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***A MODERN
MERCENARY***

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CHAPTER I.

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A LIEUTENANT OF FRONTIER CAVALRY.

During four months of the year the independent State of Maäsau,' we will call it—which is not very noticeable even on the largest sized map of Europe—is tormented by a dry and weary north-east wind. And nowhere is its influence more unpleasantly felt than in the capital, Révonde, which stands shoulder-on to the hustling gales, its stately frontages and noble quays stretching out westwards along the shores of the Kofn almost to where the yellow waters of the river spread fan-wise into a grey-green sea.

The *tsa* was blowing strongly on a certain November afternoon, eddying and whistling about the wide spaces of the Grand Square as John Rallywood, a tall figure in a military cloak, turned the corner of a side street and met its full blast. He faced it for some yards along the empty pavements, then ran up the steps of his club. A few minutes later he passed through a lofty corridor and entered a door over which is set a quaint invitation to smokers, which may not be written down here, for it is the jealously guarded copyright of the club.

It chanced that the room for the moment had but one occupant, who sat in a roomy armchair by the white stove. This gentleman did not raise his head, but continued to gaze thoughtfully at his well shaped though square and comfortable boots.

Rallywood paused almost imperceptibly in his stride.

'Hullo, Major! Glad to see you,' he said, as he dropped into an armchair opposite.

Major Counsellor stood up with his back to the stove, thereby giving a view of a red, challenging face, heavy eyebrows, and a huge white droop of moustache. He looked down at Rallywood consideringly before he spoke. 'So you're here. I imagined they kept you pretty closely on the frontier. The world been kicking you?'

Rallywood laughed.

'No, but it would do me good to kick the world,' he answered as he helped himself from the Major's cigar case. 'Five years, almost six, spent on the frontier, with nothing to show for it, isn't good enough. I've come up to send in my papers.'

'Then you'll be a fool,' returned the Major with decision.

Rallywood was busy lighting his cigar; when that was arranged to his satisfaction he said easily—

'Just so. History repeats itself.'

Counsellor stood squarely upright with his hands behind him.

'Any other reasons?' he asked.

'Plenty.'

'Pity! Are they serious or—otherwise?'

Rallywood pulled his moustache.

'Why is it a pity?' he asked slowly.

'Because there is going to be trouble here, and with trouble comes a chance.'

Rallywood smoked on in silence. He was a big, shallow-flanked man with the marks of the world upon him, and that indescribable air which comes to one who has passed a

good portion of his time in laughing at the arbitrary handicaps arranged by Fate in the race of life.

'Where do you propose to go?' asked Counsellor after an interval.

'Back to Africa, I think—Buluwayo, Johannesburg, anywhere. South Africa's still in the bud, you see.'

'Yes, but it is a biggish bud and will take time to blow. You can afford to wait and—it may be worth your while.'

Rallywood threw a swift glance at Counsellor's inscrutable face.

'Seven years ago,' he said in a deliberate manner, 'you told me it was worth while, but life has not grown more interesting since then.'

'Ah!' Counsellor paused, then went on with a grim smile, 'At your age, John, there are possibilities. Think over it. After hanging on here for more than five years why lose your chance now? Look at those fellows.' He pointed out into the square.

Rallywood rose lazily and gazed out also. The prospect was not cheering. A few troopers, their cloaks flapping in the wind, were galloping across the square on the way to relieve guard at the Palace, and under the statue of the late Grand Duke on horseback three men in tall hats stood talking together; then they turned and walked towards the club.

'Know them?' asked Counsellor.

Rallywood shook his head.

'The man with the beard is Stokes of the 'Times:' next him is Bradley; he's on another big daily. Their being here speaks for itself. Maäsau is going to take up people's

attention shortly. The Grand Duke is in a tight place, and there will be a flare-up sooner or later.'

'And you advise me to stop and see it through?' said Rallywood meditatively from the window; then he lounged back to his chair. 'How will it end?'

Counsellor shook the ash from his cigar.

'Selpdorf is the man of the hour,' he said.

On the autumn evening when these two men were talking at the club the Duchy of Maäsau was, in the opinion of Maäsaun patriots, going as fast as it could to the devil. With them, it may be added, the devil was personified and bore the name of a neighbouring nation. The one person who ignored this fact was the Grand Duke. With an inset, stubborn pride he believed that his country must remain for ever, as the long centuries had known her, Maäsau the Free. This being the case, he felt himself at liberty to spend his time in cursing the fate that had refused blue seas and skies to wintry Révonde, thus depriving it of these sources of revenue which depend upon climate, and which are enjoyed by places far less naturally beautiful than the capital of Maäsau.

The Duke, prematurely aged, by the manner of his life, made it his chief business to devise schemes for raising money whereby he might carry on the staling pleasures of his youth. Beyond this the administration of public affairs was left entirely in the supple hands of the Chancellor, M. Selpdorf, while the Duke, with those who surrounded him, plunged into the newest excitement of the hour, for who knew what a day might bring forth? The Court was like a stage lit by lurid light, on which the actors laughed and

loved, danced and fought to the music of a wild finale, that whirled and maddened before the crash of the coming end.

Once upon a time Maäsau was accounted of no particular importance or value amongst its bigger neighbours; but of late, for various reasons, its fortunes had become the subject of attention and discussion in at least three foreign chancelleries, where old maps were being looked up and new ones bought and painted different colours, according as seemed most desirable by the bearded men, who sat in council to apportion the marsh, rock, dune, and forest of which the now absorbingly interesting pigmy State was composed.

In fact, Maäsau, with its twenty miles or so of seaboard, containing one excellent port *in esse* and two others *in posse*, had become a Naboth's vineyard to a country almost land-bound and yet dreaming of the supremacy of the four seas. On this ambition and its possible consequences the other Great Powers looked, to speak diplomatically, with coldness.

It was generally understood that the English Foreign Office desired the maintenance of the *status quo*; France was supposed to be ready to clap a young republic on the back and to accord it her protection, while Russia played her own dumb and blinding game, of which none could definitely pronounce the issue. The political world thus stood at gaze, watching every change and prepared to take advantage of any chance that offered. The honours of the game so far had lain with M. Selpdorf, who scored each trick with the same bland smile. Whenever the Treasury of Maäsau was at a low ebb Selpdorf usually had a thirteenth

card to lay upon the table, and as the nations cautiously proceeded to frustrate each other's purposes royal remittances from Heaven knows where flowed in abundantly to replenish the bankrupt exchequer of the State.

When Major Counsellor expressed his emphatic disapproval of the intended resignation of Rallywood a new development was in the air. Hitherto the lead had mostly devolved upon Selpdorf; on this occasion he was known to be hanging back, and the question of who would take the initiative was the question of the day. The fact that Germany had lately accredited a new representative, a certain Baron von Elmur, to the Court of Maäsau,—an able man whose reputation rested mainly on the successful performance of missions of a delicate nature,—added to the tension of the moment.

'So you say they are getting up steam in Maäsau?' said Rallywood again. 'I have been out in the wilds for the last six months, and don't know so much about events as I might.'

'Steam?' growled Counsellor. 'Steam enough to wreck Europe! I almost wish I'd never godfathered you into this blessed little stoke-hole. Why the deuce didn't you enlist at home instead of coming here?'

'That was out of the question, of course.'

'Why? Isn't our army good enough for you to fight in?'

'If it was only that!—I could fight in the ranks, God knows, but I couldn't parade in them! Besides, the life here suited me—then.'

'What's gone wrong with it now? I should have thought you would have got used to it by this time,' observed Counsellor with the air of the older man. It was not the first

occasion on which he had played the part of elderly relative towards Rallywood during the course of their queer, rough-grained friendship—a friendship of a type which exists only between man and man, and even then is sufficiently rare.

'Precisely, I'm too infernally used to it! It was not half bad as long as the newness lasted, but I can't stand it any longer! I'm sick of the monotony. Do you know old Fitzadams's criticism on the service here? "Dust and drill, drill and dust, and fill in the chinks with homicidal manœuvres."'

'Maäsau only apes its betters. These Continental armies devote themselves very assiduously to rehearsals, and there is no end of waste about the process,' remarked Counsellor. 'They rehearse in summer and get sunstroke; then they rehearse in winter with rheumatisms and lung troubles growing on every bush. The bill for blank cartridges alone is enormous! And all because they have no India and no Africa, as we have, where we can give our fellows a taste of the real thing any day in the week. We carry on a small war with a regiment, or despatch a youngster with half a company to teach manners and honesty to twenty thousand niggers. The peculiarity of our army is that it is always at war. In this way we escape the dangers of theory, and get practice with something for our money into the bargain.'

'Our plan has its advantages,' agreed Rallywood lazily. 'I saw in South Africa what a little active service does for a man. The first time he is under fire he is persuaded that he is going to be killed, and that every shot must hit him. But after a trial or two he begins to think the odds are in his

favour and he becomes a much more effective fighting machine.'

'Necessarily he does. We don't half realise the value of our colonies yet—as a training ground for our soldiers. The British army is the smallest in Europe, but it remains to be seen what account it will give of itself if it is ever brought into contact with these huge, peace-trained conscript monsters.'

'When the Duke dies——' began Rallywood, harking back to the former topic of conversation.

The door was softly opened, and a waiter advanced into the room, bearing a letter for Rallywood, who took it and laid it down on the table beside him, then looked at Counsellor for an answer to his half spoken question. Counsellor shrugged his shoulders.

'Who can tell?' he replied. 'Meanwhile take the gifts the gods have sent you to-day,' and he pointed to the long, heavily sealed envelope that lay at Rallywood's elbow. 'Selpdorf, I see, already has his finger upon you.'

Rallywood broke the great seals, and, having read, he tossed the paper into the other's hands.

'He wishes to see me at 9.30. What can he want with me?' he asked.

'Probably he has heard you intend to cut the service. It appears to me, Rallywood, that your chance has come out to meet you.'

'How could he have heard that I meant to go? And what can it matter to any one if I do?' went on Rallywood incredulously.

Counsellor shook his head, but made no other reply.

'A lieutenant of the Frontier Cavalry,' resumed Rallywood, 'is merely a superior make of excise officer!'

'You will be something more or something else before 10, I expect. As for what he wants with you, that is for you to find out—if you can.'

'It is to be hoped he may feel moved to let me have my arrears of pay,' said Rallywood, relapsing into his usual tone of indifference; 'that is the chief consideration with us on the frontier just now.'

'He probably will if it suits him—or rather perhaps if you suit him. Come over and dine with me presently at the Continental. There's generally a decent dinner to be had there.'

John Rallywood, one of the old Lincolnshire Rallywoods, had been born to a fortune, and moreover with an immense capacity for enjoying it after a wholesome fashion. Queens Fain had fallen to him while still an infant upon the death of a great-uncle, and with the old place were connected all those hundred untranslatable ties and associations which go to make up a boy's dreams. He was a man of suppressed, perhaps half unconscious, but nevertheless deep-rooted enthusiasms; hence when the blow fell which deprived him not only of his inheritance, but also cut short the life of his mother, the unexpected, almost intolerable anguish he silently endured had left a deep, defacing scar upon his personality.

Up to twenty-two the record of his life, if not striking, had been clean and manly. He had passed through Sandhurst, and joined a dragoon regiment for something over a year, when an older branch of the family, supposed for a quarter

of a century to be extinct, suddenly presented itself very much alive in the person of a middle-aged, middle-class American. Within three months the man's claim was substantiated, and estate, fortune, position, and home—as far as John Rallywood was concerned—had melted into thin air.

During this period of disruption and trouble Counsellor, who happened to be distantly connected with him, came into his life. They did not meet very often and spoke little when together, but mutual knowledge and liking resulted. Friendship is a living thing: it cannot be made; it grows.

Rallywood, when he turned to seek the means of a livelihood, found himself, as he said long afterwards, standing in the corridor of life with all the doors shut and no key to open them.

His tastes and training alike led in the direction of a military career, and presently he went out to the Cape, where he spent a year or two in a police force which was in time disbanded, and he returned to England once more at a loose end.

At this juncture Major Counsellor suggested to him the possibility of obtaining a commission in the little army of the Duchy of Maäsau. This hint set him on the right track. The regiments of Maäsau, though few in number, carried splendid traditions. Their ranks were drawn from a stolid, silent peasantry, and officered by a wire-strung, high tempered aristocracy, born of a mixed race, it is true, but none the less frantically devoted to the freedom and independence of their shred of a fatherland.

In compliance with a private request on the part of Major Counsellor the British Minister at Révonde bestirred himself to procure a commission for Rallywood, who thus became a lieutenant in the Frontier Cavalry, and for more than five years had taken his share in riding and keeping the marches of Maäsau gaining much experience in capturing smugglers and in superintending the digging out of snowed up trains. But life on the frontier, though crammed with physical activity and routine work, was in every other respect monotonously empty, and breaks in the shape of furlough were few and far between. Half liked, wholly respected, and a little feared amongst his comrades, but always remaining a lieutenant to whom now, the State owed eighteen months' arrears of pay, Rallywood, in return, owed to Maäsau only the qualified service of an unpaid man, but gave it the full devotion of a capable officer.

As to Counsellor, no one could quite account for his presence at Révonde at the present moment. He was supposed to be attached in some indefinite way to the Legation, but he described himself as a bird of passage, whose appearance in the European capital simply meant whim or pleasure, for he was growing old and lazy and could not be brought to account for his wanderings, which he assured those who ventured to enquire were chiefly undertaken in search of health. Nevertheless wherever he went or came something interesting in a political sense—and more often than not, in favour of British interests—was almost sure to happen.

In former days he had filled the position of military attaché to two or three of the more important embassies,

and was said to be the best known man in Europe. He had, moreover, the right to carry upon his breast the ribbon and decoration of more than one exclusive and distinguished Order. Of the many rumours associated with him this saying was certainly true: that one could never enter the smoking-room of any diplomatic club in any city in Europe without standing a fair chance of encountering Major Counsellor warming himself beside the stove.

Therefore he had naturally an enormous circle of acquaintance, each individual knowing very little about him, though he always formed an interesting subject of conversation, and a political opinion backed by his name became at once important.

CHAPTER II.

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A GENTLEMAN OF THE GUARD.

Shortly before 9.30 Rallywood presented himself at the granite palace, with its four cupolas, which M. Selpdorf occupied in his capacity of First Minister of State. After some slight delay he was ushered into a comfortable study, where he found Selpdorf with a reading-lamp at his elbow, glancing rapidly through a mass of papers that he threw one after another, with apparent carelessness, on the floor beside him.

The chancellor of a small State might very well have been pardoned had he introduced a certain amount of what an old official used to call 'desk dignity' into his dealings with those who approached him, but Selpdorf habitually affected an easy manner and an easy chair. He was a middle-sized man, possessed of a very round head, bald at the crown, but having still a lock of dark hair on the summit of his round forehead; very round eyes set far back in smooth holes, showing little lid; a nose blunt and thick over lips that might have been coarse, but were controlled, and betrayed a lurking humour at the corners, to which the upstanding moustaches seemed to add point. For all his peculiarity of aspect, he was a man who left an impression on the memory of something pleasing and attractive, especially in the minds of women.

He received Rallywood with that air of deep personal interest which told with such happy effect on those whom

he desired to influence.

'Ah, my dear Lieutenant, I understood you were in Révonde, and took the advantage of your presence to put into effect a little plan which has been for some time in contemplation. I recollect having had the pleasure of meeting you not so long ago when you arrived in Maäsau.'

'Nearly six years ago, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood with a smile.

'I can scarcely believe it to be so long. At any rate I remember perfectly that I had the honour of presenting you to his Highness as the latest addition to our Frontier Cavalry.'

'Your Excellency might easily have forgotten. From the nature of the case that could not be possible with me.'

Selpdorf listened with a little astonishment. This Englishman was not quite such a fool as one might have expected from the fact of his having been content to remain without preferment and only a proportion of his pay for over five years on the frontier. He had hoped to find the fellow adaptable, but this long-limbed, slow-spoken gentleman was not altogether so transparent an individuality as Selpdorf had led himself to expect.

'But why have you secluded yourself for so long among those barbarous marshes and forests?' demanded the Chancellor in a rallying manner. The young man made no reply, though the obvious one was in his mind.

'By-the-by,' resumed the Chancellor, as if struck by a new thought, 'I have heard that your countryman Major Counsellor has come to pay us a little visit in Maäsau.'

'He is here. I have just seen him,' replied Rallywood.

Selpdorf's round eyes glanced once more at his companion. The simple directness of the reply was admirable but baffling.

'Ah, he is invaluable, the good Major, quite invaluable! England may well be proud of him. He is one of the ablest men in Europe, besides'—here he smiled, showing a row of strong, even teeth—'besides being one of the most honest. For a diplomatist—what praise!'

Rallywood met his glance imperturbably.

'For a diplomatist, your Excellency?' he repeated.

'But assuredly,' replied the Chancellor warmly: 'figure to yourself, my friend, the condition of politics if all statesmen were like him—honest! An invaluable man!'

He paused for a reply, but Rallywood merely bowed. He felt that so much at least was expected of him on the part of England.

'But now, monsieur, with regard to your own affair. You have been five years in the service of his Highness. And your command?'

'At present fifty troopers at the block-houses above Kofn Ford and along the river. In the winter, during the long dark nights, when there are many attempts to run illicit goods across the frontier, I shall have, perhaps, a score or so more.'

'And you are not tired of it?' M. Selpdorf raised his hands.

'So tired, your Excellency, that I am half inclined to let a better man step into my shoes.'

'But come, come, that is impossible!' returned his Excellency agreeably. 'Are you also tired of our capital, of Révonde?'

'I have had very little opportunity of growing tired of Révonde. I know nothing of it.'

'But you would prefer Révonde, believe me.'

At this moment an attendant appeared with a card upon a salver. Selpdorf read the name with the faintest contraction of his brows.

'You will excuse me, M. Rallywood,' he said; 'I must ask you to wait in the ante-room for a few minutes.'

The ante-room was a long pillared corridor, in which Rallywood found himself quite alone. He fell at once into speculations as to the meaning and aim of Selpdorf's late awakened interest in himself. Also the allusions to Counsellor had probably been made with calculated intention.

Rallywood understood that each of these two men had the same end in view; each desired to dissemble his own character. And each of them succeeded with the many, but failed as between themselves. Selpdorf posed as the suave, sympathetic, good-natured friend of those with whom he came in contact; Counsellor, as a man of no account, a rugged soldier, honest, strong, outspoken, a good agent to act under the direction of more astute brains, but if left to his own resources somewhat blunt and blundering.

To do Rallywood justice, he was far more occupied with this last thought than with the things which bore more directly on his own prospects and future. At this period his life was comparatively tasteless and void of interest; there was nothing to look forward to, and the recent past meant extremes of heat and cold, long solitary rounds ridden by night, and days rendered so far alike by iron-handed rule

and method that one was driven to mark the lapse of time by the seasons, not by the ordinary divisions of weeks and months.

As he lounged in a chair full of these thoughts a slight rustle, soft and silken, like the rustle of a woman's dress, caught his ear. He turned his head quickly. The corridor with its splendid pillars, which stood at long intervals, was steeped in the clear electric light, and from where he sat he could see that there was no person visible throughout its entire length.

Then as his gaze travelled back it rested on something which had certainly not been lying where he now saw it at the time of his entrance.

Not six paces behind him, stretched across the dark carpeting, in the very centre of the pillared vista, lay a woman's long glove.

A woman's glove possesses a peculiar charm for all men. Perhaps it suggests some of the sweet mystery of womanhood. The first action of most young men in Rallywood's place would have been to raise it at once and to examine it, as though in some impalpable manner it could tell something of its unknown wearer, who might turn out to be the Hathor, the one woman in the world.

But the circumstances of Rallywood's life, and perhaps also some exclusive element in his character, had heretofore set him rather apart from the influence of women. He had grown to regard them without curiosity, which is the last stage indifference can reach.

It must be admitted that it was with a feeling akin to repugnance that he at last lifted the long, soft, pale-hued,

faintly-scented *suède* from the floor and dangled it at an unnecessary distance from his eyes, holding it as he did so daintily between finger and thumb. Its subtle appeal to his senses as a man failed to reach him. It simply aroused an old feeling of reserve toward the sex it represented. His face altered slightly and he dropped it suddenly with an odd repulsion, as he might have dropped a snake, on a couch near by.

Then he resumed his chair and turned his back upon it, till the reflection that the woman to whom it belonged must have come and gone while he sat thinking with his back to the corridor sent him wheeling round again.

The glove still lay where he had placed it on the edge of the couch, palm upwards and with a suggestion of helplessness and pleading. It annoyed him unreasonably. He frowned and looked at his watch. Half an hour had passed since Selpdorf dismissed him.

At that moment a guttural voice broke the silence of the house, and the heavy curtain over the door at the nearer end of the ante-room was thrust back by a brusque hand, and a tall, high-shouldered, handsome man, dressed as if he were about to attend some Court function, stood in the opening. Behind him Rallywood caught sight of a flurried and explanatory lackey.

'Ah! so I have lost my way after all,' said this personage in a bland voice. 'A mistake! But I hope you will accord me your forgiveness, mademoiselle?'

Rallywood sprang to his feet at this most unexpected ending and looked round.

Close beside him stood a tall girl wrapped in a long cloak of fur and amber velvet. She was singularly beautiful, with a pale, clear-hued beauty. Her black, long-lashed eyes were on him and they were full of laughter.

'Enter, then, Baron,' said the girl, glancing across at the courtier. 'Did you guess you would find me here, or were you seeking monsieur?' and she waved her bare left hand towards Rallywood.

'I lost my way, nothing more,' returned the Baron, coming forward; 'but perhaps, as in my heart, all roads lead towards ——' He bowed deeply once more, this time stooping to kiss the girl's hand with a certain show of restrained eagerness.

She drew back with a little impatient gesture.

'I should not have been here, but for an accident,' she replied coldly. 'In fact I was on the point of starting for his Highness's reception, had not monsieur detained me.' And, to Rallywood's amazement, she indicated himself.

Before he could speak she pointed to his spurred boot.

'Monsieur has set his heel on my poor glove,' she added.

By his hasty movement in rising he had apparently dislodged the glove from its position on the edge of the couch. He stooped with a hurried word of apology and picked it up. On the delicate palm was stamped the curved stain of his boot-heel.

'Do you always treat a lady's glove so?' she asked gravely, and held out her hand for it.

Rallywood looked down at her very deliberately, and something that was neither his will nor his reason decided the next action. He folded the soft *suède* reverently together.

'No, mademoiselle,' he answered, as he placed it inside his tunic, 'I have never before treated a lady's glove—so. For the accident, I offer my deepest apologies.'

She watched him with raised eyebrows and a slight derisive smile. Then she drew the companion glove from her right hand, and giving it to the lackey, who still remained in the background, she said—

'Throw it away, it is useless, and tell Nanzelle to bring me another pair.'

'Monsieur, with whom I have not yet the pleasure of being acquainted,' interrupted the Baron rather suddenly, 'monsieur is after all the lucky man. He retains what I dare not even ask for.'

'Shall I call back the servant with its fellow for you?' mademoiselle asked haughtily. 'It is nothing to me who picks up what I have thrown away.' With this rebuff to Rallywood she placed her hand upon the German's, as if to ask him to lead her from the room, and added—

'You wish for an introduction? Then allow me to present you to each other. His excellency the Baron von Elmur.' She paused, and her eyes dwelt for a moment on Rallywood's. 'A gentleman of the Guard.' And before Rallywood could explain the mistake the curtain had dropped behind them and he was left standing alone.

In Baron von Elmur he recognized the oblique carriage of the head and the high-shouldered figure of the third man he had seen with the newspaper correspondents in the Grand Square that afternoon. Moreover he knew that the German had entered the ante-room through no mistake, but with some object in view. As for the girl, who was she and where

had she come from? She was not of Maäsau, since she had introduced him as belonging to the Guard, for not only was every officer of that favoured corps individually known, but it was further impossible for a Maäsaun to make the slightest mistake with regard to any uniform. It was one of the boasts of the country that even a child could tell at a glance not only the special regiment, but the rank of the wearer of any uniform belonging to the Duchy.

Rallywood had no time just then to pursue the subject further, as he was almost immediately recalled to the Chancellor's presence.

'Now, monsieur,' began Selpdorf, as though no break had occurred in the conversation, 'you are in truth tired of keeping our dreary marches; is it not so?'

'There are better places—and worse, your Excellency.'

'Our gay little capital will be one of the better places, I promise you,' continued the Chancellor. 'A position in the Guard of his Highness has just become vacant. Am I right in believing that a nomination to that superb regiment would tempt you to remain with us?'

Rallywood for once was a little taken aback.

'A gentleman of the Guard.' He repeated the girl's words of introduction mechanically; then, putting aside the thought of her, he took up the practical view of the situation and answered, 'I am an Englishman, your Excellency, and though I have taken the soldier's oath to the Maäsaun standard I have not taken the oath of nationality. I could not consent to become a naturalised citizen even of the Duchy of Maäsau.'

'Ah, so?' Selpdorf stroked his chin, then despatching the objection with a wave of his hand, he resumed, 'We must overlook that in your case. You have already served the Duke for five years with as sincere zeal as the truest Maäsaun amongst us. We must remember that and overlook a drawback which is far less important than it seems.'

He turned to a memorandum on the table and consulted it.

'You were engaged in the affair at Xanthal, I see?'

'Three years ago, your Excellency,' replied Rallywood in a tone that implied his powers of usefulness had probably become impaired by lapse of time.

Selpdorf moved his shoulders. Here was a man throwing difficulties in the way of his own advancement. Yet he could not possibly be so indifferent to his own interests as he chose to assume.

'To be plain with you,' Selpdorf said with an air of candour, 'the younger officers of the Guard have little experience. The latest fashion in neckties or the most charming dancer at the Folie absorbs their attention, to the exclusion of more important matters. There is, as you doubtless know, a certain admixture of French blood in the veins of our most noble families,' he finished abstractedly.

Rallywood had no remark to offer upon this. The officers of the Guard bore a very distinct reputation. They were said to be a very pleasant set of fellows socially, unless one ran foul of their prejudices, but they were credited with a good many prejudices. As for his personal acquaintance with them, it was limited to acting as second in a hastily

arranged duel fought out in the yard behind a little country railway station.

'I should like to see a somewhat different spirit introduced, and to be assured that I could always rely on the presence of at least one cool-headed officer at the Palace. Your experience on the frontier has eminently fitted you for the position. To you, therefore, will be allotted the quarters reserved in the Palace itself for the adjutant of the Guard. May I have the pleasure of saluting you as such?'

Rallywood hesitated. He foresaw certain difficulties, but they appeared rather attractive than otherwise at the moment. He threw back his shoulders, a light of laughter came into his eyes, he raised his head and looked into Selpdorf's face.

'I thank your Excellency.'

The Chancellor understood more than met the ear. He approached the subject delicately.

'Then you will allow me to congratulate you, Captain Rallywood,' he said, bending forward to shake hands with his visitor in the English fashion. 'There may possibly be some trifling difficulties at the outset. The first step in any undertaking usually costs something, but you will not, I beg, permit yourself to be drawn into,—ahem, any shallow quarrels. Our friends of the Guard, you will understand, are a little prone to pick up even a careless word on the sword-point.'

M. Selpdorf paused, and referred once more to the memorandum.

'There has been some small hitch about the pay on the frontier of late?' he asked innocently.