

THE EMPEROR'S DETECTIVE.

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I.—THE INCIDENT OF THE SEVERED FOREFINGER AND THE HOUSE IN THE WALDSTRASSE.



I AM a gentleman adventurer. I make this statement frankly and unequivocally, so that no misunderstanding on the subject may arise hereafter. There is, in my opinion, no earthly reason to be ashamed of the title. To be reduced to the necessity of living by one's wits is no disgrace, provided one is possessed of the requisite wits to live by. As for myself, they have so far never failed me, and I can afford to snap my fingers at certain stiff-necked noodles of my acquaintance who, while careful on occasion to treat me with due outward respect—for I enjoy no mean reputation as a marksman—do to my certain knowledge shun my society as if it were not fit for reputable men.

I do not give a fig for the opinion of such fools. A couple of hundred years ago qualities such as mine would have conducted a man to fame, fortune, and honour. Living as I do in this humdrum nineteenth century, two or three hundred years behind my time, I am forced to rest content with the consciousness of my deserts, and to seek adventure for the mere pleasure it brings, not for the honour it yields.

This by way of preamble to a series of adventures which in any time save the present would have placed me beyond the need of earning the precarious livelihood upon which I now depend.

It was about two years from the date of present writing that I landed in Berolingen with a couple of hundred pounds in my purse, a troublesome scar on my leg—the relic of a bullet wound received during the siege of Plevna—and in my pocket one or two introductory cards to officers in the Arminian capital, bequeathed to me by a late comrade-in-arms in colonial East Africa. I had taken service about ten years before in the Turkish Army, since when and the time I speak of I had borne arms under more flags

than I care to enumerate. There is always trouble somewhere on the globe, and, though I have at times found it difficult to make both ends meet, I have never suffered from lack of employment. My last resting-place had been Wittichau, a comparatively small garrison town in Silesia, where I had come within an ace of entering into the bonds of holy matrimony and settling down for the rest of my days to a staid and sober family life. From this fate I was mercifully preserved by the fickleness of the object of my affections, a young woman of exceptional attractions, who, after flirting with me for three weeks in the most outrageous manner, suddenly disappeared from her home with an obscure adventurer who, as I subsequently learned, had all along been paying her clandestine attentions.

I mention these latter facts as they have no little bearing upon the adventures I am about to relate, the first of which occurred within a fortnight of my advent to the Arminian capital. I had spent the greater part of those two weeks in hunting up the men to whom I had introductions, and ascertaining from them what prospects I possessed of obtaining military employment in Arminia. The result had been somewhat disheartening, for I found, in the first place, that my good friend from East Africa had considerably overrated the esteem in which he was held by the officers to whom he had commended me; and, in the second place, that, in spite of the fact of my having held honourable commissions in several European armies, my entry into the service of his Majesty the Emperor Willibald of Arminia was barred by seemingly insuperable difficulties. Accustomed as I was to a life of activity, time soon began to hang heavily upon my hands, and, disgusted at the cold reception afforded me by those upon whose assistance I had so surely reckoned, I was already determining to quit Arminia alto-

gether, and direct my steps at haphazard into some other quarter of the world, when an event occurred which altered, for a period at least, my whole fortunes, and in its sequel brought me within a hair's breadth of realising my most cherished dream.

Occupied with the thought now uppermost in my mind, the devising of some new plan for my future, I was sauntering late one night along the border of the beautiful

object apparently was to secure their man, whether for the purpose of robbery, or with some other intent, I could not say. A glance sufficed, however, to show me that, in spite of his valiant stand and the advantage he possessed in being armed, the man at the tree could not long resist the onset of such overpowering odds. Hastening to the spot, therefore, I seized the sturdiest of his three assailants by the neck, and using him as a



"Beneath a huge beech tree stood a man with a drawn sword."

Thiergarten which adorns the western portion of the city, when I chanced, on turning a corner where the forest takes a sharp bend towards the east, upon a scene of a somewhat startling character. Beneath a huge beech tree, with his back set against the trunk, stood a man with a drawn sword, defending himself against the joint attack of three stalwart fellows. The latter, as it seemed to me, were not armed, or at least, if they were, they made no use of their weapons. Their

kind of battering ram against the other two, created a sudden diversion that gave the attacked party a moment's breathing space.

The result, so far as I was concerned, proved rather different from what I had expected, for, upon recovering from their surprise, the trio, as of one accord, turned about and directed their attack against me. In the twinkling of an eye the fellow I had seized wrenched himself free, and, casting

his arms round my neck, endeavoured to throw me to the ground. Had I had only him to deal with I should have laughed at his efforts. But my attention was necessarily divided between him and his two comrades, one of whom, as I now saw, had an ugly-looking knife in his hand, with which he danced around me as I struggled with my assailant, evidently awaiting his opportunity to give me a home thrust.

It was the deuce of a predicament, and I inwardly cursed myself for my folly in meddling in a business that didn't concern me. Engaged as I was in dodging one man's knife, whilst another was using his utmost efforts to throttle me, I had no leisure to bestow any attention upon the man whose rescue I had foolishly undertaken. My breath was getting scant, and lights of various colours were beginning to dance before my eyes, between which I saw at intervals the silvery gleam of the stiletto upraised over my head. Suddenly it descended with lightning quickness, a sharp cry of pain, accompanied by a furious oath, followed, and I fell heavily to the ground. The grip upon my throat was released, but I must have lost consciousness for a few instants, for when I looked up the three villains were gone, and I was alone with the man to whose assistance I had sprung.

He stood gazing down upon my prostrate form with a cool, critical smile. In his right hand he held the short thin weapon I had seen him using against his assailants, and in his left a kind of wooden scabbard, into which he presently returned the blade. The whole arrangement, as I now saw, was what is commonly known as a sword-stick.

"Holy thunder!" I exclaimed, raising myself and involuntarily speaking in English; "that was a narrow squeak."

My companion nodded.

"I am indebted to you," he said, speaking in the same tongue. "You are an Englishman, I see."

"At your service," I replied, "and a fool at that."

"Your name?" he asked.

"Walter Raleigh," I answered. "And yours?"

"A name to be proud of," he remarked, ignoring my question. "I trust it is borne by one who is not unworthy of his greater namesake."

He spoke English with so perfect an accent that I was in doubt whether he could be a native of Arminia, and, curious to learn whom I had so opportunely befriended, I

repeated my query as to his name. But he once more coolly evaded an answer.

"We will see," he said. "We shall have time enough to become better acquainted. For the present it would be well for us to think of shifting our quarters here."

He bent down as he spoke, and, picking up an object which lay in the snow, regarded it for an instant with a grim smile. It was a human forefinger, cut off at the lower joint as clean as if severed by a surgeon's knife.

"By Jove, that's a dainty bit of work," I exclaimed, as he quietly wrapped the limb in his handkerchief and placed it in his pocket. The coolness of the whole proceeding tickled me greatly.

"Better a scoundrel's finger than your life, friend Sir Walter," he said. "I owed you a debt, and I have repaid it. We are quits."

"Rather far from quits," I cried, a good deal moved by this explanation of my escape from certain death. "The odds are yours, and you may count upon Walter Raleigh to make them even should occasion offer."

"We can discuss that later," he replied, regarding me sharply for a moment, as if weighing my words. "If you care to render me a service, maybe you will find it not entirely to your disadvantage to do so."

Without awaiting my reply, he emerged from the trees under which we had been conversing, and hailing an empty droschky that happened to pass sleepily along the boulevard, motioned me to enter it with him. I complied almost mechanically. He gave the driver his directions, and in another moment we were being whirled at a rapid pace towards the great Brandenburg Gate at the top of the famous Avenue of Limes.

The drive occupied but a few minutes, my companion's abode being one of the few smaller detached residences, surrounded by a garden, which are still left in that portion of the city. The vehicle had scarcely stopped at the front gate, when the door of the house was opened, letting out a flood of light into the dark night, and a man-servant came hurrying down the walk with a lantern in his hand to receive us. Having handed the driver a piece of money, he preceded us with his lantern and escorted us in this fashion into the house.

To say that the appearance of the interior, which was profusely illuminated, surprised me would be to understate the case. The effect was simply dazzling, and reminded me very forcibly, in everything except its size, which was small, of those brilliant fairy

palaces we read so much of in tales of Eastern origin. It seemed almost as if the place had been fashioned after some such oriental

gold and silver, priceless vases, gems and curios, met the eye wherever it turned.

Immediately upon my entrance, at a sign from my companion, I was taken in charge by the servant who had carried the lantern, and conducted to a large bath-room on the ground floor arranged in Moorish fashion, with a large pool in the middle and stone divans covered with silk cushions along the walls. A black attendant, with turbaned head and attired in long, loose robes girded round the waist, stepped forward to receive me, and after assisting me to disrobe, retired to a seat at the head of the bath, whilst I plunged into the tepid water and refreshed my limbs after the somewhat severe tussle in which they had been engaged.

Having taken my tub under these to me very novel circumstances, I was once more assisted into my clothes by my black friend, whereupon the servant who had brought me reappeared and conducted me to another room, where I found a table laid out with every possible delicacy. I had scarcely had time to look around me when my host himself entered by a door at the lower end. Taking his seat at the head of the table, whilst two servants placed themselves behind his chair, he motioned to me to join him, which I did without demur, proceeding to attack the good



"A black attendant, with turbaned head, stepped forward to receive me."

model. Every room was furnished and appointed after a different artistic design. The costliest materials draped the walls and carpeted the floors, and ornaments of massive

things set before me without waiting to be invited. The repast was excellent, the wines superb, and my spirits rising with the occasion, I was not backward in replying to

the many questions regarding my birth, experiences, and general antecedents, with which my host plied me pretty freely during the course of the meal.

On one subject, however, I noticed that he maintained a curious reticence, cutting me short in a very peremptory manner when I questioned him upon it. It was the reason of the attack that had been made upon him that night. All I could gather was that he knew nothing of his assailants, nor of the object of their assault. Yet, from the general tenor of his conversation I felt sure that he had had some definite purpose in bringing me to his house, and I naturally connected it in my own mind with his adventure that night.

I was not left long in doubt on the subject, for, when the meal was over and the servants had retired at a sign from their master, the latter addressed me, without further preamble, as follows :

"From what you have been good enough to tell me, I gather that you are here in search of employment congenial to a character such as yours. Are you willing to accept such employment at my hands ?"

"Provided it is compatible with the dignity and honour of a gentleman, certainly," I replied promptly.

"The service I should require of you demands two things—firstly courage, and secondly discretion. From what I have seen of you, I believe you to possess courage. Whether you have discretion is a question I am still left to solve."

I bowed. "And the service ?" I asked.

"It is this. A few days hence a certain person will present himself under cover of night at a certain house in the north-western part of the city, where he will receive a packet of papers. Your task will be to secure this packet of papers and deliver it to me."

I rose. "This smacks of highway robbery," I said coldly. "I am ready to fight, but not to steal."

"The distinction does you credit," he replied, without moving from his seat. "I may understand, then, that you refuse to render me this service."

"Unless you can prove to me satisfactorily that you possess some just claim to the papers you desire to secure by such unusual means, undoubtedly. You forget," I added, "that, although I am under an admitted debt of gratitude to you, I have as yet not even the honour of knowing your name."

"That is a defect easily remedied," he

rejoined. "On the one condition, however, that you pledge me your word of honour never to mention the fact of your acquaintance with me to living soul. Are you prepared to do this ?"

"Why not ?" I answered with a laugh. "I have no confidential friends here, and my circle of acquaintance is but slight ; you have my word."

"Good," he said simply. "My name is Heinrich von Retzow." He fixed his eyes keenly upon me as he spoke. "It is, perhaps, one that is not entirely unknown to you."

I gave a start of surprise. The name, as I need scarcely tell the well-informed reader, was none other than that of the famous, much-feared political detective who was currently believed to hold in his hand the fate of half the notables at the Emperor Willibald's court.

Certainly, I thought to myself, as I glanced round the sumptuously furnished apartment in which we were sitting and remembered the luxury of which every corner of the house gave striking testimony, the business of this man, if not exactly reputable in the strictest sense of the term, must be an unusually remunerative one.

"Will it content you," my companion went on, "if I assure you that the papers I desire to secure contain a state secret of vital importance to his Majesty the Emperor, into whose hands they will be delivered ?"

"Why, that sounds somewhat better," I said, after a moment's reflection, "though I must confess I do not relish the task."

"I can promise you that it shall be followed by one which is perhaps more congenial to your taste," he answered. "I mean the tracking down of the gentleman who, but for my timely intervention, would undoubtedly have placed you beyond the need of the employment you are seeking. I have some personal curiosity to learn more of this personage."

"A difficult job," I remarked, "since I unfortunately never caught a glimpse of the fellow's face. Even if I came across him, I am afraid I shouldn't know him from Adam."

"You forget," he rejoined, "that he has had a mark placed upon him that will be difficult to conceal. We have a clue there which should make it easy to hunt down our man."

He pointed as he spoke to the mantelpiece, where I now saw for the first time, among the costly bric-a-brac ornaments that adorned it, a small bottle filled with a whitish fluid and

containing a ghastly-looking object, which I recognised at once as the forefinger he had picked up from the snow.

I am not of a squeamish disposition, but I could scarcely repress a slight shudder of disgust at the sight of it.

"But let us return to our subject," my companion continued, as if we had been discussing the most ordinary topic in the world. "I have asked this particular service of you as a repayment of the debt you owe me. Of course, if you fear the danger it involves—"

"I fear no danger," I interrupted him, growing warm at the insinuation, "save dishonour. If I fail in this undertaking, who will guarantee me immunity from punishment at the hands of the law?"

"Ah, if you count upon failure," he said, turning away with a gesture of contempt, "let us break off at once. I see I have misgauged you."

Whether it was design or not, he had touched me very cleverly at my weakest spot, and I exclaimed angrily—

"By heavens! no one shall say I am a coward. I am your man, then, let happen what may."

He resumed his seat quietly, and in a few terse sentences set forth the plan I was to follow, giving me the exact locality of the house I was to watch and the probable time of the delivery of the packet I was to secure. Having done which, he dropped the subject and fell into an easy discourse upon other matters, chiefly military, his object evidently being to set me talking about my adventures in foreign parts and the events I had participated in, for which he seemed to evince a curious interest. At last, the hour having advanced far into the morning, he rose abruptly and dismissed me without further ceremony, with an air of easy command that nettled me somewhat, though it became him marvellously well.

On thinking over the details of my adventure the following day, I had to admit to myself that I had acted very foolishly in undertaking the perilous mission imposed upon me. It is true I was fond of adventure, and the mystery attaching to the enterprise before me rather enhanced than lessened its charm in my eyes. But certain reports that had reached me concerning the doings of Herr von Retzow, whose reputation for scrupulousness was not of the best, rendered me a trifle uneasy as to the ultimate consequences to myself of the step I had undertaken. What if this man merely

intended to use me as a tool to compass his own ends, and then to cast me aside, or perhaps make me his scapegoat in the event of his plan failing?

It was too late to retreat now, however, for my word was pledged, and I have never broken my word in my life.

Three days after the incident in the Thiergarten, I received a note, warning me to be on my guard that night. It was signed, "H. v. R.," contained an enclosure, and concluded with the following words—"Keep the enclosed, but use it only in the direst extremity."

The enclosure referred to was merely a visiting card, across which was written slantwise in bold characters—"Commending the bearer, Mr. Walter Raleigh, to the good offices of Colonel Heinrich von Stauffenberg."

The thing puzzled me, for there was no signature attached to it, unless a kind of flourish at the bottom, which looked as if the writer had been about to affix his name and had stopped short in the act, could be taken for a sign manual.

I placed the card in my breast pocket, however, and when night fell proceeded with the best heart I could summon upon my mission.

It was about eight o'clock when I arrived at my destination, a house not dissimilar in size and general exterior appearance to that which I had visited three days before. The garden, which fronted it on the Waldstrasse, and through which a drive led to the main entrance at the side (front doors are not unfrequently side doors in Berolingen), was fairly deep and thickly grown with shrubs, affording excellent hiding-places for persons on errands such as mine. Nor was I slow to avail myself of the shelter it offered. The neighbourhood was quiet and almost deserted, the night being cold and very dark, and it was an easy matter for me to vault over the fence that separated the garden from the street and ensconce myself unobserved among the bushes on the lawn.

I was prepared for a vigil of possibly an hour or two, yet, as one quarter after another struck upon the neighbouring church clock without any one appearing, I began to grow impatient and suspicious that I had been sent there on a fool's errand. Once I fancied that I heard a stealthy footstep pass by me upon the gravel drive and approach the house. The signal by which I was to recognise my man was a sharp double rap with a cane against the

house-door. But I listened for the sound in vain, and concluded that I had been the victim of my own imagination.

I grew the more convinced of my error when I presently heard the further gate swing and the unmistakable crunch of a man's footsteps upon the gravel path. There was evidently no attempt at concealment here. The man, whose figure I could perfectly well distinguish through the bushes behind which I was hidden, passed rapidly up the drive, hesitated an instant when he reached the house, and then disappeared down the side walk leading to the entrance. The next moment I heard a sharp double rap upon the door, and I knew the moment for action had come.

The suspense was short. Apparently the delivery of the packet, being a preconcerted event, required no exchange of civilities between the parties concerned, for, within two minutes of the double rap at the door, the man reappeared once more in front of the house. Having meanwhile shifted my position in such wise as to be able to spring out and confront the fellow at the corner, I was just parting the undergrowth in front of me in order to dart out unhindered, when something quite unforeseen occurred which altered my plans entirely.

I had been forestalled by someone else. Instead of one solitary figure on the pathway I now saw two, and they were engaged in a desperate struggle. The glimmer of steel in the dim light shed by a lamp near by showed me that one of the two was armed, but I could not distinguish which. I heard the words—"The packet, you scoundrel, or I'll run you through the body"; then a violent scuffle, as the combatants shifted their ground on the gravel, a desperate oath or two, and, before I could make up my mind whether to step out and intervene or not, the couple had separated, and my man was speeding down the driveway as fast as his legs would carry him.

I let him run unhindered, for I saw at a glance that his assailant had possessed himself of the packet. He stood regarding it for an instant with evident satisfaction, then turned sharply on his heel, and, instead of following the other out of the place, made straight for the house door. Although I followed him as swiftly as I could without betraying my presence, I was only in time to see him open the door with a key and disappear into the house, slamming the door behind him.

My consternation at this unexpected turn

of things was complete. Here was a dilemma indeed. Did this man belong to the house? And dared I beard him in his own dwelling and take the papers from him by force? The notion savoured too much of downright burglary to be pleasant. Moreover, the man was armed with a sword, and though I carried a revolver—for safety sake—I scarcely reckoned on having to use it under such circumstances as these.

I was standing thus irresolute when of a sudden the loud, hysterical cry of a woman burst upon my ear. It came from the house, and simultaneously two shadows appeared on the blind of one of the windows of the lower floor. From the gestures made by the two figures it was evident that the one, a female, was pleading for something; whilst the other, a man, was holding her at arm's length. The shadows vanished again almost immediately, but I could hear the voice of the woman continue to implore and threaten alternately, then break off for a while into hysterical sobs, and presently resume its pleading tones once more.

In itself there was nothing particularly startling about all this. But there was something distinctly startling to me in the fact that I knew the voice of the woman. Strange as it may seem, it was none other than that of the girl who had jilted me six months before in the Silesian garrison town, and had eloped with another.

In an instant my resolve was taken. The window, on the blind of which the two shadows had appeared some moments ago, gave on to a low verandah easily accessible from where I stood, and, what was more important still, it was, as I now observed, slightly open. Without waiting to consider the full consequences of what I was doing, I swung myself on to the verandah, pushed open the window, and sprang into the room.

The effect of my appearance was somewhat dramatic. The woman, who proved indeed to be no other than my faithless love from Silesia, fell back on the sofa with a loud shriek; whilst the man, who was attired in the undress uniform of an Imperial guardsman, sprang forward, sword in hand, as if to attack me. Possibly something in my posture caused him to reflect, for, instead of using his weapon, he stopped short and asked—

"What do you seek here?"

I pointed to the packet he was holding in his hand, which had evidently been



“ ‘ You had better let us settle the matter amicably,’ I said, drawing my revolver.”

the subject of the conversation I had interrupted.

"I would trouble you for those papers," I answered, thinking it best to brazen out the situation.

"You scoundrel!" he ejaculated, "you shall pay for this insolence!"

He raised his sword as he spoke, and advanced threateningly towards me. But I was now on my mettle.

"You had better let us settle the matter amicably," I said, drawing my revolver, "or I shall be compelled to use arguments that I would prefer to avoid."

I covered him with my revolver as I said these words, and he drew back aghast.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You dare to threaten my life?"

"Precisely," I answered. "I shall shoot you where you stand within fifteen seconds, unless you deliver me those papers. I have authority for my action, and it will be at your peril that you challenge it."

People who have had the kind of experience in life that I have had will be aware that a determined attitude often masters the most desperate situations. The present proved to be a case in point. There was just one moment's suspense, then a flash as of sudden intelligence in the man's face, and the next instant the packet of papers flew at my feet.

I did not stir. No doubt he guessed the reason, for he turned deliberately on his heel and left the room.

"We shall meet again," he said, as he closed the door behind him.

"I shall be charmed," I answered, with a mock bow, and picked up the packet.

A minute afterwards I heard the house door slam very violently, and knew that my man had left the house.

I now turned my attention to the woman. She had risen from the sofa, and stood looking at me with eyes of terror.

"Mr. Raleigh?" she whispered.

I bowed.

"I am honoured," I said ironically.

"By what right do you claim that packet?" she asked.

"By the same right as he who was robbed of it ten minutes ago in that garden," I said, answering at random.

"Is that true?" she asked, her eyes lighting up strangely; and then, as I merely shrugged my shoulders, she added, "Are you one of Herr von Retzow's men?"

I opened my eyes in surprise, for this was a staggerer. But I did not hesitate a moment.

"At your service," I said.

She still looked doubtful.

"Mr. Raleigh," she said again, and her voice had that touchingly pleading sound that I knew only too well, "will you pledge me your word of honour as a gentleman and a soldier that you intend to deliver that packet into Herr von Retzow's hands?"

This time I could answer with a good conscience in the affirmative.

"Unless the gentleman who just handed it to me should meanwhile succeed in regaining possession of it, most assuredly," I replied.

She drew a breath of relief.

"You had better hasten away," she said. "If you give him time he will find means to thwart you yet."

"Is he your husband?" I asked.

She nodded.

"And you fear him?" I said.

Perhaps there was a touch of anger in my question, which she noticed, for once more that strange light came into her eyes, and she looked at me with a searching gaze.

"You are not deceiving me, Mr. Raleigh?" she faltered. "If you knew all, you would pity me and help me."

"By God!" I exclaimed, much moved by her sadly subdued manner, which was so different from that of the proud, wayward girl I had known six months ago; "if he has injured but one hair of your head I will make him rue it."

"Give me the packet," she said, with sudden energy.

I hesitated.

"I am but a weak woman," she went on scornfully, noticing my reluctance. "Are you afraid I would keep it?"

I placed the packet in her hands. She tore the cover open with nervous fingers, extracted a paper, and handed it to me.

"Read that," she said.

I glanced at it. It was a certificate of marriage between one Ernest Frederick, Count of Lausitz, and Anna Theodora, daughter of district inspector of customs, Ludwig Volkmar, of Wittichau, in Silesia.

My lip curled.

"A count," I said. "So I have the honour of addressing Madam the Countess?"

She appeared not to notice the sarcasm.

"Do you know," she asked, "who it is that bears the title of Count of Lausitz?"

"I am afraid that my genealogical knowledge does not extend so far," I remarked. "I have never heard of a Count of Lausitz."

"Possibly not," she said. "It is one of the titles borne by the Duke of Friedrichsburg."

"The Duke of Friedrichsburg?" I exclaimed, at first scarcely comprehending her full meaning. "Do you refer to the Emperor's brother-in-law?"

"I mean the Emperor Willibald's brother-in-law," she answered.

"But," I stammered incredulously, "is not this man your husband?"

"Unless that paper lies, certainly," she replied somewhat proudly. "It is the only proof I possess of my marriage, for the leaf of the register on which it was recorded has recently been torn out and destroyed, by whose order I leave you to conjecture."

I stood dumbfounded. The whole thing sounded like a romantic fable. The Duke of Friedrichsburg, the unruly and somewhat notorious brother of the Arminian Empress was, I understood, on the eve of becoming betrothed to the beautiful young Princess of Bieberstein. Yet, if what I had just heard was true, he was already a married man, and the simple daughter of the customs inspector of Wittichau was, according to all law, moral if not actual, Duchess of Friedrichsburg and sister-in-law to the Arminian Empress.

"Are you sure," I asked, handing her back the paper, which she returned into the cover, "that this Herr von Retzow will prove the true friend you think him? This is a valuable paper you are parting with, doubly valuable, indeed, in view of the destruction of the original from which it is copied."

"Do you suppose me a fool?" she said irritably. "That paper in Herr von Retzow's hands will avenge me for my sufferings, and avenged I will be, though it should cost me my life and my honour," she added, looking like a handsome little fury.

"And you shall have my help, too, for the matter of that," I exclaimed, remembering with some bitterness that the man she now hated had been the destroyer of my pretty dream of six months ago.

"Against him?" she asked, an eager sparkle in her eyes.

"Why not?" I said. "You appear to forget that I, too, have an account to settle with this gentleman."

Upon my word, I believe she remembered nothing at all of my own courtship and the cruel treatment I had received at her hands, for she looked at me blankly for a moment and then merely said, in an absent way—

"You are right. I forgot. If I should

require a friend, then, I will not fail to send for you. But now go quickly," she continued, with more animation. "You have delayed too long already, and every minute is precious."

Indeed, there was nothing more left for me to say or do, and, fearing that further delay might be dangerous, I placed the packet, which she now pressed upon me, in my pocket and took my leave.

I deemed it safest to make my exit by the same way that I had entered, and, having gained the street, walked swiftly in the direction of the main thoroughfare, where I knew I could obtain a conveyance to take me westward. I had not proceeded above fifty yards, however, before I observed that I was being shadowed. The fact in itself caused me no alarm, and I did not even think it worth while troubling to ascertain who my pursuer was. It was not detection I feared, for against that I could easily defend myself, but an attack, which might undo all I had so far achieved and cause my mission to fail on the very eve of success.

Merely hastening my footsteps, therefore, and keeping well in the middle of the road, to obviate any possibility of a sudden assault, I sped on towards the more frequented quarter where my safety lay. In the distance I could distinguish the figures of two policemen who were apparently engaged in a quiet chat at a street corner, and I felt that when I had once reached and passed them I should be well out of my danger, for the main street was but a couple of turnings farther on.

I was within a few yards of these men when a shrill whistle just behind me caused me to start and turn my head. As in a flash I recognised in the person following me the man whom I had forced to yield up the packet of letters. The next instant I was struggling in the grip of four strong arms which had seized me from behind, and I knew that I had been trapped. I fought desperately for a few seconds, and, had the contest been a fair and square affair, I believe now that I should have gained the day. But these devils would take no chances, and, before I could bring such skill as I possessed into play, I received a blow on the head from behind with a sharp instrument, and fell heavily to the ground.

I have but a faint and hazy recollection of what then occurred, for my senses came and went for a time intermittently and then left me entirely. Two scenes only have remained pretty clearly engraven on my

memory. The first was a big, bare room very sparsely lighted, with benches along the walls, and a desk-table, surrounded by a wooden railing, near the window. A police officer sat at this desk, and five or six others stood around, whilst I lay on a kind of stretcher upon the bare floor. I saw a strip of paper pass from hand to hand, and by the hushed voices of those who inspected it, and the almost scared expression upon the faces of every one present, I gathered dimly that it contained something of a character startling to my captors. Every now and then their eyes would turn, first in my direction with a look of anxious concern, and then towards the door, where presently a gentleman in civilian dress entered. The latter approached me, and lifting my head, inserted his forefinger, as it seemed to me, into the middle of my brain, whereupon the whole scene vanished strangely and made room for another.

This was a small, but comfortable and extremely clean chamber, where I lay with bandaged head upon a snow white bed. Here all was quiet and peaceful. Tender hands ministered to my wants and soothed my aching brow with some cooling fluid. Nothing could have been more delightful, had it only lasted. But this scene and the former one kept alternating and mingling and merging into each other, for how long I cannot say. All I know is that I woke up one dreary afternoon to find myself an inmate of the city hospital, where I lay, well cared for, though friendless, for about a fortnight, leaving at the end of that time with a pretty deep scar on the back of my head and a puzzled feeling as to how I had got there. The hospital authorities could tell me nothing, save that I had been brought there by the police and entered in the books of the hospital as a first-class patient. When I asked for my bill, however, I was merely told that it had been paid, though by whom and in what manner I tried in vain to elicit.

Needless to say, the packet which had been the cause of all my misfortunes was no longer in my possession. One of the first things I found, however, on rummaging the pockets of my clothes, was the card given me by Herr von Retzow. It had been a good deal crumpled and fingered, and upon mature reflection I came to the conclusion that its discovery upon my person by the police was probably answerable for the humane treatment I had received after my capture.

My first step, after my return to my lodgings, was to visit the house I had watched on that fatal night three weeks ago. I found it closed and deserted, but for a female caretaker who opened the door in answer to my repeated knocking, and informed me, upon my enquiry whether the Countess of Lausitz would receive me, that no Countess of Lausitz lived there, nor had any one of that name ever occupied the house to her knowledge. The last occupant



"A paragraph under 'Latest Intelligence' caught my eye."

had been a lady with some outlandish name, such as Ralli, or Rowley, or the like, and had left the place in a hurry three weeks ago for reasons best known to herself. For the rest, if I were curious, I was at liberty to apply to the police, whose interest in the house and its former tenant was deeper than she, the caretaker, found pleasant.

All this information, given in a tone of deeply injured dignity, fairly took my breath away, and I returned citywards a

good deal downcast. Sitting in a well-known café on the Avenue of Limes an hour or two later, I was glancing through one of the back numbers of an English daily, when a paragraph under "Latest Intelligence" caught my eye. It ran thus—

"The sudden banishment from the Imperial court of Duke Ernest Frederick, the Empress's brother, has caused a considerable flutter in society circles here. The cause of his Highness's exile appears the more mysterious in view of the almost simultaneous arrival in the capital of the Dowager Duchess of Bieberstein, whose beautiful young daughter, the Princess Alexandrine, is generally reported to be the destined bride of the banished Duke. As this match, though strenuously opposed in certain illustrious quarters both on this and the other side of the channel, is known to be a pet scheme of his Majesty the Emperor, who believes in matrimony as the best means of checking the much talked of vagaries of his obstreperous relative, the unexpected transfer of the latter to an obscure provincial garrison at the very moment of the young Princess's advent to the Arminian court has naturally set all heads here a-wagging."

So the Duke of Friedrichsburg was exiled from court. Had Herr von Retzow a hand in this? And if so, by what means? Scarcely by reason of the success of my mission, I thought.

I went back to my lonely lodging with a feeling of considerable despondency, due partly, no doubt, to my somewhat weak condition, but partly also to the sense of my failure, which nettled me deeply. The day had been an eventful one for me, but the chief event was still to come, for I had scarcely reached my rooms when my landlady placed a somewhat bulky and official-looking letter in my hands, which I hastened to open.

It contained two enclosures. One a short note without any signature, and couched in the following terms—"You have failed, my dear Sir Walter, but you have failed well. Let the enclosed be some compensation to you for what you have suffered. I shall expect to see you to-morrow before midnight."

I had scarcely cast an eager glance at the communication referred to, when I dropped it in sheer amazement at what it contained. This was nothing less than a formal document appointing Mr. Walter Raleigh, of Warden Court, Sussex—the seat of my

family—to the post of Oberstallmeister—*Anglicè*, Master of the Horse—to her Serene Highness the Dowager Duchess of Bieberstein. It was signed, "Baron Rudolph von Brinkwitz, Master of the Ducal Household," and was accompanied by a short note from that dignitary informing me that, upon the strong recommendation of Colonel Heinrich von Stauffenberg, her Highness had been pleased to make the said appointment, and requesting me to be good enough to call at the Chamberlain's office early the next morning.

I hardly knew whether to regard the whole thing in the light of a hoax or not. There were two things, however, which, upon fuller consideration, left me no doubt as to the genuineness of the affair. First, the evident knowledge of my family possessed by Herr von Retzow or his friend von Stauffenberg, and, secondly, the nature of the office to which I had been appointed. I was considered the black sheep of my flock, it is true; but the flock I came from was of the oldest and purest blood in England. I am not accustomed to boast of my family connections, nor had I breathed a word of all this to Herr von Retzow, so that he must have been at some pains to ascertain my actual birth and rearing. As for the appointment itself, it was one for which anyone who knew me intimately would admit that I was peculiarly well fitted. There was a time, indeed, though I say it myself, when my fame as a daring horseman was on the lips of every man and woman who ever rode with the hounds in the south of England. To suppose, therefore, that Herr von Retzow—or von Stauffenberg—I began to fancy they were one and the same—had recommended me without a knowledge of these facts was out of the question. Yet whence had he derived his information? And what ends was he pursuing in thus promoting me?

I confess that these and other considerations, which I need not dwell upon, rendered me a trifle uneasy. Still, my pride was considerably tickled by the prospect before me, and I never for one instant entertained the notion of refusing such brilliant preferment.

It was indeed a strange and, as it seemed to me, almost unaccountable ending to my adventure with the packet of letters. But still more strange and unaccountable things were to happen in the sequel, of which I shall have to relate hereafter.