

# The Princess Dehra

BY JOHN REED SCOTT.

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## CHAPTER III.

### The Royal Council.

Count Epping was the last of the five ministers to arrive at the council, the following morning. He came in, a few minutes before the hour, acknowledged with grave courtesy, but brief words, the greetings of the others, and when his secretary had put his dispatch box on the table he immediately opened it and busied himself with his papers. It was his way—and none of them had ever seen him otherwise; but now there seemed to be a special significance in his silence and pre-occupation.

The failure of the court journal to appear that morning had broken a custom that ante-dated the memory of man, and the information which was promptly conveyed to the ministers that at was delayed until evening, and by the personal order of the prime minister, had provoked both amazement and expectancy. It could mean only that the paper was being held for something that must be in that day's issue, and as they had promptly disclaimed to one another all responsibility, the inference was not difficult that it had to do with the new king's first proclamation.

"The count was at the castle last evening," Duval, the war minister, had remarked, "and I assumed it was to submit the proclamation and have it signed."

Baron Retz, the minister of justice, shrugged his shoulders.

"May be you assumed correctly," he remarked.

The others looked at him with quick interest, but got only a smile and another shrug.

"Then why didn't he sign it?" Duval demanded.

The baron leaned back in his chair and studied the ceiling.

"When you say 'he,' you mean—?"

"The king, of course," the other snapped. "Who the devil else would I mean?"

"And by 'the king,'" drawled Retz, "you mean—?"

There was a sudden silence—then General Duval brought his fist down on the table with a bang.

"Monsieur le Baron," he exclaimed, "you understand perfectly whom I meant by the king—the Archduke Armand. If he is not the king, and you know it, it is your duty as a member of the council to disclose the fact to us forthwith; this is no time nor place to indulge in innuendoes."

The baron's small grey eyes turned slowly and, for a brief instant, lingered, with a dull glitter, on the war minister's face.

"My dear general," he laughed, "you are so precipitate. If you ever lead an army you will deal only in frontal attacks—and defeats. I assure you I know nothing; but to restate your own question: if the Archduke Armand be the king, why didn't he sign the proclamation?"

Stauben, the grey bearded minister of the interior, cut in with a growl.

"What is the profit of all these wonderful theories?" he demanded, eyeing Retz. "The ordinary and reasonable explanation is that the proclamation is to be submitted to us this morning."

"In which event," said the baron, "we shall have the explanation in a very few minutes," and resumed his study of the ceiling.

"And in the meantime," remarked Admiral Marquand, "I am moved to inquire, where is the duke of Lotzen?"

Stauben gave a gruff laugh. "Doubtless the department of justice can also offer a violent presumption on that subject."

"On the contrary, my friend," said Retz, "it will offer the very natural presumption that the Duke of Lotzen is hastening to Dornitz; to the funeral—and the coronation."

"Whose coronation?" Duval asked quickly.

"My dear General," said the baron, "there can't be two kings of Valeria, and it would seem that the army has spoken for the Archduke Armand."

"And the department of justice for whom?" the general exclaimed.

A faint sneer played over Retz's lips. "Monsieur le General forgets that when the army speaks, justice is bound and gagged."

It was at that moment that Count Epping had entered.

When the clock on the mantel chimed the hour the count sat down and motioned the others to attend.

"Will not the king be present?" Retz asked casually, as he took his place.

The prime minister looked at him in studious comprehension.

"Patience, monsieur, patience," he said softly, "his majesty will doubtless join us in proper time. Have you any business that requires his personal attention?"

The baron shook his head. "No—nothing. I was only curious as to what uniform he would wear."

A faint smile touched the count's thin lips.

"But more particularly curious as to who would wear it," he remarked dryly.

Retz swung around and faced him.

"My lord," he said, "I would ask you, who is king of Valeria: the Archduke Armand or Ferdinand of Lotzen?"

The old minister's smile chilled to a sneer.

"That is a most astonishing question from the chief law officer of the kingdom," he said.

"But not so astonishing as that he should be compelled to ask it," was the quick answer.

"Is there, then, monsieur, any doubt in your mind as to the eldest male of the House of Dalberg?"

"None whatever; but can you assure us that he is king?"

"What has my assurance to do with the matter?" the count asked. "By the laws of the Dalbergs the crown has always passed to the eldest male."

The baron laughed quietly.

"At last we near the point—the laws. There is no doubt that, by birth, the Archduke Armand is the eldest male; yet what of the decree of the Great Henry as to Hugo? As I remember, Frederick explained enough of it to the council to cover Armand's assumption of his ancestor's rank and estates, but said no word as to the crown." He leaned forward and looked the old count in the eyes.

"And I ask you now, my lord, if under the decree, Armand became the heir presumptive, why was it that, at all our sessions, the Duke of Lotzen, until his banishment, retained his place on the king's right, and Armand sat on the left? Is it not a fair inference, from the actions of the three men who know the exact words of the decree, that, though it restored Hugo's heir to archducal rank, it specifically barred him from crown?"

The prime minister had listened with an impassive face and now he nodded curtly.

"There might be some weight to your argument, Monsieur le Baron," he said, "if you displayed a more judicial spirit in its presentation—and if you did not know otherwise."

"I shall not permit even you—" Retz broke in.

The count silenced him with a wave of his hand. "You have sat at this board with us, and since the Duke of Lotzen's absence, at least, you have seen our dead master treat the Archduke Armand, in every way, as his successor; and on one occasion, in your hearing and to your knowledge—for I saw you slyly note the exact words, on your cuff—he referred to him as the one who would 'come after.' Hence, I say, you are not honest with the council."

"I felicitate your lordship on your powers of observation and recollection," said Retz suavely; "they are vastly more effective and timely than mine, which, I confess, hesitate at miracles. But with due modesty, I submit there is a very simple way to settle this question quickly and finally. Let us have the exact words of Henry's decree. I am well aware it is unprecedented for any but a Dalberg to see the Dalberg laws; but we are facing an unprecedented condition. Never before has a Dalberg king failed to have a son to follow him. Now, we hearken back for generations, with a mysterious juggle intervening; and it is for him who claims the throne to prove his title. Before the coming of the American there was no question that Lotzen was the heir presumptive. Did he lose the place when Armand became an archduke? The decree alone can determine; let it be submitted to the

royal council for inspection."

"The minister of justice is overdoing his part," said the old count, addressing the other ministers.

"It is not for him nor his department to dictate the method by which Dalbergs shall decide their kingship, nor does it lie in the mouth of any of us to demand an inspection of the book of laws. So much for principle and ancient custom. It may be the pleasure of the archduke to confirm his right by exhibiting to us the laws; or the Duke of Lotzen may challenge his title, and so force their submission to us or to the house of nobles for decision. But, as the matter stands now, the council has no objection. We must accept the eldest male Dalberg as king of Valeria; and, as you very well know" (looking directly at Retz) "none but a Dalberg may dispute his claim—do you, Monsieur le Baron, wish to be understood as speaking for the Duke of Lotzen?"

Retz leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"No no, my lord, no, no!" he said. "I speak no more for Lotzen than you do for Armand."

"So it would be seen—though not with the same motives," the Count sneered—then arose hastily. "The king, my lords, the king!" he exclaimed, as the door in the far corner opened and Armand entered, unattended, and behind him came a man-servant bearing a brass-bound, black oak box, inlaid with silver.

Never had any of the council seen it, yet instantly all surmised what it contained; and, courtiers though they were, they (save the old count) started at it so curiously that the archduke, with an amused glance at the latter, turned and motioned the servant to precede him.

"Place it before his excellency, the prime minister," he said; and now the stares shifted, in unfeigned astonishment to Armand—while the Count's thin lips twitched ever so slightly, and, for an instant, faded blue eyes actually sparkled, as they lingered in calm derision on the baron's face.

And Retz, turning suddenly, caught the look and straightway realized he had been outplayed. He understood, now, that the count had been aware, all along, of the archduke's purpose to produce the laws to the council, this morning, and that he, by his very persistence, had given the grim old diplomat an opportunity to demonstrate, in the most effective fashion, the unprecedented honor Armand was now doing them. It was irritating enough to be out maneuvered, but to have his own ammunition seized and used to enhance another's triumph was searing to his pride; and, in truth, this was not the first time the Prime Minister had left his scar and a score to settle between them.

"Be seated, my lords," said Armand, "and accept my apologies for my tardiness," and he took the chair at the head of the table.

Count Epping drew his sword and raised it high.

"Valeria hails the head of the house of Dalberg as the king!" he cried.

And back from the others, as their blades rang together above the table, came the echo:

"We hail the Dalberg King!"

It was the ancient formula, which had always been used to welcome the new ruler upon his first entrance to the royal council.

And it had come as yet another scar to Retz, for it put him to the choice—whether to play the fool now, or the dastard later—and that with every eye upon him, even the archduke's, whose glance had instinctively followed the others'. Yet he had made it instantly, smiling mockingly at the count; and his voice rang loud and his sword was the last to fall.

But Armand knew nothing of this old ceremony, and the surprise of it brought him sharply to his feet, with his hand at the salute, while his face and brow went ruddy and his fingers chill. It was for him to speak, he knew, yet speak he could not. But when led by Count Epping, they crowded close about him and bent knee and would have kissed his hand, he drew back and waved them up.

"I thank you, my lords, I thank you from my heart," he said gravely, "though not yet will I assume to accept either the homage or the greeting. They belong to him who is king of Valeria, and whether I be I do not know. As the eldest male, the presumption is with me; yet as the monarch has full power

to choose his successor from any of the Dalbergs, it may have been his pleasure, under the peculiar conditions now existing, to name another as his heir. Hence it is my purpose to submit to you the book of laws, that you may inspect the decrees and ascertain to whom the crown descends. I am informed this is a proceeding utterly unknown; that the Dalberg laws, are seen only by Dalberg eyes. Yet, as I apprehend there will be another claimant, who will have a hearty following, and as, in the end, it is the laws that will decide between us, it is best they should decide now. If, by them, I am king of Valeria I will assume the crown and its prerogatives; and if I am not king, then I will do homage to him who is, and join with you in his service."

He paused, and instantly General Duval flashed up his sword.

"God save your royal highness!" he cried. "God grant that you be king."

And as the others gave it back for answer, their blades locked above the archduke's head, the corridor behind them swung open, and Ferdinand of Lotzen entered and, unnoticed, came slowly down the room.

All night, with a clear track and a special train, he had been speeding to the capital, anxious and fearful, for in an interregnum hours count as days against the absent claimant to a throne. But when, at the station, he learned from Baron Rosen that the proclamation had not yet been issued and the council had been called for 10 o'clock, the prospect brightened, and he hurried to the palace.

Yet there was small encouragement in the scene before him, though the words of the acclaim and the black box on the table puzzled him. Why, with the laws at their disposal, should there be any doubt as to who was king? So he leaned upon a chair and waited, a contemptuous smile on his lips, a storm of hate and anger in his heart. Those shouts, those swords, those ardent faces should all have been his; would all have been his, but for this foreigner, this American, this usurper, this thief. And his fingers closed about his sword's hilt and, for the shadow of an instant, he was tempted to spring in and drive the blade through his rival's throat. But instead he laughed and when at the sound they whirled around, he laughed again, searching the while every face with his crafty eyes, and, save in Retz's, finding no trace of confusion or regret.

"A pretty picture, messieurs," he jeered, "truly, a pretty picture—pray don't let me disturb it; though I might inquire, since when has the royal council of Valeria gone in for private theatricals?"

And Armand promptly gave him back his laugh.

"Our cousin of Lotzen appears in good time," he said very softly. "Will he not come into the picture?"

Ferdinand shook his head. "In pictures of that sort, there can be but one central figure," he answered.

The archduke swung his hand toward the ministers.

"True, quite," said he; "but there is ample space for your royal highness in the background."

Lotzen's face went white, and he measured Armand with the steady stare of implacable hate, though on his lips the sneering smile still lingered.

And presently he answered: "I trust, monsieur, you will not mistake my meaning, when I assure you that there isn't space enough in such a picture to contain us both."

"It is a positive pleasure, Monsieur le Due," returned Armand quickly, "to find, at last, one matter in which our minds can meet."

And so, for a time, they stood at gaze, while the others watched them, wondering and in silence. Then the archduke spoke again:

"And now, my dear cousin, since we understand each other, I suggest we permit the royal council to continue its session. Be seated, messieurs; and with a nod to the ministers, he resumed his place at the head of the table.

(To Be Continued Next Week)

A legless man arrested as a beggar in New York owns a \$20,000 ranch in South Dakota, police claim.

A single cabbage stalk bearing five heads is a vegetable freak grown on a farm near New London, Wis.

Madame Cheminot, a French woman farmer and the mother of 15 children, 14 of whom are working the land near Moulins, France, recently was decorated with the Order of Agricultural Merit.

An internationally owned and operated wireless station and weather observation station on the shores of Baffin bay, to supply data for the world's weather service, has been proposed and steps are being taken to insure its installation.

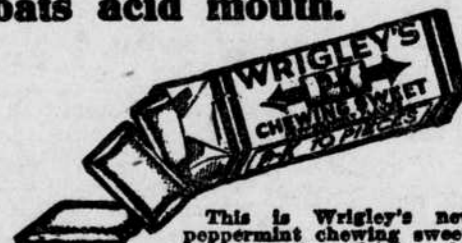
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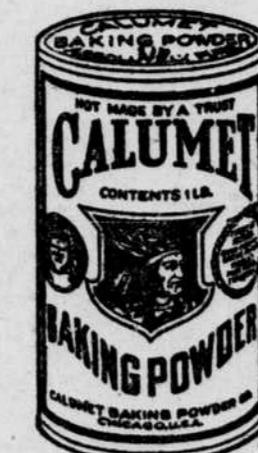
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