

Faced with dwindling income from their farms, the Grenville family has to change from being landed gentry to company owners. Led by young John, heir to the ancient earldom of Felton, the task is difficult, especially when having to deal not only with the world of commerce, but with thieves and rogues in their midst as well.

And when John Grenville falls in love with his cousin's fiancée, the fiery Saxon Princess Sabine of Witzenburg, his life only becomes more complicated.

As hatred, doomed love, financial intrigue and diplomatic scheming all combine in the turbulent times of the late nineteenth century, the action moves from England to Chile, to Germany and to Africa, reaching its thrilling climax in the wild goldfields of Johannesburg and pious streets of Pretoria.

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VIENNA DAYS

FAMILY FORTUNES

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Retained Books
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PMB 363, Suite 100
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Selection
from
Chapter 2

It will be a good union, thought Prince Karl Altendorf of Witzenburg the next day. His family's roots went back to Charlemagne, further back than most families, and much further even than the Hohenzollerns, the Kaiser's family. And Sabine, the light of his life, would be marrying a Prussian Junker, one the most powerful families in Germany, and neighbors of the great Bismarck. Altogether, a good match. He looked at his eldest daughter fondly.

"Not long now, Sabi," he comforted her as the carriage swayed perilously around a sharp bend in the road. From the carriage behind, he heard shouts and shrieks.

"See what is happening back there," his wife ordered.

The Prince stuck his head out of the window, and stared in horror at the sight that met his eyes.

"Rudi," he bellowed, "Where is your coach driver?"

His nephew cupped a hand over his ear. "What, Uncle?" he called. "This road is too dreadful, and this old cart too rickety; I cannot hear you."

"The confounded young whelp," the Prince fumed as he sat back down on the seat. "Always doing something just for the thrill of it."

"Rudi is driving the coach?" his wife, Princess Brigitte, asked in alarm.

"With two of our daughters inside," the Prince muttered.

"Has he ever driven a coach before?"

"Not to my knowledge, no," the Prince told her. "But it doesn't matter – here we are," he said with relief as they turned into Eikewald's long driveway.

As the four coaches bearing the royal family and their retinue of servants pulled into the front courtyard, the front door opened, and Baron Ordenburg, his wife, son and two other young people came down the stairs to meet them.

All was confusion as the two families surged together with cries of greeting, breathless introductions and much bowing, hugging and handshaking. There was also a rush of servants, who pulled the trunks and cases off the two coaches, carrying them indoors to their appointed rooms to be unpacked.

Caroline thought that Sabine's cousin Count Rudi von Kastell was terribly handsome. His brown eyes shone with mischief; his hair was unfashionably long, flopping over his face as he spoke, although his clothes were stylish to the point of foppishness. He was flushed with excitement, and his lips were dry, forcing him to lick them often.

"And how was that for a coach ride?" he demanded of his erstwhile passengers, who burst into shrieks of mock dismay.

"He nearly killed us!" came from Isabella von Altendorf, who was a small, dark girl of sixteen.

"My heart will surely burst from shock! He is a maniac!" exclaimed Clara, who looked absurdly like Isabella's twin, despite being a year younger.

The Prince held up his hand for silence. "And where," he asked frostily, "is the former coach driver? I trust, at least, you did not shoot him and leave his body at the side of the road."

"Oh no, I gave him some money at the last town and told him we'd send someone to collect him in a day or so," Rudi said carelessly, and he wiped his brow on his sleeve.

"I'll take care of it and send for him," the Baron soothed, chuckling heartily. "Come, one and all, let us find something to wash the dust from your throats; welcome to Eikewald," and he led them all into the house.

In the confusion of the greetings, John hadn't really had a chance to look at Princess Sabine for any length of time. Now, sitting in the front parlor drinking tea (a custom brought over from England by his aunt), he found that he could barely take his eyes off his cousin's fiancée.

Her face was perfectly shaped in a long oval, and her sparkling blue eyes and lively expression bespoke extreme intelligence and wit. Her thin nose revealed her Frankish ancestry, and her mouth was very expressive; a wide smile with sparkling white teeth showed amusement or delight, a tight *moue* revealed disapproval or agreement, and if someone was making an emphatic point, she had a habit of moving her mouth as a silent echo of their words.

A slender neck led to a pair of white shoulders, amply displayed by her off-the-shoulder afternoon dress, so unusual in Britain, where a woman would only wear such a style in the evenings.

She was tall, nearly as tall as Kaspar, and her hair was a pale blond, pulled into a tight braid. The hairstyle should have made her look more severe, but her animated features made that impossible.

She was sitting next to her betrothed, and Kaspar was ignoring her completely, quite engrossed in lording over her family with condescending statements.

John took a sip of his tea, and as he continued to look at Sabine over the top of the cup, he suddenly realized that she was staring boldly back at him. He felt himself flush a little, whereupon she gave him an enigmatic smile and looked away. He felt embarrassed that she had caught him in his appraisal, and to cover up his confusion, he started up a conversation with his uncle about farming and estate management.

All the while he was speaking, however, he was conscious of Sabine's gaze on him, and his stomach tightened into a hard knot.



The next day at breakfast, Kaspar turned to John and said, "I have bought a new rifle. Would you care to test it out with me?"

John glanced quickly over at his uncle, but Baron Ordenburg was most engrossed in cutting a piece of ham on his plate. From the other end of the long table, however, he heard a stifled giggle from his aunt, and he almost laughed himself.

He looked back at Kaspar. "Most certainly. What kind of rifle is it?"

"It is one of our newest Mausers," his cousin said, "a gun which, Cousin, I think you will find quite superior to your British Army's one."

John marveled at Kaspar's penchant for turning even the simplest conversation into an international affair of honor.

"It must be a fine rifle, then," he said politely, refusing to take the bait. But then his impish sense of humor inserted itself. "Have you noted an improvement in your shooting skills since you acquired it?" and was rewarded by a huge paroxysm of suppressed laughter, inadequately disguised as coughing, from the Baron.

"I am —" (cough) "— most certain —" (cough) "— that his skill has improved since he acquired this fine example of —" (cough) "— German workmanship," the Baron spluttered, amid the stifled giggles from the ladies.

It *was* a fine rifle, though, John decided, when he had a chance to look at it closely. The entire house party had trooped out into the back pasture, about a hundred yards from the house. Servants had set out chairs, and the ladies sat under parasols to protect their skins from the warm sun of

early autumn. Other servants had set up a dozen empty wine bottles as targets, on a long trestle table some eighty yards from the shooters.

The Baron had brought out a telescope to judge the fall of shot, and was resting it on a tall stool in front of his chair.

Kaspar was fussing about the rifle, showing John how it worked, and pouring out all sorts of information about it.

"This is the Model 71 carbine, which is issued to all our dragoons, hussars and, of course, to our Uhlan lancers," he said. "It has a shorter barrel than the standard *infanterie* rifle, only 51cm, and it uses the 11mm cartridge."

John's head was spinning at all the information, which he found quite useless. He decided to get the whole thing going, as much to shut Kaspar up as anything else.

"Why don't you take a few shots first, Kaspar?" he suggested mildly. "That way I can judge the recoil and the bullet drop for myself."

Kaspar looked at him cunningly. "The best way to 'judge recoil', Cousin, is to try out the rifle."

John shrugged. "Capital. Show me again how you load it with that bolt action, please?" and he took the rifle and a cartridge from Kaspar's grasp as soon as the demonstration was over. "Bottle on the left," he said, calling his target.

He stood with the loaded rifle, and assumed the classic shooter's standing position, his left elbow tucked up hard against his ribs, the stock tucked firmly into his right shoulder. He looked down at the sights, and the front sight seemed magically to focus on the wine bottle on the extreme left of the table downrange. He exhaled half a breath, then stood stock still. Gently, he squeezed the trigger.

"*Blitzen!*" came the exclamation from the Baron. "The shot went about a couple of centimeters high, but dead center!"

An inch over, thought John. Then he looked down at the back sight, and saw that it was set at 100 meters. *Ah*, he realized, *I didn't allow for the shorter range*. He loaded the next round into the breech, and this time, took aim for the very bottom of the bottle, right where it rested on the table.

The roar of the gun and the sound of shattering glass came almost simultaneously.

The group of spectators burst into delighted applause at the feat. John turned, and made an ironic half bow in their direction. Then he turned, and managed to get his remaining five bottles with only six shots.

He grinned at Kaspar. "One sighting shot, and then six bottles with seven shots, Cousin," he said. "Should be an easy one to beat."

He was rewarded with a dreadful scowl from Kaspar, and the young German snatched the rifle from him. "I need no 'sighting shots' with this rifle," he muttered sulkily.

"Aha!" exclaimed the Baron. "Then to win, Kaspar, seven out of seven is your goal."

John walked the few paces back towards the spectators, and found that the only vacant chair was between his sister and Princess Sabine.

He bowed to both ladies, and sat down, mopping his brow with his handkerchief, then taking a sip of cold wine from the glass offered to him by a servant.

"Bless my soul, Johnny," Caroline said admiringly, "I knew you were a good shot, but I didn't know you were *that* good."

"And with a strange weapon, too," came Sabine's compliment.

"Thankee, thankee," John said, embarrassed at the praise. "Let's see if old Kaspar can do better."

To his immense surprise, Sabine leaned over and whispered in his ear, "I hope he misses all of them."

John tried not to start at the comment, and looked around to see if anyone else had noticed her action. But everyone was concentrating on watching Kaspar, who had finished loading the rifle and was now preparing to take his first shot.

Which he missed. And to John's secret (and Sabine's not-so-secret) delight, Kaspar managed only to hit one wine bottle out of the next five shots. As Kaspar was about to take his last shot, John looked over at Sabine, and smiled. Her response was a tiny wink, and he felt his stomach churn at the intimacy of the gesture.

Kaspar missed his last shot, swore violently, threw the rifle down on the grass, and stalked back up to the house without saying a word to anyone.

There was a moment's silence; and then the entire company exploded with laughter, the Baron's bellow loudest of all.

