

Hope Anthony

Sport Royal, and Other Stories



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Hope A.

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SPORT ROYAL

An Extract from the Journals of Julius Jason, Esquire

CHAPTER I.

The Sequel to the Ball

Heidelberg seems rather a tourist-ridden, hackneyed sort of place to be the mother of adventures. Nevertheless, it is there that my story begins. I had been traveling on the Continent, and came to Heidelberg to pay my duty to the castle, and recruit in quiet after a spell of rather laborious idleness at Homburg and Baden. At first sight I made up my mind that the place would bore me, and I came down to dinner at the hotel, looking forward only to a bad dinner and an early bed. The room was so full that I could not get a table to myself, and, seeing one occupied only by a couple of gentlemanly looking men, I made for it, and took the third seat, facing one of the strangers, a short, fair young man, with a little flaxen mustache and a soldierlike air, and having the other, who was older, dark, and clean-shaved, on my left. The fourth seat was empty.

The two gentlemen returned my bow with well-bred negligence, and I started on my soup. As I finished it, I looked up and saw my companions interchanging glances. Catching my eye, they both looked away in an absent fashion, each the while taking out of his pocket a red silk handkerchief and laying it on the table by him. I turned away for a moment, then suddenly looked again and found their eyes on me, and I fancied that the next moment the eyes wandered from me to the handkerchiefs. I happened to be carrying a red handkerchief myself, and, thinking either that something was in the wind or perhaps that my friends were having a joke at my expense (though, as I said, they looked well-bred men), I took it out of my pocket and, laying it on the table, gazed calmly in front of me, my eyes naturally falling on the fair young man.

He nodded significantly to the older man, and held out his hand to me. I shook hands with him, and went through the same ceremony with the other.

“Ah!” said the young man, speaking in French, “you got her letter?”

I nodded.

“And you are willing?”

The first maxim for a would-be adventurer is always to say “yes” to questions. A “no,” is fatal to further progress.

“Yes,” I answered.

“It will be made worth your while, of course,” he went on.

I thought I ought to resent this suggestion.

“Sir,” I said, “you cannot possibly mean to suggest – ”

The young man laughed pleasantly.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “ladies have their own ways of paying debts. If you don’t like it – ” and he shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh,” said I, smiling, “I misunderstood you.”

“It is, of course,” said the older man, speaking for the first time, and in a loud whisper, “of vital importance that His Royal Highness’ name should not appear.”

This really began to be mysterious and interesting. I nodded.

“That goes without saying,” said the young man. “And you’ll be ready?”

“Ready!” I said. “But when?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Oh, six o’clock to-morrow morning.”

“That’s early hours.”

“Well, you must, you know,” he answered.

“And,” added the older man, “the countess hopes you’ll come to breakfast afterward at ten.”

“I’ll be there, never fear,” said I, “and it’s very kind.”

“Bravo!” said the young man, clapping me on the shoulder (for we had risen from table). “You take it the right way.”

As may be supposed, I was rather puzzled by this time, and decidedly vexed to find I should have to be up so early. Still, the mention of His Royal Highness and the countess decided me to go on for the present; probably the real man – for, unless it were all a mad joke, there must be a real man – would appear in the course of the evening. I only hoped my new friends would, in their turn, take it in the right way when that happened.

“Have you a servant with you?” asked the young man, as we said good-night.

“No,” said I; “I am quite alone.”

“You are a paragon of prudence,” he answered, smiling. “Well, I’ll call you, and we’ll slip out quietly.”

Just as I was getting into bed, the waiter knocked at my door and gave me a note. It bore no address.

“Is it for me?” I asked.

“Yes, sir,” he answered. “You are the gentleman who dined with Herr Vooght and M. Dumergue?”

I supposed I was, and opened the note.

“You are generous and forgiving, indeed,” it said (and said it in English). “What reward will you claim? But do be careful. He is dangerous. – M.”

“The devil!” I exclaimed.

The next morning I was aroused at five o’clock by my two friends.

“Good-morning, Herr Vooght,” said I, looking just between them.

“Good-morning,” answered the older man.

“Now, my dear fellow, come along. There’s a cup of coffee downstairs,” said the other, whom I took to be Dumergue.

After coffee, we got into a close carriage with a pair of horses, and drove two or three miles into the country; my companions said little. Dumergue twice asked in a joking way how I felt, and Vooght puzzled me very much by remarking:

“They are bringing all the necessaries; but I don’t know what they will choose.”

When this was said, Dumergue was humming a tune. He went on for five minutes, and then said, with a touch of scorn:

“My good Vooght, they know our friend’s reputation. They will choose pistols.”

I could not repress a start. No doubt it was stupid of me not to have caught the meaning of this early expedition before, but it really never struck me that our business might be a duel. However, so it seemed, and apparently I was one of the principals. Dumergue noticed my little start.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Do they know my name?” said I.

“My dear friend, could you expect the baron to fight with an unknown man? The challenge had to be in your name.”

I had clearly been the challenger. I was consumed with curiosity to know what the grievance was, and how the countess was concerned in the matter.

“The countess assured us,” said Vooght, “that she had your authority.”

“As fully as if I had been there,” I answered, and Dumergue resumed his tune.

I was sincerely glad that the name of my original had been given, for his reputation for swordsmanship had evidently saved me from a hole in my skin. I was a fair hand with a pistol; but, like most of my countrymen, a mere bungler with the rapier. It was very annoying, though, that my friends’ exaggerated prudence prevented them mentioning my name: it would have been more convenient to know who I was.

I had not long for reflection, for we soon drew up by a roadside inn, and, getting out of the carriage, walked through the house, where we were apparently expected, into a field behind. There were three men walking up and down, and two of them at once advanced to meet Vooght and

Dumergue. I remained where I was, merely raising my hat, and the third man – a big, burly fellow, with a heavy black mustache – followed my example.

This one, no doubt, was the baron. To be frank, he looked a brute, and I had very little hesitation in assuming that the merits of the quarrel must be on my side. I was comforted by this conclusion, as I had no desire to shoot an unoffending person. Preliminaries were soon concluded. I overheard one of the baron's representatives mention the word apology, and add that they would meet us halfway, but Dumergue shook his head decisively. This defiant attitude became Dumergue very well; but I, for my part, should have been open to reason.

The baron and I were placed opposite one another at twelve paces. There were to be two shots – unless, of course, one of us were disabled at the first fire; after that, the seconds were to consider whether the matter need go further.

The word was just about to be given, when to my surprise the baron cried:

“Stop!”

Everyone looked at him in astonishment.

“Before we fire,” he went on, “I wish to ask this gentleman one question. No – I will not be stopped!”

His seconds, who had advanced, fell back before his resolute gesture, and he continued, addressing me:

“Sir, will you do me the honor to answer one question? Are you the person who accompanied – ”

Vooght struck in quickly:

“No names, please!”

The baron bowed, and began again.

“On your honor, sir, are you the gentleman who accompanied the lady in question to the masked ball on the night in question?”

These gentlemen were all diplomatic. I thought I would be diplomatic too.

“Surely this is grossly irregular?” I said, appealing to my supporters.

“I ask for an answer,” said the baron.

“It's nothing but a new insult,” said I.

“I have my reasons, and those gentlemen know them.”

This was intolerable.

“You mean to fight, or you don't, M. le Baron,” said I. “Which is it?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Your master is well served,” he said with a sneer.

His seconds looked bewildered: Vooght bit his nails, and Dumergue swore furiously, and, coming near me, whispered in my ear:

“Shoot straight! Stop his cursed mouth for him!”

I had not the least intention of killing the baron, if I could avoid it without being killed myself; but I thought a slight lesson would improve his manners, and, when the word came, I fired with a careful aim. He evidently meant mischief, for I heard his ball whiz past my ear; I missed him clean, being much out of practice, and, I dare say, rather nervous. I pulled myself together for the second shot, for I saw that my opponent was not to be trifled with, and I should not have been the least surprised to find myself in paradise the next moment. On the word I fired; the baron fell back with a cry, and simultaneously I felt a tingle in my left hand, and the unmistakable warm ooze of blood. The witnesses ran to my opponent, and raised his head. Dumergue turned round to me:

“Are you hurt?”

“A scratch,” I answered, for I found the ball had run up my arm, merely grazing me in its passage.

A hurried consultation followed; then Vooght and Dumergue raised their hats and joined me.

“We had best be off,” said Vooght.

“Is he dead?” I asked.

“No,” said Dumergue, with a little disappointment, I thought. “He’ll get over it; but he’s safe for a week or two. Not a bad shot, colonel!”

So I was a colonel!

“Now,” said Vooght, “we’ll drive back, and send you to the countess.”

I had made up my mind to get away from the place as soon as I could, but my curiosity to see the *causa belli* was too strong, and I said I should be delighted to keep my engagement.

Dumergue smiled significantly, and Vooght hurried us into the carriage. We drove back to the town, and then two or three miles into the country again, till we came to a pretty villa, embowered in trees, and standing some two hundred yards back from the road. There was no drive up to the house, a turf walk forming the passage from the highway. Vooght motioned me to get down.

“Don’t you accompany me?” I asked.

Dumergue smiled again.

“Oh, no!” he said. “Come for us at the hotel, and we’ll all be off by the two o’clock train.”

“Unless you are detained,” added Vooght.

“I shouldn’t be detained, if I were you,” said Dumergue dryly. “Who knows? The baron may die!”

I was quite determined not to be detained, and said so. I was also quite determined not to keep the rendezvous at the hotel, but to slip away quietly by myself. The colonel might arrive at any moment.

I watched my friends drive off, and then walked briskly up to the house. A man in livery met me before I had time to ring.

“Are you the gentleman?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Will you be so kind, sir, as to walk straight in? That door, sir. The countess expects you.”

I had my doubts about that, but I walked in, shutting the door swiftly behind me, lest the servant should hear anything. I thought an explosion not improbable.

The room was dim, close curtains shutting out the growing strength of the sunshine. The air was thick with the scent of flowers that overpowered without quite smothering the appetizing smell rising from a table profusely spread for breakfast. I had entered softly, and had time to take note of the surroundings before I became aware of a tall, slight figure in white, first moving impetuously toward me, then stopping abruptly in surprise. Presumably, this was the countess. Charming as she was, with her open blue eyes, fluffy golden hair, and fresh tints, I wondered from what noble house she sprang. However, the fountains of honor are many, and their streams meander sometimes through very winding channels.

The countess stood and looked at me. I bowed and smiled.

“You are naturally surprised,” I said, in my smoothest tone.

“I was expecting – another gentleman.”

“Yes, I know. I come in his place.”

“In his place?” she repeated, in incredulous tones.

“Yes; in the colonel’s place.”

“Hush!” she exclaimed. “We needn’t mention names.”

It suited me perfectly not to mention names.

“I beg pardon,” I murmured.

“But how is it possible?” she asked. “Do you know what he was to come for?”

“Oh, yes!”

“And he hasn’t come?”

“No.”

She frowned.

“Wouldn’t he come?”

“He couldn’t. So I came.”

“But how did you know anything about it? Did he tell you about the pr – about the affair?”

“No. I only heard – ”

“From him?”

“Yes – that you wanted a champion.”

“Oh, that’s absurd! Why, you never heard of me!”

“Ah, indeed I have!”

“And – did you recognize me under my new name?”

“Your – ”

“My – my title. You know.”

“The – he told me that. Must I confess? I jumped at the chance of serving you.”

“You had never seen me!”

“Perhaps I had seen your photograph.”

She smiled at this, but still looked perturbed.

“Pray don’t be distressed,” said I. “I am very discreet.”

“Oh, I hope so! The prince [she spoke in a whisper] was so urgent about discretion. You haven’t seen him?”

“The prince? No.”

“And – when is it to be?”

“I don’t quite understand.” This was my first truthful remark.

“Why, the duel!”

“Oh, it’s all over!”

“Over!”

“Yes – two hours ago.”

“And the baron? No, forgive me. You! Are you hurt?”

“Not a bit. He’s hurt.”

“Is he dead?” she asked breathlessly.

“I am sorry, countess. Not quite. Was that necessary?”

“Oh, no! Though he deserved it. He insulted me shamefully.”

“Then he did deserve it.”

She went off at a tangent.

“What became of my letter?”

“They gave it to me. You only said for the gentleman who dined with your friends.”

“Then you read it?” she asked, blushing.

“Yes. How I wish I were the rightful owner of it!”

“Why didn’t he come?” she asked again.

“He’s going to write and explain.”

“And you really came because – ”

“May I tell you already? Or have you guessed already?”

She blushed again.

“I don’t see what else the prince could do, you know,” she said. “He ought, of course, never to have gone to the ball at all.”

“Perhaps not,” I answered; “but I suppose he was tempted.”

“Do you think very badly of me?”

“I should think you perfection if – ”

“Well?”

“You would give me some breakfast.”

“Oh, what a shame! You’re starving! And after all you have done! Come, I’ll wait on you.”

My meal was very pleasant. The lady was charming; she satisfied every feeling I had, except curiosity. She was clearly English; equally clearly she was involved with some great people on the Continent. I gathered that the baron had insulted her, when she was with the prince, and the latter could not, whether for state or domestic reasons, espouse the quarrel. So far I got, but no farther.

“What a debt I owe you!” she said, as she led the way after breakfast to the top of a little tower. An awning was spread overhead, and armchairs on the floor. A cool breeze blew, and stirred her hair.

“I am more than paid!”

“Fancy, if you had been hurt!”

“Better I than the colonel!” I suggested.

She darted a smile at me.

“Oh, well,” she said, “you came, and he didn’t. I like you best.”

It was all very charming, but time was flying, and I began to plan a graceful exit.

“You make it hard to go,” I said.

“Yes, I suppose we must go as soon as possible. Herr Vooght said at two o’clock.”

I was startled. Delightful as she was, I hardly reckoned on her being one of the party.

“The prince will be so pleased to see you,” she went on.

“Will he?”

“Why, you will have my recommendation!”

“I’m sure it must be all-powerful!”

“But we have two hours before we need start. You must want to rest.”

“What a charming tower this is!”

“Yes; such a view. Look, we can see for miles. Only I hate that stretch of dusty road.”

I looked carelessly toward the road along which we had come.

“Look what a dust!” she said. “It’s a carriage! Oh, they’ll upset!”

I jumped up. About half a mile off, I saw a carriage and pair driven furiously toward the villa.

My heart beat.

“Who can it be?” she said.

“Don’t be frightened,” said I. “Possibly the authorities have found out about the duel.”

“Oh!”

“Let me go and see.”

“Take care!”

“And in case I have to slip away – ”

“I shall go alone. You will join us?”

“Yes. But now, in case – ”

“Well?”

“As a reward, may I kiss your hand?”

She gave it me.

“I am glad you came,” she said. “Stay, perhaps it’s only our friends coming for us.”

“I’ll go and see.”

I was reluctant to cut short our good-by, – for I feared it must be final, – but no time was to be lost. With another kiss – and upon my honor, I can’t swear whether it was her hand or her cheek this time – I rushed downstairs, seized my hat and cane, and dived into the shrubberies that bordered on the turf walk. Quickly I made my way to within twenty yards of the road, and stopped, motionless and completely hidden by the trees. At that moment the carriage, with its smoking horses, drew up at the gate.

Dumergue got out; Vooght came next; then a tall, powerful man, of military bearing. No doubt this was the colonel. They seemed in a hurry; motioning the driver to wait, they walked or almost ran past me up the path. The moment they were by me and round a little curve, I hastened to the gate, and burst upon the driver.

“A hundred marks to the station!”

“But, sir, I am engaged.”

“Damn you! Two hundred!” I cried.

“Get in,” said he, like a sensible man, bundling back the nose-bags he was just putting on his horses. I leaped in, he jumped on the box, and off we flew quicker even than they had come. As we went, I glanced up at the tower. They were there! I saw Vooght and Dumergue lean over for a moment, and then turn as if to come down. The tall stranger stood opposite the lady, and seemed to be talking to her.

“Faster!” I cried, and faster and faster we went, till we reached the station. Flinging the driver his money, I took a ticket for the first train, and got in, hot and breathless. As we steamed out of the town, I saw, from my carriage-window, a neat barouche with a woman and three men in it, driving quickly along the road, which ran by the railway. It was my party! Youth is vain, and beauty is powerful. I bared my head, leaned out of the window, and kissed my hand to the countess. We were not more than thirty yards apart, and, to my joy, I saw her return my salutation, with a toss of her head and a defiant glance at her companions. The colonel sat glum and still; Vooght was biting his nails harder than ever; Dumergue shook his fist at me, but, I thought, more in jest than in anger. I kissed my hand again as the train and the carriage whisked by one another, and I was borne on my way out of their reach.

CHAPTER II.

At the Hôtel Magnifique

To a reflective mind nothing is more curious than the way one thing leads to another. A little experience of this tendency soon cured me of refusing to go anywhere I was asked, merely because the prospects of amusement were not very obvious. I always went – taking credit of course for much amiability – and I often received my reward in an unexpected development of something new or an interesting revival of a former episode. It happened, a few months after my adventure at Heidelberg, that my brother's wife, Jane Jason, asked me, as a favor to herself, to take a stall at the theater where a certain actress was, after a long and successful career in the provinces, introducing herself to a London audience. Jane is possessed by the idea that she has a keen nose for dramatic talent, and she assured me that her *protégée* was a wonder. I dare say the woman had some talent, but she was an ugly, gaunt creature of forty, and did not shine in *Juliet*. At the end of the second act I was bored to death, and was pondering whether I knew enough of the play to slip out without Jane being likely to discover my desertion by cross-examination, when my eye happened to fall on the stage-box in the first tier. In the center seat sat a fair, rather stout man, with the very weariest expression that I ever saw on human face. He was such an unsurpassed impersonation of boredom that I could not help staring at him; I could do so without rudeness, as his eyes were fixed on the chandelier in the roof of the house. I looked my fill, and was about to turn away, and go out for a cigarette, when somebody spoke to me in a low voice, the tones of which seemed familiar.

“Ah, impostor, here you are!”

It was Dumergue, smiling quietly at me. I greeted him with surprise and pleasure.

“How is the baron?” I asked.

“He cheated the – grave,” answered Dumergue.

“And the countess?”

“Hush! I have a message for you.”

“From her?” I inquired, not, I fear, without eagerness.

“No,” he replied, “from the prince. He desires that you should be presented to him.”

“Who is he?”

“I forgot. Prince Ferdinand of Glottenberg.”

“Indeed! He's in London, then?”

“Yes, in that box,” and he pointed to the bored man, and added:

“Come along; he hates being kept waiting.”

“He looks as if he hated most things,” I remarked.

“Well, most things are detestable,” said Dumergue, leading the way.

The prince rose and greeted me with fatigued graciousness.

“I am very much indebted to you, Mr. Jason,” he said, “for – ”

I began to stammer an apology for my intrusion into his affairs.

“For,” he resumed, without noticing what I said, “a moment's bewilderment. I quite enjoyed it.”

I bowed, and he continued.

“The only things I cling to in life, Mr. Jason, are a quiet time at home and my income. You have been very discreet. If you hadn't, I might have lost those two things. I am very much obliged. Will you give me the pleasure of your company at supper? Dumergue, the princess will be delighted to see Mr. Jason?”

“Yes, sir, Her Royal Highness will be delighted,” answered Dumergue.

“Where was the princess going?” asked the prince.

“To a meeting of the Women's International Society for the Promotion of Morality, at the Mansion House, sir.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” said the prince.

“His Majesty is much interested in the society, sir.”

“I am sure my brother would be. Come along, Mr. Jason.”

The prince and princess were staying at the Hôtel Magnifique in Northumberland Avenue. We drove thither, and were told that the princess had returned. Upon further inquiry, made by Dumergue, it appeared that it would be agreeable to her to sup with the prince and to receive Mr. Jason. So we went into the dining room and found her seated by the fire. After greeting me, she said to the prince:

“I have just written a long account of our meeting to the king. He will be so interested.”

She was a small woman, with a gentle manner and a low, sweet voice. She looked like an amiable and intelligent girl of eighteen, and had a pretty, timid air, which made me wish to assure her of my respectful protection.

“My brother,” said the prince, “is a man of catholic tastes.”

“It is necessary in a king, sir,” suggested Dumergue.

The prince did not answer him, but offered his arm to his wife, to escort her to the table. She motioned me to sit on her right hand, and began to prattle gently to me about the court of Glottenberg. The prince put in a word here and there, and Dumergue laughed appreciatively whenever the princess’ descriptions were neat and appropriate – at least, so I interpreted his delicate flattery.

I enjoyed myself very much. The princess was evidently, to judge from her conversation, a little Puritan, and I always love a pretty Puritan. That rogue Dumergue agreed with all her views, and the prince allowed his silence to pass for assent.

“We do try at court,” she ended by saying, “to set an example to society; and, as the king is unmarried, of course I have to do a great deal.”

At this moment, a servant entered, bearing a card on a salver. He approached the princess.

“A gentleman desires the honor of an audience with Her Royal Highness,” he announced.

“At this time of night!” exclaimed the princess.

“He says his business will not bear delay, and prays for a interview.”

“All business will bear delay,” said the prince, “and generally be the better for it. Who is he?”

“The Baron de Barbot.”

“Oh, I must see him,” cried the princess. “Why, he is a dear friend of ours.”

I had detected a rapid glance pass between Dumergue and the prince. The latter then answered:

“Yes, we must see Barbot. If you will go to the drawing room, I’ll take your message myself.”

“That is kind of you,” said the princess, retiring.

“Give me the card,” said the prince, “and ask the baron to be kind enough to wait a few minutes.”

The servant went out, and the prince turned to me.

“Why didn’t you kill him, Mr. Jason?” he asked.

“Is it – ” I began.

“Yes, it’s your baron,” said Dumergue.

“It’s really a little awkward,” said the prince, as though gently remonstrating with fate. “We had arranged it all so pleasantly.”

“It would upset the princess,” said Dumergue.

“What upsets the princess upsets me,” said the prince. “I am a devoted husband, Mr. Jason.”

“If there is anything I can do, sir,” said I, “rely on me.”

“You overwhelm me,” said the prince. “Is there anything, Dumergue?”

“Why, yes, sir. Mr. Jason was at the ball. Why should he have fought, if he wasn’t?”

“You are right, Dumergue. Mr. Jason, you were at the ball.”

“But, sir, I – I don’t know anything about the ball.”

“It was just like other balls – other *masked* balls,” said Dumergue.

“Perhaps a little more so,” added the prince, lighting a cigarette.

“There was a scandal at the last one,” Dumergue continued, “and the king strictly forbade anyone connected with the court to go, under pain of his severe displeasure. There had been a rumor that a royal prince was at the one before, and consequently – ”

“That royal prince was specially commanded not to go to this one,” said the prince.

“It was bad enough,” resumed Dumergue, “that it should be discovered that the princess’ favorite lady-in-waiting, the Countess von Hohstein – ”

“Who bore such a high character,” interjected the prince.

“Did go, and, moreover, went under the escort of an unknown gentleman – a gentleman whose name she refused to give.”

“Was that discovered?” said I.

“It was. This baron detected her, and, with a view, as we have reason to believe, to compelling her companion to declare himself, publicly insulted her.”

“Whereupon,” said the prince, “you very properly knocked him down, Mr. Jason.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“The princess,” continued Dumergue, “was terribly agitated and annoyed at the scandal and the duel which followed. And of course the countess left the court, and returned to England.”

“To England?”

“Yes; she was a Miss Mason. The king ennobled her at the princess’ request.”

I smiled and said:

“And now there is a question about who her escort was?”

“There is,” said Dumergue. “It is believed that the baron entertains an extraordinary idea that the gentleman in question was no other than – ”

“Myself,” said the prince, throwing away his cigarette.

I remembered the baron’s strange questions before the duel.

“Dispose of me as you please, sir,” said I.

“Then you were at the ball, and knocked the baron down!” exclaimed Dumergue.

“A thousand thanks,” said the prince.

“But what are we to do with him now, sir?” asked Dumergue. “The princess will be expecting him.”

“I will go and tell the princess of Mr. Jason’s confession. You go with Mr. Jason, and tell the baron that the princess cannot receive him. I want him to see Mr. Jason.”

“But, sir,” said I, “I didn’t fight under my own name.”

The prince was already gone, and Dumergue was halfway down the stairs. I followed the latter.

We found the baron in the smoking room, taking a cup of coffee. A couple of men sat talking on a settee near him; otherwise the room was empty.

Dumergue went up to the baron, I following a step or two behind him. The baron rose and bowed coldly.

“I am charged,” said Dumergue, “to express His Royal Highness’ regrets that Her Royal Highness cannot have the pleasure of receiving you. She has retired to her apartments.”

“The servant told me she was at supper.”

“He was misinformed.”

“I’m not to be put off like that. I’ll have a refusal from the princess herself.”

“I will inform His Royal Highness.”

The baron was about to answer, when he caught sight of me.

“Ah, there’s the jackal!” he said, with a sneer.

I stepped forward.

“Do you refer to me?” I asked.

“Unless I am wrong in recognizing my former antagonist, Colonel Despard.”

This was just what I had anticipated. Dumergue did not seem surprised either.

“Of course it is Colonel Despard,” he said. “You would not be likely to forget him, baron.”

We had been speaking in a low tone, but at Dumergue’s sneer, the baron lost his temper. Raising his voice, he said, almost in a shout:

“Then I tell Colonel Despard that he is a mean hound.”

If I assumed the colonel’s name, I felt I must at least defend it from imputations. I began:

“Once before, baron, I chastised – ”

I was interrupted. One of the men on the settee interposed, rising as he spoke.

“I beg pardon, gentlemen, but is it Colonel Despard of the Hussars to whom you refer?”

“Yes,” said the baron.

“Then that gentleman is not Colonel Despard,” announced our new friend. “I am Colonel Despard’s brother-in-law.”

For a moment I was at a loss; things were falling out so very unfortunately. Dumergue turned on the stranger fiercely:

“Pray, sir, was your interposition solicited?”

“Certainly not. But if this gentleman says he is Colonel Despard, I take leave to contradict him.”

“I should advise you to do nothing of the sort,” said I. “M. Dumergue knows me very well.”

“This person,” said the baron, “passed himself off as Colonel Despard, and, by that pretext, obtained from me the honor of a duel with me. It appears that he is a mere impostor.”

The other man on the settee called out cheerfully, “Bob, send for the police!”

Dumergue looked rather sheepish; his invention failed him.

“Do either or both of these gentlemen,” said I, indicating the baron and the colonel’s brother-in-law, “call me an impostor?”

“I do,” said the baron, with a sneering laugh.

“I am compelled to assert it,” said the other, with a bow.

I had edged near the little table, on which the baron’s coffee had been served. I now took up the coffee-pot and milk-jug. The coffee I threw in the baron’s face, and the milk in that of his ally. Both men sprang forward with an oath. At the same moment, the electric light went out, and I was violently pulled back toward the door, and someone whispered, “Vanish as quick as you can. Go home – go anywhere.”

“All right, sir,” said I, for I recognized the prince’s voice. “But what are they doing?”

“Never mind; be off.” And the prince handed me a hat.

I walked quickly to the door, and hailed a hansom. As I drove off, I saw the prince skip upstairs, and a *posse* of waiters rush toward the smoking room. I went home to bed.

The next morning, as I was breakfasting, my man told me two gentlemen were below, and wished to see me. I told him to show them up, and the prince and Dumergue came in, the former wrapped up in a fur coat, with a collar that hid most of his face.

“The prince would like some brandy in a little soda water,” said Dumergue.

I administered the cordial. The prince drank it, and then turned to me.

“Did you get home all right?” he asked.

“Perfectly, sir.”

“After you took leave of us, we had an explanation. Mr. Wetherington – it was Mr. Wetherington at whom you threw the milk – was very reasonable. I explained the whole matter, and he said he was sure his brother-in-law would pardon the liberty.”

“I’m afraid I took rather a liberty with him.”

“Oh,” said Dumergue, “we made him believe the milk was meant for the baron, as well as the coffee. I said we took it *au lait* at Glottenberg.”

“It’s lucky I thought of turning out the light,” said the prince. “I was looking on, and it seemed about time.”

“What did the hotel people say, sir?”

“They are going to sue the electric company,” said the prince, with a slight smile. “It seems there is a penalty if the light doesn’t work properly.”

“And the baron, sir?”

“We kicked the baron out as a blackmailer,” said Dumergue. “He is going to bring an action.”

“I return to Glottenberg to-day,” concluded the prince; “accompanied by the princess and M. Dumergue.”

I thought this course very prudent, and said so. “But,” I added, “I shall be called as a witness.”

“No; Colonel Despard will.”

“Well, then – ”

“He will establish an *alibi*. *Voilà tout!*”

“I am glad it all ends so happily, sir.”

“Well, there is one matter,” said the prince. “I had to tell the princess of your indiscretion in taking Mme. Vooght – ”

“Who, sir?”

“Mr. Jason,” put in Dumergue, “has not heard that the countess and Vooght are married.”

“Yes,” said the prince, “they are married, and will settle in America. Vooght is a loss; but we can’t have everything in this world.”

“I hope Herr Vooght will be happy,” said I.

“I should think it very unlikely,” said the prince. “But, to return. The princess is very angry with you. She insists – ”

“That I should never be presented to her again?”

“On the contrary; that you should come and apologize in person. Only on condition of bringing you again could I make my peace for bringing you once.”

I was very much surprised, but of course I said I was at the princess’ commands.

“You don’t mind meeting us in Paris? We stay there a few days,” said Dumergue.

“You see,” added the prince, “Dumergue says there are things called writs, and – ”

“I will be in Paris to-morrow, sir.”

“I shall be there to-day,” said the prince, rising.

CHAPTER III.

The Mission of the Ruby

I could not imagine why the princess desired to see me. It would have been much more natural to punish the impertinence of which I had no doubt been guilty – I mean, of which it was agreed on all hands that I had been guilty – by merely declining to receive me or see me again. Even the desire for a written apology would have been treating me as of too much account. But she wanted to see me. What I had heard of the princess' character utterly forbade any idea which ought not to have been, but would have been, pleasant to entertain. No; she clearly wanted me, but what for I could not imagine.

When I went to claim my audience, the prince was not visible, nor Dumergue either, and I was at once received by the princess alone. She was looking smaller, and more simple and helpless than ever. I also thought her looking prettier, and I enjoyed immensely the pious, severe, forgiving little rebuke which she administered to me. I humbly craved pardon, and had no difficulty in obtaining it. Indeed, she became very gracious.

“You must come to Glottenberg,” she said, “in a few months' time.”

“To obey Your Royal Highness' commands will be a delightful duty,” said I, bowing.

She rose and stood by the fire, “toying” (as the novelists say) with her fan.

“You seem to be an obliging man, Mr. Jason,” she said. “You were ready to oblige Mme. Vooght.”

I made a gesture of half-serious protest.

“I wonder,” she continued, “if you would do me a little service.”

“I shall be most honored if I may hope to be able to,” said I. What did she want?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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