

Secrets of the Courts of Europe

An Old Ambassador's Revelations of the Inner History of Famous Episodes Heretofore Cloaked in Mystery

Chronicles by ALLEN UPWARD

THE HONOR OF AN EMPRESS

"This is a trivial affair," commented the ambassador, as he laid down the newspaper in which he had been reading an account of one of M. de Rochefort's numerous duels. "I do not wonder that you English amuse yourselves with these comedies, which reflect little honor on France. Nevertheless, let me tell you that, when we please, we can make of the duel something very different; that is to say, an affair of life and death."

"Without doubt," I answered, tossing aside my own copy of the *Matin*—we were in the smoking room of the *Cercle des Etrangers*—"but your press should not give such importance to these farces."

The ambassador brushed this observation aside with a wave of his hand. "It is the too great facility with which these affairs are arranged that has involved them in ridicule," he said, pursuing his own line of thought. "It is when a crime has been committed which is truly worthy of death, and yet which, from its nature, is beyond the reach of laws, that the duel becomes a sacred resource, indispensable in the interests of mankind."

"And are there such occasions, then?" I responded, in order to see what was in his excellency's mind.

"I have at all events known of one," he returned gravely, as he began to roll a cigarette.

"I cannot recall the exact date at which I was accredited to the court of St. James', but it must have been at least twenty-five years ago. I had come to Great Britain with a sincere desire to win the confidence of the brave English people; and knowing that in your country even politics receives less consideration than what you call 'sport,' I resolved to prove myself a huntsman. Accordingly I bought myself horses and went out to hunt the fox."

"The hunt of which I became a member was at that time the most aristocratic in the world, made so by the patronage of an illustrious personage whose name I shall not mention. Her imperial majesty had formed the habit of coming over to England during the season of the chase, under a strict incognito, and attended by only a small suite, in order to take part in this sport. It was in this way that I obtained the privilege of an acquaintance which I shall always look back upon as my most cherished remembrance."

"Among the members of her majesty's suite at this time was a certain Baron Magratz, who filled the post of private secretary and comptroller of the household. You will understand, of course, that my intercourse with the empress was on the most respectful footing, but it was not long before I discovered that this baron, of whom I saw a good deal, was a dangerous, insolent man, quite unworthy of the confidence reposed in him by his august mistress."

"So acutely did I realize this that it became a question with me whether the favor extended to me by that noble and unsuspecting lady did not cast upon me the obligation of warning her against this man's presumption. While I was still in doubt an incident occurred which rendered it unnecessary for me to speak."

"One morning, when we were engaged in waiting outside a small covert for the fox to appear, I observed Magratz ride up to the empress and point with his hand, as if persuading her that the beast was about to emerge from a point further on. She turned her horse, and they rode off together round a corner of the wood. Troubled by some vague presentiment of mischief, I at once gave rein to my horse and followed."

"I got round the corner just in time to perceive what took place. The baron had stooped forward, with an air of undue confidence, and was apparently addressing some remark to the empress when all at once I saw her majesty rein in her horse, lift up the riding whip she held in her hand and draw it swiftly across his face."

"Magratz started with a violence which caused his horse to rear. What he would have done next I cannot say, but luckily at that moment he caught sight of me. The empress had already turned, and she rode back past me, the angry gleam in her eyes relaxing into a gracious smile as she acknowledged my respectful salute."

"The baron followed at a walk, and as he came up to me I observed on his face a narrow streak of red, crossing from the right ear to the mouth. 'Stung, doubtless, by my indignant look, he checked his horse and addressed me with bitter emphasis: 'I congratulate you M. l'Ambassadeur, on your good fortune.' (The scoundrel spoke in French—no doubt for the sake of the double meaning.) 'You have seen how a member of a family which is six hundred years old is treated by one of these royalties. We others are not of the same clay, you perceive. A Magratz is no more to them than the ground beneath their feet. But perhaps this chapter will have a sequel.'

"I disdained to make any answer, and he passed on, with a wicked smile, and rode away out of sight. 'The next day I heard that he had quitted England under the displeasure of the empress, and some years passed before I was again reminded of his existence.' The ambassador stopped and flicked his cigarette ash into the fireplace before us with much dexterity. 'It was in — that I next met with my baron.' His excellency checked himself abruptly and appeared to be overwhelmed with confusion at having allowed this name to escape him. I was careful to show that I had not heard it. 'You met him, where did you say?' I asked languidly. 'In the dominions of the emperor whose illustrious consort I have spoken of,' replied the ambassador, swiftly recovering himself. 'I had just been appointed to the charge of our embassy in the imperial capital, and it was at a state ball given in honor of the crown prince's birthday that I recognized Magratz again. 'He was moving about among the guests with the assured manner of one who held a recognized position at court. He wore on his breast the cross of the order of St. Luke, the second order in the empire, and everyone appeared to treat him with marked distinction. But what attracted my notice particularly was a young girl of extraordinary beauty, whom he was escorting through the ballroom, and who clung to his arm with a delicious shyness. You know that I am not easily moved by the sex; picture the fascination of this damsel, therefore, when I tell you that I had hard work to refrain from going up to the baron and soliciting an introduction. 'While I was wondering who she could be, and how Magratz had contrived to regain the imperial favor, I observed a movement in the crowd through which the pair was straying. The bystanders fell back, and a young man suddenly came through, a young man with heavy features and bloodshot, rolling eyes, who was dressed in a rich uniform blazing with the stars of a dozen royal orders. It was the crown prince. 'The prince, whose leaden face flushed with pleasure on catching sight of the couple, greeted Magratz in a style of much intimacy, and eagerly took possession of his exquisite partner, whom he led off through the apartments out of my sight. 'Magratz stood looking after them with an expression of dark and furtive satisfaction. Then he turned round, and for the first time caught my eye. He bowed with a polite, almost cordial air, and advanced towards me through the throng. 'Permit me to welcome you to my country, M. l'Ambassadeur,' he said, extending his hand, which I accepted with reluctance. 'What little influence I may possess here, and especially with his imperial highness, is entirely at your service. 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'Well might Magratz triumph in such a possibility. I could see only one thing to advise, and even now I do not see how I could have taken any different view. 'You must arrange a marriage for his imperial highness without delay,' I said with firmness. 'Let him be dispatched at once to some court where there is a princess of suitable age, and ordered not to return till the betrothal is an accomplished fact. 'Ah, how profound is the instinct of a woman! Her majesty immediately replied: 'But I dread the effect of a loveless marriage on my son. I know too well — ' The ambassador broke off short at this interesting point, and began coughing with violence. The cigarette smoke seemed to have got into his excellency's throat. 'But I weary you with this long conversation,' he observed, as soon as the coughing had subsided. 'Enough that this venerated personage placed entire confidence in me. 'Within a week of our conversation

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The bystanders fell back, and a young man suddenly came through, a young man with heavy features and bloodshot, rolling eyes, who was dressed in a rich uniform blazing with the stars of a dozen royal orders. It was the crown prince. 'The prince, whose leaden face flushed with pleasure on catching sight of the couple, greeted Magratz in a style of much intimacy, and eagerly took possession of his exquisite partner, whom he led off through the apartments out of my sight. 'Magratz stood looking after them with an expression of dark and furtive satisfaction. Then he turned round, and for the first time caught my eye. He bowed with a polite, almost cordial air, and advanced towards me through the throng. 'Permit me to welcome you to my country, M. l'Ambassadeur,' he said, extending his hand, which I accepted with reluctance. 'What little influence I may possess here, and especially with his imperial highness, is entirely at your service. I trust you will allow me, within the next few days, the pleasure of paying my respects to you at the embassy. 'While I murmured my formal acknowledgments I could not take my eyes off his face. It was doubtless an illusion, but I thought I could distinctly perceive a faint purple mark where I had seen the whip of the empress descend. 'M. de Magratz no doubt divined my thoughts, or rather they were conveyed to him without words, by that subtle process for which science has not yet invented a suitable name. He bit his lip and permitted himself an ill-bred remark: 'To a man of your excellency's well-known discretion it would be an impertinence to recommend silence with regard to certain incidents of the past. 'I bowed, but with coldness, and changed the subject by complimenting him on the beauty of the young girl whose arm he had just relinquished. 'Ah! that is my niece,' he observed, with affected carelessness. 'She is an orphan whom I have brought up. The crown prince is good enough to interest himself in her, but of course the difference in their ranks is too great for it to be any more than a passing fancy. 'He pronounced these last words with a fatherly air which did not impose upon me. I even fancied I detected in them a veiled allusion to the circumstances of our last meeting. 'I turned on my heel, feeling strangely disturbed, and passed on through the rooms. The crown prince and his charming partner were nowhere to be seen. 'The ambassador paused. His cigarette was smoked out, and he proceeded to roll himself a fresh one. 'Catching sight in the crowd of my friend the little Count Messana of the Italian legation, I resolved to question him. The count is a most remarkable man. He is the greatest repository of scandal in the whole of Europe, and, as his tongue never spares man or woman, he is immensely popular and goes everywhere. 'I think I have heard of the count,' I remarked. 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