

DESTINY'S DAUGHTER

PART VI

CAPTAIN DOMMELIER turned on Massarene.

"It is the Director's order that we take Madame to the Frontier?"

"His last order," Massarene nodded. "He gave it as Prince of Tashno — not as the Director. He lies in his hunting lodge at Wanczy — as Prince of Tashno. As Prince of Tashno — he has dissolved the Party by Royal command. But it will do no good. Nothing will now. They ran through the streets of Domm-Stache like stuck sheep — stuck sheep — the Stanislawski Brigade," he said. "These mountain people never cared what side they fought on as long as they fought."

"It was the Students at Domm-Stache who blew the bridge — the same Students who started the disorder at St. Beloise. They let the point go through Domm-Stache and the support battalion, then they blew the bridge and cut the column in half and they opened fire on us from the hills and every window. The Prince rallied two companies — he and I were with the support battalion after we contacted the Stanislawski Brigade — and we fought a rear guard action up into the hills. They got our own mountain guns into action against us."

"And now what will they do? They'll march on Domm and fight Zu Stu's Death Guards — and destroy each other. It is all so hopeless to change these mountain people. They know only one thing, loyalty to the House of Tashno, which the Party killed in '26 — through half-truths and the madness of Prince Henry — and a love of fighting for fighting's sake. It is awful to see a fine brigade die," he whispered.

Captain Dommel's hands were trembling. He poured more brandy for Massarene as he held up his glass. For a moment Massarene came back into himself. "And now I know only one thing. I have brought you his orders. Take the woman to the Frontier, Dommelier, and see her across. I am going back to Wanczy to His Royal Highness. My hand is gone — for him — clipped off with shrapnel. So shall my heart be."

"I have never trusted the Party. The blood in these mountains is too old for new ideas. New ideas allow of ambition. It is death. Only one thing is left to us: 'For St. Geneve and the Mountains!' The Hohenzollens turned tail, the Hapsburgs were thrown out, the Bourbons died on the vine of Spain; but Tashno is in the hearts of decent people, simple people, mountain people." He stood up.

Captain Dommelier faced them. "His Royal Highness the Prince of Tecklenburg-Lechnenstein-Tashno lies wounded at Wanczy. He has been defeated in the field. He has dissolved the Party. Domm is taken. Whom do you serve?"

They stared at him.

The cadet-sergeant

stepped forward and clicked his heels. With a quick whip of his hand, he tore the Party insignia from his arm. "I serve Tashno, sir — 'For St. Geneve and the Mountains.'" Before his words could echo through the great hall of Muncaszy, they had all torn off their Party brassards and flung them to the stone flagging. "Tashno! For St. Geneve and the Mountains!"

"Mount the escort," Dommelier snapped.

Lathrop looked at Josephine and stepped down to take her arm in his strong fingers.

"This is the last chance, Josephine," he whispered. "Think it out, girl — and whatever you decide, I'll do. I can get you out. It is only twenty kilometers through the mountains to the frontier —"

She looked up at the oaken quoins of the Great Hall — at the arms of the Sarolis over the fireplace. "Yesterday," she said quietly, "I was Josephine Wayne — so long ago that I can't remember, for I have long in these mountains for centuries, since then." She turned to him and laughed suddenly: "Lathrop — I belong here. I shall go to Wanczy too."

Wanczy lies on a shoulder of the Paagëhorn thirty miles from Muncaszy. Prince Oscar's father built it in 1790 for his hunting. He hunted until his ninetieth year and died at Wanczy. It is walled round with battlemented granite and built strongly against the northern winds of winter. There is a tiny hamlet below the walls, the Village of Wanczy, of eighteen souls, a priest and the hereditary Sept of Royal Huntsmen.

They tiptoed over to the great bed and stood looking down at Sergei

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Pas Menteen saw them bringing Prince Sergei up the mountain road to Wanczy. He had eyes that saw by night. Lieutenant Wort of the Stanislawski Brigade walked ahead, with his pistol drawn, after they left the staff car when the road became too narrow. Captain Dracu, who was not wounded, carried the head of Sergei's stretcher, and First Class Sergeant of Machine Guns Borcos the foot. Colonel Massarene, supported by the chauffeur of the car, brought up the rear, and Pas Menteen saw them all a half kilometer away, through the darkness. He called his father, Enzo Menteen, the Royal Huntsman. His father called the Ruonen, the Saard, the Geve and the Waane Huntsmen.

"There has been a battle," he said simply.

The women were sent into the Lodge of Wanczy to make the fires, to open the rooms, to heat water, to prepare a meal. The Good Father Darselis came. The entrance gates were flung wide and pine torches placed in the brackets. The young men went down to help with the litter. The Prince Sergei arrived at Wanczy and the old Royal St. Geneve Standard went up into the darkness of the staff head to fly night and day while he remained.

He was conscious when he arrived, but his mind was not a steady machine. They carried him to the Royal Chamber and brought him brandy and for a moment his mind came back. He lay on the great bed of his fathers', his

head turned sideways, staring at the fire. Massarene sat at the foot, watching him with tears of fatigue and of pain and of heartbreak just behind his eyes.

"Massarene," Sergei said, "go to Muncaszy Schloss and have Captain Dommelier escort Miss Wayne across the Frontier. She must get free."

"It is done —"

"You may say 'Sire,' Massarene. My country is through with my services as Director. I revert to private life. I shall die as the Prince Sergei of Tashno — as I was born. Go at once. It is my last order."

To Menteen the Huntsman, who stood waiting by the fireside, Sergei smiled. "Enzo Menteen you grow old — and I die. But it is pleasant to be here with your oldness, before I die. I know what you want; you want the women to see me —"

"Sire — if it please you. There is no wound in youth that the women cannot heal. Only old men die of wounds. The women of Wanczy know more of wounds than the men who are called doctors. It is their heredity — from the hunting. How they know, no one knows. But the women know."

"Enzo Menteen — have in the women."

The women came and the women stripped him to his wounds. It is said in Vienna that those women knew the need of cleanliness before Pasteur taught it. Herr Stahlheim mentions the Wanczy hunting women in his "Psychopathia."

They washed him. They examined him. They worked over him with a grave efficiency, for Geta Roone, who was the oldest and the wisest of them, looked at his eyes and said, "He will die before the sun touches the pine tops in the Valley of the Paagëhorn — but if he lives until it touches them, he will live."

Sergei heard that, but he spoke not, until they had finished and had sent Heda Saard out to watch for the sun that was hours away behind the world.

Then he said, "Geta Roone, if I die I die in my fathers' bed, in the livery of my fathers', and I will have the Good Father to pray in the old ways of prayer."

They draped the great, high bed with the Royal St. Geneve Standard and laid him upon it. From the closets they brought him the gold-striped patrol trousers of the regiment he had been trained in, the Royal Preobregan Regiment. They were old and the gold was tarnished with hanging there many years but they dusted them and put them on him, for it is believed in the Mountains that to lie in sickness in one's clothing as if one is unable to rise at any minute, is in itself a resistance to death.

They put patent leather half-Wellingtons on his feet. They brought him his buff Preobregan tunic with his

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