

# THE EMPEROR'S DETECTIVE.

BY PERCY ANDRÆ.

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

## IV.—THE INCIDENT OF THE WIFE'S DOUBLE AND THE TRAGEDY AT THE MASKED BALL.



HE masked ball given in commemoration of the wedding of their Majesties the present Emperor and Empress of Arminia is, I am told, the first and, so far, the only instance of

a dozen times by various masks, both male and female, but the remarks they addressed to me consisted only of the ordinary banter common between masqueraders all the world over. The speakers were all unknown to me, and I am certain that they were unaware of the identity of the person they were addressing.

At length, wearying of this aimless wandering from place to place, and tired of being buffeted and jostled about by the eager crowd in the great state rooms, I sought the quieter atmosphere of one of the smaller apartments adjoining the winter garden, where I retired to a secluded corner and proceeded to revolve the situation in my mind. It seemed folly to have come here and to leave again without having even attempted to gain the Emperor's ear. Supposing I boldly approached the Imperial circle and demanded access to His Majesty on urgent business? Probably I should be regarded as a madman and promptly removed, thereby losing all chance of ever effecting my purpose. I thought of conveying my warning by means of a written message. But who would undertake to place it in the Emperor's hands? In short, I devised half a dozen different plans, only to cast them aside again as impracticable, until I grew disheartened and rose impatiently, uttering an imprecation upon all princes and potentates and the foolish restrictions with which they hedge themselves in.

In my impulsiveness I must have spoken aloud, for two masks who happened to pass by at that moment turned round and glanced across at me. It may have been my fancy, but I certainly thought I saw one of them start slightly, as if struck by something in my appearance, and I drew back into the corner I had just quitted to avoid their attention.

They passed on, however, and, forgetting the incident, I relapsed into my reverie,

its kind recorded in the history of European court festivities. But the Emperor Willibald II. is nothing if not original. He loves to surprise the world with unusual spectacles, and it is but just to say that his success in this direction has been complete.

I am not going to attempt a description of the brilliant spectacular scene that unfolded itself before my eyes that night. It would require a far more facile pen than mine to accomplish such a task. To me its effect was simply bewildering, and I moved about for the first hour like one in a dream, seeking in vain to awaken to a clear sense of my surroundings. I had come there with the vague notion that, once admitted to the precincts of the Imperial palace, it would be comparatively easy to gain the ear of the sovereign himself. But I soon found that all approach to the apartments reserved for the Imperial circle was strictly barred to the ordinary guests, among whom I numbered.

As I made my way through the gay and motley throng that crowded the vast apartments, I was accosted, at intervals, some half



from which I was presently again awakened by a light touch on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw standing before me the mask I had noticed a few moments ago. He wore the ancient costume of a court jester, with cap and bells, and, concluding from his appearance that he was about to perpetrate some piece of foolery, which I was not in the mood just then to receive graciously, I remained sitting in a posture indicative of extreme indifference.

The first words he uttered, however, dispelled all such notion and caused me to alter my attitude instantly.

"So pensive, valiant knight?" he said. "Surely, when so many bright eyes are shining, it looks ill for such a *preux chevalier* to sit sulking in a solitary corner."

The short, decisive tone sounded only too familiar to me, and I felt my heart beat faster. Dared I believe that the opportunity I had sought so long was here within my grasp, at the very moment when I had renounced all hope of ever securing it? I rose quickly and gazed searchingly at the speaker.

"Appearances are sometimes deceptive," I replied, without making any attempt to disguise my voice, though this would have been needless, for my accent must have betrayed me. "It is not always the costume that proclaims the man, wise mask."

"True," he rejoined, with a short laugh. "As an instance in point, we have the fable of the ass in the lion's skin."

"I have even met with instances," I said, fixing a meaning look upon his costume, "where the case of the fable was reversed, which happens when the lion poses in the ass's skin."

"Spoken like a true courtier," the mask replied, with a touch of irony, "which proves that the costume sometimes alters, if it does not make, the man. Since your vocation as a protector of high-born dames has proved so signal a failure, Mr. Stallmeister, it is, perhaps, wise of you to seek fortune in other fields, and a courtier's life is not amiss—when the sun shines."

"I fear I am past learning the craft," I said boldly, for I knew now to whom I was speaking. "And yet," I added in a lower tone, "I am able at this moment to render the Emperor of Arminia a service which he would ask in vain of the most devoted of his courtiers."

"What," he exclaimed mockingly, "have we discovered the lost Princess of Bieberstein?"

"The Princess of Bieberstein," I answered promptly, nettled by his taunting tone, "is at present at Wittichau in Silesia, where those who look may find her."

"Your information is somewhat faulty, my gallant knight," he rejoined quietly. "The Princess is at present within these very walls, or my knowledge of petticoats and their wearers is poorer than I think it."

This staggered me a little, and I was puzzled to find a suitable reply.

"Notwithstanding," I said at last, recovering my assurance, "I can assert most positively that it is scarcely four-and-twenty hours since I met Her Highness face to face in Wittichau, where," I added, lowering my voice once more, "I also learned other news that deeply concerns his Majesty the Emperor."

I thought I saw the keen grey eyes beneath the mask fix themselves sharply upon my face.

"There is an Arminian proverb," he remarked coldly, "that says, 'his tune I pipe whose bread I eat.' What reason has the Emperor to trust news coming from such a quarter?"

"There is some news that speaks for the sincerity of its bearer," I replied, understanding the implied accusation. "If I had the good fortune to gain his Majesty's ear, I would begin by warning him to beware of Heinrich von Retzow."

There was a pause before he answered, and I felt the glance of the eyes that rested upon me grow deeper and more searching.

"May be the Emperor has larger birds to secure than Heinrich von Retzow," he said. "Let those, however, who keep his company take care that the net, when it closes over him, does not include them. But what of this news? My time is brief."

He had fallen into the quick, imperative manner of speech which I remembered so well from my first meeting with him on the Square fronting the Arch of Victory. I had thought it so simple to convey my story to his ears. But, confronted as I now found myself with the actual task, I felt unutterably confused and embarrassed. To tell even an ordinary being that a scheme is on foot to have him judged insane and deprived of power and liberty is a ticklish undertaking at the best, but when that being happens to be an Emperor, and a quick-tempered one to boot, the matter is calculated to tax a cooler head than mine. Nor do I know exactly to this day how I accomplished the thing. All I can recollect is stammering more or less



confused and incoherent answers to a series of quick, imperious questions, and experiencing a feeling something akin to that of a school-boy rehearsing a lesson to a master whose knowledge of the subject is already perfect.

He must have questioned me with a sort of instinct, for, confused though I was, I am certain that I omitted no detail of any importance, from the exact tenor of the conversation I had overheard in the garden of the hostelry at Wittichau to the meeting between the "Doctor" and Herr von Retzow in the passage of the house. And he listened to it all calmly and critically, like a general receiving the report of one of his scouts, without word or gesture denoting either surprise or any other emotion. Only when I had concluded, which I did with a recital of my flight through the inn window, and my hairbreadth escape from the bullets sent after me by Herr von Retzow, I thought I saw a twinkle of amused interest gleam in the eyes behind the mask.

"You have had a narrow escape," he said. "Let it be a warning to you not to mix with company you do not know. And now," he added sternly, "not a word of what you have heard to living soul. It is but one link more in the long chain of crime and treason that has been forging for months, and they little know, the fools, that there is one on their trail who will snap it in twain like a thread of rotten silk."

He spoke the last words in a tone of grim contentment, rather to himself than to me, and I think for the moment he forgot that I was there to overhear them.

"It would be well," I ventured to remark, somewhat audaciously, "not to delay the final blow too long, or it may fall when it is too late."

He looked at me gravely.

"He who strikes slowly strikes surely," he answered, to my surprise nowise offended. "But no more of this. Hush!" and he drew me back into the niche where I had been sitting, just as a mask costumed as a

Turk entered the apartment to our left, and, after looking cautiously around and behind him, glided swiftly through the room and out at the opposite door.

"If you would render me a service," my companion whispered quickly, "follow that mask, and bring me word who it is. Stay, you will not meet me again. If you are successful, write your message on a slip of paper, and hand it to the officer of the palace guard, with the words, 'For the king's jester,' and it will reach me."

With these words he was gone, and I hastened away to execute my mission. The room seemed to be whirling round with me, so great was my excitement; for now, I



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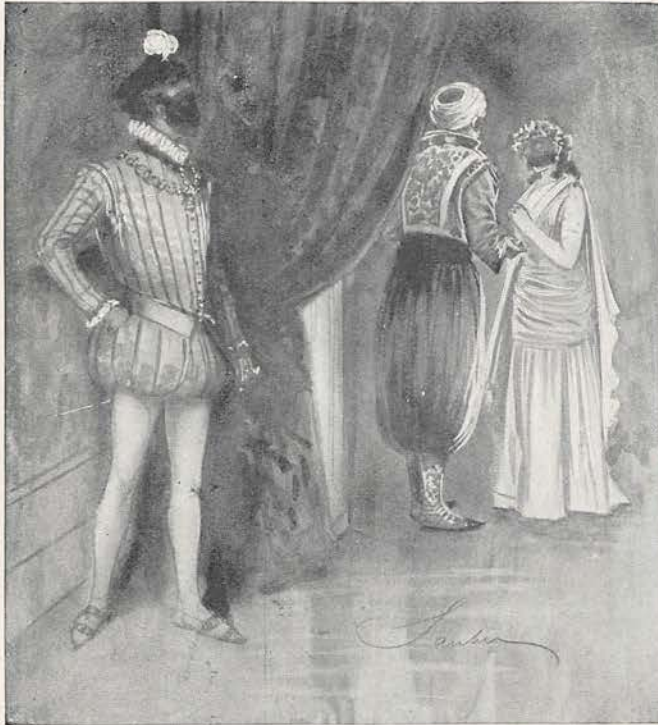
thought, I was at last on the eve of the realisation of my dream. Had I only had the presence of mind to warn the Emperor against one whom I believed to be a still greater traitor than Herr von Retzow himself, and the more dangerous, too, inasmuch as he enjoyed his Majesty's full confidence. I mean Colonel Heinrich von Stauffenberg, over whose house at the Thiergarten the arch-plotter Von Retzow apparently exercised complete mastership. But it was too late to remedy the omission now, and I had to trust to good fortune for a renewal of the opportunity I had lost.

As I passed quickly into the next apartment in pursuit of the Turk, fully determined to gain a view of his features, even if I



should have to tear his mask off by brute force, a difficulty presented itself to my mind which, in my eagerness, I had not thought of. How was I to identify the man when I did see him? There were probably not half a dozen people among the fifteen hundred guests assembled there with whose faces and personal appearance I was acquainted, excepting the members of the Imperial house, who were, of course, more or less familiar to me.

Still, I was resolved not to be at a loss to overcome so trifling an obstacle. If matters came to a pinch, I thought to myself, there



“‘You talk in riddles, fair nymph,’ I heard the Turk say.”

was always the possibility of picking a quarrel with the man, in which event an immediate exchange of names, as a preliminary to further action, would become necessary according to the Arminian code of honour.

I had not followed my friend the Turk for more than a few seconds, however, when I became aware that I was not alone in my pursuit of him. A female mask, clad as a wood nymph, was always close at his heels, following him from room to room, and evidently bent on gaining speech with him. Soon I perceived that it was she whom he

was endeavouring to evade, and I felt curious to watch the progress of the strange little comedy.

For some time he continued on his quick course from apartment to apartment, threading his way always purposely through the throng where it was thickest, no doubt hoping thereby to escape the attentions of his pursuer. But the attempt was vain, for she stuck to her task with a persistency that was little short of admirable. Presently, with a gesture of impatience, he turned about and faced his fair tormentor. In an instant she was at his side and whispered something in

his ear which I was not near enough to hear. He started like a guilty man, recovered himself quickly, and answered evidently with some masquerade pleasantry. But the nymph was not to be put off. They were now in the gallery of sculptures, to which opened a series of small chambers, each filled with a special class of art treasures, and, placing her arm in his, she motioned with her head significantly towards one of the doors, indicating that she wished to be conducted there.

No cavalier could have refused such an appeal on the part of a lady; and the Turk, seeing himself fairly caught at last, submitted with as good a grace as he could summon. The moment they had passed through the doorway I slipped noiselessly behind the huge drapery which half covered the entrance, and, concealing myself behind its folds, quietly awaited the development of events.

“‘You talk in riddles, fair nymph,’ I heard the Turk say. ‘I know no such person as you name.’”

“‘Why persist in keeping up this make-believe, Ernest?’ the nymph answered in a low monotonous voice. ‘We are alone. If I dared, I would remove my mask, to prove I am she whom you have wronged. By the memory of—’”

She lowered her voice at this point to so faint a whisper that I could not catch the words. But their effect upon the Turk was startling.

“‘Anna, great heavens!’ he exclaimed,



clutching her arm, "are you mad? Do you know what you have risked by venturing here?"

"What have I left to risk?" she replied, with a slight tremor in her voice. "Have you not taken from me all that makes a woman's life worth living? My trust, and my faith, and my hope? These you cannot restore to me, for they are gone for ever. But my honour, too, is in your possession, and you shall return it to me, or answer for it before a tribunal which recognises no distinction between man and man."

"This is folly, Anna," the other replied. "What I have done I have done to save you from the consequences of your own blind passion, for you would have delivered our secret into hands that would have used it ruthlessly against us both. I have foes that you know not of, child," he continued; "wretched, bloodthirsty vampires, who fatten upon a court scandal like vultures upon a carcass. Think of it calmly, Anna; where on God's earth should a wife's honour be safe if not in her husband's keeping?"

"In her husband's?" the nymph echoed scornfully. "Who is to prove that I have a husband? Or that you are my husband? The page on which our marriage was recorded has been removed from the register."

"Not at my doing, nor with my knowledge or consent," he said quickly. "I swear it."

"But you have robbed me of my proof," the nymph retorted. "The certificate—where is it?"

"In my keeping," he answered, almost sternly, "where it shall remain. Foolish girl, why this persistent distrust of my love and my honour? That paper would be worthless but for the love that makes it binding upon me before man as before God. If I cared—but, for Heaven's sake, let us end this tragical talk. I am not suited for it. Let us be friends, Anna, and trust each other. If I am not a saint—and I have never made pretence to the title—I am, at least, not the devil they paint me."

I think he must have approached her with some tender gesture, for I heard a rustling of garments, as if she were retreating from him; and the next moment the question came in the same low, toneless voice as before—

"How can I believe that you love me still, when all the world knows you are courting another?"

"You will listen to no reason, Anna," he

replied. "Have I not told you that policy compels me to make this feint of obeying the Emperor's commands?"

"But the Princess of Bieberstein? What of her?"

"I care no more for the Princess of Bieberstein," he exclaimed, "than for any other living woman, yourself excepted, Anna."

"Yet you are even now wooing her," she persisted, "and she who is wooed may be won. What then?"

"There is no danger," he answered curtly.

"How can you tell? She is a woman, and where one woman loves, why may not another?"

"Anna," he said impatiently, "can I do more than swear to you that the Princess will never take your place in my heart?"

"Then you are deceiving her."

"If you choose to call it by that name," he said in a tone of indifference.

"How can I choose to call it otherwise?" she answered slowly. "She may return your feigned love with true."

"She will not."

"But she may. What then?"

"It is her affair," he answered almost brutally. "What care I?"

There was a sound like the drawing of a deep breath, followed by so long a pause that I thought the strange couple had moved away. Then, suddenly, came another sound, quick and startling, resembling something between the snap of a gun that has missed fire, and the noise made by the violently clapping to of a book. It was so peculiarly suggestive that I involuntarily drew aside the drapery behind which I was concealed and peeped forth into the room.

The scene I saw there was strange indeed. The nymph had vanished, and in the middle of the room, his countenance comically expressive of rueful surprise, stood Duke Ernest Frederichsberg. At his feet lay his mask, the fastening torn asunder, while on his left cheek the imprint left by five small fingers showed with painful distinctness.

The whole thing passed my understanding, for, in truth, anything more unexpected than this abrupt and violent ending of the interview I had overheard could scarcely be conceived. As for the Duke himself, I think his astonishment must have deprived him temporarily of the power of movement, for he stood for a while in the posture I have described like one paralysed, staring into vacancy as if a ghost had just appeared to



him. Presently the spell passed. He stooped, picked up his mask, and darted towards the door, where I had now stepped out and confronted him.

"Out of the way, fool!" he exclaimed, endeavouring to push me aside, and at the same time holding his mask before his face. "I have no time for pleasantries."

But I gripped him by the arm and detained him.

"I crave but a few moments' interview, Duke Ernest of Friedrichsburg," I said; "and I promise your Highness that our talk shall touch upon no pleasantries."

He started at hearing his name.

"You have mistaken your man," he said. "Stand aside, and let me pass."

"Not until you have listened to me," I answered, maintaining my hold upon him. "It may be mere diplomacy to deny yourself to a woman. To do so to a man savours of cowardice."

His attitude altered instantly. He shook himself free from my grasp, and raised his hand as if to strike me.

"You dare——" he began in a voice of passion. But he checked himself with an effort. "Who are you?" he asked abruptly; "and by what right do you dare to address me thus?"

I removed my mask.

"My name is Walter Raleigh," I answered. "Perhaps it is not so well known to your Highness as my face."

He stared at me for a moment with a puzzled expression. Evidently he was struggling to find a place for me in his memory.

"It may help to refresh your Highness's memory," I continued, "if I refer back to a certain night at a certain house in the Waldstrasse, and to a certain incident that occurred thereafter, in which the crown of my head played one part, and I believe your Highness's sword the other. I am not accustomed to accept blows without paying for them, and I am here to liquidate my indebtedness."

He recognised me now.

"Has the madhouse been let loose to-night?" he exclaimed. "How am I to understand this strange introduction?"

"As your Highness pleases," I answered. "I am merely curious to ascertain whether your Highness's sword is as effective when used in front of an adversary as it is when used at his back."

He had lowered the hand in which he held his mask, and stood regarding me with

a look that would be difficult to describe. All I noted—and I noted it with inner contentment—was the rising anger that flashed in his fine dark eyes and played in ominous twitchings round the corners of his mouth.

"To put it plainly," he said, speaking with forced coldness, "you mean to demand satisfaction at my hands for some imaginary grievance or insult?"

"Scarcely imaginary," I said, "unless your Highness pleases to assert that the blow I received two months ago was dealt by another hand than yours; in which case," I added, "I should merely alter the grounds of my challenge. I have a rich choice to offer your Highness."

"For instance?" he said. I think he began to be amused at my persistency.

"For instance," I replied, "the betrayal of the woman whom I once had the honour to love, and who has no friend to champion her rights save myself. But perhaps your Highness does not find it convenient to recollect that such a person exists as the Countess of Lausitz."

A dark flush spread over his features at these words, and he advanced towards me threateningly.

"Fellow!" he said passionately, "you shall rue this insolence."

"That is as it may be," I retorted. "I am here, prepared to answer for myself at the sword's point."

"Pooh, you are a madman," he said. "One does not fight within the walls of a palace."

"There is the palace garden," I suggested.

"Nor with a man one doesn't know," he continued, ignoring the hint.

"That I am here is evidence that I possess the rights and privileges of gentle blood," I said.

"I prefer to trust the evidence of my own eyes, which proclaims you a desperate adventurer, if not something worse," he replied.

"It is probably the more prudent conclusion for one who values his skin more than his honour," I remarked.

"By God!" he exclaimed; "I am tempted to give you a lesson that will teach you to curb that scurrilous tongue of yours."

"If by that your Highness means that you are tempted to fight," I said, "I may observe that I have never met a man who was more difficult to tempt."

This clinched it. I saw the hot blood rush once more to his face, and his hand went instinctively to the hilt of his sword.



"I will meet you," he said; "but not now."

"It must be to-night," I said, "for my time hereafter may not be my own."

"In half an hour, then, at the great fountain in the palace garden."

"I shall be there, and await your Highness," I replied.

"You will bring your second?" he queried.

"Your Highness is aware," I answered, "that I can find no one to second me in a duel with the Duke of Friedrichsburg. We must fight without seconds or not at all."

"But this is somewhat out of the ordinary," he said, hesitating.

"If I can risk the consequences," I replied, "and I am willing, surely your Highness need have no fears."

"Let it be so, then," he said, after a moment's deliberation. "And the weapons?"

"I leave the choice to your Highness," I said.

"Swords, then?"

"Swords," I said. "But I must depend upon your Highness to procure them."

He bowed stiffly, turned away, stopped, and came back again.

"You are a gentleman, I am to presume," he said. "Will you pledge me your word that you will not betray my presence here to a living soul?"

The question startled me. I had forgotten all about my mission and the Emperor's desire to ascertain the identity of the masked Turk. Under the circumstances, it would, of course, be impossible to gratify his Majesty's curiosity.

"Your Highness need be under no apprehension on that score," I said. "I would warn you, however, to avoid a certain mask in the costume of a court jester, who is particularly anxious to obtain a view of your features."

"Ha," he exclaimed with a start, "that is the Emperor's costume. Have you seen him?"

"It is at his Majesty's commands," I replied, "that I have been following and watching your Highness for the last half hour."

He gave me a perplexed look.

"You?" he said. "Upon my word, you seem to be playing a strange variety of parts here."

"It is from necessity, not from choice," I replied.

"At the fountain, then," he said abruptly, and, turning on his heel, he left me.

I could have shouted for joy. The possibility that my presence at the masked ball would afford me this opportunity to secure an encounter with the man against whom I felt so deep a resentment had never occurred to me for an instant. I had heard of the Duke as a reckless hothead, and had laid my lines accordingly. The complete success of my taunting challenge caused me a feeling of unspeakable elation.

Has the reader ever experienced that curious sensation which is produced by the magnetic power of a pair of human eyes directing their gaze upon him with intense earnestness from some unseen quarter? That sensation overcame me now with a suddenness that sent a shock through me, and I turned with the instinctive conviction that someone was watching me. Behind me was the doorway through which I had entered the room, and for the flash of an instant, as I turned, I fancied I saw two black eyes gleam out at me from the folds of the drapery overhanging it. This may have been a freak of my own imagination; but what could not be imagination was the sudden, unmistakable movement of the drapery itself, proving beyond a doubt that someone was concealed behind it, as I had concealed myself there some minutes before.

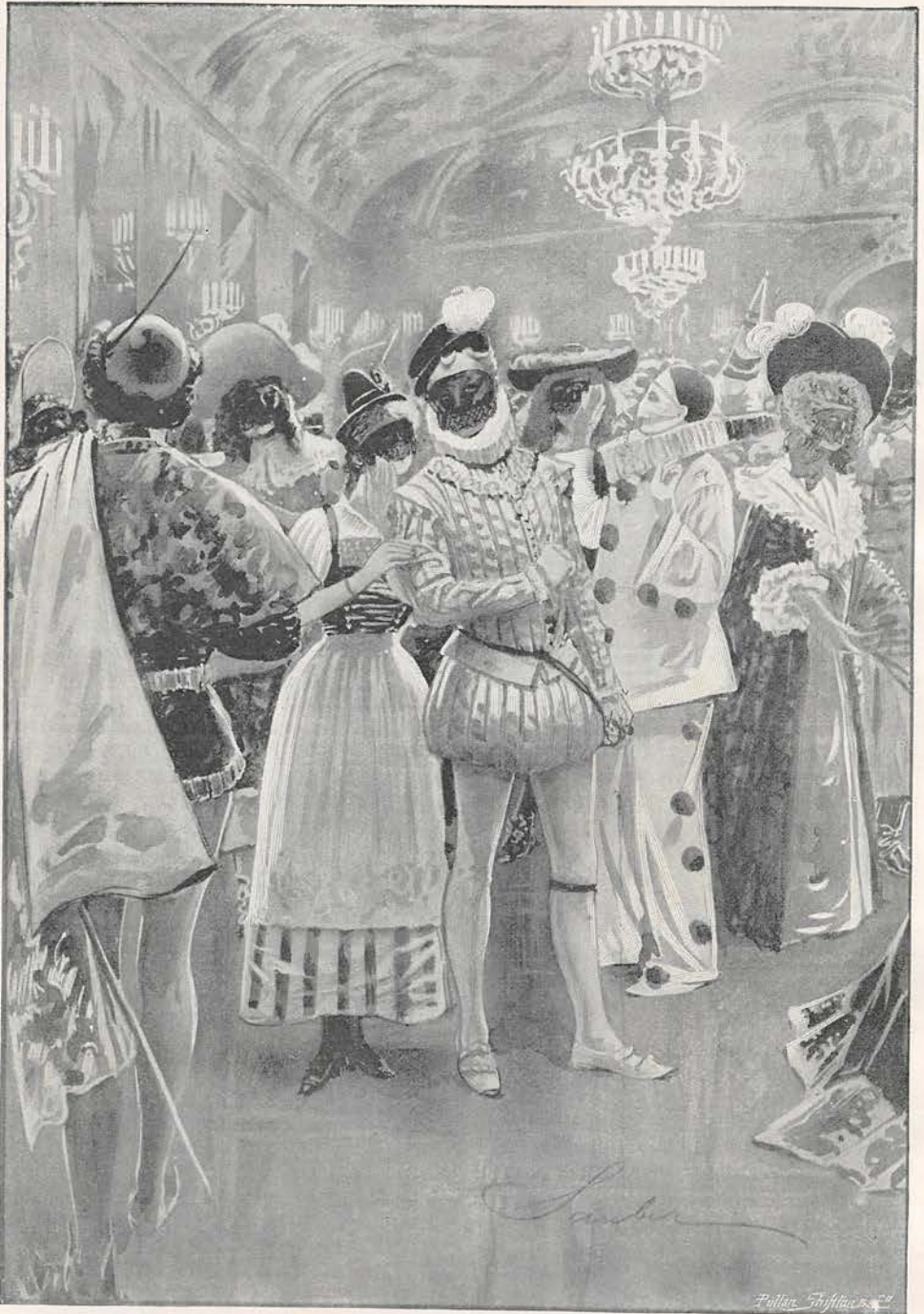
Striding quickly towards it, I pulled the folds of the drapery apart. No one was there. I passed out into the gallery beyond, and swept its whole length with my eyes in both directions, but I discovered no one to whom my suspicion could attach. There were a few groups scattered about at various points of the gallery, and here and there a solitary mask was passing leisurely along, or standing idly in contemplation of some specimen of the art treasures with which the place abounded. But the nearest of these was distant enough from where I stood to preclude the possibility of his or her being the person who had hidden behind the drapery.

Considerably perplexed, and not a little disturbed in my mind, I left the gallery, and, making my way downstairs, rejoined the throng in the great hall below. I had not mingled with the jostling crowd there above a minute or two, when I felt my sleeve pulled from behind, and, facing round, confronted a mask in the dress of a Swiss peasant girl.

"Quick, bend down and give me your ear," she whispered hurriedly. "I have something important to tell you."

I obeyed mechanically, and she continued,





“‘Quick, bend down and give me your ear,’ she whispered hurriedly.”



bringing her lips so close to my ear that I almost felt the touch of her mask against my cheeks—

“If you value your safety, leave the palace instantly. Linger another five minutes, and escape will be impossible.”

I gave a light laugh, and looked keenly at the speaker, endeavouring, but in vain, to recognise the features beneath the covering of her black mask. All I saw was a pair of dark gleaming eyes fixed with a gaze half anxious, half threatening, upon mine.

“I wish,” I said, speaking in as low a tone as she had, in order to disguise my voice the better, “that I were deserving of the interest you bestow upon me, fair mask. But I fear I cannot claim to be the person you think you are addressing.”

“Fool!” she answered. “Other eyes, besides mine, have seen Walter Raleigh’s face this evening, and know what disguise he wears. Remember Wittichau, and heed my warning. It is that of a friend.”

With these startling words she was gone, before I had recovered sufficient presence of mind to think of detaining her. What could it mean? Who was my fair warner? There were but two women I knew of who could possess any knowledge of the recent events at Wittichau, and of these two I had but just identified the one, with my ears, if not with my eyes, during her animated converse with her husband, the Duke of Friedrichsburg.

Could this, then, have been the Princess of Bieberstein? I scouted the idea at once for various reasons. Though the size, the figure, and the general appearance might have corresponded, the movements, the gestures, and the manner of speech were entirely different. I elbowed my way as deftly as I could through the crowded room in the direction the mask had taken, determined to speak with her again and ascertain, if not who she was, at least the nature of the danger against which she had cautioned me. Nor had I proceeded above a few steps when I caught sight of her standing beneath a huge vase of Sèvres porcelain that filled the embrasure of one of the windows. Her eyes were fixed upon me with a watchful gaze, and it seemed to me that she had been awaiting my approach. If so, it was only to elude me, for she moved swiftly away before I had time to reach her, and a moment or two later she was watching me again from some other distant coign of vantage.

In this fashion she led me like some fantastic will-o'-the-wisp to and fro through

some half a dozen apartments, always managing cleverly to keep a crowded space between herself and me, and thus thwart all my attempts to approach her, until I grew tired of being tricked, and, recognising that to follow her under such circumstances was mere waste of time, gave up the pursuit, and returned to the spot from which I had started.

And now a strange thing happened. If heretofore the mask had led and I had followed, there was now a reversal of the order of things, for, wherever I went, there I was sure to see, watching me with an eager glance from some remote corner of the room, the mask in the Swiss peasant’s dress whom I had so vainly pursued some moments before. Evidently, for reasons best known to herself, she was following my movements, though whether to assure herself that I would obey her warning and leave the palace, or for some other purpose, it was impossible to guess. It flashed across me that she might be the person who had been concealed behind the drapery in the art gallery, and that, having overheard my conversation there with the Duke of Friedrichsburg, her warning to me and the subsequent dance she had led me were mere manoeuvres to induce me to forego the meeting I had arranged with his Highness.

Imbued with this idea, I set about me to devise some means of ridding myself of her—a matter of comparative ease when once determined upon—and, leading her rapidly through a maze of halls and passage-ways, of the direction of which I was myself totally ignorant, I managed at last to give her the slip, as the slang phrase has it, among the crowd of dancers in the ball-room. Thence I proceeded with all possible speed to the famous winter garden, and, passing out on to the terrace, gained the garden below unhindered.

It wanted still five minutes to the hour appointed for the meeting, and I spent them in walking to and fro under the trees in the neighbourhood of the great fountain. The place was quite deserted, for it was a bleak night, though early in May, and, save for the fitful light that fell upon the garden in weird, fantastic streaks from the illuminated windows of the palace, all was dark and dreary there.

Would he come, after all? I thought to myself, as minute after minute slowly passed; and if so, would he come alone? A duel without seconds was a bold thing to undertake, even for a duke and the brother-in-law



of an emperor, and I had wondered a little at his ready acquiescence in this necessary feature of our contemplated meeting. For myself, I had no fear of its consequences; but then I had laid my plans accordingly, and entertained no doubt as to what the ultimate outcome would be.

A brisk footstep upon the gravel aroused me from my thoughts. The next instant a dark figure emerged into the spray of light that played about the fountain, and looked searchingly around. It was the Duke.

I stepped forward and saluted him.

"Let us get to business quickly," he said, producing a pair of duelling swords from beneath his mantle. He was still dressed as a Turk, but he had divested himself of certain upper parts of the costume, which would have been likely to embarrass his movements.

He presented the weapons to me for my choice, holding them by the blade. I drew one, and we measured lengths. He then drew a note-book from his pocket, tore out two leaves, upon one of which he wrote something, and handed it to me together with the blank leaf.

"It is a formality which it is desirable in both our interests to observe under these somewhat extraordinary circumstances," he said.

I read what he had written. It was as follows:—

"I, Duke Ernest Frederick of Friedrichsburg, being about to fight a duel without seconds with Mr. Walter Raleigh, hereby declare that, whatever the issue of said duel may be, it is to be regarded strictly as a contest of honour and judged accordingly."

Below his signature he had added the date and the precise hour of our meeting.

I understood. Bowing, I took the pencil he proffered me and wrote upon the blank leaf a declaration in identical terms, merely reversing the order of the names. This I handed back to him, and, retaining the other, stowed it away in my doublet. I could not help admiring the coolness and forethought of the man. Of his reputation as a swordsman I knew nothing whatever, but he was evidently well versed in the formalities attendant upon an encounter such as ours, and set about their execution with the keen relish of a schoolboy planning some forbidden frolic. He seemed to welcome the opportunity, probably rare to one of his birth and rank, of experiencing something of the reality of a soldier's life. And I liked him the better for it.

We now took our places, crossed blades, and the play began.

I say the play, for, at the risk of appearing a braggart, I must say that from the outset it was mere play to me. The Duke was fairly well schooled, and might have passed muster in the fencing room. But a good fencer and a good fighter are two very different things. It is like the learning of a foreign language at home. One may master it to perfection by the book, but, when it comes to the actual practical application, the best of scholars, with all his grammar and learning, figures but as a poor dunce until the practice and experience of every-day conversation come to his aid and teach him how to utilise his knowledge.

The coolness, the nerve, the deliberation—in short, everything apart from actual skill—that constitute the experienced swordsman were lacking in Duke Ernest. He fought excitedly, without plan or method, and with a nervous uncertainty that would have rendered him an easy victim to a far less skilled opponent than myself. Indeed, within the first thirty seconds, had I thought fit to end the contest, I could have done so with probably fatal consequences to his Highness. But I had other plans, and I continued to maintain the purely defensive attitude I had assumed from the beginning.

He saw that I was playing with him, and, to do him justice, the knowledge only stirred him to greater efforts. I fancy he thought my purpose was to tire him out, and then, throwing aside my reserve, to assume the offensive. But my intentions were quite different. I proposed to humiliate him, not to shed his blood, and I was merely awaiting my opportunity to execute a certain trick which one may occasionally see performed by fencing-masters, and which consists in neatly disarming your opponent at the very moment when a false parry leads him to believe you are at his mercy. It is a pretty device, but dangerous to attempt, for the slightest miscarriage in an actual combat means certain defeat, if not death itself.

Alas, that I waited as long as I did. But it was not until my ear caught the ominous sound of someone moving near the fountain that I seriously prepared for the final *coup*. Then, seized with the fear that I might be balked at the last moment of the empty triumph I had foolishly set my heart upon securing, I quickly changed my tactics, and passing from the attitude of defence, which I had until then assumed, to one of vigorous attack, I began to press my man close and hard.



The opportunity I had been looking for came almost instantly. With a sharp, whizzing sound the Duke's weapon flew into the air, and then— How it occurred, God knows. All I saw, at the very instant when my own weapon shot forward, was some dark object suddenly interposed between myself and the Duke. In vain I endeavoured to alter the direction of my blade. It was too late. There was a shriek and a low, moaning cry, and slowly the figure between us glided to the ground.

It must have been several seconds before either of us could stir. Then we both knelt down beside the prostrate form upon the grass and gazed upon it in a helpless, aimless fashion.

His voice died away in a stifled sob. Alas! she would never speak to him again, for my blade had passed through her heart, and she was dead. He rose to his feet with a wild, frantic gesture.

"It is my wife," he said in a hollow tone, gripping me with both his hands and shaking me. "Do you understand, man? It is my wife, and she is dead. What is to be done?"

But I was too dazed to reply, and I still knelt there motionless, staring at the dead face upon the grass as if it were an apparition from another world. Was it all some devil's play of my own fancy? If this was the wife of Duke Ernest, the girl that had so cruelly jilted me, who, then, was the wood nymph whose conversation with the Duke I



"There was a shriek and a low, moaning cry, and slowly the figure between us glided to the ground."

"Great Heaven!" I murmured, "it is the Swiss peasant girl."

The Duke clutched my arm convulsively.

"Remove her mask," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Quick, man, I must see her face."

Did he know? Had he guessed? The horror of the thing is still upon me as I write. I did as he bade me, and knelt there staring at the uplifted face like one transfixed. The features I had disclosed were those of his own wife.

With a great cry of agony he threw himself upon the lifeless body.

"Anna, my own!" he cried; "speak to me, my sweet. It is I, your husband. Speak to me, dear, speak!"

had overheard that night? Dulled as my senses were by the frightful occurrence, it was only gradually that the whole obvious truth broke in upon them, and I recognised what a blind fool I had been. Nay, worse almost than blind, not even to have seen through so palpable a trick as that played upon Duke Ernest that night, when, in the belief that he was conversing with his wife, he had been duped into confirming the story of his marriage to the Princess of Bieberstein herself. The disappearance of the Princess, her journey to Wittichau, and her subsequent reappearance with her ill-fated companion at the masked ball—it was all explained to me now.



What a hideous mingling of farce and tragedy, I thought, as I gazed stupidly at the Duke, who had thrown himself once more beside the fair corpse. It seemed like a weird dream, a dread, overwhelming nightmare. I felt a thousand things, and could give utterance to but one.

"I have killed her," I murmured at last in a dull, disconsolate fashion, "and must abide the consequences. I will go for assistance."

He sprang to his feet and held me back.

"Fool!" he exclaimed hotly. "Would you place a halter round your neck? You must fly."

I stared at him.

"I have killed her," I repeated vacantly, "and will abide the consequences."

There was a confused sound of voices in the distance, and a number of lights could be seen whisking about below the terrace of the palace. Evidently the alarm had been given by someone, and people were approaching the spot where we stood. Duke Ernest seized me by the shoulder and pushed me away.

"Go," he said, "and leave all explanations to me. You are lost if you stay."

I still hesitated, and he burst into a fit of fury.

"By the God that is above us!" he exclaimed, picking up the sword from the grass, "I will run you through the body if you do not obey me. You have trifled with me already beyond endurance. Do you think, because you are the better swordsman, that I am not a man, with a man's sense of

right and honour? Go, I say. She died, thinking to save me. It was her fault, not yours. I can explain. You cannot."

I turned mechanically to go.

"Not that way," he exclaimed. "Take the path that passes to the left by the lower terrace. It will bring you to a gate leading to the public Square. Lift the inner latch, and pass out."

He had a clearer head than I at this critical moment, and I went like a schoolboy obeying his master's behest. When I caught the last glimpse of him, as I turned and looked back before rounding a cluster of trees that cut him off from my view, he stood resting upon the sword he had picked up a moment before. His gaze was fixed downwards upon the lifeless form stretched out at his feet, but I could not see his features, and was left to imagine their expression.

Through the trees I now saw three men with lanterns hurrying towards him. They were palace servants, and I hastened on to escape them. I reached the gate unnoticed, and passed out into the Square. The place was alive with conveyances of every description. I hailed a droschky, jumped in, and ordered the man to drive me home.

What I should do when I got there, or what I should do thereafter, were questions that did not enter my thoughts then. I had a murder on my conscience—a murder of which I was innocent, and yet guilty—and as I drove along I saw nothing, and knew of nothing, but the dead face of the girl I had loved peering at me out of the darkness that surrounded me.

