

Brinton Davis

# Trusia: A Princess of Krovitch



Davis Brinton

**Trusia: A Princess of Krovitch**

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## Trusia: A Princess of Krovitch

### I

#### A WAGER IS MADE

After the termination of a three months' struggle on the floor of 'Change, resulting in the rout of his adversaries, who had counted on an easy acquisition of his heritage in the P. & S. system, Calvert Carter was grateful for that particular armchair in the reading-room of the Racquet Club.

"Those gentlemen, in banking on my inexperience in manipulations," he chuckled audibly, "evidently forgot that I had been a campaigner in Cuba. Even though I didn't learn much there about Wall Street or tickers, I did gather some very valuable knowledge of human nature. I guess that counts a little in deals, after all." His thoughts, released from the pressure of financial altercations, were a trifle tumultuous and wandering. They went bounding back now, at the mere mental suggestion of Cuba, to that tropic island, the scene of his stirring military experiences.

Event followed event on the lightened screen of reminiscence. He recalled with a quick surge of pulse the fervor of El Caney and the tide that swept San Juan Hill by the chivalry of American manhood. There, too, was Santiago where his mastery of men had resulted in his being appointed Provost Marshal of the conquered Spanish citadel. Then his mind inconsequently turned to the man who had passed through so many crises with him.

"Carrick came through it all, too," he mused. "The veteran is now the valet. Poor chap, his life has been a strange one." He recalled the story the fellow had told of his past – a tale which had won for him the friendship and aid of the man who had been his captain and was now his employer.

It had occurred in the white stuccoed house on the Plaza which had been his official quarters as Provost.

The picture of it, with its stately old-world balconies where violet shadows nested lovingly, arose before his memory's eyes with a strange yearning. The recollection of those striped awnings in the white light of mid-day had potency to cool, even now, the fever of his thoughts. The barren dignity of Carrick's story had contrasted vividly with the tropical colorings in which its recital had been inspired.

Prompted by a kindly interest in his orderly's career and ambitions, he had asked the man as to his past in general and his future in particular. He was totally unprepared for the undammed flood of confidence which had burst from the lips of the habitually taciturn Carrick. The tattered rags of the fellow's humble past were spread before him in all their pathetic squalor. He saw, as though a living thing, the barren, inarticulate childhood. He heard, under compulsion, the tale of youth's indefinable longings, with the meagre story of a love which lacked not its own shabby tragedy. The delicacy of a gentleman, who had intruded where he had no right, had caused him to draw back with an apology; but the orderly had insisted on telling him. He could almost see the raw, quivering heart in Carrick's breast.

"I wonder," he pondered, "what that medal was he wore under his shirt? He said it was an heirloom. It looked devilishly like an order of nobility." He referred to an incident in the man's narrative, when the latter had drawn from beneath the blue army blouse what had at first appeared to be a Star of the Bath. It had been solemnly handed to him for inspection, with the information that the trooper's father had also worn it.

It was old. The circular scroll, which at one time had doubtless borne an inscription, was smooth save for a few dimples which indicated faintly where words had been. The centre was a slightly raised

disc about an inch and a quarter in diameter. Upon this, of blue enamel, cracked and chipped with age and usage, was the figure of a lion rampant, a royal crown upon its head. From the central disc, intersected by the scroll, radiated points of equal length, making a star of the whole. Something also had been said about papers. Supposing that Carrick had meant insurance policies, he had paid but passing heed to the allusion.

Carter's ideas were growing patchwork, he confessed. He felt he was unable, in his weariness, to sustain much connected thought. The mental trend was all one way, however, – pointing to a desire to escape the enforced ennui, which was sure to be consequent upon his recent exhausting contest. Nor was he particularly anxious to meet any one until he had eased up the terrific pace which his nerves had set him.

Hearing a couple of his friends enter, he determined to wait until they should discover him before he would make his presence known. Aware that no one would choose that room for confidential chats, he had no fear of eavesdropping. As he was yielding to drowsiness the words of one of the men back of him caused him to sit up alertly. It was Billy Saunderson, one of the pair who had just entered, who was speaking.

"I tell you, Lang," Saunderson was saying to Langdon of the Diplomatic Corps, – "I tell you that there'll be war. It isn't going to be any police-clubbed riot this time. It'll be the real thing." Carter felt a personal affront in Langdon's sceptical laugh at this assertion.

"How do you figure that, Saunderson?" the government man queried.

"Immigration statistics of the last ten years prove to any sane man that the natives are returning to their fatherland in unprecedented numbers. Read for yourself." The pause that followed, broken only by the rustling of papers, was evidently devoted to a perusal of documents. Then Langdon's voice again took up the theme.

"All right, Billy, but what do you expect to prove by the fact that eighty thousand men came here from Krovitch in the last ten years and sixty thousand return this year?"

"By the fact that it is *men* that are going back – not women or children; that Krovitzers don't love Russia well enough to return as volunteers against Japan; by the fact that ten thousand are trained soldiers."

"How do you know the last?"

"Private information." Billy's tone was significant. "War Department; don't repeat. Their enlistment up with Uncle Sam, these men have asked for their discharges. All first-class soldiers and non coms."

"Hm," Langdon commented, partially convinced; then, as a new objection struck him, his tone was once more argumentative. "They can't fight without a backer," he continued. "Banking houses to-day control peace and war as immutably as Christianity should. I don't believe that any one would back them."

"Here comes Jackson, he'll know," Saunderson said as the door opened to admit another man who instantly joined them.

"What's that you are leaving up to me, Billy? Do I hold the stakes?" Carter recognized the voice as that of one of his bitterest opponents in the stock battle.

"Saunderson says that there will be real fighting in Krovitch," said Langdon. "What does the money mart say?" Appealed to unexpectedly on this topic, Jackson laughed a trifle consciously.

"Well, in strict confidence," he replied, "I'll tell you that I am in a pool to finance things over there. That coup of Carter's pretty nearly dumped me on it, too."

Not desiring to become the butt of overheard personalities, Carter arose at this juncture, and, bowing to the trio, left the room. After his departure, the eyes of the first comers turned to Jackson, as one who had just felt the mettle of Carter's steel. The half smile which had been on Carter's face Jackson was perfectly willing to misinterpret.

"Gloating over our downfall," he remarked with reference to the day's happenings on the Street.

"Not that kind of fellow," replied Saunderson, coming to the defense of the absent. "You were caught dancing; he simply made you pay the piper."

"He's hard as nails," retorted Jackson, gloomily; "not a particle of sentiment in him."

"Look here, Jackson," said Langdon at this juncture, "you are dead wrong there. Carter's record is different. He went out to Cuba for what we discount nowadays – patriotism. While there he picked up a poor devil of a Cockney and made more of a man of him than the fellow had ever dreamed of becoming. Literally picked him out of the gutter – drunk. That man of his, – Carrick, – I think that's his name."

"Right," assented Saunderson. "Then look what he did for Marian Griggs when Jack's western bubble burst carrying her fortune with it. Jack blew his brains out, leaving her and the kids sky high. Though they had absolutely no claim on him other than disinterested friendship, Cal, in the most delicate manner in the world, fixed things so that they should never want. The girl told me herself. Sentiment? Why, man, he's chock full of it. He's the sort that, when he hears of this coming scrap in Krovitch, will throw himself body and soul into it, as his forbears have done from Marston Moor to date, just because it's likely to be a lost cause. He's always for the under dog – and I honor him for it. I'm willing to bet he'll go to Krovitch when he hears."

"A thousand?" inquired Jackson with speculative ardor. Saunderson narrowed his eyes, as he looked judiciously at the broker. He flicked the ash from his cigarette before replying.

"Too much. What's the use?" he said. "Make it even money at a hundred and I'll go you. On any other man I'd ask odds. With Carter, though, when it comes to war, to women, or to any one needing help, he's right there with the goods. He's in a class by himself. Do you take the bet?"

"Certainly," answered Jackson as he handed the money over to Langdon as stakeholder. "Word of honor, Billy, that you will not urge him on?"

"Word of honor, Jackson. Keep your hands off, too." The two shook hands gravely, while Langdon made a memorandum of the wager.

Before he had reached the corner, the subject of this speculation had forgotten, for the nonce, all about Krovitch and her troubles. His wearied mind – like a recalcitrant hunter at a stiffish fence – had thrown off the idea as too much weight to carry. A week later he was to be reminded of the episode at the club. Its effects led him far afield into a tale of romance, intrigue, war and women. Intrigue, war and women are inseparable.

## II

### "STRANGE COUNTRIES FOR TO SEE"

In the soul of Calvert Carter arose a vague unrest. A voiceless summons bade him, with every April stir of wind, to shake off the tale of common things and match his manhood and keen intelligence in Nature's conflict, the battle of the male. Six years past had found him in Cuba. In that brief campaign against Spain, his entire military career, each day so crowded with anticipation or actual battle, had been laid the foundation for this *wanderlieb*; this growing appetite for excitement and hazard. Occasional trips to Europe and even forays after big game had failed to satisfy him. Without realizing it, his was the aboriginal's longing for war, – primitive savage against primitive savage, and – his life lacked a woman.

He paced about his library as in a cage.

He strove desperately to understand the elusive impulse which urged him to go forth running, head up, pulses flaming; on, on, out of the reeking city to the cool, clean woods; on, on, to the heart of the world where all brutes and mankind strove in one titanic fight for supremacy. Conventions held him fast. He must go somewhere, however. Where? Was there in Old or New World an unbeaten track his feet had not trodden, a chance for adventure – man-strife? Manchuria! It would not do. His was not the mood for the porcelain, perfect politeness of Nippon. He was no beast to revel in the stupid orgies of the Slav!

The door opened and Carrick entered. It was not the Carrick of yesterday, but one who, though unable to eradicate all the traces of his earlier environments, had nevertheless succeeded in achieving externally and mentally a much higher plane than that on which Carter first found him. When he spoke, seeing his master was in some perplexity, there still lingered in his accent the unmistakable evidence of his Whitechapel origin.

"What is it, sir?"

Carter turned to him with a troubled countenance.

"Carrick," he said, "do you ever feel as if you wanted to be back on the fighting line?"

The fellow smiled guiltily.

"Yes, Mr. Carter, when I 'ave the go-fever as I call it! Then you see," he explained apologetically, "I was allus a sort of a tramp before you took 'old of me, sir. Don't think it's because the plyce don't suit – no man ever 'ad a better, thanks to you. Sometimes I think, though, as 'ow all men get the feelin' in spells. Do you ever feel that wye?"

"I'm chock full of it now, Carrick. I must get away from the manacles of cities. Hand me that atlas – I'll study the map of Europe again. Thanks. This is about the tenth time." Carter bent over the plotted page anxiously while his man stood at his elbow.

"Germany won't do," said Calvert. "I hate the very sight of a wasp-waisted, self-sufficient Prussian subaltern. They're everywhere. Imperial arrogance seems to pervade even their beer gardens." His voice trailed off into silence again, as in a preoccupied manner his finger wandered over the map. It stopped suddenly as he leaned closer to study the pink plot on which it rested. "Krovitch; Krovitch!" he muttered, "now where the devil have I heard of Krovitch? Russian province it seems but that doesn't give me any clue. I'm stuck, Carrick," he said with a frank laugh as he looked up to meet the man's responsive smile.

"Can I 'elp you, sir?" He leaned over Carter's shoulder.

"What is there about that little spot to set me guessing?" His finger kept tapping the indicated locality perplexedly.

His man studied a moment as if some old memory were awakened. "Can't sye, sir; but wasn't Count Zulka, of the Racquet Club, from there, sir?" he hesitatingly suggested. "Seems as if I remember 'is man saying as much."

"Now we are getting at it, Carrick. Certainly. Zulka is a Krovitzer. Has a mediæval castle at Schallberg. Capital, I think it is. Saunderson the newspaper fellow let fall a hint that there was going to be a big fight over there. That was after Zulka went abroad so suddenly. They're going to try and restore the ancient monarchy or something. Hand me that volume of the Encyclopedia – 'H-o-r' to 'L-i-b' I think will cover it. I'll look up Krovitch. Thanks," and he was soon deeply engrossed in the desired information.

A copy of the Almanac de Gotha lay at his hand. Having avidly absorbed the meagre narration of the country's history from the pages of the encyclopedia, his inquiring mind sought enlightenment as to the present personnel of the house who had ruled the ancient race.

The almanac disclosed no descendant of Stovik. Apparently the dynasty of which he was the head had ceased with his deposition. "Humph," he ejaculated, "here is something interesting. 'Sole descendant of Augustus. Girl, twenty-two, name – Trusia.' Pretty, poetical – Trusia! I like it. Seems to me I'll be repeating that name a good deal. I wonder what she's like."

He looked up again, his face glowing with enthusiasm. "Carrick," he said indignantly, "that country ought to be free. Russia stole it by a shabby trick. Two hundred years ago the reigning king of Krovitch was a chap called Stovik. The head of another royal family there named Augustus was his rival for the crown. Not being able to arouse much of a following among a loyal people, Augustus sought aid of his namesake, the Czar of Russia, to help in his contest. Knowing that Augustus would be easily disposed of once they got a foothold in Krovitch, the Russ, who had only been waiting for some such pretext, gladly espoused his cause and threw an army of veterans across the length and breadth of the devoted land. Stovik was deposed and Russia put her dupe upon the throne. Europe stood by and let that nation, which, single handed, had time and again saved them from Moslem invasions, be annexed by the government at Moscow. I'm going there. I'll look up Zulka and get him to have me counted in if there's any fight going to occur."

"And me too, sir," answered Carrick, standing like a stag who from a peak challenges his kind.

Carter looked at the man with evident appreciation and a pleased smile animated his face.

"It will be the old days over again. I warn you, Carrick, you'll have to hustle to beat me up another hill."

The Cockney laughed in the free masonry of their mutual reminiscences. "All right, sir, forewarned is forearmed. How soon do we start?"

"Just as soon as you can get our camp kits ready. We'll board the next steamer for Danzig. I think I'll take the big auto along, too. It may come in handy."

### III

## A DUEL – OF WITS

Russian affairs had reached the climax anticipated by the world as the result of her persistent encroachments in the Orient.

Precipitated by a fiery aggression from Nippon the gasping Slav had been pushed back across the Yalu. His ships around Port Arthur had been crippled and destroyed. The astonished nations, Russia included, awoke to a grim realization of war.

Not only the home staying Japanese, but millions of Russian subjects joined in the universal acclaim that hailed these first victories of the war, presaging that the Banners of the Rising Sun were well able to cope with the armed hordes which held Manchuria in the name of the Great White Czar.

First grumbling murmurs, next spasmodic disturbances defying police discipline, afterward outbreaks of thousands of workmen even in the larger cities, followed by armed and desperate uprisings in different provinces, demonstrated with seismic violence that an appreciable portion of domestic sympathy was with the enemies of the Empire.

The autocracy had been feared only while it had been able to assert universal invincibility.

Plots and counterplots added to the general uneasiness; failing to soothe them, more than one minister had been dismissed in disgrace.

In the Imperial Palace a war conference had been called with reference to a new and startling development. A map lay spread upon the table. A white-haired grand duke arose and placed a finger on the spot indicating the Russian capital.

"Here is St. Petersburg," he said dogmatically, "while away off here is Krovitch just across a little river from Germany and Austria. While those greedy neighbors may be held back now, you could not restrain them a moment after revolt broke out in that border province. For two centuries those Krovitzers have been a defiant and stiff-necked race in spite of every corrective measure adopted to suppress them. Unless immediate action is taken to anticipate and abort any movement of theirs, it may mean the utter destruction of your present southern frontiers. I am convinced that they will take advantage of the present disturbances to attempt their independence."

A wan and tolerant smile on the imperial countenance apprised him his appeal had been in vain. A suppressed buzz of incredulity brought a flush of resentment to his cheek.

"We are not ungrateful for your loyal advice, Your Grace, and will give it our future consideration." This imperial acknowledgment dismissed a matter which apparently was promptly forgotten in the discussion of events in Manchuria. But the apparition of Krovitch, in arms, would not so easily down in the minds of the thoughtful present, even though an autocrat had dismissed the notion as frivolous.

Never having been kind, now was the moment when the least sign of relaxation would be interpreted by the watchful millions as an evidence of weakness. Therefore the blows of the knout should be redoubled and prisons be enlarged the better to maintain hierarchical supremacy.

Provinces, conquered and made subject by the ancient strength of Russian arms, were becoming restless. Whispers of what a year earlier would have been avoided by the many in terror were now changed into shouts of defiance and publicly bruited in the daily papers. On all sides an oppressed country crouched tiger-like, ready for revolt should the whip be laid aside for even an instant.

Krovitch once having had a king, a *patrie* of her own, stubbornly and persistently kept alive her national feeling, language, and traditions in spite of imperial *ukase*. Naturally she caused considerable uneasiness among those who were the real rulers of Russia.

Persistent reports from their apprehensive agents alarmed those who, standing in the shadows of a toppling throne, feared an outbreak of the Krovitzers more than they despised the ultimate valor of the Japanese.

An ambitious minister, listening attentively to the warning against Krovitch, determined to put a quietus on that province, which once and for all time would blight her hopes of independence. He wired many questions and voluminous suggestions to his agent in Paris, Casper Haupt, who was a sub-chief of the White Police. This ardent subject of Nicholas II had cabled back immediately:

"Have here only one man who can. Must have free foot."

A reference to a portfolio biography disclosed the operator's name to be Josef Kolinsky.

The conversation resulting in this cabled information to the minister had taken place in a private room of the Russian consulate in the French capital between the sub-chief and Kolinsky.

One plan after another had been suggested by the superior only to be torn into threads by the operator. Finally in desperation the sub-chief had demanded that Kolinsky furnish a more practical scheme.

A pause followed, in which, with elbows on the table, and flushed, indignant visage, the Russian leaned forward waiting for the compliance of his subordinate. Kolinsky, with a sphynx-like face, sat gazing steadily at a point on the floor slightly beyond his extended feet. His principal sought in vain to penetrate the pale, smiling mask which he was beginning to acknowledge held a more subtle mind than his own. He would have given much to have seen the galloping, tumultuous thoughts, which, chaotic at first, became as orderly as heaven at their master's wish.

Impatient at a silence promising to be interminable the Russian agent coughed suggestively.

Kolinsky, with leisurely indulgence, looked up while the sneering smile deepened the lines about his mouth.

The face of his *vis-à-vis* brightened.

"Well," the chief asked breathlessly.

"First, monsieur, if my plan is adopted, do I, alone, unaided, have free foot to work it out? Otherwise I'll not tell you a word of it."

Indignant for a moment that an underling should impose conditions, the Russian determined to resort to censure, but when he looked into the culprit's eyes he was puzzled at his own acquiescence.

"You may have a free foot," he said, "now your plan."

Kolinsky shifted his chair close to that of the other man to whisper long and earnestly in his ear. His auditor evidently endorsed his suggestion, judging by his grunts of applause and the grinning display of teeth.

"It is good, fine, superb," he said as Kolinsky concluded and leaned back comfortably in his chair the better to appreciate the approval displayed in his chief's countenance. He was not to view these flattering symptoms for long, however. His superior as though discovering a fatal weakness in the completed structure, said in renewed despair: "while you have the right man, it won't do."

"Why, Excellency," asked Josef with no diminution of that glacial smile. It was as though he held his superior in hardly concealed contempt.

"The papers," said Haupt. "They can't be forged. We have no precedents to follow. Those chaps over there will know the thing by rote and probably would recognize the signatures more quickly than their own."

"Why not use the originals?"

"Where are they? We have so much time to find them." The sarcasm was crushing. "They probably were lost or destroyed years ago." He concluded temporizingly, under the compelling eyes gazing coldly at him.

"Documents of that kind are never lost or destroyed," Josef announced dogmatically.

"Where are they then? In Krovitch?" The sub-chief sneered.

"No." The reply was so positive that the Russian agent leaned forward intently. He was growing suspicious, therefore becoming cautious.

"You have seen them, I suppose." This was thrown off casually.

"Oh, certainly. That's what suggested the plan." Josef smiled like a cat who has enclosed a cup of cream.

"Then you have seen them recently." He only half waited for the assenting nod as he queried, "They are in Paris?"

"Yes." Kolinsky smiled at the other's undisguised astonishment that he would admit so much.

The sub-chief drew himself together, then turned sternly to his subordinate.

"See here, Kolinsky, that's impossible. I've been head of this bureau for ten years, and if documents of such importance had come into the possession of the French or any other government, I would have known about it. If they had been turned into this office I would have remembered."

"Nevertheless, Excellency, they are in Paris."

There was another long pause. The Russian lighted a cigarette, while he sought in silent meditation to unravel the mystery which seemed not only a challenge to his acuteness, but also an impeachment of his régime. With a casual movement that he hoped was unnoticed, he drew back into a shadow where he could note Kolinsky's face while his own avoided scrutiny.

"Kolinsky, how long have you been a member of the White Police?"

"Twelve years, Excellency."

"Two years before I came here, eh?" In a flash he had solved the enigma. "It is as I imagined. Have you the papers with you?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"May I see them?"

"They are my personal property, remember."

"How long ago did you get them?"

"Fifteen years ago the eighth of August. That was before I joined the secret police. The owner had died and it took some clever work to gain possession of them."

"How did you know of their existence?"

"It was an accident." Kolinsky answered haltingly.

"And your candidate for the crown?" asked the Russian in a slight tone of derision.

"Is a Parisian artist. A good-natured fool." Kolinsky's tone of voice echoed the other's, whose hand was held out hesitatingly across the table for the papers. Deliberately Josef drew a bundle from his inside pocket and opened it before his chief.

The parchments were old and the Latin was in an ancient cramped hand while the impression of the seal was well-nigh obliterated. When sufficient time had elapsed for the Russian to make a complete mental note of their appearance, Josef drew the papers away from him, refolded them carefully and replaced them in his pocket.

"Kolinsky, you know what will happen should you desert us when once in Krovitch?"

Josef was standing near the door. He smiled with supreme indifference.

"Do I get the mission, Excellency?" was the only reply he vouchsafed.

"Y-e-s." The superior's single acquiescence was prolonged into three syllables, urged by the acknowledged supreme ability of Kolinsky and restrained by a fear of apprehended duplicity.

Aware of this struggle the clever fellow turned back in the doorway to laugh at the other's perplexity.

"Really, Excellency, you have only one thing to fear." His chief started up suspiciously.

"What is that?" he asked tersely.

"That I may decide to claim the throne of Krovitch myself," Josef replied, as with his habitual smile he softly closed the door and hurried from the house.

## IV THE GRAY MAN

"Do you realize, Carrick, that three weeks have passed since I proposed this trip to Krovitch?" They were whirling along a badly kept road in that province of Russia as Calvert Carter made the above remark which was also an interrogation. The place of their debarkation had been an unusual one – Danzig – chosen because it had been the more accessible to the Russian frontier. Slowing down the automobile for obvious reasons, Carrick turned a ruminating expression in the direction of his master.

"Seems yesterday, sir."

"How's the go-fever? Still working?"

Carrick laughed. "Overtime, sir. Hundred miles an hour till we get there wouldn't be too fast for me." He turned his attention again to the machine and the ratty way before him.

The other drew out a road map which he consulted with trained eyes that correctly approximated both locality and distances. Slowly refolding it he replaced it in an inner pocket. Being in a mood that anticipated much at the end of the journey, he was not loath to break into his chauffeur's taciturnity.

"Well, cheer up. Even at this rate we ought to make Schallberg by sunset. It's eight o'clock now."

"Seems more than an hour since I 'ad my breakfast."

"I know, but no man's stomach is a safe timepiece, Carrick. On the road I could name at least six meal times by that organ of mine."

For a few miles the jolting of the machine over rough places punctuated their progress with a conversational hiatus.

The rarely occasional peasants working in the fields or plodding along the way, paused in their occupations to regard the novel vehicle with stolid wonderment.

"Seems odd, sir," hazarded Carrick when a comparatively smooth piece of road permitted more than monosyllabic profanity, "seems odd that we've seen ten women to one man so far. These are all 'has beens.' No young chaps workin' in the fields. What do you make of it, sir?"

"The ones not already drafted for Manchuria are dodging Russian conscription most likely."

"Think so, sir?" Carrick's tone raised a question.

"Why? Don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir. They've all taken it on the run for some reason or other. Maybe the Krovitch army is already mobilized."

"Egad, Carrick, that *is* a possibility. I never thought of that. Suppose I expected them to wait for us. We don't want to miss the opening gun. Hump her up for all she's worth. Full speed and never mind the jolts."

The chauffeur bent readily to the task and their further advance into the country of their hopes was such that boded ill to any bewildered fowl that might recklessly seek to cross in front of them. The dial indicated seventy miles an hour.

"Suppose this were Fifth Avenue." Carter bent over to assure himself of the speed as he spoke.

"Umph. We won't go into that, sir. Too 'arrowing to think of. You'd have to mortgage everything to pye the fines. Any'ow you'd go into bankruptcy after you'd bailed me out." Carrick paused to view the route before them. "That's a pretty steep 'ill a'ead, sir. Mybe we'd better stop at the top and reconnoitre a bit. We ought to get a good view from there. It looks too bloomin' rocky for this rate any'ow."

"Where are the glasses?" inquired his companion with unconcealed eagerness, fumbling about in the locker beneath the seat. "Never mind, I have them," he said, producing the binoculars.

At the crest of the Here they stopped to view the panorama of the Beyond.

From the height on which they halted, they looked out upon a wilderness of which they had no previous conception, for the hill they had just ascended had masked it from view.

Below them, at a distance of about two miles, as far as the eye could see from left to right stretched a black and dense forest of unknown antiquity. Behind and beyond it at increasing distances peak upon lofty peak, mountain after mountain, like Babel, reached upward for the sky. Of these the one nearest and directly in front of the knights errant claimed attention.

"Looks like a giant coal scuttle, sir," said Carrick the trite. The description was apt, for the freak of nature which confronted them. Towering high above its neighbors this mountain was unusual. Some outraged Titan in his ire had, in some long-forgotten æon, apparently seized and turned upon its head the top-heavy crest, whose form roughly speaking was of a reversed truncated cone. Upon the wide plateau at the top, with battlemented walls and towers outlined against a turquoise sky, stood a high pitched castle whose topmost turrets seemed suspended from the heavens above them.

"Can you myke out the flag, sir?" Carrick asked anxiously, seeing that his master was viewing the donjon critically through the glasses.

Much depended on the nationality of the standard, which, hardly visible at that distance, was only discernible as a blur upon the blue of the otherwise immaculate sky. The castle undoubtedly commanded that highway on the far side of the wood along which they must pass. Carter had descended into the road and was eagerly adjusting the focus for a better view.

"Can't make it out exactly. It's not Russian for one thing. Field's red. Device is blue. Dragon or something. Have to take a chance till we get a nearer look."

Carrick, meanwhile, was peering intently down the road ahead of him where it disappeared into the midnight gloom of the forest. His alert eyes had noted two or three objects emerge from among the trees and stop.

"Look there, sir," and his outstretched arm indicated the direction while Carter swung his glasses around to the place.

"Videttes," he exclaimed without looking up. "Sizing us up through glasses, eh?"

"Russians?" The chauffeur's excitement was manifest, for he was frowning in a vain endeavor to discern the distant specks.

"I don't know. We're in sort of a fix," was the answer as Carter looked up at Carrick with a frank laugh. The dilemma was not causing him much alarm. "If they are," he continued, "we're dished unless we can get by them. I'll take a chance anyhow. We won't stop to investigate. Right through the woods as if the devil was after us," with which instructions he leaped into the machine.

Carrick grinned. Such orders were just to his taste. A touch on the lever and the automobile shot down the hillside at a speed more rapid than Terror's own. Nearing the scattered outposts, whose frightened horses flattened themselves against adjacent fences, the occupants of the touring car were greeted by a shower of bullets, all of which went wide owing to the disconcerted aim of the sentries, who seemed to fly by the autoists in phantom shapes as the wood was safely gained. Once in its tree-protected road they never relaxed speed until five miles had been placed between them and possible pursuit.

"That's done with, anyway," remarked Carter jubilantly. He turned and faced his comrade whom the hum of bullets had exhilarated.

"Were they Russians? Did you notice anything?"

Carrick laughed outright. Peel followed peel before he could control himself. "I just saw one 'oss, sir. 'E was bally well scared. I'll never forget 'is look, – eyes bulging and mouth open as if 'e was going to swallow a whole hyrick. After spying 'im I couldn't 'ave looked at 'is rider if I 'ad tried."

"Well, they'll have trouble overtaking us anyhow if they were children of the Czar. Look, Carrick," he continued, indicating the wider and more frequent patches of sunlight flecking the road, "it's lighting up. We'll soon be out of the woods."

"Better not halloa till we are, Mr. Carter."

"Gad, that's a prophecy all right. Our way is blocked." The machine came to an abrupt halt.

Not far distant the exit from the forest disclosed to plain view an extensive segment of open country to the southward.

"Not less than a thousand in that bunch," commented Carrick with gloomy reference to a dense throng of men along the road outside the forest. "Mixed troops. 'Ow many more there are we can't see for these bloomin' trees."

"Certainly are cavalry and infantry. But they don't appear to be paying much attention to this end of the road. They're all looking the other way. That black and gold hussar uniform beats the gray and silver of the foot. I don't believe they're Russians," Carter concluded with a joyful start. "Those uniforms! Since we can't go back, we'd better go ahead."

With apparent unconcern they boldly emerged from the woodland.

To their left, about fifty yards back from the highway, stood a quaint old inn built against a sheer cliff face which in the air seemed to bend over the puny habitation. To the right stretched fields under cultivation, but beaten hard under the feet of ten thousand men in the uniform already noticed.

A little group of officers, well mounted, stood together in the commons before the hostelry. They caught but the momentary attention of the interlopers, which, as by some hypnotic influence, was drawn to one of three men quietly conversing on the stone porch of the inn.

He was short and spare of figure, lean and colorless of face, while about him hung an atmosphere of grayness.

As the puffing automobile drew up to the steps he turned quietly to survey its occupants, vividly contrasting the surprise displayed by his two companions. One of these was evidently the innkeeper from the professional air of deference which tempered even his amazement, while the other, square of jowl and deep of eye, was a peasant.

These latter could divert attention for but the moment from the gray man, their companion, whose face seemed set in a habitual, cynical smile, the intent of which was inscrutable. The deep creases running from the corners of the mouth to the narrow nostrils showed the expression was habitual and without the saving grace of mirthfulness. Without a doubt he was of those who gain the dislike of the class from which they are derived and usually not more than the tolerance of those with whom they are thrown in daily contact. Carter admitted after a critical survey that the Gray Man, as he mentally dubbed him, was an exception to this rule. Though he bore every external evidence of being of the upper servant class, there were power and masterly cunning disclosed in every line of the set face. He was of those who, in times of great crises, if they do not attain to power always pass through dangers which engulf nobler men, to emerge with profit if not with honor from even a nation's downfall. That behind the grinning mask lay a wide knowledge of the working of the human mind, Carter saw, as the Gray Man's crafty eyes weighed the repugnance he knew he had inspired. As their glances met, uncontrollably, a challenge gleamed in that of the autoist which was answered by a cold defiance on the part of the elder man.

Meanwhile the boniface, who had achieved a partial composure, hurried forward to greet the travelers.

"I am sorry, messieurs," he said in excellent French, "that every bed, every table, in my inn is engaged. I am overwhelmed. The 'Lion' doubtless loses noble guests," and he fetched a fat sigh as his keen little eyes appraised the worldly stations of the two strangers. Evidently revolving some question in his mind he hit upon, to him, a happy solution to it.

"The castle," he said, with a significant wink accompanied by an upward jerk of a pudgy thumb, "the castle, messieurs, is but two miles further along this road. Perhaps, if milords have friends there, they can find accommodations."

"While I admit, Monsieur of the Lion," said Carter, "that I would like few things better than a good square meal just now, I would forego that gratification for information regarding the whereabouts of a gentleman of these parts."

The Gray Man drew nearer as this was said. A subtle change flickered across the wide expanse of the innkeeper's face, while a tinge of suspicion added a chill to his immediate inquiry.

"Monsieur would pay well doubtless?" He eyed the tourist narrowly. "Who is it, monsieur?"

"I'd give ten golden florins to know where to find Count Paul Zulka. Do you know him?"

The boniface gasped and grew apoplectic. "I never heard of him," he said, which, in the face of his perturbation, was manifestly a lie.

The Gray Man stepped to the fore at this juncture.

"In the public squares of Schallberg, monsieur will doubtless gather much information," he said ironically and with a covert meaning at that moment not appreciated by Carter. "Monsieur must travel that way. He should not turn back," and with a nod of his head he indicated a troop of cavalry guarding the way along which the travelers had approached.

The significance of this was not lost on Carter who was now convinced that this was an army of Krovitzers and that his innocent inquiry had brought him under some sort of suspicion. Though he was burning up with curiosity to learn if it was the patriotic army, he wisely refrained from asking. With a short laugh he turned back to the Gray Man.

"I never turn back," he said. "The road toward Schallberg is better, I hope?"

"It is easier traveling, monsieur," the fellow replied insolently with an unchanging smile.

Carter was satisfied from this that if he used discretion he would be permitted to reach Schallberg or the army probably investing it. He gave the necessary orders to Carrick and without undue haste while in the vicinity of the inn the automobile proceeded on its quest.

When out of earshot of the hostelry, the Cockney, who had been a silent observer of the controversy, gave a prodigious sigh of relief.

"I wouldn't trust that grinning ape with a dead pup. 'E's a sly one. 'Opes we don't run into 'im again."

"I don't like him, either. I have a feeling, though, that we'll meet him again soon and like him less."

## V

# I AM THE LADY TRUSIA

"I hope she's not dead," Carter said fervently as he bent over the unconscious girl. He beckoned to his chauffeur. "You can't catch her horse, Carrick. No use trying. Just hand me my flask."

As he forced the brandy through the pale lips he inwardly cursed his own lust for speed which had been the cause of the possibly fatal catastrophe.

Tempted by a bit of road, straight and smooth, full power had been put on in a feverish desire to interpose as much space as possible between the automobile and the Gray Man at the inn, repugnance for whom seethed in Carter's soul. As the touring car had neared a turn in the way, its two occupants had been horrified to see a spirited black horse, ridden by a beautiful girl, swing at a sharp gallop directly in their path. A rare presence of mind on Carrick's part had prompted an instant application of the brakes which had undoubtedly prevented a collision although it had very nearly hurled him and his companion from their seats. The steed for a fraction of a second had been petrified with fear. Then it had reared violently, thrown its rider, and panic-stricken, had turned and fled in the direction of its coming.

Carter, kneeling, gently placed the girl's head against his shoulder, while he passed an arm around her the better to support the relaxed body. He looked helplessly at the Cockney.

"Wasn't there some one with her?" he inquired, with the memory of a meteoric vision of another rider fleeing back along the road on a plunging, squealing steed.

"Yes, Mr. Carter, a young chap in uniform. 'Is 'oss bolted too, sir. 'E stuck on all right though. We've certainly 'ad a bad day for a start, don't you think, sir?"

Calvert did not answer; he was bending anxiously over the still face, praying for a sign of life. He was appalled by the girl's beauty and a twofold fear possessed him. He feared she was dead. Scarcely less than this, if fortunately she was alive, he dreaded the necessity that would require his laying desecrating masculine hands upon her for her better resuscitation.

"Is she dead, sir?" asked Carrick, bending above them as he noted Carter groping blindly for her pulse. "She looks like a queen," he added in a voice husky with the awe inspired by the marble stillness of her face.

Hesitatingly Carter's finger rested on her wrist. A lump leaped to his throat, he could have shouted with joy as he found that the pulse still stirred.

"She is not dead," he said in a voice vibrant with thanksgiving. His eyes sought the Cockney's for a responsive gleam of gratitude.

His trembling fingers awkwardly loosened the habit about the round white throat. The unavoidable contact with the satiny skin caused his head to whirl and his face to crimson. Finally controlling himself he began to watch patiently for the sign of returning consciousness. During the ages it appeared to take, he inventoried the beauty of the face, the perfect ensemble of which had impressed him as she rode into view.

A shapely little head of wavy black hair lay in the crook of his elbow. The loosened strands breeze-blown against his cheek seemed light as the sheen of a spider's craft. These waved to the rhythm of beauty above a low white forehead veined in an indefinite tint of blue. The eyebrows were fine and daintily arched. Black lashes long and up-curling swept the unexplainable curve of her cheek, at the present time apparently masking eyes too rare for the vision of man. The nose, thin and ever so slightly bridged, was an epitome of aristocracy.

The mouth, just beginning to quiver with reanimation, was curved in the curl of flowers in bud, and sweet and kind as the animate soul of a rose. A womanly chin turned, none could say where, into

the matchless sweep and curve of the throat and breast, a glimpse of which he had had vouchsafed in such a breathless vision.

"Where's her hat, Carrick?" Carter asked, not because there was any immediate use for that article of apparel, but with the instinct of an orderly man to keep all things together. After a considerable search the chauffeur picked up something from the gutter by the side of the road and handed it to his master.

"This must be it, sir," he commented. It was a broad felt hat with one side of the brim looped up with a jewel *a la cavalier* while a fine black plume curled about it. For the first time, attracted doubtless by the head covering, Calvert noticed that the girl's was not the conventional costume one sees on equestriennes either in the Park or along the Row. Nevertheless the habit itself was elegantly plain.

Across from the right shoulder passing to the waist at the left was stretched a broad ribbon as red as war. A great jeweled star moved sluggishly upon it above her faintly struggling breast. The centre of the medal bore a lion rampant in blue enamel. On the beast's head was a royal crown. There was something suggestive about it which awakened his mind to grope tentacle-like for that of which it was reminiscent.

A startled exclamation from Carrick caused him to look up quickly. Fumbling nervously at his shirt with one hand, with the other the wide-eyed Cockney was pointing at the star.

"The guvnor's shiner," he exclaimed excitedly as he drew forth from the folds of his blouse a battered duplicate of the medal she wore.

Barring its condition attributable to time and rough usage it was similar in every respect.

Growing surmise as to its origin and Carrick's connection thereto were interrupted by a tearful incoherence on the part of the reviving girl. Her bosom heaved convulsively, her eyes opened wide and startled into life. She arose to a sitting posture glancing around as a child might who has been suddenly awakened from slumber. Carter still knelt at her side with ready arm for her support should weakness overtake her.

Like the sweep of rose light across a sunset land, the blush of recollection passed over her face, as the full details of the catastrophe came back to her and she recalled that, inevitably, this stranger had held her in his arms while he had performed services strictly feminine. Her eyes retreated behind the satin sheen of their lids. She struggled to her feet.

"Pardon, monsieur," she addressed him in the French of St. Germain. "Where is my gentleman? And my horses, where are they? Horses, hereabouts, are strangers to the automobile."

"Both have bolted, mademoiselle, doubtless for that very reason. I feel very guilty, I assure you. I hope and pray that you are not seriously hurt. I assure you that I would have given anything to have spared you that fall. Can you ever forgive me? Will you let me make amends?"

As one born of high places, she raised her eyes straight and frankly to his. Reading sincere regret and pain in the face of this handsome stranger, she smiled as she generously held out her hand.

"You are forgiven," she said graciously. "I am only a trifle shaken. Will you kindly take me to my castle in your car, as I do not wish my people to worry?"

Nothing could have more tactfully displaced Carter's self-censure than this expressed wish of hers. Seeing that she was still weak he gravely offered his arm for her support.

Lightly she placed her gauntleted hand upon his elbow, but soft as that touch was, no other woman had so thrilled him.

"To whom am I indebted, monsieur?" she asked with native curiosity.

"Calvert Carter, of New York, mademoiselle, is indebted to you for overlooking the accident he has caused."

"Mr. Carter," she added in delicious English, "the Duchess of Schallberg is grateful for your kindness. The question of indebtedness we will not pursue. It is not a good basis of friendship."

This was the Duchess of Schallberg; the possible aspirant to its throne?

"You – you are Trusia?" he stammered.

"I am the Lady Trusia," she corrected gently.

## VI THE GRAY MAN AGAIN

"Which wye?" asked Carrick who, having started the auto, kept his eyes steadily on the road in front of him and shot the question over his shoulder.

"Straight ahead. The lady is unconscious again."

This was true, for as they entered the car Carter had been just in time to catch the Lady Trusia in his arms as she toppled forward in a sudden return of the fainting spell.

"Why not back to the inn, sir?"

Carrick's suggestion betrayed that he shared his companion's concern for Her Grace of Schallberg.

"I'd rather not. We are not popular there and I feel present conditions would hardly increase their friendship. We'll try the castle. I fancy that's her home, anyhow."

He glanced up to where, distinctly outlined, its towers in the clouds, they beheld the grim structure, recognizable from its significant location as the one they had espied from the thither side of the forest.

"Where's the wye to it?" The chauffeur was puzzled, for straight before them the cliff ran perpendicular to the side of the road, without an apparent break. "Must be on the other side, sir, for blyme it's not on this."

"More speed then, Carrick. This faint promises to last awhile."

Carter bent over the unconscious Trusia, and, as he noted the powerful effort of her strong soul to beat off the paralysis of the senses, a thrill of tenderness shot through him.

For a man with Calvert Carter's strength of character to hold a beautiful girl in his arms it would be inevitable that a certain sense of ownership should subconsciously mingle with his thoughts of her. The germ of love may be discovered in propinquity.

Be that as it may, as the lax slender form in his arms set his heart beating wildly, he was tempted to crush her to his breast and to press his lips savagely, yearningly, upon her tender mouth. Then, in reaction, her helplessness appealed to him and aroused all the chivalry of his nature. For less than the space of a sigh the primitive savage within him had struggled with the gentleman, – and the gentleman had won. This very conflict with himself, however, had increased though it had chastened his desire. The more personal concern he now felt for her recovery was but another expression of the primal instinct dignified by discipline.

Meanwhile the touring car had been lurching forward with increasing acceleration for more than a quarter of a mile, when, surprising them agreeably, the cliff apparently opened, showing a narrow way cut through its face, leading directly up to the castle. Before the distant portal a group of horsemen could be seen making preparations for departure.

"Evidently a relief party. That riderless horse of hers must have returned and started an alarm."

"They see us, sir," said Carrick, who had brought the machine to a stop. "They're pulling up. It's a good thing, as there's barely room for me to run the car up, without their crowding the road."

So saying he carefully swung into the narrow way and soon accomplished the ascent. Passing under a portcullis as mediæval as that of any Rhenish castle, they stopped in an ancient, stone-flagged courtyard. On every side, thronging about them, they met the vengeful, scowling eyes of men in a frenzy of fear and hate, while a growling murmur of resentment greeted their ears as the mob recognized their liege lady apparently dead in the arms of a stranger. To their discipline as soldiers, for these men wore uniforms similar to those seen already at the inn, the two adventurers probably owed salvation from instant dismemberment. In their faces Calvert Carter read the unreasoning fury of their souls, experiencing his nearest approach to fear, yet he met them eye for eye.

Standing apart, his handsome boyish head hung in shame, as if ostracized for incompetency, stood a young fellow whom Carter recognized as the escort of the Lady Trusia. His face was pale and dejected. Apparently unaware of the presence of the strangers, he was fingering his revolver holster.

The heavy gate closed behind them with an ominous clang. A chill ran down Carter's spine. If bad came to worst he resolved to sell his life dearly, for murder electrified the air and was closing in around them from every side.

A wicket suddenly opened in the studded door of the castle before them. Two men stepped through it upon the broad flat stone of its only step.

Both were past middle age but vigorous looking. The first standing in front of and obscuring his companion was evidently a personage of exalted rank. His hair and long mustachios were silvery white, and the glance he shot from under his heavy brows was keen and comprehensive. He seemed a man accustomed to both camp and court. One glance at his carriage would have shown to the merest tyro that he was a soldier even had he not worn a black hussar uniform. He looked coldly around upon the impassioned throng which was quieted by the steely glitter in his disdainful eyes, and then, turning, said something to the abashed equerry. Without remonstrance, the young fellow drew out his revolver and handed it to a sergeant who immediately pocketed it.

Having quieted the disturbance, he for the first time became aware of its cause. A cry of mingled grief and rage burst from his lips. He started impulsively forward, fumbling at his sword hilt, but his companion laid a restraining hand upon his arm, coming into full view for the first time.

It was no other than the Gray Man of the inn, who now, with bent head and most deferential manner, addressed a few whispered words to the elderly noble. After a brief, inaudible conference the two descended from the step to advance through the menacing throng toward the automobile.

Mechanically, Carter, reaching back his free hand, opened the door at the back of the car. The veteran stopped within touching distance, not deigning to notice the action of invitation, and held out imperative arms for the young Duchess.

His voice rasped harshly on the hot courage of the American. "Canaille," he blurted apoplectically, "how dared you run down Her Grace with your cursed car? Your touch profanes her person. Surrender her instantly."

It was a blow in the face to Carter.

Though his blood was boiling, respect for the age of the man who addressed him restrained Calvert from voicing the hot retort which sprang to his lips or striking his adversary to the ground. His hands opened and closed tensely as he kept himself in check. Disregarding the curt command, Carter, still holding Trusia in his arms, leaped lightly from the car and would have carried her into the castle had not the elderly soldier barred his way. With face crimson every glistening hair seemed to flash the lightning of his unspeakable rage at such presumption.

"Monsieur," said Carter with level eyes, "let me pass. The lady is too ill for us to be bandying words. You are too old and too well supported for me to hope to obtain adequate satisfaction for your insult."

The other did not budge from the path, but reached out a peremptory hand which he laid on Trusia's shoulder.

"Give her to me, sir," he insisted, ignoring Carter's remarks entirely.

The Gray Man rubbed his hands together in open delight at the disfavor the two strangers were incurring and his cynical smile grew more evident every moment.

While an eye might wink the primitive man awoke in Calvert. He was prompted to fight for the woman he held as he stood measuring glances with his peremptory adversary. Then the folly of such resistance came to his mind, so with a sigh and a frown he permitted the other to take her from his arms. As he did so he felt not only that something intangible, delectable had been loosened from his clasp, but that its relinquishment had caused the life blood to move more sluggishly in his breast.

"We're up against it," whispered Carrick, who descending from the car had placed himself at his master's elbow for such eventualities as might arise.

Seemingly fearful of a conference between the two, the Gray Man gave a sudden order. Six men leaped from the hostile circle, and before there was an opportunity for resistance, Carter and Carrick were thrown to the ground and their arms were tightly bound to their sides.

The mocking face of the Gray Man regarded them as he bent over Carter's prostrate form.

"Get up," he said, touching the American ever so slightly with his toe.

"You shall pay for this," said the outraged Carter as he struggled to his feet.

"I am not indebted to you," was the sneering rejoinder, as, with the slightest of gestures, he intimated that the prisoners were to be conducted into the castle, through whose portal Her Grace of Schallberg was already being carried by the plethoric nobleman.

## VII A COOL RECEPTION

Before their eyes, accustomed to the brightness of early afternoon, in which all things were actively visible, could sufficiently adjust themselves to distinguish objects in the shadowy gloom, they were thrust into a room, the door of which was bolted after them, and they were left in utter darkness.

"You there, Carrick?" whispered Carter.

"Ere, sir," came the reply from an invisible neighborhood. "I'm trussed up like a duck. These bloomin' cords are cuttin' my wrists. It seems to me, sir," he continued ruefully, "that if we 'ad wanted to be jugged, we could 'ave gotten the job done easier by styin' in New York. 'Don't like a man, – to jail with 'im,' seems to be these chaps' motto."

"We're evidently in the bad books of the Gray Man, at any rate, Carrick."

"I'm onto his gyme, sure's my name's Tod."

"What is it?"

"'E thinks we're spies."

Carter laughed incredulously. "He has put us in a good place, then. Can't gather much information in this tomb, that is certain. We're getting into their revolution by the back door, it seems."

"Talkin' about doors," Carrick's whisper radiated with excitement, "I'd take my oath that I saw one as we came in. It's in the wall to the left of the entrance and is slightly ajar."

"How close are you to me now?" The Cockney's shoulder touched his by way of reply. "It is this wall we are leaning against, then?"

"The syme, sir. If you move along to your right about six feet, you'll be right in front of it."

"We'll try our luck, anyhow," said Carter. "Next-door may not be so much infested with the darkness of the pit." Carefully groping in the indicated direction, they found the portal as Carrick had described it. Their hands being tightly tied, they had to shove it open with their shoulders. To their anxious ears it seemed impossible that the noise of its rusty hinges could not be heard on the topmost battlement. The room which they now entered was lighted by a single casement, high above their heads. Diagonally opposite, in the wall parallel to the one by which they stood, was another door, also open.

"Cinch," said Carrick, with a hopeful nod toward the possible avenue of escape.

"I don't know that," replied the other reflectively. "Suppose we do find our way out, how could we pass the sentries, videttes, and scouts who are scouring the country – or should be? We'd have to hide without the hope of assistance from strangers. What could we do with our hands tied? Mind you, I'm not discouraging escape if we can – I'm simply groping for a plan. Let's explore our quarters. It may help to know the lay of the place."

"Wyte a bit, sir," said Carrick, moving behind his master. "My teeth are strong. Mybe I can get your 'ands loose." Kneeling on the stone floor he applied himself vigorously to the task.

"Our friends," commented Carter, "evidently foresaw such an attempt and provided against it by shutting us up in the dark. How are you getting on?" He could feel the strenuous efforts of his chauffeur as the latter gnawed at the knot.

"Not at all, Mr. Carter. It's rawhide. The saliver from my mouth only mykes it swell. Of course that tightens the knot. It mykes it slimy, too, so's I carn't keep 'old of it." He scrambled to his feet with a hasty apology for his failure.

"Fortunately our feet are not hobbled and we're not blindfolded. Come on, we'll see what's beyond that door, my man," and Calvert proceeded cautiously toward the open entrance. With ears strained to bursting, they listened by it a breathless moment. No sound, no breath, no intuition of human proximity warned them that further progress was dangerous, so they passed the threshold

into the third room. A sigh of relief came from Carter's lips as he noted that it, too, was vacant. The door to the cell beyond was likewise open. They advanced, therefore, through that and several successive cells, until they were confronted by a narrow, dark passageway, whose objective could not be discerned from where they stood.

Not knowing where the gloom would betray their feet, they stepped very cautiously as they explored the darkness before them. The better to guide himself, Carter kept his shoulder to the wall. He had not proceeded very far when his own weight, pushing against the masonry, swung him off into a narrow entrance at right angles to the main passage.

He drew back with a gasp. He found himself on the very brink of an uncurbed well. Gradually recovering himself from the involuntary start which had kept him from falling head-foremost into the opening, he leaned forward to investigate.

Far below he could see daylight, a patch of grass-grown earth, and the edge of a stable, – for a horse's head was thrust through an aperture. He turned to his companion.

"Careful, Carrick. I pretty nearly stepped into kingdom come. I think that door was purposely left open that we might commit involuntary suicide. There's a well here without a bottom. Goes down through the cliff to what is apparently the yard of the inn. It's like a shaft to the mines at home. Wonder what's it for?"

"Secret passage, sir; see that basket and rope," and Carrick indicated a huge car swinging in the gloom above their heads.

"That's how the Gray Man beat us to the castle without passing us on the road."

"Right," agreed Carrick.

"We can't profit by it now, worse luck, but it may come in useful in a pinch. Who knows? If we only had free use of our hands, now. Eh, Carrick?"

"Right," reiterated his fellow captive.

"Well," said Carter, arising from his knees, "suppose we investigate the rest of the main passage."

They turned again into the dark entry to be brought up this time by a door which they would have also attempted to force had not the sound of voices from the other side of the stout panels paralyzed their intention and filled them with apprehension.

It was clearly a position where eavesdropping was not dishonorable. They were prisoners, innocent of any moral offense, cast into jail without being apprised of the nature of the charges against them. Here might be an opportunity of gaining, at least, an insight into the character of some of those hostile to them. A knowledge of the traits of one's judge or jury is a material assistance to a sufficient defense, which no one should neglect where an opportunity for the acquisition of such information is honorably presented.

There were evidently two people in conversation in the region behind the locked door. The voices were those of women. One, crisp and girlish, was new to Carter. The other's made his heart bound hopefully. It was Trusia's.

"Let us speak in French, Natalie," she was saying to her companion in that language. "My maid need not understand all we talk about." Then she continued in evident answer to some previous question, "His name is Calvert Carter." There followed a delightful hesitancy, which sent a thrill through the invisible auditor, while in a tone intended to be judicious, Trusia completed her reply: "Yes, I think you would call him handsome. Anyway, he's a gentleman. Any person could see that."

"But what has become of him?" inquired her companion. "I have asked my father, and Tru, what sort of reply do you think he made? Mean thing."

"I don't know, dear. Probably teased."

"Exactly. He always does, no matter how serious the question may be. He laughed and pinched my cheek, and had the audacity to ask if I wanted to add the stranger to my list of victims. Then I asked the Chancellor. You know he doesn't like girls. He puffed out his cheeks – so, drew down

his brows – like this, and glared. 'Umph, umph,' he blustered and stalked away. Josef was the only one who would tell anything."

"Well, he could tell you only, as he did me, that they had resumed their journey."

"O-o-oh," the exclamation was long drawn, indicating that some one had fibbed. "He told me that the strangers were dangerous. Russian spies, he said. Do you think they are, Tru? It's perfectly thrilling. And to think, one actually held you in his arms! Who knows – " she began mischievously. There was a gurgling sputter of sounds, as if a hand had been placed over the teasing mouth. Then it was withdrawn and the offender was permitted to prattle on.

"If they weren't spies, Tru, why should they be put in one of the old cells?"

"What makes you say that, Natalie? Josef certainly told me they had gone on with their journey."

"He told me that they were locked up. I saw the auto not five minutes before coming here. It's under sentry in the courtyard."

"Surely, Natalie, you are mistaken, dear? Josef would not tell me a deliberate untruth." Carter felt a strong desire to see and expose this Josef who held such an exalted place in the confidence of Her Grace of Schallberg. Symptoms threatening a tiff were evident in the Lady Natalie's voice.

"Really, Your Grace," she said with dignity, "am I to understand that you'd take his word before mine?"

"Your Grace? – what nonsense! Between you and me! Don't pout, dear. Just think what chance Krovitch would have for a man to rule her people, and lead them in their battles if it wasn't for this same loyal, disinterested Josef? Do you wonder I hold him in such high esteem?" There was a gentle reproof in the Duchess's tones.

"But why," persisted the somewhat mollified Natalie, "did your paragon fib so to me?"

"We'll go and see now, dear. Marie has finished my hair."

The listener, assured that they would get a fair trial, arose and, with Carrick following, made his way back in the direction from which they had adventured.

There is always a difference, telepathic it may be, in a room which, then empty, has been entered and vacated by some living thing. Carter appreciated this as soon as he set his foot in the first cell on their return journey. Some one had been there since he and Carrick had come through. He glanced at the Cockney to see if he, too, had the same impression. The fellow's head was craned forward, as one who strives to catch an elusive sound.

"I was sure I 'eard something in there, Mr. Carter," he whispered, responding to the visual question, as he nodded his head toward the doorway beyond them. Carter listened intently. It might have been an atom broken from silence; he was not positive that he had really heard anything, but he was convinced that the silence had not been unbroken. They moved cautiously to the door and peered guardedly around its frame.

There is also an actual physical – or, if you choose, psychical connection between what is seen, what has just missed being seen by an infinite fraction of time, and what one has imagined one has just seen, and between these all the scientists of all the ages have not been able to formulate a real distinction. One's senses, after all, remain the best guides.

"I just missed seeing something going through that door," whispered Carrick. It is noticeable, too, that he had said "something" and not "some one." The gloomy cells, centuries old, the damp memories of the dungeons still clinging to the walls, together with this weird presence which eluded their eyes before they could behold it, might well arouse the superstitions of firmer minds than the Cockney's.

They were approaching the cell in which they had been placed. At last there was a perfectly appreciable sound. It was a fumbling, as of some one in the darkness, making hasty efforts to get a key in a lock. Carter, now bent on discovery, made a rush into the abysmal darkness. He could see – nothing!

Still he felt that he and Carrick, who had joined him, were not the only occupants of the room. Along the hall could be heard the unmistakable sound of approaching steps.

"Quite a select party, sir," remarked Carrick in comment, while Carter still tried to pierce the gloom to establish the identity of the invisible visitant.

"About three," replied Carter.

The sounds stopped directly opposite their door. There was a grating of a key against the lock and the door swung open.

## VIII

# THE SPECTRE OF THE STAR

The Gray Man stood in front of the narrow entrance. The sinister smile which flickered across his face was made diabolic by the cross rays from the lanterns carried by two peasant soldiers. As if his attendance was an enforced and unwelcome one, the equerry of Lady Trusia, who had followed in the wake of the others, advanced no further into the room, but stood with his back against the closed door.

One furtive glance cast in the direction of the cell from which Carter and Carrick had just returned convinced the former that the old fellow was at least aware of their explorations.

When the two privates had deposited their lanterns upon a table which seemed to emerge from the gloom under the partial illumination, Carter surveyed his prison with a curiosity previously denied him. One glance was sufficient. The Gray Man had come to conduct an inquisition. What more fitting place, therefore, could be found to strike terror to the hearts of the guilty or weakling than the torture chamber of the castle?

A man of keen perceptive nature is apprised of secret as well as professed antagonisms, through a primitive discrimination, unaided by either word or deed, of the one holding him in enmity. Carter felt sure that with the possible exception of the equerry this visit to the cell was not prompted by a friendly motive. They had, evidently, been imprisoned in darkness that a sudden revelation of the devilish machinery about them might shake their courage.

Carter's lip curled disdainfully at such cheap theatrical efforts. He turned to the smirking face before him, which from behind the table was watching for the signs of trepidation he had hoped to surprise. By an answering smile as mocking as his own, he was satisfied that his ruse had failed. He shrugged his thin shoulders.

Purringly in an incomprehensible jargon, he addressed Carter to receive no other response than a blank and puzzled stare.

He essayed French.

"So, Monsieur of the White Police prefers the more polite language of France? Well, so be it."

At the mention of that secret, ubiquitous organization of Russian espionage, Carter realized that Carrick's prognostications had been correct. The cool insinuation made his blood boil. His answer came with the force of a blow. "What do you mean?" he thundered.

Staggered for an instant, the Gray Man's equanimity was shaken, then, turning to speak to the two peasants, he waited until they had placed themselves at the sides of the enraged American. Assured that he had forestalled any possible violence to himself, he regarded the prisoners sneeringly.

"That you are Russian spies."

"We are Americans. I will prove it, too, as soon as I am out of this place; and that in a manner which will not be pleasant to those concerned in this outrage."

"Provided you get a chance. Spies are not given much shrift hereabouts." This was said with deliberate malevolence.

"Would you dare?" challenged Carter who realized to the full what the menace implied.

"It would be but an incident, monsieur," replied his jailer in a casual manner. "You would be numbered among the missing in the big events of to-morrow. Enough time has been wasted on you, Monsieur of the White Police," he said, as if dismissing discussion. "We must to business."

At a nod from him, the two peasant soldiers threw themselves upon the helpless prisoners, and ruthlessly rifled their persons of all belongings, which were placed upon the table before the Gray Man. Straining till the big veins in their arms stood out in ridges and the sweat poured from their brows, the captives were helpless against the indignities put upon them.

Carrick's shirt was torn open. The Krovitzer soldiers stood dumbfounded at the sight of the star which hung upon the Cockney's breast. As though its appearance had countermanded all previous orders, they turned puzzled faces to their superior, who also saw the emblem.

Into those sneering eyes crept a pallid fear, while his face grew ashen. Approaching the Cockney he laid a trembling finger on the star.

"Your name?" he asked hoarsely.

"Tod Carrick," was the sullen reply.

A slight start followed this, as though the answer had matched his anticipations.

Instantly, the training and duplicity of years reasserted themselves. The habitual mask once more settled upon his inscrutable countenance. He turned to Carter who had been an attentive though puzzled observer of this by-play.

"I was surprised," he explained, "but only for an instant, to see your companion wearing the badge of our most noble order. I should not have been as there is no moral distinction between a thief and a spy." Encouraged by his own words, he tore the medal from its resting place, while Carrick groaned impotently.

"I'll make you sweat for this," growled the Cockney.

"What authority have you for this?" asked Carter with forced calmness as the Gray Man commenced a leisurely perusal of his private papers. Without deigning a reply, their self-constituted judge completed his task; carefully folding the various documents he had been reading, he looked up complacently.

"Authority," he replied with a rising inflection, as though the idea were a new one. "Oh, I think I am justified in assuming it."

Carter breathed a prayer of silent thanksgiving that the Lady Trusia had been no party to the indignity.

As though in response to the thought, the Lady Trusia herself walked indignantly into the room. Going straight to the table she confronted the Gray Man with flashing eyes.

"Josef," she addressed him with stamping foot, "what does this mean? Who gave you permission to treat this gentleman so harshly? I am still mistress here."

"They are Russian spies, Highness."

"Fiddlesticks," she replied with the feminine faith in the man who had given her such tender care. "Anyhow," she temporized, "our Privy Council, not you, shall be their judges." With charming hesitation, she turned to make a suitable apology to Carter, when, as her eyes fell before his ardent gaze, they rested upon Carrick's heirloom lying on the table.

"Can it be?" she questioned as one in a dream. "Is it yours?" she asked breathlessly, her whole soul in her eyes and parted lips, as she turned to Carter.

"No, Your Grace," he answered, "it is my chauffeur's."

"Yours?" she skeptically inquired of Carrick. "Where did you get it?"

"He probably stole it. He had it hidden under his shirt," suggested Josef.

Her fine brows drew together in annoyance as she turned to look steadily into the crafty eyes of him she called Josef.

"You forget your place, sir. I gave you no leave to speak. Have you forgotten that I am the Duchess of Schallberg? Be silent until you are spoken to."

Josef shrugged his shoulders after he had bowed apologetically, for he saw that the lady was no longer looking in his direction. Minutely, closely, she was studying the face of the Cockney; first red, then pale, her own countenance betrayed some inward apprehension.

"It cannot be," she said huskily as if striving to dispel some doubt that would arise, "and yet there is no other jewel unlocated. Please tell me how you got this," she supplicated helplessly.

"Honestly, mem," was all the satisfaction she could elicit, for Carrick made no distinctions between her and the servant whom he thought was her agent.

"I've no doubt of that," she answered soothingly. "Will you tell me your name?" Her eager, expectant face held an expression of one who half fears the reply.

"Carrick," he answered with the monotony of iteration.

"Thank you," she said in relief. "Oh," she cried as she espied their bonds for the first time, "your hands are tied. This is intolerable. Casimir," she commanded the equerry, who had been keeping as much out of sight as possible, "undo those cords. They are cutting into the flesh. Messieurs, pardon my overzealous servants. Indeed, we have much to fear from strangers. Though you may mean no wrong to us, yet formality requires that you satisfy our Privy Council of your honesty in coming to our remote country at this particular time. Let us go at once, that you may the speedier be relieved of surveillance.

"Josef," she said, turning to the Gray Man, "if you so desire you may present your foolish charges there."

She lifted her glance graciously to Carter.

"I have no fear for you, monsieur. You have the marks of an honorable gentleman."

## IX

### IF ZULKA WERE HERE

"I've 'arf a notion to knock your block for a bloomin' sneak." Carrick halted suddenly in the doorway of the cell to face Josef. The Cockney's fists were clenched in a manner which promised that action would immediately follow declaration. Carter intervened peremptorily while Josef discreetly withdrew out of reach of the tough, bunched knuckles.

Led by the Duchess of Schallberg, they traversed a stone-flagged, arched passageway, which brought them to the main hall of the castle. A modern dwelling of average size could have been erected there without entirely exhausting the spaciousness of the hall.

Tattered banners, gray with antiquity, hung like memories on the walls. Below these, crumbling with age, were the antlers of ancestral deer, while arms and armor of heroic mold glimmered from the shadowy niches filled by them for generations.

Crossing the hall, the party led by Trusia approached a tapestried-hung archway, whose single sentry raised the heavy folds to admit her to whatever lay beyond.

Preceded by Her Grace, and followed closely by Josef, Carter and Carrick entered the Council Chamber of Schallberg.

At one end of its many-pillared room, a dais held a double throne, whose high, broad back was carved with many heraldic devices of past intelligence. Its intricate traceries were capped by a lion rampant, which had pawed the air for generations.

Directly from the steps of the throne ran a heavy table at which were seated three Privy Counselors. A fourth seat was vacant. For Her Grace of Schallberg? Evidently not, for she mounted the two broad steps and seated herself on the throne, bowing graciously to the trio of ministers who had risen at her entrance. With a gesture that indicated that Carter and Carrick should stand facing these, their judges, she settled herself back in the high chair, while the accused found themselves with their backs to the door. Josef, with mocking deference, placed himself at the end of the table as the prosecutor. He unburdened himself of the purloined articles which he now placed before him in a little pile.

Admitting the seriousness of the situation so far as himself and his man were concerned, Carter could not but confess that the scene was a picturesque one, and that the very element of danger gave it a touch of piquancy. Here were himself and Carrick, fresh from the greatest shrine of modernity, after having been cast into a mediæval dungeon, now being hauled before a trinity of gold-laced judges on a charge of being spies.

He glanced admiringly toward Her Grace, whose tempting chin was cupped in her pink palm, while the deep lace of her half sleeve fell back from the round elbow propped by the broad arm of the throne. Her eyes dreamed of far-away things, until, telepathically, she became aware of Carter's ardent gaze.

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