

"Your personal property!"

"Certainly; my revolver, and private letters."

He glanced aside at the table, non-plused for a moment, but as instantly recovering assurance.

"Oh, exactly; really do you know I had actually forgotten. You see they fell out of your pockets, and we picked them up" and to my surprise, he swept the papers together, handed them to me, then opened a drawer, and gave me the weapon. It was done with such an air of good-fellowship that I could only stare at him, my hand gripping the revolver butt.

"Nice weapon," he commented easily, "latest automatic model, I see; I am something of a connoisseur in fire-arms; acquired the taste in the army. To tell the truth I was almost tempted to keep that gun, and report to you that it was lost in the skirmish. Still, of the two, I rather believe I prefer to retain your confidence. Fact of the matter is, Dessaud," and he leaned back comfortably in his chair, "you are about the first Frenchman I ever cared to be friendly with."

"The form your friendship takes," I commended sarcastically, "would not prove a recommendation to many."

"You can scarcely blame me for protecting myself; remember you were the aggressor."

It was sufficiently plain that his present purpose was to win my confidence. Unaware that I had overheard his indiscreet conversation with Franzen, he preferred to substitute diplomacy to force. Under the circumstances I could do nothing better than encourage the effort. However there was no apparent reason why I should not call his hand, and be blunt about it.

"All right, let it go at that," I said quietly. "And now, Brandt, what is it you want? I am not simple enough to believe all this is an accident. If there is an understanding to be come at, state your purpose. I'll answer you promptly enough."

"That sounds like a declaration of war."

"Whether peace or war depends on your demands."

"Well!" he exclaimed, losing the grip on his temper. "It makes small odds to me which, if you want to know. You are going to give up one way or the other, my fine fellow, and I don't give a sou markee, whether I talk with money or fists."

"Try money first," I suggested, eager to have my value stated. "That will be easier."

He stared at me in perplexity, my cool demeanor a surprise, and unable to determine whether, or not, my proposition was made in earnest. Without doubt, however, he had been accustomed to dealing with men who were for sale, and my willingness to be approached convinced him I belonged to the same class and could be bribed if he offered enough.

"I can offer \$20,000 American gold," in a whisper, leaning closer. "And protection?"

"Certainly; a little private matter between you and me."

"I do not trust Franzen," appearing to hesitate.

"That needn't interfere; I'll send him out on some errand, and telephone for a public stenographer to be sent up here. She will take down what you have to say, and will never understand a word of it. When typed we'll pay her to destroy the notes. That will protect all parties."

"What is it you want—exactly?"

"A technical description of your machine, describing accurately wherein it differs from the ordinary type. I am not an expert, but I know enough of such matters so as not to be deceived."

"You represent your government?" He nodded, now thoroughly convinced of success, and no longer disguising his eagerness.

"Then you can offer more—the secret is worth more," I said calmly, realizing my surrender must not be too sudden.

He lit a cigarette, studying my

face intently as he did so. My own mind was in something of a chaos. Was it necessary for me to remain and negotiate with the fellow? With the revolver in my possession why could I not force my release? Some suspicion halted me, for Brandt's very coolness left me with a vague feeling that the man was not alone, that I was still completely in his power. One of his hands was in the pocket of his coat, and I thought of a hidden weapon, and wondered if he hadn't emptied my own revolver of its cartridges before handing it back. Convinced this must be true, I remained quiet awaiting his reply.

"What is your price?" he asked finally, a bit of ill concealed contempt in the tone.

"Suppose I say fifty thousand."

"Fifty?"

"Hardly; I understood your offer to be in American money."

Without changing his attitude I could see the man's muscles stiffen, his teeth clench.

"Are you in earnest?" he asked sharply. "That is your price?"

I nodded, wondering what I would do if he should accept. There was an instant of silence, and then, before he could speak three raps sounded on the outside door.

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN INTERFERES.

Ignoring my presence Brandt crossed the room, and disappeared in the narrow hall. I found as I already suspected, that my revolver was empty. This accounted then for his coolness—armed himself he had no fear of me, with only that useless weapon with which to wage battle. I sank back into my chair, calm enough to all outward appearance, but with every nerve throbbing. He came back accompanied by two men; one was Franzen, the other a stranger with drooping blonde mustache, and heavily arched brows. While Brandt locked the door, this fellow stood and stared at me in silence, and something in his expression caused me to rise to my feet. It was the Captain, however, who spoke first, advancing to the table.

"Well, Dessaud," he said more roughly than before. "I guess we understand each other, and need spar no longer. You know why I am here, and what I am after. I take it I am not entirely unknown to you by reputation?"

"I have heard of you before."

"Most French officers have," he confessed dryly, but with a smile of satisfaction. "That knowledge ought to make my work easier. For instance you are aware that I never betray a secret, and never let go when I once take hold. Is this true?"

"That is your reputation—yes."

"Then listen; you are in my power, absolutely in my power. No one except those in my employ have the slightest conception as to what has become of you. I can take your life, and it will merely remain a mystery. No one in this hotel knows who you are, or will ever suspect your identity. You are helpless to defend yourself; the revolver I just returned to you is unloaded. Now the only question is, are you going to be sensible, and give me the information I seek, or shall we have to drill it out of you? I am indifferent as to your choice, for we are prepared for either emergency. As to your price, it is too high; my limit is twenty-five thousand dollars."

"You offer that?"

"Yes."

"And if I refuse, you intend to try and force the information from me. May I ask how?"

"You may ask, certainly, but we keep our own counsel," smiling pleasantly enough. "That, however, is a procedure in which I have seldom failed. I think, Monsieur, you must perceive the helplessness of your position, and, I trust, will accept my terms, which, you must confess, are most generous."

"I refuse them," I returned coldly,

and sat down again in my chair, staring into their faces. "I am a French soldier."

No one moved, only Franzen and the other glanced aside at Brandt, as though expecting orders. It seemed to me the latter hesitated, as if puzzled at my sudden decision.

"Don't be a fool, Dessaud," he exclaimed sullenly. "This is between us alone; you better accept the money."

"No; I have answered you."

"From whom do you expect help, man? The Consul and your two machinists alone know you are in the city—surely it isn't that woman?" He laughed, glancing aside at the fellow with the mustache. "You might tell him what has become of the girl, Swigert."

"She was watched in her own home," the other rumbled. "I know. I just come from there."

"You are still obstinate?"

"The whereabouts of Miss Probyn can be of no special interest to me," I said, yet conscious of a vague disappointment. "I refuse, not from any hope of escape, but because I hold my honor of more value than my life."

"Yet you set a price."

"Pardon, Messieurs, but I did not. I mentioned a price to test the value of my invention. Personally I am not for sale."

"Your decision is final?"

"It is—go on."

"We will go on. You have a lesson to learn yet. Stand up! Now hear me. We, the four of us, are going down the elevator, and will take a cab waiting at the front door. You will walk with me, Monsieur, and Swigert and Franzen will be just behind. I advise you not to attempt breaking away, or raising any alarm. The house detective will meet us in the hall, and accompany us to the door. He supposes you to be Baron Von Eisel, a friend of ours, crazed with drink, whom we are taking home. He is paid to think so. Any break on your part will result in some rough handling. Franzen, put Lieutenant Dessaud's hat on his head. Now, Monsieur, permit me to take your arm."

An instant I hesitated, even stepped back against the wall, half inclined to resistance. Yet the odds were too great for me to battle single-handed against three armed men. Swigert gripped my shoulder savagely, and swung me into the center of the room.

"Maybe you want me to show you!" he growled, "how we handle men in the German barracks? You go quiet—hey?"

Brandt took my arm, his grasp firm.

"Come on, Dessaud," he said quietly.

"That is no use."

I realized it, but was too angry for words. Besides, anything would be better than this room. Franzen opened the door, and turned out the lights, and I permitted Brandt to lead me forth into the hall. The house detective stood leaning against the stair-rail, watching us curiously.

"Still 'bug'?" he asked, indifferently.

"Nothing serious," returned Brandt, urging me toward the elevator. "Only a bit quarrelsome; thinks we're trying to rob him. You better come along, officer, until we get him safely outside."

We were alone in the elevator, and I was crowded back into one corner. The utter uselessness of attempting resistance, or of making any appeal for help, was apparent. The very presence of the hotel officer left me helpless. Yet my brain was active enough, and I was alert for the slightest opportunity. There were several men scattered about the lobby, and, perhaps, a half dozen women visible in an ante-room beyond. A single swift glance informed me this was not the Congress, although from appearance a hotel of high grade, the furnishing expensive, and in excellent taste. The clock above the clerk's desk, told me the hour—a quarter of eleven. Almost before I realized what was happening I had been hustled across the lobby

onto the sidewalk in front. Strange

as I was to the city nothing familiar greeted me in my swift glance up and down the street. My guards gave me no opportunity to perceive much, closing tightly about, and pressing me hastily forward. The taxi stood slightly at one side the hotel entrance, but I caught a glimpse of the chauffeur's face in the blaze of electric light, as I was unceremoniously thrust through the open door—he was the reporter, Eisenbarth. Franzen and Swigert jammed themselves into the back seat on either side of me, still gripping my arms, and Brandt had one foot on the step, when he paused suddenly, and closed the door.

"Wait a minute," he said shortly, "until I use the telephone."

Helpless to move, crushed in as I was, I could see the hotel entrance, and watched him disappear, leaving the house-detective loitering in the doorway. No one spoke, except for a growl from one of my guards as I attempted to assume an easier posture. The glass windows were up in front, and the chauffeur appeared only as a mere shadow. During those few moments there was borne in upon me a full consciousness of my desperate situation. Previously I had taken the matter rather lightly, unable to comprehend how such an outrage as this could be consummated in the very heart of the city. I was not unknown, or friendless even in Chicago; to my countrymen my name stood for much, and there were many all about who would rally at a word to my relief. It had seemed that could I once escape from that room up stairs any appeal for help would meet with instant response. Yet the possibility of my attempting such an escape had been anticipated, and guarded against. I was merely a drunken fool, being taken home by friends, under direction of the hotel police officer. Any appeal I might make would only be laughed at. And these fellows were in earnest; they were prepared to go far in attaining their ends. This was a plot, well conceived and thought out. From the first appearance of Miss Probyn the object of every move was to get me into their possession; it had all been planned; the quarrel at the cafe, the room rented in this obscure hotel, the rifling of my pockets, the offer of money. And now, when all these means of learning my secret had failed, these men were equally prepared to go with on even more desperate tactics. Eisenbarth had not asked where he was to drive the machine; he already knew. I did not, yet my mind grasped one probable fact—I was either to be taken to some rendezvous, where I could be safely kept from discovery, or else to the hangar where my monoplane was under guard. The latter supposition did not appear reasonable in view of the fact that such an appearance would involve the danger of exposure. Brandt would never risk that, except as a last resort. He was a secret agent, and his ability to produce results depended largely on his presence being unknown. From the conversation overheard it was evident my men had been already tampered with—the Pinkerton guard—or one of them, at least—bought, and Ramon rendered useless by intoxicants. But De Vigne remained sober and watchful and the hangar could not be broken into without creating alarm. No, the object must be to get me where I could be handled, tortured if need be, and driven to reveal all I knew. And I could expect little mercy, once they deemed themselves safe. I had heard whispers of Brandt's methods in Europe; diplomatic and smiling as he appeared outwardly, by nature he belonged to the age of the Inquisition. To attain his ends he would not hesitate at any desperate expedient. The outlook was not a pleasant one.

The house-detective disappeared within; there were occasional passers-by, yet I was guarded too closely to make any disturbance. I thought I saw someone loitering in the dark doorway of a railway ticket office

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