

# **COUNT ZARKA**

**A Romance**

**BY**  
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# COUNT ZARKA



**“In a moment their light rapiers had touched.”**

# CHAPTER I

## THE MAN ON THE ROAN HORSE

“THE plan I have in my mind,” said Gersdorff, the Minister, “is so full of delicacy and danger that I hesitate to propose it to you.”

The young man sitting opposite to him smiled. “At least, Excellency, let me hear it. May not the man before whom the danger will lie be the best judge of whether he can undertake it. As to the delicacy involved——”

The Minister made a deprecating gesture.

“I have no fear on that score, so far as you are concerned, my dear Herr Galabin. In fact you are the only man in the Bureau whom I would trust to undertake the affair. The only question is,” he continued, as Galabin bowed in acknowledgment of the compliment, “whether I have any right to risk a valuable life in an undertaking where the very courage which points you out as the right man for the business is likely to minimize the dangers, dangers which I cannot disguise from myself may be very great.”

“Nevertheless, I am impatient to hear your Excellency’s plan.”

The Minister leaned back in his chair thoughtfully stroking his mouth with his long white fingers. “Shortly, it is this,” he said. “The mystery surrounding the extraordinary disappearance of Prince Roel of Rapsberg deepens every day. I say deepens, because, as you know, the agents of our Bureau, all the machinery which we have set working to elucidate it, have given us absolutely blank results. Had it been a mere piece of eccentricity on the Prince’s

part, the result, as has been hinted, of disappointment in a love affair, we must have found him, or at least some clue to the direction in which he had disappeared. A man, let alone a prince, cannot vanish from the face of the earth without leaving some trace.”

“That is obvious, Excellency, at any rate in a well-watched community.”

“Just so. Now—and I doubt not you will have come to the same conclusion as myself—the result which our exhaustive inquiries leave us is the inevitable conclusion that the Prince has been spirited away.”

“You think that, Excellency?”

Gersdorff nodded. “I do. And my supposition has the deeper colour in that I can easily account for it. Now, in suggesting, my dear Herr Galabin, that you should take this matter in hand and endeavour to follow up the mystery on political, that is altogether higher, lines, I feel it is only due to you to point out the danger of playing the detective, seeing that we accept the theory that this is not a mere ordinary case of a person’s disappearance, due to eccentricity or commonplace foul play. Behind it I fear we have a strong, ruthless, political motive. And a motive springing from one of the strongest, most Napoleonic brains in Europe, and at the back of that policy the might of a great Power.”

“It is fighting against tremendous odds, certainly, to follow the matter up,” Galabin remarked.

“True. Still, we have no alternative. We may be comparatively weak and insignificant in the European concert, but for all that we

cannot allow this outrage to pass. Here is one of the richest and most influential of our great territorial nobles kidnapped under our very noses. For the sudden disappearance of such a man can scarcely be accounted for otherwise. Now are we to leave this young Prince to his fate? Supposing, that is, he has not already met it. Although my own idea is—and that is the reason, Herr Galabin, I am anxious to enlist your services—that the Russian, strong though he be, will scarcely venture to put Prince Roel to death, at least until he has ascertained with some certainty the effect such an outrage would produce and the consequences he would have to face. No, he will not burn his boats until he is sure how the land lies in front of him.”

“And the motive for making away with Prince Roel?”

Gersdorff gave a shrug. “The old, wearisome motive that is responsible for ninety-nine hundredths of the world’s unrest. The policy of aggression. The Prince owns an immense territory on the very borders of the debatable land between Baratora and Sorusk, a province which is kept in a ferment by Karatieff’s agents with a view to its ultimate annexation in the interests of peace.”

“I see.”

“Now Prince Roel is, I can quite understand, a stumbling-block in the way of our friend’s policy. For, young as he is, he wields great power; he is practically an independent sovereign on his own territory; moreover he has, it is known, imbibed from his father a hatred of Russian aggression. Gorodov has tried to get round him, but with no success.”

“And so he falls back on *force majeure*.”

“It is a bold stroke, and one which I should dearly like to defeat,” Gersdorff said with a touch of professional rivalry and zeal which the other could well understand. “If once we can make sure what has become of Prince Roel his restoration to liberty will follow as a matter of course. It will be the price of our secrecy over the affair. Karatieff cannot afford to stand convicted to-day of such mediæval tactics.”

“No, clearly.”

“There is bound to be a storm of some sort,” Gersdorff proceeded. “Karatieff no doubt is prepared for that, and the only question which he has to calculate is the degree of its severity. It is already breaking out in Prince Roel’s own country. Urgent representations have already reached this Bureau; the poor fellow’s mother has given me a painful hour this morning. There is much talk of vengeance if a hair of his head is injured. The Magyars are a dangerous race when roused, but what can they do against Karatieff? No; their attitude may be heroic, but it is eminently unpractical. We must play the fox, not the lion. Let me only find out what has actually become of the Prince, and I will engage to bring Karatieff to his knees. Now, may we count on you, Herr Galabin? I can promise you that the royal gratitude will take a very practical shape, and as for expenses, why, you have *carte blanche*. You know the country and the language, you have courage and *savoir faire*, and I could not choose a better man for what is, I admit, a rather forlorn hope. I don’t want your answer at this moment. We can give you a few hours. It is hardly an affair to be entered upon lightly, although at the same time a too serious frame of mind is to be avoided. Now, will you give me the pleasure of your company at luncheon?”



They went in together to the dining-room. At the door Gersdorff laid his hand on his guest's arm and said quietly, "It will be well perhaps not to allude to this matter before the servants. Experience has taught me the impossibility of being too cautious. We have a saying in our Service, 'Three pairs of ears, one spy.'"

After luncheon they lighted cigars and sat in the bow window looking down on the busy Königstrasse, the principal thoroughfare of the city. The old Minister's casual comments on the details of the moving, thronging life beneath them were shrewd and amusing, and the idle half-hour passed agreeably enough.

"Do you see this man riding up the street towards us on the roan horse?" Gersdorff asked, suddenly breaking off from the general to the particular. "Now there is a fellow who is rather a puzzle to our intelligence department."

"In what way?" Galabin asked, looking curiously at the object of the remark as he drew nearer.

The rider was a dark, well set-up man about thirty-five or forty with something of a Greek cast of countenance. Certainly at a casual glance an undeniably handsome fellow, with a lithe figure and a perfect seat on horseback.

"He is a Count Zarka," Gersdorff answered. "He lives right away on the eastern borders of the country among the mountains, but he is often here, staying sometimes for several weeks together and living in expensive style. Now the curious thing about him is that he seems suddenly and strangely to have become rich—no one knows how. His father, the last Count, was poor, living in a half-ruined castle among the mountains; this man has, we hear, turned the dilapidated old place into an almost palatial residence where he

keeps a certain state. He appeared suddenly a year or two back in society here with a great flourish and all the surroundings of large wealth. Whence does it come? Report says he has been singularly lucky at the gaming-tables; but that would hardly account for more than a temporary state of affluence. Yes,” he continued musingly, “I shall have to find out the real source of the Herr Count’s wealth as soon as we have discovered Prince Roel. Another mission waiting for you, my adventurous young friend. Ah! here he comes back again.”

The sharp ring of the horse’s hoofs sounded on the stones below them; then abruptly ceased. “He is coming in,” Gersdorff exclaimed in some surprise, not unmingled, however, with a certain astute satisfaction. “Now I wonder what he can want here with us.”

Galabin had glanced round in time to see the Count dismount and saunter up the broad steps of the Chancellerie. Presently one of the secretaries came in and told his chief that Count Zarka was anxious to see him for a few moments on an urgent private matter.

“To see me?” Gersdorff repeated.

“No one else, Excellency. The communication the Herr Graf has to make is for your private ear. If your Excellency is engaged——”

“No, no. I will see the Count—in my room. Now,” he observed to Galabin as the secretary left them, “I may, perhaps, be able to find out something of this matter. I have my suspicions of the Herr Graf, and should not be surprised if he comes to hoodwink me. Do me the favour to smoke another cigar here till I can rejoin you. I may be able to set an explicit plan before you.”

With a courtly bow he left the young man and passed through to his private bureau. As he entered, the Count, who was scrutinizing an engraving on the wall, turned sharply. He had the easy vivacious manner of a polished man of the world, and his appearance was prepossessing enough except that the beauty of the face was spoilt by the wolfish expression of the restless eyes.

“To what cause am I indebted for the honour of this visit, Count? What is the important matter you wish to communicate?” Gersdorff never wasted time in preliminary small-talk unless he had an object in such trifling. And here with this man there was none.

“The matter, Excellency, on which I have called to give you certain information,” replied the Count with a self-possession which the experienced reader of men noticed with a certain dubious admiration, “is one to which I fancy the Government will attach great importance. I refer to the mysterious disappearance of Prince Roel.”

“Ah, yes. We shall be glad to have any tangible explanation of that.”

The diplomatic mask was impenetrable, and the sharp eyes saw nothing in the old Minister’s face beyond a calm official interest, courteously inviting him to proceed.

“I should preface such evidence as I can produce,” the Count continued, “by mentioning that during the Prince’s last stay in this city I saw much of him, indeed I may say that we were fairly intimate.”

“A doubtful advantage to the Prince,” was the other’s mental comment, but his visitor detected nothing beyond the slight bow with which the statement was acknowledged.

“During our companionship,” Zarka proceeded, “it came to my knowledge that the Prince had fallen in love, or at least was deeply fascinated by a lady he was in the habit of meeting in society.”

Gersdorff raised his bushy eyebrows in quiet surprise. “You know the lady’s name?”

The Count gave an evasive shrug. “Only so far as a guess will serve. The Prince gave me none of his confidence on the subject, and my knowledge was gathered simply from observation.”

“The man is lying,” Gersdorff said to himself. Then aloud, “Your observation, Count, surely did not stop short of the lady’s identity?”

“I must repeat I have no positive information on that point,” Zarka maintained with a smile that rather gave the lie to his words. “The Prince was most reserved and secretive in the matter, and I could not pretend to do more than hazard the merest guess as to the lady.”

Gersdorff bowed as forbearing to press the question. “Possibly the point is not essential,” he said. “I will not interrupt you.”

“That, however, the poor Prince was greatly smitten,” Zarka continued with a fluency which seemed to his hearer the result of preparation, “was clear to me. From a young man of high spirits he became gloomy, melancholy, with intervals of unnatural excitement. The usual signs of a certain state of mind.”

Gersdorff nodded him on in more curiosity than the other suspected.

Zarka paused for a moment before proceeding, as, having completed the preamble, he came to the real point of his communication.

“In my mind there is no doubt,” he said slowly, giving weight to his words, “that the Prince’s disappearance is directly due to the failure of his love affair.”

The Minister’s face assumed a look of bland inquiry.

“Indeed? That is a strong assertion, Count. You have proof?”

Zarka smiled, and his smile strengthened the other’s dislike.

“Proof absolute, to my mind. Documentary evidence.” He took out a gold-bound letter-case emblazoned with an heraldic device. “A tangible clue which I have felt it my duty to hand to your Excellency,” he said, as with deliberation he opened the case, took out a paper and carefully unfolded it. “You know Prince Roel’s handwriting?”

“Personally, no. But that is easily proved.”

“I knew it well,” Zarka returned. “And there without the suspicion of a doubt is a specimen of it.”

He rose as he spoke and handed the paper to Gersdorff. It contained only a few words, and the Minister read them, half aloud.

““I send you herewith two bunches of roses, white and red. The white signify love and life: the red hate and death. Those which you will wear to-night must decide my fate. R.””

Gersdorff turned the paper, and finding the other side blank, turned it back slowly and read the words over again. Then he laid the paper down on the desk before him, and looked up inquiringly at Zarka.

“The paper tells its own story, does it not?” the Count said in reply to the look.

“To a certain point, yes. May I ask how you came by it?”

“From the Prince’s servant who found it in the pocket of his master’s smoking-jacket,” Zarka answered readily.

“And he brought it to you?”

“To me as a friend of his master’s. It is evidently a blotted draft which the Prince intended to destroy. You notice, Excellency, the ink is spilt on it?”

Gersdorff nodded. “I do not know that this proves very much,” he observed doubtfully.

The Count drew back his lips, showing his teeth in a characteristic but utterly mirthless smile. “Not of itself, Excellency. But I should say that if it were known that a certain lady to whom the flowers were sent wore the red roses, why then——” he finished the sentence by an expressive shrug.

Perhaps had Count Zarka been able to read the significance of the look which the old diplomatist’s keen eyes fixed on him he might not have been quite so glib. But clever man as a glance would recognize the Count to be, he was here, perhaps, a little too anxious to appear quite fluent and at his ease.

“Quite so, Count,” Gersdorff said, almost coldly. “You can give me the lady’s name or not, as you please. If not, no doubt we can find it out for ourselves. It is merely a question of saving the Bureau trouble.”

Zarka affected to hesitate, then to make up his mind.

“It is my desire,” he said, with a bow, “to be of every service to your Excellency. So I must break what was my first resolve, namely that no lady’s name should pass my lips in connexion with the affair. You are welcome to know my suspicion so far as it goes. I can at least tell you the name of the lady who wore red roses at the Margravine von Reuspach’s ball the night before Prince Roel disappeared. Your Excellency may possibly be acquainted with General Hainfeld?”

He paused, with lips drawn back and his glittering eyes fixed on Gersdorff, awaiting his answer.

“I have met the General. Has he a daughter?” the Minister answered doubtfully.

“A step-daughter, Fräulein Philippa Carlstein.” He spoke the name with a curious staccato intonation.

“Oh,” Gersdorff made a mental note of it. Then he waited, his intuition telling that the Count had something to add.

“The General and Fräulein Carlstein,” Zarka proceeded when he found the other did not seem inclined to question him further, “have left the city, I hear, for Switzerland and Paris. That is all the information I have to give, Excellency. You must take it for what it is worth; but I must say it seems to me significant.”

Gersdorff rose.

“Quite so, Count,” he said curtly, as ending the interview; “we will look into the matter——”

But his visitor did not depart without a flourish. “I trust, Excellency, you will consider that what you have done me the honour to allow me to communicate has been a sufficient excuse for taking up so much of your valuable time.”

“Certainly,” Gersdorff answered a little stiffly; “I am obliged to you for your information; your theory of this unfortunate young fellow’s disappearance may be worth following up. You will leave the paper with me? Good-day.”

The Count could only grin again, bow, and take his leave.

Gersdorff returned to Galabin, who rose and looked inquiringly at his face, which, however, from habitual diplomatic schooling, told nothing.

“A lucky visit for us,” Gersdorff said, resuming his seat by the window. “I fancy it has at least narrowed the field of your proposed search, my young friend. For unless I am greatly mistaken the man who is there,” he nodded down towards the street, “mounting his horse with such swagger knows as much as anybody of Prince Roel’s disappearance.”

“He came to tell you so?”

The old diplomat smiled. “He came to throw dust in my eyes. How foolish men are!” he exclaimed reflectively. “When will they learn to hold their tongues? A false scent is very well if only you are dealing with people stupid enough to follow it. Otherwise it is



simply a negative clue, since we know the object we are hunting has not gone that way. Now, Herr Galabin,” he continued, resuming his more business-like manner, “in the interests of our State I want you to spend a holiday in the great forest at the foot of the Carpathians.”

He touched a bell. “Ask Herr Botheim to come to me,” he said to the man who answered it.

In a few moments Herr Botheim made his appearance, a small, astute-looking man, with an intensely secretive manner. He was the head of the intelligence department.

“Botheim, how long has Count Zarka been in the city?”

“Since 7.40 this morning only, Excellency. He left the city eight days ago presumably for Rozsnyo.”

“Ah, Rozsnyo. Yes? Was his departure seen?”

“No, Excellency. It appears to have been sudden and secret. We only heard of his departure some hours afterwards. There seemed no reason for suspecting——”

“No, no, my good Botheim,” Gersdorff interrupted; “there is no blame attached to your department, but I fancy we have hardly studied the Count closely enough.”

Botheim could only give a shrug.

“I do not blame you,” the Minister proceeded; “we have hitherto looked upon him, politically, as a mysterious nonentity. But now we may have reason to change our views. You have, of course, information about the Count’s home, the Schloss Rozsnyo? Its situation, I mean, and so forth?”

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