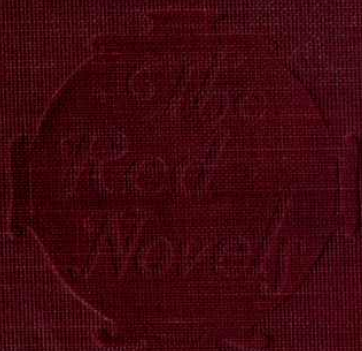
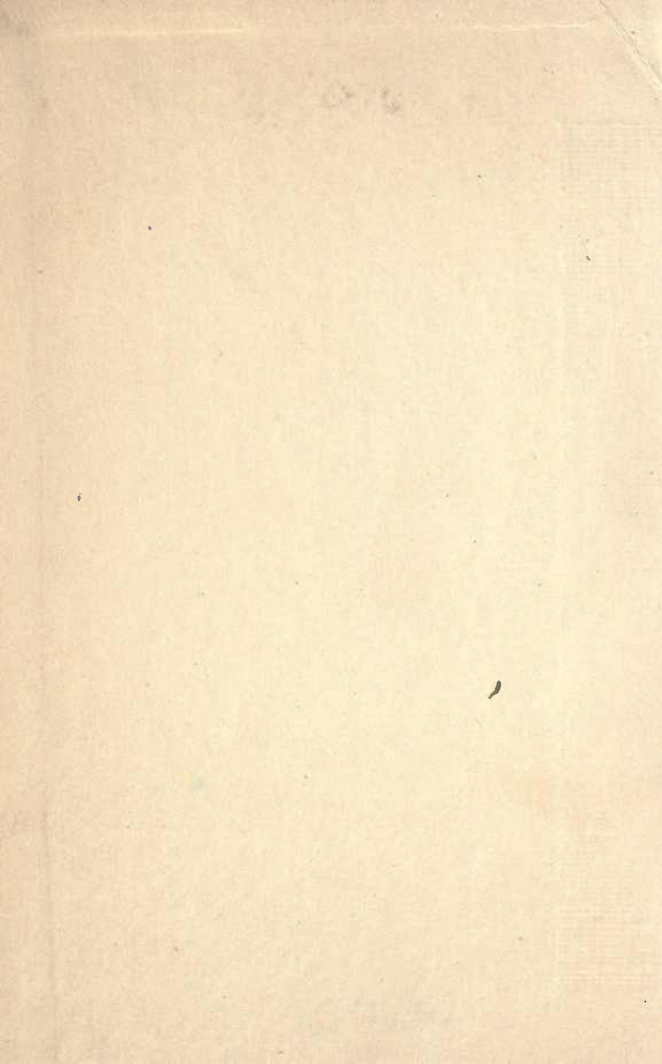


The
BINDWEED



NELLIE K. BLISSETT



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THE BINDWEED







"After the Play."

THE BINDWEED

A Romantic Novel
concerning the late Queen of Servia

BY

NELLIE K. BLISSETT

AUTHOR OF "FROM THE UNSOUNDED SEA" AND
"MOST FAMOUS LOBA"



1904

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E. MANN VYNNE

*Let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have depos'd,
Some poison'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd,
All murder'd.*

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE BINDWEED

CHAPTER I

LIANE ran up the stairs singing.

The stairs were long and steep, in one of those high old houses that overhang the two rushing rivers—one from the East, one from the West—which, mingling, rush together for a while in the city where East and West mingle strangely on the frontier of a world of dreams. Below, the two rivers flow quietly side by side; above, gray and red roofs and jutting, perilous windows make a picturesque confusion of color and form, and black-haired, wild-eyed women look out across the hurrying waters, calling to each other from house to house and balcony to balcony in a strange tongue.

The house where Liane lived was a little more tumble-down than its fellows, a little more gray and red and weather-beaten, a little more inclined to let in the rain in winter, and the sun in summer; but in Salitza all houses do this more or less. It had balconies looking across the river, and Liane had grown a great pink rose in a broken pot on that smallest, highest balcony of all where the poor Markovitch family had their tiny flat under the red tiles—fierce old Stepan,

and mischievous Pavlo, the eldest boy, and little Mikhail, the youngest, and Liane herself, who spent her days in the big French shop on the Boulevard Mikhail II, called poetically—and perhaps not without a certain amount of truth—the “Paradis des Dames.” Liane was young and pretty and miraculously quick of finger and eye, with something of the unerring, instinctive taste of her French mother, whom Stepan Markovitch had married from the very same establishment nearly twenty years ago.

The fierce old corporal of Royal Guards, with his long mustache and martial air and the very small pension, not too regularly paid, which was his reward for years of service to an exacting master, lounging one day in the sun on the Boulevard Mikhail II, had seen the little French girl go tripping down the street and made up his mind with a promptitude characteristic of his race. Next day the stout Parisian who kept the shop received a visitor who frightened her terribly until she made out his errand. Then she sent for little Elise Caron and presented to her a suitor whose very appearance would have sent most girls of her age and upbringing into hysterics. But little Elise Caron, daughter of the most frivolous, if also the most tragic, city in the world, felt the fascination of the savage, the unexplored, the unknown. Perhaps she had in her, developed in an unusual degree, that passion for experiment, for exploration, which all women have who are gifted with any imagination at all. She married Stepan

Markovitch, corporal—retired—of the Guard, and went to live in the high house over the river, and the Boulevard Mikhail II knew her no more.

It was a strange marriage enough, this union of the East and the West, of two people who could hardly speak the same tongue without making a hundred mistakes; perhaps for that reason it succeeded as many marriages do not which are entered into under apparently much more favorable circumstances. Elise never regretted the day on which old Stepan saw her running down the street. She died when her third child was born, leaving Stepan inconsolable; and Liane, gay and quick as herself, went to the "Paradis des Dames" in her place.

Liane was a favorite in the shop. If a more than usually captious customer was to be charmed or cajoled, it was Liane who was called for to do it; if a bow would not come right, or a stupid apprentice had blundered, it was Liane who was in request to repair the error; if a hat had to be sent home in a hurry, it was Liane who could be trusted to run all the way and not linger to gossip with a friend. To Liane fell, in consequence, many of the little privileges of her kind—a few yards of ribbon here, a shop-soiled blouse there, a hat which would not sell but which looked charming set off by Liane's dark eyes and rosy cheeks—trifles which make the happiness of such unimportant little probationers of fortune, and make, sometimes, their fates as well. Perhaps it was in that very hat which

would not sell that a certain rather ugly German in a blouse marked with machine oil and grease saw her running along the Boulevard Mikhail II and lost his soft heart to her at once and for ever, after the sentimental and dashing fashion of his race.

But all this time Liane is waiting on the stairs.

In reality, it took her hardly a moment to dash up them and precipitate herself into the little sitting-room. Pavlo was astride a chair, whistling a wild country dance; little Mikhail was on his knees before the stove making the coffee which their French mother had taught them all to make and love. Pavlo stopped in the middle of his whistling and looked around as his sister came in.

"Late, as usual, mademoiselle," he said in French. "Have you been catching an officer of the Guard for our supper?"

"An officer of the Guard!" She fell on little Mikhail, and with the skill born of long practice, caught up the coffee-pot before it boiled over. "What use should I have for an officer of the Guard, silly boy?"

"You might marry him, and get him to make Mikhail and me generals," suggested Pavlo practically. "Then we could all live in a big house on the Boulevard Valitzine and have meat all the year around and fish on Sundays. Liane, go out at once and catch that officer of the Guard!"

"I am going to have my supper first," she laughed. "Afterwards we will see about it."

Little Mikhail fell back on the rug, and looked up reproachfully at his brother.

"Liane is going to marry Fritz, and not a horrid, stuck-up officer with spurs and waxed mustaches," he announced.

Liane turned round with the coffee-pot in her hand.

"Fritz!" she flashed. "Fritz! Do you think I am going to do anything so foolish? Why, Fritz hasn't a penny in the world, and never will have."

"Wrong, mademoiselle. Fritz has just been made foreman of the works down the river—the new ones. Oh, Fritz is not a *parti* to be sneered at now, I can tell you. Fritz is a young man with a future, and if you are wise you will think twice before you refuse him. And he's about the best fellow in Salitza," added Pavlo with sturdy loyalty.

"Fritz is a dear," chimed in little Mikhail from his corner, whither he had retired to nurse the cat.

"And I'm to marry him because you and Mikhail are silly about him!" Liane cried. "Do you think I am so ugly I couldn't find anyone else?"

"Vain little girl!" mocked Pavlo. "I never said you were not quite pretty enough to marry a king, did I?"

Liane laughed, soothed by the implied compliment.

"I had my fortune told the other day," she said, "and do you know it was just that."

"Just what?" cried Pavlo and Mikhail together.

"Why, that I should marry a king, stupid. There, now take care how you treat me, or when I am queen I shall say 'Off with their heads!' as they do in the fairy-tales, and that will be the end of *you*. Now get up and have supper, and don't be foolish, and afterwards we will go for a walk. Father will not be home till late."

They sat down to supper—cabbage-soup, and coarse bread with no butter. It was a meal at which the poorest of English laborers would have turned up his solid British nose, but they ate it merrily, with simple, familiar little jokes and innocent laughter. The sound of the rushing rivers came up to them from below and a band was playing in a café not far off, and they were young and happy and the coffee was delicious. Also it was summer and they had not a care in the world. What did it matter to them what they had to eat, so long as it was enough to keep them from going hungry?

Long afterwards Liane remembered that supper—Pavlo's fun and little Mikhail's earnest face and the sound of the singing river and the smell of cabbage-soup.

The meal was soon over, and, Liane's jacket found, little Mikhail hustled into his best blouse. They raced each other down the stairs, and emerged hot and panting into the street. Lamps were beginning to flicker at the corners of the narrow, winding ways along the riverside; in the café someone was singing to the accompani-

ment of a violin an air so wild and savage that it seemed to take the listener back into long-past ages of bloodshed and warfare—to deeds too dark to bear the light of modern day. Liane shivered, and drew little Mikhail quickly past the café door.

Once on the broad Ostraya Bridge which leads from the old quarter across the river to the newer town, the home of the nobles and the place of commerce, there were no more wailing songs, but only gaiety and light—the white, dazzling radiance of electric lamps all down the Boulevard Mikhail II, and farther still, twinkling like stars on a frosty night among the fresh spring foliage of the gardens that line the Boulevard Valitzine—right on and on until the long vista of little lights ended in a great half-circle of pale splendor over the old West Gate of the king's palace.

On the Boulevard Mikhail II the shops shone warm and brilliant, their windows filled with gorgeously colored goods designed to catch the barbaric Salitzan eye. Red and blue cottons, vivid as the plumage of a macaw, lengths of crisp silk in orange and purple and rose; fat, twisted ropes of beads, blue and gold and green, strings of imitation pearls, and uncut turquoise. All these in the commoner shops, but in the better ones were Paris hats, and dainty collars of lace and muslin, and pale tints, and a general marked increase of articles likely to suit more educated, if less decided, tastes. Then shops full, even to the doorways, of flowers—roses and

lilies-of-the-valley in great sheaves of delicate sweetness, and bouquets of tube-roses, all in quaintly shaped pots and jars of green pottery which glittered in the light as though shot through with all the tints of the rainbow. Then came jeweler's shops with heavily barred windows behind which gleamed coyly, as though chary of their own beauty, diamonds, emeralds and rubies in necklets and rings and bracelets, and great stars, crescents and aërial aigrettes for the hair, powdered with diamonds as though with fine dust—all transfigured by the soft shaded electric lamps hung cunningly above them just out of reach of the eye, and set off by shining pillows of white satin or little velvet-lined cases of red and green leather.

Moving to and fro before all these glories, a crowd no less striking than the contents of the shops. Peasants from the country, in their rough clothes with gaudy handkerchiefs setting off their wild features and black locks; officers in uniforms of a dozen colors, glittering with gold or silver lace; beautiful women of the great world of Salitza, emerging like butterflies from the doors of the fashionable restaurants in which they had been dining before going on to the New Theatre or the opera-house beyond the palace at the far end of the Boulevard Mikhail the Pious; old gentlemen in immaculate shirt-fronts no whiter than their imperials, escorting pretty daughters or granddaughters smiling at their first taste of gaiety; young gentlemen—these last mostly in uniform—also conveying

troops of chattering, laughing women in miraculous dresses from Paris or Vienna. The confusion of tongues would have done credit to the Tower of Babel—French, German, Italian, English—and guttural, barbaric-sounding Sallitan. And, over all, was the clear night sky, dark as purple velvet and sprinkled with stars, with a pale young moon rising like a specter of herself above the imposing loops and festoons of iron-work on the Ostraya Bridge; around all, the perfume of flowers, the refrain of a waltz from a great mansion on the river bank where moving couples showed against the lighted and unfastened windows, the sound of girls laughing, the rich, occasional trill of a nightingale in the Ostraya Gardens.

To Liane Markovitch it was all enchantment. She was silent as she walked along holding Mikhail's hand, and hardly understood the gay stream of chatter which flowed incessantly from Pavlo's lips. It was the great hour of her day, this evening promenade along the lighted boulevards in which she, the little insignificant milliner of the "Paradis des Dames" became for a time, at least, a citizen of the world and felt the tides of life flowing round her, touching her, almost lifting her from her feet as though to bear her away with them, she knew not whither. It was a current from a world beyond her own, a world of women in Parisian dresses and officers in gay uniforms, and its very contact, the careless strength of its irresistible onward flow, filled her with a curious excite-

ment, an inexplicable intoxication. Oh, to wear a Paris frock, and diamonds in your hair, and step in wonderful tiny shoes across the pavement from the restaurant door to your carriage with a blue and silver officer at your side, passing in a soft, delicious frou-frou of filmy silken skirts from one pleasure to another! That was happiness—that was to be alive; not to run from the Boulevard Mikhail II to the high old house in the poor quarter and back again and carry hats to women not half so pretty as yourself and stand till you were weary showing one lovely thing after another to querulous, blasé great ladies who were too spoiled by wealth and luxury to admire anything or enjoy anything or think of anyone in the world but themselves!

She grasped Mikhail's hot little sticky fingers more tightly and tugged at Pavlo's arm.

"Come on, Pavlo! I am tired of loitering here. Let us walk as far as the palace and perhaps we shall see the queen going to the opera."

They made their way through the people and set off running down the Boulevard Valitzine. There were soldiers in front of the palace and royal carriages were rolling to and fro. Liane pressed as close to the gateway as the sentry on guard would let her, and lifted Mikhail on her shoulder. There was a rolling of wheels on the stones of the courtyard within, the sentry straightened himself up like a poker and saluted, and a royal carriage came out very slowly. Within it, clearly visible to Liane, sat a pale, thin woman with beautiful, stormy

eyes, in an exquisite dress of pale yellow satin veiled with lace embroidered with pearls and diamonds. Liane drew a deep, gasping breath of admiration.

The queen's carriage rolled on into the broad road. The sentry fell into a less poker-like attitude. Little Mikhail, fidgeting on his sister's shoulder, suddenly espied an interesting object which seemed to him more worthy of attention than a lady in a gorgeous dress.

"Look, Liane—there's a boy on that balcony."

She looked up. Mikhail was right. A boy stood on the balcony directly above their heads—a boy of about fifteen, with pale, rather insignificant features and the dark, stormy eyes of the beautiful lady in the carriage. He leaned over the rail of the balcony, looking up the Boulevard Valitzine with a wistful face.

He was very close to Liane, Pavlo and Mikhail. They heard someone speak to him from the room behind. He took his arms off the iron railing, and spoke in reply, with an odd, forlorn sound in his voice.

"I am coming in a moment, Nikolaievitch. Look here at this jolly little chap laughing at me. Do come and see."

Captain Nikolaievitch, prim and mincing in his tight blue uniform, stepped gingerly forth upon the balcony at his young master's request. He looked down at Mikhail through an eyeglass polished to the very last point of perfection.

"Isn't he jolly?" said the crown prince, a pleasant smile coming into his worn, unboyish face.

"Certainly, your royal highness," returned Captain Nikolaievitch, with unenthusiastic politeness.

"I suppose I couldn't have him up and— and speak to him?" suggested the future ruler of Salitza timidly.

Captain Nikolaievitch froze within his rigid casing of blue cloth and gold lace.

"Your royal highness is aware that such a thing would be expressly contrary to orders. Her majesty——"

"Yes—yes——" the crown prince said hastily. "Of course, I can't do it. I only thought for a moment that I would like—I wish I had a brother like that, or something that belonged to me. I suppose I couldn't give him anything, Nikolaievitch, could I?"

Captain Nikolaievitch coughed icy disapproval.

"I do not see what your royal highness could give the child. He appears to belong to the poorer classes."

"I haven't any money," said the crown prince sadly. "Stop—I know——"

He caught up a double handful of delicate, sugar-coated bonbons from a silver dish on the table beside the window and leaned over the rail once more.

"Here, you—you little chap there—catch!" he said.

Mikhail, suddenly becoming equal to an emergency for the first time in his life, held out the bulging front of his loose blouse. The bonbons descended into it and the crown prince laughed.

"He's caught them all!" he said. "Look, Nikolaievitch—wasn't that neat?"

Mikhail, with a sweetmeat in his mouth, waved his hand at the balcony.

"Thank you—thank you—thank you!" he yelled.

"Mikhail!" Liane cried, scandalized. "Don't you see it's the crown prince himself?"

The boy on the balcony heard the words.

"Never mind about the crown prince," he said. "There are quite enough people already to call me that. Look, Nikolaievitch, the girl is frightened—she's taking him away."

"A very good thing, if I may be permitted to say so, your royal highness," retorted the outraged Nikolaievitch coldly.

Liane was hurrying away, horrified at her little brother's audacity. But Mikhail, emboldened by the favor of a prince, waved a sticky hand over her shoulder.

"Good-bye, crown prince!" he shouted with his mouth full of almond paste.

"Good-bye, little chap!" called back the boy on the balcony.

They ran all the way back to the high house across the river. Only on the topmost of the steep stairs did they feel safe from the consequences of this escapade. But the crown prince

stood for a long while on the balcony, looking up the Boulevard Valitzine with very wistful eyes and oblivious of Captain Nikolaievitch's respectful but unmistakable disapproval.

"I wish I had something that belonged to me," the lonely boy said once more. "I wish——"

The future ruler of Salitza sighed a long sigh and was silent.

It is not in the Nikolaievitches of the world that their royal masters can confide—and too often there are none but Nikolaievitches near them: too often, both for the Nikolaievitches and themselves—and perhaps the world as well.

CHAPTER II

IT was not six o'clock next morning when Liane Markovitch ran down the stairs into the street. The sunshine was dancing on the little waves of the two rivers, turning their gray to gold, and spring was in the air—the keen, delicious air of all lands where spring means the melting of snows, the freeing of streams and rivers from icy fetters, the return of warmth and life and pleasure to everything and everyone.

Early as it was, the town was awake—grim, savage, yet beautiful Khristovitz, the old fortress-city of Salitza, the capital, the heart of the whole country. Workmen in worn blouses tramped quickly by, glancing admiringly at the pretty girl who passed them. Liane quickened her pace, for she knew that some of these men were bound for the new works down the river where Fritz Goldenburg had just been made foreman. She did not want to meet Fritz just then.

But on the Ostraya Bridge she met him face to face—Fritz with a flower in his cap and a clean blouse, looking unusually spruce and happy. He stopped, and pulled off his cap, and gave her the flower.

“I picked it for you—I thought I should

meet you this morning," he said. "I went up to see you last night, but you were out."

He turned, and walked by her side across the bridge, and she had to slacken her pace and walk beside him. She fastened the bit of scarlet blossom he had given her in her dress and began talking quickly with forced gaiety.

"Yes, we were out last night. We went for a walk and saw the queen starting for the opera—oh, and we had such an adventure! Fancy, the crown prince himself actually spoke to Mikhail and threw him some sweets from a balcony at the palace! I was so frightened! But Mikhail didn't mind a bit. He called out 'Good-bye, crown prince!' as if he had been used to talking to princes all his life."

"A prince is only a man, like anyone else, when you come to think of it," Fritz answered, a little absently, watching the girl's half averted, animated face and glowing eyes.

"Oh, Fritz! You must be an anarchist, or something. Only a man! He could put us all in prison if he chose."

"A poor sort of power—to put people in prison. I think a man who was really a king would only care to let them out," Fritz Goldenburg said.

Liane paused beside the thick ironwork of the bridge and looked over at the swift waters below.

"Yes, one would think that," she said reflectively. "It must be horrible to walk about and enjoy yourself and know that you were keeping

someone else shut up in a prison. But the crown prince has never put anyone in prison, you know—he's only a boy, not much older than Pavlo. Not a very nice-looking boy, either. But he had such odd eyes."

"What was there odd about them?" asked Fritz, smiling.

She went on, glad to keep talking on this harmless subject.

"Oh, I don't quite know—they were like the eyes of a person who had never been happy and never would be. They were——" she stopped for a moment. "They were—*hungry* eyes, I think."

Fritz Goldenburg looked into the hurrying waters in silence for a moment, too.

"I understand," he said. "I suppose he has not had a happy life, that boy. His father and mother hate each other so bitterly that very likely they have no time left for caring for him."

"Why does the king hate the queen?" asked Liane innocently.

"Because he is a bad man and a fool," said Fritz curtly.

Liane was silent, watching the moving water below. Presently she roused herself with a little start.

"I must go—I shall be late."

Fritz lifted his arm from the ironwork of the Ostraya Bridge.

"It is not time yet—you are early this morning, and I do not go to the works for half an

hour. I can be late sometimes now, if I like, Liane——” his voice changed a little from its usual slow, unruffled tone. “Liane—did they tell you—about me?”

“Of course they did, and I was so glad. It is nice for you, Fritz.”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “It is nice for me—if it brings me what I want. I wanted to be the first to tell you, because then I could have told you at the same time how much it might mean to me if it did that—and how little, if it did not.”

She looked at the water. It had come, then—she had better get it over as soon as possible.

“What do you want, Fritz?”

“You,” he said simply.

They were both silent now. Liane played with the scarlet flower in her blouse; Fritz watched her with eyes that had suddenly grown haggard and eager.

“I have always wanted you more than anything in the world,” he said presently. “I have always loved you, ever since the first day I saw you. You were running down the Boulevard Mikhail II and you ran up against me, and then you begged my pardon and began to laugh and I laughed too. I picked up the cardboard box you were carrying, because you had dropped it when you ran into me, and I saw ‘*Au Paradis des Dames*’ on the lid. You had on a black dress and a black hat with a big feather in it, and it had been raining and the feather was wet; and so was your hair—it was as black as the

feather—and your eyes were like diamonds. I have always remembered how you looked then—I shall always remember it, to the very day I die.”

Still she did not move or speak, but stood listening, impelled by a curious sense of fascination. But as for marrying him, and living all her life with him in one of the high houses on the river, always poor, always worked half to death, always wearing shabby clothes and never having quite enough to eat—oh, surely, surely, fate had something in store for her better than that!

He touched her arm.

“Liane, what is it to be? Liane——” His voice trembled a little with eagerness. “Liane, are you going to give me what I want?”

She turned suddenly and met his eyes. It was strange, but it seemed to her that in them she read the same wistfulness, the same sad hunger for some object never to be attained, that had struck her the night before in the eyes of the boy crown prince.

“Oh, Fritz, I’m so sorry—so sorry!” she said brokenly. “Dear Fritz, I’ll always be your friend—I’ll always be fond of you—fonder than of anyone in the world next to father and Pavlo and Mikhail. But I can’t marry you—indeed I can’t. I don’t care for you like that. Oh, don’t ask me, Fritz—it is so horrible to have to refuse, and make you hate me and think me cruel.”

He stood quite still for a moment, and the

gray look of sadness on his face hurt her with a sharp, almost physical pain.

"I could never think any evil of you, Liane," he said presently, "and I could never hate you. There—don't cry, *Herzliebchen*—you must not cry about me. I'm not good enough for you—I have always known that. Only—only nothing seems much use if I can't have you."

The tears were running down Liane's cheeks. Fortunately the cathedral clock struck the half-hour. Liane wiped her eyes hastily.

"I must go—madame will be angry. Oh, Fritz, you have made me so miserable—and look! I have lost your flower. It has fallen over into the river. I am going to be wretched all day—I know I am. Oh, Fritz, do forgive me before I go!"

He took the hand she held out and kept it for a moment in his own.

"It is the last time you shall ever be made miserable by me, *Herzliebchen*. There—run, now, or you will be terribly late and so shall I. Never mind the flower—I can get you plenty more like it."

Yet, late as it was, he stood for quite ten minutes on the Ostraya Bridge after Liane had left him, gazing sadly down the river after a tiny speck of scarlet blossom which danced gaily on the gray and golden waters.

The tears were dry on Liane's cheek before she reached the "Paradis des Dames." It was an immense relief not to see poor Fritz suffer like that. At any rate, it was over now. He

could never ask her again. Her spirits began to rise, despite her declaration of day-long wretchedness. Why, after all, should she make herself miserable about anything—even poor Fritz? It was spring, and the sun was shining, and there were a hundred delightful things in the world to think about and look at and wish for—and perhaps get, some day. People have no time for tears at half-past six on a fine morning on the Boulevard Mikhail II.

She reached the “Paradis des Dames” just as madame was beginning to conjecture what particular form of horrible end could have been the fate of her favorite. Liane stammered out a hasty formula of excuse. She was very sorry to be so late—she had overslept herself. She never remembered being so stupid before—she hoped madame would forgive her. Yes, she had a headache, but that was nothing—it would pass off.

“Thou art pale—thy pretty face has lost its roses, my child, my little cabbage,” said kind-hearted madame, mixing her botanical figures with a fine poetical disregard. “Go—get thee to the white cupboard in my chamber and fetch hither the little bottle thou wilt find there—but yes! the little bottle. That is what will make thy roses bloom once more.”

Liane fetched the “little bottle,” which, however, was not remarkable for the minuteness of its size, and swallowed a dose of its contents with much gratitude at being allowed to escape so easily.

“Ah, the little bottle that waters the roses in the cheeks when they grow pale,” she remarked, with the profound conviction born only of happy personal experience. “Go now, my little cabbage, put on the black silk dress of Katinka, whose dear grandmother has died to-day for the third time—never have I known a girl so well provided with relations of a delicacy—but yes! a delicacy. A puff of the blessed air of heaven blows on one of Katinka’s grandmothers and she is gone—finished up—extinguished. It is remarkable, also that these melancholy events always occur just after Katinka has been paid her wages. It is almost as though—but we must not be uncharitable, my child. It is possible that when I was of the age of Katinka my grandmothers also died more frequently than they do now. It is a fine day for the funeral—we must hope that Katinka will enjoy herself. We will unpack the new hats from dear Paris together. My little cabbage shall be the first person in Khristovitz to try them on. Also at mid-day I expect madame la princesse, her excellency the Russian ambassadrice. Be thou ready to serve her, for none other ever pleases her so well.”

It was long past mid-day, however, before madame l’ambassadrice arrived, in the most magnificently appointed carriage with the finest of horses and the most gorgeous of coachmen and footmen to be found in all Khristovitz, and a tall young Russian military attaché trailing with graceful and becoming languor in her

wake. She was received by madame with much respectful effusion, led to the show-room and placed in a chair. The beautiful attaché lounged over her, and looked a little at the hats and a good deal at Liane.

"Ah, how lovely—what a rose! One can almost smell it," said little Princess Roumanine, who seemed in an unusually gracious mood. "Look, Vladimir, my friend, is it not perfect?"

"Perfect!" responded the attaché, with heartfelt fervor, looking not at the rose in question, but straight at Liane Markovitch, who was holding the confection in which it bloomed.

"You are making mademoiselle blush," said Anna Roumanine, laughing. "I told you to look at the rose, Vladimir Fedorovitch, not at her. Though she is very well worth looking at, I admit."

"Yes, my angel," responded Vladimir Fedorovitch with his eyes on Liane's face.

"Vladimir, you are quite incorrigible! That lilac is a trying color, it seems to me."

"Not for you, my angel," responded Vladimir Fedorovitch in his deep, melancholy voice that made sad music of the most commonplace remark. "Nothing could try your complexion."

Anna Roumanine laughed, well pleased. Madame beamed respectful confirmation of the attaché's compliment. Liane went to fetch a mirror from the table at the end of the room, glad to escape from the young man's gaze. He watched her across the room and turned his

back for a moment on his ambassadrice, on pretence of examining a hat on a high stand behind him.

“What a contrast!” he said to himself, thinking of the two women and comparing little Anna Roumanine’s made-up face and figure and gilded hair with the splendid, unadorned freshness of the girl who was serving her. “What a face! What velvet eyes—with depths of fire beneath their velvet! What a figure—Venus before she grew fat and sat for her portrait to the old masters! How insufferably mean and small Anna looks beside her! And the old man keeps her so closely that she is no good to me—she hasn’t lent me fifty rubles for the last six months. I won’t put up with it much longer. I wonder what that girl’s name is?”

“Liane,” called madame across the room, “Liane, my child, be quick; and bring also the new blue hat with forget-me-nots.”

“Liane!” Vladimir Ourouf thought. “In French that means ‘the Bindweed’! Not a bad name. One day that girl will bind the hearts of men to her carriage-wheels and grind them to dust.”

“Look, my friend,” piped Anna Roumanine in his ear. “You are not attending to anything I say. I have asked you twice whether you prefer the lilac hat to the blue one with the forget-me-nots, and I don’t believe you even heard what I said!”

“There is no need for you to wear forget-me-

nots," Vladimir returned musically. "You can afford to leave them to women whom it would be possible to forget."

"That is a pretty way of saying you like the lilac hat best, I suppose!" laughed the little ambassadrice. "Very well, then, Vladimir, I will take your advice, and if I look a perfect fright in the thing it will be your fault. The lilac one, if you please, madame. Oblige me by sending it home at once—I shall wear it this afternoon at the palace garden-party."

The hat was put on one side, but madame l'ambassadrice still fluttered around the show-room, exclaiming here, criticising there, and ruthlessly pulling about the finest creations of the "Paradis des Dames" with her clumsy little jeweled fingers. Vladimir Oufroff followed her listlessly. Liane, removed from the immediate area of his stare, shot a glance at him from under her long black eyelashes. He was undoubtedly very handsome, though she had not liked the way he looked at her or the way he called Princess Roumanine "my angel" in that sweet, deep drawl of his. He looked like pictures she had seen of vikings, with his long, fair mustache, beautifully cut features and deep blue eyes that were almost violet in the shadow, and his tall figure set off so magnificently by the close-fitting uniform he wore. He must be over six feet high, she thought, but he carried himself with a grace most tall men never acquire, so that his abnormal inches were at first hardly apparent. He did not move quickly and stiffly,

like the men Liane had known, but softly and almost stealthily, as a cat moves, with every limb and every muscle seeming to sway and shift in time to his movements. And behind this grace, this almost feminine languor and listlessness, there was the suggestion of terrible strength and activity. She had seen many blue and silver officers but never one like this. If a fault could be found with him, it was a certain hard look that shot, now and then, into those beautiful eyes, especially when they rested on his ambassadrice and she did not happen to be looking at him. But Liane did not notice this; nor did she remark the fact that his eyes were set a shade slantingly in his head and were a little nearer together than Europeans usually have them. It was the only trace of the savage Tartar blood which still ran, a heritage of unspeakable barbarism, cruelty and duplicity from his heathen forefathers, in the veins of this seemingly exquisite production of the highest civilization of Petersburg and Paris.

"She wants me to give her a hat," the beautiful viking of foolish Liane's imagination thought, as he followed Anna Roumanine in her progress of inspection. "I would rather give her a poisoned cup of coffee. One ought to be able to bow-string women like that in a sack and throw them over the Ostraya Bridge when one has done with them, as they do in Constantinople. The sultan, with all the nations of Europe for his jailors, is the only absolutely free monarch in the world.—Yes, my

angel, it is lovely, but it would not do for you. That shade of pink is too crude for delicate coloring like yours."

She gave a last, lingering, regretful look at the coveted pink hat and turned to the stairs which led to the shop below.

Liane did not know afterwards how it happened. Madame led the way, cautioning Princess Roumanine against the darkness of the stairs. She stood back, making way for the attaché to follow the lady of his heart. He, however, gave her a long, confusing look out of those beautiful eyes, and, with a slight bow, moved aside as though bidding her precede him. Perhaps, in her hurry, unnerved by Vladimir's glance, she fell over the long train of Katinka's silk skirt—it surely could not have been that one of the blue and silver officer's pretty, polished boots occupied the whole length and breadth of the top step. At any rate, she tripped up on some unseen obstacle, and fell violently against Vladimir Oourof, so that he had to catch her in his arms to prevent her from falling down the staircase upon the diminutive princess and the voluble madame in front.

"Oh, monsieur—pardon me! A thousand pardons!" Liane gasped out.

Oourof had caught her very tightly, and he did not let go at once. Instead, she became aware, with feelings of the liveliest horror, that he was resisting her efforts to free herself and that the viking mustache was against her lips,

completely stifling her feeble attempt at an apology.

"Let me go—ah!" Her voice rose into a choking cry, and he released her rapidly. The ambassadrice in front stopped on the staircase as though a bullet had struck her.

"Vladimir, what are you about? What is the matter?"

Liane fled away into the farthest recesses of the show-room. Even as she retreated she heard the attaché answering in his melodious, unmoved way:

"It is nothing, my angel—do not alarm yourself. Mademoiselle lost her balance and I had the felicity of saving her a fall. She is not injured in the least."

The ambassadrice swept on, in such visible perturbation of spirit that she forgot to remind madame again that she wanted the hat for the palace garden-party. Once safely hidden from public scrutiny in the convenient shelter of the carriage, the tempest of her wrath burst forth upon him with ungovernable fury.

"You kissed that girl, Vladimir Fedorovitch! Oh, don't deny it—I know you did. I heard her cry out—I ought never to have gone on or left you with her, even for that moment, for I know by this time what you are. You are tired of me, though I have given up everything for you!" cried the poor little ambassadrice, breaking into tears, and assuming the air of an unfortunate heroine of romance, though it is difficult to say what possible sacrifice she had

made for her lover, except very occasional loans of money—and the affection of a husband twenty years her senior, who had always bored her to death. “You are tired of me—you never offered me a hat, and you only said that pink one wouldn’t suit me because you didn’t wish to give it to me. Oh, what a cruel world it is, and how miserable I am! And crying always makes my nose red, and I shall not be fit to be seen at the palace, and then that cat, Natalia Morisof, will be sure to tell everyone that I have been quarreling with you!”

“Then I should advise you not to cry, my dove, and your nose will not in that case be red, and Natalia Morisof will not be able to say anything about you,” remarked Vladimir coldly and without penitence.

“I don’t want to go to the palace or anywhere else, except my grave,” wept Anna Roumanine. “You spoil all my happiness, Vladimir Fedorovitch!”

Perhaps Ouf of thought he had punished her enough; perhaps he was not in the mood to sever his connection with her forever by one final quarrel. He relented, and put his arm round her, and she fell against his shoulder and sobbed less violently.

“I think you will find the palace much more amusing than your grave, my angel. You shouldn’t say these things to me when you know that I adore you passionately—that you are the only woman in the world that I care even to look at, much less to kiss.”

"You did kiss her," persisted the melting ambassadrice faintly.

"No, my white dove, I did not do anything of the kind—I swear it on my honor! The girl tripped up, and would have fallen down the staircase upon you if I had not caught her, and of course she was frightened and cried out. And then you conclude that I was kissing her!"

"Oh, Vladimir, my darling, forgive me!" She burst into a fresh flood of tears. "Oh, how unkind I am to you—and I love you so—I would do anything in the world for you!"

He bestowed a fervent salute upon the edge of her bonnet.

"Do not speak of it again, my angel. It is all over—it never happened. Only, do not bring these ridiculous accusations against me again."

"She was a beautiful girl, though, all the same," reflected the mollified ambassadrice. "You must admit that, Vladimir."

"I do not admit that anyone is beautiful but you, because I never look at anyone else. And now, my angel, I am sorry to trouble you with such sordid details—you who should always lead the life of an exquisite butterfly and flit from flower to flower and never think of anything unpleasant—but I shall have to ask you to lend me some money until they are graciously pleased to remember my pay in Petersburg. It is the greatest nuisance and I hate to worry you, but——"

"Oh, Vladimir, I am so glad to be able to do

anything to show you how sorry I am that I suspected you. How much do you want?"

So peace was restored, on a sound financial basis, and the little ambassadrice was wreathed in smiles before she reached her own door, and more in love with her beautiful attaché than ever. She did not guess how near she had been to losing him altogether, or suspect that this calamity was only averted by the generosity with which she promised to lend him by far the greater portion of a very liberal quarter's allowance.

CHAPTER III

WHEN madame went to ascertain what had happened to her favorite she found her at the further end of the show-room in a condition bordering on hysteria. Hopelessly bewildered, but sympathetic as ever, the good woman took her in her arms.

“My child, my little cabbage, what ails thee? Hast thou hurt thyself—hast thou nerves, my darling, or the grippe? Thou art trembling all over—thy poor hands are as ice—and thy face, my faith! is like fire. Come, tell me, my little one.”

Liane cowered shaking in madame’s kind arms.

“He kissed me—that man,” she gasped at last. “Oh, dear madame, do not ask me to come into the show-room again when he is here! It would kill me—he is bad—he is evil.”

Madame soothed her tenderly.

“Thou shalt never serve them again. What impertinence—to kiss a girl of mine almost under my very nose! Oh, they are wretches, these blue and silver officers, with their voices as of a cat licking up the cream! Not often do I allow them within my doors—it is not *convenable* with so many young girls about—but

madame l'ambassadrice was with him and I should have thought she would have looked after her own property."

"He loves her—the ambassadrice?" Liane asked.

"I know not, my cabbage. I think he loves any sort of wickedness. And I have heard also that he loves the gold of M. le Prince Roumanine no less than he loves madame la princesse. Do not vex thy pretty head about him any more. He shall not come here again."

But Liane could not avoid vexing her head over the delinquencies of the beautiful attaché. She never ran along the Boulevard Mikhail II without a lurking thought, half fear, half hope, that at any moment she might see that tall figure coming towards her, and hear the deep, sweet, drawling voice in her ear. She could hear it still, that drawling, musical voice, with its odd foreign accent, its little, unaccustomed slurring of certain letters which its owner did not seem to think it worth his while to pronounce. She could see the lazy blue eyes watching her with the expression which she could not read and which filled her with a contradictory form of misery and confusion which was yet very near to happiness. It was true that her first feeling towards him had been one of dislike, almost of terror, but those unpleasant impressions wore off.

"Thou art pale, my little one," kind-hearted madame would often say to her. "See, here is a hat to be taken home—run, put on thy hat, a

breath of air will bring back thy roses on this hot day. Do not hurry thyself—look in Madame Claire's window as thou comest back, and tell us what terrible things thou seest there. Ah, that Claire—to pretend to give us here the mode of Paris or Vienna! What impertinence! She has the soul of a sausage-seller and as much eye for color as a blind mole. Her windows desolate the heart of a true artist. Go, my child, and tell us how many colors the Claire has jumbled into one miserable toque."

So Liane went, and took home the hat, generally to some splendid house on the Boulevard Valitzine. Her heart beat in a sickening way as she passed the Russian embassy. Somewhere behind those white walls with their rows of glittering windows fringed with flower-boxes gay with scarlet, white and green was the tall attaché, who loved madame l'ambassadrice, and all other tempting, fascinating, forbidden things.

From reflections such as these Liane would rouse herself with a start. How silly she was, to be thinking of this blue and silver officer, who had done nothing but offer her the coolest of insults, and there was poor Fritz Goldenburg, who wanted to marry her and would have jumped over the Ostraya Bridge to please her. She did not see him often now, and she thought to herself, somewhat remorsefully, that it was amazing how little she missed him. Six months ago his absence would certainly have made a difference in her life. Now she listened to

Pavlo's remarks on the subject of the infrequency of his visits to the high house on the river with hardly a thrill of interest.

"It would have been very nice if you had married Fritz," little Mikhail remarked sorrowfully one evening as he nursed the cat by the stove while Liane made the coffee, "because I should have had another brother that I like. If you marry a blue and silver officer——"

He was amazed by the suddenness with which the coffee boiled over and scalded the cat, whose name was Ivan the Terrible, though it had once upset its master's christening arrangements considerably by presenting the establishment with a family of kittens.

"I shall not marry any officer," Liane said quite sharply. "You should not say such things, Mikhail—you know it was only Pavlo's fun."

"Well, you needn't be cross. You said more than that yourself—you said you were going to marry a king."

Liane laughed, put the coffee-pot on the table out of harm's way and picked up the injured Ivan the Terrible from the floor.

"Oh, it's very likely I shall do that, isn't it? Come and have your supper, and don't talk about things little boys do not understand. Poor pussy, did I hurt its little paw?"

Ivan the Terrible allowed herself to be soothed by an offering of milk, and Mikhail ate his supper in gloomy silence. They had hardly finished when Fritz Goldenburg came in.

"I came to say that I think you had better

stay at home tonight," he said, when he had greeted them. "The city seems in rather an excited state and there may be a row at any moment."

"Oh, let us go and see!" cried Pavlo, jumping up from his chair. But Fritz looked worried and anxious.

"I have nothing to say to your going, if you like, Pavlo, but don't take your sister or Mikhail. It is not safe for them."

"Are they going to fight and kill each other?" asked Mikhail hopefully.

"It is quite possible," Fritz answered, smiling in spite of himself at the boy's tone.

"I have never seen people do that," remarked Mikhail reflectively, as though he were weighing in his mind the comparative attractions of bloodshed.

Fritz took him on his knee.

"Pray to the good God that you never may, little one. It is not a pleasant sight. Pavlo, if you are really going, take care, and do not get mixed up in any fighting."

"I am not going to fight," retorted Pavlo scornfully. "The king isn't worth fighting for, I'm sure, and anyway *we* never get any good from anyone—king or parliament or anything else. Good-bye, I will go and have a look at the fun."

He caught up his cap and ran off. Liane, who was washing the supper things, looked across at Fritz uneasily.

"Father does not like to hear Pavlo say that.

He gets so angry if anyone talks against the king. He says it doesn't matter how bad he is, it is our duty to be loyal to him just the same. He will be furious if there is a rising against him."

"I'm afraid you must be prepared for him to come home very furious indeed tonight, then, for there is certainly going to be a rising. Khris-tovitz is not going to stand much more of King Mikhail V," said Fritz, thinking of the numberless acts of folly with which Mikhail V had degraded the calling of a sovereign in the eyes of all Europe.

"What will they do with the queen?"

"Nothing, I should think. Everyone is sorry for her, though she is a foreigner and has never been popular. I expect they will depose the king or force him to abdicate in favor of the crown prince."

"Then that boy will be king," said Liane slowly.

"Yes. He will be able to put people in prison if he likes, as you said he could the other day."

"He will be able to let them out, too, as you said a real king would want to do," she answered, smiling.

Fritz shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I never heard you say all these things before, Fritz," Liane remarked wonderingly.

He forced himself to smile, and quoted a well-known proverb of the country.

"A wise man walking among wolves does

not wear a sheepskin coat.' It is not always safe to say what you feel or think in this country, I am afraid."

"Oh, I hope Pavlo will not get into trouble! He is so reckless—he never cares what he says. Fritz, do you think there is really going to be a revolution?"

"I can't say certainly—let us hope it will all pass off quietly."

"Things of that sort never do pass off quietly in Salitza," Liane answered truly enough. "There is always a terrible fuss, a lot of people are killed and no one is any better for it afterwards."

So they sat talking, longer than Liane suspected. Fritz saw that she had forgotten the lateness of the hour in the interest of their unusual conversation, and, anxious as he himself was beginning to be at the prolonged absence of Stepan Markovitch and his son, he did not care to remind her of the flight of time. She realized it at last by seeing that little Mikhail was fast asleep in the corner, with Ivan the Terrible snoring audibly on his knees. Then she glanced at the clock and rose from her chair with an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, Fritz, it is just on twelve o'clock and father and Pavlo have never come home! What can have happened to them? Fritz, what shall I do?"

He saw that to attempt to disguise his anxiety any longer would be useless.

"I did not like to say anything to you, Liane,

but I am afraid that they would not have left you all this time alone unless something had happened. Shall I go and try to find them?"

"No, no—you could not find them and perhaps you might be hurt. Oh, Fritz, what was that?"

Fritz also had sprung to his feet as a deep, ominous boom burst upon the silence of the quiet little room. It was the great bell of the Khristovitz cathedral beginning to ring—the great bell whose voice means fire and storm. Louder and louder it grew—a sound of terror and confusion made audible in a single, awful note.

He was the first to recover himself. In a second he had unfastened the window and was out on the little balcony where Liane's pink rose hung furred in rosy slumber. She followed him and they stood together in the narrow space, listening to the booming of the great bell. Then, beyond that sound, they became conscious of another—shrill, penetrating and more terrible still.

"The bugles! They are calling out the soldiers!" Liane cried, catching at her companion's arm in the extremity of her dismay. "Oh, Fritz, Fritz, where is my father—where is Pavlo?"

He put his arm around her protectingly.

"Be brave, *Herzliebchen*—do not tremble so. The bugles don't mean that anybody is hurt, you know. Perhaps the troops will be out in time to prevent a riot. Anyway, nobody will

fight for that blackguard Mikhail—they will be far too pleased at the prospect of getting rid of him.”

But Liane was almost wild with frantic terror for her father and Pavlo. Fritz could not persuade her to leave the balcony and return to the room where Mikhail still sat curled up in his chair unconscious of the excitement around him. At last the German fetched Pavlo's cloak and wrapped her in it against the damp air rising, even on a summer night, from the river-bed below. Still the great bell boomed its message of alarm over the waking city—still the shrill cry of the bugles at the barracks flung a silver challenge into the disturbed air. Straining their eyes through the darkness, they saw an ugly red glow rising in the sky. Then came sudden scarlet flashes amid the blackness, reflected upwards, though the actual light itself was hidden from them by the high houses on the opposite side of the river. A sharp, sickening rattle of musketry followed—cries of fear and horror and wrath, echoes of a fierce struggle raging in the direction of the Boulevard Valitzine. The wind bore every sound clearly across the river. It seemed to them that they could even smell the powder.

“Oh, Fritz—my father!—Pavlo!” poor Liane whispered. “They are fighting down there—people are being wounded, and killed. Oh, I can't bear it! Let us go and see what is happening. Don't stay here and do nothing, while they are being shot!”

She would have broken from him to carry this intention into effect, but he caught her and held her back.

"I can't let you go, Liane. Your father himself would forbid it. No"—as she struggled to escape from him—"I must keep you here—*Herzliebchen*, don't make me hurt you—I shall bruise your wrists if you pull like that."

She burst into tears.

"Oh, you are afraid! Oh, let me go—let me go! If you are such a coward, let me go and look for them myself!"

But Fritz did not relax his iron grasp.

"You don't know what you are saying, my poor darling. I would go, but the moment I had gone you would be out in the streets, and they are no place for women tonight."

She wept still—stormy, hysterical tears of rage and terror.

"Father and Pavlo are being shot, and you keep me here! Listen—they are firing again—and there is another bugle sounding! Oh, let me go!"

He held her firmly, in a grasp that hurt her, and at his wit's end to know what to do. The great bell was ringing more loudly than ever, the sky was red and angry, the firing seemed closer to them than it had done at first. Lights flitted from window to window in the houses on the other side of the river; they heard people running to and fro along the waterside below calling to each other in excited voices. And still, in the room behind them, little Mikhail

slept on, with the big cat stretched across his knees, her tail sweeping the floor and one tabby paw resting on her master's hand.

Suddenly they heard steps on the steep stairs up which Liane had run singing so often when she came home from the Boulevard Mikhail II. These were hurried, stumbling steps that struck a quick chill to Liane's heart. She ceased to struggle with Fritz, and stood breathless, trembling and white as death.

It was Pavlo who burst into the room—Pavlo as they had never seen him before, stained with blood, pale, ominous, terrible. Fritz released the girl's wrists and she sprang across the room with a cry. Then stood still, gazing with questioning eyes into her brother's face.

"Father——?" she gasped.

Pavlo's eyes were dry, and blazing with fearful excitement. He stood in the middle of the room, stiff and straight, as though frozen.

"They are bringing him back," he said.
"They are—bringing him back."

Little Mikhail woke up and the big cat jumped down upon the floor.

The child looked up, bewildered, at his brother.

"What is the matter?" he said in a sleepy voice. "What has happened to you?"

But Pavlo did not hear him. He began to speak, slowly, and with difficulty, in that same dreadful, mechanical tone.

"It was at the corner of the Boulevard Valit-zine," he said. "Everybody was waiting about

and saying that the soldiers were going to the palace to kill the king. I was wedged in and didn't know that father was anywhere near. Then down the Boulevard Mikhail we saw the soldiers coming from the barracks as hard as they could come. There was a tall officer leading them, and as he came he called out 'Death to Mikhail of Paris!'—you know they call the king that. And then I saw father spring out into the very middle of the road just in front of the troops, and he cried 'I have served him and his father before him, and I will strike one more blow for him before I die. God save King Mikhail!'—and he fired that old pistol of his right at the officer's head. But it didn't hurt him and the next moment he had shot father—I saw him lying in the road, and the officer went on, as if nothing had happened, calling out 'Death to Mikhail of Paris!' as he had done before. Someone dragged father out of the road, and I fought my way to him somehow and knelt down by him. But he was quite dead."

There was a moment of silence. They all stood motionless and incapable of speaking—incapable even of understanding the dreadful thing that had happened. Then on the stairs they heard the heavy shuffling sound of men carrying a burden. Fritz Goldenburg moved to the door and threw it wide open, waiting with bent head and a heart full of pity and regret.

But Liane and Pavlo and little Mikhail clung together, speechless and tearless. Stepan Mar-

kovitch had fought his last fight for the king from whom he had not received even the meager pay, due to him for years of faithful service. The old corporal had died for the only master his simple pride had ever acknowledged—Mikhail V of Salitza—Mikhail of Paris, whom history christens “Mikhail the Bad.”

CHAPTER IV.

AT the palace on that eventful night the crown prince had gone to bed at ten o'clock, according to his invariable custom.

He was perhaps the only person in Khris-tovitz who was entirely ignorant of the fact that the storm which had long been brewing in that always tempestuous land was on the point of breaking into open fury. It wanted now only a trifle to cause the final outburst—Mikhail had only to make himself a little more unpopular than he was already. Possibly the ill-luck of those whom, as we are told, the gods wish to destroy and therefore curse with momentary madness, inspired him at this turning-point in his career. He was desperately in want of money and it occurred to him that a new tax might temporarily relieve his difficulties. He suggested this to the servile parliament which in reality did not dare to oppose any proposition the king might make. The tax was laid on the already sorely tried Salitzans—and the storm burst.

But of all this the crown prince was entirely ignorant. It was not the custom of his royal parents to take him into their confidence, and Captain Nikolaievitch did not occupy his post

for the purpose of supplying his charge with political information. The crown prince dined in his own apartments, spent a dull evening—his evenings had a way of being dull—and retired to rest at the appointed hour.

At midnight he woke with a start, to find the electric light on and, standing at his bedside, the figure of the queen in a gorgeous dinner dress, pale and obviously disturbed. He sat up in bed and looked at her in astonishment. In the distance he fancied he could hear rather an unusual amount of sound and confusion.

“What is that noise?” he asked, rather sleepily.

The beautiful pale queen smiled. It was not a pleasant sort of smile at all, her son thought.

“That noise is a revolution,” she answered with somewhat ghastly composure.

The crown prince sat up very straight among his pillows. He had read of revolutions, but they had never seemed very real things to him before,—rather like literary shadows of events which happened when the world was an interesting place and people did things, as he put it to himself. He had long ago decided that the world had ceased to be an interesting place of residence about the time that he was born. Now, however, he had suddenly waked in the middle of the night, after a day that had been rather more wearisome than most, to be told that a revolution was actually happening just outside the palace gates.

“What do the people want?” he asked.

"To kill the king," the queen said, quite calmly.

Kasimir of Salitza sprang suddenly out of bed.

"Where is he?" he said. "I must go to him—tell me where he is." The boy's eyes were flashing.

"He is over the frontier by this time, I expect," the queen answered in a tone of such bitterness that he started. "He has deserted us at the last, just as I always knew he would—he has put us in danger by his own folly and left us to get out of it as best we can. He will be in Paris tomorrow morning—but where we shall be I don't know."

The crown prince stood quite still by the side of the bed, staring at her. She went on. Even in the midst of her own danger she could not forget the bitterest thing of all—that the man whom she had once imagined a hero—though he had long ago dispelled most of her illusions about him—had proved himself nothing but the worst of cowards. She was so angry with him that she could hardly realize the peril in which she herself stood.

"Yes—he has fled. He must have known this was going to happen. I suppose he did not warn me because he thought he would be more likely to escape alone. I went to his rooms and found that he had been gone for some hours. I had his desk broken open and found a paper which he had apparently written just before leaving. He has abdicated in favor of you, and

appointed a council of regency with Schamiratz at its head."

General Schamiratz being the popular hero of Salitza, his selection as head of a council of regency was perhaps the wisest, as it was the last, act of Mikhail V's unlucky reign. Meanwhile, the uproar outside was increasing every moment. The great bell of Khristovitz cathedral began to ring, and here, as in that humbler home beyond the river where Fritz Goldenburg and Liane Markovitch stood listening to it, the sound filled the hearers with dismay.

"The troops—they must be called out! They at least will obey Schamiratz," Kasimir said.

"Not if he tries to save us. Listen!"

Through the partially open windows came the cry, clear and unmistakable, "Death to the king! Death to Mikhail of Paris!"

The queen, hearing it, shivered as though with cold.

"They mean mischief or they would not call him that." For the first time in her life she looked at the boy before her for advice, even for protection. "Kasimir, it is serious—what shall we do?"

There was a knock at the door, and Captain Nikolaievitch entered hastily, stiff and formal as always.

"I have come to ask your majesty what is to be done. They are trying to force the gates. Already some of the—rioters have got into the gardens."

Having delivered this unpleasant piece of in-

formation, he stood motionless, with the air of an automaton waiting to be wound up.

The queen looked at the crown prince, who, in his turn, looked at Nikolaievitch.

“Ring that bell, if you please,” said Kasimir, “and tell Josef to come to me—I must have some clothes on before I can do anything.”

The bell was rung accordingly, and Josef arrived, mortally frightened. As valet to the crown prince, he was beginning to fancy himself an important political person and certain to be shot. Kasimir gave his orders quietly and clearly.

“My uniform, Josef, and all the orders you can find. Be quick—there is no time to lose.”

“What are you going to do?” asked the queen curiously.

Kasimir was aiding Josef’s trembling fingers to button the tight blue uniform of a lieutenant of the Guard over his sleeping-suit.

“I don’t know. That’s right, Josef. Now the orders.” He took the velvet case which held them from the valet’s hands and opened it.

“Nikolaievitch, you’re not frightened—pin these on for me, please.”

Captain Nikolaievitch obeyed in silence. The queen looked on impatiently.

“We are all going to be shot,” she said. “I don’t see that you will do much by putting on uniform.”

But Kasimir did not answer. As he said, he did not quite know what he was going to do; but he knew that the only way to do anything at

all was to do it in uniform. A silk sleeping-suit was not the sort of garment in which to cope with revolutions.

"Now I am ready," he said, as Nikolaievitch pinned the last Grand Cross in its place. "Come, Nikolaievitch."

He ran down the broad staircase, followed by Nikolaievitch, and, at some little distance, by the queen. As they went, they heard firing in the Boulevard Valitzine. Clearly, whatever was to be done must be done quickly.

Kasimir went to the window of the balcony over the great gates—the balcony over which a pale half-circle of electric light was usually burning. Through the shutters, he could see that it had been turned off, lest its radiance should assist the rioters to find a way in. He threw the shutters back and began to unfasten the closed window.

"Turn on the light, Nikolaievitch—the button is the other side."

"But what is your majesty going to do?" asked Nikolaievitch, bewildered, for once, out of his decorous silence and groping for the electric button.

Kasimir stopped dead and stood still, with the shutter in his hand. His majesty! So he was really king—those were his subjects outside, not those of Mikhail of Paris, the father of whom he knew no good and towards whom he had only feelings of mistrust and dislike. His majesty! An odd thrill ran through his veins as he stood there with possible and even prob-

able death waiting for him on the other side of a few slips of wood and a sheet of plate-glass. Then he undid the last bolt and slipped back the window-fastening. He had not known what he was going to do before—now he knew.

He threw back the window and stepped out on to the balcony just as Nikolaievitch, in the corridor behind him, came suddenly on the button for which he was searching behind the curtains and turned on the great half-circle of electric light over the West Gate.

For a moment Kasimir was almost blinded by the sudden glare of light. Then he saw what he had come to face—the mad crowd surging from end to end of the broad Boulevard Valit-zine, almost as far as the eye could reach. Even Captain Nikolaievitch, who was not a coward, stood back from the window. His reading of the laws of court etiquette did not go as far as suicide. He waited for the shot which was to demonstrate the exact limit of his royal master's folly.

But it did not come. The crowd, too, was dazzled by the sudden light that had flamed out on the balcony above the West Gate. It paused even in the midst of its madness, its fury of revolt and vengeance, and every eye looked up.

There, on the narrow balcony, under the great half-circle of pale splendor, stood a boy of fifteen in the blue uniform of a lieutenant of the Guard—bareheaded, unarmed, alone.

The uproar died. One or two men leveled

their pistols at the figure on the balcony, but no one fired. Then, from the middle of the arrested mass of people, a voice cried:

“Where is the king?”

Kasimir moved forward and laid his hand on the iron railing of the balcony. There was a breathless silence. The great bell had ceased to boom; the crackling of musketry was still. Then he spoke, in a clear, quiet voice that everyone could hear.

“My father has fled. He is across one of the frontiers by now,” he said. “He has abdicated in my favor, and appointed a council of regency, with General Schamiratz at its head.”

A faint murmur went up which might have meant approval of General Schamiratz. On the other hand it might have been the growl of the human wild beast balked of its prey. Somewhere at the back of the crowd two or three people shouted “Mikhail of Paris! The king! We want the king!”

Kasimir leaned over the railing. A sudden sharp ring as of steel came into his thin, high voice.

“I am here,” he said. “*I am the king!*”

There was a moment of silence. In the room behind, Nikolaievitch held his breath. “They will fire now,” he said to himself.

But they did not. Instead, they stared at the blue figure on the balcony under the white, flaming lights—the boy who had come out unarmed and alone to face a revolution in defense of his crown. A wild, half-civilized people, they had

the savage's appreciation of courage. Personal bravery was perhaps the only sovereign quality they revered in any man. Had Kasimir betrayed the slightest fear—had his voice failed him, even for an instant, or the smallest sign of uneasiness appeared in his bearing, not all the armies of Europe could have saved him.

There was a moment of absolute, nerve-straining silence. Then, from almost every throat in that savage crowd, one great cry went up.

“The king! Hurrah for Kasimir! Kasimir! Long live the king!”

Mechanically Kasimir's hand went up to his bare head, and he saluted his subjects. The cry of acclamation swelled and became a roar. The roar became a tempest, a hurricane of cheers.

It was over. Mikhail of Paris was gone. The throne was safe. Kasimir I was king in Khristovitz.

It was some time before the cheering ceased. Kasimir did not move from the balcony while it lasted. When it began to flag, for the reason that human throats, even in Salitza, are not made of brass, he looked back at Nikolaievitch, who had come out into the frame of the window.

“Ask her majesty to come here,” he said.

Nikolaievitch stepped back. A moment more, and the pale, beautiful queen in her dazzling dress stood on the balcony beside her son. He led her forward to the railing, and then, with a sudden impulse, bent and kissed her hand.

Again and again the cheering rose, wild,

enthusiastic, irresistible. It was the touch of human feeling wanted to rouse the loyalty of an impressionable people to fever pitch.

The scene which followed is indescribable. In a more civilized country it would be impossible. Kasimir stood on the balcony, almost stunned, completely deafened. Tears were running down the faces of half the people below—the great, strong, savage peasants, the wild, unmanageable, ill-paid soldiers, who had come out to kill Mikhail of Paris and had ended by going almost mad with enthusiastic loyalty for his son. On the farthest edge of the crowd a tall officer in a heavy regulation cloak, the high collar of which he kept well up about his face, stood and watched this final development of a very promising revolution with an ill-pleased air. He was the man who had shot down old Stepan Markovitch.

Someone in the crowd touched his arm as he stood there. He turned to find a man cloaked like himself standing beside him. His face was shaded by the brim of his hat, but he too did not appear pleased with the sudden turn events had taken.

“It is all over, you see,” he said, addressing the tall officer in French, in a voice carefully lowered. “It did not come off. We did not reckon on this.”

The officer smiled quietly.

“No, *mon cher*, we did not reckon upon this, certainly,” he answered. “I ask you, in the name of common sense, how could anyone have

reckoned upon anything so absurd? Bah! these savages—what an infernal pandemonium! I shall be deaf for a week.”

“It is exasperating,” the man beside him remarked in a tone of most genuine disgust and disappointment.

“It is not our fault, but it is annoying, I admit. You will not get your man in this time. But do not concern yourself too deeply. Remember the proverb—‘Today to thee, tomorrow to me.’”

“Tomorrow—! What consolation is that to me, I should like to know? With a boy on the throne who can improvise a *coup-de-théâtre* like this at a moment’s notice, the devil himself can only tell when tomorrow will be.”

The tall officer who had shot Stepan Markovitch looked over the head of the crowd at the figure of the boy on the lighted balcony, and laughed softly.

“Do not disturb yourself, my friend,” he said. “Tomorrow or next week—it will be all the same in the end.”

The two men slipped away through the crowd. Gradually the excitement subsided, the people dispersed, singly, or in little groups, eagerly discussing the events of the night. Kasimir and the queen left the balcony. Almost unconsciously she led the way back to the room which they had quitted so short a time before, under circumstances so dramatically different.

Arrived there, she stood and looked for a few moments in silence at this boy whom she felt

dimly she had never understood before—whom she did not understand now. He was very pale and she noticed that his hands were trembling as they had not done when, in danger of his life, he had helped Josef put on his uniform. Another woman would have caught him in her arms and wept over him. But the queen had spent all her tenderness on a man not worthy of it nor, indeed, of her; she had none left for Kasimir, the child of a short-lived and ill-fated passion, brought up in an atmosphere of hatred and bitterness. Only, dimly, as it were, she felt that she should bestow upon him some sign of approval and affection. It was not her fault that fate had left her so little to give to anyone. She put her hand on his shoulder and brushed his white cheek lightly with her lips.

“You have behaved very well, Kasimir,” she said. “I think you have saved all our lives. Now go to bed and rest yourself. Tomorrow everything will be quiet again and Schamiratz will take over the arrangement of our tangled affairs. Goodnight.”

She went out, hardly moved from her habitual bitter calm—the calm which had been born so hardly out of such infinite agonies of shame and disgust and disillusionment unutterable.

Kasimir obeyed her mechanically. He undressed without Josef's help, and lay down in the cool, refreshing darkness. For a long time he did not move, lying quietly, looking open-eyed into the dark. Then a sudden passion of

some emotion which he could not have explained to himself swept over him. He buried his face in the pillows and the bed shook with his stifled sobs.

Tomorrow General Schamiratz would practically be king of Salitza. Everything would be quiet again, as the queen had said. But tonight for a few moments the royal cage-door had been opened and the captive within had breathed the swift, intoxicating air of freedom—the lonely boy had for a little while played the part of a man, face to face with his fellow-men, for one brief, marvelous space, if only in a struggle for life, no longer alone.

CHAPTER V

TO the high house beyond the river the accession of Kasimir I had brought sorrow and desolation. Pavlo, especially, could not recover from the shock of that moment when he had knelt in the Boulevard Valitine by his dead father's side and seen the man who had shot him down passing on unconcernedly, with the cry "Death to Mikhail of Paris!" upon his lips.

"I know his regiment," Pavlo said to Fritz Goldenburg, now become the comforter of their sorrow as in happier days he had so often been the sharer of their simple pleasures. "I know his regiment—it was the Sixth. I know them by their silver tassels—no other regiment wears tassels exactly like those. I will wait for that man and kill him."

"You must not do that, Pavlo," Fritz said, his stolid Teutonic nature appalled by the fierceness of Salitzan hatred.

"He killed my father, didn't he? Why shouldn't I kill him?"

According to Salitzan ideas, the question was unanswerable. But Fritz tried to answer it as best he could.

"It is true that he killed your father, but it

does not follow that it would be right for you to kill him."

"Right!" repeated Pavlo impatiently. "I don't know anything about it's being right. I mean to do it—that is all."

"But we should do what is right, Pavlo."

The boy shook his black head.

"That is all very well for you. You're a German. I'm not. I shall kill the man who shot my father."

Fritz went in despair to Liane and told her what her brother was contemplating.

"He is quite capable of shooting a whole regiment," he said. "You must try and persuade him to be reasonable—he is beyond me."

Liane also tried her hand at rendering her brother amenable to reason.

"After all, poor father fired first," she said. "He might have shot the officer—you don't seem to think of that."

"But he didn't," argued the boy. "He didn't, Liane. What is the use of saying silly things like that? The soldiers were on their way to the palace to kill the king and father was right to do what he did. If he had killed the officer in defence of the king's life, that would have been right too."

"I thought you were against the king," poor Liane said in despair. "I am sure I have heard you abuse him often enough."

"I am talking about father, not about the king."

In the vain hope that his blood-thirsty inten-

tions might be diverted by conversation, she made him tell her again what had happened. It was the Sixth Regiment—he was quite sure of that. He had not been able to see the officer's face—he had put the collar of his cloak up, and besides he, Pavlo, was a little behind him, on the right-hand side of the Boulevard Valitzine. He would know him again anywhere. He would know his voice if he heard it, even without seeing him at all. The man's voice seemed to have struck him, though he could not explain why. He could not describe him very clearly. He was very tall, and the boy thought he had fair hair and a fair mustache—yes, he was almost certain about the mustache.

It was a description which might have fitted almost any officer in the Salitzan army, though Salitzans, as a rule, are dark. Still, it was possible that Pavlo had made a mistake about the color of the man's hair. But it would be easy enough to find him—everybody would know the names of the officers in the Sixth.

Liane told Fritz what he said. The German looked grave.

"My brother is a lieutenant in the Sixth," he said. "I know the names of most of the officers. The colonel is Gliska, one of the new council of regency. It certainly could not have been Gliska. He wouldn't have led the way to the palace crying 'Death to Mikhail of Paris!' We may as well put that out of our minds at once. I don't know who could have led the regiment that night—everything was in such

confusion. My brother is in Berlin on leave, and Major Janno is in bed with a broken leg."

They spent some days in dreadful uncertainty as to Pavlo's intention. Then their anxiety was relieved. He came in one day and threw himself into a seat with a harassed air.

"I have seen every officer in the Sixth," he said. "There was a sort of review this morning out at Mirsk, and I thought *he* might be there. But he was not. He evidently is not an officer in the Sixth at all."

Liane and Fritz breathed more freely for the time being.

After the excitement of the revolution which had cost Mikhail V his crown, Khristovitz had grown quiet again, as the queen had prophesied it would. General Schamiratz was the idol of the army and the popular hero of Salitza; but it was not altogether his influence that had brought about this happy state of things. The coolness of the boy king on that eventful night had impressed the public mind more deeply than those in authority supposed. Certainly Schamiratz would have smiled a pitying smile if he had been told that the peaceful manner in which the capital had accepted the new regime was due as much to the enthusiasm for Kasimir as it was to any affection for him. Schamiratz had a very clear idea of his own merits and a very high opinion of his own popularity. It would not have pleased him to consider his sovereign in the light of a rival; nor would it have been a very propitious commence-

ment for his sovereign, to tell the truth, if the fact had been unduly forced upon the gallant general's notice that the king was quite as popular as himself.

So the "Lion of Mirsk," as his admirers called him, took every opportunity of riding about the city on his white charger and arousing all the enthusiasm that he could for his own person. It was all for the king's ultimate good, no doubt. But to Kasimir, shut up in the palace, the hours seemed very long.

That moment of liberty on the balcony was already receding into the dim regions of memory. But it was a memory that stung him. It was by his own act that he was king at all—that a tragedy had been averted; yet now that the danger was over, no one seemed to consider him a person of much account. Under all the pomp with which they were careful to hedge him in from all intercourse with his own subjects, he detected the eternal irony of things—the farce which surrounded with all the emblems of power and dignity one who was in reality little more than a captive. This boy, silent, nervous, intensely sensitive and impressionable, had the wit to see through the dismal comedy, if not the strength to put an end to it. On the very day after his accession, Schamiratz, with his blunt, hearty manner which innocent people imagined to be the index of a frank and honorable nature, brought the royal marionette a bundle of papers to sign.

"Your majesty need not be troubled with

needless details," he remarked, in the bluff and breezy tones which characterized the Lion of Mirsk. "It will only be necessary for you to sign these documents. I have seen that they are all in order."

Kasimir's grave mouth kept from even the suspicion of a smile. His voice was perfectly expressionless and polite as he answered:

"You are very kind, general. I think I will read the papers."

He read them, steadily and persistently, from beginning to end. Schamiratz stood by, impatient and uneasy. Then the king began to ask questions. Schamiratz fidgeted palpably. Was the king actually going to take an interest in affairs of state? If so, it struck him that the late revolution had been singularly unsuccessful.

Kasimir was perfectly aware of his impatience; but not the most accomplished actor could have appeared more utterly unconscious of it. Schamiratz became more and more uneasy, for it was clear to him that this boy of fifteen was as capable of forming an opinion even of intricate affairs of policy as many people twice his age. Some time after he had gone, the queen came to Kasimir's study.

"What have you been saying to Schamiratz?"

He looked down almost timidly. With a man he could to a certain extent hold his own, in his own way; with a woman he was hopelessly at a loss, even though that woman was his mother.

"I don't know what I said—nothing particu-

larly important. We discussed the papers he brought for me to sign. He intends taking certain measures at once which I should have thought——”

The queen broke in hastily.

“For all our sakes, don't think about these affairs, Kasimir—or think what Schamiratz wishes! You will get into worse trouble than your father, if you offend Schamiratz. Mikhail at least never meddled in politics or interfered with the government until that unlucky tax. You saw what happened then.”

Kasimir looked down still. A curious expression of humiliation, almost of disgust, was upon his face. So he was king not by the grace of God, but by the favor and protection of General Schamiratz! It seemed to him that royalty was a cheap and rather nasty commodity.

The queen looked at him curiously. To her, all matters connected with the ruling of the kingdom seemed more or less banal and even irritating. What did it matter, after all, what measures Schamiratz did or did not take? There would always be a certain number of people who were satisfied with the existing condition of things, and another much greater number who would be satisfied, on principle, with nothing at all. To her mind, it was safest to let both parties alone. She proceeded to express this view, at some length and with considerable vehemence.

Kasimir heard her in respectful, if unilluminating, silence. He naturally did not agree with

her in the least. The memory of that moment of freedom on the balcony over the West Gate still hung in his mind.

She left him at last, and took an opportunity of expressing to General Schamiratz her opinion that the king's sudden interest in affairs of state would soon pass away.

"If I may be permitted to say what I think," replied Schamiratz—he never expressed one half of what he thought—"I think his majesty needs—needs relaxation. Young society—a little pleasure, in brief," he ended, smiling with every appearance of the frankest good-humor.

The pale queen glanced at him with a swift, passing gleam of mistrust in her eyes. Pleasure! Was that to be the cure for Kasimir's precocity? She shivered at the word. Sixteen years spent as the wife of Mikhail of Paris had given the word for all time a sinister sound in her ears.

"What do you want to do to him?" she said, with the sudden fierceness of the mother whose child is menaced by a danger.

Schamiratz opened his eyes a little.

"Do to him, madame? I am always at his command, and at yours. But it struck me that the king has no friends, no intimates."

"A king *can* have no friends," the pale queen answered bitterly.

Schamiratz bowed.

"I venture to disagree with you, madame. The more friends a king has, the better for him."

“And for them,” she smiled, with a touch of irony.

Schamiratz bowed again.

“Madame, you do me an injustice. What have I to gain by the king’s favor? But—I have sons who might well be the king’s friends, to his advantage as well as to their own.”

The queen turned away for a moment and was silent.

“I will advise the king to appoint your sons to his household,” she said at last, and dismissed him with an unusual amount of hauteur.

It was done. Ivan and Sasha Schamiratz were appointed to the king’s household—one might almost say, to the king’s intimacy. He was tacitly told to make friends with them and they were told, by no means tacitly, to make friends with him. They were both some years older than himself—handsome, reckless, unscrupulous, brought up in a school which revered nothing in heaven or earth.

At first they disgusted Kasimir; afterwards they fascinated him. He followed their lead, imitated their example. After all, it was no use to take life seriously. He could do nothing in the kingdom—he, the king, the tool of General Schamiratz. He might as well enjoy himself, as his father had done.

Even General Schamiratz was astonished at the success of his little scheme and the readiness with which the king followed the example of his amiable sons. “He is the son of Mikhail of Paris, after all,” he said to himself comfortably.

But Schamiratz was far from guessing how completely the king saw through the scheme, even while he permitted it to succeed, and with what a sick loathing he hated himself for not being strong enough to revolt against the man who was his master. There were times when the full realization of his position was almost more than he could endure—when for days he would shut himself up alone in his apartments, seeing no one, and give way to black fits of despair. His temper became uncertain, and he indulged in occasional outbursts of passion before which even the light-hearted cynicism and callousness of Ivan and Sasha Schamiratz shrank appalled.

Stories of the king's delinquencies got about very rapidly. It is easy to give a king a bad name in Salitza, and, once given, it is a fixture forever. Black tales of what went on at the palace soon undermined the transient popularity which Kasimir had won for himself on the night of his accession. "He is the son of Mikhail of Paris," was the general verdict. In certain quarters people were already beginning to discuss the advisability of deposing him, and electing Schamiratz king.

The only person who tried to save Kasimir was the queen. She saw the mistake she had made in yielding to Schamiratz's suggestion. One day she went to Kasimir's study, and found him alone.

"I wanted to speak to you," she said.

Yet she did not find it easy to say what she had

come to say. She looked instead at Kasimir's face. It was sullen, and there was a dangerous light in his eyes.

"It is best to speak plainly," she said at last.

He interrupted her.

"There is no need for you to speak plainly, madame. I know what you have come to say."

A kind of desperation seized her.

"You don't know what you are doing. Already people say you are as bad as—as your father. And it is worse in your case than in his, because you are so young."

Kasimir smiled. "Young?" he said. "Have I ever been young? I don't remember it."

"Alter—send away the Schamiratzes."

"You asked me to appoint them," said the king.

"I didn't know what they were, or that you would follow their example. I find now that they have a terrible character in their regiment—they ought not to be admitted within any decent person's doors."

"I am not a decent person," said Kasimir bitterly. "I am only the king!"

"Kasimir——!" she cried.

His sullen eyes blazed suddenly.

"Leave me alone—don't come here to reproach me," he said roughly. "Do you think I can't do that for myself?"—and he threw himself into a seat and dropped his head in his hands.

She stood looking at him, utterly at a loss what to do.

“If you have any love for me——” she began at last, with the hesitating air of one trying the efficacy of an argument of which he is by no means sure.

He lifted his head.

“Don’t talk about that! You are my mother—I know that. But have you ever loved me? Have you ever been anything to me? You haven’t been unkind—you could not be that to a dog. But I think you love your dogs better than me—and understand them more.”

It was a terrible thing for her to hear. The most terrible part of it was that it was true. She tried to answer, but failed.

He understood her silence.

“You see—it is true. Don’t think I want to hurt you—don’t think I am reproaching you. It is not your fault. People are as they are made. Perhaps if I had been different you would have cared for me.”

Some instinct of pity and tenderness drew her to him. She put her hand timidly on his shoulder.

“Kasimir—I didn’t know—I didn’t understand that you wanted me. I—how was I to know? Your father——” She paused. “Your father—did not want me—or only for a little while when——” Again she broke off. It was not easy even now for her to speak of Mikhail. “I—never knew you felt like this—you were always so silent, so reserved, even as a little

child. 'And everyone was afraid of my influence with you because I am a foreigner. But now—can't we begin again—now?'

For a moment Kasimir sat very still. It seemed to her that he hesitated. Then he pushed his chair away from the table at which he sat and rose abruptly to his feet. Her hand fell to her side.

"It is too late now," he said.

CHAPTER VI

IT was with slow steps and a heavy heart that Liane Markovitch took her way now to the "Paradis des Dames." No more singing on the stair, no more joyous little suppers on cabbage soup and dry bread and happy, careless laughter. No more gay rambles along the Boulevard Mikhail II of an evening, with Pavlo chattering at her side and Mikhail's hot small fingers clinging to her hand. No more fun, no more gaiety. A black cloud hung over them all.

In vain good madame of the "Paradis des Dames" tried to comfort her favorite.

"See, now, my cabbage, thou art young—these sad days are not for ever. Come, there are hats from dear Paris today—hats new and beautiful, which will drive the Claire to distraction."

But not even professional feeling against "the Claire" could drive Liane's sadness away. Who could tell how soon Pavlo might find the tall officer who had shot his father?

She told her sorrows to madame, who held up her hands in horror.

"My poor child, how terrible! But why dost thou not go to the police?"

"And betray Pavlo?" asked poor Liane,

bursting into tears. "My own brother—oh, I can't do that!"

"Ah, this terrible country! No, my darling, I see thou canst not do that. The good God Himself can only tell what mischief that might bring upon you all!"

"That is what Fritz says."

"And who is Fritz, my cabbage?"

Liane told her, with a faint color dawning in her tear-stained cheeks.

"And why dost thou not marry this excellent young man?" inquired madame, not unnaturally.

Liane looked very hard at the new hat which she was unpacking.

"Oh, madame—I—I don't know. He is everything that is good and kind, but—but it isn't wanting to marry him, madame." She grew very red. "I—I don't love him."

"Love him! What nonsense hast thou got into thy stupid little head? Love!"—madame sniffed contemptuously—"What is love, I should like to know? If the young man is all thou hast said, he would be a most suitable husband for thee and thou wouldst soon love him as well as other women love their husbands, and a great deal more. What has given thee these foolish ideas about love, my cabbage?"

"I don't want to marry a man I don't love, madame. I—I should very soon hate him, if I did."

Madame assumed an air as nearly severe as her native good-nature would permit.

“My child, this life that we live is not a foolish book. There it is true that people marry each other for love; but in real life it is not so. Here we marry the best man we can find, with the most money—or sometimes, seest thou, the worst man, with the most money—and make ourselves as happy as we can, and do not dream dreams of the impossible. One man is the same as another, when it comes to living with him. One gets used to all things in time, my cabbage. When I married Jules I would not have believed that I should miss him so much if he were to die—no, not if an angel had come down from heaven to tell me so.”

So madame pleaded the German's cause as he himself did not try to plead it.

One evening he found Liane more than usually pale and anxious. “Pavlo has not come home,” she said. “I went to the place where he works and they have not seen him all day. Oh, Fritz, what shall I do?”

“We can only wait and see. Perhaps he has only gone off on one more wild-goose chase after this officer of his.”

But Pavlo did not come home at all that night. Liane sat waiting until the dawn crept up over the distant spire of the cathedral and the thrushes were in full chorus in the Ostraya Gardens. Then she threw herself on her bed and wept as though her heart was broken—as indeed she thought it was.

It was a sad and weary shadow of the Liane of

old days who crept into the "Paradis des Dames" that morning. Madame tried to comfort her, though in her own heart she feared the worst. At mid-day Fritz Goldenburg appeared in the Boulevard Mikhail II and asked to see Liane. She flew to him, alarmed by his appearance at that unwonted hour and in that unwonted place. His face was grave and he had a copy of the *Khristovitz Courier* in his hand.

"There is a paragraph here—I don't know whether it is about Pavlo, but I thought I would bring it to you."

The paragraph was brief.

"This evening two officers whose names we are unable to discover were fired upon in the Boulevard Valitzine by a young man who fled immediately he had committed this outrage upon the public peace. The young man wore a workman's dress, but this may have been a disguise. His name is not known. We are pleased to learn from a bystander that neither of the two officers was injured."

Liane dropped the paper and looked at Fritz.

"It is Pavlo—I am sure it is," she said. "Now he will go to the mountains and join the brigands, as he threatened more than once to do when father was angry with him."

"He may not have been the man who did this at all," Fritz said, trying to believe in his own words. "He may come back today."

"It was Pavlo—I know it was. Oh, Fritz, now he will go to the mountains and be shot and we shall never see him again!"

And indeed it looked as though she were right, for Pavlo did not return. They dared not make any inquiries about him for fear of drawing attention to his absence from home. Liane was worn out with sorrow and anxiety. Pavlo was her favorite of the two boys—he had shared her amusements and helped her to keep the tiny flat, lightening every task with nonsense and laughter. Her pale face and hollow eyes cut Fritz to the heart. He would have given his own life cheerfully to bring Pavlo back to his sister's arms.

In reality, there was more than Pavlo's fate to be thought about. Old Stepan's irregularly paid pension was gone and they had no more the earnings of his eldest son to depend upon. Money, always a scarce commodity in the little flat under the tiles, was now scarcer there than ever. Mikhail was too young to do much, though he already ran errands for madame, who had suddenly discovered that the "Paradis des Dames" could no longer exist without the services of a small and very mischievous boy of precisely Mikhail's size and age.

When the winter came the situation grew grave. If they had enough for food and rent, there was not enough for firing. Something must be done. With a sinking heart Liane told Fritz that they must find a cheaper flat.

Mikhail had run out for a few moments on an errand for Fritz. The German sat silent for a while before he spoke. He remembered that morning on the Ostraya Bridge. Would it be

of any use to try his luck again? He looked at Liane with a sick longing at his heart.

“If you would let me take care of you, dear,” he said, “you need never worry about these things any more. Liane—won’t you try? I don’t want to press you to say yes, I don’t want to vex you. But—Liane, if you would marry me I would never let you regret it.”

There was silence in the little room. Liane had dropped her work across her knees. Her head was bent, so that Fritz could not see her face. He came over to her gently, and took her hands in his. “Let me try and make you happy again, *Herzliebchen*. We will not go away from here. We will live here all together—you and I and Mikhail.”

She had let him take her hands. She sat motionless for a second. “You are too good for me,” she said presently. “Fritz, I hate to say it, but I must be honest—I must tell you the truth. If I marry you it will be because I am poor and unhappy and want someone to take care of me, and of Mikhail. I can’t pretend that I care for you, because I don’t. I like you very, very much—that’s all. If you marry me knowing this, you mustn’t blame me if I disappoint you afterwards.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her very tenderly.

“You will never disappoint me, *Herzliebchen*. Liane, I am very humble—I don’t ask much. If you will like me a little—a very little, dear——”

She was touched and softened. Perhaps at that moment she came nearer to loving him than she was ever to do again.

“Dear Fritz, I like you more than anyone else in the world,” she said.

So it was arranged, and Fritz Goldenburg had the desire of his heart. But that night when he had gone, and Mikhail had been put to bed, after expressing his entire approval of his sister's betrothal and even going so far as to guarantee the pleasure of Ivan the Terrible at receiving Fritz into her family circle—when the lights were out, and all the world of their riverside quarter was asleep, Liane sat at her window, and looked across the river with wistful eyes. As she looked, her eyes clouded with a sadness bitterer than tears. It was the end of all her dreams, and dreams die harder, perhaps, than realities. Nothing was left—except possibly the memory of a blue and silver officer lounging round the show-room of the “Paradis des Dames” in Princess Roumanine's wake, and looking at her with beautiful, inscrutable blue eyes, which were yet a little cruel and even sinister, she could not have told why. With a sigh she put it from her, drew down the blind, and went slowly and sorrowfully to bed.

They were married within a fortnight, to madame's great relief and delight. The good woman won Mikhail's heart forever by presenting Ivan the Terrible with an enormous white satin bow in which to celebrate the happy event.

“It is a great comfort that you have married a man who likes cats,” he remarked to Liane. “If you had had a blue and silver officer, as Pavlo used to tell you to do, he might have been horrid to Ivan.”

But he did not see the look that his innocent speech brought into the velvet eyes that Vladimir Oourof had admired, nor would he have understood it if he had. The dream was over. She had married Fritz.

On the very day of their marriage an incident occurred which made some stir in high circles in Khristovitz. Vladimir Oourof and a party of friends were wolf-hunting in the hilly country beyond Mirsk. Vladimir got separated from the rest and found himself in a little clearing in the forest round what seemed to be a woodcutter's hut. He went to the door, thinking to ask the way, of which he was by no means sure. For some time his knocking had no effect. Then the door was opened by a boy of fifteen or sixteen, poorly dressed, thin, and apparently in great want of food. He looked for a moment in the attaché's face, with a wild expression of astonishment and anger. Then he whipped a knife out of his sash and sprang at him like a tiger-cat.

He might as well have thrown himself against an iron wall. Vladimir was one of those men who are always ready for danger and keep their nerve even under the most sudden assault. The boy, weakened as he was by long privations, had

no chance with him. Vladimir caught him in a grip of steel, wrenched the knife out of his hands, and held him away from him, looking at him with a cruel gleam in his eyes.

"This is the second time you have tried to kill me," he said. "It was you who shot at me in the Boulevard Valitzine a month or two ago. Now I am going to kill you."

Still holding both his hands in one of his own, the Russian took a tiny silver-mounted revolver from his pocket—a pretty little toy which had been a gift from Anna Roumanine. He looked at the boy for a moment more.

"Have you anything to say before I shoot you?" he asked.

The boy did not try to struggle. His whole strength seemed to have been exhausted in that one murderous leap at his enemy. He lifted a pair of beautiful, soft black eyes to Vladimir's blue ones.

"No," he answered, panting a little. "I tried to kill you because you shot my father. I am sorry I didn't do it—that's all. Shoot me if you like—I don't want to live."

Vladimir still looked at the thin, worn face. Where had he seen eyes like those before? For the fraction of a second he wavered in his determination. Then he glanced at his own hand. It was streaming with blood from a deep gash on the wrist, which he had not felt in the struggle.

The cruel gleam came back to his eyes. He lifted the pretty little revolver and pressed it

against the boy's temple, just beneath the thick, curling hair.

"Are you ready?" he said. It was his way of paying a compliment to his adversary's coolness in the face of death.

"Yes, monsieur," the boy said quietly.

Vladimir fired. The slight figure swayed away from him and fell at his feet with a choking cry. Vladimir put the little revolver in his pocket, and, kneeling down, felt the boy's heart. It had ceased to beat almost as he fell.

The attaché knelt on for a moment more, scrutinizing the boy he had just shot in cold blood, without a trace of pity or feeling of any kind on his face. He had loosened the thin shirt and now saw that a little steel chain hung about his victim's throat, supporting a tiny photograph of a woman in the dress of twenty years ago, cased in a cheap miniature frame. Vladimir detached the chain, looked at the photograph, and put both in his pocket, side by side with the silver-mounted revolver. There was not much chance that the boy's body would ever be found, but it was always safest to remove anything that might lead to identification. Then he dragged the body into the hut, and shut the door.

For an hour or more he wandered in the forest, unable to regain his party. He was in a bad temper, for the gash in his wrist was painful. When at last he found his friends he was beginning to wish that the wolf-hunt had never taken place.

But his friends were very pleased with them-

selves after a good day's sport, and very much inclined to be witty on the subject of his disappearance.

"Vladimir has been wolf-hunting with the woodman's pretty daughter. Trust him to amuse himself while other people are hard at work! Tell us the color of her hair, Vladimir."

"Why, he's got a cut on the wrist I could put three fingers in!" cried someone, surprised. "What has happened to you, Oourof?"

"The woodman's pretty daughter has teeth as beautiful as her eyes!"—and there was a general laugh.

Vladimir disposed of a stiff glass of brandy, smiling composedly all the while at these pleasantries. Then he told his story. It was one so usual in that part of the world that no one dreamed of casting a suspicion upon his veracity. He had lost his way and strayed into an unfamiliar portion of the forest. There he had been attacked with a knife by a man who first demanded his money. The knife hurt his wrist, and then he got out his revolver, upon seeing which the robber fled. The cut was a mere scratch—would someone oblige him by tying a handkerchief round it? But it was very annoying to have lost a day's sport.

That evening when Vladimir lounged into his ambassadrice's boudoir, she ran to him with a cry.

"Oh, Vladimir, I have been so frightened about you! Oh, that wicked man—I would kill him if I could! My friend, you are pale—

you are in pain. Ah!"—she recoiled from him with a pretty, affected little scream of terror—"your hand is bound up—you are badly hurt!" She dragged him down on to a rose-silk sofa, and exclaimed over him, and petted him, and worked herself into a condition of the most charming tender sympathy and terror.

"It is nothing—really nothing," he told her; but she would not be content until he had told her the whole story—or at least, his own version of it.

"And you shot at him!" she cried, when he had finished, in an ecstasy of admiration. "You defended yourself, wounded as you were—ah, my hero!—my paladin!"

She threw herself into his arms in tears. But this was a little too much, even for Vladimir Oourof, who, whatever his sins, had a certain sense of humor, and was not a fool.

"It isn't particularly heroic to defend one's life, I imagine," he said, somewhat coldly. "You let your feelings run away with you, my angel."

"I know I do—you always said you adored impulsive women," returned the unsuspecting ambassadrice triumphantly. "Oh, Vladimir, what should I have done if you had been killed? And my poor little gift saved your life, my darling," she murmured, taking it from its place in his pocket, and pressing it theatrically to her lips.

A gleam of sinister amusement shot into Oourof's beautiful eyes. He saw again the little

hut in the forest—the boy's slight figure stretched upon the ground.

“Yes, my white dove,” he said, in his soft, deep, drawling voice, “your little gift—saved my life.”

CHAPTER VII

FOUR years had passed since Fritz and Liane were married. They still lived in the high house by the riverside, but they lived there now by themselves, for little Mikhail, whose ambitions had always lain in a military direction, had become a drummer-boy in a regiment quartered in a frontier town. Liane still went every day to the "Paradis des Dames," for Fritz was at the works up the river from seven in the morning up to eight or nine o'clock at night, and she hated being left alone in the little flat with Ivan the Terrible, now grown fat and lazy and irritable of temper since the departure of her master. So every morning still saw her in the Boulevard Mikhail II, much to madame's delight.

"What should I have done without thee, my cabbage," that good lady would inquire pathetically, "hadst thou married a man less excellent than thy admirable Fritz?"

"He is very good—too good for me," Liane always said in reply to these praises of Fritz. But there was not much enthusiasm in her tone. She had tried at first to make some response to his tenderness—to repay him for all he did for her. She would have given everything in the world to love him, if only because by doing so

she might discharge the infinite debt she owed him; but she came of a race whose passions, both of love and hate, are impatient of control. She tried hard to love Fritz—and the very effort, and the sense of its failure, bred in her heart a sick weariness which in time became almost dislike. His tenderness irritated her because she could not return it, and she drew more and more into herself. She grew hard, and silent, unsympathetic, and at times unkind. She tried to make amends afterwards, but the effort only made things worse. Yet he was very patient still—it was not in him to be otherwise with any living thing, much less with Liane. She wished at times that he would grow weary of wasting his love upon one so unresponsive, but he was not of those who can change.

There were gray days up there in the little flat where once all had been so gay and bright. Ah, how long ago they seemed, those days of careless gaiety! What sweet, foolish visions she had dreamed in the old days—and how utterly they had come to nothing! There was no place now in her life for dreams of any kind—no place for that wild, poetic, passionate spirit which beat its wings against the cage-bars of commonplace real life and sighed desperately for it knew not what.

It was a spring morning like that day long ago when she had stood with Fritz on the Ostraya Bridge. In the Ostraya Gardens the thrushes were singing as though their little speckled throats must burst with sweetness.

Liane, going to the Boulevard Mikhail II, paused to hear them. She stood on the broad bridge and looked down at the gray and golden waters dancing below. Gradually she forgot everything in the world but the dance of the waves as they went by under the dark arches of the bridge, and the song of the birds in the gardens beyond. She leaned over the ironwork of the balustrade, and a flush came into her cheeks and her eyes grew wide and dreamy. She was a girl again, and gay and happy.

A tall man with a cloak across his shoulders saw her standing there and looked at her thoughtfully. It was Vladimir Oourof. He had been dancing all night at a ball at the embassy and any other man would have been in bed at that moment feeling himself a martyr to the absurd manner in which society chooses to amuse itself. Vladimir bore the inflictions of popularity with graceful resignation. He had nerves of iron and nothing ever tired him. There was to be a review at Mirsk that morning and it seemed foolish to go to bed at five in the morning for the purpose of getting up at seven. The tall attaché drank his morning coffee and went for a walk. And on the Ostraya Bridge he saw Liane.

He had an unfailing memory for faces and knew her at once, remembering with a touch of ironical amusement, that day in the "Paradis des Dames" when he had kissed the pretty girl who served his ambassadrice almost under his ambassadrice's pretty little foolish nose. And

how lovely the girl had been—how lovely she was still! He had seen many pretty women in his time, but here was the queen of them all. He stood there smoothing his mustache, and studying her—the velvet eyes that had taken his fancy before, the pale, delicately cut features, the black hair piled in thick masses under the brim of a simple straw hat.

She turned suddenly and saw him. The color flamed into her face and the velvet eyes glowed as though with fire. It was a day of long ago come back to her indeed, and Vladimir Ouf had come with it.

Vladimir saw the look. He was not impressionable, and, for all the long list of his conquests, he was not given to falling in love at first sight. But here was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and he had sense enough to know it. He did not look at her again. He simply walked past her in a preoccupied way, and caught his sword in her dress.

The army of Salitza, when it does these things, even to ladies, does not as a rule trouble itself to apologize very profoundly for its awkwardness. Vladimir did. He apologized so well, indeed, that five minutes later he was still standing on the Ostraya Bridge by Liane's side.

He was very careful. He saw that she knew him, that she remembered the "Paradis des Dames." He spoke of the fine morning, of the thrushes singing in the gardens, the exquisite gray and gold of the waves rushing under the

bridge. His conversation might have been printed as a model of simplicity and decorum. But all the time his eyes were upon her with the look she remembered so well from that day in the "Paradis des Dames."

The cathedral clock struck six, and Liane started.

"It is late—what have I been thinking of to stay here so long?" she said, trembling suddenly with a strange sort of fear. "Goodmorning, monsieur!"

"I had forgotten that such a thing as time still existed," Vladimir said softly, and gave her one more look out of those confusing eyes of his before she could hurry away.

For himself, he was not in any hurry at all. He strolled slowly back to the embassy, where his horse was waiting for him, and set out for the review at Mirsk.

After dinner he received a summons from Prince Roumanine. He found the little ambassadrice's husband in his study, with a cigarette between his lips, and a thoughtful expression upon his small, wrinkled face. He was one of those dry, elderly men who appear never to have been young, and who never seem to grow any older than they have always been. He nodded at Vladimir Oourof and blinked at him with a pair of weak gray eyes which were yet uncommonly well able to see all that went on about him.

"Sit down, Oourof," he said, in a high, expressionless voice which sometimes gave his

wife "nerves." "I suppose you have been bored to death? This Schamiratz is a singularly stupid person. What is the good of reviewing this ridiculous toy army of his, which consists of three men and a boy, and with which he dare not go to war?"

Vladimir smiled.

"Schamiratz seemed to enjoy himself, excellency. And I am very seldom bored. I possess the happy faculty of becoming interested in small things."

Roumanine offered the young man his cigarette-case.

"I want to talk to you. You are the only one here who has any brains. You are a favorite at the palace, I believe. Do you see much of the king?"

"A good deal, excellency. I have often the honor of playing tennis with him. He is a good player, and likes an adversary who can give him some trouble."

"And are you undiplomatic enough to beat his majesty?"

"Occasionally, excellency. To be beaten is a charming novelty for him—even a king must get tired of winning in time."

Roumanine stroked his short beard, and smiled faintly.

"I see you possess high diplomatic qualities, my dear Oourof. Well—how does he strike you, this young man? There are tales told of him in Khristovitz—I don't know whether they are true."

“When one hears evil of a man, excellency, it is generally safest to believe it—especially if one has any personal dealing with him. I imagine that most of the tales you have heard are true.”

“He is supposed to be very much against foreigners. Especially against us.”

“Ah, most nations are that. It is because they do not understand our peaceful intentions towards other Powers and the absolute frankness and straightforwardness of our diplomatic methods.”

Roumanine rubbed his beard until the short gray hairs bristled. His weak eyes blinked at space.

“Exactly—exactly. It is very extraordinary, when our one desire is to promote peace and the welfare of Europe in general. Yet we are always being misunderstood and suspected. Even those fools of English don’t trust us, though they will believe in almost anybody. And as for the Americans! It is simply unpardonable when one Power hasn’t even the decency to pretend to believe what another tells it—besides, it is so ill-bred. One would almost suppose that they considered diplomacy another word for lying.”

Vladimir knocked the ash off the top of his cigarette.

“Almost, excellency,” he assented with an unmoved face.

Roumanine sighed softly, as though bewailing in his own mind the want of faith of the

Great Powers in the good intentions of the country he represented in Salitza.

"Yes—yes—it is very annoying. But the king—you don't suppose he could be influenced?"

"He might be influenced, excellency, but what would be the good of influencing him? Schamiratz governs the country—and his sons rule the king."

"Yes, but things might happen—Schamiratz might drink a cup of coffee which didn't agree with him—in a country like this, these deplorable things are always happening."

"Even if so dreadful an event as your excellency mentions were to happen, the king is in the hands of Ivan and Sasha Schamiratz."

"There is still the other man—the pretender."

"There was a party in the country which hoped he would come in at the last revolution."

"You know everyone in Paris—I suppose you know him?"

"Slightly. He is rather a mild sort of person, with no enterprise. He has a penchant for pretty opera-singers, imagines himself a musical genius in consequence, and plays the flute very much out of tune."

Roumanine smiled at the description.

"I never knew an amateur who played it otherwise. Well—he might be influenced."

"Doubtless, excellency—but we should be put to all the trouble and expense of organizing another revolution in order to put him on the throne."

"That is true. Then we had better turn our attention to the king. I suppose *some* kind of influence could be brought to bear upon him. If not a man's, then a woman's."

"He is afraid of women."

"I do not believe in these young men who are afraid of women," Roumanine answered somewhat drily. "I have never yet met a man who was at all afraid of the right woman."

"And if the influence of the right woman were in our favor——" the tall attaché observed thoughtfully—and did not finish the sentence.

"Exactly. Now you see what I mean. If we can't influence the king through a man, we must do it through a woman. If we can do it through neither, then—he must go."

"Exit Kasimir. Enter Zanolitch," said Vladimir, as though quoting from the stage directions of a play.

"Exactly," said Roumanine again.

"And what if Zanolitch——?"

Roumanine lighted himself another cigarette.

"Ah, my friend, that is all on the knees of the gods. Even in diplomacy it is best not to look too far ahead—it disturbs one's sense of perspective. Zanolitch will probably see which way the interests of European peace lie and place himself with us upon the side of civilization and tranquillity. If not——"

There was silence in the room for a moment. The ambassador looked into space with a contemplative air. Vladimir Oourof examined the toes of his beautifully polished boots.

“If not, excellency,” he said presently, as though continuing Roumanine’s remark, “there is always—coffee.”

Roumanine made a little sudden movement of dissent.

“My dear Ouf, you are laughing at me!”

Vladimir lifted his eyes from the contemplation of his boots.

“I should not dream of such a thing, excellency,” he said. “But of course we will try other means first.”

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER that morning on the Ostraya Bridge Liane was continually haunted by Vladimir Oourof. If she lingered on the bridge for a moment on her way to work, he was certain to appear; when she left the "Paradis des Dames" in the evening, she almost always met him somewhere in the Boulevard Valitzine, or the Boulevard Mikhail II. He was always at hand, and she grew to look for his presence—to miss it when he did not appear.

Somehow the high house on the riverside was less dull now that Vladimir had again come into her life. There was the possibility of seeing him during the day to keep her company. At night she wondered whether she would see him next morning; in the morning she wondered whether she would meet him again at night. The day began to mean to her one thing and nothing else—whether she would see Vladimir Oourof.

She began to sing again now, as she ran up the stairs, with a step light and careless as in the days of long ago. Fritz heard her once or twice and took comfort. She was happy—it was all that he asked. Her happiness was a hundred times dearer to him than his own. But she herself could not have said whether she was

happy or not. She was living in a kind of dream, from which she did not want ever to wake. What did it matter about the rest of the world, and the little, stupid things that happened every day? She had escaped at last into a land where they could weary her no more. Vladimir would meet her in an hour's time—she could not think of anything else but that.

The waking came at last, one night when there was an open-air fête in the Ostraya Gardens. She had stolen out for an hour, for Fritz had not come home, and the little flat under the tiles was very silent and dull. The Ostraya Gardens looked like fairy-land, with tiny electric lamps hanging in ropes of blue and gold and red from the branches of the trees. She strayed along the lighted paths for a few moments before she saw Vladimir Ouf walking towards her. She smiled at him in silence, and in silence he turned and walked slowly beside her.

It was fairy-land indeed—the colored lamps, the sound of music stealing to them softly under the illuminated trees. A spell seemed to be on her—she did not care to speak. Side by side they strayed along the winding paths. She did not notice that they had left the crowd very far away and were alone, until Vladimir suddenly stopped and stood motionless before her.

She stopped too, suddenly trembling, filled with a strange sense of fear. She looked up at him with wide, terrified eyes. In another second he caught her in his arms and held her,

kissing her madly, again and again, crushing her, hurting her.

Just for a moment she did not resist. She would never see him again, as long as she lived, but, for this one moment, she would drain the last dregs of the cup of happiness which she was about to dash from her lips forever.

She tore herself away from him. For a second she stood motionless before him, with her hand to her throat as though she could not breathe.

“Never dare speak to me again!” she gasped at last, and turned and fled away from him like a deer under the lighted trees.

He stood there looking after her, absolutely paralyzed with astonishment and rage.

But she did not look back. Like the wind she fled through the least frequented paths of the gardens and gained the gates. Panting and trembling, she hurried over the bridge and along the riverside ways to the high house beyond. Up the steep stairs she ran, and turned the handle of the door at the top.

She pushed the door open softly, and looked in. Fritz was sitting at the little table, with a copy of the *Khristovitz Courier* before him. Ah, how peaceful it looked, the quiet little room with Ivan the Terrible licking herself on the rug and Fritz's kind face bent placidly over the paper! How peaceful and still and quiet—and she had been—where? In heaven, or in hell? She did not know then—she never would know; but she felt Vladimir Oourof's arms

around her and his kisses on her lips. With a sudden cry of fear, of remorse, she crossed the room, and threw herself on her knees by the chair where Fritz was sitting.

“Oh, Fritz, save me—forgive me!”

It was some time before he could soothe her apparently inexplicable terror. Then, in a voice broken with sobs, she told him everything.

Fritz Goldenburg sat and listened with a sinking heart. There was only one thing which comforted him. She had drawn back before it was too late—she had repented of her folly while it was no more than that, and confessed all and asked him to forgive her and help her to escape from the ruin which lay before her.

He lifted her from the ground and soothed her as he would have soothed a child; and she clung to him, and grew gradually more quiet.

“Fritz, will you ever forgive me? Ah, don’t kiss me—I am not fit for you to touch! If you only knew—I can’t tell you everything, I am afraid you would hate me if I did. It was my fault—all my fault. Oh, Fritz, don’t hate me!”

He only held her closer.

“Don’t cry so, *Herzliebchen*,” he said. “You have told me—you will never see the man again. You didn’t deceive me and lie to me, as some women would have done. And as for hating you——” he broke off, and was silent for a moment. “You must never think of that. I have always loved you and I shall love you to the last hour of my life.”

“You will keep me safe—you will keep me

away from—from him?" she whispered. "I'm afraid of myself, Fritz—afraid. I can't trust myself any more."

"You must swear to me that you will never see this man again."

But he saw that she hesitated.

"If I should break my oath, Fritz——?" she said, and he felt her shudder.

"What am I to do?" he asked in something like despair.

"If you would take me away—quite away—somewhere in another country where he could never come. Take me to Germany, Fritz!"

If he could only do that! But he knew that it was impossible for him to leave Khristovitz.

"You won't swear that you will never see him again, then?" he said very sadly.

She clung to him, shuddering, shivering, as though with violent cold.

"I will try," she answered, very low. "Oh, Fritz, I will try, with my whole heart and soul. But I can't swear—I can't trust myself to keep my word."

He said no more—what, indeed, could he say? It would have been easy to be harsh with her, but he knew that it would have driven her straight to Oourof.

She would not go again to the "Paradis des Dames." She sent some excuse to madame—she was ill, and besides, Fritz wanted her at home. She stayed all day in the hot little flat under the tiles and grew every hour more wretched. The flat stifled her in those hot sum-

mer days—she was sick for a breath of fresh air, for the movement and gaiety of the Boulevard Mikhail II.

And Vladimir Oourof, the cause of all her trouble, was almost as miserable as she was. He was caught at last, the blue and silver dandy, the exquisite lady-killer whose boast it was that, for all the hearts he had broken, he had never once lost his own. This was another sort of woman from any he had known—she was no Anna Roumanine, frail and foolish, to be won and wearied of in a week. It would be difficult to describe the disgust with which the poor little ambassadrice filled her paladin's faithless soul during those few weeks after the *fête* in the Ostraya Gardens.

But his preoccupation and unresponsiveness brought about a crisis before long. One evening she sank on the rose-silk sofa in tears. It was the old story—he was tired of her—she would poison herself—she would never live on if he deserted her.

Vladimir stood by the sofa, and looked at her. How absurd she was—how she irritated him, and bored him! What devil of perversity led her to make a scene with him tonight when he was in a bad temper and desperately in love with another woman, who apparently did not intend to have anything more to do with him? He was savage with a sense of his own failure and mad with frustrated passion. A sudden fury swept over him.

“You fool!” he said through his teeth in a

voice his ambassadrice had never heard. "You miserable little, painted, ridiculous fool!"

With a gasp Anna Roumanine left off sobbing, and stared up at him with amazed, incredulous eyes. Alas, they were not to remain incredulous long! There was no mistaking the cold fury of his face—the bitter contempt in his eyes. His lips were drawn back a little over his white teeth, as a vicious horse will draw its lips back before it bites. Anna Roumanine gave a queer, choking cry. "Vladimir——!"

But he was not in the mood for pity, or even for prudence.

"I will have no more of these scenes!" he said brutally. "I have been made ridiculous by your jealousy and vanity quite long enough! Tired of you! I have been tired to death of you for years!"

She held out her poor little helpless, jeweled hands in a gesture of entreaty, of agonized appeal which would have touched another man to compassion, if to nothing else.

"Vladimir! Why are you so cruel—what have I done?"

"You have bored me to death," he said curtly. "Now we will have no more of it, if you please. This is the end."

He turned to the door. With a cry that was almost a scream she sprang up from the rose-silk sofa and ran after him and caught his arm. Her face was gray and colorless under its paint and her eyes were the eyes of a thing stricken with terror.

“Vladimir—Vladimir—don’t leave me! How am I to live without you—how am I to bear my life? You are all I ever had—you are everything in the world to me. Kill me, if you like, but don’t leave me—I love you so—Vladimir! I love you so!”

The cry came straight from the heart which lay beneath all her silliness and shallowness—the heart which had spent all its strength on this one foolish, guilty passion. He tore the little clinging, desperate hands from his sleeve so roughly that he hurt her; but still she tried to bar his way to the door. Losing all control of himself, he caught her by the shoulders and sent her staggering across to the sofa. She fell face-downwards among the rose-silk cushions, and lay there, pitifully still.

Poor little Anna Roumanine! Poor little butterfly, bruised and broken upon the grinding wheel of life! Perhaps it was nothing but a just payment for her many sins and follies which was meted out to her by Vladimir Ouf’s hand. But how can one judge a butterfly hardly, and not pity her, lying there among her rose-silk cushions with her shallow little soul torn with agony and her toy world in pieces round her?

Vladimir, however, was past pity. He left the house as quickly as he could and found himself out in the cool night air with a sense of infinite relief. He went quickly along the Boulevard Valitzine and the Boulevard Mikhail II and on to the Ostraya Gardens. He did not

quite know what led him there. He walked under the trees where only a few weeks ago he had walked with Liane Goldenburg. They were dark now and in the distance a band was playing softly a wild, melancholy air. He wandered to the place where they had stood on the night he had last seen her. If she would only come! He had not understood how great was the hold she had over him until she had disappeared, as it seemed, forever, leaving not a clue behind by which he might have traced her.

That night Liane stood long on the little balcony, gazing wistfully towards the Boulevard Valitzine. Fritz had been detained late at the works, as he was sometimes. He probably would not be home until eleven, or even later. A voice seemed calling her down to the city—to the Ostraya Gardens, cool and deep and green in the shadows of a summer night. She tried to shut her ears to it, but in vain. A kind of terror seized her—oh, if Fritz would but come home! Then she would feel safe again and this horrible temptation would leave her—the horrible, irresistible temptation to go down to the Ostraya Gardens and see Vladimir Oourof once again!

She stood fighting with herself, pale, breathless, trembling. It had come at last, as she had so feared it would, when Fritz was away and there was nothing to defend her from it—the sick longing for Vladimir's voice, for the sight of his tall figure coming towards her under the trees. If she might but see the place where she

had seen him last—surely, surely, there could be no harm in that? He would not be there—had she not told him never to dare to see her again? There could be no harm in her going down for a few minutes.

With feverish haste she put on her hat and ran down the stairs. At the gates of the gardens she paused for a second and hung back. It was wrong—she would never be able to look Fritz in the face again if she went in. But—she went in.

Like one in a dream she went along the shadowy paths. Like one in a dream she saw Vladimir's tall figure coming towards her in the gloom. She did not hesitate now—she did not try to turn back. It was too late. Her chance was gone.

He drew her to him without a word and she threw her arms around his neck and nestled against him with a little, tired sigh. What was the use of resistance? The dream was carrying her away with it. It was too late to turn back.

When she roused herself he would not let her go. She looked up at him with a strange shadow in the velvet eyes he loved.

“I must go back,” she whispered.

“You will never go back,” he said in her ear, in the deep, sweet voice that had mastered her so long ago. “You will come to Paris with me by the midnight train.”

For one moment she saw, as in a vision, the little room high up under the tiles and Fritz

standing there—alone. Then she hid her face against Oufrof's shoulder.

“Take me where you like,” she said. “You are stronger than anything else in the world—I understand that now. I have always belonged to you in my heart—I have always seen your face and heard your voice. I don't care what happens—nothing seems to matter much. I can never escape from you again.”

And up in the little room under the tiles, Fritz was waiting for her as she had seen him waiting. He had come in late and not found her there. A horrible fear awoke in his heart—she was gone to Oufrof, as he had always known she would go some day. He stood there irresolute. Then he went down to the Ostraya Gardens.

He went to the gate-keeper. Yes, he had seen the young woman he described. She had gone out quite half an hour ago with a tall officer in a military cloak. He had heard the officer say to her “We shall be late—we shall lose the Paris train.”

The Paris train! Poor Fritz! He stood there, staring at the man.

“You wanted to catch them?” the gate-keeper said, beginning to suspect something of the real state of the case. “I'm afraid you are too late, my friend. It is five minutes past twelve now—I must shut the gates. Hark! There is the whistle—the train has gone!” He turned his back mercifully upon the German.

But Fritz stood still and speechless, with his eyes on the railway-bridge which crosses the river close to the Ostraya Gardens. He saw the train come tearing across it, a long line of brilliantly lighted carriages, dashing from one dark shore of the river to another. It passed with a rattle and a shriek, the long, swaying, golden thing. Darkness and silence descended again upon the river—it was gone, bearing Liane away to Paris with Vladimir Oourof.

Very slowly he went back to the lonely little room under the tiles, and sat down at the table and hid his face in his hands.

The summer dawn was stealing through the curtains when he got up and went to the little table in the corner, where old Stepan's pistols were kept.

It was mid-day before he was found, sitting dead by the table, as though waiting still for the woman who would never come back.

CHAPTER IX

AT the corner of the Boulevard Valitzine, just where it joins the Boulevard Mikhail the Pious, you will see still a tall white house with green-painted iron balconies at every window. It was here, on the second floor, that Liane Goldenburg came three months after her husband's suicide.

She heard of that in Paris. Vladimir Oourof had been astonished, and perhaps a little piqued as well, by the violence of her grief. For three days she lay in a darkened room, and would hardly speak to him. Then a spirit of reckless gaiety seemed to seize her. She got up, made him take her everywhere, asked to see everything, to hear everything—was never still for a moment. There was a fire in her eyes before which even Vladimir felt a little uneasy. She never spoke of Khristovitz. When he suggested going back, she hesitated and begged for a week more. At the end of the week, it was the same thing. At last he was forced to return to Salitza. He could get no further extension of the leave which had already been protracted to an unusual extent.

So they went back and she came to the tall white house on the corner of the Boulevard Valitzine. It was easy to explain her absence to the few persons who were interested in it.

An uncle of her mother's had died in Paris, leaving her all his fortune, and she had been obliged to go there to claim the money. She had heard of Fritz's suicide in Paris and the news had so prostrated her that she was too ill to come back at once. She could not explain the mystery of his dreadful act. He had been dismissed from the works—probably that had disturbed his mind.

All this she said in an odd, mechanical way, like one repeating a lesson. Good madame at the "Paradis des Dames" held up her hands in horror at her pale face and the haunted look in her eyes.

"And thou art rich—thou hast fine clothes and jewels, my cabbage," she said innocently. "Thou lookest beautiful as a queen."

Liane looked down at the exquisite dress she wore—Vladimir had chosen it; at the diamonds glittering on her fingers—Vladimir's gifts. A strange smile crossed her face.

It was true—she had everything in the world that she had longed for so passionately in the old days. She had even Vladimir Ouf's love as well. But she had also always before her eyes that little room beyond the river, with Fritz sitting by the table, dead, as much by her act as though she had shot him with her own hand; she had always in her ear the sound of the shot that had killed him. She had sat at the opera in Paris, and heard it, louder than all the music. She knew that she would hear it to the last day of her life. Once she spoke to Ouf about it.

"Your nerves are wrong, my darling," he said. "It is imagination—there is no pistol-shot. Think! Shouldn't I have heard it, too? It is fancy—you heard something fall down, perhaps, and thought it was a shot."

She shook her head.

"No—it was no fancy. I heard it and I knew what it was. I am always hearing it—not in the daytime so much, but at night, or when I am alone."

Vladimir glanced up at her quickly, with real pain in his eyes.

"Yes, that is why I hate your leaving me even for a few moments," she said, answering his unspoken question. "That is why I am always asking you to take me about. It isn't that I care for going—it is because I want to forget—not to think."

"But you are not responsible for your husband's death. A man does not necessarily shoot himself because his wife leaves him," the attaché argued.

Again she shook her head.

"You don't understand. I was everything to poor Fritz."

"And are you not everything to me?" he asked, with a sudden little stab of the jealousy he had made his ambassadrice endure so often, unpitied. He drew her closer to him and looked almost fiercely into the velvet eyes. "You repent coming to me—is that it? If you had the chance over again, you would not come?"

He felt her tremble, but the velvet eyes never faltered from his own.

"No, Vladimir," she said very sadly. "That's the worst of it—if I could, I wouldn't go back. If I had the chance over again, and knew what Fritz would do, I should come to you just the same."

A very real tenderness awoke in the fickle attaché's heart.

"I will teach you to forget," he said earnestly. "I will make you so happy that you will not be able to remember."

"Even you cannot do that," she said.

He could not, but he tried, honestly enough. Fickle, selfish and cruel as he was, if he had a genuine feeling for anything, it was for her. He spent every moment he could spare with her; he heaped the most exquisite gifts upon her. They were quite probably unpaid for, but the sentiment which offered them was very real.

One evening he came to the tall white house in the Boulevard Valitzine earlier than usual, with a great bouquet of pink and white roses in his hand.

"Sczeverdin is playing at the Café Valitzine," he said. "We will go and hear him."

She glanced in the long glass beside her.

"As I am, Vladimir? Will this dress do?"

He looked at the dress—it was white, with masses of falling lace. There were pearls at her throat and in her splendid hair, and the roses he had just given her were in her hand.

"Yes—come as you are," he said. "You are

perfectly beautiful tonight." He touched the hand that held the roses with his lips and smiled at her. "You are always perfectly beautiful," he added, in a tone in which he had never paid a compliment to little Anna Roumanine.

She smiled too, and a light of triumph came into her eyes. Sometimes she forgot the little room under the tiles, for a moment or two. She forgot it now. She went down to the waiting carriage by Vladimir's side with a radiant face. The enchantment of the moment mastered her. It was the old ideal of happiness—to roll along the Boulevard Valitzine in a carriage with a blue and silver officer by her side. She looked at Vladimir and smiled again, and touched his arm with a little caressing movement.

"I am happy, Vladimir," she whispered. "It is fairy-land—look at the lamps among the trees. How beautiful it is to be alive!"

The light was still in her eyes when they entered the café. People forgot the music and watched her as she picked her way among the little tables. They found one at last, in a corner away from the rest. Vladimir ordered dinner, and she laid her roses on the table, and looked about her.

The gipsy band was playing a wild, fantastic dance. Sczeverdin, the leader, conducted it with gestures that seemed as wild and barbaric as the music itself. Presently he would play—it was too early yet. People were talking over their dinners and not attending to the music. Even Sczeverdin's black eyes roamed occasion-

ally round the room, as though for him, too, the solemn business of the evening had not begun.

Suddenly Liane laid her hand on the attaché's arm.

"Look, Vladimir—that officer who has just come in. Surely it is the king!"

Vladimir followed the direction of her glance, and saw that she was right. It was the king, attended only by Sasha Schamiratz, and evidently incognito, in the plain, undress uniform of an officer of the Guard. Presumably he, too, had come to hear the gipsy violinist who was drawing enthusiastic crowds to the Café Valitzine. Liane, remembering the night when he had given the bonbons to Mikhail, looked at him with interest. He had altered considerably, and not for the better. His always slight figure seemed to have grown thinner; his face had a haggard look; the sensitive mouth had become nervous. He carried himself with a curious mixture of awkward shyness and military stiffness. When he entered the café all the tables were occupied, and he stood by the door, apparently in some embarrassment, and speaking in a low voice to Sasha Schamiratz.

Vladimir looked across the room at him, and, catching his eye, rose from his seat.

"I will ask him to share our table," he said. "Don't be afraid of him—on these occasions he is only Captain Mikhailovitch."

Before Liane could reply he was half across the room. She saw him speak to the king for

a moment or two. Then they all came across to the table where she was sitting.

"Let me present Captain Mikhailovitch—Madame Goldenburg—Lieutenant Schamiratz," Vladimir said.

The king bowed in his stiff little way, like a shy school-boy.

"Madame permits that we share her table?" he said, speaking in French, but with a strong Salitzan accent. "It is tiresome that the room is so full."

"So many people have to come to hear Sczeverdin," she said, smiling at him with a sudden desire to put him at his ease and forgetting that he was a king—surely kings were not often so shy! He smiled too, and the smile changed his face completely.

"Yes, of course that is it," he answered, speaking more naturally. "They say he is very wonderful. I don't understand music, but sometimes these gipsy bands make me think that I really care for it a great deal more than I am supposed to do. Their music carries one away—it is real, it is alive, it isn't something that a man has made up to sell."

The ice was soon broken. The king had always liked the Russian attaché who played tennis so well and was undiplomatic enough to beat him. Vladimir's ready acceptance of his incognito, and the promptitude with which he had come to his assistance and offered him his own table, pleased him and put him at his ease. It was true that he was a little afraid of the beau-

tiful woman who presided over the table. He glanced at her furtively as he sat beside her, and grew less and less afraid.

She was more beautiful than anyone he had ever seen, but she did not seem to be aware of her own advantages, as most of the women he had met appeared to be to a somewhat painful degree. Her voice was soft and a little sad, and her manner was very simple. She was not nervous with him—she did not put on an air of ostentatious respect when she spoke to him as the queen's ladies were always careful to do. Indeed, it struck him that she was aware of his shyness and wanted to make him comfortable. The idea went a long way towards thawing his reserve. He was talking to her quite easily at the end of ten minutes, and Vladimir Ouf of was aware of the fact, smiled to himself as he ate his dinner and devoted his conversation to Sasha Schamiratz.

"This is the young man who is afraid of women!" he thought, with a touch of satirical amusement.

The dinner came to an end at last, and so did the wild and rather noisy dances which Sczeverdin perhaps thought good enough for an audience engaged in the prosaic occupation of dining. A little thrill of expectation ran round the café as Sczeverdin took up his violin, tossed back his grizzled black hair and cast a rapid glance round him. His eyes fell on the little table in the corner—on the young king with his worn face and wistful eyes, on Liane in her

white dress with the roses lying beside her on the table. Very slowly the gipsy laid his violin against his shoulder and began to play.

A stillness fell upon the café, broken only by the sighing accompaniment of the band, very faint and far-away. As he listened, the worn look faded from Kasimir's face. He forgot where he was, he forgot everything but Sczeverdin's music, wild and sweet and sad, and the face of the beautiful woman who sat beside him. In some strange way Liane Goldenburg and Sczeverdin's music seemed to belong to each other.

The sighing of the band grew louder. It became a tempest, a hurricane, and over it all, clear and high, like a voice calling a nation to battle, rose the sound of Sczeverdin's violin. It was a trumpet—the very clarion-call of victory itself. Squadron seemed hurled against squadron, cannon boomed, and bugles sang. There, in the lighted café, they heard the tramp of men marching to war, the shock of the meeting, the passion and despair and glory of the struggle as it ebbed and flowed and finally subsided into a dying thunder-growl of distant cannon, a sound of feet marching away. Twilight fell upon the field of battle, and then night. The band sank to a whispering lament, breathing softly over the place where heroes had fallen.

And then, out of the night, out of the silence, came the silvery voice of the violin again, singing, as none other had ever sung it, the old national War Hymn of Salitza. The effect

was indescribable. For a moment no one moved or seemed to breathe. Then, with one impulse, every man in the café sprang to his feet as though to the call of the trumpet.

So they stood, tense with the feeling which Sczeverdin's magic had evoked. No one noticed the king, standing straight and still at the little corner table—no one but Liane Gold-
enburg, who looked at him suddenly and smiled, with an odd touch of pride in the old war-song of her father's native land.

The king's face was transfigured. There were tears in his eyes, and the hand which rested on the edge of the table was clenched as if upon the hilt of a sword. He met Liane's smile and answered it, and for a moment his gaze held hers. Then, with a sudden movement, he put out his hand, tore a single rose from the bouquet beside her, and stuck it through the little slip of green ribbon of the Order of St. Mikhail which was the only ornament of his plain blue coat.

Neither Vladimir Ourof nor Sasha Schamiratz saw the action. But Liane's eyes fell suddenly, with a momentary sense of something that was almost fear. Why had he taken the rose, this strange, shy king with his awkward manner and his wistful eyes? What did it mean?

She had no time to decide then. The music ceased in a frenzy of applause. Sczeverdin could not be induced to play again. He took a large silver shell which one of the band handed to him, and came down into the café,

going from table to table, smiling at the compliments which assailed him on every side, and bending his grizzled head with dignity as the money rattled in showers into the silver shell. He came to the next table to that where the king was seated, looked up at him, bowed, and would have passed by; but Kasimir, with a sudden imperious gesture, called him back. Vladimir was speaking to the waiter who had attended them, and Sasha Schamiratz was looking with a fascinating expression—or one which was intended to be fascinating—at a pretty woman at the next table.

“Why didn’t you ask us for money?” Kasimir said, in his abrupt way, holding out a gold piece.

Sczeverdin did not take it.

“Let the others pay,” he said. “I will not take gold from you. The honor is enough for me. I shall always remember that tonight I have played to a king”—his black eyes fell on Liane’s face, and he lowered his voice, and smiled—“and to a queen!” he added, and passed on, smiling still, an odd, mysterious smile, with the silver shell in his hand.

CHAPTER X

THE king's head was spinning when he left the Café Valitzine. The lights, the music, the intoxication of that moment when, in the midst of the War Hymn, moved by an uncontrollable impulse which he could not explain even to himself, he had taken the rose from Liane Goldenburg's bouquet and stuck it behind the ribbon of St. Mikhail, still held him under a sort of spell. He sent Sasha Schamiratz back to the palace in the carriage which was waiting for them, and walked away down the Boulevard Valitzine and the Boulevard Mikhail II alone. For a while at least he felt that he must escape from the spying eyes of the Schamiratzes. The music of the War Hymn was having an effect upon him of which Sczeverdin had little dreamed when he began to play it.

Down the Boulevard Mikhail II he went, and on to the Ostraya Bridge. The peace of the darkness, the cool air coming up from the shade of the Ostraya Gardens, brought him gradually to himself. He drew a long breath and leaned more easily against the iron-work.

He was not certain, as he stood there, whether it was the War Hymn after all, which had affected him, or the look in Liane Goldenburg's

eyes as she turned towards him. He was never sure of that, either at the time or long afterwards. It was the little spark which had lighted a great fire—Sczeverdin's playing, Liane's smile.

Ever since that night of the revolution he had been in slavery—to Schamiratz, to Sasha and Ivan, perhaps even to himself. He had never rebelled against the tyranny which forced him into the society of the young Schamiratzes while their father ruled the country of which Kasimir was supposed to be king. A fatal weakness, the outcome of years of repression and reserve, and deep-seated disgust in his own powers, in his own good fortune, had kept him inactive and silent, though only too painfully aware of his position. No one suspected him of a desire to rule his own kingdom. He had known quite well that trap after trap had been laid for him to get him into disrepute with his own subjects—that the mad escapades into which Ivan and Sasha Schamiratz were always dragging him, and of which he, and not they, got the discredit, were all moves in the great game against him. If in any moment of anger he had ever felt inclined to resent his lot, it had never seemed worth while to put the inclination into action when the moment was over. There was no one in his life to whom he could turn for praise or sympathy when his fetters were broken—no one who would even understand the impulse which had led him to break them. What then was the use of troubling to break them at

all? It was all labor in vain, he told himself. Better to leave it alone and amuse himself with the Schamiratzes.

But tonight something seemed to have changed. He could no longer console himself by a cynical acceptance of the evils of his fate. Something within him had risen in hot revolt, upsetting all his hardly acquired philosophy, dealing sudden destruction to the apathy which had bound him for so long. He must do something to free himself, or stifle in the suffocating atmosphere of oppression in which he existed. Mikhail V's act of abdication permitted Schamiratz and his creatures to retain their power for another two years—until he was twenty-one. Two years more!

He turned quickly and walked back to the palace. He went straight to his own apartments where Ivan and Sasha would be waiting for him. They were there—as he expected. Ivan was palpably in a bad temper. Sasha greeted his sovereign with a significant smile.

“We were beginning to feel anxious, sir,” he remarked. “Ivan wanted to rouse the police, but I said that you had only gone off to reflect upon the charms of Madame Goldenburg in romantic solitude.”

Kasimir started as though he had been shot. So that was the interpretation which the amiable Sasha had put upon his solitary walk!

“You seem to have paid more attention to my reflections than they deserve,” he said ironically. “They were not romantic in the least.”

Sasha had evidently spent the time which the king had devoted to reflection in endeavoring to get as nearly drunk as an iron head would permit. He had gone far enough to dull his own naturally acute perception of his sovereign's moods, and did not see that he had already said more than the king liked. His significant smile broadened a little, and, with a gesture of gay and bantering familiarity, he slapped the ruler of Salitza on the back. "Don't say it wasn't Madame Goldenburg, Kasimir," he cried jovially. "Didn't I see the rose she gave you in your coat?"

He got no further. The king stopped him with a look so terrible that it became apparent even to his dulled perceptions that he had made a mistake.

"You forget yourself," Kasimir said, in a voice literally shaking with passion.

There was a dead silence. Neither of the Schamiratzes dared to speak. The king walked slowly across to the bell and rang it.

The servant who came in a moment later found Ivan and Sasha Schamiratz standing silent, with scared and trembling looks. The king was looking out of the open window with his back to them.

"Show Lieutenant Schamiratz to his room," he said, without turning his head or raising his voice.

The wretched Sasha was far too thunder-struck to protest, but Ivan made a step towards the tense figure of the king at the window.

“Sir—I entreat your majesty to pardon my brother. He——”

Kasimir glanced at him over his shoulder.

“I have ordered your brother to his room,” he said. “If you do not wish to be placed under arrest, you will see that he goes there as quickly as possible. I have no further need of the services of either of you.”

There was clearly nothing more to be done. The Schamiratzes passed out slowly, crestfallen and cowed. It had come—their helpless prey had turned and rent them at last.

When they had gone, the king stood for quite ten minutes at the window. A very madness of shame and anger possessed him. Presently he sent for Nikolaievitch.

“I want a regiment from the barracks here within a quarter of an hour,” he said briefly. “Bring them in by the garden gate—here is the key of the private door. Don’t let them be noticed more than you can help. When they are here, come and tell me.”

Captain Nikolaievitch was himself a man of few words. It was his business to obey the king’s orders. He obeyed them now. In less than the allotted quarter of an hour he reported the arrival of the required force.

Kasimir gave his orders quietly and quickly. Within ten minutes of the arrival of the soldiers at the palace an urgent summons to the royal presence was in the hands of every member of the council of regency. No one suspected anything, though all were surprised and curious.

They made all the haste they could to get to the palace and satisfy their curiosity.

One by one they filed into the empty council chamber. It wore its most ordinary aspect, with its long table covered with rather shabby green baize, its row of solid chairs, and the king's seat at the head of the table, with the royal arms embroidered on its back. The few royal portraits which hung on the walls looked down expectantly, and Mikhail of Paris, over the carved fireplace, gorgeous in the uniform of a field marshal, wore an ironical smile on his keen, dark face. The regents of Salitza consulted together in low voices as to the meaning of the summons which had brought them to the palace at this unusual hour.

Suddenly the great doors at the end of the council chamber were thrown open and the king entered, followed by Captain Nikolaievitch, the officers of the Third Regiment and a file of soldiers. The regents gave a kind of stifled cry and then were silent. Kasimir advanced to the table, looking very young and slight and boyish in his plain blue uniform.

He came straight to his own seat, but he did not sit down. Instead, he stood there beside it, looking at them with eyes which they could not read. No one moved. General Schamiratz gazed obstinately at his boots and was seen to bite the fringe of his white mustache. Colonel Gliska, of the Sixth Regiment, put his hand furtively on his sword. The rest of the council simply stared with amazed faces at the king.

He spoke at last. His voice was quite calm—a little high and thin, as it had always been, but perfectly decided. He spoke very slowly, as though weighing his words as he uttered them.

“I have sent for you tonight, gentlemen,” he said, “to tell you that tomorrow there will no longer be such a thing in Salitza as a council of regency.”

A startled movement ran around the council chamber. Schamiratz shot a glance across the table at Gliska. The colonel of the historic Sixth took his hand from his sword with sudden haste.

The king went on.

“By the terms of my father’s act of abdication the regency has still two years to run. It is in no spirit of disrespect to his judgment that I now set this arrangement aside. No man can decide what measure, however wise at the moment, will stand the test of time—no man, however far-seeing, may rule the future by the laws of the past. It would have been unusual, I admit, to hand the government of any nation over to a boy of fifteen. But I am a boy no longer—I have the right to rule the country which has been entrusted to me. I have summoned you here tonight to tell you, with my own lips, that I now claim this right. I shall no doubt make mistakes—I realize, as no one else can do, the difficulty of the task and how little fitted I am to discharge it successfully; but if I allowed considerations of this sort to hamper me in what I feel to be my duty, both to the nation and myself,

I should only increase the number of my own disqualifications by adding cowardice to incompetence. Gentlemen, to all of you here present—except one—I appeal for the help which only you can give me in this difficult hour—the loyalty and fidelity which Salitza has so often and so gloriously proved for my house in the past, and in which I trust she will never fail us in the future.”

Colonel Gliska made a quick movement of response.

“If loyalty and fidelity are what your majesty asks,” he said hotly, “by God! you shall have mine.”

Kasimir turned to him with a little smile in his eyes and held out his hand.

“There is no man in the kingdom whose support could be more welcome to me than yours, Gliska,” he said. “The man who was faithful to my father is not likely to fail me.”

Then, with a sudden change of manner, he turned to the Lion of Mirsk on the other side of the table.

“Before I say more, I have to do something which is inexpressibly painful to me. I would avoid it if I could, if only because I know that to many people it will wear the aspect of personal feeling. If for a moment I supposed myself to be acting from a motive of that kind, I should regret the action even more than I do at present.”

He paused, for the first time showing some sign of emotion. His high clear voice shook a

little as he addressed the man who stood silent and sullen on his right hand.

“General Schamiratz, you have abused the power which was entrusted to you—the power which made you the guardian of a nation and the ruler of a king. How you have failed in your duty to your country your country herself knows. How you have failed in your duty to me I alone know, and, for the sake of the deed which gained for you the name by which Salitza is proud to call you, even now, I shall keep that knowledge to myself. But I cannot pass over your conduct. Within twenty-four hours you will resign your command and retire to your estates. It will be well if you think fit to do this quietly and without comment, and so spare me and yourself the pain of unavailing explanations.”

There was silence in the council chamber. The deposed regents held their breath. Then Schamiratz, purple with passion to which he dared not give way, laid his sword on the table before the king.

“I resign my command,” he muttered, in a strangled voice, “and with it I renounce my connection with your majesty’s army.”

The king bent his head.

“I accept both your resignation and your renunciation,” he said, “though I regret the manner in which you have chosen to tender them. For the many services which you have rendered to Salitza I thank you in the name of the whole nation. For the rest—we will say no more.”

Very slowly Schamiratz bowed and left the room in which he had sat so many times as the actual ruler of Salitza. The others watched him with fascinated eyes. They could hardly believe the evidence of their senses or understand that the powerful Schamiratz, the greatest man in Salitza, had been disgraced, banished, and outwitted, in the short space of a few minutes and by the boy whom he supposed to be his helpless tool.

The door of the council chamber closed upon Schamiratz forever, and the king, with a sharp sigh of relief, turned to the men who remained.

"It is late," he said, in his natural voice, "and I think nothing more can be done tonight. Tomorrow we will begin afresh. I will wish you goodnight, gentlemen."

"But not before we have assured your majesty of our loyalty and devotion," Gliska cried. "Sir, you have spoken like a king, and acted like one. You are right—the regency has lasted too long. Let the council of regency be the first to tell you so and to offer you their homage in the hour in which you have claimed your right to sit on the throne of your fathers."

He dropped on one knee as he spoke, and lifted the king's hand to his lips. There was an instant of hesitation, and then, when he rose, the whole council of regency, one by one, followed his example. It was perhaps a greater triumph for Kasimir than the night of the revolution, for here at least was no mad mob, carried away by the sentiment of the moment. The re-

gents had every reason to feel sore, for they had certainly been tricked into a rather ignominious position; but, after the first swift shock of resentment had passed, they could not but recognize the justice of the king's action. He was no longer a child; and Schamiratz had gone too far.

So they filed out in a better temper than might have been expected. Kasimir told off the delighted Third Regiment to guard the palace and keep order in case of accidents. It was still on the cards that Schamiratz might use the tremendous influence he possessed to raise the army against the sovereign who had disgraced him, and indeed it is possible that only the unexpectedness of the king's attack upon him prevented this. Mingled with his anger at the disgrace which had fallen upon him so deservedly was a sort of relief. His life at any rate was safe; his revenge could wait until another day.

Meanwhile the king went to his own apartments. He was very tired, now that the excitement of his act of self-emancipation was at an end. But he was not to rest yet. Kasimir had hardly regained his rooms when the queen came to him.

She was perhaps the last person he wished to see at that moment; yet at the sight of her he had one of his rare impulses of frankness and enthusiasm. He went to her quickly and took her hand and kissed it.

“You will wish me good luck, won't you?”

he said, almost pleadingly. "I suppose you have heard what has happened, or you wouldn't have come. You don't know how glad I am that you did come."

She took her hand from his and looked at him with an air at once cold and disturbed.

"You have dismissed the council of regency?"

"Yes," he said, and drew a long breath of relief. Then he looked at her pale face. A chill struck him, but he tried to smile.

"You told me to dismiss the Schamiratzes," he said. "Well—I have dismissed them all. You told me to—to alter. I mean to do that too." His eyes softened suddenly, and his voice sank a little. "You will help me—won't you?"

For one moment she stood looking at him, pale, distressed, annoyed. Ah, how simple it would have seemed to another woman to have answered his appeal in the spirit in which it had been made—how simple—how natural! And, if she had done so, who can say what evils it might not have averted?

But she did not understand—it was not given her to read the nature of the son of Mikhail of Paris. At the back of her mind she felt always the old mistrust and suspicion which she had felt for his father. She felt it now. There was a cloud between them which neither he nor she could dispel.

"Help you!" she said bitterly. "Help you! If you persist in this sort of madness, neither I nor anyone else will be able to help you long."

The king turned away, biting his lip. What

a fool he had been to hope for sympathy from her, or even common justice! The old chill struck to his heart—the old dull pain of misunderstanding and solitude. He had played his part and played it successfully—and who was there to applaud him? He walked slowly away from her towards the window at which he had stood during the removal of Sasha Schamiratz.

“I am sorry you don't approve of my action,” he said very coldly. “We will not discuss it. I am tired. I shall be glad if you will leave me.”

She went without a word, feeling oddly humbled in the midst of her anger.

Kasimir stood at the window for a long while after she had left him, looking with weary, disillusioned eyes into the summer night. The barren victory—the conflict waged in vain! Were these always to be his lot?

Suddenly the face of another woman rose before him out of the night. He put up his hand and felt for the dead rose behind the ribbon of St. Mikhail—the rose which he had taken from Liane Goldenburg's bouquet in the Café Valitzine.

Were all women like that—were they all like the queen? Was there not perhaps one in the world who would sympathize with him—who would not blame him—who would understand?

He did not answer the question. He only stood there looking very wistfully into the night, with the dead rose drooping between his fingers.

CHAPTER XI

NEXT morning Khristovitz was in a state of excitement. A large placard on the palace gate announced, in very simple language, the end of the regency, and appealed to the people of Salitza to support their king. It was a singularly unstatesmanlike composition, this first address of Kasimir I to his subjects—almost as unstatesmanlike, indeed, as that first reckless utterance of his when he had stood on the balcony over the West Gate and boldly informed a howling mob that he was the king; but perhaps it did not succeed any the worse for that. With the general surprise was mingled also not a little admiration for the boy who could outwit so accomplished a popular hero as Schamiratz. That gallant general had not done his own cause much good by the manner in which he had accepted his dismissal. Had he elected to fight for his position, all Salitza would most probably have fought with him; but even the most enthusiastic followers cannot do much for a leader who hauls down his flag at the first sign of a struggle, and departs in a pet to his estates. This was what the great Schamiratz chose to do, and his admirers felt disappointed in him, not without very good reason. They would never believe in him again.

The irreconcilables among them remembered the existence of Zanolitch, the pretender, occupied peacefully in Paris with easy airs for the flute, which, according to Vladimir Ouf, he played out of tune. A small number of the most rabid of all sent an expression of their loyalty to Zanolitch himself. The poor harmless pretender received it with consternation, and for some days afterwards played more out of tune than usual. A vague idea of his own importance woke in his not very acute brain, and it struck him that he would not mind being a king in the land from which his ancestors had managed to get themselves ejected by a long career of violence, oppression, and unchecked passions.

It never occurred to this innocent amateur flutist how utterly unfitted he was to cope with the stormy ways of a stormy country like his native land, the very language of which he had almost forgotten, nor how much better off he was in Paris with his mild musical enthusiasms for sentimental airs and pretty opera-singers. The shadow of his own greatness fell upon him like a cloud, and his former amusements contented him no more. He sent a florid reply to those faithful souls who had remembered their lawful sovereign in his lonely exile. He spoke in a suitably homesick manner of the beloved fatherland without which he had existed in perfect comfort for some forty and more odd years. Carried away by his own enthusiasm he even held out vague hopes of some blessed, far-off

day when he should once more set foot on the soil whereon his fathers had dwelt as kings.

The faithful received this charming composition with suitable joy. They had not the slightest intention of risking their own safety to bring about the restoration of the Zanovitch dynasty; but a turn of the wheel might at any moment set Zanovitch on the throne by no act of theirs, for Kasimir was the last of the other line. It was well, therefore, to be prepared for accidents.

In the midst of the popular excitement Kasimir preserved an unmoved air. To say that he felt any thrill of pleasure in his own emancipation would be impossible. He must be content, for the future, to do what he thought best without looking for applause, or even comprehension.

Yet, because he was too young yet to resign himself without a struggle to this unattractive fate, he remembered that moment when, in the first bitterness of his disappointment at the queen's displeasure, his hand had instinctively gone to the rose which he had taken from Liane Goldenburg's bouquet.

It was past mid-day when a card was brought to Liane with the name of Captain Mikhailovitch on it. She looked at it for a second in some astonishment, for she, too, had heard of the *coup d'état*. Then she said that she would receive Captain Mikhailovitch.

He came in in the abrupt way which she had noticed in the Café Valitzine. The slight, nervous, awkward figure, the sensitive face, the wistful eyes, all struck her with a sudden sense

of pity. How young he looked to battle with affairs of state, to brave the hatred of Schamiratz! She rose from her low chair and went towards him with a warmth of half-compassionate admiration in her soft eyes. He moved towards her quickly through the gloom of a room darkened from the sun. Then she saw for the first time that in his hand was a huge bunch of violets, tied with a purple ribbon. He held it out to her almost shyly.

"I brought you these, madame," he said briefly.

She took them, smiling.

"Ah, how sweet they are!—how kind of you! But—am I to thank Captain Mikhailovitch, or—the king?"

He made a sudden little gesture of impatience, of irritation.

"If you like the violets, madame," he said, "shall I tell you how you can thank me?"

"Yes."

"By forgetting that I am a king."

She held out her hand.

"Thank you, Captain Mikhailovitch!" she said softly.

He took her hand and kissed it, and looked up at her with a smile. She remembered that night long ago when he had smiled at little Mikhail.

"I don't come here as the king," he said. "I don't quite know why I am here at all. There are a hundred and fifty things to be done—all Khristovitz is cursing me at this moment. There will probably be a revolution tonight and that

will very likely be the end of me—I thought I should like to see you again, at any rate. It was fine at the Café Valitzine last night, wasn't it? It was worth living through centuries of monotony to feel like that, even for a moment or two. Of course it is all over now—I see that I might as well have left the Schamiratzes alone. I have made myself unpopular for nothing. I have made enemies, I have turned the whole country upside down. But—it was worth it all—last night.”

He broke off abruptly. He was talking as he had never talked before to any human being—what madness possessed him? Of course she would not understand—no one ever did.

He looked at her nervously. Her eyes were shining. Was it possible that she did understand?

“Ah, you mustn't say that—you mustn't think that!” she answered. “It was right to send Schamiratz away. When people begin to see what you have done, they will thank you for it.”

He sat very still, with his eyes fixed on the ground. Was it possible, he asked himself? Was there really someone in the world who did not blame him—who gave him credit for having meant well, however disappointing the result of his good intentions?

“You think that?” he asked, after a minute or two. “You are not saying it because I am the king?”

The simplicity of the question brought the shadow of a smile to her face, though she could

not but recognize its pathos too. He was so used to being deceived, and flattered—he asked her for truth as a child asks, unconsciously appealing against the falsehood which is meant to pacify it.

“I have not the honor of knowing the king,” she said. “I am speaking to Captain Mikhailovitch.”

“Forgive me,” he said quickly. “You see, I am not used to the truth. And one wants sometimes to know it—not to be cajoled, not to be blamed, but just to be treated as an ordinary human being.”

She remembered that morning on the Ostraya Bridge, and Fritz saying that princes were only men.

“I used to think kings ogres,” she said lightly.

He laughed, with a little note of bitterness in his laughter.

“You were quite right. They are ogres—to themselves.” He rose to his feet with a sigh. “I must go and do some of the hundred and fifty things that I mentioned just now. Madame, for half an hour you have almost made me forget that I am a king. May I come here again, when I want very much to forget it for a little while? May I?”

She hesitated for an instant, and then drew herself up rather stiffly.

“It is not for me to say where your majesty may or may not go.”

He interrupted her impetuously.

“No—no—it *is* for you to say! It is Mikhailovitch who asks—not the king. The king could not come here—do you think I don’t know that? The king has no friends—do you think I don’t know that, too? But surely Mikhailovitch may come.”

But neither to the king nor to Captain Mikhailovitch was her permission given, but rather to the boy crown prince who had thrown the bonbons to Mikhail nearly five years ago.

She told Vladimir of the king’s visit. The attaché’s eyes narrowed a little as he listened. She glanced at him uneasily.

“Ought I to have said he could not come, Vladimir? I didn’t know what to do.”

Vladimir smoothed the ends of his long mustache and looked at her with a meditative air.

“You did quite right. That young man may be very useful to me.”

Her feeling of uneasiness deepened.

“Useful to you—the king? But how?”

Vladimir smiled at her indulgently.

“My angel, you are not a diplomatist. Don’t you know that the king is said to be prejudiced against Russians—against Russian policy, and Russian influence? Roumanine would give a good deal to convince him of the purity of our aims and teach him that the best interests of his country depend upon his behavior to us. Hitherto no one has ever been able to influence him at all. He was not important before, so it would not have been worth while to try. But

now——” He broke off, and still she sat looking at him, as though for some further explanation.

“And who is to influence him now?”

“You are,” Vladimir said briefly.

“I! How in the world am I to influence the king?”

“My angel, you are extraordinarily innocent!” he said, with the very faintest suggestion of a sneer in his voice. “Why do you imagine the king came here yesterday?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, trembling suddenly. “I don’t know!”

“Because you are the most beautiful woman he has ever seen,” the attaché said quietly.

She sprang to her feet in an instant, with blazing eyes.

“Vladimir! How dare you say such a thing to me? Oh, I see what you want! I am to delude that poor boy, I am to influence him, as you call it, I am to make him fall in love with me, and you will turn it all to your advantage—for the sake of Russia! What do I care for Russia? Do you think that because I did wrong for you I am a bad woman—that I have no heart and no conscience? What right have I given you to insult me with such a plan as this?”

She stood trembling with shame and anger; and Vladimir Oourof watched her lazily from the low chair in which he sat.

“It is you who insult me,” he said gently. “What have I done? I certainly told you that

you might influence the king in the interests of Russia—what harm was there in that? It will be a good thing for him if he is influenced that way, for if he is not he will not reign long, as you will see. As for taking advantage of his falling in love with you—what insult is there in that? It will not do him any harm to fall in love with you—and I am foolish enough to trust you because I believe in your love for me. Is *that* an insult too, Liane?"

His voice had sunk to the deep, caressing tone she knew so well, and she half-believed him. Very slowly she sat down again, uneasy, hurt, but also a little ashamed.

"Forgive me, Vladimir—I shouldn't have said that. But don't ask me to have anything to do with the king. I will refuse to receive him if he comes again."

"You will not do anything of the sort, my angel," Vladimir said, with bland decision. "Don't you understand that if I can influence the king in any way it will mean my career? You will be good enough to receive the king and to make yourself agreeable to him. And do not talk sentimental nonsense about being insulted. Do you wish me to do Kasimir the honor of pretending to be jealous of him? I will do anything to please you, but I really cannot consent to play such a ridiculous rôle as that, even for you."

Her mood changed suddenly. She looked up at him with a strange smile on her face.

"Isn't that rather an odd thing to say to me,

Vladimir? You are not jealous—even of a king! There are men who would be jealous of much less. What if I take your advice and gain all the influence I can over him and use it—not for you, not for Russia, but for myself? Do you think I couldn't do it—that I am not clever enough? Oh, I could do it if I liked—I could make that poor boy do anything I wished. But—if I did, I should hate myself and I should expect you to hate me too.”

Her eyes were shining, and there was a dangerous note in her voice.

He watched her curiously. For the first time it struck him that he did not altogether understand her.

“What do you mean?”

She left her seat and began to pace up and down the room, restlessly, feverishly, as though moved by some power outside herself.

“Ah, it is you who don't understand now! If I didn't love you as I do, it would be all so easy. I could make the king do as I liked—I could rule Salitza—I, who only a few months ago was selling hats in the ‘Paradis des Dames!’ Do you think I don't care for power—I who have never had any, all my life? All women are tyrants—unless fate has made them slaves. It has made me a slave—first to poverty and circumstance, and then to you. If I didn't care for you, I would do as you say. I would make the king love me—I would——”

She broke off suddenly, shuddering, and knelt down beside his chair and hid her face against

him. He put his arm around her as she knelt there, and patted her hair with soothing fingers.

“What is the matter, my angel? What is the matter with you today?”

“Oh, I don’t know—I don’t know! Vladimir, don’t ask me to see the king again—don’t drag me into this horrible plot. Poor boy, he was kind to my little Mikhail—I don’t want to hurt him. And—and——” she looked up, half sobbing in the earnestness of her appeal—“I am not like other people, Vladimir—when anyone cares for me too much it is like a fate—a curse. I felt that when Fritz shot himself—I have felt it ever since. Don’t tell me it isn’t true—there are people in the world who are fatal to others, like poisonous plants. I am one of them—ah, don’t make me hurt the boy who was kind to Mikhail!”

Vladimir Ouf sat very still, touching her hair. He remembered the day he had seen her first and heard the fat Frenchwoman call her by name.

“The Bindweed!” he murmured to himself, under his breath.

“And is there a curse on me?” he said presently. “Do I love you more than is prudent—will the fate come on me too, foolish child? Am I to moderate my regard for you to a discreet, tepid, uninteresting degree, in order to avoid misfortune?”

“You are laughing at me,” she said sadly.

“No, I don’t know that I am, my angel. It is a very pretty and poetical idea, and I am not

sure that it isn't really true, as well. There are certainly people who are fatal to others—they have existed since the beginning of time. You have only to read the history of any country attentively to see that. And perhaps your idea is truer of women than of men, when one comes to think of it. There have always been women who have dragged down men and nations too—who have clung to them like the graceful, swaying creeper from which you take your name, and wound them round with white flowers and wreaths of tender green—and have grown so strong in the end that they have strangled the life out of everything they clung to. That is true, at any rate—there is nothing strange in it, nothing new. Are you going to strangle me?"

She looked up with somber, passionate eyes the utter sincerity of which silenced him.

"I would kill myself first," she said simply.

He laughed.

"Ah, you think so—they all think so! No—no—perhaps I was only laughing at you all the time. We will not think of these unpleasant things. But why are you more frightened about the king than you seem to be about me?"

For a moment she was silent.

"I shall not hurt you," she said at last, very low, "because—you don't love me enough to be hurt."

Vladimir made a quick movement of protest.

"You are unjust and unkind. That isn't true."

She smiled sadly at his indignation and he

shrank a little from the look she gave him—he, Vladimir Oourof, who had never been afraid of anything in the world.

“Ah, but it is true,” she said. “Don’t be angry, Vladimir. Sometimes I am glad of it, because I know that you will never come to harm through me. Sometimes——”

“Well?” he said curiously, as she broke off.

“Sometimes I think that if I didn’t love you as I do, I should hate you more than anyone in the world!”

He caught her wrists suddenly and drew her nearer to him, looking at her with an odd, sinister gleam in his eyes.

“If you hated me, I would kill you,” he said, in an altered voice. Then, almost as suddenly as he had seized them, he released her wrists, and laughed.

“We are both a little mad today, I think, my angel,” he said, in his ordinary tone. “The *coup d’état* has got into our heads!”

CHAPTER XII

LITTLE Anna Roumanine, propped up with cushions on the rose-silk couch, pale and languid and less artistically made up than usual, had received a visit from Madame Natalia Morisof, who came to condole with cruelty and remained to torture with sympathy. Half of her conversation had been of Oourof, Liane and her suffering hostess; the other half, of Oourof, Liane and the king. All of it was barbed and bitter, but it left its victim thinking as well as suffering.

The result of her cogitations was a clumsily worded little anonymous note, in a very badly disguised hand, and smelling vilely of musk, which was brought to Vladimir Oourof two nights later, as he sat on one of the green iron balconies in the Boulevard Valitzine, at the side of Liane Goldenburg. He read the poor, futile, stupid little composition with a smile of contempt, and tossed it into Liane's lap.

"There are some poor fools in the world," he remarked, as he lighted himself a fresh cigarette. "My angel, would you like to see that there exists someone who envies you my not particularly valuable devotion? Read that precious letter, and realize, if you can, how low a woman can sink when she likes."

Liane obeyed. Perhaps the letter did not strike her in precisely the light he intended, for she handed it back in silence.

"I suppose you know who wrote it?" she said presently.

"I can guess," Vladimir answered, lazily watching the smoke of his cigarette as it rose slowly into the quiet night air. "Yes—I imagine I can guess. It is Anna Roumanine—do you remember selling her a hat that day I first saw you at the 'Paradis des Dames?' It was a lilac hat, and she looked like a resuscitated corpse in it. And she was furious because I kissed you—what a scene I had with her going home! I wonder why these tiresome women exist?"

Liane sat very still, looking out into the night.

"And yet you did not always think her tiresome," she said, with a touch of reproach.

Vladimir glanced at her from under his eyelashes, and laughed.

"Don't you know that there is nothing in the world so tiresome as the woman one has once thought charming—when one is tired of her?"

She made a quick movement of protest.

"Ah, Vladimir, don't say things like that! Some day you will be tired of me too."

"Never! It is much more likely you who will tire of me, as madame l'ambassadrice is kind enough to tell me here. I will keep this pretty little token of her affection—it may be useful to me."

He took out a small leather pocket-book, and

laid it on his knee as he folded up the musk-scented note. The pocket-book, insecurely balanced, fell to the ground at Liane's feet and she bent and picked it up. Something fell out of it into her lap—a little steel chain, on the end of which was a cheap miniature-frame containing a faded photograph.

She was in the darkness, away from the ray of light which fell on Ourof from the window of the room behind. For a moment she sat motionless, holding the miniature close to her eyes. Even in the gloom she knew it again.

"Where—where did you get this?" she asked very slowly.

Vladimir glanced at the chain in her hand.

"Oh—that? I don't know who it is. I got it somehow or other—I forget."

"You have not forgotten," she said in a dry voice. "Tell me how you got it."

Vladimir looked at her curiously for a second. He could not see her face clearly, but the peculiarity of her tone struck him. Was it possible that she was jealous of this unknown woman in the miniature? Perhaps he had said too much about Anna Roumanine. He felt a pang of compassion and regret—he had not meant to hurt her.

"I will tell you how I got it, Liane. Only remember—it is putting my life in your hands."

"You needn't be afraid," she said quietly. "I shall never betray you. Only tell me—tell me at once!"

He told her—told her of that day in the forest

when he had taken the miniature from the neck of the boy he had shot—the boy who had twice tried to murder him in revenge for his father's death, but whom he would not help to identify after the first attempt because it would have revealed to the police a fact which he had hitherto hidden so successfully—that the Sixth Regiment had been led to the palace that night of the revolution, not by one of its own officers, but by himself in Major Janno's uniform. He told it all lightly, carelessly, laughing at the mad freak of putting on his sick friend's uniform in order to lead a revolution in his place. He told her of the old man who had fired at him in the Boulevard Valitzine, and how he had shot him down and gone on, shouting "Death to Mikhail of Paris!" in his assumed character of a frenzied revolutionary.

"I suppose that was the boy's father," he said. "I didn't ask him, but I have always thought so. It is funny, but I have thought of that boy often since—he reminded me of someone and I could never make out who it was. He had the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen, except yours."

She sat and listened quietly to the end. Vladimir went on speaking—she did not hear what he said. She was cold and sick and numb—she sat there like a statue and let him talk. Presently she rose and passed behind his chair into the room. She could not have spoken to him—she could not have touched him, even to kill him. She was conscious of but one idea, one wild,

overmastering desire—to escape, not to hear his voice, not to see the tall figure in the long chair at her side with the one broad ray of light falling on its fair head—to get away, to fly as though from a pestilence, and never to see him again.

Vladimir suspected nothing. She often had fits of silence and depression, and he was used to them. He simply supposed that she was tired of sitting in the dark—had perhaps remembered something she wanted to do before it was too late. He sat on, and smoked his cigarette peacefully to the end.

It was quite half an hour before he left the balcony. When he entered the room behind he was little surprised to find it empty. She was tired, no doubt—he remembered that she had complained of a headache earlier in the evening. Probably it had grown worse, and she had gone to take off her dress, and lie down for a brief rest.

The little, brilliantly lighted flat seemed suddenly to have grown very still and empty as he went down the tiny corridor to the door of the bedroom at the end. He turned the handle—the door was locked.

He stood there for a moment, with the handle of the door between his fingers. For the first time he began to feel vaguely uneasy—he could hear no sound of movement or life beyond that locked door. Then he called himself a fool, and rapped gently on the white panels. “Liane—are you ill?” he asked, raising his voice a little. There was no answer, and he knocked

again, more loudly. "Liane! Let me in." There was no answer.

For a minute or two longer he stood there. The silence of the white-painted, lighted corridor began to seem heavy and ominous. For the first time in his life he felt afraid, though he could not have said what he feared.

Then he put his shoulder against the white-painted door and burst into the room.

It was empty!

He stood by the splintered door, staring around with bewildered eyes. On a chair near him lay the dress she had worn that evening—he noticed that the lace around the shoulders was torn, as though she had taken it off in haste. The thin, filmy stuff trailed limply and forlornly on the floor.

Then his eye caught a sparkle of something bright on the dressing-table. He crossed the room quickly. There, heaped together in a little pile of living fire and color, lay her rings, her bracelets, the pearls she had worn in her hair and at her throat—all the jewels he had given her. A horrible fear clutched at his heart. He put out his hand, half mechanically, and touched the glittering stones. What had she done—what did it mean?

A folded sheet of paper lay beside the jewels—under a ring he remembered giving her the day they had arrived in Paris. He took it up, unfolded it and saw the words written on it in a hand so shaking and uneven that he could hardly make it out. Then he read:

“Good-bye. I am leaving you forever—if I have any wish left—if I could say any prayer—it is, that never, as long as I live, may I see you or hear of you again. Don't be afraid—I will not betray the story you told me. I am too utterly broken-hearted to ask for vengeance, even against you. It was my mother's miniature that you found on the boy you murdered—the boy was my brother—the old man was my father. I am punished as I deserve.”

For a long, long time Vladimir Oourof stood there with that accusing sheet of paper in his hand. It had come at last, his day of reckoning—come through a little, common, faded photograph in a cheap miniature-frame, hung on a steel chain.

Suddenly a kind of horror seized upon him. For an instant his iron nerve deserted him and he hid his face in his hands, as though to shut out some accusing vision—the vision of a little hut in the winter forest and a slight figure lying dead at his feet. “My God! The boy's eyes were like hers—like hers!” he said—and so saying, turned and rushed away out of the silent, empty flat as though pursued by all the furies.

CHAPTER XIII

THE king glanced at the little silver clock on the mantelpiece beside him and paused in the middle of a sentence which he was dictating to his secretary, a pale young man with eye-glasses and a pronounced stoop. It was past mid-day. The secretary's fountain-pen ceased in its smooth progress across the paper and the secretary himself looked up for further instructions.

“‘In the interests of peace and——’ Yes, sir?”

“‘Peace and civilization,’” ended Kasimir, flicking a speck of dust from his sleeve. “That will do for this morning, I think. I will send for you this afternoon, about five, to finish this.”

“Yes, sir.”

The pale secretary put away his pen and departed. Kasimir passed quickly into the ante-room, where he found Nikolaievitch yawning over the *Khristovitz Courier*.

“I am going out, Nikolaievitch. If the queen wants me, say that I am engaged.” He paused for a moment. “Does she ever ask for me at this time?”

“Her majesty asked for you yesterday, sir. I explained to her that you were engaged.”

"That's right. I shall be back soon."

Nikolaievitch hesitated.

"Do you think it quite safe to go about like this, sir? Would it not be better to take one of the detectives?"

"I am not afraid. I detest going about with a lot of police at my heels, as though I were a dangerous criminal," Kasimir answered, smiling a little. "Don't worry about me, Nikolaievitch—I shall be all right."

He ran down a back staircase which led to one of the smaller entrances of the palace. Once in the street he was safe from observation—the plain blue uniform of the Guards was an excellent disguise for one whose public appearances were usually made in gorgeous robes of state. It would be impossible to describe the charm which these incognito expeditions had for him. Oh, the relief of escaping, even for half an hour, from all the stupid, needless ceremony with which he was eternally surrounded! Nature had never meant him for a king. He hated the useless pomp of his position—he shrank, with a kind of physical loathing, from the display which was expected of him, the publicity which hardly left him an hour unspied upon or an action unobserved. He knew perfectly well that his visits to the tall house on the Boulevard Valitzine would not be a secret long, and in his own heart he knew that his effort to dissociate the personality of Captain Mikhailovitch from that of Kasimir I of Salitza would not long remain successful. Perhaps that very conviction added

to the pleasure of these moments which he admitted to himself were numbered. He enjoyed the present all the more recklessly because he knew that it would so soon be relegated to the past.

He asked himself no questions with regard to Liane Goldenburg. Perhaps he did not dare to ask any. It was enough that the half hour he could manage to spend with her was the pleasantest in all of a not particularly pleasant day. He did not ask himself whither the affair would lead him in the end. He did not want to know. The queen would be quite certain to find out and put a stop to it before considerations of that kind became necessary.

So today he went light-heartedly down the Boulevard Valitzine to the tall house with the green balconies. When he reached the door of the flat on the second floor he had to ring more than once before it was suddenly thrown open to him.

The girl who at last opened it had pale cheeks and red eyes. He looked at her in astonishment. It was easy to see that something had gone wrong.

"Is Madame Goldenburg ill?" he asked quickly.

The girl was from the country and very young and simple. Liane's kindness and beauty had won her heart and she had not the slightest idea that the plain young officer in the unimposing uniform who came so often to see her mistress was the king. Therefore, instead of replying to

his question, she put her apron to her eyes and burst into tears.

Kasimir pushed her gently into the little entrance-hall, and shut the door behind them.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, kindly enough. “Tell me what has happened. Here—sit down, and don’t cry like that. Where is your mistress?”

With some difficulty he made out her story. She had not called anyone in the house because madame did not like to have her affairs talked about. She thought perhaps madame might come back next morning, or Captain Oufro might come in. But no one had been near the place, and she did not know what to do. No—she had not told the police—she did not like to leave the flat with all madame’s jewels lying about.

“But have you found nothing to explain why Madame Goldenburg should have left so suddenly?” Kasimir asked, completely puzzled by the situation.

The girl stopped crying, and looked at him doubtfully. Yes—she had found one thing. When she went to brush out the balcony in the morning she had found a letter lying under one of the chairs—she thought someone must have dropped it. She did not read it until she found madame did not come home. She did not understand the letter at all—she thought someone had written it to vex madame. Would it be wrong to show it to him? Perhaps he might be able to understand it and tell her what to do.

Kasimir hesitated for a moment. Then his anxiety mastered every other consideration.

"Show me the letter," he said.

She led him into the room which gave upon the balcony where Ouf and Liane had sat the night before, and put Anna Roumanine's little spiteful, scented note into his hand. He read it at a glance, and, though he understood its meaning better than the servant had done, he still did not understand all. From the wording, it might have been addressed to Liane herself, and he not unnaturally assumed that this had been the case. It plainly hinted that she was carrying on a compromising flirtation with a certain "S. M."

Suddenly he dropped the letter on the table, much as he would have dropped a snake if one had been put into his hand.

"S. M." stood for "*Sa Majesté*"—in other words, himself. He understood everything now.

He stood there staring down at the wicked little sheet of paper with a sense of unendurable outrage. Oh, could they never leave anything of his alone—was some evil construction to be placed upon his most innocent actions, some false meaning to be read into everything he did or said or thought? Was it then impossible for him to indulge himself to the extent of a few moments out of the day spent in the society of so unimportant a person as Madame Goldenburg, without making her at once a target for the vilest sort of scandal? Was his friendship a

dishonor to any woman to whom it was offered, as he knew too well it was a means of self-advancement to every man? Was this what it meant to be a king?

Of course she had gone—he would have gone himself, he thought, in a like case. Of course, wounded beyond endurance, indignant beyond words, she had shaken the dust of Khristovitz from her feet at a moment's notice.

He turned his back on the little servant, who was crying softly, and went to the window and looked down sadly into the Boulevard Valitzine which had looked so bright to him a short half hour ago. It was all over, his pleasant dream of freedom. There had been only one person in his world who had understood him, to whom he had been able to talk without restraint or fear of misunderstanding, or—no, it had been something more than that. There was something in that vile little musk-scented note, after all. He had blinded himself to the truth as long as he could.

He had not admitted the possibility of loving Liane Goldenburg, because he knew that it was forbidden him to love any woman whom at the same time he wished to respect. Love was as impossible a luxury to a king as every other human and natural impulse seemed to be. Presently he would be dragged into some dreary convenient marriage, contracted for reasons of state without the smallest consideration for the feelings of the persons concerned—and sentimental European journals would print gushing

paragraphs about it and christen it "A Royal Romance," as he had known them to do in the case of similar alliances, the results of which had not infrequently scandalized whole continents. What a tragic farce it was! And now, the one thing which for him had begun to redeem it was torn from him by scandal and spite. Liane Goldenburg was gone—he would never see her again.

For a moment or two he stood there, silent, despondent, resigned. Then the tides of revolt rose furiously within him. No—he would not, could not, submit! Why should his whole life, his whole happiness, be sacrificed to this Juggernaut of royalty?

He turned to the little servant.

"You have done quite right," he said quickly. "Stay here until—until someone comes. Don't be afraid—don't tell anyone that your mistress is not at home."

In five minutes he was back at the palace. He called Nikolaievitch out of the anteroom into his study.

"Nikolaievitch, I must leave Khristovitz for a few hours—perhaps I shall not be able to get back until tomorrow morning. You must not let anyone know that I am away. Say that I am tired—have a headache—anything. Keep everyone out of my rooms. Can you do it?"

"I will try, sir. Of course it will be perfectly easy to keep everyone out—except the queen."

"Ah—the queen!" He paused for a mo-

ment and reflected. "We must risk the queen. If nothing else will do, I suppose you must tell her that I am not here. Manage as well as you can."

"But——"

"I can't stop," Kasimir said simply. "There is a train to Britz in twenty minutes—I shall have to catch that."

He was gone before the astonished Nikolaievitch could protest. What on earth was the king going to do at Britz, the nearest frontier town? Was there a revolution in the air and had he adopted his father's simple and successful method of escaping from its possible consequences?

But the king, on his way to the station, was quite reckless as to the impression which his sudden departure from Khristovitz might leave in the mind of Nikolaievitch or anyone else, for that matter.

He did not leave his capital unobserved, however. Prince Roumanine, standing smoking his eternal cigarette at a window in the Russian embassy, saw the slight figure hurrying past, and rubbed his beard thoughtfully. Then he went to a speaking-tube on the wall, and called a single name down it.

Hardly a second had passed before a man had entered noiselessly, without knocking, and stood at the ambassador's side—a thin man, with a face that seemed made of india-rubber, so colorless and expressionless was it, and small, beady eyes set deep under heavy eyebrows. Rou-

manine nodded at him, and took his cigarette from his lips.

"The king has just gone by on foot, alone, in the uniform of an officer of the Guard. He was going towards the station. Follow him. Report yourself directly you return."

The cleverest spy in Europe bowed in silence and took his india-rubber countenance rapidly from the room. Roumanine returned to his cigarette.

"I wonder if anything is the matter?" he said to himself. "I haven't seen Oourof today. I will send for him."

In five minutes Vladimir Oourof was with him. The astute old diplomatist glanced at him curiously as he entered, and then dropped his blinking gaze discreetly to the floor before he greeted his visitor.

"Good afternoon, Oourof. You don't look very well," he said softly.

"It is nothing, excellency—a mere headache." Roumanine settled himself more easily in his chair and pushed his cigarette-case across the table.

"Madame Goldenburg left her flat in the Boulevard Valitzine last night," he remarked, in much the same uninterested tone that he would have used to say it was a fine day.

Vladimir bit his lip and bent his fair head very low over the cigarette-case.

"Yes, excellency."

"You didn't report it to me, my dear Oourof. That was a mistake. We should never allow

our personal feelings to get the better of us in matters of diplomacy. Why did she go?"

Vladimir's face, bent over his cigarette, was livid.

"Is it absolutely necessary that your excellency should have the—the details?"

Roumanine sank back luxuriously among his cushions and blinked at space.

"Absolutely, I am afraid. Go on, Oourof."

He listened in silence to the attaché's story.

"And did you try to find her?" he said, when it ended.

"No, excellency."

"Ah—! Well, it is a good thing that my agents were not so scrupulous," Roumanine said, with a sneer which he hardly attempted to disguise. "She went to the 'Paradis des Dames.' An hour ago she left for Britz. I am afraid you have managed this affair rather badly, my friend."

Vladimir was silent.

"Ten minutes ago the king went by on foot, incognito. He seemed in a hurry and I imagine he was on his way to the station." Roumanine glanced at the clock. "There is a train to Britz that starts about now."

Vladimir sprang to his feet, but the ambassador waved him blandly back to his seat with a claw-like hand.

"Sit down—I have not done with you yet. I repeat, you have muddled this business. Of course she will hate us all madly for the rest of her life—women are always so unreasonable."

“But—the king——?” Vladimir stammered in a strangled voice.

“He has gone to find her—since you did not take the trouble to do so. I should say he would most probably succeed. It is just the sort of thing he would be sure to do. That was a very clever move of hers.”

“Clever, excellency?”

“Yes. You don’t seem to understand it, my dear Oourof. Of course she meant him to follow her. She judged him perfectly. With some men, a woman’s best game is to run away. He probably didn’t know he cared a kopeck for her before. Now—he knows.”

Vladimir rose once more from his chair.

“Will you excuse me, excellency?”

Roumanine glanced at him viciously from behind his light eye-lashes. In spite of his theory that personal feelings should never be allowed any influence in matters of diplomacy, he was taking his revenge upon the handsome attaché and he meant to enjoy it to the full. It had not suited him to observe his wife’s infatuation for Vladimir Oourof or to resent it by any overt act, but he was human enough to seize his vengeance when he could do so without inconveniencing himself.

“You seem in a hurry, Oourof. You will not catch the train to Britz. Besides—is it any good? Do you imagine the Goldenburg will prefer the man who has shot her father and brother to the king? I believe reigning sovereigns are not often rejected, even in much higher

quarters. There is a royal hunting-lodge vacant at Mirsk, since the abdication of Mikhail of Paris. No doubt it will do admirably for the Goldenburg."

Vladimir was trembling with passion and his face was white.

"Your excellency does not seem to be very well informed as to the character of Madame Goldenburg. I hope you do not intend to draw any comparison between her and the ladies of the late king's court?"

Roumanine saw that he had gone a little too far.

"My dear Oourof, I have other things to occupy me. Your charming friend is no doubt an angel of disinterestedness and devotion. But meanwhile there is another question to be considered. It is hardly likely, I imagine, that you will be able to influence the king in our favor now—through Madame Goldenburg, at any rate. We may as well look out for someone else."

"Why not marry him to a Russian princess?"

Roumanine's thin eyebrows rose in an expressive curve.

"Oh, of course—in due time. But marriage isn't influence, my very dear Oourof. However, we must wait and see what turn events will take before we make any more plans, or perhaps they too will go astray. There is always Zanovitch to fall back upon. I have an idea that this young man will require strong measures before we have done with him."

“Strong measures?” Vladimir said questioningly.

Roumanine smiled.

“The sort of strong measures you took when you put on Major Janno’s uniform. You must take care that that story doesn’t get about, Ouf. Our part in these lamentable internal disturbances which are always taking place in these countries is one of pacification—you must always remember that. We deplore these insurrections most deeply—we have nothing to gain by them in most cases. Here, of course, it is in the highest degree probable that any rising against the existing dynasty would be set down to us by the other powers, who, not having sufficient brains to pursue any definite policy of their own, are always suspicious of the motives of anyone who has.”

CHAPTER XIV

ROUMANINE was right when he said that Liane Goldenburg, after leaving her flat in the Boulevard Valitzine, had gone to the "Paradis des Dames." Almost unconsciously, in that agony of horror and remorse which had seized her upon hearing Vladimir's story, her feet had borne her upon their accustomed path to the big shop in the Boulevard Mikhaïl II as to the one haven of refuge left her in the world. Good madame exclaimed at the sight of her white face, her pitiful eyes:

"My cabbage, what is the matter with thee? Come in—here, in my own little room. Thou art white as a ghost."

Liane followed her mechanically into the little private room.

"Will you let me stay here for tonight, dear madame? I can't tell you what is the matter—I am in terrible trouble, I must leave this place tomorrow. Tonight I have nowhere to go—I have no money—nothing. Will you lend me enough to get me over the frontier into Austria? I will pay it back as soon as I can."

The good woman took her in her arms.

"Will I? My poor little one, thou art welcome to all I have! But why go to Austria—hast thou not a home always ready for thee here?"

I will ask no questions, my darling—thou knowest I am not one of those whose noses are ever in the affairs of their neighbors. Stay with me, and help me—none of these stupid girls can make a bow as thou canst.”

“I can’t stay,” Liane said, trembling at the thought of being pursued by Vladimir. “I would leave Khristovitz tonight if I could.”

Madame pressed her no more. All that night the girl lay awake, staring with dry eyes into the darkness, seeing always that little hut in the forest and Vladimir holding the pistol to Pavlo’s head—or that other scene in the Boulevard Valitzine with her father lying dead by the Russian’s shot. And she had loved this man—this cruel murderer—she had left poor Fritz for him! The horror of it all was almost more than she could endure.

In the morning madame persuaded her to rest for a few hours longer before leaving for Britz. It was mid-day before she left the Boulevard Mikhail II. On second thoughts delay had seemed safer. If the attaché wanted to stop her journey, he would be more likely to watch the earlier trains.

But, after all, it was not Vladimir Oourof who followed her, but the king, whom she had forgotten altogether in the shock of her discovery that Vladimir was the murderer of her father and brother. It was the king who saw her get into the train, and himself selected another carriage in which he followed her quietly to Britz.

At Britz, as she stood, forlorn and helpless, on

the platform, it was the king who came up to her, with an odd look of resolution on his face.

She gave a little cry and shrank back.

"You need not be afraid, madame," he said. "I have followed you here because I must speak to you before you leave Salitza. There is a very good hotel just outside the station, where we shall not be interrupted. Will you come?"

She was too astonished to protest. In silence she followed him out of the miserable little frontier station and across a badly kept road to the hotel beyond. He had a moment's conversation with a waiter, who finally showed them into a large empty salon and left them there.

It was the moment Kasimir had been preparing himself to meet ever since he left Khristovitz; but now that it had come he was silent. The painful nervousness which had affected him all his life mastered him completely for a second or two. Mutely and awkwardly he set a chair for Liane, who by a gesture refused it. They stood facing each other in the middle of the room in a silence which would have been ridiculous if it had not been almost tragic.

Kasimir spoke at last—hesitatingly, haltingly, in a voice changed almost beyond recognition by mingled timidity and earnestness.

"I know why you are here," he said. "The girl gave me that—that vile letter. I understand. Of course you went away—I should have done the same thing myself. It has always been the fate that has pursued me, this—I might have expected it. They will leave me nothing

—nothing that I—care for. And there are so few things I do care for—I have learned not to care, in most cases. But now——”

For the first time since they had entered the room he lifted his head, and fixed upon her a look so wistful, so passionate, so full of tragedy and tenderness that she made a little startled movement as though to seek safety in flight.

He saw the movement and it unlocked his halting speech. Almost with a cry of despair he held out his hands to her, as though in appeal against the letter which had libeled him—the whole world which failed to understand him—even against herself, who had misjudged him and fled from him.

“No—no!” he said passionately. “Not that—I’m not such a scoundrel as that! You think I have trapped you here—God knows, it isn’t so! I have followed you because I could do nothing else. Could I have let you go without a word? I let other people think the worst of me—I can’t fight against everyone. But I can’t let you go away thinking that what that letter said was true. I came to your house as Mikhailovitch—never as the king. I told you so the first time I came at all. I meant it honestly—I swear I did. I never meant to bring all this upon you, though I might have known—‘A hunting-lodge at Mirsk!’” he said, unconsciously quoting Anna Roumanine’s letter. “You thought I meant *that*——!”

“I never thought it,” she said gently.

“But you left Khristovitz—without a word to

me. You wouldn't even wait to say good-bye to me. Listen—I am going to tell you the whole truth. That letter is true, after all, though not in the way it was meant."

He paused for an instant, hesitating, and deadly pale.

"How am I to tell you?" he went on in a voice so low that she could hardly hear what he was saying. "You will think it an insult, after what has happened—you will say I had no right to come here after you. Oh, I don't care what you think—you must believe me! Until I read that letter, I wouldn't let myself know—I tried not to know, because that would have ended it all. I have never cared for anything or anyone very much—I didn't think I cared then—until I read that letter. Then I knew that it was true—that I loved you as I have never loved anything all my life."

Again she made a hurried movement of protest and dismay.

"Your majesty will let me go?" she said. "You should not have come here—you should not have told me this."

"No," he said simply, "I shouldn't have told you—as the king. But I am not speaking to you as the king—it is you who have made that mistake. I am speaking to you as Kasimir Mikhailovitch."

"It is the same thing—you know it is the same," she said, distressed beyond words by his earnestness, afraid of wounding him, unable not to pity him. "You must let me go at once."

A sudden vision of desolation rose before him. The palace—the old, dreary life—the hopelessness, the helplessness of it all. The political marriage in the future, and, for the past, the memory of Liane Goldenburg.

He made a step towards her and caught her hands.

“No—I won’t let you go,” he said passionately. “You are the one thing that I have ever cared for—if I lose you I don’t care to go on living. Don’t you understand how empty my life is—won’t you try to understand, and pity me a little, if you can do nothing else? I have been a puppet always. I have always been cut off and alone. And now you could give me everything. Are you going to refuse—to send me back to Khristovitz alone, without you, without anything on earth to care for or hope for? Are you going to be so cruel, so heartless?”

For a moment she stood helpless with astonishment. She tried to release herself, but it was useless. With a kind of terror she looked at Kasimir’s tense face and entreating eyes.

“Your majesty—Captain Mikhailovitch—am I to think that the letter was true, that, after all, you only meant—the hunting-lodge at Mirsk?”

He dropped her hand as though she had struck him, and drew back with a sudden dignity and simplicity which sat very well on him.

“I am asking you to marry me, madame,” he said.

She was silent from sheer amazement.

"It is impossible," she said at last. "You could not do it."

"Not as the king—perhaps. As Mikhailovitch I may marry anyone I please. But, if you wish it, I will marry you as the king—in spite of everyone in Salitza."

"No, no," she answered, touched by his willingness to sacrifice everything for her. "It would be asking too much—it would cost you too much."

"Then will you marry me as Mikhailovitch?" he said quickly.

She hesitated. She remembered that conversation which she had had with Vladimir Ouf, she remembered saying that she could rule Salitza, if she chose. Should she choose? Or should she go out of the country, penniless, a fugitive, without a friend or a refuge in the world?

She looked up irresolutely and met Kasimir's eyes fixed upon her with the wistful expression she had seen in them long ago when he had thrown the bonbons to Mikhail. It was not ambition, after all, which decided her, but pity—pity for this boy whom unkind fate had made a king.

"You have not refused," he said. "You are not going to refuse?"

"Your majesty——"

"Not that," he interrupted quickly.

"Captain Mikhailovitch——"

He stopped her with a look.

"Not that—please!"

Her velvet eyes softened and she held out her hand.

“Kasimir——”

He took her hand and kissed it. The wistful look died out of his face, and he smiled at her with infinite tenderness and contentment.

“Don’t tell me to go back to Khristovitz alone—anything but that! If you knew how terribly lonely I have been all my life—you won’t leave me, Liane?”

The tears came suddenly into her eyes—the pathos of his appeal touched her as nothing else could have done.

“You shall never be lonely again,” she said, almost as she would have said it to little Mikhail in the days when he had been afraid of being left alone in the dark.

Next morning, as Roumanine sat by the window of his pleasant study overlooking the Boulevard Valitzine, the man with the india-rubber face and the beady, unexpressive eyes came in softly, without knocking, and stood at his elbow.

Roumanine nodded curtly.

“Well?”

“I have come to report myself, excellency. I obeyed your orders. The king followed Madame Goldenburg to Britz. They went to the Grand Hotel. At ten o’clock last night they were married.”

Roumanine dropped the match with which he was preparing to light a fresh cigarette. It fell

on the rug at his feet, lighted as it was, and began to burn a little round hole. The astonished ambassador took no notice, but sat staring at his agent with a petrified air.

“Married!”

The india-rubber countenance of the spy never changed. It was his business in life to observe events, not to take an interest in them. His beady eyes roamed round the room, and then fell on the burning match at Roumanine’s feet.

“Yes, excellency—married. Permit me——” He put his foot on the match. A singeing rug was as interesting to him as the morganatic marriage of a reigning sovereign.

“You are sure you made no mistake?”

“I never make mistakes, excellency,” said the spy simply.

It was true—Roumanine had never known him to make a mistake, this automatic human watching-machine. In Salitza his appearance had earned for him the unenviable title of “the Death’s Head.”

“Where is the king now?”

“He returned to Khristovitz this morning, excellency. Madame Goldenburg has gone on to Mirsk.”

A very evil smile curled the thin edges of Roumanine’s mouth.

“Ourof will like to hear that,” he said to himself. “I think I will keep the marriage to myself for the moment—very well. Now go to Mirsk and see what happens there.”

"Yes, excellency," said the Death's Head submissively.

"Find out where Madame Goldenburg goes—what she does—how often the king sees her. She has a maid?"

"At Britz she was alone, excellency."

"Ah—it will be different now. He will give her an establishment of some sort—she will take good care of that," said the ambassador, whose dealings with women had not inclined him to take a high view of their disinterestedness. "There will be a maid. You can manage a maid, I suppose?" he added, glancing sardonically at the unattractive countenance of the Death's Head.

"Yes, excellency."

"Well—the particular form of ugliness that women won't take to has not yet been invented," said Roumanine with his acid smile. "Men generally have the sense to look out for beauty of some sort—it is about all they ever get from a woman, so they have the right to demand it. That is all, I think. You may go."

The spy went out, noiselessly, as he had come. Roumanine lighted his neglected cigarette, and settled himself comfortably in his chair. He had hardly done so when the door opened once more, and the princess entered.

Roumanine laid down his cigarette resignedly, wondering what on earth his wife wanted.

The little ambassadrice looked flushed and excited.

"Ivan—is it true that the—that Madame

Goldenburg has left her flat in the Boulevard Valitzine?"

Roumanine eyed her coldly.

"Madame Goldenburg? May I ask what you know about Madame Goldenburg, Anna?"

Anna's little gilded and elaborately dressed head went into the air.

"Pray don't be absurd, Ivan. You always think nobody knows anything except yourself—is it true that she is gone?"

"Madame Goldenburg has left her flat, if that is what you are so anxious to know."

"And where has she gone? Tell me, Ivan—there's a dear. Do tell me. They say it's the king now. Is it?"

Roumanine looked at his wife with a thoughtful air. So she had heard about the king, too. Was it possible——? Ah—he understood.

"You are very anxious to hear that your friend Captain Ouf is free from the toils of Madame Goldenburg," he said in an unemotional voice.

The poor little princess glanced timidly at his face—the gray, wrinkled, inexpressive face which she could never read, and which filled her at times with an almost hysterical terror and suspicion.

"Ouf?" she stammered.

"Yes—Ouf. You say that I think I know everything. What if I know even more than you imagine?"

There was an instant of dreadful silence. Anna fidgeted with the gold bangles at her

wrists; Roumanine put out a cold hand towards his cigarette.

"It is very touching, this interest you take in Madame Goldenburg," he said. "Do you suppose it blinds me? Do you suppose I don't know why you are interested in her? You think the pretty attaché will ask *you* to mend his broken heart—eh? A brilliant idea, certainly! Perhaps he will."

"Ivan——!" she murmured faintly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, don't imagine that I mind. I have never interfered with your methods of amusing yourself. I am not that sort of man at all. I shall never give you the satisfaction of seeing me go out to be shot by *ce bel Oourof*. Shot—for you! That would be a good joke, my pretty Anna, wouldn't it?"

She stood shivering beneath the lash of his imperturbable sarcasm. He continued in his cool, level voice, which he never lifted above its usual expressionless tone.

"But pray don't imagine that I am a fool. I have seen what has been going on for years. And now M. l'Attaché has deserted you for the Goldenburg? Well—I congratulate him on his good taste."

She gave a little miserable cry of indignation. Roumanine threw his extinguished cigarette out of the window and turned upon her a look of cold hatred and contempt.

"Yes—he has good taste, your handsome Oourof. Do you suppose *you* are going to con-

sole him for the loss of the Goldenburg? He came here yesterday—I made him tell me the story of her flight. I didn't think he had it in him to feel so much about anything. Of course it was *you* who wrote that blundering letter—it is just the sort of absolutely unnecessary stupidity that you would commit. Well—you have driven the Goldenburg into the king's arms, and Vladimir Oourof will hate you for the rest of his life. I hope you are satisfied."

The little ambassadrice turned and went hastily from the room. Her husband resumed his chair, his cigarette, and his habitual calm.

"She won't write any more anonymous letters, I think," he said. "If it hadn't been for that, I would not have said anything. But—to interfere like this—to spoil all my plans with her sickly sentimental infatuation for that intolerable Oourof——! No—that I really could not pass over in silence. The impertinence of these women! They have no brains themselves—they are only fit to frivol about among hats and clothes—and they must interfere in matters of this kind and upset all one's arrangements for the sake of some long-legged, empty-headed adventurer like Oourof! I am half inclined to resign and retire to Paris."

He sat for a long time looking out of the window in silence.

"We must see what she does," he said at last, referring to Liane Goldenburg. "Perhaps she will behave like any other woman and be satisfied with diamonds. Perhaps she will not."

Again he sat silent for a little while.

“If she does not content herself with diamonds,” he said, “she will have to go. Yes—if she interferes and influences that hot-headed boy against us—she will have to go.”

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Vladimir Oourof went out of Roumanine's study, on the day Liane left Khristovitz for Britz, it was in a mood which seemed to call for action of some kind—the more desperate, the better. He had for a moment a wild idea of going to Britz himself and confronting the king, but a little reflection soon showed him the futility of doing anything of that kind. After all, Liane was gone and nothing that he could do would bring her back to him. A thousand times he cursed himself for his folly in telling her the story of the miniature. It was his own stupidity which had undone him—and Anna Roumanine's letter. It was almost a pleasure to think of someone besides himself to revile.

Yes—it was Anna Roumanine, after all, who had brought the catastrophe about. He looked in his pocket-book for her letter and was astonished to find that it was not there. He went to the flat in the Boulevard Valitzine and frightened the poor little servant nearly out of her wits by his inquiries. She had the sense to deny all knowledge of the letter, though she admitted that Captain Mikhailovitch had called to see madame and had seemed much disturbed at finding her gone. This was all exactly what

Vladimir had expected to hear and he had to be satisfied. The letter was gone. After all, it was not important. He could deal with Anna Roumanine without it, when the time came.

Then he sat down to reflect, and his reflections were anything but pleasant. He had lost Liane; he had muddled his ambassador's plans, thereby interfering very considerably with his own chances of success in the tortuous paths which he had chosen; and he was desperately in want of money. He was literally at the end of his resources.

Of all this Roumanine was as well aware as he was; but he wanted the man whom he intended to use as a tool to realize his condition thoroughly before he had need of his services. The astute diplomatist was the last person in the world to lose anything by being in a hurry. He knew that the scheme he had in view would hardly be one of which even Vladimir Oourof would approve in cold blood; and besides, it might never become necessary. At the same time, a desperate man badly in want of money, is, if he possesses any sense at all, a more valuable tool than half a dozen ordinary agents.

So he waited for a few days before he sent for Oourof again. He was well informed as to the attaché's movements. There were other spies besides the Death's Head in Khristovitz, and one of the secrets of Roumanine's success in his career was that he set almost as many spies to watch his agents as he did to report the doings

of his enemies. It is possible that even the Death's Head himself had a pair of invisible eyes watching his operations at Mirsk.

But at Mirsk, at least, there was peace. The few people who lived there were not at all interested in the fact that the low white villa on the hill, next to the royal hunting lodge, had again found an occupant. They were still less interested—being bucolically and agriculturally minded—in the occupant herself. The low white villa stood away from every other house except the hunting lodge wherein Mikhail of Paris had entertained the ladies of his court.

Perhaps Kasimir was the only one of all the actors in this drama which was being played in Khristovitz whose mind was at rest. For a little while, at least, the black shadow of the palace seemed to have fallen from about him—for a little while he was to taste the happiness for which he had longed so often and so sorely all his life. It was true that his days were spent in Khristovitz, struggling with political intrigues, with popular discontent, with the frank disapproval of a hostile cabinet and a premier who was almost as much afraid of action as of inaction. It was true that his differences with the queen became every day more frequent. Perhaps his mother's persistent miscomprehension was Kasimir's worst trial at that time. But, when the daily labor of either fighting with or ignoring all these unfavorable opinions was over, what a relief it was to step into

the white electric launch, and go gliding up the still river under the shadow of pines and rocks to the quiet landing stage of Liane's villa at Mirsk! For a few hours, at least, he was free to forget all the disagreeable incidents of his life in an atmosphere of peace. The eager boy who sprang out of the launch was a very different person from the cold, nervous king who drove now and then through the streets of his capital, responding to perfunctory cheers with equally perfunctory bows. Here he could be himself, without the mask of ceremony or of shyness which disfigured his whole nature in Khristovitz.

Even Liane Goldenburg, who had married him out of pity—or ambition—forgot that fact at times. It was impossible not to be touched by his devotion, by the gaiety with which he escaped from state affairs and came to her as to a refuge from that other life which he led apart from hers. It was impossible not to sympathize with him in his struggle with everyone about him. It was impossible not to love him, with the half-protective affection she would have given to a child. His absolute adoration of her touched a chord in her nature which Vladimir's passion had never reached. There was something oddly pathetic in the way in which he seemed to cling to her and depend upon her—he who had always borne the reputation of being so suspicious of those about him, so reticent and uncommunicative, so devoid of every natural feeling. How terribly he had

been misjudged! she thought. He had almost every quality which his caviling subjects denied him, and hardly one which they credited him with possessing. She hardly realized as yet that there was, after all, some excuse for their mistake, for they only knew him as the king, and as the king he did not shine. He had not the gift of leading men, though he had enough spirit to oppose them; and his nature was too sensitive to bear opposition well. He had never been intended for a hero, and a life of semi-publicity had only emphasized that fact more cruelly than nature had done already.

But at Mirsk it was easy to forget all this. He almost forgot it himself. His delight in the little white villa amused Liane. He was never tired of suggesting alterations and improvements.

"Do you turn the palace upside down like this?" she asked one night after he had vigorously carried out some scheme of improvement in the arrangement of one of the rooms with his own hands.

He pushed a chair into place, and laughed.

"The palace! I should as soon think of interfering with the architecture of the cathedral. No—the palace is not my business."

"Yet you are in love with this little place," Liane said, smiling. "I shall soon be jealous of the furniture—I am not sure that I am not quite jealous of the gardens already. You are in as much of a hurry to see the last rose that is out as you are to see me!"

"You don't understand," he said simply. "I have half a dozen palaces, but I have never had a home until now. That is why I love this little place so."

"And the gardens?" she said, touched by his answer, but still laughing at his energy. "Do you know what time it was when you dragged me out there this morning in a dressing-gown to see that new rose? Six o'clock, Kasimir!—not a minute more! Are there no roses at the palace?"

"Yes, but you are not there, so they don't grow like these," he said gaily.

"Do you make pretty speeches like that at the palace?" she asked.

"To Nikolaievitch—or my mother's ladies-in-waiting? Oh, I don't get much practice at that sort of thing at the palace," Kasimir said with a sigh. "If you knew how delightful these little rooms are after those great, gloomy, glacial state apartments!"

"Don't think of them," she said gently. "You can be happy here."

"I should be perfectly happy if you would let me acknowledge our marriage," he said. "I can't bear——"

"What is the matter?" she asked, as he broke off.

"You have never lived in a court—I was born in one. You don't know how impossible it is to keep anything secret. My visits to the hunting lodge will not escape notice long—and then someone will find out that I don't go to

the hunting lodge at all. Then—you know the sort of things that will be said about you. Liane—I can't bear that they should be said!"

"But we know they are not true," she answered. "What does it matter what people say? Let us be happy, Kasimir, and forget that Khristovitz exists."

It was always the attitude which she took when the question of acknowledging the marriage was spoken of. She would not agree to his idea of making it at least an open secret. She had always the fear of Vladimir Oourof in her mind—the fear lest he should break into the pleasant peace of the little white villa on the hill and ruin everything, both for Kasimir and herself.

Indeed it was of Kasimir rather than herself that she thought—it was for him that she feared. The terror with which Vladimir had inspired her on the occasion of their first meeting had returned in full force. By a miracle, as it seemed to her, she had escaped from the disaster in which he had involved her whole existence. But even while she admitted the miracle she doubted its power to protect her permanently from the man whom she had such good cause to dread.

But Kasimir had been right when he said that his visits to the hunting lodge could not escape notice long. The queen, jealous of anyone else acquiring over her son that influence which she had never been able to acquire herself, managed to be very well informed as to his movements.

His sudden fondness for Mirsk aroused her suspicions. One day, about three weeks after his marriage, she came to him pale with the anger she tried to suppress.

“What is this last story I hear of you, Kasimir? Why do you spend so much time at Mirsk?”

Her tone stung him, but he answered quietly enough.

“Mirsk is pleasant in this hot weather. Is there any reason why I shouldn't go there? My father——”

He stopped, with a touch of confusion. It was about the worst thing he could have said, for the queen had been only too painfully aware of Mikhail's partiality for Mirsk. She turned a shade paler than before.

“Pray don't think it necessary to try to deceive me, Kasimir. I know that Madame Goldenburg has a villa at Mirsk.”

Kasimir prepared for the inevitable battle.

“Madame Goldenburg has a villa at Mirsk,” he said quietly, “and I have a hunting lodge. May I ask you to say quite frankly what you mean?”

“I mean that you are always at Madame Goldenburg's villa. Can you deny it?”

“I haven't the smallest intention of denying it. But how do you know so much about my movements at Mirsk? Is it possible that you have set spies upon me there?”

She colored uncomfortably.

“You are never frank with me, Kasimir, and

I thought it my duty to try and save you from this woman."

"You may spare yourself the trouble," the king replied coldly. "I don't require any protection from Madame Goldenburg."

"You must give her up at once."

Kasimir was silent for a moment. It was not easy to decide what to do.

"We will not discuss the question," he said at last. "I don't admit your right to spy upon me and criticise my conduct in this way, but if it is any consolation to you I will give you my word of honor that my relations with Madame Goldenburg are perfectly innocent."

She stared at him for a moment. This was worse than anything he had ever done. Even Mikhail of Paris, she thought, would have had more sense than to tell her such a shameless, stupid lie.

"Do you expect me to believe that?" she said furiously, startled and shocked out of her usual self-composure.

Curiously enough, it was exactly what he had expected. The shock of finding that she would not believe him gave him one of the most unpleasant moments of his life.

"I have given you my word of honor," he said. "In your place, I hope I should have believed the word of my own son against the testimony of fifty spies. I have never lied to you before, and I am telling the truth now. As you don't believe me, I am forced to prove what I say. Madame Goldenburg is my wife."

She gave a little cry of horror and astonishment.

“Kasimir! This is utter madness!”

He watched her coolly. He was very angry—so angry that he had ceased to be afraid of her.

“Am I to understand,” he asked with a touch of bitter sarcasm, “that in spite of the high moral tone you were preparing to take with me you would have preferred to find that Madame Goldenburg was *not* my wife? I should be sorry to come to such a conclusion.”

“But the marriage isn’t legal?”

Almost for the first time in their constant misunderstandings he lost his temper completely.

“Are you trying to insult me?” he said hotly. “Do you think I am such a scoundrel that I would entrap a woman into a false marriage?”

She saw that she had made a mistake.

“I beg your pardon, Kasimir—of course I didn’t mean that. But it is only a morganatic marriage. It will not make any difference—nobody could object to it seriously. I have wanted to speak to you about your marriage for some time. You ought to marry soon.”

“What do you mean?” he said, almost bewildered by this sudden change in her attitude.

“What I say. There is the succession to be considered—I suppose you have realized that if you die without children Zanolitch is the heir to the throne? And an alliance by marriage with Austria or Russia would be to your inter-

est. Salitza is not a country that can stand alone."

Kasimir stood looking at her with something like despair. The net was closing around him again. The political marriage, always one of the terrors of his life, was to be forced upon him now as a duty which he owed his country, in dire peril of falling into the hands of the hated Zanovitch dynasty once more. Of the sort of family feud which had existed for centuries between his own house and that of the so-called pretender he was only too well aware. That dismal tale of stabbings and poisonings had been poured into his ears as a child and had filled him with vague fears even at that early age. Zanovitch had been the bogey of his childhood and the nightmare of his youth. The mild musical amateur was to him the descendant of murderers of countless members of his family from olden times almost to the present day. Apart from all other considerations, it was not a pleasant thought that the labors of a life spent in the ungrateful task of ruling Salitza should in the end only benefit the traditional enemy of his house. If he refused to marry some Russian or Austrian princess of whom the queen and his ministers might approve it simply meant that he was handing back to Zanovitch those very possessions which his father and his grandfather had spared no effort to gain and retain. It was decidedly unpleasant to imagine Zanovitch succeeding him. Something of the old feud rankled in his mind still—he would have

felt far less repugnance to the idea of a foreigner and a stranger ruling in his place.

It is probable that the queen had counted upon the existence of this feeling. She had never loved her son nor held his affection, yet she hated Liane Goldenburg for taking from her what she had never possessed—she resolved to punish her to the utmost for having dared to ensnare the king in her toils. But for the moment she did not accomplish much, beyond planting in the king's mind a vague sense of uneasiness. He would not admit to her the necessity of the political marriage, whatever he might do to himself.

"There is no need to talk about this now," he said, thought not without a certain hesitation which she was quick to perceive. "I don't intend to die just yet, if I can help it, and when I do, it will not matter much to me who succeeds. Zanovitch, from all one hears, is a harmless sort of man and almost as unfit to be a king as I am. It is quite in accord with the eternal irony of things that he should become king of Salitza."

"You are trying to talk as your father used to do," the queen said impatiently. "Take care, Kasimir. With nations, as well as with individuals, it is possible to go too far. Your father went too far, and you know what happened. You don't want to be obliged to abdicate and retire to Paris, I suppose."

Kasimir was getting a little reckless.

"Paris is not a bad place to retire to, by all accounts," he said. "Don't you think your

views are a shade too pessimistic? My marriage with Madame Goldenburg doesn't seem to me to be of any importance to anyone except myself and her."

One last little dart of spite the queen could not refrain from using.

"You know all about Madame Goldenburg, no doubt," she said calmly. "I believe you met her first at the Café Valitzine, in the company of Captain Ouf, the Russian attaché. From what I have heard of him, I should say he was rather a curious sort of acquaintance for a young and beautiful woman, as I believe Madame Goldenburg is, living by herself, with friends or relations."

Kasimir looked at her quickly. The dart had gone home, but it did not do its work. Its immediate effect was to widen the breach between them rather than to arouse his suspicions of Liane.

"I beg that you will make no more remarks of that kind to me, madame," he said.

CHAPTER XVI

IT was not through Roumanine that Vladimir heard of Liane Goldenburg's marriage. One night at a ball at the palace he had the qualified happiness of dancing with Natalia Morisof. Little Anna Roumanine was present and it must be admitted that her friend was rather unusually gracious to the handsome attaché in consequence.

"You have heard the last piece of news?" she said. "No? Why, I always thought you knew everything! That beautiful Madame Goldenburg——" she felt him wince at the name and noted the fact with malicious satisfaction—"is actually married to *Sa Majesté*. Extraordinary, isn't it? Fedor says that the queen is furious and is trying all she can to marry him off at once to one of our princesses. Hasn't Roumanine told you that? Dear me, I thought he was so fond of you."

"Diplomacy is a game in which confidences are sometimes dangerous, madame," Vladimir answered, conscious of the scrutiny of Natalia's keen eyes. "His excellency doesn't tell me everything, as you are kind enough to suppose."

He asked no questions about the marriage, somewhat to her disgust, and for the rest of their dance he was singularly silent. He escaped

from the ball-room as soon as he could, and found Roumanine, as luck would have it, alone, on a balcony overlooking the illuminated palace gardens.

Vladimir came up to him with an ominous quietness.

"So Madame Goldenburg has married the king," he said, looking at him closely. "You did not tell me that the other day, excellency."

Roumanine smoothed his beard reflectively.

"No—I did not tell you. I wished to prevent you from doing anything imprudent, my dear Oourof."

"Some day I will take an opportunity of repaying in full your excellency's kind consideration for my feelings," Vladimir said, with the most perfect air of unconcern. "The queen is trying to bring about a Russian marriage, I hear?" he added in the same tone.

Roumanine smiled.

"I see that you have been dancing with Madame Morisof. Yes, it is quite true."

Vladimir lounged away. He returned to the ball-room and went straight to the little ambassadrice. She stopped talking when she caught sight of the attaché's tall figure coming towards her and turned pale under her paint.

"Madame will give me the honor of a dance?" Vladimir said in his most formal manner. He had never spoken to her except when speech became absolutely necessary since the night he left Khristovitz with Liane Goldenburg.

The little ambassadrice hesitated. Morisof was looking on. Finally she murmured something inaudible and let him lead her away as he wished.

"It is detestably hot in these rooms," he said. "Possibly you would prefer the gardens."

"Yes," Anna Roumanine answered faintly.

In the gardens it was possible to find a place where one could talk in peace. Vladimir led the frightened princess in silence under the trees to a seat where he had often sat paying her pretty compliments in the days when her affection had been as necessary to him as her rubles were now.

Perhaps she remembered this as well as he did, for she stopped suddenly and took her hand from his arm.

"What do you want?" she asked in a shaking voice. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Because I never get a chance of speaking to you now," Vladimir said, in his musical, melancholy way. "Because you are angry with me, my angel—I beg your pardon—I should not have called you that. For the moment I forgot. How that dress suits you—how beautiful you look tonight!"

The little ambassadrice began to cry softly, regardless of her complexion.

"Oh, Vladimir, why have you been so cruel? I am so wretched—you don't know what I have suffered!"

Vladimir sat down beside her very gently on the narrow seat.

"And haven't I suffered too, my angel? Do

you think I have not paid for my folly and treachery?"

"How could you do it?" Anna sobbed. "Oh, that horrible woman—if I could have killed her for taking you away from me!"

The attaché put his arm around her cautiously. She did not appear to resent the action.

"Don't speak of her," he said in her ear. "Has she not punished me enough as it is? Are you going to help her, Anna?"

The little ambassadrice's foolish, tender heart was melted at once.

"But you don't care for me," she said, in a very small voice. "You said so, Vladimir—you were tired of me—tired to death!"

"I was in a vile temper, my angel—and I was completely infatuated with her. I own it—I throw myself on your mercy. I obeyed a mad impulse—I abandoned you for her—I have never had a happy moment since. You talk about having suffered—you! Do you think I didn't repent, long before she left me? When she went I had one consolation. I said to myself 'Anna will forgive me now.'"

"I don't know that I can," Anna replied, summoning her dignity in spite of her desire to throw herself into his arms and forgive him. "It would never be the same thing again, Vladimir—you must see that for yourself. How am I to be sure that you will not fall in love with some other horrible creature like the Goldenburg? Natalia Morisof told me a lot of things about you when she knew we had quarreled.

Only yesterday she told me that you were seen with that girl who is singing at the opera—Eva Carillon.”

“Natalia Morisof is a cat, my angel. She is jealous of you. But I will be quite frank. I will confess all my sins and you shall give me absolution. It is quite true about Eva Carillon. Will you forgive me that, too? I was desperate because you would not have anything to say to me—I didn’t dare come to you then; and I was savage about the Goldenburg. I had to amuse myself somehow—if I had sat down and thought about it all I should have gone mad.”

“But you don’t care about that girl?” Anna Roumanine asked jealously.

“My angel, I have never cared for anyone but you, if you would only believe me. The Goldenburg—Eva Carillon—all that is nothing.”

“But you will never see the Goldenburg or Eva Carillon again?” the little ambassadrice stipulated, hauling down her flag with a faint appearance of reluctance.

“I will not promise not to go to the opera, my angel; but of course I will never speak to Eva again. As for the Goldenburg, she is safe at Mirsk. Do not be paltry and suspicious, Anna. It is so unlike you.”

She surrendered at last, but not without a certain pathetic consciousness of her own weakness and a touch of truer insight into the character of her handsome attaché than she had ever betrayed before.

“I’m not paltry or suspicious,” she said, rather

sadly. "I forgive you, Vladimir, but it isn't because I think you are really speaking the truth or mean to be any different, but because I can't do without you. I wish I had more spirit, but it's no use. I have wanted you so—I have been so miserable! Oh, Vladimir, be good to me—I love you a thousand times more than the Goldenburg or Eva Carillon."

Poor little Anna! How little she suspected the hatred that lay behind those smooth protestations of devotion! She let him take her in his arms and kiss her—she could not see the sinister gleam in his eyes as they rested on her white throat with its collar of diamonds. If he could only take that jeweled throat between his hands and choke the life out of this detestable little fool who had robbed him of Liane Goldenburg! And instead of that, he was forced to make love to her for the sake of her money!

But he was too cunning to broach the subject of a loan then. Next morning he appeared in her pink and gold boudoir with a worried and suppliant air.

"My angel, I hate to ask you—you who are always so generous—but I am in difficulties again."

She looked at him gravely for a moment. It is possible that the thought crossed her mind that it was for this he had sought a reconciliation; but she said nothing. Instead, she fetched the diamond collar she had worn the night before and put it into his hand.

"I have no money left this quarter," she said,

“but I will give you that. It is my own—not Ivan’s. Take it.”

He took it, but not without an infinitesimal stab of shame—for which he only hated her the more. Perhaps for that reason, with a fiendish refinement of cruelty, he did not use the collar to pay his debts, but presented it to Eva Carillon—and sat in his ambassadrice’s box at the opera that night, watching it sparkle round the singer’s pretty throat with a strong sense of savage satisfaction.

“She has a collar like mine,” the little princess said, laying down her glasses and looking at Oufrof’s face.

“You are not wearing it tonight,” Roumanine said, seeing the look.

Anna flushed and paled nervously, and turned her eyes from Vladimir to the stage, where Eva Carillon was standing smiling and singing like an angel in the full glare of the footlights. Roumanine smoothed his beard. He possessed in the highest degree the art of putting two and two together.

“She has given the collar to Oufrof, the little fool!” he said to himself. “And he has handed it on to the Carillon. Well—she can sing, at any rate.”

“The voice of a nightingale, is it not?” he remarked aloud to his wife. “She is charmingly pretty, this little Carillon—don’t you find her so, Anna? How that collar flashes as she sings!—it is certainly very like yours. You must bring yours out when we go home or I shall

really imagine someone has stolen it and sent it to *la belle Eva*."

"I have sent mine to be mended," Anna said hastily. "I broke the clasp last night."

She knew well enough that Roumanine guessed the fate of the collar and her small features grew hard and haggard beneath their paint. Roumanine smoothed his beard more carefully than ever and applauded Eva Carillon with enthusiasm on every possible occasion.

"Even the king is delighted with her," he said, glancing at the royal box. "He does not look bored, as he usually does at the opera. Why, who is the lady at the back of the box? She has kept in the background until now."

It was true—the tall figure of a woman dressed in white had appeared once or twice at the back of the royal box, where the king was seated with Captain Nikolaievitch. Even as Roumanine spoke, he saw Kasimir say something to her and saw her come forward and sit down opposite him. Anna Roumanine gave a little cry, and Vladimir Oourof, after one rapid glance, turned his face resolutely towards the stage.

"It is Madame Goldenburg," Roumanine said, addressing the two silent people beside him. "Look, Anna—you are interested in her, I believe. She is certainly very beautiful."

"I don't care for these black beauties," the little ambassadrice said pettishly. "She is too tall and too big. Captain Oourof, will you please give me my fan? I have dropped it by that chair."

Vladimir gave her the fan in silence. She turned her back on Roumanine and began to talk to Oourof with somewhat forced and feverish gaiety. He hardly heard what she said, or knew what answer he made to her. It was the first time he had seen Liane since the night she had left him, and the sight of her almost drove him mad. When the last act of the opera came, he could bear it no longer. He excused himself, and went out into the street, and waited for the king to leave the opera-house after the performance.

It seemed a century before he came. At last the guard of honor stiffened themselves up to salute him, and the tall attaché, looking over their heads, saw him come out rapidly, with Liane's hand on his arm. He put her into the carriage which was waiting and sprang in after her. The guard saluted once more and the carriage rolled away down the Boulevard Valitzine towards Mirsk.

That night, though perhaps no one in the opera-house suspected it, was the turning point in the king's career. In spite of Roumanine's declaration that he was delighted with Eva Carillon, there was very little pleasure in Kasimir's mind as he sat there listening to the music and applauding mechanically. The hardest thing he had ever had to do was before him, and he knew it. He was very silent as the carriage rolled along the dark roads towards Mirsk. When they reached the little villa on the hill

Liane saw from his face that something was wrong.

"You are tired, Kasimir," she said, when they were alone in the long room looking upon the garden where supper had been laid for them.

He sat down wearily, poured himself out a glass of water and drank it before he answered.

"No—I am not tired," he said at last. "It is worse than that. I have to tell you something. I have received what is practically a command to marry a Russian princess."

For a moment Liane stood motionless by the lighted supper-table, staring at him almost incredulously. Then she came to his side, and put her hand on his shoulder. The grip of those slight fingers hurt him oddly.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, in a voice that had suddenly become hard.

He looked down at the cloth and would not meet her eyes.

"What am I to do? If I die without an heir, Zanovitch will come to the throne. The people have a right to demand that I shall do the only thing in my power to protect them from becoming the subjects of a house they detest. Then, if I do not accept this Russian alliance, Russia will of course be offended—and we all know what that means. Alexander of Bulgaria offended Russia—you remember what happened to him. Oh, these miserable little kingdoms, ruled by kings who are not strong enough to stand alone! If I were only strong enough to resist, I would resist until not a man was left to fight for me or

a single round of ammunition was left in Salitza! But—what can I do?”

She did not answer at once. It was the moment which was to decide her fate, for better or for worse. Should she let him marry a Russian—should she sit down contented for the rest of her life with the second place—the lot of the morganatic wife, subservient in all things to the royal consort? Should she be satisfied for ever with the villa at Mirsk, while another woman reigned in the palace at Khristovitz? Should she see another woman's children honored and acknowledged as heirs to the throne, while hers, if she had any, would not even have the right to bear their father's name?

“What shall I do?” the king said again helplessly.

“You will refuse!”

He looked up at the sound of command in her voice. Her face was very pale, her eyes were blazing with excitement—with anger, though it was not with him that she was angry. It was the last thing left to her—her power over Kasimir of Salitza. She was going to fight for it to the end.

“You will refuse,” she said, “or—never see me again. Choose which it shall be.”

Kasimir was almost frightened by her passion. He had imagined that she would detest the idea of his making a political marriage as much as he did, but he had thought she would understand his reasons too well to resent it. It had never entered his head that she, who had tried her

hardest to prevent him from even acknowledging their marriage, should resist him in this.

“What are you saying?” he asked. “There is no need for you to be angry. The whole thing is a horrible necessity and no choice of mine. You know that I love you—that I loathe the very idea of this marriage—that I shall never look upon anyone but you as my wife. But if I refuse——”

“I give you your choice,” she interrupted passionately. “If you consent to this marriage I will never see you again—you shall go out of this house now—tonight—at once. I never asked you to acknowledge me—I refused when you said you would marry me as the king in spite of all Salitza. But this—this is impossible—it is a hideous farce. If I am your wife, you cannot marry any other woman while I am alive. If you can marry this Russian princess, then I am not your wife at all.”

He sat silent, struggling with himself. He knew what it meant better than she did—he gauged more truly the temper of the enemy he had to fight.

“Liane——”

“No—no—don’t speak to me. Decide yourself, without asking me. I will never consent to it—that is all I shall ever say. You tell me that you love me—it is for you to decide whether you are going to desert me now.”

She turned away and went to the window looking out upon the moonlit gardens. Kasimir did not speak. She cast a questioning glance at

him over her shoulder, and went out upon the little terrace and sat down upon the low balustrade of stone which ran along it. The air came cool and damp from the river, but she did not feel it. She was listening for Kasimir's step behind her—for Kasimir's voice to tell her whether she had lost or won a crown.

For a long time she waited in vain. The king sat where she had left him, looking after her with a haggard face.

How often he had cursed the fate which had made him what he was! If he could abdicate and be simply Kasimir Mikhailovitch, how happy he might be! But there was Zanovitch to be considered—Zanovitch, whose fathers had murdered his, whose pretensions to the throne had always been a menace to his house. It would be the act of a coward to give up his rights to the man whom he disliked most in the world.

He sat there, looking around the pretty room with its flowers and pictures and scattered books on the little tables. It was the only place in which he had ever been happy. As he sat there, the old loneliness and sadness came back to him. He shivered as though he felt the cool air stealing in from the river.

There was only one thing which made life worth living for him. He could not give it up. There were no doubt men who would have been strong enough to do even that, rather than risk their own success. He had never wanted success, but only happiness. He did not know that

he had wanted the hardest thing in the world to find, the most difficult to keep.

Very slowly he went out upon the terrace and stood by Liane's side. "There is no choice for me," he said, rather sadly. "You knew that, Liane. How could I give you up—you who are everything to me? I will refuse this Russian marriage and make you queen."

She looked up with a startled cry of triumph and relief and met the sadness in his eyes. With a sudden passing feeling of compunction and tenderness she repented of her victory.

"Kasimir, I have asked too much—and you are too generous!" she said.

"You have asked for your rights," he answered simply, "and you shall have them. I never knew you wished for them before. It seems strange to me that anyone should want to be a queen—I have so often wished that I had been born a subject rather than a king. But you are in the right, after all—I see that. Only—don't say that I am selfish and superstitious, Liane—somehow I felt that while you were here, outside the life I lead as the king, it was possible for me to escape from Khristovitz. Now that is over. You have chosen Khristovitz. My place of refuge is gone."

She did not answer him, for to answer would have been to renounce her triumph. For a few moments they lingered on the terrace.

"It is cold and very late," he said at last. "Let us go in."

As she stepped into the lighted room he bent

to disentangle a long trailing piece of creeper from about his feet.

“What is that?” she asked, with a sudden unaccountable chill.

He held up a spray of white, half-shut blossoms. Something seemed to seize her by the throat and choke her. The room whirled round her and she heard Vladimir Oourof’s voice, deep and sweet and soft, speaking again the words which had frightened her long ago. “There have always been women who have dragged men down—who have clung to them like the graceful, swaying creeper from which you take your name and wound them round with white flowers and wreaths of tender green—and have grown so strong in the end that they have strangled the life out of everything they clung to.”

She cast the white spray of convolvulus from her with a gesture that was almost violent, and went hurriedly from the room.

CHAPTER XVII

CASIMIR kept his word. A few days later he opened parliament in state, and acknowledged his marriage with Liane Goldenburg in the speech from the throne.

It would be impossible to describe the sensation caused by his announcement. The escapades of Mikhail of Paris paled for ever in comparison with this.

That night, in a stormy scene in the very council chamber wherein Schamiratz had been deposed, the entire cabinet tendered its resignation. Almost with tears the unhappy premier pointed out to his unmoved sovereign the madness of rejecting the proposed Russian marriage. Kasimir listened patiently, but with no sign of surrender.

"I have told myself all that you can possibly tell me," he said. "My decision is unalterable."

"Then I also must resign, sir," the premier answered in despair. "I am not competent to deal with a crisis like this."

"You have never been competent to deal with the simplest matters, far less with a crisis of any kind," the king said, giving way to a momentary impulse of irritation. He regretted the words almost before they were spoken. "I should not have said that—no doubt you have done your

best. I thank you for your services, and accept your resignation."

He had made one more enemy—he who had such sore need of friends. He knew it and the knowledge added to his distress of mind. But outwardly he showed nothing—he had never seemed more cold, more unapproachable.

Then came a fresh difficulty. No one could be found to accept office. Royal carriages drove to house after house on the Boulevard Valitzine inhabited by every man whom it would have been possible to press into this ungrateful service. All was in vain. At last, in utter despair, Kasimir sent for Colonel Gliska.

It was then three o'clock in the morning. Gliska was shocked by his master's haggard face and hollow eyes. Out of pure loyalty and compassion he accepted the vacant premiership and consented to try to form a ministry. Then he, too, endeavored to dissuade the king from refusing the Russian marriage.

"If it were the poorest peasant girl in Salitza whom your majesty wished to make your queen," he said, "I would tell you to follow the dictates of your own heart and conscience and think of nothing else—I would predict happiness to you and prosperity to Salitza, in spite of every voice to the contrary. But Madame Goldenburg's elevation to the throne will be taken as an insult by every human being in the country."

"Madame Goldenburg is my wife. I cannot hear anything against her."

"As a man, perhaps you could not, sir; as a

king proposing to give your people a queen, you must listen to what I have to say. Madame Goldenburg's first husband shot himself because she left him for Oourof, the Russian attaché. Is it possible that you are ignorant of that? The flat in the Boulevard Valitzine was Oourof's. It was with Oourof, I understand, that you met her for the first time. Sir, I entreat you to listen to me—I implore you not to proclaim Madame Goldenburg queen."

Kasimir sat very still at the head of the table, in the great chair with the arms of Salitza on its back.

"It is all a vile lie," he said at last, in a changed voice.

Gliska's honest face flushed.

"Your majesty is the only man in the world from whom I would take such a speech. It is no lie, but the truth. She left Oourof because she thought she could trap your majesty into a marriage. She succeeded. Now she wishes to become queen. Sir, you owe it to your people not to give them a queen of whom they must always be ashamed. If Madame Goldenburg is necessary to your happiness, keep her—but keep her at Mirsk. Or, if you are a brave man, shake off this terrible infatuation—divorce her—accept the Russian marriage and begin life again. It is not too late for that. The whole nation will applaud you for the sacrifice."

Kasimir's head was bent. He did not look up when he spoke.

"The whole nation will applaud me for be-

having like a cad and a coward," he said slowly. "Do you think such applause is worth buying—at such a price? Even if what you tell me were true——"

"It is true, sir," Gliska urged, as he relapsed into silence once more. "It is true—in your own heart you acknowledge it. Did you never ask yourself what Madame Goldenburg's friendship to Ourof meant?"

"I never asked myself any question about her," the king said simply. "I ask no questions now. I loved her—that is all."

There was a long silence in the empty council chamber. Gliska did not speak. The king sat motionless, a limp, tired figure in his great chair, with the ghastly radiance of the electric lamps falling on his bent head.

"You have been deceived," Kasimir said at last. "It is a lie." Suddenly he looked up and fixed agonized, appealing eyes on Gliska's face. "Gliska—tell me it is a lie!" he said, almost in a whisper.

For a moment the two men faced each other as though in a silent conflict. Then the king's eyes wavered and fell. He covered his face with his hands.

Presently the king recovered himself. He rose very slowly from the great chair. His features looked set and hard; his voice was clear and steady.

"I shall proclaim Madame Goldenburg queen tomorrow," he said. "She will be crowned with me as soon as the coronation can take place."

It was his answer to Gliska's story—the only answer he could make. The colonel of the Sixth understood, and pitied him even more profoundly than before.

But of pity Kasimir was to find little in that worst and hardest moment of his troubled reign. His interview with the queen was one which severed for ever any natural tie between them. All her long pent distrust of him burst forth with redoubled strength. Next day she left for Paris without even bidding him farewell.

The same day Liane came from Mirsk in state. Orders had been issued to the citizens to decorate their houses, but not a flag was hung out, not a cheer was raised as the string of royal carriages drove rapidly and almost furtively up the Boulevard Valitzine. Only the Russian embassy was gay all day with colored bunting and all night with glittering electric lamps.

"I thought we were offended by this marriage," little Anna Roumanine remarked to the ambassador, on learning that the embassy was to decorate in honor of the new queen.

Roumanine smiled, but said nothing. When Vladimir Ouf, an hour later, made much the same remark, he condescended to explain.

"We have the honor of serving a most conciliatory and enlightened government," he said. "I ask you, my dear Ouf, would it be dignified for us to sulk as though we resented this petty little king's impertinence in rejecting an alliance? Of course not! We deplore the attitude of the people. A romantic marriage commands

our liveliest sympathy and admiration. Of all things in the world, romantic marriages appeal to us most—at this moment. Our most gracious imperial master has himself addressed an autograph letter of congratulation to the king and dispatched a diamond necklace to his beautiful consort.”

“No, excellency!” Vladimir said, startled, for once, by the diplomatic methods of a government whose diplomacy is at once the most polished and least scrupulous known to the world.

Roumanine smiled.

“A fact, I assure you! Only consider the advantages of our amiability, my friend. The letter softens the king’s heart towards us; the necklace removes any little suspicion from her mind which may have arisen from your late deplorable bungling of a royal love-affair. There is great virtue in diamonds, where a woman is concerned. Like charity, they may be said to cover a multitude of sins.”

“And then, excellency——?”

“Then—there is a little question of boundary rights going on—one of these eternal little nothings which are so important. The queen, who is fond of diamonds, sides with us—and we appropriate another little slice of frontier and station a few more men in a convenient position and build a fort or two and extend our march of progress a few miles farther on, as we are always doing. Of course the boundary treaty will contain nothing about forts or men, but, by

the time Salitza wakes up to that, the forts will be built, and no purpose will be served by pulling them down again.

“Ah, those few more miles, those unostentatious forts, those few men, properly placed—how useful they will be some day when we are ready to strike! Believe me, Ourof, when that time does come, it will be the forts we had no right to build and the men we had no right to place and the arsenals we made to employ our troops during their enforced exile in out-of-the-way places, that will decide the fate of the empire. It will be of no use then for those fools of English to sit down and shut their eyes, and soothe themselves to sleep with any idea that we are going to evacuate valuable strategical positions which we have appropriated while they were looking on, afraid to interfere or too stupid to see what we were doing. It will be no use to argue that we are not in certain places simply because our international agreements don't permit of our being there. It is the man on the spot who decides the fortune of war; it will be the nation which is on the spot that will dictate terms to the others at the decisive moment when the balance of power depends on a few hundred men in the right place, rather than on thousands too far away to be of use.

“That is our policy, Ourof—the only policy worthy of a great nation; to go on, always on—a little farther, a little farther, placing a gun here and a fort there, building an arsenal in a third place and a dockyard in a fourth—creeping on,

slowly and surely and cautiously, and never going back or giving up what we have gained. The other nations are so easily fooled! When they get uneasy, it is always possible to soothe them with some excuse—to promise evacuation which will never take place, restitution which will never be made. They don't want to fight, and they accept the excuse, and look the other way while we creep on a little farther. They all have their watchwords—Freedom, where no one is free, Equality where only millionaires are equal. But the unspoken watchword of Russia is written on every frontier in growing steel and accumulating men and forts that spring up like mushrooms in a night. We have no need to talk about it. It is there. Some day we shall proclaim it, but then it will be too late for anyone else to protest.”

Roumanine's thin, high voice ceased. Vladimir Oourof looked at him curiously with half-shut eyes.

“But, excellency, if, in spite of the diamonds, the—the queen does not take our side?”

“Then you will go to Paris on leave and see Zanovitch. But if it comes to that, there is only one thing to be done. When Zanovitch comes to the throne there must be no more pretenders—no more kings in exile. Kasimir in exile would be a continual nuisance to us all; that woman would never give him any peace until he had won back for her the crown she had lost. She would intrigue for a restoration, and she would quite probably succeed in bringing it

about. No—there must be no more pretenders in Salitza.”

Vladimir asked no more questions.

The coronation was hurried on, and it was Vladimir's unpleasant duty to attend it. The king had made his arrangements very carefully. To command public enthusiasm was, he knew, impossible; but he managed to secure public respect, or at least the semblance of it. A route lined with troops, to the exclusion of most of his not too faithful subjects, prevented any explosion of hostility. The splendor of the display which always attends a great ceremony drew a certain number of spectators more or less interested, if not altogether approving. The silence of the streets could be disguised by music. It was all beautifully stage-managed, and perhaps few of the lookers-on suspected it or missed the warmth of popular welcome which should have waited on such an event. The ceremony in the cathedral was imposing and dramatic in the highest degree, with the white-haired Metropolitan archbishop and the beautiful queen in her glittering robes as the two chief personages. The king, always an insignificant figure at the best of times, seemed weighed down by his heavy coronation robes of gold and purple. Splendor did not become him. His pale face and stiff bearing impressed no one. He was uneasy and nervous and he made not the slightest attempt to appear pleased.

Even Liane, in the midst of her triumph, noticed his cold manner and wondered. She did not guess the infinite pains he had taken to protect her from insult or even worse. She did not guess that he was strung up all through the progress to the cathedral, all through the ceremony within it, to meet the attempt which might be made upon her at any moment in spite of all his precautions.

And all the time, though he would have thrown himself between her and the knife of an assassin without an instant's hesitation, that fatal story of Gliska's telling rankled in his mind. Nothing would ever induce him to admit, by a word or a look or a single action of his life, that it was anything but a lie; but in his own heart he acknowledged that it was true. He understood many things of which he had never troubled himself to think much before.

But only one fact was uppermost in his mind. She had married him to become a queen—she did not love him—had never loved him from the first. Every tender word she had ever spoken to him had been a trick; every caress she had ever given him had been a lie. In the very middle of the coronation his eye roamed to where Ouf stood. She had loved Ouf—no doubt she loved him still. Yet pride, and perhaps a sort of fatalism, forbade him to acknowledge his mistake. He had staked everything on this woman who had deceived him—his happiness, his crown, perhaps even his life as well. He would lose all in silence rather than a single

human being should know that he realized his own folly.

But the bitterness of his disillusionment—and after all, he had not been tricked in the way he suspected—was known only to himself. His beautiful dream had been a lie, and he had to live with it day by day, knowing it for what it was, and acting, acting all the time, that no one might suppose he knew. Even to Liane he had to act the part which was hardest in the world to play, because it had until now been no part, but a reality—the part of the man who loved her and believed in her love for him. He did not act his part well. In the midst of the preparations for the coronation, Liane found time to miss the Kasimir of Mirsk—the gay Mikhailovitch with whom she had spent such happy hours in the little white villa on the hill. Even on the day of the coronation itself she saw his altered manner, his sadness, the harassed look in his eyes.

That night when the state banquet and ball were over she sent away her attendants, and, throwing a dark cloak over her ball-dress, made her way, almost furtively, to Kasimir's study. She opened the door and entered so softly that he did not look up from the table at which he sat with some papers before him which he was not reading.

She was beside him before he was aware of her presence. He looked up quickly. The strain of the long, wearisome ceremonies through which he had been passing all day made

him a little less able to command himself than he usually was.

“What do you want?” he said harshly.

He had never used that tone to her before. She stood looking at him in astonishment for a moment.

“I wanted to see you,” she said. “I haven’t seen you all day—I never see you now, it seems to me. You were not like this at Mirsk.”

“I am sorry,” he said, more gently. “I have been busy—I didn’t know you wanted me. Is it anything particular now? I am very tired.”

“Is it unnatural that I should want to see you particularly tonight?”

“To thank me?” he said, with sudden, irrepressible bitterness. “You may spare me that. I hope I have repaid you for the dullness of Mirsk.”

“The dullness of Mirsk?” she repeated slowly.

He began tracing irregular patterns on the papers before him with a pen that shook painfully.

“Yes. Do you think I don’t know that Mirsk was dull—that I was a stupid companion for you? I see now how bored you must have been there, alone with me.”

For a second she said nothing. Then with a sudden impulse of pity and tenderness she knelt down by his chair and took the pen out of his cold fingers and held them.

“Kasimir, it isn’t true—I was never dull at Mirsk. I was happy there—and so were you.

What is the matter—what have I done that you are angry with me?”

He was silent, for he did not dare trust himself to speak. She went on, very gently.

“I didn’t come to thank you—at least not for proclaiming me queen, but for those days at Mirsk when we were so happy together. Perhaps you were right—it would have been better if I had stayed there. Why are you so different? Is it because you regret having acknowledged me—is that it?”

“No,” he said curtly.

“Then what is it? Kasimir, you must tell me—I will know!”

Suddenly he pushed her from him roughly and rose to his feet.

“You don’t care for me,” he said. “*This* was what you cared for—not me. It was only because you wanted to be queen of Salitza—and I thought you cared for me—I thought——”

He broke off, unable to continue—unable to face the bitterness of his own words.

Liane had grown very pale.

“Who has told you this lie?” she said fiercely.

“Isn’t it only too obvious? I have been a fool—that’s all. I should have known myself better by this time than to have made such a mistake as to imagine that you could care anything for me.”

“It was no mistake.” Her voice shook a little. “Kasimir, I will tell you the truth. I was too miserable when I married you to care about

you—I can't tell you why, but I had reason enough. But afterwards—at Mirsk—do you think I didn't care for you then? Do you think I don't care now?"

It was true, though perhaps she had never known how true it was until then. Kasimir stood looking at her for a moment longer. There were tears in the velvet eyes that he loved. He came back to her quickly and kissed her, sadly and remorsefully. He knew that he had done the very thing he had not meant to do.

"Forgive me, Liane," he said. "You see what I am—you are the only thing that I care for in the world and yet I suspected you. That is what it is to be a king!"

But he was not satisfied—he suspected her still, though he hated and despised himself for doing so. Perhaps she had said the very same thing to poor Fritz Goldenburg before she left him forever with the Russian attaché—perhaps she had clung to Vladimir Ouf of just as tenderly before she fled to Britz.

It was the inevitable doubt which would never leave him again. A stronger nature might have thrown it off; a nature less sensitive might never have felt it at all. He was so constituted that he could do neither one thing nor the other. It was the very irony of fate that he had risked everything for a woman with whom he could not be happy, but whom he had not the strength of mind to renounce.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT is nearly two years since the coronation," Anna Roumanine said. "Two years—what an age it seems! Vladimir, how long is it going to last?"

"How long is what going to last, my angel?"

"Oh, you know perfectly well what I mean! I am not really half so stupid as you think—and I know Ivan expects something to happen soon. He had the Death's Head in his study for an hour last night—something always happens when the Death's Head is about—I hate the sight of the man. Is it a conspiracy this time, Vladimir?"

"Why do you ask me?" the attaché said evasively. "I am not a professional conspirator—what a lovely dress that is, and how well it suits you!"

For once the little ambassadrice was not to be turned from her purpose by flattery.

Anna pouted.

"You are quite detestable tonight. You know this state of things can't go on—she has offended everybody. Such impertinence! And we all know what she was by this time. Of course, she was handsome when the king married her, but she has gone off dreadfully of late."

Vladimir glanced at the little figure on the

rose-silk sofa—the artistically painted and powdered face, the delicately darkened eyebrows, the eyes which owed none of their luster to nature.

“She is beautiful still,” he said, half to himself.

Anna Roumanine moved pettishly among her cushions.

“How can you say that, Vladimir? Of course she makes up very well, and her dresses are superb—but that is all. I dare say the king is tired of her by this time and will be quite ready to divorce her and marry someone else. And she is fearfully unpopular—the whole army to a man detests her and this little upstart of a brother of hers who was a drummer in a frontier regiment until the king gave him a lieutenant-colonelcy in the Guards—and now he is swaggering about the place and expecting men like Nikolaievitch and Gliska to salute him first because he is the queen’s brother! People say the king is going to proclaim him heir to the throne, just to spite Zanovitch.”

Vladimir started.

“He wouldn’t dare do that. Do people say so really, Anna?”

“Of course they do—you see, I know more than you think,” she answered with an air of importance that would have amused the attaché at any other time. “The queen is devoted to him—and the king seems to be nearly as bad. He is certainly the handsomest boy I ever saw, and looks a great deal more like a

crown prince than a drummer, as far as that goes—but did you ever hear of such madness as proclaiming him heir to the throne?”

Vladimir did not answer.

“It is the end,” he said to himself. “She is right, silly as she is—something will have to happen now.”

“Here’s Natalia—what a nuisance of her to come so early!” Anna said, rising from her sofa just as the door burst open and Natalia Morisof, in a gorgeous dress and positively reeking with violets, almost ran into the pink and gold room.

“My dearest Anna, you can’t think what has happened! Oh, I am out of breath—I dashed up your stairs like a whirlwind. You remember Stephanie Gliska’s saying the other night that she would never kiss the hand of a woman who had sold her hats in the ‘Paradis des Dames’? Oh, of course she said some other things about her, too, which I needn’t repeat—we have heard them too often. Well, someone must have told the queen, for she sent for Stephanie this afternoon. Everyone you ever heard of was in the great state drawing-room and Stephanie couldn’t think why she had been sent for. Then the queen came in looking like a thundercloud and held out her hand to Stephanie without a word. Of course there was nothing for poor Stephanie to do but kiss it—and then her majesty remarked, in a voice that everyone could hear, ‘Now, Madame Gliska, go and tell your friends that you *have* kissed the hand of the

woman who once sold you hats in the 'Paradis des Dames.'"

Anna Roumanine clapped her hands.

"Oh, how delicious! How mad Stephanie must have been! But, my dear, how imprudent of the queen! Gliska will never forgive her."

Natalia Morisof shrugged her shoulders until they threatened to come entirely out of the very low bodice she was wearing. Her shoulders were her best point—it was perhaps for that reason she had acquired the habit of shrugging them on every possible occasion.

"Gliska knows his wife's little ways as well as we do—I can imagine him chuckling quietly behind her back. And—do you know?—I think the queen was right. After all, she *is* the queen and she has the right to be treated properly. Stephanie is a little cad—I am sure *she* has no business to be throwing stones at other people when we know all about that affair of hers with—oh, I forgot you were there, Captain Oourof!"

"Pray don't spoil your story on my account, madame," Vladimir said, quite aware that she had not forgotten his presence for the fraction of a second. "I hope you don't imagine that I have grown too old to enjoy listening to these innocent little fairy-tales?"

Natalia laughed affectedly. She did not, however, continue her story for the very good reason that the attaché himself had been the other party implicated in Madame Gliska's little affair.

"We have all grown too old for fairy-tales,

I'm afraid. That is where the king made his mistake—in a fairy-tale the king always marries the beauty of low degree and they are happy ever afterwards. In real life things don't seem to turn out so conveniently. Do you know that a plot to poison her was discovered last week?"

"Surely not, Natalia! Dear me—I hope our cook is to be trusted," the little ambassadrice murmured uncomfortably. "I shall not enjoy my dinner for a week after this."

"It is quite true—they had the man shot at once. That was the king's doing—he was furious, I believe. That looks as though he cared for her still," Natalia added, with a malicious glance at Oourof. "Do you suppose he does, Captain Oourof? I always say you know everything."

Oourof was very pale, even under the pink lights which his ambassadrice found so becoming to her complexion.

"You have too high an opinion of me, madame," he said, rising. "I know nothing about the king—or the queen either. Will you excuse me? I have to see his excellency for a moment before the reception begins."

"He is unusually stupid tonight, your handsome Oourof," Natalia remarked to her friend as the door closed upon the tall figure of the attaché. "My belief is that he cares for that woman still. Did you notice how white he looked when I said that they had tried to poison her? Why in the world should he care what happens to her? She treated him very badly,

by all accounts. Well, I expect she is going to pay for that now—and for a good many other things as well. The army is furious with her about this little wretch Mikhail Markovitch—Lieutenant-Colonel Markovitch, I should have said. I danced with him last night—he dances divinely—better than your charming attaché, my dear. Have you dragged him out of the clutches of Eva Carrillon yet, my poor Anna? I heard the other day—oh, it is all over with her, is it? Well—of course you ought to know—I hope it's true. I went to the opera last week and she was in splendid voice—I noticed that she wore that diamond collar of hers that is so like one you used to wear.”

“He gave her up ages ago. What a lot of scandal people seem to tell you, Natalia!” Anna said petulantly. “Tell me some more about the queen and the divorce—we shall have to go down in a moment.”

“They say that the king found some letters—I don't know who was supposed to have written them. Some people say they were genuine—some say they were only a forgery. He tore them up and gave her the pieces, without a word! I believe that woman has some supernatural influence over him—would your husband or mine do a thing like that?”

“He must believe in her very much.”

“Oh, my dear, that's nonsense! It is only because he is foolish enough to be madly in love with her still. But she's a failure after all—there is some consolation in that. If she had had a

child, no one would ever have been able to dethrone her—it is just that that the nation won't forgive her. And now they say that she wants to have her brother acknowledged as heir to the throne! She must be quite mad if she thinks they will stand it. But it is probably a fabrication of the Zanovitch party. Do you know that they are intriguing to bring that man back?"

"No," Anna said. She was less interested in the pretender than in the queen. "It is time to go down—I hear a carriage. How do you like my dress, Natalia?"

"It is quite perfect, my dear—if it has the ghost of a fault it is that perhaps it makes you look a little stout, but that is all. Thin women are the fashion this year," Natalia said—she was thin herself. "So absurd these fashions are—don't you think so?"

"I don't see what worse fault a dress could very well have than to make one look fat," said the poor little ambassadrice, with a touch of very excusable ill-temper. "You always tell me these things just when it is too late to put on anything else."

"My dear! Would you have liked me to have told you before Vladimir Oufrof that you were getting stout?" asked Natalia reproachfully as they went downstairs.

"Do you think he doesn't know it as well as I do?" Anna retorted.

"He is a most remarkable young man," said Natalia Morisof drily.

Perhaps she would have said in earnest what she said in jest if she could have been present at the interview between Oourof and his ambassador which was even then proceeding in Roumanine's study.

The ambassador looked up from his desk as Vladimir entered. Oourof's face told him all he wished to know.

"Come in, my friend—I see you have heard the news. But not all—that madwoman has inspired the king to reject the boundary treaty. They will not give up Nieff—that decides the matter."

"Yes, excellency," Vladimir said quietly, as Roumanine paused.

"You must go to Paris tomorrow and see Zanovitch. Be cautious—but let him think we will support him unless the other Powers absolutely refuse to acknowledge him. Personally, I don't imagine they will trouble about him, one way or the other. We will manage his party here better than he can do. He must stay in Paris and play the flute a little more than usual in order that no one may be able to say afterwards that he had anything to do with—whatever happens."

"What will happen, excellency?"

Roumanine looked his chosen assistant in political crime carefully up and down with a practiced eye.

"You, too, had better not know, Oourof," he said at last.

"I must know," the attaché answered briefly.

Roumanine did not speak. There was an instant's silence and then Vladimir turned upon him with white lips and gleaming eyes.

"I *will* know," he said, in a voice that had suddenly grown hoarse and harsh. "You—or your agents—tried to poison her the other day! I am not a fool—I know well enough who was at the bottom of that! You have tried to ruin her with the king—to compromise her by a forged letter—to drive him into a divorce by any means in your power—and you have failed. Of course you have failed! I have little enough cause to like him, but I admire him for that. He will ruin himself and his kingdom—but he will never give her up. I would do the same in his place—I tell you so quite frankly. And I will not help you in this business unless you give me the terms I ask."

Roumanine smoothed out a paper on the desk before him before he made any reply.

"It is no question of what you will or will not do," he said. "You will do what you are told. Still, I should like to know the price you ask for your valuable assistance. What is it?"

"The queen," Vladimir said.

Roumanine lifted his scanty eyebrows in a little grimace of amusement and scorn.

"Take her—by all means!" he said. "Take her out of the kingdom, and we shall all be much obliged to you. You don't by any chance want the king, too, do you, my dear Oourof?"

"I will shoot him with my own hand, if you like," Vladimir answered, with a savage light in

his eyes. "No—I don't want him. Give me the queen—she shall never trouble you again."

Roumanine took up a pen from his desk and looked at it thoughtfully.

"You must understand that this has nothing to do with me," he said. "Take the queen, if you can, on your own responsibility. You must be prepared for unpleasant consequences. It may suit the government to make an example of you if any suspicion seems to attach to us. You may even be dismissed from the army—virtuous indignation is sometimes a very telling card to play. I will have nothing to do with the affair. On any night that you wish I will make arrangements to get you and the queen safely over the frontier into Austria—it would not do for you to try our side; that might point to complicity. But that is all I can promise to do. Will that suit you?"

"Yes. You will do nothing until I come back from Paris?"

"Nothing—we shall not be ready until then. There is a good deal to be arranged before we move, for it would be fatal to everything to bungle the affair. But whatever you do, keep Zanovitch quiet. He is to do nothing, to know nothing, until all is over. Then, of course, he can deplore the turn events have taken—and accept the crown. It is an easy part to play, if he only has sense enough to see it."

"I will make him see it, excellency."

"You will do a very useful thing, then, my

friend. It will not do for Zanolitch to appear at all active just now. He had much better stick to his flute. Now you had better go and make yourself agreeable."

It is probable that Vladimir felt anything but agreeable, but it was part of his trade to disguise his feelings successfully. Natalia Morisof pounced upon him the instant he entered the reception rooms.

"Now, what conspiracies have you been hatching, Captain Oufrof? Oh, I have something to tell you. The Death's Head passed me on the stairs as I came down. He makes me shiver, that man! I always think something is going to happen when I see him."

"Something is always happening somewhere in the world, madame," the attaché answered calmly. "May I get you an ice?"

But even while he stood watching Natalia demolish her ice, the Death's Head had entered Roumanine's study and reported himself. His india-rubber face was as impassive as ever, but there seemed to cling to him an indefinable atmosphere of ill-omen—a shadow as of the coming of fate.

"This story of the heir to the throne—is that true?" Roumanine asked, looking up at the silent figure before him.

"No, excellency—but the pretender's party think it is. I have spread the story everywhere I could—it is generally believed."

"Quite right—it will rouse popular feeling. The letters failed, unfortunately. There is no

possibility of a divorce that way. Is there any break between the king and queen?"

"No, excellency. Since the letters were discovered, they have been on better terms than ever."

"Of all the mad fools——!" murmured Roumanine contemptuously. "Does she ever see Captain Oourof?"

"In private, excellency? Never."

"He imagines he has influence with her still, I think. Watch him and see whether she receives him."

"Yes, excellency."

"And play the Mikhail Markovitch story for all it is worth. It is so utterly preposterous that you can easily make people believe it. Is there anyone fresh in the conspiracy?"

"Colonel Nikolaievitch, excellency."

"The minister of war—good, very good," Roumanine said reflectively.

"That will do—report yourself to me to-morrow."

The Death's Head glided noiselessly from the room. Roumanine rose from his chair with an air of satisfaction.

"It is all going on admirably," he said to himself. "But I hope Oourof won't succeed with the queen—I detest that woman."

CHAPTER XIX

VLADIMIR obeyed the ambassador's orders, went to Paris next day and interviewed Zanolitch.

It was a curious conversation which took place in the pretender's charming flat, in a room all flowers and autograph portraits of musical celebrities, with an open grand piano and sheets of music scattered about everywhere. In the midst of this artistic confusion Zanolitch himself, with his rather good features and picturesque shock of grizzled hair, his air at once pompous and timid, had much more the appearance of a distinguished composer than that of an aspirant to the throne of Salitza. He received the Russian attaché with a curious mixture of caution and effusion. It was easy to see that he was half afraid of the idea of a restoration, as entailing upon him some danger and a good deal of difficulty. When Vladimir, not without a secret sensation of contempt, explained the rôle he was to play, his evident relief had an element of comedy. Kasimir had been right when he said that Zanolitch was almost as unfit to be a king as he was himself. Even Vladimir Oourof felt the superiority of the unpopular king to this showy, incompetent personage who hummed a

sentimental air one moment and put on a kind of uncertain would-be dignity the next.

In one respect, at least, the interview was entirely satisfactory. Roumanine need not have feared that the pretender would have any desire to take an active part in his own restoration. He was plainly only too happy to keep out of everything and practice his flute in peace until the great moment arrived. He was palpably the born amateur, in more important things than music—the self-conscious dabbler, incapable of forgetting his own unimpressive personality and professing a vast enthusiasm and devotion when, as a matter of fact, his real sentiments were only tepid. There was probably as much pose in his flute-playing as there was in his assumption of the rightful sovereign condemned to tedious exile from his native land. He was incapable of sincerity, because he had not enough capacity for feeling of any kind even to realize what it was to be sincere.

Of the means of which his restoration was to be brought about he was almost pathetically anxious to know nothing.

“Terrible things have been done in the past in my unhappy country—terrible things, my dear Captain Oufouf!” he said, assuming a plaintive air, and performing a five-finger exercise on the arm of his chair with his long, delicate fingers.

“Your great-uncle shot the present king’s grandfather, I think?” the attaché could not resist saying.

Zanovitch looked uncomfortable.

"Yes—yes—these deeds of blood are infinitely repugnant to me," he replied hurriedly. "Pray don't give me any details of your arrangements—my nerves are so easily upset."

Vladimir had a swift moment of admiration for the man who had at least risked his own life boldly to take that of his enemy. His degenerate descendant was of a very different temper.

"As I am ignorant myself as to the arrangements you mention, I can't trouble you with details," he said.

There their conversation ended. He left the pretender resuming his practice and preparing to wipe his immaculately polished flute with a silk handkerchief exquisitely embroidered with the royal arms of Salitza—the gift, probably, of some feminine enthusiast desirous of flattering the amateur pretender's vanity.

Vladimir found himself in the street with a sensation of positive relief. He himself, as he had told Roumanine, would have shot the king without an instant's hesitation if the occasion had offered. But he felt that he would not have been able to stay quietly in Paris while other men risked their lives for him, as Zanovitch was so evidently willing and even eager to do.

"He is a fool and a coward," he told Roumanine when describing the conversation on his return to Khristovitz.

Roumanine smiled.

"That is exactly the sort of person we want

on the throne," he said. "Kasimir isn't a coward, and, if he is a fool, he is a fool who tries to think—the worst kind of all, my friend. Well—there are a few more arrangements to be made. Then——"

"You will warn me first," Vladimir said. "I have arrangements to make, too."

He tried his hardest to get near the queen during those few days—to speak to her, even for a moment. He did not succeed. But his efforts, diplomatic as they were, attracted the king's attention.

Perhaps the two years that had elapsed since the coronation had been the most wretched of Kasimir's life. Since the frustrated attempt to poison the queen and his discovery of the forged letters his misery had reached an acute form. It is true that he had torn the letters up, without a word, as the Death's Head had told Roumanine; but it was not altogether because he believed her innocent. He had been brought up in such an atmosphere of hatred and suspicion that it was only too fatally easy for him to learn to suspect even the woman whom he still loved better than anything in the world. The episode of the letters had made his position almost intolerable. His pride forbade him from leveling a direct accusation against her; her pride forbade her from uttering a word in her own defense. She understood his attitude only too well; what she did not understand was the torture which it inflicted on him.

Hour by hour, almost, she waited to hear that

he had consented to a divorce; and with the tenacity of despair she clung to the splendor which had only brought her misery. In spite of all her enemies she had still one weapon left—the beauty to which she owed her hard-won royalty; but even that seemed slipping away from her at times. The suspense in which she lived, the hourly dread either of assassination or disgrace had worn and aged her before her time and written lines in her face and dimmed the beauty of her velvet eyes. With all the strength left to her she set herself to hide from the world what she could not hide from herself. She made up very well, as Anna Roumanine had said—she dressed superbly. Art and Paris combined to help her in this last struggle against fate. She knew that spiteful eyes were watching her on all sides, waiting to hail with joy the hour of her downfall—the knowledge nerved her to supreme efforts.

And, of all who watched this strange drama of Khristovitz no one realized the tragedy of it—no one could find any pity for this woman who was fighting the hatred of a whole nation with the frail aid of a vanishing beauty—a charm the very hours of which were numbered. Perhaps it was the spirit which had sent old Stepan Markovitch to his death which upheld Liane now. She held still the love of the man who had ceased to believe in her—it was her last poor defense against ruin and disgrace. She would fight for it as long as it was possible to fight at all. With despairing courage and

resolution she faced the truth. She knew it. When her beauty was gone—when she could hold the king no more—he would divorce her and marry another woman, if only to settle the vexed question of the succession. He did not trust her—it was only her beauty which had saved her from that fate until now; when that too deserted her, the hour of her fall would be at hand.

It was nearly a week after Vladimir's return from Paris that, on arriving late one afternoon at the embassy, he found the little ambassadrice in some excitement and more than anxious to explain the cause thereof.

“Ivan has gone to Petersburg,” she said. “He started half an hour ago, in a tremendous hurry. Vladimir, there is a plot against that woman—I have found out a lot about it. Young Ivanovitch was here today—you know how silly he is. He showed me a key, and laughed and asked me if I wouldn't like to know what he was going to do with it. Then I think he got frightened and thought he had said too much and put it away in a great hurry—but not before I had seen that it was one of the keys of the small garden entrances to the palace. I have one myself—you know the last queen—Kasimir's mother—was rather fond of me, and once when I was ill she gave me a private key to the gardens that I might go and sit there whenever I liked. I know the keys quite well—they all have the royal arms on them. Dmitri Ivano-

vitch certainly had one of them—what do you think he is going to do with it?”

Vladimir saw it all in a flash of horror-struck comprehension. Roumanine had fooled him at the last—the revolution was fixed for that night and the wily ambassador had left for Petersburg without warning him as he had promised to do, in order to be out of the way when the crash came! The attack on the palace would take place in a few hours' time—and he had made no arrangements for the queen's escape! He had no means of warning her or of getting her across the frontier. Roumanine did not mean her to escape—he had only consented to the terms the attaché demanded to keep him from betraying the plot as he might otherwise have done. Should he betray it now, or—he turned suddenly to Anna Roumanine.

“That key the queen gave you—you have it still?”

“Yes—I never used it, but I never gave it back. I don't think anyone except the queen knew I had it.”

“Give it to me,” Vladimir said quickly. “There is time still. Give me the key directly.”

Anna sprang up from the sofa.

“What do you want it for?” she asked suspiciously.

For an instant Vladimir hesitated. What could he say, except the truth? There was nothing else to be done—there was no possible lie which could serve his purpose.

"I want it to save the queen," he said.

Anna gave a little savage cry of jealousy and rage.

"To save her! You love her still—you want to save her!" the little ambassadrice cried. "I thought so—I knew it. You shall never have it—never—never!"

Vladimir stared at her—he could hardly believe the evidence of his own senses.

"You don't understand," he said. "They mean to murder her! Give me the key at once. Anna—there is no time for this sort of thing now! I must have the key without an instant's delay."

Anna Roumanine's small features were set as though in a mask of passionate resolution.

"You shall never have it," she repeated. "You have deceived me enough as it is. She took you away from me once—she shall never have you again! Let them murder her—she deserves it—she is a bad woman! I suppose you are her lover still—perhaps they were your letters that they found the other day. Yes, that's it—that's it—I can see it is from your face!" She burst into hysterical laughter. "Save her? I wish I could go to the palace tonight and *see* her murdered!"

For a moment even Vladimir was silent, with something very like horror.

"A bad woman!" he said at last, in a voice that trembled with fury and disgust. "And what are you that you dare to judge her—you who have deceived your husband for years—

you who stand there condemning another woman to a horrible death to gratify your own senseless jealousy and spite? Are you so immaculate that you can afford to talk about the wickedness of Liane Goldenburg? Give me the key," he added in another tone. "For God's sake, give it to me, Anna—you don't understand—you can't. I only want to save her—I will swear it, if you like."

"You have sworn hundreds of lies to me! You are going to save her and escape with her—I am sure of it," the little ambassadrice cried wildly. Go and warn the king, if you like—you will get no help from me! Go—and never come near me again!"

Vladimir stood irresolute. Then with one stride he reached the wrathful little figure in its trailing white draperies, caught it in an iron grasp and forced it down among the cushions of the sofa.

"Give me the key," he said through his teeth, "or I will strangle you! If I have sworn hundreds of lies to you, I am swearing the truth now—if you do not give me the key I will kill you!"

She struggled vainly against him. With one hand he kept her down, with the other he held her by the throat so that she could not scream. It was a wonder that he did not really strangle her by the sheer force of his anger. But he restrained himself, for the possession of the key meant Liane's life or death, and he knew it. After a moment he loosened his hold a little.

“Now will you tell me where the key is?” he said.

Her strength was exhausted and she ceased to struggle and made a sign of assent. He released her throat—it was purple with the marks of his fingers, and a diamond chain which she was wearing had cut into the flesh so that Vladimir’s hand was stained with blood. He did not notice it. He shook the wretched little figure as a terrier shakes a rat.

“Tell me, then!”

She pointed to a little desk lying on the table behind the sofa.

Still keeping his hold upon her, he leaned over and seized it. It was open—he emptied the contents into Anna’s lap, and uttered an inarticulate cry of rage and disappointment.

“You have been lying to me—there is no key here!”

She wrenched herself free for an instant.

“It was there—I know it was!” she gasped in deadly terror. “Ivan must have found it and taken it——”

“And given it to Dmitri Ivanovitch,” Vladimir said calmly.

He saw it all, and for a moment he decided that he was too late. It was Anna’s key, of course, that Ivanovitch had foolishly shown her—that was why he had put it away in such a hurry, afraid that she might recognize it. It was too late.

He was silent and Anna Roumanine cowered among the pink cushions and watched him.

Suddenly she saw his eyes fall on the stains of blood upon his hand. A very cruel look came into his face and he lifted his head and smiled at her, with a smile that turned her cold.

She slipped from the sofa to his feet.

"Vladimir—Vladimir—don't kill me! I told you the truth—Ivan has taken the key. Don't kill me—don't kill me!" she shrieked, as he dragged her from the floor.

Vladimir Oufouf laughed softly.

"I am not going to kill you," he said. "You may keep your miserable life. There's a better way of punishing you than that. I am going to kill your vanity—you will never have cause to be jealous of any woman again."

With terrified eyes she watched him take out the hunting-knife he always wore. Still she did not understand what he meant to do. She crouched, almost paralyzed, among the tumbled cushions, lifting to him a face pinched and blanched with abject fear.

Suddenly he caught her by the shoulder again and slashed her twice across the face with the hunting-knife and flung her from him backwards to the farther end of the sofa!

"When Roumanine comes back," he said, "show him your face and tell him who marked it for you—to brand you and him for ever for what you both are! Tell him that—with my compliments. If at any future time I can afford to give myself the great pleasure of meeting him again and shooting him for the liar he is, I will let him know where to find me."

The miserable little figure on the sofa lay motionless. He went to the door without looking back. A moment or two later he was hurrying up the Boulevard Valitzine towards the Boulevard Mikhail the Pious and the opera-house.

There was one last chance of getting the key from Dmitri Ivanovitch—only one; and that, too, depended on a woman's charity for another woman.

It was the interval before the last act of the opera when he slipped in by the artist's entrance and made his way to Eva Carillon's dressing-room. A shrill, sweet voice bade him enter. Eva was alone, putting on some powder before the glass. She dropped the powder-puff when she caught sight of his white face in the mirror.

"Ah, *mon dieu!*—my friend, what has happened? What a face! Tell me quickly—ah, how cruel I am! You are ill—and I begin to chatter like a dozen magpies! Sit down—here—take this! You frighten me—you, who have nerves of iron, to look like that!"

She pushed him into a chair and held brandy to his lips. He drank the brandy eagerly. It pulled him together—he caught Eva Carillon's hand as she stood beside him.

"Eva," he said hoarsely, "I have heard you say you would sell your soul if anyone offered you enough for it. See here—if you will help me tonight, you shall be paid for it—I swear I will pay you whatever you ask afterwards, if I sell myself to do it. It isn't much that I want

—Eva, it isn't much! Get Dmitri Ivanovitch to give you the key to the palace gardens tonight! Steal it from him—only get it, somehow—I don't care how you do it!”

Eva laughed musically and picked up the powder-puff.

“Dmitri Ivanovitch! Now, who has been talking scandal to you? And what do you want with the key of the palace gardens, my friend? Is it a maid-of-honor this time? What will the ambassadrice say!”

“Eva—Eva—I'm not joking! You can get the key if you like.”

“But I shall not like unless you tell me why you want it.”

There was nothing else to do, so he told her. She stood by the dressing-table and listened and put the powder-puff absently into the powder-box and then took it out again. He could not see her face.

“And you want to save her?” she said, when he ended.

“Yes.”

She swung round suddenly. Her face was pale beneath its paint—her eyes were shining oddly.

“And you offered me money—money to save a woman's life!” she said, in a choked voice. “Money—to get you the key! Am I as bad as that? Did you think I wouldn't help the queen unless you paid me for it? I don't want your pay—I won't take it! I will make Dmitri give me the key. He is coming to supper with me

after the opera—I will drug the champagne and steal the key and you shall put on his uniform—you may get into the palace more easily in that than in your own. And you will want a passport for the queen, won't you? I will give you mine—it will help to get you over the frontier."

"Eva, you are an angel!" Vladimir said—and he meant what he said, for once.

She shrugged her shoulders and caught up the neglected powder-puff.

"There—there—that's enough. I'm not doing it for you, but for the queen—don't flatter yourself, my friend! Of course, I know you're in love with her—you have never cared for anyone else. Oh, I'm not jealous—you haven't got enough money for me to be jealous of you, you know. But, even if you had—and if I adored you—which I don't, of course!—even then I would do what I could. There's the last act beginning and I'm not half dressed! Here—help me into this thing—give me the powder again, I believe you have made me cry with your horrible plots and conspiracies—oh, this detestable country! When shall I see Paris again? There—that's right—I shall be as hoarse as a crow and it will be all your fault! Come to my room in three-quarters of an hour. And go—go at once—don't let Dmitri see you here, or he will suspect something."

She dashed away on to the stage, and Vladimir left the opera-house and spent three interminable quarters of an hour waiting about the

Boulevard Valitzine. Then he hurried to the singer's rooms. As he went up the stairs, Eva's head was thrust over the banisters.

"Come quickly—it is all right."

Vladimir dashed up the last few steps and into the room. His quick eye took in the lighted supper-table, and the limp figure of Dmitri Ivanovitch, in the uniform of the Sixth Regiment, sprawling in an ungraceful attitude on the floor. Eva was already on her knees beside him, searching rapidly in his pockets for the key. Suddenly she uttered a cry of triumph, and held it above her head like a trophy of war.

"Here it is! Quick! Off with his things—he is nearly as tall as you are. That's right—never mind about him, he won't know anything until tomorrow and then he'll only think he got rather more drunk than he usually does. I'll watch outside the door."

She returned in time to fasten the last buckle of the unconscious Dmitri's belt round Vladimir Oourof's waist. Then she ran to a table at the side of the room and came back with a handful of gold.

"You will want a lot of money—take this. No—I want you to take it, Vladimir—you must. And send to me for some more if you want it—Dmitri is disgustingly rich and I can screw anything out of him, he's such a fool. That's right. Good-bye, Vladimir—I suppose I shall never see you again."

A little note of wistfulness crept into her shrill

voice, and Vladimir bent and kissed her, with very real admiration in his heart.

“Good-bye, Eva—I don’t know how to thank you. If I can save the queen——”

She drew herself away from him rather hurriedly.

“Yes, yes—save her—don’t mind about me. Good-bye!”

When he had gone she went back into the little room where Dmitri Ivanovitch lay sprawling beside the dismantled supper-table. She shrugged her shoulders scornfully and stirred the unconscious conspirator with the tip of her pretty slipper.

“He was the only one of them all that I cared a rap for,” she said to herself, “and I have been fool enough to send him off to another woman while I stay here with this—pig!”

CHAPTER XX

AT the palace the day had passed quietly. The king had been more than usually occupied, and had hardly left his study since breakfast, in spite of the heat. An hour before dinner he had an interview of rather a painful nature with Gliska. Once more the premier, aware of the growing discontent of all parties, the daily increasing disaffection of the army, had begged his sovereign to do the only thing which, in his opinion, could avert some great disaster, and consent to a divorce. Once more Kasimir had refused—not, as he had done until now, with the calmness of unalterable resolution, but fiercely, as though driven almost beyond the limits of endurance by these repeated attacks.

“I will never consent—never!” he said. “Nothing shall induce me to send away the queen. Tell that to those who sent you! I am not afraid of them—I shall not run away, as my father did. Tell them to do their worst. I know who they are—these men who will not leave me the only thing I have ever cared for—I have their names, and I mean to punish them—to crush them so that they shall never dare to oppose me again! Tell them that too, if you

like—I suppose you are as much a traitor as they are.”

“Sir——!”

“Let me speak!” the king interrupted with a sort of fury. “I know what I am accused of wishing—that Mikhail Markovitch should be acknowledged heir to the throne. Well—and if I do wish it, is it so very strange? You have all made up your minds—you who know such a deal about the business of others, though you don’t know how to be loyal to me—you have all decided that I am never to have an heir of my own—you have made that a lever against me and a reason why I should divorce the queen. Why should I sacrifice her to provide Salitza with a crown prince? If you are all so very anxious for one, choose Mikhail Markovitch. He is as fit to be a king as I was—more fit, perhaps, for I ought never to have been one at all. My reign has been a mistake from beginning to end—and yet I have tried to do right, though I have never succeeded.”

Gliska forced himself to make the only proposition left to him.

“Then why not abdicate, sir?”

“In favor of Zanovitch, I suppose?” Kasimir said bitterly. “I said you were a traitor, Gliska. No—I will never abdicate. I am not a coward—only a coward would hand over his inheritance to the man whose fathers had murdered his. I will not divorce the queen—I tell you so for the last time.”

“Then I can only entreat your majesty to re-

lieve me of the premiership as soon as possible," said Gliska sadly.

It hurt him horribly to do it—he was a soldier and a brave one, and resignation at this moment seemed to him very like desertion of his post in the time of danger. But it was clearly the only thing left for him to do. He could support the king no longer. He sympathized sincerely with him as a private individual—he even felt that in his place he also would have refused to divorce the queen—but the fact remained that a sovereign's private life was the property of his people to be used for their best interests.

For a moment the king had sat very still, without moving or speaking.

"You too!" he said at last, in a very low voice. "You too, Gliska! Yes—I understand. They say the rats always leave a sinking ship. You are—wise."

Gliska's disapproval was not proof against this. For the first time in his life he broke down completely.

"Sir—I would die for you, but I must resign—it would not be honest to hold office!" he cried helplessly. "What can I say? Don't you understand that I must resign?"

"Yes—I understand. I told you that I understood—perfectly," the king said, almost gently. "Why should a man have less sense of self-preservation than a rat? You are right to save yourself—I know that you cannot save me."

“But you can save yourself,” Gliska urged. “Only consent to a divorce——”

Kasimir stopped him with a sort of dignity which had come to him only once or twice in his life.

“Not that again, please, Gliska,” he said. “I have never had a friend, but I have always felt that, if things had been different, you might have been a very real friend to me. I am parting from you now—don’t say anything that might make us part as enemies. I can understand your point of view better than you can understand mine, perhaps, and I know that you are giving me honest advice, but I can’t take it. If I could, I should not be the kind of man whom it would be worth your while to save.”

Gliska looked at him in despair.

“And you are ruining yourself—for what, sir?” he asked. “Is it for a point of honor? I could understand that.”

Kasimir smiled sadly.

“No, it is not for a point of honor—I’m afraid I should not be capable of ruining myself for that,” he said. “I could never make you understand. Your life has been a very full one, Gliska—you have had friends and children and honors and a brilliant career. I was born in the narrow circle which shuts in every throne. Perhaps for me it was a little narrower than it is for others—perhaps I have found its narrowness a little harder to bear. I hope so—I should not like to think that every king has always paid for his rank as I have done. You know how I

was brought up—the atmosphere of bitterness and distrust which surrounded me—the unnatural scenes of hatred into which I was always being dragged, a frightened and unwilling spectator, even when I was quite a child. To my father and mother I was only a pawn in the game which each was playing against the other. I am not blaming them, but it was a bad training for any boy.”

He paused. Gliska stood silent, unable to contradict him, unable to offer him either consolation for the past or hope for the future.

“How can you understand?” the king went on. “You have had so much in your life—and I have had only one thing—only one, Gliska! And you blame me because I cling to it—you tell me to part with it to save my crown. I would not part with it to save my soul!”

There was a long silence in the small, dark room over which the gloom of a coming storm was beginning to brood. The intolerable heat of the day had become breathless, stifling; even as the king ceased speaking, a faint mutter of distant thunder rolled far away among the hills.

“I do not understand,” Gliska said huskily at last; “but—your majesty is the bravest man I have ever known!”

The king shook his head.

“No, it isn't that—you are right, you don't understand, even now. It is because I am afraid—afraid of being left alone!”

Again he was silent. Presently he roused himself from his reflections with a start.

"It is late and I am keeping you. Good-night, Gliska. Thank you for all you have done for me—you at least have been honest. So few people have been honest with me—I am very grateful to you. Goodnight—good-bye!"

He rose wearily from his seat and held out his hand. Gliska held it in silence for a moment before he bent and lifted it to his lips.

"Goodnight, sir," he said, almost with a sob. "May God protect your majesty!"

"Thank you," the king said simply.

Dinner was served on the terrace, and Mikhail Markovitch dined with the king and queen, together with several officers of the Sixth Regiment. Mikhail was in high spirits, but the king and queen were both unusually silent. A band was playing in the gardens and the soft sound of the music came and went pleasantly on the hot air. It was very still again—the thunder had died away. Once a few big drops of rain fell on the flowers on the dinner-table. Mikhail joked his sister about them, and prophesied flight into the palace.

"There is going to be a bad storm," Liane said, glancing mechanically at the heavy sky. "I have felt it coming all day."

Kasimir looked at her quickly, but said nothing. The storm did not come, however. Dinner over, they walked still on the terrace, listening to the band. The officers of the Sixth hurried away as soon as they decently could—to Colonel Nikolaievitch's house on the Boule-

vard Valitzine to plan the last details of the attack on the sovereign whose uniform they wore, the host whose bread they had just eaten.

The King went back to his study; but for a long time Liane sat with Mikhail on the terrace. For some reason, Mikhail began to talk of their life in the high house beyond the river—of their father and Pavlo and Ivan the Terrible—whose obsequies the young lieutenant-colonel had celebrated not many months before—not, perhaps, without a secret tear or two. She sat silent, listening to his careless talk. How real they all seemed tonight, those far-away days! Then, as she sat there, everything else faded gradually away and only one scene of her past life remained. She sat again on the balcony of the tall house on the Boulevard Valitzine and Vladimir Oourof sat beside her with a sheet of scented note-paper in his hand, telling her, in his deep, soft voice, the story of her father's and Pavlo's death. She could hear his voice and see the light falling on his fair head from the window of the room behind.

She rose abruptly and said goodnight to Mikhail. She was tired—the storm was coming on, and the heat had given her a headache.

It was a relief to be alone at last in her own room—to send away everyone and brush out her splendid coils of black hair herself, as she had done in the little room beyond the river when she was only a work-girl at the "Paradis des Dames." It was a relief, but, tired as she was, she still could not make up her mind to go to

bed. The storm had affected her nerves perhaps; she felt restless and strung up and inclined to start at every sound. She made an effort to conquer the feeling and lay down on the couch at the foot of the bed opposite the open windows, shut her eyes and tried to quiet herself.

But still the disquieting vision of Vladimir Ourof pursued her. She could see his face and hear his voice as plainly as though he had been in the room. And always she saw him in two ways—sitting on the balcony with her, and riding up the Boulevard Valitzine in Major Janno's uniform with its silver tassels gleaming in the lamplight, while behind him Pavlo knelt in the road by his dead father's side.

Always, always the vision came back, however hard she tried to dispel it. A kind of horror seized her. What did it mean? Why did the memory of Vladimir haunt her so persistently tonight? She lay fighting with the thing that haunted her, so absorbed in the struggle that she heard nothing about her. Suddenly some warning impulse which she could not have defined made her open her eyes and look up.

The vision had been reality after all. Vladimir Ourof stood by the open window, in the uniform of the Sixth Regiment, as she had seen him an instant ago. There were the silver tassels which poor Pavlo had recognized on the night of Stepan Markovitch's death. Was it really Vladimir, or a dream?

Slowly she sat up and turned towards him, never taking her eyes from his face.

“Vladimir?” she whispered questioningly.

At the sound of her voice he came forward and knelt down by the couch, so close that she could see the thick rain-drops lying like diamond-dust on the dark blue cloth of his tunic. Mechanically, in a sort of dream, she put out her hand and touched his wet sleeve.

“It is raining,” she said very quietly. “The storm has come at last.”

“Yes—at last,” he answered, in a voice as quiet as her own.

For the moment he had forgotten her deadly peril—his frantic efforts to get the key of the garden gate, his race through the dark gardens. Only his great height and the fact that he was in the humor to do absolute impossibilities had enabled him to reach the high balcony of the queen’s room. He forgot that, too. Everything else ceased to be of any importance before the white figure leaning towards him, the beautiful, pale face gazing at him with questioning eyes, the hand that rested on his wet sleeve. He was back in the flat on the Boulevard Valit-zine in the days before Liane Goldenburg had learned to hate him.

And Liane also forgot—forgot that this man kneeling beside her was the murderer of her father and brother—the one human being in the world whom she had most cause to fear and detest. She sat very still. Then, suddenly, her eyes fell again on the silver tassels. With a stifled cry she sprang to her feet.

“Go—go! What are you doing here?”

Haven't you done me enough harm as it is—will nothing content you? Oh, go before the king finds you here and we are both ruined!"

"I will go," Vladimir said quietly; "but you must come with me. I have come to save you—to get you over the frontier. There is a plot to kill you tonight—come quickly, Liane—even now it may be too late."

She stared at him as though she hardly understood what he meant.

"And—the king?" she said.

"The king? What does the king matter to us? Come quickly—there is no time to spare."

She pointed to the open window.

"Go. Did you think I should leave him to save myself? It is because he would not desert me that they want to kill him—do you think I will desert him? If I can't save him, I can die with him—it is all I can do now."

"You are mad," Vladimir said desperately. "You can't stay here to be butchered by Nikolaievitch. Liane—Liane—come with me! We will be happy again, as we were before you left me. I have wanted you so—have pity on me, if you will have none on yourself. I have risked everything to save you, but you must come at once—we must not stay here."

"I will not come," she answered.

"Then I will take you!" Vladimir cried.

He made a movement as though to seize her and bear her away in spite of her resistance; but she sprang back with a gesture of warning and dismay.

“It is the king! Vladimir—go! We are lost. Go—do you want to ruin me utterly?”

It was too true—steps were approaching along the corridor without.

The attaché understood that he had failed and in the savage despair which seized him he was conscious only of a blind, furious desire to bring the worst upon the woman who had withstood him.

“It is too late,” he said, with a cruel satisfaction in his own power,—“you are ruined already.”

Even as he spoke, the door opened and the king came in.

His eye took in the scene at a glance—the tense figure of Vladimir Ourof—the queen’s attitude of startled terror. Yes—he understood now the depression that had weighed upon him all day. It was not the storm—it was *this!*

He came quietly into the room and the door closed noiselessly on its spring behind him. He was very pale and his features had suddenly become sharp and thin, as the features of a man will do after a long illness. His whole figure seemed to have shrunk together as though with age—as though his youth had been stripped from him in that one terrible little moment after he opened the door and saw Ourof standing beside the queen.

Involuntarily his hand went to his breast, to the tiny revolver which he carried night and day about him. Just for that second or two he felt only the natural, human desire to kill, with his

own hand, the man who had dishonored him and the woman who had deceived him. Already he had half drawn the revolver from its place.

Then—it seemed to him that a savage cry of joy rang in his ears in the midst of the silence which had fallen upon the room. He heard the horrible chorus of vilification that would rise from every town, from every village, from every solitary hut upon the mountains, when it became known that the king had shot Vladimir Oourof in the queen's bedroom at midnight. He heard the torrent of savage abuse which would be heaped upon the woman for whom he had risked his life and his throne. And it was he himself who was about to strike the first note in this outburst of hatred and scorn!

Very slowly he put back the revolver and walked to the door and opened it and turned to Oourof.

“Go!” he said, speaking with almost unnatural clearness and composure. “Go, Captain Oourof, and tell those who planned this—this unspeakable villainy that, clever as it was, it has failed. My faith in the queen is not to be destroyed by a trick like this. Go!”

For a moment Vladimir stood motionless. The king waited still, holding open the door.

“Will you go, or shall I call the guard?” he said, in the same quiet tone.

Vladimir crossed the room in silence and passed through the doorway without a word.

The king stood and watched his tall figure disappear down the lighted corridor. Even

after it had quite disappeared—after the last sound of steps had died away—he stood there, immovable as a statue, with one hand holding open the door.

Then at last he turned. The door swung from his hand and shut itself. The calm with which he had dismissed Ouf had vanished. Dumb, trembling, shaken by a passion of shame and despair, he looked at Liane.

With a cry she sprang forward.

“Kasimir—it isn’t true—it isn’t true!”

He shrank back, holding out his hands as though to keep her away from him.

“Don’t touch me!” he said. “Don’t touch me! How could you do this? Even if it was only the crown you cared for—I gave it to you. You had everything that I could give you. Only today I parted with Gliska because he pressed the divorce on me. And this is the end!”

“Kasimir——!”

“No—let me speak. It is the last time I will ever speak to you alone—the last time I shall ever speak to you here. You needn’t be afraid—you will be queen still, as you wished to be. I will not take it away—the empty honor to gain which you fooled me and lied to me. But I will never again enter your presence except in public—you shall be rid of me now. You loved that man all the time—even at Britz—even at Mirsk. I suppose everyone knew it except me—the whole nation was laughing at its miserable fool of a king, who had made you queen—you! Ah—I have paid for my folly tonight!”

“Kasimir——!” she cried again; but again he stopped her.

“No—don’t lie to me—I have had enough of lies! I cared for no one in the world but you—you know that. Even now I love you too much to disgrace you—I would shoot myself and end it all, but if I did that people would guess the truth. It is for your sake that I consent to live out an existence from which you have taken the only thing that made it worth while to live at all. Why do you look at me like that? You are safe—no one will ever know. You have what you wanted—you are queen of Salitza still.”

He turned and went to the door; but her ear, quicker than his, had heard a sound in the stillness of the sleeping palace. She sprang across the room to the door and drew the heavy bolts. He watched her dully. He hardly understood what she was doing—he certainly did not understand why she did it.

“There is a plot,” she said breathlessly. “Listen—I can hear steps! They are coming—Kasimir, won’t you believe me? Captain Oourof came to warn me—to get me across the frontier. There is a plot against us—Colonel Nikolaievitch is in it.”

“There is no plot,” he said quietly.

“But it is true—I can hear steps—they are coming now.”

She stood by the door, trembling, listening to that ominous sound which swelled gradually behind it. Suddenly, as they stood there, both

uttered an exclamation of surprise which was almost fear. The electric light had been switched off in the palace and the room was in darkness except for the faint glimmer of the little night-lamp which burned on the table by the bed.

The sound of people advancing stopped. Only the heavy pouring of the rain could be heard, and a growl of thunder, far off still, over the hills beyond Mirsk.

In the gloom Kasimir could make out the white face of the queen as she leaned against the door, listening.

Suddenly it seemed as though a large body of people burst into the corridor without. There was a thunderous knocking at the door and someone tried to open it and failed. Then came a voice——

“The king! Where is the king?”

It was Nikolaievitch's voice. Liane shivered and looked at the motionless figure beside her.

“What shall we do? Is there nowhere we can hide?”

“Kasimir, we know that you are there!” came Nikolaievitch's voice through the door. “Open to us or it will be the worse for you!”

The rough insult of his tone stung the king.

“I will not open the door,” he called back. “You are insolent rebels, all of you! I will see no one tonight.”

Outside in the corridor they heard a savage laugh.

“You will see no one in the morning, then. We are going to make you abdicate—we have had enough of you and the woman you have made queen.”

“I will not abdicate——”

“Then divorce that woman—divorce her—send her out to us and we will pronounce your sentence of divorce!”—and again someone laughed.

The king pushed Liane suddenly from the door.

“I will not divorce the queen and I refuse to abdicate,” he shouted.

“Then we will kill you. We have had enough of you, Kasimir. We give you five minutes to decide. Then we will burst open the door.”

There was silence, outside and in. Liane flung herself at the feet of the listening king.

“Open the door,” she said. “It is the only thing to do. Tell them you will divorce me—let them kill me, as they say. Perhaps they will be satisfied with that.”

He looked down at her with a smile of contempt.

“You think I would do that—to save myself?”

“Oh, let me go—open the door—open the door! Tell them that you found me here with Ouf——”

“To save my own life? You think I would do that, Liane?”

She burst into tears.

“Let me go—I am not worth dying for, Kasimir—you said so yourself just now when you refused to believe me about Oourof.”

He bent down and looked at her closely in the dim light.

“Was I wrong then?” he said gently. “Liane—they are going to kill us—tell me the truth. If I could die believing in you it wouldn’t be so hard. Answer me—was I wrong just now?”

For an instant she hesitated. Something told her that, though he had refused to believe in her innocence before, he would believe her now. Then, from behind the bolted door, came a cry, savage, imperative:

“Divorce the queen! Send her out to us and we will give you your life!”

She covered her face with her hands and shivered from head to foot. It was the hardest thing she had ever tried to do, but it might save him.

“Was I wrong?” Kasimir said again, in a tone sharp with suspense.

She took her hands from her face.

“No!”

There was a moment of silence. Then a roar of thunder shook the palace to its foundations and a glare of blinding lightning filled the darkness of the room. In that ghastly illumination the king and Liane Goldenburg for a single instant stood immovable, face to face, each looking into the very soul of the other.

Neither had expected that sudden blaze of

light. The king, looking at Liane, understood that she had lied to him to save him; and Liane, with her eyes on his face, knew that her lie had been told in vain.

Swiftly as it had come, the lightning vanished. In the darkness that followed he caught her in his arms. Words had never come easily to him—they did not come easily now. But he forgot the end that waited for them beyond the bolted door.

“Forgive me, Liane—I was wrong! Thank God, I was wrong!”

As he spoke there was another flash, another explosion. A bomb had burst in the door. The conspirators were in the room. There were more than a dozen men besides Nikolaievitch—all were officers in the Sixth—three or four of them were those who had dined at the king’s table a few hours ago.

Nikolaievitch had a paper in his hand. The others were all armed; some of them held candles. It was a strange combination of the terrible and the ridiculous—these conspirators, armed for regicide, looking for their victims with a few flickering candles in the darkened palace from which some servant more faithful than the rest had turned off the electric light in the vain hope that the darkness might hinder the search for the king and queen.

Nikolaievitch thrust the paper into the king’s hand.

“Abdicate, or we kill you.”

The first words upon which Kasimir’s eyes

fell were full of abuse of the queen. With a sudden impulse of ungovernable anger he drew the revolver from his pocket and, before anyone could prevent him, shot Nikolaievitch dead. The minister of war fell in a limp heap at his feet.

But almost before he touched the ground a dozen revolver shots rang out and the king fell back in Liane's arms, riddled with bullets.

Twice—three times—came the hail of shot. Liane flung herself before the king as he fell. The conspirators drew their swords. She saw the dull blue gleam of the steel as the last shot struck her and she fell back dead upon the body of the dead king.

There was a savage cry of triumph, of joy. In a fury of vengeance they fell upon the man who could feel their strokes no longer and the woman for whose sake he had died.

In the darkness of that room hell was let loose; and outside, in the pouring rain, Vladimir Oourof, in the uniform of an officer of the Sixth, kept back the people who surged up and down the Boulevard Valitzine, disturbed by the explosion in the palace and suspecting that something was happening.

And among the crowd, slowly but surely, a cry grew, though no one could have told from whose lips it had first come.

“Death to the Goldenburg—to Kasimir! Long live Zanovitch—long live Stepan Zanovitch! Long live King Stepan!”

Vladimir Ouf heard the cry and smiled to himself with white lips.

Already the restoration had begun—already upon the mild amateur flutist, sleeping peacefully, far away in Paris, had fallen the shadow of the crown for which he longed.

CHAPTER XXI

THE tragedy was over; farce, of a somewhat dismal kind, followed close upon its heels.

Zanovitch arrived from Paris, elected to the throne by the unanimous vote of a parliament which hailed the late minister of war as the savior of his country and accorded the thanks of the nation to the gallant patriots who had butchered their king and queen. The hoary hypocrite who had crowned the dead sovereigns announced to a somewhat skeptical world that it was by the will of heaven that Kasimir and Liane had died. Khristovitz was illuminated to celebrate the murder of its king.

The king and queen had not fallen alone. A long list of victims paid for their supposed loyalty on that fatal night. Gliska's resignation did not save him; Kranitz, the minister for foreign affairs, was shot in the presence of his wife and children. Such of the Palace Guards as had resisted the entrance of the murderers had all been killed. Rarely in the whole course of history has a plot been more carefully planned, more completely carried out. The master mind of Roumanine had known how to secure success to the men who, for all their imaginary freedom

of will, had in reality been no more than puppets in his hands.

The arrival of Zanovitch, the elected king, came as a kind of anti-climax to the tragedy of Khristovitz. The spectacle of the mild musician, with his timidly pompous air, driving through the streets of his capital on a pouring wet day, under draggled flags and triumphal arches that dripped all the colors of the rainbow upon a not very large or enthusiastic crowd, receiving addresses to which he did not know how to reply and bouquets the possession of which plainly filled him with embarrassment—was one which, to tell the truth, was less impressive than comic. His very reception at the railway station was shorn of due ceremony by the conspicuous absence of most of the representatives of the powers, they having received telegraphic instructions during the night to leave the function severely alone. Russia and Austria alone were represented. Roumanine had returned in haste from Petersburg in order to be present, and it was remarked that King Stepan's warmest greeting was for him. Roumanine himself would probably have wished Zanovitch's effusion less apparent to the public eye.

It was very likely on his advice that, by a master-stroke of cunning which rather overreached itself in the end, Russia was the first to congratulate the new king, in a telegram from the czar which carefully omitted any mention of the crime by which Stepan I had been enabled to return to the land of his ancestors. The tele-

gram established Zanovitch's recognition as king of Salitza, even though it aroused rather uncomplimentary comment in some quarters. But that both Roumanine and his imperial master could perhaps afford to disregard. The game was played—they had placed their pawn on the throne.

By another master-stroke the great and underhanded empire, or her representative, demanded the punishment of the assassins who had served her purpose so well. But the point was allowed to drop, and it is a singular fact that almost immediately afterwards every one of the regicides was promoted. Zanovitch issued rather feeble addresses to his "dear army," which had "covered itself with glory"—presumably by its decided, if sanguinary, method of placing him on the throne. No one, at any rate, could at the moment remember any particularly glorious acts of the Salitzan army to which its affectionate king could have referred. Murder, in Salitza, has frequently been confounded with glory by a curious obliquity of mental vision peculiar to that part of the world.

Perhaps the only redeeming touch of poetic justice was Zanovitch's palpable discomfort—his ineptitude to play the rôle which he had chosen, his inability to manage the wild subjects who called him master but of whom he was almost pathetically afraid. He was uneasy as only a man can be who suddenly finds himself in a position for which he is totally unfitted. Zanovitch, after his long sojourn in Paris, was

far too deeply steeped in civilization to accommodate himself to the ways of a half savage state. He began to fear the people whom he soon felt himself incapable of ruling. Like a timid rider on a restive horse, he made the mistake of giving in too easily at first. Later on, he would inevitably make the equally fatal mistake of refusing to give in at all.

But the most singular circumstance to be observed was the utter callousness of the nations before a crime which should have thrilled every civilized country with horror. Perhaps this callousness originated in the illuminated streets of Khristovitz where excited crowds celebrated with rejoicing the murder of their king. Poor Kasimir had never known how to command popularity. The tragedy of his death touched his subjects no more than the tragedy of his life had done.

Many who had kept away from the palace during the reign of Liane Goldenburg flocked to the court of Stepan I. The first royal reception under the new regime was a brilliant affair. Even Zanolitch's air of uneasiness could not rob the affair of its splendor. The officers of the Sixth were conspicuous everywhere; the historic silver tassels of the "deliverers of Salitza" caught the eye on every side. Even Dmitri Ivanovitch, who had nearly caused the whole enterprise to fail, was swaggering about with the bearing of a full-blown patriotic hero in all the glory of his recent promotion. Vladimir Oourof met him with Natalia Morisof on his arm. The

attaché would have passed without speaking, but Natalia Morisof stopped her cavalier at once.

“So you are here, Captain Oourof? I didn’t know—but I am so glad you were sensible enough to come. Zanovitch does things well, doesn’t he? He seems quite a civilized person—and musical, too. So nice to have an artistic king—don’t you think so? Poor Kasimir was really such a bear—nothing but the Goldenburg—always the Goldenburg! It makes a court very dull when the king won’t look at anyone but his wife. What are you being rude enough to laugh at, Captain Ivanovitch? Have I said something shocking? Well, it does make it dull, you know—for other people. Dear, dear, I do wish you wouldn’t laugh like that—I was quite serious, I assure you.”

“That’s what made your remark so funny, madame,” Dmitri Ivanovitch chuckled.

“Oh, of course, I’m not saying it wasn’t very nice and right and all that—but it was certainly very dull. So absurd, to ruin himself for a woman like that! She was beautiful, no doubt, but there were other people in Khristovitz—only he never seemed to see them. Isn’t it sad about poor dear little Anna, Captain Oourof? What—haven’t you heard? She fell down on some glass—a most extraordinary accident, it seems to me, but I suppose she knows how it happened herself, though she can’t explain it at all well. Oh, she is most dreadfully cut—her poor face is all bandaged up and she cries and says she will never be fit to be seen again. I dare

say she will, you know—what with these new enamels and things, one can hide almost anything now—and her complexion was—well—wasn't it, now? Captain Ivanovitch, I can't think what is the matter with you tonight—you're laughing at me again! Of course, I'm most dreadfully sorry for poor Anna—but when a woman gets to her age I don't really think it is quite necessary to make such a fuss about her looks being damaged a little, do you? But she was always rather vain, poor dear! And Roumanine is such an insensible, stony person. When you ask after Anna, he looks at you with the most extraordinary expression in those light eyes of his—I really believe that he's pleased that poor Anna is hurt.—I've been trying to get Captain Ivanovitch to tell me about what happened at the palace the other night. He says he wasn't there, but I don't believe it. It must be so amusing to be mixed up in a real conspiracy. That horrid little upstart Mikhail Markovitch was wiped out too, wasn't he? They shot him in the barrack square—they made him put on his uniform first and then they tore off his epaulettes and broke his sword and shot him. It seems rather a pity, but I suppose you can't wonder at it—everyone hated that woman so. For my part, I rather admired her—like anyone who gets what he wants and sticks to it to the end. I married Fedor because he asked me every day for six months, until I was sick and tired of being worried—but I tell him no one would imagine him capable of doing that now,

by the way he goes on—ah, you never know what kind of a brute a man is until after you have married him, and then of course it's too late for your knowledge to be any good to you."

She stopped, fairly out of breath.

"I've a bone to pick with you presently, Oourof," Dmitri Ivanovitch remarked to the attaché. "You played me a pretty mean trick the other night, you know. If it hadn't been for you, I should have been at the palace—I don't know what business it was of yours to interfere."

"If you're going to quarrel, I shall run away," Natalia Morisof said gaily. "I always run away when people quarrel. There's Roumaine—I'll go and ask him how Anna is and try to get him to explain how she fell on that glass."

She went off to question the ambassador, and Dmitri Ivanovitch and Vladimir were left alone.

"You needn't tell me it was Eva," Ivanovitch said, working himself gradually into a passion. "I know who put her up to that game. It was you—you wanted to get into the palace. You did get in too. I suppose you had an appointment with the Golden——"

But the name was never finished. Without an instant's hesitation Vladimir struck him across the mouth and stopped it.

"That is a lie, and you know it," he said quietly.

Dmitri Ivanovitch went scarlet with passion.

"You know what you have done?" he blus-

tered. "You have struck an officer of the Sixth, you infernal Russian spy!"

"I shall be charmed to give you satisfaction," Vladimir said. "I want a little excitement as much as you seem to do. You can send your seconds to me tonight—Alexander Gliska will act for me. Good evening, Captain Ivanovitch."

He turned and went out of the palace. It was a relief to leave the walls which were stained with the blood of the woman he had helped to murder. It had been a relief to strike Dmitri Ivanovitch. It would perhaps be a relief to shoot him in an hour or two, as he meant to do.

It was already dawn when he left the palace. He went to his rooms and wrote a note to Alexander Gliska. Then he went to Eva Carillon's flat.

He found it in confusion. Boxes stood in the passages—Eva herself, in a rather dirty dressing-gown, was piling a large quantity of oddly assorted articles into a huge trunk. She sprang up when she saw him.

"Ah, you have come? That is well, for I was going to send for you. Come in here—I have something to say."

She whisked into a bedroom littered from end to end with dresses and hats and music. She shut the door and turned upon him with a face that had suddenly grown unfamiliar to him.

"I thought you would come—I wanted you to come," she said, panting a little as she spoke. "But now that you are here, I don't know what to say. It was different with Dmitri—he is

only a fool and I always detested him—but you—*you!*”

She stopped, choking. Vladimir drew back a little. Eva, in her shabby dressing-gown, had taken on the aspect of an avenging angel.

“You dared to come!” she said. “That was what I wished—that I might tell you what I think of you. But it isn’t easy to do that. You were outside the palace when they were murdering her—you never lifted a finger to save her—you opened the doors to them—Oh, I know—I know! I understand more than you think—I know the game you have been playing—you and that cold-blooded devil Roumanine and your hypocritical government that talks of peace one moment and plans murder the next! It is all your doing—do you think you deceive anyone? And you come here to me, with Liane Goldenburg’s blood on your hands—you assassin—you contemptible spy!”

She turned from him and went to the jewel-case which lay open on the table, took something out and threw it on the ground at his feet. It was Anna Roumanine’s diamond collar.

“There are your diamonds,” she said. “Take them—give them to someone who will wear your jewels—I won’t. I am going back to Paris—I won’t sing to murderers who illuminate their streets to celebrate the death of their king and queen.”

Vladimir looked for a moment at her angry face. Then he turned and went quietly out of the room and out of the house.

Eva caught up an armful of things and went back to her packing.

"Thank heaven, tonight I shall be in Paris!" she remarked fervently.

It was perhaps an hour later, while she was sitting on the top of a mountainous trunk in the vain hope of inducing the lock to close under her weight, that a maid came rushing up the stairs.

"Oh, madame, there has been a duel between Captain Oourof and Captain Ivanovitch, and one of them is killed!"

Eva slipped off the top of the trunk and stood up, very stiff and straight.

"Is it Ivanovitch?" she asked rather faintly.

But Ivanovitch's was not the name she expected to hear—nor did she hear it.

"No, madame—it is Captain Oourof."

The Bindweed had claimed her last victim.

Eva listened to the maid's rather incoherent story with a stony face. Oourof had not fired—his pistol was still loaded in every chamber when they picked him up. Dmitri Ivanovitch, by no means a good shot, had sent his bullet clean through his heart.

"He did not mean to fire," Eva said to herself.

She went back to the bedroom where she had parted with Vladimir an hour ago, and looked upon its confusion with hard eyes.

"I am glad I did it," she said once or twice. "I would do it again."

Her foot touched something, and she bent

down and picked up the diamond collar. She looked at it for a moment. Then she went to the glass and fastened it round her throat.

"He never meant to fire—it was his way of being sorry," she said.

The collar touched her bare throat with sudden cold. She looked at herself in the glass.

"I told him I wouldn't wear them," she murmured.

She flung herself upon the bed in a passion of tears. Presently, half ashamed, she sat up and wiped her eyes furtively with a corner of the sheet. Her hand went again to the diamond collar and she shrugged her shoulders.

"I may as well have it," she said. "These things often come in useful."

THE END

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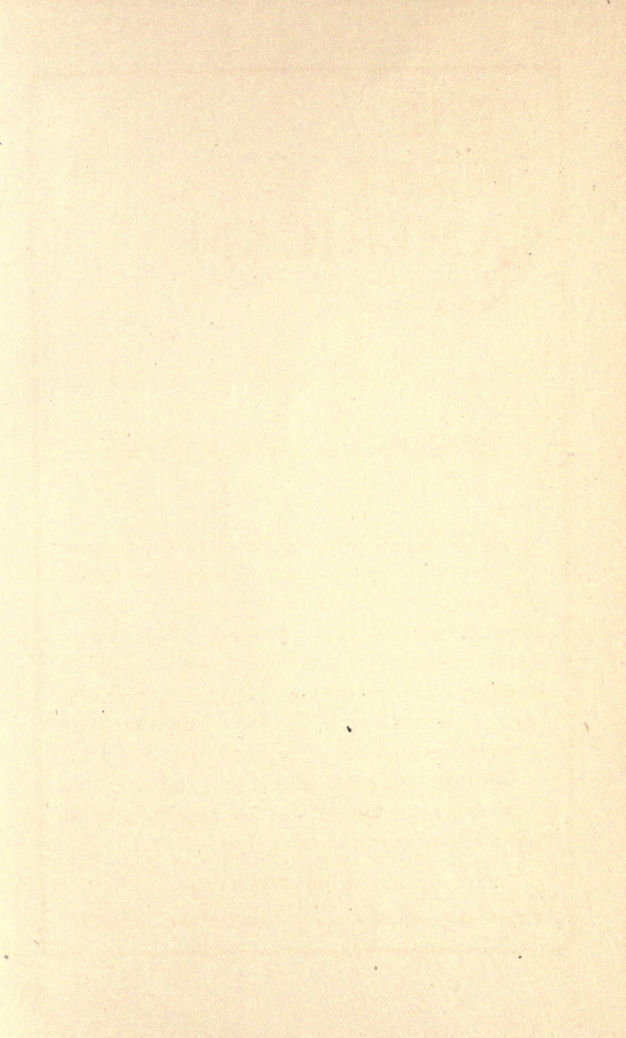
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