

THE SPUR OF FATE

By Ashley Towne

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CHAPTER I.

THE MAN WHO WOULD REIGN.



66 TYPICAL Parisian crowd," said Darrell, indicating by an almost imperceptible gesture the passing through upon the pavement—"always animated, various, full of life and color."

"Interesting because interested," rejoined Gordon, slowly twirling his wineglass by the stem—"interested in a vast range of small matters, the trifling affairs of the moment."

"Not a bit like New York," Darrell continued, "and always new to me. See those young fellows, clerks, I suppose, going home. Would you see any so light hearted on Broadway? Why, every mother's son of them would be gnawing his mustache with fierce determination, and if an honest answer could be had you might ask one question of fifty of them in succession and get the same answer every time. 'What are you thinking about?' 'I'm thinking about a scheme to get hold of some money.' And if two were talking it would be of business—of girls, perhaps, once in awhile, but of business nine times in ten. Look at the people sitting around these tables!"

Darrell shifted his glance with the last words, and there was a pause before he added in an altered and much lowertone: "Now, that's a little more like what we're accustomed to see at home."

Gordon turned a cautious eye toward a table upon their left. "You mean," he said, "your Russian friend and the black whiskered pirate who is talking to him?"

Darrell nodded. "From a snatch of their conversation which I overheard," said Gordon, "I judge that your friend has been losing money in a gambling club and is anxious to return and lose some more. The other is disarming him."

"Then I beg the pirate's pardon," replied Darrell. "I thought he was trying to sell Getchikoff a gold brick. That's what reminded me of New York."

"What's his name?" asked Gordon. "I didn't catch it."

"Ivan Getchikoff," was the reply. "He's the son of the governor general of Stavropol, in the Caucasus, and colonel in the czar's army. I met him through Braybrook of the British embassy. He seems to be a gentleman, but he's no friend of mine. His society is a little too thrilling for me in my present state of nerves."

"I would like to assist at some sort of a duel, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I succeeded in dodging it," said Darrell, "without getting into it myself, as usually happens over here when a fellow attempts to evade those little social obligations. No more of that sort of thing for me. Bob, there's nothing in it, and nobody knows that better than I do."

Gordon nodded several times slowly and with a glance that may have betrayed a trace of envy. "You've had adventures in all quarters of the globe," he said, "while I—well, I married early and settled down, and I've been thoroughly happy," he added almost defiantly.

seemed adequate. He swore at the waiter for returning without the pen, and it was while relieving his feelings in this way that he first saw Darrell, to whom his back had been turned when the two Americans sat down. Arising unsteadily, he approached their table, with extended hand.

Darrell slowly raised his eyes, with a glance of mild curiosity quite characteristic of him. He had the face of a student and a gently questioning manner. He seemed a person of leisurely and safe conclusions and one who took a very serious view of all things great or small. In reality his manner was a mask and the man behind it a born jester. He was enjoying at that moment the drunken dignity of the ponderous, yellow bearded Russian, copying it mentally for use in some story that should set a dinner party of good fellows roaring. But no man could have guessed it.

He greeted Getchikoff with gravity and introduced Gordon, with the result that the swarthy and formidable individual hitherto called "the pirate" was summoned and presented. It appeared that he was a captain and that his patronymic was Ladislav. He spoke French like one long accustomed to its use, and the conversation offered no linguistic difficulties. It had, indeed, scarcely begun when Getchikoff suddenly spied a stylographic pen in Darrell's waistcoat pocket and requested permission to use it. The pen was a very large one, and a good three inches of it protruded from the pocket, so that it was quite conspicuous as Darrell sat there with his coat thrown open.

"Pen?" cried Darrell, annoyed by the incident and determined to save Getchikoff from a folly if possible or at least to avoid assisting him in the commission of it. "That isn't a pen; it's a musical instrument."

And he put it to his lips as one holds a flute. Getchikoff, whose wits were by no means clear, seemed to credit this fiction without question. Indeed, as Darrell knew, he was a man who would believe anything of an American, even to the eccentricity of carrying a little flute in a waistcoat pocket.

"It is much used in my country," said Darrell politely. "You might almost call it the national instrument."

"I never saw one before," replied Getchikoff, with perfect seriousness, and the jest was in a fair way to pass successfully when Ladislav, leaning upon the table and looking keenly at Darrell, said:

"I would give much to hear you play upon it."

Gordon glanced at Ladislav in surprise, being still convinced that the man had sought to dissuade Getchikoff from drawing a check. In fact, he had distinctly heard him speak against that course.

"Would you?" said Darrell, reddening at this obvious attempt to put him in a difficulty. "Then you shall be gratified."

And softly, but with a clear and very agreeable tone, he played "Hail, Columbia" in a manner that was a perfect illusion. It was a trick that Darrell had learned long ago, in college days, when his repertory of imitations had included many instruments. Gordon, to whom the performance had been familiar in those old times, could not remember to have heard it better

"I do not like your American jokes," done, and he experienced a boyish delight in the utter surprise and confusion of the captain.

Having finished the air, Darrell smilingly passed the pen to Ladislav, a proceeding not unsafe, for the cap closed and opened by means of a spring not easily discovered. Incident to this mechanism there were two perforations of the outer shell, which might seem to connect with the inner parts, though they did not.

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"I do not like your tone, sir," said Darrell calmly as he extended his hand for the pen.

"And I do not like your American jokes," replied Ladislav, rising. "Among gentlemen there are certain views about lying."

Gordon expected to see Ladislav's body go flying over the table behind him, for he knew Darrell of old as a man exceedingly prompt in such matters. But Darrell merely put the pen into his pocket as if he had heard nothing offensive, and leaning back in his chair, he regarded Ladislav with an agreeable smile.

"You should not permit yourself to become excited," he said. "I have been informed by my physician that it is exceedingly bad for the health."

Getchikoff was staring stupidly, unable to comprehend what was passing. Seeing Ladislav standing, he staggered to his feet.

"You are right," he said. "We must go, gentlemen, we regret that we have not more leisure."

And he struggled clumsily with his watch. Ladislav remained for a moment scowling at Darrell and seemingly at a loss for words; then, taking Getchikoff suddenly by the arm, he led him away among the tables and into the cafe beyond. Ten minutes afterward the waiter whom Darrell had bribed came up behind him and said in a cautious tone:

"Monsieur, I did as you told me, but they found pen and ink inside. The man with yellow hair signed something for the other."

"A check?" asked Darrell. "No, monsieur; it was some sort of document which the man with the black beard took from his pocket."

"Thank you," said Darrell, rewarding him once more.

"They say," remarked the waiter, "that monsieur and the man with the black beard had a quarrel."

"They lie," said Darrell, addressing Gordon rather than the servant. "No man can quarrel with me, and the next one that tries it will get his head broken. I am here for rest."

He tapped gently on the table with his clenched fist to emphasize this statement, and Gordon laughed.

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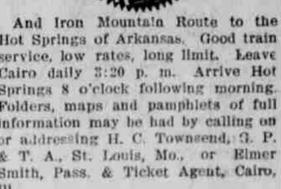
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