

THE SPUR OF FATE

By Ashley Towne

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Fontaine did not reply in words, but his face was well worth noticing. A light shadow favorably into the cab, revealing a glance of "I told you so" directed by Fontaine toward the chief detective. Darrell knew that he had made a center shot and that Fontaine must have already expressed his belief that Darrell and the lady had been in the Moonlight lounge at the time of the act of which Ladislov had complained, whatever that act might be. Of course there was no certainty that the black visaged rascal had sworn to the truth. The cab stopped, and its occupants alighted. As they entered the station Darrell was annoyed to observe that the detectives surrounded him with a somewhat elaborate display of precaution lest he should escape, and the passage of the party through the outer room excited an audible thrill of interest. They entered a private office where Darrell perceived a gray and solidly officer seated by a flat topped desk. Behind him sat a man who leaned forward as if he had caught his elbow on his knee, his chin on his hand. The attitude and the peculiar arrangement of the lights made this man's face a blurred shadow except for his left eye, which, being turned toward Darrell, shone like a star.

"The three men who had brought in the prisoner fell away from him, leaving him standing alone before the desk in a glare of light. Immediately the elderly officer took up a paper from the table and began to read aloud in a loud and monotonous tone an accurate description of John Darrell, American, and of his doings since he had come to Paris.

"Sir," said Darrell in his gentlest tone, "this record is very interesting and surprisingly correct, but it does not seem to explain my presence here at this time. Would you favor me with a few words on that point?"

"The officer shook his head," said the officer, "putting the paper carefully aside, as if to show that it was only one of many damning documents in the case—the charge against you, Mr. Darrell, relates to Captain Sergius Ladislov."

"If Captain Ladislov has made a complaint against me," answered Darrell, "I would like to meet him face to face." "I would venture to suggest that he repeat it in my presence. That is more the manner of my country. I would like to meet him face to face."

"The officer shook his head, but before he had denied the request in words the man in the shadow said: "If such is your wish, follow me." He arose and walked toward a door at the rear of the office, and Darrell followed him. They descended some iron steps, not very well lighted, and passed into a long room below the street level. At the farther end sat two policemen, one upon each side of a large table. Darrell at first supposed that a third officer lay upon the table asleep and covered with a cloak, but as he approached, the policeman who had been seated arose, and apparently obeying a sign, drew away the covering from the recumbent figure.

"It was Ladislov who lay there dead," Darrell, after a single word, turned the right face, turned hastily to find the man who had led him to this room, but he was not to be seen. At the foot of the stairs he had stepped back, allowing the American to proceed, but what had become of him afterward was a mystery. It was the tall officer with the grizzled locks whom Darrell confronted as he turned.

"This is a great surprise to me," said he. "He had been shot in the back," replied the officer. "We have our own opinion as to how it happened. The body was brought here, which is unusual. Moreover, as you asked to see him, and it was so convenient, I finished the sentence with a shrug of the shoulders. "I know nothing of this," said Darrell earnestly. "I never saw the man until this afternoon." "When you had a violent quarrel," said the officer. "Nothing of the kind," retorted Darrell. "I can bring abundant evidence to prove that it was the merest trifle." He walked hastily to the table and over the body, which was clothed in the coachman's rough garments that the man had worn when Darrell had dislodged him from the box of the coach. He turned the corpse upon its face, though shrinking from the touch of it. The clothing had been cut and was for an examination of the wound, but it was not very much soiled with blood. The bullet had struck below the left shoulder blade, and it seemed to have remained in the body.

"You ever know anything like the way she has veiled her secret through-out her talk with us? Perfectly frank about herself and about her past sorrows, absolutely elusive on matters of the present and future! What is she doing in Paris?" "I give it up," said Darrell, "but I hope she'll succeed, whatever it is, and if I can help her—"

"Why, you'll plunge into any scrape to do it," said Gordon. "I'll not drag you and your wife in after me, however," rejoined Darrell firmly. "Don't worry about us," responded Gordon, with a laugh. "Any friend of yours is more than welcome, even though her baggage may be full of dynamite. And as to Mrs. Shevaloff," he added seriously, "my wife is completely satisfied, and that decision is final hereabout; also it is invariably correct."

Darrell crossed to the eastern window and stood for some time looking out upon the gray morning. He turned at the sound of Mrs. Gordon's voice. "I have to thank you, Jack," said she, "for what I believe to be a great and splendid opportunity. This girl you have brought to me is a wonderful creature, full of glorious possibilities, but she stands in great peril. She has birth and breeding, and unless I am grossly mistaken, she has that which is much better—the instinct of true womanhood. But she is as little fit for vengeance as Hamlet was, and she should not waste her life upon it if I can prevent."

"Beyond a doubt the girl is a conspirator of some sort," said the lady, "committed to an impossible plan that will result inevitably in her own destruction. Selfish men are probably using her for their own ends, playing upon her father's wrongs, squandering her money. I have no doubt, on the pretense of furthering some mad design of extrajudicial justice. I am going to see what common sense can do for her. She cannot bring her parents back to life. She cannot right the wrongs that have been done. It would be better for her to consider her own life and to accept such happiness as the world offers."

"I hope to heaven that you'll succeed," said Darrell, taking her hand. "With Mrs. Gordon's amiable attempt to stem the tide of destiny this present record is not intimately concerned. It is sufficient to say that Vera was for several days a member of that household and that she revealed a many-sided and most interesting nature. But she did not reveal the secret of her mission in Paris. She continued to be frank about herself, disclosing without reserve the facts of her ancestry and earlier life. It appeared that upon her mother's side she was descended from a princely house of Circassia, of which she was almost the sole survivor. Moreover, she had a strain of American blood through an international marriage two generations back, and to that, in her opinion, she owed her chief distinguishing peculiarities, both of mind and body. Certainly her appearance was most unusual for a Circassian."

"She made no attempt to secure her personal effects, and the Gordons were not aware that she communicated with the persons in whose charge the things there were, but she obtained money from a bank where she had an account under an assumed name. Darrell presented the check for her, and it was for a large sum."

"On the second day she asked leave to receive two gentlemen, and as a result of this permission and a note dispatched by a messenger there appeared at the house about 9 o'clock in the evening two persons of a somewhat formidable aspect. They were presented to Mrs. Gordon as M. Kilzlar and M. Korna, and were subsequently referred to by Darrell and Gordon in their private conversation as the alternative names of the same persons. M. Kilzlar was a bulky man, nearly fifty years old, swarthy and keen eyed. He had the air of one inured to physical hardships, familiar with the saddle and the sword. M. Korna was under thirty, slender and graceful. His narrow forehead was handsome, but the leanness of his visage and consequent unpleasant prominence of his high cheek bones spoiled the effect of brilliant eyes and a fine, firm mouth and chin.

"There are among my friends," said she, "or at least among those with whom I have recently been brought into contact, men who would not regret the death of Captain Ladislov. He was, like almost all spies, as well known and conspicuous as the Eiffel tower. But my closest associates had no idea of his designs upon me. They could not have learned of my capture in so short a time. Therefore I have no suspicion as to who killed Captain Ladislov."

"The fruitless discussion which followed was broken off by Mrs. Gordon, who insisted that Vera must seek rest. Indeed there could be no doubt of the fact. "Old man, you're jealous," Darrell stopped short and for some seconds regarded his friend with that glance of careful, searching inquiry which was so good a mask for the reality of his thought. "Bob," said he, "do you know who M. Clery is?" "Certainly," replied Gordon, and he gave a hasty sketch of the man. "Do you know what he does?" demanded Darrell. "He is a man of business. He is a silent partner in the biggest powder mill in France. He makes all kinds of explosives, Robert, and sells them, sometimes on the quiet. Now, what do you make of that?" "I don't like it," answered Gordon. "This girl has no right to be mixed up in nihilism and that sort of thing. She's a high spirited, high souled woman. She is out of place as a conspirator."

"Isn't this situation preposterous?" exclaimed Darrell. "Here is this beautiful child—for really she's nothing else—plotting heaven knows what atrocities with hardened adventurers like Kilzlar and negotiating for dynamite with this fellow Clery, who is hand in glove with the most desperate revolutionists on earth, and we can't do anything to save her. We are restrained by the conventionalities of polite society from prying into her affairs." "He laughed in a reckless fashion, as if upon the whole he relished the adventure. "If she would trust me, Bob," he said, with sudden earnestness, "I'd follow her to the utmost limit and make no end of a fool of myself, of course. But I'd do it gladly for her, and you know why, my friend." "I'm afraid I do," returned Gordon. "You're caught in the net." "She has set no snares for me,"

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In this connection we wish to say that Wallace's Farmer is one of the best agricultural papers that comes to this office. It is handsomely printed on paper of fine quality, filled with attractive illustrations, and in addition to its regular features, its editorials by "Uncle Henry" Wallace, the Iowa Farmer, and the Iowa Department of Agriculture, Horticulture, the Hog and Poultry, its Home Department, for the women; contains full reports of the leading live stock shows, and sales, agricultural meetings, etc. It is published weekly at Des Moines, Iowa, at \$1.00 a year, and subscriptions payable in advance. The paper stops when the time is out. We can send Wallace's Farmer and the Democrat both one year for only \$2.25 and you get the best of both. Apply at the Democrat office.

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