

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAPPED.

I reached him, gripping his collar with one hand, and driving my fist twice into his face, hurling him back against the tonneau. Yet they were three to one, the chauffeur springing from his seat to help, while Franzen clung to the girl. Swigert's arms jerked me back, someone kicked me savagely in the side, and then I felt the muzzle of a revolver pressed against my cheek. Dark as it was I could see a gash across Brandt's chin from which blood dripped.

"I marked you anyway," I jeered up at him, unable to move, "you brute."

"You'll find out what I am soon enough now," he answered, panting slightly from exertion. "That blow won't make things any easier for you. I pay my debts, Monsieur. Come on now, unless you prefer to be shot."

I got to my feet slowly, but not at all frightened by his threat.

"There are too many of you for me," I acknowledged, rubbing my knuckles, and endeavoring to distinguish the presence of the girl, "but I am not afraid of your shooting."

"You mean I do not dare?"

"Well, partly that; rather, however, there would be nothing for you to gain—I am worth more to you alive."

"You would be as valuable wounded."

"Yet you will not risk it. Where is Miss Probyn?"

"Out of your way. But this is enough talk until we are inside. No one is going to injure the girl if she will behave herself. That you, Franzen? Safe, hey? All right, now I guess the two of us can handle this French cockerel. You stay with the car, Eisenbarth. Come, Lieutenant, you may as well go along quietly, unless you enjoy being hurt."

The basement door had been left open, and between them I was shoved into the dark passage beyond. Someone closed and locked the outer barrier and then switched on an electric light, revealing a flight of stairs. Realizing my inability to resist, and more impressed now with the fact that Helen Probyn was also being held prisoner in this house, than with my own danger, I obeyed instructions without a word, and ascended to the second story. The great hall we traversed, as well as the rooms into which I was ushered, gave evidence that this was a private home, the residence of someone possessing both wealth and refinement. The rugs on the floor, the furniture draped in denim, the choice pictures on the walls, revealed in the dim light, all combined to make this evident. The double shades at the windows were drawn closely, and Brandt turned on sufficient light so I could perceive something of my surroundings. We came to a halt in what was apparently a music room, as it contained a grand piano as well as a harp, and I was thrust down into a chair. Brandt muttered some words of instruction to the others in German, and they disappeared, leaving us alone together, the captain remaining between me and the door. He did not speak, although I noticed his right hand was hidden in his pocket, and his eyes watched me closely. For some moments I also remained silent, staring about the room, but the silence became oppressive, and my curiosity overcame my contempt.

"I presume I am to consider myself a prisoner."

"For the present—yes. How long that state of affairs may continue will depend entirely upon yourself."

"You mean when I am prepared to reveal the secrets entrusted to me by my government?"

He bowed, nursing the cut on his chin. "You have our offer, Monsieur. My face flushed."

"Apparently your conception of the honor of a French officer is not high."

"This is not the first time I have put it to the test," he said lightly, "and think you will learn to see the value of freedom."

"But you cannot expect to hold me here indefinitely? I am not an unknown gutter rat."

"You might as well be, Monsieur," he replied, apparently quite at ease. "Do not deceive yourself as to any chance of rescue. I am too old at the game to be caught in that way. I presume you have no conception as to where you are at present."

"No, except that I am still in Chicago."

"A rather indefinite description, as Chicago is a large city, and hence one of the best hiding places in the world. You are in a private home, unoccupied for a year, and your whereabouts are unknown except to those connected with our secret service. The care-keeper is in my pay—Swigert. Meanwhile who is liable to be particularly interested in your disappearance? the French Consul, and a couple of mechanics. The police, bah!" and he smiled genially, waving his hand. "'Tis easy enough to steer them wrong, Monsieur," leaning forward, and lowering his voice, "if you never came back, I do not believe it would create such a great stir—there could be reasons given, most plausible reasons, whispered here and there."

"That I had sold out?" I asked, gripping the arms of my chair. "That I had been untrue to France?"

"Why not? Who could tell otherwise? You would be neither the first, nor the last, Monsieur. We Germans get what we go after."

I drew in my breath sharply, perceiving in an instant the predicament in which this suave villain had placed me. It was true—if I disappeared, and these men, through force, or finesse, succeeded in learning the secrets of my monoplane, the construction would be obvious. No one would believe I had died in honor; no one would ever know.

"You perceive, Monsieur," Brandt went on calmly, grasping my thought.

"'Tis why we brought you here to this lonely house, that you might think over my liberal offer of recompense. It was dollars, not francs, Monsieur, and, they tell me, the West offers opportunities to energy, and—means. Is not life and money more to be sought than death and dishonor? 'Tis to be considered, Monsieur."

"You threaten that! What would my death gain you?"

"Nothing at present, tonight," his voice cold and deliberate. "We naturally prefer to deal quietly with you, yet there are other methods available. It would not be impossible, I imagine, to even find a way into your hangar without discovery. You smile! We Germans study everything, Monsieur; we are patient, diligent. The guard—pah! it is less money than we offer you for a guard, and, as for your own men, Ramon is a drunken fool, and De Vigne; there are ways of dealing with De Vigne. I tell you this that you may see just how you are situated. Not that I threaten—oh, no; but they know me in Europe for what I am—I do not fear the extreme measures, when all else fails."

He leaned back, his eyes looking frankly into mine, his shoulders squared. There was no doubt as to his exact meaning, his intentions. Something about the cold insolence of the man, coupled with memories of his reputation, caused me to shiver. He was like a wild beast on the trail, merciless, unyielding, hungry for the smell of blood. And I recognized now he possessed the power; he had played his cards well.

"Possibly, Herr Brandt," I suggested at last, holding myself firm, "you may have overlooked Mademoiselle Probyn."

"No harm will be done her, except a slight detention. We are not interested in any story she might care to tell afterwards. Whatever her suspicions, she knows practically nothing."

"True; yet she must have friends to be alarmed at her absence."

He laughed.

"Which remark serves us rather than yourself. 'Twas a point I had overlooked. Fritz, come here." Fran-

zen appeared so suddenly that I comprehended he had been on guard in the hall without. "Is not Monsieur's room ready yet? No; it should have been prepared before we came. Keep watch here a moment while I telephone."

He crossed the room, disappearing into an alcove at my left, while the newcomer leaned watchfully in the doorway. I heard the click of the receiver as it was taken down.

"Give me Main 782—yes, the Press office; hello, is this the Press editorial rooms?—can you connect me with the City-Editor's desk? Yes, it is important—thank you. Who is it speaking? All right, Schmitt; I recognize the voice now—this is Brandt—never mind where I am—the less you know the better—yes, everything is all right—what I called you up for is this, if anyone inquires for your young lady reporter just tell them she is on an assignment out of town, will you—may be gone a week. Never mind the reason; you do as I say. Oh, she's safe enough, but there might be friends who would inquire. Yes, that is all—good-by."

He sauntered carelessly back into the room, whistling softly.

"A ghost easily laid," he said, "and do you still require time in which to consider, Monsieur?"

"No; you already have my answer."



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