

A Modern Mercenary.

BY E. H. HERON.

CHAPTER I.

A Lieutenant of Frontier Cavalry.
During four months of the year the independent state of Maassau, we will call it, which was territorially the largest-sized map of Europe—was tormented by a dry and wearying northeast wind. And nowhere is its influence more unpleasantly felt than in the capital, Revonde, which stands shoulder-on to the bustling gales. Its stately frontage and noble square towered westward along the shores of the Kofa almost to where the yellow waters of the river spread fanwise into a gray green sea. The sea was blowing strongly on a certain November afternoon, eddies and whistling about the wide spaces of the Grand square as John Rallywood, a tall figure in a military cloak, turned the corner of a side street and met its full blast. He faced it for some yards along the empty pavements, then ran up the steps of his club. A few minutes later he came through a lofty corridor and entered a door which he set a quiet invitation to smokers, which may not be written down here, for it is the jealously guarded copyright of the club.

It chanced that the room for the moment had but one occupant. He sat in a rosy armchair by the white stove. This gentleman did not raise his head, but continued to gaze thoughtfully at his well-shaped though square and comfortable boots.

Rallywood majored almost imperceptibly in his stride.

"Hallo, major! Glad to see you," he said, as he dropped into an armchair opposite.

Major Counsellor stood up with his back to the stove, thereby giving a view of a red, challenging face, heavy eyebrows and a huge white droop of mustache. He looked down at Rallywood contemptuously before he spoke. "So you're here; I imagined they kept you pretty close on the frontier. The world been kicking you?"

"No, but it would do me good to kick the world," he answered as he helped himself from the major's cigar case. "Five years, almost six, spent on the frontier, with nothing to show for it, isn't good enough. I've come up to send in my papers."

"Then you'll be a fool," returned the major with decision.

Rallywood was busy lighting his cigar; when that was arranged to his satisfaction he said easily:

"Just so, history repeats itself. Counsellor stood squarely upright with his hands behind his back and observed calmly:

"Any other reasons?" he asked.

"Plenty."

"Pity! Are they serious or—otherwise?" Rallywood pulled his mustache.

"Why is it a pity?" he asked slowly.

"Because the life is going to be a trouble here, and with trouble comes a chance."

Rallywood smoked on in silence. He was a big, shallow-flanked man with the marks of the world upon him, and that indescribable air which comes to one who has passed a good portion of his time in laughing at the arbitrary handicaps arranged by fate in the race of life.

"Where do you propose to go?" asked Counsellor after an interval.

"Back to Africa, I think—Buluwayo, Johannesburg, anywhere. South Africa's the bill in the bill, you see."

"Yes, but it is a big job and will take time to blow. You can afford to wait and it may be worth your while."

Rallywood threw a swift glance at Counsellor's inscrutable face.

"Seven years ago," he said in a deliberate manner, "you told me it was worth while, but life has not grown more interesting since then."

"Ah!" Counsellor paused, then went on with a grim smile, "at your age, John, there are possibilities. Think of it. After hanging on here for more than five years you lose your chance now? Look at those fellows." He pointed out into the square.

Rallywood rose lazily and gazed out also. The prospect was not cheering. A few troopers, their cloaks flapping in the wind, were galloping across the square on the way to relieve guard at the palace, and under the statue of the late grand duke on horseback three men in tall hats stood talking together, then they turned and walked toward the club.

"Know them?" asked Counsellor.

Rallywood shook his head.

"The man with the beard is Stokes of the Times; next him is Bradley; he's on another big daily. Their belated speaks for itself. Maassau is going to take up people's attention shortly. The grand duke is in a tight place, and there will be a flareup sooner or later."

"And you advise me to step and see it through?" said Rallywood meditatively from the window; then he lounged back to his chair. "How will it end?"

Counsellor shook the ash from his cigar.

"Seldorf is the man of the hour," he said. On the instant evening when these two men were talking at the club the day of Maassau was, in the opinion of Maassau patriots, going as fast as it could to the devil.

With them, it may be added, the devil was personified and bore the name of a neighboring nation. The one person who ignored this fact was the grand duke. With an insect's stubborn pride he believed that his country must remain free, as the long centuries had known it, Maassau the Free. This being the case, he felt himself at liberty to enter his time and to take the fate that had refused blue seas and skies to wintry Revonde, thus depriving it of these sources of revenue which depend upon climate, and which are enjoyed by places far less naturally beautiful than the capital of Maassau.

The duke, prematurely aged by the manner of his life, made it his chief business to devise schemes for raising money whereby he might carry on the stalling pleasures of his youth. Beyond this the administration of public affairs was left entirely in the

Biliousness

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REGULATE THE LIVER

Pleasant, Palatable, Potent, Taste Good, Do Good, Never Sickens, Weakens, or Grips. SO. CO.

supple hands of the chancellor, M. Seldorf, while the duke, with those who surrounded him, gazed at the newest excitement of the hour, for who knew what a day might bring forth? The court was like a stage lit by lurid light, on which the actors laughed and loved, danced and fought to the music of a wild fane, that whirled and maddened before the eyes of the counting end.

Once upon a time Maassau was accounted of no particular importance or value among its bigger neighbors; but of late, for various reasons, its fortunes had become the subject of attention and discussion in at least three foreign chancelleries, while old maps were being looked up and new ones bought and painted in different colors, according as seemed most desirable by the bearded men, who sat in council to appportion the marsh, rock, dune and forest of which the now absorbingly interesting pigmy state was composed.

In fact, Maassau, with its twenty miles or so of seaboard, containing one excellent port in esse and two others in posse, had become a Nabob's vineyard to a country almost land-bound and yet dreaming of the supremacy of the five seas. On this ambition and its possible consequences the other great powers looked, to speak diplomatically, with coldness.

It was generally understood that the English foreign office desired the maintenance of the status quo; France was supposed to be ready to clap a young republic on the back and to accord it her protection, while Russia played her own dumb and blinding game, of which none could definitely pronounce the issue. The political world thus stood at gaze, watching every change and prepared to take advantage of every chance that offered. The honors of the game so far had lain with M. Seldorf, who scored each trick with the same bland smile. Whenever the treasury of Maassau was at a low ebb Seldorf usually had a thirteenth card to lay upon the table, and as the nations cautiously proceeded to frustrate each other's purposes royal remittances from heaven knows where flowed in abundance to replenish the bankrupt exchequer of the alone.

When Major Counsellor expressed his emphatic disapproval of the intended resignation of Rallywood a new development was in the air. Hitherto the lead had now devolved upon Seldorf, on this account he devoted himself to hanging back, and the question of who would take the initiative was the question of the day. The fact that Germany had lately accredited a new representative, a certain Baron von Elmur to the court of Maassau, was a new factor in the game, and it was not without some interest that the nations eyed Seldorf's new ally.

"What's gone wrong with it now? I should have thought you would have got used to this kind of thing," observed Counsellor with the air of the older man. It was not the first occasion on which he had played the part of elderly relative toward Rallywood during the course of their queer, rough-grained friendship—a friendship of a type which exists only between a soldier and a man, and even then is sufficiently rare.

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"Dust and drill, drill and dust, and fill in the chinks with homicidal manuevers."

"Maassau only apes its betters. These Continental armies devote themselves very conscientiously to the business of the end of the waster about the process," remarked the chancellor. "They rehearse in summer and get sunstroke; then they rehearse in winter with rheumatism and lung troubles growing on every bush. The bill for blank cartridges is a enormous. And all because they have no India and no Africa, as we have, where we can give our fellows a taste of the real thing any day in the week."

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"Your plan has its advantages," agreed Rallywood lazily. "I saw in South Africa what a little active service does for a man. The first time he is under fire he is persuaded that he is going to be killed, and that every shot may be his last. But after a trial or two he begins to think that the odds are in his favor and he becomes a much more effective fighting machine."

"Necessarily he does. We don't half realize the value of our colonies yet—as a training school for our men. In the British army is the smallest in Europe, but it remains to be seen what account it will give of itself if it is ever brought into contact with these huge, peace-trained conscript monstrosities."

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The door was softly opened and a waiter advanced into the room, bearing a letter for Rallywood, and he laid it down on the table beside him. Then he looked at Counsellor for an answer to his half spoken question. Counsellor shrugged his shoulders.

"Who can tell?" he replied. "Meanwhile take the gifts the gods have sent you today, and let them go to the devil. The sealed envelope that lay at Rallywood's elbow. 'Seldorf, I see, already has his fingers upon you.'"

Rallywood broke the great seals, and, having looked the paper into the other's hands.

"He wishes to see me at 9:30. What can he want with me?" he asked.

"Probably he has heard you intend to cut the service. It appears to me, Rallywood, that you have not had any more of the good things of life since you got here."

"How could he have heard that I meant to go? And what can it matter to any one if I do?" went on Rallywood incredulously.

Counsellor shook his head, but made no reply.

"A lieutenant of the frontier cavalry," resumed Rallywood, "is merely a superior make of excise officer!"

"You will be something more or something else before 10, I expect. As for what you will do, that is for you to find out—if you can."

"It is to be hoped he may feel moved to let me have my arrears of pay," said Rallywood, relaxing into his usual tone of indifference; "that is the chief consideration with us on the frontier just now."

"He probably will if it suits him—or

rather, perhaps, if you suit him. Come over and dine with me presently at the Continental. There's generally a decent dinner to be had there."

John Rallywood, one of the old Lincolnshire Rallywoods, had been born to a fortune, and, moreover, with an immense capacity for enjoying it after a wholesome fashion. Queens Fain had fallen in to him while still an infant upon the death of a great-uncle, and with the old place were connected all those hundred untransferable titles and associations which go to make up a boy's dreams. He was a man of suppressed, perhaps half unconscious, but nevertheless deep rooted enthusiasm; hence when the blow fell which deprived him not only of his inheritance, but also cut short the life of his mother, the unexpected, almost intolerable anguish he silently endured had left a deep, defacing scar upon his personality.

Up to 22 the record of his life, if not striking, had been clean and manly. He had passed through Sandhurst, and joined a dragon regiment for something over a year, when an older branch of the family, supposed for a quarter of a century to be extinct, suddenly presented itself very much alive in the person of a middle-aged, middle-class American. Within three months the man's claim was substantiated, and estate, fortune, position and home—as far as John Rallywood was concerned—had melted into thin air.

The chancellor of a small state might very well have been pardoned had he introduced a certain amount of what an old official would call "desk dignity" into his dealings with those who approached him, but Seldorf habitually affected an easy manner and an easy chair. He was a middle-sized man, possessed of a very still head, bald at the crown, but having still a lock of dark hair on the summit of his round forehead; very round eyes set far back in smooth holes, showing little lid; a nose blunt and thick over lips that might have been coarse, but were controlled and betrayed a lurking humor at the corners, to which the upstanding mustache seemed to add point. For all his peculiarity of aspect, he was a man who left an impression on the memory of something pleasing and attractive, especially in the minds of women.

CHAPTER II.
"A Gentleman of the Guard."

Shortly before 9:30 Rallywood presented himself at the granite palace, with his four capotes, which M. Seldorf accepted in his capacity of first minister of state. After some slight delay he was ushered into a comfortable study, where he found Seldorf with a reading lamp at his elbow, glancing rapidly through a mass of papers that he threw one after another, with apparent carelessness, on the floor beside him.

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growing tired of Revonde. I know nothing of it."

"But you would prefer Revonde, believe me."

At this moment an attendant appeared with a card upon a saucer; Seldorf read the name with the faintest contraction of his brows.

"You will excuse me, M. Rallywood," he said; "I must ask you to wait in the ante-room for a few minutes."

The ante-room was a long, pillared corridor in which Rallywood found himself quite alone. He fell at once into speculations as to the meaning and aim of Seldorf's late awakened interest in himself. Also the allusions to Counsellor had probably been made with calculated intention.

Rallywood understood that each of these two men had the same end in view; each desired to dissemble his own character. And each of them succeeded with the many, but failed as between themselves. Seldorf posed as the suave, sympathetic, gold-natured friend of those with whom he came in contact; Counsellor, as a man of no account, a rugged soldier, honest, strong, outspoken, a good agent to act under the direction of more astute brains, but if left to his own resources, somewhat blunt and blinding.

To do Rallywood justice, he was far more occupied with this last thought than with the thine which bore more directly on his own prospects and future. At this period his

life was comparatively tasteless and void of interest; there was nothing to look forward to and the recent past meant trifles of heat and cold, long solitary rounds ridden by night and days rendered so far alike by iron-handed rule and method that one was driven to mark the lapse of time by the seasons, not by the ordinary divisions of weeks and months.

As he lounged in a chair, full of these thoughts, a slight rustle, soft and silken, like the rustle of a woman's dress, caught his ear. He turned his head quickly. The corridor, with its slender pillars, which stood at long intervals, was steeped in the clear electric light and from where he sat he could see there was no person visible throughout its entire length.

Then, as his gaze traveled back, it rested on something which had certainly not been lying there he now saw it at the time of his entrance.

Not six paces behind him, stretched across the dark carpeting, in the very center of the pillared vista, lay a woman's long glove.

A woman's glove possesses a peculiar charm for all men. Perhaps it suggests some of the sweet mystery of womanhood. The first action of most young men in Rallywood's place would have been to raise it at once and to examine it, as though in some impalpable manner it could tell something of its unknown wearer, who might turn out to be the Hathor, the one woman in the world.

But the circumstances of Rallywood's life, and perhaps, also, some exclusive element in his character, had heretofore set him rather apart from the influence of women. He had grown to regard them without curiosity, which is the last stage indifference can reach.

It must be admitted that it was with a feeling akin to repugnance that he at last lifted the long, soft, pale-hued, faintly scented suede from the floor and dangled it at an unnecessary distance from his eyes, holding it as he did so daintily between finger and thumb. His subtle appeal to his senses as a man failed to reach him. It simply aroused the self feeling of reserve toward the sex it represented. His face altered slightly and he dropped it suddenly with an odd repulsion, as he might have dropped a snake, on a couch nearby.

Then he resumed his chair and turned his back upon it, till the reflection that the woman to whom it belonged must have come and gone while he sat thinking with his back to the corridor sent him wheeling round again.

The glove still lay where he had placed it on the edge of the couch palm upward and with a suggestion of helplessness and pleading. It annoyed him unreasonably. He frowned and looked at his watch. Half an hour had passed since Seldorf dismissed him.

At that moment a guttural voice broke the silence of the house and a heavy curtain opened the door at the nearer end of the ante-room was thrust back by a brusque hand and a tall, high-shouldered, handsome man, dressed as if he were about to attend some court function, stood in the opening. Behind him Rallywood caught sight of a flurried and explanatory lackey.

"Ah, so I have lost my way after all," said the personage in a bland voice. "A mistake! But I hope you will accord me your forgiveness, mademoiselle!"

Rallywood sprang to his feet at this most unexpected ending and looked around.

"Close beside him stood a tall girl wrapped in a long cloak of fur and amber velvet. She was singularly beautiful, with a clear, clear

eyes, her black, long-lashed eyes were on him and they were full of laughter.

"Enter, then baron," said the girl, glancing across at the courtier. "Did you guess you would find me here, or were you seeking monsieur?" and she waved her bare left hand toward Rallywood.

"I lost my way, nothing more," returned the baron, coming forward; "but perhaps, as in my heart, all roads lead toward you."

He bowed deeply once more, this time stooping to kiss the girl's hand with a certain show of restrained eagerness.

She drew back with a little impatient gesture.

"I should not have been here but for an accident," she replied coldly. "In fact, I was on the point of starting for his highness's reception, had not monsieur detained me."

And, to Rallywood's amazement, she indicated himself.

Before he could speak she pointed to his spur and he added:

"Monsieur has set his heel on my poor glove," she added.

By his hasty movement in rising he had apparently dislodged the glove from its position on the edge of the couch. He stooped with a hurried word of apology and picked it up. On the delicate palm was stamped the curved stain of his boot heel.

"Do you always treat a lady's glove so?" she asked gravely, and held out her hand for it.

Rallywood looked down at her very deliberately, and something that was neither his will nor his reason decided his next action. He folded the soft suede reverently together.

"No, mademoiselle," he answered, as he placed it inside his tunic. "I have never before treated a lady's glove—so. For the accident I offer my deepest apologies."

She watched him with raised eyebrows and a slight derisive smile. Then she drew a long, slow breath and with some object in view. As for the girl, who was she and where had she come from? She was not of Maassau, since she had introduced him as belonging to the guard, for not only so every officer of that favored corps individually known, but it was further impossible for a Maassau to make the slightest mistake with regard to any uniform. It was one of the boasts of the country that even a child could tell at a glance not only the special regiment, but the rank of the wearer of any uniform belonging to the duchy.

Rallywood had no time just then to pursue the subject further, as he was almost immediately recalled to the chancellor's presence.

"Now, monsieur," began Seldorf, as though no break had occurred in the conversation, "you are in truth tired of keeping our dreary marches; is it not so?"

"These are better places—and worse, your excellency."

"Our gay little capital will be one of the better places, I promise you," continued the chancellor. "A position in the guard of his highness has just become vacant. Am I right in believing that a nomination to that superb regiment would tempt you to remain with us?"

Rallywood for once was a little taken aback.

"A gentleman of the guard," he repeated the girl's words of introduction mechanically; then, putting aside the thought of the situation and answered, "I am an Englishman, your excellency, and though I have taken the soldier's oath to the Maassau standard, I have not taken the oath of nationality. I could not consent to become a naturalized citizen even of the duchy of Maassau."

"Ah, so," Seldorf stroked his chin, then despatching the objection with a wave of his hand, he resumed, "We must overlook that in your case. You have already served the duke for five years with as sincere a heart as any Maassau amongst us. We must remember that and overlook a drawback which is far less important than it seems."

He turned to a memorandum on the table and consulted it.

"You were engaged in the affair at Xanthal, I see?"

"Three years ago, your excellency," replied Rallywood in a tone that implied his powers of usefulness had probably been impaired by lapse of time.

"I do not mind his examinations. Here was a man throwing difficulties in the way of his own advancement. Yet he could not possibly be so indifferent to his own interests as he chose to assume."

"To be plain with you," Seldorf said with an air of candor, "my younger officers of the guard have little experience. The latest fashion in neckties or the most charming dancer at the Folie absorbs their attention, to the exclusion of more important matters. There is, as you doubtless know, a certain admixture of French blood in the veins of our most noble families; he finished abstractedly."

Rallywood had no remark to offer upon this. The officers of the guard bore a very distinct reputation. They were said to be a pleasant set of fellows socially, unless one fell foul of their prejudices, but they were credited with a good man's prejudice. As for his personal acquaintance with them, it was limited to acting second in a hastily arranged duel fought out in the yard behind a little country railway station.

"I should like to see a somewhat different spirit introduced and to be assured that I could always rely on the presence of at least one cool-headed officer at the palace. Your experience on the frontier has, you mention, fitted you for the position. It is, therefore, will be allotted the quarter reserved in the palace itself for the adjutant of the guard. May I have the pleasure of saluting you as such?"

Rallywood hesitated. He foresaw certain difficulties, but they appeared rather attractive than otherwise at the moment. He threw back his shoulders, a light of laughter came into his eyes, he raised his head and looked into Seldorf's face.

"I thank your excellency."

The chancellor undisturbed more than met his ear. He approached the subject delicately.

"Then you will allow me to congratulate you, Captain Rallywood," he said, bending forward to shake hands with his visitor in English fashion. "There may possibly be some trifling difficulties at the moment. The first step in any undertaking usually costs something, but you will not, I beg, permit yourself to be drawn into, them, any shallow quarrels. Our friends of the guard, you will understand, are a little too prone



"YOU WISH FOR AN INTRODUCTION? THEN ALLOW ME TO PRESENT YOU TO EACH OTHER."

During this period of disruption and trouble Counsellor, who happened to be a type which exists only between a soldier and a man, and even then is sufficiently rare.

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