

# THE EMPEROR'S DETECTIVE.

BY PERCY ANDREÆ.

*Illustrated by* ROBERT SAUBER, R.B.A.

## III.—THE INCIDENT OF THE PRINCESS IN DISGUISE AND THE CONSPIRACY IN THE HOSTELRY AT WITTICHAU.



WITTICHAU is a small garrison town of about fifty thousand inhabitants on the borders of Silesia. It is situated at a distance of about two hundred and fifty miles from Bero-

lingen, and lies upon the direct railway route between that city and the Austrian capital.

I would spare the reader these dry geographical statistics but for the fact that, by what I have always considered one of the strangest coincidences in my career, this place now became the scene of events so startling in character that it can scarcely be wondered at if in their sequel I was induced to cast all my good resolves to the four winds and enter once more upon the course of strange adventure which I had vowed to abandon.

Perhaps some may consider that I already partly broke that vow by repairing to Wittichau at all, which I did the second night after my dismissal from the Bieberstein household. My object, however, was not the search of adventure, but merely the gratification of a very natural desire to learn the true facts regarding the alleged marriage of the woman who had tricked me so shamefully seven or eight months before.

The means of obtaining light on this point appeared very simple, for I reckoned that, if what she had told me that night of my adventure in the house in the Waldstrasse were true, I should find a leaf in the Wittichau register of marriages missing, and in that event could consider her story established. Unfortunately, I did not reckon that my polite request to be allowed to inspect the register would be met with a surly negative on the part of the official entrusted with the safe-keeping of these important records; and, as this proved to be the case, I saw the success of my quest barred at the outset by an insuperable obstacle.

So much, then, for the innocence of my

purpose in going to Wittichau and my failure to obtain the knowledge I desired. The knowledge I did obtain there proved to be of a different description altogether, and was certainly not of my seeking. But the facts shall speak for themselves.

I had taken up my quarters at a well-known roadside tavern or hostelry, about two miles from Wittichau proper, which possessed a certain interest in my eyes from the fact of its having once harboured beneath its roof the famous hero of the Seven Years' War—the great warrior king who may be said to have prepared, if not laid, the foundation of Arminia's present greatness. In the garden of this ancient hostelry, appropriately christened "Zum Alten Fritz," I was nursing my disappointment at the failure of my expedition early in the afternoon after my arrival in Wittichau, when my mind was suddenly diverted from the thoughts of my personal affairs by an incident which set my curiosity agog in quite a new direction.

It was a lovely spring day, and I had ensconced myself, fortified with a bottle of choice Rhine wine, in an arbour at the lower end of the garden, to deliberate on my next move. Possibly the warmth of the afternoon sun, which shone almost unhindered through the scarcely-developed foliage of the creeper growing up the lattice-work of the arbour, or, more likely still, the wine I had drunk, exercised a soporific effect upon me. At any rate, I fell into a quiet slumber, from which I was awakened by the sound of voices close by.

The persons conversing appeared to be sauntering to and fro on the short pathway running along the hedge at the end of the garden, for their voices rose and fell at regular intervals, enabling me only to catch disjointed snatches of their discourse. That this latter was of a nature to interest me and justify my playing the rôle of an eavesdropper will be conceded by the most scrupulous of men when I state that its subject was no less



a personage than his Majesty the Emperor Willibald of Arminia, and that one of the two individuals engaged in it, incredible as it may sound in view of the humble surroundings I am speaking of, was a person of scarcely inferior rank. At least, no other supposition was possible, unless I were to assume that some absurd farce was being enacted for my especial delectation, for the first words that reached my ear upon my awaking were these—

shall naturally be exposed to certain risks, which——”

“I fully understand your motives, Doctor,” the other here broke in, in a tone which I thought had a touch of contempt in it; “we need not discuss this further. The compensation you are to receive for such services as you may have to render is a matter I leave you to settle with others who are more conversant with these things. You would oblige me, however by dropping the



“Needless to say, I was by this time on the tip-toe of excited curiosity, and strained my ears to the utmost to catch some further scraps of their conversation.”

“I can assure your Royal Highness that there are not ten physicians of repute in Berolingen who would not cheerfully confirm the testimony I am prepared to give regarding his Majesty’s lamentable mental derangement. If I have attached somewhat rigorous conditions to the rendering of that testimony, I beg your Royal Highness to believe that I am not actuated by any mercenary motives in doing so. In my position as body physician to his Majesty I

formal appellation you are good enough to bestow upon me. While I am here I am plain Herr Leopold, and would beg you to treat and address me accordingly.”

They passed out of my hearing at this point, and by the time they again came within earshot the drift of their conversation had altered. Evidently the chief personage Herr Leopold, as he dubbed himself, had come there to meet had not kept his appointment, and his disgust at being kept waiting



found vent in frequent strong exclamations of impatience.

"If he should play us false," I heard him say angrily, "he shall pay dearly for it." And, again—"This matter must be consummated before another week has passed; there are too many interests involved, and further delay may bring premature disclosure. Why is he not here? His non-appearance is, to say the least, very suspicious. I don't like the man's reputation—I don't like the man's reputation!"

He repeated this last sentiment several times, but I could gather nothing further of the personage referred to, excepting that he was, according to the assurance of the individual I had heard addressed as "Doctor," detained upon some other important business with the particulars of which the doctor was not acquainted.

Needless to say, I was by this time on the tip-toe of excited curiosity, and strained my ears to the utmost to catch some further scraps of their conversation. But it was evident that, failing the presence of the principal agent in the conspiracy of which I had so accidentally obtained a general outline, the illustrious guest of mine host of the "Alter Fritz" felt disinclined to talk. Indeed, he presently notified his intention of retiring to his room in the hostelry, where he would await the arrival of the third party to the conference, and, after exchanging a few more remarks, the two men sauntered away again in the direction of the house.

I waited until the sound of their retreating footsteps was lost in the distance, and then emerged from my place of concealment in a state of considerable perturbation. What I had heard was plainly a plot to depose and possibly incarcerate His Majesty the Emperor Willibald on the plea of lunacy. But, having heard it, what was I to do with it? It was impossible to say who else might not be implicated in this nefarious design, for, as all the world knows, his somewhat eccentric Majesty's reign, though a subject of unmingled satisfaction to himself, had not been so to everybody else, and to assess the number of those who would have joyfully endorsed the physician's certificate as to his mental incapability would entail work almost assuming the dimensions of a census.

One thing I felt certain of. It was not likely that a plan of this far-reaching character would have been seriously considered unless the co-operation of men nearer the Imperial throne than those whose conversation I had overheard had been first

secured. Such danger, therefore, as was threatening the Emperor was obviously very imminent.

Could it be possible that Herr von Retzow, the astute detective who was supposed to hold in the palm of his hand the threads of all the political intrigues festering at the court of Berolingen, was ignorant of this strange conspiracy? It afforded me a sense of no little satisfaction to think that I was to be the means of acquainting him with these startling facts. Perhaps I should not have contemplated such a thing, after what I considered the shameful duplicity with which he had treated me in the matter of the abduction of the Princess of Bieberstein, had I known of any other channel through which I could have conveyed a warning to the Emperor. But I knew of no other, and, after all, though my faith in the perfect integrity of Herr von Retzow had been rather rudely shaken, I had no reason to harbour any doubts as to his loyalty to the sovereign whose interests he pretended to serve.

Deliberating on these matters, I returned to the inn and mounted the stairs to my room. The place was of pretty ancient origin, as was evidenced by the straggling nature of its structure, it having apparently been a good deal altered and added to at various dates during the course of its chequered existence. Situated as it was just at the junction of two very important highways, it had in former days done service as a convenient halting-place for travellers journeying by stage coach or otherwise to and from almost every part of the province. The railroads had long put an end to its profitable utility in this respect, but it still remained on the spot where it had stood for so many a year, unchanged externally, as a memento of the romantic old days which we now only read of in books, or sometimes still hear of, in their retrospective moods, from the lips of our grandfathers and grandmothers.

The room I had had assigned to me was situated in the main, and probably oldest, part of the building, and overlooked the entrance porch facing the high road to Wittichau. As I entered it I heard a carriage drive up at a rapid pace from the direction of the town and stop at the inn door. Impelled by curiosity to ascertain what kind of guest or guests it was bringing to mine host of the "Alter Fritz," and thinking I might possibly catch a glimpse of the gentleman whose lack of punctuality had so



seriously displeased my unknown friend in the garden below, I stepped quickly to the window and looked out.

I was just in time to see the coat-tails of a man disappear into the house. But the carriage had not discharged all its freight. Two ladies now alighted and passed quickly into the hostelry. The one, a slim, girlish figure, wore a thick veil which completely hid her features. The other I recognised instantly as my former acquaintance of Wittichau, the mistress of the house in the Waldstrasse.

For a moment or two I remained at the window scarcely realising the full import of what I had seen. Then gradually something in the figure and carriage of the girl in the veil began to impress itself upon me as familiar, and my heart gave a great leap. Was it possible? Could this be the Princess Alexandrine? I gave myself no time to weigh the probability or improbability of her appearance here, at an obscure country inn some 250 miles from Berolingen, but, hastening from the room, made my way with all speed downstairs, where I hoped to intercept the newcomers before they were conducted to their room.

On reaching the ground floor I found no trace of the man, but the two ladies were crossing the lobby towards the staircase I had just descended. They were already within a few feet of me, when of a sudden my friend from Wittichau perceived me, and, seizing her companion by the arm, literally whisked her into a passage leading to the left wing of the house, at the end of which I knew there was a smaller stairway to the floor above.

Determined not to be so easily foiled, and now more certain than ever that the veiled lady was the Princess of Bieberstein, I followed as quickly as I could without exciting the attention of the idlers standing about in the lobby. The corridor was so dark that in rushing along it I was in imminent peril of breaking my neck; and, indeed, just as I arrived at the foot of the staircase I stumbled rather heavily against someone apparently approaching from the opposite direction. The person, whoever it was—for it was impossible to recognise his features in the dark passage—appeared to lose his equilibrium, and only saved himself from falling headlong by clutching me round the neck. I apologised hastily, and shaking myself free as soon as I could, continued on my way. But the consequence of the delay was that I only reached the top of

the small stairway in time to see the objects of my pursuit vanish into one of the rooms on the first floor, slamming and locking the door behind them.

I stood for a moment irresolute. Should I knock and demand admission? My purpose might be misconstrued, and possibly land me in unpleasant difficulties, should the occupants of the room resent my intrusion.

I was still revolving the matter in my mind when I heard the heavy tread of a man ascending the stairs, and instinctively drew aside to wait until he came into view and I could ascertain who it was. I fancied now, as I thought of the occurrence a moment or two ago in the passage below, that the person who had collided so violently with me there had clung to me somewhat more tenaciously than the occasion called for, and I suspected some design in his action. The moment the individual I now heard approaching turned the corner at the top of the stairs I knew that my suspicion had been only too well founded. It was no other than Herr von Retzow himself.

I waited with breathless expectation to see what his next movement would be, feeling certain that he would proceed straight to the room I had just seen the ladies enter. Nor did I prove mistaken. Looking cautiously around him, apparently expecting to see me, he advanced a few steps along the passage in the direction of the room in question. His hand was already upon the handle of the door, and I was preparing to dart forward and enter with him, if necessary by force, when something entirely unexpected happened which altered the whole aspect of affairs.

It was the sudden appearance upon the scene of another personage, who now came hurrying along the passage towards the main staircase. As he caught sight of Herr von Retzow he stopped abruptly, and, addressing him by name, exclaimed—

“Why, here you are! Upon my soul, man, you have an enviable nerve. The Prince has been fretting and fuming like an overheated steam engine for the last half hour. If he is kept waiting much longer, there will be the devil to pay.”

Although I could not see the speaker, for his back was turned to me, I recognised his voice at once. It was that of the gentleman whose conversation with the mysterious stranger I had overheard in the garden of the hostelry that afternoon.

There was a moment's pause, then a muttered exclamation of impatience, half-



suppressed, followed by an admonition to remember that even the walls of a country inn are liable to have ears, and the two men proceeded together down the passage towards the main staircase.

I issued from the recess in which I had concealed myself, hardly daring to trust the evidence of my own senses. So the personage Herr Leopold, as he called himself, had come here to meet was none other than Herr von Retzow himself, and I, idiot that I was, had been on the point of confiding the dangerous secret I had become possessed of to the very man whom it most nearly concerned.

The alarming nature of this discovery almost caused me to lose my interest in the Princess of Bieberstein and her detention in this obscure place; for that she was detained here against her will, and that Herr von Retzow had some hand in the business, was now a matter of settled conviction with me. After cudgelling my brains in vain to devise some means of obtaining an interview with the Princess, I decided to post myself at the entrance to the inn, where she was bound to pass me if she left the place again, which I had reason to suppose she would do shortly, seeing that the carriage she had come in was still waiting outside.

I found the lobby below now almost deserted, save for the presence of the landlord himself, a rather surly specimen of his genus, from whom I vainly endeavoured to extract some information regarding his strange guests. I believe the fellow had been warned against me or cautioned not to talk, for he received my inquiries with ill-concealed suspicion, and evidently regarded my continued presence in the lobby as an impertinent intrusion. I was not to be deterred from my purpose, however, by surly looks and rude insinuations, and only stuck all the more obstinately to my post. I had been there about an hour, and the shades of evening were already beginning to fall, when the two persons I had heard conversing in the garden came down the stairs, and, passing out of the house, walked away in the direction of the town.

Evidently the conference with Herr von Retzow had ended satisfactorily, for the countenance of the distinguished stranger wore an expression of contentment which had been absent from it before. But where was Herr von Retzow himself? Had he remained behind for some purpose of his own? And if so, for what purpose? I felt uneasy and at a loss what to do.

Presently I observed the driver of the

carriage that had drawn up on the opposite side of the road touch up his horses and drive slowly away in the direction taken by the two strangers. The manner in which this occurred was such as to convince me that the man had obeyed a signal from the house, and I involuntarily suspected some devilry. For all I knew of the place and its surroundings, there might be some back entrance where the carriage could drive up unseen, in which case my good friends were likely to escape with their captive unobserved, while I was standing here like a fool watching an empty space.

The thought was no sooner conceived than I had made up my mind how to act. Deserting my post, therefore, I now made my way once more with all speed to the floor above, and, proceeding straight to the room where I had seen the Princess and her companion enter an hour or more before, I knocked boldly and demanded admission.

No answer came, however, and everything remained so still in the room that I could have almost doubted the possibility of any living soul being in it. I called through the keyhole, stating who I was, and asking the Princess to inform me if she were there of her own free will, in which case I would retire satisfied. But the result was the same. All remained quiet.

Exasperated at this persistent silence, I now brought my whole weight to bear upon the door, for I was determined to gain an entrance by fair means or foul. Thanks to the rottenness of the ancient woodwork, it yielded to the pressure at once, and, the door flying open, I all but tumbled headlong into the room.

To my surprise, I found that it was empty. There was an inner door in the side wall, however, which evidently led to an adjoining apartment, and, after trying it and finding it locked, I knocked loudly upon the panels. Although I received no answer, I could hear this time unmistakable sounds of someone moving on the other side. I therefore called out that unless the door were unlocked immediately I would burst it open. The threat appeared to have some effect, for a key was presently inserted in the lock on the other side, and the voice of a man called to me to have a moment's patience.

The person, whoever it was, fumbled some time with the lock, apparently without succeeding in turning the key. At last, in response to my impatient exclamations, he suggested that the door might be bolted on my side. I looked, but though there was a



bolt on my side of the door, it was withdrawn, and, concluding that the fellow was playing a game with me to delay my admittance, I was just about to repeat my performance of a minute before, when I suddenly heard the click of the key turning in the lock, and the next moment the door was opened from the other side.

I rushed into the room, and saw myself face to face with Herr von Retzow. Not

throttle you where you stand, and put an end to your rascally existence."

The words were scarcely out of my mouth when I heard the grating sound of carriage wheels in the distance; and, darting to the window, which overlooked a portion of the garden running parallel with the high road, I saw the conveyance I had been watching downstairs drive away at a rapid pace towards Wittichau, with the Princess and her companion inside.

I had been fooled. Doubtless the carriage I had seen drive off a few moments before had merely changed its position in obedience to a signal from the house. In all probability it had drawn up again at the garden gate a little further on, and the Princess had then been hurried downstairs and through the garden to the high road, whilst I was being kept parleying for admittance at the inner door connecting this apartment with the one I had first entered.

The ugly smile, full of triumphant malice, which flitted across Herr von Retzow's features as I turned away from the window and looked at him, tempted me sorely to carry out the threat I had uttered a few moments ago, and strangle the fellow there and then. But I wanted to obtain information regarding the destination of the Princess, and

this would hardly have been the way to secure it. I restrained myself, therefore, for the time being, and, addressing my companion politely, told him in very plain words that I considered our compact at an end, and that, unless he complied with my demand, and took instant measures to deliver the Princess Alexandrine into my keeping, I would make matters uncommonly warm for him.

"You may think the game is entirely



"I saw the conveyance I had been watching downstairs drive away at a rapid pace towards Wittichau."

another soul was visible. Without waiting to exchange a word with him, I darted to the outer door of the room, but only to find it locked.

"May I ask," Herr von Retzow now inquired in a cold, harsh voice, "what is the meaning of this insolent intrusion?"

"The meaning is this," I exclaimed angrily; "that, unless you conduct me without an instant's delay to the presence of her Highness the Princess Alexandrine, I shall



yours, my friend," I said quietly. "But I happen to possess a trump card which you have quite left out of the reckoning, and it will depend upon your next move whether I play it or not."

He made no answer, but stood regarding me as before with a grin of contemptuous amusement, as if I were some prattling idiot whose words it was not worth while to take seriously. I felt my choler rising, and continued in a tone of irony—

"To be more explicit, my precious Herr von Retzow, I have not passed the last six hours in this ramshackle old inn without ascertaining the full depth of your loyalty to the sovereign you pretend to serve, and I would advise you to consult both your interests and those of your friend, 'Herr Leopold,' before you defy the man who holds the fate of both of you in the palm of his hand."

This time I had hit straight home. The expression of the man's countenance changed instantly, and he turned pale as death.

"You fool of an Englishman!" he exclaimed suddenly, pointing with energy towards the window, "look out there."

The impressiveness of his tone and action startled me, and I stepped quickly to the window and looked out. As I did so I heard a low laugh behind me, and, turning round swiftly, saw Herr von Retzow disappear through the door leading to the adjoining apartment. With one bound I was across the room again, but not before he had closed the door and drawn the bolt on the other side, locking me in the room.

I rushed to the other door, which gave on to the passage, but it was locked too, and I was a prisoner. I threw myself with all my weight against it, thinking to burst it open as I had done the one of the adjoining room. But my efforts in this instance proved unavailing, and I had to desist. Nor was I more fortunate with the inner door. They both opened into the room I was confined in, and, consequently, no pressure from my side could make the locks yield.

"Fairly caught," I muttered to myself, feeling more ashamed at the easy way I had allowed myself to be duped than angry at the plight I found myself in. I had little leisure, however, to devote to thoughts of this description, for there now arose such a hubbub and noise in the hostelry below that I concluded Herr von Retzow had lost no time in informing the landlord of what had occurred, no doubt varnishing his tale to suit his own purposes.

As I listened I could hear the staircase creak in the distance under the tread of several pairs of feet. Presently there was a rush of people in the passage, a key was inserted in the lock, and the next instant Herr von Retzow appeared on the threshold accompanied by the landlord and two of the inn hands.

"I call upon you in the Emperor's name to arrest that man," he said, pointing to me. "He is a dangerous foreign anarchist."

Evidently the landlord was aware of his guest's calling, for he received his order in that peculiarly obsequious manner which is so eminently characteristic of the Arminian in his dealings with police officials. Motioning to his two assistants to follow him, he advanced a step or two into the room, and then came to an abrupt halt, trembling in every limb like an aspen leaf. He had good cause for this exhibition of fear, for I had quietly drawn my revolver and covered him with it.

"The first one who advances another step," I said, "will be a dead man. I have a bullet here for each of you, and a couple to spare."

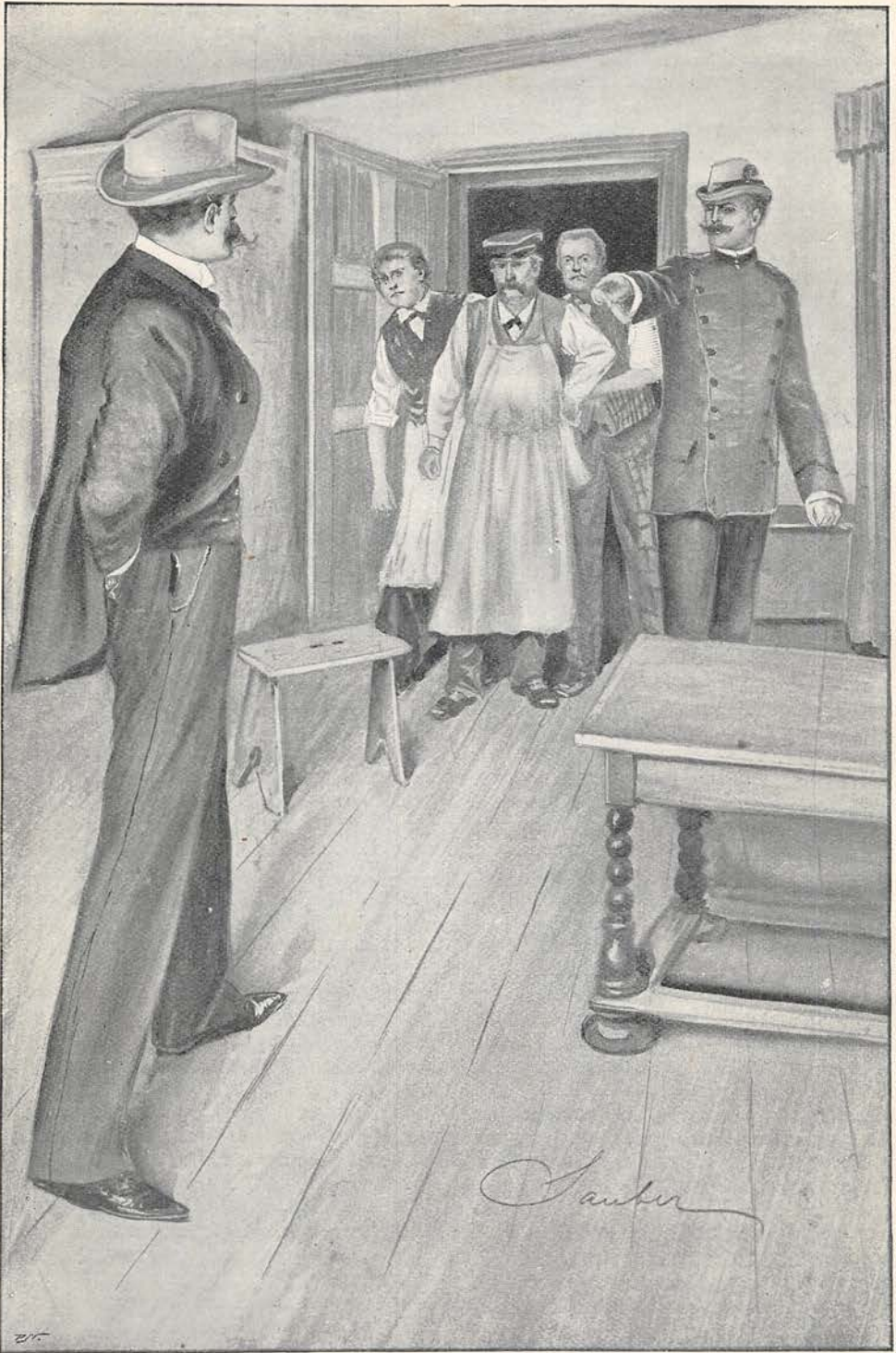
I retreated backwards towards the open window as I spoke, and, lifting myself quickly on to the ledge, sat regarding my would-be captors with a look of defiance.

"Remember," I said, as I took a rapid survey of the height and the ground below, "the man who hinders or follows me takes his life in his hands. That villain there"—and I pointed my revolver at Herr von Retzow, whose right hand had made an ominous movement towards his breastpocket—"is a traitor to the Emperor whose name he misuses, and I warn you to beware of him."

With these words I vaulted quickly over the ledge and took a flying leap to the ground beneath. I was not a minute too soon, for a bullet whizzed so close by my head as I felt that I felt the hair on my crown stir as it passed. It was from Herr von Retzow's pistol, and I had hardly gathered myself up from the soft ground on which I had fallen and started to run for the hedge beyond which the open fields lay, when three more shots followed quickly one upon the other, each striking the earth within no great distance from me.

But the dusk had now deepened considerably, and it would have been the merest chance had I been struck. Once over the garden hedge, and I could defy all pursuit. It was an easy vault over, and a minute later





“I call upon you in the Emperor’s name to arrest that man.”



I had gained the tract of potato field that stretched from the hedge to a small copse of hazelnut trees about half a mile distant.

It was my object to gain this cover with as little loss of time as possible. Not that I had any apprehension of being followed and captured. I would have matched myself at a foot race with the fleetest runner in all Arminia. But I thought it expedient to put myself out of my pursuers' sight as quickly as I could, and this was the best means that presented itself of doing so.

When I reached my goal at last I threw myself on the ground at the foot of a solitary birch tree, and proceeded to consider the situation. Had anyone, I thought to myself dolefully, ever experienced such vicissitudes of fortune within so short a time as I had since my arrival in Berolingen? I cursed the hour which had thrown me in the path of this villainous von Retzow, and I cursed my own folly in always casting myself incontinently into the breach for others who concerned me no more than did the man in the moon. For, after all, what interest had I in the fate of the Princess of Bieberstein, or, for the matter of that, in the sanity or insanity of his self-opinionated Majesty the Emperor Willibald of Arminia, whose incarceration as a lunatic, if permitted by his own people, would certainly be hailed by many outside of his dominions as a boon and a blessing to mankind? As for the wilful little Princess Alexandrine, I had some suspicion that she was herself not altogether free from participation in the trickery that had been played upon me that afternoon. It struck me at least as strange, now I thought the matter over calmly, that one so spirited as I knew her to be should submit so tamely to the coercion I had supposed her to be enduring.

At all events, I resolved to wash my hands henceforth of her and her fate, and proceeded to turn my thoughts to my own immediate future. My first consideration was how I was to get safely back to Berolingen; for return there I must, since all I possessed in the world was stored away in the old trunk I had left behind me in my lodgings. I had no doubt that Herr von Retzow, using his influence at police headquarters, would take prompt measures to have my person secured on my arrival in the capital. Unless, therefore, I was desirous of gaining some practical experience of the methods adopted by the Arminian police authorities towards prisoners suspected of anarchistic tendencies, I was compelled to

devise some means of escaping the vigilance of the secret police agents who would be sure to infest the railway stations with a full description of my personality in their pockets.

The plan I eventually hit upon was a very simple one. Instead of proceeding to Wittichau, where I might have been seized, I passed the night in walking a distance of some twenty miles to the next railroad town. Here, after due inquiry, I boarded a train bound for a southern junction, where I changed for Berolingen, thereby returning to the capital by a roundabout route which no one, coming from Wittichau, would be expected to take. To make assurance doubly sure, I left the train a couple of stations before the terminus, and rode into the city on one of the numerous car lines that connect it with the surrounding places.

The detour I made cost me a delay of more than six hours, and it was towards eight o'clock the next evening when I at last reached my lodgings in the Kanonierstrasse. I was weary and disgusted—disgusted at being footballed about in this humiliating fashion from one puzzling situation to the other, and more than ever determined to turn my back upon a country where my experiences had all been of so fruitless and disappointing a nature.

Had I only carried this determination into effect there and then, I should have been spared much subsequent pain and regret. But, as if everything conspired to urge me further along on the career I had once launched upon, an incident now occurred which overthrew all my fine resolves and revived in me once more in all its vigour that luckless spirit of adventure which recent events had all but quelled. It was this.

Upon my arrival at my lodgings, my landlady, a good-natured old soul, who in the palmy days of her youth had been an actress of some repute at the Court of St. Petersburg, drew my attention to an oblong box, some three feet long, which had been left at my address on the previous day. I had paid no heed to the matter at first, being engrossed with other thoughts; but the persistent anxiety of the good old lady that I should open the box and examine its contents led me to suspect that she had given way to her curiosity during my absence, and already knew what it contained. To humour her whim, therefore, I proceeded to open the thing, when, to my astonishment, I found neatly packed up in it the complete costume of an English courtier



of the fifteenth century, together with a sword and a mask. Pinned to the packet was a large gilt-edged official card, issued from the Imperial Chamberlain's office and inviting the attendance of Mr. Walter Raleigh, late Stallmeister to her Highness the Dowager Duchess of Bieberstein, at the masked ball given that night by their Majesties the Emperor and the Empress of Arminia in celebration of the fifth anniversary of their wedding.

I stood completely confused. The thought of the court ball had gone clean out of my head. Even the sight of the many carriages driving through the streets, with gorgeously-dressed cavaliers and ladies inside, which I had met on my way through the city that evening, had not recalled the fact to my mind. Doubtless, I reflected, as I now remembered the note I had received just before my dismissal from the ducal household of Bieberstein, Herr von Retzow had sent me these things before leaving Berolingen, little dreaming that by the time I used them the relations existing between us would have become the reverse of friendly.

I say "by the time I used them," for I will not pretend that I wavered for one

instant as to what I should do under the circumstances. The temptation to plunge once more into the mysterious life I was just about to quit was simply irresistible in the form it presented itself to me, and I made no idle feint of withstanding it.

Glancing at my watch, I saw that it was barely a quarter to nine. The ball was not likely to commence before ten. I had ample time, therefore, to don my toggery, drive to the palace, and present myself boldly for admittance. What I should do when I arrived there was a matter to which I gave no thought. I left it simply to chance or the happy inspiration of the moment. The one all-important thing to me was that the man whose dupe I felt I had been for so long had unwittingly placed in my hands a weapon which could be used against him, and I was determined to avail myself of it to the very fullest extent.

I wasted no time in useless reflections, but, gently forcing my garrulous old landlady to leave my room, quickly exchanged my dusty, travel-stained clothes for the finery now spread out before me, and within less than an hour of my return home was well on my way to the Imperial palace.



"I stood completely confused. The thought of the court ball had gone clean out of my head."

