

A Modern Mercenary.

BY E. & H. HERON.

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Synopsis of Pleading Chapters.
Maassu, a little duchy in Europe, which has maintained her independence because of the jealousies of the large surrounding countries, seems about to be swallowed up. Germany is represented as beyond the capital, by the shrewd statesman, Baron von Elmur. England's influence is strong and Major Counselor, a young Englishman, much. France and Russia are also playing the diplomatic game. At the time that the duke of Sagan, a young Englishman, who has served several years in the Maassu frontier service, is ordered to resign his commission, when Seldorf, the chancellor and "man of the hour," sends for him and makes him a gentleman of the Guard. Rallywood meets Valerie Seldorf, the chancellor's daughter. The gentlemen of the Guard object to the appointment of the Englishman, Unzlar, a leader and a soldier for Valerie's hand, arranged for the duke's hearing, which she has shot and, with his companions, is overcome by the duke's men. Valerie escapes to the castle at the palace ball over which the young Englishman with congratulations. Counselor Sagan, great interest in Rallywood and invites him to Castle Sagan with a party. Von Elmur plots with Seldorf in behalf of the duke to disband the Guard. At the castle Valerie offends the duke. Sagan, fearing that the women will spoil the duke's wishes to cause the death of Valerie and his wife, Von Elmur will not consent because he is a gentleman of the Guard, and still believes he can carry out his plan with Seldorf. Meantime, the duke, Unzlar, Colendorp and Rallywood, who are disposed of, Von Elmur, Unzlar and Rallywood, who Valerie, Count Sagan, foresees the danger of the young Englishman and warns him. Colendorp refuses to be a traitor to the duke and is murdered by Sagan in the presence of Von Elmur. The followers of Sagan attack the Guard in the duke's apartments. The duke is overpowered, but Major Counselor in disguise as the duke appears and the whole affair is a great success. Sagan does not dare to carry out his present plot, since Germany, Russia and England would know the facts. Count Sagan and Valerie escape death from a pre-arranged runaway and Rallywood finds them badly frightened at a frontier town. The countess attempts to humble Valerie, but Rallywood turns the tables by declaring his love for Valerie. Sagan then hastens away to Revonde before an explanation can be made. Von Elmur, who has been behind the Maassu, Rallywood is sent to Kofn Ford to take charge of the prison. The unknown prisoner turns out to be Major Counselor.

CHAPTER XIV.

A Question of Two Moralities.
The road toward the blockhouse ran along the river bank past the Kofn ford. They went slowly on together through the stary, windy night, Rallywood with his hands on the bridle and the wounded man holding limply to the reins.

Counselor, with an unaccustomed warfare in his heart—rage and the pity of it working together—stared into space across the leaping river.

As the two men drew near the ford they saw the dim figure of a horseman riding down the bank on the opposite side, with the evident intention of crossing. The approaches to the ford were flooded, for the angry water fretted out its banks at such times and deepened into dangerous swirls over the crossing place.

Rallywood checked the horse to shout and signal to the man that the ford was impassable, but his voice was drowned by the harsh-throated noises of the night. Weak as was the starlight, something of the loose, reckless swing in the saddle of Rallywood that the rider was Anthony Unzlar.

It was now evident that Unzlar saw Rallywood for in answer to the latter's signs that he must make for the shallows lower down. Unzlar waved some object over his head as if to call attention to it. The sick of the current was fast drawing him away, but with another strong effort he got the horse's head round; they heard his faint shout upon the wind, then the words came more clearly:

"Carry them on—Seldorf!" He swung something forward, a pale caught and hurled it on the rocks at Rallywood's feet.

When they looked again Unzlar had disappeared.

Hurrying to the blockhouse, Rallywood sent off some troopers to Unzlar's assistance; then with some difficulty set his prisoner, who was stiff and dizzy, on his feet and supported him to the room where Mme. de Sagan and Valerie had rested on the night of the snow storm.

But he scarcely yet knew the worst. Presently the chancelor's foot came beyond a look. He said, "What does it mean?" The glance from under the overhanging gray brows had remained his fire.

"My orders are simple enough. I am to keep you here until tomorrow afternoon at 3 o'clock."

"By doing so you will ruin Maassu as a free state and bring a most serious defeat upon British policy," Counselor's voice was rasping. "Are you prepared for that?"

Both men were strenuous, and bred deep into the bone of each were the same dominant qualities.

"I am prepared to carry out my orders," answered Rallywood; "I had them practically from the duke himself."

"The duke is of the same mind in which I found him at the castle, though he may be forced to dissemble," asserted Counselor, then with a twist he sat up as his glance fell upon the square dark object lying on the table between them. "John Rallywood, do you know what that is?"

"The dispatches thrown to me by Unzlar."

solider of Maassu and as such my public honor has first claim."

It was a simple rendering of a tremendous problem, but it served for Rallywood.

"There—" said Counselor, but Rallywood was young and strong and more active than the major.

"Confound you!" Counselor felt back a step or two, breathing hard. There are some situations which by their elemental force destroy all other emotions. The situation at Kofn guardhouse was one of these. The point at issue between these two men pierced to the bedrock of national loyalty. Perhaps Blivinski was right. Love of country was part of their physical equipment, yet by the irony of circumstances they were pitted against each other.

"Will you give me your parole?" asked Rallywood with his back to the door. Counselor drew out a big watch.

"For fifteen minutes," he said. "It is now half-past 9; at forty-five minutes past I shall have my own Great free to do what I can. You understand? In the meantime we will talk."

Counselor put his watch back into his pocket. Rallywood stood up.

"I cannot argue," he said, "but major, you will believe me when I say that I see my duty plainly. I refuse!"

"I have had a great regard for you," replied Counselor, slowly, "but if you were my own son, by heaven, I'd blow your brains out tonight! Give me those dispatches."

There was a rapid movement and the gleam of a pistol barrel in his hand. "Thank God!" It was not more than the faintest whisper from Rallywood as he sprang at his companion.

But there was no report, only an ominous click as Counselor flung the unloaded revolver in Rallywood's face with a bitter word.

"It was not loaded."

Hardly had they closed when the door was opened and a couple of men supported Unzlar into the room. The water ran in streams from his clothes to the floor, while he stood and stared at the two combatants, who had fallen apart.

"I suppose they sent you to meet me, Rallywood," he said in English. "It is lucky, for I'm done! You must carry those dispatches on without delay, for they must reach the chancelor at the earliest possible moment. Go; there is no time to lose!"

Rallywood related to Counselor, "This gentleman is my prisoner. You will keep him here until further orders. Meantime I will ride on with these to Revonde."

Counselor and Unzlar remained together, but no word passed between them till out in the windy night they heard the beat of hoofs as Rallywood rode away on his mission.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Love's Handicap.
As Rallywood galloped steadily through the night under the shrinking moon, with the tea behind him and the pearl-gray road weaving away into the level distance ahead, it happened that the two women of whom he must have had some thoughts during that lonely ride met and spoke together.

"Valerie, I called for you to go with me to the Apsenfelds' reception, because I have a question to ask you," began Isolde at once when the door of the carriage was closed.

The passing lamps shone varyingly upon their faces as they passed through the lighted streets and Mme. de Sagan looked at her companion.

"Where is Captain Rallywood?" she asked abruptly.

His name had not passed between them since the interview at the blockhouse.

"I cannot tell you. I don't know," said Valerie, coldly.

"O, my dear child, all is fair in love and in war. Why be so dreadfully cross with me still?"

"Is it necessary to recur to the subject at all?"

"Will you never forgive me, I wonder?" Valerie looked steadily back into the lover's face, where the underlying spirit of mockery was transmuted into an innocent playfulness like a child's.

"On the contrary, I thank you," Valerie said, "for humbling him? Valerie, you are very happy!"

"Happy!" Valerie could not forego the very womanly triumph, "very happy! And you made me so."

"But," said Isolde with some perplexity, "you would have it that he did not mean what he said."

In her heart she thought Valerie's great goose for making any such disclaimer. Valerie has knowledge of no tongue whereby to interpret pride.

"No, but it showed me what he was."

"I wonder how Baron von Elmur would like to hear the future wife was not ashamed to declare her love for another man," retorted Isolde.

"I mean to tell him."

"No, no, Valerie, don't!" exclaimed Mme. de Sagan, whose weakness exuded very often in a sort of kindheartedness. "I should not tell him. Such a confidence is apt to turn sour in a husband's memory. You may trust me—I will keep your secret."

Valerie smiled scornfully.

"But I can keep a secret! For instance, I want to hear what Captain Rallywood has to say about the count's hatred for me, also," she nodded her head slowly, "and also our dear friend Baron von Elmur."

Valerie was startled.

"Baron von Elmur?" she repeated.

"O, you quite mistake the matter. The ill-feeling has nothing to do whatever with you or with me. The count and von Elmur hate him on very different grounds. Everything appears to interest men nowadays but ourselves!" she smiled sadly.

"Because he is English, perhaps?"

"Well, yes, it has something to do with it. You remember that last night at the castle? I conclude it was Jack who spoiled their plans when Simon and the baron went to the duke's apartments."

"The count and Baron von Elmur together? What did they go for?"

The question dried up the little stream of babble.

"How should I know? But there was a fight—I'd back Jack against most people! That is one reason I—liked him. We heard the shots, and though I was horribly frightened I told you none of the particulars, yet I knew all. Speak to me, Valerie! What are you thinking of?"

"I was thinking of Captain Rallywood," answered the girl at last, offering the excuse Isolde had nothing to do whatever with as true. "I did not know he had so many enemies. But he is not in Revonde?"

"No, he has not been at the barracks since yesterday afternoon. I sent him an invitation. You never give me credit for sincerity, but I am steady in doing with it. I do not mean to drop him because he talked all that nonsense at Kofn Ford. You boasted about M. Seldorf's power—make him use it now to save Rallywood. I begin to believe that you are really as cold as you pretend to be, Valerie, you care so little!

ing, and there is something I must say to you before he comes."

She clasped her hands nervously, the bare shapely hands with their gleaming rings, and Rallywood watched her and felt as if he were dreaming.

"Captain Rallywood, I want to thank you. I can never thank you enough for that night at Kofn Ford. I understood—pray believe I understood it—and I think you are the noblest gentleman alive!"

Rallywood did not hesitate. There was one thing Valerie should know and be certain of in the uncertain future.

"Give me a moment, mademoiselle," he exclaimed, detaining her. "I see you do not quite understand. I could not expect you to understand. But now—now that I am leaving Maassu, I must tell you the truth. Perhaps you will believe it some day. I am proud—"

"I knew it, and yet you—O, say no more! For my sake you stooped to say it. It was not true! But I knew that."

He took her hand between his own in a firm, strong clasp.

"Listen, mademoiselle. It was true! Since first I saw you it always has been true."

"I remember!" she said, breathlessly. She could not help saying it.

"Do you?" he answered. The temptation to wander a little was too sweet. "You wore this cloak"—he touched it softly with his fingers, then laid his hand over hers deliberately, in the quiet, confident way in which he did everything, and which she had grown to love—"and ever since I have car-

ried the glove you despised. And, though this is my goodbye, I will carry it—always."

"But—but—"

"Oh, I don't ask you to believe me now," he said, bitterly, "I am not noble, mademoiselle. I was only too proud to say I loved you that night, as—with another little smile—"I was only too proud not to say it before."

Valerie raised her face, and her eyes were full of light.

"Then it was true—thank God!"

But Rallywood, though he saw the purpose of her speech, would not understand its significance. He led her toward the door by which she had entered.

"You must go, mademoiselle. I—dare not keep you with me longer. Goodbye, and may God be with you, Valerie!"

She stopped suddenly and kissed the hand that held hers.

It was a little necessary make-believe before the numerous servants. How far it deceived them may be faintly guessed when one considers any one's secrets in relation to any one's servants.

"Man designs his own game," thought Rallywood as he followed the servant into whose charge he was given, "or he is forced to stand out and circumstances play it for him. In the years all is one."

Whichever way the issue of this night's work turned, Maassu and Valerie must both pass from his life forever. The one supreme obstacle which lurks always beside the mercenary's path had arisen for her advance at last.

Valerie opened the door softly. She was trembling and afraid, but she would not be outdone in generosity by Rallywood. She had determined to thank him for the words spoken at Kofn Ford, and to show him how entirely she comprehended their chivalrous intention. But when her eyes fell upon him all thought of self faded. He was standing midway between the gleaming wine and glass of the side table and the flickering glow of the open stove, upright and stately, as he ever appeared to her, but in his new attitude her sharpened senses perceived a suggestion of disheartenment and solitude.

Swept away by the feeling of the moment, she crossed the room to his side and laid her hand upon his arm.

"What is it? Something has happened," she said.

Rallywood looked down at her. The beautiful eyes like starlit darkness, her clear-headed loveliness, the soft, dusky curls above her brow, her girlish reserve and reticences, all her sweet, unapproachable personality enhanced to pain the knowledge that he was looking his last upon them.

"Nothing to distress you, mademoiselle, because M. Seldorf knows all about it."

"Then tell me; I know so much already."

"I wish I could, but I think his excellency might prefer to tell you himself."

"Is it good news, then? Major Counselor has succeeded? Then why are you so sad?"

"Sad, mademoiselle?" he answered with a smile. "Men often look sad when they are only hungry and dog-tired."

"Then eat," she said. "Let me give you some wine."

She drew him to a table and poured out a glass of wine.

"To the success of Maassu and of England," she said. Then touching it with her lips in the graceful fashion of Maassu, she handed it to him.

"I, too, am proud," she whispered. And the door closed upon her.

CHAPTER XXVII.
The Man of the Hour.

"Seldorf is the man of the hour," Counselor once said to Rallywood, and the major's sayings had a trick of lingering in the memory. With the chancelor there still remained the key to the situation. He was implicated in the conspiracy, but he had less to gain and far more to lose than the others. A dangerous condition and one possible of development.

All this passed in a flash through Rallywood's mind as the opposite door opened to admit M. Seldorf, who replied stiffly to Rallywood's bow.

"I was not prepared to see you this evening," began Seldorf.

"I have brought the dispatches, your excellency," replied Rallywood, taking the packet from his pocket, but continuing to hold it in his hand.

Seldorf eyed him.

"From whom?"

"From Lieutenant Unzlar?"

"From Lieutenant Unzlar?" Seldorf repeated tentatively. "And your prisoner? The man whom I ordered you to keep at the blockhouse?"

The chancelor half expected to hear that Counselor was also in Revonde, and that Rallywood with an unassuming, but un-speakable effrontery had called to explain his own view of the matter.

"Unzlar is with him—with Major Counselor at Kofn Ford. Unzlar was unable to

seller did not even take the precaution of placing it under another cover. He recognized it at the blockhouse."

"It seems to me then that you had a decision to make at the blockhouse?"

"Yes," said Rallywood simply. But it was not a subject to bear discussion.

"As a soldier of Maassu you decided rightly," Seldorf misjudged Rallywood for the moment; it crossed his mind that this was a necessary after all and to be bought.

"But as a man I now wish to resign my commission."

Seldorf raised his brows.

"But why? At the very moment when you have proved your faithfulness and your zeal? When we owe you a recognition of the high qualities?"

"I want nothing, your excellency, but to get out from this house a free man," returned Rallywood coldly.

"Reconsider your words, Captain Rallywood."

"Even if other difficulties had not arisen," went on Rallywood, "I may remind your excellency that a soldier's oath does not cover robbery and assassination."

Seldorf was, and looked, astonished.

"I don't understand you," he said gravely.

"I tell me what you mean."

"I found Major Counselor alone and unconscious in a single carriage that had been sent rolling down the incline on the line where the outgoing mail train could not fail to collide with it. The inference is clear. Some one wished to make an end of him in a railway accident. But the plan was a curiously stupid one, for nothing could satisfactorily explain Major Counselor's presence there, since it was well known to the British legation in Revonde that he was entering, not leaving Maassu."

Seldorf stood silent. Here was another ill-considered amendment born of Count Sagan's blundering brain.

"It is a very strange story," he said at length. "Had the train come into collision with the carriage which you assert was on the down line—"

"The troops from Kofn and the railway people at Alfau can prove that."

"The mail might have been derailed, with no one to tell what loss of life."

"Count Simon holds life cheap," said Rallywood. "No life that stands in his way can be safe. Not even the life of Mile. Seldorf."

The chancelor was moved for once.

"You are out of your senses!" he said sternly.

"It is true!"

Both men looked round. Valerie had entered.

"Father, you must hear me before you—before you—"

She glanced at Rallywood and stopped.

"Go, Valerie; I have nothing to do with these things."

Seldorf met her as she came toward him.

"You must hear me before you—before you—"

She was clinging to his arm.

"To kill you?" If I thought that was true—if I could believe he meant to injure you—"

The chancelor raised his eyes. At this moment—diplomatically—he was superb. He had an air of sagacious decision, an air of holding a master stroke in reserve, whereas he was in reality merely retreating to a negative position to wait upon events.

"Tell me the story," he said.

"There is nothing further to tell," replied Rallywood. "Mademoiselle has given you the main facts for her Maassu would today be a province of Germany, in fact if not in name."

"I have been misinformed and deceived in an incomprehensible manner," the chancelor said emphatically. There was still the matter of Counselor's dispatches. Nothing was now to be gained by keeping them, whereas, by giving them back to the old diplomatist, Maassu was sure to profit for the time at least. The difficulty was to get rid of the packet without loss of prestige to himself.

"Now as to Major Counselor's dispatches," he added doubtfully.

"You will send them back to him," said Valerie eagerly.

"You cannot see the difficulty of my position," the chancelor laid his hand upon

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her shoulder. "To be frank with you, and in confidence, Captain Rallywood, I have not been ignorant that an understanding existed between Count Sagan and the Baron von Elmur. I have even been obliged to countenance it to a certain extent. As you know, they are aware that these dispatches have been sent to me. If I use them as my daughter suggests, I need scarcely point out that trouble must ensue, since I, more or less, represent Maassu. Now we cannot afford to offend Germany. It only awaits a pretext to hurl down its army of occupation upon us. Had I never had those dispatches the way might have been easier."

His glance at Rallywood held a large reproach.

"But, father, in honesty and justice."

"It is a case of private justice as opposed to national necessity. If Captain Rallywood had sacrificed his public to his private honor, if he had chosen to prefer his country's cause to his own, I should have been proud."

Rallywood understood.

"No one knows I am here," he said.

"Ah, true!"

"No one need ever know where the dispatches have been. In four hours they shall be with Major Counselor at the British legation."

"If you, Captain Rallywood, will bear the whole responsibility that would simplify the matter. Otherwise it is war," Seldorf looked meaningfully at Rallywood as he spoke.

But Valerie was not deceived.

"Not that! Count Sagan's visit to the duke's rooms in the middle of the night with Baron von Elmur. I—we, Isolde and I—heard the shots. You do not know it, but there was a plot. Your life is not safe. Captain Rallywood is right; no life that stands in Count Sagan's way is safe! And you on whom the state depends—you who alone can uphold her liberty—you are the first they will try to destroy! He hates you, else why should he try to kill me?"

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