimation, was curved in the curl of flowers in bud, and sweet and kind as the animate soul of a rose. A womanly chin turned, none could say where, into the matchless sweep and curve of the throat and breast, a glimpse of which he had had vouchsafed in such a breathless vision.

"Where's her hat, Carrick?" Carter asked, not because there was any immediate use for that article of apparel, but with the instinct of an orderly man to keep all things together. After a considerable search the chauffeur picked up something from the gutter by the side of the road and handed it to his master.

"This must be it, sir," he commented. It was a broad felt hat with one side of the brim looped up with a jewel *a la cavalier* while a fine black plume curled about it. For the first time, attracted doubtless by the head covering, Calvert noticed that the girl's was not the conventional costume one sees on equestriennes either in the Park or along the Row. Nevertheless the habit itself was elegantly plain.

Across from the right shoulder passing to the waist at the left was stretched a broad ribbon as red as war. A great jeweled star moved sluggishly upon it above her faintly struggling breast. The centre of the medal bore a lion rampant in blue enamel. On the beast's head was a royal crown. There was something suggestive about it which awakened his mind to grope tentacle-like for that of which it was reminiscent.

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A startled exclamation from Carrick caused him to look up quickly. Fumbling nervously at his shirt with one hand, with the other the wide-eyed Cockney was pointing at the star.

"The guvnor's shiner," he exclaimed excitedly as he drew forth from the folds of his blouse a battered duplicate of the medal she wore.

Barring its condition attributable to time and rough usage it was similar in every respect.

Growing surmise as to its origin and Carrick's connection thereto were interrupted by a tearful

incoherence on the part of the reviving girl. Her bosom heaved convulsively, her eyes opened wide and startled into life. She arose to a sitting posture glancing around as a child might who has been suddenly awakened from slumber. Carter still knelt at her side with ready arm for her support should weakness overtake her.

Like the sweep of rose light across a sunset land, the blush of recollection passed over her face, as the full details of the catastrophe came back to her and she recalled that, inevitably, this stranger had held her in his arms while he had performed services strictly feminine. Her eyes retreated behind the satin sheen of their lids. She struggled to her feet.

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"Pardon, monsieur," she addressed him in the French of St. Germain. "Where is my gentleman? And my horses, where are they? Horses, hereabouts, are strangers to the automobile."

"Both have bolted, mademoiselle, doubtless for that very reason. I feel very guilty, I assure you. I hope and pray that you are not seriously hurt. I assure you that I would have given anything to have spared you that fall. Can you ever forgive me? Will you let me make amends?"

As one born of high places, she raised her eyes straight and frankly to his. Reading sincere regret and pain in the face of this handsome stranger, she smiled as she generously held out her hand.

"You are forgiven," she said graciously. "I am only a trifle shaken. Will you kindly take me to my castle in your car, as I do not wish my people to worry?"

Nothing could have more tactfully displaced Carter's self-censure than this expressed wish of hers. Seeing that she was still weak he gravely offered his arm for her support.

Lightly she placed her gauntleted hand upon his elbow, but soft as that touch was, no other woman had so thrilled him.

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"To whom am I indebted, monsieur?" she asked with native curiosity.

"Calvert Carter, of New York, mademoiselle, is indebted to you for overlooking the accident he has caused."

"Mr. Carter," she added in delicious English, "the Duchess of Schallberg is grateful for your kindness. The question of indebtedness we will not pursue. It is not a good basis of friendship."

This was the Duchess of Schallberg; the possible aspirant to its throne?

"You—you are Trusia?" he stammered.

"I am the Lady Trusia," she corrected gently.

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VI

THE GRAY MAN AGAIN

"Which wye?" asked Carrick who, having started the auto, kept his eyes steadily on the road in front of him and shot the question over his shoulder.

"Straight ahead. The lady is unconscious again."

This was true, for as they entered the car Carter had been just in time to catch the Lady Trusia in his arms as she toppled forward in a sudden return of the fainting spell.

"Why not back to the inn, sir?"

Carrick's suggestion betrayed that he shared his companion's concern for Her Grace of Schallberg.

"I'd rather not. We are not popular there and I feel present conditions would hardly increase their friendship. We'll try the castle. I fancy that's her home, anyhow."

He glanced up to where, distinctly outlined, its towers in the clouds, they beheld the grim structure, recognizable from its significant location as the one they had espied from the thither side of the forest.

"Where's the wye to it?" The chauffeur was puzzled, for straight before them the cliff ran perpendicular to the side of the road, without an apparent break. "Must be on the other side, sir, for blyme it's not on this."

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"More speed then, Carrick. This faint promises to last awhile."

Carter bent over the unconscious Trusia, and, as he noted the powerful effort of her strong soul to beat off the paralysis of the senses, a thrill of tenderness shot through him.

For a man with Calvert Carter's strength of character to hold a beautiful girl in his arms it would be inevitable that a certain sense of ownership should subconsciously mingle with his thoughts of her. The germ of love may be discovered in propinquity.

Be that as it may, as the lax slender form in his arms set his heart beating wildly, he was tempted to crush her to his breast and to press his lips savagely, yearningly, upon her tender mouth. Then, in reaction, her helplessness appealed to him and aroused all the chivalry of his nature. For less than the space of a sigh the primitive savage within him had struggled with the gentleman,—and the gentleman had won. This very conflict with himself, however, had increased though it had chastened his desire. The more personal concern he now felt for her recovery was but another expression of the primal instinct dignified by discipline.

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Meanwhile the touring car had been lurching forward with increasing acceleration for more than a quarter of a mile, when, surprising them agreeably, the cliff apparently opened, showing a narrow way cut through its face, leading directly up to the castle. Before the distant portal a group of horsemen could be seen making preparations for departure.

"Evidently a relief party. That riderless horse of hers must have returned and started an alarm."

"They see us, sir," said Carrick, who had brought the machine to a stop. "They're pulling up. It's a good thing, as there's barely room for me to run the car up, without their crowding the road."

So saying he carefully swung into the narrow way and soon accomplished the ascent. Passing under a portcullis as mediæval as that of any Rhenish castle, they stopped in an ancient, stone-flagged courtyard. On every side, thronging about them, they met the vengeful, scowling eyes of men in a frenzy of fear and hate, while a growling murmur of resentment greeted their ears as the mob recognized their liege lady apparently dead in the arms of a stranger. To their discipline as soldiers, for these men wore uniforms similar to those seen already at the inn, the two adventurers probably owed salvation from instant dismemberment. In their faces Calvert Carter read the unreasoning fury of their souls, experiencing his nearest approach to fear, yet he met them eye for eye.

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Standing apart, his handsome boyish head hung in shame, as if ostracized for incompetency, stood a young fellow whom Carter recognized as the escort of the Lady Trusia. His face was pale and dejected. Apparently unaware of the presence of the strangers, he was fingering his revolver holster.

The heavy gate closed behind them with an ominous clang. A chill ran down Carter's spine. If bad came to worst he resolved to sell his life dearly, for murder electrified the air and was closing in around them from every side.

A wicket suddenly opened in the studded door of the castle before them. Two men stepped through it upon the broad flat stone of its only step.

Both were past middle age but vigorous looking. The first standing in front of and obscuring his companion was evidently a personage of exalted rank. His hair and long mustachios were silvery white, and the glance he shot from under his heavy brows was keen and comprehensive. He seemed a man accustomed to both camp and court. One glance at his carriage would have shown to the merest tyro that he was a soldier even had he not worn a black hussar uniform. He looked coldly around upon the impassioned throng which was quieted by the steely glitter in his disdainful eyes, and then, turning, said something to the abashed equerry. Without remonstrance, the young fellow drew out his revolver and handed it to a sergeant who immediately pocketed it.

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Having quieted the disturbance, he for the first time became aware of its cause. A cry of mingled grief and rage burst from his lips. He started impulsively forward, fumbling at his sword hilt, but his companion laid a restraining hand upon his arm, coming into full view for the first time.

It was no other than the Gray Man of the inn, who now, with bent head and most deferential manner, addressed a few whispered words to the elderly noble. After a brief, inaudible conference the two descended from the step to advance through the menacing throng toward the automobile.

Mechanically, Carter, reaching back his free hand, opened the door at the back of the car. The veteran stopped within touching distance, not deigning to notice the action of invitation, and held out imperative arms for the young Duchess.

His voice rasped harshly on the hot courage of the American. "Canaille," he blurted apoplectically, "how dared you run down Her Grace with your cursed car? Your touch profanes her person. Surrender her instantly."

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It was a blow in the face to Carter.

Though his blood was boiling, respect for the age of the man who addressed him restrained Calvert from voicing the hot retort which sprang to his lips or striking his adversary to the ground. His hands opened and closed tensely as he kept himself in check. Disregarding the curt command, Carter, still holding Trusia in his arms, leaped lightly from the car and would have carried her into the castle had not the elderly soldier barred his way. With face crimson every glistening hair seemed to flash the lightning of his unspeakable rage at such presumption.

"Monsieur," said Carter with level eyes, "let me pass. The lady is too ill for us to be bandying words. You are too old and too well supported for me to hope to obtain adequate satisfaction for your insult."

The other did not budge from the path, but reached out a peremptory hand which he laid on Trusia's shoulder.

"Give her to me, sir," he insisted, ignoring Carter's remarks entirely.

The Gray Man rubbed his hands together in open delight at the disfavor the two strangers were incurring and his cynical smile grew more evident every moment.

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While an eye might wink the primitive man awoke in Calvert. He was prompted to fight for the woman he held as he stood measuring glances with his peremptory adversary. Then the folly of such resistance came to his mind, so with a sigh and a frown he permitted the other to take her from his arms. As he did so he felt not only that something intangible, delectable had been loosened from his clasp, but that its relinquishment had caused the life blood to move more sluggishly in his breast.

"We're up against it," whispered Carrick, who descending from the car had placed himself at his master's elbow for such eventualities as might arise.

Seemingly fearful of a conference between the two, the Gray Man gave a sudden order. Six men leaped from the hostile circle, and before there was an opportunity for resistance, Carter and Carrick were thrown to the ground and their arms were tightly bound to their sides.

The mocking face of the Gray Man regarded them as he bent over Carter's prostrate form.

"Get up," he said, touching the American ever so slightly with his toe.

"You shall pay for this," said the outraged Carter as he struggled to his feet.

"I am not indebted to you," was the sneering rejoinder, as, with the slightest of gestures, he intimated that the prisoners were to be conducted into the castle, through whose portal Her Grace of Schallberg was already being carried by the plethoric nobleman.

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VII

A COOL RECEPTION

Before their eyes, accustomed to the brightness of early afternoon, in which all things were actively visible, could sufficiently adjust themselves to distinguish objects in the shadowy gloom, they were thrust into a room, the door of which was bolted after them, and they were left in utter darkness.

"You there, Carrick?" whispered Carter.

"Ere, sir," came the reply from an invisible neighborhood. "I'm trussed up like a duck. These bloomin' cords are cuttin' my wrists. It seems to me, sir," he continued ruefully, "that if we 'ad wanted to be jugged, we could 'ave gotten the job done easier by styin' in New York. 'Don't like a man,—to jail with 'im,' seems to be these chaps' motto."

"We're evidently in the bad books of the Gray Man, at any rate, Carrick."

"I'm onto his gyime, sure's my name's Tod."

"What is it?"

"'E thinks we're spies."

Carter laughed incredulously. "He has put us in a good place, then. Can't gather much information in this tomb, that is certain. We're getting into their revolution by the back door, it seems."

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"Talkin' about doors," Carrick's whisper radiated with excitement, "I'd take my oath that I saw one as we came in. It's in the wall to the left of the entrance and is slightly ajar."

"How close are you to me now?" The Cockney's shoulder touched his by way of reply. "It is this wall we are leaning against, then?"

"The syme, sir. If you move along to your right about six feet, you'll be right in front of it."

"We'll try our luck, anyhow," said Carter. "Next-door may not be so much infested with the darkness of the pit." Carefully groping in the indicated direction, they found the portal as Carrick had described it. Their hands being tightly tied, they had to shove it open with their shoulders. To their anxious ears it seemed impossible that the noise of its rusty hinges could not be heard on the topmost battlement. The room which they now entered was lighted by a single casement, high above their heads. Diagonally opposite, in the wall parallel to the one by which they stood, was another door, also open.

"Cinch," said Carrick, with a hopeful nod toward the possible avenue of escape.

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"I don't know that," replied the other reflectively. "Suppose we do find our way out, how could we

pass the sentries, videttes, and scouts who are scouring the country—or should be? We'd have to hide without the hope of assistance from strangers. What could we do with our hands tied? Mind you, I'm not discouraging escape if we can—I'm simply groping for a plan. Let's explore our quarters. It may help to know the lay of the place."

"Wyte a bit, sir," said Carrick, moving behind his master. "My teeth are strong. Mybe I can get your 'ands loose." Kneeling on the stone floor he applied himself vigorously to the task.

"Our friends," commented Carter, "evidently foresaw such an attempt and provided against it by shutting us up in the dark. How are you getting on?" He could feel the strenuous efforts of his chauffeur as the latter gnawed at the knot.

"Not at all, Mr. Carter. It's rawhide. The saliver from my mouth only mykes it swell. Of course that tightens the knot. It mykes it slimy, too, so's I carn't keep 'old of it." He scrambled to his feet with a hasty apology for his failure.

"Fortunately our feet are not hobbled and we're not blindfolded. Come on, we'll see what's beyond that door, my man," and Calvert proceeded cautiously toward the open entrance. With ears strained to bursting, they listened by it a breathless moment. No sound, no breath, no intuition of human proximity warned them that further progress was dangerous, so they passed the threshold into the third room. A sigh of relief came from Carter's lips as he noted that it, too, was vacant. The door to the cell beyond was likewise open. They advanced, therefore, through that and several successive cells, until they were confronted by a narrow, dark passageway, whose objective could not be discerned from where they stood.

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Not knowing where the gloom would betray their feet, they stepped very cautiously as they explored the darkness before them. The better to guide himself, Carter kept his shoulder to the wall. He had not proceeded very far when his own weight, pushing against the masonry, swung him off into a narrow entrance at right angles to the main passage.

He drew back with a gasp. He found himself on the very brink of an uncurbed well. Gradually recovering himself from the involuntary start which had kept him from falling head-foremost into the opening, he leaned forward to investigate.

Far below he could see daylight, a patch of grass-grown earth, and the edge of a stable,—for a horse's head was thrust through an aperture. He turned to his companion.

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"Careful, Carrick. I pretty nearly stepped into kingdom come. I think that door was purposely left open that we might commit involuntary suicide. There's a well here without a bottom. Goes down through the cliff to what is apparently the yard of the inn. It's like a shaft to the mines at home. Wonder what's it for?"

"Secret passage, sir; see that basket and rope," and Carrick indicated a huge car swinging in the gloom above their heads.

"That's how the Gray Man beat us to the castle without passing us on the road."

"Right," agreed Carrick.

"We can't profit by it now, worse luck, but it may come in useful in a pinch. Who knows? If we only had free use of our hands, now. Eh, Carrick?"

"Right," reiterated his fellow captive.

"Well," said Carter, arising from his knees, "suppose we investigate the rest of the main passage."

They turned again into the dark entry to be brought up this time by a door which they would have also attempted to force had not the sound of voices from the other side of the stout panels paralyzed their intention and filled them with apprehension.

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It was clearly a position where eavesdropping was not dishonorable. They were prisoners, innocent of any moral offense, cast into jail without being apprised of the nature of the charges against them. Here might be an opportunity of gaining, at least, an insight into the character of some of those hostile to them. A knowledge of the traits of one's judge or jury is a material assistance to a sufficient defense, which no one should neglect where an opportunity for the acquisition of such information is honorably presented.

There were evidently two people in conversation in the region behind the locked door. The voices were those of women. One, crisp and girlish, was new to Carter. The other's made his heart bound hopefully. It was Trusia's.

"Let us speak in French, Natalie," she was saying to her companion in that language. "My maid need not understand all we talk about." Then she continued in evident answer to some previous question, "His name is Calvert Carter." There followed a delightful hesitancy, which sent a thrill through the invisible auditor, while in a tone intended to be judicious, Trusia completed her reply: "Yes, I think you would call him handsome. Anyway, he's a gentleman. Any person could see that."

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"But what has become of him?" inquired her companion. "I have asked my father, and Tru, what sort of reply do you think he made? Mean thing."

"I don't know, dear. Probably teased."

"Exactly. He always does, no matter how serious the question may be. He laughed and pinched my cheek, and had the audacity to ask if I wanted to add the stranger to my list of victims. Then I asked the Chancellor. You know he doesn't like girls. He puffed out his cheeks—so, drew down his brows—like this, and glared. 'Umph, umph,' he blustered and stalked away. Josef was the only one who would tell anything."

"Well, he could tell you only, as he did me, that they had resumed their journey."

"O-o-oh," the exclamation was long drawn, indicating that some one had fibbed. "He told me that the strangers were dangerous. Russian spies, he said. Do you think they are, Tru? It's perfectly thrilling. And to think, one actually held you in his arms! Who knows——" she began mischievously. There was a gurgling sputter of sounds, as if a hand had been placed over the teasing mouth. Then it was withdrawn and the offender was permitted to prattle on.

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"If they weren't spies, Tru, why should they be put in one of the old cells?"

"What makes you say that, Natalie? Josef certainly told me they had gone on with their journey."

"He told me that they were locked up. I saw the auto not five minutes before coming here. It's under sentry in the courtyard."

"Surely, Natalie, you are mistaken, dear? Josef would not tell me a deliberate untruth." Carter felt a strong desire to see and expose this Josef who held such an exalted place in the confidence of Her Grace of Schallberg. Symptoms threatening a tiff were evident in the Lady Natalie's voice.

"Really, Your Grace," she said with dignity, "am I to understand that you'd take his word before mine?"

"Your Grace?—what nonsense! Between you and me! Don't pout, dear. Just think what chance Krovitch would have for a man to rule her people, and lead them in their battles if it wasn't for this same loyal, disinterested Josef? Do you wonder I hold him in such high esteem?" There was a gentle reproof in the Duchess's tones.

"But why," persisted the somewhat mollified Natalie, "did your paragon fib so to me?"

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"We'll go and see now, dear. Marie has finished my hair."

The listener, assured that they would get a fair trial, arose and, with Carrick following, made his way back in the direction from which they had adventured.

There is always a difference, telepathic it may be, in a room which, then empty, has been entered and vacated by some living thing. Carter appreciated this as soon as he set his foot in the first cell on their return journey. Some one had been there since he and Carrick had come through. He glanced at the Cockney to see if he, too, had the same impression. The fellow's head was craned forward, as one who strives to catch an elusive sound.

"I was sure I 'eard something in there, Mr. Carter," he whispered, responding to the visual question, as he nodded his head toward the doorway beyond them. Carter listened intently. It might have been an atom broken from silence; he was not positive that he had really heard anything, but he was convinced that the silence had not been unbroken. They moved cautiously to the door and peered guardedly around its frame.

There is also an actual physical—or, if you choose, psychical connection between what is seen, what has just missed being seen by an infinite fraction of time, and what one has imagined one has just seen, and between these all the scientists of all the ages have not been able to formulate a real distinction. One's senses, after all, remain the best guides.

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"I just missed seeing something going through that door," whispered Carrick. It is noticeable, too, that he had said "something" and not "some one." The gloomy cells, centuries old, the damp memories of the dungeons still clinging to the walls, together with this weird presence which eluded their eyes before they could behold it, might well arouse the superstitions of firmer minds than the Cockney's.

They were approaching the cell in which they had been placed. At last there was a perfectly appreciable sound. It was a fumbling, as of some one in the darkness, making hasty efforts to get a key in a lock. Carter, now bent on discovery, made a rush into the abysmal darkness. He could see—nothing!

Still he felt that he and Carrick, who had joined him, were not the only occupants of the room.

Along the hall could be heard the unmistakable sound of approaching steps.

"Quite a select party, sir," remarked Carrick in comment, while Carter still tried to pierce the gloom to establish the identity of the invisible visitant.

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"About three," replied Carter.

The sounds stopped directly opposite their door. There was a grating of a key against the lock and the door swung open.

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VIII

THE SPECTRE OF THE STAR

The Gray Man stood in front of the narrow entrance. The sinister smile which flickered across his face was made diabolic by the cross rays from the lanterns carried by two peasant soldiers. As if his attendance was an enforced and unwelcome one, the equerry of Lady Trusia, who had followed in the wake of the others, advanced no further into the room, but stood with his back against the closed door.

One furtive glance cast in the direction of the cell from which Carter and Carrick had just returned convinced the former that the old fellow was at least aware of their explorations.

When the two privates had deposited their lanterns upon a table which seemed to emerge from the gloom under the partial illumination, Carter surveyed his prison with a curiosity previously denied him. One glance was sufficient. The Gray Man had come to conduct an inquisition. What more fitting place, therefore, could be found to strike terror to the hearts of the guilty or weakling than the torture chamber of the castle?

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A man of keen perceptive nature is apprised of secret as well as professed antagonisms, through a primitive discrimination, unaided by either word or deed, of the one holding him in enmity. Carter felt sure that with the possible exception of the equerry this visit to the cell was not prompted by a friendly motive. They had, evidently, been imprisoned in darkness that a sudden revelation of the devilish machinery about them might shake their courage.

Carter's lip curled disdainfully at such cheap theatrical efforts. He turned to the smirking face before him, which from behind the table was watching for the signs of trepidation he had hoped to surprise. By an answering smile as mocking as his own, he was satisfied that his ruse had failed. He shrugged his thin shoulders.

Purringly in an incomprehensible jargon, he addressed Carter to receive no other response than a blank and puzzled stare.

He essayed French.

"So, Monsieur of the White Police prefers the more polite language of France? Well, so be it."

At the mention of that secret, ubiquitous organization of Russian espionage, Carter realized that Carrick's prognostications had been correct. The cool insinuation made his blood boil. His answer came with the force of a blow. "What do you mean?" he thundered.

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Staggered for an instant, the Gray Man's equanimity was shaken, then, turning to speak to the two peasants, he waited until they had placed themselves at the sides of the enraged American. Assured that he had forestalled any possible violence to himself, he regarded the prisoners sneeringly.

"That you are Russian spies."

"We are Americans. I will prove it, too, as soon as I am out of this place; and that in a manner which will not be pleasant to those concerned in this outrage."

"Provided you get a chance. Spies are not given much shrift hereabouts." This was said with deliberate malevolence.

"Would you dare?" challenged Carter who realized to the full what the menace implied.

"It would be but an incident, monsieur," replied his jailer in a casual manner. "You would be numbered among the missing in the big events of to-morrow. Enough time has been wasted on you, Monsieur of the White Police," he said, as if dismissing discussion. "We must to business."

At a nod from him, the two peasant soldiers threw themselves upon the helpless prisoners, and ruthlessly rifled their persons of all belongings, which were placed upon the table before the Gray Man. Straining till the big veins in their arms stood out in ridges and the sweat poured from their brows, the captives were helpless against the indignities put upon them.

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Carrick's shirt was torn open. The Krovitzer soldiers stood dumbfounded at the sight of the star which hung upon the Cockney's breast. As though its appearance had countermanded all previous orders, they turned puzzled faces to their superior, who also saw the emblem.

Into those sneering eyes crept a pallid fear, while his face grew ashen. Approaching the Cockney he laid a trembling finger on the star.

"Your name?" he asked hoarsely.

"Tod Carrick," was the sullen reply.

A slight start followed this, as though the answer had matched his anticipations.

Instantly, the training and duplicity of years reasserted themselves. The habitual mask once more settled upon his inscrutable countenance. He turned to Carter who had been an attentive though puzzled observer of this by-play.

"I was surprised," he explained, "but only for an instant, to see your companion wearing the badge of our most noble order. I should not have been as there is no moral distinction between a thief and a spy." Encouraged by his own words, he tore the medal from its resting place, while Carrick groaned impotently.

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"I'll make you sweat for this," growled the Cockney.

"What authority have you for this?" asked Carter with forced calmness as the Gray Man commenced a leisurely perusal of his private papers. Without deigning a reply, their self-constituted judge completed his task; carefully folding the various documents he had been reading, he looked up complacently.

"Authority," he replied with a rising inflection, as though the idea were a new one. "Oh, I think I am justified in assuming it."

Carter breathed a prayer of silent thanksgiving that the Lady Trusia had been no party to the indignity.

As though in response to the thought, the Lady Trusia herself walked indignantly into the room. Going straight to the table she confronted the Gray Man with flashing eyes.

"Josef," she addressed him with stamping foot, "what does this mean? Who gave you permission to treat this gentleman so harshly? I am still mistress here."

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"They are Russian spies, Highness."

"Fiddlesticks," she replied with the feminine faith in the man who had given her such tender care. "Anyhow," she temporized, "our Privy Council, not you, shall be their judges." With charming hesitation, she turned to make a suitable apology to Carter, when, as her eyes fell before his ardent gaze, they rested upon Carrick's heirloom lying on the table.

"Can it be?" she questioned as one in a dream. "Is it yours?" she asked breathlessly, her whole soul in her eyes and parted lips, as she turned to Carter.

"No, Your Grace," he answered, "it is my chauffeur's."

"Yours?" she skeptically inquired of Carrick. "Where did you get it?"

"He probably stole it. He had it hidden under his shirt," suggested Josef.

Her fine brows drew together in annoyance as she turned to look steadily into the crafty eyes of him she called Josef.

"You forget your place, sir. I gave you no leave to speak. Have you forgotten that I am the Duchess of Schallberg? Be silent until you are spoken to."

Josef shrugged his shoulders after he had bowed apologetically, for he saw that the lady was no longer looking in his direction. Minutely, closely, she was studying the face of the Cockney; first red, then pale, her own countenance betrayed some inward apprehension.

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"It cannot be," she said huskily as if striving to dispel some doubt that would arise, "and yet there is no other jewel unlocated. Please tell me how you got this," she supplicated helplessly.

"Honestly, mem," was all the satisfaction she could elicit, for Carrick made no distinctions between her and the servant whom he thought was her agent.

"I've no doubt of that," she answered soothingly. "Will you tell me your name?" Her eager, expectant face held an expression of one who half fears the reply.

"Carrick," he answered with the monotony of iteration.

"Thank you," she said in relief. "Oh," she cried as she espied their bonds for the first time, "your hands are tied. This is intolerable. Casimir," she commanded the equerry, who had been keeping as much out of sight as possible, "undo those cords. They are cutting into the flesh. Messieurs, pardon my overzealous servants. Indeed, we have much to fear from strangers. Though you may mean no wrong to us, yet formality requires that you satisfy our Privy Council of your honesty in coming to our remote country at this particular time. Let us go at once, that you may the speedier be relieved of surveillance."

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"Josef," she said, turning to the Gray Man, "if you so desire you may present your foolish charges there."

She lifted her glance graciously to Carter.

"I have no fear for you, monsieur. You have the marks of an honorable gentleman."

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IX

IF ZULKA WERE HERE

"I've 'arf a notion to knock your block for a bloomin' sneak." Carrick halted suddenly in the doorway of the cell to face Josef. The Cockney's fists were clenched in a manner which promised that action would immediately follow declaration. Carter intervened peremptorily while Josef discreetly withdrew out of reach of the tough, bunched knuckles.

Led by the Duchess of Schallberg, they traversed a stone-flagged, arched passageway, which brought them to the main hall of the castle. A modern dwelling of average size could have been erected there without entirely exhausting the spaciousness of the hall.

Tattered banners, gray with antiquity, hung like memories on the walls. Below these, crumbling with age, were the antlers of ancestral deer, while arms and armor of heroic mold glimmered from the shadowy niches filled by them for generations.

Crossing the hall, the party led by Trusia approached a tapestried-hung archway, whose single sentry raised the heavy folds to admit her to whatever lay beyond. [Pg 81]

Preceded by Her Grace, and followed closely by Josef, Carter and Carrick entered the Council Chamber of Schallberg.

At one end of its many-pillared room, a dais held a double throne, whose high, broad back was carved with many heraldic devices of past intelligence. Its intricate traceries were capped by a lion rampant, which had pawed the air for generations.

Directly from the steps of the throne ran a heavy table at which were seated three Privy Counselors. A fourth seat was vacant. For Her Grace of Schallberg? Evidently not, for she mounted the two broad steps and seated herself on the throne, bowing graciously to the trio of ministers who had risen at her entrance. With a gesture that indicated that Carter and Carrick should stand facing these, their judges, she settled herself back in the high chair, while the accused found themselves with their backs to the door. Josef, with mocking deference, placed himself at the end of the table as the prosecutor. He unburdened himself of the purloined articles which he now placed before him in a little pile.

Admitting the seriousness of the situation so far as himself and his man were concerned, Carter could not but confess that the scene was a picturesque one, and that the very element of danger gave it a touch of piquancy. Here were himself and Carrick, fresh from the greatest shrine of modernity, after having been cast into a mediæval dungeon, now being hauled before a trinity of gold-laced judges on a charge of being spies. [Pg 82]



MOUNTED THE STEPS AND SEATED HERSELF ON THE
THRONE

He glanced admiringly toward Her Grace, whose tempting chin was cupped in her pink palm, while the deep lace of her half sleeve fell back from the round elbow propped by the broad arm of the throne. Her eyes dreamed of far-away things, until, telepathically, she became aware of Carter's ardent gaze.

Recalled to the duty before her, she blushed guiltily at her abstraction.

"Josef says these strangers are spies. You must judge," she said trenchantly to her Counselors.

Carter could have knelt before her as she spoke, for her voice proclaimed her disbelief.

"This," she said turning to Calvert as she indicated the stern-faced veteran nearest the throne, "this is Colonel Sutphen, the Hereditary Chancellor of Krovitch and member of our Privy Council."

Carter bowed gravely, but received no other acknowledgment than a frigid glare from the veteran. Josef had undoubtedly prejudiced Sutphen against the accused. This was more plausible than to suppose that the Colonel had become rancorous merely because the unconscious Trusia had not been more promptly surrendered to him, for it was he who had received her from the automobile. Proudly meeting the glaring eyes of Sutphen, Carter turned with relief to Her Grace of Schallberg. He caught the faint smile of amused comprehension which hovered about her lips; she had seen and enjoyed that duel of glances, as an ancient suzeraine might have delighted in a tourney in her honor. As her eyes met those of the American, he smiled.

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"Seated beside Colonel Sutphen is Count Muhlen-Sarkey, the Holder of the Purse."

This Privy Counselor was a moon-faced and rotund individual, who, in his efforts to preserve a fitting severity of expression in keeping with the duty before him, had succeeded only in appearing monstrously depressed. He smiled eagerly, responsively, to Carter's bow, bobbing his head like a gleeful sparrow. As a matter of fact, the proceedings were to him a joke—something to relieve the monotony of his existence. Yet this modern Falstaff, as Carter afterward learned, was among the bravest of the brave, meeting death with this same cheery smile, and following the grim monarch with a jest.

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The only remaining member of the Council present was Count Sobieska, Minister of Private Intelligence, who, from under half closed Oriental eyes, acknowledged the presentation with a dignified, but non-committal, inclination of the head. He seemed preoccupied in his own passivity, and was a man in the fullest triumph of life,—the years that enrich at forty. Lithe-looking as a panther—a somnolent animal now to all appearances—an occasional gleam of the half masked eyes suggested that this show of indifference concealed a mind of no inferior order. His nose was thin and arched like an Arab sheik's, and the close black hair was chafed from his temples in a seeming baldness. The iron firmness of his square jaw was not effaced beneath his well-trimmed beard. His hands, lightly folded over the hilt of a sword held between his knees, were long, slim, and muscular. Evidently a tireless friend or an implacable enemy, his was the strongest personality of the three Counselors present, despite his seeming air of ennui.

Bowing to Carter, he had turned an indifferent scrutiny upon Josef, who, though smiling, would have apparently foregone the inspection. All eyes were upon the accuser, however. Trusia's voice broke the silence as she addressed him.

"You may speak, Josef." There was a trace of regret in her voice. "I fear you have been over-zealous."

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"Listen, Highness," he said. He was anxious to convince; over-anxious, it seemed. "These men, in their accursed machine, flew past the sentries at the frontier, disregarding all commands to halt, even the shots fired."

"That is true," replied Carter. "We could take no chances. We had no desire to meet Russians just then."

An inquiry half parted Trusia's lips as she turned to hear Carter's confirmation, but checking her curiosity, she signed for Josef to proceed.

"Then they came to Posner's Inn. You know, Highness, what preparations were going forward there. These the spies noted. They even tried to bribe Posner into telling where Count Zulka could be found. They knew there was a heavy price upon his head. The cursed Russians." Carter started in surprise at this information regarding his friend. Josef pointed a triumphant finger at him. "See," he said, "it is true as I have said." Turning to Her Grace he continued, "If you attribute your fall from your horse to an accident, there are others who do not. It was part of their plan. Had not the highways been so well guarded they would have carried you to the Russian salt mines, a prisoner." Josef's vehemence had cost him his breath. He paused to regain it.

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To all appearances the Minister of Private Intelligence had been the least interested of the auditors. He now spoke quietly with reference to the belongings lying upon the table. Doubtless his keen eyes had already inventoried them.

"Have you found any proofs?" he asked, with a wave of his hand toward the group of miscellany.

At this question, Josef faced about with a conciliatory smile.

"No more than was to be expected, Excellency, upon the person of a spy of the undoubtedly superior intelligence that Russia would send on a mission to Krovitch just now. A fortune in bills—presumably for bribes, a road map of our country, and the name of 'Zulka' written across the capital, Schallberg."

At the reference to Zulka's name used in connection with the alleged plot, Trusia gave a slight start and a reproachful look clouded her eyes.

Frankly, fearlessly, he met her glance as well as the steel-like glint from Sobieska.

"He was my friend," the American said, as though no further explanation could be demanded.

"He was their quarry," retorted Josef vehemently. "Else why the questions to Posner and attempts to bribe, the fortune in bills, the name written significantly across the capital's, the city where to friends and foes he was best known. Had his friend been as careful," continued Josef, who already tasted triumph and liked the flavor, "we would have no more clues. His passion for acquisition, however, has given us additional material." He held up the star with evident dramatic intent.

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As Sutphen and Muhlen-Sarkey recognized it they started in genuine surprise.

"King Stovik's star," cried Sutphen.

Sobieska held out an indolent hand into which the eager Josef dropped it for examination. First the obverse, then the reverse were inspected with apparently slight interest. To Carter's appreciation of character, however, it was evident that not the slightest scratch on its surface had escaped those drooping eyes, as it was passed on to the gaping Holder of the Purse, whose chubby hands received it as though it were the relic of a saint. The jovial face was for the first time honestly grave. Reverently he transferred it to the Hereditary Chancellor. It lay before that bristling veteran who turned a questioning glance to Her Grace of Schallberg.

"I have seen it," she said.

"Is it—is it the missing star?" he asked in a hesitating manner, as though an affirmative answer was more than he could hope for.

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"It is," she replied with slightly inclining head.

"Then who is he?" asked the bewildered Sutphen, rising from his seat and pointing impulsively at Carrick.

"Only an English peasant, Excellency, who has stolen the missing star," Josef insinuated.

"Are you sure? Are you sure?" persisted the Colonel, who was struggling with a grave doubt, which was now inclining his judgment in favor of the captives.

Josef, comprehending the nature of the perplexity and fearing he might lose a partisan, advanced an argument whose significance did not then appeal to Carter.

"A medal, Excellency, even that medal may pass easily from one person to another without ownership having any special value. Papers, valuable papers, would be guarded faithfully from father to son because they alone would be incontestable proof. We know what we have already found. Look at this uncouth fellow," said Josef, indicating Carrick with a sneer. "Remember, he is a servant, and judge if there be any chance that his possession of the star should cause you any doubts? Was it with such as he the Line was maintained?"

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That he had stilled any uneasiness in the minds of the Counselors caused by the display of the medal, Josef was now satisfied. He paused for a final effort.

Sobieska spoke quickly to Carrick in an unintelligible language to be met with a look of honest mystification.

Josef smiled ironically.

"Your Lordship surely did not expect to catch such clever rogues by so innocent a ruse? They hardly would confess to a familiarity with Russian. Such an admission would convict them. Indulge them in French. One of the pair has that much linguistic ability. Besides, we have so far conducted our investigations in that diplomatic language."

"You are presumptuous, sir," said Trusia sharply. "*You* have no part in the conduct of this matter. You are simply a witness." Josef bowed low in meekness.

Without deigning a reply to the old fellow, Sobieska spoke next in fairly good English to the Cockney.

"What is your nation—birthplace?"

"England; Whitechapel, London," replied Carrick with natural taciturnity.

"Where did you get that?" continued the Minister, pointing to the medal.

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"My guv'nor left it to me when he croaked."

His questioner's eyelids were raised the merest shade in non-comprehension of the vernacular.

"Your governor," he said slowly as if seeking a key to relationship. Josef smiled. The latter's exultation was that of one enjoying a possible misconception which might attend a literal interpretation of what he knew was idiomatic.

"Guv'nor is the Whitechapel slang for father. My man many years ago told me he had received it in that way—the death of his parent," explained Carter coming to the rescue.

The stately Krovitzer bowed in acknowledgment of the explanation then continued his questioning.

"Where did he get it?" His sleepy eyes were probing deep.

"How the hell should I know," replied the irritated Cockney, who swiftly resented this prying into his affairs. Remembering himself instantly, he turned with a fine red in his face to the girl on the dais. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace, for forgetting myself. It was none of 'is business," he said, defending his lapse.

"Was he English, also?" pursued Sobieska relentlessly.

"Sure."

"His name?"

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"Mark Carrick," was the almost surly answer.

"His business?"

"Scrivener."

"Why did you come to Krovitch?" The question was advanced suddenly, unexpectedly, as if to catch the chauffeur off his guard.

"I'm Captain Carter's man; you'd better arsk him." Carrick was displaying renewed signs of impatience.

Sobieska paused. He gravely turned to his associates, and, for their information, translated fairly and without comment what the chauffeur had said into French, with which language Sutphen and Muhlen-Sarkey seemed conversant.

"That you might correct any misstatements," he explained calmly to Carter.

"There was no need," replied the American. "You have been most impartial."

Evidently not yet satisfied with the results obtained from his preliminary investigations, he turned again to the Englishman, who seemed not a little mystified to find his domestic history so interesting to these lordly foreigners.

"Where is your father buried?" inquired Sobieska courteously.

"Dunno, sir. I was awye when 'e died. Landliday said as 'ow a strange gent came, buried 'im an' took 'is hinsurance pipers awye with 'im. Sed 'e was the guvnor's brother."

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"Did you ever see this uncle?" he asked suavely.

"No, sir. Never knew I 'ad one. Guvnor sed 'e was the only child."

"Did you claim the insurance?"

Carrick paused long before replying. When he spoke again his tone was decidedly hostile.

"What's all this got to do with my bein' a spy? These things about my guvnor an' me are personal matters. I don't see as 'ow I'm bound to answer such questions." His face reddened slowly and then he added impressively, "This much I'll admit to my own discredit, though."

Sobieska bent forward even more closely in anticipation.

"The guvnor an' me," continued Carrick, "didn't allus 'it hit off together, so you see I didn't know much about 'is affairs. I said hinsurance pipers, because they looked like 'em to me. They might not 'ave been, but the guvnor set a great store by 'em. Captain Carter can tell as 'ow I told 'im all this at Santiago." He turned to his master for confirmation.

"It is true," said the latter.

Still the Minister was not satisfied to relax his intimate investigations. Her Grace of Schallberg appeared an interested listener and had lost not a syllable of what had been said. The remaining Counselors were patiently expectant of translation as English was a closed door to them. Josef on the other hand would have gladly welcomed a divertisement though clearly afraid to inaugurate one. For some subtle reason he was very uneasy. Since Carrick's assertion that a stranger had purloined valuable papers from his father, the Gray Man had seemed to fear an unexpected revelation of some sort. Sobieska seemed to scent this secret fear and was willing to play with Josef's susceptibility.

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"When did your father die?" asked the Count after a pause which had threatened to become intense, during which Josef had shifted uneasily.

"Fifteen years ago come the seventh of August."

"Where?"

"Twelve Tottinam Plyce, Whitechapel."

"Is the landlady living?"

"Now 'ow the devil should I know? I beg your pardon, again, Your Grace, but this man is badgerin' me orful." Her smile asked him to be patient so he turned to his inquisitor patiently.

"I 'aven't seen 'er since," he replied.

Josef felt this line of investigation had gone far enough and determined to stop it at all hazards. He coughed. Sobieska turned to him inquiringly, an amused smile in his eyes.

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"Is all this important, Excellency?" the Gray Man asked deprecatingly, intimating that the issue had been forgotten. With a quiet drawl, containing both a reproof and a demurrer, Sobieska corrected him.

"Interesting," he said as he shot a covert glance at Josef which also held a challenge. Then as though in tacit compliance with the suggestion he turned not discourteously to Carter.

"Where did you get the title of Captain your man gave you a while ago?"

"I have no real right to it, never claim it," replied the American, "though at one time I bore it as of right in the Spanish-American war. It is the American habit never to let a man forget a title he has once won through merit."

Sobieska bowed.

"What brought you to Krovitch? It is outside the usual route of tourists."

For the fraction of a second the men gazed steadily at each other—possible antagonists appraising the other's chances. The question had been as hitherto in French for the benefit of the other auditors.

Careful to keep any appearance of apology from what he might say, yet scorning any other medium than the truth, Carter explained the motive for his coming to Krovitch. "An American's love of adventure—a wish to join your insurrection."

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Even his inquisitor was startled by the boldness of the reply. The Counselors leaped to their feet and laid suggestive hands upon their swords. Trusia's face went white, while her hand clutched in terror at her throat. Then, seeing that Carter was in danger, with an effort she quickly recovered herself.

"Put up your swords, my lords," she commanded in distress. "Let him explain."

"What insurrection?" thundered a bristling Sutphen, seating himself stiffly erect, on the edge of his chair.

"I told you they were spies," Josef almost shouted in gratification. "Why else would they say such a thing except as a play for your confidence. Where would they learn our secret?"

Carter turned to Trusia.

"Pardon me, Your Grace, for my inept choice of words. I meant restoration, not insurrection." He bowed low as to the sovereign of Krovitch as he supposed her to be. Then raising his head he continued, "As for your secret, the world has already heard the rumors of the approaching war."

Then with effective repression he added, "My country's wars have always been for Freedom and Righteousness, never for aggrandizement. A nation's sentiments will animate her citizens. I heard rumors of a sister country in distress and longed to help her. I heard rumors. I find them confirmed. I am no spy. I am Adventure's cadet."

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"How then did he hear or know of Count Zulka?" sneeringly suggested Josef. Carter noticed that again the momentarily favorable impression had been destroyed. Josef for some strange reason was aggressively opposed to a vindication of the two strangers in Krovitch.

"Your Grace, there was a club in New York City," Carter explained to Trusia, "of which Paul Zulka and myself were members. We were good friends. One year ago he left hurriedly. Knowing from his ardently expressed love for his birthplace and his outspoken hate for Russia that he would be in the front rank of any fight of Krovitch's, I naturally sought him for my voucher."

The chubby Purse Holder was anxious to question the accused. "What is the name of this club?" he asked.

"It is the Racquet Club."

The Holder of the Purse leaned back. With a satisfied air, Sutphen turned to him.

"That the club to which your nephew, Count Paul, belonged?" he asked.

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"Yes," he said genially. "I am Paul Zulka's uncle," he explained to Carter.

"Did he ever mention a Calvert Carter as among his associates there?" queried a lenient Trusia.

The Holder of the Purse spread out two fat palms deprecatingly.

"How should I remember?" he said helplessly. "These English names are hard to bear in mind. Such things, ach! as I have had to remember in the last year." The burden was evidently appalling. "Yet," he added kindly, that he might do no injustice, "it might be so that he did."

"If Count Zulka were here"—began Carter confidently. He was interrupted by Her Grace of Schallberg who raised her hand for silence.

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X

THE GLIMMER OF SUSPICION

It was Paul Zulka who bowed low over the Duchess's hand. He was totally oblivious to all other claims upon his attention for the nonce.

"Do you know that gentleman, Paul?"

As Trusia questioned him, he turned about in mystification. Not expecting to see Carter there or anywhere, it required time for his mental processes to adjust themselves to the detached conditions, unfavorable to a recognition.

That the Krovitzer had not instantly identified his former clubmate was causing the latter some uneasiness. He knew it would be impossible for Zulka to have forgotten his existence completely after two years of almost daily social intercourse. A greater fear followed on the heels of this first misgiving. Carter's mouth set firm and hard as he considered the possibility of an intentional snub. If such were the case his fate was undoubtedly sealed, for he had invoked this very test—this meeting was to vouch for his sincerity. His mind went rapidly back over the whole period of his acquaintance with the Krovitch nobleman, to recall if there had been any indication of such a poltroon trait in Paul Zulka's character. He was, in justice, forced to deny the existence of any such.

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In the flash of an eye it had all happened. Forgetting court etiquette in his rush, Zulka grasped his friend's hand and shook it vigorously.

"You," he said half doubting his own senses. "Here? Will wonders never cease? Carrick, too," and a friendly nod greeted the grinning and relieved Cockney. The recognition was complete.

"Mea Culpa!" said Zulka, suddenly remembering his grievous breach of decorum, turning now to bow deeply with a humility which seemed but half sincere. Of course Trusia forgave him for she seemed vastly pleased with the favorable outcome of the meeting.

"Carter a spy!" Paul exploded, when the status of affairs was duly explained to him. "I would as soon suspect our loyal old Josef there."

The face of the latter, since Zulka's advent, had been a study, though this allusion to him had been received with his accustomed smirk.

Sobieska, for the time being no further interested in the proceedings, was openly watching the mask-like face. It was as though a suspicious mind, aroused by the vigorous and unsustained charges, had, as a reflex, determined to probe the motives to their devious sources. Too subtle to display the uneasiness he felt at this surveillance, Josef appeared the personification of innocence and candor.

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Colonel Sutphen, willing to make amends, and aware that Carter and Carrick had not yet been formally acquitted, arose and addressed Her Grace.

"I think we may take it, Highness, that this gentleman and his—his servant are vindicated." The word servant caused him some difficulty as he was not prepared to relegate Carrick to such servile rank. It might be of some significance to note that both Josef and Sobieska displayed a covert interest in this hesitation in the usually downright Chancellor.

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XI

YOU LOVE TRUSIA

"I am so glad," she said as she stepped from the dais to greet him.

There was a generous simplicity of movement somewhat at variance with the haughty poise of her head. That Trusia, Duchess of Schallberg, was a very lovely young woman Carter found himself mentally confessing with no small degree of enthusiasm, while his heart warmed at her sweet effusiveness.

"Do you really and truly mean it?" she continued as she placed a small, firm palm in his, man-wise. "You have come all the way from that wonderful country of yours to join us?"

She clasped her hands at her neck in a sweet girlish gesture as he silently bowed his assent. He felt dazzled. Though accustomed to the society of high-bred women, he was at a loss for the first time in his experience; was unable to frame a simple affirmative. If, he thought, she would only turn away those wonderful eyes of hers for an instant, he felt confident of accomplishing a conversational commonplace at least.

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The members of the Privy Council, following her lead, came forward to greet him. Carter devoutly prayed that this diversion might loosen his unruly member.

That no remark might escape his vigilant ears, Josef edged cautiously to the outskirts of the group now gathered around the Americans. Trusia espied him, and much against his desire haled him to the fore.

"You must make amends, sir," she prompted, though not unkindly, "for the annoyance you have caused Captain Carter."

"Your Highness," he said with a deferential bow, but unbending mind, "must accept my zeal in the cause as my justification." Trusia was much hurt at this intentional and undisguised evasion of her behest, as much on the strangers' as on her own account, so hastened to supplement such an ambiguous apology.

"Josef is indulged by us," she began deprecatingly, "because to his fidelity, loyalty and zeal, we are indebted for a royal leader for Krovitch, a man descended from our one-time kings of the day when Krovitch was great."

"But I thought," said the puzzled Carter, "that you were the only descendant of Augustus."

"I am." The little head was raised in imperial pride. "But King Stovik, though deposed, was the rightful sovereign, not my ancestor. The fugitive monarch left a scion whom Josef as a faithful servitor has attended from his infancy. Finding in recent events that the time was ripe for his crownless prince, he came to tell us that we had a king, if we dared to strike for him. He showed us proofs. We already had organization, men and money, but we sadly lacked a man for the struggle. My valorous people would have fought for me, poor as were my claims to the crown, founded on the wrong done another. Imagine how high their enthusiasm became on hearing that not only one of King Stovik's glorified stock, but a man—a young king—was to lead the ancient flag to victory. Russia, already dazed, can do nothing against the flame of my people's ardor."

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"But the Almanac de Gotha," insisted Carter to whom the reference to the invisible king was a puzzling one.

"Knew nothing about King Stovik after his deposition and flight," she interrupted with a charming smile.

"Tell me the story, Your Grace," he pleaded, for he could feel instinctively that there was a story, an old world romance hidden here.

She held up a warning finger. "Be warned in time," she said, "it is a vulnerable point with me, one on which I am likely to be extremely prolix."

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"You can but enhance the value of the legend," he replied with a bow. "I promise, Highness," he laughed, once more at his ease, "not to take the teeniest of naps."

Already deep in her recollections of her country's tribulations, her responsive smile was of one who dreamed. Inspiring scenes of tragic grandeur, the pageant of a nation's history wiped out in the groans of conquest, lit the beauty of her eyes. So must the Maid of Orleans have appeared to those who in awe listened to her. Softened by her translation into the world of inspiration, she turned to him.

"How I envy those who can wield the pen," she sighed. "I wish I could chronicle the story of the kings who have been safely hidden for generations. Patiently, devotedly, for two centuries have they waited for this day to dawn, the first opportunity that Krovitch has had to take back her own from the despoiler of Europe. The narrative from where general information ends," she continued, "briefly is as follows: King Stovik with his queen and infant son escaped by the connivance of a loyal nobleman on the midnight of the intended assassination of the overthrown dynasty. With two servants, husband and wife, who insisted on sharing the exile, he left Krovitch to find an asylum in a strange country, where caution led him to change his name. Certain it is that his subjects never learned the place of his retreat though they were well assured that his line was maintained in exile. After some years of silence, during which the heir apparent had reached a marriageable age, King Stovik sent again to his native land, to that nobleman in fact who had aided his escape, beseeching that from the maidens of noble birth a bride should be selected and sent back under the care of the messenger, who was none other than the faithful servant who had shared all the tribulations of the royal family. Bribes, threats, and coaxing of still loyal Krovitzers could not induce the faithful fellow to betray his master's hiding place. In fact on that, as on all similar embassies, in the generations that followed, her family bade farewell to their daughter, knowing not the place of her future home, nor her name, nothing but that she was to be the consort of their rightful king. So careful was Stovik in his banishment, that it became a hereditary rule not to permit the young bride to communicate with her family. Thus only could the never-dying hatred of Russia be avoided."

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"Until my father's time this system has been maintained, always through the agency of the descendants of that pair of original servants, of whom Josef is the last. As a little child, I remember him first, when he came and claimed the hand of one of our most beautiful girls to share his master's banishment. Then, until recently, we had supposed the Line had become extinct, for no further missions came. Then he returned and offered to put a king at the head of our national movement. Nothing could have been a greater boon. Those who, for years, at all corners of the earth, had been striving for Krovitch, came flocking to her standards. Our joy was complete. Do you wonder, Captain Carter," she said gently, "that we are very lenient to Josef?"

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Appreciating the girl's nobility, Carter strove to do justice to the Gray Man, but as he glanced

into the mask-like face a greater repugnance than aforesaid overcame all generous impulses. He strove to put down the distrust that he was certain no one present shared with him, for on every countenance, save that of Sobieska who was gazing idly out of a window, he read a story of affection for the man who had done this thing for Krovitch.

"And the new king," he questioned lightly, avoiding the issue raised, "has he, too, married a maid of Krovitch?"

She crimsoned in manifest confusion. Averting her head for an instant, she bravely met his glance.

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"Not yet," she replied. The signals of her embarrassment told him on whom the choice had nevertheless fallen.

She hurried on that this stranger might not the longer probe her sentiments with his compelling eyes. "In a few days we go to bring him who knows not he is king, and at the head of a valorous people seat him on his throne. Now are the days when only a man must lead. My ancestors threw this land into Russia's clutches, their descendant must return it to Krovitch's rightful king. This is about all, Captain Carter, except that when King Stovik fled he was supposed to have worn the medal found on your chauffeur. Doubtless at some time a member of Carrick's family received it as a mark of royal gratitude."

"I thank you for the story," said Carter. "Now that my identity is established, may I ask for a place in your army? The cause of your country shall be my own."

She smiled indulgently. "Perhaps," she said, "when you have fully mastered our language, we might make you a lance corporal. You see we have only one Field Marshal, Colonel Sutphen, although fully a score of applicants for that rank."

"Don't tease, Tru," said Zulka with the intimacy of a lifelong friendship, "I am a colonel. Cal Carter, here, is a better soldier. We fought together at Santiago, so I should know."

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"We'll see," was all she would reply, as she turned to go. Then hesitatingly she held out her hand to Carter, who bent above it with inspired gallantry and touched his lips to her fingers.

"Au revoir, Lady Paramount," he said.

"Au revoir, Sir Knight of the Auto-car," she replied; adding; "be sure to come to the levee to-night. Already the maidens of Krovitch have heard of you, sir. One at least, desires to make your acquaintance."

"We are going to the inn," Zulka announced as he took Carter by the arm, so the latter made his adieux to the gentlemen of the Privy Council and turned prepared to follow him.

"Castle's full," Paul explained to relieve the mystification apparent on his friend's countenance. "Privy Counselors with their families and households, Army Staff, Duchess's Attendants and Aides-de-Camp, and so forth."

"But the inn's full, too, Paul. The landlord——"

"Thought you were a spy. That's why Josef recommended Schallberg. Thought you would probably tumble to the fact that he was wise, as we say in New York; to the fact that more than a hundred notices were posted there offering a reward for the apprehension of humble me, whom they flatteringly described. You see," he explained, "shortly after my return last year, I hurt Russia's feelings. Made what they very truthfully called a revolutionary address. I've been dodging Siberia ever since. Get your medal, Carrick, and come along," he called over his shoulder to the Cockney, who was reluctant to leave without his precious heirloom.

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Carter's second appearance in the courtyard was more gratifying than his first, and he had no difficulty in procuring his touring car from the sentry, who already seemed to have been apprised of the stalwart stranger's status.

Whirled along in the auto, the inn was soon reached, where, arm in arm with Count Zulka, Carter entered, much to the unlightened bewilderment of the landlord, who, nevertheless, at the Krovitser's request, had no difficulty in finding them a private room for their dinner.

After having enjoyed to the full the appetizing meal which had been set before them, the two friends at first indulged themselves with intermittent cigarettes and the thimblefuls of local liquor attendant at their elbows. Digestion, for a while, stood in the way of discourse, and the tally was naturally indolent, somnolent.

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Presently, after having sufficiently watched the rings of smoke flatten themselves against a black, studded rafter, Carter gave a slight rein to his speculations.

"Why," he said, holding up his cigarette to gaze squintingly at the ember at its head, "why is the Count Sobieska antagonistic to Josef?"

Zulka stretched himself further back in his heavy chair. Very much at his ease, he could have dispensed with questions just then.

"Professional jealousy, I suppose," he replied. "When it comes to knowledge of Russian movements," he went on to explain, "that's Sobieska's department, mind you, but somehow Josef

is always hours ahead of him through some source of his own. Naturally Sobieska takes the chance to rub a miscue in on the old chap."

"Why should he be interested in Carrick's antecedents, Paul?"

"Cal, you are like the youngster, who after exhausting all other questions, asked his dazed parent, 'Father, why is why?' Tell me all that happened," he said, seeing the slightly nettled expression on his friend's face. "You see the circus was all over before I arrived."

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Carter related the affair from the time of their first meeting with Josef, at that very inn, to the time when Zulka's timely appearance put an end to their trial. "The rest you know," he concluded.

Zulka opened his cigarette case, selected one and after knocking the end of it two or three times against the metal lid without putting it in his mouth, looked up at his friend. "Cal, I'm afraid I've given you the idea that Sobieska is incompetent. That is not so. The fact is, he is devilish deep and clever. He never lets up once he has struck a trail. He's probably hit on something now that he thinks should be investigated. By the way, how's Saunderson of the Racquet?" So the conversation drifted.

Their mutual friends in New York had included many women of gentle birth with whom Paul Zulka had always been more or less of a favorite. Concerning these, individually and collectively, Carter's replies to his friend's inquiries had been equally frank and responsive.

"So you left no sweetheart behind, Cal?"

"No, Paul. I'd not leave a sweetheart. I'd make her my wife."

"In the face of a congé?"

"You ought to know me better. I never take 'no' for an answer." Carter's pride glowed in his face as he made this reply.

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"The Duchess of Schallberg," announced Zulka, "will marry the King of Krovitch to unite the two houses. She has pledged herself." This seemingly irrelevant announcement was made through a swirling cloud of smoke.

"So?" Carter strove to make his reply partake of easy nonchalance, but his throat tightened so that he could feel his face go red and hot. It was as if Paul had intimated that he, Calvert Carter, would seek and be refused by the Duchess of Schallberg. He was thankful the Krovitzer was not looking just then.

Had he been wise, Carter would have said no more. But failing to emphasize his disinterestedness, he added to his monosyllabic exclamation a query in a studied tone of unconcern.

"What's that got to do with us, old chap?"

Zulka leaned forward confidentially as he laid a friendly hand upon the other's knee.

"She's for neither you nor me, Cal," he said regretfully. "She must marry a man she has never seen for the sake of a country that she adores. Without this submission on her part we could count on no united Krovitch. Our country worships her and will follow no king who will not seat her upon his throne. Get that angel face out of your heart. Deafen your ears to her voice before, like me, you try too late. Oh, I know, I saw," he hastened on as Carter would have stopped him, "love makes all eyes keen. You love Trusia."

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As the significance of the last remark went home, Carter sat as one stunned. The perspiration gathered slowly in great beads on his forehead. He hung his head gloomily; his face went pale. It seemed, suddenly, that life, ever a pleasant vista to him, had built a wall before his eyes, unscalable, opaque.

Then he understood. A pain gripped his heart as the great truth came home to him.

"I do," he answered jerkily, for he was striving to keep a strong man's grip on his soul. Slowly, however, the agony, defying him, triumphed. "My God," he wailed in surrender, "it is true though I never realized it till now." That was all he said, but with blind hands he groped for fellowship and welcomed Zulka's responsive grip of steel.

Relaxing his handclasp, he arose and walked to the window, to gaze out upon darkness until his own night passed from him sufficiently to enable him to seize upon his soul in the elusive shadows and hold it firmly. From where he stood, after an interval of pregnant silence, he turned a high-held, stern, white face upon Zulka.

"Paul," he said quietly, "we'll have to stand by her now to the end. If Krovitch wins and I'm alive, I'll go back to New York. If she loses, our lives must purchase her safety, should that be the price. It will be Trusia first, then."

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"It will always be Trusia," said Zulka.

Carter nodded his understanding.

"Come, Carter!" Zulka said almost brusquely, "enough of sentiment. We must dress for the levee. I can fit you out in clothes."

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XII

CARTER FINDS AN ALLY

The haut nobility of Krovitch were present at the Ducal reception that night. Glittering uniforms, with a plentiful supply of feminine silks and sparkling jewels, made even the gray old halls of the castle take on a warmer, gladder note. But to Carter, with an aching heart hidden behind a smiling countenance, the gaiety seemed forced, the colors glaring; while to his questing eyes all faces appeared blank surfaces, save one.

She was talking to a wisp of a golden-haired girl, whom he afterward learned was Zulka's cousin, the daughter of the plump Holder of the Purse. Apparently Trusia had not yet noticed his entrance, but why should she?

Had he been gifted with omnipresence, however, he would have heard her say to her companion, "That is he. The one in dress suit. No, stupid, not the short man in black and gold, but the strapping big fellow who holds his head like some ancient paladin."

"Oh," her companion had answered impulsively, as she finally singled Carter out from the throng about the entrance, "he is fine, Highness. I'm going to fall in love with him. I'm sure I am. Do you mind, Tru?" she teased, with the intuitive sex-given perception that her royal chum felt at least a passing interest in the handsome stranger. The Duchess made no immediate reply to her friend, but gazed resolutely in a direction opposite to the one from which she knew Carter was approaching. Even predestined queens are not averse to stately coquetry. [Pg 116]

"No, Natalie," she finally condescended to reply, "why should I, dear?" She smiled affectionately down on the sweet face before her. "I envy you, child, that you may love where you please," she added gently.

"Oh," said Natalie. The little maid of honor changed front with ready sympathy. "I might have known you could not faint in his arms, be brought home by him, rescue him from jail, without feeling some interest in him. He's coming this way, Highness," she added in a confidential undertone as if Trusia had not already divined the fact through the back of her regal little head. Nevertheless, the Duchess achieved a very natural surprise as Calvert Carter presented himself before her. [Pg 117]

He was duly presented to the golden-haired girl and apprised of her kinship to his friend Paul, who had already entered into conversation with Her Grace of Schallberg. Carter found a temporary distraction from his unearned wounds in listening to her cheery prattle and answering her light queries about the wilderness she imagined his country to be, just beyond the environs of the municipalities. Their group was constantly augmented by fresh arrivals, so the conversation grew general, and Carter had no opportunity except for a chance word now and then with the woman to whom he had silently yielded his heart. Enthusiastic young officers, cadets of ancient lineage, boasted hopefully of the efforts which they would make to restore the fatherland to its place among the great nations of the world. Even Natalie was soon claimed by an admiring young hussar glittering in black and gold, and Carter found himself alone for the nonce. He suddenly remembered a forgotten duty, and the possibility of its performance was now causing him some perplexity.

"You look troubled, Captain Carter," said Trusia, at his elbow. "Is there anything we can do?"

He smiled gratefully. "Yes, Highness," he responded eagerly. "I was just cudgeling my brains for a suitable form in which to present my request." [Pg 118]

"It is——"

"Permission to cable my address in the morning to my New York agent."

"It is granted," she said. "A messenger will leave at seven to-morrow morning for Vienna. I will have Josef call with him in the morning. I need scarcely caution you not to refer to the state of affairs here."

"You have my word, Highness," he answered.

"I could ask for no better guaranty," she commented sweetly.

If Carter was distrustful of the emissary she had chosen, he was well aware that his vague misgivings would find no other reception than coldness did he even dare to hint at them. He turned to find Sobieska's look of pseudo-indolence upon him.

"Have I your permission, Highness, to make Captain Carter acquainted with some of his brother officers?" queried the Minister of Private Intelligence. She nodded her consent and Carter was led away, but not to meet any military men. Having found a place sufficiently out of earshot of the others, the Count motioned the American into a seat, placing himself opposite him.

"There is nothing like a common object of suspicion, Captain Carter, to make men friends," he began guardedly. Then probably recognizing that the man to whom he was speaking would hold his disclosures sacred, he threw away his diplomatic subterfuges and came frankly to the point. [Pg 119]

"I wanted to tell you," he said gravely, "that I have already cabled my agents in London and Paris to investigate the history of your man Carrick." The American turned to regard him with a slight frown. Had the fellow brought him here to tell him they had not been believed at the afternoon's trial? Sobieska, understanding what was passing in the other's mind, smiled indulgently.

"Oh, I believed your story, don't fear," he said; "but, in the face of all things, I have always doubted the sincerity of Josef. I cannot convince myself that his motives are entirely as disinterested as he has convinced Her Grace they are. There was something, too, about Carrick's story of his father's death that awakened my suspicions. That medal for instance."

"You surely cannot mean——" began Carter, fairly rising from his seat in his wild surmise.

"Quietly, quietly," cautioned Sobieska, glancing warily back toward the throng of guests to assure himself that the American's perturbation had passed unnoted. Having satisfied himself that it had attracted no attention, he took up the thread where it had been dropped by him.

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"I meant nothing more at present than that I want to know everything my agents can learn. Meanwhile not a word to any one, especially Josef. Don't trust him in any way, though."

With such an opportunity, Carter naturally told him about his dilemma concerning the despatches.

"Oh, if they refer to business, I suppose you may let him have them," he was assured. "He would hardly tamper with private papers. They will be perfectly safe, especially as he will know that you have already spoken to Her Grace concerning them. I may be doing him an injustice," he continued cogitatingly, "but I somehow feel that he is playing a deeper game in Krovitch than you or I have any idea of at present. Every one here from Her Highness down almost worships him. Can I count on your aid?"

"Certainly," replied Carter as they both arose. "I don't like the fellow either." They sauntered nonchalantly back to the others, baffling Josef's inquiring eyes.

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XIII

A NEW MAJOR OF HUSSARS

Carter admitted that in his present state of mind dawn was no more to be welcomed than darkness. For hours on end now, he had been fighting grimly and silently to the end that he might cast out of his heart, for all time, the love for a woman which had crept in. Sleep had dared not come within range of that titanic struggle. Worn with the battle which had witnessed his defeat, he had just completed his cipher message, when, following a modest knock at the door, Josef entered complacently with the pent-browed peasant at his heels.

"If monsieur desires to send despatches," said the Hereditary Servitor, "he can make his arrangements with Johann here. Johann goes at once to Vienna, via Schallberg. He is trustworthy and discreet. Can I be of further service to monsieur? No? Then I shall go." Without waiting for any reply, he closed the door behind him as though upon a nervous patient.

After giving the messenger minute instructions and a liberal gratuity, Carter dismissed him and the despatches from his thoughts. Later in the day he was to be reminded not only of them but of the evil leer bestowed by Johann at the munificent tip dropped into his horny palm.

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From the window of his room Carter watched the stir in the camp. In response to the first call from the bugles, the men were already bestirring themselves along the tent-marked company streets; some industriously polishing belt plates and buttons; some tightening the laces of their leggings, while still others, ruddy of visage, were plunging close-cropped heads into buckets of splashing cold water. At the far end of the street, opposite his window, the over prompt were already falling in. The sergeants picturesquely marked the points of rest. The first sergeant was glancing over the bundle of orders he had drawn from his belt, preparatory to roll call and the routine of the day.

The world beyond, the world of fields and woods and flowers, looked fair; the sun had not yet dried the dew, and jaded as he was, Carter thanked God for all things sweet and pure. Something choked in his throat. He welcomed the galloping approach of Zulka, who, shortly, drew up beneath his window. In a flash, the Count read the trouble in the New Yorker's face, but pretending not to, he touched his hat brim in precise military salute.

"I've rare tidings for thee, my lord," and he vigorously waved an oblong paper in a melodramatic manner. "Given under hand and seal, as your lawyer chaps would say."

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"Just as soon as I can get this boot on," answered Carter in a tone he strove desperately to keep cheerful. Having accomplished his task without unreasonable delay, he picked up a hat and crop and descended to the courtyard of the inn where the other was impatiently waiting with some good tidings he found hard to contain.

"Read that, Cal," he said, as he thrust the papers into his friend's hands. Carter opened the

document to be confronted with an incomprehensible jumble of letters in Latin,—a language he had promptly forgotten the day of his graduation,—a lordly seal and, dearest of all, in an angular feminine hand, in subscription:

"Trusia, Dei Gratia, Vice Regina."

He feasted his eyes on the one word that for him blurred all the rest, "Trusia."

"Trusia" of the marvelous eyes. "Trusia" of the ensnaring hair. "Trusia" the beloved, the desirable.

"So you haven't forgotten your Latin, after all," Zulka was saying, leisurely dismounting from his horse.

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"But I have," answered Carter. "What does it all mean?"

"Your commission, man. Major of the Royal Hussars. For the present attached to Her Grace, as Aide. I congratulate you."

"Don't, Paul; not yet. It is going to be all the harder for me."

Zulka nodded his head gravely. "You'd better fight at close range. It is harder, but quicker."

He noted Calvert's riding costume at a glance and made a sudden resolve.

"Better take a ride, old chap. Get yourself in condition. I'm busy to-day. Borrow Casimir's horse—he's off for the morning. I think Natalie will be out on the road this way. She'd appreciate your escort, I'll wager. We creep a step nearer the city this morning, and as Division Adjutant I'll have my hands full.

"Here, Casimir," he called to the equerry who was lazily swinging his feet over the edge of the porch on which he had seated himself, "lend Major Carter your mount for this morning, can't you?"

"Gladly. Saral is the right sort and I guess bears him no ill will for yesterday's stampede."

Carter was about to mount when Carrick put in a solemn appearance from the stables.

"Some one has tackled the automobile with an axe, sir," he announced ruefully. "The wheels are left, and that's about all of the 'go' part." Carter turned wrathfully from the horse to follow Carrick back to the shed where the big car had been housed. With ready sympathy the two young Krovitzers followed.

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"It is dastardly," Paul remarked as he bent over and discovered that not a particle of the motive mechanism had been left intact.

"Count on me, sir," Casimir volunteered, "to help you ferret out the rascals. Have you any idea who could have played such a shabby trick?"

While Carter had pretty definite suspicions he was not prepared just then to announce them.

"The car is done for, certainly," he said gloomily. "No," he said as he turned indifferently away, "I don't know who did it, and thank you, Casimir, I don't care to. I don't think I would be justified in killing a man for breaking up even six thousand dollars' worth of property, but if I was certain just now who did it I feel I would be strongly tempted to wring his neck. Au revoir, gentlemen, I am not going to permit this to spoil my ride." With this and a nod, he returned and, mounting the horse, cantered out of view along the road to the castle.

The handsome bay pounded steadily ahead. The air was soothing soft with a thousand scents of forest and hill, of field and farm; kind zephyrs of morning touched his brow and eased his sorrows, while the sun, from a bed of pearl-pink clouds, rose slowly before his eyes. Beyond and alongside of the already striking camp, on the right of the road, the woods began again, leaving the open fields like an alternate square on some mammoth checker board. More than one soldier gazed admiringly at his strong figure as he cantered past, while the sentries, doubtless under instructions, permitted him to pass unchallenged through the lines.

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When he reached the spot where he had first seen Trusia—the place of the accident, he checked his horse to indulge in the sensations the scene awakened. He beheld again the marble beauty of the face; he felt the wondrous softness of the skin, and once more his heart was entangled in the meshes of the fragrant hair as the loosened strands blew against his hot cheek.

Round the bend in the road, as then, he heard approaching hoof beats. He marveled that his heart should beat so high merely for the advent of Lady Natalie. In the indulgence of his dream, the suggested thuds presaged the coming of Trusia. He sat immovably upon his horse in mid-road, waiting. Every sense was aquiver, every nerve on edge.

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A black horse swept into view as it first had in his fancy. It was ridden by Trusia. Saladin had not forgotten. As his mistress reined him in, his wide eyes shifted about distrustfully. A quiver ran beneath the satiny flanks while his slender legs trembled. Carter made no effort to conceal his surprise, as he lifted his hat in salutation.

"Your Highness," he ejaculated.

"Yes," she laughed. "Why, aren't you disappointed? Lady Natalie is. Her mother found some unwelcome duty shirked which she insisted should be properly discharged. I am her apologetic substitute. Besides I wished to discipline Saladin to this place before he should acquire the habit of shying at it. There, Beauty," she said patting his arching neck as he snorted in pure ecstasy of terrified recollections. Calmed by her caressing voice and the touch of her hand he stretched forth his head to nozzle the other horse in neighborly fashion.

"Natalie is a sweet girl, Major Carter," she said tentatively, giving him his full title. "Am I forgiven for coming—in her stead?"

"On condition that Your Highness will do me the honor of riding with me—in her stead." He smiled his usual frank smile. "Besides," he pleaded, "it will take me some time to thank you for your kindness in giving me my brevet. I know it is an honor which many a man of Krovitch would die to win."

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She flushed as she answered him. "It was but a small return for what you have suffered."

In silent assent to his invitation, she pointed her crop to a path among the trees, which might easily have escaped the observation of those not familiar with its existence.

"Right beyond the turn in the road is a bypath. Let us take that. It goes down into the heart of the wood, to the ancestor of forests. The trees stand there as if brooding over the lost centuries of their youth. The moss is as gray as Time himself. The only sounds, save the sougning sighs of the giant branches, are the chime of the waterfall and the chirping of birds. I love it," she said with sparkling eyes, "because those trees seem typical of the undying faith of the land, which for two centuries has never lost hope and has never ceased working for the day which will soon crown our efforts. See," she pointed down the aisle of overhanging branches they were entering, "is it not magnificent?"

Side by side, comrades under the spell of the woodlands, rode Trusia and Carter, inhaling the fresh morning sifted through the leaves. A vista of trees arose on either hand, each one seemingly more massive, more aged than its fellow; some bowed in retrospection, some erect with hope and looking skyward for the new star in their country's firmament.

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A peace begotten of serenity settled on Carter's soul. He turned to look at the girl beside him. The magic of the place had brought a refreshing expression of content into her face. He noted the soft turn of her cheek, the inviting round chin and the steady splendor of the eyes. The spell of silence was broken then. The wood sprites were routed by a modern girl. Feeling his eyes upon her, she turned to him, her lips half parted in a smile.

"Is it not wonderful, all of this?" she said, caressing the leafy monarchs with a wide-spread gesture. "Do you have such forests in America, such trees? Oh, I have heard of your California forests, where roads are cut through the trunk of a single giant without destroying its life. But it is the spirit of the woodlands, I mean. Do they breathe traditions?"

"Not to us, Highness. We are not their children. Perhaps the Indian when he bade them farewell could understand their counsels."

"You were a soldier," she said, as a suggested possibility caught her, "did you ever fight Indians?" Her eager face was almost as a child's who begs a story.

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"Sorry I can't oblige you," he laughed indulgently. "I engaged only the prosaic European from Spain."

"You fought in Cuba? Tell me about it."

So much as he modestly might tell, he related to her as they rode on. They were young, time was cheap and the tale was not uninteresting.

The labored heaving of the horses' shoulders brought them back to their surroundings. They were leaving the forest to mount a little hill upon whose side a small hovel stood, which Carter some time in his need was to bless.

"It's Hans's, the charcoal-burner's," Trusia said with surprise; "we've ridden ten miles, Major Carter, and scarcely faster than a walk. We must turn back at once; my household will be filled with alarm. Please come," she said earnestly.

Together they turned their horses about, and started the return journey at a good ground-eating gallop. Mile after mile they canceled, occupied in the thoughts the ride had awakened. She was silent, in the spell of a new obsession wrought by this man with his honest voice and stories of the new, strange land, from which he came. Carter, distressed that possibly he had caused trouble by his senseless prattle, was dutifully bent on getting her back to the castle with the least possible delay. Mentally he was attempting to frame a suitable and fitting apology to offer her. Several times he cleared his throat, but she seemed so preoccupied that he maintained silence.

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Finally he achieved an explanation.

"I have been trying, Highness, to apologize, but really I can't. You understand, don't you? I would be a hypocrite to say that I am sorry. I am not. It must have been the magic of the place to which a year is as a second quickly passed, so old is the forest."

"Have you been worrying about that all this time, my friend?" she said with a quick laugh,

awakening from her reverie. "You remind me of my duty," she added gently. "I was wool-gathering." She turned to discover if he had in any measure divined her thoughts. Satisfied that he had not, she was content to talk of many things which would claim her time. Their conversation became gradually impersonal and general.

Once he had asked her why she had been so relieved at the answers concerning the medal the Cockney wore. She hung her head for a moment answering almost in a whisper, "It was Stovik's medal. I feared Carrick was the king to whom I am to be married." Carter pursued the matter no further. To his regret he saw that they were fast approaching the entrance to the wood.

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Bending forward suddenly she looked athwart his horse into the shadows of bough and bush.

"Did you see him?" she inquired breathlessly.

"Whom? Where?" He pivoted about stupidly.

"Johann, the messenger," she answered, "who should have been in Schallberg two hours ago. There, he's skulking behind that white oak. Johann!" she commanded imperiously. Seeing that concealment was no longer practicable, the fellow sulkily came from his hiding-place and stood, with sullen countenance, in the path beside them. "Find out what he is doing here, Major Carter."

The messenger maintained a dogged silence to Carter's inquiries. Fearing that some treachery was at the root of the matter, the American finally asked whether the fellow had the despatches given him that morning. With an evil leer Johann looked up at this, breaking his silence.

"Ja, Herr Major," he replied, "I have them all right, and your hush money, too." He jingled the coins in his pocket with insolent significance.

"He's surely drunk, but what does he mean, Major?" asked Trusia in bewilderment.

"I do not know, Highness," he replied tensely, "but if, as I suspect, some treason's afoot, I would suggest he be at once taken to the castle for a formal investigation."

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The man guffawed impudently. "You wouldn't dare," he said meaningly to Carter, "you wouldn't dare let Count Sobieska or Her Grace know what is in that letter."

Indignant at the suggestion that his message had been read Carter retorted: "We shall see, my man, for to Count Sobieska you go at once."

"All right," the peasant answered jauntily, with a satisfaction Carter thought was assumed, "if you are willing, I am. Come along," and with a leering wink he initiated the return castleward.

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XIV

FOUND IN THE COURTYARD OF THE INN

Through the thronged courtyard Johann was led directly to the office of the Minister of Private Intelligence. Not, however, before Josef had attempted to communicate with him. This privilege Carter denied. Nevertheless he was unable to prevent a covert exchange of triumphant glances between the Hereditary Servitor and the closely watched messenger. This argued that the two were in league. Josef followed, unbidden.

As they entered his official sanctum, Sobieska looked up, and, as he arose, a genuine surprise passed, cloudlike, across his face. He appreciated at a glance that something unusual had occurred. He bowed Trusia to a seat, directing a well-defined look of inquiry toward Carter. The latter merely shrugged his shoulders, implying that it was not his affair.

Sobieska consulted his watch, which lay on the table beside him, while he turned sternly to Johann. "Why aren't you in Schallberg?" he demanded; "you had despatches, as well as a cable to send for Major Carter."

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"I have that cable still, Excellency," he grunted.

"What, you didn't transmit it?"

"No," the man answered boldly. Seeing the volcanic wrath awakening behind the Minister's sleepy eyes, he hastened to explain.

"I went to his room," he said, pointing fiercely at Carter, "he gave me a sealed envelope. After I had taken it he handed me a large sum of money—a fortune to a peasant. He told me to let no one see it but the telegraph operator at Schallberg."

"That is true," said Carter. "It was a business transaction, a communication relating to my personal affairs."

"I am an ignorant man," whimpered the messenger, stimulated by a mental contemplation of his supposed injuries, "but I was made the tool of that traitor—that spy." His eyes, red from excessive potations, glared with hatred as he pointed to Carter.

"Be careful, sir," broke in indignant Trusia, "remember the gentleman is one of our Aides and bears a commission in the royal army. Would you taste the whip?"

"Better that than the noose he planned for me," sulkily retorted the peasant.

"You had better be precise," said Sobieska.

"Well, if you will have it, I'll tell you," the man answered. Emboldened by an encouraging murmur from Josef he continued. [Pg 136]

Carter held up his hand. "Wait a moment," he exclaimed as he turned appealingly to Trusia. "Highness, this may be of greatest interest to some one not present when Johann, the messenger, was apprehended. It may also be of secret importance to Krovitch, to Your Highness. Is Josef necessary here? Surely he can offer neither testimony nor enlightenment."

Though cautioned to stay within call, Josef was dismissed to his unrevealed disappointment.

"Now, go ahead, Johann," commanded the Privy Counselor, when the sound of receding footsteps assured him that Josef was no longer in earshot.

"I never had so much money at one time," continued the messenger, manifestly ill at ease since the departure of Josef. "I began to wonder why the stranger had given it to me for so simple a service. When the dumb man ponders overlong he seeks counsel. That was my case. My friend and I sat and talked of it and as we talked we drank.

"My friend said that the reason for keeping it secret was the person to whom it was written. At first I laughed at him. It could mean nothing. He pushed the brandy toward me and laughed too. I supposed he thought the same. Then I began to turn it over in my head, and as it seemed possible it might mean something, I besought him how such a thing could be. He replied by asking to whom the letter was addressed. I said in a foreign language,—English I do not understand. He pondered and said it might be sent by a spy to the Russian police. He added that it might mean hanging for me; I was afraid it was so, then in my fright I drank more brandy. My head reeled, but I was less afraid. I laughed once more. I asked him what he would do. He requested to see the letter. I was angry. 'Fool,' he said, 'not to open it; just to see the address. That will tell. No one will know.' I gave it to him. He pushed the brandy to me as he puzzled over the odd letters. When I looked up from the bottle, he was staring at me, his eyes big and scared. 'It is as I thought,' he said, in a whisper one uses near the graveyard at night. I hardly knew what to do, Excellency, so I wandered in the forest. I fear I was drunk from the brandy. The rest Her Highness can tell you," and the man wiped the perspiration from his brow. [Pg 137]

"We found him skulking in the forest; not twenty minutes ago," supplemented Trusia. "His actions were so mysterious and his speech so reprehensible that we brought him here."

Carter, regarding the whole affair as a delusion—a bubble soon broken, brought the matter to an issue. [Pg 138]

"Don't you think," he suggested confidently, "that Johann should produce the incriminating document. I think it will turn out to be a certain message to one Henry Jarvis, Broker, William Street, New York." He came forward to stand beside Sobieska at the table, as Johann took out a bulky envelope from a dispatch box and placed it before the Minister. Trusia, too, had drawn near. The trio started involuntarily as they read the address of Russia's sub-minister of Secret Police in Warsaw staring them in the face. Trusia gasped and turned white. Sobieska walked to the door, closed it gently and returned to the table.

"Who was your friendly counselor?" he demanded of Johann.

"I dare not tell you," the fellow replied doggedly.

"If I have to ask Posner at the inn, it will go hard with you, Johann."

"He does not know; we did not drink at Posner's."

"That is certainly a clever imitation of my writing," said Carter, who had been carefully studying the characters on the envelope. Sobieska looked up. "You do not believe me capable of communicating with your enemies!" He appealed to the girl, whose white face was staring at the oblong packet lying on the table. [Pg 139]

"I do not know what to believe," she said as she struggled to keep back the tears. "Open it, Sobieska." The latter complied and scanned the communication.

"This," he said, looking up gravely, "purports to be a preliminary report of Calvert Carter and Todcaster Carrick to their immediate superior in the Imperial Secret Police at Warsaw. It contains a further promise of early developments and the coming of a King to Krovitch. It is signed 'Calvert Carter.'"

Sobieska reached so suddenly forward to touch a call bell that Johann jumped. A gray-haired sergeant entered.

"A corporal and file," was Sobieska's command. Carter straightened himself haughtily. Were they going to arrest him for this forgery?

"Count Sobieska," he began indignantly, while Johann's dull eyes brightened.

"Wait, please," was the Minister's only comment.

Carter turned to Her Grace to remonstrate against such an indignity, but her head was turned from him. There were footsteps, rhythmic, orderly, at the door. It opened to admit the corporal and his men. Vividly it recalled to Carter another such scene when he was a judge and—

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"Put Johann under arrest," came the curt interruption to his thoughts from the lips of Sobieska. "If you permit any one to communicate with him, it will mean a court martial for all of you," said the Minister.

The sudden and unexpected reversal of the preconceived program was too much for the messenger, as, cursing and struggling, he was hustled toward the door. As the heavy oak panel swung to upon the prisoner, he muttered something which caught the waiting ear of Sobieska, who glanced toward his princess to see if she had heard. Satisfied that she had not, he swept a triumphant look at Carter, who was dumbfounded at the turn affairs had taken. The American stretched out his hand to the Krovitzer.

"Paul Zulka's friends are to be trusted," said Sobieska. "You have already made a personally vindictive enemy," he continued; "have you any idea who it is?" The indolent wink accompanying the inquiry cautioned Carter not to name any one if he had.

"I have," replied Calvert, who had understood the signal.

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"Don't name him then, at present," requested the Minister.

"Why not?" queried an indignant Trusia, "as Major Carter is innocent, this wretch must be punished at once."

"Your Highness," respectfully counseled the Privy Counselor, "Major Carter has been in our country too short a time even to be sure of his friends, much less of his enemies. His surmises, therefore, might be unwarranted, and might put a perfectly innocent person under suspicion. Be assured," he asserted vehemently, "I will thoroughly sift out this matter in my official capacity. Whether it confirms his premonitions or not, you will learn in due time. I am inclined to believe that Johann was intended to fall into your hands, but with a different intent. Either that or the message was meant for Russia, the risk to be shouldered upon Carter. May I employ Josef," he requested blandly, "as a messenger to Colonel Sutphen?"

"Certainly," she replied, and the old fellow was sent for.

There was neither tremor nor twitch on his impassive countenance as he responded to the summons, although he must have missed Johann and knew not what had transpired.

"You are to take this note to Colonel Sutphen at once," said Sobieska curtly. "At once," he reiterated with emphasis, "don't even wait for a hat. Your trip and return will be timed," he was fairly warned. "It is of the utmost importance," the Minister remarked impressively as he handed the retainer a hastily scrawled but securely sealed note. Josef might have been carrying the order for his own execution, for all he knew, but he did not permit any outward sign of trepidation to show in his face. With commendable alacrity he left the room on his mission, watched by Sobieska in the doorway. Returning, with hardly concealed impatience, the Minister begged of Her Grace to be excused for the time being and requested the assistance of Carter.

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"Yes, Sobieska, go," she said. "I am as anxious as you can be to reach the bottom of this mystery. Somehow, I cannot help feeling that there is something inimical to my country in it all."

"Pray God that it is not so," said the Minister as he bowed her from the office. No sooner was she gone than the two men faced each other, the same thought in their minds, the same name on their lips.

"Josef," they said in the same breath.

"There's not a minute to lose," continued the Minister. "That is why I trumped up that message to get him out of the way. We must search his room immediately, before he has a chance to forestall us. Come," he said, grasping Carter's arm.

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Together they mounted stairways, plunged down passages, grim and shadow infested, until the Servitor's room was reached. The barrenness of the place seemed to be sufficient guarantee for the honesty of its usual occupant. A table without a drawer, no closet and some burned-out logs in the large fireplace afforded but scant hiding places. Sobieska carefully tapped each board separately to ascertain if a secret receptacle had been formed in such a fashion, but the floor was perfectly solid. He tried the flagging of the hearth as well as the brick arch of the fireplace with no more success. He was about to acknowledge failure when Carter accidentally turned over one of the charred logs lying at his feet. An exclamation burst from the Minister's lips.

Minute and scattered fragments of paper, saved from the blaze by the bulk of the log above them, lay scattered on the hearth. These Sobieska pounced upon eagerly.

Further search bore no fuller fruit, so with their meagre harvest the pair descended to the office again. Here the Krovitzer, piecing the fragments together, and pasting them on a sheet of paper, laid them before Carter.

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"There," said the Minister, "are the experiments in your handwriting. Now wait until he comes back."

"But how did he get a copy?" queried the puzzled American.

"Easy enough," replied Sobieska. "He kept those papers he took from you in the cell yesterday. Your passport furnished your signature. He's a clever rascal. Substituted the forgery for the other letter, while Johann drank. Either that or they're in league together, which I am not prepared to believe, yet. In any event we must get a new messenger."

"Tell me," said the curious Carter, "how came you to suspect Josef, as you read the letter Johann had with him?"

Sobieska smiled indulgently. "A man of your varied metropolitan experience would scarcely write a letter as he would a thesis for a University degree. Whoever wrote that epistle had doubtless a work of rhetoric at his elbow, fearful of mistakes. Look at it yourself," and he pushed the paper over to Carter. It was, indeed, a studied composition of good proportions and well rounded sentences.

"I have heard you talk," continued his instructor, "and I felt satisfied that Major Carter, if a spy, would hardly have wasted his efforts in such a prim presentation of his facts." He glanced at his watch. "He would have doubtless used cipher. Josef is due in just one minute now. There he comes," he said, as there was a low rap at the door. "Come in."

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Punctuality outdone, Josef entered and handed Sobieska a note. Without even glancing at it, the latter tossed it on the table. Picking up the sheet on which were the pasted fragments, he handed it to the Servitor, watching him closely with narrowing eyes. Without a tremor the paper was received, examined, read, and handed back to Sobieska with a smile.

"Well, Excellency?"

"Ever see that before, Josef?"

"I think so, Excellency. Did you find them in my room?" he inquired with quiet effrontery.

"They were found there. I found them," replied Sobieska coolly, not yet despairing of breaking down the impassive wall with which Josef had surrounded his thoughts.

"Then I have seen them before," the Servitor answered as though courteously acknowledging an irrefutable logic. "I took them there to interpret them," he said as if willing to make an explanation though not admitting any necessity. "I found them beneath a certain window last night—in the courtyard of the inn," he concluded with a significant glance at Carter. Then boldly his eyes challenged both men.

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"It's a lie," said Carter contemptuously. Josef smiled.

"Your word—the word of a stranger—against mine," he sneered. "Shall I appeal to Her Highness?"

"Her Highness knows everything," hazarded Sobieska. "From Johann," he added deliberately.

There was a start, if you call the slightest flicker of the eyelids such—to show that the shot had told; then Josef, calm as before, inquired,

"Then of what interest can these scraps of paper be?"

"Be careful, Josef," interrupted Carter, whose anger had not yet been appeased, "that you do not pick up something deadly—in the courtyard of the inn, something like a revolver bullet."

The fellow bowed mockingly to the last speaker, then turning to Sobieska said, "May I go, Excellency?" Sobieska nodded assent.

"Wait," said Carter, and Josef paused.

"You say you found these papers—in the courtyard of the inn," said Carter endeavoring to connect the man with the mishap to the auto, "any place near the carriage shed?"

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The Servitor smiled and assumed a non-committal aloofness.

"Why," he asked as, turning, he left the room.

Following a short talk with the Minister of Private Intelligence, Carter took his departure, and, as he rode thoughtfully back to the inn, he was startled to see a distraught Carrick arise from a stone by the highway.

"Why, Carrick," he cried with a premonitive feeling of some new evil, "what brings you here?"

"Been huntin' for you for nearly three hours, sir. I could not bide there, sir, till I 'ad seen you."

Carter, dismounting, took the bridle rein over his arm and walked alongside the Cockney, who in detail recited the story of a meeting of Josef and Johann in the wood, which, unseen by them, he had watched, and which in every detail corroborated the recital of Johann and the surmises of Sobieska.

"What do you think of it, sir?" he concluded.

Carter shook his head gravely.

"I can't say, Carrick. Keep your eyes and ears open, but do not say a word to any one but me of this or anything else you happen to notice about Josef. There's some game going on that I have not fathomed yet.

"Tod Carrick," he continued in a burst of affectionate consideration, "you're a good faithful soul. Here's my hand. I do not believe you have had a mouthful to eat to-day. Now, have you?"

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The Cockney smiled.

"I forgot, sir," he answered almost shyly, elated with the words of approval he had won.

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XV

THE DREAM KISS

The next day in solemn conclave the Counselors decided that the time had come to bring the King to Krovitch.

"All is ready," said the grizzled Sutphen, "to inaugurate his reign with the fall of Schallberg."

"You must come too," said Trusia to Carter, "as a member of my household." The question of expedients was debated. Suspicion might be awakened should such a large party travel together. It was decided that Carter and Sobieska should proceed to Vienna; Muhlen-Sarkey and Trusia with their two attendants were to cross into Germany at the nearest point, thence travel by rail, while Josef and the rest should embark boldly from Schallberg.

Carrick was much depressed at learning he was to be left behind, but extracted some consolation from the fact that he was to be detailed to attend Count Zulka for whom he had always shown a preference.

"The rendezvous is Paris,—Boulevard St. Michel, second house on the left from St. Germain. The time, two days hence, at six o'clock in the evening. That will allow the necessary time for unforeseen hitches," said Sobieska, to which all quietly assented.

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Speeded by the entire court coterie, Sobieska and Carter mounted and clattered out of the courtyard, and by ways through the forest, which the Minister of Private Intelligence had learned in a score of hunting trips, the pair, evading the vigilance of Russian sentries, reached the Vistula. They were ferried across by a loyal peasant and landed on Austrian soil without hostile interruption.

While the journey from Vienna to Paris was destined to be without particular incident, it furnished the opportunity for a fuller acquaintance and understanding between Carter and Sobieska.

"I have wanted to have a fuller talk with you anent Josef," said Sobieska when their conversation had reached the confidential stage. "It was manifestly impossible at the castle. I was afraid of eavesdroppers. It may be one of those unreasonable prejudices, but, aside from the fellow's social inferiority, I cannot help feeling that his is a sinister influence in Krovitch."

"I thought his allegiance held him to the side of his exiled master. Has he been in Krovitch all his life?"

"Although familiar to the older nobles during the lifetime of King Marc, the grandfather of his present Majesty, Josef reappeared last autumn after an absence of several years. He immediately requested the hand of Lady Trusia in marriage for His Majesty." Here Sobieska glanced covertly at Carter to see the effect of this disclosure. The American's face, however, was as stoical as an Indian's. "He produced the historic documents of Stovik's right to the crown—the traditional proof of embassy. He preached a war on Russia and the rehabilitation of Krovitch. Our people were aroused. For our country's sake, our lady yielded. Messages were sent to all parts of the world to the patriots, who, in large numbers, have been returning to their fatherland. Russia, asleep, or lulled into a false sense of security, has made no move to indicate that she is aware of a plot, yet you heard rumors a year ago that at least matters were in a ferment here. It is strange, strange," he said musingly.

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Then, marveling at his own irrelevance, Carter told Sobieska for the first time of Carrick's confirmation of their suspicions that Josef was party to the plot of the substituted letter in the forest. "He knew the name and address of Russia's chief spy in Warsaw. How could he, a retainer—a loyal servant of an exiled monarch, know these things? Pitch defiles."

With a laugh which dismissed the subject, Sobieska turned to Carter. "It seems to me," he said, "we're allowing an absent servant to monopolize considerable of our conversation. Let's talk of something else."

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"Have you any conception of His Majesty's, the King's, personality?" asked Carter.

"We were shown a photograph by Josef. Certainly a handsome fellow. An artist." This with the faintest shade of contempt that the man of action always holds for the artist, the poet or the

dreamer. "I may be deceived in him, God grant I am, but the face is the face of a sensualist, not of a leader of men. What we need now for the throne is an inveterate hater of Russia. We have good leaders, now. We don't want a king who cannot understand and, consequently, may spoil our best plans."

"Wouldn't he be controlled?"

"You mean by his wife, by Trusia? He may, if she takes his fancy. If not, he may lose interest, and fall under other control."

"You mean Josef's?"

"Yes."

"It seems complications are likely to arise."

"It is not too late for you to draw out," replied Sobieska coldly.

"I am no quitter." Carter's jaws set grim and hard. Then catching an elusive humor in the fact that, even as one who might become unfriendly to him, he should have to accompany this man to Paris, he smiled. So did Sobieska and a cordial understanding was reestablished. [Pg 153]

Paris was reached. Familiar as New York to Carter, he had no difficulty in guiding his companion directly to the rendezvous near the Quai D'Orsay.

Although their friends were not yet arrived, they found a corps of servants had already arranged the house for their reception. As Sobieska was known to the majestic butler, the travelers had no difficulty in immediately establishing themselves in the quarters intended for them.

As night drew on, the others came trooping in, ready to do justice to anything eatable the chef could purvey.

"We had an unexpected rencontre just as we alighted from the train," said Trusia. She leaned forward from her place at the table to speak to Count Sobieska. In doing so, her eyes met Carter's. They were filled with a gentle regard—a more than friendliness.

"With whom?" asked her Minister of Private Intelligence anxiously, for this city was the centre of international intrigue and espionage. [Pg 154]

"You remember General Vladimar, the former Russian commandant at Schallberg? It was he. He was very cordial; as cordial as a dangerous Russian always is."

Sobieska, in assenting, drew in his breath with a sibilant sound through pursed lips.

"I have every reason to believe he has been transferred to the White Police," he commented gravely, as he turned his listless glance toward the girl. "Any one with him—did he give any inkling that he suspected anything?"

"He must suspect something," said Trusia, "he was so very, very pleasant. It is impossible for him to know anything, though." She turned her fine eyes again to her Minister. "There was a man with him. He presented him as Herr Casper Haupt, who the General said was connected with the Russian Consulate here. He did not say in what capacity."

Sobieska aimlessly turned and returned a fork lying before him.

"No?" he inquired listlessly; then he repeated the question more indifferently, "No?" He permitted a distant shadow of a smile to cross his face as he looked up. "He didn't tell you, for instance, that Herr Casper Haupt is the Chief of Imperial Secret Police for the district embracing Poland, Krovitch, Austria and France; a very important personage? What did Vladimar have to say?" [Pg 155]

"When I told him I was on a shopping tour, he looked the usual masculine horror and gave the usual masculine prayer for deliverance. He jokingly suggested that I was going to purchase a trousseau." Her cheeks took a faint color from her remark. "When he saw my suite—though he didn't think I noticed it—his face stiffened a trifle and his tone was a trifle less cordial. He remarked dryly we must be shopping for an army. He became very anxious to learn my stopping-place that he might call, as an old neighbor. I told him that I had determined, as yet, neither where I would stay permanently, nor how long I would be in Paris, and he had to be content with that."

Sobieska nodded his approval and laid down his fork.

"Such neighbors become more dangerous the older they grow. We will have to keep a lookout for General Alexis Vladimar. He suspects something."

"He made no attempt to follow us," replied Trusia. "I watched. He appeared to have forgotten our existence."

"He is a clever man, that Vladimar," said Sobieska grudgingly. "He has not forgotten. Perhaps he is so sure of finding you when he wants to that he is not giving himself any trouble. Fortunately we leave to-morrow morning and will give him the slip, for all his cleverness." [Pg 156]

Trusia now turned to Carter, and with fine free friendliness asked him of his journey and if it had

seemed long.

"Yes, it did," he admitted, but he did not say it was because it took him from her.

"Now, isn't that odd," she laughed, "a journey home seems always the longest to me; no train can get me there quickly enough," she added with an extra note of tender patriotism.

When dinner was spread, Trusia seemed pale and depressed as though the anticipated meeting with her unknown fiancé was not fraught with joy. Rallying herself, however, she was soon as much a centre of attraction as a sparkling fountain in a park is to feathered citizens on a sultry summer day.

The wine of Krovitch, unfamiliar to Carter, was quite heady. He felt it coursing through his arteries while his heart beat stronger. In its convivial influence he turned to the jovial Muhlen-Sarkey and touched glasses.

"A short life and a merry one," he said.

"A strong blade and a noble one," replied the elderly noble with unexpected martial ardor. The incident had not escaped the notice of Trusia. She arose, glass held high above her head. [Pg 157]

"Gentlemen," she cried, "the King of Krovitch!"

"The King! The King!" came the ready response. Each toaster crashed his glass in token that no less worthy sentiments should ever be drunk from it. When the loyal cries had faded into a ghostly silence, the tall, pale girl spoke again.

"This night, my lords and gentlemen, you go, after two centuries, to call him back unto his own. As you kneel before him, you will hold your sword hilts to his hand in token that at his call, alone, they'll be drawn. Remember, this man is your king, whatever the state in which you find him. Reverence must be shown as though upon his ancestral throne. In full regalia, then, you must present yourselves.

"He may be in rags, but purple never made a king. He may be alone, but royal birth gave him dominion over millions. He may be poor in purse, but is rich in your—in Krovitch's devotion. You must bring him here to-night, guarded with your naked breasts if need be. God save His Majesty!"

When, resplendent in their uniforms, glittering with noble orders, the party reappeared before Her Grace, her face was still pale and her eyes shone from startled depths. Each man kissed her hand and, leaving, received her whispered—"Godspeed." Carter was last. [Pg 158]

With his hand upon the knob, he felt that the closing of that door was like sealing the death warrant of his hopes. He was going to find a husband among strangers for the girl he loved. Obeying an irresistible impulse he looked back.

Trusia was standing by the table in the middle of the room. Her left hand leaned on its edge, supporting a weariness shown in the relaxed lines of her figure. Her lips were parted as if in pain, while her eyes seemed searching for Carter as he met her gaze. The others had already passed from the hall. With a bound he was before her, kneeling, his face, turned upward to hers, pleading the love he dared not speak.

Whether he imagined what he wished the most, or whether she, bending, actually touched her lips to his, he could not have said, but satisfied that she loved him, he arose and staggered blindly from the room. [Pg 159]

XVI

YOU ARE THE KING OF KROVITCH

At about the same time the Krovitzers were leaving the house on the Boulevard S. Michel, one of those little comedies from real life was being enacted in the attic studio of Eugene Delmotte. Its finale was to be influenced considerably by their actions. The artist was to be transported by them from Hadean depths of despair to Olympian heights of rejoicing.

His disordered locks, beret upon the floor, red tie askew, if not his tragic, rolling eyes and clenched fists, would have apprised Mlle. Marie that all was not as it should be with M. Delmotte. With full appreciation of the effectiveness of the gesture, the artist threw himself into a large chair before an unfinished canvas of heroic dimensions. He buried his face in his hands. He groaned. This was too much for Marie. She approached. Laying a hesitating hand upon his shoulder, she looked down with real concern at the bowed, curly head.

"And Pere Caros will not wait for the rent?" she queried. [Pg 160]

"No, curse him," came from between the locked fingers.

"But 'Gene," persisted the girl as though puzzled, "I thought that Harjes, the banker, always paid you an income."

"So he did until to-day. I went there, to be told that, to their regret, my unknown benefactor had not sent them the usual monthly remittance. They regretted also that their foolish rules prevented them advancing me as much as a sou. No reasons given, no names disclosed. I haven't a centime. Not a canvas can I sell. I've fasted since yesterday morning."

"Why, 'Gene?" she inquired innocently. Her mind was occupied with the puzzle of the income which, womanlike, engrossed her entire curiosity.

"Huh," he sniffed bitterly, "because I had to. I haven't even paints with which to complete my masterpiece."

He turned, the personification of despair, to regard the painting against the wall.

"Have you no clues as to the source of the income?" she asked, her mind clinging tenaciously to that unsettled question. "Have you no relatives? No one you could ask to assist you?"

"Only slight memories dating back to early childhood—the remembrance of a servant's face. Here is the tale, Marie. A thousand times I have gone over it to myself, only to be disappointed at its meagreness. My parents must have died when I was too young to have remembered them, judging from what this attendant seems to have told me. I have that impression resisting all arguments. My recollections all centre about a gray-haired man of the confidential-servant class. He was my companion and humored my every whim. By and by, though, he left me. I was taken charge of by a charwoman, and only once visited by my infancy's mentor. My new guardian was authority for the statement that, though not appearing wealthy, this M. Petros, as she called him, was always able to obtain money as needed from M. Harjes. There is nothing more to add."

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"Clearly, M. Petros then knew something about the source of your income," said Marie.

"Agreed, sweet creature, but since I do not have the slightest idea where he is, I can't see how that will help me. I don't even know his full name."

"Cheer up, 'Gene, you will yet see that picture hang."

"More likely to hang myself," he said with a return of awful gloom.

"But the great M. Lourney praised the conception, the breadth, of this, your last picture," the girl said, as her hand pushed lightly through the shock of curls on the man's head.

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"Yes, it is good," he said responsively, both to the hope she inspired and the caress she bestowed. That girl understood men. "Krovitch the Bulwark," he continued. "They were a great people, Marie. Their history, unfamiliar to most, has always interested me strangely." His eyes were illumined with enthusiasm as he raised an index arm toward the canvas. "See those vigorous fellows, each a hero. A single nation flinging back from Europe the invasion of the infidel. A heroic subject for a painting, eh, girlie?" He smiled up in her face, his troubles for the nonce forgotten. Get a man talking about his abilities to achieve and you can dispel the darkest gloom from his brow. It was high time to bring him back to earth again, but she knew how. He had had just sufficient gratulation to take the edge off pretended or real misery.

"It is, 'Gene, but it will not pay the rent. Listen." The timid flush mounted to her cheek as she made the suggestion, "Go to the pawnbroker's. Take these trinkets of mine. Beg him to loan you sufficient for your rent. Now, don't refuse. You may redeem them when you can. Besides, you gave them to me." She looked down with affectionate regret at the bracelets, the bangles, the rings, which use and the donor had made dear to her.

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Being weak, he hesitated. His need was great. Then kissing the girl lightly, he took them and strode from the room.

"Come right back, 'Gene," she called, happy as only a woman can be in a sacrifice.

During his absence, from her own scanty store of edibles across the hall, she prepared a meal for him. Absorbed in this occupation she gave little heed to the steady tramp of feet ascending the staircase. A peremptory knock recalled her from her world of happy thoughts.

"*Entrez*," she added, thinking it was one of 'Gene's jokes.

The door opened. Into the room trooped a throng of men, resplendent in black and gold, silver and gray. Her eyes opened in astonishment; so did theirs. Her lips, parted to speak, could only gasp; so could theirs. The surprise was apparently mutual. With true Parisian humor she laughed heartily at the paralysis, and speech was thawed. Colonel Sutphen stood forward and bowed courteously.

"Your pardon, mademoiselle. We were informed that a young man, Eugene Delmotte, resided here. Pardon our mistake, accept our most humble apology and permit us to depart." He moved toward the door as a signal for a general exodus.

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"But 'Gene—but M. Delmotte does live here," she cried, in apprehension of the departure of these lordly and apparently affluent strangers who might aid poor 'Gene. The elderly gentleman stopped on hearing this. He regarded her with more chilling politeness.

"And you," he asked, "are Mme. Delmotte?"

"Oh, no, monsieur," she replied simply.

"His—his companion?" The Colonel flushed at his own audacity. The girl smiled forgivingly, though a little wanly.

"Oh, no, monsieur. I am only his friend and occasional model. He is in trouble, messieurs. I came to cheer him up. I live across the hall."

Colonel Sutphen, scanning the far end of the room, failed to find the object of his inquiry. The girl came forward with an explanation as the elderly noble turned a questioning face toward hers.

"He has gone out, monsieur," she said. "He will soon return. He is in debt." She hung her head in distress. Colonel Sutphen turned to Josef in surprise. The latter whispered something in his ear, which apparently satisfied him. The girl closely watched this little by-play. [Pg 165]

"Oh, then you know about him, messieurs?" she said. "You will help him? You are his friends?" She was happy for her neighbor.

"Only a few of a great many thousands," replied Sutphen ponderously. "Tell me, mademoiselle, have you any—er—er claims upon M. Delmotte? Are you betrothed? Any claims of er—er sentiment?"

The girl's eyelids dropped as she answered,

"Not that he is aware of, monsieur." Then her eyes blazed at the sudden realization of the indignity put upon her. "Who are you, though, and by what right do you question me? He is an artist and I—I am a friend. That is all, monsieur."

She had little spirit, after all, for a contest; but a door in her heart had been opened, a door that a girl generally keeps closed to mankind, and she naturally resented the intrusion. Look, too, where she would she could not escape the eyes of encircling masculinity.

Carter, appreciating her embarrassment and feeling an American gentleman's compassion for her predicament, undertook a divertisement.

"Fine picture, that," he said, loud enough to be heard by the others. "Those chaps are wearing the Krovitch Lion, too. Coincidence, isn't it?" Involuntary curiosity called all eyes toward the painting. The effect was magical. Astonishment showed in every Krovitch face. They, one and all, uncovered their heads as they recognized in the subject the unconscious expression of their sovereign's patriotism. [Pg 166]

"Is that the work of M. Delmotte?" inquired the Colonel with voice softened by what he had just seen.

The girl nodded; she was proud of her friend's ability to move these strangers to reverence.

"Gentlemen—an omen," said the grizzled veteran, pointing to the picture. "History repeats itself."

"Mademoiselle," Carter said gently under cover of the general buzz of excited comment aroused by the picture, "mademoiselle, M. Delmotte is destined to a high place among the great men of the world. While to some is given the power to portray famous events, to a very few indeed it is given to create such epochs. Such men are necessarily set apart from their fellows. Despite the promptings of their hearts, they must forego many friendships which would otherwise be dear to them. M. Delmotte is both fortunate and unfortunate in this." As with careful solicitude for her feelings he strove to prepare her for the separation from the artist, the girl's color came and went fitfully as gradually the truth began to dawn upon her. [Pg 167]

"I think I understand, monsieur," she said, grateful for his consideration. Then she continued slowly, deliberately, letting the acid truth of each word eat out the joy in her heart, "You mean that M. Delmotte must no longer know Marie, the model."

The Colonel, who had approached, had overheard this last thing spoken.

"It is possible," the latter hinted, "that he might desire to spare you the pain of leave taking, as he goes with us from Paris—from your world."

"Oh, monsieur," she turned appealingly to Carter, her eyes wide in their efforts to restrain their tears, "is this true?"

Carter nodded his head gravely. Sutphen pressed a fat, black wallet upon her, which she declined gently.

"As a gift," he insisted.

"Oh, monsieur," she cried reproachfully, and with averted face fled from the room.

Sheepishly guilty in feeling as only men can be, the party in the studio awaited expected developments. In a few minutes they heard the approach of a man's footsteps upon the stairs. All eyes turned curiously toward the doorway. Nearer came the sounds, nearer, while with increasing volume their hearts beat responsively. The steps stopped. The waiting hearts seemed to stand still in sympathy. Then the door opened. [Pg 168]

"It is he," whispered Josef. All heads uncovered and each man bowed low. Delmotte stood petrified with astonishment.

"Messieurs," he said at last, recovering his speech, "messieurs, I am honored." Then as his eyes lighted on Josef, they sparkled with unexpected recognition. "You are Petros," he said, puzzled by the brilliant throng surrounding him.

"Josef Petros Zolsky, Your Majesty. I am your childhood's retainer and hereditary servitor. Yes, I am he you call Petros," and the white head bowed low as a gratified light kindled in the crafty eyes.

"Majesty! What the devil—am I crazy? I am not drunk," he added regretfully.

"Sire," stammered Colonel Sutphen, "sire, you are the King of Krovitch."

"The devil I am," came the prompt response. Nevertheless the artist threw an affectionate glance at the painting as one might in saying, "You were my people." The piquancy of the situation caused him to smile. "Gentlemen," he said, "if this is some hoax, believe me it is in very poor taste. Taste? Yes, for I haven't eaten in two days. What's your game? I've just come from a pawnbroker's, where I had gone with the paltry jewels of a model, to try and secure enough to pay my rent. You offer me a crown. Corduroys and blouse," he pointed to his garb, "you tempt me with visions of ermine. A throne to replace my stool, and pages of history are given for my future canvases. I am starving, gentlemen," he said half turning away suffused in his own self-pity, "do not trifle with me." He appealed to Josef. "Is this true—what they say, Josef-Petros, or whatever your name is?"

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"It is true, Your Majesty."

"A King! A King!" exclaimed the astonished artist. "But still a King without a kingdom—a table without meat. A mockery of greatness after all. Why do you come to tell me this?" he cried turning fiercely on them. "Was I too contented as I was? It is not good to taunt a hungry man. To tell me that I am a crownless King without six feet of land to call my realm, is but to mock me."

"The remedy is at hand, Your Majesty," Sutphen asserted confidently. "Eighty thousand men await your coming, all trained soldiers. We will raise the battle cry of Krovitch and at Schallberg crown you and your Queen."

"My Queen," almost shouted the astonished Delmotte, "have I a Queen, too? Are you all crazy, or am I? Pray heaven the Queen is none other than Marie, else I'll have no supper to-night. Who is my queen?" He asked as he saw the expression of disapproval which appeared on more than one face present.

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"The noblest woman under heaven, sire," said Sutphen reverently. "One who well could have claimed the crown herself. She wished a man to lead her people in the bitter strife and waived her claims for you. It is therefore but meet that she who has wrought all this for you should share your throne."

"Why was I chosen?"

"You are descended from Stovik—she from Augustus, the last King of Krovitch, Stovik's rival." So step by step they disclosed their plans, their hopes and ambitions to the dazzled Parisian. Finally, his mind was surfeited with the tale of this country which was claiming him; he turned and, with sweeping gesture, indicated those present.

"And you?" he asked. "And these? I know your rightful name as little as I am sure of my own."

"Your Majesty's rightful name is Stovik Fourth." Then Sutphen presented each in turn. Carter came last. The eyes of these two, so near an age, instinctively sought out the other and recognized him as a possible rival. Probably the first there to do so, Carter admitted that this so-called heir to a throne was nothing but an ordinary habitué of café and boulevard; a jest-loving animal, with possibly talents, but no great genius.

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The artist, with an assertion of his novel dominance, arose. "I am ready, gentlemen," he said. "My baggage is on my back. I understand that the rendezvous is on the Boulevard S. Michel. Proceed."

Without one backward glance or thought he passed from the attic home, his foot in fancy already mounting his throne. Marie was forgotten in the dream of a royal crown and visions of a distant kingdom.

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XVII

AT THE HOTEL DES S. CROIX

Some distance back from its fellows on the Boulevard S. Michel, not far from its intersection with S. Germain, stands the one-time palace of the Ducs des S. Croix.

Time, the leveler, seemed to have no more effect upon the princely pile than to increase its hauteur with each passing year. Its every stone breathed the dominant spirit of its founders, until at last it stood for all that was patrician, exclusive and unapproachable.

Its eight-foot iron fence, wrought in many an intricate design, formed a corroding barrier to the over-curious, while its spiked top challenged the foolish scaler. A clanging gate opened rebelliously to the paved way which led unto the wide balustraded steps. The windows, each with its projecting balcony, seemed thrusting back all cordial advances. Along that side toward the Quai D'Orsay, a cloistered porch joined the terrace from the steps to rear its carven roof beneath the windows of the upper floors. Each rigid pillar was lifted like a lance of prohibition. The walls of either neighbor, unbroken, windowless and blank, were flanking ramparts of its secrecy.

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The casual pedestrian, after dusk, was tempted to tiptoe lightly across the palace front, so pervasive was its air of mystery. No more fitting place could be found for plots of deposed monarchies and uncrowned kings. The last S. Croix, impoverished in the mutations of generations, reluctantly, half savagely, had swallowed his pride a few years previously and had consented to rent his ancestral halls. The ideal locality and its immunity from the over-curious had appealed to one who, gladly paying the first price asked, had held the place against the day of need. The lease was in the name of Josef Zorsky, none other than the Hereditary Servitor.

Behind the mask of night, the new-found king, with his gentlemen, was driven to the Hotel des S. Croix, where three ordinary Parisian *fiacres* discharged the royal party who had come directly from the attic studio. His Majesty was the last to alight. Taking Colonel Sutphen's proffered arm, he proceeded toward the entrance, followed by his suite. The place was dark and grim, no light came through the heavily curtained windows and only by a gleam through the transom above the door could the closest observer have discovered that it was inhabited.

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A single wayfarer—the neighborhood boasted but few pedestrians after dark—was approaching. As he drew nearer the group about the King he slackened his pace. Probably actuated by some slight natural curiosity aroused by the unaccustomed sight of many men alighting from cabs before a mansion traditionally, and apparently, empty, he could be excused for gazing inquiringly at each of the party in turn. Accident may have made Josef the last to be noticed, but to Carter's watchful eyes it seemed that some lightning recognition passed between the two. Certainly he saw Josef extend two fingers and as rapidly withdraw them. The passer-by acknowledged the signal, if such it was, by the slightest of smiles and passed on toward the Quai D'Orsay. Carter mentally determined to speak to Sobieska at the first opportunity and regretted that his duties to His Majesty for the present prohibited the consultation.

A species of stage-fright, seizing upon the King, sent a quiver through his limbs, causing his knees to quake, his hands to tremble.

"Who will be here?" he asked in a tone he strove desperately to hold natural and easy. He had already received this information, but speech seemed a refuge from his trepidation. If Sutphen had noticed how his king's voice quavered he was too loyal a subject to comment. With the patience of iteration he answered his sovereign.

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"The Duchess of Schallberg, the Countess Muhlen-Sarkey, together with the remaining gentlemen of the household, are all anxiously waiting to welcome Your Majesty."

In response to a signal from Sutphen, the doors were flung wide to admit His Majesty, Stovik Fourth, King of Krovitch. An hundred electric lights, doubled and trebled a score of times by pendant crystals and glistening sconces, greeted the eyes of the man who a few short hours before had been a struggling artist.

Half blinded by the brilliance, he hesitated, his foot already upon a way strange to him. He realized numbly how symbolic of his future that present moment might be. New conditions arose suddenly to confront him, only to find him halting, incompetent. He took a step forward. In his embarrassment his foot caught beneath a rug's edge. Calvert Carter's hand, alone, kept the king from sprawling frog-wise on the polished floor. A sudden pallor at the untimely accident came to the face of Sutphen.

"What is it?" Carter whisperingly inquired of the veteran.

"A bad omen, coming as it does as he enters the house," replied the soldier in the same low tone, tinged with the superstition of his race. "I pray God," he continued, "that he turn out no weak-kneed stumbler."

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The incident naturally enough had not served to increase the King's self-confidence. After a glance into the impassive faces of the waiting servants, he gathered sufficient grace to proceed and look about him, with eyes more accustomed to the light. With an assumption of ease foreign to his turbulent heart, he took his way along the splendid hall. He was soon lost in a professional appreciation of the evidence of royal circumstance, the glories the succeeding years had generously spared, and which now were enriched and ripened by Times' deft touch.

From their coigns the priceless portraits of the S. Croix gazed complacently down upon him. Royalty had aforesometimes been of daily habit to them. Their scornful brows with sombre eyes, their thin curling lips, appeared to be of some alien race. They seemed to hold themselves aloof as though he was a child of their one-time serfs, having no claim upon their bond of caste. Even to himself he felt an impostor, a peasant in a royal mask. That he was really a king had not yet come home to him. He felt no embryo greatness struggling to possess him. Upon his face abode the look of one who dreams of pleasant, impossible things. Half smiling, he was yet reluctant of the awakening he was sure would come and scatter forever the wondrous glories of his slumbers. Unwilling that these creations of pigment, brush and canvas should, by exposing him, dissipate

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his fancies, he dropped his gaze to find himself approaching the entrance of a brilliantly lighted salon.

What lay beyond?

A new world, a new life, an existence such as he had never dreamed of might be waiting on the thither side. He paused again involuntarily. Beside the richer scene, with all its priceless relics of another age, its warmth, its lights, its rows of bowing flunkies and his new-found friends, its dream of a crown and distant throne, arose a passing vision of a life he had laid aside. There the plenty of yesterday melted in the paucity of to-day. There cringing cold had crept forlornly in and hunger had been no unexpected guest. There hope and ambition on their brows had ever borne the bruising thorns of defeat and failure. There wealth was a surprising stranger and poverty a daily friend. Friends! Friends! Yes, friends leal and true, a crust for one had meant a meal for all. Such had been real friends. Their jests had banished every aching care and solaced each careless curse of fate. Would this new life give as much? Could the new life give him more? Would even the "glory that was Greece and the splendor that was Rome" repay him for the sleepless nights, the watchful anxious days of him who fought, who ruled, who trembled upon an uncertain throne?

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Having chosen he feared to turn back, lest men should call him a craven and coward. Sensual visions of a greater luxury than this around him came to console him as the picture of the attic life slipped from him.

He stepped beyond the boundaries of regret into the radiant portals of the salon.

A woman stood before him.

Unconsciously his fingers itched for the abandoned brush while his thumb crooked longingly for the discarded palette. Here was a subject fit for his Muse, a Jeanne d'Arc whose soul was beaming from her luminous eyes. Not that maid of visions and fought fields, but as she hung flame-tortured in the open square of Rouen. No peasant soul this, rather a royal maiden burning on the altars of her country. Awkward and speechless he stood before her. Instinct apprised him that this was no other than Trusia, waiting to receive her King.

Her head was held high in regal pride, but her eyes were the wide dark eyes of a fawn, fear-haunted, at the gaze. Her throat and shoulders gleamed white as starlight while her tapering arms would have urged an envious sigh from a Phidias or a David. Her gown of silk was snow white; the light clung to its watered woof waving and trembling in its folds as though upon a frosted glass. Diagonally from right to left across her breast descended a great red ribbon upon whose way the jeweled Lion of Krovitch rose and fell above her throbbing heart. This with her diamond coronet were her only jewels. The high spirited, whole-souled girl was face to face at last with the man she had vowed to marry to give her land a king.

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Unswervingly her fearless eyes probed to the soul of Stovik and dragged it forth to weigh it in the balance with her own. Fate had denied her heart the right of choosing, so she had prayed that at least her King should be great and strong of soul. Fate in mockery had placed before her an ordinary man to rule her people and her future life.

As though to gain courage from the contact, her hand sought and rested upon the jeweled Lion of her race. Slowly she forced her lips into a little smile, which one observer knew was sadder than tears.

Carter, standing behind the King, was madly tempted to dash aside the royal lout to take her in his arms where she might find the longed-for solace of her pent-up tears.

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Colonel Sutphen with a courtly bow took her hand and turned to the monarch.

"Your Majesty," he said gravely, "this is Trusia, Duchess of Schallberg, than whom the earth holds no sweeter, nobler woman. To God and Trusia you will owe your throne. She has urged us, cheered us, led us, till this day has grown out of our wordy plans. See that she has her full measure of reward from you. Though our swords be for your service, our hearts we hold for her in any hour of her need."

Sutphen's keen eyes had never left the sovereign's face while speaking. If the words were blunt his manner had been courtly and deferential. With a courtesy which was superbly free from her inmost trepidation, Trusia swept up the King's reluctant hand, pressing it to lips as chill as winter's bane.

"Sire," she said in a voice scarcely audible, "sire, I did no more than many a loyal son of Krovitch. I—we all—will give our lives for our country and her rightful king."

"Duchess! Lady Trusia," stammered the flushing, self-conscious king embarrassed by the kiss upon his hand, "I fear I am unworthy of such devotion. Unused to courtly custom I feel that I should rather render homage unto you. They tell me, these friends who say that they are my subjects, that I am your debtor. My obligations may already be beyond discharge. Add no more by obeisance." The poorly turned speech awoke a slight defiance in Trusia's heart. It was oversoon, she thought, for her King to patronize her.

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"Your Majesty mistakes," was the quick retort, "my homage is to Krovitch. We are equals—you and I."

"I could ask no greater distinction than equality with you." Stovik's answer was a pattern of humility, which Trusia in her loyalty was quick to see. Her face softened.

"If Your Majesty will deign to come, I have something over there I think will interest you," and she indicated the far end of the room where stood a velvet draped table guarded by two gentlemen in hussar uniform. With her hand upon his arm Stovik sedately approached the place. Here he saw nothing but the bulk of objects covered by a silken cloth. This Trusia removed.

The act disclosed a crown, a sceptre and a jeweled sword. Before them on the cushion also lay the grand badge of the Order of the Lion with a fine chain of gold.

"As the hereditary head of the Order, sire," Trusia remarked as she raised the glittering insignia, "you are entitled to assume the mark at once." Without further words she drew the chain over his head letting the Lion depend upon the breast of his artist's blouse. [Pg 182]

Lifting up the crown he turned to her mischievously. "Why not this?" He made a gesture to put it on his head.

"It will be a burden, sire. That's why they are all made so pleasing to look upon; gemmed and jeweled, just as sugar coats a bitter pill. A crown means weariness and strife. Are you so anxious to take up its cares? They will come soon enough." She spoke in a sweetly serious voice that was not without its effect upon him. "Besides," she said, "the Bishop of Schallberg has waited many years to perform that office. Would you rob him of it?"

Although Stovik replaced the glittering loop upon the velvet pall, he smiled to think how little the Church had entered into his former scheme of life. Trusia seemed to divine his thoughts, for, as his ascending eyes met hers, she continued speaking of the aged prelate.

"He is a dear old man, sire, kindly and gentle. The beggars and little children call him their patron saint. Well past the allotted span of years, he has prayed to be spared until the day when he can anoint the head of the King of Krovitch. Then, he says, he will die joyously." [Pg 183]

The King murmured his hopes for a longer life for the Bishop, and Trusia turned to present her chaperon, the Countess Muhlen-Sarkey, with the remaining gentlemen of the Court.

After the formalities had been attended to, and he had received the sincere good wishes of his nobles, the King turned to the beautiful girl at his side.

"Do you leave with us to-morrow?" he asked. "Of our future plans I have had necessarily only a sketch. So little time has elapsed since Colonel Sutphen visited Eugene Delmotte that King Stovik can readily be forgiven for some slight ignorance."

"If it meets with Your Majesty's approval, we will start to-morrow for Vienna," Trusia said. "There we will await Colonel Sutphen's summons from your capital, Schallberg. Major Carter, Josef, myself and the Countess Muhlen-Sarkey will accompany Your Majesty. The other gentlemen will attend the Colonel. They precede us to ascertain if all is in readiness."

"Will the gentlemen travel in uniform?" The King's glance about the room had not been free from an apprehension that such a course might awaken inquisitive questions from officials. [Pg 184]

"Oh, certainly not, Your Majesty," the girl reassured him. "Your Majesty will procure a passport made out to Eugene Delmotte, artist. You will be traveling to Krovitch for studies for the painting I hear you are making. The uniforms will be a part of your paraphernalia."

"Will there be no risk?"

"Is Your Majesty unwilling to take the least? Your subjects must indeed seem reckless to you." Trusia's tone indicated the depth of her reproof.

"I suppose that did sound rather selfish," he hastened to confess, "but the truth is that I do not yet realize that I am actually a king. That I, a few hours ago a penniless artist, should be plunging into a national movement as its leader, its king, seems nothing short of a dream. But tell me, Duchess, from whom we should fear detection?"

"This is a national movement of ours, sire. Some chance may have aroused Russian suspicion, but believe me, I'd stake my life on your people's loyalty. St. Petersburg may be apprehensive, but they know nothing of the real truth nor the imminence of our uprising. Here is Colonel Sutphen, doubtless wishing to talk more fully of our plans to you," she concluded as the grizzled veteran stood courteously awaiting their leisure to speak with the King. [Pg 185]

Feeling free to do so now, she turned to her American aide. "Major Carter," she said, "I think His Majesty can spare me now. Won't you tell me of your adventures to-night?" Taking the arm he offered they strolled together into the hall. Being there out of the royal presence they were at liberty to seat themselves. An alcove held a tempting divan. Here they found a place.

"Your Grace," he said in a tone he strove valiantly to hold within the pitch of social usage, "let me rather tell you how beautiful I fancied you to-night."

As the handsome fellow bent his head toward her, she was possessed of a strange yearning. The plans, the plots, the wearying details of years had almost deprived her of the solace of sex; in the rôle of patriot she had well-nigh forgotten that she was a woman. A hunger for her due, so long deferred, spoke in her voice.

"Yes," she said honestly, "please do. Anything to make me forget for the few minutes I can call my own. Tell me a fairy-story," she commanded with almost childish eagerness. "Or have you Americans foresworn fairies for Edisons?"

"I know one who has not," he answered, falling soothingly into her mood. "He has seen the Queen, Titania."

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"Well, tell me about her. Oh, I do hope that she was beautiful," and she dimpled bewitchingly.

"She was—fairy queens are always beautiful, and sometimes kind. Once upon a time—all fairy-stories have happened once upon a time—there was a man."

"Yes," she interrupted, bending expectantly toward him.

"He was poor," he continued quietly.

"Oh," she exclaimed in disappointment.

Carter shook his head understandingly. "He was an artist. He hoped one day to be called a genius. The fairy queen knew this was not to be so she made him a king and gave him—part of her kingdom." He paused to find her looking down, a shade of sadness on her face. Noticing his pause she looked up.

"Well?" she asked.

"There was another man," he continued. "This other man was not poor. He was not an artist, but to-night he saw the fairy queen in all her regal splendor. It made him think that all the flowers in all the worlds condensed into one small but perfect bloom were not so sweet as she. So the other man more than ever wished to rule in her fairyland—with her."

"No, no," she cried, detecting the prohibited note, "you must not speak so." Her hands crumpled the morsel of cobweb and lace she had for handkerchief. Carried away with her proximity, however, he would not now be denied.

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"This is but a fairy-story, Duchess. Oh, Fairy Queen, could you not find a kingdom for the other man in fairyland—a kingdom with you as Queen?"

His naked soul was laying pleading hands upon her quivering heart. She turned away, unable to withstand the suppliance of his eyes.

"You do not know what you ask," she whispered hoarsely. Then vehemently spurring her resolve into a gallop, she added, "When the King is crowned in Schallberg, I become his wife."

"Suppose he isn't," he urged doggedly.

"Oh, no," she cried brokenly, "don't make me a traitor to my country's hopes. Don't make me wish for failure."

Unwittingly her words confessed her love for Carter. Grimly forcing her weakness back into her secret heart, she turned a calm front to him once again.

"Enough of fairy-stories, Major Carter," she said. "We live in a workaday world where the 'little people' have no place. All of us have our duties to perform. If some be less pleasant than others it is no excuse for not fulfilling them to the uttermost. We have a hard day before us. With His Majesty's permission, therefore, I will retire for the night." She arose as she said this, so Carter had no other alternative than to follow her into the royal presence.

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From a balcony at the far end of the room, crept a faint note of music. The players were carefully concealed behind banked palms and gigantic ferns. To the surprised ears of those unaware of their presence it came first as a single note, then a chord, a stave, a vibrant meaning. It was like a distant bugle call across a midnight plain. It swelled into a challenge.

Then, echoing the hoof beats of horses, it swept into a glorious charge. All the invisible instruments crashed valorously into their fullest sounds. The arteries of the listeners throbbed a response to its inspiration. Trusia, her eyes gleaming like twin stars, laid her hand softly on the royal arm.

"Oh, sire," she cried, "it is our nation's battle song."

Carter sighed. He saw that her loyalty would hold her to an alliance against her heart.

Possessed by the ardor of the song, the nobles, drawing their swords, cried in ecstatic chorus, "For Krovitch! For Krovitch!" In their pandemonium of joy, Carter's distress was unnoted.

He could not longer endure the sight of the prophetic association; it seemed as if they were receiving nuptial felicitations as they stood there side by side, so with a heavy heart he crept up to his own apartment, where, at least, without stint, he could indulge his thoughts. After the brilliance of the salon, the single light in his room seemed puling and weak, so he crossed over and extinguished it. In doing so, he found himself near the window, which, opening to the floor, door wise, looked along the roof of the stone porch. A cooling sweep of moonlight fell on Carter's face and urged him to peace of soul. He never noticed the soft indulgence of Diana, for, as he glanced streetward, he recalled the incident of Josef and the stranger. Drawing an easy-chair into the zone of moonlight he lit a cigar and strove desperately to find a clue.

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"Two fingers—that means two something, at first glance. Has it any further significance?" he pondered. "Of course it was prearranged, when and how—and does Sobieska know? If he doesn't, Josef has correspondents unknown to Krovitch—that alone looks dangerous. I'll look up Sobieska. It's now twenty minutes of two," he said as he consulted his watch. A swift inspiration caused him suddenly to raise his head. "I've got it. The house is all still now. Two—two—two o'clock, that's the solution. They're to meet at two o'clock. Where? I can't wait for Sobieska, there's no time."

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He bent over and slipped off his military boots and put on a pair of moccasins he always wore about his room. Cautiously he opened the long window and stepped gingerly upon the roof. "Josef won't dare go out the front way; so to leave the grounds he'll have to pass beneath me, and I can follow if he does." Placing one hand on the bow window beside him, he leaned over to peer into the moonlit yard beneath.

After he had waited what seemed a double eternity he was rewarded by seeing a shape disengage itself from the shadows about the servant's quarters in the rear, and come and stand directly beneath his place of observation. Somewhere a clock struck two. There was a grating sound as of the moving of rusty hinges from the direction of the front of the house, and the first comer had a companion with whom he instantly began a whispered conversation, of which, strain his ears as he might, Carter could catch only four words,—*"Your report—and lists."* The man whom he supposed to be Josef drew a bulky sheaf of papers from his breast pocket and passed them to the mysterious stranger. It was time to interfere, Carter thought. Swinging by his arms until his legs encircled the stone pillar he slid to the porch and, leaping to the ground, confronted the conspirators. Instinctively his first act was to clutch the papers, and as he did so he was struck from behind and fell unconscious to the ground. As his senses passed from him, he was dimly conscious of a surprise that neither man was Josef. A sleepy determination possessed him to hold grimly to the papers. Then all was blank.

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He wished they wouldn't annoy him, he remonstrated drowsily. When he was asleep he didn't have that awful pain in his head. As he opened his eyes he smiled vacuously into Trusia's face. That brought him to his senses with a jerk. A candle sputtered fitfully in a gilt stand beside him on the ground. Trusia's arm was about his shoulder. The King and, yes, Sobieska were there. And that other figure, that was Josef. He glanced at his own right hand. It was still tightly clenched, but held no papers.

"How did you know I was here?" he inquired, his voice a trifle husky and weak. He looked at the girl against whose breast he leaned; her reply alone could satisfy him.

"Josef, in going around to see if all things were locked tight, heard you groaning, and, not knowing who it was, gave the alarm."

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Carter struggled to his feet and, though a trifle dizzy yet from the blow of his unseen foe, was able to stagger into the house. There Trusia, with a woman's tender solicitude for those for whom she cares, without the intervention of servants poured from a near-by decanter, and forced Carter to drain, a goblet of wine. Under the stimulant his strength returned.

"If Count Sobieska will lend me his arm I think I can retire now. How I came in the yard—I see you are all curious though too polite to inquire—I'll tell you in the morning when I feel more fit. At present I have either a strange head or a beehive on my shoulders, I don't know which."

When he reached his room and the Count entering also had closed the door, Carter threw off much of the assumed languor, and told the Counselor the whole of the tale. The Krovitzer shook his head dubiously. "Josef found you at quarter past three this morning—yet you say Josef was not one of the two men. Did you see the faces of both?"

"Only a glance. Both were bearded. The one who came from the back part of the house was dark, black eyebrows, heavy black beard, pallid face, or so it looked in the moonlight. The visitor was undoubtedly Russian."

"It may have been soot," said Sobieska musingly. "I remember now that, while the rest of his face looked remarkably like a freshly scrubbed one, there was a long dark smear along one of Josef's eyebrows as we brought you into the house; but that is not enough to convict him of the treason, however strong a suspicion it arouses. Well, things are looking a trifle as if Vladimar not only knows where we are, but why we are here. We'll have to strike quickly—as soon, in fact, as we set foot in Krovitch again."

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XVIII

I SAW—I KNOW

The next day they left Paris. Almost the first person Trusia espied at the railroad station was General Vladimar, a stately young aide, and the Casper Haupt of yesterday. Carter felt a thrill of recognition for the latter; he was the passer-by of the night before who had received Josef's

signal, and, yes, it was the man who had met the Hereditary Servitor in the moonlit shadow of the porch.

The General hustled forward with easy appearance of boisterous friendliness. The group split; the King was adroitly surrounded by Sobieska, Muhlen-Sarkey and Carter, while Trusia and Sutphen advanced to meet and check the too curious Russian.

He smiled blandly as he tacitly acknowledged to himself that he had been gracefully repulsed in one direction. Glancing at the baggage of the party, he bent over Trusia's hand with almost real deference.

"So soon?" he inquired with a gesture toward the trunks. "It is almost as if I was hurrying you off," he laughed. Sutphen was reading what was back of the man's eyes. The Russian seemed so sure of his game that like a cat with a mouse, he played at friendliness. "I am going again to Schallberg, soon," he continued in his same manner of large good nature, "and hope the beastly hole will furnish more excitement this time. Could you arrange it, eh, Colonel?" and he turned smilingly to the troubled Krovitzer.

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"We'll try," replied the veteran, "forewarned is always forearmed."

Vladimar assumed a look of gravity. "Let's not speak of arms, good friends, for your—for all our sakes. There's my train! Adieu; *bon voyage*." Without waiting to see the impression of his words, he left them. They were all conscious of an unrest caused by the Russian's advent. He had mentioned his return to Schallberg; could he know of what was going forward? Trusia summoned the Hereditary Servitor.

That those waiting in Krovitch should be informed of their coming, Josef was directed by her to send an already prepared cipher dispatch. The white-haired servitor did so with commendable alacrity. Assured that the operator had actually transmitted it, he filled in a blank for himself, with the following simple message: "Reach Bregenz Thursday. Be on hand. Josef." Dating it, he handed it to the official. The latter carefully read and reread it, then turned quizzically to Josef.

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"A thousand pardons, m'sieu," he said, "but you have given no address."

"How stupid," laughed the old fellow. "It is for Fraulein Julia Haupt, Notions Merchant, 16 Hoffstrasse, Bregenz."

Long before their first objective was reached, the journey had proven exceedingly irksome to one member of the party; while, for the greater part of the time, a conscious restraint held both Trusia and Calvert in a silence broken only when the monotony grew unbearable. Stovik, lost in wonderment at his future regal state, and a trifle awed at the high-bred girl beside him, added but little to the conversation. The Countess Muhlen-Sarkey awoke only when there was a fitful attempt to break the embarrassment which held all the others. The quondam Parisian openly welcomed each stopping-place as an excuse to escape from such uncongenial companionship. In the throngs on the platforms he found both transient excitement and opportunities of stretching his cramped and restless limbs. Josef conscientiously attended him on these brief excursions, never relaxing for an instant his grave watchfulness over his royal charge.

There was a protracted stop at Bregenz. Being at the entrance of the Austrian Tyrol, there followed a rigid frontier examination of baggage. The three men excused themselves to Trusia and descended to the station in order to expedite matters as much as possible by their prompt appearance and presence. Apparently by accident, in the pushing crowd, Josef and his royal charge were separated from Carter, who was temporarily lost to view. Having no apprehension on that score, they gave no heed to his absence, but shouldered their way to the groups about the piled-up trunks where they knew he would rejoin them. After having their belongings properly *viséd*, the pair stood watching the panorama of the crowd.

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Carter, at last catching sight of his fellow travelers, noted with some apprehension that they were being pretty closely watched by an alert-looking, middle-aged man. Receiving a covert nod from Josef, the latter had disappeared at once into the human medley. With all expedition, therefore, the American rejoined them. He read a question in Josef's eyes which changed into a defiance as the latter read in the newcomer's that the incident had not escaped him.

Just then Stovik caught him by the arm. "Look, Major," he cried, indicating a vivacious Austrienne at no great distance from where they stood, "isn't that a dainty morsel?" Carter turned to see that the woman was freely indulging in an ocular conversation with His Majesty.

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"Monsieur," Carter commenced in dignified remonstrance, only to be cut short by a peevish King.

"See here, Carter, official business does not begin until we reach Schallberg. I'll practically be a prisoner for life if all goes well. I am not going to give up without just one more fling at the poms and vanities of this wicked world."

To emphasize his assertion, he smiled gaily at the pretty woman, whose lips parted in audacious invitation.

"But the Duchess," Carter persisted, frowning.

"That's just it," Stovik replied unblushingly. "I am not accustomed to such women as Her Grace. When near her I have to keep a tight rein on my tongue for fear of being guilty of a *faux pas*. A pinch of a round cheek, a warm kiss given and returned, an arm about a lithe waist, is what I like.

Her Grace is an iceberg."

Carter flushed angrily at the comparison. He restrained with some difficulty the stinging words of rebuke which sprang to his lips in Trusia's defense.

"Oh, I know what you would say," continued the royal scamp. "I admit her patriotism, sacrifices, devotion, and all that sort of thing. Frankly, though, we are too dissimilar ever to get along together. The differences are temperamental. Environment and education have made an insuperable barrier to our mutual happiness."

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A hope he could not restrain lighted Carter's face at these careless words. "Do you mean," he inquired gravely, simulating a solemnity he felt but little, "do you mean that you will not marry Her Grace of Schallberg?"

The King, coming close, looked searchingly into Carter's eyes and laughed in faint raillery; he partially understood. His reply was evasive. "It is not every one," he said, "who can gain a throne by marrying a pretty girl." Shrugging his shoulders, he abruptly left his companions and approached the woman, with whom he did not seem to have any difficulty in establishing a cordial relation.

Carter reluctantly retraced his steps to the car. He was joined by Josef. The American nodded his head savagely toward where the monarch could be seen in high glee at his conquest. Taking this, apparently, as an indication that his persuasive offices were desired in that direction, Josef approached his royal master with deferential remonstrance. He touched the elbow of the oblivious King, who instantly turned. Irritated by what he could see of the express disapproval of his conduct in the smug face of the servitor, he inquired harshly what the fellow wanted.

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"Beg pardon, m'sieu," stammered the old man, "but the train starts immediately." If Josef's poor efforts had been intended to persuade the return of the King they had been made with but little understanding of the character of the man addressed. The contrary effect was produced.

"So do I," responded His Majesty curtly, annoyed at what he considered an impertinent surveillance. "I shall rejoin the party at Vienna. You may call me when we arrive. Not before." He turned his back upon the discomfited Josef.

Carter, on reentering the car, braced himself to render an acceptable yet plausible excuse for Stovik's absence. The Countess Muhlen-Sarkey was placidly sleeping in the corner. Trusia was sitting with palm-propped chin, gazing straight out of the window. This kept the full view of her face away from such of the party as might chance to enter the car. Carter saw enough, however, to convince him that she had been weeping. One forgotten tear hung tremulously on her lashes as though too reluctant to part with her grief. A fierce resentment seized him. He turned to leave the car, determined to drag back the graceless King by the neck if necessary.

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"Don't go," she pleaded as though comprehending his intentions. Unable to refuse her request he sat down beside her.

"Duchess," he began in the alternative of explanation; "His Majesty——"

"Has chosen to ride in another car," she interrupted, loyally unwilling that even he should criticise the King of Krovitch. "It is his right. I, a subject, would not attempt to pass in judgment upon the acts of my sovereign." There was a sad weakening of voice as she completed her defense, which convinced Carter that she had seen the whole disgusting performance.

"Forgive me," he said very gently.

"I saw," she admitted in distress. A woman, urged by pride, she had at first refused his sympathy. Finding pride insufficient for her solace, she now, womanlike, sought what she had refused. The entrance of Josef, at this juncture, however, and the resumption of the journey, deprived Carter of what had been the most propitious moment he had yet had to bind her heart indissolubly to his own.

How much the King had disclosed, how much the woman had discovered, Carter was unable to find out, as Stovik maintained a sulky silence in the face of all inquiries.

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XIX

IT WAS JUDSON'S FAULT

Calvert Carter had a very democratic conversation with His Majesty of Krovitch. They were standing on the platform of the station at Vienna waiting with ill-concealed impatience for the train which was to carry them into Krovitch. Needless to say, their talk turned upon the King's recent misbehavior. It contained a sketchy outline of what the American considered would happen did the monarch again put such an affront upon Her Grace.

"You threaten, Major Carter?" asked Stovik with the insolence inseparable from a recent exaltation from humble life.

"No, Your Majesty," replied Carter, no whit annoyed by the other's ill-temper; "I never threaten. I promise." That was all that was said. Neither Eugene Delmotte in his proper person nor the future ruler of Krovitch was able, however, to withstand the cool, hard glitter in the American's eyes.

They boarded the waiting train as they came to this understanding. King Stovik's conduct for this new journey was exemplary. Nor were there other pretty coquettes available. He even exerted himself sufficiently to take an interest in the general conversation, at which Trusia's face brightened with appreciation. [Pg 203]

Houses, fields, woods, mountains and sky fled by as the train sped on. At last the Vistula was crossed. Trusia's face grew radiant as the landmarks of her country began to appear on every hand. With grumbling wheels the cars drew nearer Schallberg.

"See, away off there to the northeast. There, that tiny speck against the sky," she cried rapturously as one returning home from a long sojourn abroad. "That is my castle. Do you see it, Your Majesty?" she asked, as she turned appealingly to him. "Schallberg, your capital, lies this side of it. The city is in a valley on the far side of this mountain we are now climbing." The whole party were peering out of the windows on the rapidly changing landscape, eagerly awaiting the first view of the place of their hopes.

The train, sobbing out its protests against the steep ascent, soon brought them into a region of puzzling circumstances. Flashing past rural crossroads, they could see large groups of excited peasants talking, gesticulating and laughing, as they one and all were pointing in the direction of the capital. To their greater bewilderment, videttes in jaunty black and gold could be seen, as if courting publicity, patrolling the public highways. [Pg 204]

"What can it mean?" asked Trusia, whose heart beat wildly with a surmise she dare not voice.

The crest of the mountain was reached. The city lay spread before them. Over the Government buildings floated the Lion of Krovitch. The standard, waving gently in the breeze, seemed beckoning them to approach.

"The city is ours," burst simultaneously from their lips. The train in one headlong descent drew up at the station at Schallberg.

Looking out they could see a multitude of eager, expectant faces turned trainward. All Schallberg and most of the surrounding country had congregated to welcome their sovereign.

In the front rank Carter espied his former friends, while last but not least a jubilant Carrick awaited his alighting. A guard was drawn up about the platform on which stood the little group of officers.

Urged to the front, King Stovik was the first to step into view of the throng. Recognizing him, the officers drew their swords and raised them high above their heads.

"Long live King Stovik!" they cried.

For the life of a sigh there was a silence while the multitude realized that this man was their King. Then a pandemonium of cheers shattered the air. A roar of two centuries of repressed loyalty greeted him. He would indeed have been of meagre soul not to have been touched by such devotion. Handkerchiefs, hats, and flags were waved by his people—his people—at sight of him. What could be the limited fame of an artist compared to the devotion of an entire people for their sovereign? He stood erect, proudly lifting his hat to the full height of his arm in dignified response. There came a mightier cheer. [Pg 205]

"Long live Stovik Fourth!"

"God save the King of Krovitch!"

"A Lion for the Bear!"

Filled with the moment's majesty, Stovik stepped down to greet his officers.

Next came Trusia. The crowd caught sight of her happy, inspired face. She was recognized by all; they knew and worshiped her. A wilder cry, a mightier joy, made up of mingled cheers and tears, went up at sight of her. Her bosom heaved, her lips trembled. At the thought of her country's salvation her glorious eyes grew soft and moist. Lovingly, almost maternally, she held out her arms to her beloved countrymen.

Somewhere in the crowd a woman's voice was heard to cry: "Saint Trusia; angel!" Ten thousand voices took up the acclaim. She shook her head reprovingly as she, too, joined the group about His Majesty. After Carter and the others stepped upon the platform, the former looked about him for his whilom chauffeur. Carrick, with some difficulty, pushed his way through the crowd and was soon at his master's side. [Pg 206]

"Ave a pleasant trip, sir?" he asked, his mobile countenance abeam with joy at the meeting. The aide cast a significant glance at the crowd, then at the Krovitch standard, before replying.

"Fairly, Carrick," he said. "I notice that you and our friends have been busy hereabouts in our absence," he added, hinting at an enlightenment.

The Cockney's face grew red with embarrassment as he answered lightly, "Yes, we 'ave sort of kept our hands in, sir. It's a long story," he appended, appreciating that his master must have some natural curiosity regarding the premature change in plans which had resulted in the capture of the city before the coming of the King. The American smiled, he felt sure that the fellow had had a greater part in the proceedings than he would like to confess in public. Something on Carrick's sleeves seemed to confirm this supposition.

"All right," he answered, "I guess it will keep until we have reached our quarters. By the way how did you get the chevrons of a sergeant-major? That's the highest rank a non com. can aspire to." [Pg 207]

Carrick grinned. "That's part of the story, sir," he retorted.

Zulka, having made his devoirs to the sovereign, now approached his friend.

"Surprised, Cal?" he queried.

"I surely am, Zulka. How—" Carter began when he was interrupted by the Count who laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder.

"Things are moving," said the Krovitzer with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm busy, ask Carrick." He chuckled as if it were a huge joke.

"I feel as if I had missed something big," the American replied with the generous regret of one who would have thoroughly enjoyed his own share of the labor.

"Thank Carrick for that. Here comes Sutphen. He'll be Marshal for this," he said as the grizzled commanding officer approached. All three saluted.

"Congratulations, Colonel," said Carter as the elder man acknowledged their formal courtesies.

"Sorry I can't congratulate you, Major," the veteran replied with a dry chuckle; "the truth is that you have lost a valuable asset by the victory." Calvert was properly mystified. [Pg 208]

"So?" he questioned; "I haven't missed anything yet."

"A good attendant," the other explained, pointing to the Cockney. "Our army will never let him go, now. They'd sooner give him my place. Nothing but continued obstinacy on his part hinders him from wearing shoulder straps."

"Carrick seems in high favor about here," Carter remarked as a more pronounced hint for enlightenment. Sutphen grunted.

"Let him tell you, then," he said. "Excuse me. Her Grace is looking this way." He straightway departed to escape explanations and Zulka followed him.

While these greetings were being exchanged, the populace were not idle. With enthusiastic vigor they had removed the horses from the equipages meant for the royal party, and now, through a spokesman, begged permission to draw the carriages themselves as a token of their devoted allegiance. Stovik gaily agreed when their request was explained to him.

"Come with me, Sergeant," Calvert requested. Elated at the opportunity, the Cockney leaped into the landau beside him. Pulled, pushed and surrounded by a cheering, happy pack, the entire suite was whirled along toward Trusia's castle. When well under way, the New Yorker turned to the man beside him. He seemed to beg Carrick for an explanation of the day's mystery. [Pg 209]

"Well," he ejaculated, in the assurance that the Cockney always comprehended his monosyllabic meanings. Carrick reddened sheepishly under the other's gaze.

"You remember Judson? Sergeant Judson, of old E Troop?" he inquired, not knowing how to commence his narrative.

"Yes," Carter replied, "what of him?"

"It's his fault," Carrick answered, pointing at the densely packed mass of Krovitzers about them.

"What are you driving at?"

"It's this wye, sir," said his whilom chauffeur, taking grace of words. "You know we struck this plyce yesterday. Feelin' out o' plyce among them furrin-speakin' Krovitzers I hiked down to the Russian guard mount."

"You mean that you understood Russian better than the native language?"

"Not that, sir, but I knew I would feel more at 'ome there than I would with the big bugs. When I got there the band was a plyin' over at the side o' the square, the flags was aflyin', and blyme me if something didn't stick in my throat, thinkin' of old times, sir." His eyes grew soft at the recollections evoked. "When it came time for 'Sergeants front and centre' I got to thinkin' how old Sarge Judson used to stalk up as proud as Colonel Wood himself. I 'ad to rub my bloomin' eyes, for large as life, there was Doc Judson with all them whiskered chaps." [Pg 210]

"Surely, Carrick," interrupted the astonished Carter, "you must be mistaken. You don't mean Sergeant Judson of the First Volunteer Cavalry?"

"The syme, sir. When they countermarched back to barracks I saw 'im again. That was fine, sir,"

said the fellow enthusiastically. "Quite like old times, sir. Right 'and grippin' the piece; left 'and swingin' free. Swingin' along, swingin', swingin', swingin' to the music o' the band. When a fellow who is out of it has been in the service, 'e feels bloomin' soft when 'e sees the fours sweep by 'im. I wanted to cheer and swing me bloomin' cap just to keep from blubberin'. Then, right guide of his four, come Judson. Six paces awye he saw me. He turned white, then red, but like the good soldier 'e was, 'e never let it spoil 'is cadence. 'E tipped me the wink and passed by. I waited. Presently 'e came back. 'Are you with the gang at the castle?' 'e arsked. I said I was. 'Cut it, Bull, and run,' 'e said. They used to call me John Bull, you know. Then 'e added slow as if 'e was not sure 'e 'ad the right to tell—'I'm on to their game. To-morrow mornin' I'm goin' to squeal on 'em to the commandant. That'll give you plenty o' time for you to get awye. For old times' syke, Bull,' 'e said as 'e gripped my 'and."

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Then Carrick went on to narrate how Judson had told him that a fellow named Johann, who had broken jail, had just that morning drifted into the guardhouse where the sergeant had the relief. He had promised Judson if given twenty-four hours' start he would disclose a big game of treason. Judson promised, and the fellow,—none other than the pent-browed peasant,—had related all he knew of the Krovitzers' plans. Carrick confessed to some trepidation when he had heard that so much was known outside their own party. But he had stood his guns manfully and refused to fly. He gave as his reason his loyalty to Calvert Carter. When Judson learned that his old captain was walking straight into the impending peril he was greatly surprised, but promised to take care of him or forfeit his life. Carrick by way of reply had innocently inquired who was sergeant of relief that night.

"'E was wise, though," said Carrick with a laugh. "'E looked at me suspiciously. 'I am,' 'e said with a jerk; 'why?'

"'Better 'ave ball cartridges,' I says, 'I'm goin' to give you a surprise. That's a fair warnin' for a fair warnin', Doc,' I said. 'E showed 'e was worried. 'E begged me not to do it, sayin' that they'd 'ave ball cartridges an' reinforcements a-plenty to-morrow, which is to-day, sir. I knew by that that they were shy at that time, sir. I found out that their strength was only 'arf a battalion. We sprung our surprise last night, sir, overpowered the sentries and took the bloomin' town."

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"It will surely be traced to Judson, Carrick. You know what that means for him. I hope the poor fellow made his escape before they had the chance of standing him up against the wall. Did you see him again?" Carrick's mobile face took on an unaccustomed gravity.

"Once," he answered with some effort. "Don't worry, sir, the Russians won't bother *him*. You see," he hurried on with obvious haste, "we sneaked on each sentry until we came to Number One Post. It was near the gates—connected by phone and electric light wires with the barracks."

"How did you manage?"

"Cut the bloomin' wires."

"Didn't the guard rush out?"

"They did, sir. Couldn't find their pieces in the dark. They rushed right into the arms of the two companies Colonel Sutphen had there waiting for them. Only one, a sergeant, 'ad grit enough to fight. 'E picked me out, sir. Rushed me with 'is sword and gave me all I could do," said Carrick giving gallant tribute to a valiant foe. The Cockney became silent.

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"Well?" inquired Carter after a prolonged season of expectancy.

"The old trick you taught me in E Troop did for 'im, sir. As 'e fell, 'e said, 'Bull, you are a damned rascal,' and laughed as if the joke was on 'im. 'I'm done for, Bull,' 'e went on, 'but I'd rather die this wye in a fair fight with a friend, than blindfold against the wall for a traitor. Take care o' Cap Carter, 'e said. Then 'e croaked."

"Judson," cried Carter regretfully at the death of a brave man.

"Judson, of old E Troop," replied Carrick solemnly. "We sounded taps over 'im this mornin', sir."

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XX

A SOUND AT MIDNIGHT

Two days later a royal banquet followed by a cotillion celebrated the coming of the King. The monarch was in the white uniform of a Field Marshal, above which his handsome face rose in striking contrast. His collar, heavy with gold embroidery, seemed held in place by the Star of the Lion. At his right hand sat Trusia, resplendent and warmly human, while flanking him on the left was the grizzled Sutphen. Carter's place as an aide was far down the side of the table. Only by leaning forward, and glancing past those intervening, could he get a glimpse of the marvelous woman, who, young as she was, had made this event a possibility.

Sallies, laughter, repartee came floating down to him. A momentary pang of envy shot through him that the royal party, which to him meant Trusia, should be in such high feather. Owing to his

remoteness it was impossible for him to participate in their mirth, so he resigned himself to the duty of entertaining the daughter of an elderly nobleman who was under his escort.

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"And you," he said, "you, too, are delighted with the dashing King. Confess."

"I am afraid," she laughed back, "that all girls, even in America, dream what their ideal king should be."

"Your sex's ideal man?" he inquired quizzically.

"Oh, no, monsieur," she replied with grave, wide eyes. "Our ideal man is only a prince."

"Then your ideal king must be something more than a man," he said in soberer mood as she unfolded to him the working of a maiden mind, which is always awe-inspiring.

"Yes," she responded, "something less than a god."

"And the maidens of Krovitch, what have they dreamed?"

She glanced up to see if his expression matched the apparent gravity of his words. Reassured by the entire absence of banter in his face, she answered him sincerely. She was too guileless to analyze his possible mental attitude save by these superficial indications. "A demigod like our ancient sovereign, Stovik First," she responded reverently.

"So you have deified His Majesty already?"

"God save His Majesty from ill," she answered, "but I think he is very human—and handsome." She blushed uneasily. A merry peal of laughter from the group about the King drew their attention. Leaning her elbow on the cloth, the girl turned her head to learn the cause of the hilarity. Carter, thankful for the opportunity, employed the pause in studying Trusia. The Duchess's eyes were sparkling like some lustrous jet. The deep flush of the jacqueminot burned in her cheeks as she smilingly regarded Natalie, the heroine of the jest. Was all this scintillation a mask, he wondered, or had the coming of the King—the remembrance of her vow—driven the recollection of that momentary surrender in Paris from her heart? He sighed. The girl next him turned in apology.

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"Forgive me, monsieur, for forgetting you. But Her Grace—is she not beautiful? When she makes us girls forget, is it any wonder the youths of Krovitch are oblivious of our poor existence?"

"She has had many suitors, then?" Carter to save him could not refrain from the question.

"A legion," she answered; "but all have withdrawn nobly in favor of the King. Even Paul Zulka and Major Sobieska. They are transferring to him their lives and their swords to please her."

A slight commotion at the head of the table again caused them to turn their heads in that direction. The King was rising.

"He is going to announce his betrothal," suggested the girl at Carter's side. Carter's face grew grim and white. But such was not the royal intent. Being assured that all present understood French, King Stovik in a short speech thanked the people of Krovitch for their devotion to his House. He promised that, if destiny placed him on their throne, he would treat his power as a trust for them.

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"For this day at least we give ourselves over to the joy of meeting you. To-morrow comes the fearful care of kings. You have labored faithfully, to-night be merry," he said in conclusion. He lifted a bubbling glass from the table. "Our battle cry, my lords, is 'God and Krovitch.'"

There was an hysteric outburst. Men and women leaped to their feet to drain the toast. When the King regained his seat the cheers subsided. Slowly, impressively Trusia arose at his side, the light of inspiration radiating from her glorious self like the warm light that comes from the sun.

"There can be only one other toast after that, my people," she said. "God save the King." Like a real prayer, solemn and soul-felt, arose a responsive, "God save the King." Then deliberately, that the glasses might never be profaned with a less loyal toast, the guests snapped the fragile stems between their fingers and cast the dainty bowls to the floor in tinkling fragments.

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At a signal from Stovik the banquet was over. He arose, and, taking Trusia by the hand, escorted her to the great hall to lead the cotillion with him. The royal pair having departed, the guests arose and, in the order of their precedence, filed into the ballroom in the train of their King.

The first figure, patriotically named the "Flag of Krovitch," was danced by Stovik, Trusia and seven other couples all nearly related to royalty, each person waving a small silken flag bearing the Lion of their race.

Carter, from the throng, with hungry eyes saw but one wondrous form, supported on the arm of royalty, glide through the graceful maze. A lull came in the music and Stovik, bowing the Duchess to her seat, turned with evident relish to a coquettish brunette who had assured him that they were first cousins.

Having fulfilled the demands of Court etiquette in yielding first place to her sovereign, Trusia was now free to indulge any other preference for partners for the ensuing figures. The American glanced covetously toward the place where Sobieska and Zulka stood, expectantly awaiting her invitation. With a mild negation of her head she passed them, moving to where Carter was

engaged talking to the Countess Muhlen-Sarkey. Seeing her approach, his heart beat with a foolish hope and his remarks to his matronly auditor, took on a perplexing shade of incoherence. Evidently Trusia shyly expected him to accept the courtesy; as through a myriad phantoms, where only she was real, he threaded his way to her side.

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"You are the stranger within our gates," she explained as in rhythmic unison they drifted into the cadence of the waltz.

"Have I awakened," he inquired, "or is this part of the dream I had in the Boulevard S. Michel?"

"It must have been a dream, monsieur," she said with sad finality. "It is folly to encumber one's life with useless dreams."

"Your Grace wishes it?" he asked in halting syllables wrenched from a heavy heart.

"For your own happiness, now," she answered with a meaning nod toward the King.

"But," he pleaded, "it was such a beautiful dream."

"Dreams are—sometimes. Then we awake." He felt the slight tremor against his arm as she spoke.

"I wish," he sighed impotently, "that you were an American girl."

She smiled mechanically to hide the sadness welling in her breast. "Wishes," she murmured resignedly, "are too near akin to dreams for me to indulge them. Besides I have a country to hope for. Why should I join you in such a wish?"

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"Have you, then, realized your wishes in His Majesty?" It was a brutal thing to say; he saw it when too late to recall the words which had passed his lips.

She shrank as if struck. Her eyes spoke the volumes of her appeal. They read in his a hopeless prayer for forgiveness, and graciously, gently, she pressed his arm under her hand as a sweet upward glance assured him of absolution. Like the sigh in his own soul, sweet and low, the music died out. The figure was finished.

Pleading fatigue, Carter sought the quarters assigned him in the castle. His senses were awlirl, his spirits high in the chimera that Trusia cared for him. Had he been compelled to remain in attendance he felt certain that he would have bruted his glad tidings abroad. Between the throbs of hope, however, with growing insistence threaded the stinging pulses of despair and pity; despair that destiny would never give her to him as wife, pity that she should sacrifice her own sweet self to a man who had no real affection for her. Hers was a nature, he well knew, requiring the full measure of tenderness to bloom in its fullest beauty. Believing her beyond his reach he felt a sudden overpowering sense of utter loneliness. Fully clad as he was, he flung himself upon his bed, but his arm, his breast, still tingled with the contact from the dance. Sleep held aloof from him. Darkness was no refuge from her tempting face, for, visible to his soul, it stood between him and the gloom.

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From the distant hall, augmenting his restlessness, came occasional snatches of music mingled with the hum of voices. The hours passed on while he tossed nervously on his bed. Then the music stopped. Laughter and farewells floated up to him. In a few minutes all was silence save for the footfalls of the sentries on their posts.

Somewhere in its boat of song, the nightingale was floating on the sea of darkness. Drawn aimlessly by the pathos of the songster's lay, Carter wandered to the window to gaze out into the moonless midnight. Racking his quivering heart, his imagination dwelt on a pictured life with Trusia, emphasizing the sweet moments of her complete surrender.

Time lost all measure in his rhapsody. He might have stood leaning over the sill a day or a second, when a sound, persistent and murmuring, haled him back to mundane things. Intermittently, but with growing volume, from somewhere beyond the wall of black, came the echoes of an army in passage. He could separate the different noises. That, he recognized by its deep grumbling noise, was cannon; the rattling sound, like an empty hay wagon, was caissons, while the muffled, thudding echo was cavalry at the trot. The force, apparently a heavy one, did not seem to be coming from Schallberg. He leaned far out of the window challenging the darkness with his peering eyes. Dimly he could descry the plateau about the castle with its low bastions at the cliff's edge. Indefinite shapes pacing along the wall he knew to be Krovitzer sentries. He fancied he heard a challenge on the distant road, a halt, then the invisible army took up its march again.

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Straining every sense, he concluded that the force was moving from, and not toward, the frontier. Sutphen, then, for some unknown reason, must have consented to withdraw part of his none too strong army from points which Carter believed to be greatly in need of reinforcement. He debated with himself, therefore, the military necessity of confirming these impressions. Knowing, however, how prone to offense the plethoric Colonel could be, and reassured by the fancied challenges, he relinquished the idea. Growing drowsy with the extra mental exertion, he divested himself of his clothing and was soon in bed and asleep.

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During his slumber another detachment passed, then another, while just before dawn a heavy force of infantry at double time went down the road.

Carter arose late the next morning. After a hasty breakfast, too early, however, for the other participants in the evening's festivities, he buckled on his sabre and, taking his fatigue cap, strolled out upon the terrace. He found the Minister of Private Intelligence pacing moodily back and forth on the stone flags. Acknowledging his salute, Carter stopped and spoke.

"Anything doing?" he inquired with a cheerful air.

Sobieska nodded. "Zulka's in command of Schallberg. Sutphen with a small force occupies Markos due east of the capital. Lesky's Rifles have seized Bagos on a line with both at the western frontier. This completes our alignment on the south. Wings have been thrown out from both Markos and Bagos to the extreme north, making a monster 'E' of which we are the middle arm."

Carter betrayed surprise. "Well, what force was that which passed during the night?" he asked. "I thought you said Sutphen had only a small command on the frontier, yet there were two or three parks of heavy artillery went by."

"I didn't hear them," responded Sobieska, "but Josef reported them as reinforcements from the Rifles for the frontier. There may have been some cannon, but not as many as you think. He dare not weaken his strength that way."

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"It seemed to me," said Carter dubiously, "that they marched from the frontier, not toward it. But how did Josef come to report it? Where was the officer of the guard?"

Sobieska turned an indulgently commiserating smile on Carter.

"Haven't you heard?" he asked as he lightly flicked the ash from his morning cigar. Carter pleaded ignorance.

The Privy Counselor drew close to his shoulder and spoke in a confidential tone. "Josef has made himself indispensable to His Majesty. He begged for, and yesterday received, a commission as Colonel of Hussars as a return for services in restoring the King to his own. Whether or not at his own request, he was yesterday appointed Officer of the Guard. It was in the line of his duty that he reported." He next spoke as to one in whom he could safely confide. "I don't like the look of things there," he said, pointing toward the frontier. "There weren't too many men, in my opinion, to hold it as it was. Now they have withdrawn part of that force. Unless they can mobilize quickly on this road we are holding wide open arms for Russia's forces. However," he said hopefully, "last night's movement may have been to cure the evil."

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Setting them down to the vagaries of darkness, Carter dismissed his surmises of the night before as untenable in the face of this explanation. His companion continued his promenade nervously along the front of the castle. Carter joined him.

"There is another matter," said the Krovitzer with a slight contraction of his brows, "that is causing me some little annoyance. I am very punctilious about some things and exact promptitude as the greatest qualification in my subordinates. I should have had dispatches from London and Paris two days ago. I am out here now waiting for Max to arrive with them. It's a minor matter, but it has made me uneasy."

"Information concerning Carrick?" Carter queried.

"Yes," Sobieska replied. "What is that?" he asked with more than usual animation as the dull sound of distant booming interrupted them.

"Krupp guns," Carter answered, as much in surprise as for the information of the other. "Russia must have awakened at last. Sounds like a general engagement," he said as the volume of the distant sounds increased.

"We'll have to inform His Majesty. Hope he is awake." Sobieska started for the door. Carter lingered, for just then Trusia appeared in the entrance.

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She seemed a part of the sweet, pure morning. Clad in an informal riding habit, such as he had frequently met in early rides in Central Park, in her starched waist, khaki skirt and broad-brimmed felt, she made a charming picture against the grim doorway.

"Plotting?" she asked with a gay little smile, shaking her bamboo crop at them. "You look like surprised conspirators. Major Carter, I'll have to claim your escort this morning. Casimir is still asleep. I'm afraid Lady Natalie danced him to death last night, the will-o'-the-wisp. His Majesty has his duties for some hours to come, as I can tell by that portentous frown on Sobieska's face. I, alone, once so busy, now find time hanging heavy on my hands. Can you come?"

"My only duty, Highness, is to serve you. That makes any duty a pleasure."

"Rather well done," she said with head on one side critically, "just a trifle stiff. I saw Carrick at the stable and anticipated your acquiescence. He is saddling a mount for you. Here he comes now," she added, as the clatter of hoofs on the flags approached from the direction of the stables.

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The Cockney approached leading two horses. He held Trusia's foot as she leaped lightly into the saddle. After he was satisfied that she was properly mounted he came to the off side of Carter's horse. There was a request written in every line of the earnest face.

"Well?" asked Carter bending down from his saddle.

"May I go too, sir? Just as groom, sir. Please, sir?" he added, seeing a shade of dissent upon his master's face. "The truth is, sir, I 'ad a bad dream last night. Don't laugh," he pleaded as the corners of Carter's mouth twitched suggestively, "don't laugh. It was too real, too 'orrible. I thought an army rode over you and 'Er Grace and tramped you down. You called out to me to 'elp. I could 'ave saved you, but was too far away. Let me go, sir; just as groom. I'll keep far be'ind." The fellow was honestly distressed, so Carter sent him to Trusia, who gave him the desired permission. Then for the first time the Major noted that Carrick wore his sabre. The holster by his saddle held a revolver.

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XXI

CARRICK WAS FAR BEHIND

Carrick was far behind. Overhead the tattered roof of leaves made a lacework of the sun. Birds were singing; their bright eyes turned curiously on the young couple passing beneath their verdant bowers. Tiny feathered brides nodded dainty heads, urging the great, stupid, human fellow to sing the love song in his heart to the girl by his side. "Mate now," they chirped, "in leaf time, in flower time, while fields are warm and nature yielding. The great mother, herself, commands it."

The impulses of nature were astir in the breasts of both Trusia and Carter, awakening in each a silent rebellion against a destiny which was forcing them to talk of trivial nothings which add naught to the greater issues of life. So far they had bowed to the dictates of destiny, but were growing more and more restive under the self-imposed restraint.

The horses stopped to drink from a stream which crossed their path. Carter, glancing in the direction of its source, saw that a heavy limb had fallen from a dead tree, blocking the passage of what had otherwise been but a wavering string of water. Restrained, however, it had mounted higher and higher, until at last, broadened, strengthened, and deepened, it had swept triumphantly over the dam and kept on its way. He felt that he was undergoing the same process in restraining the natural expression of his love for Trusia. Unconscious of his comprehension, she, too, had grasped the lesson of the stream. Their satiny nozzles dripping sparkling drops of water, the horses resumed their progress beneath the forest colonnade.

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Trusia turned to him. Her resolution had been difficult to reach.

"When Krovitch is free," she said, "you must still remain with our army." She observed him covertly as she awaited his reply. The hopefulness, which at first drew him erect, gradually disappeared, leaving in its wake the bending lines of despair. There was a drawn look in his face as he turned to answer.

"No," he said, and moodily turned his eyes away again.

"That means you will return to America." A subtle sensitiveness could have construed this to embrace a query, a request and a regret. The slightest quiver inflected her voice as she had spoken, but she bravely finished without a break. Poor girl, she, too, was suffering. She was sending away her ideal lover with only a meagre taste of maiden romance to make life all the more sorrowful for the having. All this he felt. As he recognized what it must mean to her—to any woman—deprived of man's right of initiative in declaration, he was tempted to gather her roughly in his arms and carry her away from duties, friends, country even, to fulfil her own happiness, which was his. The maxillary muscles ached with the strain his restraint put upon them.

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"I must go. I must," he replied. "Pride, honor, sanity demand it."

"It is better so," she said softly as she bent her head. She, a Jeanne D'Arc to her people, was inured to sacrifice. Above all, sweet and clean, she saw Duty shine through Love as the sun shone through the leaves above her head. So was the royal duchess fortified for her future. Then Trusia, beautiful and desirable, Trusia, the woman, rebelled that destiny should have ignored her in the plans for Trusia the princess.

"I will never see you again—as a dear friend—after you have gone. But I—but Krovitch will never forget you." Then in her royal pride that felt no noble confession could shame her womanhood, she turned almost fiercely upon him.

"Oh, why was I chosen for the sacrifice? Why couldn't I be as other women? Natalie need not drive her friends away. Alone; I stand alone." Her breath came in short, sobbing gasps which she fought courageously to silence.

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Carrick was far behind. Forgetting everything except the quivering heart of the girl beside him, Carter leaned over and drawing her gently toward him, patted the convulsive shoulders with awkward masculine solace. Like a child in the shelter of maternal arms, the glossy head, forgetful for the instant, nestled against his shoulder, soothed and at peace. While Duty had manacled the queen, the woman had been justified. Then she sighed. With a weary gesture of renunciation she sat upright in her saddle, looking directly to the front. A single tear hung quivering on her lashes.

"Another dream for the Queen to sigh over," she commented with a quick laugh, flavored of

wormwood.

"Why must it be?" he queried. "You do not love the King." Then all the tide of courage flooding past his lips, he asserted against all denial,—*"You love me."*

The regal head drooped as she turned from him.

"I would not love you, dear, so much,
Loved I not honor more,"

she quoted sadly.

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"But it is not honor; it is sacrifice," he argued.

"What duty is not?" she questioned sadly.

"It is madness," he fumed impotently.

"Think of my people." She shook her head in magnificent self-abnegation, putting aside the tenderer visions which were thronging her heart, picturing her life with the man at her side. "Their welfare demands it."

He leaned across to plead with her. The loose flying tresses of her hair touched his cheeks in elusive salute. They beckoned him closer and ever closer. His heart could be heard, he feared, so loudly did it beat. He could feel the great red surges being pumped through arteries, too small for their impulsive torrents. They choked him.

"Trusia," he cried hoarsely, for the first time using her Christian name. The entire soul of the man, every particle of his entity, had entered into the saying of that name.

Startled, she turned to learn the reason for his vehemence; that voice had spoken so compellingly to her eyes, ears, heart and body, and had sought out every resistance and overcome it. Her eyes, held captive to his gaze, were wide with question.

"I love you," he continued with quiet masterfulness, as one who, staking all on one throw of the dice, dispenses with pretense and braggadocio in the face of despair. "Listen to me. I would make you happy. I'd be your devoted slave, till white-haired, aged and blissful, life should pass from us gently as the echoes of a happy song of spring."

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"You make it so hard for me," she said pleadingly.

"Forgive me, sweetheart, but love will not be denied," he answered. "Let the King have Krovitch, and you come with me." His face was close to hers, his heart was slowly, strongly closing on her own fluttering heart.

She felt that, unless she could at once throw off the spell, in another minute she would be limply lying in his arms in complete surrender to his plea. For a long eternity it seemed that, strive as she would, she could not conquer herself. Then she sat erect; the victory was won.

"I cannot; I cannot," she replied tensely, the last modicum of will summoned to resist what he sought and she desired. "The King"—she began, bethinking her of her reason; "you know that he is not always prudent. Mine is a hot-headed though loyal people. I must be by to guide him—for Krovitch. But, ah, 'twill be with a heavy heart!"

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He leaned across from his saddle. "I care not for Krovitch so much as you do. Tell me that you love me."

She turned away her face that the eye of the man might not see and be blinded by the white light of the woman's love which shone in her own countenance.

"Say it, Trusia," he urged; "say it for my soul's peace."

With a royal pride in the confession, she turned her head, meeting his regard with level eyes.

"I love you, Calvert," she responded simply.

Carrick was far behind. Though she struggled faintly, he drew her to him. Her face was turned up to his. Her eyes shone misty, dark and wonderful, like the reflection of stars on the shimmering waters of a lake. They illumined his soul. Her lips for the first time received a kiss from any lover. Then cheek to burning cheek, they passed the crest of a little hill and rode slowly down its thither side.

Like an accusation, from some place behind them, rang out the unmistakable clang of sword on sword. They reined in their horses to listen.

"Carrick," hazarded Trusia, voicing the premonition paralyzing both. Then, forgetful of self, in the chivalrous creed of her race, she pointed back in the direction of the noise. "Go," she commanded, "he needs you."

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"But you?" he demurred, his first thought, lover-like, being for her safety. His eyes fell approvingly upon the thick covert by the roadside. He nodded suggestively toward it.

"Yes, I'll be safe—I'll hide," she promised eagerly; "now go." He fairly lifted his horse from its feet as he swung it around. In mighty bounds it carried him over the crest of the hill.

Two hundred yards away, Carrick could be seen defending himself gamely against the combined attack of three mounted men. Something, even at that distance, about their uncouth horses and absurdly high saddles, sent a shiver of recognition through Carter. He had seen thousands of their ilk along the Neva. The trio of strangers were Russian Cossacks. How had they passed the Krovitch outposts some miles back? The boldness of their onslaught argued the presence of reinforcements in the neighborhood. Could it be part of a reconnoissance in force? The sudden memory of the passing of the invisible army in the darkness came back to Carter with sinister meaning. He realized that it had been an invasion by a Russian army. Krovitch had been betrayed—by Josef. Carrick was in danger.

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He roweled the horse's side. The animal, smarting under the punishment, plunged forward like some mad thing. Settling firmly back in his saddle for the crash to come, Carter drew his sabre with the yell that had swept the Americans up San Juan Hill and the Spaniards out of Cuba.

One Cossack, startled at the unexpected shout, turned his head for an instant in the direction of the approaching succor. It served for Carrick. Like a tongue of lightning his nimble sword entered the tough brown throat. Even from that distance the American could distinguish the "Ht" of the brute as he fell, lifeless, in the road. In order to make short work of the agile swordsman, the other two closed grimly in. The Cockney had had some difficulty in disengaging his blade from the falling man, permitting his adversaries to push their ponies so close to his sides that he could work only with a shortened blade. Appreciating what terrific additional handicap this would be to Carrick, Carter was yet scarcely prepared for the immediate tragedy that followed. Like the phantasmagoria of dreams, he saw the Cockney, cut, slashed, and pierced, fall heavily from his horse.

Just a second too late, he burst upon them. With the yell of a baffled animal Carter hurled himself upon the nearest Cossack. His fury was volcanic. Terrified by such titanic rage the pair gave way as to something superhuman, wielding an irresistible sword. Blood-lust made him see everything through a mist, red and stinging. He was a Cave Man. His opponents were pigmies who shrank back, appalled, by his murderous might. One Slav saw death beckon him, so fell, wild-eyed, to the ground, his neck spurting a fountain of blood. The other, too paralyzed with terror to fight or flee, stood irresolutely in the mid-road, his ugly face twitching with an idiotic grin. Carter, hell in his heart, rode fiercely against his horse. The Cossack raised a futile blade. Carter battered it down with vengeful satisfaction, driving its point through the fellow's heart.

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The last of the Russian trio lay dead upon the ground, but Carter, in short nervous excursions, rode back and forth as he searched for new prey. The mood for killing—and killing—was upon him. He was a primitive savage.

His horse shied violently and stood still. Blinded with rage, the rider would have wreaked his unreasoning hatred on the animal who, even for a second, had stopped the ceaseless, prowling movements inseparable from the man's strange jungle mood. With a curse he drove his spurs deep. The poor brute quivered, but would not budge. Carter looked ahead of him to ascertain the cause, determined if it was a living obstacle, to batter, slash, and cut it into nothingness.

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He met the white, smiling face of Carrick, who, dying, was striving to regain his feet. The red mist of carnage passed from Carter's eyes and sanity came back to him. Dismounting, he bent over the stricken Cockney.

"I was insane, Carrick, old chap," he said brokenly, as he drew his hand heavily across his aching brow. "I thought they had done for you." A sob choked him, caused by the recollection of the dream the fellow had urged as a reason for accompanying his master. The tables had turned bitterly against him.

Looking with that affection in his eyes that sometimes does exist between men, Carrick saw the thought with the weird prescience of the dying. "Dreams go by contraries, sir," he said and attempted a laugh.

"But it might have been Her Grace, Carrick, old man. You have saved her life." He grasped the fast chilling hand and wrung it fervently.

"Her Grace is safe, then?"

Carter striving busily to stanch half a score of wounds, nodded affirmatively.

"It's my last scrap, sir," the Cockney said simply.

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"Nonsense. We'll pull you through." Carter lied manfully, but the other shook his head in resignation to the inevitable.

"She's a lydey—you understand—but would it be too great a shock—to 'er—for me to speak to 'er—before—before—I croak?" he stammered wistfully.

"I'll get her, old man." Gently he lifted the wounded Carrick, carried him to where, aside from the road, a bed of moss made a more comfortable pillow for the stricken red head, then, with a sigh, he set out to bring Trusia. Roweling deep, he raced with Death to bring a woman's solace to a dying man.

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CARRICK IS KING

"Where is Carrick?" Her question came from the thick copse in which she was concealed. "You have had news, I know," she said, stepping into view and glancing searchingly into his troubled countenance. "Is he wounded?" He could have gathered her into his arms and kissed her as she stood before him, but that the very air seemed charged with impending disaster. As gently as brevity would permit, he told her of Carrick's fate. Together they rode swiftly back to where Carrick lay, fighting his last triumphant adversary, Death himself.

"No Lunnon sights to see," he muttered in his delirium; "no concert songs to'ear.... Ah, Meg, you was cruel 'ard on poor Tod, but damn you, I loves you still."

"A woman betrayed him," she said. Carter nodded a grim assent. Her lips quivered. Her eyes brimmed to the brink with priceless womanly sympathy. "Perhaps," she said rising and turning away, "perhaps he wouldn't care for us to know."

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Carter drew her back gently. "I don't think he would mind—if you knew. Poor chap, his has certainly been a hard fate."

Responding to the appeal in their hearts, which penetrated the numbing faculties, Carrick, in one final effort, threw off the shackles of Death and stood free for a season. His eyes opened at first without recognition for the pair bending over him. Then a gradual joy warmed the cooling embers of his life.

"'Ighness," he cried; the neighborhood of Death stripped his speech to its native crudeness. "'Ighness, a man carries to 'is grave the face of one woman in 'is 'eart. Hi knows that much to me sorrow. Captain, 'ere, beggin' your pardon, loves you, but daren't sye so for fear of 'Is Majesty. You don't love the King, you love Captain Carter. God bless 'im, 'e's the best man ever breathed. For Gawd's sake, 'Ighness, don't let 'im carry your sweet face to the grave with 'im unless your love goes with hit. You two was made for each other."

As a blade loses its sharpness from continuous wear, so dulled the eyes of Carrick in his combat with Death. In the bitterness of his strife he struggled to his elbow. Who can tell of the range of one's soul or the might thereof? On the brink of Eternity, Life wrestled with Death. The body was to be bared of the soul. Was the soul to be stripped of the associations it had formed in this existence? Might it not also strive for a continuance of its entity even as the man struggled for further living? Does the soul return to a nebulous state without further initiate perceptions after a life—a span—of activity? Was it merely recollections, or did his desperate spirit revisit the route of its life in a fruitless flight from Death? His voice came from far away, and what he said showed that he was at least living over the older days.

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"DON'T LET 'IM CARRY YOUR SWEET FACE TO THE GRAVE
WITH 'IM UNLESS YOUR LOVE GOES WITH IT"

"Yes, Meg, Hi loves you. There hisn't a king, girl, has Hi would change plices with for you.... Posies for yer winder. Let 'em grow, till we've other posies in our 'ome. Yer blushin', Meg. Ha! Ha!... Oh, Gawd, me 'eart's broke.... Forget?... Hit's you, Doc Judson, as will look arter Captain Carter now. Good-bye, Doc.... Why, there's 'er face again. Damn you, Meg. Hi hates you, but Hi loves you.... Captain Carter.... Ah-h-h."

His struggle with Love, with Life, and with Death was over. With a long-drawn sigh of relief his spirit had passed. His head was turned to the man who had befriended him.

Hand in hand, Trusia and Carter arose and stood over the pulseless form. Trusia was the first to speak.

"We cannot leave him here, dear. Poor, poor Carrick," and she threatened to sob. Carter slipped his arm about her comfortingly. As though returning, birdlike, to its nest, her head cradled itself against his shoulder, her arm timidly sought his neck and for one brief second she was content. [Pg 243]

"Come," he said almost brutally to dissipate the apathy which death had thrown upon them both. "I'll carry him." He assisted her to mount, then, Carrick in his arms, he scrambled into the saddle. As they swung at a gallop out of the woods, a shot whistled past his head.

"Are you hurt, dear?" she cried.

"No; these woods seem Russianized, though. Pray heaven the road is not," and with strained eyes to the front, with word and spur, they raced for the lane to the castle.

"Something is amiss, dear; I know; I feel it. Still no matter what it is," she said, turning and laying her hand with a trustful little movement upon his arm, "I have your love, my King." With one foot on the flat step of the castle entrance, as she said this Trusia turned to Carter, a world of capitulated love in her eyes. The wicket opened with a more ominous creak than was its wont, it seemed. The Sergeant thrust his shaggy pate through the narrow opening in answer to their knock. On seeing who it was he stepped out to where he would have ample space for the full salute he always gave Her Grace. Some perplexity on the simple face aroused her forebodings anew. [Pg 244]

"What is it, Sergeant?" she inquired anxiously. "Who is here?"

"Can't make heads or tails of it, Your Grace; not that I have any right to, but one gets figuring on what is going on around him when he is idle. It must be very important, since Colonel Sutphen has been summoned from the frontier. Count Zulka has not arrived yet, but a courier was sent for him, too. His Majesty is also here, but it seems that Count Sobieska sent out all the orders. The courier from Paris arrived about an hour before the Privy Council was summoned. Then Josef was sent for. Then, though kept in the office, he was put under arrest. Search has been made everywhere for Your Grace. My commands were to invite you to enter as soon as you could be found. I will announce you."

"You must come, also," the girl insisted, turning to Carter.

"But Carrick?" he objected, as he looked down at the lifeless figure in his arms.

"Bring him in," she replied. "Though too late to do him further service, Krovitch shall not forget his devotion and his sacrifice." [Pg 245]

They opened and entered the door of Sobieska's office. A faint commotion heralded the sight of Carrick which Carter attributed to natural surprise; he had no idea that it held a deeper significance. He placed the blood-stained form upon a leather lounge, folding the hands across the breast. The pallid features seemed to have taken on a strange nobility in death.

It needed but a scant glance to prove that something was wrong, an odd repression filled the air with a myriad silent surmises. Trusia's eyes were blazing. Then Carter, following their direction, noted that the Minister of Private Intelligence, against all etiquette, was seated calmly at his desk, while His Majesty was standing. Josef, at one corner of the room, was guarded by the pair of soldiers who had been placed to watch Carter and Carrick the day of their arrival. A strapping young fellow, pale and mud-splashed, a bandage about his head, his left arm in a sling, leaned heavily against the wainscoting.

As Trusia courtesied low to Stovik, Sobieska arose, a slight frown marking a thin line between his brows, to bow sadly in the direction of the body on the lounge. His back was deliberately turned upon the Parisian with such studied insolence of action that the Duchess could not permit it to pass unrebuked. [Pg 246]

"The King!" she said.

There followed—silence. Stovik and the courier dropped to their knees with bowed heads. Sobieska, gloom encircled, stood with bent head and quivering lips. His sombre eyes were fixed upon the inanimate Cockney as though to this modern he would recall the miracle of Lazarus. Then out of the well of his woe, came his voice, deep, and grief-laden. In the simplicity of life's greatest emotion, he pointed toward the couch.

"The King?" he questioned, looking straight into Trusia's eyes now. "The King? Does not your blood—your common heritage—tell you that the King is dead? God rest His Majesty."

She turned from one to the other in total bewilderment; finally, as though trusting none other,

she came to Carter for enlightenment. He had comprehended in a glance.

"What do they mean?" she begged plaintively. "My poor head is awlirl in all this gloom."

"Carrick is King," he answered. A single tear, a perfect pearl of pity, hung abashed upon her cheek.

"It is so," assented the Minister, as she awaited his confirmation. Gradually her grief dried in the realization of the awful deception which had been practiced by some one on her country. The flame of her burning rage shot suddenly into sight. [Pg 247]

"What treason brought him here, then?" she asked haughtily, pointing indignantly at Stovik.

The latter smiled deprecatingly, as Sobieska answered, "Part of a Russian plot, Highness, of which, so far as we can ascertain, this gentleman has been the innocent victim. It was by such a plan they sought to lure all the patriots within the boundaries of our land, then to draw their net about us. I pray God that we still have time."

"Who was it?" she inquired with lips white and drawn, and brow contracted.

"Josef."

All eyes were turned upon the accused, whose inscrutable countenance underwent no shadow of a change, no fear of death was there, no regret for infamy. If the expression had altered at all, it was to display a shade more of triumphant insolence. The Duchess turned sternly to him.

"Is this true?" she asked, loathing the necessity of speaking to him. Yet there was no passion in her voice; the situation was too grave for that.

He smiled his hateful, unchanging smile, as he bowed a taunting assent. [Pg 248]

"You shall die," she said, in the same level tones. She was not cruel, had not lost an iota of her womanliness. The crushing magnitude of his falsity to her country made her forget that she was aught else than the regent for these people and that here was a matter of primitive, vindictive justice which must be settled by her hand.

"When?" Josef's tone ridiculed the sentence imposed.

"At dawn," she answered, her scornful glance sweeping his colorless face.

For the first time, his aspect was nearly that of a man. He held his head erect, the cringe disappeared from his back, the obsequiousness from his manner. Then while an eye might wink, he took on the appearance of a snake with high-held head—about to strike.

"In about one hour," he boldly asserted, "the troops of His Imperial Majesty will have surrounded, yes, and entered this place. If harm comes to me, you all shall swing. Schallberg, Lore, Bagos are already ours. What," he continued with a comprehensive sneer, including all present, "did you think that you had conquered the Bear so handily?"

They felt it was the unwelcome truth he was speaking. All day the distant booming of guns had sounded in their ears as the "death bells" ring for the superstitious gude-wife. [Pg 249]

"All last night as you laughed and danced," Josef continued, "a Russian army, unchallenged, passed your gates, and could have taken you all. Knowing that it had you safe when needed, it pushed on to the bigger game, the capture of your capital. At daybreak it began battering down those walls you thought you held so firmly."

The wrath, gathering in a purple cloud on Sutphen's brow, now broke into a storm. "He must have known," he said pointing at the pseudo-king. "He appointed you officer of the day," and the outraged Colonel wheeled about on Josef, who scarcely deigned a smile of commiseration for such ignorance.

"He knew nothing," he finally volunteered. "I brought him here so that if Russia won, I could save my dupe. If Krovitch won, a true revelation of his real status would make him my debtor for life."

"Why?" Sobieska asked amid a stillness freighted with the prophecy of a startling revelation. All held their breath as Josef, turning slowly from countenance to countenance, read the disdain which he inspired.

"He has kissed you," he said pointing a bony finger at Trusia, "and would have married you." Her face crimsoned at the memory of that betrothal salute, formal and public as it had been. Waiting until the scene had time to rise before her eyes, he continued that by no chance should the import of his words be missed, "He is my son." The pride of the parent snake was in the eyes that he turned upon the Parisian, who turned his head away, ashamed of such regard. [Pg 250]

"May God forgive us both," he whispered, "but I disown you."

For the first time a hint of color appeared in the parchment hue of Josef's cheek and for the first time a human note sounded in his voice. "My son," he began with a slight outstretching of his hands, "my son, I wanted you to be wealthy, great, not the spawn of a hereditary servitor, not a struggling artist." Slowly, as he realized that the artist would have none of him, the wonted bitter look crept back into his face, leaving it wan as ever, while additional defiance increased the grim lines about his mouth.

There followed a breathless silence. Somewhere, to the actual pain of all but one present, a bird was singing in the outside world. The sound came faintly to their ears as from another existence—the shadow sound of dreams. In the room itself reigned the cold stillness of death. Then gradually a sigh of sounds crept in. Increasing in volume, it shaped itself into an approaching medley of shouts, hoof-beats, scattering rifle shots, a fierce sentry challenge, a reply,—then a steed halted on the stone flags of the courtyard. They waited breathlessly for the added disaster all felt was coming. Their senses, cloyed by grief, knew that whatever it was of ill-omen, it could not touch them now. Still they listened. The wicket in the entrance door was heard to open. An irregular, halting, desperate step came up the hall.

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With a lunge, the door flung open. Zulka, bleeding, grimy, and gasping, tottered into the room.

"Schallberg! Schallberg!" he whispered faintly, "Lore! Bagos! all are taken!" And he fell heavily to the floor.

They pressed forward, excepting Josef, who, in the prevailing excitement slipped from the room. His escape was unnoticed for the time being, as Zulka, struggling to his feet, told them the story of the attack upon the capital and the death blow to their hopes.

"You left your post alive, Paul," said Her Highness reproachfully.

"Don't say that," he begged, raising his hopeless face to read her condemnation. "With the five survivors of the last assault, I escaped, Highness, to bring the news, so that you might be saved. My companions mark the road to Schallberg. The enemy followed me to your very gates. I wish," he said, with a gulping sob, "that I, too, lay dead with those brave fellows in the ruins of our ancient capital." He raised his face, all powder-stained, as he searched the room with eyes that glowed with a desire for righteous vengeance. No countenance present wore the insignia of guilt. "Where is the traitor?" he asked. For the first time Josef's absence was noted.

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Sobieska ran to the door. "Stop Josef before he gets to the road," he cried to the sergeant, who seemed utterly amazed at such a command.

"Excellency," he replied, "Josef never passed me through this door." Trusia approached the excited Minister.

"It is no use to attempt to stop him," she said with a shake of the head. "He knows of the secret passage to the inn. Doubtless he has already joined his comrades."

Sobieska groaned. "He'll give the alarm. We will be cut off."

"If we want to save Her Grace," said Carter, "we will have no time to lose. We do not wish to be mewed up here. We'd better make a dash for the forest and trust to God to reach the frontier. Take this, Paul," he said, thrusting a flask into the hands of the nobleman, who was swaying upon uncertain legs. "Brace up." He caught his friend as the latter was about to topple over.

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"It must be Trusia first," said the Krovitzer, grasping the American's hand with a pressure which was fervently returned.

"It will always be Trusia," he replied firmly.

Not yet enlightened, Zulka now approached Delmotte, before whom he knelt. "Your Majesty absolves me for leaving my post?" he besought.

"I am not your king, Count," said the Parisian, honestly chagrined at his false position. "He lies dead over there," and he indicated the temporary bier. "I have unhappily been the victim of an imposture." Then hurriedly Sobieska recited to Zulka the outline of the conspiracy and Delmotte's connection with it.

"If you will let me help," said the artist appealing to them all, "I'll show you that though a bourgeois Frenchman, I know how to die."

Trusia held out her hand impulsively. "I thank you, monsieur," she said simply. "Forgive me if I have been late in discovering that you are a brave man."

Divested of his fancied power, Delmotte was again the amiable boulevardier, as could be seen by the manner in which he received the plaudits of the men, with whom he now was rated as a comrade-in-arms.

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Zulka, meanwhile, having learned how Sobieska had unearthed Carrick's claims to the crown, had approached and lifted the lifeless hand to his lips.

"May God rest Your Majesty," he murmured reverently. He arose and spoke quietly to his companions. "He must be interred before we leave. In a few days, no doubt, the castle will be razed to the ground. It is not fitting that a King of Krovitch should be the feast of wolves and ravens."

So Carrick, with a scanty following, was carried to the little chapel, behind the throne-room, where the sarcophagi of the ancient kings could be seen lining the walls.

Upon his head they placed the crown. His hands were crossed upon the sceptre he had never dreamed of wielding, while, dearer than all to him in life, upon his breast they placed the heirloom he had prized,—the grand medal of the Lion.

His body was placed in the mausoleum of the first Stovik, his ancestor. No royal name was cut, but the place of his burial was deeply graven in the hearts of all present. Had he lived he had been a farcical king, but dead he was as imposing as the grandest monarch of them all.

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Sorrowfully they turned and left the mortuary. Returning to Sobieska's office, impelled by the necessities of the moment, they plunged into the plans for an immediate flight from the castle.

"The highways are already swarming with Cossacks," said Zulka. "Once gain the shelter of the woods, however, and we can hide by day and travel at night until we reach the frontier."

"How many have we in the garrison?" inquired Trusia, who had instinctively placed herself at Carter's side.

"Half a platoon of cavalry," replied Sobieska gravely, thinking of the meagreness of their force for the occasion.

"One more," said Muhlen-Sarkey entering the room. He bent above Trusia's extended hand as serenely as though they were both figuring in a court function and not a congress of death.

"Living nearer Schallberg," he explained, "I saw how matters stood, and immediately packed off the women folk to the boundaries. I then came here to offer my services, my sword, if necessary."

"Courageous heart," applauded Trusia, touched by the old fellow's loyalty. At her commendation his face, as round as a schoolboy's, lighted up with happiness.

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"The roads?" Carter questioned eagerly.

The old nobleman shook his head, regretting that he could furnish no information concerning their state. "I do not know. Anticipating that they would be crowded, though," he coughed suggestively, and his eyes twinkled, "I came through the woods. Met one inquisitive young Russian. Convinced him it would be impossible for him to tell all he knew." The Treasurer touched his sword with a gesture which the men understood. "He contracted an impediment to his speech."

While the horses were being hastily saddled, Trusia had the garrison assembled in the courtyard and explained to the heart-broken soldiers that Krovitch's dream of independence was over, giving them free permission to leave their colors at once if any so desired. When she called for volunteers to aid in her escape every man sprang forward, loudly cheering Trusia, then Krovitch.

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XXIII

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

"Marie, you are to go with the first detachment. You, Therese, with the second. Your mistress will ride with the gentlemen of her household."

Clad in the Duchess's clothes, as they had volunteered devotedly, the better to throw off pursuit from Her Grace, the maids with many tearful protestations of undying loyalty took their allotted places in the cavalcade which was forming in the courtyard of the castle.

"First section," rang out the preliminary command, "draw sabres. By fours, left. March. Trot," and the first of the forlorn hope was started. The troops swung by the little group which held Trusia in its centre. As the head of the scanty column came abreast of where she sat in her saddle, the lieutenant, Casimir, turned on his horse, his voice husky with emotion, to give a command. "Present sabres," he cried, and a score of blades were pointed heavenward, perhaps for the last time for the royal house of Schallberg. Something caught in Trusia's throat as the gallant band swept by to challenge Death that *she* might live.

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After these had turned into the narrow incline, Marie in their midst, the second detachment followed, gravely saluting their loved liege lady.

Swords in hand, then, came the grave-faced men who had borne her hopes for Krovitch in their hearts. Courageous as any knights of old, their faces betrayed what an awful price they considered this flight to be. Alone, they would have preferred to have fought it out to the last drop of blood in their veins, but had yielded to the expedient because the girl's safety was dearer to them than their most cherished wish. At the foot of the declivity, the entire force reunited before finally debouching into the road.

"Should our party be attacked," suggested Sobieska, "it is imperative that Her Grace should be hurried right on to the frontier without awaiting the issue of the combat. Some one must accompany her. Will Your Highness choose?" he turned to her with a deep bow, a wistful light glowing in his cynical eyes.

"If Major Carter will accompany me," she said almost timidly, "I will select him." The others pressed forward to wring his hand in silence.

"We are ready, Lieutenant Casimir, advance your men," cried Sutphen.

"Columns of eights. First section to the right, second section to the left. March. Trot. Gallop," rang out the commands, as, with their last cheer for Krovitch, the troopers dashed into the highway to clear the space for Trusia. A wild confusion of sounds apprised those waiting that at least one party had engaged adversaries.

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"Now," shouted Carter rising in his stirrups. With an involuntary cheer, they bolted for the cover of the woods across the road. They beheld Casimir's little band hotly engaged with an entire troop of cavalry, but it was stubbornly, unyieldingly, holding the Cossacks back. On the left the remaining squad merely awaited the passing of the Duchess to go to their comrades' assistance.

With such speed as the underbrush and rough ground would permit, the court party, headed by the white-haired Sutphen, plunged onward to the lane which led to the charcoal burner's hut. They were soon beyond even the sounds of the conflict. Carter, riding at Trusia's right, saw the tears gathering for the devoted heroes they had deserted of such cruel necessity.

They swept into the narrow lane and reached the crest of that little hill where sudden sorrow had made mock of sudden joy. Coming toward them, as if apprised of their neighborhood, they saw a squadron of Russian cavalry numerically overwhelming. Both parties stopped for the breathing space preliminary to the death grip.

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"FOR TRUSIA!" THEY SHOUTED, AND THEN, "FOR KROVITCH!"

"We cannot turn back. We'll have to fight, gentlemen," said the fleshy Treasurer. "Who knows," he said with a quaint smile, "it may reduce my flesh." He turned back his sleeve very deliberately and carefully until his arm was bare to the elbow. Drawing his sword, he securely fastened the thong on the hilt about his wrist that no matter how fierce the *mêlée*, he would not be disarmed. Delmotte imitated his example. Giving the blade a preparatory swing, the doughty Treasurer settled back in his saddle with a sigh of anticipation.

Zulka and Sobieska rode back to Trusia.

"Just for 'Auf wiederseh'n," they said smilingly. Trusia held out her hands to them with sweet impulsiveness. In turn they took them and carried them to their lips. Sobieska turned to Carter for a parting word. "The charcoal burner is loyal. He can hide you by day and guide you by night. None knows better all the byways and secret paths in the forests. By to-morrow evening you should be safe in Austria. Good-bye, Highness," he said, turning to Her Grace. "God bring you safe through." His voice was hoarse with repression.

"Good luck, Carter," said Zulka, and turned away as he spoke.

Bustling good-naturedly in the very jaws of danger, Muhlen-Sarkey made his adieux with no ruffle disturbing his customary urbanity. "Sorry we can't have your help," he remarked to Carter; "you have the place of honor, though. No need to caution you. Go now. Go quickly."

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"Wait," said Trusia, holding up a denying hand. "See, they are sending out a single rider around our flank." A courier detaching himself from the main body of their foes could be seen making his way past their line through the wilderness.

"To report that the quarry has been run to earth." Carter gathered up his reins grimly as he spoke. "Come, Highness," he said to the girl who was lost in some sad dream.

"I do not wish to leave them. It seems so heartless," she burst forth. Then she turned to him appealingly as to that one who must henceforth order all things for her guidance. "Let me stay," she begged, "I can die like a Krovitzer."

"For you to fall into their hands, sweetheart," he whispered, "might mean worse than death. Would you leave such a reproach to haunt the survivors? The enemy is already approaching; come." His insistent hand was at her bridle and compelled her compliance.

The Krovitzers, with high-bred courage, spurred forward to meet their opponents, scorning to await the attack of even such superior numbers. [Pg 262]

"For Trusia!" they shouted, and then, "For Krovitch!" as they engaged with a crash which halted the fugitives by its vehemence.

"A short life and a merry one, a stout blade and a noble one," they heard Muhlen-Sarkey shout as he lunged forward with a laugh into the thickest of the fray. At the first onslaught they saw Delmotte fall apparently dead. Carter drew the girl away from the sight of further carnage.

"He has proven himself a gallant gentleman," said Carter for her comfort, as once more they entered the protection of the patriarchal trees. [Pg 263]

XXIV

STOLEN SLEEP

Caution is slow-footed. It was already night when they drew in sight of the little blur of lamp-light in the charcoal burner's window. The girl at Carter's side straightened herself briskly in her saddle and gave an involuntary sigh of relief.

They had neither time to hail him nor a chance to dismount, before the bearded face of the occupant appeared in the doorway, which he cautiously closed behind him. He held up a warning finger. Approaching Trusia's side, he uncovered his head and humbly lifting her skirt's edge kissed its hem. He spoke in a tone too low for Carter's ear, but Trusia, turning, conveyed to her escort the substance of his remarks.

"He says that he already has guests—uninvited ones—in his home. A Cossack picket has been quartered upon him. At present they are asleep. He learned of our possible fate from them, and waited at the window, watching for such chance stragglers as might escape. He offers to guide us to a cave, which Krovitzers deserting from the Russian army have been accustomed to make their refuge against pursuit. We can lie safely hid there to-night and to-morrow he will guide us to the Vistula. Or, if we would rather, he will immediately lead us to a path which if we follow should bring us to the riverside by dawn. Which shall it be, Calvert?" He was stirred to the depths of his nature by her unreserved trust in him. [Pg 264]

"Can you stand the longer journey?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, with you," she replied gently.

"Let us push on, then," he suggested. "We cannot put too many miles between us and pursuit. Tell him, though, to bring some food and at least one blanket for you."

Upon learning her decision the faithful fellow disappeared into the cabin, from which he presently emerged carrying two parcels which he handed to Carter. Cautioning them to follow as silently as might be, he plunged without further comment into the darkest shadows about them, which, upon their nearer approach, disclosed a tiny footpath in which they found it impossible for them to ride abreast. The peasant, with the lantern which he had lit when well out of sight of the hut, was plodding silently ahead, so Carter dropped back, keeping both eyes and ears open for any sight or sounds that might warn him of the neighborhood of strangers. The path grew each moment wilder and more impassable for equestrians. The low branches of the trees more than once whipped their faces. Three times did Trusia's horse stumble over some projecting root directly in their route. After the eternity it takes to cover five miles on an unknown road in chaotic darkness, the charcoal burner turned to his princess. [Pg 265]

"From now on, Highness," he said with an apologetic gesture, "the road is too narrow for horses."

She turned to Carter, awaiting his decision. It was an odd picture they made. He could not but note it. The peasant held his lantern on a level with his shaggy head which alternated in deep shadows and high lights. About them, within the zone of its rays, the huge trunks of trees stood out on every side, their tops lost in the surrounding darkness. Before him, but partially revealed by the illumination, sat the girl upon her horse, her head turned to him with an expression emphasized by the encircling gloom.

"Well?" she asked, recalling him from his observations.

"We'll have to abandon them," he answered, dismounting and reluctantly helping her to the ground. When Trusia offered the horses to Hans, he refused, saying that their possession might lead to the pursuit of the fugitives.

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Trusia fondly drew the satiny muzzle of her own steed down to her cheek.

"I hate to do it, Saladin," she murmured chokingly, "but I have to; you understand, dear horse." She kissed the soft nose that was resting affectionately on her shoulder. "You will have to drive him away, Calvert," she said turning to the man at her side, "I cannot." The steed seemed to comprehend, for with a whinny that was almost a sigh, he coaxingly nozzled her hand and rubbed his shapely head against her arm.

"Good-bye, Saladin," she cried wistfully, as in obedience to a sharp smack on their flanks, the horses trotted off into the thicket and were swallowed up in the gloom.

Hour after hour Carter and Trusia, led by Hans, trudged ahead, silently advancing upon the wall of darkness ever facing them. Their reflections were absorbing them and each respected the sanctity of the other's thoughts. After the second five miles had been accomplished, they suddenly came upon a clear space under the unveiled splendor of the stars. At their feet, reflecting the glory of the heavens, bubbled a forest spring. Hans dropped at Trusia's feet, and catching her hand, mumbled some grief-hampered words.

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"He must go back now," she explained to Carter. "He says our way is plain from here on. We are to follow this path until daylight. By then we should reach a similar clearing, where his brother, Carl, has his ovens. There we can get shelter. When we have had sufficient rest, Carl will guide us to the frontier. That last part of the road Hans does not know. Once at the river, he says, there is a ferry, used by peasants, which will take us across to Austria."

"Why must he go?" Carter inquired, his every suspicion aroused for the woman he loved.

"Should he be missing in the morning from his hut, the soldiers would guess the reason for his absence. His wife and infant would probably pay for his loyalty with their lives."

"And this Carl, how can he vouch for his loyalty?" Carter persisted.

"I know Carl," said the girl sweetly. That was enough.

The peasant stood to one side as the pair passed him. One glance into the honest eyes was sufficient to convince Carter that the man had spoken the truth.

Soon nothing could be seen of the shadowy figure on the forest edge which stood watching until darkness swallowed the form of his beloved suzerain. Side by side again, the two persisted along the starlit way of their hopes, until they, too, entered another forest beyond. Here, though aided by the lantern Hans had left with them, they lost the narrow lane a score of times; disuse had made it almost invisible.

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At last, gray with mourning, the tardy day awoke. With heavy limbs and straining eyes, they stumbled at last into view of the promised haven of thatch.

A premonition of something amiss caused Carter to pause as they hastened toward it. The door, unlatched, swung open desolately upon creaking hinges. No smoke beckoned from its chimneys, no sign of personality bade them draw near. Trusia choked back the sob as she clung heavily to Carter's arm.

"It is empty," she prophesied.

"The fellow is about some place, doubtless," Carter answered cheerfully, that she might not be panic-stricken by his acquiescence. "You stay here. I'll scout about a bit,—and find him," he added as an afterthought. Leaving both his pack and revolver with her, he approached the house with the same caution he would have displayed in routing out a grizzly bear.

In the tiny enclosure in front of the cabin, he found the disturbing evidence of the visitation of a number of horses in the marred and furrowed soil of the garden, torn by a score of hoofs. Cossacks had been here. He paused, with straining ears, by the door, listening for some portent from within. No sound gave him a clue as to the situation inside the single room which made up the peasant home. He entered boldly.

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Trusia's heart pounded in lonely centuries, it seemed, as she prayed fervently for his reappearance. Presently, staggering beneath a burden of suggestive shape, Carter came out and took his way to the dense underbrush behind the cabin. He returned to the hut for a spade and pick and went back to the underbrush. His absence seemed interminable. Then, with blistered hands, he stepped out of the thicket at her side.

"What was it? What kept you so long?" she asked, startled by his sudden appearance and petulant with exhaustion.

"Don't ask me, sweet," he begged, "but come and rest for an hour or so. I'll be the sentry at your gate."

"But the Cossacks may come," she hesitated.

"Lightning never strikes twice in the same place," he assured with a grim meaning for himself in

the words. "Come, the coast is clear."

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"But that you carried," she held back as the doubt arose, for she had seen.

"Without benefit of clergy, poor fellow," he replied seeing that it was too late to deceive her. "I hoped you wouldn't notice."

Gently he urged her to the hut. Freshening the pallet with twigs and leaves, he spread the double blanket they had brought upon the bed and then withdrew to mount guard while she might snatch some rest.

With his back against the wall, seated on a rude bench outside the cabin, he watched the heavy-eyed sun arise and yawn. Once from the cabin a sigh floated.

"Rest well, sweetheart," he called. "Our flight has just commenced."

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XXV

THEY MEET JOSEF

He dared not sleep. Thousands of aching demons in his weary limbs promised him surcease if he would. Every stir in nature, each drowsy twitter of the birds, coaxed him to relax his watchfulness, but he resisted. Time seemed a paralytic as Carter waited the passing of the day. A score of times his head bent forward in weariness. He could feel pain pass from him like a sigh, only to be called back as in reaction he would jerk his head up to wakefulness.

Slumber reigned indoors. As the hours dragged on, it seemed to the watchful lover that something was surely wrong. He had heard no sound, no stir, no sigh, for an age of patience. Half ashamed of his own boldness, he tiptoed in to where she lay. Her face was pale with languor; no breath appeared to stir her breast. With a great leap his mind went back, fearing, to that scene by the roadside as she lay fainting in his arms. He reached out and touched her wrist. Again he gave thanks that, beneath his finger, life flowed serenely in its course.

He turned and went back to his seat on the bench. He counted time now by the throbbing of his nerves. The sun passed its zenith, began to droop; still Trusia slept and Carter kept a sleepless vigil. Great and red, in the west, the sun was setting as the girl came out and laid a soft, comforting hand upon his shoulder.

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"I have been selfish, Calvert," she said in self-accusation. "I should have let you rest first. You have had the greater labor and worryment. We will eat something now, then I shall watch while you sleep."

"I am not tired," he protested, yawning as he spoke. "Even though I have not slept I have dreamed—of you." He marveled at the mystery which bade a rose pink creep into a girl's cheek and pass and come again.

The simple food provided by Hans was a delectable feast to the wayworn pair, who appreciated it down to the last allotted crumb.

After the final morsel had disappeared, they quietly conversed, but while they talked, Carter's head lurched forward and he was asleep. Sweetly, with the maternal impulse found even in maidens, she drew the heavy head to her and smiled happily at its weight upon her breast. She bent forward to listen, for sweetened in the dream he held, she heard her name whispered in adoration.

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The shadows were creeping upon them. Evening had drawn the curtain across reluctant day. In the dusk, sinister figures appeared to crouch and creep by every bush and tree. Inevitable as darkness it seemed, they gathered from every side. Her fright numbered them as a myriad. They were three. Unwilling in her solicitude to disturb her sleeping lover until the last moment, she drew her revolver. Then with chilling misgivings she realized that these men had followed the path used by herself and Carter.

Some acute sympathy—maybe his dreams, maybe a prescience which never slumbers—awoke Carter with a full realization of the imminent danger which threatened.

"Come," he said, arising to his full height, "you must go in." He pushed her through the door and stood in the narrow entrance, awaiting the onslaught. "They outnumber me," he laughed, "but it is a dark night. That reduces the odds. You see, sweetheart, that while in the gloom they may hit friends, yet if it comes to sword play I can't possibly hit any one else but them." He actually chuckled as he rolled back the sleeve on his right arm. "They won't use pistols unless I do, for they don't know how near we are to reinforcements. Neither do we for that matter," and he smiled again. "Have you that revolver?" he inquired, quite serious this time. "No, I don't want it," he said as she held it out to him. "You know what to do with it if the time comes."

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They had not long to wait. Their opponents, confident of success, came rapidly forward. One figure was familiar even in the gloom. It was Josef. With a leap the trio were upon Carter. He felt the impact of their blades like pulse beats in the darkness as they met his own steel. As weapon

met weapon in clanging song his spirits arose. He wanted to chant to the dainty, cruel rhythm of the tempered strokes. He knew on the instant that he should vanquish these foes. Muscle after muscle, sinew after sinew, thickened and grew lean alternately as thrust followed guard. His body, moving with his arm, seemed following some primitive dance—the orgy of the Sword, the prince of battle weapons.

He heard a smothered gasp in the darkness, succeeded by a curse in a familiar voice.

"You, Josef?" he queried with a satisfied laugh.

"Not yet, m'sieu the American," came back the sneering answer. "You first," it taunted, just beyond Carter's reach in the gloom. The remark was followed by a slight touch in the shoulder from which the warm blood spouted as the keen point was withdrawn. [Pg 275]

"Not quite low enough for me, Josef," answered Carter. "That was only a scratch. Try a ripost. I don't intend to wound *you*. I am going to kill you."

"You'll have no chance. We are three and we will carry off the Lady Trusia. She'll be a dainty bit for our feasting." A sob behind him apprised him that she had heard.

"Cur," Carter cried, and drove straight for the neck he knew held a smirking face. With the slipping of Carter's foot, Josef escaped death at the price of a companion's life, behind whom Josef had escaped Carter's vengeance. The American, hearing the suggestive thud in the darkness, pushed his advantage, with the result that soon an angry snarl told him that the second Russian was wounded. The fellow dropped his sword to clasp his right wrist, then fled, closely followed by the discreet servitor. When Calvert had recovered his balance, the Gray Man had disappeared.

"There is no time to lose," he called to Trusia, "we must start at once before that old rascal brings reinforcements." Though he jestingly belittled its importance, she insisted upon bandaging the wound in his shoulder and made much of him, womanlike. [Pg 276]

"I do not care if they should send a dozen men," she said, dazzling the gloom with her eyes; "my king, my lover, could defeat them all!" He dared not kiss her, then, as they both would have wished. Her isolation made her holy.

"That," he said, pointing southwardly, "is our general direction. Fate must guide our steps." [Pg 277]

XXVI

THE VISTULA!

It was a weary journey. Confused, discouraged, losing their paths a score of times each hour, they lurched forward through the gloom of night and the unfeeling dawn of the next day. They prayed a ceaseless prayer for succor and—the Vistula. They were hungry, for the last crumb of food had been lost in fording a boisterous stream in their road, and in the darkness they had been unable to recover it. Rough stones cut Trusia's feet, but she uttered no complaint. The brambles tore her clothes, and scarred her hands, while more than one low-hanging limb clutched at her hair. Nor did Carter fare any better.

The second morning found them helplessly lost in the forest. By sheer strength he broke down saplings and built a wigwam in which Trusia could rest. He caught a rabbit, off which they fared for one meal and still frugally saved a portion for the necessities of mid-day. When that time came around, the girl generously insisted that he should take it all, there not being enough for both, and he having been unable to snare any other unwary woodland denizen. Of course he refused. She looked at him, grief-stricken and imploring. Still he would not yield. Then came their nearest approach to a quarrel. Fatigued, depressed, bewildered, it is no wonder that the strained nerves gave way. [Pg 278]

"See, Calvert," she said at last, looking at him through tear-dimmed eyes, "I give in. I'll feel like a cannibal, though; I know I shall—eating your strength." Unable to refrain under the yielding influences, he bent toward her for a kiss of reconciliation, but she gently held him off.

"Not yet," she said gravely, "not yet."

With mid-afternoon they resumed their weary advance and maintained their plodding way through the night. Along toward dawn of this, the third, day of their flight, a suggestive, recurrent, monotonous sigh in the air told their hopeful ears that they were drawing near a large body of water.

"Do you hear it, Calvert?" she asked ecstatically, a convulsive hand upon his elbow.

"Yes," he answered in a voice husky with thanksgiving, "it is right over the breast of that bank of firs. Oh, little girl," he said bending the depths of his eyes into her soul, "I am glad for you. You are safe."

"I have been safe all along with you, Calvert," she smiled up into his face. [Pg 279]

He half turned away his head, her smile was as intoxicating as strong wine. "Don't say that," he said guiltily. "I am but a man and more than once—in the solitude—I was tempted."

She smiled an Eve-taught reproof. "Yet you did not yield, my lover. Come, let us race the last few steps for the first view of the river."

Their clothes in flags, disheveled, bruised, unkempt, like wild things of the woods, they rushed from the forest to the edge of the river. The Vistula!

"There lies Austria," he cried exultantly, pointing to the other shore.

"And here—and here," she cried with a little sob halting her words,— "and here lies—here lies poor, poor Krovitch." Tears came and saved her reason, for under the heavy strain her senses reeled. Then both together they searched for the ferry; but doubtless miles away from the end of the tiny path, it was a hopeless task to search further. As despondently they gave up the quest, Carter turned a grove-covered bend in the river.

"Look, Trusia," he called back to her; "a yacht—an American yacht! See," he cried in a frenzy of delight, "there is the flag. The flag—the stars and stripes! Oh, fate is kind." He seized the girl and whirled her around in a dervish dance of joy, hallooing at the top of his voice. [Pg 280]

There came an answer presently to his cheers. "They have heard us, doubtless," he said, peering shipward. Then his eyes lit with a new discovery. "That's the New York Yacht Club pennant. Owner's aboard and I'm darned—I beg pardon—if it isn't Billy Saunderson's signal at the peak. Funny that they answered our hail when no one seems on deck."

"Hark, Calvert, what is that?" asked Trusia apprehensively. He bent his head fearfully toward the forest. Shouts, the crackling of fallen twigs, cheers and commands in Russian, greeted their ears.

"And we thought it was some one on the boat," was his only comment. "You are too late, Mr. Tsar," he called back as he waved his hand as if in farewell. "My countryman is a friend of mine," he said in explanation to the trembling girl. "He will give us a berth, never fear. We will have to swim for it, though."

"But I can't swim a stroke, Calvert. I will only hamper you. You save yourself, sweetheart. They will never take me. I promise you. Do go, dear."

"Nonsense. Will you trust yourself with me? I can handle two like you." [Pg 281]

She looked at him with that look that a man need see but once in a woman's eyes and hold life cheap for its purchase.

"Calvert, I would trust you any place after this journey."

In the unlit gray of dawn, the waters were dark and chill. Carter was numbed; he realized for the first time how mercilessly their cruel journey had drawn on his strength. His stroke seemed laborious from the very start, and his clothes hampered him. The girl obediently clung to his shoulders.

About a quarter of the distance to the island in midstream was accomplished. That diminutive patch of soil was a mutually acknowledged boundary between Russia and Austria. A fierce yell of triumph caused the swimmer to pause in his efforts. He looked back over his shoulder to see the first pair of pursuers push their wiry mounts into the river. Then with a groan he realized that the stream was dotted with horsemen.

It seemed almost a hopeless task to strive to reach the boat. That haven of safety was anchored a good two hundred yards below and beyond the isle. Gritting his teeth, however, he redoubled his efforts.

"They are gaining on us, dear," Trusia prompted. [Pg 282]

"If it comes to the worst we can go down together, but we are not caught yet. How close are they?"

"Not two hundred yards away," she replied after a careful backward look.

Carter caught sight of a man on deck of the vessel and hailed him with desperately good lungs. The seaman seemed to take one fleeting look at the struggle in the water and then disappeared hastily down a companionway.

"How near are they now, Trusia?" gasped Carter.

"They have gained only about ten yards."

Calvert's head seemed the bursting hive of a million stinging bees. His arms ached horribly. His legs were flung out like useless flags. He made superhuman efforts to keep up the unequal struggle.

"How near are they now, sweetheart?" he asked again, his voice rasping out sharply under his strain.

"They have gained only another ten yards, beloved," she responded solacing as a sweet woman does in the very teeth of despair.

His mouth and tongue were swollen and his throat was parched. His head throbbed wildly with an ugly drumming, while each breath seemed a solid thing racking his burning lungs with a novel pain.

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"I'll make it—I'll make it—I'll make it," he repeated in semi-conscious determination. "How near now?" he gasped back to her.

"They have gained in all about fifty yards." She began to weep softly. It acted like a spur to his flagging strength. It was helpless womankind calling upon man for succor. His eyes felt like overripe fruit, ready to burst, and blue flashes of pain danced before them. Then all things looked black—a veil had fallen in front of him.

"I'll make it—I'll make it—I'll make it," his iteration sounded like a mocking echo flung back into his ears. "I must not sink," he asserted to himself. "Not until I have saved Trusia," his thoughts were becoming incapable of coherence.

"Aboard the *Bronx*. Aboard the *Bronx*." His voice sounded a long way off. His movements were becoming feebly automatic. He was sure a maliciously grinning horseman was reaching out for Trusia, though it was impossible to see him.

"Now?" he gasped.

"Only five yards away," she answered calmly.

It is easy to die, easier to drown, when there is no escape.

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XXVII

YOU ARE STILL MY KING

It seemed that the shadows were being withdrawn from his eyes, just as a curtain is pulled back from a window. As consciousness became a more certain quantity he wondered vaguely why he did not feel drenched and uncomfortable, instead of cozy and warm. He was aware of a pinkish-gray blur hanging above his head; this slowly resolved itself into a human face. While he could not distinguish the features in the darkened light of the room, he was certain that it was that of a woman.

"Trusia," he cried ecstatically.

"Please be quiet," responded an unfamiliar voice in a tone of undemurrable authority. He pondered. He puzzled. Finally he gathered courage to speak.

"Who are you?" he queried dubiously.

"I am the nurse," came back indulgently through the dim haze of semi-consciousness still enveloping him.

"Nurse," he exclaimed, throwing off the gray mist, to notice for the first time that he was in his own bed and room, in New York City. Accepting conditions as they were for the time being, he settled back and sighed the long, indolent sigh of convalescence. He glanced expectantly toward the door, Carrick should be coming soon with the much needed shaving things. Carrick? It all came back to him now. He no longer was satisfied to lie back comfortably on the pillow and dream the hazy dreams of the convalescent. Carrick was dead and he himself had been drowned—but Trusia? He groaned in great distress. The nurse hastened to his side.

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"Are you in pain?" she asked, a trifle surprised that such a symptom should appear in this case.

"No," he said abstractedly, his mind revisiting the banks of the Vistula; "no, I am not in pain. I was thinking."

The nurse held a draught to his lips. Carter resolutely put it to one side. "Wait," he commanded, "I must know how I came here, or I will not rest with a thousand soporifics."

"Mr. Saunderson picked you up just as you were drowning in the Vistula. You have been ill ever since—delirious."

"Good old Billy," he said in gratitude, then turned a silent inquiry on the nurse. She saw the awful heart-hunger in his eyes and, had she followed her impulse, would have thrown a sisterly arm about him in solace, so compelling was the look, so hopeless its message. "Was any—was any one saved with me?" he ventured. "Did any one come with me here? On the boat? For God's sake, nurse, tell me." His quivering life seemed hanging in the balance. The magnitude of his gravity filled the woman with sudden apprehension. She feared equally to tell him or refuse him.

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"I was not there, Mr. Carter. I cannot tell," she compromised. "Mr. Saunderson will make his usual call this afternoon. You can ask him; he will doubtless tell you." Partially reassured by this, Carter fell asleep.

When he awoke he felt much stronger. The nurse was standing at the bedside smiling down at

him.

"Mr. Saunderson is waiting in the library. If I let him come in to see you, will you be good?"

Carter readily promised, as he would have anything just then, at the opportunity of resolving his doubts. Saunderson was ushered in quietly; when he bent over the patient, the latter wrenched the proffered hand with hysterical strength.

"See here, Carter, this won't do," said his caller, making a wry face; "I believe that you have been shamming these two months."

"Two months?" Carter sat upright. "Have I been laid up that long?"

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"To the very day," said Saunderson, smiling.

"Tell me, Billy, how you came to be out there. I want to thank you for saving my life, though I don't know yet whether you have done a wise or a foolish thing."

"So? How soon can you let me know? Dorothy says it's the only sensible, useful thing I've ever done. You always were a favorite of Mrs. Saunderson, you know."

"It's a serious matter, Billy, so I want the truth for what I'm going to ask you. Give it to me straight from the shoulder and don't mince matters. Promise?"

"I must confess, Cal, I don't see what you're driving at, but I suppose it's all right. Yes, I promise. Now, fire away. Wait a minute. Perhaps I'd better lead off with how I got there. You've been pretty loose up here, you know," he touched his forehead by way of illustration. "Perhaps I may save you the worry of framing up questions—my account may cover everything."

"Did I talk much—rot?" asked Carter.

"Yes, rather. Calling all the time for Trusia—said Carrick was a King—and lots more of the same kind. Who was Trusia?"

"The Duchess of Schallberg." Carter's reply was unnaturally grave and his face solemn and tense. "Tell me, Billy," he requested quietly, "when I sank—was there any one with me?"

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"It might have been a bundle of rags—it might have been a man or a woman, I rather thought it was a woman. What did you do, Cal, run off with some Cossack's wife?"

"It was Her Grace."

"The deuce it was!" exclaimed Saunderson.

Carter bent forward until their faces were close. "Oh, Billy," he begged piteously, "don't tell me you let her drown! Don't tell me she is dead! Don't——"

"I didn't. She isn't," said Saunderson with more care for denial than lucidity. He laid a restraining, friendly hand on Carter's shoulder.

"You saved her too, then?" The thin talon-like hand clutched Billy's like a vise.

"No," answered Saunderson reluctantly, beginning to see how matters stood.

"Where is she then?" was the eager question.

"See here, Cal, you haven't given me a chance to tell you how I came to be there. I'm just aching for the opportunity too. You don't know it, but I had a bet with Jackson that you'd go over there when the matter became known to you. Naturally I took more than a casual interest in Krovitch after that. Reports got disturbing, so I ran the *Bronx* over to sort of hang around until needed. To be perfectly frank, I was looking for you. When the skipper called me that morning and said some one was swimming for the boat I took a long guess that it was you. The first time you sank the launch was almost on top of you. We pulled you out of the very claws of a Cossack."

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"But the girl?—But Her Grace of Schallberg?" It was pitiable how abject a strong man could become.

"If that was the Duchess of Schallberg, Cal, a second Russian picked her up, apparently unconscious, and made off with her—toward the Austrian shore. Just why he went that way no one seemed to know. His comrades fired after them. No, don't start; no one hit. Bum shots, those Asiatics."

Seeing the terrible pressure under which Carter was laboring, the nurse came forward at this juncture and sent Saunderson away. For some unaccountable reason Carter could not force the conviction on himself that serious evil had befallen Trusia. Hope departs only with life. Paradoxical as it may seem, he worried not about her safety, but about the dangers which, without his aid, she could overcome only with great difficulty. Such is the egotism of love. He reverted anxiously to the story of her questionable rescue. Who could the Cossack have been—why hadn't he returned to his comrades? Why,—why,—why? Question followed question, like the alarm bells at a fire. At last he wearily fell asleep.

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He opened his eyes the second time to find the day was gathering darkness from the corners and niches of the room.

"Nurse," he called. In an instant, silent as the gloaming, she approached the bed. "Might I have my mail? It must have been accumulating for months."

"You must not read," she said firmly.

"Then read for me," he urged.

Wise as any daughter of Eve, she selected intuitively that one letter which she knew would satisfy him so that he would forget there were others. It bore the post-mark "Wien."

"Here is one from Vienna," she explained, "shall I read that?"

"Yes, yes," he acceded, tingling with anticipation. She tore off the edge with feminine precision. "Who wrote it?" he queried, unable to await its perusal. He was partly up now, leaning forward on his elbow, his white face gleaming through the dusk. The green shade of the lamp accentuated his pallor.

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"It is signed 'Sobieska,'" she replied, after turning to the subscription.

"Oh," he said in evident disappointment, and sank back on the pillow.

"Here's what he says:

"When Her Grace, under your escort, left us on the road to the charcoal burner's we had a desperate fight. Muhlen-Sarkey, after giving a good account of himself, fell like the noble gentleman he was and jested with death. Zulka was killed in a three-to-one fight. Delmotte fell badly wounded but not seriously. Casimir and the rest were killed. A cut over the head rendered me unconscious and I fell across Delmotte. Supposing that we were dead, anxious for repairs themselves, the Russians did not disturb us. About dusk I came to and aided Delmotte across the frontier. I returned, determined to reinforce you and Her Grace if I could catch up with you, for I had found out how things were at your first stopping-place.

"Carefully following the path to the ferry, imagine my surprise at espying a man running rapidly along the same path but toward me. The mutual discovery was simultaneous. It was Josef. He, quicker than I could, drew his revolver. By dodging behind trees, however, I got past him. Had I not had a more sacred duty to Her Grace just then, I should have risked all for the pleasure of killing that snake. After this rencounter, I proceeded more carefully until I reached the cabin in the clearing. Here I found the bodies of two Russian Cossacks, dead apparently from the night before. Both had been killed by the sword. Your work, as I surmised. One was a lieutenant. I appropriated his uniform as a safeguard in case I met other interruptions. His horse was luckily tethered in the woods. Thanking my good fortune, I mounted and pushed on.

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"I soon was to be enlightened as to the dangers of your flight; though in sympathy with the quarry I was running with the hunters.

"Stimulated by a large reward, offered by their commandant at Schallberg, the country was overrun by Russians searching for the Lady Trusia. I constantly met them. Being very ignorant fellows, they took me for what I seemed to be. By working on their credulity I got each party that I met to believe that I had private information as to the whereabouts of the fugitives whom I had been despatched to capture by the commanding officer himself. Of course forbidding them to follow me, they all trailed after me. Supposing that you had followed the bypath, I plunged right through the most trackless part of the wilderness, to keep the pursuit as far from you as possible. What my fate would be when they discovered I had cheated them, I didn't stop to weigh; if I knew Her Grace was safe, I could but die.

"Imagine my despair when, on reaching the Vistula, I found I had actually led the pursuit right upon you. At first I considered the advisability of selling my life then and there, carrying down as many as possible in death with me, but I saw that my sword could not account for enough to scare off the pursuit. When you took to the water, I apparently joined the chase. By your side, in the water, I would have a better chance. I helped Her Grace to escape. Was sorry to leave you, but my first duty was to save her. You were not wholly neglected either. I saw you pulled aboard a yacht, which, not seeing my desperate signals, took its course at once toward the mouth of the river.

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"Her Grace is safe. I have offered her the poor protection of my impoverished name, only to learn that she loves you. I assure you that since I learned this, no sister could receive tenderer treatment. I congratulate you. Come at once. Frankly, my scanty funds will be exhausted in three weeks' time. It is impossible to get employment here."

There followed some friendly phrases, their address in Vienna, and the subscription.

"What is the date of the letter?" Carter asked apprehensively.

"June second," came the quiet reply.

"And to-day is——"

"July seventeenth."

"What has become of them?" he groaned. "What can they think of me? A messenger boy, nurse, at once. Are you paralyzed?"

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XXVIII

A RE-UNION

Four short months before, Carter and Carrick had set out for Krovitch. It did not seem possible that so many conclusive, completed events could have transpired in that limited time. It seemed more like some whirlwind dream to the man who, pale and wan, sat in the reading-room of the Racquet Club gazing indolently at the passing throng outside the club windows. It was Calvert Carter, of course, who so reasoned.

Carrick was dead, he continued in his reflections. Of a certainty this had been a grievous blow, but even this was overshadowed by the doubt as to the whereabouts of his beloved Trusia.

"Four months ago," he said aloud in his surprise, "the same man sat in this same club, before this same window, and"—he paused, while his hand ran along the arm of the chair as he glanced down at it,— "in this very chair. He fretted because life could not give him enough of excitement and contest—could not give him love. Well, to show him that her resources were boundless, Life gave him all he wanted—then took back her gifts." Relapsing into silence again with a heavy sigh, he contemplated the strange warp of destiny.

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Trusia, his beloved Trusia,—where was she? Wealth had not been spared, nor time, in a hitherto fruitless effort to locate her. On this, his first excursion from the sick-room, he was already planning to take up the search himself—to scour Europe until he found her. Yet some instinct, stronger than he dared admit, warned him that she was closer to him where he now sat.

Puzzled, he gazed out the window, hoping that the panorama of the moving crowds would ease his worried mind. A man's face detached itself from the encircling throng, catching and holding Carter's attention. He leaned eagerly forward, why, he could not have explained. At this, the man, also turned and looked. An impartial observer of both would have said that these two were in doubt as to whether they recognized each other. The man on the sidewalk, while clean, was rather seedy-looking and apparently a foreigner. His face was drawn and hollow as though privation had sculptured there. His beard was full and streaked with gray. His eyes alternately burned with the fires of inward visions and dulled with disappointment at hopes destroyed. Carter arose and went closer to the window, with steps still unsteady in his convalescence.

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The stranger had passed, but, noting Carter's action, repassed, evidently as much at loss as the man inside. To him, too, there was something strangely familiar about the thin, pale face, the languid, hopeless air, of the man in the club window,—but they were not the attributes of the man he remembered. Nor was this shade the vigorous friend he had known so short a while before.

Carter walked deliberately out to the street and extended his hand to the passer-by who had so strangely moved him. Recognition was complete.

"It is you, at last, Sobieska," he said as the thin hand of the Krovitzer closed over his own. A smile lighted up the half-veiled eyes, he read in the American's soul that word of their distress had come too late.

"Come into the club," Carter urged him. Sobieska smiled grimly as he glanced down at his shabby garments. Carter understood.

"Let's walk out to the Park," suggested the Krovitzer. "I have something to tell you that I know you are anxious to hear. Wait, though, until we get out of the crowd. You don't want Fifth Avenue as an audience, do you?" he asked as he noted the quick joy which lit Carter's face.

"Just one question," Calvert begged. "Is she well?"

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"Yes," replied the Krovitzer, confining himself to the naked assent. Then, pitying the man who had been so woefully shaken since their parting in Krovitch, he opened the gate of Pity a bit and added, "She is in New York."

Carter stopped short in the street and turned to read in the other's eyes whether this promised miracle was true or false. He reached out and caught Sobieska's hand and wrung it with the fervor he would fain have loosed in a cheer.

"Thank God," he said vehemently. "Are we going to her, now?"

Sobieska nodded an affirmative.

"Is it far?"

"Not over two miles."

"And you intend to walk? Great Scott, man, do you think I have lead in my veins instead of blood?"

"No, Carter, but remember that I have no longer money at my command. Poverty has taught me strange tricks of economy. Pride would not let me think of asking you if you preferred riding."

"You might have known," said Carter reproachfully, "that every cent I have would be at your disposal for such an errand."

His companion nodded his head wearily. Was the fellow not satisfied, he thought? It meant that he was being led to the woman that he, Sobieska, loved with fervor equal to Carter's. Why should he hasten the minute that would place her in the American's arms? Ah, well, Trusia loved him. That must suffice. They entered a cab which had drawn up in answer to Carter's hail. [Pg 298]

"I will not apologize for our lodgings," said Sobieska, as he gave a cheap East Side locality to the driver as their destination. "Thousands of my countrymen have no better."

As the cab rattled along, he gave the details of their varied vicissitudes and the determined faith of Trusia in Carter, culminating in her insistence that they come to New York to find him. "Some woman instinct told her that you had not received my letter and she feared that some calamity had befallen you that nothing but her coming would dispel." By the work of his hands and the sweat of his brow he had finally been able to secure their passage on an ocean steamship.

"We arrived two weeks ago to-morrow," said the Krovitzer. "Twice I called at your house, three times at your club. They supposed I was some beggar, no doubt, and never gave you my messages. Having no money over actual necessities for either telephones or postage stamps, I took the poor man's way of communicating with you while I sought work—waited till I could see you. In fact, Carter, to be perfectly frank, I did not know but that our altered circumstances might influence you as it has some other acquaintances I have appealed to." [Pg 299]

"That is unjust, Sobieska," said Carter.

"I should have known better," answered Sobieska apologetically, "but, Carter, we have had some pretty hard knocks. You were silent to my letter—how could I guess you were ill? I was rebuffed at both your house and club. A sensitive man might well read your acquiescence in such treatment. Will you accept my apology? Here we are," he added, as the cab drew up to the curb.

"Don't apologize," said Carter, shaking him by the hand, while his eyes hungrily devoured the front of the tenement with avidity that sought for some sign of Trusia. "Is this the place?" The grimy pile was sanctified in his eyes as it sheltered the woman to whom he had given his whole heart.

Trembling like an eager child, after dismissing the cabby, he scrambled breathlessly after his guide up steep and dirty stairs to the third floor, past passages and open doors, which showed more than one family huddled together in single apartments.

"She does not live as these?" he asked with repugnance.

"No," said his companion, regarding a group with unconcealed compassion, "I was fortunate enough to secure a separate room for her, poor as it is." But the man nobly concealed the price he had had to pay, to be content to sleep upon a straw mattress in a sub-cellar—nor did Trusia know what sacrifices her former minister was making for her meagre comforts. [Pg 300]

The door of an apartment stood open at the end of the next turn in the entry. Both men, hushed by conflicting emotions, stood regarding the scene before them.

At a window, her face a trifle thinner, more *spirituelle*, because of her heartaches, sat Trusia. The light, touching the edges of her hair, glinted into an iridescent halo about her face. Across her knees lay a little child. Its mother, with anxious, peasant face, was bending over its ailing form, while the large, whole-souled regard which Trusia bent upon the tiny form made a picture of a modern Madonna.

Then, the air whispered its tidings to her soul. She glanced up and saw Carter standing in the passageway. Gently placing the infant in the maternal arms held out for it, she arose and without a spoken word came to him; came so close that there was nothing for him to do but to take her tenderly in his arms. Assured of their right, her hands lay on his shoulders, while her eyes sought out his soul. [Pg 301]

Then, careless whether the whole world looked on or not, their lips met gently, lingeringly.

"Though all thrones have fallen," she sighed blissfully, "you are still my King."

"Trusia, my Trusia," he said, while Sobieska fled silently from their view.

FINALE

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TRUSIA: A PRINCESS OF KROVITCH ***

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