The Princess Dehra

BY JOHN REED SCOTT.

And in the morning, monsieur, I forgot the book—forgot it until his majesty had gone to the city.—Then, in desperation, I tried every key I could find—tried to pick the lock—in vain. . . . . I knew the Archduke Armand was to dine here that evening, and from what the king said to the princess I knew, also, the book would have to be in the box before then. I felt, however, that I would have a good chance at the key when my master dressed for dinner. Then, my lord, came the awful news of his death ,and once again I forgot the book—nor ever thought of it, until I saw the council gather—and then——" he threw up his hand, expressively.

"And, now, what were you about to do" asked Lotzen.

"Put the book in the box, monsieur, and return it to its place in the vault."

The duke looked at him in surprise.

"Clever, clever, indeed," he muttered . . . . . "I thought you gave the key to her highness."

Adolph smiled—his spirit was never long in travail. "I did, monsieur—I didn't need it;—and it was a good play to give it up at once. Never having had the key to the box, it could not be I who replaced the book."

Lotzen studied the little valet a bit.

"Clever," he repeaed, "clever . . . . quite too clever, I fear." He leaned across and tried the closed lid of the box; it lifted to his hand—and out on the desk dropped the little square of folded paper that had held the lock just out of catch.

Altogether, too clever," he concluded, picking it up and looking at it.

"I fixed that in the council chamber," Adolph explained; then he stared knowingly at the duke—"monsieur was behind the curtain when I brought back the box."

Decidedly, this fellow was not to Lotzen's liking. He made no reply beyond a quick, sidelong glance, drumming with his finger tips softly on his knees. Then he turned to the desk and tapped the book of laws.

"You read this, I suppose, Adolph?" he remarked indifferently.

"King Frederick's, you mean?—yes, my lord, I did; but that is all—I had no time to read more."

The duke nodded, his eyes on the book.

The valet was becoming uneasy; he fidgeted in his chair, locked and unlocked his hands, listened toward all the doors.

"My lord" he said, at length, "we may be found here!"

Lotzen closed the book. "True, Adolph, true," he answered, getting up and stepping back. "Put the laws in the box—don't let it lock."

The valet sprang to obey; and as he leaned across the desk—his back to the duke—and dropped the book into the box, Ferdinand of Lotzen whipped out his sword, and with the sure hand of the skilled fencer, drove the rapier-like blade through the man's heart.

Without cry or stuggle, Adolph sank forward; and the box locked, as the lid fell under him.

For a moment, the duke held the body with his sword; then he slowly drew out the blade and wiped it on his hankerchief; while the dead man slipped from the desk and crumpled on the floor.

Lotzen looked down at him and shrugged his shoulders.

"You poor fool," he muttered—"why did you read what didn't concern you!" . . . He stooped and turned the body on its face. "No blood!—a neat thrust, truly."

He knew the room overlooked the king's private gardens, and, going to a window, he cautiously raised the sash. It was as he had thought:—below was a thick hedge of box wood, that grew to within a foot of the palace wall, which at that point was blank. Fortune was still his friend, it seemed; and, with a smile, he carried the valet's body to the window and—after a quick survey of the garden to assure that no one was in sight—balanced it an instant on the casement, then dropped it behind the hedge.

Drawing down the window he re-arranged the curtains and returned to the desk.

"Damnation!" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon the box—"Locked!—the fool must have fallen on it."

He stood looking at it, frowning in indecision. He hand intended to take the book with him, trusting to conceal it under his short cavalry cape—but the box was impossible; not only was it considerably larger than the laws, but its wegiht was amazing for its size. . . . Then he saw the open vault, and what to do was plain—he would follow the valet's plan. None now would look in the box, and, for a time, the book would be safer there than with him; later, he could arrange to get it—he knew the combination. . . . . He laughed cynically—it was a pretty game, and the pleasanter because it would be played directly under the American's eye.

He carried the box into the vault, closed and locked the door, and, returning to the desk, put in place the papers disarranged by the valet's fall. Among them lay the blotter that had been in the book of laws. He studied it a moment . . . made as though to tear it . . . then folded it and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. A last glance around the room assured him that everything was as he had found it. With a satisfied smile, he turned toward the corridor door, and his eyes rested on the portrait of his late Majesty. He stopped, and the smile changed to a sneer, and doffing his cap he bowed mockingly.

"My thanks, Sire, for dying so opportunely," he said; "may the devil keep you."

CHAPTER VII.

The Armistice of Mourning.

And so Fredrick the fourth of Valeria slept with his fathers, and Dehra, his daughter, ruled, as regent, in his stead.

In the great crypt of the Cathedral, among the other Dalbergs, they had laid him away, with all the pomp and circumstance that befit a king—within, the gorgeous uniforms and vestments, the chanting priests, the floating incense; without, the boom of cannon, the toll of bells, the solemn music of the bands, the click of hoofs, the rumble of the caissons, the tramp of many feet.

When it was all done, the visiting princes huried away, the governmental machinery sped on, the capital took up its usual routine, and all that remained externally to remind the people of a ruler just and righteous, were the draped buildings and the crape upon the troops. And, at the dead's own express behest, even these had vanished on the fifteenth day after his demise. "Let the period of mourning be limited strictly to a fortnight, both for the Nation and my House," he had written, in his own hand, as a codicil to his testament; and the Regent, with no shade of hesitation, had ordered it as he wished. She knew it was Frederick's last kindness to his subjects. A court in sackcloth buries the capital in ashes, drives the tradesmen into insolvency, and bores the nobility well nigh into insanity or revolt.

And as she ordered, so she did—though sadly and regretfully—and with a blessing upon her, the court resumed its accustomed life and garb, and Dornlitz its gayety and pleasures. Yet Valeria was sorry enough at Frederick's demise—sorrier far than he would have believed it could be. At the best, a king is of use, these days, only as a head for the Government—and when the new head is capable and popular, the old one is not missed for long.

As it was, the people had scarcely relized that Frederick was dead when they were met with the amazing proclamation of Dehra's regency; with the result that usually follows when sorrow and joy mingle, with joy mingling last.

In the interval, there had been no developments as to the book of laws. The Duke of Lotzen had observed the very strictest of mourning; not transgressing, in the slightest particular, the most trivial cannon of propriety. He had remained practically secluded in his residence on the Alta Avenue, appearing in public only at intervals. He had paid his brief visit of condolence to the Princess and had been greeted by her with calm and formal dignity. He had made his call of ceremony upon the Governor of Dornlitz—the Archduke Armand—and had been received by him in the presence of half his staff. Then, after the funeral of the dead king, he had settled down to wait the termination of the two weeks of enforced inactivity. He could well afford, for that long, to dally with the future. So he subdued his natural indisposition to quiet and orderly living, and sternly bade Bigler and the others do likewise, telling them that the search for the laws and the removal of the American could abide for the time.

But never a word did he speak to them of having seen the book and what Frederick had written the night before he died.

Sometime before midnight, of the day that Adolph, the valet, had been killed, the sergeant of the guard, in making his rounds, saw a man skulking in the private garden. At the order to stand, the fellow had dashed away, and, seemingly unharmed by the shot sent after him, he leaped the low wall into the park, where among the trees and bushes, he had little difficulty in escaping. The matter was duly reported to the officer of the day and an entry made of it, but as such occurrences were rather frequent in the park, due sometimes to petty pilferers from the town, and sometimes to soldiers out without pass, it received no special attention, beyond a cursory inspection of the locality the following morning.

Two days later, Adolph's body was discovered by a gardner who was clipping the hedge; and then it was remembered that the valet had not been seen since the morning after Frederick's death. No one had given him a thought—in truth, no one cared anything about him. Like most of his class under such circumstances, he had won the cordial hatred of every one about the court—a spoiled, impudent and lying knave. Busy with the royal funeral, and the great crowds it brought to the capital, the police gave the matter scant regard—the fellow was known to them as a night prowler and a frequenter of questionable resorts, and to have had numerous escapades with married women; and the autopsy indicating he had been dead at least 36 hours, they had promptly ascribed the death to the skulker shot at by the sergeant. There was no other clue to work on, so, after a perfunctory search, they shrugged it over among the other unsolved. What was the use of bothering about a valet, any way! Besides, it was a case to let alone, unless special orders came from higher powers.

So they saw to it that the affair was entirely suppressed—such happenings around royal palaces are not for the public—and the information was casually given out that the king's valet was so distressed, by his royal master's death, he found it quite impossible to remain in Dornlitz, and had returned to France.

Once again, had the fickle goddess smiled upon the Duke of Lotzen, still captivated, doubtless, by the very debonairness of his villainy and his steady gambler's nerve.

And all unwittingly the Archduke Armand had played directly into Lotzen's hands. Out of consideration for the princess, he had insisted that they forget the book of laws until the period of mourning were passed, and Dehra, against her better judgment, had consented, though only upon condition that they two should first make a thorough search of her father's apartments, which they did the following morning; she even climbing up and looking behind the large pictures—much to Armand's amusement; he asking what would be the king's object in concealing the book in such a place; and she retorting that, as there was no reason at all for concealing it, the unreasonable place was the most likely.

And in that she was very right; for the box itself was now the most unreasonable place, yet even her woman's fancy stopped short of it.

The period of official mourning expired on the 20th, and on the 21st, the princess telephoned to the archduke to ride out to the palace for luncheon that day, and to bring the American ambassador with him—unless Mr. Courtney would object to being with Helen Radnor—and that the day being very warm they would be served under the trees near the sun dial, below the marble terrace—and that he and Courtney should join them there—and that Helen was with her now. And Armand had laughed and readily promised for them both.

As he hung up the receiver, Colonel Bernheim stood in the doorway, and he nodded for him to come in.

Bernheim saluted and crossing to the desk put down a small package, about as large as one's fist.

"My lord," he said, "here is the steel vest."

The archduke leaned back and laughed.

"You say that as naturally as though it were my cap or gloves," he commented.

"And why not, sir—Ferdinand of Lotzen is in Dornlitz, and the truce is ended."

"The truce?"

"The truce of mourning—you were quite safe so long as it lasted; Moore and I made sure of that."

"Really, colonel, you surprise me," said Armand. "How did you make sure?"

"By having some one buy Bigler plenty of wine, at the club—and then putting together stray words he let slip."

The archduke shook his head in mock reproof.

"You and Moore are a wonderful pair," he said. "You think for me more than I think for myself."

A smile touched Bernheim's stern mouth and impassive face.

"We need to, your highness," he answered. "You don't think at all; you leave it to Lotzen." He pushed the package a little nearer—"You will wear it, my lord?"

Armand took it, and, cutting the wrapper, shook out the wonderful steel vest, that had saved his life at the Vierle Masque when, from across the hedge, the assassin's dagger had sought his heart. It was, truly, a marvellous bit of craftsmanship; pliable as silk and scarcely more bulky, the tiny steel links so cunningly joined they had the appearance of dark gray cloth. He bent and twisted it in admiring contemplation. Verily, those armorers of old Milan understood their art—never could modern hand have forged and knit so perfect a garment. He found the mark on the back where the bravo's weapon struck—only a scratch, so faint it was almost indistinguishable, yet the blow had sent him plunging on his face.

"It served you well that night," said Bernheim.

The archduke smiled. "And as its owner always does;" he smiled—and the old aide bowed—"but there is no Masque tonight."

"Every night, now, is a Masque for Lotzen—and every day, too."

"Heaven man! you wouldn't have me wear this constantly?"

"No—not in bed;" then seriously—"but at all other times, sir."

Armand pushed the vest back on the desk and frowned.

"Has it come to this, then—that my life isn't safe here—nor in my house, nor on the street! Is this civilization or savagery?"

Bernheim shrugged his shoulders.

"Neither" he said, "neither—it's hell. It's always hell where Lotzen plays. Surely, sir, you have not forgot the past."

"No—no—but that was a Masque, and assassination went with the costumes and the atmosphere; yet now, in Dornlitz of the 20th century—I can't bring myself to believe . . . . why don't you threaten me with poison or a bomb?"

"Poison is possible, but not a bomb—it is not neat enough for Lotzen."

Armand looked at him in puzzled amusement.

"I see," he said, "I see—he murders artistically—he doesn't like a mess."

"Just so, sir; and the most artistic and least messy is a neat hole through the heart. . . . . You will wear the vest, my lord?"

The archduke's glance wandered to the window—electric cars were speeding down the avenue—an automobile whizzed by—and another—and another.

"Look," said he, "look! isn't at absurd to talk of stee lvests!"

Berheim shook his head. "Lotzen does not belong yonder—he is a remnant of the middle ages."

"Well, I'm not; so no armor for me, my dear Bernheim—I'll keep my eyes open and take my chances. I don't believe the crown of Valeria will be the reward of an assassin."

Disappointment shone in the aide's eyes.

"I'm something of a fatalist, myself, sir," he said, "but I wouldn't play with a tiger after I had goaded him to fury."

Armand smiled. "The case isn't exactly parallel."

"No—not exactly:—the tiger might not kill me."

(To Be Continued Next Week)

WORKMAN WAS NO FLATTERER

Street Vocalist Labored Under Misconception and He Was Frankly So Informed.

"Oi can see the red roses bloomin'!" sang the street vocalist inharmoniously, and he was about to begin the second spasm when a carpenter's helper beckoned him to his side.

"I'll give you a dime," he declared generously, "if you'll stay in this shed until I come back. I'm dying for a drink o' milk." And the songster assented.

Soon the helper reappeared, wiping his mouth and paid over the reward as he had promised.

"I s'pose," said the vocalist knowingly, "that my voice is about the same as your own, an' that you thought your boss wouldn't know the difference—eh?"

The other looked at him indignantly, and he replied:

"Your voice the same as mine! I should hope not. If you want to know, it's the same as the noise my saw makes, and I wanted the boss to think I was workin' hard on these planks!"

Only the great now get epitaphs.

Simple Home Remedy.

For matrimonial heartache: A lump of pride dissolved in a glass of common sense. Swallow immediately and settle with a kiss. Add a dose of wholesome compliments. Repeat as often as needed.—From Life.

On the Eve of Election.

"Make the announcement as usual," said Senator Sorghum, "that on election night I have given myself to tranquil sleep, absolutely fearless of the future."

"What's the idea?" inquired the campaign assistant.

"I'll probably keep tab on the returns all night, and I don't want to be disturbed."