

# THE EMPEROR'S DETECTIVE.

BY PERCY ANDREÆ.

Illustrated by ROBERT SAUBER, R.B.A.

## II.—THE INCIDENT OF THE RUNAWAY HORSE AND THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

I WAS Master of the Horse to her Serene Highness the Dowager Duchess of Bieberstein. I chuckled to myself when I thought of what certain friends of mine would say if they could see me in my new exalted position.

Let no man think, however, that it was a sinecure. Far from it. The office, even in smaller principalities than that of Bieberstein, is to some extent one of honour, much coveted by the blue-blooded gallants who exist at courts; but it is also connected with a good deal of downright hard work. In my case I soon found that the chief service expected of me was that of teaching the young Princess what is known in Arminia as English riding.

I shall never forget the impression produced upon me by my first interview with my illustrious young pupil, whose loveliness, so often commented upon of late by the newspapers, was really no myth. The old Dowager Duchess, who had honoured me with a two minutes' audience upon my entry into the ducal household in Berolingen, was a stiff and starchy body, who, after eyeing me for fully

ten seconds through a *lorgnon* with an immense handle, asked me if I spoke French, and, upon my replying in the negative, turned her back upon me and conversed for the remaining 110 seconds in that particular lingo with Baron von Brinkwitz, who had presented me. The Princess Alexandrine was of a different make altogether. She addressed me at once in English, extended me her hand, not to kiss, but to



“She extended me her hand, not to kiss, but to shake.”



shake, and kept me busy for quite a quarter of an hour answering questions innumerable about London society folks, the latest English sporting news, and other similarly entertaining matters. She spoke our language with a slight accent, but remarkably fluently, interspersing her sentences with the sweetest little slang phrases that ever fell from the lips of a pretty girl. Altogether, she was an up-to-date young lady of the most approved type, full of spirit, and dash, and pluck, and so simple and unaffected in manner that you quite forgot, when she talked with you, that you were conversing with the daughter of a sovereign house, who was about to ally herself with the near relative of the most powerful army chief in Europe.

For there appeared to be little doubt that the chances of Duke Ernest with this sweet young princess were, in spite of his banishment, very favourable. The Duke was by no means ill-favoured. He had an engaging manner, and his reputation as a fast liver served, perhaps, rather to enhance than to lessen his charm in the eyes of an innocent girl, to whom wickedness, being an unknown and mysterious quantity, is correspondingly fascinating. Yet, pure and innocent as she was, it was the opinion of those who knew the Princess Alexandrine that, if anyone were capable of taming the rakish Duke, it was she, and it was not long before I coincided with this view.

I had not been installed in my new office more than a couple of days before I discovered that my surroundings were not all of a friendly character. I was looked upon with a good deal of envy by my fellow-servitors, and with unconcealed suspicion by those above me in rank and station. Among the latter, to my chagrin, I had to reckon her Majesty the Dowager Empress Fritz, to whom my young mistress, in her goodness of heart, took the first occasion to present me, thinking, no doubt, that, as an Englishman, I should be received with particular graciousness. Unfortunately, the reverse was the case. Her Majesty gave me, on the occasion in question, such indubitable signs of her disfavour that I turned red and white from sheer dismay, and the young Princess looked not a little embarrassed and displeased.

I attributed all this to the fact that I was believed to have been introduced into the Bieberstein household as a kind of spy in the employ of the Duke of Friedrichsburg's party, a circumstance, by the way, that

annoyed and disturbed me a good deal; for, though I had learned that the mysterious Colonel von Stauffenberg, through whom I had received my appointment, was no less a personage than the military secretary of the Emperor Willibald, I had no reason to suppose that he was in any way interested in my humble person. My dealings were with Herr von Retzow alone, and to all appearances the service this gentleman expected of me was merely that of tracking and identifying the persons who attacked him that eventful night when I first formed his acquaintance.

Still, I harboured for some time secret hopes that the disfavour with which I was evidently regarded by the party of the Dowager Empress might one day be counterbalanced by the favour of one still more powerful than she. Truth to say, I had originally come to Berolingen with some hazy notion that I might possibly succeed in entering the personal service of the Arminian sovereign, for whose adventurous spirit I entertained a deep admiration. Herr von Retzow, to whom I had confessed these aspirations, had somewhat artfully hinted at the possibility of their fulfilment as a kind of general recompense for the faithful performance of such duties as he imposed upon me.

However, if I dwelt fondly upon such dreams, they were soon destined to be rudely dispelled, as the incident I shall now relate will show.

It occurred on one of Princess Alexandrine's morning rides in the Thiergarten, which it was my duty to superintend in person in my capacity as Stallmeister. Those who know Berolingen and its unique Thiergarten will, of course, not need to be told that the famous central avenue leading from the Brandenburg Gate in a straight line through the forest to Carolinenburg possesses one of the finest riding rows in all Europe. It was here that the young Princess, usually accompanied by one of her ladies, took her regular morning canter. On the occasion I speak of, it being a somewhat raw and threatening March day, the thoroughfare was almost deserted. Riders on the row there were practically none, and, apart from the few gapers whose attention was arrested by the ducal livery of the groom following us, and who stood still and stared as we passed, we could scarcely have enjoyed greater privacy had we been taking exercise in the palace grounds.

I was riding pensively about thirty yards behind the Princess and her lady, having



fallen back in order to give some instructions to the groom, when suddenly a loud shriek burst upon my ear and caused me to start and look up. The shriek proceeded from the Princess's lady, and a glance was sufficient to satisfy me as to its cause. A man, who had apparently emerged from the forest that flanked the riding row, had seized the Princess's horse by the bridle, and was forcing the animal backwards with his right hand, whilst his left hand was raised towards her in an attitude of urgent supplication. The fellow, as I could easily discern from the distance, was speaking to her rapidly and with great earnestness, but what the import of his words was, it was, of course, impossible for me to distinguish. As I drove the spurs into my horse and galloped forward, I saw the Princess raise her riding-whip aloft, as if to strike at her assailant, and then lower her arm again without executing her purpose. The next instant the man's left arm shot forward, an object like a letter or paper of some description passed from his hand to that of the Princess, and, before I could quite realise what was occurring, he had released the bridle of the horse and disappeared with one or two bounds into the forest.

Something like an electric shock passed through me as I saw him vanish, for just at that moment my eye had fallen upon his uplifted arm, and I observed that *the forefinger of his left hand was missing*. I was near enough to recognise that the loss of the finger was of recent date, a circumstance that exercised my mind greatly and increased my desire to capture the fellow.

But here was a dilemma. Owing to the somewhat rough usage the Princess's horse had been subjected to, it had become restive, and, unnerved as its rider was by what had occurred, I could see that she was fast losing

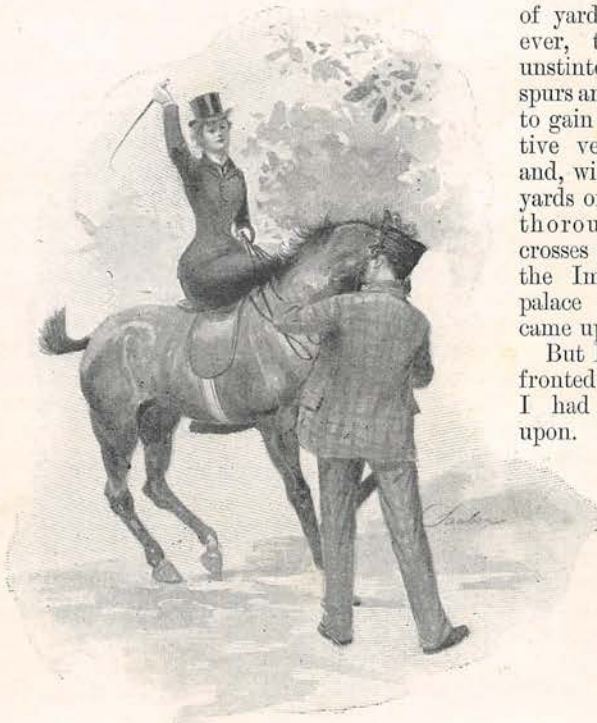
control of it. Indeed, almost before I had time to reflect whether I should spring to her assistance or follow my man into the wood, the spirited animal took a sudden side-leap and darted off at a furious gallop down the avenue. In an instant I had given my own horse the reins and was hot in pursuit. Hopeless as the attempt seemed, I had a notion that if I could overtake the affrighted beast before it reached the end of the avenue, which was fully two miles distant, I should succeed in seizing its bridle and checking its mad career. For the first minute or two I scarcely lessened the distance

between us by a couple of yards. Then, however, thanks to the unstinted application of spurs and whip, I began to gain upon the fugitive very perceptibly, and, within a hundred yards or so of the main thoroughfare which crosses the avenue near the Imperial summer palace at the end, I came up with it.

But I was now confronted with a difficulty I had not reckoned upon. I had foolishly approached on the left side of the Princess, and consequently found myself unable to bring my animal near enough to reach over and seize the bridle of the

runaway. I could have cursed myself for a senseless fool, but there was no time to dwell upon my folly. We were now barely fifty yards from the crossing, and in another minute would dash into the midst of the traffic passing there.

Riding neck and neck as we were, I could see that the Princess in her fright had lost all power over her limbs, and merely retained her seat owing to the fact that the course of her animal's flight was perfectly straight. The slightest swerve of the horse to the right or the left would have unseated her, with probably fatal consequences. The



"I saw the Princess raise her riding-whip."



sweat stood out on my brow in great drops, as I realised the imminent peril of the situation. There was only one possible course to pursue, and, desperate though it was, I decided upon it instantly. Wrapping my own horse's bridle firmly round my left hand, I extended my right arm towards the half inanimate girl.

"Courage, Princess," I cried to her. "Rise in your stirrups and lean over towards me. I will answer for your safety."

I feared that she was already past comprehending me, but to my relief she obeyed mechanically, and, bending over until my body formed an obtuse angle with my beast, I clasped my arm tightly round her waist, and lifted her bodily on to my own saddle. The weight caused me to sway dangerously for a moment, and the fearful strain of the bridle in my left hand, as I simultaneously reined in my horse, nearly broke my wrist. But I maintained my balance with a supreme effort, and brought my beast to a standstill within half a dozen paces of the line of carriages and foot-passengers that was crossing the avenue at its lower end. Meanwhile the Princess's horse, relieved of its burden, turned sharply when it reached the crossing, and, retracing its course, careered back again towards the spot it had started from, where it was intercepted and caught by the groom.

It was a feat to be proud of, though I say it myself, who in my day have successfully matched my skill in similar *tours de force* against many a famous circus rider in his own arena. Still, but for the nerve displayed by my illustrious young mistress, I could not have accomplished it.

As her beautiful, lithe form lay closely nestled in my embrace, a thrill of immense pride and pleasure passed through me, and it was with difficulty that I restrained myself from caressing her. To escape the curiosity of the passers-by, who were attracted by the novel sight, I cantered back a couple of hundred yards, where I gently lifted my fair burden to the ground, and, dismounting myself, led her to a seat under the trees. She was still pale and trembling, but perfectly collected, and by the time her lady rode up and inquired tearfully whether she was injured, she had quite regained her old self again.

"I have had a jolly good fright, that's all," she said, in reply to her companion's question. "There's no need to make a fuss."

To me she had so far not addressed a word. But I had felt the warm pressure of

her little hand that lay in mine as I conducted her to the seat, and it had spoken volumes. Now, however, she turned to me and said simply, in her delightful, unconventional little way—

"That was bravely done of you, Mr. Raleigh. You are a brick. I shall not forget it."

To convey on paper the sweet effect of her words and accent would be impossible. There was as little sentimentality about her as there was stiffness or hauteur in her manner, and once her gratitude was expressed, the matter was dismissed for good. The groom had now trotted up with her Highness's horse, which she insisted on remounting, in spite of my remonstrances and the agonised entreaties of her lady that she would allow a carriage to be sent for and drive back to the palace.

"Nonsense, Wenzlau," she said, addressing the noble Fräulein somewhat peremptorily. "Do you take me for a hysterical schoolgirl? You may go home in a carriage if you prefer it; but when I ride out on horseback, I return on horseback or not at all."

I ventured to propose that, for safety's sake, we should exchange horses, and offered to transfer the saddle from her horse to mine. But she persisted in her determination to ride home on her own animal, and, having satisfied myself that there was no real danger, I assisted her to mount, and we returned to the city.

I have noticed, in my humble experience of life, that the events of our existence which raise us, so to speak, to the summit of delight, are generally in the closest proximity to those which hurl us into the dust of shame and despondency. As I rode at the side of my young Princess, carefully watching every movement of her horse, I would not have exchanged my position for a generalship. Yet, before we reached the palace I was destined to meet with a rebuff that dashed my dearest hopes to the ground.

It occurred thus. Our little cavalcade had hardly issued from the avenue, and was crossing the large open space fronting the Arch of Victory, or Brandenburg Gate, when the beating of drums and the sharp, regular clash of military arms close by indicated that the guard stationed behind the Arch had turned out and was rendering a royal salute. In another instant the carriage of the Emperor came into view, driving rapidly through the great arched gateway and across the square towards the Thiergarten.

Observing our little party, his Majesty





"I clasped my arm tightly round her waist, and lifted her bodily on to my own saddle."



immediately gave a sign for the carriage to be stopped, and the Princess rode forward to greet its Imperial occupant. The moment was an exciting one for me, for I could see by the animated way in which her Highness was conversing that she had plunged impulsively into a description of her recent adventure, and, from the quick glance which his Majesty once or twice shot in my direction, I judged that my own exploit had not been passed over in silence.

I was just wondering whether the Princess would mention the circumstance of the paper handed to her by her strange assailant—a subject on which she had so far maintained complete silence—when I suddenly saw the Emperor beckon to me to approach. I went forward with a beating heart. I had never seen his Majesty at close quarters, and my natural curiosity, coupled with the elation I felt at being presented to him under what I thought such exceptionally favourable circumstances, caused me a mingled sensation of pride and nervous dread.

Judge of my consternation, then, when his Majesty, without waiting for the Princess to present me to him, and regarding me with a look of stern displeasure, addressed me as follows:—

“These are strange things I hear, Mr. Stallmeister. A princess attacked in my capital in open daylight before your eyes, without so much as an attempt being made to secure the guilty scoundrel. Is it the custom of gentlemen in your country to suffer such affronts to go unpunished?”

I began to stammer a few words of excuse, but his Majesty instantly cut me short.

“Are you not acquainted with the Arminian language?” he asked, speaking, as he had done before, in that tongue.

I replied that I was, though I could boast but of a poor scholarship.

“Then please to note, sir,” his Majesty said curtly, “that it behoves the servant of an Arminian Princess to address the Arminian Emperor in the Arminian tongue.”

This last shaft routed me utterly, and I stood there like a fool, quite at a loss for words to defend myself. The manifest injustice of this treatment, seeing that the Emperor had just been fully acquainted with the true circumstances of the occurrence which was apparently the cause of it, struck me less than what seemed to me to be the pointed animosity of the tone in which he addressed me. The Princess had noticed both with evident displeasure, and I saw her pretty lip pout ominously.

“I fear I have not explained myself clearly, sire,” she said boldly, before I could collect myself to reply. “Doubtless Mr. Raleigh could have made an attempt to seize the man; but in that case it would certainly not have fallen to my lot to relate the facts of my adventure to your Majesty.”

“I understand, I understand,” the Emperor answered, totally ignoring the drift of her words, and still speaking with some irritability. “Rest assured, Princess, that the matter shall be strictly inquired into. My police shall leave no stone unturned to discover the perpetrator of this gross insult and bring him to justice. I will concern myself personally in the investigation.”

“May I be permitted to state, sire,” I now ventured to say, my confidence being somewhat restored by the generous intervention of my fair champion, “that the fellow has the forefinger of his left hand missing, and that I have reason to believe that it was cut off within the last four or five weeks.”

I saw his Majesty give a slight start, and looked at me sharply.

“It is well,” he said after a pause. “You will have an opportunity of giving such information as you may possess to the proper authorities.”

He waved his hand in token that both the subject and I were dismissed, and, turning to the Princess, conversed with her for a few minutes, after which he saluted her Highness and drove on.

I think one is never more conscious of the intensity of one's hopes than at the moment when they crumble into dust. The manifest disfavour shown me by the Dowager Empress had led me to the conclusion that I should be the more likely to find grace with her imperious son. Yet, unaccountably enough, I had been received here with even greater coldness and repugnance. The mystery of it all was the greater that I could not imagine my present position had been secured to me without some favour in exalted quarters. Herr von Retzow, powerful though he was, could scarcely have placed me where I was unless he had been aided by others more influential than he. Who, then, were these? I had learned by this time to know that there were but two parties at the Imperial Court—that of the Emperor himself and that of his mother the Empress Fritz.

By those in whose midst I now lived I was supposed to be in the service of the former. Yet, if all the gossip I heard around me was true, the famous political spy, whom



so many feared, had cast in his lot with the Emperor's opponents, and was using the knowledge he possessed to paralyse the actions of those upon whom the success of his Majesty's pet schemes mainly depended. Surely a more puzzling situation could hardly be conceived.

The occurrence of that day seemed to me momentous enough to be made the subject of a special report to my patron, and I consequently repaired to his house towards midnight, the hour he had set for my visits, in order to place him in possession of the facts.

He received me, as he always did, with that curious mixture of kindly regard and conscious superiority which marked his whole bearing towards me. Inwardly I resented the tone of raillery he frequently fell into when addressing me. But there was that about the man which checked any expression of ill-humour on my part, and, to put it quite plainly, awed me into a state of submissiveness which often caused me to wonder at myself.

I offer this as an explanation of much that may appear dubious in the course of conduct I pursued towards a personage whose plans were then as much a mystery to me as he was himself. I would also, in justice to myself, beg the reader to understand that the Herr von Retzow, as he figured some weeks later in the famous political trial that engrossed the attention of Europe—as the convicted traitor and notorious blackmailer who levied fortunes by way of hush-money from those whose secrets he had made his own—was not the Herr von Retzow as he was known to the public at the time I am writing of. Else, on my word as a man and a soldier, this history had never been penned.

Apart from the natural desire for my own preferment, I had had two strong personal reasons for entering the household of the Duchess of Bieberstein, conscious though I was that I did so practically in the capacity of a spy and an eavesdropper. In the first place, unless Herr von Retzow had grossly deceived me, it was in these surroundings that I was most likely to meet and identify the gentleman who had so narrowly missed knifing me that night in the Thiergarten six weeks ago; and, secondly, I knew of no better means of bringing about an encounter between my humble person and the illustrious Duke whom I had to thank, either directly or indirectly, for the present damaged condition of my cranium. I had vowed that I would not quit Arminian soil before I had

crossed swords with his High-and-mightiness, for, with all due honour to royal blood, when it comes to hard knocks all the world is a level plain to me, and one skull as good as another.

Herr von Retzow listened to my story with rapt attention, but expressed no surprise.

"I cannot complain of the manner in which you have acquitted yourself," he said when I had finished, "save in one respect. The opportunity to secure the person of my particular friend with the missing fore-finger was, I admit, forfeited through no fault of yours. But if you could not lay hands on the man himself, you might well have secured the next most important thing—namely, the paper he passed into the hands of the Princess. Did you not think of that while she lay unconscious in your very arms?"

The thing had certainly not occurred to me; nor, indeed, had it done so, would I have considered the act one worthy of an honourable man and a gentleman—a fact which I conveyed to my questioner in very plain terms.

"You are somewhat punctilious, my good friend, for a man in your position," he said, with that confounded air of a grand seigneur which he was wont to assume on occasions. "There is such a thing as a man proving too large for his boots, which is rather awkward when the boots happen to be purchased but not paid for. Nay, you need not grow angry," he added quietly, seeing me start up and redden at the taunt. "I know what I am saying, and you may believe me that you would have served the Princess more effectively by acting as I have suggested. But let that pass. On the whole, friend Sir Walter, I think I would rather entrust my safety to your sword than to your wit."

He was full of these cutting sayings; but he uttered them so coolly and so obviously unconscious of the possibility of their giving offence, that it was difficult to receive them otherwise than in good part. It was evident that he regarded the letter incident as being of more serious import than I had imagined. Indeed, he questioned me so closely as to what I knew of the Princess's movements and the opportunities afforded her for interviews with strangers that I concluded he anticipated some sinister design upon her person; and, my mind running, as it frequently did of late, upon the Duke of Friedrichsburg and his madcap escapades, I somewhat foolishly exclaimed that if it



were he who contemplated any violence to her Highness, there was a certain person not too distantly connected with myself who would make him pay dearly for it.

Herr von Retzow looked at me with a glance of amused surprise.

"Oho!" he said, "you aim at high game, it appears. It would be well for you to remember, however, that we are not in England, and that there are such things as indictments for high treason in this country."

"Treason or no treason," I replied stubbornly, "I have an old score to settle with the Duke, and the opportunity shall not fail me for want of the making."

"Well," observed Herr von Retzow sardonically, "I am not sure that his Highness might not be the better for a little blood-letting. But let this jest go no further," he broke off sternly. "For one who aspires to win the Emperor's favour, you are venturing upon very dangerous ground."

"Pooh!" I said; "such threats do not frighten me. Truth to say, I would part with my chance of gaining his Majesty's good will for a mighty small consideration. It appears I am not of the make that pleases his Imperial fancy."

"Possibly because his Majesty knows more of Mr. Raleigh and his doings than Mr. Raleigh wots of," Herr von Retzow remarked drily.

His words made me start, recalling to my mind, as they did, the various whisperings I had lately heard of this man's daring interference in the political movements of the time. But before I could reply Herr von Retzow burst into a boisterous laugh.

"As I have said, my dear Sir Walter," he cried, "whatever your other abilities may be, you are decidedly lacking in detective penetration, or you would not be so blind to what is most obvious."

Saying which, he dismissed me in his usual peremptory fashion, after having cautioned me to note carefully who approached my young mistress, outside of those who formed her ordinary surroundings, and to inform him instantly of any unusual event that might occur in the ducal household.

I little dreamed how soon I should have occasion to follow these directions, nor how miserably I myself was to become involved in the extraordinary event which shortly befell, and which threw the whole court of Berolingen into a state of consternation.

It was about four days after my visit to Herr von Retzow, and three days before the

famous masked ball that took place that year at the Imperial Palace—the first of its kind, I was told, ever given at the Arminian court—when the Princess Alexandrine sent for me early one morning, and, placing a strip of paper in my hands, asked me if I was acquainted with the address written upon it, and would undertake to conduct her thither.

"I intend to ride to this place within half an hour," she said, "accompanied by you and Wenzlau, whom I know I can trust. You will, therefore, have to find some excuse for leaving Friedrich (her Highness's groom) behind. The visit, I need hardly tell you, must be kept strictly secret."

I gave a glance at the paper, and fell back aghast. The address it contained was that of the identical house I had watched and entered that fatal night when I made the attempt to secure the mysterious packet of papers for Herr von Retzow.

"I am only too well acquainted with this place, Princess," I stammered at last. "If I may venture to advise your Highness——"

"No, you may not, Mr. Raleigh," she interrupted me in her most peremptory fashion. "I only take advice when I ask for it. You need feel no alarm," she added reassuringly. "I know my own mind, and am very well able to take care of myself."

With that she intimated to me very clearly that my interview was at an end, and I retired in a state of considerable perplexity.

What could I do? Had I refused to become a party to the expedition, it would undoubtedly have taken place without me, and what would have been gained thereby? It required little reflection to tell me that this proposed visit of the Princess to the house in the Waldstrasse was the sequel of her adventure in the Thiergarten four days before. Nor was its purpose any less easy of conjecture. What cared I, then, if the Princess, as appeared more than likely, were going there to obtain proofs, as I had obtained them, of the Duke of Friedrichsburg's secret marriage? At all events, I could not prevent it. My sense of justice and propriety had always rebelled at the thought of the projected union between this sweet girl and the notorious rake who was bound by every instinct of truth and honour, if not by the law itself, to abide by his sacred pledge to another. I knew, of course, that no alliance entered into by a member of the Arminian Imperial family is regarded as binding in law, unless it be contracted with the express sanction of the head of the reigning house. But I knew also, just as surely,



that if the Princess Alexandrine once learned of such an alliance on the part of Duke Ernest, no power on earth would induce her to confer her hand upon him, let the law say what it might.

When her Highness started out, therefore, about half an hour later, on this peculiar expedition, I accompanied her with some misgivings as to the view Herr von Retzow might take of my ready compliance with her wishes, but certainly without the slightest apprehension that any danger threatened her person.

In order to avoid the main thoroughfares and the public attention our appearance there was sure to attract, we took a round-about course to our destination, passing eastward through the quiet residential quarter in the rear of the museums and picture galleries. It was consequently fully three-quarters of an hour before we reached the house in the Waldstrasse.

While I assisted the Princess to dismount at the front gate, where she directed us to await her return, I glanced curiously up the drive at the windows of the house, secretly wondering what kind of an interview was about to take place there, and whether my erstwhile charmer from Wittichau in Silesia would have any part in it. As I did so, the face of a man appeared for the space of an instant at one of the upper windows, and vanished again immediately. Brief as that instant was, however, it had given me an opportunity to scan the man's features, and, incredible though it seemed, I could have sworn they were those of Herr von Retzow himself.

A good deal disturbed by this coincidence, if coincidence it was, I would have asked the Princess's permission to accompany her at least to the entrance of the house, where I should be closer at hand in case of need, but she anticipated my intention before I could carry it out, and, forbidding me in almost stern terms to follow her beyond the gate, walked with rapid strides alone up the drive-way to the house door. I saw it open at her approach, and noted with a sense of relief that the person who received her Highness was a woman. The door closed, however, too quickly to allow of my recognising who it was.

I passed the minutes that now followed in a state of anxious suspense, which grew in intensity as I gradually conjured up in my mind all the possible dangers to which my young mistress might be exposed. The certainty that the man whose face I had

seen appear at the window was Herr von Retzow, while it mystified me beyond description, caused me no particular alarm in itself. That this Herr von Retzow was an inveterate schemer I had good reason to know. But from my experience of him I believed him to be, if not an absolutely honourable and scrupulous gentleman, at least one who would be incapable of ensnaring and doing injury to an innocent and defenceless girl. The very daring of such a thing, in face of the fact, of which he was



"I hammered against the door with both my fist."

now doubtless aware, that the Princess had not come unprotected, made it seem impossible to conceive.

Yet, as twenty minutes, and even a half hour passed without sign of her Highness's return, my uneasiness became a veritable torture. She had assured me that her presence in the house would not exceed a quarter of an hour. What, then, could be detaining her there? I saw that Fräulein von Wenzlau herself had now grown alarmed, and, determined at all cost to satisfy myself of the Princess's safety, I



tied my horse to a tree, and, walking up the drive to the house, knocked resolutely at the door. Receiving no response, I knocked again, this time with such vigour that the possibility of the sound not being heard inside was out of the question. But all remained still. I listened through the keyhole—for the door, upon my trying it, proved to be locked—but I heard no sound save the thumping of my own heart against my breast. To all appearances the place was totally deserted.

Roused now to a pitch of frenzied fear, I hammered against the door with both my fists until they were so much bruised that the continuance of the operation caused me actual pain. Then I bethought myself of another and more effective mode of procedure. I had entered the house once before by unusual means, and what was to prevent me from doing so again now? Running round to the verandah fronting the garden proper, I swung myself upon it, and smashing in the first window I reached, crept through the aperture thus created, and so effected my entrance into the house.

The room I entered was the same one that I had been in on the occasion of my former adventure. But it was empty, and passing through it into the outer passage I rushed at breakneck speed through the entire house, entering room after room, and searching every nook and corner, even down to the kitchen and cellar, without finding a living soul anywhere. The place was completely deserted.

I rubbed my eyes and forehead in my utter perplexity to account for the strange fact. But no amount of thinking and speculating could alter it. The Princess was gone, and those she had come to visit, whoever they were, had disappeared with her. Had she been kidnapped, murdered, abducted, or what? I could have kicked myself, as I stood there actually wringing my hands in my desperation, for the incredible folly I had been guilty of in permitting my young mistress to enter such a place unaccompanied.

In the fever of my anxiety I recommenced my investigation and went through the house once more from the top to the bottom, but to no purpose, so far as the object I had in view was concerned, which was to find the Princess. My search this time, however, was rewarded by a discovery which at least threw some light on her Highness's strange disappearance, though it was far from affording any explanation of its cause. There

was a kitchen door, as I now found, leading into a kind of back garden, at the end of which I could see a hedge that evidently divided the garden from a narrow lane beyond, for while I was gazing through one of the latticed windows in the basement I saw the head of some passer-by appear above the hedge in the distance, indicating clearly that there was some kind of thoroughfare behind it.

The discovery acted upon me like a charm. Doubtless there was a gate leading from the garden to the lane, and if the Princess had left the house by this back exit, whether of her own free will or under compulsion, I might possibly still overtake her. Without a moment's delay, therefore, I hastened back to the spot where I had tied up my horse, and bidding the Princess's lady, who had by this time arrived at a state of tearful imbecility, await my return, I mounted the beast and rode off at a gallop.

Taking the first left turning I came to, I struck the lane, as I had calculated, within about fifty yards of the spot where it passed the garden hedge. But, unfortunately, its whole length, as I now perceived, did not exceed three or four hundred yards, and, what was worse, though it had but one outlet, being a kind of blind alley, this communicated with an important thoroughfare, amidst the bustle and traffic of which it was all but hopeless to track the fugitives. Still, I persevered for a while, riding up the street about half a mile in each direction, and inquiring in vain of every constable I met whether he had seen any persons pass by answering to the description I was able to give. At last, feeling that further pursuit was futile, and only meant a loss of valuable time, I returned once more to the place where I had left Fräulein von Wenzlau, and telling her in a few brief words what had happened, requested her to accompany me with all speed back to the palace in order to notify the Dowager Duchess of her daughter's strange disappearance.

Instead of responding to my request, however, the brainless girl promptly went off into a violent fit of hysterics, which threatened to detain us still longer, for I was totally at sea as to how I ought to act in such an emergency. In my rage I fortunately applied by instinct what I have since learned is the best remedy in cases of this kind, that is to say, I gave the girl a sound rating, winding up with the threat that I would hand her over to the next policeman



for safe custody, and proceed alone to the ducal palace, unless she instantly stopped her tomfoolery and accompanied me.

The effect was instantaneous. She called me a brute of an Englishman, whose company no Arminian lady of noble birth ought to be forced to endure, and rode off at such a pace that I had no little difficulty in keeping up with her. But the main object was gained, for in another twenty minutes we had reached the palace, where, the Duchess being absent, I unfolded my tale to the Master of the Household, with the result that, in less time than it takes me to write it down, the entire establishment was in a state of indescribable confusion and uproar.

Mounted grooms were sent off in every direction, the Prefect of Police was immediately summoned to the palace, and messengers were despatched to the Minister of the Interior—the Arminian equivalent of our Home Secretary—asking for the adoption of prompt measures to ensure the safety and the ultimate restoration of the kidnapped Princess.

In the midst of all this turmoil and disorder, I quietly took my leave, and, jumping into a droschky, directed the driver to take me at his top speed to the residence of Herr von Retzow. I was determined, in the first place, to make sure, without loss of time, that I had been mistaken in his supposed identity with the personage whose face I had seen at the window of the house in the Waldstrasse, and, secondly, provided I really found him at his place of abode, to acquaint him with the startling event of that morning, and enlist his aid in searching for the lost Princess.

It had struck the half hour after noon when I arrived at the well-known house, which I had, until then, never visited except at night. The door was opened by a servant in dark blue livery, whose face was unknown to me, and who, upon my inquiry whether Herr von Retzow was within, regarded me with a stare of supercilious surprise.

"There is no person of that name living here," he said curtly. "You have probably mistaken the house."

"Not at all," I answered. "I have visited Herr von Retzow here on several occasions. But I am not particular about the name. If your master is within, you will be good enough to announce me to him. I am Mr. Walter Raleigh, Master of the Horse to her Serene Highness the Duchess of Bieberstein."

I knew the Arminian weakness for high-

sounding titles, and had not miscalculated the effect of my words.

"I am very sorry, sir," the man said civilly, "but there must be some mistake in the address. This house belongs to his Excellency Colonel Heinrich von Stauffenberg."

"Very well, then, if the Colonel is within," I said quickly, "have the goodness to conduct me to him. I have matters of importance to communicate to him."

I spoke on the spur of the moment, without consideration. I had often seen Colonel von Stauffenberg these last few weeks, and was aware that he and the man I knew as Herr von Retzow were two quite different persons. I knew, moreover, that his Excellency was a stern and uncompromising follower of the Emperor, who was as little likely to associate on intimate terms with a man like von Retzow as I was likely to fraternise with a cowherd. It afforded me, therefore, almost a sense of relief when the servant answered—

"But his Excellency is not within. He is on duty"—meaning in attendance on the Emperor—"and will not return home for three or four days. Of course, if you desire that a message be delivered to his Excellency—"

"No, no," I said hastily; "that is unnecessary."

In fact, I was at that moment in a state of confusion that left me very much in doubt whether my head was still between my shoulders or floating about in some other unknown region. The unexpected denial of Herr von Retzow's connection with this house, where I had seen him act as undisputed master, the recollection of the face at the window in the Waldstrasse, of whose true identity I was now more than ever convinced; in short, the whole string of strange contradictions which appeared to characterise the actions of the extraordinary personage who, for more than six weeks, had exercised a controlling influence over my destiny, excited my imagination to such a degree that I felt as if I were in the hands of some uncanny power, and, stammering a foolish excuse, I fairly turned tail and fled, no doubt leaving the pompous lacquey fully convinced that he had been dealing with an escaped lunatic.

As I entered the Wilhelmstrasse, ten minutes afterwards, from the Avenue of Limes, the Emperor's carriage, preceded by two mounted policemen, and driving almost at a gallop, turned into the street at the same



time. His Majesty's looks, of which I just caught a glimpse as the carriage whirled by, were as black as thunder, and he paid no response whatever to the respectful salutations of the people, who stopped and uncovered as their Emperor swept past them. From the direction the carriage was taking, and other significant circumstances, I guessed without difficulty that his Majesty's destination was the ducal palace, and desirous, for obvious reasons, to avoid approaching the Imperial presence just now, I altered my course, and, instead of returning to the palace at once, as I had intended, proceeded to my lodgings, where I spent a couple of hours in distracted meditation before venturing back to the scene of my duties.

When I reached the palace at last, towards four in the afternoon, order had to some extent been restored there, but no clue to the whereabouts of the young Princess had as yet been found. Nor, indeed, was the diligent search prosecuted by the authorities during the next few days rewarded by one particle of success. Not a trace of the lost Princess Alexandrine of Bieberstein could be found. She had disappeared, it seemed, as completely as if the earth had swallowed her up.

As for myself, a perusal of the following missive will enable the reader to judge for himself of my condition of mind at this juncture. It was delivered at the palace by an ordinary street messenger about half an hour after my return, and ran as follows:—

"You are a sad simpleton, my dear Sir Walter. I can only hope that you will still retrieve some of the confidence I have reposed in you. We may meet again three days hence at the Imperial court ball, which you will attend without fail. My further instructions will reach you there.—H. v. R."

To say that this message, which in its cool

insolence capped everything else I had experienced during the last six weeks, completely staggered me, would be putting it too mildly. I was furious at the assumption of authority which its contents argued, but I was also totally nonplussed by its general tenor. That Herr von Retzow had had a hand in the abduction of the Princess Alexandrine was a fact I could have all but sworn to in a court of law. Yet, unless I was unable to read English aright, here was this same Herr von Retzow upbraiding me for not having prevented that calamity.

It was worse than useless, however, to cogitate upon the subject, for the more I tried to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, the more intricate it seemed to grow. Moreover, I soon had matters nearer home to engross my thoughts.

That evening I received a verbal notification from Baron von Brinkwitz curtly dismissing me from my office in the ducal household. It was a grievous blow to me, of course; still, it was not an unexpected one, and I received it with a certain amount of equanimity. I was now once more a free lance, with little prospect of ever again intervening in the destiny of a Princess of the house of Bieberstein, or of even attending an Imperial masked ball.

That I felt deeply humiliated by this new change in my fortunes goes without saying. But the humiliation was agreeably tempered with a sense of satisfaction at my release from a thralldom which had commenced to galling me, and when I laid my head upon my pillow that night I did so with the solemn vow that no man on earth should again induce me to take upon myself the anxieties and responsibilities I was now quit of.

Better men than I have made similar vows before now, and broken them in spite of themselves, as I shortly broke mine. But this belongs to a new story.

