

The Princess Dehra

BY JOHN REED SCOTT.
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Then they brought up suddenly in front of the house; and as they paused to find the steps, a light flashed, for an instant, from the upper windows, and disappeared—as if an electric switch had been turned on, and off again. But its light had been long enough to show the broad entrance porch, and the big doors beyond it—and that they were open wide.

At the sight, Bernheim swore a good round oath and seized the archduke's arm.

"It's a trap, my lord, it's a trap!" he exclaimed.

And again Armand hesitated; and again the cry came, though muffled now and indistinct.

"We will have to chance it," he said, "I can't desert a woman who calls for help."

"Very well, sir," said Bernheim, knowing that further opposition was useless, "but if it is a trap, she'll be the first I kill."

They went softly up the steps and into the vestibule; not a sound came from within.

"Are you familiar with this house?" the archduke whispered.

"Very, sir; I've been in it scores of times—salon on right, dining room and library opposite."

"And the stairs?"

"In the rear, on the left."

"Can you find the electric switch?"

The colonel drew his revolver and stepped quickly inside; he knew there was a row of buttons near the library door, and he found them readily. With a single motion he pushed them in, and every chandelier and sidelight in the entire lower floor sprang to life—illuminating rooms, solitary and undisturbed.

Over the mantel in the library hung a pair of beautiful old dueling rapiers, and the archduke snatched one down and tried its balance; then took the other and handed it to Bernheim.

"Take it, man," he said, as the colonel touched his own sword; "take it, it's worth an armory of those; its reach alone may save your life, if we are crowded."

He made a pass in the air and laughed—it was sweet any time to feel the hit of such a weapon, but now it was doubly sweet, with danger ahead and the odds he knew not what. He pointed upward.

"Come along," he said—"now for the next floor and the clash of steel."

But Bernheim shook his head. "I pray you, my lord, be prudent," he urged—"remember, to us you are the king."

Faintly, from somewhere above the cry came—weak and suppressed, but audible.

"Help! oh help!"

"Damn the woman!" Bernheim exclaimed, dashing forward to go first; and failing, by four steps.

The upper hall was dark, save for the reflection from below, but Armand caught the sheen of a switch plate and pressed the key. Five closed doors confronted him—without hesitation he chose the rear one on the right, and sprang toward it.

Further toward the front. Evidently, the archduke had met no misadventure yet. And so he stood there, tense and expectant, while the darkness pressed hard upon his eyes, and set them burning with the strain of striving to pierce through.

Presently he felt that some one was coming toward him, and then the faintest whisper spoke his name. He reached out, and his fingers touched the archduke's shoulder.

Armand put his mouth close to his aide's ear.

"Rooms deserted," he whispered—"what's on the third floor?"

"It's a mere garret; the servants' quarters are in a detached building in the rear."

"We'll chance the garret—I laid a chair across the foot of those stairs—and also at the head of the back stairs—anything doing below?"

"Quiet as the grave, sir."

"An apt simile, Bernheim," said the archduke; "there is going to be a death of two down there tonight, if we can manage it—just as a gentle notice to our cousin of what he may expect."

The old soldier's hand sought impulsively his master's.

"You mean it, my lord?" he asked eagerly.

"I do; I'm—" a stair creaked very faintly—"they're coming," he ended.

Both men bent forward listening. . . . the seconds passed . . . no sound came to them.

Then Bernheim bethought himself of the rail, and laid his ear upon it. Instantly he was up.

"They are coming," he whispered, "I could hear them distinctly."

"Good," said Armand. "We will give them the steel as soon as they're within reach—we're ready—I'll take the right."

The stairway was of more than medium width and straight-away almost to the lower floor, the turn being at the bottom. While the lights were on, Bernheim had noticed a heavy oak chest against the wall near where they were standing. Now it suddenly occurred to him how it could be used. Asking the archduke to bear aside a moment, he seized it in his powerful arms, and carrying it to the head of the stairs hurled it, with all his strength, down into the darkness.

There was a heavy thud as of human bodies struck, wild shrieks of pain and terror, and then a deafening crash, as the chest broke asunder against the wall below, followed directly by moans, and curses, and struggles to get free.

Although Armand had not seen what his aide had done, he could picture it all now, and he laughed aloud.

"Clear away the debris, gentlemen!" he called. "On to the charge! Don't be a lot of quitters; we've plenty of ammunition left; en avant!"

But only the moans answered him. He drew Bernheim closed.

"What do you suggest," he asked; "shall we go down?"

And the upsetting of the chair at the rear stairs answered him.

fired into the semi-obscurity below, and as the knave's head was almost on a lone with the floor, brought an answering cry; but it did not disable him; they heard him stumble over the broken chest, then the key was thrust into the lock, the front door was flung back, and he crossed the porch at a run.

"He's the last of them, I fancy," said Armand.

Bernheim looked at the pistol in disgust.

"I never did have any patience with these toys," he growled; "three shots across a blanket, and only a touch!"

The archduke pointed to the dead body.

"You did pretty well there," he said.

"Luck, pure luck." He went over to the stairs. "I don't hear anything," he said; "the chest seems to be very quiet—what about the lights; shall I turn them off?"

"First take a look at these gentlemen," said Armand; "do you know them?"

The aide stooped over the one he had killed and jerked off the mask that covered his upper face—then did the same with the other, and shook his head.

"I never saw either of them," he said; "but they look the part—you hit this one exactly on the spot; he is paralyzed or dead."

"We will leave him to find out for himself which it is," the archduke answered—"unless, colonel, you wish to search further for the lady—as I remember, you promised her the first killing."

Bernheim laughed.

"I rather imagine your lady is a man—I think we shall find her at the foot of the stairs."

He ran quickly down, vaulted over the debris with the aid of the rail, and turned on the light.

The archduke had followed him as far as the turn.

"It looks as though you got her, colonel," he remarked, pointing with his rapier to two men who lay among the fragments of the chest. One was dead—face and head mashed flat, the crimson splotch on the white wall marking where the heavy missile had crushed them. The other, both legs broken at ankles, and half his ribs driven in, was pinned in the corner, unconscious—a singularly repulsive creature, with huge, protruding teeth, pimply face, an enormous red nose, and a mouth like a fish's.

Bernheim looked him over.

"Positively, I'd be ashamed to employ such a creature," he remarked. "I don't understand Lotzen; he is an aesthete, even in his crimes."

The archduke stepped carefully into the hall, and laid his rapier on the table.

"Let us be off," he said; "there is nothing more to do." He turned toward the door—then stopped and reached for the sword.

"Others are coming," he said; "we'll fight it out right here."

There was the quick tramp of feet on the porch, and a sergeant and two police entered. Their looks of bewildered surprise, as they recognized the archduke and his aide, were so comical that even Bernheim smiled, though his words were curt enough.

"Salute, men!" he said, "don't you know his royal highness?"

The sergeant's hand went up. "Your pardon, sir," he stammered, "but we heard shots—and this house is supposed to be unoccupied. I am sorry."

Armand motioned him to silence.

"There is nothing to pardon, sergeant," he said; "you are doing your duty very properly, and you come in good time. You will search this place thoroughly, including the grounds; remove the dead and wounded immediately; see that all knowledge of the affair is suppressed, and report to me at noon tomorrow."

The officer saluted again.

"Yes, your highness."

"Where are our capes, colonel?"

"In the library—I'll get them." . . . He dropped the archduke's about his shoulders, and the sergeant did the same for him.

As they gained the avenue, the cathedral bell struck 3.

"A nice hour for an old man like you, Bernheim, to be going home," said the archduke.

A quizzical smile came into the aide's stern face.

"A lady called me," he replied.

Lotzen, on the Alta avenue half a mile or so beyond the Epsau, is a great, rambling pile of gray stone, of varying height and diverse architecture, set in the midst of grounds that occupy two entire squares, and are surrounded by a high, embattled wall, pierced with four wide entrances, whose bronze gates are famous in their craftsmanship.

Here the duke lived in a splendor and munificence almost rivaling the king himself, and with a callous indifference to certain laws of society, that would have scandalized the capital had it become public knowledge. But in his household, the servant who babbled, never babbled twice; he left Dornitz quite too suddenly; and those who were wise learned quickly that they lost nothing in wage nor perquisite by being blind and dumb. For Lotzen did not skimp his steward—all he required was skillful service, and that what occurred within the palace must not go beyond the walls. Nevertheless, in conduct, he was not the habitual libertine and rone,—the contrary was, in truth, the fact—but he proposed to have the opportunity to do as he liked when the fancy moved him—and to have no carping moralist prying over him and then retailing his misdeeds with unctuous smirks of pious horror. Not that he cared a centime for their horrors or their prayers, but because it were not well to irritate unduly the king, by doing which he might not countenance, if brought formally to his attention—though the duke was well aware that Frederick troubled himself not at all how he went to the devil, nor when, save that the quicker he went the better.

And so it was, that he had not hesitated to bring with him the woman of raven hair and dead-white cheek, and to install her in the gorgeous suite in the west wing of the Ferida, where others, as frail but far less fair, had been before her—and the world never the wiser—just as now it was not the wiser as to Madaline Spencer's presence. The time was not yet for her to show herself, and in the meantime she had remained secluded; she was too well known in Dornitz to escape recognition; and even Lotzen dared not, at this exigency, so spurn public sentiment as to sponsor the adventuress whom he had procured to pose as wife to the Archduke Armand.

She had come with him to the capital with deep misgiving, and only after much urging and jeweled caresses; though not the least of the inducements was the hope of annoying the Princess Dehra—for whom she had conceived the most violent hate. By herself it would, of course, have been a fatuously foolish hate, but with Lotzen, and under the peculiar situation existing at court, there was a chance—and it was this chance she meant to play for and to seize. And besides, it promised the excitement and ample financial returns that were the mainsprings of her existence.

And though it fretted her beyond measure to dawdle in idleness and tiresome inaction, even in the luxury of the Ferida, yet she endured it with amazing equanimity; and amused herself, the while, by flirting with the Duke's friends, when the duke was not in presence—and sometimes when he was. And then, when he sulked or stormed, a soft arm would slip around his neck, and a pair of red lips smile close to his face; and, presently, he was caressing the one, and pleading for the others—and there was peace, and on her terms. The marvel of it all, was how she held him—as no woman had ever held him hitherto; she made no pretense of love, nor tried for it from him—a pleasant camaraderie was all she gave, and all she asked for; favor free today, favor cold tomorrow; elusive as a moonbeam; fickle as the wind; tempting and alluring as a vestal; false and faithless as the Daughter of the Foam.

And though Lotzen knew it—and knew it well—for she had told him frankly what she was and what she lived for, yet her fascinations negated her words; while her indifference as to whether she stayed or went—and which he was thoroughly aware was not assumed—only captivated him the more, who had been used to easy conquest and clinging hearts.

(To be Continued Next Week.)

Consolidation of five eastern railroads has been approved by the directors of the systems. The grouping of the lines in accordance with the Esch-Cummins bill seems under way, and should make for economy in operation.



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CHAPTER XII.
The Sole Survivor.
Ferida palace, the residence of