

III.

Alarms and Excursions.

It was a serious annoyance to the government of Galicia that the contents of Colonel Koupets' despatches—forwarded from Adoshaf by special runners—could not have been suppressed a fortnight before their receipt. The facts, reiterated with constantly accelerated wealth of detail, were in every newspaper, and the official dementis grew weaker and weaker. The embassies alone remained officially ignorant of the most startling development of the century. Koupets had blundered into a peaceful powder factory with a Roman candle in full blast.

When he last left Galicia, the republican government had been extremely popular, and Adoshaf had barely been discovered. During his enforced retirement from clubs and tape telegraphs, the said government had been found out. Singly and collectively, nearly every member of the parliament had robbed the nation wholesale in a way quite apart from the ordinary methods of political graft. It was plain swindling, and its apologists themselves could find no other word for it, but contented themselves with trying to find scapegoats. Several governments fell in quick succession, each being as tainted as its predecessors, the fact becoming more and more conspicuous as its members entered the limelight of office. A great genius—the prince of the thieves—had latterly managed to turn the tables for a moment by unearthing at prodigious cost a most unsavory scandal against the enemies of the republican form of government, who became daily more numerous and powerful. Most fortunately some six dynasties claimed the crown of Galicia, and their interminable struggles kept the republic erect though staggering.

A further complication had arisen with regard to Adoshaf. A great diplomatic victory had been won, and a great war averted; and one of the conditions of peace was the recognition of the Elin valley—Adoshaf is on the Elin, though Koupets had no idea of the fact for months afterwards!—as within the "sphere of influence" of Noibla, the treacherous and hereditary enemy of Galicia.

And here was the government looking out of its governmental windows and seeing the streets ablaze with enthusiasm and ringing with the cry of "Krets Koupets" (Long live Koupets!), while it had not even received the explorer's despatches, and could only wish that he had perished long ago in Central Kainogenogy. It could not even disown Koupets to the ambassador of Noibla. It could only deny that anything had occurred. And at any moment one of the six pretenders might take it into his head to telegraph "Krets Koupets," (Long live Koupets!) to a royalist newspaper, sneak in disguise into Tetulia, and upset the republican apple-cart for a generation.

When the despatches at last arrived, the situation touched boiling point. Royalist deputies insisted on their being read in parliament, and with a mob of about a million people thronging the parliament square, chanting "Krets Koupets!" hour by hour in formidable unison, the government could not refuse.

The house went mad with excitement. Koupets in his elation had been singularly positive and eloquent. "Light of civilization in darkest Kainogenogy," "Slavery abolished," "Fanaticism disarmed," and above all, "The flag of Galicia and glory set up in the metropolis of barbarism."

The government tried to proceed to the order of the day. It was in vain. "Krets Koupets" resounded inside the house as well as outside. The premier of the government that had fallen only a month earlier mounted the

tribune, his vengeance irresistibly in his hand. He compelled the house to silence. He was very sorry, he said, he was above all a man of moderation. He would be the last to injure a friendly nation such as Noibla. But the flag of Galicia had been set up in the market-place of Adoshaf, and where that flag had once floated, who dared pull it down? Not while he lived, or any Gallician worthy of the fatherland.

The government were thunderstruck at this diabolical moderation. Chauvinism they could sneer at; this was unanswerable. They resorted to obstruction. Speaker after speaker mounted the tribune; each exhausted himself in the effort to glorify Koupets and say nothing compromising. These tactics triumphed; the debate stood adjourned. The premier returned to the foreign office with the minister of external affairs—to find what was, in fact, though not in name, an ultimatum from Noibla.

They stood on a crazy pinnacle. Disown Koupets, and they would be lucky if the people did not tear them limb from limb; acknowledge him, and war would follow within forty-eight hours. Dared they fight? They drove to the house of the Minister for the Navy, and pulled him out of bed. The first point of attack would be their great arsenal at Nolout, and the fleet of Noibla lay stripped at Atlam, not a day and a half away.

Was everything ready down to the last gaiter button?

The minister dared not give an official reply. Instead, he had the line cleared, and went to Nolout on a light engine.

An hour's inspection told him everything. There was no shortage of gaiter buttons, but of the more serious munitions of war there was a most surprising dearth. There was no ammunition for the heavy guns. There were no mines. There was not ten per cent. of the shell that should have been. There were insufficient torpedoes to put half the craft in the harbor on a war footing. Miracles apart, Nolout must fall within three days of a declaration of war. The minister's telegram to his colleague was terse Gallician for "peace at any price."

He remained in Nolout to organize courts-martial on an unprecedented scale, and to escape the fury of the Tetulian mob.

With the fate of the government we have no concern; with the attitude of Balustan we have. The ambassador of that country represented to the foreign minister that a climb-down so ignominious on the part of an ally was a blow to the prestige of his own country.

"My dear ambassador," said the minister in a temper unrestrained by any fear of consequences, since in any case he must fall that day, and for ever, "we can't fight Noibla without ships, and from all I learn the only wonder is that our chaps didn't try to sell the navy as a going concern."

The ambassador, expressing a few apt words of polite sympathy, retired, and sent his most confidential attaché with despatches to the Khan. It might be as well, he opined with deference, to take stock at the arsenal of Sebastian.

The Khan acted on his advice, and found the words of one of the minor prophets about the locust and the grasshopper and the palmer-worm and the canker-worm to be strictly applicable to the situation at Sebastian. The place was a husk; there were not a week's munitions in it.

The Khan ordered the arrest of every officer above the rank of commander. They were put in cells under sentries, furnished with writing materials, and informed that doubtless they would furnish a perfectly satisfactory ex-