The Princess Dehra

BY JOHN REED SCOTT.

The archduke smiled. "And just to prove that the friend isn't meddling, I shall accept his advice—bearing in mind, however, that this is particularly an exigency where prudence must be subordinate to daring. Prudence is all very well in the abstract, but it is more dangerous to our success than recklessness. I'm playing for a Crown and a nation's favor—let my personal courage be questioned for an instant, and the game is lost as surely as though I were dead. As for my dear cousin of Lotzen, I assure you I've not the least scruple about killing him, under proper opportunity. In fact, I'm inclined to think I should rather enjoy it. I admit now that there have been times when I regret I didn't run him through at the Vierle masque."

Courtney nodded. "It would have saved you all this trouble—I wanted to call to you to make an end of him."

"I can't do murder; I had disarmed him. Next time, I'll make a different play."

"There won't be a next time, if the duke has the choosing. He isn't the sort to seek death, and he knows you are his master. You'll have to kill him in a melee, or maneuver him into a position where he has no option but to fight."

"He is maneuvering himself into a position where he will have to contend with a far more formidable blade than mine."

Courtney's eye brows lifted expressively. Than the archduke himself there was but one better swordsman in the kingdom.

"What has Lotzen been doing to Moore?" he asked.

"Insulting Elise d'Essolde."

"By making advances?"

Armand nodded. "And in a particularly nasty way."

"He isn't bothered about Moore," said Courtney. "He thinks he is safe from any one that isn't of his station."

"He doesn't know the Irishman—Moore would kill him without a thought."

"I'm not so sure," said Courtney. "Moore is bred to respect for royalty; he would hesitate to use sword against one of the blood except in defense."

"Lotzen would best not bank much on that for immunity if he pursue d'Essolde."

"Well, so much the better; between you, the trick should be turned; though, as a matter of abstract justice, it's your particular work."

"And I shan't shirk it," said Armand—then he laughed—"on the whole, I'm something of a savage myself; Lotzen hasn't got all of it for the family, it would seem."

Courtney shrugged his shoulders. "We all are savages at the core—it's only a question of the veneer's thickness."

"Of its thinness, I should say. However, now that you have saved my precious life, and dedicated me to care and prudence and to killing my enemies, we can get down to business. You had something to tell me."

"I have told you," said Courtney. "I wanted to show you that note and save your precious life."

The archduke picked up the paper, and read it again.

"May be the party who wrote this," he said, "can help you answer the question I came to ask: what brought Lotzen to the summer palace, this afternoon; and, in particular, why did he go into the king's library?"

Courtney lit a fresh cigaret and watched the match burn to a cinder.

"Isn't your second question the answer to the first?" he asked.

"Doubtless; but what's the answer to the second?"

Courtney shook his head. "I pass—unless you can give me some details."

"Here's everything I know," said Armand. "Moore, as adjutant to the regent, occupies part of the king's suite as his quarters. This afternoon, he went out, leaving open the corridor door of the library. A little later Mademoiselle d'Esolde saw Lotzen come from the library—subsequently he met Moore and casually remarked to him that, as he passed his quarters, the door being open, he had taken the liberty of looking at his late majesty's portrait, which he wished to have copied."

Courtney considered a bit.

"Its really most interesting to study your cousin's methods," he said presently. "He seems to take particular pleasure in telling one what he knows will not be believed. It was quite absurd to offer such a fool explanation, if he really wished to explain—and none knows it better than Lotzen. It was just as though he had said to Moore: 'Tell the Archduke Armand, I've been in the library, I've accompanied what I went for, and he may go to the devil, with my compliments.' "

"That's very well, as an exposition of Lotzen's methods," said Armand; I've been in the library, I've accomplished what I went for, and he may go to the devil, with my compliments.' "

"That's very well, as an exposition of Lotzen's methods," said Armand; "but what concerns me is his motive; what was it he went for?"

"The book of laws, possibly," Courtney replied.

"Nonsense—he knows it's not in the library—if it were, I would have had it days ago."

"And how does he know you haven't got it?"

"How! Because I'd have produced it to proive my title,"

Courtney smiled. "Certainly you would—if it proved your title; but if it didn't?"

"You overlook Frederick's decree."

"No, I don't—you overlook the fact that no one has ever seen that decree, and that Lotzen is entitled to assume it was not executed—that the whole story is fabricated, and that you have made away with the book in order to throw the election into the house of nobles; and so to have a chance for the crown, when, in reality, you are entitled to none."

"Lotzen understands perfectly that Dehra told the truth," said Armand; "and that I've not got the book—for my part, I'm almost ready to accept her notion that he has it."

Courtney leaned back in his chair, and studied the smoke rings he sent whirling upwards.

"I can't agree with you," he said; "indeed, since his visit to the library, I'm more convinced than ever that he hasn't the book. He pretends to have it, so as to mislead you in your search."

"More likely, in you view of him," said Armand, "it is to decoy me into a trap where he can make an end of me."

"I believe you've guessed it," said Courtney, after a moment's thought; "and what is more, it's the key to Lotzen's plan of campaign, and it proves conclusvely his murderous purpose. I'd be very shy of information that points bookward, unless you know the informant; above everything, don't be fooled by the device of a rendezvous, or a tattling servant."

"True enough; and yet I must not let slip any chance that might lead to the recovery of the book; my equivocal position demands that it be found, both to vindicate Dehra's story and to justify my own claim to the succession. Indeed, to my mind, I have no chance whatever unless Frederick's decree is produced. However, Lotzen won't use such hoary artifices; he will have some simple little plot that will enmesh me by its very innocence. As a schemer against him I'm not even an 'also ran.' "

"And, therefore, my dear Armand," said Courtney quickly, "you must be prepared to cut the meshes when they close; an escort—a sword—a pistol—a steel vest—there's where you get your chance at him. Between the schemer and the ready fighter, I'll gamble on the fighter every time. . . . . It's a pity you've lost Moore—you and he would make a famous pair. Bernheim is a good sort, but Moore is worth 20 of him in this business."

The archduke's eyes brightened—the Irishman and he together could make a merry fight—an altogether worth while sort of fight—a fight that the Great Henry himself, in his younger days, would have sought with eager blade and joyful heart—a quick, sharp fight that gave the enemy no rest nor quarter—a thrust—a fall—a careless laugh—a dripping point wiped on a handkerchief. He saw it all, and his fingers tingled and his eyes went brighter still.

And across the table Courtney blew ring upon ring of smoke, and watched him curiously, until the intent look waned and passed.

"Well," he said, "did you kill him?"

"Yes, I killed him . . . . . and even wiped my sword—much ground have I to cast reproach at Lotzen." He got up. "I'm going; if I sit under your tutelage any longer, I'll be jabbling holes in the good citizens I meet on the avenue."

"With that stick" Courtney asked.

"I forgot—the good citizen is safe tonight."

"But you're not. Let me give you a sword or a revolver." And when both were declined, he held up the paper: "Danger imminent," he warned.

"Bernheim will take care of me," said Armand; "and a light stick isn't a bad sort of rapier, if it is handled properly. I'm glad for this talk, and to have learned how very thin my veneer is—I'm going back to the Epsau now, and teach Bernheim the scalp dance. Good night."

"And trade him to the regent for Moore, the first thing in the morning," Courtney urged.

The archduke paused at the threshold:

"Well, may be I shall," he said; "I believe he is a bit more the savage." He faced about. "As for you, my dear Dick, you're cut out for a typical missionary—you would have the natives killing one another within an hour after you landed."

"Danger imminent!" called Courtney, and the door swung shut.

CHAPTER XI.

First Blood.

The archduke knew where to find his aide, so he waived aside the servant and went on to the billiard room.

"Don't mind me, boys," he said, as they sprang up; "go on with the deal—unless," motioning toward Bernheim's big pile of chips, "you want to be relieved of the beginner."

"Your highness is ready to go?" Bernheim asked.

Armand nodded. "But that mustn't take you away; luck's with you, it's a crime to desert her—I know the way home."

The colonel pushed his winnings into the center of the table.

"I have to thank you for a delightful evening, messieurs," he said, with his stiff, military bow; "and since I must leave before the end of the game, I make a John-pot of these for you."

The archduke took him by the arm.

"You may not do that, colonel," he laughed; "they cannot let you. You must cash in, and give them a chance some other time."

"But it is my pleasure, sir, for them to have back what I won."

"And it will be their pleasure to take it back," said Armand kindly, "but not in that way—they must win it back from you."

Bernheim drew himself up. "I understand, sir," he said—"Messieurs, I salute you."

When they came out on the avenue, a fine rain was blowing in clouds, but the archduke declined the servant's offer to ring the stables for a carriage. The street was deserted; not a pedestrian, nor even a cab, was in sight, either way. Both men wrapped their capes around them, and strode off toward the Epsau.

"A dirty night, sir," the colonel observed—"it might have been well to take the carriage."

"I like it," said Armand; "to walk in the rain or to ride in the snow."

"The snow, yes—but we don't have much of it in Dornlitz—one must go to the mountains in the north—to Lotzenia—for it."

"My dear cousin's country!"

"His titular estates—but not his country," said Bernheim. "He has the old castle on the Dreer and a huge domain—that King Frederick's father gave to Lotzen's father in a foolish moment of generosity—but he hasn't the heart of a single inhabitant; indeed, until his banishment there, I think he had never even seen the place. But with the old castle of Dalberg, across the valley—the cradle of your race, sir—it's very different. Who rules there is the idol of the Lotzenians; he is their hereditary lord; and they can never forget that he belonged to them before he took the crown, and that they helped him in the taking."

"And now that there is no king, whom will they serve until the new lord comes?"

Bernheim raised his cap.

"Her royal highness the regent—until they serve you."

No man could be quite insensible to all that this implied of kingly power, and the traditional homage of inherited devotion, the hot love for him who was born their chief—given them of God, and their own before all others.

The archduke's fingers closed a bit tighter on his stick, his blood pulsed faster, and the stubborn spirit of old Hugo awoke to new life; and in that moment, in the dead of night, with the rain whipping around them, as it wrapped the city in a cloud of glowing mist he turned his face forever from his old life, its memories and methods, and passed finally into the new, its high destiny, its privileges, its responsibilities, its dangers and its cares. He would make this fight in the duke's own fashion, and end it in the duke's own way; if he fell in the ending, he would see to it that the duke fell first; not that he cared for his company in the outgoing—though, doubtless, it would matter little then—but because it were not well to leave him behind to plague the kingdom with his viciousness.

They now had left the more modern portion of the avenue and were in the older section, where the houses were smaller and stood only a little way from the sidewalk; though occasionally a more pretentious one was set far back, with trees and shrubbery around it, and a wall before, hiding it almost entirely from the street.

In front of one of these residences, the archduke suddenly stopped and caught Bernheim's arm.

"Listen!" he said, "I heard a cry."

Bernheim, too, had heard it, but he was not minded to let his master know.

"It was the wind, doubtless, sir," he said.

A blast of rain and mist swept by them and through the trees, stirring the leaves into a rustling as of the sighs of disembodied spirits, while the swaying street lights flung the shadows hither and thither like pursuing cerecloths struggling to reshroud them in their forsaken garb.

Bernheim looked around to fix the location.

It's the De Saure house," he said, "and has been unoccupied for months—your highness must have been mistaken."

The archduke moved on. "Doubtless, the wind plays queer tricks with sound on such a night; yet my ears rarely deceive me."

They were passing the wide entrance gates, and he went nearer and peered within—and as though in answer, from out the darkness came the shriek of one in awful terror.

"Don't strike me again! For God's sake don't strike me!"

The archduke seized the gate.

"Come on, Bernheim," he exclaimed; "it is a woman."

The aide caught his arm.

"Don't, sir," he said; "don't—it is nothing for you to mix in—it is for the police."

Armand made no answer; he was trying to find the latch.

"I pray your highness to refrain," Bernheim begged; "an archduke—"

"Help! For God's sake help!" came the cry.

The latch yielded, and Armand flung back the gate.

"Come on," he ordered, "I'm a man, and yonder a woman calls."

He sprang down the path toward the house, which he could see now in black forbiddingness among the trees far back from the street.

Again Bernheim ventured to protest.

"Don't strike me! Don't str—" and a gurgling choke ended it.

"To the devil with Lotzen!" he exclaimed, and dashed on.

And Bernheim, with a silent curse, went beside him, loosening his sword as he ran, and feeling for the small revolver he had slipped inside his tunic before they left the Epsau. To him, now, everything of mystery or danger spelled Lotzen—but even if it were not he, there was trouble enough ahead, and scandal enough, too, likely; scandal in which the governor of Dornlitz, an archduke, may be the king, had no place, and which could serve only to injure him before the people and in the esteem of the nobles. Better that half the women in Dornlitz should be beaten and choked than that his master should be smirched by the tongue of calumny. He had no patience with this quixotism that succored foolish females at foolish hours, in a place where neither the female nor they had any right to enter—and where, for her, at least to enter was a crime. If he were able, he would have picked the archduke up bodily, and borne him back to the palace, and have left the infernal woman to shift for herself, and to save herself or not, as her luck might rule.

(To be Continued Next Week.)

Spreading the News.

"I hope that you won't object to my guests knowing that I paid you $1,000 to entertain them this evening?" remarked Mrs. Gawker.

"Not at all, ma'am," replied the tenor, in sarcastic tones. "Would you like me to pin the check on my coat lapel just before I sing?"—Birmingham Age-Herald.

A rich bachelor uncle has matters made as pleasant for him as a rich grandpa.

An Expert.

She—"Do you like to dance?" He—"Not particularly." She—"Oh, well, no one dances that way nowadays."—American Legion Weekly.