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SOPHY OF KRAVONIA

Continued from page 12

revolver in hand, Peter Vassip with knife unsheathed.

As they leaped, another shout rang out: "Long live King Sergius!"

The Prince rode his fastest, but faster still rode Zerkovitch. He outpaced the Prince and rode right in among Mistitch's men, crying loudly, again and again, unceasingly: "The King is dead! The King is dead! The King is dead!"

Then came the Prince. He rode full at Mistitch. His men followed him and dashed with a shock against the troopers of Mistitch's escort. As they rode, they cried: "Long live King Sergius!" They had unhorsed a dozen men and wounded four or five before they realized that they met with no resistance. Mistitch's men were paralyzed. The King was dead—they were to fight against the King! The magic of the name worked. They dropped the points of their swords. The Volsenians, hesitating to strike men who did not defend themselves, puzzled and in doubt, turned to their Prince—their King—for his orders.

As the Prince came up, Mistitch hurled Sophy from him; she fell from her horse, but fell on the soft grassy roadside, and sprang up unhurt save for a cruel pain in her crushed wrist. She turned her eyes whither all eyes were turned now. The general battle was stayed, but not the single combat. For a moment none moved save the two combatants who were now to engage. The fight of the Street of the Fountain fell to be fought again. For when Peter Vassip was darting forward, knife in hand, with a spring like a mountain goat's, his master's voice called.

"Mine, Peter, mine!" It was the old cry when they shot wild boar in the woods about Dobrava, and it brought Peter Vassip to a stand. Max von Hollbrandt, too, lowered his pointed revolver. Who should stand between his quarry and the King, between Sophy's lover and the man who had so outraged her? Big Mistitch was the King's game, and the King's only, that day.

Two shots rang out sharply—that was all. The King reeled in his saddle, but maintained his seat. Big Mistitch threw his hands above his head with a loud cry and fell with a mighty crash on the road, shot through the head.

Peter Vassip ran to the King and helped him to dismount, while Max von Hollbrandt held his horse. Sophy hurried to where they laid him by the roadside.

"Disarm those fellows!" cried Zerkovitch.

But Mistitch's escort were in no mood to wait for this operation, nor to stay and suffer the anger of the King. With their leader's fall the last of heart was out of them. Wrenching themselves free from such of the Volsenians as sought to arrest their flight, they turned their horses' heads and fled, one and all, for Slavna. The King's men attempted no pursuit; they clustered round the spot where he lay.

"I am hit," he said to Sophy; "but not badly, I think."

From the castle door down the causeway came Marie Zerkovitch, weeping passionately, wringing her hands. The soldiers parted their close ranks to let her through. She came to the roadside where Sophy supported monseigneur's head upon her knees. Sophy looked up and saw her. Marie did not speak. She stood there sobbing and wringing her hands over Sophy and the wounded King.

That afternoon—an hour after the first of the straggling rout of Mistitch's escort came in—King Alexis died suddenly. So ran the official notice, indorsed by Dr. Natcheff's high authority.

The coterie were in up to their necks; they could not go back now; they must go through with it. Countess Ellenburg took to her knees, Stenovics and Stafnitz held long conversations. Every point of tactical importance in the city was occupied by troops. Slavna was silent, expectant, curious.

Markart awoke at five o'clock, heavy of head, dry in the mouth, sick and ill. He found himself no longer in the King's suite, but in one of the apartments which Stafnitz had occupied. He was all alone, the door stood open. He understood that he was no more a prisoner, he knew that the King was dead. But who else was dead—and who alive—and who King of Slavna?

He forced himself to rise, and hurried through the corridors of the Palace. They were deserted; there was nobody to hinder him, nobody of whom to ask a question. He saw a decanter of brandy standing near the door of one room, and drank freely of it; then he made his way into the garden. He saw men streaming over the bridge toward Slavna, and hastened after them as quickly as he could. His head was still in a maze, he remembered nothing after drinking the glass of wine which Lepage the valet had given him. But he was possessed by a strong excitement, and he followed obstinately in the wake of the throng which set from the Palace and the suburbs into Slavna.

The streets were quiet; soldiers occupied the corners of the ways; they looked curiously at Markart's pale face and disordered uniform. A dull roar came from the direction of St. Michael's Square, and thither Markart aimed his course. He found all one side of the square full of a dense crowd, swaying, jostling, talking. On the other side troops were massed: in an open space in front of the troops, facing the crowd, was Colonel Stafnitz, and by his side a little boy on a white pony.

Markart was too far off to hear what Stafnitz said when he began to speak—nay, the cheers of the troops behind the Colonel came so sharp on his words as almost to drown them; and after a moment's hesitation, as it seemed to Markart, the crowd of people on the other side of the square echoed back the acclamations of the soldiers. All Countess Ellenburg's ambitions were at stake. For Stenovics and Stafnitz it was a matter of life itself now, so daringly had they raised their hands against King Sergius. Countess Ellenburg had indeed prayed, and now prayed all alone in a deserted Palace; but not one of the three had hesitated.

At the head of a united army, in the name of a united people, Stafnitz had demanded the proclamation of young Alexis as King. For an hour Stenovics had made a show of demurring; then he bowed to the national will. That night young Alexis enjoyed more honor than he had asked of Lepage the valet—he was called not Prince, but Majesty. He was King in Slavna, and the first work to which they set his childish hand was the proclamation of a state of siege.

Slavna chose him willingly, or because it must at the bidding of the soldiers. But Volseni was of another mind. They would not have the German woman's son to reign over them. Into that faithful city the wounded King threw himself with all his friends.

The body of Mistitch lay all day and all night by the wayside. Next morning at dawn the King's grooms came back from Volseni and buried it under a clump of trees by the side of the lane running down to Lake Talti. Their curses were the only words spoken over the grave; and they flattened the earth level with the ground again, that none might know where the man rested who had lifted his hand against their master.

The King was carried to Volseni sore stricken; they did not know whether he would live or die. He had a dangerous wound in the lungs, and, to make matters worse, the surgical skill available in Volseni was extremely primitive.

To be continued next Sunday

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

IT is name-day of the King of the ancient Kingdom of Kravonia, and the capital city of Slavna is given over to festivities in His Majesty's honor.

Sophy de Gruche is new to Slavna and its people, except to Marie Zerkovitch and the latter's husband, proprietor of the leading newspaper in Kravonia. She has come to Slavna to find her fortune; but on this festal day has only a few shillings and the fee from a couple of French pupils between her and dire want.

Sophy is watching the military parade, and listening to the court gossip of Captain Markart. The latter hints of some grave scandals in imperial affairs, notably the evident existence of factions—some plotting for the elevation of the King's son by a morganatic wife in place of the legitimate Prince.

The Prince is considered a martinet by the Slavna military, of whom he is garrison Commandant, and there is no small objecting when an order is issued that all soldiers must remain at barracks during this merry evening. Captain Mistitch (nicknamed Captain "Hercules"), the leader in mutinous talk, induces Lieutenants Rastatz and Sterkoff to join him in defying the order, and the three start out to find the Prince, loudly boasting of what will happen when they meet him.

They do meet him soon. Rastatz flees in terror, and Sterkoff conceals himself behind a pillar, leaving Mistitch to make good his threats. The latter defies the Commandant. In the ensuing duel the Prince severs the tendons of Mistitch's wrist, and is about to march him off to the guard-house, when Sterkoff springs out of the darkness to stab the Prince in the back.

At that instant, Sophy, who has been watching the encounter from a window overhead, lets fall a heavy bronze statue, which crushes the would-be assassin to the ground.

Sophy receives her reward, the King appointing her Keeper of the Tapestries, at four hundred pounds a year; but there is no end of trouble over Mistitch's proposed execution. The Prince is firm in his intention, despite the protests of General Stenovics and Hercules's admirers; but finally consents to reprieve his assailant, when the General approves an order for a lot of cannon, which will give the Prince's tower command of the city.

The King confers a patent of nobility on Sophy, making her Baroness of Dobrava, as further recognition of her services.

Sophy goes to Praslok, the Prince's country estate, and is there appointed lieutenant of the Volseni artillery at the request of the rank and file.

The King, in fear of an early death, orders the Prince to go abroad to find a fitting wife. The Prince, in love with Sophy, temporizes. The two plight their troth with the arrival of the news of the "big guns" for Slavna.

The clique at the Palace conspire to keep from the Prince all knowledge of his father's pre arious condition; but the valet Lepage and the journalist Zerkovitch inform the Prince that "the King's life hangs by a hair; and your crown by a thread."

The cabal in the Palace persuade the King to sign an order requiring the immediate return from Praslok of Sophy, convincing him that she has designs on the Prince.

Stenovics, knowing that Lepage is giving information to the Prince, so informs the King. The valet, given a hearing, tells the King of the conspiracy to place the Countess' son on the throne, and His Majesty, suffering from his weak heart, falls back dead. Stafnitz, realizing the need of time, when informed by the physician of the King's death, exclaims: "No! His Majesty dies to-morrow!"

The twenty-four hours this would give the conspirators would be enough to effectually head off the Prince's attempt to assume his inheritance, and to place the Countess' son on the throne. Also they decide to send Captain Mistitch with one hundred soldiers to Praslok to execute the King's order in reference to Sophy, with the tentative hope that the Prince would object, and be shot.

However, Lepage manages to escape from the Palace and inform Zerkovitch of the King's death, and Zerkovitch departs to inform the Prince, an hour before Mistitch leaves on his mission.

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