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A Modern Mercenary



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Prichard Hesketh Vernon Hesketh, Prichard K. Kate A Modern Mercenary

CHAPTER I A LIEUTENANT OF FRONTIER CAVALRY

During four months of the year the independent State of Maäsau,' we will call it – which is not very noticeable even on the largest sized map of Europe – is tormented by a dry and weary north-east wind. And nowhere is its influence more unpleasantly felt than in the capital, Révonde, which stands shoulder-on to the hustling gales, its stately frontages and noble quays stretching out westwards along the shores of the Kofn almost to where the yellow waters of the river spread fan-wise into a grey-green sea.

The *tsa* was blowing strongly on a certain November afternoon, eddying and whistling about the wide spaces of the Grand Square as John Rallywood, a tall figure in a military cloak, turned the corner of a side street and met its full blast. He faced it for some yards along the empty pavements, then ran up the steps of his club. A few minutes later he passed through a lofty corridor and entered a door over which is set a quaint invitation to smokers, which may not be written down here, for it is the jealously guarded copyright of the club.

It chanced that the room for the moment had but one occupant, who sat in a roomy armchair by the white stove. This gentleman did not raise his head, but continued to gaze thoughtfully at his well shaped though square and comfortable boots.

Rallywood paused almost imperceptibly in his stride.

'Hullo, Major! Glad to see you,' he said, as he dropped into an armchair opposite.

Major Counsellor stood up with his back to the stove, thereby giving a view of a red, challenging face, heavy eyebrows, and a huge white droop of moustache. He looked down at Rallywood consideringly before he spoke. 'So you're here. I imagined they kept you pretty closely on the frontier. The world been kicking you?'

Rallywood laughed.

'No, but it would do me good to kick the world,' he answered as he helped himself from the Major's cigar case. 'Five years, almost six, spent on the frontier, with nothing to show for it, isn't good enough. I've come up to send in my papers.'

'Then you'll be a fool,' returned the Major with decision.

Rallywood was busy lighting his cigar; when that was arranged to his satisfaction he said easily

'Just so. History repeats itself.'

Counsellor stood squarely upright with his hands behind him.

'Any other reasons?' he asked.

'Plenty.'

'Pity! Are they serious or – otherwise?'

Rallywood pulled his moustache.

'Why is it a pity?' he asked slowly.

'Because there is going to be trouble here, and with trouble comes a chance.'

Rallywood smoked on in silence. He was a big, shallow-flanked man with the marks of the world upon him, and that indescribable air which comes to one who has passed a good portion of his time in laughing at the arbitrary handicaps arranged by Fate in the race of life.

'Where do you propose to go?' asked Counsellor after an interval.

'Back to Africa, I think – Buluwayo, Johannesburg, anywhere. South Africa's still in the bud, you see.'

'Yes, but it is a biggish bud and will take time to blow. You can afford to wait and – it may be worth your while.'

Rallywood threw a swift glance at Counsellor's inscrutable face.

'Seven years ago,' he said in a deliberate manner, 'you told me it was worth while, but life has not grown more interesting since then.'

'Ah!' Counsellor paused, then went on with a grim smile, 'At your age, John, there are possibilities. Think over it. After hanging on here for more than five years why lose your chance now? Look at those fellows.' He pointed out into the square.

Rallywood rose lazily and gazed out also. The prospect was not cheering. A few troopers, their cloaks flapping in the wind, were galloping across the square on the way to relieve guard at the Palace, and under the statue of the late Grand Duke on horseback three men in tall hats stood talking together; then they turned and walked towards the club.

'Know them?' asked Counsellor.

Rallywood shook his head.

'The man with the beard is Stokes of the 'Times;' next him is Bradley; he's on another big daily. Their being here speaks for itself. Maäsau is going to take up people's attention shortly. The Grand Duke is in a tight place, and there will be a flare-up sooner or later.'

'And you advise me to stop and see it through?' said Rallywood meditatively from the window; then he lounged back to his chair. 'How will it end?'

Counsellor shook the ash from his cigar.

'Selpdorf is the man of the hour,' he said.

On the autumn evening when these two men were talking at the club the Duchy of Maäsau was, in the opinion of Maäsaun patriots, going as fast as it could to the devil. With them, it may be added, the devil was personified and bore the name of a neighbouring nation. The one person who ignored this fact was the Grand Duke. With an inset, stubborn pride he believed that his country must remain for ever, as the long centuries had known her, Maäsau the Free. This being the case, he felt himself at liberty to spend his time in cursing the fate that had refused blue seas and skies to wintry Révonde, thus depriving it of these sources of revenue which depend upon climate, and which are enjoyed by places far less naturally beautiful than the capital of Maäsau.

The Duke, prematurely aged, by the manner of his life, made it his chief business to devise schemes for raising money whereby he might carry on the staling pleasures of his youth. Beyond this the administration of public affairs was left entirely in the supple hands of the Chancellor, M. Selpdorf, while the Duke, with those who surrounded him, plunged into the newest excitement of the hour, for who knew what a day might bring forth? The Court was like a stage lit by lurid light, on which the actors laughed and loved, danced and fought to the music of a wild finale, that whirled and maddened before the crash of the coming end.

Once upon a time Maäsau was accounted of no particular importance or value amongst its bigger neighbours; but of late, for various reasons, its fortunes had become the subject of attention and discussion in at least three foreign chancelleries, where old maps were being looked up and new ones bought and painted different colours, according as seemed most desirable by the bearded men, who sat in council to apportion the marsh, rock, dune, and forest of which the now absorbingly interesting pigmy State was composed.

In fact, Maäsau, with its twenty miles or so of seaboard, containing one excellent port *in esse* and two others *in posse*, had become a Naboth's vineyard to a country almost land-bound and yet dreaming of the supremacy of the four seas. On this ambition and its possible consequences the other Great Powers looked, to speak diplomatically, with coldness.

It was generally understood that the English Foreign Office desired the maintenance of the *status quo*; France was supposed to be ready to clap a young republic on the back and to accord it her protection, while Russia played her own dumb and blinding game, of which none could definitely pronounce the issue. The political world thus stood at gaze, watching every change and prepared to take advantage of any chance that offered. The honours of the game so far had lain with M. Selpdorf, who scored each trick with the same bland smile. Whenever the Treasury of Maäsau was at a low ebb Selpdorf usually had a thirteenth card to lay upon the table, and as the nations cautiously proceeded to frustrate each other's purposes royal remittances from Heaven knows where flowed in abundantly to replenish the bankrupt exchequer of the State.

When Major Counsellor expressed his emphatic disapproval of the intended resignation of Rallywood a new development was in the air. Hitherto the lead had mostly devolved upon Selpdorf; on this occasion he was known to be hanging back, and the question of who would take the initiative was the question of the day. The fact that Germany had lately accredited a new representative, a certain Baron von Elmur, to the Court of Maäsau, – an able man whose reputation rested mainly on the successful performance of missions of a delicate nature, – added to the tension of the moment.

'So you say they are getting up steam in Maäsau?' said Rallywood again. 'I have been out in the wilds for the last six months, and don't know so much about events as I might.'

'Steam?' growled Counsellor. 'Steam enough to wreck Europe! I almost wish I'd never godfathered you into this blessed little stoke-hole. Why the deuce didn't you enlist at home instead of coming here?'

'That was out of the question, of course.'

'Why? Isn't our army good enough for you to fight in?'

'If it was only that! – I could fight in the ranks, God knows, but I couldn't parade in them! Besides, the life here suited me – then.'

'What's gone wrong with it now? I should have thought you would have got used to it by this time,' observed Counsellor with the air of the older man. It was not the first occasion on which he had played the part of elderly relative towards Rallywood during the course of their queer, rough-grained friendship – a friendship of a type which exists only between man and man, and even then is sufficiently rare.

'Precisely, I'm too infernally used to it! It was not half bad as long as the newness lasted, but I can't stand it any longer! I'm sick of the monotony. Do you know old Fitzadams's criticism on the service here? "Dust and drill, drill and dust, and fill in the chinks with homicidal manoeuvres."'

'Maäsau only apes its betters. These Continental armies devote themselves very assiduously to rehearsals, and there is no end of waste about the process,' remarked Counsellor. 'They rehearse in summer and get sunstroke; then they rehearse in winter with rheumatisms and lung troubles growing on every bush. The bill for blank cartridges alone is enormous! And all because they have no India and no Africa, as we have, where we can give our fellows a taste of the real thing any day in the week. We carry on a small war with a regiment, or despatch a youngster with half a company to teach manners and honesty to twenty thousand niggers. The peculiarity of our army is that it is always at war. In this way we escape the dangers of theory, and get practice with something for our money into the bargain.'

'Our plan has its advantages,' agreed Rallywood lazily. 'I saw in South Africa what a little active service does for a man. The first time he is under fire he is persuaded that he is going to be killed, and that every shot must hit him. But after a trial or two he begins to think the odds are in his favour and he becomes a much more effective fighting machine.'

'Necessarily he does. We don't half realise the value of our colonies yet – as a training ground for our soldiers. The British army is the smallest in Europe, but it remains to be seen what account it will give of itself if it is ever brought into contact with these huge, peace-trained conscript monsters.'

'When the Duke dies – ' began Rallywood, harking back to the former topic of conversation.

The door was softly opened, and a waiter advanced into the room, bearing a letter for Rallywood, who took it and laid it down on the table beside him, then looked at Counsellor for an answer to his half spoken question. Counsellor shrugged his shoulders.

'Who can tell?' he replied. 'Meanwhile take the gifts the gods have sent you to-day,' and he pointed to the long, heavily sealed envelope that lay at Rallywood's elbow. 'Selpdorf, I see, already has his finger upon you.'

Rallywood broke the great seals, and, having read, he tossed the paper into the other's hands.

'He wishes to see me at 9.30. What can he want with me?' he asked.

'Probably he has heard you intend to cut the service. It appears to me, Rallywood, that your chance has come out to meet you.'

'How could he have heard that I meant to go? And what can it matter to any one if I do?' went on Rallywood incredulously.

Counsellor shook his head, but made no other reply.

'A lieutenant of the Frontier Cavalry,' resumed Rallywood, 'is merely a superior make of excise officer!'

'You will be something more or something else before 10, I expect. As for what he wants with you, that is for you to find out – if you can.'

'It is to be hoped he may feel moved to let me have my arrears of pay,' said Rallywood, relapsing into his usual tone of indifference; 'that is the chief consideration with us on the frontier just now.'

'He probably will if it suits him – or rather perhaps if you suit him. Come over and dine with me presently at the Continental. There's generally a decent dinner to be had there.'

John Rallywood, one of the old Lincolnshire Rallywoods, had been born to a fortune, and moreover with an immense capacity for enjoying it after a wholesome fashion. Queens Fain had fallen to him while still an infant upon the death of a great-uncle, and with the old place were connected all those hundred untranslatable ties and associations which go to make up a boy's dreams. He was a man of suppressed, perhaps half unconscious, but nevertheless deep-rooted enthusiasms; hence when the blow fell which deprived him not only of his inheritance, but also cut short the life of his mother, the unexpected, almost intolerable anguish he silently endured had left a deep, defacing scar upon his personality.

Up to twenty-two the record of his life, if not striking, had been clean and manly. He had passed through Sandhurst, and joined a dragoon regiment for something over a year, when an older branch of the family, supposed for a quarter of a century to be extinct, suddenly presented itself very much alive in the person of a middle-aged, middle-class American. Within three months the man's claim was substantiated, and estate, fortune, position, and home – as far as John Rallywood was concerned – had melted into thin air.

During this period of disruption and trouble Counsellor, who happened to be distantly connected with him, came into his life. They did not meet very often and spoke little when together, but mutual knowledge and liking resulted. Friendship is a living thing: it cannot be made; it grows.

Rallywood, when he turned to seek the means of a livelihood, found himself, as he said long afterwards, standing in the corridor of life with all the doors shut and no key to open them.

His tastes and training alike led in the direction of a military career, and presently he went out to the Cape, where he spent a year or two in a police force which was in time disbanded, and he returned to England once more at a loose end.

At this juncture Major Counsellor suggested to him the possibility of obtaining a commission in the little army of the Duchy of Maäsau. This hint set him on the right track. The regiments of Maäsau, though few in number, carried splendid traditions. Their ranks were drawn from a stolid, silent peasantry, and officered by a wire-strung, high tempered aristocracy, born of a mixed race, it is true, but none the less frantically devoted to the freedom and independence of their shred of a fatherland.

In compliance with a private request on the part of Major Counsellor the British Minister at Révonde bestirred himself to procure a commission for Rallywood, who thus became a lieutenant in the Frontier Cavalry, and for more than five years had taken his share in riding and keeping the marches of Maäsau gaining much experience in capturing smugglers and in superintending the digging out of snowed up trains. But life on the frontier, though crammed with physical activity and routine work, was in every other respect monotonously empty, and breaks in the shape of furlough were few and far between. Half liked, wholly respected, and a little feared amongst his comrades, but always remaining a lieutenant to whom now, the State owed eighteen months' arrears of pay, Rallywood, in return, owed to Maäsau only the qualified service of an unpaid man, but gave it the full devotion of a capable officer.

As to Counsellor, no one could quite account for his presence at Révonde at the present moment. He was supposed to be attached in some indefinite way to the Legation, but he described himself as a bird of passage, whose appearance in the European capital simply meant whim or pleasure, for he was growing old and lazy and could not be brought to account for his wanderings, which he assured those who ventured to enquire were chiefly undertaken in search of health. Nevertheless wherever he went or came something interesting in a political sense – and more often than not, in favour of British interests – was almost sure to happen.

In former days he had filled the position of military attaché to two or three of the more important embassies, and was said to be the best known man in Europe. He had, moreover, the right to carry upon his breast the ribbon and decoration of more than one exclusive and distinguished Order. Of the many rumours associated with him this saying was certainly true: that one could never enter the smoking-room of any diplomatic club in any city in Europe without standing a fair chance of encountering Major Counsellor warming himself beside the stove.

Therefore he had naturally an enormous circle of acquaintance, each individual knowing very little about him, though he always formed an interesting subject of conversation, and a political opinion backed by his name became at once important.

CHAPTER II

A GENTLEMAN OF THE GUARD

Shortly before 9.30 Rallywood presented himself at the granite palace, with its four cupolas, which M. Selpdorf occupied in his capacity of First Minister of State. After some slight delay he was ushered into a comfortable study, where he found Selpdorf with a reading-lamp at his elbow, glancing rapidly through a mass of papers that he threw one after another, with apparent carelessness, on the floor beside him.

The chancellor of a small State might very well have been pardoned had he introduced a certain amount of what an old official used to call 'desk dignity' into his dealings with those who approached him, but Selpdorf habitually affected an easy manner and an easy chair. He was a middle-sized man, possessed of a very round head, bald at the crown, but having still a lock of dark hair on the summit of his round forehead; very round eyes set far back in smooth holes, showing little lid; a nose blunt and thick over lips that might have been coarse, but were controlled, and betrayed a lurking humour at the corners, to which the upstanding moustaches seemed to add point. For all his peculiarity of aspect, he was a man who left an impression on the memory of something pleasing and attractive, especially in the minds of women.

He received Rallywood with that air of deep personal interest which told with such happy effect on those whom he desired to influence.

'Ah, my dear Lieutenant, I understood you were in Révonde, and took the advantage of your presence to put into effect a little plan which has been for some time in contemplation. I recollect having had the pleasure of meeting you not so long ago when you arrived in Maäsau.'

'Nearly six years ago, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood with a smile.

'I can scarcely believe it to be so long. At any rate I remember perfectly that I had the honour of presenting you to his Highness as the latest addition to our Frontier Cavalry.'

'Your Excellency might easily have forgotten. From the nature of the case that could not be possible with me.'

Selpdorf listened with a little astonishment. This Englishman was not quite such a fool as one might have expected from the fact of his having been content to remain without preferment and only a proportion of his pay for over five years on the frontier. He had hoped to find the fellow adaptable, but this long-limbed, slow-spoken gentleman was not altogether so transparent an individuality as Selpdorf had led himself to expect.

'But why have you secluded yourself for so long among those barbarous marshes and forests?' demanded the Chancellor in a rallying manner. The young man made no reply, though the obvious one was in his mind.

'By-the-by,' resumed the Chancellor, as if struck by a new thought, 'I have heard that your countryman Major Counsellor has come to pay us a little visit in Maäsau.'

'He is here. I have just seen him,' replied Rallywood.

Selpdorf's round eyes glanced once more at his companion. The simple directness of the reply was admirable but baffling.

'Ah, he is invaluable, the good Major, quite invaluable! England may well be proud of him. He is one of the ablest men in Europe, besides' – here he smiled, showing a row of strong, even teeth – 'besides being one of the most honest. For a diplomatist – what praise!'

Rallywood met his glance imperturbably.

'For a diplomatist, your Excellency?' he repeated.

'But assuredly,' replied the Chancellor warmly: 'figure to yourself, my friend, the condition of politics if all statesmen were like him – honest! An invaluable man!'

He paused for a reply, but Rallywood merely bowed. He felt that so much at least was expected of him on the part of England.

'But now, monsieur, with regard to your own affair. You have been five years in the service of his Highness. And your command?'

'At present fifty troopers at the block-houses above Kofn Ford and along the river. In the winter, during the long dark nights, when there are many attempts to run illicit goods across the frontier, I shall have, perhaps, a score or so more.'

'And you are not tired of it?' M. Selpdorf raised his hands.

'So tired, your Excellency, that I am half inclined to let a better man step into my shoes.'

'But come, come, that is impossible!' returned his Excellency agreeably. 'Are you also tired of our capital, of Révonde?'

'I have had very little opportunity of growing tired of Révonde. I know nothing of it.'

'But you would prefer Révonde, believe me.'

At this moment an attendant appeared with a card upon a salver. Selpdorf read the name with the faintest contraction of his brows.

'You will excuse me, M. Rallywood,' he said; 'I must ask you to wait in the ante-room for a few minutes.'

The ante-room was a long pillared corridor, in which Rallywood found himself quite alone. He fell at once into speculations as to the meaning and aim of Selpdorf's late awakened interest in himself. Also the allusions to Counsellor had probably been made with calculated intention.

Rallywood understood that each of these two men had the same end in view; each desired to dissemble his own character. And each of them succeeded with the many, but failed as between themselves. Selpdorf posed as the suave, sympathetic, good-natured friend of those with whom he came in contact; Counsellor, as a man of no account, a rugged soldier, honest, strong, outspoken, a good agent to act under the direction of more astute brains, but if left to his own resources somewhat blunt and blundering.

To do Rallywood justice, he was far more occupied with this last thought than with the things which bore more directly on his own prospects and future. At this period his life was comparatively tasteless and void of interest; there was nothing to look forward to, and the recent past meant extremes of heat and cold, long solitary rounds ridden by night, and days rendered so far alike by iron-handed rule and method that one was driven to mark the lapse of time by the seasons, not by the ordinary divisions of weeks and months.

As he lounged in a chair full of these thoughts a slight rustle, soft and silken, like the rustle of a woman's dress, caught his ear. He turned his head quickly. The corridor with its splendid pillars, which stood at long intervals, was steeped in the clear electric light, and from where he sat he could see that there was no person visible throughout its entire length.

Then as his gaze travelled back it rested on something which had certainly not been lying where he now saw it at the time of his entrance.

Not six paces behind him, stretched across the dark carpeting, in the very centre of the pillared vista, lay a woman's long glove.

A woman's glove possesses a peculiar charm for all men. Perhaps it suggests some of the sweet mystery of womanhood. The first action of most young men in Rallywood's place would have been to raise it at once and to examine it, as though in some impalpable manner it could tell something of its unknown wearer, who might turn out to be the Hathor, the one woman in the world.

But the circumstances of Rallywood's life, and perhaps also some exclusive element in his character, had heretofore set him rather apart from the influence of women. He had grown to regard them without curiosity, which is the last stage indifference can reach.

It must be admitted that it was with a feeling akin to repugnance that he at last lifted the long, soft, pale-hued, faintly-scented *suède* from the floor and dangled it at an unnecessary distance from

his eyes, holding it as he did so daintily between finger and thumb. Its subtle appeal to his senses as a man failed to reach him. It simply aroused an old feeling of reserve toward the sex it represented. His face altered slightly and he dropped it suddenly with an odd repulsion, as he might have dropped a snake, on a couch near by.

Then he resumed his chair and turned his back upon it, till the reflection that the woman to whom it belonged must have come and gone while he sat thinking with his back to the corridor sent him wheeling round again.

The glove still lay where he had placed it on the edge of the couch, palm upwards and with a suggestion of helplessness and pleading. It annoyed him unreasonably. He frowned and looked at his watch. Half an hour had passed since Selpdorf dismissed him.

At that moment a guttural voice broke the silence of the house, and the heavy curtain over the door at the nearer end of the ante-room was thrust back by a brusque hand, and a tall, high-shouldered, handsome man, dressed as if he were about to attend some Court function, stood in the opening. Behind him Rallywood caught sight of a flurried and explanatory lackey.

'Ah! so I have lost my way after all,' said this personage in a bland voice. 'A mistake! But I hope you will accord me your forgiveness, mademoiselle?'

Rallywood sprang to his feet at this most unexpected ending and looked round.

Close beside him stood a tall girl wrapped in a long cloak of fur and amber velvet. She was singularly beautiful, with a pale, clear-hued beauty. Her black, long-lashed eyes were on him and they were full of laughter.

'Enter, then, Baron,' said the girl, glancing across at the courtier. 'Did you guess you would find me here, or were you seeking monsieur?' and she waved her bare left hand towards Rallywood.

'I lost my way, nothing more,' returned the Baron, coming forward; 'but perhaps, as in my heart, all roads lead towards – ' He bowed deeply once more, this time stooping to kiss the girl's hand with a certain show of restrained eagerness.

She drew back with a little impatient gesture.

'I should not have been here, but for an accident,' she replied coldly. 'In fact I was on the point of starting for his Highness's reception, had not monsieur detained me.' And, to Rallywood's amazement, she indicated himself.

Before he could speak she pointed to his spurred boot.

'Monsieur has set his heel on my poor glove,' she added.

By his hasty movement in rising he had apparently dislodged the glove from its position on the edge of the couch. He stooped with a hurried word of apology and picked it up. On the delicate palm was stamped the curved stain of his boot-heel.

'Do you always treat a lady's glove so?' she asked gravely, and held out her hand for it.

Rallywood looked down at her very deliberately, and something that was neither his will nor his reason decided the next action. He folded the soft *suède* reverently together.

'No, mademoiselle,' he answered, as he placed it inside his tunic, 'I have never before treated a lady's glove – so. For the accident, I offer my deepest apologies.'

She watched him with raised eyebrows and a slight derisive smile. Then she drew the companion glove from her right hand, and giving it to the lackey, who still remained in the background, she said —

'Throw it away, it is useless, and tell Nanzelle to bring me another pair.'

'Monsieur, with whom I have not yet the pleasure of being acquainted,' interrupted the Baron rather suddenly, 'monsieur is after all the lucky man. He retains what I dare not even ask for.'

'Shall I call back the servant with its fellow for you?' mademoiselle asked haughtily. 'It is nothing to me who picks up what I have thrown away.' With this rebuff to Rallywood she placed her hand upon the German's, as if to ask him to lead her from the room, and added —

'You wish for an introduction? Then allow me to present you to each other. His excellency the Baron von Elmur.' She paused, and her eyes dwelt for a moment on Rallywood's. 'A gentleman of

the Guard.' And before Rallywood could explain the mistake the curtain had dropped behind them and he was left standing alone.

In Baron von Elmur he recognized the oblique carriage of the head and the high-shouldered figure of the third man he had seen with the newspaper correspondents in the Grand Square that afternoon. Moreover he knew that the German had entered the ante-room through no mistake, but with some object in view. As for the girl, who was she and where had she come from? She was not of Maäsau, since she had introduced him as belonging to the Guard, for not only was every officer of that favoured corps individually known, but it was further impossible for a Maäsaun to make the slightest mistake with regard to any uniform. It was one of the boasts of the country that even a child could tell at a glance not only the special regiment, but the rank of the wearer of any uniform belonging to the Duchy.

Rallywood had no time just then to pursue the subject further, as he was almost immediately recalled to the Chancellor's presence.

'Now, monsieur,' began Selpdorf, as though no break had occurred in the conversation, 'you are in truth tired of keeping our dreary marches; is it not so?'

'There are better places – and worse, your Excellency.'

'Our gay little capital will be one of the better places, I promise you,' continued the Chancellor. 'A position in the Guard of his Highness has just become vacant. Am I right in believing that a nomination to that superb regiment would tempt you to remain with us?'

Rallywood for once was a little taken aback.

'A gentleman of the Guard.' He repeated the girl's words of introduction mechanically; then, putting aside the thought of her, he took up the practical view of the situation and answered, 'I am an Englishman, your Excellency, and though I have taken the soldier's oath to the Maäsaun standard I have not taken the oath of nationality. I could not consent to become a naturalised citizen even of the Duchy of Maäsau.'

'Ah, so?' Selpdorf stroked his chin, then despatching the objection with a wave of his hand, he resumed, 'We must overlook that in your case. You have already served the Duke for five years with as sincere zeal as the truest Maäsaun amongst us. We must remember that and overlook a drawback which is far less important than it seems.'

He turned to a memorandum on the table and consulted it.

'You were engaged in the affair at Xanthal, I see?'

'Three years ago, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood in a tone that implied his powers of usefulness had probably become impaired by lapse of time.

Selpdorf moved his shoulders. Here was a man throwing difficulties in the way of his own advancement. Yet he could not possibly be so indifferent to his own interests as he chose to assume.

'To be plain with you,' Selpdorf said with an air of candour, 'the younger officers of the Guard have little experience. The latest fashion in neckties or the most charming dancer at the Folie absorbs their attention, to the exclusion of more important matters. There is, as you doubtless know, a certain admixture of French blood in the veins of our most noble families,' he finished abstractedly.

Rallywood had no remark to offer upon this. The officers of the Guard bore a very distinct reputation. They were said to be a very pleasant set of fellows socially, unless one ran foul of their prejudices, but they were credited with a good many prejudices. As for his personal acquaintance with them, it was limited to acting as second in a hastily arranged duel fought out in the yard behind a little country railway station.

'I should like to see a somewhat different spirit introduced, and to be assured that I could always rely on the presence of at least one cool-headed officer at the Palace. Your experience on the frontier has eminently fitted you for the position. To you, therefore, will be allotted the quarters reserved in the Palace itself for the adjutant of the Guard. May I have the pleasure of saluting you as such?'

Rallywood hesitated. He foresaw certain difficulties, but they appeared rather attractive than otherwise at the moment. He threw back his shoulders, a light of laughter came into his eyes, he raised his head and looked into Selpdorf's face.

'I thank your Excellency.'

The Chancellor understood more than met the ear. He approached the subject delicately.

'Then you will allow me to congratulate you, Captain Rallywood,' he said, bending forward to shake hands with his visitor in the English fashion. 'There may possibly be some trifling difficulties at the outset. The first step in any undertaking usually costs something, but you will not, I beg, permit yourself to be drawn into, – ahem, any shallow quarrels. Our friends of the Guard, you will understand, are a little prone to pick up even a careless word on the sword-point.'

M. Selpdorf paused, and referred once more to the memorandum.

'There has been some small hitch about the pay on the frontier of late?' he asked innocently.

'A serious hitch for the last eighteen months or so, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood with a smile that did not reach his eyes.

'Indeed? That must be remedied. The paymaster-General shall have a note upon your affair immediately, Captain Rallywood. Good-night.'

Rallywood stepped out into the windy, frozen night, and also out of his old life into the new. Above him the stars, written in their vast, vague characters upon the night-blue vault of sky, shone with a keen lustre. Below his feet, with scarce a break in the great circle, it seemed as if they drew together in denser clusters and set themselves in luminous tiers. These latter were the lights of the city. For the Hôtel du Chancelier stands high upon one of the twin ridges which form the ravine of the river, and upon whose converging slopes Révonde is built. Rallywood stood and looked down upon the dip and rise of the terraced city with a new interest, for now it held a future for him individually, a future which must be stirring and might be something more.

The eyes of the girl whose glove he had trodden upon still challenged him from the starlit darkness, eyes made of starlit darkness themselves. He followed the broad black line of the river between its sweeping curves of lamps, broadening out seawards into hazy dimness. Then as a great bell across the water boomed out the hour he turned his gaze to the east, in the direction of the sound, to where the broken brightness of the crowding streets gave place to a majestic alignment of light and shadow, showing the position of the Ducal Palace upon the river bank. Behind and above it shone a blood-red gleam like an angry eye; this Rallywood knew to be the great stained dome of the historic mess-room of the Guard.

Then the late lieutenant of the Frontier Cavalry laughed aloud in the dark, his blood tingled in his veins, for the priceless element of a vague, unknown danger and excitement had entered into his life.

CHAPTER III

THE GENTLEMEN OF THE GUARD

Members of great families frequently regard themselves as submerged individualities. They wilfully sink all identity of their own in the traditions handed down to them, and live as mere representatives of a line which bears in common a noble name. This principle, which has something to recommend it, was adopted long ago into the system of the Guard of Maäsau, the officers of which were first gentlemen of the Guard and afterwards men in the private and ordinary sense of the term. There were eight of them – a colonel-in-chief, whose position became honorary after his elevation to that rank; a colonel, upon whom devolved the active command; a second in command, whose title of over-captain may be translated major; three captains, and as many subalterns. And every individual was drawn from the noblest blood of the country.

Thus it will be seen that Rallywood was about to enter the best company in Révonde.

On a lofty cliff above the gorge from which the Kofn issues to curve round the Palace gardens, and exposed to the four winds of heaven, stands an imposing square block of grey buildings. These contain the permanent quarters of the Guard. One whole side of the courtyard within is taken up by the domed mess-room with its necessary adjuncts and offices.

Here on the day following Rallywood's interview with Selpdorf, three men lounged over their lunch. Any one of them, had he cared to take the regimental rolls from their brass-bound coffer in the ante-room, could have read his own name repeating itself down the columns as generation after generation lived through its identical life in the same surroundings, and died, most of them going to the devil with a fine inherited pride and even gracefully.

Nearly every man who had crossed the page of the Maäsaun annals had dined in that historic room, and each one of the men who now held the right to dine there had a hereditary interest, and in many cases a hereditary characteristic, to maintain. There was old walrus-faced Wallenloup; thin, dark, reckless Colendorp; Adiron, whose great bulk behind a cavalry sword was a sight for the gods, and so on; the three lieutenants following closely in the footsteps of the three lieutenants who had been before them; men who went to the rendezvous of a duel in all comfort, affecting to be infinitely more afraid of catching cold than of being killed; men who kissed the wife and dispatched the husband with equal skill and as little noise as might be; men who were feared by a rough, swaggering, raucous soldiery, whom they only knew through the hard-faced sergeants; men, in fact, who lived out their debonair, picturesquely evil lives to the satisfaction of themselves and of few others.

On this occasion Colonel Wallenloup, the commandant, was not present. Of him it was told that while still a lieutenant he had been offered, as a reward for services rendered to the Crown, the command of any Maäsaun regiment he might choose to select, and he had replied that he would rather be a lieutenant of the Guard than a field-marshal elsewhere. And so he remained to favour the mess with his somewhat blood-and-iron jokes. The mess-room was a spacious hall, and though only three men sat at table the place seemed full of life and colour from the black polished flooring to the carved and vaulted ceiling, from which hung in tattered folds the old banners of the regiment. Red hangings partially draped the dark walls, and over all the light from the stained dome fell in rich colour; while through the talk of the men ran the one weird sound that never ceased about those walls, the whimpering of the wind.

Suddenly the door opened, and a young man, small and thin, with a faint down upon his upper lip, entered quickly.

'Unziar has won!' he cried.

'Won what?' asked Adiron, the senior man present, as he poured out another glass of wine.

'Won his second match against Abenfeldt with seven to spare.'

Adiron stretched his legs and leant back; his figure was well adapted for leaning back.

'My good Adolph, explain yourself.'

'Hadh't you heard of it? Why, they arranged it last night at Countess Sagan's.'

'Abenfeldt fancies himself as a shot, but he forgot he had to do with Unziar,' laughed Captain Adiron.

'Abenfeldt bet that he could shoot more swallows in half an hour before breakfast than any man in Révonde. That was in September, you know, and Unziar took him up – with service revolvers – and shot fifteen, winning easily. Abenfeldt can't get over it, and challenged him to a shooting-match again last night. I say,' Adolph broke off, and his face altered; he thrust out a little foot and surveyed the spurred boot that covered it critically, 'I've just ridden back from Brale. That new charger of mine bolted down the hill by the paling. I went to see Insermann; they had not been able to move him, you know.'

'Well,' urged all three voices at once.

'Insermann's dead. He died last night at dinner time.'

The men's eyes shot for a second at Insermann's empty place, which he was never to occupy again.

'Ah, I told him that scooping pass of his was a mistake,' commented Adiron. 'And the worst of it is that his death breaks the line of the Xanthal Insermanns. Poor old Insermann! he was the last of a good stock, and I, for one, don't like new blood. What have you to say about that pass now, Colendorp? If I am not mistaken, you defended it?'

'Insermann was by three inches too tall,' replied the individual addressed. 'For a short man one would be hard put to it to discover a more useful – Hullo!'

The folding doors had been flung open with a crash, and a man of fifty or thereabouts, dressed in the gorgeous green and gold of the Guard, strode in tempestuously. He was short and heavily built, with a weather-red face and a coarse, overhanging moustache, which gave him rather the expression of an angry walrus. So angry, indeed, was he that his words came volleying out inarticulately. In his hand he held a crumpled sheet of parchment.

The men rose as he took his place at the head of the table.

'Insermann's dead, and Selpdorf says – ' The Colonel's choked ejaculations broke, his voice failed him, and he sent the paper fluttering from his hand across the silver and glass till little Adolf picked it up. In another moment Colonel Wallenloup was more coherent.

'I am afraid I must have walked up the hill rather too quickly,' he said apologetically, after draining a great goblet of beer. 'However, it is not to be denied that M. Selpdorf begins to take too much upon himself. The entire administration of the State is in his hands, and yet he is not satisfied with that position! No, he aims even higher; he desires to nominate the officers of his Highness's Guard!'

Every man present had his own peculiarity. The Colonel's reputation would not have stood so high as it actually did but for his insensate temper. Perhaps the anecdote told of him that, when discussing the point of having been ruled out of action during certain army manœuvres he became so enraged that he pursued the umpire in question with a wooden tent hammer, had added more to his popularity than all his thirty odd years of service and his immense genius for fortification.

Some of the Continental armies are always marking time, and they do not prize the most the man who marks time best, but the man who can bring some humour or touch of romance into the dullness of routine, and they prefer the humour to be led up to by the winding road of eccentricity. It was never dull with the Guard. They possessed officers who kept their world on the move.

'Gentlemen,' said Wallenloup at length, when his last remark had been received with approval, 'I have the honour to inform you that M. Selpdorf has seen fit to appoint, *vice* Captain Insermann, deceased, Lieutenant John Rallywood, of the Frontier Cavalry.'

A silence followed this announcement.

'Upon whose recommendation has M. Selpdorf taken this step?' inquired Captain Colendorp gravely.

'Reasons of State – mere reasons of State. He had the audacity to tell me so.'

'I understood, sir, that you had other views?' said Adiron.

'Well, yes, we had virtually agreed upon our choice, I may say, gentlemen.'

'Certainly, sir. And you made that clear to the Chancellor?'

'I did so – perfectly clear. I told him in the most reasonable manner that we wanted no condemned rabble in the Maäsaun Guard! I told him that we had practically decided on Abenfeldt in case of a vacancy occurring. I even went so far as to remind him that there had been Abenfeldts among us for four centuries.'

'He couldn't meet that argument!' exclaimed Adiron.

'No, he parried it, gracefully enough, I admit. He reminded me in turn that there had been Selpdorfs also in the Guard, and swore that had he a son of his own to nominate he must still at this moment have given the preference to this Englishman. I left him to reconsider the matter, however, and rode home, to find *that* already waiting for me in my quarters,' and he pointed to the parchment in Adolf's hand.

Adolf looked up with a smile.

'He will not join immediately, sir, this Rallywood?' he said with his gentle lisp.

'Not for a week.'

'Then it doesn't really matter, you know,' added the young man.

Wallenloup's red-shot eyes gleamed upon him suddenly.

'As your commanding officer, sir,' he said grimly, 'I don't understand your meaning, but – ' and an odd smile flickered about the savage lips.

'As a private gentleman, Colonel – ' put in Colendorp.

'As a private individual I understand your meaning very well. But if I were here as your colonel, Lieutenant Adolf, by Heaven, sir, not all the officers of the Guard, past or present' – he rose to his feet as he spoke, and grasping the hilt of his sword glared round upon them – 'should dare to hint at insult to a comrade!' and he drove the blade home with a clatter into its scabbard and strode out of the room as he had come, like a thunderstorm.

The men waited in silence until the echo of his footsteps died away, and in the mind of each rose a vivid memory. It happened, from causes which might in the case of the Guard of Maäsaun be called natural, that the three present lieutenants, viz. Unziar, Varanheim, and Adolf, had joined on the same day, and by way of supporting the traditions of their immediate predecessors each instantly agreed to challenge each of the others, the result of which would in all probability have been the speedy occurrence of three fresh vacancies, in the list of officers.

Wallenloup heard of this and sent for the lieutenants, whom he considered too valuable to be thus easily lost.

'Gentlemen,' he began, 'I am about to enforce an old order that expressly forbids quarrels amongst the members of our corps. If you want to fight, fight some one else. There are plenty of men who stand badly in need of being killed. Turn your attention to them. But if any trouble should arise between any two of you, come to me. There has been enough of this kind of scandal about us lately, and therefore for the future we will do the thing quietly with a pack of cards, or, if you prefer it, with dice. The man who loses can – go. There is the river, or for choice, his own pistol. You understand me?'

Varanheim looked at Unziar and Unziar looked at Adolf, and they smiled.

'I think,' said little Adolf, 'we *might* find others to brawl with.'

'The river is abominably cold,' added Unziar.

'And the same dish is served for us all,' concluded Varanheim.

Wallenloup laughed.

'I have laid the alternative before you, gentlemen,' he said, 'the cards or the dice.'

This was the story that rose in the minds of the men round the mess table, and a minute later they joined in a simultaneous shout of laughter. Adiron's big face was flushed as he called for a special brand of champagne wherein to drink the Colonel's health.

'He's magnificent – the old man!' he said when he could speak. 'Let him alone. He's equal to any mortal occasion! He reminds me of the day when his Imperial Majesty over the border complimented him on the appearance of the Guard, saying he should feel proud to number us amongst the regiments of the German army. "And I can assure your Majesty that the feeling of admiration is entirely reciprocal," says the C.O. "We should be happy to incorporate your army in ours!"'

The men had heard the story often before, but it was greeted with all the relish of novelty, a quality which lives eternally in any anecdote that tells on one's own side.

Before the laughter had subsided another man entered the room. He was, perhaps, nearer thirty than twenty, and the face under his dull, colourless hair was singularly pale, but there was promise of great strength in the long angular body.

'My congratulations, Unziar.' Colendorp turned to the new-comer.

'Thanks. By the way, have you heard of Insermann? Gone out, they tell me.'

'Yes. And have you heard of the new appointment?'

'No. But it's Abenfeldt, of course. The Colonel as good as promised him last year.'

'Ever heard of Lieutenant Rallywood of the frontier?' demanded Colendorp in his slow way.

'Yes, I do happen to know him.' Unziar looked round in some surprise. 'He was the frontier fellow who undertook to be my second at the station when I fought De Balsas because he insisted that our trains were inferior to those in Germany. Rallywood – you don't mean to say?' a slow comprehension dawning upon him. 'But it's impossible! The fellow's an Englishman. How could such a thing be possible? On the frontier, yes, but not in the Guard!'

Colendorp was a silent, reserved man, disliked by persons who met him casually in society, but to those who inhabited with him the quarters at the Palace he stood as the impersonation of the grim spirit of the Guard. He drew away from the table and crossed his legs.

'The idea has at length occurred to one man,' he with his glance on Unziar's pale face, 'to M. Selpdorf, in fact.'

Unziar looked back at his interlocutor, his eyes hardening.

'Of course,' he said, bringing out each word distinctly, 'Rallywood must be got rid of.'

'It will offend M. Selpdorf if his nominee be interfered with,' went on Colendorp.

'I have already undertaken that little matter,' put in Adolf eagerly.

There was an undercurrent of meaning in all this of which each man present was fully aware. Unziar was presumed to have very strong private reasons to propitiate rather than to offend the powerful Minister. But this happened to be a typical instance in which the interests of the corps over-rode those of the individual. Moreover the custom of the Guard required the individual most concerned to prove his loyalty at such times.

Colendorp continued to gaze at Unziar.

'We are much obliged to you, Adolf,' he said courteously; 'but in compliment to his comrades I feel sure that Unziar will hardly wish to allow any other to undertake this special matter.'

Adolf would have spoken again, but Unziar stopped him.

'As a personal favour, Adolf, leave it to me,' he said.

Adiron, who had thus far taken no part in the discussion, now struck in.

'But remember, Unziar, that you must act with caution. For obvious reasons there must be no apparent design. The dispute, whatever it may turn upon, must appear to come about naturally. Above all, it must not take place here.'

'Precautions from Adiron!' remarked Colendorp with a thin smile. 'The affair becomes serious indeed!'

'We cannot afford to offend England while Elmur is at work in this country. She is at this moment our very good friend,' Adiron observed apologetically. 'There will be many public occasions – at the Palace ball, for example.'

'You may trust me to keep up appearances,' said Unziar. 'Then it is understood that I arrange the affair of Captain Rallywood at the Palace ball if possible. The matter may safely be left in my hands.'

Once more the folding doors were thrown back, and between the crimson portieres appeared the face of Colonel Wallenloup, charged with a strange expression. He advanced a step or two into the room, then turned to introduce a man behind him.

'Captain Rallywood, gentlemen,' he said.

CHAPTER IV

DANGER SIGNALS

A week later Rallywood returned from the frontier to take up his appointment in the Guard. Advised by a note from Wallenloup that his quarters were not yet in readiness for him at the Palace, he drove direct to the Continental on his arrival in Révonde.

Here presently Counsellor dropped in upon him. Rallywood was in his dressing-room, transforming himself as rapidly as possible into the likeness of an English gamekeeper; for a magnificent festivity in the shape of a masked ball was about to take place at the Palace. All the world had been invited, and as many of the world as could go were going, each with his or her own dream or purpose, as the case might be.

Major Counsellor sat and surveyed his friend, occasionally offering suggestions and remarks.

'Are you aware that the Guard of Maäsaus never condescends to show itself in Révonde in any costume but its own blazing uniform? I see you have your edition of it lying on the chair over there. Why are you not conforming with their amiable peculiarities?'

Rallywood had his back to Counsellor at the moment.

'So I have heard, but I do not join until to-morrow,' he replied in an expressionless voice.

'And your quarters in the Palace? How about them?'

'I shall also have the rooms to-morrow.' Then he wheeled round and his eyes lit on his companion. 'Hullo! I didn't notice you before. Is that your notion of the gentle art of masquerade? What are you meant to be – a sort of Tommy Atkins?'

'I believed myself to be disguised as an officer and a gentleman,' returned Counsellor, rising to give Rallywood the full effect of his sturdy figure, clad in the uncompromising scarlet so dear to his country's heart. 'This is the uniform of the 30th Dragoons as worn in or about the year of grace 1730.'

'Your old regiment?'

Counsellor nodded. 'And my grandfather's,' adding, 'What's the matter with the dress?'

'Nothing,' said Rallywood, laughing. 'Perhaps I imagined on an occasion of this kind you might possibly stoop to something more misleading than this blatantly British get-up.'

'What were you expecting – a troubadour? I am satisfied to appear in my own character. Only a proportion of the people wear masks at this ball; it's an annual affair. Besides, life with a purpose is too wearing; one must always be on the alert and have the purpose in view, like the actor in a sixpenny theatre, who plays up to the gallery and keeps his eye open for the rotten egg of his enemy. The egg may not be thrown, but he must be ready to dodge it all the same. And – I have never excelled in dodging.'

'Ah – just what the Chancellor thinks. He says he has an immense admiration for you as the most honest diplomatist in Europe.'

'He put himself to the trouble of mentioning that fact to you, did he? Then I shall take the precaution of insuring my life. Anything might happen to a man of whom he has so villainous an opinion.'

Rallywood was arranging his gaiters.

'Why? You don't suppose Selpdorf is going to throw the egg? He spoke of you with absolute affection.'

'My good John, he has already thrown it! Now I must harass myself to find out the reason,' said Counsellor. 'You have spoilt my evening out. Before I had no purpose; now you have thrust one upon me. You should have kept your news until to-morrow.'

Rallywood was getting himself into his velveteen coat with a good deal of unnecessary violence.

'I don't believe the Chancellor is so dangerous,' he said carelessly. 'He is a consummate actor, but one knows it.'

'Yes,' assented the Major thoughtfully; 'yet the moment to watch him is the moment when he acts that he is acting. With the others of us acting is troublesome; with him it is habitual and a pleasure. However, he has given you your company; the rank is substantial, as far as it goes, and at least the accompanying pay is not altogether visionary.'

'Yes, he's done all that.' Rallywood was flinging some of his belongings back into his portmanteau.

'The next thing will be to find you a mission.'

'He has done that also.' Rallywood raised an expressive face. 'I am to reform the Guard!'

Counsellor burst into a great laugh, but as suddenly grew grave.

'They will take it kindly! Their welcome to you is likely to be ... interesting!'

'So I expected. But I went down to the mess last week and was introduced by old Wallenloup. They were very civil.'

'Ah! and since you left they have been very silent. They are overdoing it – too civil and too silent. Looks bad, you know.'

'Oh, that's all right; Selpdorf told me not to be drawn into any shallow quarrels,' Rallywood answered with a smile.

But the Major did not take up the smile. The two vertical lines above his fleshy nose deepened.

'It strikes me, my boy, that you've got the devil by the tail this time,' he said gruffly, as his eyes rested for a moment on Rallywood; 'but you know how to take care of yourself. Ready? We can drive to the Palace together. I have a carriage waiting.'

The couple proceeded downstairs, bought cigarettes of the waiter, and started. The wind was howling in its usual twanging cadences down the broad streets, increasing in force as they gained the open, lighted embankment of the river, along which they passed for some distance before reaching the courtyard of the Palace.

The great entrance hall was still full of arrivals, while up the wide central staircase trooped masks and dominos in a changing kaleidoscope of form and colour. Eager heads thrust this way and that, picturesque figures grouping and greeting, cavaliers of all periods, maidens of all nations, monks, barbarians, cardinals, queens, and clowns – sometimes the wisest heads under the most foolish caps – while here and there a few favoured paper-folk made desultory notes and sketches.

The painted ceiling stretching overhead is one of the triumphs of Renaissance art. The identity of the master hand who achieved that marvellous work has been a mooted point in art circles for a couple of centuries or thereabouts, and quite a library on the subject exists. The Maäsauns are very proud of their ceiling, prouder still of the controversy which has raged and still continues to rage around it.

M. Selpdorf, as representing his master, stood at the head of the staircase, and received the guests with a good deal more politeness and discrimination than the Duke himself might have shown, for that personage was said to have an awkward habit of turning his back upon those whom he happened to dislike.

Major Counsellor was greeted with effusion; Rallywood with raised eyebrows and a slight reserve.

'I had hoped to welcome the new captain of the Guard this evening,' Selpdorf said in a low voice and with a significant glance at Rallywood's velveteens.

'I have not yet joined, your Excellency. To-morrow I hope to have that honour,' returned Rallywood and passed on into the gallery beyond. This gallery, opening from the head of the staircase, ran round the great saloon, which served the purpose of a ballroom, and many of the guests were amusing themselves by looking down over the silk-hung balustrade on the dancers below.

In the gallery Counsellor paused to say a word here and there to several persons, who, like Rallywood and himself, were without masks, but he seemed to have curiously little facility in penetrating disguises. Presently a burly old man in the glittering green and gold of the Guard disengaged himself from the curtains at the back of the gallery, and nodding a supercilious acknowledgment of Rallywood's salute, brought his hand down with a rough heartiness on Counsellor's shoulder.

'Back again in Maäsau, Major Counsellor. I'm glad to see you!' he said with the laugh in his small eyes marred by a wrinkle of suspicious cunning, an expression which seemed startling on what was at first sight a big, bluff, sensual face. 'What good wind has blown you back among us?'

'Thanks, my lord;' Counsellor turned with ready response. 'I am glad to find that some of my old friends, especially Count Sagan, have not forgotten me,' he said simply.

'We believed you had forgotten Maäsau.'

'Maäsau will not allow herself to be forgotten!' laughed Counsellor. 'She is a coquette, and demands consideration from all the world.'

Sagan's face changed.

'Yes, a coquette, who trifles with many admirers but who knows how to hold her own against them,' he replied significantly. 'Who is that?' he added, staring after Rallywood. 'I think I recognise him as an English lieutenant in the Frontier Cavalry.'

'He is the same to-day,' said Counsellor.

'What?' exclaimed Sagan. 'Why to-day? Has he, then, come in for one of your colossal fortunes?'

'Who can say?' returned Counsellor. 'A fortune or – a colossal misfortune. Ah! there is Madame Aspard. Au revoir, Count.'

Counsellor passed on, perfectly well aware of the heavy meaning attached to the wilful ignoring of Rallywood's appointment to the Guard by its colonel-in-chief. There was certainly danger ahead.

CHAPTER V

GOOD LUCK AND A FIREFLY

Meanwhile Rallywood had come to an anchor beside one of the high embossed doors of gold and white which led from the gallery into various luxurious withdrawing rooms. As he leant against the lintel a voice suddenly said in his ear, as it seemed —

'My dear lady, why have such scruples? They are the most detestable things in life and the least profitable. They poison pleasure even when they do not altogether deprive us of it. And what does one gain by them? Absolutely nothing, not so much as the good opinion of our friends, who can never be brought to believe we possess them,' said a man in a mocking tone.

A distinctly uncomfortable sensation pervaded Rallywood's mind for the second which preceded the reply. The voice was Baron von Elmur's, and there was a note of admiration in it that he had reason to be acquainted with.

A woman laughed, a light, provoking laugh, Rallywood, who was still held by the crush against the door, knew it well, but he breathed freely, for it was not the laugh he had feared to hear.

'Nevertheless, Baron, I like scruples; they are always respectable, and therefore of use — sometimes,' the lady answered in a high, sweet tone.

'Your husband, my Lord Sagan, has not found them indispensable in his career.'

'But he is not a woman!' with a sigh.

'A beautiful woman can dispense with everything except — her beauty! That makes fools of us all! Besides —'

The rest of the sentence was lost, as Rallywood managed at length to force his way through the crowd, which was thickening rapidly.

Then he came upon a group of men he knew, men from the frontier, from the marshes about Kofn Ford and the crags of Pulesco, men with tanned skins like his own, and the mark of the collar rim of their high military tunics round their throats. They were masked, and represented various original characters, and were enjoying themselves hugely. More than all were they astonished at being recognised so readily by Rallywood. Rallywood drew his finger round his throat by way of explanation. There was a general laugh, and the men scattered each to seek his own particular pleasure. Rallywood remained looking down on the dancers. There was in the back of his mind some desire to identify the lady whose glove was still in his possession. He fixed now on one tall domino, now on another, but without satisfaction. He was discontentedly coming to the point of knowing that he had made a fresh mistake, when he turned his head abruptly, with a vague sense of being looked at, and saw a black domino standing for an instant alone at the further end of the gallery. Even under the muffling silken folds he fancied he recognised the attitude of the girl he had met at the Chancellor's.

He at once began to make his way through the crowd in her direction, but when next he looked she was gone. He descended to the salon, where he danced with more than one masked lady. His six feet of stature marked him out from the shorter Maäsauns, and the tall athletic figure of the gamekeeper, who moved with so much of unexpected ease and grace, excited some attention.

After an interval, as he stood back against the wall to allow a couple who had been following him to pass, they drew up in front of him.

'I obey you, Mademoiselle,' said the man.

His companion, who wore a black domino, made a gesture of dismissal; then she turned to Rallywood. 'You have been looking for me?' she said, as her late partner moved away.

'But naturally, Mademoiselle,' replied Rallywood.

'You know who I am?'

'Not in the least. I cannot even make a guess, though I have been waiting to know since this day last week.'

'It would have been easy to ask the question – of anyone,' she said with an odd intonation.

'By no means. There are questions which cannot be asked – of anyone, because the answer touches too closely.' Rallywood pulled himself up with a sudden sense of being ridiculously in earnest. And then they were dancing.

'Yet you are not a stranger in Révonde. Madame de Sagan could have answered your question – had you cared to ask it,' the girl said.

'It did not strike me to ask her. I trusted to the fact that, belonging to the Guard, I must some day have the good fortune to find you again.'

'You are patient!'

'No,' returned Rallywood, 'I am not patient. But I know that all things come to him who waits. I wait.'

'So I see, excellently!'

'Have I not waited long enough to hear your name first from your own lips?'

'Stop for a moment,' then standing beside him, she continued, 'Ask me to-morrow.'

'If I am alive I will!' he laughed.

He felt her hand move with a quick tremor on his arm.

'I knew it! Which of them has challenged you? Unziar?' The swift question, echoing his own thought, took him completely by surprise.

He passed his arm round her, for the waltz was nearing its end.

'Shall we go on? No; no one has done me the honour of sending me a challenge.'

'Let us have an end of this absurd mystery!' said the girl impatiently. 'I am Valerie Selpdorf, and you are –'

'John Rallywood of the Guard of Maäsau!' he interposed. 'I had my commission from you in the ante-room of the Hôtel du Chancelier. But for that I should have been more than half inclined to refuse it.'

'I wish you had refused it! It may cost you – more than a man cares to pay. I thought my father held the power to give any commission he pleased, but one can never reckon with the Guard. They mean to kill you, Captain Rallywood! I wanted to warn you, but I think you know more, perhaps, than I can tell you or than you will tell me. What is going to happen? I want to help you – you must let me help you!'

Rallywood laughed, but perhaps his arm drew her a little closer as they moved more slowly during the concluding bars of the waltz.

'My dear Mademoiselle, I assure you that your fears are quite groundless. I am proud to belong to the Guard of Maäsau, and they have so far shown no intention of rejecting me. As for duels, if there happened to be one – are not affairs common in Maäsau? And afterwards, fewer funerals take place than one would suppose likely! Besides, M. Selpdorf's wishes cannot be lightly disregarded in Révonde.'

'You will be drawn into a quarrel before the night is over.' Mademoiselle Selpdorf stated her conviction very plainly, without noticing his disclaimers.

The music ceased. Rallywood spoke once more. 'To prove to you how little I anticipate anything of the sort, will you allow me to have the last dance on the programme?'

'That is nothing! What can I do for you?' she exclaimed.

'Expect me! If you would promise to expect me, I don't yet know the man who could stop my coming to you.'

The words were lightly spoken, but Valerie Selpdorf, looking up into Rallywood's eyes, understood that he was likely to be able to make any words of his good. They were handsome eyes, rather long in shape, frank and steady, the iris of a dense grey bordering on hazel as became the

sunburnt yellow of his hair and moustache, and at that moment they contained an expression which remained in Valerie's memory as the distinctive expression of his face. Whenever in the future she recalled Rallywood, she thought of him as he looked then.

'I will expect you,' promised Valerie.

They both knew that for the moment they stood together at one of those cross-roads where life and death meet, where moreover a look and a word convey a mutual revelation of character such as years of ordinary intercourse often fail to supply.

Rallywood did not dance again; he contented himself with following the movements of the black domino. After a time she joined a little group of people with whom she stood talking. One of the group presently detached himself and glanced round as if searching for some one. It was Unziar of the Guard. He quickly perceived Rallywood and at once came towards him.

'Allow me to recall myself to your memory, Captain Rallywood; I am Unziar of the Guard,' he said bowing, both voice and bow touching that extreme of punctiliousness which in itself constitutes an insolence.

'The Guard are said to have long memories. I hope in that particular, at least, if in no other, to support their traditions,' replied Rallywood, with an air of cool and serene indifference said to be impossible to any but men of his race.

'That is – something,' rejoined Unziar with a smile that belied its name. 'We are somewhat exigent in the Guard. We ask for more than a long memory – a long pedigree, for example, and a long sword.'

'I have heard that also.'

Unziar glanced sharply at him out of his pale keen eyes. The fellow was too non-committal to please his taste. To hound a coward out of the corps promised infinitely less difficulty and enjoyment than he had hoped for when he pledged himself to rid the Guard of the Englishman. For perhaps the only time in his life he wished he wore any uniform but the tell-tale green and gold, for he knew of the Guard that it was often their 'great name that conquered.'

Spurred by this thought he looked Rallywood very straightly in the face, and the gleam of his eyes reminded the Englishman of glacier ice.

'Knowing so many of our peculiarities, perhaps Captain Rallywood may no longer care to join us?' said the Guardsman.

Rallywood laughed with absolute good-humour.

'I both care and – dare!' he said pleasantly.

Unziar's face cleared.

'I am forgetting my errand,' he said with a slight change of tone. 'I have been sent by a lady to bring you to her. Will you follow me?'

As they approached the group, the shorter of the two black dominoes spoke.

'You need not trouble to introduce Captain Rallywood, Anthony. We are already friends; are we not, Monsieur?'

The sweet high voice and the inconsequent childish laugh came upon Rallywood with a slight shock.

'I could hardly have dared to claim so much,' he said; 'but I cannot forget that Madame de Sagan –'

She laid her hand with a suspicion of caressing familiarity on his arm.

'Hush, then! Do you not know that it is inadmissible to mention the name of a masked lady until the clock strikes midnight? Captain Rallywood has been stationed near the Castle at Kofn Ford; we have therefore met – occasionally,' continued the lady, addressing herself to Mademoiselle Selpdorf.

'Captain Rallywood is luckier than most of us,' interposed another voice. 'He seems to have an enviable facility for appearing where we others in vain wish to be. Only last week –'

A tall Mephistopheles in scarlet silk, whose high shoulders lent him added height, had joined them. His peaked cap and feather sparkled with lurid points of fire. Countess Sagan turned upon him.

'But, Baron, where is then your domino? It is not yet midnight,' she exclaimed, her hand still remaining on Rallywood's arm.

'Listen!' von Elmur raised his hand. 'The happy moment arrives when the beautiful faces we long to see – ' He gave the rest of the sentence to the ear of Mademoiselle Selpdorf, who stood silently looking on at the little scene.

At this instant the music broke off with a sudden clang; the dancers paused where they stood, as the great bell of the palace tower sent its strong, mellow boom of midnight out over the frost-bound city.

Rallywood, on looking round an instant later, saw that masks and dominoes had disappeared. Opposite to him stood Valerie Selpdorf in a dress of some deep velvety shade, which bore, wrought upon its texture here and there, tiny horseshoes embossed in iridescent jewels. A diadem of the same shape crowned her dark hair. Yet all the richness and delicacy of the blended colourings struck Rallywood with only one odd remembrance – his own boot-heel outlined in Révonde mud upon a long *suède* glove. The same association apparently occurred to Baron von Elmur. His glance fled from Valerie to Rallywood, and he smiled with some malice.

'What have we here, Mademoiselle? The stamp of some idealised cavalry charger?' he asked. 'I should be eternally grateful if only I were – of the cavalry!'

A sudden intense expression, like a spasm of hope or happiness, crossed Unziar's pale face in a flash. A word sprang almost involuntarily from his lips.

'The Guard – ' But the girl cut him remorselessly short.

'I do not idealise either the Guard' – she paused, then went on without taking her eyes from Elmur's face – 'or the cavalry. One has illusions, doubtless, but none so entirely absurd! I have idealised my own desire merely. I want good luck. I am "Good Luck!"' She spoke the last two words in English, smiling back at Elmur.

The Baron bowed. He was not beaten yet.

'That is well,' he exclaimed; 'since the cavalry and Guard are disowned, it means that the good luck is for the poor diplomat!'

'Provisionally, yes,' said the girl.

'Mademoiselle Selpdorf has already given this waltz to me,' said Unziar, stepping forward.

But Mademoiselle Selpdorf placed her hand within the Baron's ready arm.

'Later, Anthony,' she answered. 'His Excellency deserves a consolation prize, since my reading of "Good Luck" is not in the German language.'

She turned away, and with her the group parted and scattered.

'You are very much interested; is it not so?'

Rallywood started. The Countess spoke petulantly.

'Do you not know,' she added, 'that the custom in Révonde holds you to the partner with whom you find yourself when midnight rings? Valerie Selpdorf is embarrassed with partners – my cousin Anthony Unziar, who desires perhaps herself, but most certainly her fortune, and our delightful German Minister, who uses all means that come to hand to win Maäsau for his master! But I should not say these foolish things to you, who are of the other party.'

They were dancing by this time, her head near his shoulder, her voice soft in his bending ear.

'Of the other party?' he repeated. 'I flattered myself that you said something else just now.'

'Yes, a friend; but I made a mistake – I have none – no, not one true friend!' the voice said passionately in his ear, 'and my husband – '

Rallywood almost lifted her clear of some crowding couples, and then gently released her. In a vague way he felt the force of her appealing beauty as he had felt it intermittently for some months

past. It touched him for the moment, but he was apt to forget both it and the very existence of the woman herself directly he parted from her.

'Count Sagan is colonel-in-chief of the Guard?' he asked, and the question seemed to fit in with her train of thought.

She made no immediate response, but with a light touch on his arm led him to a flower-banked apartment, about which a few couples were scattered in various convenient nooks. She sank upon a sequestered settee, and made room for him beside her.

'Yes, he is colonel-in-chief of the Guard because they think him too old to act any longer as its real commandant. He was the first soldier in Maäsaus and the most unequalled sportsman. He was all these things, and I am proud of them! But look at me!'

She rose languidly and stood before him. Rallywood saw a slight woman, tall and exquisitely fair, who carried her small head with its gleaming coronet royally. Her skin and her soft flushed cheeks had the pure, evanescent quality of a child's complexion. Moreover, her chief charm was perhaps her air of child-like innocence. Isolde of Sagan had seldom looked more lovely; she was honestly touched by self-pity, and was posing as the proud yet disillusioned wife of a man hopelessly older than herself, and for the time being she believed earnestly in that view of her lot.

'All these things have been,' she added softly, her eyes filling with tears, 'but *I am!* Can I ever be satisfied with what only was?' Rallywood's face altered. Like any other man in such a position he felt immensely sorry for her. She saw the advantage she had gained, and at once the coquette awoke in her.

'Captain Rallywood,' she sank down beside him again, 'I need a friend in whom I can trust, who will ask nothing of me, but who will give me all the things I most want.'

The interpretation of this enigmatical speech was left to the ear, for the young Countess was gazing at her big black fan, where luminous fireflies hung tangled amongst the dusky feathers. Quickly with some dissatisfaction she became aware that Rallywood was not looking at her – as he should have been doing – but staring in front of him with a grave expression. Well, she knew she could make him look at her as she desired – yet. It was but a matter of time.

'I think you may count upon me,' said Rallywood at last. He believed in her, which was good; moreover, he meant what he said; yet the speech was wholly lacking in the flavour which to the Countess Sagan was the flavour of life.

'After all, it is little to promise, and I may not need your friendship for very long,' she replied, plucking a glittering firefly from her fan and laying it on his sleeve with her sweet light laugh. 'Like a firefly I shall dance out my short night, and die quickly before life grows stale!'

Rallywood took out his cigarette case of Alfaun leather-work, and dropped the firefly with its sparkle of diamond-dust into it.

'I don't like to hear you say that,' he said in his quiet way, which the listener decided might mean so much or so little. 'We must all go out some time, I suppose, but one always wants the beautiful things to live for ever... Meanwhile, can you spare me another dance?'

CHAPTER VI

THE CLOISTER OF ST. ANTHONY

The night was drawing to a close. The long supper room was almost deserted. Amongst the lingerers were a few officers in the uniform of the Guard, who stood talking together in one corner.

'The fellow has given you no chance,' Adolf was saying gloomily.

'Have him in here! Kick him in here, if necessary!' said Colendorp.

'I don't think you will find him reluctant, drawled Unziar. 'I have spoken with him already this evening, and I – ah – rather liked what he said.'

'Then why haven't you arranged it? To-morrow he joins – and he must never be permitted to join the Guard! We might have asked Abenfeldt to remove him, but the Guard has up to the present day been able to set its own house in order,' added Colendorp with a sour glance at Unziar. 'Has his Excellency the Chancellor thrown out too powerful a hint about the fellow? – I saw Mademoiselle dancing with him this evening – I mean a hint too powerful to be disregarded by those who wish to retain the good opinion of M. Selpdorf!'

Unziar scowled.

'I permit no one – not one of my own regiment – to insult me,' he rejoined with a white blaze of anger on his pale face, and the wine in his hand trembled.

Adolf suddenly stretched across to take up a decanter, and catching the glass with the edge of his heavy epaulet, knocked it from Unziar's fingers.

'We are losing sight of the main question,' he said. 'May I suggest, sir,' to Colendorp, who happened to be the captain of his own squadron, 'that it is unusual to be obliged to act so carefully as we have been advised to do in this case?'

Colendorp's dark face grew darker, but the honour of the Guard over-rode all personal considerations.

'I have been hasty, Unziar,' he said in a stifled voice after a slight pause.

Unziar bowed and continued as if the interlude with its covert allusions had not taken place.

'It has been difficult to get at Rallywood this evening. Yet let us see how he shoots before we conclude that he has any rooted objection to handling a pistol. I agree with Captain Colendorp, that the affair should be brought off to-night. I will go and find the Englishman.'

He had already walked towards the broad arched doorway, when among the palms and the hangings which shrouded it two men appeared. One was Counsellor, in his blazing red uniform, beside him Rallywood's tall figure, clad in soft brown tones of velveteen, looked almost black.

Behind them again appeared other faces.

Rallywood took in the meaning of the situation at a glance. Without any perceptible pause he held out his hand to Counsellor.

'Well, good-bye, Major, since you are going. I will turn up to-morrow as early as I can,' he said.

Counsellor understood also. In his position it was impossible to do anything for Rallywood. As an agent secretly accredited by the Court of St. James's, he must hold aloof and neutral in all personal quarrels. He appreciated the tact with which Rallywood dismissed him from a scene which promised to be distinctly awkward, but his hand itched to shoot down the flower of the Guard of Maäsau for the insolence that dared to doubt the worthiness of an Englishman of birth to hold a place among them.

'Good-bye, Rallywood,' he said gruffly, and turned on his heel to find himself face to face with Baron von Elmur and one or two officers of the Frontier Cavalry.

'There is about to be a storm, Major, observed Elmur, passing Counsellor with a cool nod.

'So it seems. A storm in a teacup!' retorted the Major derisively.

Meanwhile Rallywood, with the men of the Cavalry, his old brother-officers, behind him, advanced to meet Unziar.

'We of the Guard are hoping to break glasses with you gentlemen of the Cavalry before the night is over,' began Unziar, alluding to a fashion amongst the military contingent in Maäsau of taking wine together and breaking the glasses afterwards as a sign of unalterable good feeling and mutual loyalty. Unziar included Rallywood with the two officers beside him in this invitation, by a slight inclination of the head.

The three men accepted, but there was a little stiffening in the attitude of each, for Rallywood had friends here who were resolved, if only for the honour of the Frontier Corps, to see their late comrade through the coming trouble.

Before the wine filled the glasses, Adolf was already deep in the story of Unziar's shooting-match with Abenfeldt.

'Allow me the honour of drinking with you, Monsieur,' said Colendorp to Rallywood. 'It was in truth a notable performance; we have never had even in the Guard a surer shot than Unziar,' he added, alluding to the anecdote.

Rallywood had just time to make up his mind and determine upon his course of action.

The glasses clinked together, and then clashed upon the floor, where the men set their heels upon them. Then Rallywood turned to Unziar:

'I compliment you, Lieutenant Unziar,' he said. 'I already knew that you were a swordsman not easily to be matched; since, in fact, the little affair at Alfau, when I had the pleasure of acting as your second. But the pistol is, I venture to say, another matter.'

Unziar set his shoulders back with an indescribable suggestion of scornful defiance.

'May I ask you to state precisely what you mean, Monsieur?' he answered.

'I mean that although a man may shoot any number of swallows of a morning before breakfast, it does not follow that he can hit a man at, say, twenty paces.' Rallywood spoke deliberately.

The whole group of men listened in silence. Then Unziar leant towards Rallywood with a smile.

'We can but try, Captain Rallywood,' he said gently.

Although everyone in their immediate neighbourhood was listening, from the other side of the hall they looked, no doubt, like a group of tall men engaged in the ordinary conversation and common amenities of society, the only noticeable difference being that Unziar was a little more deprecating and low-voiced than usual. Elmur, standing near by, filled his glass and drank, with a silent nod at Unziar.

'I shall be delighted to assist you in settling the question,' returned Rallywood; then, consulting his card, he added, 'I find I have an engagement for the last dance, some twenty minutes hence. May I recommend the interval to your consideration?'

The two frontier men stepped forward simultaneously to offer their services to Rallywood. He thanked them, and was about to accept, when Captain Adiron interposed.

'If either of these gentlemen will resign in my favour I shall feel it an obligation, as I can then offer myself to Captain Rallywood as one of his seconds.'

Courtesy demanded that Rallywood and his friends should fall in with this proposal, and Rallywood, replying to Adiron, added:

'You have heard exactly what passed between Lieutenant Unziar and myself, and I am sure I cannot do better than leave the matter in your hands in conjunction with my friend, Colonel Jenard.'

Colendorp and Adolf, as representing Unziar, accompanied Rallywood's seconds to make the necessary arrangements. Meanwhile, Rallywood strolled back to the gallery above the ballroom, and looked down at the dancers. He could not see Valerie, but he remembered Selpdorf and his injunctions to avoid a quarrel, and smiled as he thought over the words, since the Chancellor must have been perfectly aware that he had pushed an unwelcome foreigner into a position that could only be held by force of arms, even in the case of a Maäsaun candidate of noble blood. At that moment he saw his own position clearly. He knew himself to be an unconsidered unit in the big game of diplomacy

that was being played over his head, and he remembered that the day of human sacrifices is not yet, as many suppose, quite a thing of the past. The gods are changed, or called by other names, and the high priest no longer dips his hands in the actual blood of the victim; but the whole deadly drama goes on repeating itself as it always must while the generations of men have their being under various modifications of the primeval system of the strong hand. That his life might be deliberately requisitioned by Selpdorf to forward some secret policy of his own was by no means an impossible supposition. Rallywood glanced at the clock. In another quarter of an hour he must either be dancing with Valerie Selpdorf or lying dead in the famous Cloister of St. Anthony, which overlooked the river, and where many another man had died under much the same circumstances.

Rallywood laughed again and turned on his heel. At that period it did not seem to matter greatly which way it ended, but he was going to carry the undertaking through with what credit his wits afforded him.

In the meantime the Cloister of St. Anthony had been lit up from end to end with a brilliant light, and while the other two seconds went to fetch their respective principals to the spot, Adiron and Adolf exchanged a word or two as they waited.

'The Englishman took it very well,' remarked Adiron.

'Devilish well,' lisped little Adolf; 'he made rather a favour, of it just to satisfy Unziar, you know! He's too sure of himself, this Rallywood. If he kills Unziar, which is unlikely, I shall have to finish the affair myself!' with a frowning importance that sent Adiron into one of his ready roars of laughter.

The Cloister was still echoing with the sound when Rallywood, accompanied by Jenard, arrived from the other side of the palace, where the state rooms were situated. On the way Jenard explained to Rallywood that the procedure decided upon as being best suited to the requirements of the case was simply alternate shots at twenty paces.

Rallywood and Unziar being placed, one of the men sent a coin spinning up into the air. Then followed a long minute of silence.

St. Anthony's Cloister looks inward towards a quadrangle; the outer side bordering the river has been glazed in, but in the interval of waiting Rallywood could hear the water plashing and sobbing against the foundations of the old walls, and the wild sound of the *tza*, sweeping down from the snowy frontier above Kofn Ford, as it wailed and howled drearily along the dark waters. He almost started when Adiron, approaching him, said:

'You have won the first shot, Captain Rallywood.'

'Then I am afraid I must beg of you to do me the great favour of rearranging the affair,' replied Rallywood; 'for if I should be unfortunate enough to kill Lieutenant Unziar, or even to disable him, the question at issue between us must remain undecided for at the best an indefinite time, and possibly for ever. If you recollect, the matter over which he was pleased to differ with me was my expressed opinion that though a good shot may bring down swallows to perfection, he might miss a man at a moderate distance.'

'You have won the toss,' remonstrated Adiron.

'Yes, unluckily. But I feel sure that Lieutenant Unziar will be kind enough not to hold me to that, since it is evident that the first shot should be his.'

Adiron grinned. It was his way of showing many mixed emotions.

'I like your way of conducting a dispute, Captain Rallywood,' he said; 'but as your second I must warn you that it is the worst luck in the world to refuse luck. You have won the toss. In declining to profit by it you are paying court to death.'

Rallywood shrugged his shoulders.

'I may prove my point,' he retorted, smiling.

'As for that, it might be decided on a different basis later on,' urged Adiron.

For the second time that night Rallywood looked at his watch.

'I have an engagement in seven minutes,' he said. 'I shall be glad if you will convey my meaning to Lieutenant Unziar.'

'As you like,' said Adiron; 'but in case of accident I should like to take the opportunity of saying to you now, that in the whole range of my experience I have never derived more pleasure from the attitude of a principal than I have on this occasion from yours.'

Adiron concluded with a bow and recrossed to the other second. Since the Englishman was determined to go to his grave in so excellent and gallant a fashion, by heaven, it was Victor St. Just Adiron who would escort him to its brink with all the honours of a fine and hereditary courtesy! He was a man quite capable of losing himself in a cause; therefore, as he approached the other seconds, he came as a partisan of Rallywood's, resolved that his man should have his will in spite of all or any opposition.

'My principal,' he began, 'has just pointed out that this meeting is rather in the nature of the justification of an opinion than a quarrel in the ordinary sense;' then, repeating Rallywood's contention, he added, 'You will see that it remains for Lieutenant Unziar to prove himself in the right.'

Colendorp threw out a bitter oath, Adolf objected softly, and Jenard stood silent and in dismay. What could Rallywood mean by throwing away his life? But Adiron backed up Rallywood; he was going to bring this thing to pass! Rallywood should have a last satisfaction in this life, because he was worthy of it.

'If Lieutenant Unziar chooses to withdraw his opinion,' he said, 'of course Captain Rallywood will not go any further into the matter. For the rest, he has an appointment in less than seven minutes. On his behalf I can but insist that his suggestion affords the only possible way out of the difficulty.'

Reluctantly the other men yielded. Rallywood had gained a moral advantage. If he were destined to die, he would die in a manner that would go down into the history of the Guard. Hastily and in accordance with the request of Rallywood, the change of procedure was explained to Unziar.

The two opponents stood absolutely still, Rallywood's face wearing the expression of one who is politely interested in something that is happening to somebody else.

At the signal Unziar raised his pistol and fired.

Rallywood stood in his place for some thirty seconds, while there was a sound of splintering glass as the bullet rushed out into the darkness above the river; then he advanced smiling.

'It seems,' he said, 'that I was right.'

Unziar stared at him.

Rallywood handed his pistol to Jenard, and bowing to the assembled men ceremoniously, he went on:

'I hope we may consider the affair concluded, and as I am engaged for the dance that is about to begin, I trust you will excuse me.'

And with another bow he was gone. No one spoke for a little while, then Unziar walked towards the others with no very pleasant face. That Rallywood had done a thing above reproach, and in a manner above reproach, made it none the easier for his pride to accept the result. But he was above all considerations and before all considerations true to himself – to Anthony Unziar.

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