

A Modern Mercenary.

BY E. & H. HERON.

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Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Maasau, a little European duchy in Europe, which has maintained its independence during the progress of the large surrounding countries, seems about to be swallowed up. Germany is represented at Revonde, the capital, by the shrewd statesman, Baron von Elmur. England's influence is strong and Major Counselor's presence means much. Russia and France are also playing the diplomatic game. At the time John Selldorf, a young Englishman, who has served seven years in the Maasau frontier cavalry, is about to resign his commission, when Selldorf, the chancellor and "man of the hour," recommends him and makes him a gentleman of the guard. Rallywood meets Valerie Selpdorf, the chancellor's daughter. The gentleman of the guard object to the appointment of the Englishman, but the leader and a tutor for Valerie's hand, arranges for the affair. Rallywood, however, is overcome by the manly bearing of Rallywood. The guests at the palace must welcome the young Englishman with congratulations. Counselor Sagan takes a great interest in Rallywood and invites him to Castle Sagan with a party. Von Elmur plots with Selldorf in behalf of Germany and the chancellor's daughter. Valerie, the castle Valerie offends the duke. Sagan, fearing that the women will spoil the plot, wishes to cause the death of Valerie in his wife. Von Elmur will not consent because she wishes to marry Valerie and still believe she can control his step with Selldorf. Meantime the guard, Unzlar, Calendorf and Rallywood must be disposed of.

CHAPTER XI.

A Counsel of Expediency.

The foundation of the family and castle of Sagan was said to belong to the period of the Frankish incursions. Some one had once remarked that Count Simon himself was the most perfect valley of the herbage period to be found in Europe, which, coming around in due time to Count Simon, the joker paid with his life for his poor attempt at wit.

However true this tradition of Sagan might be, the castle itself was medieval, and though it has been added to and restored, dark and tortuous passages still existed in the older portion of its huge bulk, and could by no means be improved away. Treacherous steps waylaid and betrayed the unwary foot, undreamed of doors gave upon their dimmed corners and not all the efforts of the nervous chateaufort ever accomplished the adequate lighting of their recesses.

The spirit of fear seemed to be abroad in the castle that night and the guests moved with a cautious but irresistible hurry when coming or going from the upper apartments or through the halls and corridors. Valerie was conscious of it, as, wrapped in a long cloak, she opened her door and started back on finding a tall, high-shouldered figure standing outside.

"Take my arm, mademoiselle, I beg of you," Von Elmur bent his head, speaking urgently. "I am aware that my august impertinence well deserved your rebuke! But may I hear it and by some a sinister construction has been put upon it. For your father's sake, will you condescend to listen to me?"

Valerie withdrew her hand from his arm with a swift movement, but he caught and replaced it almost roughly. "Forgive me, mademoiselle, you must listen to me! I am not urging my suit upon you—I will not urge it until you consult your father; but, in the meantime, the exigencies of the case, difficulties which have arisen as the result of your own being, make it essential for you to follow my advice. You are aware, you must be aware, of my feelings toward you, and may I remind you that your father's wishes coincide with mine? Will you allow me to announce our betrothal to the count? In the future—may I repeat me, Valerie, you see I am not a lover's persuasiveness, I do not tell you that I adore you—though you are well aware of that! I only declare that your fallings in with my request may mean the difference between life and death to some of us."

"My father in danger through my fault?" His hand held hers close, and she could see that he was moved out of the common by some emotion, the cool stillness of his manner was replaced by a passion of which she had not believed him capable. Her beauty and her youth, and the faint gleam of a good deal to do with this disturbance, but the chief cause was the fear that, after all, his mission might fail and fall badly.

"I cannot explain; but I implore you to act on my advice."

Valerie hesitated. Elmur was very much in earnest, yet it struck her into a position from which she would find it almost impossible to withdraw. "Do you wish to make this public?" she asked. "No, no. That—pardon me once more—would be equally fatal after the impression you unluckily conveyed to the duke. No; I only ask you to allow Count Sagan to believe that you have consented to become my wife. I beg you to do this—for M. Selldorf's sake, and, indeed, mademoiselle, for your own."

As they entered the circle of brilliant light from the great lamp above Mme. de Sagan's door Baron von Elmur resumed something of his usual manner. "Then I may conduct you no further?" he said, turning in front of her to screen her agitated face from two persons who were coming along the gallery.

"Thank you for your protection, baron," the girl replied in an audible tone, "the castle is haunted on nights like these when the tea cries around it."

been altogether as successful as I hoped. But, had anything to offer her besides my father's German have her?"

"In these affairs, my friend, the ladies equally make choice," Unzlar replied with a sneer. "Besides, it is only a part of the plot." The last word was scarcely audible. Rallywood turned on him a long, keen look.

"And you think that she, mademoiselle, is in it?" he asked at last. "I wish to God I could say no! But in the teeth of this conspiracy, for the sake of Maasau, we of the guard cannot lie to each other."

Rallywood, being on duty during the evening, stood, according to usage, at some little distance behind the duke's chair. From among the coming and going, from chance words and prepared speeches, he gathered a thread of suspicion which had its use in the perplexing future that was rapidly advancing upon them.

CHAPTER XII.

Anthony Unzlar.

No one could have gathered, from the quiet aspect of Rallywood's tall, soldierly figure, that a whirl of emotion was passing through his brain. Yet above all rose one dominant sensation—a vast relief. Counselor shared his own opinion with regard to Valerie. Her daring words to the duke had no serious meaning. They were only the natural echo of a girl's preference for a young and beautiful woman to preside over the court, rather than the bloated rake who now lolled uneasily in the chair before him. He recalled the former's little smile with which she had accepted Von Elmur's love-like protestations at Mme. de Sagan's doorway. Its forlornness had been lost upon Unzlar, who had drawn but one merciless conclusion from the little scene. Close on the heels of these reflections a vivid recollection rose before Rallywood's mind of the next night he had met her. The lights and music of the grand salon of Sagan died away and he was standing again on the ridge below the Hotel du Chancelier, looking out over the glimmering lamps of Revonde, dominated, as always, by the regnant red eyes of the guards' dome, and he felt once again that strange warmth and glow in his veins which, at the time, he had believed to be born of an opening career beset with danger and difficulty. Tonight, however, he judged more clearly; he knew that his dull life had been rekindled and his ambitions had taken fresh fire from the darkening eyes of the Selpdorf girl raised to his in the chancellor's anteroom two months ago.

"Captain Rallywood!" The duke made him a sign to approach. Then, rising from his chair, he took the young man's arm, and leaning heavily upon it, moved toward the east room, meeting Unzlar with Mademoiselle Selpdorf on the way.

"Hey, Mademoiselle Valerie!" he stopped abruptly, "would you teach my guards treason?" "To teach your highness' guards treason is impossible!" replied Valerie, with a slight lifting of her eyebrows. "The influence of a beautiful woman has no limit," retorted the duke. Valerie's red lips trembled.

"Generations have already proved the fidelity of the Seldpords has also no limit. But I beg you to accept an apology for my foolish words."

"But such words from a Seldpord!" "We have always been loyal, sire." "The duke shook his head sadly. "But the world changes—what has been is not. And the first reason nowadays why a thing should no longer be is the fact that once it was!"

"Have we changed with the world, sire?" "Not—yet," replied the duke, bitterly; "but, struck, as it seemed, with the intrinsic spirit of the young imperial face gazing into his eyes, he almost as tall as the duke himself, and she looked level into his weary eyes.

"I say this before your highness and these gentlemen of your guard," Valerie said, her eyes flashing. "May the Selpdorf, who ceases to be true to your highness and to Maasau, die!"

Valerie, then you love no one? Say it again. The hinge of spur and scabbard came through the flower-hung spaces and Rallywood passed within a few feet of them. He was whistling softly as he walked along with an easy swing of his strong shoulders.

"I love—" Valerie began, and stopped short, for Rallywood turned in his stride as if he felt their eyes upon him.

CHAPTER XIII.

Love in Two Shades.

All the next morning the snow fell persistently and Sagan might have been, as far as appearances went, a castle built in the air. Above, below, around, the snow eddied like a fairy torrent, beating against the solid

walls and curling in curious ringed swirls about its buttresses as water beats about a rock in mid-stream. But the dominant gray of the outside world cast no appreciable reflection on the spirits of Mme. de Sagan's guests, with whom gaiety and wild devices for killing time were necessary and familiar things.

"The guard keep their falsehoods for outsiders I suppose." Unzlar liked this harping upon Rallywood less and less. He moved irritably. "But that is not all. You have admitted that you are going to marry Elmur. That also signifies—something."

"Whatever it signifies, it does not signify that I am disloyal to Maasau." "You have seen for yourself that there is a change here at Sagan," argued Unzlar. "No German has ever been welcomed here before. We can but guess at treason."

"Hush! It cannot be that, since my father has knowledge of it." This was an entirely unexpected development of the difficulty. Unzlar felt the check, and even in his turbulence he changed his venue.

"It may be so—let that rest; but nothing can alter me in the belief that Elmur is the natural enemy of the state. Valerie, he can give you many things that I cannot offer you. But my love—No, hear me for once. You must hear me, Valerie! You know that I have loved you always, I don't remember when it began—I was a boy. But Elmur at the best must have loved others before you. Whereas I—I have thought of no one else all my life!"

"Why, I have heard differently, Anthony," she interposed with a smile that was a vain effort to temper the intensity of his mood. He stamped with his spurred heel upon a fallen flower. "I don't pretend to be a saint; I am what other men are. You see I do not deceive you even now. But give me the chance and I will prove to you that the Unzlar's can be faithful. Valerie, give me your love! For God's sake don't say you cannot! Give me your love!"

"Anthony!" It almost shocked her to see Unzlar—cold and cynical Unzlar—pleading as a man pleads for escape from death, with a terrible self-abandonment.

"Wait! Tell me this. Did you choose Von Elmur?" "My—no—it has nothing to do with that kind of thing." "I thought not! Then you will sacrifice yourself for an idea? You shall not!"

"Anthony, you are very good to me—you have always been. I know that if I felt for you as you wish me to feel, then you could help me. But I don't! As long as I can remember, you have been my play-fellow, my brother; but not more—never this! Anthony, I love you, but not—but not—you have been so honest with me that whatever it costs I must be honest with you. I can never do as you wish!"

what he has heard of me, he must still be loyal to Maasau is the dearest thing on earth to me? Tell him that if needful, I am ready to prove it with my life! I may make quite sure I meant all I said to him yesterday."

Rallywood stood silent. The passion of her voice and speech echoed in her own ears and suddenly seemed all excessive and unneeded. Above all, her womanly perceptions had taken on a strange edge of sensitive power, due to her father's quaint methods of pointing out to her the difference between the seeming and the true.

"I will tell him," said Rallywood at last, "though I cannot understand." "No, you cannot understand! You are so cold, so self-centered that the feelings and tumults which trouble most of us ap-



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