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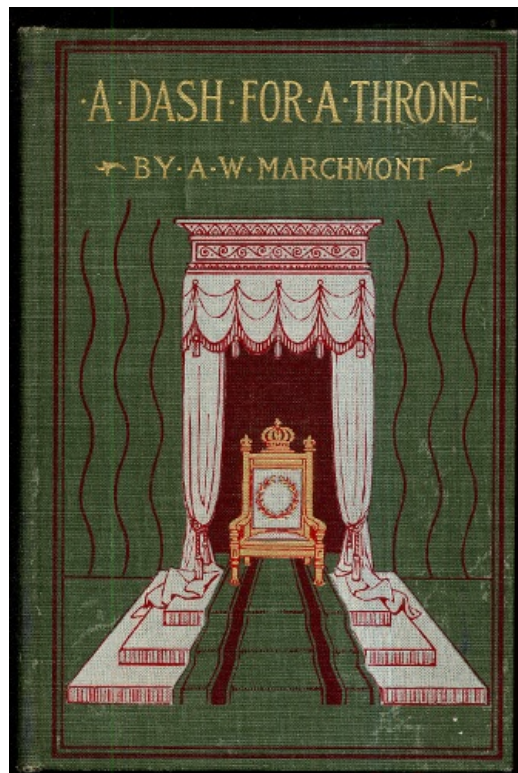
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A Dash For a Throne

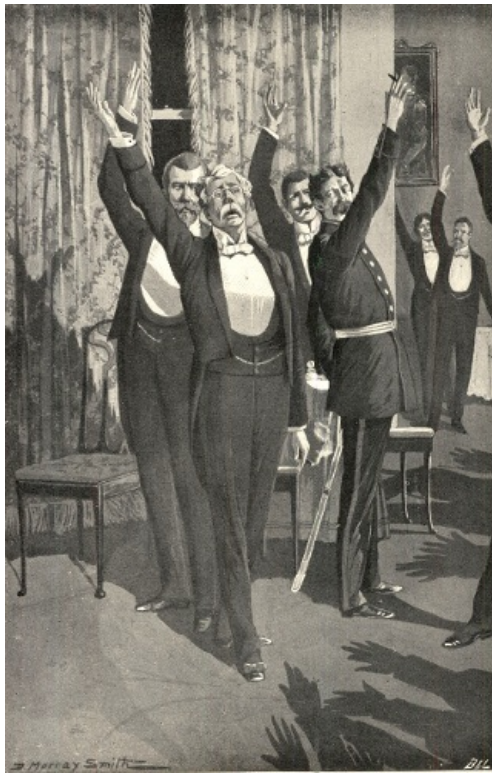
By Arthur W. Marchmont

Author of "By Right of Sword," etc.

Illustrated by
D. Murray Smith

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HE RAISED HIS RIGHT HAND ON HIGH

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A DASH FOR A THRONE

CHAPTER I

MY DEATH

"To a man who has been dead nearly five years everything would be forgiven, probably—except his resurrection."

This half-cynical thought was suggested by the extraordinary change which a few hours of one memorable July day had wrought in my circumstances and position.

As the thought occurred to me I was standing in the library of Gramberg Castle, my hands plunged deep in my pockets, deliberately dallying with my fate, as I watched the black dress of the Prince's beautiful daughter moving slowly among the gayly colored flower-beds in the warm sunshine, like a soothing shadow in the brilliant glare.

I was face to face with a temptation which I found infinitely alluring and immeasurably difficult to resist.

For five years I had been enduring an existence of monotonous emptiness, that depressed me till my heart ached and my spirit wearied; and now a chance of change had been thrust upon me, all against my seeking, at which my pulses were beating high with the bound of hope, my blood running once again with the old quick tingling of excitement, and, through the reopened portals of a life akin to that from which I had been thrust, desire, ambition, pleasure, hazard, were all beckoning to me with fascinating invitation.

I turned from the window and threw myself into a deep easy-chair to think.

Five years before I had passed in a moment from a position of Royal favor, with limitless ambition and opportunities, to one where death was avowedly the only alternate.

And no one had recognized this more readily than I myself.

I am half English by birth. My mother was an English woman, and went to the Prussian Court in the small suite of the bride whom "Unser Fritz" carried from England. My father rose very high in Royal favor, and, as a consequence, I was thrown early in life in the company of the young Princes. We grew up close and intimate companions; and when I chose the navy for my profession every facility was employed to insure my advancement. I had been about five years in the navy, and was already a flag-lieutenant, when the smash came. Happily my father and mother were both dead then.

We were not puritans in those days, and there were some wild times. The last of these in which I took a part finished up on the Imperial yacht; and a wild enough time it was.

I had drunk much more freely than the rest—there were only some half-dozen of us altogether—and then, being a quarrelsome, hot-headed fool, I took fire at some words that fell from the Prince, and I gave him the lie direct. Exactly what happened I don't clearly remember; but I know that he flung his wine right at my face, and I, forgetting entirely that he was at once my future Emperor and my commanding officer, clenched my fist and struck him a violent blow in the face which knocked him down. He hit his head in falling, and lay still as death. We thought at first he was dead. What followed can be imagined. I cannot describe it. It sobered the lot of us; and our relief when we found he was not dead, but only stunned, cannot be put in words.



HE FLUNG HIS WINE RIGHT AT MY FACE

He was lifted up and laid on the table, his face all ghastly gray-white, save where the mark of my blow on the cheek stood out red and livid—a sight I shall never forget.

When the doctor came we told him the Prince had had an ugly fall, and, as soon as he showed signs of coming round, I left and went off to my ship, in a condition of pitiable consternation and remorse.

I nearly shot myself that night. I took out my revolver twice and laid it between my teeth, and was only stopped by the consideration that, if I did it, my suicide would be connected with the affair, and some garbled account of the brawl and of what was behind it would leak out.

The next day old Count von Augener, who had been telegraphed for, came to my cabin. He hated me as he had hated my father, and I knew it.

The interview was brief enough, and he sounded the keynote in the sentence with which he opened it.

"You are still alive, lieutenant?" he said, bending on me a piercing look from under his shaggy, beetling brows.

"Say what you have to say, and be good enough to keep from taunts," I answered, and then told him the thought that alone had stopped me from shooting myself.

He listened in silence, and at the close nodded.

"You have enough wit when the wine's out, and you understand what you have done. Were you other than you are, you would be tried by court-martial and shot. But your act is worse than that of a mutineer—you are a coward"—I started to my feet—"because you have struck a man you know cannot demand satisfaction."

I sank again into my chair and covered my face in shame, for the taunt was true. But to have it thus flung at me ruthlessly was worse than a red-hot brand plunged into my flesh.

The old man stopped and looked at me, pleased that he had thus tortured me.

"There is but one course open to you. You know that?"

"I know it," I answered sullenly.

"Only one reparation you can make. Your death can appear to be either accidental or natural—anyhow, provided that it is at once. You can have a week; after that, if you are alive, you will die an infamous death."

"I understand," I replied, rising as he rose. "Will you give my assurance to the Prince and the Emperor that ..."

"I am no tale-bearer, sir," he answered sternly. "The one desire now is to forget that you ever lived." And flinging these harsh words at me, he left me humiliated, ashamed, angry, and

impotently remorseful.

Not another word should pass my lips. How should I die? It was not so easy as it seemed. A fatal accident to appear genuine called for clever stage-management, and I did not see how to arrange matters.

I applied for leave, and went to Berlin. There was one man there who could help me—old Dr. Mein. He was a bachelor recluse, an Englishman who had been naturalized, and in the old days he had been in love with my mother. It was she who told me the tale just before her death, when urging me to trust him should I ever find myself in need of an absolutely reliable, level-headed friend. I knew that he loved me for the English blood in my veins. I told him what I had to do; but at first did not mention the cause. He listened intently, questioned me shrewdly, and then stopped to think.

"You want me to murder you, or at least give you the means of murdering yourself?" he said bluntly.

"If you don't help me, I shall do it without you, that's all," I returned.

He paused again to think, pursing up his lips, and fixing his keen blue eyes upon me.

"I have loved you like my own son, and you ask me to kill you?"

"My mother would have had me come to you, because I am in trouble."

"You have no right to be in trouble. You are no fool. You have all your father's wealth—millions of marks; you have your mother's English blood—which is much better; you have her brains—which is best of all; you have a noble profession—the sea; you enjoy the Imperial favor and friendship—a slippery honor, maybe; and you are certain of rapid promotion to almost any height you please. Why, then, should you want to die?"

"Because I have sacrificed everything by my reckless temper," I answered, and told him what had happened. "I have no option but to die," I concluded. "If you will not help me——" I broke the sentence and got up to go.

"I didn't say I wouldn't help you—I will." I sat down again. "You don't care how you die, so long as it's quickly?" I shook my head. "Very well. I have in my laboratory the bacilli of a deadly fever. I will inject the virus into your veins. In three days you will be in the fever's grip, and in less than a week you will be dead." I took off my coat and bared my arms to show my readiness. "I make only one condition. You must be ill here; I must watch the progress of the experiment."

"Nothing will suit me better," I returned.

He made the injection there and then, and gave me two days to be away and wind up my affairs; and when I returned to him he made another injection and put me to bed. That night I was in a raging fever. All the paraphernalia of a sick-bed were soon in evidence, and the following day it was known all over Berlin that the wealthy young Count von Rudloff was down in the grip of a fever at the house of a once well-known physician, Dr. Mein. The little house was besieged with callers. A few only were admitted. Von Augener was one, and he brought with him the Court physician.

I grew worse rapidly, and only in intermittent gleams of intelligence was I conscious of the lean, grizzled face and watchful blue eyes of the doctor bending over me, assuring me that I was a most interesting case, and rapidly growing worse. For three days this continued, until in a moment of consciousness I heard him say to the nurse:

"He cannot last through the night," and the woman turned and looked sympathetically toward the bed.

I tried to speak, but could not. I could scarcely move; but they noticed my restlessness, and the doctor came and bent over me.

"Am I dying?" I whispered.

"Yes. You must have courage. You are dying."

"I am glad. Thank you. I have no pain."

He turned away, and after a moment gave me my medicine. Then with a touch soft like a woman's he smoothed the bedclothes, and bending down put his lips to my forehead, and left me glad, as I had said, that the end had come thus calmly.

I must have become unconscious again almost directly after that, for I know nothing of what happened until I awoke gradually and found myself in a place that was pitch dark. I was lying on the floor, though it felt soft like a mattress, and when I stretched out my arm I touched a wall that was soft like the floor.

I was quick in jumping to a conclusion. The doctor had fooled me, and probably had fooled everybody else, about my illness and death. If I had ever been ill, I was quite well now, and I scrambled up and strode about the place, feeling all the walls and floor and everything within my reach. I soon knew where I was. It was the old fellow's padded room. I knew, too, that I could do no good by struggling or shouting or trying to get out of it. I must wait, and I sat down on the

floor to think.

After what seemed like many hours an electric light was switched on, and I saw a sheet of paper pinned to the wall. It was a letter from the doctor.

"I have done what your mother would have wished. You have the makings of a real man in you, and you must not die. Every one thinks you dead; and not a soul suspects. Your funeral took place yesterday, amid all the pomp of Court mourning; and all the papers to-day are full of descriptions of your career, your illness, death, and funeral. But you will live to do yourself justice; if need be, in another name. Your next career you must make, however, and not merely inherit. But you are your mother's son, and will not flinch."

The old man had known me better than I knew myself. I had been glad to die; but the pulse of life runs strong in the twenties; and the shrewd old beggar was right. Half an hour later I was glad to live; and when he came to me I was quite ready to thank him for what he had done.

We had a long talk about my future, and he urged me to go to England.

"You can be an Englishman; indeed, you are one already. Your family must have rich and powerful friends there; and there you can make a career."

But I would not give my assent. I had no plans, and was in the mood to make none.

"I will see," I answered. "I am a dead man, and the dead are more the concern of Providence than the living. I will drift for a while in the back waters," and I shrugged my shoulders.

I made no plans. That night I left Berlin, and as the train whirled me southward I tried with resolute hand to make the barrier that shut out the old life so bullet-proof that not even the stinging thoughts of impotent remorse and regret could wound me. I was only human, however, and barely twenty-three; and the sorrow of my loneliness was like a cankered wound. I felt like a shipwrecked derelict waif on the wide callous sea of stranger humanity.

And like a derelict I drifted for a while, and accident determined a course for me. At Frankfort, where I stayed a considerable time, a chance meeting in a hotel gave me as a companion an actor, and in his room at the theatre one night he asked me if I would care to join his company. All life was to be but a burlesque for me, and, as it seemed the training might be useful, I consented.

I threw myself into the mimic business with ardor, and stayed with the company four years. Under the guise of professional enthusiasm I became a past master in the art of making up, and altered my appearance completely. I changed my voice until it was two full tones lower than by nature, and I practised an expression and accent altogether unlike my own. Under the tuition of a clever old acrobat, who had deformed himself until he was past work, I changed entirely the character of my walk and carriage. I cultivated assiduously marked peculiarities of gesture and manner; and by constant massage even the contour of my features was altered, and lines and wrinkles were brought with results that astonished me.

After some three years of this I tested these results by a visit to the only man who knew me to be alive—Dr. Mein. I wished him to know what I was doing, but was not willing to trust the secret on paper. I went to him in my professional name, Heinrich Fischer, and consulted him for about half an hour about an imaginary complaint, without his having an idea of my identity. Once or twice he looked at me with an expression of rather doubting inquiry; but he did not know me. He wrote me a prescription, and, rising to go, I laid a fee on his table.

Then I lingered on, and he glanced at me in polite surprise. I smiled; and he fixed his little glittering eyes on mine steadily, as if I were a lunatic.

"Have you any more bacilli to spare, doctor?" I whispered.

A start, a quick frown, and the closing together of his eyebrows showed his surprise. Then he wheeled me round to the light.

"Are you—?"

He stopped short, his face alight with doubt and interrogation.

"I am Heinrich Fischer, an actor—now," I replied.

The last word was quite enough, and the tough old man almost broke down in the delight of recognition. When I explained to him the elaborate processes by which I had changed my figure, looks, and voice, he grew intensely interested in me as a strange experiment, and declared that not a soul in all the world would recognize me.

My visit was a brief one, though he pressed me earnestly to stay with him; and when I would not he said he would come to me at Frankfort, and that I must be his adopted son. But he never came, and we never met again. A letter or two passed between us—I had altered even my handwriting—and then a year later came the news to me that he was dead—had died suddenly in the midst of his work—and that I was left his heir.

This again changed my life, for his fortune gave me abundant means; and as I considered my actor training had been sufficient, I resolved to close that chapter of my life.

It would have been a commonplace affair enough, with an accompaniment of nothing more than a few mutual personal regrets, but for one incident. One of the actresses—a handsome, passionate woman, named Clara Weylin—had done me the quite unsolicited honor to fall violently in love with me; and when, at the time of parting, I could not tell her that we should ever meet again—for I had not the least intention or wish to do so—she was first tearful, then hysterical, and at last vindictively menacing.

"There's a secret about you, Fischer," she cried passionately. "I've always thought so; and, mark me, I'll find it out some day; and then you'll remember this, and your treatment of Clara Weylin. Look to yourself."

I tried to reason away her somewhat theatrical resentment, but she interpreted my words as an indication that she had struck home; and she flung away, with a toss of the head, another threat, and a look of bitter anger. I thought no more of the incident then—though afterward I had occasion enough to recall it; and when the evening brought me a letter from her, couched in very loving terms, I tossed it into the fire with a feeling akin to contempt. The next morning I left the town early, and was off on a purposeless and once more planless ramble.

With the stage I dropped also my stage name, for I had no wish to be known as an ex-play-actor; and as the old doctor's original counsel chanced to occur to me, I turned English. I now let my beard and mustaches grow; and I was satisfied that, with my changed carriage and looks, not a soul in the whole fatherland would recognize in Henry Fisher, a sober-looking English gentleman, travelling for pleasure and literary purposes, the once well-known and dashing naval lieutenant and Court favorite, the Count von Rudloff.

I moved from point to point aimlessly for some months until the vapid, vacuous monotony of the existence sickened and appalled me. Then suddenly chance or Fate opened a gate of life.

CHAPTER II

A GATE OF LIFE

I was droning in the small Rhine town Hamnel, close to Kehl, and struck up a casual acquaintance with a man of about my own age, named von Fromberg, to whom I had been at first attracted somewhat by the fact that in some respects he resembled myself. It happened, too, that one night I was able to render him a little service.

I was walking late near the river when he came rushing up to me to beg me to help him against the attack of a couple of men who were running after him with some angry threats. He was trembling and very much excited, although there did not seem to me to be much cause for fear; for the men sheered off as soon as they saw he was no longer alone.

My companion was greatly agitated, however, and talked, as I thought very absurdly, about my having saved his life. For the next two or three days he would scarcely leave my side; and during that time he poured into my ears much of what was filling his soul. It was only a little soul, and the contents mere tags and patches of dishevelled passion and emotions, though to him all real and disturbing enough.

He was a student and a dreamer, and of course in love. He had in some way got mixed up in some brawling with the men who I had seen pursuing him, and the whole trouble had set his little pulses throbbing and palpitating with the fear of terrible but quite vague consequences.

He told me also his love troubles. The girl he wished to marry was French, and while his people hated the French, her father would only allow him to marry the daughter if he would become a Frenchman. And mingled up with all this was a strange story of family complications. The pith of this was that his uncle, the head of the family, the Prince von Gramberg, a well enough known man, had written to urge him to go at once to the castle, declaring that his instant presence was imperative. Von Fromberg was thus the prey of three sets of emotions—desire to marry the French girl; terror of the men he had in some way provoked; and deadly fear that his uncle would prevent his turning French, and so stop his marriage. The last disquieted him the most.

"He has never seen me," he cried quite passionately, "never even given a thought to me, till I suppose he thinks that, as his son is now dead, I can be of some use to him. And he is such a fire-eating old devil he would think nothing of kidnapping me and shutting me up till I did what he wanted, and gave up my marriage. He loathes everything French."

It was difficult to associate von Fromberg with any very fire-eating kith and kin, but I sympathized vaguely, and soon found out his reasons for giving me his confidence. He wanted me to help him, and the request took a singular shape. He was to be married, and was crossing the frontier to Charmes for the purpose; and as he was very fearful of interruption and pursuit, he wished me to remain in Hamnel for a couple of days in his name.

It sounded ridiculous, and of course I demurred, pointing to a dozen difficulties that might follow. He pressed me very strongly, however, until I had to tell him pretty curtly that I would do nothing of the sort. He was silent a minute and then said:

"Of course it must be as you please, but if I tell people that your name is really von Fromberg and mine Fisher it will not hurt any one."

"I shall very speedily undeceive them," I answered promptly, and thought little more about the matter. But on that day I had to change my residence, and the next morning I found to my annoyance that he had indeed told the people at both houses that my name was in reality von Fromberg and his Fisher.

It was too small a matter to make a fuss about; and as I reflected that the only result would be to let him get married with fewer fears, I kept my anger till we should meet again.

But I little foresaw the consequences.

I was away for several hours in the latter part of the day, walking and sketching, and on my return to the house at night I thought there was something strange in the manner of a servant who met me and said two gentlemen were waiting for me in my room.

"For me?" I said, with some astonishment; for I could not think of any two men in the whole empire likely to come for me.

"Yes, sir, for you. They asked for you first as Herr von Fromberg, then as Mr. Fisher."

"Some more tomfoolery," I thought, as I went up the stairs, and then it flashed across me that they might be connected with the visit von Fromberg had been fearing.

A glance at the two men who rose at my entrance showed me they were at least gentlemen—officers, I thought, in mufti. They were both dark, and one—the elder—carried a beard, the other a heavy mustache only.

"Good evening, gentlemen," I said quietly. "To what do I owe the favor of this visit?"

I was disposed to be on my guard for von Fromberg's sake. The man with the beard answered.

"This is the first time we have met, Herr von Fromberg. My name is von Krugen, and my friend's Steinitz."

I was not quite sure whether to repudiate von Fromberg's name at once, or to wait until I knew more of the errand. I decided that it could do no harm to wait.

"And your object in coming?" I asked.

I saw a glance pass between the two, and the younger stepped past me casually, and took up a position close to the door. This interested me at once. It was quite obviously a move to prevent my running away. They seemed to understand von Fromberg's character.

"I think you will be able to guess," he replied, waiting until his companion had carried out the manoeuvre. "We wish to have a little private conversation with you, and to induce you to go with us—you will know where."

"And to make sure that it shall be private, I suppose you got your friend to stand over there by the door," I said, motioning toward him.

"A merely superfluous caution, I am sure," was the answer, given with a smile; "but a locked door always keeps intruders out."

"And prisoners in," I retorted.

"True," he assented, with another smile. "So you may as well lock it, Steinitz," and this was done promptly.

I laughed. I had, of course, nothing to fear.

"I shouldn't run away," I said. "You interest me too much, though what on earth you are doing here I can't for the life of me guess."

"We come from your uncle, the Prince von Gramberg, and I am specially charged to tell you that matters of the deepest moment, involving issues of life and death, make it absolutely imperative that you should go with us to the castle at once."

He spoke in so earnest a tone that his words produced an immediate effect upon me. I had no right to play fast and loose with the affairs of a powerful family—and the Prince's reputation was well enough known to me. Obviously I must at once explain the mistake as to my identity. I was sorry I had not done so at once.

"You are speaking in error, and I must tell you before you say another word. I am not the nephew of the Prince von Gramberg."

"I am aware you have denied yourself. You are Herr von Fromberg? I addressed you so a minute since."

"No. My name is not von Fromberg, but Fisher. I am English."

"Oh, yes, I know that. They told me that you preferred to be called that. But I am not here to pay heed to small preferences of the kind. These are no trifling concerns."

"They are no concerns of mine at all," I answered shortly. "And now that I have explained this, have the goodness to leave my rooms."

I turned to the door as I spoke, but the man standing there made no movement at all.

"Where, then, is Herr von Fromberg?" asked the older man, with incredulity manifest in his tone.

"I cannot tell you. I believe I know, but I am not at liberty to say."

"I did not think you would be," he returned dryly. "But are you prepared to go to the castle with us? You can explain afterward that we have taken you there wrongfully," he added, with ironical courtesy.

"Certainly I am not."

I spoke warmly, for his manner irritated me.

"Then will you have the goodness to inform me how it is that you are here in the character of Herr von Fromberg, with the people of the house looking upon you as that gentleman, and yourself answering to the name?"

My story was too tame and lame for me to think of telling it. I took shelter behind indignation.

"I shall certainly give no explanation which is demanded of me by those who have forced themselves into my room and hold me a prisoner in it in this way," I answered hotly.

"Then you will scarcely be surprised that, as I have been informed you are Herr von Fromberg, and you have answered to the name to me, I cannot accept your repudiation. I do not know why you are so anxious to deny your identity and to keep away from the great position that has opened to you since the death of the Prince's son."

This was thrown out to test me.

"I should refuse no position offered to me, I can assure you, if it were offered rightfully. But I am not the Prince's nephew."

"You are sufficiently like him to satisfy me, and I'm a good deal mistaken if you have not a good deal of his Highness's spirit. But now it is useless to talk any more here. You will go with us, of course? he asked abruptly.

"Of course I will do nothing of the sort."

"Very well, then, I suppose we must go alone. Steinitz!" he called sharply, jerking his head as if bidding the other to unlock the door; and he himself made as if to leave the room.

My back was to the second man, and before I even suspected treachery he sprang upon me from behind, pinioned my arms, and bound them, while the elder man held a revolver pointed right between my eyes.

"I am sorry you have driven me to do this," he said; "for I am perhaps making you a deadly enemy when I would rather serve you with my life if necessary. But my master's orders are imperative. We are playing for high stakes there, and have to throw boldly at times. Your presence is necessary at the castle, and my instructions are to take you there, free or by force. Will you go without compelling me to use force?"

I looked calmly at his revolver. There was no fear he would fire.

"We can scarcely cross the empire in a procession of this kind," I said, meeting his stern look with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders.

"We shall not try," he answered promptly. "We shall go as doctors—you as a mad patient, who has escaped from an asylum. I have come prepared with the necessary papers; and I need not remind you that your own actions here have helped this plan."

"I tell you again I am not the man you seek," I cried angrily; for I saw the power of his threat.

"I take my chance of that. You can explain to the Prince."

"This is monstrously ridiculous," I exclaimed hotly. "There are a thousand proofs here in this room that I am not the man you want. Put your hand in my pocket here and you will see by my letters that I am not."

After a moment's pause he did so; and then, too late, I remembered von Fromberg had given me one of his uncle's letters to read which I had not returned. The man chanced to take it out first and held it up.

"Your own proof," he said laconically, and thrust them all back again.

"You are making fools of every one concerned," I cried, very angrily.

"Will you give your word of honor to go with us?" was his answer, stolidly spoken. "It is time to start."

It was useless to fight further, so with another shrug of the shoulders I gave up.

"I warn you the whole thing's a farce, though I can't make you believe it. I'll go with you; but you must put up with the consequences."

In another moment I was free, and he was profuse with his apologies.

As he opened the door to leave some one came running up the stairs looking hot and agitated. To my relief it was von Fromberg.

"How is it you're back so soon?" I cried. "Never mind how it is; you come in the nick of time anyhow. This is Herr von Fromberg, gentlemen. These gentlemen are from your uncle, and wish you to go with them."

"You said you would go freely with us, sir," whispered the elder man at my side. "You gave your word of honor."

"But this is the man you want," I cried, pointing to von Fromberg, who was staring like one panic-stricken from me to the others.

The elder man turned to him.

"Are you the Herr von Fromberg?"

"Certainly not," he stammered, with a quick look of appeal to me. "This is——" He quailed before the look I gave him and stopped.

"You are not going to deny yourself, man?" I cried.

"Deny myself, von Fromberg," he answered, with a forced, uneasy laugh. "Why should I? My name is Fisher. Do you want me?" he said to the two.

"Certainly not. Our business is with this gentleman. This is Herr von Fromberg, is it not?"

"Yes, certainly," was the reply, with another forced laugh.

"Now, will you keep your word?" said the man in a meaning tone to me. "Or will you compel me ..." He did not finish the sentence.

"Oh, just as you like. Only I warn you it's all an infernal blunder," and with that I went with them.

At the bottom of the stairs I turned and looked up at the man for whom I was mistaken. He nodded and made signs to me as if thanking me, and urging me to keep up the deception.

I said not a word more, but went with the two men in dogged silence. When we reached the station, I flung myself into a corner of the railway carriage, my companions mounting guard over me, one at my side, the other in the opposite corner.

We travelled through the night, changing trains more than once—sometimes travelling at express speed, sometimes crawling, and now and again making long stops at junctions. I scarcely spoke, except to protest that it was all a fool's journey; and when the elder man attempted to talk to me, I stopped him peremptorily, saying that as a stranger I had not the least wish to learn anything of the family's affairs. I would not hear a word until we reached the castle.

There, however, a surprise awaited me that pierced the shell of my apathy in an instant, and filled me with a sudden longing to go on with the strange part for which my companions had thus cast me.

The greatest deference was shown to me on my arrival, and I was ushered into a large and lofty room, while the elder man went to inform the Prince of my arrival, the younger man remaining with me.

The castle was certainly magnificent; and I could not refrain from an intense wish that I were indeed the heir to such a glorious place and position. My thoughts slipped back to the old life that I had thrown away, contrasting it with the mockery of my stale, humdrum existence, and I asked myself what I would not give for such a career as I felt I could build out of the materials Fortune had now shovelled into my lap with this taunting munificence.

Then I saw from the window a young golden-haired girl, standing among the flower-beds. She was dressed all in black, the exquisitely beautiful and regular features set and saddened with an expression of profound grief and melancholy. She was holding some freshly plucked roses in her hand, and after she had plucked one or two others a serving-maid approached and said something to her; and she turned and looked toward the window at which I stood. Probably mere curiosity was the motive, but to me it seemed as if the look were instinct with anxiety, doubt, and appeal.

Suddenly I saw her start and glance round; and if ever a face told of fear and repulsion hers did, for all the struggle that her pride made to repress the evidence of her emotion, and to force up a smile to cover an aching heart.

Then I saw the cause of the change.

A man came into view, and my heart gave a great leap of anger that had long slumbered. I had known him in the old life for the falsest scoundrel that ever cheated a friend or ruined a woman. The mere sight of him set me on fire. He had dealt me a foul and treacherous wrong, and when I

had sought him to call him to account he had fled, and I could never trace him.

I watched him now as he spoke to the girl, and my old hate awoke till I could have found it in me to rush out there and then to cast his foulness in his face and choke his life out of him. And my brow gathered in an angry scowl as I watched the girl's struggle between pride and loathing when she answered him, and shrank back from the sensual brute stare of his eyes.

As soon as I could keep my voice steady I called my companion to the window.

"Who are those?" I asked.

"The Countess Minna, the Prince's only daughter, now his only child. It is she who, under heaven, will be the Queen of——"

He checked himself when he caught my look of intense surprise.

"And the man. Who is he?"

"The Count von Nauheim, her future husband."

"God help her, then," said I, with involuntary fervor.

My companion started and looked at me.

"Do you know——"

"I know nothing," I replied very curtly. "These are no concerns of mine. But I can read a face." He looked at me searchingly, but I had taken my watch out and was playing with the guard. "This Prince seems a devil of a long time sending for me. If he keeps me much longer I shall lose my train back."

I spoke indifferently, and threw myself into a chair to think.

I sat a long time buried in these old rustled reflections, until the chain of thought was snapped abruptly, and I sprang to my feet as a great cry ran through the castle, and the sound of a woman's sobbing.

"What's that?" I asked of the man with me, who had changed color and was manifestly disturbed.

"I don't understand it," he said, after a long pause, during which he went and stood by the door, as if doubting whether I might try to leave.

The sounds of confusion in the castle increased. Servants were hurrying in all directions; but no one came to us.

Later on the toll of a heavy bell sounded with vibrating echoes through the hot, heavy, sleepy air. A minute after it was repeated; and before the sound had died away the elder of the two men came back into the room. He was deadly pale, and so agitated that his voice trembled. He approached me and bowed with signs of deep respect.

"I bring you the worst of news. The Prince is dead; and your Highness is master in his stead."

"Dead!" I cried, in the profoundest astonishment.

"He was stricken this morning, and lay dying when we entered the castle. And he was dead before your Highness could be summoned."

A protest leapt to my lips. But I did not give it utterance. The thought of the girl I had seen, the Countess Minna, left helpless in the power of that consummate villain von Nauheim, silenced me. I would wait until at least I had time to think out a course of action.

CHAPTER III

"AS YOUR HIGHNESS WILL"

The perplexing difficulty of my position was extreme. The eyes of both men were fixed on me, noting every expression that crossed my face, waiting upon my lightest word, and eager to show their allegiance to me as the new head of the house.

A career of magnificent promise lay invitingly at my very feet, and I had but to utter a word to step into a position of power and influence.

Moreover, every chivalrous instinct of my nature was stirred with a desire to save the beautiful girl I had seen from the clutch of the man threatening her with worse than ruin; while my red-hot desire for revenge on the man himself was prompting me to stay where I was until at least I could expose and punish him.

His sin against me had been the one absolutely unforgivable. He had married my sister; and too late we had discovered that at the time he was already married. The blow and the shame had killed her and broken my mother's heart; and over my sister's coffin I had sworn to have his life

for hers. But he had fled, and no efforts of mine had been able to find him up to the hour of my own supposed death. And now here he was delivered into my hands, and actually in the very act of repeating his foul offence. Fate had surely brought us together in this dramatic fashion. I could not disclose my identity to him; but I could be the agent to detect this new sin, and could thus myself punish him for the old.

With my pulses throbbing with this fire, was it likely that I could make an instant decision in accordance with the dictates of mere surface conventionality? I held back from the decision, and even then might have persisted in avowing the truth, when the man himself came ruffling into the room. His strong, dark, coarse features wore an expression of bullying assertiveness; his manner was that of the lord of the place toward an interloper; and he spoke to me in the hectoring tone of a master toward an inferior servant. The personal contact with him, the sound of his voice, the insolent look of his heavy eyes, and my old hate of him were like so many knots on a whiplash goading me to fury.

"I heard you had come, but I suppose you know your errand is a fruitless one."

Had I been the most contemptible lickspittle on the meanest and greediest quest, his expression could not have been worse. I saw the other two men exchange a rapid glance.

"What do you deem my errand?" I asked quietly.

"Oh, that's plain enough," he answered, with a sneer. "You've come after what you can get. The Prince probably sent you by these agents of his"—with a contemptuous sweep of the hand toward them—"some wonderful account of the good things in store for you here, and very naturally you came to gather them. But the Prince's death has knocked the bottom out of that barrel," and he laughed very coarsely. "There's nothing here for you except an empty title, and a beggarly old castle mortgaged from the bottom of the old moat to the tip-top of the flagstaff. That and a mess of very hazardous intrigue is all you can hope for here."

This speech, coarse and contemptible as it was under such circumstances, was not to be compared with the ineffable brutality of the manner which marked its delivery. I was astounded that any man could so behave; but I saw his motive instinctively.

He had heard little of me except as a meek-spirited student, likely to shy at any danger, and his object was to frighten me away.

"And who are you, then?" I asked. "These gentlemen have told me nothing of the position of matters here."

"Then the sooner you know something the better. Have the goodness to leave us, Captain von Krugen."

The latter started, as I thought angrily, at the sharp imperious tone in which he was addressed, and glanced at me in some hesitation.

"Do you hear me, sir?" exclaimed von Nauheim, still more sharply; and then, getting no sign from me, the two men left the room. "That fellow gets more presuming every day. The Prince made far too much of him; but I'll soon have a change. So you don't know the position of things here, eh, Mr. Student? Do you set much store on your life?" And he eyed me very sharply, expecting to see me wince.

I did not disappoint him. I started and, in a tone of some alarm, asked:

"Why? There is no danger of that sort here, is there?"

"Do you know how your late cousin, Gustav, lost his?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, I thought the question would surprise you. I'm not going to tell you everything, because these matters are for men of action, and not bookworms. He died in a duel, forced on him for the sole reason that he was the Prince's next heir."

"Oh, but that cannot be possible," I cried, as if incredulous.

"Possible," he echoed, with a laugh. "Can you fight? I mean, do you think you can stand before the finest swordsmen or the picked shots in all Bavaria?"

"I don't see the necessity."

"Perhaps not—just yet," he returned dryly. "Poor Gustav didn't—but the time came none the less. The man who puts on the mantle of the dead Prince upstairs must look to find little in the pockets except challenges."

"But what of you? Who are you? Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I dislike attending funerals," he replied, with a grim laugh. "Besides, I am a soldier; and it's my business to fight. You have probably heard my name already. I'm the Count von Nauheim, and the late Prince's daughter is my betrothed wife."

"And you mean, I suppose, that all the Prince's wealth will pass to the daughter?"

"That is the Prince's will. And you weren't in time to get him to alter it, you see," he sneered; but I let the sneer pass for the moment.

"Then you will be the head of the family in all but the name—the husband of the daughter, the owner of the wealth, and the guardian of its honor?"

"You can put a point with the clearness of a lawyer," he said.

"Have you, then, fought the man who killed the son Gustav?"

As I asked the question I kept my eyes fixed steadily on his, and all his bluster could not hide his discomfiture.

"These are things you don't understand," he said brusksly. "There is much behind—too much to explain to you."

"But if you say that my cousin Gustav was murdered, that you know this to be so, that fighting is your business, and that you are the guardian of the family's honor, why have you not called the murderer to account?"

"I tell you you don't understand these things. We don't manage matters like a parcel of swaggering student duels."

"Apparently not," I answered in a studiously quiet tone. "Students would say in such a case that you did not fight because—you dared not."

"You speak with a strange license, and if you are not careful you will get yourself into trouble!" he cried furiously, trying to frighten me with a bullying stare. "You won't find every one ready to make such allowances for your *gaucherie* as I am. You will have the goodness to withdraw that suggestion."

"I will do so with pleasure the moment I know you have challenged the man you call a murderer, or have repeated in his presence what you have said about him to me."

His surprise at this unexpected tone of quiet insistence on my part was almost laughable; but he tried to carry it off and bear me down with his boisterous, bullying manner.

"You had better take heed how you presume on my forbearance toward one in your position, or even the fact that you are nominally a member of the family will not prevent me from giving you a pretty severe lesson."

"You mean, I suppose, that, although you dared not challenge the man who killed Gustav, you think you might tackle me with impunity. That is not a very high standard of courage," and I shrugged my shoulders, and curled my lips in contempt, as I added, "If that is all the protection the Gramberg honor can rely upon, God save the family reputation."

The sneer drove him mad, and the blood rushed to his face, until every one of his coarse features glowed with his passion.

"With the Prince lying dead in the castle, this is not the time for such a matter to be settled; but I will not suffer such an insult even from you to pass unpunished. Why should you seek to force a quarrel on me at such a time?"

"You forget the quarrel is of your making," I answered coolly. "The moment you entered this room you insulted me by saying I had come here for what I could get, and sneered that I was too late to induce the Prince to alter the will leaving his property to his daughter. In my view that will is perfectly just and right. Then for some object, I know not what as yet, you tried to frighten me into running away from the place altogether. You have mistaken your man, sir. I have no hankering for the late Prince's wealth; but what you have said of yourself is more than enough to prove that the honor of my family is not in safe keeping when left in your hands. As there is nothing but that honor, I will accept that part of the inheritance."

Rage, hate, threats, and baffled malice were in the look he turned on me at this.

"You wish to make me your enemy?"

"At least I have no wish to make you my friend," I retorted.

"You will live to repent this bitterly!" he cried, with an oath. "We will have no meddlers here in the path of our purpose," and, still more enraged by the smile which the threat evoked from me, he went hurriedly out of the room.

Truly my years of self-repression had wrought a great change in me. Five years before his hot insolence would have so fired me that I would have made him answer for it on the spot; but now I could hold my anger in check and wait for my revenge. But this little conflict was my first live experience for five years, and the sense of it pleased me.

When the man had left me I had no longer any scruples about going forward with my new character. There was no one to be robbed of a fortune, no one to be supplanted in a coveted position—nothing but an overpawed castle to be gained. There was apparently a dangerous intrigue to be faced, and a sweet girl's honor to be saved, and a treacherous villain to be exposed and punished—not the kind of inheritance which many men would covet. But then few men were ever placed in my situation.

I was thinking hard over all this when my two captors came back into the room hurriedly, both very angry. Von Nauheim had seen them after leaving me, and had vented his anger on them. They asked me now excitedly if it was my wish that they should leave the castle immediately after the Prince's funeral. I listened to them very quietly. I had already had pretty strong evidence of the lengths to which their zeal for the family's affairs would induce them to go; and von Nauheim's hostility to them was a powerful recommendation in my eyes.

"I beg you to be calm, gentlemen," I said, "and to bear in mind that I know very little of the position of affairs here. I have understood from you that you were both largely in the late Prince's confidence—indeed, you have given me pretty good proof of that since yesterday. But beyond that I do not know what your relations here have been in the past."

"We have been for years in the Prince's confidential service; I myself enjoyed his closest confidence," answered Captain von Krugen. "But my allegiance is to the head of the house. I recognize no one else."

"And you desire to remain in that service?"

"I have no other wish in life, sir," he replied earnestly.

"Nor I," assented the other.

"If you were in his confidence, you will know that the late Prince has left to his successor no means of maintaining a large retinue."

"What I am and all that I have I owe to your late uncle," said the captain in the same earnest tone. "I ask nothing else than to place my sword and my fortune alike at your disposal. And I can speak for Steinitz here. Our liberty and lives are indeed at issue in the present crisis; and if all is not to fail ignominiously now, we must have a strong hand and a clear head in command."

There was no mistaking the man's sincerity, and, usurper though I was, the offer touched me.

"I believe you absolutely, Captain von Krugen, and you, Herr Steinitz," and I gave them my hand. "But, all the same, I do not know what crisis you mean. Tell me freely."

"I tried to tell you on the journey here, but you prevented me. Do you know the history of your family—the lineage on the side of the late Prince's wife?"

"I know very little. Speak as freely as if I knew nothing. You will not try my patience."

"Steinitz, see that there is no one about; and keep guard outside the door that no one enters."

He paused while the younger man withdrew, and then, leading me to a deep window-seat at the end of the room, began to speak in a low tone:

"There is a traitor somewhere among us, and thus the greatest need for caution. For a long time previous to his death your uncle was engaged in a task that involved the highest issues of State. The extreme discontent at the antics of the madman who is now King of Bavaria induced a number of the more prominent and bolder men in the country to plot his overthrow. There is a slip in his ancestry, and the disappearance of a certain Prince Otto, who was the heir to the throne, let in the younger branch of the family, through whom the title has descended to the present King. Otto was supposed to have died; but he was only eccentric. He lived in secret retirement, married, and left a son. From that son, who was unquestionably the rightful heir, the late wife of your uncle came in direct descent. She was the only child of the eldest line, and by right she should have reigned as Queen. As you know, she died, and left the two children—Gustav, who was killed in a duel, and the daughter, who is in the castle at this moment."

"Do you mean——?" I began when he paused.

"I mean that the Countess Minna von Gramberg should at this moment be the Queen of Bavaria; and that by God's help we shall all live to see her crowned."

His dark face flushed and his eyes glowed with the enthusiasm of this speech.

My own feeling was more wonderment than enthusiasm, however. If this most hazardous and ambitious scheme were afoot, what could be the meaning of von Nauheim's share in it as the betrothed husband of a future queen?

"The Prince's first intention was of course to put his son on the throne, and matters were indeed well ripe for this, when unfortunately he became embroiled in a duel and was killed. That duel we believe to have been forced on him—murder in all but the actual form."

"And the man who killed him?" I asked.

"A noted Italian swordsman, Praga, hired and paid, as we believe, for his work."

"Hired? By whom?"

"By the family who stand next in succession to the throne. The King, as you know, has no children, and the succession passes to the Ostenburg branch of the family. That was my master's main hope. Our claims are stronger than theirs; and we had on this account secured the support of most of the prominent men in the country."

"Well?" I asked, for he paused with a gesture of disappointment.

"Count Gustav's death threw everything back. Where they had been ready to stand by a man, some of them drew back, frightened, from supporting a young girl—and, unless a bold stroke be made now, everything may be lost."

"What bold stroke do you mean?"

"Like that planned before. Everything was ready. We thought the Ostenburg agents had not a suspicion of our plans. We had resolved to take advantage of the mad King's fancies to lure him out on one of those wild midnight drives of his, and then to seize his person and put one of ourselves into his place, made up, of course, to resemble him; and to let the dummy play the part of King long enough to enable us to get the madman where he ought to have been long since—into restraint. Then the dummy was to throw aside his disguise and declare that he had been acting by the King's orders; that the latter had abdicated and had proclaimed the Count Gustav his successor, as being the rightful lineal heir. We should have done the rest. It was a brave scheme."

"It was as mad as the King himself," said I. "But what then?"

"It was just before things were ripe that the other side got wind through some treachery somewhere; and the count was killed in the duel."

"Well?"

"Half the cowards drew away. But they will all come back the moment they see us strike a blow; and it was to have you close at hand, helping in the good work, that the Prince sent for you."

"And the Count von Nauheim?"

"The Prince had supreme confidence in him. He was not with us at first; but his coming secured us the help of a very large and influential section of the people—enough to turn the balance, indeed, and make the scheme certain of success. The Prince welcomed him heartily enough, and cheerfully complied with the condition fixed by those for whom he acted—that the Countess Minna should be given to him in marriage."

This made me thoughtful, knowing as I did the man's character.

"And the daughter herself?"

My companion frowned, drawing his dark brows close together, and pursed up his lips, as he replied ambiguously:

"Neither man nor woman at such a time can think of any but reasons of State."

"You mean that she consented to give her hand, but could not give her heart with it."

"I mean more than that, sir, and I must speak frankly to you. The Countess Minna has never favored the scheme, but has strongly opposed it—and opposes it still. Women have no ambition. She has no longing for a throne; and now that her father is dead I fear—well, I do not know what she may do. If you will urge her, she is her father's daughter, and will, I believe, go through with it. But much will depend upon you."

"And if she does not go on with it—what then?"

"We are all pledged too deeply to draw back now, your Highness," he answered, very earnestly. "We must either succeed or fail—there is no middle course; and failure means a prison or a convent for the Prince's daughter, and worse than ruin for the rest of us. As for yourself, you, I warn you, will be the certain object of attack, for there is no safe obscurity here. The enemies of your Highness's house will never rest satisfied while a possible heiress to the throne remains at large, or while those who have helped to put her there are alive and at liberty. As I told you at Hamnel, we are playing for desperate stakes, and must play boldly and like men."

Before I had time to reply we heard Steinitz in conversation with some one outside the door, and a moment later he opened it, and said that the Countess Minna was anxious to see me, and was coming to the library for that purpose.

CHAPTER IV

"YOU ARE HEAD OF THE HOUSE NOW"

My chief feeling as I rose to receive the Prince's daughter was a sort of shamefaced regret that I had allowed myself to be hurried into a position which made it necessary for me to mislead her. I meant her nothing but good. I had been brought to the castle all against my will. I had stayed there largely in order that I might be the means of saving her from danger; and everything I heard only served to increase that danger in my view. Yet the fact of the deception I was practising hampered and embarrassed me in her presence.

She was garbed now in the deepest black, was pale and hollow-eyed, and trembling under the stress of her new sudden sorrow; and she seemed so frail and fragile that my heart ached for her, while my senses were thrilled by her exquisite beauty and by a strange subtle influence which her presence exercised upon me. My pulses beat fast with a tumultuous desire to help her in her helplessness. Never, indeed, had woman moved me like this.

She paused a moment on the threshold, her hand on the arm of an elderly lady who accompanied her; and her large blue eyes rested on my face, searching, reading, and appealing, as I hastened across the room toward her. Her scrutiny appeared to give her confidence, for she withdrew her hand from her companion's arm and held it out to greet me.

"I felt I must come to bid you welcome, cousin," she said in a low, sweet voice that trembled. "You are welcome—very welcome."

I took the hand and raised it to my lips.

"You should not have distressed yourself to come; I should have understood," I answered.

"I felt that I must see you," she said, very graciously; and I, remembering what I had seen in the garden and all that von Krugen had told me, knew well enough the doubts and fears, anxieties and hopes, that might lie behind the words.

I racked my brain for some sentence that would convey some assurance of my wish to serve her; but I could find no words that pleased me; and after a pause, that to me was awkward enough, she added:

"You are now my only relative in the world except my dear aunt here, the Baroness Gratz."

The old lady made me a very stately and ceremonious bow, which I returned with such courtesy as I could command.

"A great heritage has come to you, sir, and a trust that must test to the utmost one so young in years," she said.

"My one life-purpose shall be to prove worthy of it," I answered earnestly; and I thought the girl's eyes lightened a little at the words.

"We were alarmed, sir, when we heard that you were unwilling to come," said the baroness.

"I am here, madam, to remove that alarm."

"The future fortunes of this noble house rest largely in your hands, as well as those of this sweet child. You know that?" she asked in reply.

"I know little as yet; but in all I shall strive earnestly to win the confidence of you both."

"You will have mine, cousin," said the girl, impulsively and almost eagerly, as it seemed to me. "And at the earliest moment I wish to tell you all that is in my thoughts and to ask your help."

"You will never ask that in vain, believe me," I returned, raising my eyes to hers, which had all the time been fixed on my face.

"I do believe you—I am sure of you," she cried, again impulsively; and I could have blessed her for the words. "And, oh, I am so glad you have come. There is so much to change and set right."

"Minna!" said the aunt in a gently warning tone.

"I am with friends, and I can speak freely. I feel it. I am sure we shall be friends, cousin. Shall we not? And you will be on my side?"

At this Captain von Krugen, who had remained at the other end of the room, took two or three steps forward as if to speak; but the baroness interposed, and after a warning glance at him whispered to the girl:

"We have not come for this now, child."

"The captain will be my friend, too, whatever happens, I am confident," said the girl, looking toward him; "even if I will not go forward with a scheme that must die——"

The word distressed her, and she caught her breath, and her lips faltered so that she could not finish the sentence. She sighed deeply and turned to lean on her companion's arm again.

"You must not distress yourself, Minna," said the baroness gently.

A rather long, trying pause followed, during which the Countess Minna appeared to be struggling to regain her self-composure. And at the close she said, sadly and listlessly, and yet with a great effort to speak firmly:

"I did not come to speak of these things now, but to ask you, cousin, to do all that has to be done at this time of—of sorrow. You are the head of the house now, and I trust you will use the authority."

"Until you desire otherwise," I answered. "You may depend upon me absolutely."

"That is my wish, cousin; and when I can trust myself, we will have a long conference."

She gave me her hand, and I was in the act of putting it once more to my lips when hurried steps approached, and the Count von Nauheim entered the room hastily. I felt the girl's fingers start, and involuntarily they closed on mine in a little trembling gesture of half agitation and fear. The touch thrilled me.

"I am surprised to find you here, Minna," he said brusquely. "I think, baroness, it would have been more seemly if Minna had kept in her apartments."

The old lady was more afraid of him than Minna herself, I could see, and she murmured some half-incoherent excuses.

"I see no wrong in coming here to welcome the head of the house," said the girl, trying to appear firm.

"Head of the house," he cried, with a sneer. "You are the head of the house, and, as your affianced husband, it is for me to say what is necessary in these matters of courtesy. I have already seen Herr von Fromberg to welcome him, as you say. Nothing more was necessary. Let me give you my arm to take you to my apartments. Come."

She hesitated an instant, and seemed as if about to refuse; but then changed and placed the tips of her fingers on his arm, and as she did so turned and bowed to me with a smile on her sweet, sad, pale face.



SHE TURNED AND BOWED TO ME WITH A SMILE.

"I shall see you, cousin Hans, soon, as I said just now. In the mean time I rely upon you to order all such arrangements as you think best—as your position here now requires."

"This gentleman need not trouble himself," said the man, frowning heavily and angrily. "I have given all necessary instructions."

"I will do what you wish," I said to her, ignoring him entirely.

I kept out of sight my rage at his conduct until the three had left the room, and then, forgetting that I was not alone, I vented it in a heavy, bitter oath, and turned to find von Krugen's keen dark eyes fixed upon me.

I was annoyed to have thus bared my feelings to his quick gaze. I did not wish him to know that I suspected, or even disliked, the count; but he had seen it already.

"He would try to overrule even the Prince himself in the latter time; and he takes interference very ill. He will ride roughshod over all of us if he can."

"Ah, you do not like him," I answered. "But there is no room for dissensions among ourselves. Let it go no farther."

"Have you any commands to give, your Highness? If I am to take them from him, I am to leave the castle."

This was intended to see if I should exercise my authority.

"You will not leave, Captain von Krugen," I replied promptly. "Heaven knows there is too much need of a faithful friend at such a juncture." He bowed, and his eyes lighted with pleasure at my words. "And now," I added, "we will discuss together what has to be done, and try to settle the arrangements."

There were, of course, many arrangements to be made, and the consultation occupied a long time. As a result I issued a number of directions such as seemed best, including those for the funeral, which I fixed for three days later.

Then I had to consider my own matters, and to mature a plan which I had formed after my interview with the Countess Minna. I felt that I could not continue the deception in regard to myself; and I resolved that I would use the interval before the funeral to try and find the real von Fromberg, and bring him to the castle to take his own position. I would come with him, and, by using the knowledge I possessed, help him in a task which, if he had a spark of honor in his nature, he could not but undertake.

The next day I took the captain so far into my confidence as to tell him there was an urgent private matter to which I was compelled to attend, and that I must return to Hamnel for that purpose. I told him to keep the fact of my absence as secret as possible, saying merely that I was out riding or walking, and that I would return soon. If the countess asked for me, he was in confidence to tell her the truth, and to assure her that, in any event, I should be back before the day of the funeral. Moreover, he was to keep a most vigilant watch over everything and everybody, and if my presence was urgently needed to telegraph to me to Hamnel. But to no one was he to give that address.

I started early, and the same evening arrived at Hamnel, but failed to find von Fromberg either in his own name or in mine; and theft I hurried on to Charmes. There I caught him at the house of the Compté de Charmes, whose daughter, Angele, he was to marry.

At first he was like an emotional girl. He rushed into the room, and would have embraced me had I not prevented him, while he loaded me with thanks and praise for having helped him to get free from his uncle by not declaring myself; while, with all this, he was profuse and gushingly voluble with his apologies.

He acted like an hysterical fool, bubbling over with silly laughter one moment and shedding equally silly tears the next. He was ridiculously light-spirited and happy, until his fantastic hilarity angered me. He appeared to think that, as he had become a Frenchman, he ought to behave as a sort of feather-headed clown.

His one consuming wish was that I should see Angele—the girl was the one object in his mental outlook at that moment, and everything else was all out of perspective.

It was a long time before I could make him understand that a much more serious matter than his love-farce had brought me to Charmes; and even while I compelled him to listen to the position of affairs at the castle, and the plight of his cousin there, I could see that his thoughts were away out of the room with his Angele.

"I am sorry for her, poor soul. I am sure I would have every one happy at a time like this. But I suppose it will be all settled somehow and some day," he said at the close, in a tone which made me fully realize that he considered it no business of his.

"There is a train that starts from Charmes in an hour and a half," said I, thinking it best to assume that he would go back with me. "We can catch by that a fairly good connection at Strasburg, and can reach the castle to-morrow."

"You are going back, then?" he queried.

"I think I can be of help to you."

"How can you help me if you are going there?"

"You will wish, of course, to hasten to the castle to save the honor of your family and of your cousin?"

"My family is here. My home is France. I am no longer a German. I have made the declaration to become naturalized. Do you think I would leave Angele on almost the eve of my wedding-day? To-morrow we shall be man and wife. Shall I instead, then, go to look after the affairs of a dead old man who never worried himself the paring of a nail about me until he thought I could be of use to him? What do you suppose Angele's father would say? Pouf! I can hear him. 'Very well, monsieur, go away. Attend to these people—these Germans—leave my daughter. Show yourself more German than French, and give the lie to your protestations. Pretend to become a Frenchman one moment and the next recognize the claim of your Fatherland and your German blood and kinship. Go, by all means, but do not return. Never set eyes on Angele again!' Eh, do you think I could do that?" and he threw up his hands, shoulders, and eyebrows in a perfect ecstasy of repudiation of the mere idea.

"A helpless young girl, your only kin in the world, is waiting there dependent upon your assistance. You are now the head of that great family whose honor and future are now threatened; and the entire fortunes of your noble house are at a crisis which make it imperative in all honor that you should assume the responsibilities of the position."

"And is there not a helpless girl here who will be dependent upon me? Am I not here taking the headship of a noble family? With this difference—that here I was not forgotten and ignored until I became necessary as a prop for a tottering wall. Would honor, think you, have nothing to say against my desertion of this family in the way you suggest? No, no, my friend; these people have appealed to your sentimental side. My place is here, and here I stop."

From that resolve no pleas, reproaches, arguments, or goads could move him. Nothing should make him budge from Angele; and he viewed everything from that one new standpoint.

"If you are eager to free my family from the mess their affairs have got into, take my place, go back and do it. You may claim by right all there is to be got; for certainly I could not help if I would. If he who was all his life at this work could not keep his house from falling, his son from being killed, and his daughter from danger, what can I hope to do?—I, a student, who have lived three-quarters of my life in France, who loathe a military life, and know absolutely nothing of the intricacies of diplomatic intrigue? You say you could help me? I don't know how; but if you could, what is the gain for me? My uncle is dead and leaves me nothing but a mess of intrigue and danger. My cousin is engaged and therefore will marry—and what is her husband to me?"

"Surely you are not dead to the demands of honor?" I cried; but against the wall of his selfishness the sea would have broken itself in vain.

"How do I serve my honor by forsaking Angele? No, no. I tell you I have ceased to be a German; I have renounced my family, and shall live under a new name. I am a student. This is work for men like you. Go and do it. I am rendering that girl a far greater service by sending you than by going myself."

It was useless to argue with him. He was hopelessly callous; and I sat biting my lips in anxious thought.

"When they know I have become a Frenchman, do you think they will accept help at my hands? Will they welcome my French wife, or my new family? Should I wreck my own happiness to enable them to insult me, and all that are now dear to me? Am I a fool? I will do what I can, but not that. If my cousin should need a home, she shall have as comfortable a one as my means will provide. But they must not claim me as one of their own kin. That is all."

"They are not likely to make any claim of the kind on you," I said. And the bitter contempt I felt for him came out in my tone.

He winced and flushed, and for a moment was stung to anger; but it passed.

"You think poorly of me because I have decided matters thus. As you will. We shall not meet again. Probably I shall never again cross the frontier. To show you my decision is no mere whim, but a deliberately chosen course, here I have a duly drawn up declaration renouncing my heirship. I drew it, of course, before I knew of the Prince's death, and I declined absolutely his proposals, and announced my intention to change my name and become a Frenchman. I was going to have this attested before a notary, and then send it to my uncle; but you can take it as it is, if you like. I will make a sworn declaration at any time it is desired. Do just what you will. And this I swear to you: I will never breathe a word of what has passed unless you wish me to speak. I owe you that for having brought you into the mess."

I took the paper and rose to leave.

"I will take means to let you know what is done. Here, I suppose?"

I spoke curtly, for I felt strongly.

"I do not wish to hear anything. A letter here will find me, of course, but my name for the future will be Henri Frombe—Hans von Fromberg will have ceased to exist, unless you are he." So indifferent was he to the critical seriousness of the affair that he laughed as he said this, and added: "After all, then, you will not see Angele. I am grieved at that," and he held out his hand.

"I cannot take your hand, M. Frombe," I said sternly. "I remain a German. Your desertion of your family at such a juncture of need makes any friendly feeling toward you impossible on my part. You hold that any man can lightly renounce his family and country. I do not. I take the strongest view of your conduct. France profits little by her newest citizen, and the Fatherland gains by the loss of so self-satisfied a renegade. I trust that we shall not meet again."

He was a coward, and shrank and paled under the lash of my words; but he made no attempt to resent them, and I left him with a feeling of bitter contempt and disgust at his conduct.

During the whole of my long journey back to the castle I sat absorbed in close thought, mapping out my plans, recalling old memories, and rousing my wits and energies for the task which Fate had set me, and from which apparently I could not break away.

CHAPTER V

THE SCENT OF TREACHERY

When I reached the castle, Captain von Krugen met me with several stories about steps which von Nauheim had taken to contest my authority. Orders I had given had been countermanded, and several arrangements changed. These things were small in themselves, but as his object was evidently to fight my influence and dispute my authority, I deemed it best to put my foot down at once.

I sent for all to whom the contradictory instructions had been given, and then requested von Nauheim's presence. At first he would not come, and then I sent the captain to tell him exactly what I meant to do, and that if he did not come every man and woman in the place would be warned to take no orders from him under pain of instant dismissal. Von Krugen carried the message with glee, and it roused the count to such anger that he came at once in a fury. Without giving him time to speak, I said:

"I sent for you, Count von Nauheim, because these good people here are in some difficulty as to where they are to look for orders. Will you explain to them that, although the Prince has left his fortune to his daughter, the castle passes to me with the headship of the house, and that, as at times like these there can be only one master, they must take their orders from me, and that where any instructions clash with mine they must be referred to me?"

He eyed me angrily, but could not dispute what I implied.

"I am no mouthpiece for you," he answered sullenly. "I have been accustomed to control matters here, for an obvious reason known to every one, that I have the honor to be the Countess Minna's affianced husband. What object, then, have you for any change?"

"Will you tell them what I have said, or will you compel me to issue peremptory orders, and cancel openly what you have done?" I asked in a quick, resolute tone, but low enough to be heard only by him.

"If you dare to humiliate me in that way——" he began.

"Quick, decide," I interposed sharply. "There can't be two masters here."

He hesitated, glancing first at and then away from me, while I kept my eyes fixed steadily on his face.

"Quick," I repeated sternly.

"Curse you, I'll make you pay for this!" he swore under his breath, with a vicious scowl. Then aloud, "Of course you people will understand that for the moment the present Prince here is your master," and with a wave of the hand he indicated me. He did it as ungraciously as he dared, and as soon as he had finished he left the room.

The effect of the incident was twofold—it strengthened my authority in the castle, and it made it more difficult than ever for me to draw back. But I had no thought now of doing that. I felt that I had cut off my retreat; and that, although I would much rather have told the Countess Minna exactly what my position was, any such candor was for the moment at least quite out of the question.

Of the girl herself I saw nothing during the next few days, and I passed the time absorbing all the information I could get, and trying to form a plan of campaign.

I guessed that nothing would be done by the agents of the Ostenburg family until a sufficient time had elapsed after the Prince's funeral to make it plain what we intended to do; and I judged that their next move would be determined by our own acts.

The funeral took place and directly afterward von Nauheim left the castle without acquainting me with his plans; and for four or five days following the Countess Minna gave no sign of a desire to see me. I began to grow impatient. I had no wish to force myself on her or into her confidence, but it was imperative that I should at least learn her wishes both in regard to von Nauheim and the big scheme of which her marriage was a part. In the mean time von Krugen was urging me to come to a decision to strike a blow to show our friends in Munich that we were going on with the matter.

I had come to the conclusion, however, that there was no chance whatever of carrying through any such plot as the old Prince had attempted. If it had ever been practicable to carry it out successfully, the chance had passed when the son, Gustav, had been killed. Up to that time there had, indeed, been a pretty widespread sympathy with the movement; and if a bold coup had been made, the lunatic King kidnapped, the young fellow proclaimed, and the Prince's power, shrewdness, and enormous influence thrown into the scales, it was possible that enough strength might have been paraded in the country to force the hands of the Imperial Government. But with the death of the son went half the support; and now with the death of the Prince I judged that more than half the remainder would go. It seemed to me, therefore, a sheer impossibility to carry such a scheme through successfully. The utmost I could hope to achieve would be to make such terms as should secure the safety of the Countess Minna, as well as of those who had been

concerned in the plot thus far.

Obviously they were compromised up to the hilt; and the manner in which Gustav's death had been compassed showed that among the Ostenburg interest there were men of great daring and recklessness ready to go to any length in defence of their own. They were on the winning side now, moreover, and I deemed it certain that to whatever lengths they might go they were pretty certain to secure the covert sanction of the authorities at Berlin. Berlin would side with the successful, I reckoned. Thus the more closely I probed the situation the less I liked it.

But in these desperate circumstances, where each man who took a part was playing with his life, what was a coward like von Nauheim doing? Even if he was angling to get possession of the wealth which would be the portion of the countess, he was not the man to run his neck into a noose: and whoever married the Countess Minna would inevitably have as part of that dowry the implacable enmity of her enemies.

What, then, ought I to do? My instincts were all in favor of striking some kind of blow, and of being the attacker instead of waiting to be attacked. We appeared to be in danger of being squeezed out of existence. Our supporters were falling away, our position growing weaker, and our resources becoming feebler the longer we waited. If we could only effect some little thing, it seemed that we should be in a better position to negotiate than if we merely did nothing. But what could we do?

There was another serious danger in delay, moreover, arising out of the consummate uncertainty of my own position. It was one thing to be mistaken for the rightful heir to the Prince, but quite another to attempt to make good that claim legally; and I soon had a sharp reminder of this.

The old lawyer who had acted for the Prince came to me a few days after the funeral for his instructions. I expressed in a general way what I wished, and then he said:

"There are certain of the estates which have always gone with the title, and should go now. It would be possible to make a claim to them against the actual provisions of the will."

He put it suggestively.

"I shall make no claim," I answered. "I do not for a moment intend to interfere with the Prince's disposition of matters."

"But he would have wished you to have them, I know. Indeed, I have letters from him to that effect."

"I shall not interfere with the will," I returned, rather abruptly.

"They are very rich estates."

"That makes no difference to me."

"The cost of maintaining the dignity of your Highness's title and position will be very heavy, and without them scarcely practicable."

"I have my private fortune, and that will and must suffice."

"Indeed!" he exclaimed in surprise. "I thought I knew to a mark the extent of your mother's small income. It is derived almost entirely from the Graffenheim property; and I understand that within the last few days you have ordered it to be sold. Do you not intend your affairs to remain in my hands?"

Here was clearly a mess I had not foreseen. The real man was getting rid of his German property when he turned Frenchman.

"You will certainly have my confidence, my dear sir," I said, in a carefully courteous manner. "And of course my affairs will remain in your hands. This, however, is only a very small thing, and I did not know of my uncle's death when I put it in hand."

"The Prince was always desirous of purchasing that property, because, as you know, it lies in the midst of the Gramberg estates. If you wish to sell it I should advise the Countess Minna to purchase it."

"I shall not sell it to the Countess Minna," I said, at a loss how to parry him. "I mean that probably I shall withdraw it from sale altogether now."

He looked at me in such surprise that I saw he knew something which made my reply ridiculous; but, being afraid to offend me, he said no more about it, and answered:

"That is, of course, just as you will. Then should I get on with the preparation of the papers of formal proof of your succession?"

"I don't know what is wanted," said I indifferently, though the man's words had sprung a mine under my very feet.

"Mere formalities, of course; just tracing your descent. The certificates of birth and such matters."

"Oh, yes; whatever is necessary you may prepare. Will it take long?"

His answer would tell me what time I should have for the whole business.

"No. A day or two—not more."

The reply filled me with consternation. I could not possibly make a legal claim to what did not belong to me; and yet I must have time—weeks, at least, and probably months. I let no sign of my feeling show in my face, but sat impassively thoughtful. Then, as if debating a point, I answered:

"You will have to create some delay in the matter. It is useless keeping my confidence from you. This will of the Prince's leaves me nothing but the castle, and that seems to have been about the only part of his property that he had mortgaged; so that practically there is nothing. Whether I shall accept the inheritance, therefore—and, of course, the title with it—is a question I have yet to decide; and I must have as long a time for that decision as possible; but, mark you, no one must know of this but yourself. This is my first confidential commission to you. Certain things might determine me at once; but marriages cannot be arranged in a week. You understand? And I have no fancy for the life of a man weighted with a big title and no means to support it properly."

He bowed as if in acquiescence, although this glaring contradiction of what I had said only a minute before obviously perplexed and disconcerted him.

"And now that you have my confidence," I said, laying great stress on the word, "tell me how long can we postpone these formalities—or, in other words, how long can I have to carry out my—my plan?" And I smiled slightly, as though the plan were some such matrimonial one as I had hinted at.

"A month, perhaps two months, without provoking much comment—of course, provided there is no opposition," he replied cautiously.

"I will find a way to deal with any opposition," said I promptly. "And now we understand one another."

With that I dismissed him. I saw the danger of this new development. The least suspicion would inevitably cause inquiry; and the most superficial inquiry would as inevitably bring the whole house of cards tumbling about my ears. But I had certainly one month, and perhaps two; and I must put the time to the best use I could.

The question of what that use should be was considerably influenced by von Nauheim, who returned that night, and immediately sought an interview with me. I noticed at once a marked change in his attitude.

"I want a confidential talk with you, Prince," he said; "and before we begin I wish to say I am very sorry I made a bear of myself to you before the funeral. But I was frightfully upset at the Prince's sudden death. It seemed to me that all our plans were going to the devil, and it was impossible for a man who had had only a student's career like yours to be of any use in such a case as ours. I own that I tried to frighten you into leaving here without going into matters; and then it was I saw what a different kind of man you were. But I was too wild to own it."

"And what has changed you since?"

"I've been in Munich in conference with our friends there to ascertain what effect the Prince's death will have."

"Well?"

"Von Krugen tells me you know everything, and the long and short of it is that if you'll join us we shall all be only too glad to have your help. I need scarcely tell you that those who stand by us now will reap the harvest when we've succeeded. It's deuced hard on you to have the whole of the Prince's fortune left away to Minna. Once this thing gets through she won't want it, of course; and it'll be my business to see that the Gramberg estates go with the title. I give you my word on that."

The man was lying, of course; but it wouldn't do to show that I knew it.

"I don't think the terms are high enough," said I quietly, as if weighing them. "The risk is enormous."

"It might be if we were not certain of success."

"And we certainly are not."

"Why, what can stand in the way? The feeling against the King grows every day. What do you think is his last freak? Another confounded palace, and this time underground. It will cost millions of marks—millions. Do you suppose the people are going to put up forever with this sort of thing? It has only just leaked out in Munich; and I tell you, man, the whole country will take fire and clamor for his deposition. There never was such a chance, and never will be such another."

There was a ring of sincerity in this indignation quite foreign to his usual manner, and I could not understand it.

"And what is your plan?" I asked.

"To strike—and strike at once," he cried loudly, dashing his fist down on the table, "while Munich

is mad with anger."

It was plausible enough, but I knew the man for a scoundrel.

"And my cousin—what does she say?" I asked.

"She can have no choice," he returned readily. "She must leave these things to us. She has a kind of reluctance, I know, and her heart has never been really in the work. But she is pledged to the finger-tips and can't draw back—at least without betraying the lot of us, as well as ruining herself. Sometimes I wish, indeed, that she had more spirit. Had I known she felt so strongly I should never have gone in so deep myself."

"Before I decide anything I must know her wishes," I said.

"Her wishes will be ours—if we make her understand that the alternative will be the ruin of all who have taken up her cause, and probably the death of every man here. Of course you'll force this home upon her?"

"It must first be forced home on me," said I.

"You know von Krugen's views," he urged.

He was showing too much earnestness now, and his whole manner was suggestive of a secret purpose. What it was I could not guess, of course; but no one could fail to read it in his manner.

"Yes, I know von Krugen's views; but I am accustomed to form my own opinions and to act on my own judgment."

"If you will come with me to Munich, I will give you plenty of facts to convince you."

He spoke with an assumption of lightness in his tone, and accompanied the words with a shrug of the shoulders, as of indifference. But the man was as easy to read as a book in some respects. I saw instantly that he had approached one of the chief points at which he had been aiming.

"Of course I will go with you to Munich," I answered readily; and a momentary flash of pleasure in his eyes gave me the clue I needed. It was at Munich that Minna's brother had been inveigled into the duel and killed, and this man had come back from there with some such plan against myself. My death would leave the girl absolutely without a friend in the world.

The game was indeed becoming engrossing in its interests; and at that moment I began to see the course I would take to cut the coils which threatened her.

"Before I go," I added, after a pause that was scarcely perceptible for all the revelation that had come to me in it, "I will see my cousin, and hear from her lips what she wishes."

"We will see her at once," he answered instantly.

"With your permission, I will see her alone."

"That is rather a strange request, Prince," he returned in a tone of surprise, "considering she is my promised wife. What reason have you for making it?"

"I wish her to speak freely to me, unfettered by either you or von Krugen's insistent persuasions. She will speak more freely alone, and, as head of the house, I choose my own steps."

"I see no reason for it," he replied sharply. "Do you suggest I intimidate her?"

"I suggest nothing," I returned quietly. "I get my information in my own way, that is all. If you object to my doing that, I decline to get it in yours. My visit to Munich can stand over meanwhile."

"But things can't wait; this business must be done at once."

"Then the short cut to it must be as I prefer to direct."

The mask nearly fell from him. He bit his lips, and I saw the anger rush to his eyes and face; but he checked it, and, though he had to fight hard to keep from breaking out, he answered sufficiently calmly:

"Oh, if you set so much store by it as all that, certainly see her alone. You will find out no more than I have said."

But I had a different opinion; and I sent up a message at once to the Countess Minna to ask for an interview immediately.

"And when shall we start for Munich?" I asked when the messenger had gone. "To-morrow?"

"The sooner the better," he replied; and again I caught a fleeting, stealthy glint of pleasure in his eyes.

CHAPTER VI

MY "COUSIN"

My short conversation with von Nauheim, the sudden change in his attitude toward me, and the slight indications of his real feelings which I had observed did more than anything which had yet occurred to impress me with the deadly seriousness of the task I had undertaken. I was convinced that as the result of this visit to Munich some fresh development of treachery had been planned, and that he was closely concerned as either principal or tool. Fortunately for me he was a poor diplomatist, and as my former knowledge of him gave me a sufficient clew to his real character, he could not so dissemble his manner as to mislead me. Without that clew he might have tricked me, of course, as he had tricked, others. Apparently his interests lay entirely in carrying forward the plot to place the girl he was to marry on the throne. He would certainly secure her fortune, while as her consort he would enjoy a position of magnificent power, infinitely alluring to a man of his nature. Moreover, he was the chosen representative of one of the most influential sections of Bavarian society, whose power must be an enormous factor in any struggle.

Then I had been a good deal impressed by his momentary flash of sincerity when he had been speaking of the King's mad excesses. He was then expressing a sincere opinion, I was sure, though whether his own or inspired by others for whom he was acting I could not say. But the thought kept recurring to me with ever-increasing suggestiveness.

The key to his conduct lay, I was convinced, in Munich—and to Munich I would go at any risk. That there would be risk a child could see; and the nature of it would depend on the character of this man's treachery, the people with whom he was co-operating, and the length they were prepared to go in silencing me.

I regarded it as quite possible that I should not return. If, as was supposed, the death of the Count Gustav had been deliberately planned, I might take it for granted that I should be pursued with almost equal hostility. This I had read plainly in the man's manner, and it prepared me to believe that he himself in some way had been connected with Gustav's murder.

But there was another very serious consideration. If I was put out of the way and no one at the castle had proof of von Nauheim's treachery, what would be Minna's position? Obviously it must at once become one of consummate peril. Ought I to go away, therefore, without warning her of the man's true character, and without arranging some definite plan of action? Yet how was I to warn her without telling her what I knew and how I knew it—in other words, unless I took her into my confidence as to who I was?

It will be easily understood how these thoughts perplexed me as I made my way up the broad stairway of the castle to the room where she was to receive me, and how infinitely the embarrassment was magnified by the unwonted emotions which her presence now, as formerly, roused in my breast.

She greeted me with sweet cordiality, and the eyes, which had an indescribable fascination for me, wore now an expression of almost anxious alarm as their gaze rested on my very grave face. The Baroness Gratz was with her, a circumstance which made me unwilling to speak plainly and added to my embarrassment.

I inquired after the health of the two and uttered one or two commonplaces, when Minna, after a pause, during which she had most attentively studied my looks, exclaimed:

"You have not come only to say these things, cousin. Your face tells me plainly enough there is something urgent."

"That is true. I have much to say that concerns you very closely."

She was very quick and understood me.

"You wish to speak to me alone. I am sure you will not object, aunt, if my cousin and I speak together in the window there"—and she rose and walked toward a large bay window at the far end of the room, and motioned to me to sit beside her.

The old baroness looked surprised and a little indignant. It was no occasion to stand on trifles, but I did not wish to offend her at a time when her help might be urgently needed—perhaps within a few hours; so I made a low deferential bow and said:

"You will understand this rather unusual step, baroness, when I tell you that I have already declined to hold this interview with my cousin even in the presence of the Count von Nauheim, and that my object is merely to have direct from my cousin's lips alone her wishes and intentions as to the future."

"I understand, Prince," she replied, with her stately bow; but I thought I could detect some symptoms of alarm. Whether this was merely awe of me, or the evidence of some other hidden fear, I could not decide. But the whole atmosphere of the palace reeked so foully with intrigue that I did not know whether she was true or in von Nauheim's plot.

As I took my seat by Minna's side she welcomed me with a little smile, which, sad and wan though it was, seemed like a little messenger of confidence. Then she put a hand on my arm and said wistfully:

"You will treat me quite frankly, cousin? I have been relying on that so strongly."

"As frankly as I can, but remember very little yet. Moreover, it is your frankness that is to be tested. Do you think you can trust me sufficiently to do as you said when I saw you last—tell me the whole of your wishes unreservedly?"

"Certainly I will," she replied instantly. "I have been waiting to do so ever since the day of my dear father's funeral."

"I understood that I was to await some sign from you. You said as much," I reminded her.

"True; but your message to me, that you would seek an interview as soon as practicable, has kept me waiting till now. I have been impatient; but it does not matter now," she ended, with a smile.

"Who gave you my message?" I asked. I had sent none, of course, but guessed that it was a ruse of von Nauheim's to keep us apart while he was away in Munich.

"The count himself," answered the girl in some astonishment, and with a look of quick suspicion. "Did you not send any?"

"There has been some misunderstanding," I said quietly. "But I was waiting to hear from you, and I was to the full as impatient as you could have been."

She cast her eyes down and frowned, and her little foot tapped quickly on the floor.

"It must be as you say—he misunderstood you—or else he was afraid of my speaking plainly to you while he was away." The first sentence was spoken with hesitation, the second quickly and with a touch of indignation, and directly afterward her pulse quickened and she said volubly: "Cousin Hans, I can tell you what I dared not tell my father. I am afraid of the count. You have asked me what I wish. I have two wishes—to be released from this marriage, and to stop all this hateful intrigue for the throne. I am not fit for it. I do not wish it. I am only afraid and harassed and distracted. Oh, I long with a regret I cannot put in words for the days of quiet and peace when none of this was ever thought of! Then I had not a care or grief, and now life is all fear and sorrow. I am the most miserable girl on earth."

She lifted her hands and let them fall again on her lap with a gesture eloquent of despair, and now that the momentary excitement had passed her voice grew heavy with the accents of sorrow.

I was silent, not quite knowing how to meet such an outburst of grief and confidence.

More than that, however: I had heard with a rush of joy, which I dared not let her see, the outcry against the marriage. At that moment the feeling seemed to me like a guilty one, but I vowed to myself that if it cost me every drop of blood in my body I would save her from it. But I sat now grave, silent, and thoughtful, while the little pathetic glances of appeal for help which she cast at me shot right into my heart and thrilled me till I could scarcely hold myself under restraint.

When I did not reply—and I did not because I dared not trust myself—she sighed deeply, and said in a tone even more despairing than before:

"I suppose your silence means that you also are against me. Oh, this ambition! What a curse it is! What has it not cost us? But for it my brother would be alive to-day. My dear father was just as surely another of its victims. I am forced to sacrifice all I care for on earth and to wed a man whom I fear. And now you, fresh from a life of books, on whom I built so much, are caught by the same madness, the fever burns in your blood, and you join this mad hue-and-cry after ruin. Ambition—ah, my father often rated me for my lack of it; but what has it brought to us but death, and what does it promise but misery? Cousin Hans, I beseech you with all my heart and soul do not join with those against me. Try to see this with my eyes, and do not urge me. I know you will think me weak and a child, a feeble, helpless coward; but I cannot go on. You are now my only hope. Cousin, do say you will not side against me!"

As she spoke her hands clasped my arm as if clinging to me for help, and she gazed into my face with such yearning appeal that had I been a stone, or the stern, self-contained man I had tried to appear, I must have been moved. And I was no stone where she was concerned.

"God forbid that I should force you," I said, my voice scarcely steady, despite my efforts to control it. "Do not doubt that I am with you in whatever you decide."

"Oh, thank God, thank God! How I have hoped it! Now I have a friend indeed."

No words of mine can describe the radiant look that came on her face as she cried this; and the smile she gave me lives in my memory as one of the loveliest sights my eyes have ever beheld.

After this outburst of emotion we sat silent some minutes—she, in all innocence of relief, keeping my hand between her own two; and I, on my side, drinking in, until I was intoxicated, the sweetness of emotions such as had never stirred my heart before.

I made the first movement—a slight attempt to withdraw my hand. She let go, and then, with another smile of frank pleasure and trust, she said:

"Not only my cousin, but my friend."

"There is yet much to do," I said gently.

"But we shall do it together. I am no longer alone with all against me, even my dear father. Tell me what is first to be done. I know that you will be successful, for you have given me hope. Will you tell the Count von Nauheim that the marriage project is at an end, or shall I? I will, if you wish, though I have been afraid of him; but no longer, for you are on my side."

Sweet as these renewed protestations of trust were to my ears and senses, they were not without embarrassment.

"If you trust me, you will have to do so wholly," I said; "and you must do as I wish, even if it is altogether distasteful to you."

"I will do whatever you tell me," she assented readily.

"Then in the first place we must act as if this conversation had altered nothing."

"Do you mean...?" she began, with a frown of repugnance, and then stopped.

"I mean that for the present your relations with the count must remain as they have been. Do not ask all my reasons. But for the present it is necessary that no one, you understand, no one shall have any thought that we are not going on with your father's scheme." I told her then of von Nauheim's visit to Munich and its result, and that before we settled anything we must know more. "I should be deceiving you," I added, "if I did not tell you that grave risks have yet to be run in this matter, and the danger to some of us may prove greater than we can avert. I cannot tell you all my thoughts, but I am going to Munich——"

"Ah, no, not there, cousin. That is where Gustav was killed."

"They will not kill me," I answered, smiling to reassure her. "It is essential for me to go that I may probe certain matters to the bottom. Then I shall know better what to do for the best."

"You will never come back. They will not let you," she wailed, wringing her hands.

"We are not children to foster silly fears," I said. "Of course there are risks in going, but there is certain failure if I do not go. And I go forewarned, with your brother's fate to caution me to be wary, and with the knowledge that you depend upon me to rouse my wits. Do not fear. I shall return and bring with me a plan of action. But if by any chance I should not, you will know there is danger for you. I shall leave Captain von Krugen here, and if on any day he does not hear from me, that very day you and the Baroness Gratz must leave the castle under his care, cross the French frontier, and fly to Paris. I shall leave full directions as to this with von Krugen. From Paris your cause can be best fought. But above all things be careful not to let your whereabouts be known to any one except the captain. He will know from me how to act."

She sat trembling and agitated.

"Why not say at once that the marriage has been broken off, that the plot is abandoned, and cross the frontier immediately?"

"Because I hope to win our way to a far different ending than exile. That is well enough as a last resource of a helpless woman; but these men will find me—well, I will utter no big words till I know more and have done something. I am looking for a stroke of double cunning somewhere, and I do not expect to look in vain. In my view you are safe so long as these men believe we have no suspicion of them; but their attitude toward you may change at any moment. And now remember that even von Krugen, honest and stanch as I believe him, must know nothing of our abandonment of the plot on which he has set his hopes. I am compelled to mislead even him, and the secret must be yours and mine—ours only. You promise?"

"From the bottom of my heart," she answered earnestly, putting her hand into mine. "When shall I see you again?" she asked suddenly. "I can be brave when you are with me, and I will try not to play the coward in your absence. But"—with a sigh—"I have no friend but you."

"Yes, you have a stanch and brave friend in Captain von Krugen," I answered, "and I shall be back within a few days."

I spoke cheerfully and as though with absolute conviction.

"You have opened a new gate of hope for me, cousin," she said as I rose from beside her. "But the thought of your leaving me is almost like shutting it again."

"It shall never be shut, if I can help it, until you have passed through to a safe and happy life."

I spoke earnestly as I felt, and with that I left her.

I had much to do before I could set out on my journey, and one matter especially troubled me. I must stop von Fromberg from selling the property of which the old lawyer had spoken to me, and I was at a loss how to communicate with him. To send a letter through the post I dared not; to go to him myself was impossible; yet whom could I trust to carry a letter or message? If the sale were not stopped, suspicion would certainly be created; and after much consideration I resolved to word a guarded letter addressed to Henri Frombe, and entrust it to Steinitz. I had meant to take him with me to Munich lest I should need assistance, but this other matter was more urgent.

I sent for him now and charged him on his honor to take the letter, and himself to place it in M. Frombe's hands when no one else was present; to ask no questions, and to answer none; but

simply to bring back to me direct to Munich the reply, and not to breathe a word to a soul about the mission.

"My life may depend on your loyalty," I said when I gave him the packet, "and probably also that of the Countess Minna, and most certainly the whole future of our scheme," and I exacted a pledge of loyalty.

It was a risk, of course, but then risks were all about me, and I could not avoid taking some. All I could hope to do was to manage to select the smaller ones.

Then I had a close and, to a point, confidential conference with von Krugen; and I explained clearly what he was to do in the event of anything happening to me at Munich.

"If there is no treachery there will be no danger in this journey of mine; but if there is, and I am only too sure of it, then we know that those who are playing traitor will try to get rid of me in order to render my cousin helpless and in their power. That you must prevent; and her safety will rest almost solely with you."

"But the Count von Nauheim?" he asked in some surprise.

"You will trust no one but yourself, captain," I returned significantly.

"If I had proof that he was a traitor!" he growled.

"I am going to get proofs concerning everything. Unless this is all genuine, our scheme is bound to be shipwrecked."

His face grew very dark and lowering.

"My place is by your side in Munich," he said.

"If I can find the traitors, you may share in their punishment; but meanwhile your place is here in Gramberg to guard my cousin. And if you should have even a thought of danger while I am away, call me back at once. But if my calculations are correct there will be no immediate danger for her."

"Your Highness will not reckon on me in vain. But I would to God I could be with you there. You are taking your life in your hands, and ought not to go alone."

"If there is that amount of danger, better I alone than you with me; but I am well prepared, and shall not suffer things to reach that pass"—and I repeated at great length and detail all that I wished him to do in the event of his having to fly to Paris.

At the close of the interview he gave me a solemn pledge to carry out my wishes, and showed many signs of loyal regard for myself, mingled with genuine anxiety as to the issue of this journey to Munich. Then I sent word to von Nauheim that I should be ready to start with him on the following day, and I passed a sleepless, tossing night seeking to piece together in a connected whole the fragments of the problem as I possessed them, and to estimate the actual perils and risks of what I knew must be an eventful journey.

CHAPTER VII

AT MUNICH

When we started for Munich it required very little observation to see that von Nauheim was striving sedulously to conceal the fact that he attached such critical importance to my accompanying him. Indeed, had I had no prior knowledge of him, I think his demeanor would have roused my suspicions.

"I suppose you will tell me what passed between you and Minna yesterday," he said when we were in the train. "You've produced a considerable change in her, for I found her much more willing to go on with us than she was before."

"I gave her to understand that very much must depend on the result of this journey. If I am satisfied that there is reason to hope for success, it will be at least an impartial opinion—for at present I have not much faith. And I suppose she attaches a great deal of importance to that."

"Did you urge her not to throw us over? I presume you did."

"Why should I? I am not convinced myself."

"Well, here are signs enough of the popular indignation, at any rate," he said as he tossed me a morning paper with some very strong comments on the lunatic King's acts.

"Discontent is one thing, rebellion another," I replied as I opened the paper to read what he pointed out. I had no wish to talk, but to think, and I made as though I were engrossed in the paper.

My companion took another journal and played at reading it; but I saw him watching me every

now and then, until the paper fell on his lap, and he stared out of the window obviously buried in his thoughts. I knew the tenor of them later when his face changed, and he turned to speak.

"You will stay with me, of course, Prince?" he said.

"Certainly," I replied readily, although half a hundred suspicions were started of his probably sinister motive for the invitation.

"It will be so much more convenient for our purpose than your going to the Gramberg town-house," he said. "I've been thinking of the best course to take. What sort of proof do you wish to have that measures are ripe?"

"An interview with those who are to carry them out, of course."

"That will be best; and fortunately most of them are in Munich. Then I presume you will be prepared to do what all the rest of us have done—take an oath of allegiance to the new Queen?"

"When I join you, I will do whatever the rest do."

"We are all pledged to the hilt. Every man of us has made the oath and signed a declaration to uphold the good cause."

"Signed a declaration? That seems a strong step," I said, though all forms were pretty much the same thing to me.

"But a necessary one. There is no drawing back then," he answered.

"Well, I will sign what I see others sign and do what others do," I replied firmly. "But, understand, I must see these things done before my eyes." I said this because of an idea that flashed into my thoughts at that moment.

"You are disposed to be cautious to the verge of timidity, eh?" he sneered.

"I am resolved to satisfy myself," I returned; and for a reason that I kept to myself I rather liked the idea of what he had said.

After a pause he continued:

"Roughly, what I propose is this: I will take you round to introduce you to the more prominent men—in particular to Baron Heckscher, who is really the leader of us; and then we will have a meeting at my rooms, where everything can be explained and settled. What say you?"

"I agree; but of course I reserve my right to take any other step I may think necessary that suggests itself to me."

"Naturally, naturally!" he exclaimed. "Now that the Prince has gone we are only too glad to have a cautious, calculating head to take his part."

The words were as false as the man. I read it in his tone and manner; and he was far more ready to curse me, had he dared, for my profession of caution. But I pressed it, because I knew that this exaggerated carefulness was the best evidence of my seeming sincerity.

A long silence followed, during which I weighed carefully all he had said. His manner in speaking of these details was tinged by a singular nervousness; he blurted out his points like a man who has been given a task which has overweighted him. And he suggested to me the condition of a poor actor who has had his part drilled into him by a subtler hand, and says his lesson badly.

Presently he began again:

"Of course you'll understand we are all putting ourselves into your hands and in your power in this matter; and the more so with every additional step we take." He was coming to another point in his lesson, I thought. "You will give me your solemn pledge not to divulge a single name you hear, nor a single fact that is told to you. If you'll do that now, I'll give you an outline of our plans at once."

"You can tell me as much or as little as you please. I pledge my honor to use nothing, except as the interest of my cousin may require—and that, I presume, is the intention of all concerned."

He frowned and bit his lips and thought a moment.

"Of course that's the intention; what else could it be?"

"Then if you want me to join you you must trust me; otherwise I may as well go back to Gramberg at once. But, of course, my return will be the signal for throwing the whole thing up at once. It is for you to choose."

"I had better tell you," he said after another pause. "Things are nearly ripe; almost as forward as when that hot-headed fellow Gustav wrecked everything by losing his temper and getting involved in that duel. We have resolved to take up the Prince's scheme pretty much where it was dropped. In a fortnight's time there will be an excellent time for striking the final blow. We have friends in all the public offices; several of the Ministers themselves are ready to welcome the change; the whole bodyguard of the King at the palace is practically composed of our men; and everything promises success. The King will be at the palace, and we have arranged that a great fancy-dress ball shall be given on a certain night. His lunatic Majesty is, as perhaps you know,

rather madder on that subject than on any other; and he delights in dressing himself up in half a dozen different costumes in the course of a single night to perplex, as he thinks, all who are present, and get at the real sentiments of his people about him. But his attendants always arrange that his costume shall bear a certain mark by which he will be known. In this way the ass of a King is fooled to the top of his bent, and instead of hearing genuine opinions about himself hears only those which are carefully tuned for his ears. Well, our scheme is to have this royal mark worn by some one who is not the King; to have the King himself seized and placed under restraint; to let Minna be at hand at the ball, and as soon as it is known that the King has gone to proclaim her there and then."

"An ingenious scheme, so far as the easy part of abducting the King is concerned," I replied. "But the difficulties only begin when he is out of the way. What are you going to do with him—kill him?"

"No, there will be no bloodshed. There is no need. The whole country is ready for the abdication; nine-tenths of the best men are on our side—and the other tenth will come in; and to give the thing plausibility we are going to have a sort of drama at the ball, in which the King—the sham one, of course—will announce his abdication and appoint his successor—Minna. That act of abdication will be written, and on examination will be found to be actually in the handwriting of the King himself. The whole scene will be described to the country as an actual occurrence; and this will be on the authority of the foremost men in Bavaria—a sort of informal Council of State. It will be a definite and formal abdication. That of itself will silence opposition and carry the people, who are, indeed, only too eager to need much argument."

"And the King himself?"

"He will simply be put where he ought to have been long enough ago—under restraint."

It was a clever plot, and, given the power behind those carrying it out, as likely to be successful as any that human wit could have devised.

"But what of the Ostenburg interest?" I rapped out the question sharply, with a keen, quick glance, and for a moment it seemed to disconcert him slightly.

"We do not put their power very high," he said then. "They think our chances ended with Gustav's death, and that, now the old Prince has gone, there is no one to carry the thing a step farther. But we must, of course, lose no time, and must strike before they even think we are contemplating any action at all. We shall catch them utterly unprepared; and, in a thing of this kind, to be unprepared is to lose."

"Do you mean you think they will surrender their claim to the throne without a struggle of any sort?"

"No; but they can do nothing when once we are in possession."

"But the Imperial authorities at Berlin, man?"

"The one consideration there is the *de facto* argument. Let us get possession, backed by formal abdication and the actual document appointing Minna to the succession, and Berlin may do what it likes. They will think twice before risking a civil war in the country to maintain the rights of a lunatic. At least so longer heads than mine hold, and I agree with them."

"Well, I shall see," and I was bound to confess to myself that, if everything was genuine, the inference he drew was right. I knew enough of the sort of argument that weighs at Berlin to be sure of this.

But was it genuine? If not, where was the flaw? And all the rest of the journey I sat pondering this part of the problem, and reviewing again and again all he had said.

I was much impressed by it.

Two points in particular stood out boldly in my thoughts: If this plot could be carried through—and I was half inclined to believe it possible—Minna could make far better terms, if she still wished to recede, when success had been attained than she could at present. If there were at the back of the scheme all this influence of which von Nauheim had spoken, it would be a dangerous thing for her to throw over those who had supported her without securing, at least, their safety as well as her own. That would be dishonorable and cowardly, and I knew she would not consent to such a course. If these representations were correct, therefore, I began to fear that Minna had been too far pledged to be able to draw back at this juncture. We must go forward until the best terms could be made.

But against this I knew that the man who was giving me the information was as false as hell itself; and, even while I sat meditating and brooding over what he had said, I caught the swift, searching, cunning glances which he darted every now and then at me as if to see how far he had fooled me.

It was in this mood of fresh doubt that I arrived at Munich, and drove with him to his rooms. The sumptuous comfort and costly appointments of these surprised me. When I had known him years before, he had had but scanty means, and his family were comparatively poor. Yet these rooms of his were fit for a man of the largest fortune. Even this circumstance added to my suspicions. If he was a traitor, he was being well paid for his treachery.

The journey with me in the train and the fact that he was now in his own house seemed to put him more at his ease.

"I shall have to leave you for a considerable time, Prince, while I prepare our friends for your visits," he said; "but you will of course consider this quite as your own house. This evening, or probably to-morrow, we can get to work. In the mean time, if you do not already know Munich, you will find no lack of interesting sights."

For the rest of that day I was left to my own devices, and we did not meet until late in the evening, when he told me his plans for the next day, and that he had arranged for a round of interviews with the leading men on our side.

The result of them was only to increase my perplexity. Wherever I went I was welcomed cordially, my co-operation requested, my caution approved, and the most complete assurances given to me on all points. Had the success of the scheme depended entirely upon my joining in it, I could not have been more warmly welcomed.

I could not understand it in the least. Every question I asked was answered, as it seemed, quite fully and frankly; and every investigation I made only convinced me that the ramifications of the plot were vastly wider than I imagined, and that the prospects of success were enough to force me to believe in it.

And yet I could not shake off my suspicions. I could find no ground for them other than my knowledge of von Nauheim. There was nothing but that to warrant them. But the more closely I watched him the more uneasy I became, and the more convinced that he at least had some double motive.

I was in the position of a man who is being persuaded to a course he dislikes against every prejudice and instinct of his nature, and despite his earnest desire to trust his instinct. I did not wish to find the affair genuine, but I could find no flaw anywhere, probe, search, suspect, and investigate as I would.

At the end of the fourth day I could not deny they had a right to ask for a definite decision for me to throw in my lot with them, and, while I was dead against doing so, I could not suggest a single reason of value and force for my opinion. The meeting to receive my decision was fixed for the sixth evening, and I looked forward to it with considerable apprehension.

The previous day I resolved to use for a purpose that was almost as critical as the object of the visit to Munich. It was an inquiry that I alone could make as to von Nauheim's past.

I knew that in the days when he had dealt his dastardly injury on my family he had a wife, whom he had married secretly, living in Thuringia. I was almost alone in the knowledge, which I had gained by accident, and my purpose now was to ascertain if she was still alive.

Fortune favored my investigation. The wife was still in the town, living in a humble way as a shop-keeper, and still ignorant of the real position and character of her husband. I had no difficulty in finding her, and using part of my knowledge of years before. I had some conversation with her and her two children, eliciting the fact that she had not seen von Nauheim for years, did not know whether he was alive or dead, and did not care. She was earning her own living and educating her children, and prayed only that she might be troubled by the man no more.

It was not my cue to stir muddy waters. All I needed was to know where to put my hand upon her at any moment that it might be necessary to spoil the scoundrel's schemes.

The villain meant to deceive Minna von Gramberg as he had deceived my sister years before, and my thoughts about him were bitter and black and wrathful as the train whirled me back through the summer night to Munich. But I was jubilant too; for I held the knowledge that must inevitably frustrate his scheme, and I resolved that I would use it at the forthcoming meeting, if no other cause suggested itself, to refuse to go forward any farther. It was, of course, an ample reason for such refusal; and as I had the proofs so fresh in my hands, there was not a man of honor in the affair who would not say I was doing right. But events were to happen destined to change all this current of my thoughts.

When I reached Munich it was late, but a mild, soft night, and I loitered through the deserted streets on my way to von Nauheim's house, enjoying the walk. I had to pass through one of the outlying parts of the city, and I was walking very slowly, thinking and smoking, when I was startled by a loud and sudden cry for help that came from some distance ahead of me. I am a swift runner, and I set off at my fastest pace, the cry, which was repeated, being my guide. I passed two or three streets, crossed a broad, dark square, and then I heard the cry for the third time, and with it the sound of men struggling and fighting, and the clash of steel. I had no weapon with me save a stout oak stick; but I gave no thought to my own danger as I rushed on, and set up an answering shout to let it be known that I was at hand. As I reached the other side of the square I came suddenly in full view of the disturbance.

Four men, two armed with swords and two having knives, were attacking one man, who, with his back to the wall, was fighting for his life like a demon, parrying, lunging, and thrusting with amazing dexterity and skill. He had been wounded, however, I could tell, and although he had wounded more than one of his assailants, he was in a very fair way of coming badly out of the fight.

Fired by the infernal cowardice of the four men in setting on one, I let out an oath, and, grasping my stick with both hands, I clenched my teeth, and rushed upon the villains from behind. I brought the heavy knob of my stick down with crushing force upon the arm of the man nearest me, making the arm drop nerveless by his side, and sending his sword clattering down on the stones; and then I turned and smashed it with all my force right into the face of a second man who made as if to attack me. At the same instant he who had been assailed in the first instance drove his sword through a third; and, seeing this unexpected turn given to matters, the fourth ran away—an example which the rest followed.



**GRASPING MY STICK WITH BOTH HANDS, I CLENCHED MY TEETH,
AND RUSHED UPON THE VILLAINS FROM BEHIND.**

"You came in the nick of time, friend," said the man coolly, coming toward me. "Another two minutes or so and these beasts would have done—What! Heinrich Fischer!" he cried, in a tone of the greatest astonishment, holding out his hand. "This is well met indeed."

I did not think so; for it was with something akin to dismay that I recognized a French fencing-master, named Guion, with none too savory a reputation, from whom, in the days of my play-acting, I had lessons in stage fencing. I gave him my hand, but I could not make the clasp cordial.

"How came you in this plight, M. Guion?"

He laughed.

"Guion? Was that my name then? French, I suppose. By the body of the devil, I have such a lot of names and countries I can't remember them all. But I only use one at a time, and now, my good sir, I am a Corsican, and my name is Praga—Juan Praga, at your service, and not ashamed to own that I owe you my life. But what's the matter with you?"

"Praga!" I cried. "So it's you, is it, who fought the young Count von Gramberg and killed him?"

"Ho, and what in the name of the devil's skin do you know about that? But it's true, and it's equally true that to-night's business is part of the result. But, by the blood!"—and his face snarled like an angry dog's—"I'll make them pay."

"I can help you to your revenge," I said impulsively. "Let's go where we can be alone."

He stared at me as if in the greatest astonishment, then shrugged his shoulders, laughed, swore copiously, and then laughed again and said:

"You? Well, you've saved my life, so it's only fair you should do what you please with it. Come along with me."

And he led me away, vowing and protesting, by all the saints in and out of the calendar, that all he had in the world, whether purse, sword, or life itself, was at my absolute disposal.

CHAPTER VIII

PRAGA'S STORY

My thoughts as I walked with my devil-may-care companion to his rooms were busy enough. How could I get out of him what he knew without compromising myself, and how explain that I was no longer Heinrich Fischer, the actor, but the Prince von Gramberg, without starting his suspicions? My hasty exclamation that I could help him to his revenge had been exceedingly foolish, and I was at a loss to know how far I could trust him to keep any secret.

He took me to his rooms, and very comfortable quarters they were. I noticed, too, that he was far better dressed than I had ever seen him in Frankfort. He was a dark, swarthy, lean-faced, lithe fellow, and his black eyes, keen and daring, noticed my look of questioning surprise, and he laughed, showing his gleaming white teeth in the lamplight.

"Not the first time I owe my life to that little fellow," he said, laying his sword-stick, an ordinary-looking stout malacca cane, on the table. "A workman should never travel without his tools, remember that, my friend. And so you are surprised to see me so comfortably placed, eh? Well, I am a man of means, and live at my ease—at least I was. But shall I tell you?"

"By all means," said I, throwing myself into a chair, anxious to get him to talk freely.

"First let us drink; and I may thank the Holy Virgin and you—but especially you, I think—that my throat is still sound enough to swallow good liquor—the one thing in life the loss of which makes one think of death regretfully."

And he tossed off a glass of wine.

"Are you wounded?" I asked.

"A scratch somewhere on my arm—may God blight the hand that dealt it!" He changed in a moment from a light tone to one of vehement passion, and then as quickly back again to one of cheery chatter. "If He doesn't, I will; so that's settled. Let's see to the scratch, though." He took off his coat, examined the hurt, and I bathed it and bound it up carefully. "A mere nothing," he said, "for me, that is—not for him."

For a moment or two he moved about the room as if occupied, and then he turned to me, and with a light laugh, but a piercing look from his dark, glittering eyes, he asked:

"And now, tell me, who are you?"

"The Prince von Gramberg," I answered instantly.

I was, indeed, half prepared for the question, for I had been studying him carefully. The answer pleased him.

"Good. You are not afraid to tell me the truth. But I knew it. You had been pointed out to me here in Munich—pointed out, do you understand, for a purpose. And I said to myself, the Prince von Gramberg and Heinrich Fischer are the same person. Why? And when I could not answer the question I thought to myself: I will wait. Here is a secret. It may pay me to keep my tongue still. So you see I know you."

"You were going to tell me about yourself. That will interest me more than your speculations as to my reasons for turning actor for a year or two."

I spoke with an air of indifference.

"The canaille!" he exclaimed angrily, with a bitter scowl. "They were sick of me. I know too much. I am dangerous. I will no longer do their work; and so, by the fires of hell, they think to get rid of me! Wait, wait, my masters, and you shall see what you have done." He threw his right arm up, and clenched his fist with a most dramatic gesture. "It was surely their evil genius sent you my way just now. Do you know how near death you are at this moment?" he asked; "or you would be, if I had taken up their cursed work."

"I shall know a great deal better if you will speak clearly," I replied, not letting him see how his question surprised me.

"I will. I don't know whether you wish me to regard you as a Prince or play-actor; but, whichever it is, you saved my life to-night, and if I turn against you may I go to hell straightway."

"You can please yourself what you call me. I am the Prince von Gramberg in fact, whatever I may have seemed formerly."

"And I am Juan Praga, the Corsican. Not French, or Italian, or German, or any of the dozen different damned parts I have played; but Juan Praga, the Corsican. I left Frankfort before you did—about eighteen months ago—and I wandered about the country till my reputation as a fencer, and my lack of it in other things, first set me up as a master in Berlin, and then brought these devils to me. They approached me slyly, stealthily, like cats, flattering my skill, and saying there was good work for my sword. And with lies they brought me here to Munich. I knew

nothing except that there was money to be made, and the life of a man of pleasure to lead. I suspected nothing; even when one of them came and told me my skill as a swordsman had been called in question, my honor impeached, and myself charged with being an impostor, and that if I could not clear myself I must be off for a rogue."

"I begin to see," I exclaimed when he paused.

"Yes, yes, you will guess what it meant," he replied, nodding his head vigorously. "But I could not then. And it came out gradually that the man who had dared to say this was young Count Gustav von Gramberg. I demanded to meet him face to face and give him the lie. Reluctantly, as it seemed—by the nails of the Cross! it was the reluctance of infernal traitors—they agreed and promised that we should meet. Then they fired him with wine, and fed him with a lie about me; and when we met we were like two tigers thirsting to be at one another's throats. You know what happened!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hand again. "We quarrelled, I struck him, he challenged me; and when we met I ran him through the heart."

"It was murder for you to fight a man like that with swords," I cried sternly.

"It was murder, Prince," he answered slowly. Then he added, with voluble passion, "Deep, deliberate, cold-blooded, damnable murder; but I was not the murderer. Mine was the hand, but theirs was the plot; and I never realized it till they came to me and told me that they had planned its every detail and step, that I was in their power; and that if I dared to falter in any order they gave me, they would have me charged openly as a murderer, and swear to such a story as would have me on the scaffold in a trice. What could I do? I was powerless. I raged and swore, and cursed for an hour; but they had me fast in their clutches, with never a chance of escape. But they did not know me."

He broke off and chuckled with demoniacal cunning, filled himself another bumper of wine, and drained the glass at a gulp.

"What did you do? And who are the men?"

He looked round at me with a leer of triumph, and, spreading out his hands with a wide sweeping gesture, he laughed and said:

"I spread a net, wide and fine and strong, and when all was right I baited it for a coward—a thin-blooded, hellish coward—and I caught him. You know him well enough; and if you saved my life just now, I can save yours in return. I snared him here to these rooms with a lie that I was ill and dying and wanted to make my peace with Heaven and confess; and he came running here in white-livered fear of what I should tell. That was ten days ago; and in the mean time, for weeks and months I had been probing and digging, and spying and discovering, till I had such knowledge of their doings as made a tale worth one's telling to any inquisitive old fool of a priest—and I let my lord the count have an inkling of this."

He leant back, laughed, and swore with glee.

"He came. I was in bed all white and shaking," and he illustrated the words with many gestures; "and my voice was feeble and quavering, like a dying pantaloon's, as I gurgled out what I meant, and said, 'I have written everything in a paper.' You should have seen his eyes glint at this. He urged me to be careful, not to speak too freely; and he asked to see the paper. I told him it was in a desk, and when he went to get it and his back was to me I was out of bed and upon him in a trice. I thrust him back into a chair and stood over him with my drawn sword, vowing by all the calendar that I would drive it into his bowels if he dared to so much as utter a squeak; and, by the Holy Ghost! I meant it too."

"Well?" I cried impatiently when he paused.

"Ho, but your white-livered, pigeon-hearted, sheepish coward is a pretty sight when his flesh goes gray, and his haggard eyes, drawn with fear, stare up at you from under a brow all flecked with fright-sweat. I wish you could have seen him. Well, I held him thus, told him all I knew, and made him write out a confession of the true means by which the young count had been lured to his death, the object of it all, and the story of the double plot this treacherous villain is carrying on. I had found out much, guessed more, and made him fill in what I didn't know. More than that, too, I made him promise me certain definite rewards when the plot succeeded, and to take me in with the rest as one of them—to work with them now and share with them afterward."

"You are one of them?" I cried.

"You saw the answer to that to-night by the old church. They played the game shrewdly enough. When I had let him go, one or two of the others came to me and wished me to attend a meeting. I promised; but I am not a lunatic, if their fool of a King is. No, no; I would not. Then they changed and said there was another quarrel to be picked with you, my friend; to send you to call on the young Count Gustav. But I said no; that you were a great swordsman, better than myself, which was a lie of course—but lies are everywhere in this Munich—and that I would not meet you. So they will find some other end for you. Then the next little friendly attention for me was the interview which you interrupted to-night."

The effect of this recital upon me, so quaintly and so dramatically told, may be conceived; and I sat turning it over and over and judging it by the light of what I myself already knew.

"And what are you going to do now?" I asked at length.

"Sell what I know to the best purchaser—unless you can do what you said, help me to my revenge. I know you are in this; though you little guess the part they have cast for you."

"What's your price? I can take care of myself," I answered.

"Revenge is my chief point. I am a Corsican; and, by the Holy Tomb! I'll never stay my hand till I've dragged the chief villain down."

"You mean?" I asked.

"That snake von Nauheim—the Count von Nauheim. The Honorable Count, a member of the aristocracy. A lily-livered maggot."

He changed from irony to vehement, ungovernable rage with swift, tempestuous suddenness.

"To whom will you sell your secret? The Ostenburgs?"

At the mention of the name he turned and looked at me intently, the light of the lamp throwing up the strong shadows of the face; and he stood staring thus for a full minute. Then he laughed.

"So you haven't guessed the riddle yet, eh? You're a deal simpler than I thought." He came close to me, sat down, and put his face right into mine, turning his head on one side and closing one eye with a gesture of indescribable suggestion. "Have you never asked yourself how it was that with all these people so dead set on putting a Gramberg on the throne they should take the trouble to get the heir of that renowned family killed?"

"Yes, it was because the Ostenburg agents got wind of the plot."

"Pouf!"

He laughed in my face and threw his hand up, and then rose and filled himself another glass of wine, tossing it off like the rest.

"You can play a good game, no doubt, Prince, but you don't know the cards you hold. If your young relative was killed by the Ostenburgs, what the devil's hoofs was von Nauheim doing in that boat? And what the devil's tail does he want to set me on to you for? Does he think the Gramberg chances are to be improved by first killing off the heir and then getting rid of you, the girl's chief protection? I know all about Minna von Gramberg, and the plot to put her on the throne. I know this, too, that she has no more chance of sitting on that throne than I have of eating it. Body of Bacchus, man, these are foul fiends you are leagued with and want knowing."

I began to see everything now, and my pulses quickened up with excitement; and I guessed what was coming.

"What is your aim in all this?" he asked suddenly.

"I have come to Munich to see exactly how matters stand."

"And nicely they've fooled you, maybe—or at least they might have done so if you hadn't been lucky enough to be within sound of my shout to-night. I'll give you the key to the whole thing. There's a plot within a plot, and all the Grambergs are being fooled. This type of innocence, von Nauheim, is the tool of the Ostenburg interest. The indignation against the King is all genuine enough; the people would welcome his abdication to-morrow, and wouldn't seriously concern themselves even if the abdication came by way of a dagger-thrust or a pistol bullet. But the Ostenburg faction dare not force the abdication for two reasons: because, in the first place, the people on your side are strong enough to make a fight of it; and, in the second, if a fight did come, no one can say what line the people at Berlin would take. It is quite possible that they would swoop down and clear both sides out. What these precious Ostenburgs have to do, therefore, is to get the Crown without a suspicion of treachery."

He broke off with another of his sardonic laughs, and took more wine.

I did not interrupt, and a moment later he continued:

"Then came your old Prince as a stalking-horse. He wanted to make a grab for the throne, fostered the discontent and rebellion, put his son forward, and sounded the people here as to his chances. The Ostenburgs knew of it directly, of course, and laid a clever, devilish plot to profit by it. A large number of the wealthiest and most influential supporters appeared to favor your Gustav; they warmed, made indirect overtures, and then went over in a body, making it a condition that the man they put forward as one of their leaders, von Nauheim, should marry your old Prince's daughter. By the bag of Iscariot, a shrewd stroke! The Prince saw nothing, and agreed, and that's the reason of that love-match."

"A damnable scheme!" I exclaimed, between my teeth.

"Wait, wait," he said calmly, laying a hand on my arm. "Your Gustav was in the way, and it is a canon of the Ostenburg code that there shall be no Gramberg claimant to the throne alive, or, at any rate, fit to claim it. So the quarrel and the duel were engineered, and there remained only the Countess Minna. Then they had a stroke of luck. The old Prince died, and the girl alone remained, helpless and friendless, except for you. Your turn will therefore come, and then this is the plan: The plot to place the Countess Minna on the throne will go forward gayly, is going

forward now, in point of fact. But—and mark this carefully—at the critical moment your Countess Minna will have vanished, and then see the position. The mad King will be gone, the throne will be vacant, the cry of the conspirators and of Munich will be for the new Queen, and there will be no Queen to answer. What next? Why, that the thoughts of all men will turn to the Ostenburgs—the loyal, faithful, true, innocent, do-nothing Ostenburgs—and the Duke Marx, their heir, will consent, when the matter is forced upon him by the united populace, to mount the throne. No taint of suspicion against him, no thought of treachery, actually an opponent of the movement against this mad royalty, a staunch upholder of the right divine of monarchs—he will be hailed by all as the only possible successor to a King who cannot be found, and Berlin will rejoice to see an ugly trouble got over in this easy fashion. Now!" he exclaimed, with a grin full of meaning, "you can see much where before you could see nothing at all."

"And what of the Countess Minna?"

He paused, and then answered in a low, guttural voice, and with a look of deep, suggestive meaning:

"Von Nauheim will see to that. There is something in regard to him I do not know; but I do know that, married to him, she would be impossible for a Queen, for he is of the scum of the gutter, and there is worse behind, I believe. But von Nauheim is no stickler for ceremonies. He may not marry her at all; and, ruined by him, you may guess what her chances of the throne would be."

"Hell!" I cried, leaping to my feet in fury.

He had got inside my impassiveness now, and I was like a madman at the thoughts he had raised.

"I must see you to-morrow. Ride ten miles out on the Linden road, and wait for me at noon. I shall go mad if I stay here longer."

And with that I rushed away.

CHAPTER IX

MY PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

The first effect upon me of Praga's story was to rouse and thrill every pulse of passion in my nature. I could not think connectedly, and as I plunged along through the early morning to von Nauheim's house I was impelled by an overwhelming desire to call that villain instantly to account. Insane plans flitted through my head of dashing into his room and making him fight me to the death; and I gloated in the belief that I could kill him.

But as the air cooled my fever my steps slackened their speed, my judgment began to reassert its rule, and I saw that I should make a huge mistake if I allowed myself to be led in such a crisis by the mere impulses of blind rage. I had another to think of beside myself. He was waiting up for me, no doubt curious and anxious to learn what I had been doing; but I dared not trust myself to be with him then; so I sent a message that I was unwell, and I hurried at once to my rooms.

Then I made the first practical admission that I felt myself in peril; for I searched the rooms carefully to see that no one was concealed in them, and I looked carefully to the fastenings of the doors to make certain that no one could get in while I slept. I resolved also to buy myself arms on the following day. I could not sleep, of course. I lay tossing from side to side all through the hours of the dawn, thinking, puzzling, speculating, and scheming; striving my hardest to decide what I ought to do.

After what I had seen in the attack on Praga, I could not doubt that my own personal danger was great. My cousin Gustav's fate had shown that the men I had to deal with were infinitely cunning in resource and absolutely desperate in resolve. Where, then, might I look for any attack? I judged that it would be most likely to come in some shape that would be difficult to trace to its authors; and I felt that I must guard against getting embroiled in any quarrel, must go armed, and must be always most vigilant and alert when I found myself in circumstances that would lend themselves to my being attacked with impunity.

I own that I did not like the prospect. I don't think I'm a coward, and claim no greater bravery than other men; but the thought that any moment might find me the mark for an assassin's dagger or bullet tested my courage to the utmost. My main problem, however, was of course as to what I should do in regard to the plot. There were undoubtedly a number of men pledged to support Minna's cause; loyal, true, faithful men of honor, who had risked much for her and would uphold her to the last; but how was I to distinguish the false from the true? If I could do that, my path would be plain enough. I could reveal the whole business to them, and we could together take means to checkmate the inner treachery. But I could not distinguish them; nor on the other hand could Minna in honor desert them.

There was the alternative of flight, of course; I could return to Gramberg and rush the girl across the French frontier; but in addition to the distaste for abandoning those who had been true to her, there were other solid reasons against the flight. I could not see that there was any permanent safety for Minna that way. As Praga had put it, it was a canon of the Ostenburg

position that there should be no Gramberg claimant to the throne left alive or fit to claim the throne; and I did not doubt for a moment that she might still be the object of attack wherever she went. Their arm would be long enough to reach her. Thus flight would thwart the Ostenburg scheme, but it would not achieve what was far more important to us, the safety of all concerned.

Thus I was driven back again upon my former conclusion that the policy of flight must be only the last resource when other things had failed. And I made up my mind that if at all possible this Ostenburg scheme must be met and outwitted.

After many hours of thought on these lines, I began to see two courses. We must go on with the scheme up to the very verge of its completion. Then Minna should indeed disappear; but the disappearance should be stage-managed by us, and not by the Ostenburg agents; and a daring thought occurred to me, to entrap these men with their own snare when pledged to the hilt to support Minna.

I would not only let her reappear at the very moment when they would be reckoning on her absence to push the claims of their own man, the Duke Marx; but I would get hold of this duke himself and put him away in her place. We would thus hold the throne against them for long enough to make such terms of compromise as we chose to dictate.

It would be a dare-devil piece of work, and call for one or two desperate men. But I had two already to hand—von Krugen and Praga, with Steinitz as a faithful third—and we might find one or two more among those who were faithful to Minna's interests.

The thought of this so roused me that I could not stay in my bed, but paced up and down my room in a glow of excitement as I thought out, pondered, and planned the details move by move to the final climax.

My first step must be, of course, to mislead all those concerned in the scheme to believe that I was with them, and that I pledged Minna herself to the same course; and I went to meet von Nauheim in the morning with this idea clear in my thoughts.

"You were out of town yesterday, Prince?" he said.

"Yes, I am accustomed to quietude, and can clear my thoughts best in the country. This affair worries me."

"I understood you were ill when you came back?"

"Merely an excuse. I was fatigued, and in no mood for conversation. It was late."

"It was—very," he replied dryly.

I made no answer, and after a moment he said:

"I presume you were thinking about our matters?"

"They were not out of my thoughts all day, and have kept me awake all night. I could wish I had never heard of them!" I exclaimed sharply.

"I suppose it is rather a big thing for you to decide?" he said, with a laugh; and then added quickly, "I presume you have decided, though? We shall expect to know to-night definitely."

"I am disposed to advise my cousin to join you and go on; but it may be nervousness, or that I am unused to such weighty affairs—whatever it is, I scarcely know how to answer."

"Well, you have had five or six days, you know."

"I've had to change all my views. I came to Munich with the conviction that such a scheme must fail, and could only end in disaster or, perhaps, worse."

"And now?" he asked, eyeing me sharply.

"I see the risks are enormous; but success seems much more probable than I thought. Indeed, if all is as it appears to be, I don't see where failure can come. I was trying to see that all day yesterday."

"What do you mean 'if all is as it appears'? What else can it be?"

"In a thousand schemes every one must have a weak spot somewhere. In this I fear what Berlin may do."

This answer relieved the doubt I had purposely raised, and he smiled as though my objection were ridiculous.

"Discuss that with Baron Heckscher. You'll soon see there's no cause for fear in it."

"If I were sure of that, my last objection would be gone."

"Then you are ours at last!" he exclaimed triumphantly, "and I'm right glad of it, Prince. You'll never repent throwing in your lot with us, for we shall rule this kingdom as surely as you and I are sitting at this table."

Gradually I allowed myself to be led on by him to copy, in a modified degree, his tone of jubilant enthusiasm, until he had no longer a doubt that I had been won over completely; and I spoke as if

in some awe of the magnificent mission and great opportunities which a woman of Minna's high character and aims would have as the future Queen of Bavaria. He indulged this vein in the belief that he was drawing out my earnestness and encouraging my loyalty, and, indeed, fooling me to the top of my bent.

He asked me how I would spend the day, and whether I wished to see any more of our friends, before the meeting, to discuss my lingering doubts as to interference from Berlin; but I said I would rather be alone, as I was accustomed to solitary meditation, and that I was going to ride. He placed his stable at my disposal, and suggested one or two places of interest to which I could go.

I pretended to accept his suggestions, and he watched me ride off, standing bare-headed and gazing after me. When I turned, he waved his hand, and his face wore a smile of confident self-congratulation at the cleverness with which he had duped me. I kept to the road which he had mentioned for a short distance, riding at a slow pace, and then, turning off from it, I threaded the outskirts of the town until I struck the Linden road, when I put my horse to a sharp canter to keep my appointment.

One point I had to consider carefully—how far to trust Praga. He was a man to beware of, unscrupulous, recklessly daring, and bitterly vengeful; but I had saved his life, and I believed that he had in his disposition that kind of rough and dogged chivalry which would incline him to feel under an obligation to me, at least until he had paid the debt in kind. Assistance of some sort from some one with inside knowledge I must have, for the case was desperate enough; and there was no doubt that he would be infinitely valuable to me. I had strong inducements to offer, too—revenge for his own injuries; gratitude for my help on the preceding night; momentary reward to any reasonable amount; and advancement to a post of confidence. There was a risk that he would betray me, of course; but I could not weigh these risks too carefully, and this was one I felt I must be content to take.

I had ridden some ten or eleven miles, and was walking my horse slowly past a small coppice, when I heard him call to me from among the trees. He had chosen a cunning hiding-place. He knew his business.

"Ride on to the next turning on this side, Prince, and turn in at the first gate."

I followed his instructions, and found him already at the gate, on foot, having tied his horse to a tree. I fastened mine and then joined him.

"Were you followed from my house last night?" he asked; and when I told him no, he added: "Good; I had to shake them off this morning. The game is getting warmer. We must not stay long together. What have you to say to me?"

"Will you show me the paper you made von Nauheim sign?" I asked.

"I will take your word of honor for its safe keeping," he returned, his dark face smiling. "I guessed you would wish to see it." And he handed it to me.

"You trust it to me?" I cried, in some surprise.

"I am no fool, Prince," he answered. "If you keep that, it means we shall work together, and that is what I wish. If we are not to do so, you are too honorable a man not to return it. I trust either wholly, or not at all." He raised his hands, shoulders, and eyebrows in a combined gesture, as though suggesting there was no more to be said about the matter. "But you, what are you going to do? You have some plan, of course?"

"Will you work with me?" I asked.

"I told you last night—my purse, my sword, and my life are at your service, and if your plan helps my revenge I will keep as stanch and true as a hound."

"I am going to put my whole scheme in your possession," was my answer; and in the fewest words I told him what I had resolved, keeping back only such parts of the plan as touched the Countess Minna and myself personally.

He listened with rapt attention, his swarthy face drawn into thoughtful lines, and he did not interrupt me once. When I had finished, he remained silent a long while thinking it all over carefully.

"It is a shrewd scheme, Prince, very shrewd. There is only one difficulty."

"Well?"

"For you and me to keep alive sufficiently long to carry it through. The attempt last night will not be the last, and the efforts won't be confined to me. They have not touched you so far, probably because they feel it will strengthen their hands with the Countess Minna to get your open adherence to the plot. But when that has once been obtained, you will only be in the way, and you had better lay your account with that. But if we can keep our hearts beating and our throats unslit until the time of crisis comes, we shall win. By the sword of the archangel, but I like the scheme!"

"There is a meeting to-night at which I announce my formal adherence, and then I shall return to Gramberg to complete my arrangements."

"If you live to leave the town," he said grimly. "But you understand now the sort of men you are fighting. And what do you wish me to do?"

"Yours will be the most dangerous and, in some respects, I think the most difficult work of all—the post of honor. You must prepare the means by which the Duke Marx von Ostenburg can be got into our power, and you must be prepared to carry out the seizure the moment I give the signal. It had best be done on the very day of the court ball."

To my surprise he smiled and declared that that part of the business would not be difficult of accomplishment.

"I may need one man to help me, though I can probably do it all alone; and you will only have to say where you wish him carried."

"I have to find the place yet," I replied. "But how can you do this? Why are you so sure?"

"I can move the female lever which can move him," he returned, with his hard smile.

"But at that moment he himself will be all anxiety for these matters of State, and his presence in Munich will be simply imperative for their interests."

"No matter. If he was buried under a mountain and had to claw his way out with his nails and teeth, he would do it at her bidding. Have no fear."

"He will not be harmed?"

"That we can settle when we get him," he answered grimly.

I said no more. So long as we could make secure the person of the duke at the moment we needed him, I would see to the rest. Then I arranged how we two were to hold communication and untethered my horse to leave.

"You will go to that meeting to-night, Prince?" he asked.

"Certainly, it is necessary."

"You will go armed, then?"

"Arms will not be of much use; but I shall take them."

"I need not warn you again. But this I would say: At the very moment when you feel safest expect their attack. And now, as a last word, let me give you a pledge that whatever happens I will not let a word between my teeth. On the honor of a Corsican."

He raised his hat and stood bare-headed. He had the dramatic instinct keenly developed, and he did everything with pose and gesture that might have been taken for artificiality. But I was convinced that he was stanch enough in this affair.

I rode back to Munich by a different route, and my thoughts were busy with the forthcoming meeting. I did not consider it at all likely that any sort of violence would be attempted then; but Praga's words of caution began to run in my head—"When you feel safest, expect the attack." All the afternoon they were buzzing in my thoughts, and when von Nauheim returned in time for a very hurried late dinner, and the hour of the meeting drew nigh, they were more insistent than ever.

In the afternoon I bought myself arms—a sword-stick and a revolver; and while I was alone I took careful note of the room where the meeting was to be held, its entrances and exits. There was a window in the corner which opened on to a quadrangle at the back of the house, and I resolved to take my seat near that, lest I should need a speedy way of escape.

I had, indeed, determined upon one somewhat daring step, and I could not foretell what consequences might ensue.

When the hour for the meeting came, I took my seat and watched the men as they entered; and sat steadying my nerves and planning my moves in the game which was about to open in such deadly earnest, and which might have such momentous consequences for all concerned.

CHAPTER X

A COUNCIL OF CONSPIRACY

My first thought about the meeting was that I had misjudged, in an almost ludicrous manner, what the proceedings would be. My nerves were, no doubt, a little overstrung by the events of the past day or two: the dramatic exaggeration which had characterized almost every gesture and action of the Corsican, the actual evidence of my own eyes of the ruthless intensity of purpose with which these people pursued their plans, and my own exceeding conventional conceptions of what such a plot as this would be, had led me to anticipate some sort of more or less theatrical exhibition of conspiracy at the meeting. But there was nothing of the kind.

The men dropped in one after another, just as they might into any small social gathering, chatted with each other, grouped themselves in twos and threes, joked and laughed, discussed the latest scandal, exchanged notes on the newest play, and for a long time talked of nothing but the subjects on which any of them found a common surface interest. All of them made occasion to come to me and exchange a word or two: How I liked Munich, whether I had been to the opera, if I took any interest in the races, had I heard of the new military order from Berlin, and so on. Nothing more. Yet each contrived to convey that he was very glad to see me present, leaving me to infer anything more.

After a considerable time, the man whom von Nauheim had mentioned to me most often, Baron Heckscher, one of the wealthiest men in Munich, and the strongest leader in the scheme, came across and began to talk to me. He said he took the greatest interest in me; that it was a matter of great regret I had been so long absent from Munich and Gramberg; and that the honor of the great title I bore was an enormous responsibility for so young a man.

"But I am sure you will prove equal to it, Prince. Our conversations during these last few days have convinced me of this. You will play a great part in the kingdom and—who shall say?—perhaps in the Empire."

I murmured some conventional reply, and he added:

"There is only one thing against you. You will need wealth. The Gramberg estates should have gone with the title. I cannot understand my old friend's will. But that can be, and, of course, will be, rectified."

"I am not very ambitious of a State career," I replied, appreciating the proffered bribe.

"The State has need of all her strong men, Prince," he answered readily, "and she would be jealous of desertion; she cannot spare you. We old men have had our day, and it is part of our duty, and, despite the jealousies of some of us, part of our pleasure too, to mark out the rising men—the men worthy to rise, that is—and see that they have their opportunities. In the time that is coming you will have a magnificent part, for the actualities of power are not on, but around, the throne."

In this way he led adroitly round to the subject, and I knew that all his flattery was just so much verbiage. He had had no opportunities of telling whether I was a fool or a genius.

"There is a great deal of doubt about the future," said I sententiously; "but to have earned the good opinion of so shrewd a judge of men as yourself is much."

If he could flatter, so could I.

He paused a moment, and then, in a slightly lower tone, and with a suggestion of increased importance, he said, motioning toward von Nauheim:

"Our friend has told me your very shrewd doubts as to the probable action of those at Berlin. They are very natural, and you are quite right to express them; but—there is no fear on that score. The Imperial Government is as sick of the vagaries of the King as we Bavarians ourselves. He is a constant anxiety. You will see why. A madman on a throne is a standing menace to the principle of the Divine Right on which a monarchy must in reality depend. They will not interfere, because openly they dare not countenance a movement to upset a throne."

And he went on to give me elaborate arguments to explain away my doubts. I listened very carefully, stated my objections, and discussed them all; and then allowed myself to appear to be won round by his persuasion to the view that when once the plot were carried to a successful climax Berlin would recognize the new position and acquiesce in it. This I believed myself, moreover.

As I held the clew to his real motives, I was greatly interested to note the subtlety with which he avoided the points that were more closely concerned with the duplicity of the inner plot, and dwelt on those where he could be sincere.

"It will depend greatly on the solidarity of the movement and the loyalty to each other of all concerned in it," I said at the close.

"That is the pith and marrow of it all; and of that there cannot be a doubt. There are some twenty of us here," he exclaimed, with a wave of the hand round the room; "and each of us represents and can speak for at least one strong interest and section. Besides, we are not groping in the dark. I myself have secured assurances from Berlin. We have not a weak link."

He stopped, and looked at me with an invitation to make my declaration.

I noticed, too, that in some way the fact had communicated itself to the rest of those present that the moment of importance had arrived. They had at first drawn a little away from the table at which we two sat; and I had seen many little quick glances shot in our direction during the discussion between the baron and myself; but there had been no check in the general flow of chatter.

Now, however, there was a decided lull, save where one man was telling noisily an incident in which he had been the principal and was laughing at his own joke. The rest were for the most part smoking stolidly with only low murmurs of broken talk.

Von Nauheim was restless and fidgety, champing his cigar with quick, nervous bites, and blowing out the smoke rapidly in heavy puffs, and stealing furtive glances at me.

The situation was just as I would have had it. I had effectually concealed the fact that I had entered the room resolved to join them, and had produced the impression that at the last moment the baron's arguments had talked away my doubts. I kept my face impassive and set, as though weighing my words to the last moment.

"We shall go on with you, baron," I said quietly; "but of course under conditions."

"How can you make conditions, Prince?" he asked; and now the whole room was waiting upon our words.

"There must be a fresh declaration of allegiance to the Countess Minna as the future Queen."

"We are already pledged, every man of us, Prince," he returned.

"My uncle's death has altered matters," I answered. "And the declaration will be signed by all concerned here to-night and in my presence."

"That is scarcely necessary, as we have signed already. But if you make a point of it, yes."

"I do press it," I said firmly.

I had a strong reason which they did not yet see. I paused a moment before I made my next move, for it was a strong one.

"Again, as my uncle's death is so recent, it will not be seemly—indeed, it is impossible—for my cousin's marriage with the Count von Nauheim to take place until after she is on the throne—unless, indeed, all matters are postponed until a sufficient interval takes place."

I counted much on this stroke, and that it was a shrewd one was instantly apparent. It was, indeed, nothing less than a sharp test of the loyalty of every man present, and it started warm discussion among them all, several protests being made.

The avowed object of the marriage was to cement the co-operation of the powerful section of which Baron Heckscher was the head, by securing half the royal power to their representative; but the secret motive, as I knew, was to render Minna personally unfit to be Queen. Thus to postpone the marriage until after she was actually on the throne seemed on the surface to destroy the very pith of the inner plot, and so to wreck the Ostenburg plans altogether. Hence those who were for that interest felt bound to oppose the suggestion, while those who were genuinely for us would admit its reasonableness. To the one side it meant failure, and to the other, at the worst, mere postponement; and my object was thus to detach the latter and see who were really our friends. To my dismay there were but two in the room, and these the least influential; but I marked them closely while I stuck doggedly to my point.

It was the Baron Heckscher who came to the rescue.

"I have been waiting to hear the general opinion," he said—he had been sitting rapt in deep thought—"and I do not see there is any solid objection to the condition. We are all aware that this marriage, like most Court nuptials, has been arranged for certain definite purposes"—and he glanced round the room with an effect I did not fail to observe. "And if proper guarantees of these purposes are afforded, I do not see any objection. We are merely gaining the same end by slightly different means. As Count von Nauheim carries certain interests on his shoulders in the marriage, all we have to see is that those interests are protected."

It was most adroitly wrapped up, but I knew too much to be deceived; and as I had now gained my end—the separation of the sheep from the wolves in this assorted pack—I said no more than to agree that any desired guarantees should be given.

"The other condition is perhaps fanciful, as it is certainly personal," I said, "and it is somewhat connected with that which we have just discussed. My cousin, the Countess Minna, cannot, of course, go forward in a hazardous work of this kind, now we are agreed the marriage must be postponed, without a male relative to guide and counsel her. And as we Grambergs have been so unfortunate as to lose two prominent members, there is only myself remaining. One of us, my cousin Gustav, certainly lost his life in this cause, through the treachery of the Ostenburg agents, and therefore we look to you all—I look to you all, gentlemen"—and here I raised my voice slightly—"to secure me against an attack from any source that may threaten my life. I know I do not count on you in vain, because you are all loyal to the cause; but there is an additional and very special reason for my thus calling on you. Upon my life and safety the continuance or end of this scheme depends, so far as my cousin Minna is concerned. You may need to redouble your vigilance against our enemies, and to strain your efforts to the utmost to anticipate and prevent attacks upon me; but understand quite clearly that if you suffer me to be attacked and to fall, at that moment my cousin will withdraw from the scheme, and openly abandon all claim to the throne."

The disconcerting effect of this short speech was profound.

A dead silence fell on the room for a few moments, and I am bound to confess that I enjoyed immensely the general consternation. It appeared to me the strongest confirmation I could have had of the existence of a plot against my life, and that this move of mine was regarded as a

checkmate. But I shut out of my face every expression save one of a kind of friendly expectation of personal assurances of agreement.

"Why I paused before replying, Prince," said Baron Heckscher presently, "was merely that, while I am confident there is not a man in the room, nor among all the thousands for whom we can speak, who would not cheerfully risk his life in defence of one so valuable—indeed, so essential—to the cause and the country as your own, it is a little difficult for us to pledge ourselves to abandon a cause for which we have made such sacrifices, and incurred such tremendous personal risks, should accident intervene to harm you."

He was talking to gain time, I could see that easily enough.

"There was no one found ready to defend my cousin Gustav from a man who was no better than an assassin," I said, somewhat curtly. "And I have heard that the man is still mixing with some of you."

Von Nauheim's tell-tale face paled at this thrust.

"Your cousin's rashness was the cause of that quarrel, Prince," said the baron, "and it was all against our advice and our most earnest entreaty that the duel ever took place. As to Praga's connection with the matter since, you know, of course, that in affairs of this kind we must use as instruments such as we find ready to hand. But his connection with the movement is of the flimsiest and most superficial kind."

"My cousin's death remains unavenged," I answered sternly.

"It will not remain so," said the baron significantly.

"No, indeed," I returned, intentionally misunderstanding him, "for I myself will call the man to account."

"Not until after our plans have been carried through."

"At the first moment I meet with him," said I, with an air of recklessness.

"This must not be!" exclaimed the baron quickly. "Do you not see what you are doing, Prince? You tell us that if you fall the Countess Minna will desert us and abandon the whole movement on the very eve of its success; and yet in the next breath you declare that you are going to court death by fighting a duel with one of the greatest masters of fencing in Europe. Would you wreck the whole scheme?"

"I would avenge my cousin's death!" I cried sternly. "Unless, indeed, the Count von Nauheim, as a future member of the family, or some other gentleman here, is loyal enough to us to take up this work."

"I do not fight with hired bravos," growled von Nauheim.

"There is no man in Bavaria can stand before that Praga's sword," said the baron, while I enjoyed his perplexity.

"Well, then, call the man out and shoot him!" I exclaimed brutally. "But, in all truth, I can't for the life of me understand, since you are all afraid of his sword-play, why you allowed Gustav to meet him."

"We had not then had this fearful evidence of his skill; and your cousin denied it, and believed him an impostor," said the baron.

"Nor do I believe in it," I answered vehemently, and I saw that I had produced the impression I wished of extreme caution in some things, coupled with recklessness in others, and had made them believe me thoroughly in earnest in my condition that, if my life were taken, my cousin Minna would go no farther. I had no wish to press matters any more, therefore.

"You are a true Gramberg, Prince, it is easy to see," said the baron, smiling uneasily. "And I fear you will give us trouble."

I meant to, but not of the kind as anticipated.

"That may be," I replied, ungraciously and curtly. "But now, if you please, as to these conditions."

"We can accept them if you will pledge yourself to take no rash action in hazarding your life until we have succeeded. Otherwise I for one shall withdraw, even now."

I could have laughed aloud at the firm, decisive tone in which he said this—for it was the proof of how I had turned the tables upon them. I hesitated before replying, as if to think.

"Yes, it is fair that I should give such a pledge," I said then. "I will wait. It will not be long."

"In a fortnight, by the grace of God, all will be effected," cried Baron Heckscher fervently. Then, rising, he said with enthusiasm: "Gentlemen, to our future Queen—Queen Minna of Bavaria. May the blessing of God light upon her, and let her bring peace to this distracted State. In the name of God I swear allegiance to the new ruler of Bavaria."

He raised his right hand on high as he took this equivocal and falsely true oath, and every man present followed his example. It was an impressive scene, and I made haste to improve the

occasion.

"We will sign the declaration now," I said quietly.

The baron produced that which had been formerly signed—a short, simply worded document pledging the signatories to allegiance; and as he appeared loath to allow the paper to pass out of his own hands, he himself copied and then burnt it. I raised no objection to this proceeding, or to the wording, which was sufficiently compromising for the purpose I had in view. The other men signed it first, and I observed that the baron hung back until the last.

"I am the last to join you, I will sign last," I said quietly, and I laid it before him.

He wished to protest, I could see, but there was no valid reason. For the present at any rate I was in the position of power.

He wrote his name slowly and, I thought, reluctantly, and when he had finished, he put the paper across the small table, and held it firmly in one hand, pointing with the other to the place where I should write my name. I saw his object was the same as my own—to get and keep possession of a paper on which the life of every man signing it might depend. But it was an essential part of my plan that I myself should have possession of the paper to use as I might afterward find necessary. And I outwitted him. Not giving a sign of my intention, I took the pen he gave me and glanced at it.

"A pen that will have a history," I said, looking at him.

Then in making a movement as of preparation to sign I dropped the pen, and as I stooped and picked it up I broke the nib designedly, exclaiming at my carelessness.

"No matter, there is another pen there," I cried hurriedly, and with a sudden pull I snatched the sheet from his grasp, carried it to another table, and signed it before he had recovered from his surprise and vexation. Then I blotted it quickly, folded it, and put it away in my pocket, as though this were the most natural and ordinary course.

But I saw the men look from one to the other with half-hidden apprehension in their glances. I knew it was a crisis, and I carried it through with a dash.

"As head of my house, and the only blood relative of our future Queen, I shall guard with religious care this declaration of your allegiance and fidelity, this charter of the new Bavarian freedom," I said, raising my voice and speaking with as much dignity as I could assume. "In my cousin's name I thank you for your help, and I promise you the most earnest, most cordial, and most generous recognition of your efforts. From this moment her life belongs to her country. For myself, I assure you that, although I am the last to join you, no man shall be found more active, resolute, and vigilant in the cause. God bless Queen Minna of Bavaria!"

They echoed the words, but there was little heartiness in the tone, except from the two men whom I knew to be loyal; and I stood on my guard, half expecting some kind of attack.

But the moment passed and nothing was said or done to thwart me; and after a few words of lying congratulation upon the evening's work from the baron, the meeting broke up.

As the men left I could tell that my acts had produced a great impression on them, and that I had at least convinced them that I was not a man with whom they could safely trifle.

But my task had only begun.

CHAPTER XI

"EVEN ONE SUBJECT MAY MAKE A KINGDOM"

When the last of the men had left, and I had seen von Nauheim go out with the old baron in close consultation, I sat on alone for a time thinking with some exultation of the result of my week's work in Munich, and of the vastly changed position which my shuffling of the cards had created.

I should certainly sleep the sounder for the value I had contrived to put on my life in their eyes; for I calculated that until they had had time to reconstruct their plans they would not venture to attack me.

What would they do? I pondered the question very carefully, turning it over and over in my thoughts as I knew that wily old baron was doing at the self-same moment—unless he had already made a plan and had taken von Nauheim out to impart it to him.

One thing soon made itself quite clear. Whatever form their next move might take, it would closely concern Minna. She was the pivot on which everything turned in their inner plot. So long as she was a free agent, and able to do what I had said—openly renounce the scheme and publicly abandon her claim to the throne—they would not touch me. But the instant they could get her into their control my power would be broken. I should no longer be necessary to them, but in the way. I could guess what would follow.

I determined, therefore, to take the initiative and force the game with von Nauheim; and, fortunately, he gave me an opportunity.

After I had been alone about an hour he returned, and did not take any trouble to hide the fact that he was in a very bad temper. When the surface was scratched, he was too much of a cad to remember that he was my host. He swaggered into the room and poured himself out a stiff glass of brandy and drank it. Then he turned to me.

"I suppose you think you've managed things devilish well to try and play the master in this way?"

"Well, I haven't done badly," I said, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"I should like to know what you mean about your condition about my marriage—cursed interference, I call it."

"My meaning was plain enough to the rest; surely I need not repeat it."

"Oh, I know what you mean. But what the devil is it to you? Is it your game to try and stop this marriage altogether? You won't, you know, so you needn't try."

"I would rather discuss family affairs with you when you're—" I was going to say sober, but checked myself and changed it to—"when you are less excited."

"What do you mean by that?" he cried, taking fire and speaking furiously. "Do you mean to insinuate that I'm drunk?" and he rose and came up close to me.

At that I guessed his motive by a kind of intuition. He meant to put a quarrel on me over this postponement of the marriage; and probably to let it develop into a scuffle, in which he would try to regain possession of the paper I had put in my pocket.

"I prefer not to continue the conversation now," I said coolly.

"But you'll have to, whether you wish it or not. I'm not going to let you ride roughshod over me, I can tell you. You'll just have the goodness to apologize to me for your insinuation that I'm drunk. D'ye hear?"

"I have not the least intention of apologizing to you for anything," said I sharply.

"Oh, won't you? We'll see about that," he cried, in an even louder voice; and then by deliberate intention I saw him knock over a small table on which a number of bottles and glasses stood. These fell to the ground with a loud clatter and crash, and the next moment a couple of servants came running into the room.

I judged that it was a preconcerted signal, for the moment they appeared he put his hand on my arm and, staring threateningly into my face, swore at me.

"You shall not leave the room till you've apologized," he said, calling the two men to his side.

I kept cool enough. I had no difficulty in shaking off his hand, and I stared him full in the face with so stern a look that, bully as he was, he flinched and wavered and changed color.

"Are you mad, Count von Nauheim, that you would make me forget I am under your roof?"

"No, I'm not mad nor drunk either, but you shall repent this night's work. Here," he called to the men again.

What he meant to do I know not, for my next action produced so wholly unexpected a result that he had no chance to do anything.

I whipped out the revolver I had in my pocket and levelled it point-blank in the lackeys' faces and bade them in ringing tones to be off out of the room. They stayed for no second bidding, but turned on their heels and scampered for their lives, leaving their master looking very much of a fool in the middle of the room. I put the revolver away again then and turned to him.

"Now that we are alone again, what do you mean to do?"

But his courage had fled as fast as his servants, and with a feeble attempt at a lying laugh he mumbled out something to the effect that he had meant no more than a joke, and turned away to hide his confusion in another full dose of brandy.

I saw my chance and took it.

"I do not allow people to play jokes of that kind upon me, Count von Nauheim," I said, as sternly as I could. "I prefer to trust the evidence of my own wits and say that you were in earnest in the attempt to use some violence toward me. Under these circumstances I cannot, of course, remain another hour in your house; and you will understand this to mean that I cannot receive you at Gramberg. You will therefore spare me the unpleasantness of telling my servants to refuse you admittance by not attempting to come there."

"Do you mean that you will try to keep me from my affianced wife?"

"Unless my cousin chooses to meet you elsewhere than at Gramberg, that is precisely what will happen," I answered.

"I suppose you want the fortune for yourself?" he sneered.

"You have a short memory, count. You have forgotten you told me the fortune would come to me as soon as this matter was successfully accomplished."

He flushed, for he had evidently forgotten that part of his former instructions, and my reminder irritated him.

"Then maybe you want Minna, and have a fancy yourself to sit on the throne?"

"I have nothing further to say to you," I answered stiffly. "Any communication I have to make regarding matters here shall be made to Baron Heckscher." And with that I left the room and the house.

I was glad of the quarrel for many reasons. We should be rid of the man's presence at Gramberg while making our preparations there; and I should feel much freer in any future visits to Munich. But most welcome of all was the fact that I knew Minna would be delighted at my having secured that she should not see him again.

I went to a hotel, passed a very comfortable night after a very full day, and the next morning before setting out for Gramberg I paid a visit to each of the two men whom I had ascertained to be loyal to Minna. Their names were Kummell and Beilager; and I urged them, for reasons which I would explain, to pay a secret visit to Gramberg. Then I returned to the castle lighter in heart and even busier in thought than I had set out. Busy as I was with the details of my own schemes, however, I found more than once my thoughts running ahead of me to the castle in pleased speculation as to how Minna would meet me and what she would say to my news.

When I had finished my train journey, and was driving to the castle, I could not help comparing my present feelings with those on my first arrival at the place. I had played the part of the Prince so completely during the exciting experiences of the two weeks that had passed since my arrival, every one had accepted my impersonation so unconditionally, and I had acted and spoken so entirely as if I were indeed the head of that great house, that I had actually begun to feel that I was in reality the Prince. I looked upon the signs of deference, the honors, the ready compliance with my wishes, the submission to my orders, as though they were my just due; and I was conscious of a greatly increased sense of dignity, which, I have no doubt, imparted itself to my mien and speech.

I had now no thought of drawing back, of course, until at least I had cut the knot of Minna's difficulties; and I had begun to entertain some very unpleasant and disquieting doubts and anxieties as to how I could shake off my borrowed plumes and return to the humdrum, meaningless, empty, incognito existence.

As to that, indeed, a new set of thoughts had begun to take shape in my mind—wild and forlorn hopes, in truth, but none the less cherished. The idea was to try and so carry through this business of the Munich plot as to ingratiate myself sufficiently into the favor of the great ones at Berlin to win back my own position and inheritance.

The most spurring motive that can move a man was developing in me, and developing fast. As a supposititious Prince von Gramberg I was absolutely impossible as a suitor for Minna's hand. Even if I could save her from this terrible entanglement, and escape any recognition, I could not marry her. My life would then have to be lived over a mine which might be exploded under my feet at any moment, to the ruin of both her life and my own.

As an English adventurer and ex-play-actor my case was just as hopeless. But as Count von Rudloff there would be no such bar of family between us; my family was indeed as old as any in the kingdom, and I set my wits to work zealously to find means by which I could use this plot to that end. But the odds against me were enough to make any one despair, and the knowledge almost appalled me.

I was not long left in doubt as to the manner of my reception at Gramberg. My cousin was waiting for me on the very threshold, and she came to meet me, her face aglow with pleasure, and her eyes beaming with the warmest of welcomes. She took my hand in both hers, and for the moment could do no more than murmur words of welcome and gladness at my return. As for me, the sweetness of her beauty, the touch of her hands in mine, and the sheer delight I felt in her presence held me tongue-tied.

Then her words burst out with a rush, and she plied me with question upon question about my news, my doings in Munich, what was to happen, and a thousand other things, until I caught von Krugen's dark eyes—he had met me at the station and was standing by me now—fixed upon her in shrewd speculation.

"I could not hold back my impatience a minute longer, cousin Hans," she said at length, with a smile. "Although my good aunt Gratz would have had me wait upstairs in my rooms until you would find it convenient to see me. You will forgive me for this unceremonious assault?"

I would have loved to tell her what I really thought about it; but I put a curb on any such madness by reflecting that her anxiety had nothing in it personal to myself.

"It would take so long in the telling," I answered. "I can scarcely tell it to you here."

A look of regret and surprise dashed her face for the moment, and she withdrew her hands from mine and bit her lips.

"I have done wrong in rushing to you thus. You will think it unseemly. Will you let me know how soon you can come to me? Do believe, cousin, I would not wittingly do anything to displease you."

I stood silent like a dumb fool; and then after a pause she added:

"I ought to have reflected you would have many things to do, and that I—that I should be in the way. I will go."

"No, don't go," I blurted out, and then could say no more.

She looked at me in justifiable astonishment, and wrinkled her brows in perplexity.

"The Prince was saying as we drove here that he must see you at once, countess," interposed von Krugen, and I could have blessed him for the words. Then he went forward and threw open the door of the room next, and looked round as if inviting us to enter. It was the library.

I shook myself together with an effort and gathered my scattered wits.

"Can you spare me an interview at once?" I asked Minna.

"Cousin!" and her astonishment deepened and found expression in her tone. "Am I not here for that very purpose—and dying to learn the news? Come;" and she went into the room and led the way to the far end, as it chanced to the very window from the embrasure of which I had first seen her. "I hope your first news is that all this plot is at an end, and that the project of the marriage is dead with it?"

I had mastered my stupid embarrassment by this time and had found my tongue again.

"You must listen carefully to all I have to tell you, and then to what I propose to do," I replied, and plunged at once into as plain a recital as I could give of all that part of the proceedings which I deemed it necessary to tell her. I dwelt upon the reasons why in my opinion it was impossible to draw back yet, and upon all I expected to gain by the counterplot I had devised.

"I will not see the Count von Nauheim again," she said, and her dislike of him was the first and strongest feeling she expressed. Nor did I grieve at this.

"He will not come here," I said. "I was going to force a quarrel on him to make that impossible when he saved me the trouble by putting one on me. I then warned him off the place."

"Good, very good!" she cried, her eyes flashing. "If I were to see him again, I could not restrain my hatred. I should tell him exactly how I feel toward him. It is loathsome even to be linked in name with such a man. But as that is settled, I will do whatever you wish. I knew you would be too much for them all, cousin Hans, if they did not kill you, as I sadly feared they would. I shall never be able to repay you," she added, looking to me and smiling. "If I were only a man, I could —"

"What?" I asked when she stopped.

"I could at least fight with you instead of being a clog and a drag."

"You are our inspiration," I said earnestly, and at that her cheeks flushed and she cast down her eyes.

"I wish all the trouble were over," she said presently.

"We must not be in too great a hurry. We have done very well so far. A little pluck and dash, and slice or two of luck, and we shall get through all right. But now tell me, can you think of any place in Munich, or near there, where you can go secretly and hide when the moment comes?"

"Why must I be put out of the way in this fashion? It seems like running away at the very moment of peril, and I am not afraid. Do you think I am a coward?"

"This is no question of bravery or cowardice. It is merely a matter of tactics. The very keystone of this inner plot of theirs is that you shall be missing when the cry is raised for you to ascend the throne. To secure that these people will stick at nothing—they would even take your life. Now, for the success of my counter-scheme, I must be able to have you at hand just when I want you. That is all-important. You will have to go to Munich in apparent compliance with their wishes for you to be ready for the final coup, and we shall show no sign of suspicion, but you will have trusty guards to protect you against attack. My scheme is to let them carry off some one in your place, and for that purpose I shall endeavor to get wind of their plan of abduction. What I wish to do is to shut out suspicion that we have fooled them until it is too late for them to change their plans. Is there any one among your maids whom you could trust to personate you, who is sufficiently like you in height and color and so on to be mistaken for you by a stranger, knowing you only by description or having only seen you once? She would of course be dressed to represent you, and she must be sufficiently devoted to you to take a risk and hold her tongue."

"Yes, my dressing-maid, Marie, might pass for me under such circumstances, and I would answer for her stanchness."

"Tell her nothing until the time is close at hand. Then let her know what has to be done. She will wear your dress and will be carried off; you will slip away; and I shall go in a fine rage to von Nauheim to frighten him from getting to see his captive, and thus discover the trick. Your present task, then, will be to get ready for that part of the scheme, and also to think of some safe place to

which you can go."

"I will willingly do more, if it will help you," she said.

The completeness of her trust in me was apparent in every word she spoke.

"There will be plenty of exciting work to follow," I replied, with a smile, for I was pleased by her eagerness to help. "Your Majesty may depend upon it that a throne is not to be gained without a struggle."

"I should make a poor Queen," she answered.

"You will make a beautiful one; and if the Bavarians once get sight of you, they will not readily let you go."

She looked at me earnestly and, with half a sigh, said:

"You should not pay me empty compliments, cousin Hans. You should not say things you do not mean."

"Perhaps it would be truer that I must not say all I do mean," I returned, and for the moment my eyes spoke even more than my words; and I made haste to add, in as light a tone as I could: "Your Majesty will have at least one devoted subject, whatever may happen."

"I believe that with all my heart," she answered, in a tone and with a look of confidence and trust that thrilled me. Then she smiled very slightly, and added: "Even one subject may make a kingdom; though I'm sadly afraid I should not be the ruler of even such a realm."

I longed to turn her jest to earnest, and assure her that if she did not no one else ever should; but I pulled myself up on the verge, and remembered that, after all, I was an impostor, though loyal enough to her. And so I made no reply, and dared not even look at her.

After a pause she rose, and, with what sounded like a half-suppressed sigh, she went away.

I let her go, and it was not until she had left the room that the thought struck me that my silence might have seemed curmudgeonly. Then I would have gone after her and told her, and I made a step toward the door; but the thought of what I should say and how to explain my meaning stopped me, and as I hesitated Captain von Krugen came in to resume the conference we had commenced during the drive from the station.

CHAPTER XII

MY SCHEME DEVELOPS

I took von Krugen into my confidence as to my discoveries and plans. I showed him the documents I had brought back from Munich; told him of my meeting with Praga; the secret history of the duel which had ended young Gustav's life; and, at the close, invited him to say plainly what he thought of the counter-scheme, and of our chances of carrying it through.

"It is about the only chance," he said, "and once on the throne there is no reason why the countess should not stay there."

"On the contrary, there are two overpowering reasons—her own disinclination, and the attitude of the Imperial authorities at Berlin."

"There may be a third," he growled into his beard, looking sharply at me.

"What is that?" I asked, though I could almost guess his meaning. But he turned the question adroitly.

"That her Majesty would have little wish for a royal marriage with an imperially selected consort chosen by Berlin. Her Majesty has a heart, unfortunately, and God bless her for it."

"That will be all as she pleases," said I quietly. "At any rate, our purpose is to give her the opportunity of declining the throne, and to save her from these villains who would hound her down."

His face grew as dark as night.

"God! if that villain ever dares to cross her path again, I'll run my sword through his carcass, if I die the next minute; and if he doesn't come near her, I'll seek him out the moment this business is through, and make him fight me. He has put not one but a thousand insults on me—and he a traitor all the time. And to think the Prince believed in him implicitly to the last. And so did I."

"Maybe the Prince had not the private knowledge of the man that I had, nor had you," I said unguardedly.

My companion started and looked at me in such surprise that I saw my blunder in a moment.

"You had known him previously?" he asked slowly.

"I had known of him," I answered in a tone of indifference. "It's a long story, and I may tell it you some day."

"It is not for me to question your Highness, of course, but I should never betray a confidence," he replied, piqued, as I thought, that I said no more; and for the moment I was hugely tempted to tell him the whole story.

It might be enormous value to have a staunch ally in my full confidence for the task I had to carry through; but, on the other hand, I could not tell how such a man would care to take his orders from an ex-play-actor, and I decided that I dared not run a risk at such a crisis. So I held my tongue, and sat as if my thoughts were busy with our plans.

"There is much to do, captain," I said at length, "and we must waste as little time as possible in consultation. In the first place, we have to keep open a means of communicating with Praga. Are you too well known in Munich to go backward and forward?"

"I fear so; but there is Steinitz. He is scarcely known at all there; but he has not yet returned from where you sent him."

I had forgotten altogether about him and his mission; and, now that the matter was recalled to me, the length of his absence gave me an uneasy twinge. There must be some very serious cause for so long a delay.

"He should have been back some days ago," I replied slowly. "Probably he will be here to-day or to-morrow, at latest, and that will be in time for our purpose. I myself shall return to Munich in a day or two; but I have purposely made no appointment as yet, and shall make none till the eve of my going, because, if my absence from here were to be known in advance, it might probably be the signal for some attempt against the Countess Minna."

"How shall you foil the attempt when it does come?" asked von Krugen.

"By vigilance mainly; but I mean also to appear to play into this Baron Heckscher's hands, while in reality forcing them. I shall see him and tell him that all here will be in Munich two days before the Court ball. That will give them time to make their plans to strike during those two days. Further, my present idea is that for the whole of those two days the character of the countess shall be doubled; this waiting-maid of hers will be dressed precisely as she herself is dressed the whole time, and, except when any one comes to the house who is in the house, and who knows the countess on sight, the girl will be the countess to every one. This means that the servants we take with us must be strangers, with the exception of one or two on whom we can rely implicitly. And I depend on you to make the selection."

"There are several here for whom I would answer as for myself; but isn't there a risk in so long a doubling of the parts?"

"Maybe; but we must be content to take it. My object is so to arrange matters that we ourselves shall virtually select the moment when they will try to get hold of my cousin. Thus I shall make it quite plain to them that during every moment of every hour she is in Munich she will be strictly watched and guarded by us; but I shall manage to let a weak link appear in the chain, and I have chosen this one. During the two days I shall give it out that my cousin is not well, and can only receive one or two persons. But there is to be a reception at the palace by the King on the afternoon of the day of the Court ball, and I shall let it appear that our vigilance must be relaxed on the return drive from the palace to the house. It will seem an excellent opportunity for them. But while the countess shall go herself to the reception, I shall arrange for the maid to take her place on the return drive with the Baroness Gratz, and my cousin will make a sufficient change of dress in the retiring-rooms to enable her to leave the palace unknown."

"But the Baroness Gratz?"

"You have no doubt of her loyalty?" I asked sharply. "Speak out plainly if you have."

"None in the least. I have no cause. I meant, what of the danger to her?"

"There will be little or none. They may indeed be glad to let her get away, while they will do her no harm even if they keep her prisoner. But the points in favor of such a scheme outweigh all against it. It will suit both them and us to have the abduction made as close to the time of the ball as possible—they, because we should then have no time to make a disturbance; us, because the shorter time we have to keep watch over von Nauheim to prevent his finding out the deception the better. A few hours later we shall be absolute masters of the situation."

"It's a scheme that stirs one's blood," cried von Krugen warmly. "But those few hours will be anxious ones."

"Meanwhile the Duke Marx will have been caught in the toils set for him, and will be in our power; the King will be taken at the ball, and thus our whole course will be clear. The mimic ceremony of abdication will take place, the cry will be raised for the Queen Minna, and just when they are chuckling that she cannot be found I shall lead her forward and put her in the place of honor, and make some sort of speech in her name—probably to the effect that she will take time to consider her course. They will be thus caught like rats in a hole they themselves have undermined; and there will be a pretty tableau."

"And then?"

"Well, our first step will be to look out for ourselves. The attack on me and you will commence at the moment they believe they have outwitted us; and the danger will spread to us all the instant they find we have outwitted them. But our holding of their duke as a hostage will disarm them."

"You are sure of Praga, and that he can get hold of the duke?"

"I am sure of no one but you," I returned; "and of nothing except of things as they occur from hour to hour. We can only lay our plans and do our best to carry them out; but in such a case any instant may see the unexpected happening, and the shipwreck of the best laid scheme. But I like Praga's lever—a woman is a most useful mechanism when you understand how to use her; and when I left Praga every vein of his was burning with a raging lust for revenge. And he is a Corsican. But if that part of the scheme fails, we must patch up another way, that's all. I mean to be stopped by nothing."

"By Heaven, but you're a man I love to follow!" cried my companion, his eyes kindling with enthusiasm.

Then I saw his expression change, and he peered curiously at me.

"And to think you've never been anything but a student. One might think you had lived in the atmosphere of intrigue all your life. The Prince little knew you. He believed you were a milksop. How he would have loved you for a man after his own heart. Some one must have been lying to him sorely about you."

"Dead slanders are of no import to us, captain, nor living flattery either," I said shortly. "We have to plan out our respective work and to set about doing it."

And with that I told him precisely that part of the plan which would fall to his share, and gave him suggestions as to the best way of carrying it out. When I had fully instructed him, I sent him away, and mapped out in my thoughts the further developments I had yet to plan.

The absence of Steinitz gave me much uneasiness. It seemed so grossly out of perspective that a big scheme such as was on hand should be endangered by a trumpery little matter like the selling of a couple of farms. Yet that was the fear I had. If Steinitz had been able to find von Fromberg and to give him my message, he ought to have been back long since; but if he had not found the man, I could not stop the sale of the property. Yet if it went on it was almost certain that the old lawyer would in some way get into communication with the men who were selling the place for von Fromberg, and my identity would at once be questioned.

I would have paid the money, of course, willingly enough; but obviously I could not buy an estate from myself. Again, I could not get over the difficulty in any such way as I had employed with Praga—that it was a freak.

The more I considered the thing the easier it appeared to me that I might be tripped up and exposed through it; and when the whole of that day passed without the return of Steinitz, my anxiety grew fast.

He arrived on the following afternoon, but he brought no relief with him. He had not found von Fromberg. He had gone to Charmes, and had arrived there after the wedding had taken place, and then he had set out to follow the bride and bridegroom on their tour. He had traced them from hotel to hotel, to Nancy, Bar-le-Duc, Rheims, Amiens, and thence to Paris; but in the French capital all sign of them was lost, and after making many useless inquiries there he had deemed it best to return to me and bring back the letter. I told him he had done right, but the incident added to my disquiet. It was such a contemptibly little thing, and yet, like a poisonous pin-prick, it threatened to gangrene the whole venture.

To add to my annoyance and perplexity, moreover, the old lawyer came to me again on the following day to tell me that further negotiations had taken place for the sale of the farms, and he pestered me to know whether I really meant to sell them out of the family, and whether the Count von Nauheim, as the Countess Minna's future husband, ought not to be told of the matter. His manner showed that he had a suspicion that something was being kept from him, and he resented it strongly.

It was obvious, of course, that if he went to von Nauheim the latter would jump at the chance of giving me trouble, and that if any suspicions were even hinted to him the results might be exceedingly awkward. Yet I could do nothing; and I was so irritated by the lawyer's persistence that I sent him away with a sharp reply that if he wished to retain my business he had better mind his own.

I could see he was vastly astonished at this and I more than half repented my words, but he had gone before I had quite recovered my temper. It was unbearable, however, that just when I had all the weight of a really important crisis on my shoulders I should be worried by a trumpery thing of this sort. I let him go, therefore, and tried to dismiss the matter from my thoughts, while I went on with the completion of my plans.

Everything else went as well as we could have wished. Minna herself entered heart and soul into the work, and in the many interviews we had during the next few days I could not have wished for a more loyal and trusty ally. Our little confidential conferences drew us very close together, moreover, and I saw with great delight that her spirits brightened.

The preparations for the critical work in Munich occupied her so fully that her thoughts were taken away from the grief caused by the death of her father, while the belief that success in our venture would open up a new life for her by freeing her from the marriage with von Nauheim and from the dreaded responsibilities of the throne raised hopes which brought with them happiness such as she had not known for months.

"I owe it all to you, cousin," she said once, for she grew to speak with absolute candor and unrestraint to me. "If only you had come to Gramberg earlier, I am sure you would have persuaded my father to abandon the scheme altogether; although I think sometimes that——"

"Well?" I asked when she paused.

"That it is a good thing you did not come earlier."

Her eyes were laughing, and the light in them was a pleasing thing to see.

"Perhaps it is. But why do you think so?"

"You have a way of making unpleasant things pleasant; and you might have persuaded me to do what he wished."

"There are not many women who would need much persuasion to be a Queen."

"Without conditions, perhaps."

"There is one condition I would never have advocated," said I, raising my eyes to hers. "But you will be a Queen after all, and we your humble servants, wishful only to obey your royal commands."

"I have settled one of the first uses I shall make of my power," she said, looking up and speaking as if seriously.

"And that will be?"

"You will be the object of it. I shall issue an order in council—Privy Council."

"Privy Council! You are getting learned in the jargon of State. I am afraid your Privy Council will be a very small one."

"Yes," she cried, nodding her head and smiling. "We two. And the order will be that my chief councillor shall tell me all the story of his life. If you won't tell it to your cousin, you must tell it to your Queen. And I know there are secrets in it. You think I don't take notice of you, I suppose; and never know when your thoughts are slipping away to the past and never see that you fence with my questions, and glide away so cleverly from the little traps I lay. You mustn't think because you would make me a Queen that I have ceased to be a woman—and, being a woman, to be curious."

"We have no time in these days——"

"There you go," she laughed. "I know what you'll say. You never think of the past because you are so busy thinking of all this business; that when a man is planning a big scheme like this, and has all the details to arrange, he has no time, etc., etc. But you have a secret, cousin Hans—a secret that is never out of your thoughts; that has nothing to do with all this fresh trouble and intrigue; that took you away from the castle for two days just after you arrived; and that has written its lines on your face. That may be because you can find no one to tell it to. Of course you think of me only as a girl—you self-contained strong men always do that—and that I should make no sort of a friend to be trusted with secrets. And yet——" she paused, and laying her hand gently on mine said softly and wistfully, "you have done so much for me I should like to be a little help to you. Can I, cousin? I'm not Queen yet, you know, and cannot command. I'm only a grateful girl, and can do no more than ask."

I was not a little disconcerted to find that she had been watching me so closely, and I could not remain untouched by the last little appeal. But I could not reply to it.

"You are a stanch little comrade," I answered. "But we must put off the story until the Queen commands," I answered, smiling.

"That is at least an open postponement, if not a frank refusal. But the Queen will command, cousin. I want to know why you would not come here at the first; what made you change your mind; how it was that all our ideas about you were wrong; why you are so different from what we all expected—oh, there are a thousand questions that sting the tip of my tongue with the desire to ask them."

"You think a student cannot also be a man of affairs?" I said, divided between pleasure at her interest in me and perplexity at her questions.

"But you are not even a student. You never open a book; you never quote things—ah, now you start because I have watched you. I can read your eyes, although you think you can drape them with the curtains of impassiveness. But your wit is not always on guard to draw the curtains close enough. Yes, that's better; now they are saying nothing."

All this time she had been looking straight into my eyes, and laughing in gleeful triumph. And I found it embarrassing enough. Then she changed suddenly, and said:

"Does my teasing worry you and weary you, cousin? I can school my curiosity if it does. But you will tell me all some day?"

"Is that schooling it?" I asked, and she laughed again. "Yes, I will tell you some day what there may be to tell. But it could do no good to do so yet."

"Is it a sad secret?" she began again after half a minute's silence, and would no doubt have gone on with her pretty cross-examination had we not, fortunately for me, been interrupted by a servant, who brought word that Steinitz, whom I had sent to Munich, had returned, and was asking to see me instantly.

"I hope there is no trouble?" said Minna, looking alarmed.

"I anticipate none; no more, that is, than that we must break off our conference."

"You have given me your promise," she said.

"I ought to have made a condition—that you do not read me quite so carefully," I answered lightly as I rose.

"Then I have read aright? To me your eyes are as books."

"Yet you must be careful how you read them," said I.

"Why?"

"You may chance on the chapter with your name at the head."

"I wish I could," and she laughed and her eyes brightened. "I would give the world to know whether it is headed Queen of Bavaria or cousin Minna. Which is it? Tell me, at least, so much."

"It may be neither," I answered ambiguously; but she seemed to understand something of my meaning, and to be pleased, for her cheeks were aglow with color as I hurried away.

Steinitz was awaiting me impatiently.

"There is ugly news, your Highness," he said shortly. "I saw Praga early this morning, and he bade me urge you to hurry at once to Munich. He has got wind of a move on the other side, which he prefers to tell to you alone. He will meet you to-morrow at noon where you met before, and he declares that the strictest vigilance must be used in regard to the countess, especially while you are away from the castle, and that your visit to the city should be made with the greatest secrecy."

"He told you nothing more of what he had discovered?"

"No more than I say. But I gathered his meaning to be that an attempt of some kind is imminent to get the countess out of our hands here."

This was likely enough, but I did not take so serious a view of the matter as Praga, because I felt that when I had explained our movements to Baron Heckscher he would be almost sure to select the moment when the thing could apparently be done with the least risk of discovery, and that would be at the last moment, when Minna returned from the palace after the reception.

At the same time I would go to Munich. I had already planned to go there on the following day in any event, and had announced my intention; but I settled to start at once. I sent for von Krugen and told him, charging him to keep the strictest watch over Minna; and after a very brief interview with her, in which she showed the liveliest concern for my safety, mingled, as it pleased me to think, with regret at our separation, I started with Steinitz on what I knew might be a critical expedition.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHECK

Matters were now hurrying fast to a crisis; and I hoped the result of my journey would be to complete all my preparations, and leave me nothing to do but return to escort Minna to Munich. So far all had gone well enough. I had no reason to think that either Heckscher or von Nauheim had the remotest idea that I knew of their treachery; and it was, of course, of the very essence of my plan that they should remain in ignorance. On this account I was unwilling to meet Praga again personally, and I resolved therefore to send Steinitz to him as soon as we reached Munich to tell him my intentions, and to get from him in return what he believed to be the Ostenburg move. I myself went straight to Baron Heckscher. He received me with apparent cordiality; but it was not difficult to see that as the day of the crisis drew near his anxiety was growing.

"All is going well, I hope," I said, after I had greeted him. "We have all our preparations made."

"All is going very well," he replied. "But you are a day earlier in Munich than we anticipated."

"I have not come to remain," I answered, "although I have some important business. My cousin is

not well; and her nerves are giving way as the day approaches. I have difficulty in keeping her courage up. Like a woman, she has some foolish fear that at the last moment something will happen to her—some disaster to overthrow her. But I have nearly conquered that fear, I trust."

"How?"

"She associates the fear with her visit here, and I have assured her that night and day, every hour and every minute, she herself will be surrounded by absolutely staunch friends who would give their lives for her. The death of her brother just at the moment when success seemed to be within grasp is frightening her. Nor is that unnatural, especially when we reflect that her nerves have again been strained by her father's death."

My words had the effect I desired. It did not suit his plans that Minna should be guarded in this way.

"The Countess is not ill, I trust," he said after a pause.

"Oh, no, not positively ill. But she is very young, and so full of alarms that even I myself am inclined at times to question the wisdom of all this." Perceiving the value of the line I had taken, I went on to make the most of it. "Indeed, I want some very confidential talk with you. You understand that I am resolved to go on, and I have not breathed a word to suggest to her that there is even an alternative course; but there are two points on which I wish to consult you. In the first place, is it quite impracticable to abandon the thing? I am convinced my cousin would only too gladly renounce all claim to the throne."

He looked at me sharply and with manifest consternation.

"It is absolutely impossible, Prince, absolutely," he said emphatically. "But you are not in earnest. Why, it would be madness, sheer madness to think of such a thing. Since you were here we have sounded men in all directions, and there is not one who is not enthusiastic at the idea of getting rid once and for all of this madman."

"But my cousin can only make a weak Queen at the best."

"My dear Prince, her weakness will be the strength of the country. Our great object is not so much to change the person of the ruler as to break the traditions of the ruler's power—to put on the throne some one whose title will rest, not on any right divine, but on the people's power and will and choice. A woman will thus be far more dependent on the people than a man. Prince, the countess cannot draw back."

"But supposing she were willing to acquiesce in the election of the Ostenburg heir, and thus unite all sections of the people?"

"It is impossible, equally impossible!" he exclaimed readily. "It would be a betrayal of us all. It is not to be thought of."

I sat as if thinking this over, but in truth this prompt rejection of the means to do fairly what I knew he was plotting to do by foul had filled me with anger.

"And what would be the immediate consequences of a withdrawal?" I asked.

"Do you mean the personal consequences to the countess and yourself?" he asked, with a suggestion of contempt for such a consideration.

"I mean to all concerned."

"What could but be the consequences where three-fourths of a nation had been worked up to desire a revolution and found themselves cheated at the last moment by the—the timorousness of those in whose name and for whose sake the whole movement has been carried out? The badge of cowardice is a hard one to bear, Prince, and the anger of a disappointed people would not lighten the disgrace."

"We are no cowards, Baron Heckscher," I replied warmly, as if stung by his taunt.

"Then you must not so act that people may mistake you."

"We will not," I returned, with an air of angry decision.

"I was sure of it, and am only sorry you thought it necessary even to moot the suggestion. But now what is your second point? Not another objection, I hope."

"It is merely to discuss with you the last arrangements. Under the circumstances you will, I am sure, see the necessity for making them as simple as possible—indeed, my cousin's health will not permit anything else."

"Up to the moment of our great coup they cannot possibly be too simple. Anything else would be a great mistake. Up till somewhere about midnight of this day week, Wednesday next, the countess is of course no one but the very charming young lady that I am assured she is—I mean she is a private person. In that capacity she will attend the reception, and in order that there may be no suspicion attaching to her making a public appearance so soon after her father's death it has been arranged that a special desire for her attendance shall be expressed by the King. She will merely attend, kiss hands, and pass through the presence chamber, and leave the palace at once, should it be desired. She can return home and go to the ball, where she should be at about

ten o'clock. She must be at hand of course when the great drama is played in which we are to take part. When the Act of Abdication has been read, you will lead her forward. That is all. We shall do the rest."

"And what will follow then?"

"I think she will stay at the palace. It is just in the few hours succeeding that scene that we shall have to be alert. The King will be missing, and a Council of State will be called on the following morning, when she will be proclaimed to the country. After that, events will settle themselves rapidly. We are prepared with a petition to the Imperial authorities, which will be signed by nearly every man of influence in the country, to recognize the succession and validate the abdication."

"But that Act of the King will surely be found to be a forgery?" I said.

My companion smiled and shook his head.

"On the contrary, it will be genuine. We should not use such clumsy means as forgery. We have it already written. For once his Majesty's lunacy has done his subjects a good service," he said bitterly. "He was minded recently to play a farce of abdication in favor of one of his hounds, declaring with his customary facetiousness that the Bavarians were dogs, and a fit King for them would be a hound. Accordingly he held what he was pleased to call a Privy Council—consisting of himself and his dogs. But those about him knew their business, and when he thought he had abdicated in favor of his dog they fooled him to the top of his bent, but drew the document in such a way that the insertion of the countess's name would be an easy matter. The addition of a date will make everything complete; and thus when the madman thought he was only insulting his people, he was in fact signing away his throne. He had this dog, a clever poodle, seated in the chair in the Council Chamber, garbed in State robes, and crowned with the crown of Bavaria. I tell you, Prince, that one act would stir the blood of even a nation of cravens—and we Bavarians are no cowards. My blood boils at the thought," he cried, clenching his fist, while his eyes flashed, and his face, usually immobile and cold, lighted up with the fires of passion.

I joined him in a hot outburst of indignation.

"But the time is past for mere anger," he said presently. "We are resolved to act; and that farce of his shall cost him dear. As to Berlin, so soon as we have driven home the conviction that we are in dead earnest, and that practically the whole country is with us, there will be no opposition. The usual official intimation will be published that the King's health has failed, and the rest follows naturally."

"But you are forgetting the Ostenburg interest."

"I forget nothing, Prince," he replied, somewhat curtly. "I know the public feeling. The very inaction they are showing will make the Duke Marx impossible in the eyes of the people. While the country has been writhing and suffering under the insults and iniquities of this madman, what have the Ostenburgs done? Has one of them raised a finger to help the people or protest against this royal mumming? Has any one of them said a word? And how do you suppose the nation is to interpret that silence and inaction, except as approval of what has been done? They had the better right of succession and a strong following on their side; they have forfeited the one by their apathy and have lost the other as a consequence;" and he went on to give many reasons for this conclusion.

"I admit," he said at the close, "there will be some anxious hours just after the Countess Minna is proclaimed; but, with all the will in the world, they can do nothing. I tell you there is nothing can stay our success nor shake your cousin's seat on the throne when she has once taken it."

I allowed myself to appear to share his convictions, even while I marvelled at the depth of his duplicity, and I then told him the plan of our movements. He listened closely, and made several suggestions which I said we would adopt; and he quite acquiesced in my view that during the time Minna was to be in Munich she should remain in the greatest seclusion, giving audience only to himself and two or three others.

When I left him my task in Munich was practically finished, so far as he was concerned; but he advised me to attend a reception at the palace on the following day but one, the Friday, and I agreed. I felt sure I had left the impression I had gone to create—that their best time for abducting Minna would be at the moment of her return from the palace; and I completed my arrangements on that basis.

Steinitz was waiting for me at the hotel with an important communication from Praga, giving me the particulars of an intended attempt to carry off Minna from Gramberg during the night; and though it seemed to me a mad scheme enough, and pretty certain to be abandoned after my interview with Baron Heckscher, I despatched Steinitz post-haste back to the castle to put von Krugen on his guard. Whether it were abandoned or not, the fact that we had knowledge of it would render it certain to fail, and I felt no great anxiety on that score.

But I soon had cause for anxiety in another direction. The two men whom I had asked to visit Gramberg had not been there, and we were, in fact, perilously short-handed for all the work that had to be done. I was the more anxious, too, to get extra help because of a weak spot in my plans, which I could not remedy without further assistance.

If the Ostenburg agents held the person of the King, and I checkmated them at the last moment by producing Minna and keeping their duke in confinement, there was a chance that they might counter my stroke by bringing the mad King back on the scene, and thus checkmate me in turn. The only means of preventing this would be to secure that those who held the King in custody should be loyal to Minna; and it was for this part of the scheme that I had hoped to make use of the two men, Kummell and Beilager. I set out to find them, therefore.

I chanced upon them together at the house of Kummell, and it did not take me a minute to perceive that there was a decided restraint in their manner toward me. I had meant to be perfectly frank with them, telling them, indeed, all I knew; but their attitude made this impossible, and for a moment I was at a loss what line to take. While gaining time to think, I talked at large upon the importance of the affair generally, and at length asked them point-blank why they had not been to Gramberg.

"We have been very busy," replied Kummell, who spoke for both; and the answer was rather curtly given.

"Scarcely a sufficient reason, gentlemen, in an affair of this sort," I replied in quite as curt a tone, "nor, I presume, the only one."

They hesitated, and glanced at one another.

"I think you must excuse us if we do not answer the question. In point of fact, I am not yet in a position to do so."

"I cannot understand you, and, under the circumstances, I must really press you very closely to be frank with me," I urged; and, although they still hesitated and equivocated, I was resolved not to leave without an answer, and I told them as much.

"You put us in a very awkward position, indeed, but the fact is we had intended to make the visit, and had fixed the day, when we were advised not to do so by Herr Bock."

"And who is Herr Bock, pray?"

So utterly unsuspecting was I of any possible mischief that I put a good deal of indignation into the question. Yet it was a blunder of the grossest kind, and the reply astounded me utterly.

"Herr Bock is your own lawyer, who has been negotiating the sale to me of your late mother's property."

That confounded property again!

My four years' training on the stage stood me in good stead now, and I masked my surprise with a laugh as I exclaimed:

"Oh, that Bock! I did not know it was you who were contemplating a purchase. But why should that keep you away from Gramberg? Were you afraid that a look at the property would put you out of conceit with the bargain, or that I should charge you more, thinking you were growing eager?"

But there was more in this than a laugh could carry off.

"No, but he has been in communication with your old family lawyer, and together they say or think they are on the track of some kind of strange complication which I believe in some way touches yourself; how I do not know, but Bock advised me to wait."

"This has a somewhat serious sound, sir," I said, sternly enough to cover my apprehension.

"I cannot help that. You asked me, pressed me, indeed, for an answer to your question. In times like these you will understand I feel great need to be cautious—overcautious perhaps you may deem it. But still here it is."

"And what is the nature of this supposed ridiculous complication?"

"You must excuse me if I say no more. You know Herr Bock's address here in Munich."

The scent was getting warm.

"I shall of course see him," I answered readily. "And I will find a short method of dealing with a couple of meddlesome attorneys as soon as this business of next week is through. And what then do you propose to do?"

"I think we had better not discuss any matters except in the presence of Baron Heckscher."

I rose to leave. I had met with my first serious check.

"I thought I could have relied implicitly upon your loyalty to the House of Gramberg," I said loftily.

"To the House of Gramberg, yes," was the answer, stolidly spoken, yet with a significance I could not mistake.

I went back to my hotel angry and apprehensive. I could have twisted von Fromberg's neck for his maladroitness in hurrying to sell his property, and then getting beyond my reach and keeping

there.

Moreover, I could not see what to do. These two bungling old fools of lawyers had no doubt been comparing notes, and probably comparing the different handwritings of von Fromberg and myself; and had hatched a pretty cock-and-bull story about me. Probably they were already making all sorts of inquiries. Yet I dared not go and face the man Bock. I could not tell if he had ever seen von Fromberg. If he had, he would proclaim me an impostor straight away; and Heaven only knew what the consequences of such a step would be at such a time.

On the other hand the two men I had just left were obviously suspicious of me. Knowing nothing of the double plot, it was as likely as not that they viewed me as some kind of spy and traitor, either from the mad King's party or the Ostenburgs; and they would go blabbing their suspicions to every one else. And all through that greedy renegade von Fromberg.

I paced my room like a caged beast, searching every nook and cranny of my mind for some device to stop these fools of lawyers. Everything might be jeopardized. This pair of blundering meddlers might even now be in Charmes, and face to face with the real man; and the truth might come flashing over the wires at any moment.

But all my anger brought me no nearer a solution. There was just one chance—that von Fromberg might stay away on his honeymoon long enough to get us over the business of the next week, and to that fragile reed I must trust. Certainly I myself must not take the time necessary to go to Charmes, and as certainly there was no one I could trust with the secret. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to wait, and be resolved to fight when the time came.

I was in this state of excitement when a servant came and said a lady wished to see me.

"A lady?" I cried in astonishment. "What is her name? It must be a mistake. There can be no one—Stay; show her up," I broke off, for it occurred to me that after all there might be some one with information to give or sell; or, perhaps, a messenger from Praga. It would do no harm to see her.

She came in very closely veiled, and very beautifully, if very showily, dressed.

"You wish to see me, madam? What is your name?"

She stood silent until the servant had left the room; and I looked at her with considerable curiosity.

"So you are the Prince von Gramberg. I trust your Highness is in excellent health."

Despite the mocking accent, I could recognize the voice, though I could not recall the speaker. It was certainly no one whom I ought to have known as the Prince von Gramberg, and I accordingly made ready for another unpleasant surprise.

"I am sorry I cannot recall your name. I think I have heard your voice; it is too sweet to forget."

It is never wrong to flatter a woman.

My visitor stamped her foot angrily.

"Yes, you know my voice, and used to like to hear it."

The little impatient angry gesture told me who she was—Clara Weylin, the actress, who had pestered my life out at Frankfort and had vowed to be revenged on me for slighting her.

I wondered what particular strain of ill luck had brought her across my path at this juncture, and I wished her and her pretty face and sweet voice at the other end of the earth.

The coils were indeed drawing closer round me.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ABDUCTION

For another week at least I dared not make an enemy of my altogether unexpected and vastly unwelcome visitor, so I answered her with a smile, and went to greet her with outstretched hand, as though glad enough to renew our old acquaintance.

"I know you now," I said cordially. "Of course it is my old friend and comrade Clara Weylin. This is an unexpected pleasure," said I warmly.

But she stepped back, and did not take my hand.

"Unexpected, no doubt; but pleasure, scarcely. You were not much of an actor at any time; but that would not take in a fool. You are very much astonished to see me, and equally angry; so you may as well acknowledge it."

She tapped her foot again angrily. Next she removed an outer veil, which she had of course put

on to mystify me on her entrance; and she stood staring me in the face with a look of defiant hostility.

I shrugged my shoulders, and said:

"You are always more beautiful in a passion, Clara; but I'm sorry to find you in one now with me. Won't you sit down and tell me all about yourself?"

And I recalled regretfully our last interview, and bitterly deplored my stupidity in not having answered her letter. An angry woman, knowing what she knew, could do no end of mischief at this juncture.

"The chief thing about myself, as you say," she exclaimed spitefully, "is that my feelings toward you have changed. I was your friend then, now I will be your enemy."

"Then I am very sorry to hear it"—and the tone was genuine enough. "But, under the circumstances, why take the trouble to come and tell me so?"

"Because I wished to see your Highness, to observe how your Highness bore your great honors, and to bask in the radiant light of your Highness's eyes—ugh! Your Highness, indeed!"

I began to hope. Her bitterness was so very bitter that I thought some of it at least might be assumed.

"How do you play at that game, Clara?" I laughed. "While you are 'basking,' what should I do?"

"Not flatter me with lies about being glad to see me," she burst out angrily, "when you would rather have seen the devil."

"I won't go so far as that," said I lightly. "I don't admire the devil, and I always did admire you, though, if you wish me to be candid, I would much rather have seen you at another time."

"Perhaps after you are married," she cried, with a vicious glance.

"I did not say I wished never to see you again," I returned.

"You used not to lie even by implication in the old days," she said, showing she understood me.

"Nor you to insult me without implication," I retorted. "But I wish you would sit down. It is just as easy to be an enemy sitting as standing."

She sat down, and I thought her expression was a little less wrathful.

"Now, then, just tell me plainly why you think it worth while to come here, why you are such an enemy, and what particular injury you think and wish to do me?"

"Much more than you seem to imagine," she exclaimed sharply, her eyes flashing again.

The answer pleased me, for it seemed to show that I was successfully concealing the alarm which her visit had caused. Certainly I must not let her have an inkling of the fact that she could really do any harm.

"You are a most incomprehensible creature, my dear Clara. During the years I knew you I paid you as high a compliment as a man can pay a woman—by holding you in the highest esteem and entertaining for you the most honorable admiration. And you repay it—by this."

"You flouted and laughed at me and scorned me," she cried vehemently.

"You mean I did not make love to you. Let us be frank with one another. Being what I was, I could not make love to you honorably; and because I held you in too high esteem to do so dishonorably will you say I scorned you?"

"Your Highness kept the fact of your noble birth very secret," she snapped, with an accent on the "highness" I did not like.

I began to fear how much she knew.

"I had the strongest reasons, but it was not done to make so clever a woman as yourself my enemy."

"Then you succeeded unwittingly. One of the prerogatives of your sudden and unexpected inheritance."

"Well, we are fighting the air—an unprofitable waste of effort. If you won't tell me, as a friend, anything about yourself, then, as an enemy, tell me in what way I can oblige you by letting you injure me?"

She laughed unpleasantly.

"So you are not altogether free from alarm that I can injure you? You are right; I can."

"All Munich is open to you," I answered, with a show of indifference.

"Why do you want my Duke Marx lured out of the way next Wednesday?"

She dealt the thrust so sharply and watched me so keenly that I marvelled at my own self-control

in hiding all sign of my consternation.

"Who is your Duke Marx, and what on earth do you mean?" I asked, my wits busy with the thoughts which the question started.

If she was the decoy on whom Praga relied, she was in love with him, and her motive in coming to me was just sheer revenge and woman's rage. She held the very kernel of my scheme in her hands, and could blight it in a moment, revealing everything to the other side. Perhaps she had done so already. What a fool Praga had been to trust such a woman! And yet how was I to gauge the power and extent of her love for him, and say to what it might not drive her? All this rushed through my head to the accompaniment of the soft, musical, mocking laugh with which she greeted my question.

"I thought you did not lie by implication," she said.

"I thought so, too," I answered, speaking at random, and waiting for a cue from her.

"You are a clever man, Prince—if Prince you really are, and not merely a daring adventurer—but you have left out of your calculations what a woman's revenge may do."

"My dear Clara, we all expect the unexpected in a way, and never prepare for it." I rose from my chair as if to close the interview. "Whatever you wish to do, please go at once and do it."

"I will," she replied, rising also and going to the door.

If she left the room the plan would be at an end. I felt that, and I would have given all I had in the world to feel able to stop her. But I dared not show a sign of weakness. I should be in her power forever, and the scheme would be wrecked that way.

I held the door open for her, keeping my face set and expressionless.

At the door she turned and looked at me, right into my eyes, when our faces were within a few inches of one another.

"You will be sorry for this!" she cried, almost between her teeth.

"I never regret my decisions, except as they injure others," I replied coldly.

She started, and stamped her foot, and still stood staring hard at me. I thought I knew the struggle that was shaking her. It was a fight whether her old hate for me or her new love for Praga was the stronger. Her excitement and passion increased with every second that the contest endured.

"I hate you!" she cried vehemently. "I hate you, and I can ruin you!"

I made no sign of having even heard the words. I thought she was going, when suddenly her love gained a sweeping victory.

With impetuous force she wrenched the door from me, and slammed it to with great violence, and seemed almost as if she would strike me in the face.

"You are a coward and a bully!" she exclaimed hysterically. "You only act like this because you know I dare not do what is in my power."

Then she turned and rushed back to her seat, where she covered her face and burst into a storm of passionate tears.

I took a curious course. I left the room. I did not wish her to think I had been gloating over her defeat. I scribbled a hasty note that I had been called away, and should be glad to see her another time, and left this to be given to her.

This interview had the necessary effect of increasing my uneasiness materially. Each day seemed now to be revealing a fresh weak spot, and the chances of failure were growing fast. Now it was not only the failure of the plot that threatened us, but the disgrace of personal exposure.

I had had no dishonorable motives in the personation of the Prince von Gramberg; but the consequences threatened to be entirely embarrassing, and, had there been no one else to consider but myself, I should have thrown the thing up there and then. But there was Minna, and her helpless and precarious position made retreat, on my part, quite impossible. It would be dishonorable to think of myself at such a time, while every chivalrous instinct in my nature made me keenly anxious to secure her safety.

But I must see Praga, and hear from him precisely how matters stood in regard to Clara Weylin, and how far she was likely to betray us. With much difficulty, and in the face of considerable risk of my communications with the Corsican being discovered, I succeeded in getting the interview with him. He came to my hotel disguised, and after much trouble in shaking off the spies, who, he declared, were now always dogging his footsteps.

Matters were as I had surmised. The actress was in love with him, and they were to be married. They had played often in Munich, and the Duke Marx von Ostenburg had become infatuated with her. He was persecuting her with proposals, and was in that calf stage in which he would do anything, and risk anything, at her mere bidding. There was not the least doubt in the world, declared Praga, that the woman could lure him anywhere she pleased with such a bait as she

would pretend to offer. The two had, indeed, concocted a pretty little scheme between them, in while she and the duke were to be together, Praga, as the injured lover, was to interrupt them. Then they calculated that the duke, to save his skin—for his courage was not of very high quality—would consent to do anything that might be demanded.

The actress had come to Munich to put the matter in course, and, hearing of me only incidentally as the Prince von Gramberg, she had no suspicion that I was in reality the Heinrich Fischer against whom she had always nurtured her revenge, until a chance meeting with me in the street had revealed this to her.

I told him, of course, all that had passed between us, and questioned him closely as to what she was now likely to do. He declared his readiness to answer for her as for himself; and I had no alternative but to be contented with that pledge. Then we discussed many other points of the plan, and so arranged that there need not be another interview, unless unforeseen mishaps arose.

Before he left my momentary hesitation had passed, and I resolved to go on, and to trust to my wits to get out of any awkward consequences that might come. But those few days in Munich were among the most trying of any in my life. I passed them in a fever of suspense, anticipating all sorts of trouble; constantly on my guard; suspecting every one with whom I came in contact; and in such a condition of strain and tension that, when I returned to Gramberg to fetch Minna, she could not but notice with deep concern how worn and anxious I looked.

"This is wearing you out, cousin Hans," she said very gently. "You look more like a student now, and one who has been burning far too much midnight oil."

"There are only two or three days now, and then the worst will be over," I replied cheerfully; but I would have given the world to have been able to tell her what was my chief anxiety. "Munich does not agree with me, I think."

She looked at me searchingly.

"Is it that secret of yours?" she asked quietly. "When will you share it with me?"

"Probably after Wednesday," I answered, smiling. "But you will believe me loyal to you whether you hear it or not?"

"Loyal? A quick way to make me an enemy would be for any one to hint the contrary."

"You may have your faith tested yet."

"Does the secret concern me, then?" she asked quickly, adding, with a smile, "I think I am glad if it does. I thought——"

And she stopped. I hoped I could guess the thought.

"It touches the whole question of my loyalty to you and my presence here."

"Then I do not want to hear it. I would trust you if the whole world turned against you, and sought to turn me also. I do not care now what it may be," she said earnestly, so earnestly that she brought the color in a great rush to my face, and while still flushed in this way she asked: "You do not think anything could shake me?"

"No, I do not," and my love was very near declaring itself as I spoke.

On the journey to Munich her manner to me was so gentle, and tender, and confiding that I scarcely ventured to look at her lest she should read in my eyes the later secret that I was now guarding even more jealously than the former; and in Munich I would not trust myself to be alone with her during the day and a half that preceded the ball.

We stayed in the large mansion in the middle of the town that now belonged to her and had been the residence of the late Prince; and while there we carried out to the letter the plans I had arranged.

Only a few persons came to see Minna—Baron Heckscher and one or two others. Von Nauheim called, but she refused to see him, pleading illness.

During the whole of that time we kept the strictest and closest guard over her, watching vigilantly day and night. The house might have been in a state of siege, indeed. But no attempt was made to approach her, and I gathered therefore that the other side had taken my bait and had chosen the moment for their attempt which I wished.

The maid who was to personate her on the return ride from the reception was coached and drilled in every particular of her part; and every detail even of dress was most carefully considered and decided.

I began to feel that after all my fears had been premature, for not a hint or suggestion was dropped anywhere to show that any further discovery about myself had been made. But none the less I was in a condition of much inward concern when we started for the reception at the palace, Minna, the Baroness Gratz, and myself being in the carriage.

Everything went without a hitch, however. I was in the presence chamber when Minna kissed hands, and it was with a feeling of genuine pleasure that I noticed almost immediately afterward

Baron Heckscher making his way to me. He came up and engaged me in conversation, and I knew that his object was to keep me occupied so that Minna would leave the palace without my escort. I raised no difficulty; and entered into a vigorous argument with him on some point about which I knew little and cared less.

When he thought he had kept me long enough to serve his purpose he left me and I strolled slowly through the magnificent rooms, taking heed of the many quick glances directed at me; and I walked out to the entrance hall. I wasted a little more time there before I told the servants to call my carriage and inquire for my cousin.

More minutes passed, and presently they came and told me my carriage had already gone and the Countess Minna in it. I made a show of annoyance at this; and then some one came forward with the offer of his carriage. I declined it, of course. Now that they believed they had Minna, I might look for an attack on myself at any moment.

I had told von Krugen to be ready in the lobbies to watch for Minna in her changed dress and to see that she reached home safely and secretly; for we had determined that after all it would be best for her to return in her disguise to the Gramberg house rather than go to any other place. As I could see no trace of him anywhere, I concluded Minna had already gone, and I set out on foot.

I was very anxious, of course, to learn the result of the plan, and it was with infinite satisfaction that I met von Krugen and learned from him that Minna was safe in the house, and that the carriage with the Baroness Gratz and the servant had not returned.

The next thing was to simulate our agitation on account of Minna's supposed absence; and my task was to find von Nauheim and keep him under such observation as would prevent his getting to see the girl who had been carried off in Minna's place, and so find out the trick we had played.

After waiting half an hour I changed my Court dress, took my sword-stick, thrust my revolver into my pocket, for I did not know what I might have to face, and set out.

CHAPTER XV

A TREACHEROUS ATTACK

It was not until I was being driven to von Nauheim's house that I saw a blunder in my plan. I ought not to have left the palace at all, nor to have allowed von Nauheim to be for one moment out of my sight. I had seen him while I was in conversation with the baron; and he had, indeed, appeared to keep near me ostentatiously. This I attributed to his wish to make me dissociate him from the attempt on Minna; and I knew he was at the palace when I left. But he had now had half an hour's grace, and it was obvious that I might have trouble in finding him, and, further, that he might use the time to get to see Minna's double, supposing she had not been carried too far away. My suspense during the short drive was very keen. While all was going so well, I myself had endangered the whole scheme by this act of incredible shortsightedness. But at his house I was relieved. When I inquired for him, the servant told me he was at home.

"Has he been long back from the palace?" I asked indifferently.

"Not very long, your Highness; about half an hour," said the man.

I breathed freely once more. It was better luck than I had deserved.

"Show me to him at once," I said sharply.

The room was empty when I entered, and the man explained that his master was dressing, and that he would announce my visit. Suspicious of trickery in even small things, I kept the room door open lest von Nauheim should attempt to slip away while I was shut up inside it. But he made no attempt of the sort, and after keeping me waiting long enough to try my patience he came in smiling and wearing an air of insolent triumph.

"Ah, Prince, so you've come to pay me a visit, eh? I thought you were never going to enter my doors again. My man told me it was urgent business, too. You look a bit out of sorts. What's up?"

"I come with very serious news," I said.

"Egad, you look it, too," he broke in. "What's the matter?"

"That our whole scheme has fallen through. My cousin, I have every reason to fear, has been carried off by the Ostenburg agents."

"Carried off by the Ostenburgs! why, man, what nonsense is this?" he cried, with an air of incredulity. "Half an hour ago she was kissing that lunatic's hand."

"Nevertheless what I say is true. When she left the throne-room she and the Baroness Gratz entered the carriage to return home, and the carriage has never reached the house. I cannot account for it," I cried, as if amazed and baffled. "That is the only moment she has not been under the strictest guard and watch. But she has gone, and what can it mean but that they have got her?"

"You mean to say you were so foolish as to let her drive through Munich alone, or, rather, with no one but a silly old woman with her, on a day like this, and at such a crisis. Well, you took the responsibility of guarding her, and must put up with the consequences. But I can't believe it."

"The thing is just as I say," I answered, watching him closely.

He pretended to think, then he shook his head and replied:

"You must have jumped to a wrong conclusion altogether. The thing's monstrous. I expect she's just ordered the coachman to drive about the city a bit to show off her fine clothes, and is back by this time."

"You know her too well to think anything of the sort. She has a very clear knowledge of the dangers surrounding her."

"Then you shouldn't have taken her out of my control. And why do you come to me? The last time you were here you made quite a theatrical scene, after which you and I were to be strangers, I thought. Why, then, come to me now?"

"You have an even closer interest in this part of the plot than any one else. She is your promised wife; and it was my duty to acquaint you first with what had happened, and get your assistance in any search to be made."

"You're wonderfully mindful of your duty all of a sudden," he sneered, "Now that you've got us into this mess, you come whining to me to get you out of it."

"I've come out of no regard for you," I answered warmly.

"You've come quite as willingly as I welcome you. Believe that. And what do you want me to do?"

"You had better join with me in searching for her."

"Thank you—for less than nothing. I am to be put to the trouble of trying to find her in order that you may once more have the pleasure of keeping her away from me. I think you had better go and do your own spy-work."

We were each deceiving the other, though I had the clew to his attitude, and we were both wasting time in quarrelling which, had we been in earnest, we should have been only too eager to spend in the search. My motive was of course so to occupy his time that he would have no time to go to the girl; and his object was to keep me as long as possible from making inquiries to trace Minna. I let him appear to have his way, and we spent over an hour wrangling, disputing, and recriminating.

At last he exclaimed that it was no use for us to quarrel; we had better go and tell the news to Baron Heckscher and consult him. So long as we remained together, I did not care where we went nor whom we saw; and after he had occupied a very long time in changing his dress again—time wasted purposely, of course—we drove to the baron's house.

He was a far better actor than von Nauheim, and his consternation and anger were excellently assumed.

"It is ruin to everything. How could you allow it, Prince? We have placed the most precious charge in your hands, have left to you what it was your right, as the only male relative of the countess, to claim, the most delicate work of protecting the person of our future Queen; and now this has happened. I am astounded, dismayed, completely baffled. I had not the faintest idea that even a soul among the whole Ostenburg circle had a thought of what we were planning; and now, just when everything is all but ripe, this calamity has fallen like a thunderbolt."

And he continued to lament in this fashion at great length and with most voluble energy—an exceedingly artistic waste of much further time.

"Heaven knows what may happen next," he cried later on. "If these men get wind who has been in the plot, the whole city will be red with murder. For God's sake, Prince, be careful. You must be of course associated with the unfortunate countess as her relative and as the late Prince's successor, and I warn you most solemnly to be on your guard, most careful and vigilant."

It was a clever stroke, and I understood it well enough. I was to be attacked, but my suspicions of any complicity on his part were to be silenced by this warning.

"My life is of no account; I will not live, indeed, if, through my lack of care, anything happens to my cousin. Death would be my only solace!" I exclaimed passionately.

And this was made the text for a further and longer discussion, until at last Baron Heckscher cried out, as if in sudden dismay:

"But what are we doing? Wasting time in unavailing discussion, while that innocent girl may be enduring God only knows what."

I sprang to my feet also, as if equally distressed. We had occupied hours of valuable time where minutes would have sufficed had we really been in earnest; and the hour when we were due at the ball was fast approaching.

"But what of to-night's proceedings?" asked von Nauheim.

"We must go forward as if nothing of this had happened. I, for one, am all against giving up until we are really beaten. I will cause inquiry to be made at once in a hundred different quarters by our friends and agents, and maybe we shall yet find the countess in time for to-night's work. Is not that best?"

I pretended to demur.

"I fear it is useless. Cannot everything be put off until my cousin is found?"

"No, no, far safer to go on," answered the baron, a little too eagerly. "Even if we cannot present the countess as the future Queen to the people to-night, we are almost sure to be able to find her before to-morrow; and we must make the best excuse possible for her absence to-night."

I raised more objections, and thus wasted more time, only giving way in the end with apparent reluctance. Nearly another hour passed in a fresh heated discussion, and when we separated it was ten o'clock.

I calculated that von Nauheim might safely be left now. I had kept him without food for five hours, and I knew he would barely have time to rush home, put on his fancy-dress costume, snatch a hasty meal, and get to the ball at the appointed time for the meeting of the chief actors in the night's business.

I was soon to have evidence, however, that if I had been active in my preparations my antagonists had also been busy, and had laid deliberate plans for my overthrow at that very moment.

When I left the baron's house, I found, to my surprise, that my carriage had gone.

"You can't even keep in touch with your own servants, it seems, when you want them, to say nothing of guarding the Countess Minna," sneered von Nauheim.

"Apparently not," I answered; but my momentary chagrin was merged the next instant in the thought that this was probably no accident. I remembered that von Nauheim had left the room once for a few minutes, and I read the incident as a danger-signal.

"We'd better have a cab called," he added, and he sent a servant out for one.

When the man returned with one, my companion said:

"Come along, Prince, we've no time to lose."

For a moment I hung back, but, reflecting that I had better not even yet show my hand, I followed him.

The man drove off slowly at first, and as the vehicle lumbered heavily along I felt in my pocket to make sure my revolver was ready for use in need. Von Nauheim was obviously nervous. At first he whistled and drummed with his fingers on the window, and peered out into the streets. It was a dark night, and the driver had left the main road and was taking us through some narrow and ill-lighted streets, and was driving much more quickly.

"Where's the idiot taking us?" exclaimed von Nauheim, assuming a tone of anger. "Doesn't the dolt know his way?"

"He shouldn't have left the main street, should he?" I asked unconcernedly. "Tell him which way to drive. I don't know it."

He put his head out and called to the driver, and a short heated altercation took place, which ended in von Nauheim bidding him drive as fast as he could, since we were in a furious hurry.

The man now whipped up his horse, the cab travelling at a very quick pace indeed, rattling and jolting, swaying and bumping over the rough road with great violence. I began to think there was a plan to overturn it and take the chance of dealing me some injury in the consequent confusion when I might lie in the ruins of it. But there was more than that intended.

I did not know the district in the least, but I knew we had already been much longer in the vehicle than should have sufficed to carry us either to von Nauheim's house or mine, and I thought it time to put a stop to the little play.

"Stop him," I said to my companion. "I am going no farther in this crazy thing. He's either a fool or drunk, or worse."

"What are you afraid of?" he returned, with a laugh. "We're going all right. I know where we are." And I saw him look out anxiously into the dark.

"Well, I'm going no farther."

And I put my hand out of the window and loosened the handle of the door, while I called to the driver to stop. I would not turn my back to von Nauheim for fear of treachery.

"He can't hear you," he gibed. "Put your head out of the window and call him, unless; you're afraid of the dark," and he laughed again.

The situation was becoming graver every moment, and I cursed myself for having been such a foolhardy idiot as to have stepped into a snare set right before my eyes. The carriage was travelling at a high rate of speed, and I had no doubt that I was being carried away from Munich

in order to prevent my being present at the ball.

To jump out was impossible without giving my companion an opportunity to deal me a blow or a stab from behind, which, even if it did not kill me, would certainly disable me at a juncture when everything depended upon my retaining the fullest use of every faculty and every ounce of strength I possessed. Yet I suspected that to sit still and do nothing was to allow myself to be carried into some carefully prepared ambush, where the consequences might be even worse.

"I believe you are afraid of the dark," said my companion after a pause; and I could see in the indistinct, vacillating light that his face wore a confident, sneering look of infinitely malicious triumph.

I felt it would be madness to let him carry the matter farther.

"There is some devilment here," I said sternly. "This is all preconcerted. Stop that mad fool out there, and let's have no more of it."

"What do you mean? How dare you?"

Then he stopped suddenly, and I saw him rise from his seat and look out through the front windows of the carriage.

"By God! what does it mean?" he exclaimed excitedly.

His face had lost all its jaunty, blustering expression and had turned gray with sudden fear.

"He's fallen off the box, or jumped off," he cried in a tone hoarse with panic.

It was true. The driver had disappeared, and the horse, freed from all control, was stretching himself out at a wild gallop.

"For God's sake, what had we better do, Prince?" cried the coward, turning to me in positively abject fear.

It was my turn now to smile. His precious play had broken up completely, and instead of having got me into a snare he had brought himself into a mess that was likely enough to cost him his life.

"It serves you right," I growled, with a rough oath. "You'll be lucky if you get out of this mess alive."

He was a coward through and through, and the revulsion of feeling from triumph at having tricked me into his power to the realization that he himself was in dire peril was more than his nerves could stand. He groaned, and covered his eyes as if to shut out the danger, and then fell back in his seat, limp and flaccid, like a girl in a terror-swoon.

There was nothing more to be feared from him, and I turned to consider to help myself. I opened the door of the swaying, swinging carriage, and tried to judge the chances of a leap out into the road.

I could see nothing except in the feeble, oscillating, fitful light of the lamps, while the door bumped and dashed against me so violently that I had to grip hard to prevent myself being thrown out altogether. It seemed impossible to hope for escape that way.

Yet I did not know the road; and, for aught I could tell, any minute might find us dashed to pieces. To sit still, therefore, and wait for the worst to happen was at least equally perilous.

I thought of trying to clamber on to the box-seat so as to get control of the horse; but with the vehicle swaying and bumping as it was the chances were ten thousand to one against. And if I fell in the effort, I should be under the wheels.

Then an idea occurred to me—to wound the horse with a revolver-shot. It was desperate; but all courses were that. The light from the lamps shone on the horse sufficiently to let me see where to shoot; and, gripping with my left hand on to the door frame, I leaned out as far as I dared and, taking careful aim, fired.



I LEANED OUT AS FAR AS I DARED, AND TAKING CAREFUL AIM, FIRED.

I missed the horse altogether, or grazed him very slightly, and frightened him; for I felt the vehicle give a violent jolt to one side and then forward, being nearly upset in the process. Then it dashed onward at a greater speed than before.

I leaned out once more and, getting this time a clearer aim, I fired again. There was a wild and desperate plunge, during which the carriage seemed to stop dead, then there was a terrific smash, and the next instant horse and carriage were lying in an indistinguishable heap in the middle of the road; and I found myself lying unhurt a few yards off.

I got up, and ran to look for von Nauheim. One of the lamps was still burning, and by the light of it I made a discovery that told me much. The horse was no ordinary cab hack, but a valuable beast worth a place in any man's stud. This was clear evidence to me that the whole thing had been planned.

My companion was lying under a heap of the wrecked carriage; and after much trouble I hauled him out, laid him by the roadside, and endeavored to find out whether he was much hurt, or had only fainted from fright.

I could not get him round, however; and as my presence in Munich was too essential to admit of my remaining with him, I was just starting to walk back, meaning to send him help as soon as I could find it, when I heard the voices of men approaching.

I was still suspicious of treachery, and instantly on my guard.

"Is that you, Fritz?" called a voice through the dark. "Why didn't you come on to the proper place?"

I jumped to the conclusion that these were the men who were waiting in ambush at the spot where the carriage ought to have taken me. But I did not know who Fritz was, unless he were the driver, who had fallen off.

"We have had an accident here," I called in reply, muffling my voice; "and the Prince von Gramberg has been badly hurt."

"Is that your Honor speaking?" asked the voice again.

"Come along quickly," I cried. "Fritz"—I blurred the word so that it might pass for any name—"has fallen off the box. You know what to do with the Prince. I must return at once."

"We know," was the answer. "Your Honor's horse is here"—and a man came up with a led horse.

"Do your work properly," I said as I clambered into the saddle, "and mind he's a bit delirious. Pay no heed to what he says till you get my instructions."

And with that I clapped my heels into the ribs of my borrowed horse and galloped off through the dark, laughing to myself at the thought that von Nauheim himself had fallen into the clutches of the very rascals in whose hands he had designed to leave me.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BALL AT THE PALACE

The count had good cattle, and the horse that carried me back to Munich answered gamely to the calls I made on him. At any cost I must get back to the house at the earliest possible moment; and though I did not know the road, and could see scarce a dozen feet ahead of the horse's ears, I plunged along at a hand-gallop, trusting to his instinct and my own luck, that had already stood me in such good stead that night.

I had not much difficulty in finding the way, and I reined up twice to ask it of people whom I met; and at last I chanced on a man on horseback, who rode with me to within a few doors of my destination.

I kept a wary eye about me as I rode into the courtyard of the house, and my first act was to call a groom on whose discretion I knew I could rely.

"Take this horse round at once to Count von Nauheim's stables," I told the man, "and say he has requested you to bring it. Don't mention my name. I wish you to find out whether the horse is one of his, but not to say a word to show that I have sent you. Report to me immediately on your return. I must have your news before I go out to-night."

The man mounted and was off instantly, and, as I had expected, he brought me back word that the horse was one of the count's stud.

In the mean while my arrival allayed the very reasonable alarm which my prolonged absence had caused. It was long past the time at which we were to have started for the ball, and all the others were dressed and waiting for me impatiently.

Von Krugen came to me with a telegram which had arrived some time before, and as I tore open the envelope with feverish haste I told him the pith of what had happened. The message was from Praga, and to my intense relief it was worded as we had agreed it should be if all went well.

"Caught mail. Arrive by first delivery."

Innocent words to read, but meaning much to me. The Duke Marx had been secured, and Praga himself was coming on to Munich at the earliest moment. I was glad enough of this. If these attacks were to continue, the stronger force we had the better.

"The countess is full of anxiety to see you, Prince," said von Krugen when I had told him the news.

"I will go to her directly, but I must dress at once. See that something for me to eat is got ready directly. Is there any news of the Baroness Gratz or of the girl?"

"None, there is not a suspicion of the trick."

My spirits were rising fast, for everything was going well. Despite all their devilment I was master of the position. I held their man in my clutches; and before the night was a couple of hours older they should see openly enough that I had outwitted them. But it was exciting work.

Before hurrying to put on my fancy-dress costume—I was going as a French courtier, a dress in which I could wear a sword and could conceal a revolver easily—I went to Minna's rooms to let her know I had returned.

She came to me looking so radiantly lovely that I gazed at her in rapture. We had chosen her dress with a care for the part she had to play that night, and she wore a double costume. In the first place she was to wear a plain dark domino covering her entirely from head to foot, the head, of course, to be hooded and the face entirely concealed by a large mask. But underneath this she wore a gorgeously brilliant dress as Maria Theresa; the rich magnificence of the costume being further set off by a profusion of jewels of all kinds, which sparkled and glittered with dazzling brilliance. On her head as crown she wore a splendid tiara of magnificent pearls.

This was all arranged of set purpose. My object was that in the first part of the evening she should run no risk of recognition at all; and that in the second when I led her forward as the actual Queen, she might produce the greatest possible impression of queenly wealth, grandeur, dignity, and loveliness.

If the impression on others were only half as striking as it was upon me, I should be more than satisfied; and if a beautiful and queenly presence could win adherents there was not a man in the ball-room who would not be on her side.

She enjoyed the effect of her loveliness upon me, and stood smiling with bright eyes as I gazed at her.

"Shall I do, cousin?" she asked, with a dash of coquetry.

"The most lovely vision I have ever seen," I cried.

"Not vision, cousin Hans," she said, shaking her head and shrugging her shoulders till the million facets of her jewels gleamed with iridescent lustre. "Only flesh and blood—and rather frightened flesh too. I was beginning to fear for you. What has happened?"

"All is going splendidly," I said; but I could not keep my eyes from her. "You are a Queen indeed," I added. "If all Queens were like you, royalty would have no enemies. You will make a profound impression to-night."

"I am satisfied if you are pleased," she answered. "But I am afraid of to-night's work, Hans," she added, with a slight, movement of alarm, like a passing chill of fear. "I shall be glad when it is over, and we are all safe back here."

"If all goes well, you will sleep in the palace to-night as Queen-elect of Bavaria—the Queen of us all."

"No, no; I don't wish that. I wish to be here among my friends. I feel safe here; I should be frightened there."

"Your friends will be with you there also. You do not think we should desert you; by to-morrow your friends will have multiplied to half a nation."

"But my enemies—what of them? That is my fear."

"I hold the hostage that will silence them, and—But trust me and all will be well, better, I hope, than you can think. We have played a hazardous game, I know; but I have just heard that the move which must decide it in our favor has been made successfully."

"I wish I could feel your enthusiasm," she said, rather sadly.

"I have you to enthuse me," I cried. "And for your sake——"

I stopped, I was losing my head in the craze of her beauty.

"You would what?" she asked, putting her hand on mine, and setting me on fire with a look which I thought and hoped I could read.

I thrust away the almost maddening temptation to say what was in my heart and thoughts.

"I would remember that there is yet much to do," I said stolidly, dropping my eyes.

She snatched her hand away, and turned away from me with a toss of the head.

"I wish I had never gone on with this!" she exclaimed impetuously. "It was not my wish. I should not if you had not persuaded me——No, I don't mean that at all. Forgive me, cousin, I am so thoughtless!" she cried, changing again quickly. "I know all you have done for me, and I am not ungrateful. Forgive me." She came again and put her hands back into mine. "I am such a poor Queen even for a sham one."

This was even more trying than before, and I had to fight hard to hold myself in hand. But I succeeded.

"Don't speak of forgiveness; there is nothing to forgive. What lies before us to-night is enough to make any one anxious. I can understand you."

"Can you?" she answered, peering with shining, eloquent eyes into mine. "No, no, no, a hundred times no. But I am glad you like my dress and—I will try to bear myself to-night so as to be worthy of—of all you have dared for me."

"God grant we may all come safely through it, and that to-night may see you Queen indeed," I replied fervently; and I was putting my lips to her hand as a sign of my homage, though I meant more, when she drew her hand hastily away.

"I am not Queen yet," she exclaimed; and I was wondering at the meaning of this little action all the time I was donning my courtier's garb. Her changefulness puzzled me. Sometimes I hoped—well, I scarce know what I was not fool enough to think; and at others I feared. But my hopes were stronger than my fears on that account, and had there not been such important work on hand that night I think I could not have resisted putting the ball to far other use than its promoters had projected.

I could not drive with her to the palace, as it was necessary that I should arrive alone, and I had procured an invitation for her in another name. Von Krugen was to be in constant attendance upon her, with urgent instructions never to let her out of his sight; and Steinitz, who was also garbed as a courtier and carried a sword, was to be an additional guard, remaining at a distance and keeping in touch with me, so that I might know where to find Minna at the instant I needed. In order that there might be no difficulty in my recognizing her, supposing there were another domino of the same color and shape, we had had a small cross of red silk sewn on each shoulder.

I was very busy with my thoughts and full of anxiety as I drove away. So far as I could see now, my plans were complete. I had the Duke Marx in my hands; I had outwitted my opponents and could produce Minna at the very moment when they, reckoning on her absence, would have pledged themselves over the hilt in her cause; no one had breathed a hint to show that my assumption of the part of the Prince was more certainly known than a few days previously; and I had a fairly accurate knowledge of my opponents' tactics and aims, while they were ignorant of

mine.

It was probable enough that my appearance at the ball safe and sound after von Nauheim's attempt on me would cause some consternation, and no doubt I must be well on my guard for the rest of the evening.

I was very late in entering, but that would only give color to the supposition that I had been trapped by von Nauheim; and I thought I might perhaps turn it to account by surprising something out of the men who did not expect me.

With this object I fastened my mask very firmly—it was a large one, and hid my features successfully; and, taking a hint from my old stage experiences, I humped up one of my shoulders, limped on one leg, and in this way hobbled, with the gait of an old man, into the ball-room.

It was a brilliant scene indeed. The magnificent suite of rooms was decorated in the most lavish manner, each in a different style and period; and the garish blaze of light in places contrasting with the soft, seductive tints of others, the artistic combination of decorative coloring, the changing play of the electric fairy lamps of every conceivable hue, the grouping of hundreds of palms and ferns with contrasting masses of gorgeously colored flowers, a thousand guests in all the exuberant splendor of the most exquisite costumes, and the sparkling glitter of myriads of jewels, made up a scene of positively gorgeous fascination.

To me it was a great stage, on which all the people present were but supers, walking, dancing, chatting, laughing, and love-making, to fill up time until the really important characters should have their entrances called.

Near to the door, as I entered, a clown was fooling clumsily and awkwardly, and passing silly jests in a disguised voice with all who passed him.

I knew him directly. It was the mad King, and on the sleeve of his clown's tunic I saw the mark that told us who he was. Round him in busy hum I heard loud whispers about the greatness and cleverness of the King, and every now and then he would stop his silly jesting to listen to these comments.

"'Tis easy to see thou art a soldier, old hobbler," he called to me, and ran and planted himself in my path, and peered up in my face.

"Why's that, clown?" I asked in an old man's voice.

"Because thou canst not help shouldering arms," he cried, humping up his own shoulder in ridicule of mine; and at the silly jest the crowd round burst into roars of loud Court laughter, with cries of "How excellent!" "What wit!" "Who is this great jester?" and a hundred other notes of praise of his wonderful clowning.

I passed on, not ill pleased to have been mistaken for an old man, and I made my way slowly round the grand rooms, looking for the men I had to meet, and wondering why the King was still at large. I kept turning to look back at the place where I had met him, and when at length I saw that he had gone I judged that this meant he had left to change his costume, and that the occasion of that change would be seized for the purposes of the plot. And just as I noticed that a voice which I recognized as the Baron Heckscher's fell on my ear.

"It is long past the hour. Something may have happened."

"I have suspected him from the first. It spells treachery," said another.

It was Herr Kummell.

I had reached the far end of the suite of rooms, and at the back of me was a deep alcove or small ante-room, at the mouth of which the two men were standing, some others being farther inside. I guessed they were speaking of me, and I stood concealed by one of the pillars which supported the domed roof, and kept my back to them, listening with all my ears.

"I do not wish to think that," answered the baron in a tone of assumed reluctance. "But what you have told me is very extraordinary."

"He has purposely put her out of our reach. You will never find her. I am for letting matters pass. If he were here I would tell him to his face what I think."

It was certainly nothing less than a disaster that the two men who, of all those in the scheme, were really loyal to Minna, and should have been of the utmost value in co-operating with me, were, through the unfortunate turn of things, suspicious of me and hostile. I could, of course, do nothing now to undeceive them; but it was an additional aggravation that Minna's supposed disappearance should have been made to appear as the result of my treachery.

"We cannot go back now," I heard the baron say. "Indeed the curtain has drawn up already. The King has gone for his change of dress."

They turned then into the alcove to join the rest, and I moved away. Soon afterward I dropped the shuffling gait of an old man and walked to the alcove with quick, firm footsteps.

"Good evening, gentlemen," I said. "I am late, but that is no fault of my own."

My arrival produced an evident surprise, and even the astute Baron Heckscher showed some

signs of it.

"You are indeed very late, Prince," he said. "We had begun to fear that you were going to fail us at the last moment."

"Have you found the Countess Minna?" asked Kummell. "Or perhaps you have been detained searching for her?"

His tone rang with contempt, and he made no attempt to hide his suspicions of me.

"That is a question we should put to Baron Heckscher here," I answered in a tone which made the latter start and look at me. "I mean, of course, that he almost pledged his word to find her in time for to-night's work. Have you any news, baron?"

"I have every hope that all will yet be right," he said.

"Those who hide can find," said Kummell.

"They can, and I wish they'd be quick about it," I assented curtly. "But we have no time now for discussion. We have to act. And I shall be glad to be informed how matters stand. Are all the arrangements complete?"

Kummell and his friend Beilager, the baron, and I had been standing apart from the rest, who were grouped together, engaged in a low but animated conversation, of which I did not doubt I was the subject. Baron Heckscher moved across to the larger group as I put the question, and I took advantage of the moment to say to Kummell in a low, earnest tone:

"You have done me the ill turn to suspect me, and before the night is out you will have cause to admit your error. I shall rely upon you implicitly to stand by your loyalty in what is to come to-night. Afterward we can have an explanation if necessary," and without giving him time to reply I went after the baron.

A short and hurried statement of the present position of things followed, the pith of which was that all was in readiness, and we might expect the news at any moment that the final coup was to be made.

A few minutes later a messenger hurried into the alcove and spoke to the baron, who then turned to us, and in a low tone said:

"Gentlemen, the King is ours. God bless the new ruler of Bavaria."

A murmured echo of the words from all present was drowned by a loud fanfare of trumpets and thumping of drums from the other end of the domed hall, and these heralded, as we knew, the coming of the King's substitute. We moved out at once to take our places for the big drama, and I looked round anxiously for the dark domino of Minna. As I caught sight of her in the distance I found that my heart was beating with quite unusual violence and speed.

CHAPTER XVII

CHECKMATE

The entrance of the mad King's understudy had been arranged with scrupulous eye to effect. The King himself had ordered all details, and they were carried out exactly as he had planned, on a scale of ostentatious and almost insane extravagance in which he was wont to indulge.

The supposed King was made up to represent a Chinese Emperor, the full robes offering effectual concealment of any difference between the figures of the King and his substitute. His head was bald save for the ornamental head-dress and the long, coal-black pigtail. His features were entirely concealed behind the skin mask of a painted Chinese face drawn very tight, lifelike, yet infinitely grotesque; and his robes were gorgeous and most costly, embroidered with thousands of jewels in the quaintest and weirdest of Chinese designs.

He was seated in a royal palanquin, bore by eight bearers in most hideous garbs, each wearing a skin mask of the same kind as the central figure; and as they put down their burden in the middle of the hall they turned in all directions, and set their faces grinning and mouthing and grimacing with a most weird effect. The palanquin itself was decorated and bejewelled with the same lavish prodigality with which the lunatic King was accustomed to squander his people's money in trifles and fooling.

So gorgeous and costly was every appointment of it, indeed, that even while the spectators marvelled at its brilliance they cursed the wastefulness that made it practicable.

But it was quite impossible to mistake the whole thing for anything but a royal freak; and those present did not need the private mark that was, as usual, on the arm to reveal to them that the bowing, grinning, sumptuously apparelled figure that sat amid the cushions of the palanquin, squeaking out gibberish in a high-pitched voice as though indulging in Chinese greetings, was their King.

The whole scene was too characteristic of him.

Behind the palanquin, grouped with clever regard to color effects, were the members of a numerous suite, all attired in rich Chinese costumes, while musicians, playing upon all kinds of extraordinary instruments, clanged and clashed, trumpeted and drummed, squeaked and groaned, in a medley of indescribable discords and unrhythmic jangle. Yet in all the babel and confusion there was the method of shrewd organization and carefully thought out plan.

When the first effect of the dramatic entrance was over, the bearers took up the palanquin, a procession was formed, and the courtiers and musicians, reinforced by a number of dancing-girls and men, made a progress round the ball-rooms, and at last grouped themselves about and around a raised dais, on one side of which stood an improvised throne.

A programme of dancing was then gone through, followed by a number of ceremonial acts, all intended as a preface to the chief performance for which we were waiting so anxiously—the play of the formal abdication.

During the whole of this fantastic business my excitement had been growing fast. I knew that with comparatively few exceptions all the people present were dead against me and in favor of the Ostenburg interest. For months—for years, indeed—they had been working, striving, and plotting for the end which they now thought to be within their reach. Among them, as I had had abundant evidence, were men desperate enough to stop short of no excesses to gain that end, and yet I was seeking to checkmate them in the very hour of success by a single bold stroke.

All the men who had taken a leading part in the plot had dispersed among the audience, each having a definite part assigned to him. I myself stood apart leaning against a pillar, with Steinitz not far from me, and when the procession had just passed me a deep voice close to my ear said:

"A striking ceremonial, Prince."

I looked round, and thought I recognized the lithe, sinewy face of the Corsican Praga, whose dark, glittering eyes were staring at me through his mask.

"Very striking. Who are you?" I asked cautiously.

"I carry the tools of my trade," he replied, touching lightly his sword. "And I am badly in want of work."

"Why are you here?"

"I am a sort of postman—I bring news of the mail."

I understood the play of the words, and knew him by it for certain.

"And what is the news?"

"Of the best, except for one thing."

His tone alarmed me somewhat. We drew away then from the crowd, and, standing apart together, he told me what had happened.

"That Clara is a devil, Prince, and we must beware of her. She hates you, and has been torn in two ways by this business."

"What do you mean, man? Speak out. Where is the Duke Marx?"

"Safe, and where no one will find him. Drunk as a Christian duke should be, and the wine that was made from the water couldn't make him drunker. She lured him out to Spenitz; and, when she had got him separated from his servants, drove with him to the house at Friessen alone." This was the place we had secured for the purpose in a lonely spot some fifty miles from the city. "He would have gone to the world's end in the mood she worked him into, and I chuckled louder every fresh mile we covered."

"You! What were you doing there?" I asked in astonishment.

"I was the driver, of course. We wanted no servants—there was no place for them—and, once we started from Spenitz, I vowed that he should go on if I had to brain him to get him there. Bacchus, but he's a fool!"

"Get on with the story, man," said I impatiently. "I want to know what you fear is wrong."

"He went out like a lamb, protesting only now and then that he must be back soon, and must be in Munich to-night; but she stopped his protests with a kiss, and the fool was as happy as a drunken clown. We reached Friessen, and then the play began. While they were billing and fooling in the house I slipped a saddle on the horse's back in place of his harness, went out on to the road, and, after I had given him less than half an hour with Clara, I came galloping up to the house at full stretch, for all the world as if I had followed them every yard of the way from Spenitz, and I rushed into the room with my sword drawn, spluttering out oaths, and vowing I'd have his life on the spot."

"Well?"

"There's a good assortment of cowardice in that little body of his. He has too many good things in

this life to wish to leave it, I suppose, for he could scarcely make enough show of fight to make it plausible for Clara to rush in between us, throw herself on her knees, and, with a clever bit of acting, pray that there should be no bloodshed. I blustered and raged, and at length consented to spare his wee chip of a life; but I forced him to swallow an opiate that made him as drunk as a fool, and will keep him quiet for a dozen hours or more. Then I bound and gagged him to make doubly sure, and locked him up in an underground cellar. We can keep him there a close prisoner for a month if need be and not a soul will be the wiser, unless——"

"Unless what?" I cried.

"Unless the beloved Clara should choose to say what she knows."

"Do you suspect her?"

"I don't know what she means, or what she wants. She is torn between her desire to help me and to hurt you; and which will win in the end I can't say. She has done this for me, but, having done it, she is singular enough to turn round and try to hit at you in some other direction. I can't answer for her; and I thought it best to tell you so."

"If you think she means to tell of his whereabouts, we'll send out to-night at once and change it."

"I can't think that, because it would be treachery to me. In fact, I'm sure she won't. She knows me pretty well by this time, and I swore to her that if she did anything of the kind I'd wreak a bitter vengeance on her and the duke. I'll do it too," he growled, with a deep guttural oath.

"But what do you fear, then?"

"She is back to-night in Munich for some object; and as she is deep in with the Ostenburg lot, trusted by them, too—it is through her that most things have leaked to me—we may look for her to fend off suspicion from herself for this decoy work by striking at you in some other way. So you know what to expect."

"But if she is helping you, why should she turn against me?" I said, perplexed.

"For the best of all reasons, Prince—she is a woman."

The fact that I could not solve the enigma did not decrease my disquiet at the news, and had there been time I would have taken some measures of precaution. But it was too late now. We must go on, whether to succeed or to fail; for a glance at the dais showed me that the moment for the act of abdication had arrived, and we both turned to watch the proceedings.

This ceremonial was also very carefully planned to give it the appearance of formal reality. A loud flourish of trumpets was sounded, and the Court herald stepped forward and announced that his Majesty the King had a weighty communication to make at once. Every one of the Privy Councillors present went forward and stood in a group about the throne, and among them were the Baron Heckscher, and five or six of the men who had been associated as leaders in the scheme. To them the pseudo King made many bows, and, choosing the Baron Heckscher as his mouthpiece, delivered by him a message to the rest. Then the trumpets blared again, and the supposed King, standing up, laid aside the outer Chinese robe he wore, and stood revealed in the ordinary Court dress of the King himself; but he remained masked, of course. He next handed a paper to the baron, who handed it to one of the heralds, and the latter, who had been properly coached as to its contents, read it out in a loud, ringing voice to all the people assembled.

This was the royal proclamation that his Majesty had resolved to abdicate, and that he had nominated the Countess Minna von Gramberg, the nearest heir, as his successor, and called upon the people to support her. At this juncture I made my way to where Minna was standing in her hooded domino by von Krugen, and took my place beside her. She was trembling violently, and I whispered a word or two of encouragement.

"You had better get ready to unmask, and throw aside the domino," I said, and her reply was drowned in the ringing cheers of the crowd.

There was no mistaking the heartiness which greeted the news of the abdication; but the question for us was whether there would be the same cheering when it was found that Minna herself was present to accept the honor thus offered her.

At first those people who were not in the secret had been altogether unable to grasp the meaning of the proceedings; but those in the plot soon led the way, and as they scattered thickly all about the room, they spread the news quickly and by assuming to take the whole thing as genuine induced the rest to indorse an event they desired only too keenly.

Then followed the Act of Abdication.

The crown was brought by a page to the King, and he took it and placed it on his head.

This was followed by a moment of silence.

The trumpets blared out again; and the herald announced that his Majesty would lay aside the crown in accordance with the proclamation and as a sign that he renounced it forever in favor of his successor.

The action was watched in deep, dead silence; but no sooner had it been completed than the

chorsing crowd, who had been carefully coached, broke out into loud and vociferous cries and shouts of "Long live Queen Minna!"

"Now, Minna," I whispered anxiously; for she seemed too anxious to make the slightest attempt to prepare. "In another moment I must lead you forward."

As the cries died away the man on the throne, now uncrowned, moved aside, and, with a bow to those round him, walked quickly away out of the hall.

There was another blare of trumpets and a fresh call for the Queen.

"Come, Minna; you must come," I said firmly; and I myself unmasked, drawing the attention of many in the room upon me by this act.

But the girl at my side made no movement. She had ceased to tremble, however, as I found when she put her hand on my arm.

"Everything will be ruined, Minna, if you do not come," I said, and in my excitement I touched her domino, as if to draw it away.

A low soft laugh was the answer I got.

I looked up in the deepest astonishment. I began to fear I knew not what. A glance at the secret mark on the domino told me there was no mistake. The little red cross on the shoulder next me was distinctly visible. But an instant later I knew what it all meant.

The mask was slipped off, but instead of Minna the face of Clara Weylin met mine with a look of exasperating mockery in the insolent, triumphant eyes.



INSTEAD OF MINNA, THE FACE OF CLARA WEYLIN MET MINE.

For the moment I was like a man bereft of his senses.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER THE ABDUCTION

"This is my revenge, Herr Fischer."

The words were spoken in an angry, taunting voice, quite loud enough for many people round us to hear, and they looked at us in the broadest astonishment.

They recalled my scattered wits.

"Captain von Krugen, what is the meaning of this?" I demanded in a quick, stern tone of the man who was staring in abject helpless bewilderment at the woman who had thus tricked us so cleverly.

"I am absolutely at a loss——" he began; but I cut him short.

"You have betrayed your trust, sir, and God alone knows what the consequences will be."

Meanwhile the cries for the Queen Minna were growing in volume and echoing all around us, and I saw the Baron Heckscher look across at me. The men about the throne had unmasked. I thought rapidly. It was no use wasting time in reproaching or abusing the woman who had fooled us. We were in a mess which might ruin not only my scheme, but the whole of us. While the people were still shouting for the Queen, I hurried back to where Praga was standing, and in a few words told him what had occurred.

"She is the devil. I feared something. I'll——"

"Don't waste time. We have one strong card yet, and must keep possession of it. You are still true to me?" I asked.

"As true as death, I'll show——"

"Then you must do this. Return at once to Friessen with all possible speed—you and Captain von Krugen. Take the duke away anywhere, and lodge him in a place of safety. If neither of you can think of a better place, carry him to Gramberg; but one of you will probably know of some place where he can be kept as a hostage. If I cannot hold him prisoner our last hope is gone."

"She will never say——"

"I trust no woman again in a thing of this sort. Put him where she cannot tell any one where he is. You will have to ride all the way, I expect. No matter. Take the best horses in the stables here and ride them to a standstill, if necessary. You must go at a hand-gallop the whole way: or perhaps you can get a special train to Spenitz. Anything, but for God's sake go—and at once. You can deal with the woman afterward."

I called up von Krugen, and gave him the hurried orders.

"Remember at any cost to keep him a prisoner, and let me know where he is."

These were my last words to the two, and spoken with almost fierce earnestness. As I turned from them I beckoned Steinitz to me.

"I am going to speak to that woman in a dark domino. When I leave her watch her as you would watch the devil, and let me know where she goes and to whom she speaks."

I went back to Clara Weylin.

"Will you give me an interview presently?" I asked, very quietly, adding significantly, "It will be safer."

"I am not afraid of you," she replied scornfully.

"It will be safer," I repeated.

"I don't wish to speak to you."

"It will be safer," I said for the third time; and then I crossed the room to where the men clustered about the throne were waiting for me.

"Where is the Countess Minna?" asked Baron Heckscher; and he could not restrain the evidence of his feeling of triumph.

"I regret that the Countess Minna von Gramberg is unable to be present. Baron Heckscher has known for some hours that this would be the case." I said this loudly enough for those about us to hear, and a glance into the man's face told me that he knew of my sudden disappointment, and was enjoying his triumph supremely. I kept out of my voice and manner all signs of alarm or anger, and added quietly to the baron, "You had better announce her indisposition, and stop this clamor."

On seeing me cross to the throne those who were leading the chorus took up the cry for Minna with redoubled energy.

"I will not answer for the effect of the disappointment," he said.

"Yet you will have to," said I, with a look he could not fail to understand.

"I don't understand you," he returned hotly.

"I will not fail to make my meaning quite plain," I retorted. "And you may not find the course so clear as you think."

"What message shall I have announced?"

"That the Countess Minna von Gramberg accepts the high mission to which she is called, but that to-night she is too unwell to be present," I answered; "and let the message be given at once."

"We can't do that," he replied, seeing my object—to bind him to this public acceptance of the throne by Minna. "She must be here in person to make that possible."

"If that is not done and at once," I cried, going close to him and speaking the words between my teeth, "I myself will proclaim the fact that the man who was here a minute since was not the King, but your dummy, and that the whole thing is a farce got up by you and these gentlemen. You will then have to bring back the King himself, and you can judge as well as I how he will view the acts that have been done here to-night, and reward the actors."

"You dare not play the traitor in that way!"

"Dare not? I dare do more than that," and I clipped my words short as I whispered them into his ear. "I dare stand up now and tell the whole story of your double treachery, for I know it all: and, by God! if you thwart me any farther I'll make my words good to the last letter."

I meant every syllable of the threat, and I made this perfectly plain in my manner. Whether the man was actually afraid for himself I know not; but he saw clearly enough that any such sensational statement made by me at that juncture would inevitably result in the complete overthrow of the scheme for which he had worked so hard.

"I don't affect to understand your meaning," he said; "but one way is as good as another to put an end to a scene that must be ended somehow."

"Then give the instructions, and let the people see that they come from you," and I drew back.

He called the man who had been acting as herald, and spoke to him in an undertone; and the latter was turning to the people when I interposed.

"As this is the first utterance from the Queen, you had better have the trumpeters call for silence, and let the herald end the declaration with the formal prayer, God save the Queen."

This was done, though the men round me frowned in angry dissent; and as soon as the announcement had been made the signal was given, the band struck up for the dancing to recommence, and the throng of people began to melt away from the dais on which we had all been collected.

So far, I felt I had done the best I could to repair the disconcerting smash-up of my plans, and already I had in my thoughts a rough idea of the line I would take later with the baron and his friends of the Ostenburg interest. They had outplayed me at my own game, and had dealt me a shrewd and clever stroke, which must have completely defeated me but for the fact that I had kidnapped their man, the Duke Marx. For the moment everything must yield to the necessity of keeping him secure, and thus for some hours at least I dared not say a word to let them know what I had done with him.

I calculated that von Krugen and Praga would take about five hours to get to the place where he was concealed, and they would need at least further four or five hours to get him to some other spot. That at the least. I had given them a difficult piece of work, but they were both resolute and indeed desperate men, and I had ample confidence that, given sufficient time, they would overcome the difficulty. It was now past midnight, and I reckoned, therefore, that I must hold my tongue about the duke until the following morning.

In the mean time I had the problem of Minna's whereabouts to solve. I must also ascertain whether the woman had told anything of the part which she and Praga had played together in getting hold of the duke.

I looked round the room in search of her, and, not seeing either her or Steinitz, I was moving off the dais to make a tour of the rooms to find her, when the two men Kummell and Beilager stopped me.

"You promised an explanation of your conduct," said the former in a curt, angry tone. "Be so good as to give it."

"You will have an ample explanation later, gentlemen. Matters of greater moment are pressing me now."

"Nothing could be of greater moment than the reason for the Countess Minna's non-appearance here to-night; for that statement about her indisposition was, of course, untrue."

"It was untrue, as you say. But until the whole matter can be told it is a waste of valuable time to discuss a small part of it," I answered coolly, although the insult in his tone and words was more than galling.

"I differ from you, and demand an explanation at once—or I shall draw my own conclusions."

"That is at your discretion. You have taken a course throughout this which makes you largely responsible for the result."

"Do you insinuate that we are in any way responsible for spiriting away the countess?" he asked hotly.

"I must decline to discuss this with you in your present frame of mind and temper. Your manner to me is an insinuation and an insult."

"You will have to discuss it all the same, or I will publicly insult you here, in the presence of the whole room."

The hot-headed fool was likely to spoil everything.

"That must also be as your indiscretion prompts you," I returned sharply. "If you think you will serve the interests of my family by wrangling here, and causing me to run you through the body afterward, take your own course. But you will do far better to keep a sharp watch on the man who has apparently been duping you—I mean Baron Heckscher—and try to thwart the deep scheme he has laid."

"I believe you to be a traitor; to have worked openly for the Countess Minna, and secretly to have intrigued against her; and that you have kept her out of the way purposely in the interests of the Ostenburg family. You are a spy; nothing better."

"And you are a foolish little man, whose sight is as short as your temper, and whose wits are as dull as your silly suspicions are keen. You are the dupe of the Baron Heckscher."

"You shall answer to me for this—or at least you should, if you were worthy of consideration."

He was so angry and excited that he could scarcely keep from striking, and this last insinuation of his had leapt out in his exasperation.

I had been expecting something of the kind, and it prepared me for the line which the rest would take later; but at that moment I caught sight of Steinitz, moving among the crowd in the distance, and I put an end to this altercation promptly.

"When you know the facts, sir, you will be far more ready to apologize to me than to challenge me. But if you should then wish this matter to go forward, you will not find me in the least unwilling."

I bowed ceremoniously and, putting on my mask again, hurried away after Steinitz.

It was quite clear now that these men had got hold of some tale from the two lawyers about me, and the baron was quite shrewd enough, in order to separate from me the only two men among the leaders who were really loyal to Minna, to turn it to good account by proclaiming me a spy in the Ostenburg interest.

It was an exceedingly plausible story to account for my having kept Minna out of the way. In the mean time my anxiety on her account was growing very keen, and had I not known that happily von Nauheim was laid by the heels and, as I sincerely hoped, badly hurt, I should have been desperate enough. As it was, however, I held a hostage for her safety, and I was eagerly impatient for the moment to come when I could show the baron the real strength of my position.

Steinitz pointed out to me the actress, who had thrown off her domino, and was standing in the middle of a group of men and women laughing and talking merrily. I shouldered my way among the promenading dancers to a spot near her, and then stood forward that she might see me. As soon as she caught sight of me she threw a glance of angry defiance in my direction, and, turning her back, recommenced her gay chatter with her companions. But I was in no mood to let her trifle with me nor to allow her to think she could treat me as she pleased. I went up and requested an immediate interview.

"Can't you see that I am engaged? My dance card is full," she replied, with supercilious nonchalance.

"The business that I have with you cannot wait," I said firmly. "And if you cannot give me a private interview, I shall be compelled to discuss it here and now in public."

She looked at me to see if I were in earnest, and apparently came to the conclusion that I was, for with an angry toss of the head she said:

"I can spare you three minutes until my next dance."

I led her to one of the many luxurious cosy corners of the place.

"You have taken a very bitter revenge, and a very cowardly one, for no real offence," I said. "Is your anger satisfied with the one stroke, or am I to look for another?"

"I warned you that you had made an enemy of me."

"And you have made the warning good. Have you done anything else? You know I refer to your work to-day at Friessen."

"If I can harm you I will."

"And Praga?"

"I hate you!" she cried, with intense bitterness.

"You have given ample proof of that. Have you betrayed him in regard to that affair of to-day?"

"I shall not tell you. Who are you that you should cross-question me in this manner? I am no servant of yours."

"Have you told the people for whom you have to-night tricked me that you have decoyed the Duke Marx into the hands of those who, if need be, will take his life?"

I struck home with this thrust; and she glanced about her in manifest alarm.

"Don't speak like that," she cried in a hurried whisper. "There is no fear of anything of that kind."

"You mistake," I answered shortly and sternly. "If anything happens to the girl whom you have betrayed to-night, the man whom you lured away will pay for it with his life; and I myself will explain every detail of your share in the matter."

It was a little cowardly to play on her fears in this way; but it was not my own safety—it was Minna's—I was fighting for.

The woman's agitation increased with each word.

"It must not be. It shall not be. You dare not," she cried.

"There is no dare not in schemes like these," I answered grimly.

"But I was promised there should be no violence."

"You had not then played us false and worn that domino."

"I will go at once and tell all I know," she exclaimed excitedly.

Good. She had not told.

"It is too late. You were the decoy, but the duke is now in the hands of my men, and no power on earth can save him if I but issue the order. Do you think I do my work so poorly as to leave him where you, or those whom you send, could find him?"

She sat, her fingers interlocked and her eyes staring in a fixed, set gaze of abject fright, while her breath came and went with quick catches of agitation.

"You have played the subtle part of double treachery, and you will find it deadly dangerous," I went on sternly.

It was necessary to frighten her thoroughly for the object I had, and I let a couple of minutes pass in silence, while this conviction of her danger forced itself home. Then I opened the door of relief.

"It rests with you to save his life, and your own, and Praga's," I said.

She was too panic-stricken to act, and the hope in her face at my words made me rejoice.

"Save the Countess Minna von Gramberg. Help me to find her."

The light died out as suddenly as it had come.

"I cannot. I know nothing of her whereabouts."

"Tell me all you know about this trick by which you personated her."

At that moment a man dressed as a Venetian gondolier approached to claim her for a dance.

"I must know everything at once," I whispered hurriedly. "You must refuse him."

It was a test of my power. If she went off to dance I should accept it as a sign of defeat.

"I must not refuse. I dare not," she said nervously.

"You understand what it means," I replied in the same undertone.

The man came up, and the nervous movements of my companion's fingers showed me something of her agitation.

"This is our dance, I think," he murmured, bowing.

"Yes, I—yes, it is," and she half rose from her seat, but then sank back again. "But I am not quite well enough to dance. I am sitting here for the cooler air. Please excuse me."

"Permit me to sit it out with you then," he said, and he turned toward me as if expecting me to give way.

I did not budge, of course, but stared out in front of me as if I had not seen his look.

"I am sorry, but—a friend has—has brought me some important—news, and it has distressed me—and I wish to continue the conversation."

It was as clumsy an excuse as any child in her teens could have mumbled out, and given in a manner altogether unlike her own. But fortunately the man took umbrage at the obvious slight, and with a stiff bow went off.

I had won again.

"Now you can tell me all you know."

"Wait a moment. Let me be quiet, or I shall faint."

She was now trembling violently, and I sat waiting until she should have recovered her self-composure sufficiently to tell me the news I was burning to learn.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAID'S STORY

"I have really very little to tell you," said the actress after a long silence, in which she had been making strenuous efforts to recover self-possession. "I know very little. I have known, of course, for a long time that there was to be special interest attaching to the proceedings here to-night, and for Signor Praga's sake I had learned all that I could."

"I wish to know the particular facts in connection with your taking the place of the countess, that's all," for the time was slipping by and my anxiety on Minna's account was growing to fever heat.

"I was merely told that I had to play the part of another woman, and that I was to be paid for doing so. More than that, I was given to understand that in the event of the matter being carried through successfully I should gain the favor of some of those high in authority."

"Do you mean you were doing this for money only?"

"No, but because I believed there was some other great advantage to be gained."

"Did you tell Praga?"

"No. Why should I tell him everything? I did not know for certain until my return to-night what was really intended. I might have drawn back then if I could—if I had not also known that I should be dealing a blow at you and revenging myself."

"How did you get possession of the countess's domino, and when did you take her place by the side of the man guarding her?"

"I did not get her domino. The one I wore was ready for me when I arrived here to-night. Some one had described exactly the dress the Countess Minna was to wear, and everything was ready for me when I arrived."

"Did you know it was the Countess Minna you were to personate?"

"Yes. I was not told, but I guessed; and when they told me that you would come up to me and lead me forward to the throne, I knew of course all that was meant. I did not do all I was told to do, however. I was to have kept my mask on and to have walked across the room with you to the dais, and then have thrown it off, to shame and confuse you before every one."

"And why didn't you?"

"I preferred to enjoy my revenge privately. And I had it when I saw your look of dismay on catching sight of my face."

"And how was the change effected?"

"Simply and easily enough. Some of those in the secret began to crowd and crush round the Countess Minna; others resented this, a confusion was caused, and in the moment I slipped into her place, while some one made up to look like the man with her went up and led her, as he said, to a place of refuge from the pressure of the crowd."

"Where did they take her?" I asked anxiously.

"I don't know. I know no more than yourself what happened afterward. I had not been in my place more than a few minutes before you came up to me. You know the rest."

"Who told you all our plans and made this thing possible?"

For it was clear that I had been betrayed by some one in our closest confidence—some one who knew even of the secret mark on Minna's domino. It was no mere case of her having been seen and recognized while at the ball; for the dress had obviously been ready before Minna herself had arrived.

"I was not told," replied my companion.

Whoever it was, the betrayal had been complete. I had been allowed to think that my ruse of substituting the waiting-maid Marie for her mistress had been successful; and just when I had thought everything safe I had the mine sprung right under my feet. They had reckoned I should be all unconscious of such a stroke, and unfortunately they had reckoned correctly.

But who was the traitor? This was no plan that could be laid in an hour. It showed that from the first there had been some leakage by which my whole scheme was carried over to my enemies; and it appeared to me that it must lie between two people, the Baroness Gratz and the waiting-maid Marie.

"Who gave you your instructions?" I asked sharply.

"I will not tell you," was the equally sharp reply, and though pressed she held to her refusal.

"Have you seen the Count von Nauheim here to-night?"

"No, he is not here."

"How do you know?"

"I overheard surprise expressed at his absence."

"Can you give any clew as to where I shall find the Countess Minna?"

"No, none whatever. I know no more than you yourself."

It was useless to ask any more questions. It was clear that she had been used as a tool for this particular task, and had been trusted no further. I must seek my information elsewhere; from either von Nauheim, if I could find him, or from Baron Heckscher.

But I was altogether unwilling to see the latter until sufficient time had passed for von Krugen and Praga to have secured the person of the Duke Marx.

It was a sheer impossibility, however, for me to remain inactive while Minna was in the hands of her enemies, and I resolved to try to trace von Nauheim. From what the actress told me, it appeared probable either that his accident in the carriage with me had hurt him sufficiently to prevent his coming to the ball, or else that he had found it difficult to escape from the hands of the men whom he had planned should hold me. In either event he would be unable to get to Minna, and so long as that was the case her danger was proportionately less.

But I must find him if possible; for the suspense of the present uncertainty was maddening.

I crossed to Steinitz, and telling him to follow me I threaded my way through the laughing, gossiping, excited throng and made my way to the nearest exit.

In the ante-room through which I had to pass a group of men were standing deep in conversation. Among them were several of the leaders of the movement, and I recognized, to my annoyance, Kummell and Beilager among them.

Kummell was, as usual, gesticulating rather wildly, and on catching sight of me he stepped forward and barred my progress.

"Here is the traitor, gentlemen," he cried angrily. "We have caught him in the very act of trying to sneak away. You won't pass here, my fine fellow, I can tell you."

It was the very climax of irony that this man, who should have been so valuable an ally, should in this way be perpetually crossing and thwarting me. In my angry mood at the moment I could have found it in me to strike him.

"That has yet to be proved," I answered as quietly as my anger would permit.

An audible sneer ran round the group.

"I will prove it, for I will stop you," and he planted himself right in front of me, put his arms akimbo, and stared me insolently in the face.

"Good!" exclaimed one or two of the others.

I took off my mask before I answered. His insulting, swaggering manner was almost more than I could brook, although I knew the other men were deliberately endeavoring to provoke a fight, and, further, that it would be the height of folly for two men who were in reality heart and soul together in pursuit of the same object to go out and try to kill each other.

"You can scarcely be in earnest, Herr Kummell," I said, after a pause. "I have already told you once to-night that later on I shall be ready to hold myself at your disposal, should you wish it. We are still in the precincts of the palace, and the business of the night is one on which you and I are in heart agreed. There are those here whom nothing would please better than to see us two crossing swords; and it is they who are the traitors"—I looked round at the rest—"and if any one of them is minded to make this quarrel his own he will not find me backward. But with you and Herr Beilager I will not fight at present."

"I shall not allow you to pass for all your big words," said the little hot-headed fool in the same tone.

"The work I have is too urgent to be delayed now. Stand aside, if you please," I answered sternly.

"You shall not pass here."

"Fore God, sir, take care, or you will drive me to do that which I may regret." I thundered the words out, and putting on as stern and fierce a look as I could I moved on. He stood his ground a moment, but then winced and retreated a step.

At this a taunting, jeering laugh came from one of the rest.

I wheeled round instantly upon the group, and, not knowing which of the men it was, I picked out

the biggest of them and, walking up to him till my face was close to his, I stared him dead in the eyes for some seconds.

"Did you do me the honor to speak, sir?"

"No, I did not," he answered.

I turned to the rest.

"One of you gentlemen either spoke or sneered. Which of you was it? I am rather anxious to show him that it is not altogether safe to play in this way with me." I stared at each of them in turn, but none said a word.

"To-morrow, Herr Kummell," I said then to the little man, whose fierceness had very much abated, "you may look for the explanation I have promised you; and as soon as the business on which I am urgently engaged is finished I shall be at your service," and with that I swung forward out of the place, nor was there any longer the least attempt made to interfere with me.

The incident ruffled my temper considerably, and I went hurriedly out into the night and set off at a sharp pace for the Gramberg house, when Steinitz came up and whispered a word or two about the need for caution.

"Won't you drive home?" he asked. "To walk seems like inviting an attack."

"No, I'll walk. The air will do me good. No one will be expecting me to do so; and I will be on my guard."

In truth I did not know what my opponents' next move against me might be. It was not at all improbable that, as they had now the knowledge which would enable them to accuse me of imposture, they would deem it needless to run any risks by attacking me with violence. They could probably get at me by some kind of legal process.

I did not care in the least. I had no thought except the overpowering desire and resolve to find Minna and rescue her. I was indifferent to all else.

It was therefore with intense pleasure that I learned when I reached the house that there was important news. The maid, Marie, had arrived there about half an hour previously, and was waiting in feverish anxiety to tell me her story. I was no less anxious to hear it.

"Tell me as plainly and as shortly as you can," I said, "everything that has passed since you left the palace with the baroness up to this moment."

"The first thing I noticed was that there was a stranger on the box as coachman, and that there were also two strangers on the board behind. We drove away slowly through the lines of people and until we had gone about half a mile. Then the carriage turned away to the right, and began to thread a number of streets, the pace gradually increasing until the outskirts of the town were reached. There the carriage stopped with a jerk, and a stranger sprang in and took his seat opposite to us.

"'Do not be alarmed, ladies,' he said, 'but the Prince desires you should call first at the house of Baron Heckscher to complete certain details.' I made no opposition, because you had told me not to speak a word if I could avoid doing so; and thus we drove on for about half an hour at a rapid pace."

"Do you know the road?" I asked.

"Yes, it was the Linden road. Then the carriage turned in through some side gates," continued the girl, "and we drew up at the door of a large house."

"'You will come in,' said the man, alighting and leading the way. I noticed a large number of men about, who took careful heed of us, as we were led into a room at the far end of a long corridor. There we were left for a few minutes alone, when the stranger came back to us.

"'I have to tell you now,' he said to the baroness, 'that it will be necessary for you to remain here some time. Reasons of State have made it desirable that you should be separated from those whom you have hitherto looked on as your friends; but, of course, no harm will come to you, and the detention will only be for a few hours. You will not need an attendant, baroness, as this young woman'—waving his hand toward me—'can transfer to you the services she is accustomed to render to her mistress, the Countess Minna.'

"'What do you mean, sir?' I asked, for I could not keep quiet.

"'That it is perfectly well known to me that you are not the Countess Minna von Gramberg, but merely her waiting-maid. You will therefore be good enough to attend to the baroness,' and with that he went out of the room."

"And the baroness?" I asked eagerly.

"I was so overcome at learning that the scheme had got known to them, and that, therefore, the danger to my dear young mistress was as great as ever, perhaps greater, that I did not know what to say, or think, or do. The baroness seemed to think I had been guilty of treachery, but, your Highness, I would die sooner than be the means of any harm coming to my mistress," cried the girl, with what appeared to me to be the energy of truth, and with the tears in her eyes.

"Have you told any one of this change?" the baroness asked me, and, despite my utter protests, I could not make her believe that I had not. I sat there utterly miserable, only thinking and fearing what might happen to my mistress.

"The baroness would not speak to me, and hour after hour passed in this awful suspense. They brought us food, but I could not touch it, though the baroness ate some, and told me to do the same. But I could not. The dreadful thought of my mistress' danger seemed to shut out everything else, even anger at these suspicions of treachery."

"Well, how did you get away?" I asked as she paused. "Stay, will you know the house again? And could you guide me to it?"

"Yes, your Highness," was the ready answer.

I sent for Steinitz and told him to have a carriage got ready for me at once.

"After we had been thus for some hours," the girl resumed when I turned to her again, "I thought I heard the sound of a horse galloping up to the house, and about an hour later the same man came to our room.

"You can get ready to go. We have done with you," he said bluntly to me. 'I regret it is impossible to release you yet, baroness; but your niece will certainly have need of you, and you will probably wish to be with her again.'

"Can I not go to my mistress?" I asked, in distress at the thought of her being in this man's power.

"No, you can return to the Prince von Gramberg, and tell him the next time he plans a coup to do it more shrewdly.'

"I wrung my hands in despair and prayed and begged of him to let me go to the countess; but he scowled and frowned me down and ordered me to be silent. Then he led me away alone to where a carriage was waiting for me, and after I had been driven back to the city they set me down, and I hurried here as fast as I could."

I had already resolved to go to the place, although it was almost certain I should not find Minna there.

"Get ready to go with me. You will take your place by the coachman and direct him where to drive;" and after a rapid change of dress I armed myself and set out for the house where the girl had been detained, bidding the man drive as fast as his horses could travel.

CHAPTER XX

COVERING MY DEFEAT

As I rode through the quickly brightening dawn I endeavored to piece together some plan of action for this visit to the house; but it was obvious I should have to be guided largely by what might occur. It was exceedingly improbable that I should find Minna there. It seemed in the highest degree improbable that they would have let the girl Marie out in such a way if they had intended to take Minna to the same house; for they would have known I should go there at once. Certainly they did not intend me to know Minna's whereabouts.

There were other considerations, moreover. Marie herself might still be playing me false, or these men might be using her as a decoy to lure me into a trap. I was inclined to the latter view. I believed the girl to be true to her mistress, and I read the detention of the Baroness Gratz, judged by what the girl had said of her manner, to indicate that the treachery was hers, and not the girl's. In any event I must be on my guard.

I felt that until I could make the Baron Heckscher understand that any harm to either Minna or myself would be the signal for the death of the Duke Marx there might be danger for us both.

For Minna's sake—seeing that her helplessness would be vastly increased were anything to happen to me—I must run no unnecessary personal risks. I would use the occasion only therefore to endeavor to ascertain where Minna had been carried. After a few hours, as soon, that was, as I could safely communicate with Baron Heckscher, the axis of the danger would be shifted.

Presently the carriage stopped, and I was told that we were near the house. Calculating that if any mischief were meant a secret approach would be as dangerous as an open one, I ordered the coachman to drive straight up to the door, and I jumped out, and myself thundered at the heavy knocker, and pealed away loudly at the bell.

The noise awoke the echoes of the still, heavy, morning air, but for a long time received no attention from within the house. I grew impatient, and walked round it, examining the windows, which for the most part were closely shuttered.

I went back to the door, and knocked and rang again; and then a window at the top of the house was opened, and an old man put out his head and asked what was the matter.

"Come down to the door at once," I replied peremptorily.

"What for?"

"Come down," I cried angrily. "At once. I order you in the name of the Queen—or I shall have the door broken in."

The head was withdrawn and I thought I could hear the sounds of a muffled conference.

"Who are you and what do you want?" said the old fellow, putting out his head again.

"I order you in the name of the Queen to do as I have said," I answered, rather liking the sound of the formula. It served my purpose, for the man drew in his head muttering he would be down in a minute.

"Are you sure this is the house?" I asked the girl Marie.

"Positive. I will lead you straight to the room," she returned.

I waited impatiently until I heard some one fumbling with the fastenings of the door, and after a minute it was opened by the old man, partially dressed and yawning heavily.

"I have come for the Baroness Gratz and her companion," I said sharply as I stepped into the hall. "Let them be roused at once."

"There's no baroness here," said the man.

"Who is in the house, then?" I asked.

The old fellow looked at me shrewdly.

"There are more than enough to guard it; but there are no ladies," he answered.

"That I shall see for myself," said I, and I called Marie and told her to show me the way to the room where she and the baroness had been kept.

The old man followed, protesting at every step energetically.

"This is the room, your Highness," said the girl, laying her hand on the door.

I opened it and looked in. It was empty and dark.

"How long have you been in the house?" I asked the old man, on whom the mention of the term "highness" had produced a marked effect.

"I live here, my lord," he answered in a tone of much greater respect.

"Were you here this afternoon and evening?" and I took out a couple of gold pieces so that he could see them.

"No, your Highness," he said, with a bow—the mere sight of them had given me a step in the peerage in his opinion. "I was away in the country this morning and only returned late."

"Were there two ladies here when you returned?"

"Not that I know of, sire."

"Was your master here?"

"No, sire. He is away."

"Who is your master?"

He looked astonished.

"Herr Schemmell, your Grace."

"And were the preparations all complete at Herr Schemmell's country-seat when you left—the preparations for the expected guests, I mean?"

The shot told; for he started and looked up and I thought he was going to reply, when a stolid, sullen look settled on his face and he was silent.

I jingled the two gold pieces and added a third, and then on my side I was considerably startled, for a deep voice said from behind me:

"The bribery of a servant is not a very princely employment."

"Who are you, sir?" I cried, turning quickly on the newcomer.

"Some one to whom you will be good enough to address any further questions, if you please. Ludwig, go away." The old man shambled off down the long corridor. "And now, sir, you will be well advised to leave the house—while the way is open. You may find it difficult later."

"That may be as it will, but I am not going until I have effected my purpose and satisfied myself that those whom I seek are not here." I spoke resolutely.

"You are a trespasser, and will be good enough to leave when I tell you."

"This is the house to which those whom I seek were kidnapped and brought, and I will not leave until I have searched it."

"One of the persons kidnapped is by your side now," said he, pointing to the girl; "but you will not be allowed to search the house. If you attempt it, you will be detained and given an excellent opportunity of searching one of the cellars, but no more."

"You dare not interfere with me. I am no woman!" said I hotly.

"You will be well advised to moderate your language. You are one man, we are many. You have forced yourself into this house, and, if we deal harshly with you, you will have only yourself to blame. Personally, I have no wish to do you any hurt. You have served our turn, and can do no further harm."

I bit my lip in vexation.

"Is the Baroness Gratz in the house, or the Countess Minna von Gramberg?" I asked after a pause of embarrassment.

"I decline to answer your questions. And again I warn you to leave, or I will not be responsible for the consequences."

"I will search the house!" I exclaimed, and, without further words, I plunged along the corridor, trying to open the doors of the rooms which I passed.

They were all locked, and when I turned to the staircase it was only to find that a couple of men armed with revolvers had been posted there to prevent my ascending.

"Stand aside and let me pass!" I cried firmly.

"You will fire, if necessary," commanded the man who had followed me, and he took up a place by them. Then to me he added: "My patience is exhausted now, and I will give you three minutes only to leave the house. At the end of that time the doors will be closed, and I shall keep you here a prisoner. You are but one against a dozen, and can do nothing. It will be sheer madness to attempt to resist us."

I saw this well enough; but the thought of the ignominious failure to get even information galled and maddened me. But it would have been greater madness to resist.

"Will you give me a moment in private?" I asked the man.

He came aside with me readily.

"Can you give me any assurance that my cousin, the Countess Minna, is safe?"

"I have no instructions to give you any information whatever, but to the best of my knowledge she is perfectly safe."

"Where is the Count von Nauheim?"

"I decline to tell you, sir," he answered curtly, and I could get no more from him.

Thus, baffled and exasperated, I left the house.

I had gained little or nothing definite by my venture, and yet, despite my disappointment, I was in a sense relieved of some of my anxiety in regard to Minna's safety. Whether she was in the house or not I could not say, and, until I had seen Baron Heckscher, I had not ventured to take any too desperate steps to ascertain; but as I drove back to the house I determined on a much bolder measure to take presently.

I stopped the carriage a little way from the house, and sent back the coachman to wait and watch if the baroness or Minna left the place, and told the man to remain until Steinitz should relieve him. I drove the carriage home, and then despatched Steinitz with instructions to keep a strict watch on any movements from the house, and particularly to follow Minna should she leave the house.

As I knew that I must have a trying day before me, I lay down for an hour or two until the time for my visit to Baron Heckscher.

I arrived at his house just as he was in the act of starting for a meeting of the Council of State, which had been hurriedly summoned.

"I cannot stay to speak to you now, sir. I have to go out," he said shortly.

"On the contrary, you cannot go out until you have spoken to me," I replied, copying his manner.

"This is no time for play-acting," he said significantly. "There are serious matters of State to be settled, caused by your trickery or treachery."

"You are an authority on the latter, at any rate. But I have not come to bandy words. I wish to know where the Countess Minna von Gramberg has been carried, and to demand her instant and unconditional release."

"In what character do you demand that information?" he said, with a sneer.

"As her cousin, the Prince von Gramberg."

"The Prince. You still hold to that farce?"

"Be good enough to explain what you mean."

"Simply that you are no more the Prince von Gramberg than I am, but Heinrich Fischer, an ex-play-actor. Do you dare to deny that?"

"Certainly I do."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Then who are you?"

"For the present, and for the purposes of this interview, I am the Prince von Gramberg, and you will be good enough so to regard me."

"Swashbuckling talk is of no use to frighten me, and I have no time for any further antics of yours. You deceived me for a time, I admit, but I know you now, and, unless you leave my house, I will call my servants, and have you expelled from it and handed over to the police for an impostor."

"No, Baron Heckscher, you will not," I answered firmly, shaking my head. "I know the whole of this inner plot of yours, and can expose it, and will, too, as I told you last night."

"Possibly an effective weapon in a stage-play," he sneered. "But I have no time for folly of this sort."

He crossed the room to the bell, and stretched out his hand as if to ring it.

"I know the scheme to marry my cousin to a man already married, and so to betray and ruin her. And, mark me, if you attempt to send me away, I will go straight to Berlin and denounce the whole of your foul treachery against that girl."

"You speak a fool's tale!" he cried angrily, though he withdrew his hand from the bell.

"Maybe, but even a fool's tale, as you call it, can be sifted. Your scheme now seems on the point of succeeding. The gist of it is that when my cousin Minna is not forthcoming—through your own machinations, mark you—the cry should be raised for the Duke Marx. I have known that throughout, and I too have had my plans. You will find it difficult to play your game of chess without the King."

I enjoyed the start of surprise my words caused. It was now my turn to smile with an air of confidence.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, frowning.

"All that is in your thoughts, and more," said I significantly.

"What do you mean?" he repeated, coming toward me and looking searchingly at me.

"I mean," I began very earnestly, as if about to tell him; but changed my tone, and asked, "Where is the Countess Minna?"

He took his eyes off my face, and glanced quickly from side to side, as some men will in moments of swift, searching thought.

"You have not dared——" he began, and paused.

"You have dared to seize the Queen," said I quickly. "Why should I not dare to seize your King? This is no child's game we are playing."

He started again, pursed his lips, and frowned. I had beaten him. I knew it.

"It is checkmate," said I quietly. "And you may as well admit it. But my game is a cleaner one than yours. You have thought to ruin the Countess Minna either by a bigamous marriage or by a fate so foul that none but a soulless, intriguing traitor would have conceived it. I mean your King no harm; but I swear by every god that man has ever set up for a fetich that if so much as a hair of the pure girl's head is harmed I will visit it a thousandfold on my hostage. Now, will you tell me where is the Countess Minna?"

I had him now fast in my clutches, and turn which way he would there was no escape. To do him justice, so soon as his first dismay had passed his face wore an impassive, expressionless look that told me little. But I could read his other actions.

He had been going to his colleagues to propose that the agitation to bring the Duke Marx forward should be set on foot at once; and this move of mine had beaten him absolutely. Once or twice he let out of his eyes a glance of malice that told me what he would have done had he dared; but I had drawn his fangs, and for the time he was powerless to harm.

While I sat thus watching him and enjoying my triumph, a knock came to the door and a servant entered to say that a messenger had come for me, and wished to see me urgently.

"I will return in a moment," I said as I went out.

The man had brought me a telegram. I tore it open and found it was from von Krugen.

"Safe so far."

I dismissed the man and returned to the baron with a feeling of even greater exultation and confidence than before. I was like a man drowning who, at the last moment, had pulled himself into safety.

"Well, baron?" I asked as I re-entered the room. "Have you decided to answer my question?"

He was writing hurriedly, and glanced up a moment without speaking, then resumed, finished the letter, rang for a servant, and ordered it to be delivered at once.

"That is your answer. It is a letter to excuse my presence for half an hour. It will give time for our conference. Now, what is your motive, and what are your terms?"

As he put the question he wheeled his chair round so that he could face me as he waited for the answer.

CHAPTER XXI

NEWS OF MINNA

I did not reply to Baron Heckscher for a few seconds. It was obvious, of course, that matters had taken a new turn, and I sat thinking how to use the situation to Minna's best advantage.

"Now that you are reasonable, we will go back a little way," I said deliberately. "What do you mean by asking me my motive?"

"Presumably you have some strong motive and some object to gain. Though for the purposes of this interview, as you say, I am willing to call you the Prince von Gramberg, or anything else you like, I have proofs that you are nothing of the kind. Apparently you are an adventurer. Certainly you have been Heinrich Fischer, an actor at Frankfort, and that within a year or two. You were there for several years, and have been identified beyond question. What you were before then I neither know nor care. You have played the part of the Prince von Gramberg, and played it with plenty of dash, spirit, skill, and shrewdness. But men don't do these things for no object. You have run an hourly risk of detection as an impostor, and have certainly rendered yourself liable to heavy imprisonment; indeed, proceedings are already in course for your prosecution. Why, then, have you acted in this way?"

"Those are my private affairs," I answered after a pause; "and until you can disprove my assertion I remain the Prince von Gramberg, if you please."

"As you will, your Highness." He gave the title with excellent irony. "I may tell you that when the information reached us it was at the request of the countess's only surviving relative that she was removed from your custody."

"You mean the Baroness Gratz. I had already suspected her treachery; but you will save much trouble by keeping to the plain truth. Your object was not to get the countess out of my custody, but into your own, so that while this plot to place her on the throne had apparently been engineered in her interest it was the Ostenburg heir who should benefit. It was your work to put forward that scoundrel von Nauheim as her husband, so that when she had been ruined by him she would be impossible as a claimant for the throne. We may as well be frank."

He made a movement of anger at this, and then asked sharply:

"If what you say of him be true, how did you know it?"

"We may pass that by," I replied, with a wave of the hand; "sufficient that I did know him. To save her from such a fate has been my motive."

"You have aimed high, young man; but the Countess Minna von Gramberg's hand is not for an ex—for the present Prince von Gramberg." He made the change of phrase with dry significance. "She herself quite understands that."

It was my turn to start at this.

"You mean that what you have said has been told to her?"

"Your tone is enough to show me my information is correct. You will be wise to abandon that idea once for all. Neither her title nor her wealth is for a nameless adventurer."

His words stung me deeply, as no doubt he intended they should.

"If you knew——" I began, but then checked myself in the act of blurting out what I myself might afterward repent, and said instead: "If you knew my real plans, you would see the futility of pursuing this any further."

"That is why I asked what your plans are. What are your terms? Most men have a price. Name

yours, and I'll see whether we can pay it."

He spoke with cold deliberation.

"My terms are the safety and immediate liberation of the countess."

"They are impossible, at the present juncture. Impossible."

"Very good; then we resume matters precisely where they were when I entered this room," I replied, and rose as if to leave.

"You have been playing for a big stake, and I have shown you it is out of your reach. This girl is nothing to you—unless she has succeeded in winning your valuable heart. But you are no fool to waste your strength in chasing the unattainable. Give her up. Name your own terms in money and position. Enlist on my side, and whatever you ask you shall have."

"I am not for sale," I answered indignantly.

"Then you will be a fool, that's all. You have said enough to me here, coupled with the fact that you are what I know you to be, to warrant me in clapping you into a jail straightaway, and I will do it, believe me, if you force me."

"If you like to sign the death warrant of the Duke Marx in that way, you can. I have not come here to you without knowing you, and preparing for eventualities. Your part in all this is known to others besides me, and I leave you to judge where you, or those joined with you, would benefit if there were no Ostenburg heir to take the throne. Berlin would have to bring back the madman, or put the Countess Minna on the throne, or some stranger; and, in either event, your power and influence would be gone. But you know all this well enough. Clap me into jail as you say, or have my head cut off if you like it better, but how would it help you? No, baron, you will have to try something else. The cards I hold are too strong for you."

I flung the words at him with a reckless air, and he knew the truth of them. After a moment he replied:

"You mean you will keep to your mad plan of marrying the Countess Minna?"

"I have said nothing of the sort. My object is merely to free her from a position of danger from those against whom alone she is powerless to fight. It has been part of your infernal scheme to ruin her, to take her life, or to shut her up somewhere for the rest of it, because she interferes in some way with your plans."

"And you wished to put her on the throne in spite of us?"

"She has no more wish to become Queen of Bavaria than to become one of your kitchen wenches. You have known this throughout. She has always been against it, and it was only for the purposes of your own double treachery that you would not recognize it openly. Give her the chance and she would renounce all claim to the throne at this very instant. But you would give her no opportunity. You used her to mask your own hidden scheme, and you have always harbored a design against her safety. And now your own precious scheme has failed, as it deserved to. She has been your victim throughout, just as that infamous von Nauheim has been your abominable instrument. Where is that scoundrel now?" I cried.

He paid no heed to the question, but was rapt in thought for some seconds, and, seeing yet another development opening, I resumed my seat.

"Can I believe you?" he asked at length slowly.

"You can please yourself."

"It might be possible," he said thoughtfully, and as if half communing with himself. "You say your terms are that the countess be at once released? What use will she make of her liberty? Or rather, what use will you make of it for her? If she is released, when will the Duke Marx return to Munich? And where would the Countess Minna be?"

I saw his drift in a moment.

"You mean, will I undertake that she is away long enough for this scheme of yours to go through even now?"

"You can put it that way."

"I must see her for myself before I answer."

"Even that might be practicable," he replied cautiously. "I will see."

"Where is she?"

"If this is done, and she is willing, do you pledge yourself to get her away out of the country for the present?"

Something in his accent and tone roused my suspicions, and I watched him very closely as he added:

"And further, that the Duke Marx shall return to Munich as soon as she is at liberty."

"The Countess Minna's fortune must be secured to her," I said, speaking more to gain time to think than with any real care for the money.

"You are cautious for a young man in love," he sneered; "but you need have no fear on that score. You will not lose that."

I saw his object then pretty fully. He perceived that a marriage with an actor and adventurer such as he deemed me would help his plans for the Ostenburgs at least as much as a marriage with von Nauheim. Everything could go forward with his scheme. Minna would be out of the way even as he had planned, and she could still be used as a stalking-horse to cover his great object, and thus the Duke Marx would be called to the throne apparently without having plotted for it.

There was one obstacle that I saw—von Nauheim.

"What of von Nauheim?" I asked. "Where is he?"

The answer was a wave of the hand, as though such a consideration were beneath serious notice.

"Is he with the Countess Minna now?" I asked, my face growing dark.

"He met with some sort of accident last night, it seems," he said, with a shrewd glance at me. "But for that he might have been with her, by the desire of Baroness Gratz. But as it is——" he added, with another hand wave.

"I don't regard him so lightly," said I, in reply to the gesture.

"You have already had to face much more serious obstacles."

"I could not choose the terms then; I can now. But I will take the chance of what I may do. I can almost pledge myself for the countess, unless you have undermined my influence with her. That is your lookout. But if you set her free at once, and she consents, I will pledge myself to let your scheme go on as you desire, and will see that the Duke Marx is back in Munich as soon as the Countess Minna is safe out of the clutches of your agents and across the French frontier. There is no time to lose," I added, rising, for the thought of seeing Minna had filled me with eagerness.

"What guarantee have I that you will do this?"

"None. What can you have—except that the sooner I have shaken myself free from this infernal intrigue the better I shall be pleased."

The sincerity with which I said this appeared to satisfy him; for after a moment he rose to end the interview.

"And where shall I find the Countess Minna?" I asked.

"She had better not return to Munich. She can join you at Gramberg."

"Thank you, I prefer to fetch her myself," I interposed quickly.

"There is a difficulty——" he began thoughtfully.

"Then the sooner it is smoothed away the better," I interrupted.

"I will send you word where to find her. But, first, there are certain matters which must be set straight."

"I don't trust your agents, baron; you had better understand that. What is to be done must be done to-day."

"I am as anxious as you can be for haste. There is more to apprehend from delay than you appear to think. At any moment we may have some interruption from Berlin. But I can say no more now. If you return to the Gramberg house and hold yourself in readiness to start, I will communicate with you at the earliest possible moment. I can do no more. At this instant I myself do not know the exact whereabouts of the countess. She was taken last night to Herr Schemmell's house, close to town here, and early this morning was to have been removed—almost directly after your visit, indeed, of which I was, of course, informed—and was to be taken to his country-seat near Landsberg. But until I know that she has arrived there it would be folly for me to send you out. Those who have charge of her are to use their discretion as events may require."

"I will wait till I hear from you," I said, and as a last word asked, "You say she has been told that I am not her kinsman, the Prince von Gramberg?"

"Certainly. And probably the tale has been garnished with abundant details. The Baroness Gratz is no friend of yours."

"And von Nauheim?"

"If he is well enough he may have gone after them. I cannot say."

"If there is any wrong done to her, I shall set it to your account," I cried passionately, for this news of von Nauheim filled me with rage.

With this I left him, the fear that von Nauheim might even yet be able to deal some treacherous blow haunting me.

On my way from the baron's I called at von Nauheim's house, and there I learned something that added to my disquiet. He had returned home in the small hours of the morning, and after a brief stay in the house had left again, declaring he might be absent for some time. This was to me like oil poured on to a roaring fire.

"Had your master been hurt?" I inquired of the servant.

"Yes, your Highness. I believe he had had a narrow escape in some carriage accident; but he had almost entirely recovered; and happily no serious injury was caused. He was bruised, of course, but seemed much himself again this morning."

This was ill news enough, and I gnashed my teeth in impotent anger, when I reached the house and had to sit kicking my heels in idleness while I waited for news from the baron; and that at the very hour when, for all I knew, von Nauheim might be forcing his abominable attentions on Minna.

Late in the morning, toward noon, something happened that increased my uneasiness. A letter was brought me from Minna. It had been hurriedly written, and was scarcely coherent.

"COUSIN HANS,—I am in sore trouble and fear. There is no doubt I am in the hands of the Ostenburg agents—they tricked me at the ball, and I am being taken away from Munich. My aunt Gratz is with me, and it seems that Marie was false and told everything—though I scarcely distrust her. That is one story. Another is so dreadful I dare not think of it. They dare to tell me you are not my cousin, but a spy paid by the King's party to cheat us all and wreck the whole scheme. I don't believe it. I would trust you against the world. I do trust you. But I do so long to see you face to face again and hear from your own lips that all this is false. I believe I am being taken to Landsberg to the country-house of a Herr Schemmell. Aunt Gratz says so, and thinks you could come after us. She will get this letter to you. Try and follow me at once, and save me from I know not what. All this is killing me. Your distracted cousin,

MINNA."

What on earth could this jumble mean? The Baroness Gratz the medium of news of this sort. First assuring Minna that I was a rascally spy, and then suggesting that I could follow and rescue them. Of course it was treachery somewhere. Was it to put me off the scent altogether? Were they being taken to some other place? It baffled me, and I could not see a solution.

The fact that von Nauheim had recovered, and, as I knew, had followed them, led me to connect him with the business in some way, but how?

The thought was so maddening that I was raging and fuming at the delay in hearing from the Baron Heckscher when, to my further surprise, Praga was announced.

He had come, he told me, to consult about the disposal of our hostage, the duke.

I turned for a moment with relief from the bewildering puzzle of Minna's letter to ask him his news of the duke.

CHAPTER XXII

AT LANDSBERG

Praga was in his customary devil-may-care humor, and in reply to my earnest request for information he laughed and showed his teeth, tossed his head and shrugged his shoulders, and his first answer was a volley of his strangely phrased oaths.

"Safe so far, Prince, but it was a devilish tight place you put us in. That fellow of yours, von Krugen, is true grit, by the devil, a good fellow right through."

"What have you done with the duke? Don't waste words, man," I said, with much impatience.

"Poor little beast!" exclaimed the Corsican, with an ugly laugh. "We had to frighten him till the sweat stood thick on his forehead, his teeth chattered, and his knees knocked together like loose spokes in a rickety wheel. In truth we didn't know what to do with him, and I was half for knocking him on the head to be done with it, but von Krugen wouldn't. Then it occurred to us that we could play at being about to put him to death, and, as von Krugen was in his fancy dress, we let him play the part of his mad Majesty's executioner. We patched up a few lies, sewed them together with threats, and trimmed them with plenty of oaths. Told him the whole plot was discovered, that the madman's agents had found it all out, that my lord the duke was first on the honorable list for having his head chopped off, and that von Krugen had been sent out to give him the happy despatch. It was magnificent," and he laughed loudly at the recollection.

"Well?" I cried, the delay irritating me.

"Your duke's a lily-livered wretch enough when it comes to facing cold steel, and I'm bound to say von Krugen looked devilish ugly and dead set in earnest as, wearing his mask, he drew his sword

and gave the little crank five minutes to balance up his ledgers with Heaven. He was in no mood for that sort of work, as we had guessed of course, and instead of putting up a few concentrated prayers of the customary strength he flopped down on his knees and begged us to spare his life, and he grovelled and squirmed and wriggled on his belly and wept till I could have spat on him. Faugh!" and the Corsican's face was a picture of disgust.

"I begin to see," I said.

"Not quite," said my companion, with a laugh. "For the next act was that von Krugen and I quarrelled, and we pretended to wrangle and jangle until I seemed to gain my end, and the little fool thought he owed his life to me. He clung to me and shrank from the 'executioner,' and was altogether in a fit state to promise anything I told him in order to save his skin. I told him it would cost von Krugen his life if it were known that he had not done the work, and that if any one had even a suspicion of who the duke was and who we were all our lives would be sacrificed in a twinkling. By that time he was about wet through with fear, so we told him he must consent to be thought a mad patient of ours whom we, as doctor and attendant, were conveying to an asylum. In this way we took him to Gramberg—not to the castle, but to some place where von Krugen said he would be safe for a time. There he is awaiting your instructions. He's safe enough for a few days, but what after?"

"You have done well and cleverly," I said warmly. "A little fright won't hurt him, and meanwhile matters here have taken a turn which may render it necessary for us to set him free in a few hours," and I told Praga what had happened—except as to the discovery of my imposture—and the tale made a considerable impression on him.

"When that wily old Iscariot says one thing, I always look for another meaning. But you had a master card to play. He must have been mad. And what will you do?"

"If I do not hear from him at once, I shall go on to Landsberg on the chance of my cousin's letter being right, and I will send a messenger to the baron at once."

I was in the act of ringing for a servant when one entered to tell me that Baron Heckscher was waiting to see me.

"He had better not see me," said the Corsican.

"There is no need. I will go to him. Meanwhile get ready to go with me, and communicate with von Krugen to keep the duke where he is until he hears from me."

Then I hurried to the room where Baron Heckscher was waiting.

"I deemed it best to come to you myself," he said on my entrance. "I have been delayed, because I wished to be able to assure you that others are with us in what we propose. Further, there is very important news."

"Stay, if you please," I interposed, "before you tell me any more of your news. Understand, I am not, and will not, be a party to any of your schemes. I have no wish to be in any degree in your confidence."

I guessed that the purport of his news was that some sort of interference from Berlin was threatened, and I had the strongest reasons for keeping clear of any complications whatever in that direction.

"I don't think I quite understand you," he said sharply.

"I mean that up to this point you have been working against the Countess Minna and myself and I against you. So far I have outwitted you, and you are taking the present step of freeing the countess because you can't help yourself, not in any spirit of co-operation with me, but under pressure from me, and because, if you don't do it, you know that your whole plan will be spoiled. We are still opponents, and I decline to be associated with you and your colleagues, and I retain complete freedom of action and entire liberty to explain exactly the circumstances under which this new development has taken place."

"You mean that you have threatened to murder the rightful heir to the Bavarian throne," he said, harshly and angrily.

"That I have taken less shameful steps in regard to one of the heirs than you took in regard to the other. Precisely," I retorted.

"If you will not act with us, there must be an end of things, then."

"Yes, if you mean that I must act with you, I will have no hand in your plot."

"You make needless difficulties."

"On the contrary, I make no difficulties. I refuse only to be drawn into your plot, or to be considered as one of you."

"A sudden development of scruples, under the circumstances," he sneered.

"A proper development of caution I prefer to call it, seeing that I am acting as the only real representative of the Countess Minna, and am dealing with those who have tricked her so abominably."

I spoke with all the warmth I felt.

"You wish to pose as my enemy?"

"I am quite indifferent. I know already the whereabouts of the countess from a source independent of you, and I have taken means to insure her safety."

This was not strictly accurate, but it was indirectly true, for I knew that so long as the Duke Marx remained in my hands Minna was safe enough.

He paused to think.

"Do you mean you wish to break away from the arrangement we made this morning?"

"Not so far as the renunciation of the throne is concerned; but the arrangement as to my cousin's freedom is to be considered as forced from you, not made in complicity with you. I do not wish you to tell me anything because you think I am acting with you. I am not."

"So long as you do what you've agreed, I ask no more," he answered, with a shrug of the shoulders, as though he considered the matter not worth discussing.

But I knew his indifference was only assumed to cover his chagrin.

"The news is that the greatest haste is now imperative, or everything will be lost. The Duke Marx must be back in Munich to-night or at latest to-morrow. The whole city is in an uproar, and if the duke is not back the ill consequences may be irretrievable. Moreover, I have news of action from Berlin."

"You mean you wish to pull the wires at once for an agitation in favor of your duke, I suppose, but dare not until you know he is at liberty and able to come forward. A very pretty dilemma," and I smiled. "I am in luck, it seems. But now what of this Landsberg business? The countess is there. What have you done?"

"I have wired to our leader there, Major Gessler, to expect you to take away the countess; and I have written you an authority to him that will do all you need. Give him that—you will know him, for you saw him last night when you visited the town-house of Herr Schemmell—and that very moment the countess will be placed in your hands."

"Good!" I cried gladly, my blood warming at the thought of Minna being again in my charge. "But you know that von Nauheim has gone to Landsberg."

A frown crossed his face, but with an impatient wave of the hand he exclaimed:

"He can do nothing. Now as to your part. As soon as the countess is in your care again you will hand to Gessler an authority to set the Duke Marx at liberty?"

"Yes," I replied after a moment's consideration.

"Then the sooner you are en route the better," he said, rising as he spoke. "I have no more to say to you. We part as——?"

"As we met—opponents, Baron Heckscher," I answered promptly; and as soon as he had gone I hurried back to Praga to tell him what had occurred. Within a few minutes we were driving rapidly on our way to Landsberg.

My heart was beating with pleased anticipation of seeing Minna, though I was not without some apprehension as to how she would take the news I had to tell of myself and of the deception I had practised. Nor was I altogether free from disquieting fears that in some way there was danger to her from the presence of von Nauheim. I had, too, many plans to make regarding our future movements, so that I was in no mood for conversation.

Praga began to beguile the journey by attempting to tell me a number of piquant and characteristic anecdotes of his experiences; but he soon found I was not listening, and he then relapsed into silence, and sat smoking furiously.

Once when he broke a long silence his words chanced to chime with my thoughts and I answered.

"When am I to have my revenge on that brute von Nauheim?" he asked, his dark face lowering with anger.

"You have had much of it already, for most of his plans have miscarried."

"Ay, but I want to be face to face with him, with nothing between but a couple of sharp swords," and his eyes flashed as he spoke.

"That may come sooner than we think. I care not how soon," I said.

"But I do. Body of Bacchus, but I long to see him squirm and shiver and shrink when I fix his eyes with mine and press his sword with the touch of death."

"I have a score to settle with him, too, and it grows in the waiting."

"My turn first. You can have him when I've done with him—or at least what's left of him," he cried, with a callous laugh. "Not before. And what are you going to do afterward?"

"I am still undecided," I replied; and again we were both silent.

The journey was a very tedious one, for the train was slow, and we were much delayed owing to a breakdown on the line, which made our train several hours late. The delay fretted and galled me, for I could not make sure that von Nauheim would not use the interval for some devilment of his own. My impatience made the time pass with wings of lead.

It was well toward evening when we reached our destination, and then came another delay. There was an eight-mile drive to the house, and at first we couldn't get horses.

After much difficulty we procured a couple of riding hacks of very indifferent quality, and as soon as we were mounted we pushed forward at such speed as the nature of our beasts would allow. The effect of the comparatively rapid motion through the air was exhilarating and braced me. It was dusk, however, when we reached the village, at the far end of which was the mansion.

"At last!" I exclaimed as we turned in through a pair of massive gates and rattled up the drive at a quick trot.

As I glanced at the great, grim, square building, in which scarcely a light was to be seen, a thought that all was not right was put into words by my companion, who exclaimed with an oath:

"I don't like the look of this place, Prince. I seem to smell something wrong. I'm not for trusting myself inside."

"It's all right," I answered. "It must be; there's no object now to be gained by playing us false," and I jumped from the saddle and ran up the broad flight of steps to the front door.

"Maybe," growled Praga. "But I'd rather stay where I am. I'll turn horse-minder. If it's a trap, it's as well for one of us to remain on the outside of it."

I was not sorry for him to do that, as I did not wish Minna to see him until she knew how he had been helping us. His name was too repugnant to her in connection with her brother's death.

My summons was answered at once, and I asked for Major Gessler. I was shown to a room at once, and as the door closed on me I heard a rush of footsteps, a cry or two of anger, a shout from Praga that we were betrayed, and then the quick gallop of horses down the drive.

Before I had recovered from my consternation the door was opened again quickly, and an officer appeared at it, accompanied by a couple of men, who covered me with their guns.

"What is the meaning of this?" I cried angrily. "Where is Major Gessler? I am the Prince von Gramberg, and am here with an authority from Baron Heckscher to the major. You will repent this attack, sir, whoever you are."

"If you will be good enough to hand over any weapons you may have, and to sit down quietly there"—pointing to a chair—"I shall be glad to answer you."

"I'll see you damned first!" I cried in a blind rage, and I whipped out my revolver and levelled it point-blank at his face. "Stand out of my way, or I'll shoot you like a dog!"

He was as cool as though I was merely offering him my card.

"You will gain nothing by shooting me, except that my men will promptly shoot you," he answered.

"Then tell me what the devil you mean by this outrage," I said; and despite my rage I saw readily the truth of what he said.

"I allow no man to force me in this way," he answered calmly, looking me steadily in the face. "Give up your revolver and no harm will be done to you. Indeed I shall be glad to explain matters."

I tossed the pistol on to the table, and he picked it up, handed it to one of the men, and ordered them to leave the room.

"Remain at hand to come if I call," he told them. Then to me he said, shutting the door: "I am merely obeying orders. Major Gessler is away for a time, and my instructions were to detain you until he returned."

"Why is not the major here? He was prepared for my coming by a telegram from Baron Heckscher."

"You must put your questions to him. I only obey orders. But there has been some ugly business here in regard to the Countess Minna von Gramberg. She left the place secretly with her aunt and the Count von Nauheim, about three hours ago, and the major is gone in pursuit of them."

The news set me on fire.

"I must go after them!" I cried. "Don't try to stop me. Where have they gone?"

"My orders are that you remain here," he answered stolidly, "and I cannot disobey them."

"But I have come to fetch the countess. This is the authority to Major Gessler to deliver her up to me," and, snatching the baron's letter from my pocket, I handed it to the officer.

He took it slowly, examined it carefully, and held it out again.

"It is addressed to my superior officer, I cannot open it," he said, with the same deliberate coolness.

I tore open the envelope and gave him the letter.

He shook his head.

"It is not for me. I cannot read my superior's letters. I could not act upon it if I did."

"But, good God, man, these women may be in desperate peril! You must read it!"

He shook his head again with dogged obstinacy.

At that I lost all control of myself, and with an oath I threw myself upon him to drag him out of the way of my escape from the place.

He clung to me, and wrestled furiously, and with a call brought in the two men, who soon overpowered and forced me back in my chair, fuming with rage.

"It is useless to struggle," he said in his cold, even tone. "I have my orders, and more than enough strength to see that they are obeyed."

I recognized the force of this, and, though I cursed the blockhead stolidity of the man, I could do nothing but yield.

I ceased to struggle, but felt like a madman in my baffled fury and fear for Minna. Heaven alone knew what use von Nauheim might make of this opportunity.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PURSUIT

"Will you cease to resist if my men leave you?" asked the officer after I had been quiet some time.

"Yes, but I shall hold you responsible for the consequences of this detention of me, and they may be heavy and serious," I replied.

"I am only acting under orders," was his answer, and he signed to the men to withdraw again. "I am sorry you have compelled me to resort to force. It was not my wish."

"How long will Major Gessler be?"

"It is impossible to say. He may return in five minutes or in five hours; I can have no idea."

"He knew that I was coming?"

"Obviously, for I was told to expect you, and detain you when you arrived."

"Told to lay a trap for me, you mean?"

He made no reply.

"Did your instructions include the unwarrantable attack I heard being made upon my companion?"

"My instructions were to detain you, and I must really leave all explanations to my superior."

"Then I wish you'd leave the room as well," I retorted curtly, and, to my surprise, he took me at my word, and went out immediately, giving a command, in a tone loud enough to reach me, that the men stationed outside the door were to remain there.

As soon as I was alone I resolved to escape by the window. I got up and stole softly to it. It was shuttered, but the fastenings were on the inside, and as I tried them gently and slowly I found they were easy to release. But I knew the men outside the door would be on the alert, and that the least noise I made would bring them in.

I sat down again, therefore, and began to make a noisy clatter with some of the furniture. I banged the door of the big stove, upset a couple of chairs, and threw down some things from the table. As I stooped to pick them up one of the men put his head in at the door.

"Well, what the devil do you want?" I cried, with an angry scowl.

"I thought you called, sir," he answered.

"That's a ready lie, my man. You came because you heard a noise. That was the noise," and I picked up a chair and threw it across the room at the door. "Just hand it back, will you?"

He picked it up and placed it near the door, and went out, and I heard him mutter something to his companion about my being a "queer sort."

I slipped to the window then, and, not being afraid of making a noise, I unfastened the shutters to find the catch of the window, and was in the act of undoing that when I heard steps approaching the door across the hall. In a moment I replaced the shutters, slipped back to my chair, and was yawning heavily when the door was opened and the officer came in.

"They report to me that you have been making some disturbance here," he said shortly. "I will, therefore, leave a man in the room with you."

I cursed the clumsiness of my ruse, which had thus frustrated the chance of my escape.

"I decline to submit to such an indignity, sir," I said angrily. "I will have no jailer here."

But my protest, like everything else with this wooden idiot, passed unheeded, and one of the men was told to stand by the door inside.

For a moment I was in despair. My first thought was to try and bribe him, but I abandoned the idea as readily, for I saw that if I failed he would report the attempt to the officer, and I should be in a worse plight than ever. Yet the thought that time was flying, and von Nauheim getting farther and farther away with Minna, while I was condemned to this helpless inactivity, was like hell to me. Then a last and desperate scheme suggested itself to me. The room was lighted by an oil lamp, and my thought was to try and extinguish it, and escape in the consequent confusion and darkness. I knew now that in a moment I could open the window.

Keeping up my character for eccentricity, I jumped to my feet so suddenly that the man started and grasped his weapon, and, declaring that I was cold—though the evening was stifling, and my rage made me as hot as a fever patient—I began to stamp up and down the room, taking care at first to keep well away from the window, lest he should suspect my object. Next I declared that the lamp smelt vilely, and I set it down near the stove, and opened the little door that the fumes might escape up the flue. My next step was to whip the cover off the table, and throw it around my shoulders.

The man kept his eyes steadily on me, obviously regarding me as more than half insane, but he made no attempt to interfere with me, and I continued my monotonous march backward and forward, backward and forward, until I noticed that his vigilant watch was gradually being relaxed. Then I altered my direction slightly, until each turn took me nearer and nearer to the window, and at last I prepared to make my effort.

"Turn that lamp down a bit, it stinks," I said, with a vigorous grimace of disgust, and, without in the least suspecting my intention, he went to do it.

For a moment his back was toward me, and at that instant I snatched the cloth from my shoulders and threw it with all my force at the lamp, enveloping both it and the man as he was bending over it to do as I had requested.

He shouted lustily for help, but there were a few seconds of darkness before any one could reach me, and I tore back the shutters, opened the window, leapt out, and dashed away through the darkness at top speed, running in zigzag fashion for the cover of some shrubbery about fifty yards distant.

Before I reached the cover I heard the sounds of great commotion in the house, and a number of men started out in pursuit of me, but I plunged through the bushes at as great a speed as possible. The noise I made would, I knew, render pursuit an easy matter, and thus when I gained a small clearing I changed my direction, and raced across the lawn, taking my chance of where I was going. Fortune favored me, and I came upon a boundary wall, over which I climbed, dropping breathless and excited, but free, into a deep, dry ditch by the side of a lane. I lay down to regain my breath and to listen for any further signs of pursuit, as well as to think out my next step. I had escaped, but what use to make of my freedom I could not for a moment tell.

Presently I heard the sound of a horse cantering on the turf by the side of the lane, and looking up cautiously I saw, by the light of the moon, which was shining brilliantly, a man riding toward me. As he came closer I recognized, to my infinite pleasure, that it was the Corsican, Praga. I scrambled out of the ditch and stood up to wait for him, calling to him when he was some twenty yards away. He reined up and jumped from his horse. I told him my experiences with that dolt of an officer in the house, and he told me he was just riding back to see what had become of me, and that he had news.

"It is great news," he said. "When they tried to get at me, I galloped off, and in the village I stumbled against an old Munich acquaintance, who is here over this business, and was just coming back from a start he had made with Major Gessler. He told me something of what had happened here to-day. It seems that that brute von Nauheim got wind that something was going to happen which he didn't like—I suppose it was your coming—and he bolted with the Countess Minna and her aunt. At that Gessler seems to have thought treachery was in the wind, and that you were in some way connected with it—these officers are always fools, especially when some one tells them about half the truth—and he set out after the runaways, and left orders that if you did come you were to be kept. I was coming back to try if I couldn't find you, and perhaps get you out of the house, so that we might start in pursuit on our own account."

"Where has von Nauheim gone? Does any one know?" I asked.

"Yes, the major is on their track, I think. They are supposed to have taken the south road, von

Nauheim's object being apparently to strike the railway when some miles out, and presumably get out of Bavaria as soon as possible."

"I have no horse," I said. "You had better give me yours, and then try to get one and follow me as soon as you can. I am on fire. I cannot wait."

"It's not much of a beast, and very tired, but it may serve till you can get a better," said Praga. "Make for Waal first, and then try to find some traces, and leave word for me where I am to follow. I think I can find your horse. He followed me out of the place, and I tethered him up somewhere about here."

I mounted, and after a few more hurried words from him about the direction to be taken I clapped my heels into the horse's ribs, and set off at a pace that was as near a gallop as the tired brute could imitate. The clattering of the beast's hoofs on the rough, uneven road woke the echoes around me as I dashed forward, filled with the one consuming thought of rescuing Minna from the hands of the dastard who had carried her off from me.

I found to my dismay, however, that my horse was quite incapable of any great effort, and soon began to show signs of fatigue. I had to ease him constantly, and after a few miles I could not urge him beyond a rather slow trot. To get another horse appeared difficult, and I did not pass any place that even offered a hope of one. My progress was thus irritatingly slow, and every mile I covered seemed to detract from, rather than add to, the chances of my overtaking von Nauheim.

I had no difficulty, however, in tracing the fugitives. Major Gessler, in company with three other men, had passed scarcely two hours ahead of me, and as they had made inquiries all along the route, they had left a broad trail easy enough for me to follow. If they were on the right track it was certain that I was.

After riding for a couple of hours at this slow pace I saw a mile or two ahead of me the lights of a small town, and, in the hope of being able to get a fresh mount there, I urged on my shambling steed to the utmost of his powers. But he was quite used up, and as I was forcing him down a slight hill I felt him stagger and stumble under me; and then down he went in a heap, throwing me clear of him. I could not afford to waste time over him, and as soon as I had managed to drag him to his feet I tied his head to a tree by the wayside, and set out to finish the remaining distance to the town on foot.

I had not walked more than a few hundred yards, however, when I discovered that the fall from the horse had shaken me considerably. I turned dizzy, and reeled and staggered as I walked. I kept on as long as I could, but at last, despite my burning impatience to get forward, I was compelled to sit down by the roadside and rest until the feeling passed off.

How long I sat there I do not know, but I think that for a short time I must have lost consciousness. The rest refreshed me, however, and, feeling almost myself again, I jumped to my feet quickly, eager to resume my journey.

As I did so I was startled by a low cry, like an exclamation of fear, from some one close to me; and by the moon's light I made out the darkly dressed figure of a woman some twenty or thirty paces ahead. I had been sitting in the shadow of an overhanging tree, and, no doubt, my sudden appearance had frightened her.

She stood looking at me irresolutely, and when I commenced to walk toward her she turned and sped away on the grass by the roadside noiselessly, in the hope, no doubt, that I had not seen her. Obviously she wished to avoid me.

She was nothing to me, and as I had no wish to add to her fright, I let her go, and merely watched her as she ran. I had no other feeling but curiosity, tempered with regret that all unwittingly I had been the means of frightening her. She had nearly passed out of sight when I heard her cry out again, this time a louder and shriller cry, and I thought I saw her trip and fall. I went after her then, as quickly as I could, and found her kneeling on the ground moaning, with her hands to her head.

"Are you hurt?" I asked. "I am afraid I frightened you. I trust——"

I stopped in amazement, for she turned her face quickly to me, and the next instant I was down by her side with my arm round her. It was Minna herself.

"Oh, Hans, is it really you? I am so frightened. Save me." And without another word she let her head sink on my shoulder, while she twined her arms round me in quite hysterical fear.

"Hush, my child. You are safe now," I said gently, in the soothing tone one might use to a child who had hurt itself.

And I held her in my arms in silence, my heart too full for words, as, indeed, hers was, with mingled fear, relief, and agitation.

"Where are you hurt, Minna?" I asked after a time. "Let's see if I cannot help you."

"Don't leave me; pray don't leave me," she whispered, clinging to me more tightly than ever. "I shall be better in a moment—now I am safe. I was running away from you. I was frightened when you jumped up suddenly in the road, and I fell and hurt my head. Don't leave me. I want to realize that I am really, really safe."

"Don't doubt that. None can hurt you now."

I would have added many a passionate protestation in my excitement, but I checked myself, remembering all I had yet to tell her. I let a longer interval pass before I spoke again; for, though I was burning with impatience to learn how she came to be in this way alone on the road and to take means to get her to some place of safety, I could not resist the thrilling delight of feeling her arms about me and her head nestling confidently against my breast. The mere touch of her was an ecstasy of passion.

"Let me see to your hurt, Minna," I whispered. "We have a long journey before us."

At that she started, and began to tremble again, and said, her lips faltering as the words fell from them:

"I had forgotten. I had forgotten everything when I felt your arms around me; but he will follow us. We must hurry on. Where can I go to escape him?"

"You mean von Nauheim?" I asked, my face frowning at thought of him.

"Oh, there is so much to tell and to ask. What does it all mean, Hans? I am not much hurt. It is here," and she put her hand to her forehead, which was bleeding slightly. "I struck it against a stone when I tripped and fell, I think. And to think I was running from you, of all the world!"

I could not answer the tenderness of her tone or the love that breathed in every syllable of the words. If I had tried, the passion that was pent in me must have come rushing out. I sought to affect indifference, therefore; and though my fingers trembled as I touched her face, and my heart ached at the sight of the little wound, I dressed it in silence, and bound it up with my handkerchief.

She smiled to me several times as I did this, and when I had finished she murmured, lifting her eyes to mine:

"It will soon be well, now you have touched it, cousin." And she sighed. But the next instant she started, and a look of fear showed on her face. "I can hear the sounds of a horse at full gallop. I have been hearing nothing else in imagination for the last two hours; but this time it is real."

She spoke very wildly.

I listened intently, but could hear nothing.

"It is only imagination still," I replied. "And if it were real, it would mean nothing."

"Listen!" and she put up her finger and strained her ears.

She was right. She had caught the sound before me; but now I could distinguish the beat of hoofs in the far distance.

"I hear it now. Which way is the sound from?" I asked.

She began to tremble, and clung to me again.

"It is from that way," pointing in the direction from which I had come.

I listened again, and again found she was right.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "It will be Praga. He is following me."

"Praga! The villain who killed Gustav! Oh, Hans, it is true then that you are in league with that terrible man. I would not believe it when they told me." And she moved away from me as she spoke, and stood at a little distance, trembling.

But it was only for an instant. I had not time to reply before she came again to my side and clung to me as before, crying with quick agitation:

"I did not mean that, cousin Hans. I did not mean anything in distrust of you. I trust you altogether with my whole heart and soul. If he is with you, I know it will be not that you help him to do harm, but that he helps you to do good. I know that. Believe and forgive me for shrinking away like that. But I have always had such a dread and loathing at his mere name, for dear Gustav's sake. Oh, there is so much to be made clear."

"It will all be clear enough to you when I have told you my story," I said in as unmoved a tone as I could command at this fresh proof of her absolute confidence. "And that will be as soon as we can get out of our present plight. Even Praga has been wronged, and in this matter at least he is with us."

After that we stood in silence listening to the now fast approaching gallop of the horse.

Then came to our ears the whinnying of another horse. The galloping stopped. The horse was pulled up short.

"What does that mean?" asked Minna in a whisper of alarm; for all sounds breathed the language of danger in her present agitation.

"I left my horse tied to the hedge some distance behind there, and Praga has found it, I expect."

Almost directly after that Minna started again and cried:

"There is another horseman coming from the opposite direction. That will be the Count von Nauheim."

"It is luck that Praga is close at hand, then," said I, "for I have no arms. It will be a dramatic meeting."

And now Minna was pressing close to my side again; and in this way we stood and listened to the more distant horseman's approach, and heard also the man I judged to be Praga bring his animal back on to the hard road and set off at a sharp trot toward us.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MEETING

If Minna was right in her conjecture that the horseman coming up on our right was von Nauheim, it was easy to foresee that the meeting between him and Praga would have an ugly ending. I knew well enough that the Corsican's fiery hatred of the count would urge him to take his revenge on the spot, and for the moment I was a little at a loss how to act.

Praga was now close to us, riding slowly and peering anxiously on each side of him for any traces of me. Obviously I had better let him know that I was at hand.

Minna and I were standing close under the shadow of a tree whose low branches concealed us effectually.

"Stop here while I go to speak to him," I said in a low tone.

"No, no, don't leave me," she urged, holding my arm in a nervous clutch.

"Have no fear. It is not you who need to fear now, but that villain von Nauheim, if it is indeed he coming up the hill."

"Don't go out of sight, then, cousin. I can't help being afraid—except with you close to me."

I whispered a word of reassurance, and stepped out from the shadow of the tree into the moonlight and went toward Praga.

"Who is there?" he called, stopping his horse.

"It is I, Praga—the Prince."

"Well met, indeed. Is that your horse tied to a tree back there a bit?"

"Yes, he fell and threw me; but I am all right. Quick, bring your horse on to the grass here, and under this tree," and I led him into the shadow of the tall hedge.

"Have you any traces of them?" he asked impatiently.

"Yes, I have the best news. I have found the Countess Minna. She has escaped from that villain, and I believe that the horseman you can hear coming up the hill now is the man himself coming in pursuit of her."

"Ah!" He drew in his breath. "We are in luck indeed. There is a good light," and he glanced up at the moon, and I heard him swear into his mustache, and mutter, "At last!" Then, after listening a moment, he said: "He is breathing his horse up the hill. He little guesses who's here to give him a welcome. I'll go forward and meet him. I hope to God he has a sword with him. Will you stay here? You can act as second for us both, and see that all is fair, though it would serve the dog right if I were to shoot him down without a chance."

He walked his horse slowly forward on the grass, making no noise, and keeping out of sight in the shadow of the hedge.

I went back to Minna.

The on-coming horseman was now in full sight of us on the slope of the white hill, the moonlight showing up the figures of both horse and rider, as he turned to look behind him, and sat listening intently. The silence was so intense that we seemed to feel it, and even the creak of the saddle leather, as he turned, reached our ears.

Then we saw him face round quickly and dash his heels into his horse's ribs as if to gallop forward; but, at the same instant, he caught sight of Praga, and he checked his horse again almost as he was in the very act of urging it forward. The next moment Praga was at his side.

For a second neither spoke. Then through the still night air we heard the Corsican laugh.

"You're riding late, my lord, the most noble Count von Nauheim," he said in a mocking tone.

No answer was made, and Praga put in words the thought that flashed upon me.

"Don't think of trying to escape. You won't do it this time." He spoke sternly, adding, in the previous mocking tone, "And what brings you out for horse exercise at this uncanny hour, most noble?"

The reply was sudden and unexpected by me, but not by the Corsican.

Von Nauheim drew a revolver, and fired point-blank at Praga, and then dashed his heels into his horse's sides, and tried to make off. But the other was fully prepared for the manœuvre, and when the noise of the shot, which frightened Minna excessively, and woke the echoes of the woods round us, had died away, I saw that the Corsican had grasped the bridle of von Nauheim's horse in a grip of steel, till the beast swerved round and nearly unhorsed its rider, while with his other hand Praga had struck the revolver from his opponent's grasp.

Then he laughed again.

"A hand is rarely steady when a man's shivering with fright," he said in his bantering tone; but he changed it swiftly, and, in a voice deep with passion, he cried, "Get off your horse, you coward, or I'll drag you from your saddle! Do you hear?"

Von Nauheim made no reply, and no effort to dismount.

"Do you hear me? Dismount!" thundered the Corsican, his deep, rolling voice vibrating with wrath; and when von Nauheim still hesitated, Praga bent forward, and, with a strength that surprised me, tore him from his horse, and forced him to the ground.

Von Nauheim seemed helpless with terror.

"What is he going to do?" asked Minna, shivering.

"We must wait," I answered.

Praga dismounted then, and, tying the reins of the two horses together, led them to a tree, and fastened them. Every action was done with cool, methodical purpose, which I knew was carefully calculated to increase the other's fear; and though the Corsican pretended not to watch the latter's actions, I could see that the whole time the dark, dangerous eyes were taking the keenest note of every gesture and movement.

When he had tethered the horses, he crossed the road back to where von Nauheim stood in an attitude of sullen dejection. He was like one fascinated and paralyzed with fear.

All at once I saw Praga start and glance in my direction, as a thought seemed to occur to him.

"Come," he said in a voice of rough command, short, sharp, and stern. "This way," motioning along the road toward the spot where Minna and I stood.

I wondered what he meant to do.

Von Nauheim did not move, and Praga, seizing him by the arm, half led, half dragged him forward.

"You can do an act of justice for once in your life."

He clipped the words, and followed them with a short, sneering laugh, a curious mixture of humor and anger.

"We are not alone here, and I have a fancy that you shall tell what you know about the death of young Gustav von Gramberg."

At this von Nauheim looked up, and stared rather wildly about him. I saw Praga's motive then, and was glad.

"Halt! most noble and honorable of counts," he cried when they stood about twenty paces from us. Then, in a rough, stern tone, he added, "Now tell the truth—the part you played in it."

At that von Nauheim made a sudden dash and struggle to get free from his antagonist's grip; but he might as well have tried to get away from his master, the devil, as from the iron hand that held and then shook him till his teeth chattered.

I guessed that he had caught sight of us.

"Now the truth!" cried Praga in a truly terrifying tone. "Out with it. You know me by this time."

The other glanced about him in abject fright, and then said, in a whisper hoarse and husky with agitation:

"Are you there, Minna?"

"Silence!" thundered Praga, shaking him again. "Speak what I have told you—no more, no less."

For a time von Nauheim tried vainly to find words, and the sight of his fear was so appalling and repulsive that Minna clung closer to me, and hid her face against my arm.

Another threat and command came from Praga, and then, in a voice that shook and quavered, and broke again and again, he began the shameful story of his own abominable part in the intrigue which had led to the duel between Minna's brother and the Corsican; and the latter

would not let him halt until the whole villainous tale was complete.

It took a long time in the telling, and I could feel the girl shrink and wince as the truth came out in the dreary, monotonous voice of the terror-possessed wretch.

"Take me away, cousin Hans, I cannot bear this," she cried to me piteously. "My poor, poor brother!"

"Yes, we will go," I said. "But it was right for you to hear the tale, and to know who in reality played the villain's part in it."

I led her out in the moonlight then, and told Praga that we should go.

"As you will," he answered; "I will follow. Take my horse, and I'll do the best I can with yours."

In turning to speak to me he loosened his hold somewhat of von Nauheim for an instant, and the latter, with what sounded like a great sob of fear, broke away, and threw himself on the ground at Minna's feet.

"For God's sake, don't go away, Minna. Don't leave me with this man. He will murder me. Have mercy on me. Plead with him for me. You can save me. Minna, do you hear? For God's sake, have mercy," and he caught hold of her dress and clung to her—the type of broken, abject, fright-becrazed cowardice.

"Don't touch me!" she cried. "Your hands are red with my brother's blood."

"Get up, you crawling, unclean brute, and cease your whining," said Praga, dragging him to his feet.

"Don't let him be killed, cousin Hans," whispered Minna. "He is not fit to die. But, oh, take me away. This scene is killing me," she cried in distress.

At that von Nauheim broke out with more pleas and entreaties, his voice shaking as he trembled in his fear. I did not know what to do. I had promised Praga his revenge; and in all truth I could see no reason for interfering to save the man's life. He had played the scoundrel all through, and if ever a man deserved death he did.

But at the same time it was Minna who asked for mercy, and I loved her for it, and my heart was moved by her appeal. I stood thus in hesitation, when an interruption came which, for the instant, I welcomed gladly.

We were to have more company on that lonely spot; and we all four heard at the same moment the sound of horses coming quickly up the hill. A minute later we caught sight of a couple of figures in the moonlight.

The effect on von Nauheim was electrical.

He sprang up and gave a loud shout for help.

"Help, help! Murder! Help!"

The cry rang over the country-side and awakened a thousand echoes in the still night air.

An answering shout came from the approaching men, and they dashed headlong toward us, reigning up their horses almost on to their haunches.

"What is this?" cried a voice which I seemed to recognize. "Who called for help?"

"It is Major Gessler, Hans," whispered Minna. "Take care."

While I was assuring her that all was well, and that I had an order to him for her release, Praga was answering him.

"You come in excellent time, gentlemen, whoever you are. This is the thing that screeched for help," pointing to von Nauheim.

"Ah, the Count von Nauheim," said the major in a tone of satisfaction.

"There is the lady you seek, Major Gessler," said the poltroon, pointing a trembling finger to Minna. "And I call you to witness that I have been stopped on the highway by these two men and my life threatened. I claim your protection."

The major looked from one to the other of us in indecision, and then the Corsican laughed a deep, rolling laugh of contemptuous anger.

"By the nails that pierced the feet, you are a paltry thing!" he cried. "Nothing's too vile and base for you to save your dirty little life; is it? A minute since you were grovelling to the Countess Minna, hanging to her skirts, and begging her to save you; and now you think to try and curry favor with Major Gessler by this lick-spittling attempt to betray her. But you don't know him, lily-liver; he's the last man in the world to step in to prevent an affair of this kind. This is an affair of honor, major, if we can use that term with a man like this; and of course you will not think of interfering, except to see that everything is done duly and in good order."

There was a significance in his tone which did not escape me.

"I must first learn the reason of your all being here, if you please."

"I was returning to—" began von Nauheim, when Praga cut him short.

"Silence!" he thundered; "you will only lie." Then to the major he said, "I know no reason why I should explain my conduct to you."

"I can best explain this, I think," I said. "The Count von Nauheim had induced or compelled the Countess Minna here to leave your custody, and after some time she escaped from him. I was following, and by the happiest of coincidences we met. She will now remain in my care. Signor Praga was riding after me, and the Count von Nauheim came up soon afterward in search of the countess. Between Signor Praga and the count there is an old quarrel, and it was in course of arrangement when you arrived."

"Then you will return with me, countess?" said the officer.

"On the contrary, as I have already said, my cousin will remain in my charge," and I handed him the letter from Baron Heckscher.

He read it by the light of the moon, and we waited in silence till he had finished.

"You are to hand me an authority to your agents," he said as he folded up the letter.

"I have also to demand an explanation for the treatment I received on my arrival, as I understood, by your instructions," I answered sharply.

"It can all best be done at the house itself. My work is finished here, and I must set about this other matter of the Duke Marx without delay," he said. "Count von Nauheim has also an explanation to give me. We had better proceed to the house, Prince."

At this Praga showed signs of restiveness, while von Nauheim agreed eagerly.

"I have a word to say about that," exclaimed the Corsican, intervening. "I have brought this fox to earth, and have no mind to see him slip through my fingers. Prince, you won't forget our compact?"

"I shall be responsible for the count's custody," put in Major Gessler.

"Maybe, but you have an unfortunate trick of letting your prisoners slip the leash," cried Praga bluntly. "I shouldn't trust myself in that house again, Prince, if I were you. There may be more treachery there."

"Those are ugly words, sir," exclaimed the major hotly.

"They describe an ugly fact, major," returned Praga recklessly, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I am not concerned to pick my words to tickle your ears. If you don't like them"—and he threw up his hands—"I can't help it."

"I need not give you my assurance, I trust, Prince von Gramberg," said the officer, turning to me, "that so long as I am at that house your personal safety and that of the Countess Minna will be absolutely secure."

"If I doubt it, you have only the acts of your own men to blame," I answered curtly.

"That can be explained. When the Countess Minna was taken away by this"—he was going to say gentleman, but substituted—"by this count, I feared that some further plot might be afloat, and I left instructions that you should be detained until my return from my search for her. If my men exceeded their instructions in any way—I had only time to give them very hurriedly—I beg to tender you my sincerest apologies. But at least the countess here will tell you that while she was in my care complete regard was paid alike to her comfort and safety."

"Certainly I would trust Major Gessler's word," said Minna.

"Will you return to the house?" I asked.

"Yes, if we have his word that we are to be at liberty to leave it. But I would rather go to Gramberg."

"I pledge you my word on that," said the major.

I reflected that we had better not go to Gramberg until I had had an opportunity of explaining the whole position to Minna, and in fact I had another plan in my thoughts.

But while this conversation had been taking place, and our attention had been engrossed, von Nauheim had stolen unobserved to the place where Praga had tethered the horses, and, having cut the reins which tied the two together, he leapt on the back of his own and made off down the road at a hard gallop.

With a furious oath Praga ran to his horse, caught it cleverly, jumped into the saddle, and dashed after the fugitive in mad pursuit. The major told the man who was with him to follow, and we stood and watched the wild race as the three streamed down the hill from us at unequal distances, along a flat stretch of level road at the bottom, and then up a long incline beyond.

Praga was the better horseman or had the better mount, for we saw him gaining fast on the dark

figure in front, and then as they neared the top of the incline we heard the report of a pistol shot, followed at a short interval by another.

A moment later the two leading figures passed out of sight, and we were left to conjecture what had happened.

"Had you better not push on to the house?" asked the major. "I will ride back and see the result. It has an ugly look. I shall probably overtake you before long," and with that he wheeled his horse round and galloped off, leaving Minna and myself alone again.

CHAPTER XXV

"I AM NOT THE PRINCE"

"I think we had better return to that house," I said to Minna. "My horse is close here, and you can ride while I lead him. You must be worn out."

"I will do whatever you think best. I believe Major Gessler is to be trusted."

"Yes, I think so now. I have given him an order from those for whom he is acting that you are to be detained no longer."

"How did you find out where I was?" she asked. "I am longing to hear everything."

"You had better have some rest first. There is much to tell and a weighty decision to make. Let us start."

I led the way to where I had tied the horse, and, having unfastened the reins, I walked him up and down once or twice to see if he showed any signs of lameness as the result of his fall, and whether he was fit to carry the girl. He appeared all right and much the fresher for the rest, so I lifted her into the saddle, and taking the rein in my hand started on the return journey.

"You can tell me as we go along what has happened to you since the ball," I said.

"It has been a terrible experience, but it is simple enough to describe. In the crowd at the ball I got separated from Captain von Krugen, and some one just like him came up and said we had better stand out of the throng a minute; and when we had moved away, he added that you wished me to be in the ante-room instead of the ball-room. I suspected nothing, of course, and went with him, and then some people came pressing round me, and some one said that as a matter of fact they had bad news to break to me—that you had met with an accident and were seriously hurt, and wished me to go at once to you. I did not hesitate an instant when I heard that, and so I fell into the trap. You don't blame me?"

"Blame you for being solicitous about me?" I asked, turning and glancing up to her with a smile. "But it was a cowardly scheme. And had you not seen me in the ball-room?"

"Yes, of course, and I said so. But they told me it had happened only a few minutes before, and that you had been carried at once to the house of a doctor, where you were expecting me. They told me you might die, and at that I was so eager to get to you that I would have gone anywhere."

She paused again here, but this time I would not trust myself to look round.

"In this way," she continued, "I was lured into the carriage, and after that, of course, I was helpless. They took me to some house near Munich, and the place seemed alive with armed men. There, to my surprise, I found aunt Gratz, who told me that Marie had betrayed us all, and that I was in a trap. I felt at first glad in a sense, because I knew then that you were not hurt after all; but presently I grew angry, for she began to tell me all kinds of horrible things about you; I will tell you them some time. And when my anger passed, I was nearly broken-hearted, for, as all our plans were known to the others, I was afraid, horribly afraid, of what might happen to you, and what mischief my foolish credulity might cause you. It was a time crowded with terror," she sighed.

"And after that?" I asked, wishing her to finish her story before I began mine.

"In the early morning Major Gessler sent word that we were to prepare for a journey, and then we thought of writing you. I should not have thought it possible, but aunt Gratz suggested it, and said that she was sure she could get it delivered to you. I wrote it then readily enough; but what I said I do not know—I scarcely knew at the time—it must have read like a wild, incoherent cry—for that's what it was."

"How did you know you were coming to Landsberg? I have been much perplexed by your letter, why your aunt should have spoken in this way of me in regard to it."

"I am afraid I can give you the clew. She knew about Landsberg—she seemed to know everything; and from what I have heard to-night, she was acting in collusion with that man. His object was, as I now know, to let you have the clew where to follow us, so that he could draw you into a snare, for some object I am almost afraid to think of. But something happened to interfere with the plans."

"I know what that was. He learnt, probably from Major Gessler, that I was coming to Landsberg direct from Baron Heckscher, and probably there would be some special reference to him in the baron's message."

"That may have been it. At any rate he came to us in a state of great excitement, declared that he had found out a plot to kill me, that you had communicated with him, and that we three were to set off at once to meet you at a place he named; I forget its name. I was suspicious at first; but when he declared that there was to be a clear-up of everything and a complete understanding between us all, and that all they had said about you was not true, and when aunt Gratz joined in persuading me, I consented. We got away secretly, and I was glad indeed to leave. They all appear to have known that with me your name was the one argument sure to prevail," she said softly.

"It has led you into plenty of perils, Minna," I replied.

"But it will lead me out of them again. You have done it already, and I do not care now what happens. It is good to have some one to trust—and, best of all, to be with him." She paused and sighed contentedly, and then exclaimed: "But why don't you say something? I have not done wrong, have I?"

What could I say, if I spoke at all, but turn and tell her that this trust in me was just the sweetest savor that could be put into my life; and that to hear it from her own lips was enough to set every pulse in my body beating fast with my love? But yet I could not speak this until I had told her all from my side; and so I gripped the bridle rein the tighter and plodded on through the moonlight, keeping my face resolutely turned from her lest the sight of her beauty and the knowledge of her trust should burst the last bonds of my self-restraint.

"No, you have done no wrong, Minna; but tell me the rest."

She waited a second, and then continued:

"In the carriage, to-night, the truth came out. Aunt Gratz and he quarrelled, and with a sort of blunt, brutal frankness he blurted out the truth that we were flying from, not to, you, and that he was carrying me away to make me his wife. In his mad rage against you he heaped all kinds of abuse on you, knowing that it made my blood boil. He is a villain."

"He has paid for his treachery by now, probably," I said, and then there came a longer pause.

"Don't you wish to hear any more?" she asked gently, as if anxious to make me speak to her; and when I told her that I was only too eager to hear it all, she went on: "I thought it best to say nothing, but I made up my mind that I would slip away and seek any one's help rather than stay with them. My great thought was to get back to the house at Landsberg; and I sat as if prostrated with grief and waited, watching for a chance. It came at last, at a town where we stopped to change horses, and he got out of the carriage. There was some delay; and I saw him enter the house. Aunt Gratz was half dead with fatigue, and lay back in the carriage and fell asleep. I opened the door on my side very softly and slipped out, without disturbing her, and then ran off in the thick dusk for my life. I was soon missed, of course, and should not have escaped had it not been that there was a wagon standing not far away, though out of sight of those in the carriage. There was no one in it, and I jumped in and hid myself among some hay and sacks that lay in the bottom. I lay concealed there a long time and heard the hue and cry raised, and people searching for me, though no one thought to look in the wagon. Presently the wagoner came, and we started off at a slow pace. I let him go on for a few miles, and then to his intense astonishment I rose up suddenly from among the sacks and told him I would give him money if he would take me toward Landsberg."

"Poor Minna! What an experience for you."

"I did not care then, for I was free from that man. The wagoner was a good fellow and, though I did not know it, we had been coming in this direction, and he set me down about a mile from here, where his road turned off. I walked on to be frightened again, but this time—by you; and then to feel safe, oh, so safe, again."

"You did splendidly!" I cried warmly; for her pluck and resource had been admirable. And then I walked on in silence thinking how best I could commence my confession.

"Can you hear sounds of any one coming?" she asked.

I stopped the horse directly and stood listening. Turning my head, I glanced in her face and saw a smile there.

"I hear nothing; do you?" I asked.

"No. I didn't expect to. I——" She stopped.

"You what?"

"I've seen nothing but the back of your head for two miles, I should think, at the least. And I thought perhaps the horse might need a rest."

It was a little act of coquetry after all.

"He must be a sorry beast if he tires in carrying such a burden," said I, smiling. "But we have

come half the distance, I think. You haven't much farther to go. Aren't you tired?"

I was standing close to the saddle, and she looked down into my face without speaking for a while. Then she said:

"I was thinking—cousin."



"I WAS THINKING—COUSIN."

The pause before the use of the word and the emphasis upon it told me she had more than her usual meaning.

"I can guess your thought, I believe," I said.

"Well?"

"You were wondering whether you are right still to call me cousin."

"I don't believe what they told me," she replied quickly, for I had guessed her thought.

"What did they tell you? No; I won't ask that either. I will tell you freely all that has to be told."

I paused an instant, and suddenly the clean, clear moonlight which flooded everything so brilliantly seemed to turn chill and fear-laden for me.

The horse moved restlessly, striking the ground harshly with his fore hoof. I stroked his neck to quiet him and left my hand on the crest of it.

"Well?" The question was asked softly and gently.

"It is hard to tell it," I answered in a low and rather unsteady voice.

"To me? Are you afraid of me?" and I felt a hand placed on mine.

"It is hard to speak words that may divide us—but I have deceived you. I am not your cousin. I am not the Prince."

I felt the fingers on mine start and tighten for a second, and then close in a warm, trustful pressure.

"Can I make the telling easier for you? I had made up my mind that that was so; but the rest? Who are you? Don't tell me unless you wish. I trust you none the less. You remember I told you days ago—how long it seems—you had a secret and that I saw it. Now I know part of it; and I am glad of the knowledge—not glad that you are not my cousin Hans; glad only that you have told me. But I am eager for the unknown part."

I could not beat down my feelings to speak coolly; so I waited to fight for my self-control.

"They told me only one thing that should be hard for you to tell me—and that I know was untrue," she continued, as if it were a pleasure to bare her heart to me. "That you were not true to me, but seeking to betray me. I would have laughed at the absurdity if the malignity of such a slander had not maddened me."

"No, I have been no traitor to you," I answered readily. "That I can declare from my soul. But I have kept this knowledge from you. Even that I would not have done but that I could not see how else I could go on helping you. I could do nothing unless men thought I was the Prince."

"Yet you could have trusted me," she said, with a gentle sigh of reproach.

"Had I told you, I could no longer have remained at the castle. It was not that I did not trust you—indeed, I longed to tell you, not only that but all the rest."

"The rest?" she repeated softly in a low voice that trembled; and again I felt her fingers on mine start.

"Yes. The secret at which even you did not guess. I can judge pretty much what these people have told you—that I am an adventurer and an ex-play-actor. There is a secret behind that which I have not shared with a single soul on earth; but I will tell you."

Then I told her plainly of my meeting with von Fromberg, the mistake under which I was first taken to Gramberg, and the chain of circumstances which had kept me from breaking silence as to my identity and had seemed to drive me into accepting the part that had been thrust upon me.

I did not dwell too strongly upon the one motive that had influenced me—the wish to save her from the plot against her safety. But she was quick to read it all; and maybe her feelings for me prompted her to give it exaggerated importance.

She listened almost in silence, merely asking a question here and there when some point was not clear, and at the close she sat thoughtful, and said sweetly:

"It means a great loss to me—and yet perhaps a greater gain."

I looked up with a question in my eyes.

"I have lost my cousin, it seems—surely the truest cousin that ever a woman had; but then I have gained a friend whose stanchness must be even greater than my cousin's, for there was no claim of kinship to motive his sacrifices for me. But, cousin or friend, you are still—" She did not finish the sentence.

"Still what?" I asked.

I think she was going to make some pretty quip in reply, for I saw a smile half mischievous and all witching on her face; but, reading by my looks how much store I set on her answer, she said earnestly:

"The one man in the world who has proved himself as true as steel to me, and whom I trust with my whole heart."

"You may," I answered, with an earnestness equal to her own, and my hand, which was resting on the horse's neck, turned and sought hers, and pressed it in a strong, firm clasp. "Whatever happens," I added, "I can at least be your friend, and I will."

We stood thus awhile, our heart-thoughts in close sympathy, till she started and lifted her head. Those quick ears of hers had caught the sound of a horse's hoofs approaching from behind us.

"Some one is coming. You have not yet told me something. How am I to call you, and by what name to think of you?"

"There is still a longish story to tell, and I will tell it all to you; but for the present we must keep up our play of cousinship until the truth can be safely told. That will not be long now."

"And then? But there, I do not wish our cousinship to end. I am glad to know so much, however. Every time I say 'cousin' I shall think of this talk to-night."

I took the horse's bridle again then, and led him on, for the sounds of the hoofs behind us were growing clear and distinct, and we did not speak until Major Gessler rode up to us.

"You have not got so far as I expected, Prince," was his greeting. "I'm afraid I seemed to leave you rather in the lurch."

"This horse of ours was tired, and we stayed a time on the road," I answered, not without a slight feeling of embarrassment. We should probably have reached the house at Landsberg but for the long halt I had made in telling my story. "But what is your news, major?"

"They are following," he said briefly, and he made a sign to me that something very serious had occurred, which I judged he did not care to tell before Minna.

She saw the gesture and read it also.

"Have they fought?" she asked.

"No, there was no fighting; but the Count von Nauheim has met with a serious accident—very

serious."

He thought evidently that any ill news in regard to him might need to be broken carefully to Minna.

"You may speak plainly," I said. "Is he dead?"

"Yes, he is dead. When he ran off in that way, and Signor Praga after him, the shots we heard were fired at the count's horse by his pursuer. His object was not to kill the man, but to prevent his escape. Both shots missed their aim, however, and then he determined to ride the man down. On the brow of the hill, where you saw them disappear, comes a straight bit of road for a couple of miles, at the end of which is a steep, dangerous hill. Both men rode like madmen across the level—Praga, who is a splendid horseman, gaining steadily all the time. Finding that he was being caught, von Nauheim began to punish his horse mercilessly, and when they came to the steep descent the poor brute seems to have stretched himself for a final effort to answer the call on him. For a moment he raced away from the other, but when about half-way down the hill he collapsed suddenly, and dropped like a stone. So frightful was the speed at which they had been going that horse and rider rolled over and over several times in an almost indistinguishable mass. Praga, who was not far behind, had great difficulty in avoiding them and in checking his own horse. When he went back to von Nauheim he found him dead. The stirrups had prevented him from getting free when the smash came, and the horse had fallen on him and rolled over him, breaking his back and crushing the life out of him. He was a horrible sight."



THE HORSE HAD FALLEN ON HIM AND ROLLED OVER HIM.

"I am glad Praga didn't kill him," I said. "But I can't say I am sorry he has met his death. He deserved it."

The others made no reply, and we held on our way without speaking. The officer rode on the other side of Minna; and the silence of the night was broken only by the sound of the horses' hoofs, the major's being restive, and breaking now and then into an amble.

"Do you know much of Signor Praga, Prince?" asked the major after a long silence.

"Not enough to speak of him," I replied shortly; and the effort at conversation closed as abruptly as it had begun.

When we had covered a couple more miles, he said he would ride on and prepare for our arrival, and I was not sorry to be quit of him.

"It is a terrible end," said Minna thoughtfully, referring to von Nauheim.

"A more merciful one than he deserved," said I. I could find no pity for such a scoundrel. "He has been a traitor all his life."

"He is dead," said the girl gently.

"But he lived too long. Years ago I would have killed him had he not run from me."

"You knew him years ago?"

"And never knew anything but ill of him. It was because of my knowledge of him that I stayed on at Gramberg. That is part of the story I have yet to tell you."

"When?" she asked eagerly.

"To-morrow. I would tell it you now, but we are close to the house."

And a few minutes later we turned in at the lodge gates, and were winding our way through the high shrubs which lined the drive for more than half the way to the mansion.

When we reached the house an old motherly woman came forward to receive Minna and take her to her rooms.

The girl stood a moment, and put both her hands into mine, with a gesture she had used once just after my arrival at Gramberg. She was thinking of it, too.

"Do you remember my telling you at Gramberg how I trusted you?" she asked, leaving her hands in mine and looking into my eyes.

"I could never forget it," said I, speaking low.

"My instinct was very true, wasn't it? I knew. And after to-night I trust my friend more than I even trusted my cousin. Goodnight, friend—and cousin."

"Goodnight."

A slight shade passed over her face for a moment, though a great light was shining in her eyes, and she waited as if I should say more.

"Good night, Minna," I whispered.

And then she cast her eyes down and blushed; and after standing thus for the space of perhaps five seconds she took her hands gently out of mine, glanced once rapidly into my face, smiled, and turned to the woman, who was waiting at a distance.

"Be up early, cousin," I called to her in a tone of assumed indifference, as if anything about her could be indifferent to me, "for we must make our plans."

"I am quite as anxious as you," she replied; but the real answer was with her eyes, which reflected the thought beneath my words—that I should be all eagerness till the time came for us to meet again.

CHAPTER XXVI

FLIGHT

As soon as Minna had left me the major brought the officer to apologize for the conduct which had so exasperated me on my arrival. The man had of course exceeded his instructions, and although the explanation did not by any means make amends for what I had endured, it was tendered in good faith, and I accepted it. I was in no mood to harbor anger against any one. What I most wished now was to be alone to recall the scene with Minna on the road, the ineffable sweetness of her voice, the soft tenderness of her looks, and the magic thrill of her touch.

When the major asked me my plans, I answered almost at random, for my thoughts were away back with the darkly robed figure on the horse looking down on me with a light in the eyes which it filled me with sheer ecstasy to believe had been kindled by the torch of love.

I pleaded that I was vastly fatigued, and then went to my room, to lie tossing from side to side like a love-mad loon, grudging even the hours to sleep because I should not be able to think of Minna.

I was in truth crazed with the knowledge that she loved me; and when I awoke in the morning—for sleep conquered my silly resistance—it was with just the same fevered longing to be with her.

Yet I had plenty to think of and to plan; and when I forced myself to think that even now, though things had gone so well thus far, there was much to do before Minna's safety was secured, I began to think rationally and connectedly.

As I stepped into the fresh morning air I found Praga out before me, pacing up and down in heavy thought. He had not been to bed at all, but was like iron, and seemed as fresh as the morning itself.

"I was thinking of rousing you, Prince," he said. "What about the Duke Marx? That best of good fellows von Krugen may be getting anxious."

"I can say nothing yet; but I think my purpose is accomplished, and that I shall send you to him

with an order for the duke's release."

"What!" he cried in a tone of astonishment. "Throw it all up when you have the game in your hands? A couple of days' firmness and the countess will have the throne as surely as I know how to whip a sword from its scabbard. You're not turning chicken-hearted, surely?"

"You do not understand matters," I said shortly.

"Understand! There's not much wit needed to understand this business. I know enough what the people think and want, and what a bold coup would do at this crisis; and if ever a woman had a crown at her feet, and for the mere picking up, it's the countess."

"Maybe; but matters are as I say. I will give you my decision later."

"I hope you won't let yourself be ruled by a woman's tricky fears. There's danger that way, too. Once give these Ostenburg folk the power, and you may whistle for your chances of any safety. I wouldn't trust one of them. What will you do?"

"I have not decided," I repeated; and it was evident that my apparent vacillation mortified him. But the mood passed in a second, as did most moods with him, except revenge, and he laughed.

"Well, of course, it must be as you please. It is your game, not mine," and he waved his hand as though the matter were settled. Then he asked with another change of tone:

"And about the burial of that carrion von Nauheim?"

"Where is the body lying?"

"In the shed of a cottage nearest to the spot where he broke his miserable neck."

"I will leave directions here for the funeral. There will be some sort of inquiry, and you may have to be present as witness. But I don't suppose any of those who have used him will take much heed of his death, and probably Major Gessler will be able to make all arrangements."

Later on I discussed this with him, and he agreed to see that everything the authorities might require should be done.

"If you're giving up things, you'll have no more need of me, I suppose?" asked the Corsican after a pause.

"You put it bluntly," I answered. "I hope, of course, that all these complications are nearly over, but if you will let me I shall wish to see you about your future. But for you I could not have carried this through, and I shall not forget that."

"I never take too serious thought about what you call my future, Prince. If I killed the brother, I've helped to save the sister, and, if she knows it, that's enough for me." He said this with as much earnestness as I had ever observed in him save in his moods of furious passion. But he lapsed into his more customary temper immediately after, and added: "Besides, I've had my revenge, although I'm sorry I didn't run the brute through before he had the luck to break his neck. To the close of my life I shall regret never having had him to play with at the end of my sword."

At that moment Major Gessler came out of the house looking very serious and called me aside.

"I have very grave news from Munich, Prince," he said. I noticed that he was now always very careful to give me the title which I think he knew did not belong to me. "Last night the Kaiser's confidential adviser, von Augener, arrived there from Berlin. The news of this business has caused a big stir in the capital, and the Emperor himself is expected at Munich. The Duke Marx should be there without an hour's unnecessary delay."

"Had you held the Countess Minna safe in your charge yesterday, Major Gessler, he might have been there now. It is not I who am responsible for the delay."

I spoke firmly, for I resented the too peremptory tone he adopted.

"What are your plans, then?" he asked next. "Will you give me the authority for his release?"

"I can tell you better an hour hence, when I have seen my cousin."

"You must be good enough to give me some definite news to send to Munich."

"You can send them the reason for the delay," I retorted hotly. "I decline your dictation, sir, and can dispense with your interference."

He was about to reply with equal warmth when Minna came out of one of the windows.

"Good morning, gentlemen," she said brightly. "Good morning, cousin Hans," and, her face radiant with smiles, she came to me holding out her hands.

All my anger fled at the sight of her, and when I held her hands in mine and read in her eyes the answering emotions to those which were rushing out through mine I had no thoughts save of peace, gladness, goodwill, and love.

"We must speak together at once," I said. "Shall we walk in the gardens here?"

I led her to a large, wide lawn, through the centre of which ran a broad path. It was a spot where we could not well be overheard.

"I passed the night in wondering what I was to hear this morning," she said. "I think it must be good news, for I was so happy."

"You have not slept, then?"

"Oh, yes. But while I slept I dreamt, and now and then had spells of delicious wakefulness. I don't know which was the better—the dreams that all was right, or the waking beliefs that all would soon be."

"I hope it will be," I declared earnestly.

"Nay, I am sure it all will," she declared, as if in rebuke of my doubt. "Isn't this a lovely old garden?" she cried. "Not so good as Gramberg, of course, because no place could be so dear to me as that. But yet lovely. And what flowers! Did you ever see such magnificence? And the perfumes! They seem to distil the very essence of peace. And what a change from yesterday. It was a prison then—to-day a veritable palace of delight. Heigho! And you have changed it for me! And now for this news. You know where you left off? I do. I think I could repeat every word you said. You are going to tell me who you were before you became Heinrich Fischer, the actor at Frankfort."

"I was a nameless wanderer, and went there almost direct from my death and burial."

She stood still in the path and looked at me in blank surprise; her face wrinkled in perplexity that was only half earnest; and, despite the serious nature of things, her mood partially infected me.

"Your death?" she said in wonderment.

"It is all true. Did you ever hear your brother speak of a young Count von Rudloff, in the navy, who was at one time a friend of the Royal Family, and whose death at Berlin about five years ago aroused some comment? It happened almost immediately after the Prince, now his Majesty the Emperor, had met with an accident on board the Imperial yacht."

"The Count von Rudloff?" she repeated thoughtfully, saying the name over once or twice as though some old memories were partly stirred by it. "I think I did—but what is that to us?"

"To me much—everything, indeed. I am the Count von Rudloff," and then I told her unreservedly the whole of my strange story.

Her first comment surprised me.

"Is this the story you thought would part us?" she asked.

"I had misled you."

"Yes, and for a base and cruel purpose—to help me out of my trouble," and she raised her eyebrows as she smiled. "You must judge me curiously if you think I should consider that a cause for sacrificing the truest friend a helpless girl could have. I believe I could almost be angry with you for that judgment."

"But my helping you was, after all, only for a selfish purpose," I said after a pause.

"What was that?" she asked quickly, all unsuspecting.

"I loved you, Minna."

We were near the end of the gravel walk and, instead of turning as we had done before, I walked on past some large laurels which hid us from the house.

I stopped there and took her hand, which she left freely in mine.

"I have told you all now," I whispered. "Your answer?"

"This is the happiest day of my life," she murmured.

I put my arm round her and held her to my heart.

"You love me, then?"

Her face was close to me, she was smiling trustfully and lovingly, and the answer came in the pressure of her lips to mine as our hearts met in pledge of our betrothal. After that we stood together there, just a pair of happy lovers, for whom the sun was made to shine and the earth to be beautiful, and forgetting all else save the one immeasurable fact of our avowed love. A commotion somewhere near the house recalled us to ourselves as the sounds floated across to our ears. They broke in upon our love ecstasy, and with a sigh Minna unwound her arms from my neck, and we stood hand in hand a minute.

"Better than friendship or cousinship, Minna?" I asked.

The glad glow on her cheeks and in her eyes answered me, and I kissed her again.

"And now we must be common-sense folk, for we have to decide what course to take."

"I can make no decision—except that you must not leave me," she said.

"Yet we are forgetting you are the Queen."

"Do you remember what I once told you would be my first command?"

"Your Majesty has been anticipated. I have told you all—and the assembly was certainly a very Privy Council."

"Yes. Just Queen—and——" she paused, and then, hiding her face on my shoulder, added softly, "and King. I want no other throne than this."

It was very sweet fooling, though not very witty, and I would have been glad enough to continue it if I had not seen through the little gaps in the bushes that a number of people had come out of the house and were walking in different directions through the grounds. Some were coming our way.

"Let us walk on here, dearest," I whispered. "There are men coming from the house in search of me, I think. And remember I must still be for the present the Prince, and you my cousin."

We moved away then and walked as if in consultation, and I told her what I thought we had best do.

"I do not know how matters will go at Munich," I said; "but I hear this morning that the Kaiser himself will see what the trouble is, and that already old von Augener—the 'Kaiser's own man,' as they call him—is there making inquiries."

"He is the awful man who came to you years ago, isn't he?" cried Minna, with fear speaking from her eyes at the mere thought of danger to me.

"Yes—but there is no reason to fear that he will recognize me. I am so completely changed. The more serious consideration is what view he will take of your supposed part in the disturbance, and of my having kidnapped the Duke Marx on your behalf. I told Baron Heckscher that you were only too anxious to resign all claim to the throne, and that I would use my influence with you—it was not so great then as now," I broke off to say.

"Oh, yes, I should always have done whatever you wished," replied Minna. "It never occurred to me to do anything else."

"Well, I told him I thought you would remain in hiding long enough for him to settle matters in the Ostenburg interest. And this coming of von Augener makes me more inclined than ever to advise you to put the frontier between yourself and these plotters."

"When shall we start?" she asked instantly.

"And then I can watch your interests at Munich."

"You do not wish me to go alone?"

"Not to *go* alone. But unless you know of some better place you might well go to Charmes to your real cousin; and you could stay there until these troubles have blown over."

"And you?"

"I shall of course go with you to Charmes, and then return with all speed to Munich to watch matters there."

"Why should you go back to face the risks there alone?"

"I can do more good for you as well as for myself if I know you are in a place of safety."

"We can talk of that on the way; but what should I do now if anything happened to you?" she cried in distress.

I loved her for the words, but could not thank her as I would, for at that moment one of the men caught sight of us and came hastily toward me.

"Major Gessler is very desirous of seeing your Highness at once," he said.

"I will come to the house," I said, and with that we turned, the man hastening on to give my message.

"I am sorry to have to press you, Prince," said the major, coming to meet me; "but I am most anxious to send tidings to Munich. Have you made your decision? It is nearly three hours since I spoke to you."

I saw Minna start with surprise at this mention of the time we had been together.

"It has been a complicated problem to discuss, major," I answered gravely. "But we have decided it at last. The countess will leave by the first train from Landsberg, and I shall accompany her. At the station I will hand the authority you need to you and Signor Praga."

"And your destination?" he asked.

"Is our own affair, sir," I returned stiffly.

"I merely asked so that I should know when to meet you at the station;" and he turned on his heel and left us abruptly.

"I can be ready directly," said Minna, and she ran into the house.

A few minutes later she returned, and we had breakfast together, in the middle of which a messenger from Major Gessler brought me a list of the chief trains in each direction. I chose the first that started westward; and we set out soon afterward for the station.

There Praga was waiting, and I gave him the authority which I had written out to von Krugen to release the Duke Marx, and added in a tone loud enough for the major to hear:

"I shall be in Munich to-night or to-morrow. You can see me there."

A minute later the train started.

"Now for freedom, Minna. A few hours more and we shall be across the French frontier!" I exclaimed.

"Did you hear Major Gessler say that we had been three hours in the garden this morning, Karl?" asked Minna, blushing and smiling. "Can it really have been so long?"

"The time did not fly on the same wings for him as for us," I answered; "and if the next half-dozen or so will only speed at the same pace, I shall breathe all the more freely."

"And will they, do you think?" she asked demurely as she crossed from her seat to that next mine.

They did, although I had many moments of anxiety.

The journey itself was as uneventful for some hours as a tourist's trip. We had the compartment to ourselves for the greater part of the time, though occasionally an unwelcome passenger came in for a few miles, and so broke the thread of our long, delicious talk. But my anxiety began to increase when, as the hot afternoon passed and the cool evening air refreshed us, we began to approach the frontier. I could not put my fears into words, nor could I see any probable reason to fear interruption. But whenever we stopped I looked out with an ever-increasing apprehension I could not entirely allay, and scanned curiously the people standing about on the platforms.

As we ran into the frontier station this feeling quickened up into excitement. A few minutes would see Minna safe, if only there were no interruption.

The officials came to examine tickets, then others to see the baggage, and still all was going well. We had no baggage, of course, and sat watching the different effects which that most irritating process of examination produced upon the tempers of our fellow-travellers.

As the time slipped away I fast grew easier in mind, and I joined with Minna in laughing at one or two comical incidents. But my laughter died away as I saw a couple of officials walking slowly along the train, scrutinizing closely all who were in the carriages.

On catching sight of me one of the men started, and drew the attention of a companion, who looked quickly in my direction, and then referred to some papers. The papers seemed to satisfy him, for he called up a couple of men, and all four came to our carriage.

"Something is wrong," I whispered to Minna. "Be on your guard."

"Pardon me, sir," said the man, bowing, "but I think you are the Prince von Gramberg, and this lady is the Countess Minna von Gramberg?"

"Yes. What do you want?" I replied.

"I am sorry to incommode your Highness, but may I ask you to alight for a moment?"

"How much time is there before the train starts?" I asked sharply.

"There will be plenty of time. Will you come to the waiting-room, and you, madam, as well, if you please?"

"No, I will not," I answered firmly. "If you have anything to say to me, say it here. What is it?"

"I regret that my instructions are to detain your Highness."

"Let me see your instructions."

"Pardon me, I am not at liberty to show them. But I trust you will make this repugnant duty as little unpleasant as possible. It is inevitable," and a glance at the men around him emphasized his meaning.

"Where are your instructions from? At whose instigation is this unwarrantable liberty taken with us?" I asked, with as grand an air as I could assume.

"I can say no more now than that you must really do what I wish. You will surely see the uselessness of resistance."

His tone changed slightly, and he showed a little more authority.

Minna had turned very pale, and sat trembling.

"We had better go," she said in reply to a glance from me.

"I comply—under protest, mind," I said to the official. "I shall hold you responsible for this outrage."

He spread out his hands and shrugged his shoulders by way of reply; and, when we left the carriage, he and his men walked on each side of us to the waiting-room. He came in alone with us, signing to the others to stay outside, and he gave utterance to the most voluble apologies for his unpleasant duty.

At that moment the whistle sounded, and the train started.

"You said there was plenty of time for this to be explained before the train went," I cried angrily.

"Before your train, your Highness; and, besides, I wished to avoid any scene. But I am pained to say you must consider yourselves under arrest, and must be prepared to return to Munich by the first available train."

CHAPTER XXVII

AN OLD ENEMY

I saw at once it would be hopeless to attempt any resistance to this new development. My first feeling was one of bitter chagrin and exasperation, mingled with genuine alarm for the consequences to Minna. Who had dealt the blow, and for what object? I knew that I had rendered myself liable to arrest and prosecution for my impersonation of the Prince von Gramberg, although, despite what Baron Heckscher had said, I could not understand who would attempt to set the law in motion.

But with Minna it was very different. It was certain that the conspiracy with which she had nominally been concerned might carry very ugly consequences; but, at the worst, any such act would constitute only a political offence against the Bavarian laws, and I did not think that outside Bavaria she could be touched. But we had long passed that frontier safely. Whose hand, then, was this?

I recalled, with something of a shudder, the news which Major Gessler had told me, to the effect that von Augener had gone to Munich, and I saw that, if our arrest was made at his instigation, the results might be even more serious than I had anticipated.

"I have no intention to offer resistance to this step," I said after a pause of thought; "but, of course, you must satisfy me of your authority for it."

"I am the chief of the police here," replied the official, "and hold full instructions—very full instructions indeed, and very urgent ones. The case is a very exceptional one."

"But surely you can tell me the nature of the charge for which you say I am to consider myself under arrest?"

"Under ordinary circumstances I could and should, of course, do so; but not in this. I trust you will understand my position."

"You have performed an unpleasant task very tactfully. But can you tell me no more than you have—if not officially, then as a matter of courtesy?"

"We are not allowed much latitude for courtesy, I fear, your Highness; but I may tell you privately that I have not been informed of any charge against you. My instructions are merely to prevent your crossing the frontier should you attempt to do so, and to see that you return to Munich; and these instructions, which came first from Munich, have been repeated as urgent from Berlin."

"I need no more than that, and will not mention that you told me. We will return to Munich, Minna," I said, turning to her.

There was an hour to wait for the train, the man told me, and we filled up the time by getting some supper. It was a doleful enough meal. The police official did his best to make the fact that we were under arrest as little obvious as possible; but it was plain to me that we were kept under the strictest surveillance.

"What do you think it means?" asked Minna.

"It can scarcely be anything very serious, I think. Probably it is the outcome of old von Augener's presence at Munich, and maybe half an hour's conversation with him will be enough to put things right again. I had intended to see him in any event."

I spoke much more lightly of the matter than I thought, in order to reassure her, and I was pleased to see my words had the effect I desired.

When the train came in, the police official showed us to a carriage, and, with another apology for his intrusion, entered it after us. I made no demur, because I knew it would be superfluous. We

must make the best of a bad job, and consequently I settled Minna comfortably in a corner of the carriage so that she might sleep through the night. I took my seat opposite to her, and during the whole of the long, wearisome journey I sat rapt in thought, speculating upon the possible reasons for the arrest and trying to see the best course to be taken in her interest.

I was now disposed to blame myself bitterly, since matters had come to this pass, for not having, in the first instance, abstained from meddling with the plot against the mad King. I had pitted my wits against the men in the Ostenburg interest, and had allowed Minna to appear to be implicated in everything that was done, trusting to my own ingenuity to beat them at their own game. I had done it successfully to a point; but now I could see how, like a fool, I had miscalculated the real effect of this intervention from Imperial headquarters.

The flaw in the present situation was one I could see easily enough now. I had neglected to provide anything like sufficient proof of Minna's innocence, her dislike of the scheme, and her disinclination even to think of accepting the throne. I could see now clearly what I ought to have seen at the start—that if Minna had actually left the country at the moment following her father's death, and had openly relinquished all claim to the throne, she would have had an absolutely clean case so far as Berlin was concerned, and, if necessary, could have appealed there for protection against any efforts of the Ostenburgs to harm her.

The danger to her from the Ostenburgs, which had then loomed so large in my thought, was dwarfed now by this greater and actual danger from Berlin. How, then, was I to repair the blunder I had made?

There was one possible chance—forlorn so far as Minna was concerned, and almost desperate for myself. But the pith of everything would be now that I should be able to prove beyond question and suspicion the absolute sincerity of my motives, and be able to thoroughly convince the Emperor and his advisers that my version of the facts was the correct one. Everything might turn upon this.

As an adventurer who had been known first as Heinrich Fischer, an actor, next as Henry Fisher, an Englishman, and afterward as Hans von Fromberg, only to change once more into the Prince von Gramberg, I could not hope to be believed. Even this very attempt to get Minna out of the country would be charged against me as a crowning offence; while I might rely upon it that every word and act I had spoken and done in the character of the Prince would be construed in the worst light by my enemies.

But what if I declared myself in my true character?

The question stirred a host of old memories and associations which came crowding thick and fast upon me with conflicting force and perplexing contradictions. I lived again in thought the crowded week of my life that came between the scene on the yacht and my supposed death. I could not tell how far that act of expiation on my part had changed the royal feeling toward me; nor on the other hand could I gauge what effect would be produced by the avowal that I cheated every one by the farce of my supposed death.

There was one thing on which I thought I could rely, however.

There had been many acts of close friendship between the Prince and myself, and on one occasion I had rendered him a service which he declared at the time would make him ready to grant me any favor I should ever ask. I had none too high an opinion of the gratitude of princes, and had never urged any request; while it was more than likely he would consider what had happened since had completely cancelled any obligation. But I was prepared to risk any and every thing now, and to exhaust every possible resource to help Minna at this juncture.

I had never had such a motive to spur my energies, and I ransacked my memory for incidents which I thought might be turned to help my purpose.

I was in this frame of mind when we arrived at Munich; but I had not got much farther in my plans than a resolve to use every means that might offer, regardless of any effect upon myself.

Minna awoke, chilled and cramped by the long journey, and the cold gray light of the morning depressed her spirits. She looked pale and frightened as the train entered the station, and we peered out curiously to see what reception awaited us.

"Keep a brave heart, Minna," I whispered.

And she smiled a rather wan, weary smile in reply.

"Where are we to go?" I asked the police official.

"I expect to find instructions here," he answered.

Then Minna gave a little start and cry of surprise.

"There is aunt Gratz," she said. "What can that mean?"

I could make no suggestion; but the reason of her presence was soon clear enough.

As we alighted she came forward.

"I should think you are ashamed of yourself, Minna," was her greeting. "If not, I am ashamed of

you. Thank God, we have saved you, though only on the very brink, it seems."

"There is no need for you to say that to me," returned Minna warmly.

"There is very great need, indeed. You have been the victim of this man's villany."

"There has been no villany—except, perhaps, that which you and the Count von Nauheim attempted yesterday, and cousin Hans succeeded in foiling."

"Cousin Hans, indeed. Poor child; it's only your own obstinacy which prevents your seeing that this man is a wicked impostor who has——"

"Pardon me, baroness——" I began, when she turned on me.

"I will not pardon you nor allow you to speak to me or to the poor girl whom you have so shamefully deceived. But you are unmasked at last, and will be punished as you deserve. Come, Minna. You are to come with me."

At that moment the police official who had travelled with us came forward with another man, who said:

"The countess is to go to her own house here with this lady; and you are to accompany me, if you please."

"As you will," I answered.

At that the tears forced themselves into Minna's eyes, and she came very close to me and gave me her hand.

"We shall meet again soon. I am sure of that. Meanwhile"—and she raised her head proudly as she looked round at the others present, and said: "I wish all to know that I am your promised wife. You have saved my life, and more than my life; and I can never sufficiently repay you for all you have done. When every one else was treacherous, you were stanch and brave on my behalf. Let them say what they will, I know the truth, and nothing shall ever make me doubt you."

I had no words ready for a reply, but I raised her hand to my lips; and, with a lingering look into my eyes, she went away, her face aflame with her gallant little act of loyalty to me.

Then I turned to the man who had spoken to me.

"And what is the charge against me?" I asked.

"You will learn it to-day," he said, with courteous curtness. "Be good enough to come with me."

We entered a carriage that was waiting, and drove to the police bureau, the official stolidly declining to exchange a single word on the way. There they gave me breakfast, and afterward I was left by myself for some two or three hours. At the end of that time the same man entered the room—for I had not been put to the indignity of having to enter a police cell—and requested me to accompany him, though again he would not say where we were to go.

I was not much surprised, however, when I found the carriage approaching the palace, for I had detected old von Augener's hand in the matter. He delighted in secrecy and surprises. I was led through several corridors into an ante-room, where I waited some time until the door of an inner room was opened and I was told to enter.

I went forward, and, as I had anticipated, the first object which my eyes encountered in the room was the hard, stern face of von Augener, whose sharp, piercing eyes looked at me, curiously and menacingly, from under the heavy brows I knew well enough.

He let me stand before his table for some minutes without a word, and after his first glance at me pretended to be writing. He finished this, and then took up a bundle of papers, which he turned over leisurely. I guessed that his motive was to make me understand by this brusque treatment the change in my position. But I let him understand quietly that it had no such effect on me as he wished. I carried a chair close to the side of his table and sat down, saying lightly, as I crossed my legs:

"I've had rather a long journey, so you'll excuse me if I sit down until you are ready to commence our conversation."

At the sound of my voice I saw him start, bend a sharp, keen look on me, and then appear to dive into his capacious memory for the connection which it stirred. Then he said as sternly and harshly as he could:

"This is no drawing-room audience. I don't allow prisoners to sit in my presence. Be so good as to stand up," and he motioned with his hand.

"Thank you, but I deny your right to address me in that tone. I am no prisoner, and this is no court. While I am here I demand to be treated with common courtesy."

"I will send you to a police cell to learn manners," he cried.

"As you please. I would rather sit in a jail than stand to be hectorated by you," and I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

Like my voice, the smile appeared to set his wits gleaning for the facts that would piece together the puzzle my voice and gesture had set him.

For a moment he seemed as if he would carry out his threat; but I judged he would be much more eager to learn what I knew of the conspiracy than to stickle over the question whether I sat or stood in his presence. And so it proved.

"You still dare to carry things with a high hand, even with me?"

"On the contrary, I am here for the express purpose of discussing the whole of this affair with you in its new light. But I tell you at the outset that if you think to frighten me with threats or to treat me as what you call a prisoner, with the meaning your accent gives to the term, you will get nothing from the interview."

"We shall see," he said grimly; but he said no more about my standing up.

A long pause followed, in which I saw him look several times at me with obvious doubt and interest; and I knew by these glances that he was trying hard to place me in his memory and failing.

"Now, sir," he said at length in a quick, sharp tone. "Who are you?"

"At present I am generally known as the Prince von Gramberg—but that is not my real name."

"A needless addition. What is your real name? Who were you before you were known as Heinrich Fischer, the actor at Frankfort? I warn you to speak freely. Your only hope lies in that."

"For the present I prefer not to tell you," I answered very quietly. "It does not concern this matter—in its present stage, that is."

"You refuse to tell me?"

"If you put it so, I refuse to tell you."

"What was your object in usurping the character of the Prince von Gramberg?"

"I was forced by a series of blunders on the part of others to take the position; it was done by the desire of the real heir of the Prince, Hans von Fromberg, who is now known as Henri Frombe; and I kept up the part in order to protect the Countess Minna from a foul conspiracy against her, in which a scoundrel who is now dead was one of the chief agents." And then I told him at considerable length the exact circumstances under which I had first been taken to Gramberg by von Krugen and Steinitz. "You can easily verify what I say," I added.

"You mean by those two men who have since been your tools in the affair?" he sneered.

"I mean by finding the real von Fromberg and questioning him."

Despite his sneer I could see that the story impressed him; and he put a number of questions to test its consistency and truth.

"You don't attempt to deny, then, that you were willing to continue the impersonation of the late Prince and to accept the inheritance?"

"There were no gains in what you call the inheritance. The only inheritance was the castle of Gramberg itself, mortgaged for a great deal more than its value. Scarcely a valuable prize for such an adventurer as men appear to have described me to you. I have my own private fortune—a large one."

"There was something else at the castle besides a mortgage," he sneered.

"Indeed there was," I replied quickly, purposely misunderstanding him. "There was a mess of intrigue and treachery against the Countess Minna."

"And you were the cavalier to save her from it—and for yourself."

The gibe made my blood boil.

"That is the sneer of a coward," I cried hotly. "And if that is to be the tone in which you dare to address me, I decline to say another word or to remain in your presence. I am prepared to tell you the whole truth, and to lay bare every word, motive, and act of mine throughout; but I will not allow you or any man to insult me in that coarse and brutal fashion."

He laughed coldly.

"You use bold terms," he said.

"I will back them with acts. Unless you pledge yourself to abstain from further insults, you can send me to jail or to hell itself before I'll remain here."

"I'm not accustomed to make compacts with prisoners."

"Nor I to hold converse with bullies who forget themselves!" I cried, all my old hate of the man fired by his manner and words.

I got up and turned to the door.

"Come back at once, sir," he thundered. "If you dare to attempt to leave this room you go straight to a prison."

"Rather there than here." I flung the words at him over my shoulder, and went on toward the door.

He struck the bell on his table sharply, and the door opened as I neared it to admit two men in uniform.

"Will you return here?" he called to me.

"No, not without a pledge that you cease to insult me."

"Detain that man," he cried to the others, who came and stood on either side of me, and laid their hands on my shoulders.

I stood with my back to the table.

"Face him round," he ordered, his voice thick with anger.

The men forced me to turn round.

"Now, sir, I give you a last chance," he cried, pointing his finger at me and shaking it menacingly.

"I don't accept it," I answered recklessly. "I've had enough of this Inquisition process. I will have a public trial. I am not ashamed of what I have done; but I should be ashamed of myself if I stayed here to be bullied and browbeaten and insulted and sneered at by you. Do what you like."

My recklessness was a factor on which he had not calculated, and I could tell by his indecision how it perplexed him. Without my version of the plot he could not hope to get a full grasp of the facts, and I reckoned that in an affair of such real State importance he would be altogether unwilling to have any public trial.

"Leave us a moment," he said to the men; and when they had gone he asked, "Do you mean to persist in this obstinacy?"

"Obstinacy! Is that what you call my refusal to be a stalking-horse for your ill-conditioned flouts and gibes, after you have had me dragged three hundred or four hundred miles, and hauled in here that you may treat me like a dog or a thief, without even telling me the charge preferred against me? If that be obstinacy, then indeed I am obstinate, and shall remain so. But I will do more than that. I will appeal to the Emperor himself, and tell him the story to which you have refused a courteous ear."

"The Emperor does not concern himself with the private offences of every nameless adventurer in his empire."

"I am no nameless adventurer. I bear a name——"

I stopped, checked by the cold, steely glance of his eye.

"What name is that? Or what do you say it is?" he asked when I paused.

"I decline to tell you;" and with that I turned on my heel and walked to the back door.

Again the bell was rung, and the two men entered.

"Detain the prisoner in the ante-room," cried von Augener peremptorily; "and send the chief of the police to me at once. I'll find a way to make you talk," he added angrily to me.

I was led out into the ante-room, and the men mounted guard over me, the rest of those present, who were lolling and chatting idly, staring at me with some curiosity. I cared nothing. My temper was still excited, and my pulses throbbing with anger, as I sat paying scant heed to what went on around me.

Suddenly there came a change. Every man in the room leapt to his feet and stood rigid at attention. A strong, firm, somewhat harsh voice was heard, which I knew well; and, like the rest, I rose instinctively as I saw the Emperor enter the room, followed by two officers of his suite. A single, hurried, sweeping glance of his appeared to notice everything in the place, and after a rapid, lightning look in my direction, the eyes dwelling on my face for one second, he passed through the door and entered the room which I had just left. When I resumed my seat my heart was beating fast, no longer with anger against von Augener, but with the thought of meeting again under such altered circumstances the powerful and remarkable monarch who, as a Prince, had been my intimate companion. I hoped and more than half believed that he had come so that he might be present at my examination. I guessed he would have been told the hour fixed for it, and, let the risks be what they might, I resolved that the opportunity should not pass, if I could possibly help it, without my obtaining an audience. I would put everything to the hazard in order to lay before him directly the true story of the plot from Minna's point of view, and I would back my statement with an avowal of my identity. A quarter of an hour later the door was opened again—and how anxiously I had kept my eyes glued to it may be imagined—and I was ordered to return alone into the room. My excitement, as I rose to obey, was so intense and unnerving that it was all I could do to command myself sufficiently to be able to walk steadily into the presence.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE EMPEROR

When I entered the room the second time, old von Augener was still sitting at the table, and the Emperor was standing at one of the windows, his stern, strong profile showing to me clear cut and hard against the light. I halted just inside the door, and stood gazing at him. I was in a sense half fascinated by the crowd of emotions which his presence roused. To me he was still what he had always been—the type of much that is best and highest in mankind, while his actual greatness and nobility were magnified many times by the glamour of my old personal affection for him. Had he known who I was, what, I wondered, would have been the manner of my reception? As I entered the room the two members of the suite left it, and we three—the Emperor, von Augener, and I—were left alone. Ignorant though the harsh old man was of my identity, yet the hate and hostility which he had felt for me originally appeared to motive him now, for he scowled to the full as angrily as on that day when he had come to my cabin to pass the virtual sentence of death upon me.

"Now," he called suddenly, with a sharp, rasping jerk of his voice, for he saw that my eyes were fixed on the Emperor, "stand here, if you please," and he pointed to a spot in front of his table. "You refused to speak a few minutes since, and to tell me what you know of this matter. Perhaps you will do so now since his Majesty has graciously vouchsafed to give you another chance."

The harshness of his manner did more than anything else could have done to collect my somewhat scrambled wits.

"I did not refuse to say what I knew—I refused to submit to insinuations that were insulting to me. I told you that if you would question me without insult I would reply. I am only too anxious to make known every fact in my possession, and it was my intention to solicit an audience of his Majesty for that purpose."

The old bully listened with very ill grace to this, and would have frowned me down had he dared; but I was not to be stopped by him.

"You have told me how you went to Gramberg, and you allege that you remained there to protect the Countess Minna from a plot against her. How came you as a stranger to know anything about such a plot?"

"I was told that the Count von Nauheim was the acknowledged representative of a powerful section of the Gramberg supporters here in Munich, and that it was a part of the compact that he should have the countess as his wife; the alleged reason being the desire to secure to that section a direct share of the influence which the throne would naturally wield. As I knew that the count was already married, and a man of the vilest and most infamous character, the inference of treachery lay on the surface."

"The inference might affect the man himself, but how do you know that others were aware of his character?"

"The fact itself was a sufficient motive to induce me to try and save the girl from such a man—the proofs that others were concerned with him came afterward and gradually."

"What proofs?"

"That von Nauheim, at the instigation of others, had virtually murdered the Countess Minna's brother at the moment when a former plot was rife to carry the throne and put the Count Gustav upon it. The murder was in this wise;" and I told the story of Praga's duel.

As I spoke, unfolding the story gradually and with such skill as I had at command, I saw the face by the window growing darker and gloomier and sterner every minute.

"There is a nest of vermin here that needs clearing out," exclaimed von Augener at the close. "How do you know all this?"

"From Praga himself, who extorted the confession of the whole plot from von Nauheim both in writing and afterward in the presence of the Countess Minna and myself. Praga was himself attacked in turn by the agents of these men, because he had refused to do what they wished—to murder me. By a lucky stroke of fortune, it was I who chanced to come to his help."

"What attempts have been made on you, and, in your opinion, why?"

For answer I described the means by which I had at the meeting managed to make my life necessary for the carrying on of their scheme.

"There was a plot within a plot," I said—"an open plot, of which the securing of the crown for the Countess Minna was the object ostensibly; and a secret one, which aimed at her ruin, to make her unfit to become Queen by mating her with a man already married, or to ruin her by putting her into his power for an object infinitely more foul and vile. It was against that I had to fight, and to fight almost single-handed;" and I went on to describe at length many of the incidents of the past few weeks.

"Why did you not come to Berlin, sir?"

The question came from the Emperor, who wheeled round on me as if clinching an accusation, while he stared fixedly at me, those searching, piercing, wonderful eyes of his boring into my head.

"You would have spared us all this trouble."

"I should have spared myself also the humiliation of having no sufficient answer to your Majesty's question," was my reply. "I see it now. My motive was that I feared the enmity of the Ostenburg family would reach the Countess Minna wherever she might be. I was told, and believed that indeed, that they would suffer no Gramberg rival for the throne to remain alive and at liberty. I knew that they had compassed the death of the brother and had plotted a dishonor worse than death against the countess herself, and I believed there were no limits to their venom and hostility."

"But how could you hope to save her by allowing things to go on?" he asked again after a pause in the same sharp, indicting tone.

"I thought I had devised a scheme by which I could put the countess in a position of such strength that she could dictate virtually her own terms, and so secure that liberty which I feared they would never otherwise concede. My plan was to allow the conspiracy to go forward for putting the countess upon the throne, to postpone the marriage with von Nauheim, and then to watch for and thwart the attempt I knew would be made to get her into their power; and at the same time to deliver a counter-blow and to get the Ostenburg heir, the Duke Marx, into my own hands. I calculated that then I could make my own terms in the countess's interests."

"Fore Heaven, sir, you don't lack daring to play fast and loose with thrones in this way," cried von Augener; while the Emperor stood sternly silent, revolving what I had said.

"Tell me the rest," he said abruptly.

"My scheme broke in my hands, because I was myself betrayed to them. The Baron Heckscher succeeded in gaining information of my plans, or rather of that part of them which I had made for the safe-keeping of the countess, and he outwitted me at the last moment," and I described the whole ruse by which Minna had been carried off at the ball and Clara Weylin put in her place.

The story was interesting enough to them, and both listened closely. When I ended, von Augener bent to read some of the papers on his desk, in order, as I saw, to compare what I had told him with what had been previously reported to him.

But the Kaiser needed no notes; that extraordinary memory of his carried every detail, item, and particular, and as I was telling him my version he was comparing it link for link with what he already knew, in a process of subtle mental analysis.

"And your next step?" he asked sharply after a short pause.

"To make my possession of the Duke Marx perfectly secure, and then to warn Baron Heckscher that I held the duke as a hostage for the safety of the countess."

"Do you mean to admit that you openly threatened to use violence on the person of the duke, the heir to the throne?" asked von Augener, as if aghast at my temerity in venturing on such a confession.

"I threatened it, and I meant it too," I replied, in a voice firm enough to prove that I was in earnest.

"You can see the heinousness of that offence?"

"It was not a tenth part so bad as the offences of the Ostenburg party. They had actually murdered one heir and threatened another. I had chosen a course and was compelled to carry it out my own way. But I knew the baron would never drive me to an extreme step of that kind. While I held the duke in pawn the baron was helpless and had no option but to yield to me. And this I made him understand," and with that I gave them a full report of my last interview with Baron Heckscher, and of the compact we then made—that Minna should be given up to me and the Duke Marx set at liberty, the condition being that the former should go away and leave the latter at liberty to come forward when called to the throne, and that there should be a subsequent definite renunciation by Minna of all claim to the crown.

"A pretty ring of king-makers, indeed!" exclaimed von Augener.

"And that 'compact,' as you term it, was carried out?" asked the Emperor.

"Yes, sire. But everything was jeopardized at the eleventh hour by the villany of the man von Nauheim, who made a bold effort to break away with the countess, having as his confederate her aunt, the Baroness Gratz."

"You scatter your charges with a free hand, young man. Every one appears to be a rogue but yourself," ejaculated von Augener, whose malice apparently prompted him to see and put my conduct in the worst light.

The Emperor lifted a protesting hand, however.

"Tell your tale," he said, addressing me curtly.

"Every word I say can be tested by independent inquiry," I answered. "These people are accused not by my words, but by their own acts."

I described then my journey to Landsberg and what had happened there, though I said nothing of the love scenes.

"And by that time, I suppose, you thought you had done enough to warrant you in running off with the countess herself?" said old von Augener.

I made no reply, but kept my face as though he had not spoken.

"How came you to attempt to fly the country?" asked the Emperor.

"I was not attempting to fly the country, sire," I replied readily. "I had told the countess of the interview with Baron Heckscher, and my advice to her was that she should put the frontier between her and the enemies who had betrayed and persecuted her with such virulence. I was taking her to Charmes, to the care of the man in whose place I stood, Herr von Fromberg, now known as M. Henri Frombe; and I had told her that I should immediately return either here or to Berlin to lay her case before your Majesty, that her interests might be secured and herself protected from further violence."

"But you kept up your personation of the Prince," cried von Augener, seeing another point to be scored against me.

"I deemed that a necessary step until all could be explained. The countess was left at Landsberg without a friend to whom she could turn. The Baroness Gratz, who should have protected her, had first betrayed her to Baron Heckscher, and then connived at von Nauheim stealing away with her from Landsberg. What then was I to do? I had explained to her that I was not the Prince, and it seemed that my only possible course was to take her to where she would at least be in the care of a relative, and, as I judged, safe. What else should I have done?"

"Is that all you have to say of your part in the plot?"

The question came from the Emperor as sharply as a pistol shot.

"I think I have told your Majesty everything of my share in it."

"You haven't told us what you hoped to gain by your work," said the vindictive old man, ruthless in his desire to injure me. "But I suppose it's no use to ask that," he added—this with a shrug of the shoulders, as if to suggest that I was no better than a paltry, unreliable rascal, who would tell any tale and any lie to serve his own ends.

I let the sneer pass unheeded.

"Could you form any opinion of the state of feeling in Munich or in the kingdom?" was the Emperor's next question.

"I know but little of either Munich or Bavaria, sire. The men I came in contact with were certainly men of influence, and as certainly were moved by feelings of deep resentment against the conduct of the King, his extravagance in particular. But I was planning for the Countess Minna's safety, and not probing Bavarian politics."

The Kaiser's face gave no indication of the impression which my words created, and after a moment's thought he dismissed that part of the matter with a sentence, and turned to another.

"You will write out a list of all the men whom you met. And now, what of the Countess Minna? Speak as plainly of her part as you have of your own."

The last words were welcome indeed. Like the wave of a brush, they wiped out the sneers of von Augener, and showed me they had produced no effect.

"I thank you, sire," I answered, my pulse quickening. "The countess has had no part or lot in all this, save that of passive acquiescence in my suggestions. She was against the scheme when her brother was the claimant for the throne; she remained hostile to it when he had been killed; and when the Prince, her father, died, she was resolute never under any circumstances to consent to take the crown. It was only the knowledge that her own personal safety was imperilled, and the belief that by this apparent agreement with the scheme she could best secure that safety, which induced her to consent—to even appear to consent—to any such plot being carried on in her name. For that belief I myself accept the responsibility. She left it to me to select the best road to safety, and she is as innocent as any unborn babe of even an intention to conspire against the King."

"You have taken a grave responsibility," he said sternly.

"And I trust your Majesty will visit on me alone the consequences," I answered earnestly. "This unfortunate girl had scarcely any one round her but those who were plotting to betray her, and it will be a strange irony if I, who at least was loyal to her, have brought her under the heavy lash of your Majesty's displeasure."

I spoke with warm feeling, and went on to put such reasons as my fear and love for Minna prompted why any penalty for what had been done should fall on me.

And as I spoke I watched the Emperor with eager, hungry keenness for some sign that my

pleading was likely to prevail. But not a feature was relaxed for an instant, not a sign or token did he give of feeling. The face retained the same set, impassive, inflexible, gloomy sternness which he had maintained throughout. He heard me to the end, but made no response or reply.

There remained then but one thing more for me to say, one more avowal to make, and I thought of it with something like foreboding. He seemed so cold, so unimpressionable, so infinitely removed from me, that I could not bring myself to hope that any good would result from my declaring my identity. There appeared no chords of old friendship, no associations of comradeship to reawaken. But there was at least the chance that it would convince him I had spoken the truth.

He appeared to me as the type and embodiment of cold, rarefied, unemotional intellectuality. Judgment founded on justice, but feelingless; mind, not heart; the very presentment of retributive righteousness without the warmth of charity. A man who had accepted the high mission of his rulership in a spirit of unshakable faith in the heavenly character of the mission, but who in accepting it had bound down with the iron clamps of an implacable will the milder attributes which go to make humanity human.

Who was to say what would be the effect of an avowal like mine which, like a sudden sword-thrust, might pierce for once his armor of inflexibility and set flowing again the blood of his older nature?

It was he who touched the subject first, and in the form which I had anticipated. He broke a long pause to say:

"You have spoken freely enough, but what is the guarantee of your truth?"

I paused an instant, and, looking him straight in the face, I answered, with slow emphasis:

"I have never told your Majesty a lie in my life."

The unexpected character of the reply set him thinking, and he fixed his eyes on mine.

"What do you mean by that? Who are you and what was your real motive in this?"

Von Augener was also staring hard at me, and I could see that both were thinking hard in the effort to solve the puzzle I had evidently set them.

I let a minute pass without a word, and then said in a low voice:

"I am a man who for years has been under a ban, condemned to live an empty, useless, purposeless life. I saw in this affair at once a means of helping a helpless girl who was sorely beset by dangers; I longed for some sphere of activity for myself again; and I hoped that possibly I might even achieve an object that is never out of my thoughts."

I found myself speaking for the first time with nervousness and hesitation; and I faltered, and then stopped.

The Emperor made no reply, but kept his eyes fixed piercingly on my face.

Old von Augener sneered.

"We are getting to the truth now, I suppose."

The sneer was just the tonic I needed. I found my voice again, and went on in the same low tone.

"For years I have been one of the most pitiable and remorseful of your Majesty's subjects, and I was fighting in this thing in the vague hope that it might possibly in some means enable me to regain part of my old character."

I thought I could detect a faint symptom of concern on the tense, set face turned full on me—just a momentary dilation of the nostrils; but it passed before my pause ended, and in quite as brief, stern a tone as he had before used he asked:

"Who are you?"

I took heart, and tried to brace myself for the final effort.

"Your Majesty, one day some years ago in one of the upper reaches of the Elbe where the current was known to be fierce and dangerous two lads, who had stolen away from their companions, were bathing alone. The river was flooded and swollen, and the stream more than commonly perilous to the swimmers. It proved too powerful for one of them, and he gave a cry and sank. His friend—for they were close friends then—himself struggling hard with the stream, was ahead, and had nearly reached the bank, but turned back and dived for his friend, and under the mercy of God was the means of saving his life."

I stopped. The Emperor was staring at me with a look of such intentness as I have never seen on any human face before or since. He had drawn himself to his full height; and every muscle of his sinewy, powerful, tireless frame was at full tension, while his breath was labored, and came and went through his dilated nostrils as though the passing of it were a pain.

But he made no answer.

"One of the lads, sire, the one whose life was in danger, was the future ruler of the mighty

German empire; the other"—I paused again, and then suddenly threw myself on one knee before him—"was your Majesty's most miserable subject, the Count Karl von Rudloff, whose shameful, violent deed against you later has now been punished by five years of bitter remorse and hopeless solitude. I am that unhappiest of men."

"Von Rudloff?" cried the Emperor, now in amazement, while the older man sprang to his feet, and both stood looking down at me in unbounded astonishment.

CHAPTER XXIX

COUNT VON RUDLOFF

The effect of my announcement was supreme. I myself was deeply affected, and in the moments of critical silence during which the Emperor and his old confidential adviser stood gazing at me I could not raise my head to meet their looks.

The Kaiser was the first to speak.

"You have amazed me. I know you now, but I did not. What was the meaning of your pretended death? Rise, I do not wish you to kneel to me."

There seemed a little hope in the last sentence. I got up slowly.

"It was not premeditated, sire. I gave my word to Count von Augener here—"

"Stay," interposed the Kaiser quickly, turning a frowning face to his adviser. "What is this?"

"I should prefer to discuss these matters in private with your Majesty," was the answer, not without what appeared to me to be some anxiety.

"Would you prefer to retire at once?"

"As your Majesty pleases."

This reply was given with great reluctance.

"Be it so, then," and the old man went away, giving me a glance of hate as he passed.

I did not understand the meaning of this development, and stood waiting in silence for the Imperial command to speak.

The silence lengthened itself into minutes, and, when I ventured to glance at the Kaiser, I was disconcerted to find that he was staring at me fixedly, and, as it seemed, very sternly. But there were certain symptoms of unrest and agitation that made me believe that he was forcing himself rather to repress every trace of the feelings I had roused.

When at length he spoke, his voice had a depth and vibration which told me, who knew him so well, how strongly he was moved.

"Why have you done this? Why deceive me with a gorgeous lie of your death and funeral? Why never declare yourself till now?"

There was much more reproach than anger in the tone, and I began to hope again.

"May I tell your Majesty plainly all that occurred? When that mad thing happened on the yacht—a madness that will be an ever-pressing grief and shame to me to my dying hour—I went out feeling that only death at my own hands could wipe out the disgrace of it. I should have killed myself that night but for the reflection that my death might come to be publicly associated with what had happened. Then, the next day, Count von Augener came and told me that unless I was dead within a week my death would be an infamous one. The threat was unneeded, sire. That day I went to Berlin to Dr. Mein S—."

And I went on to give him a succinct account of all the circumstances by which the old doctor had led me to believe that I was dying, and had played out the drama of my funeral while I lay in his house unconscious.

"I set out from Berlin," I continued, "to make the career which the old man had spoken of, and my first effort was on the stage. There I learnt the secret of disguise, and became what you see me, to all intents and purposes another man in appearance. A little more than a year ago the doctor died and left me his large fortune, and I was once again set roaming, alive, but without a life to live, when I was carried, against my will and in spite of my protests, to Gramberg, and plunged into the seething cauldron of intrigue there. The rest your Majesty knows, and it remains only for me to say that the one wild hope I had in carrying the intrigue forward was that I might perhaps so control the position here in Munich as to prove myself of service to you, sire, and be able to plead it as a ground for your pardon."

His Majesty had made no comment during the whole narrative, and now he stood for some moments without making a reply. He stared steadfastly at me the whole time with an expression of sombre, stern melancholy. When he spoke at length it was in the firm, quick, decisive tone

which he used when his mind was made up and his course chosen.

"I accept your story absolutely, for I believe you incapable of intentional deceit toward me. So far as the Countess Minna is concerned, it will be my personal care to see that she is righted, and her enemies thwarted."

He ceased as abruptly as he had spoken.

"May I thank you——" I began.

"You have no right to speak for her," he interrupted shortly.

I took the rebuff in silence, and stood wondering what he would say as to my own affairs. There came another long, trying pause.

"You did wrong, very wrong," he burst out, with sudden vehemence, speaking almost passionately. "I have been badly served in your matters. You were no more to blame than I myself, and you have made me bear for five years the secret fear that I drove you to your death. And I have cares enough without that."

He stopped, and I looked up as if to speak, but he silenced me with a gesture; and the grandeur of his dignity awed me. I recognized the supremely unselfish magnanimity of his act, and I longed to put my feelings into words; but I fell back abashed and speechless before the sense of intense power and majesty which surrounded him like a subtle, magnetic force. He stood buried in thought, wholly self-absorbed for some minutes; and then in the same abrupt manner broke the silence to dismiss me.

"Leave me now, and remain in the ante-room. I will see you later or send you my decision as to yourself."

I backed to the door, bowing, and had all but reached it in silence when a hasty movement of his caused me to look up.

"Stay," he cried, and he came toward me with his quick, firm stride. "I cannot let you go like this. I am glad you are living. You come back to me out of the past that is, and must be, dead; and our friendship is one of the dead things in it. An Emperor has no friend but his God. Still we were friends once, and this is our more proper parting."

He held out his hand to me, and took mine and clasped it; and at the clasp of it my blood thrilled in accord with a thousand thoughts and promptings. I carried his hand to my lips.

"If your Majesty will give me a chance of serving you again in any capacity, my life shall be ever at your bidding."

I spoke from my heart, and my voice trembled under the strain of my feelings.

"I believe you. But you yourself have made it difficult. Save for that, what might we not have been!"

There was no sternness or harshness in this. It was not my Emperor who spoke, but for one fleeting instant it was the personal lament of my old true friend whose friendship I had cast away. The words brought the tears to my eyes, and I could not look up at him, though I knew his eyes were bent upon me, and judged that their light was a kindly one. A moment later the mood passed with him, or was crushed back by the relentless power of his stern will. He drew himself up to his customary, rigid, soldier-like attitude, and said in the short, sharp tone of a military command:

"And now leave me."

I backed out, and took my place in the ante-room, a prey to a tumultuous rush of emotions which flooded upon me, preventing for the moment any attempt at consecutive thought. My mind was a maelstrom, in which hopes, regrets, fear, and delight were mingled in an indistinguishable whirlpool.

Presently, out of the roar and rush of inchoate emotions, three thoughts began to dominate me.

Regret—bitter, maddening, and unavailing—for the years I had lost and the career I had thrown away; wrath, wild and vengeful, against the old enemy of my family, von Augener, for the treachery of his action toward me; and delight, infinitely sweet, that Minna's safety was secured, and that, after all, it was I who had secured it.

The last outweighed the others, and I lost myself in the maze of a love reverie as I sat there, picturing the joy that would leap from her eyes and the light that would gladden her beautiful face if only I could be the messenger of the good news. And it was to be so.

After I had waited I know not how long, for time goes unmeasured in love dreams, some one came and addressed me by a name that made me jump to my feet and stare at the messenger like one half beside himself.

"Count von Rudloff!"

It was one of the two members of the suite I had seen with the Emperor before my interview with him.

"You are addressing me, sir?" I asked.

"I am addressing the Count von Rudloff," he answered, with that air of impassive coolness that men of his kind affect.

I made an effort to regain my self-possession, and to answer him with the same measured calmness.

"I am the Count von Rudloff," I said.

"I bring you a letter from the Emperor, count."

He waited while I tore it open with fingers that trembled. It was short and peremptory enough, but what did it not mean to me?

"I have decided to restore to you your title and possessions. The question of your future career remains in abeyance for the present."

That was all; with the signature of the Emperor himself.

"May I be the first to offer a word of congratulation, count?" asked the messenger.

"Thank you, thank you," I murmured. "It is all unexpected."

He still waited, and I thought there might be something more to add.

"Is there anything more to add?" I asked.

"His Majesty suggests that you should travel for a time—a year or so, perhaps—so that the manner of your return to Berlin and your resumption of your position may not seem to come as the result of this business here in Munich."

"I understand," I said, though I still seemed in a dream. "And am I free to go where I please now?"

"Certainly," he returned, smiling. "Can I be of any assistance?"

"No, thank you. No. I have some urgent business that will not wait another second."

A minute after that I had left the palace, and was hurrying as fast as horses could drag me to Minna to tell her the brilliant news.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END

When I reached Minna's house, I had an experience that at first amused me. I could not, of course, any longer treat the house as my own, nor look on myself as having any right to enter, and I found the servants very reluctant to admit me at all, and it was only after some difficulty that I succeeded in getting shown into a room close to the door, while they said they would carry my message. I waited in some little fever of impatience, and when the delay had grown into minutes I began to wonder that Minna should take so coolly the fact of my return and the news she must know I should carry. I saw the explanation, however, when the door was opened and the Baroness Gratz sailed in, pompous and very angry.

"What can be your business here now?" she asked, staring at me through her eyeglass.

"I have come to see Minna," I replied, with an inclination to smile at her conduct.

"I am astounded that you should have the assurance to come here after your egregious imposture. Of course you do not expect to see her?"

"Indeed I do," said I quickly, "and as soon as possible."

"And pray in what character now?"

This with a contemptuous and insulting curl of the lip. I paused to give my reply the greater emphasis.

"In a double character—a messenger from his Majesty the Emperor, and as her affianced husband."

"You are not her affianced husband, and I will not suffer that tale to be told in my presence. As for the rest, it is more like a play-actor's story. You imposed upon us too long. You will not do it again." She said this very angrily indeed, and added, almost spitefully: "The countess does not wish to see you."

"In this case I am afraid she cannot choose," I answered. "The Emperor's business cannot wait upon any prejudices for or against his messengers." There was a little stretch of authority insinuated in this. "Moreover, I am bound to say that I prefer to have her decision straight from herself."

"You suggest that I lie, I suppose," she cried, her eyes flashing. "You are too brave a man not to seize a chance of insulting a defenceless woman. That is your stage chivalry. But you will find I am not so defenceless as you suppose."

She rang the bell sharply twice, and then, somewhat to my surprise, and a good deal to my pleasure, the Baron Heckscher was shown in.

"I am told you wish to see me, baroness," he said, ignoring my presence.

"I wish you to tell this person what we have decided as to his prosecution."

I swung round on him instantly.

"I am glad there is a man to deal with. How dare you presume to meddle in my affairs, Baron Heckscher?"

"Really—but how shall I call you? Not the Prince any longer, I presume? Then what?" and he regarded me with an insolent smile.

"His Majesty the Emperor, within the last few minutes, has been good enough to call me by my own name—the Count von Rudloff. That may be a precedent good enough for even you to follow."

He stared at me in blank astonishment. The fact that I had been closeted with the Emperor might mean everything to him, and at the thought all other considerations were dwarfed. I enjoyed his discomfiture. All his insolence disappeared.

"You do not believe what he says, surely?" cried the vindictive old lady when he made no immediate answer, for he stood in great perplexity what course to take toward me.

"You will see you cannot remain here in the face of the baroness's attitude," he said to me at length, with an air that was half truculent and half deprecatory.

I laughed.

"I see you are vastly disconcerted to hear that I have had an audience with his Majesty, and have left him under circumstances that augur ill for you; and well you may be," I added meaningly. "You dare to meddle in my matters at a time when you will need all your wits to save your own from shipwreck. But I have had enough of you, and of this folly. I now demand in the name of the Emperor to see the Countess Minna von Gramberg, and if you attempt to stop me," I said sternly to the Baroness Gratz, "the consequences may be far more grave than you think."

Her anger and dislike of me gave her plenty of courage, however, and she still set me at defiance, abusing me for an impostor and a cheat; and when I declared that if they did not take my message to Minna I would myself go straight to her rooms, she planted herself in front of the door and dared me to attempt to leave it for that purpose, and vowed she would call the servants if I would not go away.

The situation began to verge upon the ridiculous, despite the fact that it was in a measure embarrassing. I could not for the moment see what to do, and was debating this in my thoughts when a sudden turn was given to matters by the entrance of Minna herself, the door being opened from without.

"Ah, Minna!" I cried, hastening to her.

The Baroness Gratz stepped in between us, however, and lifted her hand as if to keep me away.

"The countess is here in my charge," she cried to me; "and while that is so I forbid you to go near her."

But love laughs at prohibitions. A moment later we were hand-locked, and she had read in my glad face that my news was good. Then she turned angrily upon the baroness, her face flushed and her eyes shining:

"You have no right to interfere with me," she said, her words shortly and sharply spoken. "I have just heard, to my intense indignation, that you have even ventured to tell my servants who shall and who shall not enter my house. Is this true?"

"So far as it relates to this person, of course it is true. You are in my charge, and it is my duty ____"

"You have mistaken your duty and overstepped your privileges. You have no right to give such orders, and to do it in my name. You must have known as well as I that the last man in the world against whom my door would ever be shut would be—my affianced husband;" and she raised her head, and stood very erect, looking rarely beautiful in her pride and happiness.

"I did it to save you from the wiles of an adventurer who——"

"Silence, aunt Gratz, and shame to you for those words," cried Minna hotly. "It was this 'adventurer,' as you dare to say, who saved me from the hands of the villain whose schemes you helped, and from the cowardly double plot of the Baron Heckscher there. As for you, sir, if you knew the character of your puppet and tool von Nauheim, as I firmly believe you did," she cried to Baron Heckscher, "there are no words bad enough to paint the infamous vileness of your treachery. While pretending to conspire in my interest, and while professing loyalty to me and

mine, you plotted to ruin and dishonor me; and when I find you here to-day I can only believe you have some further abominable motive or plot against me, and that you are here to suborn some of those about me for your purposes. Be good enough to leave the house."

"I have come to protest to you——" he began in reply.

"I decline to listen to you, sir," she interrupted, with quiet dignity.

He stood a moment, scowling viciously, and then, with an ugly glance at me, said:

"Your nameless friend there——"

"I have already told you," I broke in angrily, "that I am the Count von Rudloff, and that the Emperor himself has addressed me in my name."

"I have known for some time all the facts as to this," added Minna, a swift flash from her eyes telling me her delight at the news, "and of the load of infinite obligation I owe to the Count von Rudloff; not the least part of it is for the defeat and exposure of your schemes against me. Be good enough to spare me the necessity of bidding my servants expel you from the house."

"You had better go, baron," I put in. "You will probably find at your house by this time a summons to the Emperor's presence, for he has heard from me the whole story of your acts."

This statement completed his disquiet, and without another word he hurried away.

"You will be troubled by him no more, Minna," I said. "I bring you the best of news. The Emperor has given a personal pledge to answer for your safety and to uphold your interests."

"The Emperor!" she cried in a tone of surprise.

"More than that: I have told him all, and he has acknowledged my title," and I showed her the Imperial letter.

Her face shone with pride and delight.

"I can forgive every one now, for it has all ended so splendidly for you," she said.

"For us," I corrected; and she acknowledged the correction with a blush and a smile of love which exasperated the Baroness Gratz, who had been listening to us in indignant silence.

"Then I suppose you have no more use for me?" she declared, with an angry toss of the head, as she turned to leave us.

"I am afraid you yourself have made it difficult for you to share in my happiness—in our happiness, I mean," said Minna gently. "I am so happy that I have no room for any thought on that score but regret that it should be so."

"You were always an ungrateful girl, Minna," replied the old lady very ungraciously, bitter to the end against me. "And I have no wish to share with you, or deprive you of any part of, such happiness as you may expect to find in company with a man who is sometimes play-actor, sometimes Prince, and always an impostor," and with that parting taunt she flung away.

"Poor aunt Gratz!" sighed Minna.

Then she put her hands in mine, and, nestling close to me, asked with a winsome coquettishness:

"Am I ungrateful, Karl?"

My answer may be guessed, and it took long in telling. But we returned after a time to the ways of common sense, and then I told her what had passed during the audience with the Kaiser; that I was to travel for a year, and then return to Berlin to take up formally my old title and position.

At first the news brought a cloud to her happy face.

"A year is a long time, Karl," she murmured. "Shall you never be in either Munich or Gramberg all that time?"

"I think not. I expect it means at least a year away from the Fatherland."

She was silent and looked almost sad.

"But a year will soon pass," I whispered.

A gesture of pretty reproach answered me.

"If you would make a little sacrifice, it would help, I think."

"Sacrifice!" she echoed, not catching my meaning. And when I did not reply she lifted her head from my shoulder and peered into my eyes, her own full of curiosity.

"You used to pride yourself on reading my secrets," said I.

She thought a minute; then a look of wonderment shone in her eyes, followed almost directly by a great, glad blush that spread all over her face, dyeing her cheeks with crimson and driving her to hide them against my shoulder.

"I don't guess this one," she said.

But I was sure she had.

"Don't?"

"Won't, then," she murmured into my coat lapel.

"It could not be yet, of course," said I. "But in three months——"

"You said sacrifice," she interrupted, and glanced up with a quick darting of the eyes.

"It would have to be very quiet—very, very quiet."

"It is no sacrifice to travel—in company."

And there we left it; but we knew well enough each other's hopes and desires.

To accomplish our purpose called for some little tact and effort, because the Emperor was for having Minna taken to Berlin when the Munich troubles had been arranged.

His prompt and drastic measures soon settled these, indeed.

An official announcement was made that the King had been suffering from an indisposition, but had happily recovered completely; and a couple of days later saw him back at the palace—but with a change in the executive which was calculated to work vastly beneficial results for the country. The Heckscher party was broken up, their influence destroyed, and their leaders dealt with secretly, but in some cases none the less severely. The question of the succession to the throne was settled upon a sound basis—one of the points being the renunciation by Minna of all the Gramberg claims.

And it was in settling this that the matter of her marriage was mooted and the Imperial consent gained to her becoming my wife. We succeeded, too, in getting the necessary interval fixed at three months.

The time passed very pleasantly. It was the sweet preface to a life-long romance.

As the outcome of the dash we had made for the throne I had one or two arrangements to complete, and in some respects the most difficult of these was in regard to the Corsican Praga. I could not retain him in my service, because of his association with the death of Minna's brother; while I hoped, too, that the time would never recur when I might have need of his clever, sharp, ready sword. I told him the case plainly, and he was too careless to make demur. He was going to marry and settle in Berlin, he assured me—his bride was to be the actress, Clara Weylin, who had made her peace with him in the score of her act of treachery—and he meant to be the greatest fencing master in Berlin, he declared. I gave him as a wedding present a considerable sum of money, and we parted with many assurances, characteristic and voluble, on his part that he would ever be devoted to me and my interests.

Steinitz I kept with me as secretary, and von Krugen was to remain as guardian of our interests at Gramberg. There was one commission we gave to the two just before our marriage—to go to Charmes and endeavor to bring the real von Fromberg to Munich to be present at the marriage.

Minna and I were together when they started, and she was looking more radiant and beautiful than ever in the anticipative joy of the marriage.

I gave them full instructions, and then, with a smile, I turned to von Krugen.

"Be more careful this time," I said, "and be sure you bring the right man."

"I could not have brought a better man last time, count," he replied.

And in the tone and earnestness spoke all the regard and esteem of a staunch and sincere friend.

"What do you say to that, Minna?" I asked as they drove off.

"A happier mistake was never made, but I don't want him to do it again. The only throne I care for is won now," and, reaching up on tiptoe, she put up her face to mine for a tribute of my loyalty, and I paid it willingly.

THE END

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