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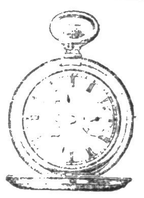

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C. A.	Tuesday	10.30 a.m.	12	2	7	9	11	2	11	11
C. L.	Tuesday	12.30 p.m.	12	9	4	6	14	9	11	8
C. P.	Wednesday	10.00 a.m.	13	10	5	7	15	10	12	9
C. C.	Thursday	10.15 a.m.	14	11	6	8	16	11	13	10
C. O.	Saturday	10.00 a.m.	16	13	8	10	18	13	15	12
C. W.	Monday	11.00 a.m.	11	8	3	5	13	8	10	7

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Court Sittings, without Jury, 6th April and 5th October, and so often as other business may be required for the despatch of business.

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		8.30 p.m.	

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"Natcheff!" exclaimed the king.

"Certainly not, sir. Another. This man, of whom I had suspicions and whom I caused to be watched, went by night to the house of M. Zerkovitch, who is, as you are aware, a close friend and, if I may use the word, an adherent of the Prince of Slavna. Their interview took place between 9 and 10 last night. At 11 Zerkovitch, having borrowed a horse from the prince's stables, set out for Praslok. He rode hard through the night and reached the castle, as Captain Markart has told us, in the small hours of the morning. There he had an interview with the prince. He left Praslok between 6 and 7 in the morning and arrived at his house on the south boulevard by 11. At half past 11 he walked up the Street of the Fountain, crossed St. Michael's square and entered a small inn in a little alley behind the cathedral. Here the man I speak of was waiting for him. They were together half an hour. Zerkovitch then left. The man remained till 1, then came out and returned to the palace by a circuitous route, arriving here about 2 o'clock. I venture to say that the meaning of all this is quite clear. This man is in communication with Praslok, using Zerkovitch as his intermediary. It's for your majesty to say how far his disobedience in regard to acquainting the prince with your condition is a serious offense. As to that I say nothing, but it will be obvious that this man should know nothing of any private measures undertaken or contemplated."

The king had listened carefully. "The case seems clear," he said. "This fellow's a traitor. He's done harm already and may do more. What do you ask, general?"

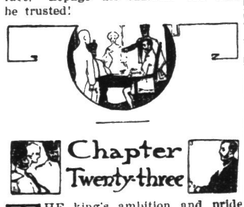
"We might be content to let him know nothing, but who can be quite certain of insuring that? Sir, you have just arrived at a very important decision—to take certain action. Absolute secrecy is essential to its success. I've no wish to press hardly on this man, but I feel bound to urge that he should be put under arrest and kept in the charge of a person who is beyond suspicion until the action to which I refer has been successfully carried out."

"The precaution is an obvious one and the punishment hardly sufficient." The king rose. "Do as you say, general. I leave you full discretion. And now I'll go to my room and rest. I'm very tired. Give me your arm, Lepage, and come and make me comfortable."

Lepage did not offer his arm. He was not looking at the king nor listening to him. His eyes and his ears were fot General Stenovics. Stenovics rose now and pointed his finger at Lepage.

"That, sir, is the man," said he.

"Lepage!" cried the king and sank heavily into his seat, with a bewildered face. Lepage—his familiar—the man he trusted!



Chapter Twenty-three

THE king's ambition and pride had quivered under the threat of a cruel blow. The charge against Lepage wounded him hardly less deeply. He regarded his body servant with the trustful affection which grows on an indolent man in course of years—of countless days of consulting, trusting, relying on one ever present, ever ready, always trustworthy. Lepage had been with him nearly thirty years. There was hardly a secret of the king's manhood which he had not known and kept. At last had he turned traitor!

Stenovics had failed to allow for this human side of the matter—how much more alone the revelation would make the king feel, how much more exposed and helpless, just, moreover, when sickness made his invaluable servant more indispensable still. A forlorn dignity filled the king's simple question. "Is it true, Lepage?"

Lepage's impassivity vanished. He, too, was deeply moved. The sense of guilt was on him—of guilt against his master. It drove him on beyond itself to a fierce rage against those who had goaded him into his disobedience, whose action and plans had made his disobedience right, for right now he believed and felt it. His talks with Zerkovitch had crystallized his suspicions into confident certainty. He was carried beyond thinking of what effect his outburst might have on his own fortunes or how it might distress the already harassed king. He struck back fiercely at his accuser, all his national quickness of passion finding vent in the torrent of words he poured forth in excuse or justification. He spoke his native French very quickly, one word jostling over another, his arms flying like windmills and his hair bristling, as it seemed, with defiance.

"Yes, it's true, sir. I disobeyed your majesty—for the first time in thirty years! For the first time in my life, sir, I did it! And why? Because it was right. Because it was for honor. I was angry, yes! I had been scolded because Count Alexis bade me call him 'prince' and you heard me do it. Yes, I was angry. Was it my fault? Had I told him he was a prince? No! Who had told him he was a prince? Don't ask me, sir. Ask somebody else. For my part, I know well the difference between one who is a prince and one who is not. Oh, I'm not ignorant of that! I know, too, the difference between one who is a queen and one who is not—oh with the utmost respect to Mme. la Comtesse! But I know it, and I remember it. Does everybody else remember it?"

He stopped for a moment and clutched at his stiff, tight collar as though to wrench it away from his neck and let the stream of his words flow even more freely. While he paused nobody spoke. Stenovics' heavy gaze was on the king Stafnitz's eyes discreetly on the ceiling. The countess looked scared. Had they made a mistake? Would it have been better to run the risk of what Lepage could do? The king's hands were on the table in front of him. They trembled where they lay.

"Why wasn't the prince to know? Because then he wouldn't go on his journey! His journey after the German princess!" He faced Stenovics now, boldly and defiantly, pointing a forefinger at him. "Yes, they wanted him to go. Yes, they did! Why, sir? To marry a princess—a great princess? Was that what they wanted? Eh, but it would have been little use for Count Alexis to ask me to call him a prince then! And Mme. la Comtesse—with the utmost respect to Mme. la Comtesse—she wanted a great princess here? Oh, she wanted that mightily, to be sure!"

The king stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Sir, will you listen to him?" the countess broke in.

His answer was cold. "I listen to every man before I order him to be punished."

"Yes, they wanted him to go. Yes, certainly! For he trains his men at

He faced Stenovics now, boldly and defiantly, pointing a forefinger at him.

Volseni, trains them for his big guns When the men are trained and the guns have come—well, who'll call Count Alexis a prince then? Will even they who taught him to think himself a prince? Oh, yes; they wanted him to go! And he wouldn't go if he knew your majesty was ill. He loves your majesty. Yes! But if he hated you, still would he go?" With a sudden turn he was round on Stenovics again and threw out his arms as though to embrace a picture. "Look! The prince is away, the guns are come, the king dies! Who commands in the palace? Who governs Slavna? He was back to the king with another swift turn. "May I answer, sir? May I tell you? The mother of Prince Alexis commands in the palace. Slavna is ruled by the friends of Captain Mistitch!" His voice fell to an ironical murmur. "And the prince is far off—seeking a great princess! Sir, do you see the picture?"

Stafnitz suddenly lowered his eyes from the ceiling and looked at the gesticulating little man, with a smile.

"Such imagination in the servants' hall!" he murmured half under his breath.

The king neither rebuked his levity nor indorsed the insinuated satire. He took no notice at all. His eyes were fixed on his still trembling hands.

Stenovics spoke in a calm, smooth voice. "Absolutely, sir, I believe the man's honest!" he said, with an inflection of good humored surprise. "One sees how he got the idea! I'm sure he's genuinely devoted to your majesty and to the prince, as we all are. He sees something going on which he doesn't understand. He knows something is going on that he's ignorant of. He knows the unfortunate condition of your majesty's health. He's like a nurse—forgive me—in charge of a sick child. He thinks everybody but himself has designs on his charge. It's really natural, however absurd, but it surely makes the precaution I suggested even more necessary! If he went about spreading a tale like this!"

The line was clever—cleverer far than the countess' rage, cleverer than Stafnitz's airily bitter sneer. But of it, too, the king took no notice. Lepage took no more than lay in a very scornful smile. He leaned down toward the motionless, dull faced king and said in his ear:

"They wanted him to go, yes! Did they want him to come back again, sir?" He bent a little lower and almost whispered: "How long would his journey have taken, sir? How long would it have taken him to get back if—in case of need?" One more question he did not ask in words, but it was plain enough without them, "How long can your majesty count on living?"

At last the king raised his head and looked round on them. His eyes were heavy and glassy.

"This man has been my trusted servant for many, many years. You, General Stenovics, have been my right hand, my other self. Colonel Stafnitz is high in my confidence, and Lepage is only my servant."

"I seek to stand no higher than any other of your majesty's servants except in so far as the nature of my services gives me a claim," said Stenovics.

"But there's one here who stands far nearer to me than any one, who stands nearer to me than any living being. She must know of this thing if it's true. If it's being done her hand must be foremost among the hands that are doing it." His eyes fixed themselves on the countess' face. "Is it true?" he asked.

"Sir, how can you ask? How can you listen? True! It's a malignant invention! He's angry because I reproved him."

"Yes, I'm angry. I said so. But it's true for all that."

"Silence, Lepage! Am I to take your word against the countess'?"

Markart, a silent listener to all this ere, thought that Lepage's game was up. Who could doubt what the countess' word would be? Probably Lepage, too, thought that he was beaten, that he was a ruined man, for he played a desperate card—the last card of a bankrupt player. Yet it was guided by shrewdness and by the intimate knowledge which his years of residence in the palace had given him. He knew the king well, and he knew the Countess Ellenburg hardly less thoroughly.

"I speak truth, sir, as I believe it, but I can't expect you to take my word against the countess'. I have too much respect for Mme. la Comtesse to ask that."

Again he bent down toward the king. The king looked up at him. Stenovics' simile came back into the mind. In a low, soothing tone Lepage made his throw—his last suggestion. "Mme. la Comtesse is of great piety. If Mme. la Comtesse will take a solemn oath—well, then, I'm content! I'll say I was mistaken—honest, I declare, sir, but mistaken."

Stenovics raised his head, with a jerk. Stafnitz smiled scornfully. He was thinking that Lepage was not, after all, a very resourceful fellow. An oath! Great heavens! Oaths were in the day's work when such things were in question. But here Stenovics was wiser, and Lepage was brewder. Stafnitz generalized from experience rather one sided. The other two knew the special case. When oaths were mentioned—solemn oaths—Stenovics scented danger.

The king knew his wife, too, and he was profoundly affected—convulsed to the depths of his mind. The thing sounded true. It had a horrible sound of truth. He craved the countess' denial, solemn as it could be framed. That would restore the confidence which was crumbling from beneath his tormented, bewildered mind.

"Can anybody object to that," he asked slowly, "if I say it will relieve my mind?" He smiled apologetically. "I'm a sick man, you know. If it will relieve a sick man's mind, banish a sick man's fancies? If I shall sleep a little better and old Lepage here be ashamed of himself?"

None of them dared to object. None could plausibly unless the countess herself, and she dared not. In his present mood the king would not accept the plea of her dignity. Against it he would set the indulgence due to a sick man's rebellious fancies. Could she for her dignity's sake deny him what would make him sleep?

He looked at her. Something in her face appeared to strike him as strange. A sort of quiver ran through his body. He seemed to pull himself together with an effort. As he spoke to her his voice sounded faint and ever so slightly blurred.

"You've heard Lepage, and I know that you'll speak the truth to me on your oath—the truth about the thing nearest to the heart of a dying man—nearest to the heart of your dying husband. You wouldn't lie on oath to a dying man, your husband and your king, for I am dying. You have years still, but they'll end. You believe that some day you and I will stand together before the throne. As you shall answer to heaven in that day, is this true? Was it in your heart and in the heart of these men to keep my son, the heir of my house, from his throne? Is it true? As you shall answer to God for your soul, is there any truth in it?"

The woman went gray in the face—a sheet of gray paper seemed drawn over her cheeks. Her narrow lips showed a pale red streak across it. Her prayers—those laborious, ingenious, plausible prayers—helped her nothing here.

"I protest! At this time, sir! The countess will be upset!"

Stenovics had been driven to this. He feared greatly. Not a soul heeded him. Every eye now was on the woman. She struggled—she struggled to lie. She struggled to do what she believed would bring perdition to her soul. Her voice was forced and harsh when at last she broke silence.

"As I shall answer in that day"—

"As you shall answer to God for your soul in that day"— the king repeated.

She gave a wild glance at Stenovics, seeking succor, finding no refuge. Her eyes came back to the king's face. "As I shall answer"— Every word came forth by its own self, with its separate birth pang—"As I shall answer to God for my soul"—

She stopped. There was silence while a man might count ten. She threw her hands above her head and broke into a violent torrent of sobs. "I can't! I can't!" they heard her say through her tumultuous weeping.

"I can't! I can't!"

The king suddenly started back in his chair as though somebody had offered to strike him. "You—you—you, my wife! You, Stenovics! You, whom I trusted—trusted—trusted like— Ah, is that you, Lepage? Did I hear rightly—wouldn't she swear?"

"With the utmost respect to Mme. la Comtesse, she could not swear, sir."

The king sprang to his feet. "Go!" he cried.

They all rose—the countess shaken with unconquerable sobs. But the next moment the king made a quick indrawing of the breath, like a man suddenly pricked by some sharp thing. He dropped back in his chair. His head fell to meet his hands on the table in front. The hands were palms downward, and his forehead rested on his knuckles.

There was a moment's pause. Then Lepage darted from the room, crying "Dr. Natcheff! Dr. Natcheff!" Stenovics wiped his brow. Stafnitz raised his head, with a queer look at the king, and his mouth shaped for a whistle. The countess' sobs seemed as though frozen; her whole frame was rigid. The king did not move.

Natcheff came rushing in. Lepage, who followed closely, shut the door after him. They both went to the king. There was silence while Natcheff made his examination. In a couple of minutes he turned round to them.

"Something has caused his majesty strong agitation?"

"Yes," answered Stenovics.

"Yes," said Natcheff. He cleared his throat and glanced doubtfully at the countess.

"Well?" asked Stenovics.

Natcheff threw out his hands, shrugging his shoulders ever so slightly.

"I regret to say that the effect is the worst possible His majesty is dead."

Silence again—a silence strangely broken Stafnitz sprang across the room with a bound like a cat's and caught the physician by the shoulder.

"No!" he said. "Not for twenty-four hours yet! His majesty dies tomorrow!"

Chapter Twenty-four

"HIS majesty dies tomorrow!"

Stafnitz's words seemed to freeze them all stiff where they stood Even Countess Ellenburg's sobs, which had threatened to break forth again, were arrested in their flow

"Markart, lock the door leading to the king's apartments Dr Natcheff and Lepage, carry the king into his bedroom Lay him on the bed Stay there till I call you Countess, general I invite your earnest attention"

Stenovics' mind excelled in the waiting game, the slow tortuous approach the inch by inch advance of leisurely diplomacy. For him this crisis was at first too sudden The swift and daring intellect of Stafnitz naturally and inevitably took the lead. His strong will fascinated his confederates.

"Is this to be the beginning or the end?" he asked. "For us and our friends—which? If we send a courier to Praslok to call King Sergius to his capital—what then? For you, countess, and your son oblivion and obscurity at Dobrava for all the rest of your life, just that! For you, general, and for me and our friends—yes, you, too, Markart—our congé, more or less civilly given. There won't be more insignificant men in all Slavna on the day King Sergius enters. But there's no King Sergius yet!"

Stenovics was regaining the use of his brain. His eyes grew distant in deep meditation. Countess Ellenburg looked eager and grim. Her lips could not swear a false oath—well, she was not asked to swear any oath now. Markart could not think. He stood staring at Stafnitz.

"In half an hour that courier must start for Praslok if he starts at all. Of all things, we mustn't hesitate."

He had painted the result to them of the coming of King Sergius. It meant the defeat of years of effort. It entailed the end of hopes, of place, of power or influence. There was no future for those three in Kravonia if King Sergius came. And Markart, of course, seemed no more than one of Stenovics' train.

"And if the courier doesn't start?" asked Stenovics. He took out a cigar and lit it, asking no leave of the countess. Probably he hardly knew that he was smoking it.

Stafnitz looked at his watch. "Five o'clock! We have twenty-four hours. It would be risky to keep the secret longer. There's not much time. We must be prompt, but we mustn't sacrifice anything to hurry. For instance, it would look odd to present the king's orders to Baroness Dobrava in the middle of the night! She'd smell a rat if she's as clever as they say, and so would the prince, I think. I could have a hundred men at Praslok by midnight, but I shouldn't propose to have them there before 11 o'clock tomorrow. Well, they could be back here by 5 in the afternoon! In the course of the day we'll occupy all the important points of the city with troops we can trust. Then, in the evening, as soon as we see how matters have gone at Praslok, we proclaim King Alexis!"

The countess gave a little shiver, whether of fear or of eagerness it was impossible to tell. Stenovics drummed his fingers on the table and turned his cigar quickly round and round in his mouth Markart had recovered his clearness of mind and closely watched all the scene.

"I—I can't bear it," she said.

The countess rose suddenly in strong agitation. "I—I can't bear it," she said "With him lying there! Let me go! Presently—presently you shall tell me—anything"

Stenovics laid down his cigar and went to her. "Wait in there"—he pointed to Natcheff's room—"till you're quite composed. Then go to your own room and wait till I come. Mind, countess, no sign of agitation!" He led her out. Stafnitz shrugged his shoulders.

"She'll be all right," he said to Markart, with a passing smile.

"I think she was fond of the king," said Markart.

Stenovics returned "Now!" he said, seating himself again and resuming his cigar. "You suggest that we still use that order for the arrest of Baroness Dobrava?"

"It's signed 'Alexis' and King Alexis lives till 5 tomorrow Moreover, if all goes well King Alexis lives again for many years after that"

Stenovics nodded slightly "The baroness comes willingly or you bring her? At any rate one way or the other, she's in our hands by this time tomorrow?"

"Exactly, general I fail to perceive how this lamentable event" he waved his hand toward the king's empty chair—"alters the case as regards the baroness one jot."

"Not the least, unless you consider that risking our heads on the throw has any such effect," replied Stenovics. And for the first time he smiled.

"Once you wanted to play the big stake on a bad hand, general. Won't you put it on the table now, when you've a good one?"

"I'm thinking of a certain strong card in the other hand which you haven't mentioned yet. Baroness Dobrava is to be in our power, by this time tomorrow, but what will the Prince of Slavna be doing? Still drilling his men at Volseni, still waiting for his guns?"

Stafnitz looked him full in the face. "No," he said. "The prince had better not still be drilling his men at Volseni nor waiting for his guns."

"I think not, too," Stenovics agreed, twisting his cigar round again.

"General, do you think the prince will let Baroness Dobrava come to Slavna without him?"

"I don't know. He might have confidence enough in you. He wouldn't wish to annoy or agitate the king. He might await his summons to an audience. On the whole, I think he would submit and rely on being able to induce the king to alter his mind when they met. I'm not sure he wouldn't advise her to go with you."

"Well, yes, I confess that struck me, too, as rather likely or at least possible."

"If it happened it wouldn't be convenient," said Stenovics, with a patient sigh, "because he would come after her in a day or two."

"But if I were detained by urgent business in Slavna—and we've agreed that there's work to be done tomorrow in Slavna—another officer would go to Praslok. The order, which I have here, mentions no name, although the king designated me by word of mouth."

"The order mentions no name?"

"No; it directs the baroness to accompany the bearer. True, at the foot my name is written, 'Intrusted to Colonel Stafnitz.' But with care and a pair of scissors"— He smiled at Markart again, as though taking him into the joke.

"Well, well, suppose another officer goes to Praslok. Why shouldn't the prince trust the baroness to the care of that officer as readily as to you? You don't—how shall I put it—monopolize his confidence, colonel."

Stafnitz still wore his easy, confidential smile as he answered, with an air of innocent slyness: "Suppose the officer were Captain Mistitch? I think it's just the job for Captain Hercules!"

Even Stenovics started a little at that. He laid down his cigar and looked at his friend the colonel for some seconds. Then he looked at Markart, smiling, seeming to ponder, to watch how Markart was taking it, even to sympathize with Markart on having to consider a rather startling proposal, on having possibly to do some little violence to his feelings. Certainly Captain Markart gathered the impression that Stenovics was doubtful how he would stand this somewhat staggering suggestion. At last the general turned his eyes back to Stafnitz again.

The king's body lay on the bed

"That's as ingenious a bit of devilitry as I ever heard, colonel," he remarked quietly.

"Captain Mistitch is restored to duty. He's of proper rank to perform such a service and to command an escort of a hundred men. After all, an officer of my rank made a certain concession in accepting so small a command."

"The prince would regard the sending of Mistitch as a deliberate insult!"

"I'm afraid he would"

"He's hot tempered. He'd probably say as much."

"Yes, and Mistitch is hot tempered He'd probably resent the observation But you'll remember, general, that the escort is to be large enough to make the officer commanding it secure against hindrance by any sudden open and armed resistance to the king's command."

"He'll never believe the King would send Mistitch"

"Will that make his peaceable obedience more likely?"

"In a moment they'll be at cross purposes"— He stopped. "Markart go and see if they need anything in there" He pointed to the king's bedroom where Natcheff and Lepage were.

Markart rose and obeyed. His brain was swimming. He hardly yet understood how very ingenious the proposed devilitry was, how the one man whom he sent whose directions the king could not submit to, whose presence was an insult, to whom it was impossible to intrust Baroness Dobrava. He was very glad to get out of the room. In fact he saw was Stafnitz drawing his chair close up to Stenovics and starting in low voiced, earnest talk.

The king's body lay on the bed decently disposed and covered with a large fur rug. Lepage sat on a chair near by, Natcheff on another in the window. Both looked up as Markart entered, but neither spoke. Markart found a third chair and sat down. Nobody said anything. The three were as silent and almost as still as the fourth on the bed. A low murmur of voices came from the other room. The words were inaudible. So passed full half an hour, strange and terrible half hour to Markart.

The door opened and Stafnitz and Natcheff. The physician took and followed him Another twenty minutes went by, still in silence but for Markart, looking for a moment at his companion, saw a tear roll down Lepage's wrinkled cheek. The page saw him looking and they sat in silence:

"I suppose I fell asleep," said Markart stretching himself and yawning lessly. Silence was unbroken. As it seemed, but on looking at his watch Markart found that it was just past 6.

Again the door opened and Stafnitz called to them both. They followed him into the next room. Stenovics was sitting at the table, with his head clasped on his hand in front of him. Stafnitz took up a position by the fire place as though on duty. Natcheff hat appeared Stenovics spoke in a deliberate tones. He ordered Markart assumed command of the escort again

To be continued

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