

The Princess Dehra

BY JOHN REED SCOTT.

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That was the question of the succession was behind it all, she was very well persuaded; the family laws of the Dalbergs were secret, undisclosed to any but the ranking members of the house, but the crown had always descended by male primogeniture. The advent of Armand, the eldest male descendant of Hugo Dalberg (who had been banished by his father, the Great Henry, when he had gone to America and taken service under Washington) had tangled matters, for Armand was senior in line to Lotzen. It was known that Henry, shortly before his death, had revoked the former decree and restored Hugo and his children to their rank and estates; and Frederick had proclaimed this decree to the nation and had executed it in favor of Armand, making him an Archduke and Colonel of the Red Hussars. But what no one knew was whether Lotzen had hereby been displaced as heir presumptive. How far did the Great Henry's decree of restoration extend? How far had Frederick made it effective? In short, would the next king be Ferdinand, Duke of Lotzen, or Armand, Archduke of Valeria?

And to Madeline Spencer the answer was of deep concern; and she had been maneuvering to draw it from the duke ever since she had come to the castle. But every time she had led up to it, he had led away, and with evident deliberation. Plainly there was something in the laws that made it well for him to drive the king no further; and what could it be but the power to remove him as heir presumptive.

And as Lotzen knew the answer, she would know it, too. If he were not to be king, she had no notion to entangle herself further with him; he was then too small game for her bow; and there would be a very chill welcome for her in Dornnitz from Queen Dehra. But should he get the crown—well, there are worse positions than a king's favorite—for a few months—the open-handed months.

So she slipped an arm about his shoulders and let a whisp of perfumed hair flirt across his face. "Tell me, dear," she said, "why won't you go to Paris?" He laughed and lightly pinched her cheek. "Because I'm surer of you here. Paris breeds too many rivals." "Yet I left them all to come here," she answered. "But now you would go back."

She smiled up at him. "Yes, but with you, dear—not alone." Her hand stole into his. "Tell me, sweetheart, why will you not go—might it cause Frederick to deprive you of the succession?"

For a space the duke made no answer, gazing the while steadily into the distance, with eyebrows slightly drawn. And she, having dared so far, dared further. "Surely, dear he would not wrong you by making Armand king," she exclaimed, as though the thought had but that moment come.

He turned to her with quick sympathy, a look of warm appreciation in his eyes. The answer she had played for trembled on his lips—then died unspoken.

He bent down and kissed her forehead. "We of the Dalbergs still believe, my dear, that the king can do no wrong," he said, and swung her to the floor. "Come, let us walk on the wall, and forget everything except that we are together, and that I love you."

She closed her eyes to hide the flash of angry disappointment, though her voice was calm and easy. "Love!" she laughed; "love! what is it? The infatuation of the moment—the pleasure of an hour?"

"And hence this eagerness for Paris?" She gave him a quick glance. "May be, my lord, to prolong our moment; to extend our hour."

He paused, his hand upon the door. "And otherwise are they ended?" he asked quietly. She let her eyes seek the door. "No—not yet."

He slowly closed the door and leaned against it. "My dear Madeline," he said, "let us deal frankly with each other. I am not so silly as to

think you love me, though I'm willing to admit I wish you did. You have fascinated me—ever since that evening in the Hanging Garden when you made the play of being Archduke Armand's wife. Love may be what you style it: 'the infatuation of the moment; the pleasure of an hour.' If so, for you, my moment and my hour still linger. But with you, I know, there is a different motive; you may like me passing well—I believe you do—yet it was not that which brought you here, away from Paris—the boulevards and the music. You came because—well, what matters the because; you came; and for that I am very grateful; they have been pleasant days for me—"

She had been gazing through the window; now she looked him in the eyes.

"And for me as well," she said. "I am glad," he answered gravely—"and it shall not be I that ends them. You wish to know if I am still the heir presumptive. You shall have your answer: I do not know. It rests with the king. He has the power to displace me in favor of Armand."

She smiled comprehendingly. It was as she had feared.

"And the princess royal is betrothed to Armand," she commented.

Lotzen shrugged his shoulders. "Just so," he said. "Do you wonder I may not go to Paris?"

She went over to the fireplace, and sitting on the arm of a chair rested her slender feet on the fender, her silk clad ankles glistening in the firelight.

"I don't quite understand," she said, "why, when the American was restored to Hugo's rank, he did not, by that very fact, become also heir presumptive—his line is senior to yours."

There was room on the chair arm for another and he took it.

"You have touched the very point," he said. "Henry the Third himself restored Hugo and his heirs to rank and estate; but it needs Frederick's decree to make him eligible to the crown."

"And has he made it?" He shook his head. "I do not know—"

"But, surely, it would be promulgated, if he had."

"Very probably; but not necessarily. All that is required is a line in the big book which for centuries has contained the laws of the Dalbergs."

She studied the tip of her shoe, tapping it the while on the fender rod.

"When will this marriage be solemnized?" she asked.

He laughed rather curtly. "Never, I hope."

She gave him a quick look. "So—the wound still hurts. I beg your pardon; I did not mean to be unkind. I was only thinking that, if the decree were not yet made, the wedding would be sure to bring it."

He put his arm around her waist and drew her over until the black hair pressed his shoulder.

"Nay, Madeline, you are quite wrong," he said. "The princess is nothing to me now—nothing but the king's daughter and the American's chief advocate. I meant what you did—that the marriage will lose me the crown."

For a moment she suffered his embrace, watching him the while through half closed eyes; then she drew away.

"I suppose there is no way to prevent the marriage," she remarked, her gaze upon the fire.

He arose and, crossing to the table, found a cigaret.

"Can you suggest a way?" he asked, his back toward her, the match aflame, poised before his face.

She had turned and was watching him with sharp interest, but she did not answer, and when he glanced around, in question, she was looking at the fire.

"Want a cigaret?" he said. She nodded, and he took it to her and held the match for lighting.

"I asked you if you could suggest a way," he remarked.

She blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling. "Yes, go back to Dornnitz and kill the American."

"Will you go with me? banteringly."

"Indeed I won't," with a reminiscent smile; "I have quite too vivid a memory of my recent

visit there."

"And the killing—shall I do it by proxy or in person?"

"Any way—so it is done—though one's best servant is one's self, you know."

He had thought her jesting, but now he leaned forward to see her face.

"Surely, you do not mean it," he said uncertainly.

"Why not?" she asked. "It's true you have already tried both ways—and failed; but that is no assurance of the future. The second, or some other try may win."

A tolerant smile crossed his lips. "And meanwhile of course, the American would wait patiently to be killed."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You seem to have forgot that steel vests do not protect the head; and that several swords might penetrate a guard which one could not."

"Surely," he exclaimed, "surely, you must have loved this man!"

She put his words aside with a wave of her hand.

"My advice is quite impersonal," she said—"and it is only trite advice at that, as you know. You have yourself considered it already scores of times, and have been deterred only by the danger to yourself."

He laughed. "I'm glad you cannot go over to my enemies. You read my mind too accurately."

"Nonsense," she retorted; "Armand knows it quite as well as I, though possibly he may not yet have realized how timid you have grown."

"Timid!"

She nodded. "Yes, timid; you had plenty of nerve at first, when the American came, but it seems to have run to water."

"And I shall lose, you think?" She tossed the cigaret among the red ashes and arose.

"Why should you win, Ferdinand?" she asked—then a sly smile touched her lips—"so far as I have observed, you haven't troubled even so much as to pray for success."

He leaned forward and drew her back to the place beside him. "Patience, Madeline, patience," said he; "some day I'm going back to Dornnitz."

"To see the Archduke Armand crowned?" she scoffed.

He bent his head close to her ear. "I trust so—with the diadem that never fades."

She laughed. "Trust and hope are the weapons of the apathetic. Why don't you, at least, deal in predictions; sometimes they inspire deeds."

"Very good," he said smilingly. "I predict that there is another little game for you and me to play in Dornnitz, and that we shall be there before many days."

"You are an absent minded prophet," she said; "I told you I would not go to Dornnitz."

"But if I need you, Madeline."

She shook her head. "Transfer the game to Paris, or any place outside of Valeria, and I will gladly be your partner."

He took her hand. "Will not persuade you?"

She faced him instantly. "Nothing, my lord, nothing, so long as Frederick is king."

The Duke lifted her hand and tapped it softly against his cheek.

"Tres bien ma chere, tres bien," he said; then frowned, as Mrs. Spencer's maid entered.

"Pour Monsieur le Duc," she curtsied.

Lotzen took the card from the salver and turned it over.

"I will see him at once," he said; "have him shown to my private cabinet—It is Bigler," he explained.

"Why not have him here?" He hesitated.

"Oh, very well; I thought you trusted me."

He struck the bell. "Show Count Bigler here," he ordered. Then when the maid had gone: "There, Madeline, that should satisfy you, for I have no idea what brings him."

She went quickly to him, leaning over his shoulder lightly kissed his cheek.

"I knew you trusted me, dear," she said, "but a woman likes to have it demonstrated, now and then."

He turned to catch her; but she sprang away.

"No, Ferdinand, no," as he pursued her; "the Count is coming—go and sit down."—she tried to reach her boudoir, but with a laugh he headed her off, and slowly drove her into a corner.

"Surrender," he said; "I'll be merciful."

For answer there came a swish of high-held skirts, a vision of black silk stockings, white lace, and she was across a huge sofa,

and, with a flushed face and merry eyes had turned and faced him.

And as they stood so, Count Bigler was announced.

"Welcome, my dear Bigler, welcome!" the Duke exclaimed, hurrying over to greet him; "you are surely Heaven sent—Madame Spencer, I think you know the Count."

She saw the look of sharp surprise that Bigler tried to hide by bowing very low, and she laughed gayly.

"Indeed, you do come in good time, my lord," she said; "we were so put to for amusement we were reduced to playing tag around the room—don't be shocked; you will be playing it too, if you are here for long."

"If it carry the usual penalty," he answered, joining in her laugh, "I am very ready to help it now."

"Doubtless," said the Duke dryly, motioning him to a chair. "But first, tell us the gossip of the Capital; we have heard nothing for weeks. What's my dear cousin Armand up to—not dying, I fear?"

"Dying! Not he—not while there are any honors handy, with a dotting kin to shower them on him, and a Princess waiting for wife."

The Duke's face, cold at best, went yet colder.

"Has the wedding date been announced?" he asked.

"Not formally, but I understand it has been fixed for the twenty-seventh."

Lotzen glanced at a calendar.

"Three weeks from tomorrow—well, much may happen in that time. 'Come,' he said good-naturedly, shaking off the irritation, 'tell us all you know—everything—from the newest dance at the opera to the tattle of the Clubs. I said you were Heaven sent—now prove it. But first—was it wise for you to come here? What will Frederick say?'"

The Count laughed. "Oh, I'm not here; I'm in Paris, on two weeks leave."

"Paris!" the Duke exclaimed. "Surely, this Paris fever is the very devil; are you off tonight or in the morning?"

Bigler shot a quick glance at Mrs. Spencer, and understood. "I'm not to Paris at all," he said, "unless you send me."

"He won't do that, Monsieur le Conte," the lady laughed; and Lotzen, who had quite missed the hidden meaning in their words, nodded in affirmation.

"Come," he said, "your budget—out with it, I'm athirst for news."

The Count drew out a cigar, and, at Mrs. Spencer's smile of permission, he lighted it, and began his tale. And it took time in the telling, for the Duke was constant in his questions, and a month is very long for such as he to be torn from his usual life and haunts.

And, through it all, Mrs. Spencer lay back in sinuous indulgence among the cushions on the couch before the fire, one hand behind her shapely head, her eyes, languidly indifferent, upon the two men, her thoughts seemingly far away. And while he talked, Count Bigler watched her curiously, but discreetly.

This was the first time he had seen the famous "Woman in Black" so closely, and her striking beauty fairly stunned him. He knew his Paris and Vienna well, but her equal was not there—no, nor elsewhere, he would swear. Truly, he had wasted his sympathy on Lotzen—he needed one of it with such a companion for his exile.

And she, unseeing, yet seeing all, read much of his thoughts; and presently, from behind her heavy lashes, she flashed a smile upon him—half challenge, half rebuke—then turned her face from him, nor shifted it until the fading daylight wrapped her in its shadow.

"There, my tale is told," the Count ended. "I'm empty as a broken bottle—and as dry," and he poured himself a glass of wine from the decanter on a side table.

"You are a rare gossip, truly," said the Duke; "but you have most carefully avoided the one matter that interests me most:—what do they say of me in Dornnitz?"

Bigler shrugged his shoulders. "Why ask?" he said. "You know quite well the Capital does not love you."

"And, therefore, no reason for me to be sensitive. Come, out with it. What do they say?"

"Very well," said Bigler, "if you want it, here it is—they have the notion that you are no longer the Heir Presumptive, and it seems to give them vast delight."

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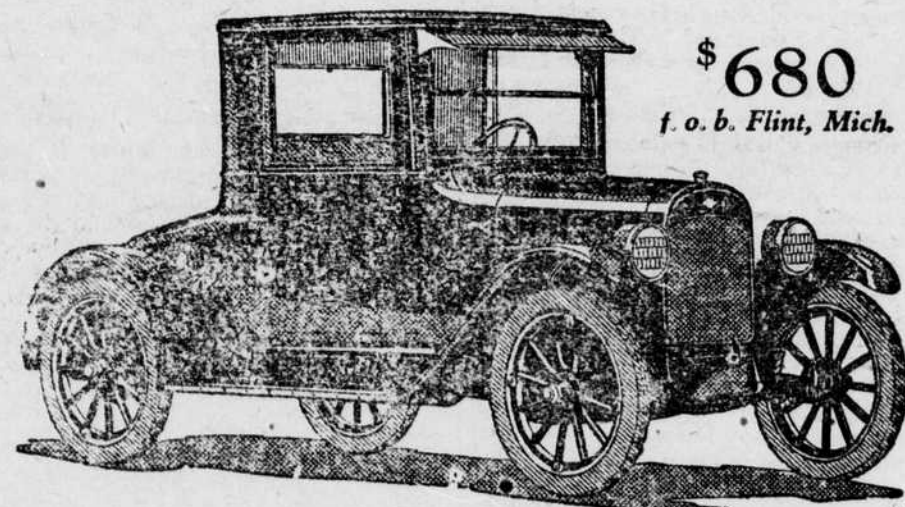
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