THE RETURN OF THE COLONEL OF KOEPENICK

The life, death, resurrection and further adventures of the great international joker as given to his friend

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IF WILHELM VOIGT — the international joker, the fascinating old adventurer who is known to the world as "The Colonel of Koepenick" — had been given the necessary education, he might have refrained from acting on his grotesque impulses, and using them to better advantage in fiction, have become a rival of Dumas, Turgenieff or Joseph Conrad. But he was born to poverty, and assigned to a cobbler's bench as soon as he was old enough to ply a needle, and to tap nails into the soles of old shoes. Cobbling! A great destiny for a man of imagination!

But the life had its compensations. It gave him the leisure to think, and he developed a humorously cynical attitude toward humanity. Few readers will fail to remember how, six years ago, at the age of fifty-eight, he dressed himself in a colonel's uniform, went to Koepenick, and arrested the burgomaster and the treasurer of that highly respectable suburb of Berlin, on charges that they were too frightened to question. Immediately, he became the news sensation of the day. He gained nothing from this bizarre proceeding, except a term in jail. But he had freed himself from the shackles of the conventions that he hated, and thereafter his life became a romance unparalleled in the pages of the novelists. It is still an astounding adventure; and, on his authority, I say that before long he will again spring to the center of the stage as the hero of a world drama of his own devising.

For, in spite of the fact that "The Colonel of Koepenick" died and was officially buried in London this summer; in spite of the fact that his body was identified and his obituary printed in thousands of newspapers; I assert that he has returned and is in New York today. He has confided his memoirs to my care; he has made me his biographer to the American public; and the following is a true account of my relationship with him, and of his career as known to me.

I Meet the "Colonel"

I FIRST met Herr Voigt while I was living in Berlin as a political refugee, and acting as the correspondent of a Russian newspaper. Immediately after the Koepenick incident, I visited him in jail and obtained his story. I, incidentally, made a friend of the then broken-down old cobbler. His personality interested me immensely; for I perceived that he was by no means the madman, or crank, that he was supposed to be. He had worked out a philosophy that, if based upon false premises, was nevertheless sincere. Money — or, rather, the commercial spirit — he believed to be the curse of the world; and, as he could not take his age seriously, he was unable to resist the temptation to flout its prejudices.

"I am a born adventurer and social rebel," he said once. "From the stolid German point of view, the adventures that appeal to me are crimes; and accordingly the law of my native land has dubbed me with the name of 'Criminal.' Much as I despise the unjust label, I have no choice but to bear it."

Even as a boy, Voigt played many extraordinary pranks. His brain was always full of schemes, and he seems to have had no difficulty in planning the details. This so alarmed his father, who was himself engaged in the family trade of cobbling at Weissenee, that he made an apprentice of him without delay.

"The cobbler must stick to his last. It is an honest profession, and will give a dreamer every opportunity to build air castles." Thus spoke old Voigt; and the divergence of temperaments is illustrated by the "Colonel's" statement in later years. "My youth was a period of prosaic vegetation," he said to me. "I worked hard from early morning until late at night, and with what reward in view? To earn my living and to learn a trade that would insure cabbage and sausages when I was old. And in the end, when they buried me, a few of my friends and customers would say: 'Wilhelm Voigt was a good old cobbler; he did honest work and made low charges. Peace be to his soul!' The mere idea of such a career filled me with horror."

Berlin being a big city that offered possibilities of romance, he moved there; but in a short time he realized that a cobbler's boy would hardly run across any fabulous adventures. He, therefore, commenced to dream about conjuring up romance on his own account.

The basement shop in which he worked faced an old church with a small graveyard behind it. Voigt saw the pastor every day, as he went down the street; and, in time, he got to know the members of the congregation. His employer was a convert of the old pastor, and took his religion seriously. It was a queer sect, with a belief in supernatural manifestations. Although Voigt's employer pretended not to admit that ghosts could exist in these matter-of-fact days — especially in a busy city like Berlin — he was ready to swallow any tale of one having been seen in the countryside, or in a graveyard. This gave the young trickster an idea.

He made an instrument somewhat resembling a bag-pipe that, when properly manipulated, gave out a weird and ghastly sound. Armed with this, he concealed himself in the graveyard of the old church one dark and rainy night. It was early autumn; and, in spite of the rain, many of the windows in the row of houses across the way were half open. He began to play on his bag-pipe, and the music roused strange echoes about the old church. The startled faces of the householders appeared at the windows. He saw the bearded face of the pastor and the faces of the members of his family. Dogs barked frantically, and the yowling of cats added to the pandemonium.

Voigt stopped his music at the right moment, and vanished through a rear gate behind the shrubbery. He had hardly reached the street before he saw people with lanterns in their hands exploring the graveyard. The next day, his employer told him with bulging eyes of the ghost that had disturbed the neighborhood. The hoax was kept up, night after night, to the terror of the citizens and the cynical amusement of the perpetrator; until, at last, Voigt realized that there might be money in the game. He redoubled his efforts, and created an actual reign of terror in that district of Berlin. Then, he circulated mysterious notes, to the effect that the ghost would be satisfied if under the headstone of a certain grave in the churchyard, there should be placed a cross of gold, a silver tablet and three golden wedding rings, accompanied by the written words: "Leave us alone! Amen!" He craftily added that this offering was to be kept under the headstone only on Monday night. During the balance of the week it might rest under a brass candlestick in the southwestern corner of the church.

He did not believe that the citizens could be so easily gulled; but to his surprise, the very next Monday night he found the trinkets under the headstone. He promptly took them to a pawn-shop, and realized fifty marks on them.

"I felt like a millionaire," said the "Colonel," in recounting his experiences to me, "and immediately decided that, thereafter, I would live by my wits. That there was anything crooked in such methods I did not admit then, and do not admit now. What is commercial competition but the preying of the strong upon the weak? Compared with the great wrongs that are done under cover of the law by persons in high places, my tricks were innocent. I only devised ways to fool the fools."

Unfortunately, from Herr Voigt's point of view, his further conjuring up of specters did not prove financially successful. He was detected, and sentenced to serve six months in the penitentiary. After that, he seems to have quieted down, and to have pursued his trade of cobbling until his fifty-eighth year, without getting a chance to make Society understand that he was an arch satirist of its conventions.

Then, out of a clear sky came the Koepenick adventure; and its details shall be told in his own words, as translated from the original German of his memoirs.

Voigt's Own Story of Koepenick

"I RESOLVED," he writes, "to expose that most absurd of German absurdities — the slavish respect of a uniform that has turned a race of poets and thinkers into militaristic tyrants. After being released from jail for a petty offence, I earned enough at my cobbling to buy, second-hand, the uniform of a captain of the First Foot Guards. This I cleaned and greased until it was nearly as good as new; but I needed a cap, an overcoat and a saber. I worked hard for three weeks longer and saved every penny. My weekly income was only two dollars and fifty cents; but I scraped a dollar together and bought a cap. Later, I purchased, for two dollars, the cast-off overcoat of a colonel of a Line regiment. The saber I borrowed from a dealer in theatrical costumes, to whom I stated that I had a friend who was to play the role of a lieutenant in an out-of-town theater, but who lacked a sword. The patchwork character of my uniform was ludicrous. Any army officer would have known in a moment that I was faking. I relied, however, on the fact that the average German citizen stands in such awe of a uniform that no one would dare to suspect me.

"On October 16, 1906, I was ready for action. I placed my military uniform in a grip; and early in the morning left my boarding house, and took the municipal circuit railway to Schoeneberg. The park was deserted, and under cover of the shrubbery I arrayed myself as a colonel. With the change of garments, my personality underwent a singular transformation. I was no longer a poor cobbler, but felt as if I had always belonged to the high and mighty military class. On my return to the railway station, I realized that universal respect was being paid to me. A policeman saluted me with an air of great humility, and

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