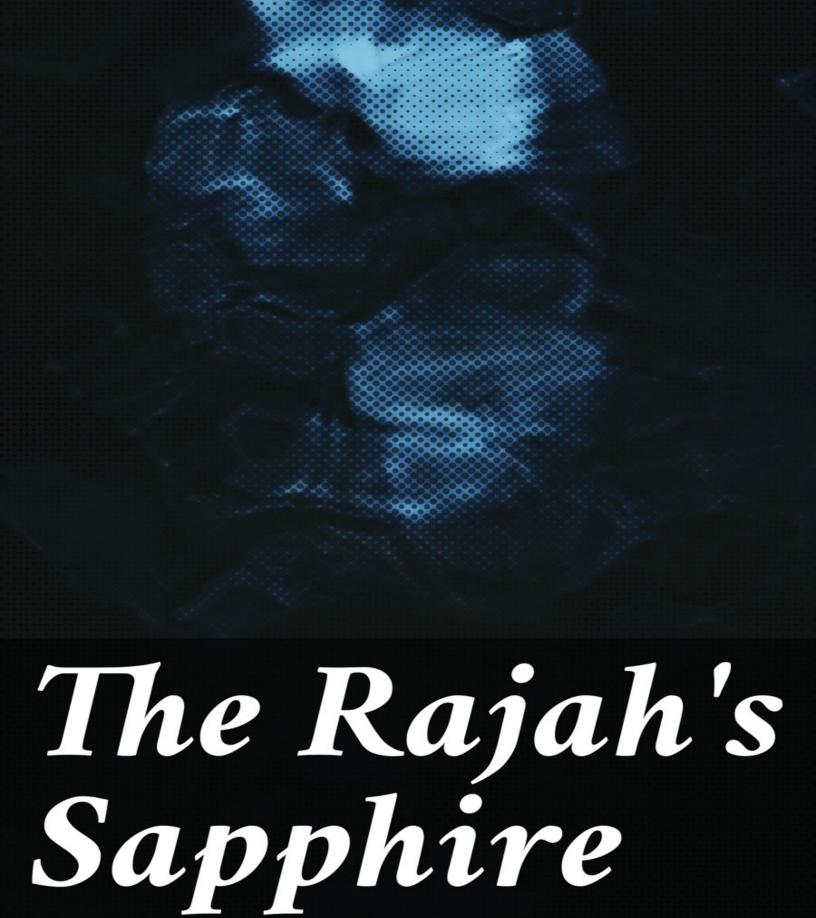
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The Rajah's Sapphire



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CHAPTER I.

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The Markgraf Stefan von Reutlingen, that rising son of the corps diplomatique, was not in the best of spirits. He felt as if he lacked part of himself, like an animal whose tail has been decapitated; for, while his handsome, knit body was in close attendance on the Kaiser at the Zeughaus, in Berlin, on the particular Sunday afternoon in question, the most important organ of that same handsome body was away truant in a certain western English county. Now, a frame without a heart is like an egg without salt; and thus it was that the Kaiser frowned more than once during the day to find his brilliant protege insipid to his taste, wearing an absent look, and giving spiritless answers to the spirited questions of his volcanic sovereign.

It was the 27th of January, in this year of grace 1895, and so, of course, the birthday of Wilhelm. Stefan's first task for the day had been to attend in the train of his young master at the Palast-kapelle to hear divine service. The soldier-emperor is nothing if not devout, and the days wound up with wine-libations to Mars are usually begun by him with the payment of his respects to the Nazarene carpenter. Stefan, too, like most sons of noble, old German races, had a tincture of a certain haughty piety in his composition. He rose early, full of the great day and all its details, sighed the name of a certain Ada Macdonald, called down with genuine feeling a blessing on the turbulent head of his young master, and, having ensconced his feet in the fur of a pair of wrought slippers and his back in the fur of a dressing-gown

of scarlet velvet, sat down to the white napery and the silver service of a dainty private breakfast.

Fritz, the trusty, his right-hand man, the only living being who could satisfactorily wax the sweeping, diplomatic semicircles of the young Markgraf's radiant moustache, placed gingerly by his right hand the privileged letters of the morning, and it was the very first of these which the Markgraf opened that sealed the fate of his good spirits for the rest of that day. Stefan had a trick of tapping lightly with his knuckles on the nearest convenient surface in moments of high impatience, and for a full quarter of an hour after reading this letter he gazed vaguely before him, and the table sounded forth a gentle, mechanical tattoo under his tapping hand. The note was short, and ran:

"Dearest,—All is fixed. The ball will be, after all, on the 6th. and you are going to be there. Do not tell me about diplomacy, do not tell me about your too absurd, little Kaiser! If trifles such as these keep you from me at a time when I specially require, and demand, your presence—what am I to think? No, no, you must come. It will be no ball to your Ada if you are not there; I think you appreciate the compliment. And there is danger in your absence, mon ami, at a function such as that. Can you not conceive how poor little me will be nibbled at, fished for, hunted like a stag by the hunters? And how can I save myself? Not mine the fault if the rats prefer Gorgonzola to Cheshire. I did not make the golden vermilion flashings which lure the fishers to linger above my waters. If my hoofs are slender, and the coating of my haunches sleek, I am no more responsible for that than I am for the fact that the hunters persist in preferring sleek and slender quarry. Come, come, and rescue me. And here is some news for you which should spur you: I have had another, my dear; yes, yet another. Think of it! Is this the twenty-ninth or the thirtieth? I forget. I have them all noted down in my diary with the records of my new gowns. And only guess from whom this last comes? Oh, it fills the cup of your Ada's bitterness to the brim! From whom but from the 'High-flyer.' Know you in the Fatherland the fame and prowess of that knight? The 'High-flyer,' my dear. He went down upon one of his little nervous knees and implored me to be his! Art jealous? Don't! Still, I assure you, he did it very prettily, and I was far from really degoute. The man has a certain charm, though he is undoubtedly madder than any March hare that ever scampered over a hill. He called me the Virgin Mary: said that then, for the first time in his life, he bent the knee before the unsullied soul of a virgin. And when I recommended him to rise from his tooabsurd position he seemed to forget all about the matter at once, and coolly commenced to talk of—something else. Not one single word of it all did that man really mean! He is simply the creature of sheer, headlong, momentary impulse, and rather a ruffian into the bargain. And yet I like him and, oh, he is so rich! He is to be at the ball, if he can remember so small a matter for so long a time as a week.

"I am now staying at Lord Darley's, in Somersetshire; but shall be in London with the St. John-Heygates in two days: we return west together for the ball. I shall meet you in London without fail, remember. "Yours, yours!

"ADA."

"P.S.—I have, or had, something—a favor—to ask you. Dare I? But no, I am superstitious—and I love you! No, no. And yet I dearly wish it, too."

The Markgraf Stefan's immediate reply to this letter was the tattoo with his knuckles on the table. He frowned, he ran his fingers through his hair, he made slender as his toothpick the ends of his moustache. "And—who—the devil." he slowly asked himself, "is the High-flyer?" The one thing he disliked in that perfection, his beloved, was a certain too high respect he had noticed in her for wealth—wealth for wealth's sake. Ada Macdonald "loved" him, and he was not rich: she did not love the High-flyer, but she loved money, and the High-flyer had what she loved. Small things trouble the lover, and Stefan was an intense member of that sect. "Donner and Blitz!"—he was still old-fashioned Teuton enough to swear by the elements in his hour of oaths—"who —the devil—is the High-flyer?" And with this second repetition of the question, a certain reputation flashed across his memory. "Ralloner, perhaps?" Yes, surely, that must be the man who had received this nickname in England; Ralloner, the incarnate whirlwind, that genius of the hurricane, the typhoon of flesh. The rumor of him had Europe, the dollar-compeller, the madcap, the dispenser of palaces, the keeper of zenanas whose inmates were countesses and prima donnas. And this ghoul had been on a knee before his betrothed—a dangerous man, not