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BY M. IMLAY TAYLOR

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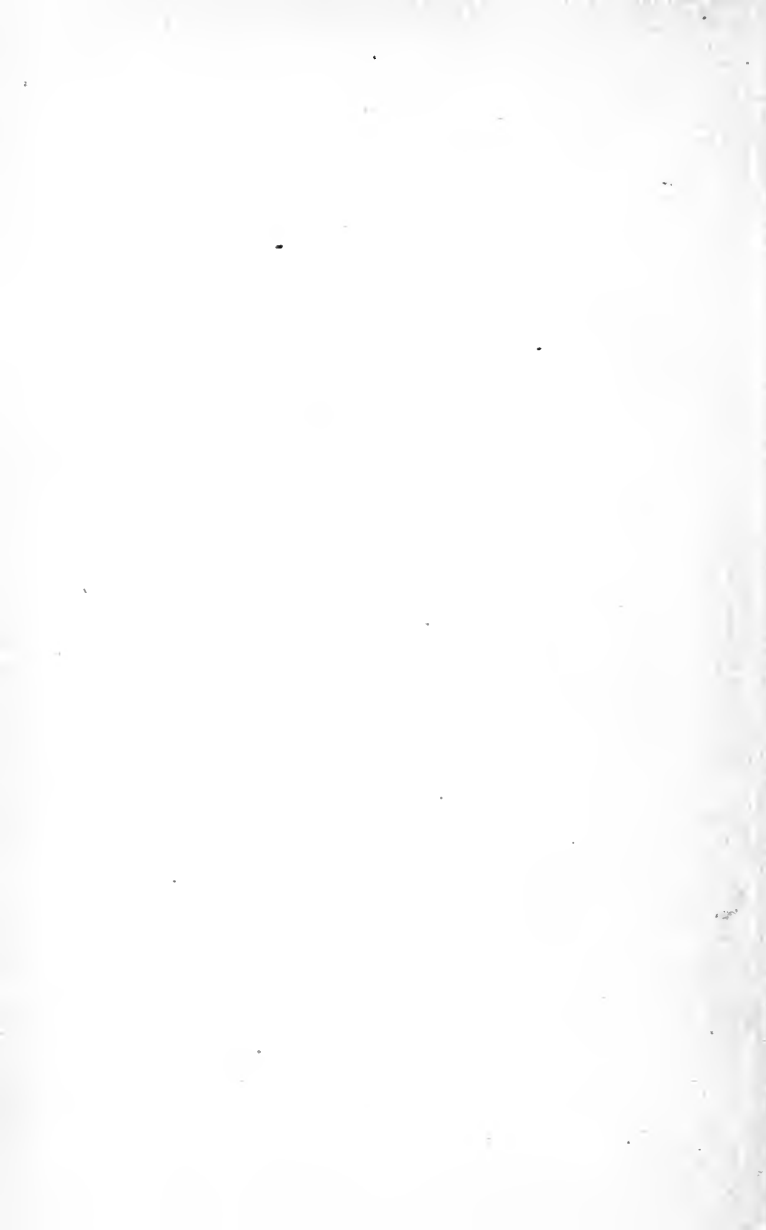
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AN IMPERIAL LOVER





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AN IMPERIAL LOVER

BY

M. IMLAY TAYLOR

AUTHOR OF "ON THE RED STAIRCASE," ETC.



CHICAGO

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. GUILLAUME DE LAMBERT	7
II. THE GOLDEN HALL	21
III. AUNT AND NIECE	34
IV. THE LIVONIAN PEASANT GIRL	49
V. THE TOWER OF IVAN VELIKI	64
VI. CATHERINE AND THE CZAR	79
VII. THE ENVOY'S CLOAK	93
VIII. A MEDDLESOME COUSIN	106
IX. MADEMOISELLE'S BRACELET	120
X. THE TRYST	131
XI. AN INTERCEPTED LETTER	146
XII. UNDER A CLOUD	160
XIII. TWO WARNINGS	172
XIV. A FAIR REBEL	184
XV. AN IMPERIAL INQUISITOR	196
XVI. A DUEL WITH TONGUES	207
XVII. MENTCHIKOF	223
XVIII. MISSING	233

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. THE MARRIAGE OF THE DWARFS . . .	244
XX. THE FAITHFUL SPY	256
XXI. NAJINE	266
XXII. AN INTERVAL OF SUSPENSE	279
XXIII. A FAIR PETITIONER	290
XXIV. A DUEL WITH SWORDS	303
XXV. NAJINE AND HER LOVER	314
XXVI. MADAME ZOTOF	326
XXVII. THE CZAR'S EQUERRY	337
XXVIII. A SON OF MISFORTUNE	346
XXIX. THE GREATEST ROMANOFF	357
XXX. A FUTURE EMPRESS	369

AN IMPERIAL LOVER.

CHAPTER I.

GUILLAUME DE LAMBERT.

TWENTY years had passed since my last visit to Moscow, a visit made memorable by my marriage with Zénaïde Ramodanofsky. For many reasons we did not return to Russia until, in the spring of 1703, the King of France said to me: "M. de Brousson, there is no one else whom I care to send to Moscow on a delicate mission. You have married a Russian, you know Russia and the czar. In short, monsieur, I desire that you should go."

The year before the king my master had bestowed upon me the bâton of a marshal of France, a reward for my services with the Marquis de Villars at the victory of Friedlingen. The king's favors to me had been conspicuous; owing him so much, I owed him also a ready obedience to his wishes, although this second mission to Moscow was far from acceptable. The king desired to have some one at the Russian Court to watch the vicissitudes of the northern war. The Czar

Peter had joined the alliance recently formed between Denmark, Brandenburg, and King Augustus of Poland, against Sweden. He had been drawn into it partly by his friendship for Augustus of Saxony, the King of Poland, but more because he desired to recover the Land of Izhore, lost to Russia in the Troublous Times. France was embarrassed by the war of the Spanish Succession, which had broken out after King Louis XIV. accepted the conditions of the will of the King of Spain, Charles II., bequeathing the Spanish crown to the Duke of Anjou, the son of Monseigneur. It was because of this imbroglio that the king my master watched with interest the struggle between the princes of the North, since it diverted that mad young hero Charles XII. of Sweden from supporting the Grand Alliance against France.

In the midst of these complications it was my duty to go to Moscow and observe the course of events, and transact some delicate diplomatic business with the czar. My mission was a secret one, and I travelled ostensibly to take my wife to visit the home of her childhood and to look after some estates recently bequeathed to my son. I was destined to find an altered Russia since the days of the regency of my old friend the Czarina Sophia, now imprisoned by her imperial brother in the Novodevitchy Monastery. Peter's journey through Europe had inspired him with a desire

for reform, and on his return he swept away the old régime. The national costume and the beard, sacred in the eyes of the devout Russian, were sacrificed by this young iconoclast. All the men about the person of the czar wore German clothes, and shaved their faces so that the aspect of the court was greatly changed. Peter no longer permitted forced marriages, and had liberated the women from the old Eastern seclusion, and they, at least, rejoiced in the fashions of Europe.

Madame de Brousson and I set out upon our journey north without our son, a young man of nineteen, who was enrolled in the king's household troops and on the road to early preferment. Our daughter remained in a convent at Paris, for we did not care to take her to the Russian Court. We were attended by Pierrot, my old and faithful servant, who spoke the Russian language, and an equerry named Touchet, and my friend and secretary, Guillaume de Lambert, — a young man of noble family related to my own, in whom I had become interested. On the field of Friedlingen he was sent with a message from M. de Villars to one of the squadrons; when he returned to where the marshal stood, surrounded by his staff, he was about to present a note from one of the officers, when there was a flash, and some one cried out that M. de Lambert was wounded. "It is nothing," he said with a smile, "but M. le Maréchal must pardon my left hand;" and he pre-

sented his despatches with a salute, but we saw the blood on his right sleeve, and his arm hung limp, broken by the shot. From that day I became interested in M. de Lambert. A man who can endure a broken arm with a smile has the mettle of a soldier in him. As soon as his wound was healed he served directly under me through the remainder of the campaign, and we became attached to each other. He was the very picture of a soldier, of medium height, powerfully built and athletic, with a handsome face and bright hazel eyes; something of a gay courtier, but keen, ambitious, and brave to a fault, so that I forgave the tendency to the fashions and foibles of the day, which my wife declared I often regarded with too much severity. M. de Lambert was the figure for a romance, yet little did I suspect the labyrinth into which he was destined to lead me.

I had supposed that my mission would be speedily accomplished, and left France in May, expecting to return in two or three months; but to my chagrin December found me in Moscow, waiting impatiently for my recall and involved in a domestic drama of a nature far too romantic and delicate for my taste. I was no longer the hot-headed gallant who had wooed and won Zénaïde Ramodanofsky. I was now past fifty, a marshal of France, and a man whose mind was full of many grave problems; nevertheless M. de Lambert had succeeded in interesting me in his

love affair, and Madame de Brousson was full of sympathy for him, — for, like all handsome young soldiers, he knew how to win a woman's friendship.

On our arrival in May we had been introduced to the new court, and soon became acquainted with the alteration in the manners and customs of the people. One of the greatest changes seemed to me to be the freedom permitted to the women, who now appeared at court and at all the festivals. It was no longer difficult to become acquainted with the families of the nobility, and M. de Lambert met Najine at the house of her uncle, M. Zotof. Najine was an orphan, the daughter of Zotof's brother Alexis; and, to my discomfiture, my secretary promptly fell in love with her. At first the incipient romance troubled me but little, and I thought that his suit would prosper, since I had no doubt that Mademoiselle Zotof would reciprocate his affection, and the uncle seemed inclined to regard the young French soldier with favor. M. de Lambert was noble, brave, and handsome, and there was no reason to foresee any obstacle to his suit. I was even disposed to regard it with amusement, as an example of the ease with which some men march on the road to happiness and fortune. Time was to undeceive me.

My own mission progressed but slowly. The czar was arrogant and arbitrary, a difficult man to meet on diplomatic grounds and full of a hot, un-

governed temper. Many times my mind recurred to my old friend Dr. von Gaden's estimate of him as a child: 'a Tartar' he used to call him, and a Tartar I found him, though a far different man from the one pictured by the exaggerated reports current in Europe, which made him an uncouth and ferocious monster. He was restless, — sometimes at Preobrazhensky, where he had spent his early manhood; sometimes at Voronezh, superintending his fleet, for ship-building was his mania; and sometimes at St. Petersburg, his new city on the Neva, which the nobility hated. In December he had returned to Moscow, and I was endeavoring to make the best of my opportunities. In 1698 he had sent his wife, the Czarina Eudoxia, to the Pokrofsky Convent at Suzdal in an open postcard, and ten months afterwards she was compelled to take the vows as the nun Helen, — a practical divorce. Since then his mistress Anna Mons, a German woman, had been discarded, and there were rumors that he would marry again. His son by Eudoxia, the Czarevitch Alexis, who was destined to cause him so much trouble, was already out of favor; and in fact the shining light at court was the new favorite, Alexander Danilovitch Mentchikof, who claimed to be descended from a noble Lithuanian family, but was said to be the son of a pastry-cook. Mentchikof was the only one who seemed likely to take the place of Lefort in the czar's regard.

The difference between the old days and the new was great. My friend Prince Basil Galitsyn had been sent into exile at the fall of the regency, and was to die in poverty and obscurity. The old régime was swept away. I found myself in a network of intrigue and malice, beset with a thousand annoyances, for the French at that time were regarded with suspicion at Moscow; the Russians had never forgiven what they imagined to be the bad treatment received by Sophia's embassy to Versailles, which was in reality due to the Russians' ignorance of French and their violation of all the etiquette of embassies. I had asked the king for my recall again and again, but he would not hear of it, and I was still struggling with my difficulties.

It was near Christmas, and I had been all day at the Kremlin wrangling with the court officials over the minor articles of an agreement which had consumed six months in the making and was unmade in six hours. The obstinacy and the distrustfulness of the Russians made me think of the Duke de Cröy when he exclaimed at the battle of Narva, "The devil would not fight with such soldiers!" The Duke de Cröy was the prince of the Holy Roman Empire into whose hands Peter confided his forces too late to save them from defeat, and the Russians suspected the foreign officers of betraying them into the hands of the Swedes.

I returned to my quarters sick at heart and in no pleasant humor. Madame de Brousson was that day visiting at the house of a friend, and I found that Pierrot had prepared my supper and had the tapers burning. I sat down wearily, at first scarcely noticing the absence of M. de Lambert; but presently I inquired if the young gallant had been there during the day, but Pierrot replied in the negative.

“He went out early, M. le Maréchal,” he said, “and he has not yet returned. Touchet attended him.”

“Humph!” I muttered, “little use is Touchet. He stands gaping when a Russian speaks to him.”

“He is trying to learn the language, monsieur,” Pierrot replied discreetly, “and he was ever better with his sword than with his tongue.”

“Just as you were ever better with your tongue than with your sword, you knave!” I retorted with amusement.

As I spoke, I heard steps in the hall, and Touchet opened the door for M. de Lambert. The young man came in, arrayed in the richest of court costumes, his coat of blue velvet and his white satin waistcoat ruffled with lace, his graceful figure showing to advantage; but his brow was like a thunder-cloud, and he barely controlled himself to salute me with respect.

“You are late, monsieur,” I said jestingly;

“love is often a laggard at supper, but yours is wellnigh cold.”

He did not receive my pleasantry in good part, but muttering some excuse seated himself at the board, and began to eat with the air of a man with whom the world is at variance. Seeing his ill-humor, I shrugged my shoulders and let him alone, giving my attention to my meal, although I was not a little perplexed by his obvious perturbation, for he was one of the most courteous of companions; and it was the more incomprehensible because his dress told me plainly that he had been in attendance either at court or upon mademoiselle. It was not until Pierrot had retired and we sat over our wine that I addressed another personal remark to him.

“You are ill at ease, M. de Lambert,” I said lightly.

“Not without reason, M. le Maréchal,” he replied sullenly; “one cannot see a hawk about a dove without anger.”

“So ho, monsieur!” I said, laughing. “I read the riddle. You have a rival!”

“Even so,” he replied in a low voice, “and a dangerous one.”

“What!” I exclaimed in surprise, “does mademoiselle regard him with favor?”

“How can I tell, monsieur?” he retorted impatiently; “few young girls would regard such a suitor with disfavor.”

I looked at him without understanding.

“Your meaning is obscure, monsieur,” I said.

“Have you not heard, then?” he asked; “it is whispered about already.”

“I did not know that there was any talk about Mademoiselle Zotof,” I said; “she lives in comparative retirement. The new suitor is of importance?”

He looked at me with a certain exasperation in his face.

“It is the czar,” he said.

I set down my glass, which had been half-way to my lips. I was conscious of staring at him with amazement; my mind was really grasping the situation in terrible detail. Here was a new complication for me. I knew M. de Lambert, and was fully aware that not even an imperial rival would daunt his courage, that opposition would only add fuel to the flame. On the other hand, I knew the czar and the Councillor Zotof, and I saw a tremendous climax. For my life I could not forbear laughing. It was so perfectly in harmony with my usual fortune. M. de Lambert regarded me with a frown.

“I am glad that you find it amusing, M. le Vicomte,” he said, his temper showing itself.

“I beg your pardon, monsieur,” I said at once, “I do not find your situation amusing, only my own. Frankly, my friend,” I added gravely, “I advise you to resign your pretensions to made-

moiselle's hand. It is impossible to meet a royal suitor on equal terms. You remember the fate of M. de Bassompierre and the Prince de Condé in the old days, and we might point a nearer example. Your position is already difficult. A subject of the King of France and my secretary, you cannot offend the czar. Mademoiselle Zotof is lovely, but there are many beautiful maidens in our own country."

M. de Lambert had risen from his chair and was pacing the room. From my heart I sympathized with his impotent anger.

"Monsieur," he said, pausing in front of me, "I have heard of your romantic wooing. Did you apply the same argument to your own case?"

He had caught me fairly, and I smiled.

"I was a young man, M. de Lambert," I said lightly, "and my rival was not a Romanoff."

He flung out his hands with a gesture of impatience. "It does not matter, M. le Maréchal," he exclaimed passionately. "I will not surrender without a fight."

"And mademoiselle?" I asked after a moment. "Have you any assurance that she looks favorably upon your suit?"

He chafed a little under my inquiry, and his color rose.

"I believe that I am not indifferent to her, monsieur," he answered proudly.

"Then it is quite another matter," I said gravely,

“but how do you propose to thwart the czar?”

He knit his brows, and I saw him gnawing his lip. He was violently angry, and my composure fretted him. He writhed under my interrogations, as I have seen a high-spirited horse restive under the whip.

“That is a hard question, M. le Vicomte,” he said angrily; “emperors and kings take an unfair advantage against honest men. But I am determined that no man shall blast the future of mademoiselle.”

He was walking to and fro across the room, his face working with contending emotions. I read his thoughts easily.

“You take a curious view of it, monsieur,” I remarked; “mademoiselle could hardly desire a more brilliant future than to be Czarina of Russia.”

He stopped short in his walk and gazed at me fiercely.

“The Czarina Eudoxia still lives, monsieur,” he said, “and you forget the intrigue with Anna Mons.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“The czarina is divorced, monsieur,” I said quietly, “and Mademoiselle Zotof will never share the fate of Anna Mons. Mademoiselle is noble, and there is no reason why she should not ascend the throne. Peter has no heir but the czarevitch, and there is little love between the boy and his

father. There is no doubt that the czar will marry again, and you can scarcely expect that the guardians of any young Russian girl would prefer a poor French gentleman to the czar. I presume that the Councillor Zotof is only too anxious to forward the interest of his niece."

I saw that his agitation was increased by my argument, and was heartily sorry for him, even while I felt it my duty to show him the case in its true aspect.

"There can be no doubt that the uncle is anxious to propitiate the czar," he remarked moodily.

He sat down as he spoke, and, leaning his elbow upon the table, shaded his face with his hand. Remembering the days of my own youth, I pitied him.

"You have one consolation, monsieur," I said reassuringly; "mademoiselle has many rivals. There is scarcely a maiden of noble blood who will not be presented as a candidate for his hand. I have heard rumors that his favorite Mentchikof has a candidate for the czar's favor, a young woman of obscure origin, Catherine Shavronsky."

M. de Lambert brightened at this. "I had heard that also," he said, and then added dubiously, "there is no chance that she can outshine Najine."

I rose from the table.

"A lover's view of it, monsieur," I said, smiling, and then added with a sudden impulse of sympathy:

“mademoiselle is indeed lovely, but her beauty has a purity and delicacy that may be less attractive to her imperial suitor than the coarser charms of Mentchikof’s candidate. Take heart, monsieur; even a czar can fail in affairs of love!”

CHAPTER II.

THE GOLDEN HALL.

THE morning after M. de Lambert's disclosure the czar held an audience at the Kremlin. All ambassadors and special envoys were expected to be present, and though I laid no claim to either title I was privileged to appear. I saw that M. de Lambert was anxious to shirk the duty of attending me, but I was determined that he should not remain behind, for I foresaw future trouble from his excited mood, and was convinced that it would be necessary to keep him under my own eye. Therefore, a little before nine o'clock, we left our quarters and proceeded to the Kremlin. It was a frosty morning, and we felt the need of our heavy cloaks. The sky was gray,—that cold, even gray that makes the Russian winter so gloomy. The snow was deep, and the domes and turrets of the Kremlin and its fanglike battlements were sheeted in ice. M. de Lambert was still in an angry humor, and muttered some curses on Russian weather which made me smile, for a few days before he had been delighted with Moscow: a lover's mood is as variable as the favor

of his mistress. I could not forbear tormenting him a little with an occasional taunt that made the blood rise to his hair and his brown eyes kindle with a dangerous light. His was one of those sensitive, fiery spirits that flash out in quick resentment, and Madame de Brousson accused me of playing with his mood as a cat would worry a mouse, and yet the young fellow stood high in my esteem. However, he took my pleasantry so ill that morning that I let him have his way at last, and we accomplished the rest of our walk in silence. When we arrived at the Granovitaia Palata, the entrance to the Golden Hall was crowded, for the guards still stood before the door. However, we came at the appointed hour, and in a moment the doors were opened and the throng admitted. It was a splendid spectacle; the vast golden hall with its arches supported by a central pillar, and upon the arches were inscribed ancient legends in Slavonic characters, and here and there was a darkly rich painting in the golden vaults; it made a magnificent background for the brilliant scene. All the men of note in Moscow were there, foreign residents, ambassadors, gallant soldiers, gay courtiers. I noticed at once the czar's especial coterie, the Prince Dolgoruky, Repnin, and Kurakin, Prince Ivan Troubetskoy, Andrew Matveief, the son of the old chancellor, Prince Boris Galitsyn, the cousin of the exile, Count Feodor Apraxin, and the new

favorite, Alexander Mentchikof. In the center of the room stood the czar, a conspicuous figure. Peter was now thirty-one years old, and there was something in his appearance that suggested at once his tremendous personality. His stature was immense, nearly seven feet; his deep chest and powerful limbs showing his great strength, while his presence was commanding. His forehead was high, and he wore an unpowdered brown peruke, which was too short for the prevailing fashion. His complexion was of a clear olive tint, and his nose short and thick at the end, and his lips full. His eyes were handsome, large, dark, and brilliant, reminding me of those of his mother, the Czarina Natalia, but unfortunately affected by the *tic* which occasionally convulsed his features. He had suffered from a nervous affliction, accompanied by a twitching of the face and body, since he had been poisoned in his youth. His dress was usually conspicuous for its simplicity and carelessness, for he seemed to scorn the insignia of rank, and, in the midst of that brilliant assemblage, he wore a close-fitting brown coat with gold buttons, a linen collar, and no cuffs, his waistcoat, breeches, and stockings being as plain as his coat, which was unbuttoned. He wore no jewels, only the blue ribbon of the Order of St. Andrew which he had created, and of which he was the sixth knight, having received it at the first Russian naval victory over the Swedes, off the Vassily Island in the

Neva, in 1702. About his neck was suspended an ancient Greek cross of metal, which subsequently became famous as his ornament at the victory of Poltava. A man of coarse and even brutal instincts, who could look with indifference upon torture and execution, yet withal the ruler born. As I looked at him, it seemed to me a question whether the young Frenchman at my side, undistinguished save by personal bravery, could rival this august personage in the fancy of a young and probably ambitious woman. The czar was no contemptible tyrant, but a suitor who might dazzle the imagination of a girl. He was royal, and his person was conspicuous for those very qualities of manly endurance and strength which usually attract the eye and fancy of the fair sex.

My personal relations with Peter were cordial. His temperament and manner were alike frank and unconventional. He had an indifference to the forms and ceremonies of a court, and his love of freedom had led him into many a mad frolic in the German suburb. Indeed it had been whispered that these frolics, and the intrigues connected with them, were at the root of the trouble between him and the Czarina Eudoxia.

That morning he greeted me with a little constraint, and I noticed his hawklike eye resting for an instant on M. de Lambert, who stood behind me, and who made his salutation with an air of gloomy dignity. At the time Peter was conversing

with two or three officials who stood about him, and some moments elapsed before he had an opportunity to speak to me. After a little while, however, the others fell back, and the czar, finding himself for the instant alone, addressed me with some abruptness.

“A word with you, M. le Maréchal,” he said; “you have a young gentleman in your suite, M. de —”

“M. de Lambert, your Majesty,” I said, supplying the name, as he hesitated and waited for it.

“Ah, yes, M. de Lambert,” he continued; “is he your nephew or your son-in-law?”

“Neither, your Majesty,” I replied; “he is a distant connection of my family, and an officer of the household troops of the King of France.”

“Of noble blood, then,” the czar remarked, while I marvelled and tried to divine his drift; “a good soldier, I presume?”

“A gallant one,” I replied at once, a little relieved at the turn of his questions.

He paused and turned a searching glance on my face.

“A gallant soldier is always admirable in the eyes of the fair ladies, M. de Brousson,” he continued deliberately; “perhaps it would be well for you to remind M. de Lambert that while he is in Moscow I would prefer to see him in his character of an attendant upon the envoy of the King of France and not as an esquire of dames.”

I felt the blood rising on my cheek under the czar's keen eyes. I was angry, but I made an obeisance.

"Your Majesty's wishes shall be respected," I said calmly.

"You understand me, monsieur," he went on coolly; "I rely upon your amiable discretion. It is my good fortune to have so astute a representative of the Court of France."

Dolgoruky had approached while he was speaking; and when the czar turned to address the prince, I took the opportunity to withdraw a little from his immediate vicinity. I was angry and at the same time amused. It was apparent that he regarded M. de Lambert as no contemptible rival. It was equally obvious that the autocrat would brook no interference in his dovecote, and my amusement threatened to imperil my gravity. I was making an effort to pass through the crowd unobserved and so effect an escape to some spot where I might consider the situation, but I was not destined to accomplish my purpose. Mentchikof met me on my way to the door, and laid a detaining hand on my arm.

"I would speak with you a moment, M. le Maréchal," he said pleasantly; and we turned aside into a recess where we were practically alone.

"I have but just spoken to your young friend, M. de Lambert," he began.

"*Ma foi!*" I exclaimed impatiently, "M. de

Lambert is the only man living to-day. Upon my soul, I did not know that he was so important."

Mentchikof regarded me gravely, a certain intelligence in his glance.

"He is a very accomplished young gentleman," he said, smiling, "and I understand that he is betrothed to Najine Zotof."

Now, I knew that Mentchikof was aware that there was no formal betrothal, and I began to suspect his motive. Bearing in mind the czar's words, I was cautious.

"It is news to me, monsieur," I said with assumed surprise; "surely M. de Lambert did not inform you?"

Mentchikof shrugged his shoulders.

"Not in words, M. le Maréchal," he replied suavely; "but such things cannot be hidden. The little birds about a court carry the news."

I felt a strong desire to make him drink of his own medicine and replied in kind.

"It is sometimes dangerous, monsieur," I said, "to listen to the whispers of such little birds. In France I have known it to cost a man his head."

He flushed a little, and I saw a gleam of anger in his eyes; but he was too astute to allow me to ruffle his serenity.

"An easy way of removing his ears, monsieur," he replied calmly, "but I regret to hear that there is so little foundation for my information. I regret it, you understand. M. le Vicomte, it seemed

to me, and to others, that Najine Zotof's marriage with M. de Lambert would be a subject for rejoicing. I trust that it may yet be arranged."

I looked at him keenly. While I thought that I understood his motive, I was far from feeling any confidence in him.

"I am not here to arrange marriages, monsieur," I said calmly, "but to direct some business matters of my own."

He smiled. "Twenty years ago, M. le Vicomte, you managed to accomplish both missions with conspicuous success."

I was accustomed to these references to my romantic marriage, and accepted them in good part.

"I had a greater temptation then," I said lightly.

"Nevertheless," he continued persistently, "you cannot be without interest in the welfare of your friend; and I have heard that the young woman reciprocates his affection, and it is a genuine romance."

"You are marvellously well informed, monsieur," I replied serenely; "for my own part, I do not pretend to know so much of such delicate matters."

"You tax my credulity, M. le Vicomte," he said. "It is impossible for me to believe that a man of your sagacity can be both blind and deaf. M. de Lambert has made friends here, and we desire to see him happily united to Najine

Zotof; but it is well in Russia to accomplish these things speedily and quietly. You doubtless understand me, monsieur. There are many who approve of the marriage; it is not impossible to accomplish now; later it might meet with grave opposition. I speak to you as M. de Lambert's friend and natural adviser."

"I thank you, monsieur," I rejoined with composure; "but why should I counsel a Frenchman to contract a marriage which may meet such serious opposition?"

His face hardened, and he looked at me sternly.

"You know Najine," he said; "you doubtless feel some interest in her."

"She is young and lovely," I replied gallantly. "It is unlikely that any man would regard her with entire indifference."

"There is sometimes a hard fate in store for just such young and lovely maidens, M. le Maréchal," he said coolly. "You remember the Princess Marie Dolgoruky and Euphemia Vsevolozhsky, and even the late czarina,—the nun Helen. Archangel and Siberia are both not impossible futures for candidates for the throne."

I started. This was plain speaking, and I was certain now of his motive. He had a candidate of his own, and Najine had been so unfortunate as to rival her in the eyes of the czar. I saw it all in a moment, and a grim picture it was. However, I did not permit my face to betray me.

“You should speak to mademoiselle’s natural guardians, monsieur,” I said quietly; “her interests are dear to them, while I could not even suggest such dangers.”

He measured me with his penetrating glance, but I returned it with amused serenity. Two or three nobles were approaching him, and interruption was inevitable. He leaned a little towards me.

“Nevertheless, M. le Vicomte,” he said in a low voice, “you will inform M. de Lambert that his best friends in Moscow desire to see him speedily and quietly married to Najine Zotof.”

I was saved the necessity of a reply by his friends, who joined him now and gave me my opportunity to withdraw. Near the door stood M. de Lambert, and I signaled to him to follow me. In a few minutes we had passed through the guard-rooms and left the palace. When I found myself alone with him, I was at a loss to decide upon my next move. I knew him well; brave, loyal, passionate, impulsive, and headstrong, how could I trust the complicated situation to his discretion? How could I counsel him? With him there would be but one course of action. He loved Mademoiselle Zotof, and would save her, if he could, both from the czar and from the intrigues of her rivals. But how could he accomplish this? I asked myself that question again and again as we crossed the square. He was singularly silent, as if he divined my perturbation

or was possessed with a similar anxiety. I cast a sidelong glance at him, mentally comparing him with the czar, and wondering how the two would contrast in the eyes of mademoiselle. I was forced to admit to myself that he was a goodly man; he carried himself with the proud erectness of a cavalier, and his clean-cut, candid face was good to look upon. What he lacked of the czar's powerful muscle, he gained in grace. I smiled a little as I looked at him, thinking that he was a dangerous rival even for an emperor. I could not decide upon any course, but determined to try his temper. We had passed out of the Gate of the Redeemer, and, his foot slipping on a piece of ice, he stumbled and recovered himself with a muttered exclamation of impatience.

"You are out of temper again, M. de Lambert," I said tauntingly. "You should have more fortitude; there are worse slips than those upon Russian ice."

He darted an inquiring glance at me.

"I do not take your meaning, monsieur," he said dryly, "I am not much of a diplomat."

I smiled. "No, I think not," I replied, "and you may have need to be one. The path on which an emperor treads is too slippery for other men."

He understood me, and his face flushed.

"There can be no open path which an honest man can fear to tread," he said haughtily.

"No," I acknowledged calmly, "fear is not the word; but royalty gives no elbow room, monsieur."

He shut his teeth, and I saw his hand playing with the hilt of his sword.

"No man," he said slowly, "crowned or uncrowned, shall ever thrust me aside unjustly without a struggle."

"You are a young man, M. de Lambert," I said quietly; "be warned. The dangers that would assail you would not be half so serious as those which would encompass one — whom we know."

He started perceptibly. We took a few steps more and then he stopped me. We had turned aside from the Red Place into a narrow lane; on either hand were the blank walls of the courtyards of two houses. I can see his face to-day as plainly as then, when it stood out in such relief against the background of stone. He was pale, and his brows were bent over his troubled eyes, while a lock of his own light brown hair had escaped from beneath his peruke and was blown across his cheek.

"M. de Vicomte," he said in a low voice, "have you been warned of any danger threatening Mademoiselle Zotof?"

I felt the warmest sympathy for him. His manner convinced me of the sincerity of his passion. I put my hand on his shoulder as I would have laid it on a son's.

"I will be frank, monsieur," I said, carried out of all resolution of reserve. "I have been assured

to-day of two things,—the czar has a serious fancy for mademoiselle, and Mentchikof is determined to induce him to transfer it to Catherine Shavronsky.”

“May the saints speed his efforts!” exclaimed M. de Lambert, devoutly.

“In either case,” I went on, “mademoiselle is in danger. If the czar loves her, you cannot hope to oppose him; and if he vacillates between mademoiselle and the Shavronsky woman, Mentchikof and his faction will find a way to deal with Najine Zotof, as other court factions have dealt with rival candidates for the czar’s heart. Poison, exile, death—the course is easy; and if they fail the czar will win, and you, M. de Lambert—must lose.”

He heard me calmly to the end; then, throwing back his head, he looked me in the eye, and I saw the fire kindling in his own.

“Monsieur,” he said, “no tyrant shall crush the spirit and happiness of the woman I love, were he a thousand times a czar! If she loves me, I will win her yet!”

CHAPTER III.

AUNT AND NIECE.

M. DE LAMBERT had at least one friend whose sympathy was unfailing. Madame de Brousson took the warmest interest in his trials, encouraging him in his rash suit, and even chiding me because I endeavored to point out all the perils and difficulties. "If you had been thus cautious twenty-one years ago, Philippe," she said to me, "I should not now be your wife." Which was like a woman, for women love to apply the same rule to all cases. She understood, as well as I did, all the obstacles, but chose to throw the weight of her influence in the scale with love and knight-errantry. Between the two, Zénaïde and M. de Lambert, I was sore beset. The possibility that Peter might demand our young lover's return to France was imminent, and in any case I could not discover a way for him to defeat successfully his imperial rival. In spite of Zénaïde's indignant protest, I had grave doubts that mademoiselle would remain loyal to her French suitor in the face of the czar's wooing. I had been working

industriously to ascertain something of the drift of affairs, and found that an impression existed at court that Peter intended to choose a second wife. He had confirmed this by his own words, spoken in his indignation at the discovery of the infidelity of Anna Mons. In the heat of his passion he told her lover, the Prussian minister Kayserling, that he had educated the girl to marry her himself. If he had contemplated wedding Anna Mons, it was far more probable that he would wed mademoiselle. A passing fancy might end in a futile intrigue; but if the czar was indeed seriously considering the idea of marrying her, she was exposed to the machinations of the rival parties at court, and especially to those of Mentchikof. He was now the favorite, and the center of a web of intrigue. His household was conducted by his sister, Madame Golovin, the wife of Count Alexis Golovin; and with her resided the two Arsenief sisters, one of whom, Daria, was said to be beloved by Mentchikof, — they had both been “boyar maidens,” as the maids of honor were named. To this group had recently been added Catherine Shavronsky, whom Mentchikof was introducing as a candidate for the czar’s affection. He doubtless desired to establish her in the place of Anna Mons, and through the new toy to rule the court factions. If, on the other hand, Peter’s fancy for Najine Zotof interfered with this scheme, Mentchikof would leave no stone unturned in the effort to defeat and ruin the young

girl whose beauty had been so unfortunate as to attract the imperial notice.

Such was the situation, and Madame de Brousson and M. de Lambert understood it as fully as I did; but I saw that it was only acting as a spur to his headstrong temperament. I spoke to Pierrot, and warned him to aid Touchet in attending the young man, as I anticipated no little trouble for him, knowing only too well that a sword-thrust or a pistol-shot in the dark was not a singular occurrence in Moscow. My wife did not permit my sympathy to cool, and we were both becoming keenly interested in the little drama. Only one point disturbed my appreciation of the romance, and that in spite of Madame de Brousson's protests: I had yet to feel assured of mademoiselle's feelings. M. de Lambert was loud in his denunciation of the Councillor Zotof and his wife; they of course had grown cold to his suit at the first advent of the czar, and now he accused them of endeavoring to coerce their niece. Zénaïde continually urged me to go and see mademoiselle, and so be convinced that she possessed a sweet and candid disposition; and this would also give me an opportunity to observe the manner of her guardians. My wife had no desire to go herself, because she detested Madame Zotof, who was counted one of the greatest shrews in Moscow. Moved partly by sympathy for M. de Lambert, and partly by a desire to become better acquainted with the heroine of the

romance, I yielded to the domestic pressure and found an opportunity to visit the councillor's residence.

Zotof's house stood within a spacious courtyard, and was a solid, comfortable-looking building. The main door opened into a great hall, usually full of serfs and retainers, while the living rooms were all above, — a common fashion in Russia. It was towards evening when I arrived, attended by Touchet; and a serf bearing a taper lighted me up the stairs, ushering me into a spacious apartment furnished with Russian luxuriousness in furs and heavy hangings. The councillor was entertaining several friends, and his wife and niece were both present. He received me courteously, but I fancied that I was less welcome than formerly, and noticed his glance behind me at the door as if he expected to see M. de Lambert enter also. Zotof was a short, stout man, belonging to the old coterie, and a fair type of the conservative nobility, having, I had no doubt, a wholesome abhorrence of the czar's innovations. Peter, who was fond of nick-naming the older men, called him the "Prince Pope," because he had assumed that character at a masquerade. Zotof's face, which was coarse and flushed with high living, was not brutal, and I could imagine that he found his position full of embarrassment. He had encouraged M. de Lambert until he saw that his niece might hope for a crown, and now found it difficult to extricate himself from

his entanglement. Madame, on the other hand, was the picture of a domestic tyrant, — a woman of medium stature, but carrying herself with an erectness which increased her appearance of height, her face pale and sharp-featured, her eyes keen and unsympathetic, and her whole manner sharp and sometimes rude, while not even her smile concealed her shrewish temper. I had long since made up my mind about the pair, and was more or less amused at their different attitudes in regard to me. In former days madame had been gracious to the border of flattery in her address; she had welcomed me as the representative of the king and a marshal of France, and M. de Lambert, as my friend, was an honored guest; but now her ambition had caught a glimpse of more splendid possibilities, she had a higher goal in view, and was untroubled by her husband's scruples about previous engagements and obligations. She allowed me to see at once that while she still respected my rank, she no longer desired my good offices and was independent of my approval of her niece. I saw all this at a glance, even while I was accepting their hospitality and exchanging courtesies with their guests, and I found an opportunity to observe the young girl who was the cause of all the intrigues and of so much anxiety. Mademoiselle Zotof had remained modestly in the background, but I saw that she was watching the little scene with keen attention. I did not marvel at M. de Lambert's in-

fatuation, for her face was peculiarly charming and vivacious. She had that clear white complexion which is occasionally seen with intensely black hair, and her straight black brows were strongly marked above dark blue eyes, her mouth having tender curves that were contradicted by the firmness of her chin. She was not tall, and was delicately formed, but she had the dignity of a young princess. My wife declared that the Russian women had singular ideas about the European fashions, and wore the tawdry clothes that might disgrace even poor stage-players; but mademoiselle had certainly evaded these eccentricities, for her robe was of simple white, edged with ermine and girdled at the waist with a heavy silver cord, and it dignified her girlish beauty without encumbering it with too superb a setting. As I looked at the young face with its charm and animation, I became not a little curious about her. She seemed to me to be the very woman to grasp at an ambitious dream. Whatever she felt, she could hide it well behind that inscrutable little smile, and she roused all my interest.

Zotof's guests had been enjoying an informal talk before my arrival, but at my entrance there was a certain constraint in the conviviality, although the liquor still flowed with Russian freedom, and we stood about the table conversing in formal tones while madame kept mademoiselle beside her in the background. I was determined to obtain a

nearer view of the latter, and after a little manoeuvring managed to make my way to madame's side.

"I see you but seldom at court now, madame," I said, making a direct effort to sound her feeling, and I saw her quick glance at my face.

"I have always lived a retired life," she replied calmly; "but now my husband desires me to appear upon all state occasions, and I shall make an effort to obey. I have heard with regret, monsieur," she added, "that you are so soon to return to France."

It was my turn to glance at her in astonishment, for I thought for a moment that she knew of some move of the czar's; but the expression of her face satisfied me that it was a haphazard shot and that the wish was father to the thought.

"Madame is misinformed," I said; "I have been delayed, and do not now expect to leave as soon as I supposed."

I saw her disappointment, and could scarcely restrain a smile.

"I am so fortunate," I continued gallantly, "as to be permitted to enjoy the society of my kind friends here for a yet longer period."

"And Madame de Brousson remains also?" she asked a trifle tartly, for she had doubtless detected my observation of her niece and knew the cause. "Your wife is a Russian, I believe, M. le Vicomte?" she added.

This was my opportunity, and as soon as she gave it, she regretted it and stood biting her lip.

"Yes, madame," I returned, glancing at mademoiselle, "my wife was a lovely Russian girl about the age of your fair niece when I won her. She preferred the heart and sword of her French lover to the rank and fortune of one of the imperial family, and I am happy in the assurance that she has never regretted her choice."

I was looking at mademoiselle while I spoke, and she raised her eyes to mine with sudden comprehension, a beautiful blush suffusing her fair face. Madame, following my glance, and seeing mademoiselle's confusion, gave me a look that would have annihilated a timid man; but I was too old a soldier to shrink under a woman's disapprobation, and I took the opportunity to address her niece.

"Mademoiselle has never been to France?" I asked, changing my position so as to stand between the two women.

"I have not had that happiness, M. le Vicomte," she replied in her soft voice, which had none of her aunt's shrewish tones.

"It is a fair country, mademoiselle," I said pleasantly, covertly watching madame's growing anger; "I wish that you might see it and know my daughter, who is, I think, nearly of your age."

"It would give me much pleasure, monsieur,"

she replied softly, her blue eyes glancing at me with a certain penetration which showed me that she had a character of her own behind that modest and blushing exterior.

“Mademoiselle would love France,” I went on easily, watching both aunt and niece; “it is the country of beautiful women and brave men.”

Madame laughed harshly. “M. le Maréchal has an excellent opinion of his own countrymen,” she said sharply.

“Naturally, madame,” I replied suavely; “although Russia is equally fortunate with us in the beauty of her women, I will not admit that her men are more brave.”

Madame swept me a mocking curtsy.

“The men of mature years are doubtless worthy of every panegyric, M. le Vicomte,” she said tartly; “but the young French gallants whom I meet lack discretion.”

Mademoiselle’s face was crimson, whether from embarrassment at her aunt’s rudeness or at the cut at her lover, I could not divine; but I saw that madame was unwittingly playing into my hands.

“What young Frenchman has been so unfortunate as to meet with madame’s disapproval?” I inquired with assumed anxiety. “There are so few French in Moscow; I trust it is not my own friend, M. de Lambert.”

Madame frowned; she had not anticipated my candor.

“My observation was general and not personal, monsieur,” she replied shortly.

“You relieve my mind of much uneasiness, madame,” I said with feigned earnestness. “I know there is unjust prejudice against my countrymen here, and I should be sorry to have you misjudge M. de Lambert, one of the most gallant and true young soldiers of France. It would interest you, mademoiselle,” I added, turning pleasantly to Najine, who had not yet recovered from her embarrassment, “to hear of his conduct upon the field of Friedlingen. His Majesty the King of France has been pleased to acknowledge personally the conspicuous gallantry of this young fellow.”

And I proceeded to tell her with picturesque detail some stories of M. de Lambert's courage, and had the pleasure of seeing her eyes kindle with excitement, while madame stood by fuming and tapping the floor with her foot, no doubt wishing me back in my native land. I could not repress a malicious amusement at her expense, she was so little adroit in handling the weapons of intrigue and so honestly ill-tempered. Her niece, on the other hand, changed visibly, her face flushing and her manner relaxing as she listened to my eulogium, and I knew well how to touch upon those points of courage and devotion that hold the admiration of a young girl. Mademoiselle was convent-bred, and to her mind men were

either the bold villains of the ballads or knights of the cross, and she probably comprehended her flesh-and-blood lover as little as she understood the world. It seems to me that there is nothing so sublimely ignorant of life, as it is, as a young girl just looking out from the seclusion of her home; and it occurred to me, as I watched the innocent candor of her emotion, that her marriage to the czar would be a sacrifice for the saints to weep over. Innocence and purity, youth and beauty, how sad the immolation! I thought of my own daughter, and was drawn towards the maiden. Perhaps it was the father in my tones that won her confidence, for she looked at me with growing kindness in her glance, asking more than one question about my country and my home. On one point I was reassured: she was not at all afraid of Madame Zotof. I saw that. She was even a little amused at the older woman's anger, and I perceived too that she had plenty of spirit, and was not likely to yield herself an easy victim to any of their intrigues; indeed, there was decision in her manner, and she had a proud way of holding her head that rejoiced my heart.

While I was still talking to mademoiselle, I heard madame utter an exclamation, and, following her angry eyes, saw M. de Lambert entering the room. He had never looked so handsome, and he carried himself haughtily as he advanced towards M. Zotof. Madame made a swift movement to

intercept his approach to her niece ; but I was too quick for her, and stood directly in her path, suave and smiling, ready to converse with her ; and she hesitated, her face red and her sharp eyes trying to look over my shoulder at M. de Lambert, who was bending low over mademoiselle's hand. Madame and I looked at each other in mutual defiance, and I stood my ground.

“I have always desired to ask you, madame,” I began, saying the first thing that came into my mind, “if you were personally acquainted with the Czarina Natalia? I had the honor to know her Majesty, and always desired to hear something of the last years of her life.”

“Monsieur had better ask one of the court functionaries,” she replied tartly. “I was living in the provinces, and knew little of her imperial Majesty. Have the kindness, M. le Vicomte, to permit me to speak to my niece.”

I stood aside with a profound bow. I had gained my point, and madame knew it, for M. de Lambert had had his opportunity, brief though it was. Madame Zotof swept up to Najine, and, laying a hand upon her arm, spoke a few words in her ear which were not difficult to interpret, for the young girl flushed hotly, and with a formal curtsy to M. de Lambert and to me withdrew, leaving her aunt triumphant and her lover furious. It required all my diplomacy to relieve the situation, for M. de Lambert had a quick temper, and

the contempt that a noble nature feels for intrigue. I interposed between them, and, drawing her into conversation, gave him time to recover his equanimity, but was glad of the arrival of more guests, which furnished an excuse for our departure, for I felt that I could not trust the hot-headed gallant in madame's hands. As mademoiselle had withdrawn, he was willing enough to depart with me, and I breathed more freely after we had made our formal exit and I had him once more in the street.

"You young coxcomb," I said, addressing him with that freedom which our relative positions and my age permitted me to use, "why must you anger madame at the outset, and so exile yourself from the house which enshrines your divinity? You are indeed a poor diplomat."

"Sanctus!" he exclaimed, "that woman! If she were a man I could run her through, but she delights in the immunity of her sex. A termagant! A meddling vixen!"

"Upon my soul!" I exclaimed. "A French gentleman — a soldier, and calling a woman such names!"

His cheek flushed hotly, and he quickened his pace.

"She deserves them all, and more," he said; and then I saw that he held a scrap of white paper in his hand, and in a moment divined the truth.

"Ah," I said wickedly, "I see that madame's vigilance is not unwarranted, — signs and tokens."

For a moment he was embarrassed, and then threw himself upon my confidence without reserve.

“It is but a line,” he said, with some manly confusion that pleased me, “a line which I begged for—to tell me the reason of the change there of late. It is as I feared; the czar is interfering with my happiness. The Zotofs have announced to her that they have other schemes for her future and that she must not see me again, and she bids me farewell.”

He was deeply moved, and for the moment we walked on in silence.

“Mademoiselle does not strike me as one who would surrender so easily,” I remarked quietly.

“She shall not,” he said passionately; “she shall not be crushed into submission to the dictation of that woman.”

“And how do you propose to avert the impending catastrophe?” I asked, tormenting him at will, for he was wrought up to the height of his temper.

“I mean to marry mademoiselle and carry her off to France,” he exclaimed in so clear a tone that I laid my hand on his sleeve; but at that instant there was a scuffle behind us, and I turned in time to see Touchet, with his sword half bare, staring angrily at a tall stranger who was muttering an apology in Russian, entirely uncomprehended by the angry Frenchman.

“What is it, Touchet?” I called out to him.

“The fellow was so busy listening to you, M. le Vicomte, that he nearly walked over me, and now only stands gibbering,” my equerry answered angrily.

I translated what the Russian had said, and Touchet let him pass, but not before I had obtained a view of his face, and he looked back at me again after getting past my attendant. He appeared to me a poor gentleman who might be of the suite of one of the noblemen.

“A word to you, M. de Lambert,” I said to my companion as we went on; “do not speak your mind so freely in Moscow.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE LIVONIAN PEASANT GIRL.

IN the next few days matters went from bad to worse. M. de Lambert found it impossible either to see mademoiselle or to communicate with her, and I saw that he was chafing under the restraint and would break out into some act of folly. For my own part, I regarded his case as desperate. The czar was not the man to let his wishes be thwarted; his temper was as violent as his rule was absolute, and it grew more clear every day that his preference for Najine was a fact, and not fancy. That the Zotofs would be complaisant was apparent enough, and mademoiselle's own feeling was, after all, of little consequence. Watching the affair in its slow development, and being a constant witness of M. Guillaume's anxiety and disappointment, I found myself becoming almost as interested as my wife. So it was that I promised M. de Lambert to aid him, if I could, knowing that my chances of seeing mademoiselle would be far better than his, even though Madame Zotof regarded me with an eye of suspicion and was openly hostile to Madame de Brousson, having previously

discovered her championship of mademoiselle's lover. Zénaïde was a little chagrined that she had betrayed herself by too much zeal, but was the more urgent for me to embrace the opportunities that she had lost. Having all her friends among the women, she heard the gossip of the hour and was able to aid me with many suggestions. Indeed, it was to her that the King of France owed the greater part of the information about the intrigues with Augustus of Saxony and the negotiations with the Republic of Poland; her quick eye and attentive ear caught the drift of the undercurrent. She was the first to see Catherine Shavronsky, and returned from Mentchikof's house with her mind full of the singular peasant girl.

"You must see her," she said to me; "she is not so poor a rival for Najine as I supposed."

"Is she so charming?" I asked, amused at my wife's change of sentiment; for she had been contemptuous of this woman.

"It is not altogether that," Zénaïde replied thoughtfully, "but there is something that I cannot define. She is uneducated, she cannot write, and she wears odd clothing, which does not fit her; yet she has a certain power of fascination. After all, the czar is not over-fastidious."

"Have a care, madame," I said, smiling; "he is a good judge of beauty, they tell me."

Madame's lip curled scornfully. "There is

enough of physical beauty, and it is said that he admired her before he saw Najine."

"Then it is the less likely that he will return to her, since mademoiselle must be far more lovely," I remarked.

"That is true," my wife admitted; "yet do I think that this Catherine would suit his fancy better, — she is of coarser mould. Young enough too, poor child! only seventeen, and has been a slave of the Marshal Sheremetief! And now the czar stoops to admire her. May the saints have mercy on the souls of such men! I would have none!"

I laughed a little, in spite of Zénaïde's angry glance. "It is well that you are not to judge his imperial Majesty," I said quietly.

"I pity the girl," she replied sternly; "but she has no conception of the misery of it — the shame of it! An ignorant peasant girl, how happy would it be for her if she could garner the sheaves in the field! Poor, wretched soul, may the Holy Virgin show her that mercy which man has not shown, and woman cannot show."

"Your sympathy is wasted, Zénaïde," I said dryly; "she is not dreaming of garnered sheaves, but of a crown."

"That may be; yet the woman in my heart pities her," my wife replied gently, "although I doubt not she would laugh at my pity. Ignorant as she must be, young as she is, I thought her

shrewd and, I feared, not over-scrupulous in her ambitions. You must see her and judge for yourself. I do not think you will fall under the glamor of her charms."

I saw the amusement in her eyes and answered her in kind.

"You mock me, madame," I said; "my gray hairs —"

"Are no safeguard," interrupted my wife, laughing softly, "but a loyal heart —" and she made me a graceful curtsy.

I kissed her hand with gallantry. "Madame's confidence shall not be betrayed," I said in the same tone.

"We are a couple of fools, Philippe," she exclaimed gayly.

"True enough, madame," I responded calmly; "but now I thought it fortunate that our children were in France."

"It is the old atmosphere, M. le Vicomte," she rejoined; "we forgot the twenty-one years and the young officer in the king's guards."

The next day, following her advice, I went to visit Mentchikof in his own palace for the sole purpose of obtaining a view of Catherine Shavronsky.

Alexander Mentchikof was a man of immense wealth and great influence. He was one of the czar's early companions, having as a boy enlisted in Peter's play regiment at Preobrazhensky. In

the years of the Regency, the Czarina Natalia and her two children, the little Czar Peter and the Princess Natalia, were obliged to live in retirement in a villa at the village of Preobrazhensky. There was spent Peter's childhood and youth, and there he organized those military sports which were the delight of his boyhood, and formed that famous regiment which was to be the nucleus of the Russian army. The boys that were on its muster-rolls were his life-long friends, and became the men who shared his councils. It was near Preobrazhensky, at Ismailovo, that he discovered the ancient English boat belonging to Nikita Romanoff that was to suggest to his mind the future Russian navy. From such humble beginnings unroll the destinies of nations, because He who holds in the hollow of His hand the world, works out His will with a mysterious wisdom that beholds the usefulness of even a grain of wheat or a drop of dew.

Mentchikof was the object of much jealousy, for men saw the czar's increasing affection for him and that he would probably succeed to the place of the dead Lefort, Peter's Swiss favorite, and they both envied and feared him. His palace at Moscow showed every evidence of that extravagance which kept him embarrassed with debts and which sometimes threatened to end his career in disgrace. On the day on which I presented myself, he was entertaining a large party of his friends, and I was ushered into a *salon* that was Oriental in its mag-

nificence. It was a common custom to have dinner at noon, and continue the feasting and gayety well into the night, and even until the next morning, the amount of liquor consumed making the last hours wildly riotous. Russian amusements were not always delicate; at one entertainment at which I had been present, the representative of Bacchus walked naked in the procession, crowned with a miter; the rout of Bacchanalians following with great bowls of wine, mead, beer, and brandy. I found it in my heart to pity the lean and long-limbed Bacchus, who must have felt the chill of the weather, even in his effort to please the czar; for Peter loved coarse and common amusements.

The new etiquette was in force at the house of Mentchikof, and the women mingled freely with his guests. His sister, Madame Golovin, was near him when I entered, and greeted me with effusion, warmly seconding his cordiality. I saw at once that I was not only a welcome guest, but that they desired to win me over to their interests. Madame Golovin immediately presented me to Daria Arsenief, who, it was rumored, was soon to wed Mentchikof. Mademoiselle Arsenief was a handsome and clever woman, and I should doubtless have soon been interested in her conversation if I had not been more curious to observe the candidate for the czar's favor, whom I had noticed, as soon as I entered, standing at the further end of

the *salon*, surrounded by a little court of her own. She was of medium height, and finely formed, her figure being extremely graceful, her complexion beautiful, and her hair of a flaxen color. She had dark brows, and large bright dark eyes, and a charming mouth, which made her smile most winning. Youth and a certain vivacity of manner completed an attractive picture. I found myself immediately comparing her with Mademoiselle Zotof. Najine's face was fair, intellectual, spiritual, with a charm of its own difficult to define, while Mademoiselle Shavronsky had the beauty of the flesh, the brilliant eye, the rosy cheek, the red-lipped mouth. It was impossible to imagine which would command the heart of the imperial lover. So full was my mind of all these speculations that Madame Golovin rallied me on my preoccupation, and I was at a loss for a suitable reply. However she laughed gayly.

"It is not difficult to understand you, M. le Maréchal," she said, shaking her finger at me; "your mind has been following your eyes, but we cannot permit that. Catherine Shavronsky has already become too important a figure, and we poor mortals, Daria and I, cannot suffer her to draw all attention away from us."

"And yet," added Mademoiselle Arsenief, smiling, "we understand the temptation. Is she not beautiful, monsieur?"

"Very beautiful, mademoiselle," I replied gal-

lantly; "she might appear even more so alone, but by the side of two other beauties she cannot reign undisputed."

Mademoiselle Arsenief made me a curtsy, but Madame Golovin caught at my words.

"'Reign alone'!" she repeated; "ah, monsieur, you see it? She looks an empress, does she not?"

Here was a shaft shot fairly at the mark, and I felt an inclination to smile, but commanded my countenance and regarded madame with composure.

"Every beautiful woman is an empress of our hearts, madame," I said with the tone of a courtier; and she bit her lip, a little chagrined, I thought, at the ease with which I had blunted the point of her remark.

"Monsieur desires to be presented, no doubt," she said after a moment.

"Madame, it would give me much pleasure," I replied; and at my words she turned and led the way down the long *salon* to the spot where Catherine was holding her court.

There were two mirrors at the end of the apartment which reflected the entire scene. As I approached, I could read the faces of the men who were standing with their backs towards me talking to the beauty, and I saw in their mirrored images the attention and rivalry of courtiers eager to propitiate a rising power. How often had I witnessed similar scenes at Versailles with La

Vallièrè, with Madame de Montespan, and now the same sycophants pulled long faces to suit the more subdued taste of Madame de Maintenon. Yet this was a brilliant picture; here were some of the gayest rufflers of the court, with their velvet coats and satin breeches and jewelled swords; and in their midst was Catherine Shavronsky, in a gay robe that had a suggestion of that tawdry imitation of European fashion upon which my wife had commented. Even I could see that she had not the appearance of a Frenchwoman, yet no attire could disguise her fine figure, and she held herself with imperious dignity, as if she already tasted the sweets of the power that she coveted, felt in imagination the imperial diadem on her head. For some reason the thought flashed upon me of the forlorn Eudoxia in her postcart going to Suzdal, and of the faithless Anna Mons, and I bowed low over Catherine's hand to hide my smile. How poor a thing is an emperor's favor!

She greeted me with conspicuous kindness, and I was not a little amused at her assumption of importance, — this poor Livonian peasant girl, who had been a servant in the family of Pastor Gluck and one of Sheremetief's prisoners at the fall of Marienburg! A poor little orphan girl and grasping now at a crown! However, I saw at once that here was a strong character, and that she would be no mean rival for the other candidates; moreover, her beauty was of that material and dazzling

type that seemed to me most likely to attract the czar's admiration. She talked to me eagerly, and I found her manner engaging, and her voice was soft and gentle; she asked many questions about my country and my journey, showing a ready wit. She amused me by inquiring, in a direct fashion, about M. de Lambert; betraying that she was acquainted with a little of the intrigue that was in progress, but I doubted if she knew much of Mademoiselle Zotof. Mentchikof was probably too shrewd a man to trust an impulsive girl with all the particulars of the czar's wavering and uncertain fancies. So eager was she to propitiate me that she neglected her circle of attendants, and more than one gallant cast an angry glance at me, until at last I reminded her, in an aside, of their presence.

"Mademoiselle," I said softly, "your courtiers are angry because you are so gracious to an old fellow. I have noticed many a black look in my direction."

She gave me a charming glance. "They are not worth a thought," she said in her sweet tones; "it is only men like you, M. le Maréchal, who are wise enough and brave enough to merit a woman's admiration."

"Mademoiselle does me too much honor," I said lightly, "but it is some young soldier who will win her heart."

For an instant she was disconcerted, and I

remembered that rumor had it that she had been betrothed to a Swedish soldier; however she recovered herself and laughed gayly.

“Ah, monsieur,” she said, “my heart will never be given except to a great man—brave—noble—generous, a soldier, a statesman—a—” She hesitated, her cheek mantling with color. She had read the expression in my eye.

“A prince, mademoiselle!” I concluded softly.

She flushed crimson, and held out her hand with a charming gesture of candid good-will. I took it in mine and looked into her kindling eyes.

“May mademoiselle be as fortunate and happy as her beauty deserves!” I said in a low tone, and then, kissing her fingers, made my way through the throng to Mentchikof, and so took my leave.

Pierrot was waiting for me in the lower hall, and followed as I went out. My mind was much pre-occupied by the scene that I had just witnessed. I had the key to the situation, but it was none the less a difficult one. At present no danger threatened Mademoiselle Zotof. I had no doubt that Mentchikof and his party would use every fair means before they resorted to foul; but I saw also that they were determined to accomplish their purpose, and could only anticipate trouble for the young girl whose beauty was an undoubted obstacle to their success. Peter’s speech to me in regard to M. de Lambert was sufficient to carry conviction as to his own feeling, and I was not

sure that Catherine Shavronsky's charms could equal mademoiselle's in his eyes. Meanwhile, M. de Lambert was in the unenviable position of a rival of the czar, and I was most anxious about the hot-headed young man. So absorbed was I in my own reflections that I walked on unseeing, and found myself in the Kremlin close to the Cathedral of the Assumption, before I was aware of it. My attention was immediately attracted by two closely veiled women who were just leaving the cathedral. There seemed to be something familiar in their aspect, and I was observing them with interest, when Pierrot approached.

"That is Mademoiselle Zotof, M. le Vicomte," he said quietly. "I know her woman Neonila, and that is she in the rear."

I saw my opportunity, and thought of M. de Lambert's anxiety. In a moment I crossed over and addressed the more slender of the two figures.

"Mademoiselle Zotof," I said quietly, "I am fortunate!"

She stopped, startled and confused, and stood a moment irresolute and then walked on at my side, her woman falling behind.

"M. le Maréchal," she said softly, "I — I did not think to meet you."

"I trust, mademoiselle," I said gravely, "that you do not desire to avoid me."

"Oh, no — no!" she exclaimed earnestly. "I

am happy in seeing a friend, for lately I have seen but few."

"That is not their fault, mademoiselle," I replied. "I know of at least one who has been most unhappy since he has been denied your presence. His sun is obscured."

I was watching her narrowly, and saw her nervous hands and her whole air of confusion.

"It is not my fault, either, monsieur," she said gravely. "My uncle has forbidden me to appear in public at present, and I find myself without even my usual liberty. It is a privilege to be allowed to go to church with my woman."

"This is unnecessarily rigorous treatment, mademoiselle," I said, "and, of course, I understand it. You will permit me to say so much?"

She had put her veil a little aside, and I could see her face. She raised her eyes to mine now with a half-roguish glance.

"I regard you as my friend, monsieur," she said softly, and then added with a smile and a blush, "you are a Frenchman."

"And so is M. de Lambert, mademoiselle," I exclaimed, quick to seize my opportunity. "May I not take him some little message to reassure him? Is it not possible to arrange this matter—to see him?"

She started, and I saw that she was puzzled and confused by the unexpected proposition.

"Come, mademoiselle," I said, "speak freely to

me. My own daughter is of your age; and indeed I think of her when I look at you. Is it not possible for you to pass this way at this hour again?"

She gave me a quick glance.

"Would you wish it if I were your daughter, monsieur?" she asked, smiling.

"Were you my daughter, mademoiselle," I replied with decision, "there is one who should not approach you, no matter how exalted his rank."

Her face was grave in an instant, and her cheek flushed. I followed up my advantage.

"At this hour to-morrow, mademoiselle," I said gently, "you will be here?"

She looked up at me with a suspicion of mischief in her dark blue eyes.

"Ah, M. le Maréchal," she said softly, "I comprehend now how you won Mademoiselle Ramodanofsky. You are excellent—you are determined."

"Yes, mademoiselle," I said, smiling; "but you forget that I dine and sup with a disconsolate lover, and truly it destroys my appetite. Therefore be merciful to us both."

She hesitated a moment longer, and then she smiled.

"At this hour to-morrow I shall be in church, monsieur," she said demurely, "unless madame my aunt desires my presence elsewhere."

“Mademoiselle,” I said quietly, “I cannot thank you for one who can, and will, thank you for himself.”

As I spoke, she cast a startled glance behind her and veiled her face. Looking back, I saw the same man who had jostled Touchet when M. de Lambert and I were departing from Zotof’s house.

“Mademoiselle is alarmed,” I remarked.

“I am foolish, monsieur,” she replied, slightly agitated. “I saw the man before, as I entered the cathedral, and felt as if he watched me. Adieu, M. le Maréchal, I must leave you.”

She gave me her hand at parting, and I followed her a little way with Pierrot until I saw her and her woman safe in the Zotof carriage, which was in waiting across the square.

CHAPTER V.

THE TOWER OF IVAN VELIKI.

AFTER seeing mademoiselle safe in her carriage, I turned to look for the tall stranger who had startled her, but he had vanished. I gazed about me in some astonishment, for the square was open, and a moment before he had been at our heels.

“*Morbleu!*” I exclaimed sharply, “where is the fellow?”

“He went back into the cathedral, your Excellency,” Pierrot replied quietly; “he walks fast and takes but a moment to disappear.”

“You have noticed him before?” I asked, my mind full of conjectures.

“Three times, monsieur,” Pierrot said, — “once at the palace, once behind M. de Lambert in the Zemlianoi-gorod, and once at the house of Prince Dolgoruky.”

I started, a solution of the mystery occurring to me.

“Is he an attendant of Prince Dolgoruky?” I asked.

“I believe he is the prince’s equerry, monsieur,” Pierrot replied, looking at me with an expression of intelligence.

Here was an easy explanation. Dolgoruky was conspicuous among Mentchikof's opponents; he was one of the older noblemen, and was no doubt jealous of the increasing influence of the favorite, probably feeling that he had a better claim to the czar's confidence and affection. Moreover, there was another motive for the opposition; there was much sympathy felt for the exiled czarina and her son, the czarevitch, which would embitter the faction against Catherine Shavronsky. She was the candidate of Mentchikof, and he was secretly accused of having intrigued to depose Eudoxia; the czarina herself had openly reproached him with exercising a bad influence over the czar, and it was thought that he was unfriendly to the Czarevitch Alexis. There could be no doubt that a man like Alexander Mentchikof would bitterly resent Eudoxia's reproaches, and it was natural that he should have no friendship for her son. The opposing faction, therefore, saw a double danger in his intrigues; if he could establish Catherine upon the throne, her children might succeed instead of Alexis; and all the old party, hating Peter's reforms, were rallying around the son of Eudoxia, who was herself a type of the uneducated, bigoted women of the old Moscovite Court. Better that the czar should wed one of their own partisans than be swayed by a mistress of Mentchikof's selection! Zotof was one of themselves, and I had no doubt that the faction was

behind him in his desire to marry his niece to Peter, in which case mademoiselle would be the object of constant intrigue. They probably supposed that they could control the "Prince Pope" and insure the succession of Alexis, in precedence of any children that might be born of a union between the czar and Najine. And her selection would be less of an insult to Eudoxia than the elevation of Mentchikof's creature. All these things increased the difficulties of the situation, and I was convinced that Prince Dolgoruky, fearing the miscarriage of his schemes, had set a watch upon mademoiselle and her French lover, and the suspicion of the French that was prevalent at Moscow increased the peril for M. de Lambert. A glance at Pierrot's face satisfied me that he, too, comprehended the situation; he was a shrewd fox, and grasped it as quickly as I did.

"Warn Touchet," I said to him significantly; "he does not understand the language, but he has a quick eye and a good sword arm."

"I understand, M. le Vicomte," Pierrot replied stolidly, and we walked on across the square.

I was not startled, indeed not even surprised, when a few moments later I encountered Prince Dolgoruky himself. He came out of the refectory of the Miracle Monastery, accompanied only by one of the court dwarfs, and, seeing me, stopped to await my approach. Personally, I liked the prince, although he was a somewhat pompous man, and

probably opposed to every scheme I had on foot. Greeting me pleasantly, he walked with me towards the Gate of the Redeemer. Whatever his thoughts were, he turned the conversation at once on politics. Not all the Russians felt confidence in the Saxon alliance; they knew that the War of the Spanish Succession would involve the interests of King Augustus, who was the creature of Austria and they already saw Russia deserted by her allies, and attacked by Sweden on the north and Turkey on the south. Denmark had been disposed of, and the wiser statesmen never trusted Augustus the Dissembler, and their doubts were amply justified by the trick he played Russia at the Peace of Altranstädt. Dolgoruky in his talk with me showed his contempt for the Polish-Saxon intrigue.

“What we want,” he said frankly, “is an advantageous peace with Sweden. We must have the Neva and St. Petersburg, but for my own part I am weary of his Majesty of Poland. In the end he will make a peace with Charles XII. that will suit him and will not suit the czar. He would rather lose two Polands than two feet of his native Saxony.”

The event proved the truth of the prince's assertion, but I was not prepared to commit myself on the subject.

“Poland seems to me the most unfortunate,” I said, smiling, “since she must support the war

and see her territory parcelled out by the conquerors."

"Poland should be ours," Dolgoruky replied decisively; "it is too much a part of Russia to be torn to pieces by Augustus and that madman of Sweden."

"Charles XII.," I said quietly; "a brilliant young hero."

"A lunatic!" exclaimed the Russian, contemptuously. "Do you remember the 'Gottorp Fury,' when he and his cousin Frederick, the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp, rode through Stockholm in their shirts, and spent a day striking off the heads of sheep in the palace, until the floors and staircases ran with blood, while they threw the bleeding heads out of the windows? Such men are fools."

"The Duke of Holstein-Gottorp is the *casus belli* between Sweden and Denmark," I remarked dryly.

Dolgoruky shrugged his shoulders. "Compare these men with his imperial Majesty," he said, "and you will find them but indifferent pictures of royalty. Charles is at best but a mad king and a mad soldier, while the czar has all the attributes of greatness, and only the one weakness of trusting too implicitly in the judgment of those who have won his regard."

I knew that he referred to Mentchikof, and was amused.

"A weakness that is not unusual," I remarked;

“a sovereign is often betrayed through his confidence!”

“Too often,” Dolgoruky said with feeling “and once a favorite is established, he will stop at nothing to gain complete control of his master’s affairs; when a woman is added to the complication, it passes an honest man’s patience.”

“Monsieur,” I said, smiling, “the Court of France has been swayed by many fair women since Gabrielle d’Estrées quarrelled with Sully, and before her day too. A courtier must learn to win the good graces of the queen of the hour; it is only a plain soldier, like myself, who can afford to carve his fortune with his sword.”

“I would rather carve mine with my sword,” he exclaimed, “than sue for favor from —” He checked himself in time, catching the amusement in my eye.

We had left the Kremlin and were walking through the Kitai-gorod; a few rods more would bring us to the spot where our paths would naturally separate.

“Be warned, prince,” I said kindly. “I have seen many changes, many shifts of fortune. Let the court intrigues have a smooth road; seek only the service of the state.”

He looked at me keenly, and smiled.

“Is that advice entirely disinterested, monsieur?” he asked.

We had both stopped, for here our ways parted.

“You must take the advice for what it is worth,” I replied calmly.

As I spoke, I glanced back and discovered the tall man, who had shadowed mademoiselle, coming along a little behind Pierrot. I glanced at the prince, and saw that he had followed my eyes.

“Your equerry is over-zealous,” I said, a trifle sharply.

He started. “My equerry?” he repeated with affected surprise.

“Yes, monsieur,” I replied coldly, “your equerry. This is not the first time that I have found him in my wake. I trust your Excellency will advise him to give my attendants more elbow-room; they are both Frenchmen, and they cannot become accustomed to Moscovite manners.”

Dolgoruky was annoyed. He was not skilful in the art of dissimulation, and stood frowning, uncertain whether to resent my manner or not.

“It is Tikhon,” he said after a moment. “I will speak to him; he is a stupid fellow, and has probably erred through ignorance.”

“His face belies him then,” I said dryly; “I never saw a face more shrewd. I bid your Excellency adieu.”

With this we parted, and he summoned Tikhon, and I heard hot words as I passed on. Dolgoruky was manifestly angered and surprised that I had fathomed his scheme of espionage, and I was well

satisfied that I had been able to warn him that he had shown his hand.

Half an hour later, I went to my lodgings to find M. de Lambert but just returned from a fruitless visit to Zotof's house. He was sitting moodily at the table writing a letter, and scarcely noticed me as I removed my cloak and sword. I was amused at his indifference, knowing that my tidings would speedily dispel his apathy.

"You should have visited the Kremlin to-day, M. Guillaume," I said quietly.

He looked up at me carelessly, and with some little surprise at my apparently meaningless remark.

"It will be well for you to pass the Cathedral of the Assumption to-morrow afternoon," I added, smiling.

In a moment he had caught my meaning, and his face kindled.

"You have seen her?" he exclaimed, springing up with his usual impetuosity.

"Seen her?" I repeated tormentingly; "that is certainly indefinite, monsieur. How many women are there in Moscow?"

"*Ma foi!*" he exclaimed impatiently, "you try me, M. le Maréchal; you understand me well enough, but you love your own amusement."

"Come now, M. de Lambert," I said lightly, "let me have my jest. Have I not sat opposite a disconsolate lover long enough to dull my spirit?"

But I will not try you longer; I did see Mademoiselle Zotof to-day and spoke with her, so I am a fortunate man."

His face flushed, and his honest brown eyes lighted up so pleasantly that I forgave him many short-comings.

"Was madame with her?" he asked quickly.

"She was attended only by her woman," I replied, "and had been to the cathedral. I spoke to her, and I think that she was glad to see me. I did not forget you, monsieur. I pleaded your cause—in short, she will go to the cathedral to-morrow at the same hour."

He caught my hand and shook it warmly. There was no need for words, for I understood him, and knew too that I had gained a hold upon his heart. After a little I told him of Prince Dolgoruky and of Tikhon.

"Be warned, M. de Lambert," I said; "there is danger ahead. You are unfortunate enough to be the object of one party's hopes and the other's anxiety,—in either case a dangerous position; even more so than mademoiselle's, whose place in the czar's favor intimidates while it excites the schemers. You, on the other hand, have no shelter but the majesty of the King of France, not so potent here in Moscow; your own wit and your own sword must be your chief reliance."

"The danger to myself concerns me not at all," he replied, "but for mademoiselle I am deeply dis-

turbed. Mentchikof will leave no stone unturned to advance this Livonian woman; and while his success would insure my chances of happiness, his defeat would increase mademoiselle's peril. Prince Dolgoruky's conduct shows how deep the intrigue runs, and it seems to me only to add another complication."

"The prince represents the other faction at court," I assented, "and I do not doubt their determination to defeat Mentchikof. But you may take this comfort, monsieur: the favorite is a power with the czar, and Mademoiselle Shavronsky has beauty, wit, and ambition; therefore there is hope that the autocrat may prefer the coarser charms of Catherine to mademoiselle's delicate beauty."

He listened to me courteously, but I saw that he had a lover's conviction that no woman could bear comparison with mademoiselle. He was too elated by the prospect of seeing his divinity to bear serious remonstrance, but I prevailed upon him not to go alone to meet her. I had seen enough to fear foul play, and determined to constitute myself his guardian. I felt responsible for the young hot-head, and then too he had won my regard. He was so brave a soldier, so true a gentleman, so good a lover that he rejoiced my heart. The foibles of the court had failed to spoil him, and I could forgive the fastidious elegance of the courtier when I saw it side by side with conspicuous courage.

The appointed hour on the following day found us in the Kremlin; M. de Lambert was all impatience, and I confess that my own interest was keen. Touchet attended us; for many reasons, I preferred a man who understood but little Russ and would comprehend less of the situation than did Pierrot. We took up our position near the Tower of Ivan Veliki, and M. de Lambert had time to become thoroughly impatient before mademoiselle arrived. Whether her heart failed her at the last moment or madame detained her I know not, but we had waited a full half-hour before M. de Lambert uttered an exclamation and hurried forward to meet two closely veiled women who were coming towards us. Mademoiselle saw me, so I advanced also to greet her. She lifted her veil and showed a charming face, suffused with a rosy hue that increased the luster of her eyes. She evidently felt that she had taken a decided step, and was doubtful of the propriety of her course, M. de Lambert's ardent greeting increasing her natural confusion. A flushed and handsome young pair they looked, as they stood there before me, shamefaced but manifestly happy at meeting each other.

"Mademoiselle," I said gently, "I thank you for remembering my petition; the day is brighter for seeing you."

She smiled as she replied softly to my greeting, and then I discreetly withdrew to a little distance,

that they might have an opportunity to converse. Her woman was waiting with Touchet, but as she spoke no French and he only a few words of Russ, they made an amusing by-play by their gestures and grimaces, which indeed conveyed nothing of their meaning to each other. I watched them with enjoyment, for it was evident that Touchet found it an effort to entertain her, and she regarded him with distrust as an alien. Meanwhile mademoiselle and her lover walked to and fro in the shadow of the great Tower of Ivan Veliki, conversing in low tones; now and then I caught the czar's name and madame's, and could see that M. de Lambert grew more eloquent each moment, while mademoiselle was apparently uncertain; yet her face was brighter than on the previous day. They had been talking a quarter of an hour, and seemed to forget me, although I could overhear a sentence or two as they passed and repassed me in their promenade.

"He is the czar and I but a poor French gentleman," he said; "he can offer you a crown and I—nothing but my sword and my heart."

I saw mademoiselle's face, and she gave her lover a charming glance.

"Is your heart so poor a thing, monsieur?" she asked; "it seems to me that a true heart weighed in the scale with a diadem would exceed the jewelled bauble."

“You will be true to me, Najine!” he cried passionately.

“M. de Lambert,” I heard her reply, as they turned back upon their walk, “I come of a loyal race, and the empty honor of a crown could not shake my faith. Is there a better gift than an honest heart? A throne and a heart are offered me — Guillaume, I prefer the heart!”

I smiled; were there ever two more simple children? Yet I loved them both for their simplicity. A few moments later, mademoiselle had bidden him adieu and came towards me with her veil down, so that I could but dimly see her blushing cheeks as she parted from me. She had forbidden our attendance, and with her woman walked rapidly away; as they did so, I saw Tikhon come out of the cathedral and follow in their wake, and knew that we had been watched. M. de Lambert saw it as quickly as I did, and, before I could stop him, dashed off in pursuit. Knowing his hot blood, I followed at once with Touchet, anticipating mischief. Mademoiselle and her companion, walking fast, gained upon their follower, and, turning the corner of the cathedral, disappeared just as M. de Lambert overtook the Russian, and I could see that they disputed together. Before I reached them, Guillaume struck the spy a blow with the flat of his sword that stretched him on the ground; I know not

what would have ensued if I had not come up in time to catch his arm.

“You madman!” I exclaimed, “that is Prince Dolgoruky’s equerry. What folly is this?”

But M. de Lambert’s blood was up. “The villain!” he cried fiercely; “has he no other employment than to follow mademoiselle about the city? I will teach him better manners.”

But Tikhon had scrambled to his feet while I held his assailant; and although the fellow’s face was white with fury, he had felt the strength of the Frenchman’s arm, and had no taste for more. Perhaps, too, he saw the malicious delight on Touchet’s countenance, for my man stood regarding the performance with unmitigated approval.

“Be off!” I exclaimed harshly; “and let this be a lesson to you to quit the office of a common spy upon French gentlemen.”

He lowered at us with open resentment, but nevertheless retreated slowly, as if half ashamed to yield to my command. It was plain that only the number of his enemies discomfited him. When he was out of sight, I read my fiery lover a lesson, although I knew it was to little purpose, for he was at the white heat of anger; nor did I greatly blame him for his righteous indignation; nevertheless, it was my duty to warn him.

“You forget mademoiselle,” I said significantly; “it does her no good to have this knave’s ill will. It is easy to see that she is watched at

every step — watched by a party at court. Prince Dolgoruky would not stoop to set a spy upon her unless grave interests were involved.”

But I might as well have talked to the wind. He would brook no interference in any matter touching mademoiselle, and I saw that he took my cautions with a poor grace, almost resenting my timely interference.

CHAPTER VI.

CATHERINE AND THE CZAR.

IT was not until the day after the meeting with mademoiselle at the Kremlin that M. de Lambert confided to me something of her talk with him. It appeared that Zotof was straining every nerve to bring about her union with the czar, with or without her consent; Dolgoruky, the Marshal Sheremetief, and a dozen more of the nobility supporting him in his desire for an alliance that would destroy rather than strengthen the influence of Mentchikof. The old jealousy of the favorite, "the man of the hour," was glowing in the bosoms of Mentchikof's associates, and it was probable that they would go to any length to defeat his attempt to establish Catherine Shavronsky in the czar's favor, and the fact that Peter had openly expressed his admiration for Najine supplied a weapon ready to their hands.

There was an old custom that the czar should send the bridal robes to the maiden whom he had selected, as a sign that his choice was made. Mademoiselle told her lover that Madame Zotof was already making preparations for some such

event. Najine herself was determined to resist any coercion, and she had a fine spirit. Peter had declared against the old compulsory marriages, and he would scarcely care to be the first to violate his own regulations; so there was the better opportunity for mademoiselle to assert her independence. The czar had probably not foreseen the possibility of any woman being indifferent to his advances; his success in affairs of the heart having been already but too conspicuous. But, after all, I fancied that mademoiselle's resistance could scarcely endure under the pressure that would be brought to bear. Peter's temperament was not one to brook disappointment, and there was the force of his powerful will which it would be hard for one young girl to resist. I saw that even M. de Lambert was much cast down, and I felt more anxiety than he did, for I had also the responsibility of steering him clear of the quicksands of trouble that were spreading about his feet. I staked my chief hopes on Mentchikof, on his ambition, diplomacy, and influence, and I determined to keep him informed of the Dolgoruky intrigue by a delicate hint now and then which would serve as a guide for his ready wit. He was not slow to divine my friendliness to his scheme, and I saw that he was inclined to extend every favor in his power to Guillaume de Lambert; his kindness to him somewhat reassuring me, for I was convinced that he would not will-

ingly injure Mademoiselle Zotof, if she could be removed from his path without violence.

It was at Mentchikof's palace that I saw the czar bestow some marked notice upon the Livonian girl, but at the same time he did not forget to be cold to M. de Lambert. It was a week after the meeting by the Tower of Ivan Veliki that we were bidden to a ball by Mentchikof. Madame de Brousson had no love for these fêtes where the czar presided; there was frequently too much liquor and too much violence, so she pleaded indisposition, and M. de Lambert and I went alone. If the truth must be told, I think that madame my wife looked with disapproval upon both Mademoiselle Arsenief and Catherine, and therefore avoided their presence. She had always preferred to live a retired life, and the sins and the follies of a court were little to her taste. As a young girl, she had seemed to me a model of purity, and she was no less so as a matron.

M. Guillaume and I were late in arriving at the palace of Mentchikof, and found it already crowded by the suite of the czar. When Peter went to dine, it was not unusual for him to take with him eighty or ninety guests and a hundred servants. With some difficulty we pushed our way through the throng and entered the *salon*, at the end of which a stage had been erected, and a German play was in progress. This was a form of entertainment much favored by Peter and his

court, where the German influence predominated, German clothes were worn, and the German language was more frequently spoken than any other, for the German suburb of Moscow had been a potent influence in Peter's early life; his German friends and favorites having excited the jealousy of the Russian people. To the end of the czar's life, his favor for foreigners and his constantly enforced foreign innovations were causes of bitterness and rebellion.

The room was thronged, and to avoid interruption M. de Lambert and I remained standing at the entrance, silent observers of the scene. The drama was not without wit, but of a coarse and common sort that would have been little to the taste of the Court of Versailles. However, the audience seemed to enjoy it, especially the czar, who sat almost in the center of the *salon* surrounded by his immediate circle, Mentchikof, Sheremetief, Repnin, Dolgoruky, and Prince Gregory Galitsyn, a cousin of my exiled friend. The rival interests of the court were represented. At a short distance from the czar were Madame Golovin, Madame Sheremetief, the Arsenief sisters, and Catherine Shavronsky, the last in a splendid robe of white velvet embroidered in silver, and wearing a rope of pearls around her full white throat. It was a brilliant scene of light and color, for all the great personages in Moscow were there, and the gay velvet coats and powdered

perukes made an odd contrast to the old costumes that I remembered so well. Here were ruffles of lace and the sheen of satin, and on nearly every breast gleamed a rare jewel or a conspicuous order, the czar alone wearing his usual simple attire, as if he scorned the rules that he made for others.

When the drama was over, I advanced to make my obeisance to Peter. He received me graciously, but scarcely noticed M. de Lambert, which was enough to convince me that Tikhon had not failed to report his observations. Mentchikof saw the young man's embarrassment, and taking him aside talked pleasantly for a quarter of an hour. Catherine Shavronsky was also gracious to him, which amused me not a little, especially as I noticed that the czar was observing her narrowly, and seemed to take an unusual interest in her conduct. I could not deny to myself that she was beautiful, and that there was something about her that suggested an ability above the common order. It was not long before I found myself in her vicinity, and she greeted me with a brilliant smile, extending her hand. She was not trammelled by Mademoiselle Zotof's blushes and youthful dignity; her manner was calm and frank. It was, perhaps, this very quality that appealed to the czar's fancy.

"You were tardy, M. le Maréchal," she said, upbraiding me. "I had almost given up the hope

of seeing you, and we are fortunate to-night in having the presence of his Majesty."

"I thought that the czar was frequently here, mademoiselle," I said purposely, "in the house of his favored friend."

"Then you are mistaken, sir," she retorted a little tartly. "It is long since his Majesty has been here to enjoy a play. We have been under a cloud, or, at least, so it seemed."

I stood a moment looking upon the floor. In fact, I was revolving many things in my mind.

"Mademoiselle," I remarked absently, "it may be that some other star drew away the imperial attention for the moment."

A peculiar expression came over her face.

"You have seen the star," she said, taking up my figure of speech. "Was it beautiful?"

"Most lovely, mademoiselle," I said at once; "pure and unsullied in its radiance."

She stood there twisting the pearls about her throat until I saw them press into the delicate flesh, and her lips were compressed. It was a moment before she spoke.

"I have been told," she said in a low voice, "that some stars never reach the greatest heights, but are content to shine in semi-obscurity."

"That may be true, mademoiselle," I replied; "but when a star is radiant it must rise, unless some brighter planet outshines it."

She looked at me keenly, and I returned her regard with a placid smile.

"Your friend M. de Lambert," she said, "is, I hear, also an observer of the stars."

"I commend him to your friendship, mademoiselle," I said quietly; "it may be that he will have need of it. A brave soldier, but a hot-head."

"We must find him a Russian bride, monsieur," she said at once, a gleam of amusement in her eyes. "Mentchikof and all the members of this household will aid you. I feel myself a lively interest in M. de Lambert's happiness."

"He is fortunate, mademoiselle," I replied, "in having such champions, but there is only one way to remove all rivals from his path. Mademoiselle Shavronsky herself must interpose."

She twisted the chain of pearls so tight that the necklace broke, and they fell scattered on the floor. I stooped to gather the fragments, but she received them with disdain.

"A trifle," she said, placing her foot upon them. "What are pearls when I have not my heart's desire?"

"*Ciel!*" I exclaimed in a low tone, "admit it not, mademoiselle. What can be beyond the reach of your beauty and your wit? The ladder of fate is climbed step by step; never go back to a lower rung."

Her momentary peevishness had passed, and she gave me a radiant glance.

"I thank you," she said; "the advice is excellent, but I have heard that it is more bitter to fall, when the height is once attained, than never to attempt the ascent."

"Many things in this life are bitter, mademoiselle," I replied philosophically, "but youth and beauty should not look upon the darker side."

As I spoke, there was a sudden confusion at the other side of the room, and we both turned to discover the cause. The czar was the center of an excited group, and before him stood a young man whom I knew by name, Yury Apraxin. A glance at Peter showed me that he was in one of those sudden and violent fits of passion which occasionally carried him beyond the bounds of reason, while Apraxin was painfully embarrassed, but maintained his position with sullen hauteur. We could not hear his reply to Peter; but in a moment the czar struck him in the face with his open palm, and would doubtless have followed the blow with some great indignity if Mentchikof had not interposed his person, while Sheremetief hurried the young nobleman to the door. Apraxin's face was white with fury at the insult, and in another instant, but for Sheremetief, he would have struck back at the czar. The silence in the *salon* was sudden and painful. Peter thrust his favorite aside, and with a crimson face shouted to his equerry to arrest the offender.

"I will have his head!" he cried fiercely.

From a scene of gayety it had become almost a tragedy. His Majesty's outbursts of fury were often fruitful of fearful results, and he was ever at his worst when flushed with wine. Every face was pale, and the women drew back with startled eyes, while the men regarded the czar with ill-concealed apprehension. The autocrat himself stood in the center of the apartment, his great figure towering over the others and his breast heaving, while his face twitched with that nervous affliction which made his expression for the time terrific. Through the open door we could see Apraxin, struggling in the arms of his friends.

"What is the trouble?" I asked, in a whisper, of a courtier near me.

He glanced at me in a frightened way. "The young fool got into a dispute with his Majesty about the battle of Narva," he whispered back, "praised the courage of Charles of Sweden, and condemned the conduct of the Russian troops."

I understood. It was the weak point in Peter's armor; he never forgot or forgave Narva until the victory of Poltava.

In a moment something happened which again transformed the scene. While the czar was still quivering with ill-suppressed passion, in the midst of an extending circle of courtiers, Catherine left my side and advanced across the space. She was short, but she had a peculiarly majestic

mien in her sweeping white garments, her beautiful shoulders bare and her proud head slightly bent. She walked straight up to the infuriated czar, and knelt gracefully before him. Peter stared at her in undisguised amazement, and the others were transfixed; not a word was uttered, every eye was turned on the two central figures, the massive form of the czar, contrasting with the figure of the woman at his feet.

"I pray your Majesty's forbearance," she said, in a clear voice that was heard the length of the room.

"Rise, Catherine," he exclaimed, in an embarrassed tone, his passion suddenly arrested by her unlooked-for interference.

"Nay, sire," she replied gently, "I am a suppliant, and suppliants must kneel. I crave your Majesty's forgiveness for this young man who has so unhappily offended. I doubt not that he regrets his fault, and your Majesty's anger is too great a chastisement. You are royal, and it is royal to forgive!"

Her gesture and her glance were eloquent. I had never seen her so beautiful. Her large eyes were kindled with some deep emotion, and her face was pale, while her white throat was bare even of its necklace of pearls. The Livonian peasant girl had suddenly assumed a dignity that was worthy of a nobler origin. The czar was silent, but we, who knew his moods, saw that the

tempest was spent, and that the natural generosity of his disposition would prevail; he was even perhaps a little ashamed of the vehemence of his outburst. Whether she was sure of her success or not, she spoke again, and now there was a thrill in her rich voice.

“Sire,” she said softly, “you once promised me a boon — I claim your pledge. Give me this boy’s pardon; a king may not break his word!”

The czar’s face paled, but he took her hand and raised her to her feet.

“Have I ever broken mine to you, sweetheart?” he said, a sudden smile dispelling the cloud upon his face. “The youth has my pardon, but keep him out of my sight for a while; I love not such disputatious boys.”

As he spoke, he drew a small bit of twisted paper from his pocket and laid it in her hand. “I owe you something, Catherine,” he said, “since you alone had the courage to remind me that I was a king.”

She bowed her graceful head and kissed his hand, and then the murmur of talk arose; the spell was broken, and the startled courtiers could breathe again. They flocked about Catherine with ill-concealed admiration of her prowess, and many curious glances were cast upon the paper package in her fingers. To gratify them, she opened the tiny parcel, and smoothing out the old and wrinkled wrapper revealed a splendid ruby, — a

sign of favor that increased her circle of admirers. It was characteristic of the czar to bestow a superb present with nonchalance, and to wrap a jewel in a bit of soiled paper. To me the scene was strangely significant; I had watched it as I would have watched a cleverly conducted drama. Who but this Livonian woman would have dared to achieve that success, and, after all, did she not stand high in the czar's regard? Looking across the *salon*, I saw into the ante-room beyond, where they had hurried Apraxin out of sight, and by the door stood M. de Lambert; reading the expression on his face, I divined his thought. He was radiant; he fancied that Mademoiselle Shavronsky had won the day. But I reflected that the road of court intrigue is tortuous, and that there are many turnings before the end is in view. I saw not only the satisfaction on the face of Mentchikof and his *clique*, but the anger and anxiety on the countenances of Prince Dolgoruky and Sheremetief and a dozen more, who I knew had no toleration for the favorite or his schemes. Meanwhile the czar's good-humor had returned, and he was boisterous in the reaction. The wine was already affecting several of the boyars, two or three were foolishly happy, and a third was so belligerently inclined that he had to be forcibly removed. The amount of liquor consumed often made the guests at these entertainments violently ill, for there was a rivalry

over the quantity that each man could drink. When M. de Lambert and I retired, the revelry was at its height and the czar was perhaps the only sober man present, for Peter could drink unhurt more wine than his most bibulous courtier.

As M. de Lambert and I walked to our quarters through the crooked lanes, the first rosy tint of sunrise was spreading like a blush along the eastern sky, while above it the morning star shone like a solitary jewel in the pallid blue. The white buildings of the Kremlin loomed ghostlike through the mist that was rising in a soft cloud over the river Moskva; the city was as silent as a tomb; the shuttered windows of the houses closed in their secrets, and the streets lay in the dark, untouched by the golden shafts of light that were illuminating the horizon. The spell of midnight was upon the earth, the radiance of day-break in the heavens, and between, a wreath of mist.

For a time no words passed between us, and then M. de Lambert spoke.

"The youth was foolish," he said thoughtfully, "but the czar was wrong; it was an unkingly act."

"He has a kingly temper," I said lightly; "the boy escaped easily."

"It was not royal," M. de Lambert went on, "and he lost a loyal subject. I saw Apraxin's face; he will never forgive it."

“The czar can afford to offend,” I replied dryly; “royalty is rich in friends.”

“No man can afford to be unjust,” M. de Lambert rejoined with that generosity that was natural to him, for he had a noble nature.

“Mademoiselle Catherine has set her heart upon the crown, and she is clever,” I remarked softly.

“I rejoiced to see it,” he said with relief in his voice, and added eagerly, “did you note his manner, monsieur? He was very tender with her.”

I laughed aloud. “Ah, M. de Lambert,” I said, “set not too great store by that; the royal heart, we know, is fickle. Remember Madame de Montespan!”

CHAPTER VII.

THE ENVOY'S CLOAK.

TO Zénaïde I gave a full description of the scene at Mentchikof's palace, and she soon discovered the key to the matter. The episode was much discussed, and she found that Yury Apraxin was an adopted son of Madame Zotof's brother, and called by courtesy a nephew of the Councillor Zotof. No blood relationship existed; madame's brother, having no children, had adopted the son of a friend, but young Apraxin held the place of a nephew in the Zotof household. Here, then, was a complication. Not only was the czar offended at one of mademoiselle's connections, but how would Zotof endure the insult offered to his family? Beyond all this there was another tangle in the skein; Zénaïde was informed that young Apraxin had been absent in Lithuania and was a lover of Mademoiselle Zotof, that her hand had been promised to him,—one of those marriage contracts common in Russia, as in France, when a boy and girl were betrothed in infancy by their parents. At an inopportune time the fiancé had returned to claim his bride, but had been

quickly repudiated by Zotof, and in a few days he discovered the cause of his discomfiture. Consequent jealousy of the czar led him to make the offensive speech which had caused Peter's outburst. Apraxin had been only a week in Moscow, and probably knew nothing, as yet, of M. de Lambert; but I fancied that as soon as he learned the truth, his jealousy of the Frenchman would be more bitter than that which had animated his attack upon the czar. So it was a wheel within a wheel, and it required my wife's wit to trace it all out.

Meanwhile the czar was apparently wavering between the two fair women, although showing more favor to Catherine since the offence from one of mademoiselle's family. It was whispered, too, that M. Zotof had found it difficult to accept the affair at Mentchikof's with toleration. The open insult to his protégé was scarcely repaired by the czar's forgiveness of the youth's offence; however, the councillor was, in the end, too wise to quarrel with a sovereign who might smite his adopted nephew with one hand, and raise his niece to a throne with the other. Moreover, madame would not allow him to resent the affront while she had visions of her niece upon the throne of Russia, and it ended in Apraxin being left to nurse his hatred of the czar in secret.

In the midst of these intrigues there was a little ripple of excitement at court over the arrival of a secret envoy from Augustus of Saxony, King of

Poland. The envoy had important despatches, and came with great secrecy and precaution, but in two hours his errand was known all over Moscow, so difficult is it to keep court secrets. It was a matter of particular interest to me, as it was my mission to watch the Swedish-Saxon imbroglio. M. de Lambert and I were especially active, and this very Polish envoy was, in a singular way, the cause of an incident that proved more or less important to M. Guillaume. We had both gone to the Kremlin at a late hour in the afternoon, and I had an interview with the czar, while my companion was engaged with the chief of the Department of Foreign Affairs. As we were leaving the palace, the Polish envoy arrived; he left the ante-room as we entered it and, taking up our cloaks, went out into the early Russian twilight. It was a threatening evening and rapidly growing dark. A few drops of rain fell on our faces as we crossed the square, and M. de Lambert looked up at the lowering sky.

“More ice and snow,” he said; “how thankful the Russian must be to see the spring! A man is fortunate to be born in a milder climate.”

I laughed softly. “In my young days, monsieur,” I said, “I remember thinking that the sun shone only in Moscow, and I thought it was even so with you.”

“My sun is for the time obscured by a cloud, M. le Vicomte,” he responded readily.

We had passed out of the Gate of the Redeemer, and were walking slowly towards our quarters. We were unattended, having left both Pierrot and Touchet in Zénaïde's service, and after a little we fell to talking of the czar and the Polish envoy, and our voices were lowered. A few yards from our quarters, there was a long lane flanked on either side by the blank walls of vacant courtyards. When we reached it, it was quite dark and the rain was falling fast. We were near the end of the lane, when there was a rush behind us and a man flung himself upon my companion. M. de Lambert's foot slipped, and for the moment he had difficulty in recovering himself under the sudden assault, yet he had grasped and thrown his assailant before I could interpose. The man lay still on his back in the mud, stunned by the heavy fall. We both bent over him curiously, I fully expecting to see Tikhon. He stirred and made an effort to rise, which caused M. de Lambert to lay a heavy hand on his collar, while I removed the pistol from his belt; in doing so, I discovered that it was not Dolgoruky's equerry, but a younger and smaller man. We ordered him to rise, and he obeyed sullenly, and then stood motionless, an inconvenient prisoner.

"What shall we do with him?" M. de Lambert asked of me in French.

"Take him to our quarters and there probe the matter," I said at once.

Between us we managed to force the fellow to walk along with us; but a few yards from my door, he made an effort to break away, and only M. de Lambert's agility checked him. My companion caught him in his arms, and there was a fierce struggle before he submitted and walked before us to the house, where Pierrot took him in charge. I had him taken to an upper room, and, calling for lights, sat down and looked at him. M. de Lambert was handing his cloak and sword to Touchet, when he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"I have made some mistake," he said; "this is not my cloak."

Looking around, I saw Touchet holding up a dark brown velvet cloak with an enamelled clasp.

"I must have picked up the wrong one in the ante-room," M. de Lambert remarked in an annoyed tone.

I had been examining the garment, and all at once recognized it.

"It is the Polish envoy's," I said; "I noticed the clasp."

"Ah, to be sure," replied M. de Lambert. "I remember that he laid his cloak aside just before I assumed mine. I have not profited by the exchange. Take it back to the Kremlin, Touchet, and bring me mine."

While he spoke, I saw a sudden flash of intelligence in the prisoner's expression which con-

vinced me that he took a curious interest in the cloak. He was a short man, slight but well formed, with a broad stolid face, and his hair and complexion were light, his eyes being pale blue. His garments, although plain, were not poor, and he had nothing of the appearance of a common cut-purse, neither did he look a Russian. A sudden inspiration coming to me, I took the opportunity when his attention was riveted upon M. de Lambert to address him abruptly in Swedish, with which language I was imperfectly acquainted.

"How long is it," I said, "since you left Sweden?"

"Not two months," he answered mechanically, and then, realizing that he had betrayed himself, stood staring at me like a trapped tiger, while I laughed. He had fallen so easily into my snare.

M. de Lambert and Touchet both turned at the sound of our voices; the former understood the Swedish tongue more perfectly than I did.

"I have it," he exclaimed, "he mistook me for the Polish envoy; it was my cloak that he seized first."

"Ay," I replied significantly, "the envoy had papers. We have here a pretty bird."

The fellow eyed me sullenly, the color rising to his fair hair. The more I examined his face the more satisfied I became that he was no common miscreant, and his evident youth appealed to me.

Touchet had departed with the envoy's cloak, and M. de Lambert sat down beside me at the table, shading the taper so that he threw the light full on the face of the Swede.

"What was the motive of your attack on a Frenchman, knave?" he asked, addressing the prisoner.

The man looked at him strangely for a moment, and then seemed to come to a sudden determination.

"I made a mistake, your Worship," he replied hoarsely. "I pray you, pardon me and let me go. I took you for an enemy of mine."

"A likely story," said M. de Lambert; "why should I not rather believe you a common thief? You tried to drag my cloak from my shoulders, and wellnigh strangled me to boot."

"I made a mistake," the man protested stolidly.

"You made a mistake only in the person," I remarked dryly, "you intended either to rob or stab some one—you admit that. Why should we let you go?"

"We ought rather to turn him over to the authorities at Preobrazhensky," M. de Lambert said quietly.

Now, the secret Chancery of Preobrazhensky had borne an evil name since it had been the scene of the tortures and executions of the Streltsi, when Peter summoned those stubborn rebels to a bloody judgment, and it was a common byword

of horror to the Russian miscreant. At the mention of it, the Swede started and his face paled perceptibly. I was watching him keenly, and was quick to see the signs of weakening,

“Call Pierrot,” I said to my companion, “and send him for the captain of the guard.”

At that the prisoner broke down. He made an effort to speak, but only his lips moved at first, then he came nearer to the table.

“Gentlemen,” he said excitedly, “you are Frenchmen. King Louis has no quarrel with the king my master; he even offered mediation at one time between him and King Augustus. I pray you, deal leniently with a Swedish subject. It is true that I mistook his Excellency for the Polish envoy; it is true that I tried to snatch the cloak, which I believe concealed valuable papers; but what of it? I was trying to serve the king. If you deliver me up to the Russians, I shall be hung as a spy, or perhaps tortured to death. I appeal to you as subjects of the King of France to spare me for the sake of Charles of Sweden, whose servant I am.”

M. de Lambert and I looked at each other. Here was a situation. We had unwittingly captured a Swedish spy. If the czar discovered it, we should be called to a sharp account, for Peter was not delicate in his understanding of diplomatic relations. On the other hand, neither of us cared to play the bloodhound for Russia or to sow the

seeds of greater discord between Sweden and France. Charles XII. himself could scarcely have been a more troublesome or unwelcome prisoner. I knew from the expression of M. de Lambert's face that he regretted his own skill in capturing the Swede. But the fact that we had him was palpable enough, and what should we do with him? He was scanning our perplexed faces with an anxious eye. I turned on him sternly.

"Young man," I said, "you admit that you are a Swedish spy and that you intended a mischief to the person of the Polish envoy. How dare you appeal to French gentlemen for protection from your just fate? We have no authority to save you from the Russians. This is Moscow, not Paris. Why should we interpose at the expense of our country to save a miscreant from the gallows?"

He had listened to me in silence, but a strange change came over his face; it was no longer stolid, but quivered with emotion. He did not appear like a coward at first, yet now he was showing every sign of trepidation. When I finished speaking, he looked at me with a haggard face.

"You will give me up, then?" he exclaimed in a low voice.

"Why not?" I asked coolly, leaning back in my chair, and shading my face with my hand that he might not see my perplexity; "why should I save a criminal?"

“And I shall die that shameful death,” he groaned. “My poor mother!”

I could see by M. de Lambert's face that he was weakening. He was a gallant soldier, but he had the softest heart I ever knew save in woman. At the first sign of the fellow's distress he began to waver, and cast reproachful glances at me as I spoke sternly and sharply.

“What is your name?” he asked, abruptly addressing the prisoner.

The Swede's cheeks burned with shame, but he seemed to derive some comfort from the expression of M. de Lambert's frank face.

“My name is Gustavus Lenk,” he said slowly; “a poor Swedish gentleman of the king's household. My record has been honorable, but now they will hang me like a common spy.”

He covered his face with his hands, and broke down in unmanly grief. M. de Lambert plucked my sleeve, making a mute appeal to me for mercy, but I shook my head and answered him in low tones in French.

“We cannot take the responsibility,” I said. “We are in the service of the King of France, we must do our duty.”

“I know it,” he replied; “but this is a poor fellow, and you know what Russian justice is, monsieur.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It is but a chance of war,” I said calmly; “a man coming on such an

errand takes his life in his hand. I confess I should pity him more if he showed himself more of a man. He is too womanish."

"He is young," M. de Lambert rejoined pitifully, "and they will torture him. I know that Madame de Brousson would intercede for him; she —"

"Saint Denis!" I exclaimed sharply, "do not tell her. This is no case for a woman!"

The Swede had recovered his composure and was watching us. I read his face, and saw that he knew that M. de Lambert was pleading for him; hope was kindling in his eyes. I pitied him myself more than I chose to admit; he looked but a boy, and I knew only too well the truth of M. de Lambert's plea.

"Young man," I said harshly, "you will be shut up in this house for an hour or so while we deliberate, but prepare yourself for the worst. M. de Lambert," I added, "let Pierrot take him to the west room and guard the door."

M. de Lambert looked at me a moment, as if endeavoring to read my thoughts, and then went himself with the prisoner, who submitted without a word, a look of dull despair on his face. I heard them walk across the hall, heard the thud of the bar in its sockets as M. de Lambert secured the door. Then I heard him summon Pierrot to go on duty at the door. After a moment he came back and sat down at the table. I had extinguished two of the tapers, but the light of the remaining

one fell on his face, which was still anxious. We looked straight into each other's eyes.

"It was the only way," I said, after a moment, smiling in spite of myself.

"He is extremely dull," M. de Lambert replied thoughtfully, "and half stupefied with terror."

"But, monsieur," I said dryly, "the window is unbarred."

Guillaume's face lighted. "Then surely it will dawn upon his intelligence," he exclaimed with relief.

"It is an awkward situation," I returned, "and if he is the blockhead I think him, he may not look for an escape."

"Or Touchet or Pierrot may recapture him," suggested my companion, uneasily.

"Pierrot is no such fool," I said, smiling, "Touchet might blunder, but not the other old fox."

Nevertheless, we sat there above an hour in some suspense, and then Pierrot came to the door. His manner was perfect.

"M. le Maréchal," he cried, "shall I alarm the guard? The prisoner has escaped!"

"How and when?" I exclaimed sharply, playing my part; but M. de Lambert's honest face flamed.

"Through the window, monsieur," said Pierrot; "the shutters are broken open. He must have been gone some time, for Touchet relieved me at the door, and says he had heard no noise since he was there."

"Then pursuit is useless," I said calmly; "you may secure the house and retire, Pierrot. We must avoid the west room as a prison; see that the shutters are barred."

"Very well, your Excellency," he said, and moved away with his usual unruffled countenance.

M. Guillaume drew a breath of relief, and I laughed.

"Not such a dullard as we thought," I said, "and we have escaped more easily than I hoped."

"What will become of the Polish envoy?" he asked after a moment.

I shrugged my shoulders. "He must protect himself," I said dryly; "and as for you, monsieur, be careful to wear your own cloak in the future."

"It is a dangerous thing to wear another man's in Russia, it appears," he replied with a smile.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MEDDLESOME COUSIN.

SINCE the first meeting with mademoiselle before the Tower of Ivan Veliki, M. de Lambert had found it convenient to pass in that direction at a certain hour every afternoon. Mademoiselle did not appear so frequently, but Madame de Brousson and I knew the days on which he was fortunate by his high good-humor; and the rest of the week we had cause enough to regret Najine's caprice, since his mood was usually gloomy, and he found endless fault with Touchet, who was his particular attendant. But one evening he came in from the Kremlin, having seen mademoiselle, but still being in so terrible a temper that I divined at once that something was wrong. He ate little at supper, and it evidently cost him an effort to respond to Zénaïde's pleasantry. She made covert signs to me to observe him, and soon slipped out of the room to give me an opportunity to sound him. When we were alone, I rallied him on his gloomy mood.

"You were fortunate to-day, I know," I said lightly; "you saw mademoiselle, yet you have

been but an owl at my feast. Forsooth, when I was of your age, I had a lighter heart."

He looked at me gravely. "I have had heavy tidings," he said; "mademoiselle had some information to-day. The intrigues of Catherine Shavronsky are in vain. The czar has spoken openly to the Councillor Zotof."

I started; here indeed was a climax. Since the scene at Mentchikof's, I had hung high hopes on the Livonian girl; but if the czar was seriously considering a marriage with mademoiselle, all my schemes dissolved in air.

"Did she give you the particulars?" I asked.

"All that she knew," he replied moodily. "Madame told her that she must prepare to accept the formal proposals of the czar, as he had already spoken of it to Zotof. When Najine protested that she would not listen to him, madame became violent and screamed with passion, threatening her with confinement and I know not what. Before she shall be coerced," he touched his sword, "I will settle the account with her uncle."

I looked at his haughty face with secret admiration, but I laughed.

"You are a young fool," I said dryly. "Zotof is only doing what he thinks is best for his niece; it would be a mistake to chastise him. If you bagged madame, I should congratulate you with all my heart, for she has the tongue of a vixen. Her husband is following his lights. After all, you

make a great evil out of what would seem to many the climax of a noble maid's ambition, — to ascend a throne."

I could not forbear tormenting him a little, and he fretted under it, his blood rising to his hair.

"The czar is personally unacceptable to mademoiselle," he said proudly.

I laughed. "Come, come, M. de Lambert," I said lightly, "if you were out of the way, would the czar be unacceptable? A gallant soldier, a generous foe, a warm-hearted despot, and, above all, a man of imperial presence. Kings are usually fortunate wooers; we know of one, at least, who has been ever so. Are you not standing in mademoiselle's light? Ought you not rather to retire generously and behold her Czarina and Grand Duchess of all the Russias? M. Guillaume, you are selfish."

He sprang to his feet with a passionate gesture, his fine face flushed and his brown eyes kindling; as he confronted me, I thought that I had never seen a better picture of a soldier and a lover.

"M. le Vicomte," he said, "I love mademoiselle well enough to be generous. If I thought she desired the throne, I would withdraw, but she assures me that she dreads the violence and the passion of the czar; she has no wish to take the place of the wife whom he has divorced. In thinking of the crown, she remembers a poor dishonored woman, in an open postcard, going to

hide her uncrowned head behind a convent's walls. And," he added, looking at me proudly, "mademoiselle loves me."

I bowed my head. "Mademoiselle's will is law," I said at once; "you have my congratulations, monsieur. When a woman prefers you to a czar, you may consider yourself a fortunate man. I honor her for her constancy."

"She is an angel," he replied briefly, as he walked to and fro, — his habit when excited.

"Are you not over-anxious," I remarked, after a little thought. "Has not madame pushed matters, to alarm and intimidate mademoiselle? Mayhap, there is more smoke than fire. I thought that I saw signs of great favor for the Livonian girl."

Without a word he walked to the table, and, thrusting his hand into his breast, brought out a packet, and laid a splendid ring in my hand. I recognized it at once, for it bore the double-headed eagle. Turning it over in my palm, I glanced at him interrogatively.

"Madame brought it to mademoiselle as a present from the czar," he said significantly.

I looked at it again and smiled. "And mademoiselle brought it to you," I remarked. "A dangerous thing to possess, monsieur."

He shrugged his shoulders. "As safe for me as for her," he said.

"Perilous for both," I replied. "Let me borrow it for a while," I added, after a moment, a

sudden thought having suggested a new course of action.

“Keep it,” he said indifferently. “Mademoiselle was anxious to be rid of it, and I promised to lose it for her in the river.”

“It would have been wiser to have kept the promise, monsieur,” I remarked. “The czar’s ring is an evil ornament for a foreigner, and evil indeed for you; so I will even take it into my own custody for the time.”

“I care not,” he rejoined indifferently; “do with it as you will. I am determined only to rescue mademoiselle, if I have to carry her off by force.”

“Is she willing to submit to your guidance?” I asked quietly. “As a rule, the Russian maiden is too strictly trained to contemplate a stolen marriage, especially under such peculiar conditions.”

“That is the trouble,” he replied gloomily; “she is full of doubts and hesitations. She fears for me and for herself. There are a hundred obstacles, and yet is she a brave woman and a true.”

“I doubt it not, monsieur,” I replied gravely, “but you would marry her at the risk of your life. You remember the scene at Mentchikof’s? That was caused by a trivial incident. The czar has violent moods, and it would rouse him to fury to be thwarted in this matter. We are treading on dangerous ground, and it behooves us to be careful.”

"I count the danger of small consequence," he said calmly; and I knew that his absolute fearlessness was as likely to be disastrous as his impetuosity.

"The risk must, however, be considered on mademoiselle's behalf," I warned him; and he acquiesced.

I looked again at the ring, and then, wrapping it carefully, put it in my pocket, for I had a purpose in regard to it. The czar was liberal with his tokens, it seemed.

"I marvel what he has done with his portrait, framed in diamonds, which he took away from Anna Mons," I said to myself, and then laughed aloud, although M. de Lambert did not understand the drift of my thoughts, and was piqued at my boisterous merriment. But I could not forbear; it was too absurd. Would mademoiselle fall heir to the picture that had belonged to Anna Mons—and also to Eudoxia's crown? How happy is the woman whose destiny depends upon the caprice of a tyrant!

An hour later, I summoned Pierrot, and, covering my figure with a dark cloak, made my way on foot to the palace of Mentchikof. The night was dark, for the young moon gave no light and there was a cold wind blowing that cut my face, and Pierrot and I both walked with our heads bent to avoid it. Entering the courtyard, I passed around to the side of the house, where a short flight of

stone steps built in the wall led to a private door where only a few favored guests were admitted. A porter answered my summons and held up his light to examine us, while yawning prodigiously, as if he had been asleep at his post. I sent a message desiring to see Mademoiselle Shavronsky. He left me waiting in an ante-room, and was some time absent, returning at last to conduct me through a long corridor into a suite of apartments that I had never seen. I expected to be received by the family or by Madame Golovin, at least, but was surprised to be ushered into a large room where I found only Catherine herself and a young Russian attendant, who sat in a corner over her embroidery, never once raising her eyes from her work. When I entered, Catherine was half reclining on an ottoman that was covered with a rug of sable, but at my appearance she rose, and greeted me with a manner at once frank and dignified. In spite of her short stature, there was majesty in her bearing, and she had never looked more handsome, although her attire was simple, and she wore no jewel, not even in her hair, which was rolled back from her brow after the fashion affected by the ladies of the French court. This Livonian peasant girl was, after all, a singular character; she had the intrepid courage and the unflinching purpose of a man, together with the charm of a woman.

She was the first to speak. "This is, indeed,

an honor, M. le Maréchal," she said pleasantly, "and if I mistake not, you have tidings for me."

I looked at her and smiled. If it pleased her to be direct, why should I not humor her?

"Mademoiselle," I said, "I am a seeker after information. Mentchikof stands so near the person of his imperial Majesty that I felt that in this household I should learn the truth. I have heard that the czar is soon to wed again."

She started violently, the color leaving her face.

"Your authority, sir?" she exclaimed sharply.

Watching her, I drew the ring out and laid it on my palm. She took a step nearer, and stood looking at the bauble, and I saw her breath come quickly and her eyes dilate. We were both silent; after a moment she looked up into my face.

"Whence came it?" she asked in a low voice.

I shrugged my shoulders and laughed.

"Mademoiselle, you press me too closely with questions," I said quietly, "but you know the ring?"

She put out her hand to take it, but I evaded her.

"Give it to me, M. le Maréchal," she said petulantly; "lend it to me, if only for a day."

"No, no, mademoiselle," I said lightly. "It was only lent to me. I cannot take the risk."

She looked at me like a wilful child, but I saw the tigress gleaming in her eyes.

"I beg it of you, monsieur," she said passionately, "I — who never sue for favors. I pray you give me this ring for a day, for an hour."

"Not for a moment, mademoiselle," I replied, returning it to my breast. "I have been your friend to-night, but I cannot give you this. I must remember the person who gave it to me."

"She cannot value it," Catherine exclaimed.

I looked at her calmly. "He, mademoiselle," I said quietly; "you confound the sex."

She gazed at me a moment in amazement, and then a sudden intelligence illumined her eyes. She knew that Mademoiselle Zotof had given it to M. de Lambert.

"Tell him," she said with emphasis, "to be loyal in his devotion, and happiness will crown it."

"Mademoiselle," I responded gallantly, "I know of no one who deserves it more than you, and I count myself fortunate to be your friend."

She gave me a peculiar glance, and stood trying to devise some way to obtain her wish.

"Let me look at the ring once more, then," she coaxed, changing from angry demands to a pretty persuasion that did not suit her passionate face so well.

I let her look at the ring, and then had much ado to keep it from her covetous fingers. She

was eager enough to snatch it if I was but an instant off my guard, and she began, too, to be piqued at my obstinacy, so that I saw that I was in a delicate place and half regretted my manoeuvre. Putting her off and arguing with her, I managed to evade her; but I found it expedient to withdraw as speedily as possible, foreseeing only endless contention, for she had the kind of persistence that achieves success.

I was glad enough to be in the open air again, and quickened my pace as I crossed the court. I had warned Catherine, and I did not doubt her activity. After all, she was much better suited to the czar's temper than a woman like Najine Zotof. When mademoiselle would not understand him, and would shrink from his violent moods, this Livonian girl would be full of sympathy for his ambitions, and unrevolted by the coarser aspect of his nature. I could see that she had a feline temperament, full of passion and intrigue, and that she was not scrupulous as to the means by which she could further her ends. My mind was so full of these thoughts that I almost stumbled upon a man at the gate of the court. As I apologized, he recognized me.

"A word with you, monsieur," he said, in bad French.

I was, at first, perplexed; then something in his figure suggested a memory, and I knew him. It was Yury Apraxin.

"I am at your service, monsieur," I said, not a little surprised.

"By your leave, then," he replied, "I will walk with you to the end of the street."

"As you will, M. Apraxin," I said.

He turned and accompanied me along the narrow way. He was a stranger, and I was curious to know what he wanted from me. For a few moments he was silent, and we could hear Pierrot's even tread close behind us, which made me smile, for I knew that he was on the watch.

"M. de Brousson," Apraxin said at last, "I am a relative of Mademoiselle Zotof, and, as such, I desire to warn you to restrain your friend M. de Lambert from persecuting her."

"Persecuting mademoiselle!" I exclaimed with unfeigned astonishment.

"Those were my words, sir," he replied haughtily. "I pray you tell M. de Lambert that he cannot dog mademoiselle's footsteps to and from church unobserved, and that if the Councillor Zotof does not interfere, he will have to account to me."

"You take a high tone, monsieur," I said tauntingly, for the boy's insolence annoyed me, "but you forget that a French gentleman is not likely to submit to the dictation of a sulky lad."

"Your gray hairs should be respected, M. de Brousson," he said in a choked voice, for he was

furious, "but it is unnecessary to insult me. I have a right to protect my *fiancée*, and I will. No French coxcomb shall pursue her here against her guardian's wishes."

"And yours, monsieur," I added dryly. "You are a young man, M. Apraxin; be advised, and meddle not too much with one of the most expert swordsmen that I know."

We had reached the turning of the street and he stopped. I knew, even in the darkness, that he could ill suppress his rage.

"You think me a coward, sir," he cried fiercely, "because I did not strike back at the czar, but you mistake me. That insult burnt through my face to my soul, and I will not endure such from a lesser man. 'An expert swordsman,' " he added with an oath. "I care as little for his sword as I do for a straw. I have given him a fair warning. Najine is betrothed to me, and I will brook no interference with my affairs."

"Rumor supplies another destiny for mademoiselle," I said, unable to suppress a desire to lash the ill-tempered fool to fury.

"Rumor lies!" he answered with fierce emphasis. "She is to be my wife, and no one else shall wed her."

"I trust that mademoiselle is of your mind," I replied, turning away with feigned indifference, "otherwise I fear she will think you but a sullen bridegroom. I wish you good-night, monsieur; a

good rest will clear your brain of many of these hallucinations. Take a sleeping potion and seek your couch."

I heard him muttering some passionate reply, but passed on unheeding, although secretly disturbed, for here was a new difficulty for Guillaume de Lambert. An ill-tempered boy spying upon him was enough evil to make his interviews with mademoiselle a source of anxiety to me. Moreover, I foresaw that they would speedily cease, since it was improbable that Apraxin would fail to use the simplest means to end them, by informing her uncle; and, once mademoiselle was confined to the house, communication would be difficult in the extreme. Yet I smiled a little over the situation; what a trio of lovers had mademoiselle! A czar, a French soldier, and a violent-tempered boy, whose face had been slapped by his imperial rival. What would be next?

And, on the other hand, the women. Catherine rose before my mental vision, a distinct and remarkable figure; her fate could be no common one; natures cast in that mould must achieve the highest or fall to the lowest. By contrast, I saw mademoiselle, delicately formed, but stately, high-spirited, charming, with that fine quality of soul that spurns the mire, that is free from vulgar ambition, noble, generous, and before all tenderly affectionate, not formed of the stuff that makes an empress, and yet imperial enough, in her young

beauty and purity, to adorn the most brilliant court in Europe. What a strange tangle in the skein of destiny had brought these heterogeneous characters together, and caught them in the meshes of the glittering net of court intrigue? Even so the fisher, when he casts his net into the sea, draws forth all manner of fish.

CHAPTER IX.

MADemoiselle's BRACELET.

WHEN I warned M. de Lambert of Apraxin's jealousy, he treated it with the scorn that I had anticipated. To him the disappointed lover seemed but a sulky boy, and he attached no importance to his threats until he found that mademoiselle came no more to the cathedral. It was evident that the ill-tempered youth had become a tale-bearer; failing to execute his threat in any other way, he separated mademoiselle from her lover by the interposition of her uncle's authority. M. Guillaume fretted and fumed to no purpose; if he had met Apraxin he would undoubtedly have given him a thrashing, but the young fellow had cleverness enough to evade him, and time passed with no news from mademoiselle. The day arrived for the semi-annual blessing of the river Moskva before this silence was broken.

The blessing of the river was a ceremony as old and as sacred in the eyes of the Moscovite as the holy white city of Moscow itself. Four years before, Peter had made one of those changes which shocked the conservative Russian. It had been the custom to begin the year on the 1st of

September, dating from the beginning of the world, for the Russians believed that the earth was created in the autumn with its perfected fruits. By an imperial decree, his Majesty ordered the year to begin on the 1st of January, dating from the birth of our Blessed Lord, as all the nations of Europe were accustomed to date it. This was in 1700, and his people received the change with as little favor as they received the czar's other innovations. The custom of blessing the river fell upon the Feast of Epiphany, and was a solemn event. The patriarch and all the clergy of Moscow were present with the czar and the court officials, foreign ministers and residents; rich and great, poor and humble, assembled on the banks of the river to witness the benediction.

The day was fair; the sun shone on the white walls and buildings of the Kremlin and on domes of gold and green and azure, and on a myriad cupolas, all studded with stars and surmounted by crosses, and everywhere touched by the white hand of the snow; and circling around them, soaring high overhead, flew the ravens of the Kremlin, their croaking voices making a strange monotone through all the ceremonies, their black forms now sweeping around some tower, now floating, with suspended wings, above some great cathedral. The city was full of activity, its narrow streets thronged with people, crowding toward the one spot, until every avenue was choked with

the masses. M. de Lambert and I were fortunately placed, and could look down upon the scene. It was an orderly assembly, for the Russian has a deep reverence for holy things, and there was no confusion even where the populace pressed close upon the soldiers. The river was frozen, and the troops were drawn up upon its bosom, phalanx after phalanx, war-worn veterans and raw conscripts, Russian and Cossack, presenting a curious spectacle to the eyes of the foreigners. I marked the great improvement in organization, in bearing, in clothing. Here was an army where there had been none, and it was due to the untiring energy and ambition of one man. The sun flashed on polished arms, on coats-of-mail, on helmets, and on the blades of Damascus, as the troopers waited there upon the ice, a great, compact, unwavering mass of men; and in their midst, mounted on his favorite horse, Lisette, was the czar, more like an image than a man, his great stature and huge limbs seeming to make other men diminutive. The center of all the pomp and panoply of war, surrounded by his glittering staff, he wore the simple uniform of a Colonel of the Preobrazhensky regiment, his personal guards, and there was no order, only the Greek cross on his breast. The Preobrazhensky regiment was the outgrowth of those boy soldiers that the common people had called the *Potieshnie Koniukhi*, "troops for sport," and Peter had risen

from the rank of bombardier sergeant, having enlisted in that capacity under the name of Peter Alexéief. It was his peculiarity to court a simplicity that was sometimes an offence to the pride of the Russians accustomed to look upon the person of the czar as sacred. That day, the expression of his face was stern and even sad. He was subject to seasons of melancholy, and for the time was under the shadow of some depression. A man who stands above his fellows, not only by virtue of his rank but by a certain greatness of soul, is alienated from their sympathy, — isolated in his elevation. Peter was a reformer, and since the world began reformers have been more or less hated by their contemporaries. I think the czar felt peculiarly alone, and there was, too, some shadow on his soul that no human sympathy could reach. He sat there on his splendid horse, a solitary figure amidst those tens of thousands, a soldier, a statesman, an emperor, and alone in the presence of his people. Every eye in that vast assembly was upon him, but he was as unconscious as a statue. Near him was the patriarch, his pontificals blazing with gold and silver and jewels, his miter surmounted by a jewelled cross, — an imposing figure surrounded by his priests in their Byzantine robes, their copes of silver and gold, and the acolytes in vestments of nacarated velvet and gold. They went down into the little open chapel that had been erected over the square cut through the ice

to the dark water below ; the slender pillars of the chapel supported a dome in which was suspended the dove with its golden rays, and about it stood the silent, statuelike guard of soldiers, and in the biting cold every head was bare. In the silence that falls upon a multitude when hearts are stirred, the priests chanted the solemn service, and at the final moment the cannon boomed heavily upon the air, then again came the low, even chant of the priests. The patriarch's voice, though clear and loud, did not reach the outskirts of the vast assembly, and many there could only follow the ceremony by his gestures ; but the responsive tones of the people rose in low deep notes, one mighty wave of sound, which was echoed from the battlements of the Kremlin and rolled away toward those vast plains that, surrounding the city, extend as far as the eye can reach to be lost in the horizon. Yet, impressive as was the ceremony, splendid as was the figure of the patriarch, all were alike insignificant beside that silent man upon his horse ; the ruler of the Russias held the throng fascinated by that peculiar power that made Peter always the central figure ; something about his individuality that was more than the mere habit of command and was born with him, constituting one of those influences which exalted his personality in the estimation of his people, in spite of a hundred faults and weaknesses that would have ruined a lesser man.

The scene left an enduring impress upon my mind; the clear atmosphere, the pale blue sky, the white Kremlin, the frozen river, and the brilliant assemblage, blazing with gold and jewels, against the background of the populace in their dark and often ragged clothing, brightened here and there with a touch of scarlet or of blue.

After the ceremony was concluded, there was a procession to the churches, and a banquet at the Kremlin, at which the czar entertained all the ambassadors and the nobility, — one of those tedious and interminable feasts which were so burdensome with their ceremonial and their inevitable termination in carousal, for the Russians and the Germans, of whom there were many, were heavy drinkers. I noted a significant indication of the drift of intrigue in the presence of the Councillor Zotof in the personal circle of the czar, and saw that Mentchikof was as uneasy and watchful as his opponent was complaisant. Zotof was one of those blatant fools who congratulate themselves too soon on an apparent victory, and was not keen enough to measure the wit and the resources of the favorite. The czar's gloomy mood cast a shadow upon the fête, and I observed that he did not respond at all to M. de Lambert's obeisance, — another sign of the times. King Augustus' private envoy had departed, and I could not avoid some speculation about the Swedish spy. I fancied that he had either followed the Pole or

was still loitering about the court in quest of valuable information. We had so happily escaped all responsibility in regard to him that I congratulated myself on my good fortune in finding a solution of the difficulty.

In the course of the day Alexander Mentchikof found an opportunity to speak to me privately.

"M. le Vicomte," he said, "I thank you for your visit to my house. Mademoiselle Catherine told me all, and I shall not forget your friendship. Tell M. de Lambert to be of good cheer; the game is not yet lost, and it will be many a day before I yield to that old fool across the way."

He referred to Zotof, who was standing opposite, talking to a group of his friends, and the picture of self-satisfaction.

"Mademoiselle Shavronsky is well?" I inquired courteously, anxious to avoid a too personal conversation.

The favorite smiled, and gave me a keen glance. "Mademoiselle is under a cloud at present," he said significantly, "but there must be a change ere long, unless we surrender at discretion, and you know how probable that is."

"I cannot imagine it, monsieur," I replied dryly, "and you have my good wishes."

"I thank you," he said with dignity, as he turned to rejoin the czar.

Peter had been observing us, and it was sometimes unpleasant to find his keen eye upon you;

it must have been peculiarly uncomfortable for Mentchikof at a time when he was straining every nerve to thwart his master's fancy for Mademoiselle Zotof.

It was near midnight when M. de Lambert and I left the Kremlin together. We were not in a talkative mood, and traversed the streets in silence, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Mine were anxious, and I fancied that his were gloomy, since there had been little to reassure him at court to-day. We had reached the door of our lodgings when a man stepped out of the shadow of the house and, approaching M. de Lambert, addressed him in Russ.

"A word with you, master," he said.

My foot was already on the doorstep, but I stopped, feeling some alarm for my companion.

"You may speak here," M. de Lambert said sharply.

The fellow hesitated. "I was directed to deliver my message to you alone," he replied, drawing a small packet from under his cloak.

"I am alone," M. Guillaume said.

"My mistress directed me to place this in your hands," the man explained, giving him the packet and turning away.

"Hold!" exclaimed M. de Lambert, excitedly; "there is some answer?"

"None," the messenger replied, "and I dare not linger. I have waited too long already."

He turned as he spoke and walked rapidly away, his figure soon disappearing in the darkness. M. de Lambert, following me into the house, went directly to a table in the hall where Pierrot had left the tapers burning. The packet was a small one, tied with a gold cord. In a moment M. de Lambert had it open, disclosing a band of gold with a single large emerald on the clasp, a bracelet that I had myself seen on the arm of Mademoiselle Zotof; wrapped about it was a strip of paper which her lover unfolded eagerly. I confess that I was nearly as curious as he, and watched his face as he read it.

"She has been closely guarded," he said after a moment, "but she can be at the bridge tomorrow at dusk."

"At the bridge at dusk," I repeated; "this is a strange appointment, monsieur. If she has been closely guarded, it is marvellous that she can evade them at such an hour and that she should select such a spot. Are you sure that it is her writing?"

He was half indignant at my criticism.

"It is not only her writing, monsieur," he replied, "but this is her bracelet."

"I recognize the token," I said, "but older blood is cautious, and I like neither the place nor the hour of the appointment. However, you can take both Pierrot and Touchet with you, which will be a greater protection for mademoiselle."

"That cannot be," he answered quickly, "since she especially requests me to come unattended, for some reason of her own."

For the moment I was silent. Not only did mademoiselle's request surprise me, but it seemed unnatural and without justification. She knew that her lover was encompassed by a net of intrigue, and it was more like a woman to surround him with precaution than to desire him to risk his person unprotected in a lonely spot at nightfall, and I could not suppose that she intended to bring a sufficient guard, for in the very act of evading the authority of her guardian she could scarcely command a numerous escort. The whole business seemed to me suspicious, but I saw that he was carried away by the one thought of seeing mademoiselle once more.

"At least, monsieur," I said, "you will permit me to accompany you as a friend, if I stand at a distance and do not offend against mademoiselle's rules."

He smiled a little at my words.

"I cannot even permit that," he replied. "I must obey not only in the letter but the spirit."

"A faithful lover," I said, smiling also; "I wish I shared your confidence in the authenticity of the document. At least, monsieur, go armed and be watchful. There are many here who would rejoice at your undoing; the fact that we have not lately seen a spy at your heels does not reassure

me. Prince Dolgoruky saw that we were over-watchful, and it may be that he would disarm our suspicion, if he could. I know the ways of Moscow, and I warn you to beware upon what ground you tread."

He was standing on the opposite side of the table, holding mademoiselle's bracelet in his fingers, and he looked at me and smiled.

"In the old days, monsieur," he said, "were you as cautious? If Madame de Brousson had sent for you, would you have waited for an escort?"

I laughed and shook my head.

"Young blood," I said, "young blood! I do not criticise you, monsieur, I only suggest caution. I cannot say that I exercised it. Fortunately for me, I got off with my life. The dangers which surround you are less violent, but far more subtle. Be warned, M. de Lambert, and look well to sword and pistol before you keep the tryst."

CHAPTER X.

THE TRYST.

MADemoiselle CATHERINE had fallen into a dangerous habit of sending me little billets, written at her dictation by Madame Golovin. Subtle enough in many ways, the Livonian had still a woman's excitable temperament, and was without patience to watch the results. In these missives she and Madame Golovin veiled their meaning but thinly, and it was not difficult to identify the czar, Najine, and Prince Dolgoruky. Since Peter's gift of a ring to mademoiselle, Catherine had been little noticed, and those who thought they saw in her a possible successor to Anna Mons began to doubt her influence, but I was not one of these. She actually loved the czar, and her nature was one that would be peculiarly adapted to his, and, knowing that she was aiming at the throne, I believed that nothing stood between her and her desire but Mademoiselle Zotof. Mademoiselle, however, had a tremendous advantage over her rival; Catherine was of humble origin, and her passions and ambitions were alike involved; on the other hand, Najine was noble

and entirely indifferent to her imperial lover; she would be betrayed into no indiscretion, and her birth, her beauty, and her friends would all demand the crown for her. It would be impolitic—almost impossible—for his imperial Majesty to put a slight upon the faction that supported her, and mademoiselle's personal repugnance to the marriage only piqued the pride of a suitor who had never before been rejected. Catherine was quick to see all the disadvantages of her own position and the advantages of her rival's, and was therefore urgent in her desire to forward M. de Lambert's fortunes. Immediately after Najine's message reached him, Mademoiselle Shavronsky sent me a note warning me that the czar's personal attendants had been commanded to watch M. Guillaume. I read the missive twice over to be certain that I understood it, although not surprised that such instruction had been given. The czar's manner to the young Frenchman indicated extreme displeasure, but I was astonished that the order had been issued so carelessly as to reach the ears of Mentchikof. Either Peter was willing that his favorite should see that he preferred mademoiselle, or else Mentchikof had so environed him with spies that nothing was concealed and he could manipulate every thread in the skein. It seemed almost useless to tell M. de Lambert; he was in a heedless mood, bent only on seeing mademoiselle and with all a

brave man's indifference to peril. In fact, I think the danger of the situation had its own peculiar charms for him, and he counted every risk for Najine's sake a source of comfort and rejoicing. To Pierrot I could speak with more confidence, and instructed him to be doubly cautious, especially as we could place less trust in Touchet's sagacity.

"Since M. de Lambert is sure to be watched," I concluded, "you and Touchet must exercise a peculiar vigilance and endeavor to evade the spies."

"Prince Dolgoruky's equerry has been about here for two days, M. le Maréchal," Pierrot replied calmly; "after M. de Lambert threw him down at the Kremlin he kept away for a while, but now he has returned to his old vocation, and there is also another fellow with him, who, I think, wears the czar's livery under his cloak."

"That is likely enough," I said, thinking of Catherine's warning; "watch both of them, but especially Tikhon; he has a personal grudge against M. de Lambert, and is therefore the more dangerous. It will go ill with us, Pierrot, if we cannot outwit these Russians; we did it in our young days, and if we fail now it will be because old age is creeping on."

A smile illumined Pierrot's stolid face. "Ah, M. le Vicomte," he said, "we should never have returned to Moscow, for it is our fate here to be

constantly mixed up with love and desperate intrigue. I am getting old and stiff, monsieur, and cannot defeat these rascals so easily as I did twenty years ago."

"Do not confess your age or your stiff joints, Pierrot," I said, laughing; "it is too soon to be laid upon the shelf by the wild young gallants of to-day. Moreover, they need our counsel."

"The more they need it, the less likely they are to take it, monsieur," he said dryly. "Touchet is a featherhead, and M. de Lambert is over-rash, although a noble and gallant gentleman. He reminds me of you, M. le Maréchal, in your youth; the same brave, loyal, and devoted soldier. I think of the old days often, and of madame when she was Mademoiselle Ramodanofsky."

"We are a couple of old fools, Pierrot," I replied, "for I think of it too, and perhaps that is why I have so much forbearance for M. Guillaume."

Pierrot shook his head and smiled. "Ah, monsieur," he said, "you were a gallant young gentleman too; and Mademoiselle Zénaïde—how well I remember her as she looked when we brought you up the stairs unconscious, after you had saved her life and the others! Those were brave days, M. le Vicomte; you had the swiftest and the strongest sword-thrust that it has been my good fortune to see; you—"

"Hush, man!" I interrupted, "you make me an old fogey. My hand has not yet lost its cunning. You talk of me as an old fellow without a good right arm."

"The saints forbid!" Pierrot said devoutly; "but you are now a marshal of France and you were then a young cavalier. It is the bâton that is for you now, rather than the sword and the dagger."

"True enough, Pierrot," I assented with a sigh; "I must remember my dignity and my years, and let the young have the adventures. Soon it will be my son who has his father's old tricks with the rapier, and I shall be but a gouty old gentleman who was once marshal of France, but is now a fossil too stiff for service in the field and laid upon the shelf. Well, well, Pierrot, an old sword and an old servant, I hope, will be left me."

There were tears in the honest fellow's eyes. "My father died in the service of your house, M. le Vicomte," he said proudly, "and I will die in yours."

At a later hour my wife came to me with a troubled face.

"M. de Lambert is determined to keep his appointment," she said, "and to go unattended; but it seems to me that Pierrot ought to follow him without his knowledge."

"I thought of that," I replied, "but it looked

unfair to follow him against his wishes, — a betrayal of his confidence.”

Zénaïde shrugged her shoulders. “I would not draw such distinctions,” she said, with a woman’s fine disdain of a man’s scruples; “his life is the first object. You know, Philippe, I do not believe that Najine ever sent that message; it is unnatural and unwomanly, but M. de Lambert will not listen to me. I believe I admire him the more for his rash devotion; still I would protect him, whether he wished it or not.”

I reflected, for her opinion and mine coincided, and I felt most reluctant to allow the young man to expose himself to unnecessary risk. So it was that I called Pierrot, who had withdrawn, and instructed him to follow M. de Lambert when he departed at dusk to keep the tryst.

An appointment with the czar took me to the Kremlin two hours before the important moment. At this time the Swedes were occupying the provinces of Kalisz and Posen, in Poland, and the Polish Primate, Cardinal Radziejowski, had summoned a Diet at Warsaw, ostensibly that the Republic of Poland might make a separate peace with Charles XII., but with the real purpose of deposing Augustus of Saxony. The confederation of Schrod, or Great Poland, was under the protection of the King of Sweden, who was proposing Prince Jacob Sobieski to succeed Augustus. It was an intrigue to control Poland and

dethrone her king, looked upon with little favor by the powers. Peter was continually endeavoring to feel the pulse of France; to ascertain how far the king my master would interfere between him and Charles XII., and whether the partition of Poland or the downfall of Augustus would be regarded with indifference by the French. My moves were even more cautious than his; sent to watch the disposition of Russia toward the Grand Alliance, and to ascertain how far the czar would go in upholding Augustus in Saxony, I played the game of cross purposes day by day, though I often saw the hot-tempered czar fretted by my complaisance and by the apparent indifference of France. While I never admitted that I was an envoy of my government, Peter allowed me to see that he divined my mission; but through all the manœuvring he did not forget to probe me about M. de Lambert and mademoiselle. He was quite aware that she preferred her French lover, and it must have been a keen annoyance to his haughty nature. His personal feeling toward me was cordial; he was easy to approach, his large nature scorning the trivial etiquette of courts, and, in spite of his violent temper and mad outbursts, there were many qualities that were kingly and commanded my regard. That he regretted his occasional paroxysms of fury, I did not doubt. It was not even difficult to understand his treatment of the Czarina Eudoxia. She

belonged to the old régime; an ignorant woman, narrow, bigoted, and jealous, clashing with the temperament of her husband at every point, unable to comprehend his intellect, hating his reforms, without sympathy for his ambitions; tried, no doubt, beyond endurance by the czar's intrigue with Anna Mons, but, in any case, totally unfit to hold his esteem. Unhappily, it was said that the Czarevitch Alexis, then a lad of thirteen, was like his mother in disposition and in tastes; already the wiseacres at court looked forward to the day when there would be a breach between father and son. It was this probability and the delicate constitution of Alexis which made Peter's possible marriage an event of keen interest to the opposing parties and of vital importance to Mentchikof, who was determined to keep his place beside the czar.

When I left the Kremlin and turned my steps toward my lodgings, my mind was still full of these matters. France and the Grand Alliance, Russia and Charles XII. filled my thoughts, and for the time I had forgotten M. de Lambert and his love affair. Although my path took me in the direction of the bridge, I walked toward it still too absorbed to remember the tryst. It was now quite dark, and a mist hung over the frozen river; the ground was white with snow and it was beginning to sleet. It seemed unusually still, so that I heard the scream of a raven disturbed in

his rest. Suddenly there was a cry and a pistol-shot. Remembering M. de Lambert, I dashed down the slope to the bridge. As I did so, I ran against a man who was rushing up the bank, and, obeying an instinct, I caught him in my arms, pinioning his; but the ground was slippery and he threw himself on me, pushing me sideways on the slope until I lost my footing and went down on one knee. Having me at a disadvantage, he wrenched himself free, and, dealing a blow that stretched me on the ice, dashed off in the darkness just as another man came up from the bridge, and, seeing me upon my back, fell on me with a cry of fury.

“You villain!” he exclaimed, “I have you now!”

It was Pierrot.

“Help me up, you knave!” I said, thrusting his hands from my throat; “you will choke me here in the snow.”

He uttered an ejaculation and stood transfixed with amazement.

“I beg your pardon a thousand times, M. le Maréchal,” he said, after a moment, recovering sufficiently to help me to my feet; “but where is the other?”

“Gone while you were belaboring me,” I replied dryly. “What has happened?”

“M. de Lambert is wounded,” he said, “I know not how badly. It was, as you supposed, a trap; mademoiselle was not here.”

I did not wait to hear more, being anxious for my friend. "Where is he?" I exclaimed.

Pierrot turned, and conducted me across the bridge to the farther side. There in the snow were two dark figures.

"Who is with him?" I asked quickly.

"I know not," my equerry replied; "but it is the stranger who saved his life."

As we approached, I saw that M. de Lambert was sitting up, supported by the other.

"How is it with you, Guillaume?" I inquired, bending over him.

"I have a cut," he said quietly, "but it is not serious; with your help, I will go back to our quarters."

I was straining my eyes in the dark to see the face of his companion; when he spoke, I recognized his voice.

"If he will lean on my arm, he can rise," he said.

It was the Swedish spy. With his help, M. de Lambert rose and stood leaning his hand on the other's shoulder. After a moment he recovered sufficiently to take my arm and walk slowly in the direction of our lodgings. The Swede followed us a few steps; then, seeing that the wounded man could walk alone, turned to leave us, but I checked him.

"Not so fast, friend," I said; "my man tells me that you saved M. de Lambert's life. You cannot escape our gratitude."

M. de Lambert held out his hand. "You must return with us," he said.

"Nay, your Excellencies," the Swede replied with evident embarrassment, "I should be an unwelcome visitor."

"Not so," I responded quietly, "and you alone can fully explain this matter."

After some hesitation he yielded, and we moved on slowly on account of M. de Lambert, while Pierrot went for a surgeon. We had not a great distance to walk; and when we reached our quarters, Touchet opened the door and we helped the wounded man to his room. My wife, hearing us enter, came to our aid, and we had M. de Lambert comfortably lying on his couch when the surgeon arrived, — a German whom I knew, for I would not trust him in Russian hands. An examination showed a stab in the side, which had caused some loss of blood, but had not touched any vital spot. Reassured as to his safety, I was at leisure to return to the outer room, where I found Pierrot and the Swede talking together. Sitting down by the table, I signed to them to advance.

"Now," I said, "tell me, if you can, exactly what occurred at the bridge."

Pierrot pointed to the Swede. "He can tell you more than I," he said; "obeying your instructions, I followed M. de Lambert at a distance and saw him go down to the bridge. A moment

later, I heard the noise of a struggle, and running forward reached the bridge as another man sprang upon it, and, turning aside the assassin's pistol, saved M. de Lambert's life. I had almost caught the villain, but he wrenched himself away from me and fled up the bank. You know the rest, monsieur."

"And now your story, Lenk," I said, turning to the spy.

"I was coming along by the river, your Excellency," he replied quietly, "and saw a man, muffled in his cloak, loitering by the bridge in a manner that arrested my attention. Then seeing who it was, I suspected a greater plot than even this."

"Who was it?" I asked sharply.

The Swede looked at me an instant before he answered. "It was Yury Apraxin," he said.

"Ah!" I exclaimed softly, knowing at once that he had supposed that the young man was waiting to avenge the czar's insult, aware of Peter's careless habit of going unattended.

"So suspicious were his movements," the spy continued, "that I too loitered about in the shelter of the wall and watched. After a long while M. de Lambert appeared, and walked rapidly towards the bridge. Then I observed that Apraxin had let his mantle fall until he looked almost a woman in the dusk, and it flashed upon me that it was a trick. I ran to the bridge, reach-

ing it just as he stabbed your friend. I caught the fellow's arm, and he drew his pistol with his left hand. I struck his wrist, and the weapon went off. Pierrot came, and the assassin escaped in the struggle and confusion. That is all, your Excellency."

"It is to your swift action, then, that we owe M. de Lambert's life," I said, looking at him attentively. "What motive prompted you to risk your own for his?"

The Swede's fair-skinned face flushed, and he returned my look with a flash of feeling in his light eyes.

"I owed him a life," he replied stolidly, "and I do not forget my debts."

Remembering M. de Lambert's relief and mine to be rid of him on that night, I smiled.

"You are an honest fellow; accept our thanks," I said, drawing out my purse.

He started back with an expression of resentment.

"Not that, your Excellency," he said proudly; "my life was worth more to me than French gold. I did but discharge my just debts. Keep your money for those who seek it; I am a free-born Swede and have saved a life. That requires no thanks."

I looked at him with growing interest. This was no common spy, or if the lower classes were of such noble stuff, how worthy must be the higher

orders! King Charles was fortunate. I rose and held out my hand.

“You must accept, at least, my thanks,” I said.

As I spoke, I saw my wife coming forward. She had entered the room unobserved, and overheard the conversation. Her cheeks were flushed, and her blue eyes kindled with a look they had when she was deeply stirred. She came across to the Swede, and drew a ring from her finger.

“Accept this, my friend,” she said in her gracious way, “for your sweetheart, as a gift of recognition for a gallant service to a Frenchman.”

The Swede, looking at her fine and animated face, took the ring and made her a profound obeisance.

“Madame,” he said in a low voice, “I esteem it an honor to accept your gift. In a manner I have regained my reputation. His Excellency your husband and his friend thought me a cowardly spy because I dreaded to die a shameful death; but I do not fear to die—as a brave man should.”

Zénaïde gave me a glance in which were mingled triumph and reproach.

“You have not only won our respect,” she replied, “but you have earned our gratitude, for we both love M. de Lambert. We do not forget such a service.”

“Madame, you are good,” the Swede said

quietly; "and I will wear your ring always, to remind me of the nobler purposes of life."

Kneeling down, he kissed the hem of her robe, and then, rising, left the house without another word.

"And you thought him a coward!" exclaimed Zénaïde, looking at me with a smile.

"He is not only a brave man, but a courtier, it seems, Madame de Brousson," I replied dryly.

She laughed, looking down at her robe and flushing like a girl.

CHAPTER XI.

AN INTERCEPTED LETTER.

M. DE LAMBERT'S wound, though not dangerous, was troublesome, and kept him confined to his room for some time; a fretful patient he was, trying my wife's forbearance, although she was in full sympathy with his anxieties. There were no definite developments, but it was manifest that Catherine Shavronsky was at this time more or less neglected, while favors were showered upon the Zotofs, and mademoiselle's name was on every lip. In the interval she appeared once at court, and was surrounded by a bevy of courtiers, and it occurred to me that perhaps her silence toward her lover was caused by a change of heart, that the splendors of a throne had dazzled her; but Zénaïde refused to believe it. She had an unshaken confidence in Najine's loyalty, and fully appreciated the difficulties which beset the young girl. We endeavored to send her a message explaining M. de Lambert's condition, but neither Zénaïde nor I believed that it ever reached her. Meanwhile Apraxin had disappeared. It would have been impossible to obtain any satis-

faction in regard to the young villain, and I was more or less relieved at his departure. There was no doubt that his attack on M. Guillaume had been actuated entirely by jealousy, and that there was no deeper motive behind it, which diminished the chances of obtaining any redress.

Madame de Brousson's woman, Jeanne, had made several attempts to penetrate the seclusion of the Zotof mansion without success, but at last she was more fortunate, and it was while M. de Lambert was still suffering from his wound that she returned one forenoon with important tidings. Mademoiselle herself had been dangerously ill, and there were whispers of suspicious circumstances attending her indisposition. She had accompanied Madame Zotof to a fête at the palace, returning with the usual gifts of sweetmeats; madame ate hers without ill effects, but mademoiselle had no sooner tasted the comfit than she was seized with a sudden and alarming illness, and madame summoned a physician in hot haste. At first he almost despaired of saving Najine's life, but after a while the worst symptoms passed off, and she recovered consciousness. The physician, after examining the fragment remaining, declared that the comfit had been poisoned. Mademoiselle was now recovering, Jeanne reported, and there was a close surveillance exercised, no food reaching her room untasted. The retainers and serfs at the Zotof mansion were in a state

of profound excitement, and it was whispered that the Czarevna Natalia, Peter's sister, was endeavoring to poison Najine. This, of course, was the idle gossip of the servants, and not worth a thought; Natalia Alexeievna had too many noble qualities to stoop to the assassin's weapons. Nor could the princess have any real choice between mademoiselle and the Livonian, unless, indeed, she thought that an intrigue with Catherine would end as it had ended with Anna Mons, while, on the other hand, mademoiselle would undoubtedly ascend the throne if Zotof's intrigues were successful. In any case, the czarevna could have little interest in the matter; it was true that she was the aunt of the czarevitch, but it was probable that she shared her brother's dislike of Eudoxia, and was therefore without personal feeling toward the woman who was likely to supplant her. It was not difficult to imagine that there were many at court who were jealous of Najine. I had feared from the first some overt act after Mentchikof's veiled threat to me, that if fair means did not succeed, foul would. If the czar was indeed enamored of mademoiselle, he would not be thwarted, and neither Catherine Shavronsky nor M. de Lambert nor the young fool Apraxin was likely to defeat his settled purpose; and this attempt to remove her at once convinced me that the belief was prevalent that she was the imperial choice. Zénaïde, who was a keen observer, was

deeply concerned, and, being a Russian, she understood the undercurrents. The only hope that I saw lay in the fact that Peter had made no public announcement, which would have been irretrievable. If we could but turn him aside, and prevent such a declaration for Najine, we might yet save the day. We had determined not to inform M. de Lambert of her illness, but such secrets find their way to lovers' ears too easily. I had scarcely known it a day myself when he sent for me to his room. I found him propped upon his pillows, still pale, for he had lost much blood, but with the sparkle of health in his clear brown eyes. He responded to my inquiries with impatience, and, dismissing Touchet, who was in attendance, asked me to be seated opposite to him, where the light fell full upon my face.

“How is mademoiselle?” he asked me sharply, scanning my features with the eye of a hawk; “how ill has she been?”

I smiled in spite of myself. “She is more nearly recovered than you, monsieur,” I said, “and perhaps was never worse than you have been. Some one has told you garbled tales.”

“I hope that you do not deceive me, M. le Maréchal,” he replied distrustfully; “it would be a poor kindness.”

“Happily, I do not need to deceive you,” I replied; “mademoiselle has had some illness from which she is almost recovered. The gossip of the

kitchen accounts it a poisoned comfit, but no breath of this is abroad. It would be treason to whisper it, for the sweetmeats came from the imperial table."

He looked at me thoughtfully. "Can it be that the princess is against her?" he exclaimed.

"Impossible," I replied; "Natalia is too noble. Such treachery does not belong to the Romanoff."

"Some traitor in the kitchen, then," he said gloomily; "and here I lie on my back like a fool while her life is in danger!"

"Take comfort, monsieur," I remarked calmly; "it has been a salutary lesson, and mademoiselle will be watched the more carefully. Too much hangs on her life for it to be exposed. Moreover, it may all have been the veriest accident,—something dropped upon the comfit and falling to mademoiselle by chance. Why work yourself into a fever over this? I have tasted more than one Russian dish that I thought would shortly send me to paradise, yet I live."

He smiled in spite of himself, but I saw that his enforced helplessness was fretting him like a thorn in the flesh, and could understand and sympathize with his impatience, knowing how great would be mine in the like case.

It was after leaving him that I entered Madame de Brousson's closet and found her with a letter in her hands.

"Here is another one of Catherine's billets," she

said scornfully ; “ but this one, I am certain, has been tampered with. Look at the seal — look at the manner in which it is folded ; ” and she handed it to me with a gesture of disdain.

Half amused, I took it and, holding it to the light, was at once convinced that her keen eyes had discovered the truth. There was every indication that the missive had been opened and re-sealed by some one who scarcely cared to take the pains to conceal the work. Zénaïde, seeing my face grow grave, came and stood by me, looking at the paper.

“ It is true,” I remarked ; “ some one has tampered with it.”

“ And who ? ” she said softly.

I shrugged my shoulders. “ You have overreached me there, madame,” I replied ; “ I am no reader of riddles. But let us see what the fair Catherine has to write to me in this careless way. Madame Golovin should be wiser than to be her scribe ; but when will women learn to keep their pens from paper ? ” I unfolded it as I spoke, and together we read a long note from Mademoiselle Shavronsky, full of too plain references, hinting at a dozen ways of securing mademoiselle before the czar should announce his choice or make any open sign in her favor, — a mischievous note to fall into the wrong hands ; referring to Najine’s illness and to M. de Lambert’s wound and calling men by their names. I read it through without

a comment, and then Madame de Brousson and I looked at each other.

"The woman is a fool, and Madame Golovin another," I exclaimed impatiently; "what would she have been in the hands of Madame de Montespan?"

"Ah, well, we cannot look for a Madame de Maintenon every day," Zénaïde replied, shaking her head; "yet she risks not only herself, but all this is dangerous to you. You must put an end to it, Philippe."

"An end to it!" I exclaimed; "you are a woman, and yet fancy that I can control another woman — and one like Catherine Shavronsky. You rave, madame; I am no magician."

"Appeal to Mentchikof," Zénaïde suggested.

"Appeal to the moon!" I replied with impatience. "Catherine cares not for him. Her head is full of fancies, and she must needs put them on paper like a woman!"

"Now you are out of humor, M. le Maréchal," Zénaïde said calmly; "you are never discourteous except when you lose your temper. Then women must bear the blame for all the errors of the world."

I took her hand and kissed it, for I saw the flash in her blue eyes. "If women were all like you, madame," I said gallantly, "the world would be fortunate indeed."

"I thank you, monsieur," she replied, answering

me with my own manner; "the woman does not live who is not more patient than man."

But our little comedy was ended by Pierrot, who appeared suddenly at the door with a perturbed countenance.

"A message from the Kremlin, monsieur," he said in a strange voice.

I glanced at him, surprised. "A message from whom?" I asked.

"It is the czar's equerry," he replied.

Zénaïde had risen and stood with her hand upon my shoulder, and I felt her fingers tighten their hold a trifle.

"Let him come here," I said, and Pierrot departed on his errand.

"What can it be at this hour?" Zénaïde exclaimed, for it was late in the evening.

I could not answer her, for I was myself perplexed. In a moment Pierrot returned and announced the equerry, a young fellow whom I knew by sight.

"You are charged with a message to me?" I said, responding to his salutation.

"His imperial Majesty desires your immediate attendance, M. de Brousson," he replied with an air of importance.

I rose at once. "The hour is late," I said calmly, "but I will be with you in a few moments."

Zénaïde followed me from the room with a startled face. "I do not like this summons," she

said, "or the hour. Is it necessary to obey, Philippe? Can you not evade it?"

I shook my head. "Impossible," I replied; "moreover, I have nothing to fear. The gravest offence would be a refusal to obey. Take comfort, my wife; you are too brave a woman to be anxious over a trifle."

In spite of my reassuring words, she accompanied me to the door with a grave face, and when I looked back I saw her graceful figure outlined against the light, like a picture framed by the doorway.

Pierrot attended me, and, escorted by the messenger, we walked directly to the Kremlin at a rapid pace. I had small leisure for reflection, but could not forbear some speculation upon the cause of this summons. No explanation offered itself, but the thought of the Swedish spy and Yury Apraxin, and I was therefore wholly unprepared for the humor in which I found the czar. The equerry conducted me to a private entrance of the palace, and the wicket was opened by one of the court dwarfs. We ascended a long narrow flight of stairs, and were admitted to Peter's private apartments. Pierrot remaining at the entrance, I was ushered into a long gallery, which could be entered by two doors, one being at either end, and there I remained for some moments alone. The place was lighted by three lamps, swung by chains from the low vaulted ceiling, and the whole

gallery was decorated in dark red and blue and gold. Two narrow windows looked out upon the domes of the Kremlin, shining in the moonlight; on the other side, through a golden lattice, I could see the tapers gleaming on an iconostase in one of the private chapels. The whole effect was one of Oriental color and splendor. It must have been a quarter of an hour before the door at the farther end was opened quickly and Peter entered unattended. The moment that I beheld him, I knew that there had been a paroxysm of rage and that he was suffering from its effects. His dress was disordered, his shirt thrown open at the throat, displaying his brawny neck; his face was deeply flushed, and he wore no peruke, his own dark hair hanging dishevelled on his temples, and his eyes were brilliant with anger. He came striding towards me with the air of a common brawler rather than a king, and I saw that he held a paper in his hand. Not knowing what to anticipate, I prepared for some outburst, but it was difficult to master my astonishment when, without replying to my obeisance, he thrust the letter into my hand, exclaiming, —

“ Explain that, sir ! ”

Collecting my thoughts, I slowly smoothed out the crumpled paper, and suppressed a start with an effort when I saw Catherine Shavronsky's letter to me that I had left in my own lodgings. The czar's eyes were searching my face, but I lifted my

brows with assumed surprise and looked at him with composure.

“It is addressed to me,” I said quietly; “but as it has been received by your Majesty, doubtless the explanation would be easier for those who delivered it at the palace.”

Peter was no hair-splitter; he looked at me with scorn. “The letter was on its way to you, M. de Brousson,” he said sharply; “the fac-simile of it was delivered to you, but this is the original. Am I to understand that I have a traitor in Mentchikof’s household, that my affairs are betrayed to the King of France?”

I drew myself up haughtily, and looked the czar straight in the eye.

“Your Majesty forgets that you address a marshal of France,” I replied coldly; “a soldier cannot descend to the level of a spy. Any man but the czar would answer for those words at the point of the sword.”

His cheek flushed darkly, but he was not without generosity. “High words, Maréchal de Brousson,” he said impatiently; “but I did not accuse you, but —” he hesitated and then went on frankly, “I accused Catherine Shavronsky.”

I was delicately placed and required patience. “Your Majesty,” I replied calmly, “I have ever regarded Mademoiselle Catherine as a devoted subject of the czar.”

He took two turns across the gallery, his face

working as it did at times, and his eyes on the ground. Then he faced me, and I saw that he was more composed.

“M. de Brousson,” he said hoarsely, “I would send her to a nunnery to-morrow, I would send her to Archangel, if I believed what they would have me believe of that letter. If she writes these notes to you, it will be well to warn her that she does so at her peril. These women think that because they are beautiful, Peter is too great a fool to give them their deserts, but I will tolerate no traitor, petticoated or not, about my person. I will have satisfaction!”

He stood there looking at me like a thundercloud, his great figure towering in the poorly lighted gallery and his large eyes full of passion.

“Your Majesty,” I said calmly, and with what dignity I could command, “I am a subject of the King of France, and it is outside of my province to detect traitors here, neither do threats prevail with such. If I have erred through ignorance, and violated the courtesy and respect due to your person, I crave your Majesty’s indulgence. For Mademoiselle Shavronsky I am in no way responsible.”

“By our Lady, M. l’Ambassadeur,” he exclaimed with violent excitement, “she is the traitor to pen such lines to a stranger and a Frenchman. I would rather give up the Neva to Charles of Sweden than have my heart and

thoughts betrayed to a foreign court! I have trusted her too deeply, there is no truth in woman!"

His voice rose as he spoke, and his lips quivered with passion. He was a man of strong emotions, violent and erratic. I stood silent; there was nothing that I could say with safety, and I folded my arms and leaned against the arras, regarding him with keen interest. He was muttering to himself in German, the language that he loved and used most frequently. I caught the name of Mentchikof, coupled with such expressions as "mein Bruder" and "mein Herz." He felt that he had been betrayed in the house of his friend. Suddenly looking up, he caught my eye, and perhaps read my secret amazement that a sovereign could so far forget the reserve that belonged to his dignity.

"M. de Brousson," he said, speaking with more composure, "I forget that you are a stranger. You have seen me in a moment of weakness. A king should scorn the intrigues of women, and my heart is indeed with the state; my most earnest thoughts are with the commonweal. It is only when the man feels the sting of deceit and of treachery that he forgets that he is royal. To rule an empire is to be a friendless human being," he added, with a touch of passionate sadness.

I was strongly moved. I knew that he was too far in advance of his countrymen, too far above

the level of mediocrity, to be in touch with sympathy. The isolation of this strange and violent man was almost complete, and all at once I understood that mayhap he really cared for mademoiselle's love; that he craved one single human heart, amid the adulation of a court. I remembered how Mademoiselle de la Vallière's devotion to Louis XIV. had contrasted with the intrigues of her successor.

"Your Majesty," I said in a low voice, "to be exalted is to be alone. The rulers of the world stand before the nations in splendid solitude."

His stormy mood was passing, and his face began to assume its natural expression. Something in my speech stung him. He took another quick turn across the gallery, and then paused before me, his eagle eye searching my face.

"M. le Maréchal," he said abruptly, "you are a brave man and a true. You have seen Peter of Russia in an hour of weakness, betrayed by a woman. It is unworthy of me and of your remembrance. Forget it!"

I made an obeisance. "Your Majesty, it is already forgotten," I replied.

He responded with a dignified gesture, which was at once an acknowledgment and a dismissal, and turning from me walked slowly down the gallery and went out at the other end, closing the door behind him, and leaving me with Catherine's ill-starred letter in my hand.

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

I WAS awakened early the following morning by Zénaïde, who brought me a summons from Mentchikof, — a few lines in French, asking me to come to his house at my earliest convenience. I read the note with a smile.

“This also is the outcome of Mademoiselle Catherine’s letter,” I remarked. “May the saints teach women to keep their pens from paper.”

“Such a woman cannot live without intrigue,” my wife replied; “she may be remarkable, but she is not pure of soul.”

“My love, we have nothing to do with her soul,” I remarked indifferently; “she is a splendid creature, but she is also the daughter of a peasant. A few more letters, however, will send her where neither beauty nor ambition nor intrigue will save her.”

“In which case it will be difficult to rescue Mademoiselle Zotof for M. de Lambert,” my wife said astutely.

“Upon my soul,” I retorted, “I am half inclined to sympathize with the czar. If this young

Frenchman had not crossed mademoiselle's path, she would, no doubt, have rejoiced at the thought of becoming Czarina of Russia; and, after all, is she not making a mistake? Peter is a goodly man."

Madame de Brousson uttered an exclamation of disgust. "You have no sentiment, M. le Vicomte," she said. "I often marvel that you were so romantic twenty-one years ago."

"The provocation was great, madame," I replied, smiling; "you forget that."

Half an hour later, I was entering the courtyard of Mentchikof's palace. It was unusually quiet; not even a groom loitered by the gates, and I was surprised that the master of the establishment was within when there were so few signs of attendance. The steward who answered my inquiry, however, corrected my mistake; Mentchikof was absent, but Madame Golovin desired to speak to me. Supposing that Mentchikof had been called away and had left his message with his sister, I followed the steward up the broad stairs, and through three of the long *salons*, into a small apartment, evidently dedicated to Madame Golovin, for it was furnished with all a woman's fanciful belongings, and hung with gay tapestries. Madame kept me waiting but a few minutes, and came in with a pale face. She greeted me cordially, but her manner was abrupt and anxious.

"We are in trouble, M. le Maréchal," she said at once, "and Mademoiselle Shavronsky sent for

you. She has made a painful discovery. Give her what comfort and counsel you can. My brother is with the czar."

I was not in doubt as to the nature of their trouble, and felt my position to be peculiarly delicate. Madame Golovin, however, did not wait for a reply, but conducted me to the apartment where I had last seen Catherine. At the door madame paused and whispered to me.

"Be gentle, M. le Maréchal," she said. "Mademoiselle is overwrought, and may speak unjustly, even wildly; but I trust your forbearance."

"I am at your service, madame," I replied with a gesture of reassurance.

She looked at me keenly, and I saw her lips compress, but after an instant's hesitation she threw open the door and we entered unannounced. Near the threshold sat a young Russian girl, playing upon a lute and singing a wild Cossack melody in a voice that seemed to me to have only a keen high note that pierced the ear and could scarcely have possessed the magic of consolation. Madame hushed the music with a sign, and we passed on to the other end of the room, where, on a pile of cushions and furs, lay the Livonian. As we approached, she rose and confronted us. I saw a great change in her face; it was colorless, and her large dark eyes were full of emotion; her flaxen hair had escaped its bonds and hung in masses on her shoulders.

“M. de Brousson,” she exclaimed without preface, “did you receive a letter from me last night?”

I smiled; it seemed to me that she would at last profit by her lesson.

“I received it, mademoiselle,” I said quietly.

A look of relief came over her face. “You received it,” she repeated, coming a step nearer and looking searchingly at my face; “had it been tampered with, monsieur?”

I returned her glance calmly. “It had, mademoiselle,” I replied in a low voice.

In an instant the cloud came back to her face, and she clasped her hands. “Alas!” she exclaimed, “we are undone.”

Madame Golovin made some sign to stay her impetuosity, but it was without effect. Catherine’s nature was fully as impulsive and passionate as that of the czar.

“M. le Maréchal,” she said, “my unhappy letter was taken from my messenger, and must have been opened before it was delivered to you.”

“Doubtless, mademoiselle,” I said, determined to allow her to talk rather than to talk myself. “It is unfortunate to write anything unless you are certain of the messenger.”

She made a gesture of impatience. “He was trusty enough,” she said, “but was overpowered and the letter taken from him; he knew nothing more of its fate. This morning Mentchikof was summoned by the czar, a peremptory message.

Alas, monsieur, we fear that the unhappy billet has reached his Majesty."

She was standing close to me, her hands clasped and her eyes fastened on my face. I felt her glance searching me, although I did not meet it, but stood gazing at the logs that were blazing in the great chimney.

"Mademoiselle," I said quietly, "I am old enough to be your father, therefore permit me to advise you. It is true that I have not been so much at court as in the camp, but I am not without my experience. Never write anything, mademoiselle, that can be conveyed by word of mouth; never write plainly if you write at all. That which is written is written."

"Alas!" she exclaimed, "you are a man, it is easy for you to be always cautious. I have been foolish. I see it and deplore it, but must I suffer for the fault of too much anxiety? My heart misgives me! I fear that evil will come of it." Then turning to me abruptly, she added, "Have you heard anything of the letter save from me?"

"I heard of it last night, mademoiselle," I admitted reluctantly.

She started, and caught my sleeve. "Tell me all, monsieur," she cried; "had it reached the palace? Who spoke of it to you?"

"The czar."

My words were spoken low, but a pistol-shot

could scarcely have shocked her more. She released my arm and started back, her face flushing scarlet and then becoming deadly pale. It was a moment of weakness, and I pitied her. She was a strong woman, a woman of will and brain, but she knew the peril of her situation, and for the moment tottered under the blow, while Madame Golovin sank down upon a chair, completely unnerved. Catherine was the first to recover.

“You saw him,” she exclaimed; “was he violently angry?”

I was most reluctant to speak. I neither desired to alarm her nor to betray the czar, but saw that she would have an answer.

“Mademoiselle,” I said gently, “I am sorry to be able to give you no comfort. His Majesty was sorely displeased.”

“He had — seen the letter?” she faltered.

“He had the letter,” I replied.

“Yet you also received it,” she exclaimed with momentary dulness; “I do not understand.”

“Mine was a copy, mademoiselle,” I replied quietly; “his Majesty had the original.”

She was silent, her face pale with contending emotions. She was far too clever not to realize her position and all its perils, but she was also a woman of resource, and I saw that it was not despair that had overcome her, — far from it. Her quick wit was searching for some expedient that would deliver her from the snare into which her

own folly had led her. Madame Golovin, her fellow conspirator, on the other hand, gave way to her feelings. She foresaw not only the fall of Catherine, but that of her brother, which would involve the ruin of her husband.

“Alas!” she exclaimed, “we shall share the fate of Prince Basil Galitsyn, of Sophia, of Eudoxia. Exile, imprisonment, perhaps death!”

Catherine glanced at her with contempt. Her own nature had rallied to meet the crisis, and she looked more queenly at that moment than ever before. There were no tears, there was no weakness; if disaster came, she would face it with unflinching courage.

“M. de Brousson,” she said quietly, “what did the czar say?”

“Mademoiselle,” I replied with dignity, “you forget to whom you speak. It is not for me to repeat the words of his Majesty. It would be conduct worthy a court spy, but not of a marshal of France.”

She bit her lip, for the moment baffled, and the blood rose to her brow.

“Pardon me, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she exclaimed bitterly; “I forgot that a diplomat could have no feeling for an unhappy woman.”

“You do me an injustice, mademoiselle,” I exclaimed with impatience; “I would gladly serve you, as far as my honor permits me. I would advise you now with sincerity, if you would allow me.”

"Ah, M. le Maréchal, help us if you can!" Madame Golovin exclaimed with feeling.

"We would be your debtors," Catherine added, with less excitement, giving me a haughty glance, which I interpreted to signify that she would remember my refusal to answer her, if she ever mounted the ladder of success, and remember it to my cost.

"Mademoiselle Shavronsky," I said calmly, "I would advise you to go to the czar, and, confessing your error frankly, pray his forgiveness. His Majesty is generous to a fault, and his anger passes like a cloud before the sun."

"M. de Brousson is right, Catherine," madame exclaimed; "the czar is generous. Remember that, for your sake, he forgave Yury Apraxin."

But Catherine shook her head. She knew that the offence was of a different nature, and knew also that if Peter pardoned her with indifference her defeat would be as certain as a decree of exile. She was essentially a proud woman, and half the sting of her position lay in the thought of the triumph of the Zotofs. Madame Golovin's nervous terror had no response in her heart; a bold nature like hers is untouched by little fears. She was playing for high stakes, and knew that to lose would involve not only her own ruin, but that of others, and was ready to play desperately. Looking at her face, gloomy and disturbed as it was, I was convinced that the hour had come for Made-

moiselle Zotof to be cautious; this woman would sacrifice her dearest friend to gain her ends. It had gone too far for retreat, and she was beginning, no doubt, to hate the young girl who stood between her and her ambition. I thought of the poisoned sweetmeat, and wondered a little if Catherine would have regretted fatal consequences if they had resulted from it. Najine's demise would be such an easy solution of one of her difficulties that it presented a perilous temptation.

My position was difficult, and I was casting about for a pretext to withdraw, when the door was thrown open and Alexander Mentchikof entered. He did not, at the moment, notice me, and came across the room with a rapid step, his face clouded with some deep anxiety. Madame and Catherine both stood looking at him with eager inquiry, oblivious of my presence.

"It is as we thought, and worse than we thought," he exclaimed, and then, discovering me, stopped short and broke out with a hard laugh. "On my word, M. le Vicomte," he said, "I did not see you. But it is of little consequence; it appears that we can keep no secrets in this household."

"The czar sent for M. de Brousson last night," Catherine said quietly; "therefore he knew more than we."

I made haste to seize upon this opportunity to depart. "By your leave, I will not intrude fur-

ther upon your confidence," I said; "madame and mademoiselle, I bid you adieu."

Madame Golovin responded warmly, but Catherine's reply was haughty. She had not yet forgiven my implied rebuke, and was visiting her folly on my head. Mentchikof walked with me to the head of the stairs, and I was never more impressed with his grace of manner. Anxious and disturbed as he was, he did not forget the courtesy of the host. As we stood a moment before parting, he laid his hand on my arm.

"M. le Maréchal," he said in a low tone, "tell M. de Lambert that the hour has come when Mademoiselle Zotof must either escape to France or be sacrificed."

I looked gravely into his face, and read determination in his eyes.

"Monsieur," I said quietly, "you mean that mademoiselle will be a czarina."

"I do not!" he replied emphatically; "she shall not be. There is a party yet at court strong enough to defeat her, even if Catherine's folly has ruined her cause; the other faction shall not triumph. Do you think me so poor a fool? Zotof is a braggart, an old fossil; he could never hold the regard of the czar. The beauty of the niece may have touched the royal heart, but the wit of the uncle will never establish her upon a throne."

Remarking his somber expression, I began to

apprehend serious trouble for mademoiselle, and made an effort to turn his purpose.

“Remember, M. Mentchikof,” I said, “that mademoiselle is a young girl, and I think I may safely say that her heart is in French keeping; therefore be patient in your thoughts of her, however angry towards Zotof.”

He looked back at me with an unmoved countenance.

“M. l’Ambassadeur,” he replied, in his suave way, “I have no doubt of mademoiselle’s innocence; it is as conspicuous as her beauty, but both are dangerous. Statesmen cannot see their dearest wishes, their favorite ambitions swept aside for the sake of a young girl. If mademoiselle desires to live long and happily, let her avoid the dizzy paths to eminence. Greatness has its peculiar perils, and she who would wear a crown must seek it at the risk of her head. I speak thus freely, monsieur, not because I bear ill-will to mademoiselle, but because I feel so much for her youth and her helplessness that I warn her that the steps of the throne are slippery — with blood.”

I had descended a little way and stood below him on the stair, looking up at his graceful figure and handsome face.

“Yet, monsieur,” I said lightly, “you are willing to risk one of your own particular friends.”

He smiled, and the fire kindled in his eyes.

“Ah, monsieur,” he returned, “some women are born to walk where others fear to creep. I am a believer in destiny!”

And I left him standing there with a smile upon his lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO WARNINGS.

I WALKED away from Mentchikof's house with a heavy heart. I knew that Najine's position was dangerous, and that Catherine's folly had turned the scale in Zotof's favor. The favorite would never have uttered his veiled threat against mademoiselle unless he felt that she held the key to the situation, that the czar was prepared to let his inclinations govern him at last, and would take some step towards publicly declaring his choice to be the young girl who had bewitched him. I knew that he had wavered between the two women, the one whom he already loved and the one who loved him; but now that the latter had been betrayed into something that savored so closely of treason, he would naturally turn to the young woman who by birth and education was best fitted to succeed the Czarina Eudoxia. Catherine, the Livonian peasant girl, might be the toy of the hour, but Najine would be the Czarina of Russia. Poor mademoiselle, my heart was touched whenever I remembered the expression of her dark blue eyes when she listened to my

eulogium of her lover. How little would her opposition avail her if Peter was determined to wed her! Her family would be solid in the support of her imperial lover, a crown would tempt her, an autocrat compel her; and yet, when I recalled the haughty pose of her head, I wondered if they would find her as pliable as they supposed. Poor M. de Lambert! What evil fate had turned his fancy into the same channel as a king's? My friend was recovered from his wound and was as headstrong as ever; and what would come of it?

I walked slowly to my quarters, revolving many things in my mind, and so absorbed that I scarcely noticed the men whom I passed, although it was an hour before noon, and the streets were full; but I had the habit of preoccupation and could be solitary in a crowd. When I turned into the lane behind my lodgings, however, I became suddenly aware that some one was following me, and looking back saw the Swede, Gustavus Lenk. I halted and signed to him to approach, which he did readily enough, thus refuting a momentary doubt of his integrity.

"Why do you follow me?" I asked, a trifle sharply.

"I was waiting for an opportunity to speak to you, my lord," he replied quietly; "I did not like to stop you on the open street, so many are abroad to-day."

"You have some tidings for my ear alone?" I

inquired, marvelling a little at the man's strange gratitude to us.

"Your Excellency," he began, hesitating a trifle, "am I mistaken in thinking that the young Frenchman who was attacked by the bridge is interested in the family of the Councillor Zotof?"

I was not a little surprised. "You are not mistaken," I replied at once; "have you any tidings of them?"

"I do not spy upon these people myself," he said, his face flushing under my eyes; "but others do, and information reaches me. It is rumored that the czar will select the niece of Zotof for his bride, and it is whispered, also, that she herself is in danger from the jealousy of others."

I listened gravely; he was not telling me anything new, and yet it was a shock to have my own worst fears confirmed.

"I thank you," I said briefly. "Any tidings that you can bring us will be welcome; any service that you can render to mademoiselle will be as much esteemed as a service to one of us." Remembering that he had accepted my wife's gift, I drew a ring from my finger and gave it to him. "Accept it," I said, "not only as an acknowledgment, but if any trouble threatens mademoiselle or M. de Lambert, send it to me as a signal."

He thanked me and put it on his hand, and then, as I was turning away, stopped me again.

"Your Excellency," he said, "you yourself are

constantly shadowed, not only by Prince Dolgoruky's man Tikhon, but by Apraxin, who has returned within a few days and is watching Mademoiselle Zotof and you."

Without being surprised, I was not entirely prepared for this information, and it was far from agreeable.

"Was I followed just now?" I asked.

"All the way to Mentchikof's palace," he answered quietly; "and if I mistake not, there is a fellow loitering now at the end of the lane."

We both looked back, and it seemed to me that I saw a man draw back into the corner of the wall. I shrugged my shoulders.

"They will find it a weary task," I remarked, and with a few more words of thanks I dismissed him and went on to my own door. Entering, I inquired for M. de Lambert, and found that he had just returned from his first walk abroad since his wound, and I went at once to his room.

He was reclining in a large chair by the fire, and his pallor startled me; yet it was more the contrast between his face and the dark coat he wore than the color of his complexion. But his wound and the enforced confinement had told upon him, and he looked thin and weary, although he greeted me with a smile and an expectant expression.

"A dull day, monsieur," I said, "and dull news. Let me sit by your fire."

"The heat is grateful after the frosty atmosphere without," he replied, as I seated myself opposite.

"I am beginning to grow old, I believe," I remarked, laughing, "since I love the chimney-corner and a blazing log. You have been out to-day, they tell me."

"I could endure my confinement no longer," he answered, giving me a keen glance. "You have some tidings, monsieur; what are they?"

"Nay," I said, "no tidings, M. de Lambert. I have but now returned from Mentchikof, and for the time a cloud obscures his glory. Catherine Shavronsky wrote a foolish letter—or dictated it—a letter that told too much of both the czar and his favorite and also of herself. Of course, the billet was intercepted and reached his Majesty. You can picture the result."

"The poor fool!" he exclaimed with impatience; "has she a longing for Archangel?"

"For the crown, monsieur," I replied, laughing; "but women love the pen."

"And if she is retired from the court, there is no one to stand before mademoiselle," he exclaimed abruptly, his mind suddenly grasping all the consequences. "Mentchikof out of favor and the other party in the ascendant, Najine will be the lamb for their sacrifice."

I was silent, indeed there was nothing to say; he had outlined the situation. He rose from his chair and walked to the window and looked out.

I saw that he was too agitated to discuss the matter, and I sat there turning it over in my mind. The way that was the simplest and most effectual would be the most dangerous. I could not advise him to carry mademoiselle off and marry her, for I felt sure that the czar would not scruple to throw him into prison and declare the marriage annulled, in which case it would take all my influence and the threats of France to save him; as for mademoiselle, she would be sent to a convent. Yet, for my life, I could see no other way. The Zotofs would never admit his suit, Najine was powerless, and the czar would send him back to France at the first hint of a marriage. But, after all, what was the use of my mature reasoning? He was a hot-headed lover, and I knew well that his mind was even now dwelling on some scheme to cut the knot. My chief hope was that Catherine's appeal to Peter would restore her to favor, as my chief anxiety was the veiled threat of Alexander Mentchikof.

M. de Lambert turned from the window and stood regarding me.

"I have been there," he said abruptly, "and they would not admit me."

"You mean the Zotofs?" I asked, glancing up with surprise.

"Ay," he replied, "I mean the Zotofs. I went openly to the door, and was refused admittance; then I went to the back of the house, scaled the

low wall of the court, and walked beneath Najine's windows, but without result. There was no sign or token that she was there."

"They have, doubtless, removed her to other quarters since her illness," I said. "She is there, I am sure, but probably they know that you are on the watch. I would be cautious, monsieur; the sight of you will but increase their vigilance. You are not yet recovered from the result of your temerity, therefore recollect that you carry your life in your hand."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I was a fool to be surprised by that murderous boy," he retorted, "and if he had not leaped on me with a knife so suddenly, I should have taught him a lesson; but he sprang like an animal, and had me by the throat with one hand, while with the other he struck the blade into my side."

"And he has returned," I remarked thoughtfully; "therefore it is doubly necessary to be cautious."

While I was speaking, M. de Lambert had been again looking from the window, so intently that he did not heed me.

"Pierrot is below in the court," he said, "and is talking to one of the czar's equerries. They have had their heads together for a quarter of an hour, and I have no doubt that Pierrot has sifted the fellow as wheat. There is something of interest, for the old knave will not let the equerry

go; he has him by the cloak and is questioning him with lip and eye. It is a picture."

I rose, and, joining him at his post, looked down upon the two men below. Both were too intent to observe us, — the equerry endeavoring to disengage himself; Pierrot persistent, gracious, eager. I laughed softly. The old rogue had not lost his cunning; no one was more clever at extracting information, no one more difficult to fathom.

"It is a bit of gossip," M. de Lambert said. "Look at Touchet! He is listening with that expression he wears when he hears two people speaking Russ. Now and then a gleam of absolute complaisance crosses his face, when he really understands a sentence; at other times he is the picture of contemptuous bewilderment."

"Pierrot is worth a hundred such," I said; "men like Touchet come for the asking, but there are few like Pierrot. Astute, cautious, devoted — my cause is his."

"You have the quality that attaches men to you, monsieur," M. de Lambert rejoined pleasantly; "it is a good fortune to serve the Maréchal de Brousson."

At this moment the equerry looked up, and, seeing us at the window, would be detained no longer, but tearing himself away from Pierrot hurried across the court. On the instant M. de Lambert leaned out, and called to Pierrot to come up to us.

"We must have the news, monsieur," he said, laughing. "I cannot let them keep that morsel for themselves."

"You grow trifling," I remarked with a smile.

"An invalid's privilege," he said. "My sick-room would have been dull indeed, but for the gossip they brought me."

As we resumed our former seats, Pierrot came in and stood gravely awaiting our commands.

"The tidings, Pierrot," M. de Lambert exclaimed lightly; "let us have the tidings."

I had been observing Pierrot's face, and read there a reluctance to speak which made me uneasy. He glanced at me now before he replied.

"It is but the gossip of the court officials, monsieur," he said, addressing M. de Lambert, but watching me for a sign which I did not give. "It may be false."

"It must be bad news, man," M. de Lambert remarked quickly, "else you would not give it such a preface."

"It is said," Pierrot continued, despairing of help from me, "that his Majesty was closeted with M. Zotof, that M. Mentchikof will be dismissed, and Mademoiselle Shavronsky is to go to Novodevitchy, and—" He paused, stammering and looking again at me.

"Go on!" M. de Lambert exclaimed impatiently; "have you no tongue, that you cannot get through so simple a speech? Let us hear all."

Pierrot was desperate, and he straightened himself and told the rest without a pause, his expression stolid.

“It is reported that the czar has formally declared his intention of being married to Mademoiselle Zotof within the month; and although this is not publicly announced, the court officials are preparing for the change.”

M. de Lambert's face flushed darkly, and he leaned forward in his chair, listening eagerly to the speaker; but even at the end he uttered not a word, but I saw his brown eyes flash with resolution.

“Is there anything more?” he asked sharply after the pause, searching his informant's face.

Pierrot's glance sank to the floor, and he shifted his position uneasily; I knew that the last was the most difficult to tell.

“It is said, monsieur,” he replied in a low tone, “that Mademoiselle Zotof has signified her willingness to be a — to obey the czar.”

M. de Lambert sprang from his chair with a fierce exclamation. “It is a lie!” he cried bitterly, “a worthless, miserable lie!”

I checked him with a gesture; then, addressing my equerry, —

“That is all,” I said quietly, meaning that he could go; and he availed himself of the opportunity with alacrity, only too glad to escape the responsibility of giving unpleasant information. Mean-

while M. de Lambert was walking about the room like one possessed.

“Did you ever hear such a damnable lie?” he exclaimed angrily; “the idlest, most miserable attempt to circulate a fable.”

“On the contrary,” I replied thoughtfully, “I have expected some such tidings for many days.”

“To what do you refer, M. le Maréchal?” he asked coldly.

“To the announcement of the czar’s intentions in regard to his marriage.”

“It is not that,” he said with impatience; “it is the lie about Najine, — that she has yielded so readily.”

I smiled. “After all, monsieur,” I rejoined gently, “are you sure that she may not have changed her mind? The pressure must have been tremendous, and she is young and doubtless ambitious.”

He paused before me, looking into my eyes, his flushed face unusually handsome in its anger.

“You drive me mad, M. le Vicomte,” he said bitterly. “I know that I am no match for a czar, but I judge mademoiselle’s heart by my own. Neither do I believe her so weak as to yield to any pressure; she has a noble spirit. I would stake my life upon her truth.”

I rose, and laid my hand upon his shoulder. “I did but jest, Guillaume,” I said kindly. “I have often tried you and never found you wanting. A

hot-headed lover, but a loyal one. Mademoiselle is fortunate. But plainly, monsieur, I have no doubt that the czar does intend to wed her, and I do not at the moment perceive how either you or I can prevent it."

He felt the truth of my words, and stood looking at the floor, his expression for the first time showing great depression.

"M. le Maréchal," he said at last, turning upon me, "you won Madame de Brousson almost at the point of the sword; why should I fail? Have I not the greater opportunity, since I have your advice and, I trust, your aid too?"

"My aid certainly, my dear M. de Lambert," I replied heartily, for I really loved the young man for his courage and his simplicity.

"Then doubtless I shall win," he exclaimed; "you have but to teach me how you achieved your victory, in the teeth of just such difficulties and many more."

I looked at him gravely, and shook my head.

"You forget, monsieur," I replied quietly, "my rival was not the czar."

CHAPTER XIV.

A FAIR REBEL.

THAT evening I went to the Kremlin for the sole purpose of gathering information, and met with signal failure. The czar was closeted with Prince Dolgoruky and Sheremetief, and the palace was almost deserted. The few courtiers lingering in the ante-rooms stared at me curiously, as if they knew of some matter with which my name was connected, and I attributed their interest to Catherine Shavronsky's unfortunate letter. There are no secrets at a court; malice and curiosity pry out every corner about a throne, and I had no doubt that every particular of her foolish correspondence was known. I made an effort to see Prince Dolgoruky, but to no purpose, and finally quitted the palace much disturbed. I could not sift the situation, and was uneasy for M. Guillaume, who had gone out again, in the hope of communicating with mademoiselle, although I had endeavored to restrain his impetuosity, fearing that some evil would result from it; but it was impossible to control him. He departed upon his errand, burning with ardor to achieve some enterprise, to rescue Najine, to thwart the czar. The absolute

recklessness of his courage made me smile. He dashed at obstacles in his path, as if he were dealing with a man of straw, instead of with one of the most resolute and autocratic men in the world. It looked desperate to me, for I knew that Mentchikof was under a cloud, and Catherine in a position that might terminate in exile, and the presence of Dolgoruky in the imperial closet boded ill for any hopes of M. de Lambert's success.

It was early when I reached my quarters, and I was not surprised to find that the anxious lover had not returned even to supper. Zénaïde was disturbed; she knew even more than I about the perils of Najine's position, and felt a keen sympathy for the two lovers. It was cold, and a great fire of logs blazed on the hearth, and I drew my chair before it with a sigh of relief. After all, the pleasure of sitting by a bright blaze on such a night diminished the trouble of court intrigue, but Madame de Brousson's mind was dwelling on M. de Lambert.

"I hope he will do nothing rash," she said thoughtfully; "he is determined to win, and sometimes that headlong impetuosity wrecks a cause."

"And sometimes it conquers," I replied sententiously; "he can scarcely see mademoiselle, even if he sees Zotof," I added.

"Did he intend to see Zotof?" Zénaïde asked with surprise.

"He went mainly for that purpose," I replied,

“although what he expected to gain by the interview I cannot imagine. The ‘Prince Pope’ is not likely to accept for his ward the hand of a poor Frenchman, instead of the czar, even if her coronation is not an immediate prospect. Peter would not insult her family by treating her with neglect; moreover, I believe that he really loves Najine.”

Madame de Brousson shrugged her shoulders scornfully, her lip curling.

“I believe that some thought that King Louis loved Madame de Montespan,” she said.

“The case is different, Zénaïde,” I returned quietly. “Madame de Montespan could never have been more than the king’s mistress, Madame de Maintenon can never be Queen of France, but it is different with the Romanoff. He can make mademoiselle czarina, if he chooses, and he undoubtedly will marry again. It is desirable that there should be other heirs. Monseigneur with all his dulness is far more acceptable to King Louis than is Alexis to his father. Peter might make Catherine share the fate of Anna Mons, but Najine has too powerful a party behind her, and he loves her. I have seen him strongly moved, and I know that the man is genuine.”

“You have an admiration for him,” my wife remarked dryly; “he always fascinated your interest. I confess that I remember that the Czarevna Sophia saved us both, and I cannot love the czar’s treatment of her.”

“Yet there is no doubt,” I said calmly, “that she deserved it.”

“Alas, M. le Vicomte,” she replied, smiling, “if you fall back on our merits, who can expect a better fate?”

“Hark! what is that?” I exclaimed, listening.

We both heard an unusual disturbance at the lower entrance, and the sound of voices. In another moment the door of the room was opened without ceremony by Pierrot, who stood aside to admit two closely veiled women. My wife rose from her chair with an exclamation of surprise, while I sat looking at them bewildered. It was not until they dropped their mantles that we recognized them. It was mademoiselle and her woman, Neonila. Najine threw back her hood, and her usually pale face was flushed with excitement. Behind them stood Pierrot, for the first time in his life too astonished to remember his duty and withdraw. Madame de Brousson, recovering her wits first, went up to Najine, and taking both her hands drew her to the chair by the fire.

“This is indeed a pleasure, mademoiselle,” she said easily, “and it is the first time I have seen you since your illness.”

The young girl clung to Zénaïde’s hand with the first signs of weakness that I had seen about her.

“Madame de Brousson and you, M. le Vicomte,” she said in a low voice, “I know you think me de-

mented to come here, and at this hour, but I have need of advice, of help. I am sore beset, and yet I fear my visit here will be only an embarrassment to you both. I am unfortunate."

"And we are fortunate, mademoiselle," I replied gallantly, "to have so fair a visitor. In all things you may command me."

She gave me a keen glance, as if she had already learned to sift men's souls, and was slow to give her confidence, but I saw that my wife had won her heart. It was to Zénaïde that she mainly addressed herself, as if she felt sure, at least, of a woman's sympathy.

"I am not without natural affection for my uncle, madame," she said quietly, as if collecting her thoughts. "I would gladly submit to his guidance, but his mind is full of dreams of greatness, and he forgets my personal happiness, or believes that it can be assured by the fulfilment of his wishes."

She paused as if choosing her words, and I looked around to see that Pierrot had withdrawn and her woman was standing by the door watching us, as if she doubted the wisdom of her mistress's action.

"He has determined to marry me," mademoiselle continued, looking still at my wife; "and I will not yield, even if it is —" She paused and, glancing at me, framed the words with her lips, "the czar."

Madame de Brousson was holding her hand and patting it gently, while I sat and looked at her beautiful young face and the spirited pose of her head. To advise her seemed impossible. She read my thoughts, and glanced from my face to my wife's.

"I will not marry him!" she cried passionately. "I have no desire to share the fate of Eudoxia."

"Nonsense, mademoiselle," I exclaimed, smiling; "you cannot compare yourself with the unfortunate czarina."

"And why not, monsieur?" she asked with spirit. "I, too, would be at the caprice of a tyrant. How soon might he weary of me? I am young now, but in a few years a change might come, — illness, sorrow, loss of youth, — and then I too should be sent in a postcart to the convent."

She spoke with superb contempt, and I listened, thinking that if Peter could hear her disdainful young voice it would be a salutary lesson for the autocrat. My wife was smiling; the thought of this proud young beauty sharing Eudoxia's disgrace was absurd, and yet she was terribly in earnest as she sat looking at us, her dark blue eyes kindled with passionate anger.

"You are unlike other women, mademoiselle," I said; "the splendors of a throne have no attractions for you."

"I do not say that, monsieur," she replied with a sudden smile; "but when I must share it — its

attractions depend upon the partner of my honors. I cannot purchase a crown at the price of my self-respect."

"And yet," I remarked quietly, "the czar is a ruler, a brave man, a reformer, and with a certain simplicity of nature that makes him lovable."

"I did not think to find his advocate here, M. le Maréchal," she said, her cheeks flushing. "I came rather to find a way to escape, since the matter is pressing."

"It is hard for us to advise you, my dear," Zénaïde replied gently; "we feel as if we might injure rather than aid you. It is a grave step."

"I know it," she exclaimed, her lips quivering, "and I would not bring trouble to you, but I saw no way. They have kept me as close as a prisoner, and are deaf to my entreaties; they believe that their wisdom is best."

"There are two ways, mademoiselle," I said slowly, — "one, to go to a convent for temporary protection, but that would scarcely avail you; the other —" I paused, and looked at Zénaïde. She, reading my thought, laid her finger on her lip. She felt that M. de Lambert must speak for himself.

"And the other?" repeated mademoiselle, looking at me inquiringly.

I smiled. "The other would be to go to France, mademoiselle."

Her face flushed crimson, and she gave me a

haughty glance, as if she thought that I intended to reproach her for coming to us.

“That is possible, mademoiselle,” I hastened to explain; “we would protect you, and if you could cross the border in disguise, all would be well.”

She bit her lip, and sat looking at the fire. I knew that she marvelled at M. de Lambert’s absence, but it would have been unfortunate to mention his name while she was so sensitively conscious of her precipitation in coming to us. In the pause I heard his voice in the lower hall and rose to call him, but mademoiselle detained me.

“No, no!” she cried, blushing deeply, “I did not come to seek M. de Lambert — nor would I have him think it, for the world. I came to you and to Madame de Brousson for advice. I—I have put myself in an unfortunate position.”

I took her hand, and, looking at her agitated face, understood how she felt. “Mademoiselle,” I said gently, “are you not unkind to M. de Lambert? He has but just returned from an effort to see you; he has been ill — wounded in your quarrel — ”

“Ill — wounded?” she cried in amazement, “I knew nothing of it! They have kept me like a nun.”

While I was telling her of her lover’s misadventure, there was a tap on the door, and Zénaïde

opened it for M. de Lambert. At the sight of Najine, he uttered an exclamation, and in a moment had both her hands in his and was trying to express his amazement and delight, while her face was covered with blushes, and her long lashes hid the brightness of her eyes. I glanced at my wife, and we smiled; there was even a smile on the face of the Russian woman who stood so patiently by the door. After all, they were like two children, and it was a shame to think of separating them. He led her back to her seat by the fire, sitting down himself on a low stool at her feet, while I told him briefly mademoiselle's errand, and pointed out the gravity and difficulty of the situation, although I knew that his impatience would scoff at obstacles. I was rather astonished that he listened with attention, and was willing to give the matter deep thought before proposing a way out of it. I knew well enough the expedient that he would suggest, for I saw it in his kindling eye, and imagined that mademoiselle divined it too, for her embarrassment increased. He let me finish my argument before he spoke at all.

"There is but one way," he said at last. "Her guardians will have their own wishes obeyed as long as she remains here; but —" He stopped and looked up into mademoiselle's face. "It is hasty," he went on; "but if she will marry me now — I can and will carry her back to France."

"Oh, I could not now!" mademoiselle cried

with a crimson face. "It would be as if I had sought it!"

He caught her hand, and pressed it to his lips. "Najine," he said softly, "is that truthful? I could not break into your uncle's house, but I should have found a way to bring you out of it at last. Perhaps, though," he added, with a rare touch of diplomacy, "I am too poor a man to be compared to a czar."

"For shame, M. de Lambert!" Najine cried angrily; "why taunt me with that? Have I deserved it?"

"Forgive me," he replied, smiling; "you drove me to it. Najine, you will wed me?" he went on with emotion. "There is no other way to rescue you now. If you hesitate, they will not, and they will marry you to the czar. You must choose between us."

She looked down at him with a charming smile. "I have chosen, monsieur," she said softly; "but I will not have you risk your life for me. We could not escape to-night or to-morrow, and I must not go back to the house. I cannot again evade my aunt's vigilance; she is more bent upon this unhappy matter than my uncle. Another aunt, my mother's sister, whose husband is with the army in Livonia, is at Troïtsa. She has gone there as a pilgrim to pray for her family; she is very fond of me, and will be full of sympathy for my troubles. I have almost determined to go to

her for the present, especially as I believe they would scarcely think of seeking me there, and if they do, she will help me."

I saw the wisdom of her decision as, I think, did M. de Lambert, although he protested.

"Can you not stay with us to-night?" suggested Zénaïde; "why need any one know that you are here?"

"Impossible!" she exclaimed at once. "My aunt will search Moscow for me; she is very angry with me. I must go from the city."

"Your aunt is certainly at Troïtsa, mademoiselle?" I asked.

"She has been there for some days, monsieur," she replied.

I looked thoughtfully at M. de Lambert. "I believe that would be her wisest course," I said gravely; "it would be a temporary security and a cause of desirable delay, which would enable us to find some way out of this labyrinth."

He was reluctant to assent to this arrangement, for he was manifestly determined to carry Najine off in the teeth of all opposition. While we sat looking at one another, each thinking of a different scheme, there was a sudden noise below and the sound of loud talking. Mademoiselle sprang up in quick alarm.

"They have come to seek me!" she exclaimed in excitement; "is there not some other way by which I can escape? They must not find me here."

"No harm shall come to you, Najine," M. de Lambert exclaimed.

I had been listening, and heard heavy steps upon the stair. An instinct warned me that there was danger.

"Take her away," I said quickly to Zénaïde; and she, reading my face, caught mademoiselle's hand, and drew her through the door that opened into the next apartment. Neonila followed, but had not time to close the door when the other, by the stairs, was thrown open and a stranger entered unannounced. I looked about, and saw, with relief, the door close on the Russian woman; then I rose, and confronted my visitor. He was a large man, and muffled in a long scarlet cloak, edged with sables, the collar turned up about his face and his plumed hat set low over his eyes. I raised the taper, and held it to throw the light upon his figure, but he neither moved nor spoke.

"Your pleasure, monsieur?" I said sharply; "you intrude strangely upon my privacy. It is not usual for a visitor to enter a house with such noise, and then break in upon his host unannounced and bonneted."

Without a word, he dropped his cloak and stood regarding me. It was the czar!

CHAPTER XV.

AN IMPERIAL INQUISITOR.

WHEN I saw that my visitor was the czar, I suppressed my surprise, and put the taper calmly upon the table, making my obeisance with all the grace that I could command.

"Your Majesty honors me by this visit," I said gravely, "but if I had been advised of your coming I should have been better prepared."

"Doubtless," the czar replied dryly, "but it was for that reason that I chose to come unannounced, M. le Maréchal. M. de Lambert, be kind enough to remain where you are," he added sharply.

M. de Lambert had made an effort to leave the room to warn Najine, but at the czar's words he paused, and stood haughtily with his back against the door, and I saw the fire of determination in his brown eyes as he looked back defiantly at the autocrat. I drew forward the best chair in the room.

"Your Majesty will be seated," I said courteously. "I am indeed unprepared, but the best that the house affords is at the service of the czar."

“Pshaw, M. l’Ambassadeur!” Peter exclaimed with his usual frankness, “you know that I do not come to pay you a formal visit at night and almost unattended. The greatest courtesy that you can show me is to reply to my questions without prevarication. You have one visitor here already; who is she?”

His question was abrupt, but I had the advantage of being in a measure prepared for it and remained undisturbed.

“I do not understand your Majesty,” I replied calmly; “I have no visitors.”

The czar looked at me with passionate scorn, his great figure towering in the dimly lighted room.

“Who was the woman who went out that door as I entered the other?” he demanded sternly, pointing his finger at the door against which M. de Lambert had set his back.

“Madame de Brousson,” I replied promptly, with some relief that I could tell half the truth.

His lip curled scornfully. “Do you take me for a fool, M. le Maréchal?” he exclaimed; “I presume that your wife did go out that door — and who went with her?”

I was standing opposite to him, my hand resting on the back of the chair that he had refused, and I looked him full in the face.

“Your Majesty is pleased to cross-question me closely about the affairs of my own household,” I said haughtily.

“M. de Brousson,” he replied hotly, “Najine Zotof is in this house and you know it.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “If your Majesty is convinced that the young woman is here, why should I be questioned?” I said, conscious that the blood burned on my cheeks, for his glance was exasperating.

“There is wisdom in that remark, sir,” he replied tartly. “It is indeed unnecessary for you to reply, because I know she is here—here without the consent or knowledge of her guardians,” he struck his hand on the table sharply, “here on some foolish errand. Therefore, M. le Maréchal, I demand that you bring her before me.”

I saw M. de Lambert’s face flush scarlet, and his hand seek the hilt of his sword, and dreaded some act of folly. I was striving to plan some escape and did not reply to the czar.

“Are you deaf, sir?” Peter exclaimed harshly. “Produce Najine Zotof.”

I did not move, but stood erect before him, my arms folded on my breast.

“Your Majesty,” I said slowly, “I owe you profound respect, the reverence due to an anointed king, the courtesy due to the friend of my master; but I am an officer of Louis, King of France, and my oath binds me to his service alone. I cannot become an equerry to any other sovereign, nor would I do police duty for his Majesty of

France. Your Majesty's commands unhappily exceed the limit of my compliance."

He stood gnawing his lip and regarding me with a brow as black as a thunder-cloud.

"I thank you for the lesson, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said bitterly; "perhaps this gentleman here can be more obliging," he added, turning scornfully to M. de Lambert.

I made a sign to him to beware of his reply, but his eyes were fixed haughtily on the czar's face.

"Your Majesty forgets," he replied proudly, "that I also am a subject of the King of France."

"By all the saints," the czar exclaimed passionately, "I wish the King of France had kept you there! Are you weak, that you lean so persistently against that door?" he added with fine sarcasm.

"Your Majesty desired that I should remain where I am," M. de Lambert replied calmly, a little amusement showing in his eyes.

"I am gratified," the czar said scornfully, "to find one Frenchman so little obstinate that he can comply with my request. M. le Vicomte," he added sharply, turning to me, "if you will not produce Najine, I must even go and seek her."

I started. I was not prepared for so extreme a measure, and if he searched the house, he would undoubtedly find her, unless Zénaïde had smuggled her out, which was improbable. I glanced quickly at M. de Lambert, and read consternation

in his eyes. But there was no remedy even in delay; still I made one last attempt to save the situation.

“It is an extreme measure, your Majesty,” I said with forced composure; “you have called me an ambassador — it is unusual to search the house of an ambassador.”

He uttered an exclamation of impatience. “Ambassador or not, I shall do as I please,” he said haughtily. “I am weary of this banter of idle words. You and your friend here will precede me, monsieur.”

I bowed gravely, and taking up a taper prepared to light him through the corridor.

“Not so fast, M. l’Ambassadeur,” he said quietly; “the other door, if you please, and M. de Lambert can walk in front.”

I bit my lip; my choler was rising fast, and it cost me an effort to obey him with the courtesy which was his due, and I saw that M. de Lambert was furious. However, we were compelled to open the door and walk like two children before him through the adjoining rooms; to my infinite relief, they were empty, and though he lifted the arras there was no one concealed behind it, and his face darkened as he proceeded, without any result for his pains. The apartment in which he had found us adjoined two others, which in turn were separated by a narrow passage and ante-room from my wife’s sleeping-room, and

at her door the procession halted. The czar motioned to me to proceed, but I stood unmoved.

"This is Madame de Brousson's apartment," I said with dignity; "your Majesty does not intend to intrude here."

For the moment he was nonplussed. It would be indeed an extreme measure to search my wife's rooms, and yet he and I both knew that here was the fair fugitive whom he sought. He stood irresolute, anger glowing in his dark eyes, and his lips compressed; then looking up he caught the gleam of triumph in M. de Lambert's eye, and that decided him.

"Be kind enough to inform Madame de Brousson that the czar desires to speak with her," he said sternly.

With a heavy heart I tapped upon the door and delivered his message. To my amazement, Zénaïde threw open the door, and came out to greet him with a sweeping curtsy.

"I am at your Majesty's service," she said, with a woman's graceful tact, ignoring his angry aspect.

Peter looked beyond her into an apparently vacant room, and I saw astonishment mingle with the displeasure on his countenance.

"Madame," he said gravely, "you have Najine Zotof in your room; where is she?"

"Your Majesty sees my apartment," she replied with a graceful gesture; "mademoiselle is not visible there, certainly."

"These are words, madame," he exclaimed impatiently; "Najine is concealed there, and you know it."

Zénaïde drew back haughtily. "The room is open for your Majesty's inspection," she said quietly; "it is mine, but I will not attempt to oppose the czar, since I am suspected of falsehood."

Her manner had a strange effect upon him; he regarded her intently, admiring, I think, her beauty and her dignity.

"Your husband has made many objections to my search of this house," he said slowly, "because he is an ambassador of France. I appeal to you, madame, would not the king my brother do likewise in my case?"

She looked up quickly. "Your Majesty means to ask if the king my master would search this room?" she asked in her sweet voice.

"I do, madame," he replied gravely, watching her.

"His Majesty would not dream of it in the like case," she replied at once, and with decision.

The czar glanced at her with surprise. "And why not, madame?" he asked quickly.

Zénaïde looked at him calmly, her blue eyes as innocent as they were steadfast.

"Because, your Majesty," she replied in a clear voice, "Louis de Bourbon is the first gentleman in France."

The czar started as if she had struck him in the

face, and the blood rushed to his temples. I caught my breath. What will not a woman dare? Yet her manner was perfect, her composure unruffled. For a moment I anticipated an explosion, and thought that Peter would resent her reply as a deadly insult; but he commanded his passion and made her a profound bow.

“Madame has read me a lesson,” he said bluntly, “that I would not accept from less beauty and merit, but sometimes it is well for a czar to be reminded that he is a man and not infallible. Madame, I will not be excelled in courtesy by the King of France; close your door and keep your counsel, but convey to your fair prisoner that she is a subject of Russia and must obey her sovereign. Let her return quietly to the house of her uncle, or else she will answer for her disobedience. Even the King of France, I think, compels his fair subjects to respect his authority.”

“Nay, your Majesty,” Zénaïde replied calmly, “the king my master reigns not by fear. A Frenchwoman is never a slave.”

“I have often regretted, madame, that your marriage made you a French subject,” Peter rejoined, “but I perceive now that I am fortunate, since you would have taught my whole petticoated tribe the principles of sedition.”

Zénaïde smiled. “Your Majesty would not desire a mean-spirited flock of women,” she said

quietly, "all modelled in the mould of blind acquiescence to one will."

"I have no such good hope as that," replied the czar, dryly; "since the days of Eve, madame, your sex has been a source of trouble. It was the apple of obstinacy that your ancestress ate, as well as that of knowledge. But I request you to convey my message to Najine Zotof."

"It will be my first duty, your Majesty," she replied, "when I see mademoiselle."

He made her a mocking bow. "When you see her, madame," he replied with a cynical smile, and then, turning on his heel, he walked away through the rooms, followed by M. de Lambert and me, but ignoring us both until he reached the head of the stairs. At the foot I saw Pierrot with the czar's equerry looking up at us, and understood why Peter had come up unannounced. He turned upon us with a return of his haughty manner, his dark eyes on M. de Lambert's face.

"As for you, young sir," he said coldly, "you are too clever in the gallantry of courts. France is your proper sphere, and pray do not allow us to detain you here. I will direct the authorities to furnish you with your passport."

The young man bowed haughtily, his face flushed with anger and his eyes returning the czar's glance with a defiance equal to his own.

"I am beholden to your Majesty," he said in a

low voice. "Since I have been here, I have had occasion to feel the need of a safe-conduct."

Peter gave him a searching glance.

"You are pleased to speak in riddles, M. de Lambert," he said sharply, "but it is well that something has warned you to be cautious. We Russians know how to resent idle interference with our affairs."

M. de Lambert bit his lip, his face paling a little. "Your Majesty has the advantage," he said, folding his arms on his breast, "since we cannot meet on terms of equality."

Peter laughed harshly. "You are a true knight-errant, monsieur," he said mockingly. "You forget, though, that the arm of Peter Romanoff is not so feeble that he could not do battle, even if he did not wear a crown. Do not be a fool, young man, and waste breath in idle boasts." Then turning to me, "As for you, M. l'Ambassadeur," he added bluntly, "I leave it to your conscience if it is consistent with your honor and the honor of France to conceal and aid a little rebel against her master."

"Your Majesty makes serious charges," I replied with composure, "but I trust that my honor and that of my country will remain untarnished."

The czar was already on the stairs, but at my words turned and looked at me. I was lighting the way, holding the taper over my head, and I saw the gleam of amusement in his eyes.

“You are an old fox, Brousson,” he said gravely, “but remember that the fox is no match for the lion, and you are treading on dangerous ground.”

We were at the door, and I stood aside to permit him to pass out, still holding the taper between us.

“The fox is no match for the lion, your Majesty,” I admitted calmly, “but neither is the lion a match for the turtle-dove.”

He had gone out in the dark, but turned, and, coming close to me at the door, spoke so low that none could hear.

“M. de Brousson,” he said sternly, “I have yielded to-night from courtesy to madame, but if that young man yonder takes one step to make Najine his wife without my sanction, it will cost him his head, were there forty kings of France instead of one!”

CHAPTER XVI.

A DUEL WITH TONGUES.

WITH the czar's threat ringing ominously in my ears, I ascended the stairs and, asking M. de Lambert to remain in the *salon*, went on to Madame de Brousson's door to inquire for Najine. At the sound of my voice they both came out into the ante-room, mademoiselle's face still pale with excitement. She ran up to me with the pretty manner of a child, and, taking my hand, kissed it with impulsive gratitude.

"M. l'Ambassadeur," she said, "I feel as if I ought to go down on my knees to you and Madame de Brousson, for rescuing me from this situation; I do not know how I could have faced the czar in this house."

"Mademoiselle," I replied gravely, "it was our happiness to shield you, but I fear that we can do little more at this time. I wished to talk to you without restraint, therefore I came alone. The czar has spoken freely to me, and I believe that it is impossible for you to escape to France at present; you are too closely watched. It is equally impossible for me to protect you here;

therefore, mademoiselle, there is but one course open: you must go with all speed to your good aunt at Troïtsa."

"We had ourselves reached that conclusion," Zénaïde said, "and Najine and I were perfecting our arrangements to leave here in the morning."

"That will not do," I replied at once; "you must go within the hour."

Mademoiselle glanced up with surprise, and Zénaïde uttered a protest.

"Philippe!" she exclaimed reproachfully, "mademoiselle will think you lacking in courtesy."

"No, no!" protested Najine, warmly, "I am sure that M. de Brousson has some good reason for his haste."

"I have the best, mademoiselle," I replied; "the czar will undoubtedly order your uncle to remove you from my house, and I have no authority to resist him."

"I know it, monsieur," she replied gravely; "it is as I said, I cannot remain here. Madame has urged me in her kindness, but it is impossible. Neonila and I must find a way to escape from Moscow at once."

"How can they?" cried Zénaïde, casting an indignant glance at me, — "two women, and at this hour!"

"M. de Lambert and Pierrot will accompany them," I replied firmly; "they must not lose an hour."

“ I must go with them,” Zénaïde exclaimed.

“ Pardon me, madame,” I answered, “ you must, on the contrary, remain here and detain the Councillor Zotof’s party.”

In a moment Zénaïde understood my scheme, and let me go to summon Pierrot and give my orders. It was nearly midnight, and he was sleepy and loath to go on his errand; but a few words from me roused him to meet the emergency. Then I sought M. de Lambert, and informed him of the measures which I had taken without consulting him, because I knew that it would be folly to expect his acquiescence, and fatal to delay Najine’s flight. He was angry and surprised at my action, and mastered his emotion with difficulty, for his nature was impulsive.

“ This seems a hard measure for mademoiselle,” he exclaimed at once, “ to send her away at this hour, when she came here for aid and protection.”

“ M. de Lambert,” I replied gravely, “ I understand your feeling, and you have my sympathy in your indignation for mademoiselle, but I am truly giving her the best aid in my power. If she stays here until morning, I should be compelled to surrender her to her uncle; the demand is inevitable, and may come at any hour. Moreover, I think it has cost mademoiselle something to take this decided step; she is not without regret and hesitation at the thought of acting directly in

opposition to her guardians, and it is possible that, under their persuasion, she might yet surrender her will to theirs, which would be fatal to your interests. It is no light thing for a young girl, reared as she has been, to evade her uncle's authority and contemplate a stolen marriage. If you hope to succeed in your suit, you must speedily get her out of the reach of Zotof and his wife."

He listened to me thoughtfully, and I saw that he realized the truth of my words. He stood with folded arms, his eyes bent on the fire and his brows furrowed with anxiety. He was probably thinking of a dozen ways to evade the czar, and in the end finding himself, each time, in a *cul-de-sac*. I heard Pierrot's step on the stair, and knew that all things were in readiness.

"M. de Lambert," I said gravely, "when this errand is over, we must seriously consider your own situation. The czar has virtually demanded your return to France, and I have no doubt that the passports will be forthcoming; in which case there will be an accumulation of difficulties."

He looked at me calmly. "I shall remain here, monsieur," he said at once, "as long as made-moiselle remains."

I smiled in spite of myself. "Even if she becomes the Czarina of Russia?" I asked naïvely.

At this moment Pierrot announced that all preparations for departure had been made, and so

checked the angry retort that was on M. de Lambert's lips, for he always lost his temper at the suggestion that mademoiselle would ultimately wed the czar. As Pierrot came, Madame de Brousson entered by the other door with Najine and her woman, and I had my last instructions to give, so that we had no further words over mademoiselle's future. Indeed I was anxious to hurry them off, knowing that the reprieve would be short. Najine herself was nervous and impatient, although she clung affectionately to my wife and, I thought, would have been happy to stay with her. Zénaïde petted and soothed her, after the fashion of women, until I felt it necessary to hasten them.

"Pardon my seeming discourtesy, mademoiselle," I said, "but haste is imperative. Pierrot, is everything in readiness?"

"At your service, M. le Vicomte," he replied promptly.

Zénaïde herself adjusted mademoiselle's mantle and hood, and M. de Lambert, having placed his pistols in his belt, assumed his cloak, and they were ready to follow Pierrot down to the rear door. Najine came to me with outstretched hands, her charming face just peeping out of the great gray fur-lined hood, which was peaked at the top and, framing her face, met under her small firm chin.

"I thank you from my heart, monsieur," she

said softly. "May the saints reward you for your kindness."

"Mademoiselle," I replied warmly, "I am always entirely at your service, and, I trust, may yet find a way out of your difficulties."

Something in the simplicity of her manner touched me more than her words, and I went with her to the door and stood there, while she bade Zénaïde farewell, without the heart to hasten her again. Finally, however, M. de Lambert drew her arm through his and led her out into the night, followed by Pierrot and her woman, while we watched in the entry until we heard the horses start, and knew that they were safely off; then I closed the door and barred it.

"And now for a few hours of repose!" I exclaimed with a sigh of relief; but I was destined to disappointment. The words were scarcely out of my mouth before a knock on the front door resounded through the house.

"Hark!" exclaimed Zénaïde, "what can it mean?"

"Some one who is determined to enter," I remarked dryly, as we ascended the stairs which communicated with my rooms by a rear door, so that we could avoid the entrance. I heard Touchet stumbling through the house, evidently roused from a nap, for he was slow, and there was a second summons before he unbarred the door. Zénaïde followed me to the head of the stairs,

and we stood looking down into the lower hall. When the door was opened, several persons immediately crowded into the entrance, and I at once suspected who were our visitors, and in another moment a sharp female voice confirmed my conclusion.

“Where is the marshal, and where is Madame de Brousson?” she exclaimed.

It was Madame Zotof, and she pushed past Touchet and began to come up the stairs before her husband could collect himself for the attack. It was characteristic of madame, who was always at the front of the battle, and she was eager now for the fray. As I saw her on the stair, I glanced at Zénaïde and smiled. Madame de Brousson was looking down at her with a peculiar expression in her blue eyes, and knowing, as I did, her estimate of Madame Zotof, I wondered a little what thoughts were in her mind, as she stood there with unruffled composure awaiting the onslaught. It was not until she was half-way up the stairs that Madame Zotof looked up and saw us standing at the top; then she paused an instant, and eyed us with that keen, ill-tempered look of hers, her thin face and shrewish mouth showing in the glare of the taper that Touchet had set upon the landing.

“I am fortunate to find you awake at this hour,” she remarked sharply.

“And we are fortunate to receive you at any

hour, madame," Zénaïde replied suavely, "even if it is at a time when we usually seek repose."

Madame Zotof looked at her keenly, suspicious of her opponent's smooth courtesy.

"It is evident that I did not rouse you," she retorted tartly. "You do not look as if you had come from your couch."

By this time the councillor had come up the stair and stood behind his wife, a few steps below us. Zénaïde, ignoring madame's reply, greeted him with quiet courtesy, and invited them to enter the *salon*, ordering Touchet to bring fresh tapers, for those upon the table were already exhausted. Madame Zotof, with an eager air, hurried into the room behind my wife, and looked about, apparently for some token of her truant niece, but there was no sign of her recent presence. The apartment was in order, and the logs had burned down on the hearth, so that there was a chill in the atmosphere. Zotof, following his wife, stood in the center of the room, but seemed conscious that, for the time, there was no need of speech from him, madame, as usual, taking the lead.

"Be seated by the fire, for it grows cold here," Zénaïde said easily; "and, Touchet, bring hither some wine."

"We do not want it," Madame Zotof exclaimed angrily; "we did not come out at two in the morning for entertainment. I came here for that mad niece of ours, Madame de Brousson, and I would

thank you to order her to join me immediately; her conduct is unpardonable."

Zénaïde looked at her with mild surprise. "You labor under a delusion, Madame Zotof," she said gently; "mademoiselle your niece is not here."

Madame Zotof stared at her with exasperation showing in every line of her face.

"It is you, Madame de Brousson, who labor under a mistake," she replied with a mocking imitation of Zénaïde's manner. "A little bird told me that my niece was here, and that it would be wise for you to surrender her to her guardians."

Zénaïde smiled. "It is unwise to listen to the counsel of little birds, madame," she remarked sweetly, "since your little bird was possessed of the spirit of untruth."

"It was not so small a bird as you think," Madame Zotof exclaimed. "It was a double-headed eagle, and it spoke the truth."

"How could it," Zénaïde said with a little laugh, "since it was double-tongued and therefore versed in duplicity?"

"Beware, madame!" cried Madame Zotof; "the eagle knows how to avenge both insult and injury."

My wife's face flushed with quick indignation. "Threats are wasted upon me, Madame Zotof," she said haughtily; "I am not so poor a coward as to fear even an imperial eagle."

“You will find that it has both beak and talons, madame,” the other woman replied.

“Have done with this, wife,” Zotof exclaimed suddenly. “What profit is it? In plain language, M. le Maréchal, his imperial Majesty has notified us that my niece is in your house, and commanded us to take her away. We must obey.”

“That may be, M. Zotof,” I replied haughtily; “but it does not signify that a marshal of France must obey you.”

He looked at me gravely, evidently embarrassed by the position in which he found himself, but stubbornly determined to obey the czar.

“It is true, M. le Vicomte,” he said, “that I cannot compel you to obey my master, yet we are in Moscow, and the King of France does not reign here. However, I ask you, as one man may ask another, in all courtesy, to deliver my niece into my hands.”

“And I reply in the same spirit, monsieur, that your niece is not in my house,” I said courteously.

He seemed for the moment perplexed; but Madame Zotof grasped the truth of the matter at once.

“She was here,” she exclaimed in her high voice. “Where have you sent her?”

“Madame forgets,” interposed Zénaïde, suavely, “that if she cannot control her own niece, it is certainly not in our power to do so; that is demanding a good deal of two strangers.”

The other woman turned upon her with a flash of temper. "Perhaps, Madame de Brousson," she said hotly, "you can also repudiate your knowledge of M. de Lambert's persistent pursuit of Mademoiselle Zotof."

My wife smiled, her composure still unruffled. "I do not venture to account for the love affairs of M. de Brousson's suite," she said suavely; "it is customary in France for the families of the two young people to manage these matters."

"And customary for French people out of France to aid and abet a young gallant in his pursuit of another man's niece," Madame Zotof retorted sharply.

"I really cannot say, madame," Zénaïde replied with naïveté, "for, you know, I am myself a Russian."

Madame Zotof stood biting her lip, too angry to keep up the play of words, and her husband was red with impatience. I regarded the scene with intense enjoyment. It was a fair match between two women, and Zénaïde, having the better command of her temper and the sharper wit, was lashing her opponent to fury. Meanwhile every moment's delay was precious to mademoiselle. Zotof took matters into his own hands; he went to Zénaïde, and looked at her with almost an appeal in his eyes.

"Madame," he said, "be kind enough to produce my niece."

Madame de Brousson threw out her hands with a comic gesture of despair.

"M. Zotof," she exclaimed, "I am not a magician! Mademoiselle is not here."

"I should like to look behind you in those rooms," cried Madame Zotof, pointing her finger at the door that led into the other apartments.

Zénaïde, seeing instantly an opportunity for delay, was all complaisance.

"You shall be gratified," she said sweetly. "Philippe, lead us with a light."

Madame Zotof was a little dashed by her ready compliance, but, still full of suspicion, followed her closely, as I took the taper, and, opening the door, conducted them slowly through the rooms. Zénaïde consumed much time by insisting that Madame Zotof should look behind every arras and into every cupboard, and Madame, full of doubt and eagerness, peered into the crevices and behind the doors; her husband following with a stolid obstinacy that did not permit him to see how entirely they were playing into my wife's hands. As we passed on without success, madame's face fell, and I saw the suspicion in her pale eyes grow more intense as she began to realize that there was a possibility that her niece had evaded her, even though we were both in the house. At the door of my wife's apartment I detained the councillor, and the two women went in alone, while we stood on the threshold. It was a strange scene; the

room was brightly lighted both with tapers and by the logs blazing on the hearth. The walls were covered with tapestries, and Madame Zotof went about lifting them up and searching for the truant, while Zénaïde stood in the center of the room, her figure clearly outlined in its dignified repose, and a smile of scorn on her face, her blue eyes following the other woman's quick movements. Never were two women so strongly contrasted; the fine form and stately head of Madame de Brousson dwarfing the smaller figure of Madame Zotof, whose face was naturally homely and shrewish; her eyes of that cold, pale blue that is opaque, and her mouth like a slit, while her chin projected. She had too an affectation of youth that was absurd. When she had quite completed her investigation and was satisfied that mademoiselle was not there, she paused a moment confounded.

"You have had the pleasure of searching my house, Madame Zotof," Zénaïde said with a cold smile, "and now I have the pleasure of asking you to leave it with what speed you may."

She spoke with scorn, and Madame Zotof recoiled before the unexpected attack; she felt that she had overstepped the bounds of propriety, and that my wife was justified in her retort. After a moment she recovered and made a sweeping curtsy.

"You carry things with a high hand, madame," she said bitterly, "but his Majesty the Czar will

have satisfaction. You cannot spirit away my niece without accounting for it."

"You speak wildly," replied Zénaïde, haughtily; "from your own statement, I understand that your niece has gone, and you are searching for her, but I see no reason for the accusation that I took her from your house. It is absurd!"

"You may not have taken her from my house, but you certainly sent her from yours," madame replied quickly.

"That is your conclusion, madame," Zénaïde said calmly; "and if you are quite done with your search, I will bid you good-morning, for I find myself in sore need of repose."

"Do not allow me to disturb you," Madame Zotof retorted with mock courtesy; "my husband and I will withdraw instantly, and report to the czar that you have found means to despatch Najine to some unknown spot."

"As you will, madame," Zénaïde retorted with assumed weariness; "but be careful to adhere to the truth, for sometimes kings are exacting."

Madame Zotof grew red with anger. "Madame is kind," she exclaimed; "on my word, I never received such treatment. I am requested to go, and accused of falsehood in a breath. Truly, French manners have not improved the Russian woman."

Zénaïde had her hand on the door in the act of closing it upon the other, but she paused with a little soft laugh of disdain.

“I am rebuked, madame,” she said lightly, “but you must remember that the provocation was great;” and with that she shut the door, leaving me with the pair upon my hands, — M. Zotof angry and embarrassed, and madame fuming with passion but still ready to lead.

“Come, Zotof,” she said curtly, passing me without a glance; “it is a waste of time to dally here. Najine has duped us again. Why stand there gaping? Find a way out of this difficulty!” and she walked on before us like a huge bird whose plumage had been ruffled in the fray.

“Permit me to conduct you, madame,” I said graciously, advancing with the light; “the stairs are dark and somewhat steep.”

“Nay, I shall not break my neck,” she retorted with a discordant laugh; “I am sure of foot. You will be sorry for this night’s work, M. l’Ambassadeur.”

“That is true,” said Zotof, as he came slowly down behind us. “I am truly sorry, M. le Maréchal, that you have mixed yourself up in this matter.”

“I thank you for your sollicitude, monsieur and madame both,” I replied, shading the taper from the wind, for Touchet had already opened the door and their attendants were waiting at the threshold. “I trust, however, that I shall surmount the embarrassments of the occasion, and hope that the king my master will not resent the discourtesy shown to his subjects.”

At this Zotof stopped with his mouth open, his breath coming fast, for he was a very stout man. It was obviously a new light on the situation; but madame chose to ignore it, merely gathering her skirts about her as if she shook off the dust of my dwelling.

"I should like," she remarked, eying me keenly, "to know where M. de Lambert is at this moment."

I smiled. "Madame asks too much of me," I said, shrugging my shoulders. "I am not omniscient."

"You have a devil of diplomacy, monsieur," she retorted sharply; then turning on her stout and slow moving lord, "Come, come, Zotof, we have been fools long enough; the day is breaking."

But he let her go out, and then, pausing on the threshold, looked back at me.

"I may have seemed discourteous, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said too low for her ears; "but women will be women, and we came at the command of—of one in authority."

"Of the czar, monsieur," I replied with a frankness that made him wince. "I understand, and bear you no ill will; but, M. Zotof, no Frenchman endures such impertinence with patience; therefore let this be the last time that either you or madame your wife trespass upon my hospitality after such a fashion;" and with this I closed the door sharply in his face.

CHAPTER XVII.

MENTCHIKOF.

AN hour after daybreak, Touchet came to me with the information that one of the imperial equerries was in waiting. I had been endeavoring to snatch a few hours' rest, but roused myself at once, and throwing on some clothing went out into the *salon* and received the czar's messenger. He was a young fellow, who had been instructed to see me before delivering his document,—a packet with the imperial seal. I was not surprised, on opening it, to find M. de Lambert's passports, with a formal note to me requesting that the young man be sent at once to France.

"M. de Lambert is absent," I said to the equerry, "but as soon as he returns I will inform him of the czar's pleasure."

The Russian seemed satisfied with my assurance, and with a few civil words departed, evidently having been instructed to serve his notice with all due respect to me.

The whole affair was profoundly annoying, and I wished from my heart that M. de Lambert had found it convenient to fall in love at home. I was well aware that nothing but force would induce

him to leave Moscow at this crisis, and bitterly repented my folly in bringing a young court gallant in my suite. How to get him out of the imbroglio with a whole skin was a difficult question, and I was not reassured by the thought that Catherine Shavronsky was still under a cloud. I determined to see Mentchikof at my earliest opportunity and feel his pulse on the situation. His threats against mademoiselle were not to my comfort, but I was convinced that he would never resort to extreme measures while there was a possibility of reinstating the Livonian in favor.

The day passed without event, and the inaction of all persons concerned was not altogether satisfactory. I feared that some trouble was brewing, and was not quieted by the delay in the return of M. de Lambert; he and Pierrot did not arrive until the following morning. They were travel-stained and weary, but exultant; they had conducted mademoiselle safely to her aunt at Troïtsa. Before allowing M. de Lambert to remove the dust of the journey, I handed him the czar's document without comment, watching his face while he read it. His expression was both scornful and perplexed, and his cheek flushed scarlet as he flung the packet on the table.

"*Ma foi!*" he exclaimed with impatience, "the czar takes me for a fool if he fancies that I can be packed off at his pleasure and leave mademoiselle to his tender mercy!"

“You forget, monsieur,” I said gravely, “that he is master here.”

“I do not forget,” he returned passionately, — “*parbleu!* it is thrown in my teeth at every turn, — but I am a French soldier, and forty czars shall not intimidate me.”

“Bravo, monsieur!” I retorted, clapping my hands; “but how do you propose to beard the lion in his den?”

“I will find a way to defeat him,” he replied quietly; “he cannot always conquer circumstances.”

While he was talking, Touchet came to the door and addressed him.

“There is a youth below, sir,” he said, “who would speak with you alone.”

M. de Lambert looked up in surprise. He had not had the opportunity to lay aside his cloak, and he picked up his sword from the table and started, as he was, to the door.

“Be careful,” I said to him at once; “you are in a delicate position — take no hasty step.”

“It can be nothing of importance,” he replied, “but I thank you for the caution, M. le Maréchal.”

With those words he went down the stairs to the door, and, Pierrot at the moment bringing in my breakfast, I sat down by the fire to eat it, while my equerry, giving place to Touchet, went to seek a little rest himself. In a moment Zénaïde came in through the corridor and joined me at the table.

“Who went out the door, Touchet?” she asked.

“M. de Lambert is talking to a lad there,” I explained.

“Not now,” she said at once; “some one went out and closed the door.”

I rose and went to the window in time to see M. de Lambert walking away alone and at a rapid pace.

“On some fool’s errand,” I muttered to myself, and went back to the chair, explaining the departure with impatience.

Zénaïde looked disturbed, and was yet more troubled when I found an opportunity to show her the passport.

“You should not have allowed him to go unattended, Philippe,” she said gravely; “he is surrounded by dangers and so rash and headstrong.”

“By all the saints, madame!” I exclaimed, “I cannot be his guardian. He has been here scarcely more than a quarter of an hour, and has not removed the dust of his long ride; how could I foresee his immediate departure?”

Madame de Brousson sighed. “I feel as if we were responsible for him,” she remarked pensively, “and you and I both know the methods here more thoroughly than he.”

“I am half thankful for his passports,” I grumbled, “since Russia is no place for a young courtier.”

As I spoke, I looked up and caught my wife's eyes fixed upon me with an arch glance of amusement. She laughed softly.

"If you had possessed your mature wisdom twenty years ago, M. le Vicomte," she said gravely, "we should never have met."

I had risen from my chair and I made her an obeisance.

"I am convicted, madame," I replied with mock gravity, "and crave your permission to withdraw."

Touchet came, at the moment, with my mantle and sword, and, taking him for an attendant, I went to Mentchikof's house. As I approached it, I noted with amusement the certain indications of the humor of a court. A week before, he had been the czar's favorite, the patron of a beautiful woman who was likely to be the successor of Anna Mons, and the courtyard and hall had been crowded with courtiers and those miserable creatures who fawn upon the man of the hour. But for a few days the sunshine of imperial favor had been obscured, and lo, the gay host of butterflies had fluttered to some brighter spot. The entrance was deserted, and a solitary usher conducted me through the splendid *salons* to the small room in the wing where the great man worked alone. I had not seen Mentchikof since the day that we parted on his stairs, with his veiled threat against mademoiselle in my ears, and I approached him now with some feelings of curiosity. How would

the pampered favorite endure this season of neglect? how would the darling of a court face the solitude of a discarded counsellor? Without any ceremony, the usher threw open the door and I stood face to face with Alexander Mentchikof. He sat in a large chair by his writing-table, in an easy attitude; his left elbow resting on the arm of his chair, his right arm thrown across the table; the pen, still wet with ink, in his fingers, while his left hand supported his chin, for his head was bent in thought and his fine face was unusually grave in its repose. His rich dress of black velvet was arranged as carefully as if for some court function, and the blue ribbon of the Order of Saint Andrew showed on his breast. He greeted me without emotion and with his usual urbanity, asking me to be seated.

“There are chairs in plenty to-day, M. le Maréchal,” he remarked, smiling, as he glanced at the vacant room; “you find my state reduced, and my friends” — he laughed, looking at me with those keen brilliant eyes, “my friends are running for a safer covert. It reminds me of an ancient legend, — of a great lion to whom all the beasts, through fear, paid court. The lion had a favorite, a mouse, whom he guarded tenderly, and all the other beasts paid homage to it, telling it that it resembled its patron, until the mouse, through conceit, offended, and the lion deserted it in anger. Immediately all the beasts

departed, save one, who swallowed the wretched little mouse. Presently, the lion, returning, found his pet gone, and was enraged, and fell upon the beast who had eaten it, and tore him and drove off the others, and was afterwards a scourge because no animal dared any more to try to soothe his mood." Throwing out his hands with a gesture of disdain, he added, "I am waiting to be devoured."

"It is easy to draw a parallel," I said thoughtfully, "for afterwards no man will rule the heart of this lion."

He laughed bitterly. "Fools rush upon their fate, M. le Maréchal," he rejoined; "each man thinks that he is born to scale the dizzy heights of fame. The greater the fool, the more eager he is for the attempt. Unhappily, they find their error out too late, and run headlong to their ruin."

"I have often considered whether it was worth while or not," I remarked quietly, "the glitter of a court dazzles, but its honors are hollow."

Mentchikof smiled. "It is easy to philosophize in the hour of good fortune, M. l'Ambassadeur," he replied dryly, "but in the day of evil it is difficult to apply it. We who have tasted the sweets of power find the loss a bitter one. However, sometimes our friends desert too soon, and Fortune changes when it is least expected."

"It will be so with you, monsieur," I said with

conviction; "meanwhile I find myself also in embarrassment. This morning I received this communication from the czar."

He held out his hand for the papers with an expression of curiosity; he was far from suspecting their contents, for, after glancing over the documents, he looked at me in open astonishment, smiling a little at the gravity of my face.

"When a man is a king, it is easy to dispose of rivals, monsieur," he remarked quietly; "it makes the less fortunate envious."

I laughed. "The case is peculiar, however," I replied, "for M. de Lambert is a young hot-head and ill to guide; it will be difficult to send him away. I have had some hope that this order might be reversed or, at least, a delay permitted."

"It might have been," Mentchikof replied thoughtfully; "but, unhappily, Mademoiselle Shavronsky's folly has made it impossible for me to arrange it. His Majesty would be instantly suspicious of any interference on my part. I fear, M. le Maréchal, that the young man must go."

I did not reply at once, and he folded the papers gravely and returned them to me; as he did so, he glanced at me keenly and smiled.

"Where is Mademoiselle Zotof?" he asked abruptly.

For the moment I was taken unawares and hesitated to reply, and he laughed.

"You must inquire of the Councillor Zotof," I said with composure, meeting his eye.

"If rumor makes no mistake, sir," he rejoined quietly, "the councillor is anxious to know."

I had risen to take my leave. I was disappointed at the failure of my effort, and no longer disturbed by his inquiry.

"You ask a good deal, monsieur," I remarked calmly. "If the young lady's uncle cannot find her, certainly a stranger could not."

He was still laughing softly and regarding me from beneath his drooping lids.

"The czar may not think the same," he said gently, "and it will be difficult to avoid an explanation. As your friend, M. le Maréchal, I warn you."

I thanked him and withdrew, satisfied that he was really unable to prevent M. de Lambert's dismissal, but still gravely uncertain of his intentions toward Najine. He would never accept his defeat with resignation, and I had no doubt that he and Catherine were deep in plot and counterplot. Meanwhile M. Guillaume would remain in Moscow at his peril, and I shared Zénaïde's feeling of personal responsibility. I must send him away at once, or conceal him; and he would dispute either expedient. Never was man more perplexed than I, as I walked slowly toward my quarters. Mademoiselle, for the time, was safe, but it was manifest that the Livonian girl was still out of favor,

and the czar's fancy for Najine was likely to prevail; and, after all, would she still persist in her repugnance to a crown?

When I entered the house, Pierrot met me with a grave face.

"M. de Lambert has not returned," he said quietly, "and he went out without eating a morsel."

I paused to think. It was not reassuring, and yet there was a possibility that there was no cause for apprehension.

"We will give him a few hours more, Pierrot," I said; but I was ill at ease.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISSING.

WHEN the day was far spent and there was still no sign of M. de Lambert, I began to share Madame de Brousson's solicitude. That he could be again duped when he knew that Najine was miles away, seemed improbable, but I could expect almost any folly from his impetuosity. Pierrot had been out in search of him, but without result, and came back manifestly disquieted, for years had not dulled his suspicion of the Russian. He told me too that he had seen Tikhon in the vicinity of my quarters, and I saw that he suspected some plot to make away with M. Guillaume. This seemed improbable to me, because of the czar's order for his departure, for it would be unnecessary to deal summarily with the young man until he failed to obey the instructions. However, I became uneasy and, ordering my horse, took Pierrot and started for Prince Dolgoruky's house. I could, at least, observe the prince, and learn something of his designs, especially if he had really interfered with M. de Lambert. We rode at a smart pace, and in a few moments I was dis-

mounting in the courtyard. While he did not assume the state of Mentchikof, Dolgoruky belonged to the older boyars, and there was more of the ceremony of twenty years before about his household. I was ushered into his presence by an old Russian attendant who had probably performed that office in the family for fifty years. The prince was not alone, but surrounded by a group of friends, and, to my discomfiture, attended by Zotof, who, I fancied, smiled a little at my entrance. His presence disconcerted me, suggesting, as it did, an intimate relation between the two, and therefore strengthening the probability of Dolgoruky's interference with my friend. However, I put a bold face upon the matter, and, waiving the formal courtesy of the occasion, spoke to the point, inventing a story for the purpose of entrapping him.

"I come on a pressing errand, prince," I said at once. "M. de Lambert, a gentleman of my suite, left my house this morning at a summons from one of your household and has not yet returned. His presence being imperative at my quarters, owing to a message from his Majesty the Czar, I came here to inquire for him. Doubtless you can tell me where he is."

Dolgoruky stared at me with an astonishment that was either genuine or exceedingly well feigned; then, turning to his friends, he exclaimed, —

"I call you to witness, gentlemen, the extraor-

dinary demand of M. de Brousson. He asks me to produce a French soldier whom I have not seen for at least a fortnight and then at the palace."

"M. de Brousson is a very extraordinary person," remarked Zotof, calmly. "He demands M. de Lambert at your hands, and yet refused to account for my niece, Najine Alexeievna, when she visited his wife."

"Then let us make a bargain, M. l'Ambassadeur," said Dolgoruky, smiling; "if you will produce Najine Zotof, we will endeavor to find M. de Lambert."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I am not a magician, gentlemen," I said dryly, "but I must account to the king my master for an officer of his household troops, in the person of Guillaume de Lambert. King Louis loves not an injury offered to any true Frenchman."

The Russians looked at me intently. I was standing before them, my hat in my hand, and my cloak still thrown across my shoulders, armed and booted as I had ridden, and I was measuring them with a certain scorn of their ability to dupe me, yet curious too as to their own estimate of the situation, for I no longer doubted that they knew something of M. de Lambert.

"All honor to the King of France," Dolgoruky replied suavely; "long may he live and learn to stand with Russia against the madman of Sweden

and the Turk! Why should I desire to offend his Majesty?"

"Nevertheless, the king will be gravely offended, Prince Dolgoruky," I said calmly, "if I cannot account for this young man who has served with conspicuous gallantry in the armies of France."

"Am I his keeper, M. l'Ambassadeur?" exclaimed the prince, tartly. "Why do you demand a hot-headed boy at my hands?"

For a moment I did not reply. I wished my words to have additional weight, and I let a silence intervene and then spoke with deliberation.

"I asked him at your hands, prince," I said, "because you have set a spy upon him for two months and more. It was your man, Tikhon, who dogged his steps before Apraxin joined the pursuit and attempted to assassinate him. I am responsible for his life, and am compelled to demand your aid in my search for him."

Dolgoruky's face flushed deeply at my words, and I saw that he was struggling with a passionate impulse to reply with violence, and his anger was reflected in the faces of his friends. But he had much at stake and was something of a diplomat; before I finished speaking, he had smoothed his brow and was looking at me with candid reproach.

"You do me foul injustice, M. le Vicomte," he said plaintively; "how have I deserved such treat-

ment at your hands? My assistance you shall have. Tikhon shall go with you into every corner of Moscow, to search for this young gentleman."

He had assumed the only tone possible to evade my importunity, and I was astonished at the ease with which he played the injured party. I could not quarrel with so passive a foe, and was forced to accept Tikhon for what he was worth as a guide. I had no authority to search Dolgoruky's house, and indeed doubted that he would attempt to detain M. de Lambert there.

So it was that, baffled in my intention of taunting him into an acknowledgment of his work, I left his house as quickly as possible to prosecute my search, accompanied by Tikhon, who rode along sullenly enough with Pierrot, for he probably still remembered the day when M. de Lambert had stretched him on the pavement of the Grand Square of the Kremlin. In truth, I scarcely knew what use to make of the silent Russian, who protested an ignorance as great as his master's, but whom I suspected of considerable malevolence, for he was not the man to forget or forgive.

We rode back rapidly to my quarters to inquire if M. de Lambert had returned in the interval, and, finding that he was yet absent, went on upon our errand. The improbability of his voluntarily staying so long away now that Najine was absent was palpable enough, and I had no longer any doubt that he had met with foul play. We had

searched every quarter where he was likely to visit, with the result of receiving repeated assurances that he had not been seen that day, and I was deeply disquieted. The dusk was gathering, and we rode back upon our tracks in an aimless fashion. I had ordered my two attendants in front, and was riding several yards behind absorbed in troubled thought. We were below the Kremlin, on the bank of the Moskva, and so lost was I in meditation that I started when my horse shied at the sudden appearance of a man before him. The stranger laid his hand on my bridle, and I drew my pistol, thinking him some cut-purse.

“You stop me at your peril, knave,” I said harshly, wrenching the rein free.

“Do not shoot, sir!” he exclaimed, and I knew his voice at once; it was the Swedish spy.

“You took a serious risk,” I remarked, putting up my weapon; “what would you have from me?”

“You are searching for M. de Lambert,” he said quietly; “I have heard of it. That man Tikhon knows something—and also, monsieur, Apraxin is here again.”

I started; these were evil tidings, for I looked upon him as an assassin. The Swede's knowledge did not astonish me, since it was his business to acquire information, and his devoted gratitude had already been proved. I leaned from my saddle and spoke to him in a low tone.

“I thank you,” I said; “learn all you can, for

I fear that he has met with foul play. They desire his absence or his death."

"Compel yonder man to speak, M. le Vicomte," he said earnestly, "and I will do my best. One good turn deserves another;" and with these words he slipped back behind the shadow of a low building, and I rode on.

He had scarcely detained me five minutes, but the others had gained upon me and were quite a way in advance, so that as I went I had time to formulate a plan for learning something definite from Tikhon. After a while I rode faster and, overtaking them, ordered them to proceed to the Zemlianui-gorod by way of a lonely lane with which I was familiar. It was now quite dark, and the quiet of the hour and the place suited my purpose. When we had reached the loneliest spot, I called Pierrot to me under the pretence that my saddle needed a tighter girth, and thus found an opportunity to whisper a word or so in his ear. Tikhon had halted and was waiting in sullen acquiescence, when Pierrot and I rode forward, one on either side of him, and, Pierrot seizing his horse's rein, I pressed my pistol to his temple. He was taken unawares, and for the moment, I think, was badly frightened.

"We have had enough of this child's play," I said sternly, "and now you can tell us where to find M. de Lambert or you can die—like the miserable wretch that you are."

"I know nothing," he replied stubbornly; "it will avail nothing to kill me."

"Tush, man!" I exclaimed sharply, "a spy is never so ignorant. You cannot escape me. Either take me to M. de Lambert, or tell me where to find him."

"I can do neither," he retorted, in the same sullen tone, gaining courage because I did not immediately execute my threat. "I know nothing, nor does the prince my master."

"Probably you know how to say your prayers," I remarked dryly, "in which case you had better say them, for you have only about five minutes to live. I give you so much space to choose between confession and eternity."

He did not reply. I think he only just began to believe that I was in earnest. He was not a coward, but the touch of cold steel thrills even a strong man. There was no chance of escape for him; we were in a desolate spot, and the night grew intensely dark. There was no sound as we sat there on our horses but their occasional restive movements. Pierrot held his bridle with an iron grip, and I had covered him with my weapon. A pistol-shot more or less would not be noticed in Moscow, and death stared him in the face. In the silence I could hear his breath coming short and thick, and knew his heart was failing him. He could not see my face, and I smiled in the darkness. It would not be necessary to use vio-

lence. He was struggling hard with himself, and I had no doubt that he had cause to fear the result of a confession. Dolgoruky, of course, had bound him to fidelity, and it was possible that he saw death as an alternative on either hand, for the prince would never pardon the betrayal of his trust, and he must have placed great confidence in this man or he would not have permitted him to go with me. The minutes passed, and Tikhon was silent, still doubtless hoping for rescue. The stillness was oppressive; the city was strangely quiet, only, far off, a cathedral bell tolled twice from the Kremlin. Once more I raised and levelled my pistol.

"The time has expired," I said quietly. "I shall count three before I fire, therefore be prepared for eternity."

Still he did not speak; he had a stubborn courage which was slow to yield.

"One," I counted, tightening my grip upon my horse's rein, for it seemed as if the fool was determined to rush upon his fate and I was losing patience.

"Two!"

I heard him draw his breath with a gasp.

"Wait!" he cried thickly.

It had come at last, but I carried things with a high hand.

"Do not trifle," I exclaimed sternly, "you are facing death; speak the whole truth."

"You are a hard man," he said in his sullen voice. "I am likely to die in either case, but I am not prepared now."

"Be quick!" I cried with impatience; "where is M. de Lambert?"

"Where he is not likely to escape so easily," he answered, with a certain vicious triumph in his tone; "he is in a guard-room of the Kremlin."

I started; something in his tone convinced me that he spoke the truth, and I was not prepared for it.

"He could not be there without the czar's order," I exclaimed, "and I have his passports."

"He was committed by the czar's officers," he replied.

"And you betrayed him into their hands," I said fiercely.

"I did not," he replied boldly; "not that I bore him any good-will, but I had no need to do more than watch. Zotof's relative, Apraxin, did the work."

"Ah!" I ejaculated, "where is the miserable coward?"

"Truly, I know not," Tikhon said bluntly; "he is a sullen boy for whom I have no love. He has doubtless taken care to escape your vengeance."

"Not if he is in Moscow," I said sharply, all the while thinking of some way out of the difficulty.

"Are you satisfied, M. le Vicomte?" he asked

after a moment; "am I at liberty to live, having betrayed my trust?"

"If what you have told me proves true, you are safe," I replied slowly; "if it is false, you will answer for it. Let go his rein, Pierrot, and ride with him to my quarters, and let him not escape your close surveillance until I order his dismissal. I have another errand."

I watched them ride away until their dark figures became parts of that other darkness, and then, turning my horse's head, made all speed to the Kremlin.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MARRIAGE OF THE DWARFS.

I RODE toward the Kremlin with a heavy heart; the perplexity and perils of my position were increased a hundredfold. My distance from my own government and my comparative isolation in Moscow made a demand for justice not only difficult but practically futile. The czar had no right to imprison arbitrarily one of my suite, but how absurd was it to talk of privileges to the autocrat of all the Russias! It was well enough to carry matters with a high hand and threaten the wrath of the King of France while M. de Lambert was a free man, but the *coup d'état* was accomplished; he was actually in a Russian prison, and might easily starve there before aid could come from Versailles. What folly had led him into the trap? What madness on his part had prompted this sudden seizure? Not only did I find these questions difficult to answer, but I found it difficult, too, to hit upon a plan of action. Never was man in more unfortunate position, — responsible for a delicate mission to the king my master; responsible for a reckless young soldier; responsible for the honor and dignity of my country, and

dealing with a man of violent passions, for the czar was a volcano ready to breathe smoke and fire at a moment's provocation. And how could I approach him now? Should I assume ignorance, and appeal to him to aid me in my search for M. de Lambert, or should I boldly proclaim my knowledge of the imprisonment and demand justice in the name of the King of France? I checked my horse and rode slowly to give myself time for thought. On the whole, I reflected that feigned ignorance would suit my purpose best, since defiance could scarcely help me and might deeply incense the czar. There was one chance in a hundred for the young man's release, and that was a slender one. I fancied that he would be offered an alternative; renunciation of mademoiselle or imprisonment, perhaps worse, if Peter dared to offer a deeper injury to a soldier of France. Knowing the czar as I did, I doubted his hesitation at anything, especially where his personal feelings were involved, and I no longer doubted his love for Najine. How tangled is the skein of our existence! Here was a young girl, simple, beautiful, innocent, holding in her hand the knot of an emperor's destiny, and by that accident of fate, involving so many other lives in the meshes. Here were love and hate, malice and revenge, secret treason and attempted assassination interwoven by the accident of one man's fancy, simply because that he was royal.

Slow as had been the latter part of my journey, it was accomplished in spite of my reflections, and I found myself at the entrance of the palace. My dress was somewhat disordered by hard riding, but I made no attempt to adjust it, for it seemed to me that my appearance would be one evidence of the urgency of my errand. Entering the ante-room, I requested an audience of the czar. The chamberlain hesitated at first, saying that his Majesty was present at a marriage and would scarcely permit an interruption; but, hearing that my business was imperative, he consented to be the bearer of my petition, and, departing on his errand, left me for half an hour to my own reflections. I suspected that Peter was not anxious to receive me, and speculated not a little on the possibilities of the approaching interview, although all the time full of anxiety for M. de Lambert, knowing something of the treatment that he was likely to receive. After my patience was nearly exhausted, the chamberlain returned and informed me that it was the czar's pleasure that I should be conducted to his presence. I followed the Russian, expecting a private audience; but instead of turning towards the czar's own apartments, he led me through a low narrow passage to one of the large halls. We entered by a small door at the lower end, and I paused a moment on the threshold, regarding the scene with considerable astonishment. It was a splen-

did *salon*, barbaric in its gorgeous colors, which made a background for a fantastic painted decoration of palm-leaves and flowers, and it was spanned by glittering arches supporting the vaulted roof, and was lighted by a thousand tapers. In seats and upon cushions, arranged close against the four walls, reclined the gayest courtiers, the wild coterie that constituted Peter's intimate circle of revellers. The center of the room was occupied by a crowd of dwarfs, of both sexes, some hideously and grotesquely deformed. They were in charge of a dwarf marshal who had eight assistants, all arrayed in gay uniform, bedizened with tinsel, and they were executing one of their weird dances, while at the upper end of the apartment, leaning back in his chair with a gloomy face, was the czar. After a moment's observation, I understood the scene: there had been a marriage; two dwarfs had amused the audience by the mockery of such a wedding. Those unhappy little creatures were kept about the Russian court, its playthings and the objects of many a grim jest; the spies and eavesdroppers of rival factions; the tools and the dupes of the gay and the wicked; intimate with every intrigue, masters of every secret, and often dangerous in their hatred, as such misshapen creatures are likely to be; full of malice and all unkindness, betraying and betrayed; the most pitiful and the most miserable objects of that brilliant assemblage, and yet reck-

oned to be one of its sources of amusement; ministering now to the gloomy temper of a master whose evil spirit was upon him, for I saw, at a glance, that Peter was suffering from one of those seasons of depression that came over him like a cloud, and suggested an abnormal condition of mind in a man usually so forceful and full of easy good-humor, with all his violent passions. A great soul is isolated, and as the tempests sweep around the mountain's loftiest peak, so also must storm and terror sweep sometimes over the spirit that has been set amid the rulers of the earth. As the dark hour came upon Saul, so also did it come upon the greatest Romanoff. He sat, shading his face with his hand, his eyes fixed gloomily on the dwarfs; two of the little creatures, gifted with singular beauty, were sitting at his feet, while the others had begun a country-dance, called by the Germans *Grossvater*, which Peter himself had learned when in his merry mood in the German quarter; but to-night no music could charm him into the mazes of the dance, and the revelry was subdued, for the courtier is quick to take his cue from the imperial temper. In the circle immediately about the czar, I saw Dolgoruky and Sheremetief, and, to my relief, at a little distance was Mentchikof. I was standing with the full length of the *salon* between myself and the imperial party, and was scarcely noticed by the gay young nobles near me, except

when one or two turned to stare at my plain riding-suit and at the mud upon my boots. The chamberlain who had brought me made his way slowly to the upper end of the apartment, and announced my presence to his Majesty. I was watching Peter narrowly, and saw him glance at the man with a frown, his face almost instantly convulsed by that *tic* which made his features, for the moment, terrible. He spoke a few words to the chamberlain, who withdrew a little way and waited while the czar turned his attention again to the dancers and I stood unnoticed by the door. I began to chafe under this treatment, for not only did it suggest delay, but it might indicate a possible affront to me as an ambassador, for Peter had openly called me an envoy of France, and, although I as openly disclaimed it, the position was awkward. If I resented the neglect, I would double and treble the difficulties of my situation and of M. de Lambert's. However, at the end of a quarter of an hour the chamberlain returned to guide me through the throng to the czar. The dancing had ceased, and the courtiers mingled with the dwarfs while the wine flowed freely. It was difficult to walk through the crowded room without being rudely jostled, and once I nearly stumbled over a dwarf who was scrambling about on the floor after a jewel that had fallen from some chain. Peter was talking earnestly to Sheremetief, but as I approached, he dismissed

those immediately about him, and received me almost alone, — for the babel of tongues made it impossible to overhear a conversation carried on in a low tone. The expression of the czar's face was still gloomy, and he greeted me with a certain hauteur that suggested a remembrance of our last meeting and his defeat at the hands of my wife. He measured me from head to foot, apparently noting every detail of my disordered dress and the pistols at my belt.

“You are welcome, M. l'Ambassadeur,” he said deliberately, “although you come booted and spurred and armed grimly for so festive an occasion.”

“I crave your Majesty's pardon,” I replied; “the urgency of my errand must be my apology for this untimely and unseemly appearance.”

He looked at me with well-feigned surprise.

“Your errand is urgent, then, sir,” he remarked coolly; “in that case this is scarcely the time or place for it. However, the sooner it is heard, the sooner it is over.”

“Your Majesty's permission is scarcely as gracious as I hoped to receive,” I said coldly, “but I am compelled to trespass upon your patience. One of my suite, M. de Lambert, has been missing since early morning, and all my efforts to discover him have been unavailing. I received his passports and intended to act upon them, in accordance with your Majesty's wishes; but he

almost immediately disappeared, and I fear that he has met with foul play."

Peter listened to me with close attention, not by the movement of a muscle betraying any feeling upon the subject, and his dark eyes searching my face, which I strove to render as immovable and inscrutable as his own.

"This young man, M. de Lambert," he said slowly, "is, I hear, something of a wild gallant; therefore, M. le Vicomte, it seems to my poor judgment that you make too much of a trifle. He is, doubtless, absent on some business of his own, and will shortly reappear. I see no reason for your apprehension of foul play."

"Unhappily, your Majesty," I replied boldly, "there are but too good grounds for such apprehensions. He has but lately recovered from a wound dealt by the hand of an assassin."

The czar started slightly; it was apparent that he was ignorant of this occurrence.

"It seems strange, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said, "that an assassin should attack one of your suite and you make no complaint to the authorities or to me."

"M. de Lambert was not seriously injured, your Majesty," I replied quietly, "and I did not desire to accuse a member of a family near your person."

"Speak plainly, M. de Brousson," Peter exclaimed; "who was the man?"

I knew that I was treading on delicate ground, but I delivered my blow calmly. "It was Yury Apraxin, the protégé of M. Zotof," I said with deliberation.

The czar flushed a deep red, and for an instant his eyes shot fire. He recalled the scene at Mentchikof's house, and for a moment, I believe, thought that I intended to insult him; then he controlled his passion and leaned towards me, clenching the arms of his chair with a grip that made the cords stand out upon his hands.

"What quarrel had he with M. de Lambert?" he asked in a low voice, but with an emphasis that was ominous.

I had assumed an air of innocence and candor. I looked straight back into his passionate eyes, which were like those of the untamed king of beasts.

"M. de Lambert has deeply admired M. Zotof's beautiful niece, doing homage to her beauty and purity, as we all do, your Majesty," I replied easily; "and M. Apraxin, having been betrothed to mademoiselle, resented M. de Lambert's admiration for his *fiancée*."

The czar's brow grew like a thundercloud; he knew nothing of Apraxin's early betrothal, and I began to enjoy the situation keenly. He uttered a fierce exclamation, and I saw his lips twitch.

"Najine Zotof betrothed!" he said under his breath, and then added: "Upon my soul, M. l'Am-

bassadeur, I thank you for your tidings. It seems that my own people do not often speak truth to me. Apraxin — the marplot boy! Did your friend run him through for his pains?"

"No, your Majesty," I replied quietly; "my man ran to M. de Lambert's aid, and Apraxin fled like a caitiff."

"Two Frenchmen, and yet he was not killed!" the czar exclaimed furiously; "where were their swords?"

"The night was dark, your Majesty, the ground slippery, and Frenchmen are not used to fight foes who strike in the back," I said coolly.

Peter bit his lip. "You may bless your fortune that you are a foreigner, M. de Brousson," he exclaimed with passion; "I have borne much from you. If you had been my subject, I would have had your head long since."

"That belongs to the King of France," I replied with composure, "and I trust it to your Majesty's generosity."

"The king my brother has to thank my forbearance that you carry it back to him," he retorted tartly. "You are an old fox, M. l'Ambassadeur; but you always carry matters with a high hand."

"Your Majesty compliments my wit too much," I replied courteously; "but I crave now your permission to prosecute a thorough search for M. de Lambert."

The czar made a gesture of impatience. "I am

tired of the name," he exclaimed; "prosecute your search by all means, and let me hear no more of him. He has his passports, let him use them; Moscow is no place for him."

"Will your Majesty order one of your officers to furnish me with the means to continue my search?" I asked, pressing my point.

The czar frowned, and I saw that he hesitated. No doubt, well aware of M. de Lambert's arrest, he found himself in an awkward situation. However, he called an attendant, and, scribbling a few lines on a paper, despatched him, and then turned to me. He had risen from his chair and stood there, among the gay costumes of his court, a massive figure in the uniform of a German ship-captain, without an ornament or an order.

"You will find an officer with the proper credentials at your disposal in the ante-room, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said curtly; "use what speed you may. Find this Frenchman and send him across the border, or it may be necessary for me to hasten his departure;" and with these words he turned his back upon me, and, walking through the throng of dwarfs, who fell back at his approach until he had a wide path across the *salon*, he passed out and closed the door. A chill fell upon the assemblage, and men stared at me as if I were some ill-omened visitor. I found myself the center of observation as I made my way to the entrance by which I had come, and went out unaccosted by

any one, which made me suspect that the court knew something of the seizure of my friend, and that there was peril. I was not reassured, and had accomplished nothing. I hurried through the ante-rooms to the farther one, where I found an officer of the Preobrazhensky regiment waiting for me, and, for a moment, thought that foul play was intended; but he addressed me with deference and showed his orders to obey my instructions. We went out together, and began a tedious and of course fruitless search for M. de Lambert. It was an easy matter for the imperial officer to take me to every spot but the right one, and I felt that I would have given much to read the lines that the czar had scribbled upon that slip of paper. A weary search it was, from place to place; the Russian always courteous, inscrutable, unruffled, and ignorant—as only a man can be whose business it is to be sublimely stupid.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FAITHFUL SPY.

IN asking for an officer to assist in my search for M. de Lambert, I had hoped to force the czar's hand, and to obtain some direct information as to his intentions toward his captive, but I had failed in this, and the Russian was of no assistance to me; on the contrary, he became such a burden that after a few hours I signified my readiness to dispense with his services, and saw him depart with feelings of deep relief. He left me at the door of my own lodgings, and I went in to inquire for tidings, only to find that there were none, and that Pierrot had Tikhon still in custody. I was not willing to let him go until I had absolute proof of the truth of his information, and so left him to the tender mercies of my equerry. It was late, but I found Zénaïde waiting for me with an anxious face, having spent the night in watching, all her fears alarmed by M. de Lambert's disappearance, for, though a brave woman, she was always sensitive to anxieties for my personal safety, and she understood only too well the intrigues of the court.

“Where have you been?” she asked as she helped me to lay aside my cloak and sword. “Have you any good tidings?”

“None,” I replied gloomily, “and I have seen the czar.”

“It is, then, as we feared,” she exclaimed; “he has been arrested?”

I inclined my head. “So Tikhon tells me, and I believe he speaks the truth. The czar was in an evil humor and determined to baffle me. It is a sorry affair, and if something does not occur to mend it inside of twenty-four hours, I must even send a messenger post-haste to Versailles.”

Zénaïde’s face grew grave, and she stood looking at the fire thoughtfully. “A sorry matter, indeed,” she said after a moment, “and it makes me shudder when I think of what may happen to M. de Lambert before we can do anything for him. Poor Najine!”

“I do not believe that the czar will attempt to harm him,” I replied; “the King of France is no weak foe, and I have endeavored to impress them here with the personal importance of Guillaume de Lambert.”

Zénaïde shook her head. “You do not know Russia yet, Philippe,” she said, “or you would not lay that unction to your soul. I thought that you understood better the passionate, impulsive nature of Peter Alexeivitch.”

“Ay, madame,” I said, “I know the Russian,

but I know also that the name of Louis of France is a power, and Peter never forgets altogether, even in his love fever, his quarrel with Charles of Sweden. If he affronts the king my master, how can he foresee the result in Saxony? The German princes are only too anxious to partition Augustus' patrimony, and with a new alliance what could not Charles XII. accomplish? Poland would be lost, not only to Augustus, but to Peter, and with it the Neva. No, no, Madame de Brousson, the czar dare not openly insult Louis de Bourbon."

Zénaïde shrugged her shoulders. "You do not understand Peter," she said with decision; "he is in love, and he will allow his impulses and his jealousies to rule him exactly as if he had been born a peasant. The czar is very genuine, and I believe I admire him for it. If he is a king, he is also a man, and when the depths of that soul are stirred, there is a mighty tempest."

"By Saint Denis, madame!" I exclaimed, "I shall begin to be jealous of his imperial Majesty. I never knew before how much you admired him."

She smiled. "Yes," she said thoughtfully, "I believe I do admire him; I believe that I am even sorry for him. He was married to an ignorant, bigoted woman who belongs to a past for which the czar has no sympathy. There could have been no affection between them, and he can have

little hope in the czarevitch. In a manner, I have been converted to your opinions. Peter has deep feelings and a certain simplicity; I believe that he sincerely desires to be loved by Mademoiselle Zotof. I can see just how her beauty, her wit, her spirit appeal to him. While I sympathize with her, and while her love for M. de Lambert is natural and sweet, yet I am not without regret — I confess it — that she cannot be Czarina of Russia.”

“Upon my word, Zénaïde,” I said dryly, “you should plead the czar’s cause. To me he seemed without so fine a perception.”

“A violent man, Philippe,” she replied gently, “but with some magnificent qualities, and, after all, the son of Alexis the most Debonair and Natalia Kirilovna, a beautiful and ambitious woman and a generous and benignant man; had he not the birthright to a noble soul? And how much more lovable than —”

I held up my finger in warning. “Have a care, madame,” I said.

“Nay, Philippe,” she replied, “I will say it — than the king our master.”

“Treason,” I said lightly, “high treason. It will become my duty, madame, to report you at Versailles.”

As I spoke, Touchet came to the door to announce that a stranger desired to see me at once on urgent business.

“Bid him come here,” I said, and then added, “Nay, I will go down —” But Zénaïde interrupted me.

“No, no,” she exclaimed, “let him come here. If his errand is honest, he can face the light, and we have had too much of conspiracy. The next move will be against you, and I will not be put off — I understand my own people better than you do, and I am your best defence.”

“He asked me to give this token to your Excellency,” Touchet said, handing me a ring.

It was my own which I had given to the Swede, and I bade Touchet bring him in at once.

“Your fears were groundless, Zénaïde,” I remarked, smiling; “you are over-anxious.”

“It may be, but I cannot let you run any risks,” she replied gently, laying her hand upon my arm. “There are but two Philippes in the world for me, you and my boy, and I cannot afford to lose either of them.”

Looking down upon her fair and anxious face, I kissed her.

“We are a couple of fools, madame,” I said, “and I hear the feet of Touchet and the Swede upon the stair.”

“By your leave I will stay,” she said, retiring to the alcove by the chimney, as the door opened to admit my visitor.

It was Lenk, and I was anxious to hear his tidings, for I was confident that he had found

some means to locate M. de Lambert, and my surmise proved correct.

"You are welcome, Lenk," I said, "for I doubt not that you have some information."

"I have, M. de Brousson," he replied gravely; "it is as I thought. He was betrayed by Apraxin into the hands of the czar's officers, and is imprisoned in the Kremlin."

"That is what Tikhon, Prince Dolgoruky's equerry, has already confessed," I said; "but where is he confined?"

"In a cell behind the old torture-room."

I started. It was a grim place in which to incarcerate an innocent man and a Frenchman. I felt the blood burn in my veins; it was an insult to France.

"Is it possible to communicate with him?" I asked quickly.

Lenk shook his head. "No, it was only by accident that I was enabled to locate him, your Excellency," he replied, "and no one else would have been so fortunate."

I looked at him curiously. "You have honey-combed the court secrets, I see," I remarked quietly; "how is it that you obtain such information and yet go about unsuspected and unapprehended?"

He smiled. "Is it possible that you have been so long in the courts of Europe, monsieur," he replied, "and yet do not know that treachery is

common, that no man is safe in the hands of his friends? There are many, too, who betray through folly. The brain of a fool is like an egg: you can draw out the contents, without breaking the shell."

I looked at him attentively. I saw that I had been deceived in him, and that there was a shrewd nature behind that broad blunt countenance, and that those small light eyes were keen with intelligence. His face was like a mask, and served his purpose well.

"Tell me," I said after a pause, "how is this cell situated in which M. de Lambert is confined? Can it be reached? Can a rescue be planned?"

"Impossible, your Excellency," he replied at once; "it is an interior cell, and is in charge of the Preobrazhensky guards, alike incorruptible and indomitable. We must devise some other way."

I paced the floor in silence. I was at a loss what to do or say. The situation was gloomy, and I began to entertain serious fears for my unfortunate friend.

"Where is Apraxin?" I asked at last.

"At the house of Zotof," the Swede replied promptly. "I traced him there. It was his messenger who induced M. de Lambert to leave your quarters in the morning."

I could not myself imagine what had induced M. Guillaume to be again deceived by the villain, but for the time thought little of it, only endeavoring to find a way to unravel the difficulty.

“We must have Apraxin,” I said decidedly, “and at once.”

“That will be no easy matter,” the Swede remarked calmly; “he is a miserable knave, and on the constant outlook for trouble.”

“Nevertheless we must have him,” I exclaimed; “we must find a way to secure him without bloodshed.”

“I am willing to undertake the errand, M. de Brousson,” the spy said quietly; “but I cannot hit upon a way to catch him as readily as I would like.”

Zénaïde came suddenly out of her retirement. She had understood my plan at once.

“I have it,” she said eagerly; “we must use his own methods. We must decoy him into an ambush.”

“Of course,” I retorted with a shrug; “but how, madame?”

“Wait but a moment,” she replied quickly, “and I will show you the way;” and she hurried from the room, her face flushed with excitement.

I looked after her in surprise. “I cannot see the way so easily,” I said.

“Madame will show us,” the Swede replied calmly; “a woman’s wit has often cut the knot when all else failed.”

“I trust that it will be so in this case,” I said, although I could not imagine what was my wife’s plan.

In a moment she came back with something in her hand.

“Behold the key to the difficulty,” she said triumphantly, holding out a bit of pale blue ribbon.

I stared at the ribbon and at her in silence, and, seeing my bewilderment, she laughed merrily.

“You grow dull, Philippe,” she said chidingly; “it is mademoiselle’s favorite color. It fell from her robe upon my floor, and I saved it with some inspiration that it would serve a good turn. Send it to M. Apraxin with a message. They know not yet where to find Najine, and are eager for tidings. Trust me, he will fall into the snare as easily as did M. de Lambert.”

“Madame is right,” the Swede declared with sparkling eyes; “he will jump at a token from mademoiselle, and I know a lad who can take it unsuspected and get into Zotof’s house.”

“Apraxin is a greater fool than I think him, if he follows that bit of ribbon,” I remarked grimly; “however, it is worth the trial, and we have no time to lose. Therefore, Lenk, send your messenger with speed; but stay—where shall we bid the fellow come?”

We all stood thinking for a moment, and then, again, madame found a solution for the problem.

“Bid him come to that quiet street behind the palace of Mentchikof,” she said; “then he will think, quite naturally, that Mentchikof has been trying to abduct mademoiselle, and that she

sends to her relative to rescue her, despairing of other aid."

"Your wit is excellent, madame," I said; "this may prove a clever trick. As for you, Lenk, send the message, and Pierrot and Touchet shall help you to secure him; but it must be without bloodshed."

The Swede smiled. "Have no fear, your Excellency," he replied; "assassins do not love an open fight, and it will be three to one."

"He may come reinforced," Zénaïde said; "he would scarcely come alone."

"I differ from you," I rejoined. "Zotof will not commit himself to open support of Apraxin while the czar feels as he does toward the scapegrace,—for not even his share in securing M. de Lambert will excuse his rash offence in his Majesty's eyes."

I went on to give Lenk some specific instructions, and to thank him for his aid, which was indispensable, although dangerous, for the help of a Swedish spy would ruin us if it were discovered; but a desperate game must be desperately played.

The Swede had just left the room when there was a sound of voices in the hall, and Madame de Brousson, who had been listening at the door, turned to me with a startled face.

"I cannot be mistaken," she exclaimed; "it is Najine!"

CHAPTER XXI.

NAJINE.

MADAME DE BROUSSON and I stood looking at each other in silence. What miracle was this? In another moment there were steps upon the stair, and Najine rushed into the room followed by her woman, both of them cloaked and travel-stained. Mademoiselle ran up to me, and, throwing back her hood, showed a pale face and eyes shining with excitement.

“Oh, tell me that it is not true!” she cried incoherently; “tell me that I am deceived, that Guillaume is free!”

I looked at her in astonishment; by what witchcraft had she learned of her lover's imprisonment? Reading in my face and in my hesitation a confirmation of her worst fears, she stamped her foot upon the floor with an outburst of anger that sent the blood to her cheeks.

“How could you permit it? You, an ambassador! How dare they molest him? He has done no wrong,” she cried.

“Bear with me, mademoiselle,” I replied soothingly; “it was scarcely my fault, and you must re-

member that in the eyes of the czar he has done grave wrong."

She looked at me amazed, not at first understanding, and I smiled.

"M. de Lambert loves you, mademoiselle," I explained quietly, "and that is a sufficient sin in his Majesty's eyes."

She flushed, and her glance kindled. "Then he must imprison me also," she exclaimed, "for I, too, am in error. Why should I not be likewise arrested? I love M. de Lambert."

"Would that he could hear you and see you now, mademoiselle!" I said, for never had she looked more beautiful than in her passionate excitement; her spirited face aglow with emotion, and her blue eyes almost black in their dilation. At my words she recollected her position and blushed, her dark lashes suddenly veiling her glance. She was charming. Zénaïde, seeing her confusion, took her hand and drew her down upon the seat beside her.

"My dear," she said kindly, "tell us how you learned so quickly of M. de Lambert's misfortune."

"Through Neonila," she replied; and told us briefly that her woman had left word with a faithful relative of their probable refuge, and he had sent instant tidings of M. de Lambert's fate, learned at once from one of Zotof's serfs. Najine had acted with her usual impulsiveness, turning a deaf ear to the warnings and remonstrances of her aunt.

While she was talking to my wife, I went out, in time to detain the Swede until I could arrange matters with her, for doubtless she could help us in the execution of our scheme, and returning I unfolded it. Her first thought was one of passionate indignation against Apraxin, whom she despised. Indeed, it was probably the sting of her scorn that spurred him on to many of his acts of treachery and revenge.

“A sullen boy,” she said with her quick disdain; “I was betrothed to him as a child, but would never have married him.”

“We must have this boy, though, mademoiselle,” I remarked, “and, if it can be, without bloodshed. Mayhap, you can devise some way to compass our design.”

She sat thinking for a while. “I will write a line to accompany the ribbon,” she said at last; “nothing is easier, and it will convince him. He is not clever, only cunning. Give me a bit of paper, madame, and a pen, and the deed is soon done.”

I had both at hand, and passed them to her; but she paused with the pen suspended in mid air and looked at me with sudden reproach.

“What a traitor you make me, monsieur!” she exclaimed; “here am I striving to decoy Apraxin into a trap!”

“Treachery begets treachery, mademoiselle,” I replied; “and he intended death, while we —” I laughed and shrugged my shoulders.

She remained thoughtful, with her hand suspended above the paper; then, bending over, she wrote her message and pushed it toward me.

"It is done, M. le Vicomte," she said gravely. "I have done for M. de Lambert what I would not do for myself; I have written an untruth—or that which is the same as an untruth. But no harm must come of it, even to a traitor, and I must go with the Swede and your equerry."

"We will both go, mademoiselle," I responded cheerfully, "and I apprehend no mischief, for I do not think your quondam *fiancé* loves an open fight."

Her lip curled scornfully. "He is a coward," she said; "he was always a coward. I never knew him, even as a lad, to fight his equal, but always some puny boy who could not strike again, or the child of a serf."

"And yet," I remarked thoughtfully, "he dared the wrath of the czar."

"He must have been flushed with wine," mademoiselle replied disdainfully; "indeed, I heard my uncle say so."

"I do not think your uncle loves him," I said.

"He never did," she rejoined; "Yury was called my aunt's nephew and was her favorite. She spoiled him as a child, and even now would champion his cause if she did not see a vision of a greater climax to her ambition. She could not understand my dislike for the miserable boy."

I looked at mademoiselle and smiled. How hard Madame Zotof must have found it to put a curb upon that proud young spirit, and how eternal must have been the clash between them!

I took her missive to the Swede, and sent him upon his errand. The hour appointed for the tryst was at daybreak, as the night was now far advanced, and it would be impracticable to attempt a meeting before the morning. We all chafed at the delay, but it was inevitable, and we were forced to be content with the progress we had made. Najine sat with us over the fire into the small hours before my wife persuaded her to rest after her long and rapid journey. She was the personification of youth and vigor, determined, energetic, vivacious. I saw clearly the attraction that had won the heart of the czar. Here was a complete contrast to the ignorant and bigoted Eudoxia; to the unfaithful German, Anna Mons; a contrast even greater, too, to the beauty and passion of the Livonian peasant girl. Here was a young woman, beautiful and charming, with a ready wit and a pure mind; spirited, gay, quick-tempered; the very woman to attract and hold the fancy of a man like the czar. I watched her as she sat at my fireside in her simple garb, the cloak laid aside and the outlines of her graceful figure clearly defined, her proud head setting so handsomely on her shoulders, and the color varying on her cheeks

as the light varied in her dark blue eyes. My wife and I were opposite to her and observed her, both fascinated by the picture that she made. Zénaïde had always been almost entirely French, by instinct, by education, by inclination, in spite of her Russian birth; but mademoiselle was wholly Russian, and interested me as a type of another nation. She told us of her journey back from Troïtza, of the hard riding and the dangers of being discovered by some of Zotof's household or his friends, for she had no doubt that by this time her guardians knew of her flight to her aunt.

"You have a brave spirit, mademoiselle," I said quietly; "it was a long and lonely journey, and you had no escort but your woman."

She looked at me and smiled. "I am a soldier's daughter," she replied proudly; "I have never known what it was to be afraid."

"*Bien*, mademoiselle," I replied; "and soon, if all goes well, you will be a soldier's wife."

She blushed prettily, and laughed. "I must endeavor to be brave enough, M. le Maréchal, to be worthy to be the wife of a soldier of France," she said sweetly.

I made her an obeisance. "France is honored, mademoiselle," I said, smiling; "but truly, I know no braver man than this same Guillaume de Lambert, and the only fault I find in him is that of young blood, too great an impetuosity."

"I remember the day, Najine," laughed Zénaïde,

“when Philippe de Brousson was as headstrong as any boy that he can name, and so impetuous that there is many a long chapter of the accidents which befell him. He has grown grave now, and preaches to the young upon the faults in which he himself excelled. Take heart, mademoiselle, M. de Lambert will yet emerge triumphant.”

“I do not doubt it,” Najine replied with spirit; “a brave man deserves success.”

I smiled at their confidence. The Kremlin was a grim place, and M. de Lambert was behind strong bars and in the power of a man whose resolution was iron, and whose natural generosity was frequently obscured by those bursts of passion which swept all before them. However, it would have been not only useless but ill advised to intrude my doubts upon Najine’s sanguine mood, and I remained silent. Indeed, I had ample food for reflection, for I found the situation becoming hourly more complicated. I had believed that she was safe with her aunt and that I was free of that responsibility, but she had returned upon my hands, in time, it was true, to aid me, but also at the moment when her presence under my roof would be the keenest embarrassment. Yet where to send her I knew not, and she appeared to be unconscious of the difficulty that her arrival created. I slept but little, and rose with the first peep of dawn, determined to accomplish something on that day, if it was within human

possibility. In spite of her fatiguing journey, mademoiselle was up nearly as early, and she and her woman were ready to attend me at the appointed hour. Taking both Pierrot and Touchet, we proceeded at once. The spot appointed for the meeting was a narrow lane behind the palace of Mentchikof, flanked on one side by the blank wall of the kitchen wing, and on the other by the low wall of a courtyard belonging to a deserted building. This court opened upon the lane by a postern, which was never closed because of the rusted and broken hinges; and it was behind this door that I intended to conceal my party, while mademoiselle and her woman were to come apparently from the side entrance of Mentchikof's house, thus disarming the suspicion of her cousin, who would probably enter the lane from the north. The signal appointed for his approach, two low whistles, was to summon Najine from her hiding-place behind the buttress of Mentchikof's palace, while I could approach unseen when Apraxin became engaged in conversation with her. It was a trap, and it was a question whether he would be fool enough to enter it or not. Mademoiselle, who knew him well, was confident of success, but I was less sanguine. On reaching our destination, we were met by the Swede with the report that his part of the compact had been successfully executed, and nothing remained but to take our places and wait for the development

of the plot. It had been arranged that Najine should engage him in conversation and draw from him, if possible, a confession of his part in the arrest of M. de Lambert.

It was a raw morning, and the sky was dark with heavy clouds; now and then a few flakes of snow fell, and then a keen gust of wind blew them away. We stood shivering under our heavy cloaks in our place of concealment. I was nearest the postern, and from my position commanded the spot where mademoiselle and Neonila waited. It seemed a long time before there was any indication of the approach of our victim, and I began to think that he had been keen enough to suspect a trap and to avoid it. But at last there was a low whistle, followed by another, and Pierrot, climbing up, looked over the wall; by getting his eyes above the level of the top he could see the north end of the lane, from which, as we had expected, the signal came.

“Is it he?” I asked in an undertone.

Pierrot made a sign in the affirmative.

“Alone?” I inquired again.

Pierrot dropped from his place and came to me softly.

“He has but one attendant,” he whispered; “and they advance with caution.”

I made a sign to him to be still, and we stood watching and listening. Mademoiselle at the first whistle had come from her shelter, and

walked along the lane, followed by her woman, until she reached the postern; there she halted, so that we could both see them and hear the conversation which ensued. Seeing only the two women, Apraxin was relieved of his anxiety, and advanced boldly to meet her, leaving his man a little in the rear. At his approach, Najine slightly raised her veil, meeting him with some embarrassment, which was really due to her hatred of the part that she was compelled to play.

"I thank you for coming so promptly," she said quietly. "I scarcely hoped that you would receive my missive."

"You have given us much anxiety and trouble, Najine," he exclaimed sharply, with a note of authority in his tone; "how is it that you fly to the house of that Frenchman Brousson, and reappear at that of Mentchikof? It is time that you rendered an account of your conduct."

Mademoiselle gave him a haughty glance. "I did not come here to account to you, Yury Ivanovitch," she replied coldly, "nor do I think you have any right to reproach me; that belongs to my uncle."

"Come, come, Najine," he said easily, "do not pick a quarrel with me. I have come to take you to your uncle, and I doubt not that he will be so overjoyed at your return that he will require no account from you; therefore let us lose no time."

He made a movement to take her hand to lead her away, but she repelled him with a petulant gesture.

"Nay," she said steadily; "I will not give you my hand until you can prove worthy to touch it. I have heard evil things of you, Yury Apraxin: A man who would stab another unawares is a coward and an assassin."

He started at her words, and his face flushed darkly.

"On my word!" he exclaimed passionately, "you have a shrew's tongue in your head, fair relative; if you were a man, I would resent it."

Najine laughed bitterly. "Doubtless," she said dryly, "since I am the weaker of the two. A fair fight I could forgive, but I am sorry that a friend of mine can plan assassination and betray an innocent man into the hands of his enemies!"

Apraxin looked at her with a sneer on his face.

"I marvel at your boldness," he said mockingly, "I would expect a modest maiden to hold her peace instead of quarrelling for the love of a Frenchman who doubtless has a sweetheart at home. For shame, Najine! you are a disgrace to your family, running about Moscow in search of this malapert coxcomb of a foreigner. It is well for you that he is safely out of your way," he added with his unpleasant laugh.

Mademoiselle had flushed and paled during his speech, and I saw that she was quivering with

anger and excitement, but she did not forget her rôle.

"You have murdered him," she cried with affected despair. "I will denounce you to the czar."

Apraxin laughed outright. "Have a care, Najine," he said. "I have not murdered him, but the czar will."

"What do you mean?" she cried with an agitation more real than affected. "The czar has given him his passports; it is you who have detained him."

"Not so, mademoiselle," Apraxin replied, mocking her. "I helped him into the hands of the czar's officers; that is all."

"You mock me," she said bitterly; "he would not follow you."

Apraxin laughed again; he was enjoying his triumph to the full.

"Nay," he replied gayly, "he did not follow me, fair damsel, but I sent a lad to him with a message telling him that he must come to the refectory of the Miracle Monastery for certain tidings on which depended your safety. There I led the imperial officers, for the captain of the watch had told me that his instructions were to take M. de Lambert, if he came within the Kremlin, and to imprison him to await his Majesty's pleasure; so what more had I to do? It was easy; and monsieur, like the fool he is, fell into the snare."

“You are a traitor!” mademoiselle cried passionately, “and deserve a traitor’s recompense.”

It was the signal. M. Apraxin’s back was toward me, and he was practically alone with Najine, for both her woman and his attendant had withdrawn to quite a distance. I walked out and laid a heavy hand upon his shoulder, while with the other I drew the pistol from his belt. Taken unawares, he started back and tried to throw me off, but in a moment the Swede had him upon the other side, and we disarmed him. Pierrot ran after his man; but the fellow, a miserable caitiff, had taken flight at the first alarm, and showed so clean a pair of heels that Pierrot was forced to give up the chase and returned very short of breath, for he was no longer young or fleet of foot. After the first violent struggle Apraxin yielded with sullen acquiescence, and walked between us down the lane. The scuffle had been brief and almost noiseless, so that no one saw us as we left the spot. Mademoiselle and her woman stood aside for us to pass, intending to follow with my two equerries. Our prisoner cast a glance of hatred at her as he walked past.

“Traïtress!” he cried between his teeth, “this is your revenge!”

Poor Najine! her cheek flushed scarlet, for she despised her task.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN INTERVAL OF SUSPENSE.

AS soon as Apraxin was secured, I went to the palace of Mentchikof, knowing that I had no time to lose; my captive's attendant would bear the tidings of his seizure to his uncle, and there would be some decisive action at once, on one side or the other. The czar's feeling toward Apraxin might tie Zotof's hands for the moment, but it was probable that the servant had recognized made-moiselle and would report her presence to her uncle. I reached Mentchikof's house at an hour when he was not receiving visitors, but after a little parley with the porter, was admitted and only waited a few minutes in the ante-room before being summoned to the favorite's presence. He had just risen, and he received me in his own apartment, which was as luxurious as the bed-chamber of an emperor. He had heard enough of my conversation with the czar on the previous evening to be aware of my troubles, and was therefore prepared to listen to my complaint. I told him briefly of the course of events and of the successful capture of Apraxin. I was tolerably frank with him,

knowing that I needed both his good-will and his assistance, for he was the only one on whom I could rely for any material aid. I concealed only the presence of Najine, for I was anxious to leave her out of the affair and, if possible, to hide the fact that she was at my lodgings. Mentchikof listened to me with keen attention, and I saw, at once, that he was striving to see some way out of the labyrinth. Mademoiselle's headstrong conduct and her open aversion to the czar's suit were both points in our favor, for Peter was one to resent keenly the ridicule that they naturally threw upon his course.

"It is a delicate matter, M. le Maréchal," Mentchikof remarked thoughtfully. "The czar has undoubtedly imprisoned M. de Lambert. He probably ordered his arrest in one of those moments of ungovernable passion when he takes little account of what he does, but, having taken this rash action, it is difficult for him to recede from it."

"That is true, monsieur," I replied gravely; "but such action involves an offence to France, and that is a point that his Majesty will do well to consider."

Mentchikof, who was, before all else, a Russian, resented my tone at once.

"You know very well, M. de Brousson," he said haughtily, "that the czar my master is too proud and passionate a man to count the costs, even if Russia had cause to fear."

I did not desire to offend him, and let his reply pass unnoticed.

“His Majesty should however consider the injustice, M. Mentchikof,” I said courteously. “M. de Lambert is an innocent man, and as a foreigner has a claim upon your forbearance.”

“I recognize the justice of what you say, M. l’Ambassadeur,” he replied calmly; “but the czar is human, and M. de Lambert has offended him. Perhaps, you or I in like case would be even less merciful.”

I smiled. “That may be, monsieur,” I said, “but you or I would seek redress with our swords. Prison walls are safe, but it seems a poor revenge.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “A safe one, M. de Brousson,” he replied coolly; “a sword-thrust and six feet of earth are cold satisfaction for a man in love.”

“That is true,” I said, smiling; “but prison walls are equally hard for M. de Lambert, therefore I crave your assistance to liberate him. I had thought of taking Apraxin to the czar and demanding my friend’s release from the custody into which Apraxin has betrayed him.”

“Taking the ground that his Majesty is ignorant of the conduct of his guards?” Mentchikof asked. “I see, monsieur. That is the only possible way of touching the matter. I have no doubt that the czar is ignorant of Apraxin’s share in it, but we cannot tell what effect it would have upon him.

The czar despises Apraxin, but he may, for the time, pass that over. On the other hand, the introduction of the fellow's name may bring forth a burst of passion that might end in the reverse of your wishes. And again, Apraxin may eventually injure the cause of Zotof and of—his niece."

"I have foreseen all that, monsieur," I replied gravely, "yet it seems the only hope. It is more probable that the czar will be seized with disgust of the whole affair when he finds that Apraxin regards Najine as his betrothed, and betrayed M. de Lambert to get rid of a successful rival."

Mentchikof rose, and walked up and down the room for a few moments, thinking deeply. The matter was close to his heart: it involved his own hold upon the affections of his master; it threatened the destruction of some of his dearest hopes and schemes. I watched him keenly, wondering a little what thoughts were in his mind,—if he was picturing his own success or his defeat; if he saw before him the triumph of his rivals, the obscurity of Catherine Shavronsky, and his own ruin, for the loss of favor would mean the total collapse of his fortunes. He was an extravagant man, and his debts were colossal, while his credit was tottering at the caprice of the czar's favor. His hold upon Peter's affections was strong, his influence had been almost unbounded; but the favorite of royalty keeps his place by but feeble tenure, and if the czar followed the impulse of his passion for made-

moiselle, a new party would inevitably come into power, and Mentchikof's arrogance would be remembered and revenged. I regarded him with interest. A man richly endowed in person and in mental qualities; handsome, brave, magnetic; possessed of a winning address and a pungent wit, and withal, a gallant soldier and a shrewd statesman, — he was a man to captivate and hold the fancy of almost any one who approached him, and I did not condemn Daria Arsenief for her infatuation; all the court knew that she was devoted to Alexander Mentchikof, and I had heard it said that Peter desired that he should marry her, while he was yet either unwilling or not ready to comply with his master's wishes. He paced the room now for five minutes or more, and I did not interrupt his revery, willing to allow him full time to mature his own plans; but before he spoke again, a little page brought him a message from Mademoiselle Shavronsky, asking if she might join us, as she desired to see the Vicomte de Brousson. For an instant Mentchikof looked annoyed, and then, recovering himself, sent for her to appear. When the page retired with his message, he looked at me and smiled.

“Catherine must needs manage this herself,” he said dryly; “womanlike, she believes that she can always find the end of the tangled skein.”

“A woman's wit is keen,” I replied, “and it may be that she will see a way that we cannot discover.”

“It may be,” he rejoined with a shrug; “but she has already done mischief enough to her own affairs, and yet she is a clever woman—a woman worthy to rule,” he added to himself.

As he spoke, the door opened and Catherine Shavronsky came in, attended only by a little Russian girl. Catherine’s face was pale, but more composed than when I had last seen her, and she responded to my greeting graciously. She was attired in some plain dark robe, and her figure looked less massive than usual, and there was something almost girlish in the simple earnestness of her manner.

“You have tidings, M. le Maréchal,” she said directly; “I trust that they are better than the last. Is M. de Lambert at liberty?”

I shook my head.

“What?” she exclaimed, “in prison still? Has no one appealed to the czar?”

Mentchikof cut short her inquiries by informing her briefly of my errand and my failures and successes. She listened with impatience, evidently regarding us both as laggards, and she was restless to achieve some better fortune. When he had finished speaking, she turned upon me suddenly with a searching look.

“Where is Najine Zotof?” she asked sharply.

For the moment I was taken by surprise and returned her look blankly. I had no desire to communicate to her mademoiselle’s hiding-place.

She read me through and through with those keen dark eyes of hers, and her full lips curled with a contemptuous smile.

“Do not try to deceive me, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she said dryly; “the fine-spun excuses of the court will not pass with me. You know where mademoiselle is; why does she not come forward and plead for her lover herself? If I were M. de Lambert, I would not value such faint-hearted loyalty.”

“You take a strong view, mademoiselle,” I replied gravely; “it is a difficult point to decide whether or not Mademoiselle Zotof’s presence would injure her cause.”

“Try it,” she exclaimed warmly. “I know the czar. She can do more than fifty diplomats for her lover. I tell you frankly, M. le Vicomte, that if I were in mademoiselle’s place I would appeal to his Majesty at once. I would not lose a moment. I would trust to his generosity—his natural kindness. His Majesty is always approachable, and to no one does simple devotion appeal more strongly. He is the czar, but he is also human.”

Mentchikof had listened in silence, observing her animated features, impressed no doubt, as much as I was, by the impetuosity of her manner. When she ceased speaking, he turned to me gravely.

“Catherine is right,” he said; “the czar is more likely to show mercy to Mademoiselle Zotof than

to M. de Lambert — and you could not make such an appeal. Najine can do so, and it may help in a hundred ways;” and he looked at me with a meaning smile.

And I, remembering his threat of a few weeks ago, stood irresolute. Could I trust these two, or was it a scheme to injure mademoiselle? They certainly would not plan to place her in the czar’s way if they believed that it would encourage his passion for her; but what did they intend? I looked at the two faces, and for the time felt thoroughly at sea. Their motives were apparently innocent, but how far could I trust Mentchikof? How far Catherine? Ah, that was the question! Unable to decide at the moment, I temporized.

“And how could she make this appeal?” I inquired calmly, glancing from one to the other.

“She can go direct to the palace and make the petition when the czar gives audience to all complainants,” Mentchikof replied. “It would be ill-advised for her to make it in private; his Majesty might easily put such an appeal aside, but a public one would attract attention and — in a word, you understand, M. l’Ambassadeur, he has no real reason to keep a member of your suite in prison.”

“To be frank, M. Mentchikof,” I said, “your plan strikes me as feasible; but, after all, it is like playing at dice, and it is a throw in the dark.”

Catherine had been silent for a little time, but now interrupted us again.

"I have a scheme, Alexander," she said with excitement; "let her come here to-night!"

"True!" he exclaimed, "that would be best. The czar comes here to-night," he added to me, "for the first time for weeks. Let mademoiselle make her petition to him; she will have the better opportunity, for Zotof will not come."

I saw the advantages of the opportunity, but I saw also some perils, and was not eager to acquiesce. Mentchikof read my hesitation and smiled.

"M. l'Ambassadeur," he said graciously, "I pledge you my word, as a soldier and a gentleman, that Mademoiselle Zotof shall be safe in my house. Not even his Majesty shall violate my hospitality."

I bowed gravely. "I thank you, monsieur," I replied with dignity, "for the assurance. I will communicate with mademoiselle: I am, not unnaturally, reluctant to assume the responsibility. The young lady is the niece of Zotof, and I have no right to interfere with her actions; but my anxiety for M. de Lambert is so keen that I shall not lose the opportunity to appeal to her for assistance."

"You will do well, M. l'Ambassadeur," he replied, with a reflection of my dignified courtesy, "and I trust that she will find the czar's humor propitious."

"I trust so," I replied quietly, "for I should

regret extremely being forced to call upon my government to take cognizance of this matter,—an action which will be inevitable if I cannot obtain M. de Lambert's release in a short time."

Mentchikof's cheek flushed; he resented instantly the covert thrust, but restrained his temper.

"We will hope for a happy issue, M. de Brousson," he replied haughtily, "and I doubt not that we shall succeed, if Mademoiselle Zotof is sincere in her desire to release her lover."

"Do not doubt her sincerity, monsieur," I returned calmly, "and I will do my best to achieve a happy result, and will communicate with mademoiselle as soon as possible;" and with a few more formal words, I withdrew.

Leaving the apartment, I walked slowly down the long *salon* beyond, and had my hand on the door at the farther end, when I heard the rustle of a woman's skirt behind me, and turned to find Catherine Shavronsky at my elbow. She had never looked more charming; her face, though pale, was animated, and a roguish smile curved her beautiful lips and kindled the fire in her large dark eyes. She stopped a little way from me, and held up her finger with a gesture of mock rebuke.

"Alas, M. l'Ambassadeur!" she said archly, "how will you be able to find mademoiselle? The czar cannot find her, Madame Zotof cannot find her, and you—you do not know where she is.

How can your message reach her? Ah, M. le Vicomte — M. le Vicomte!”

She stood there laughing, and shaking her finger at me. I made her a profound bow.

“Mademoiselle,” I replied, smiling, “you forget for whom she will be summoned. Love will find out the way!”

And with that I went out at the door; but she came and stood upon the threshold, and called to me as I went down the corridor.

“That cannot be, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she cried, “for they say that love is blind!”

CHAPTER XXIII.

A FAIR PETITIONER.

I WAS far from satisfied with the thought of bringing mademoiselle to Mentchikof's house, but when I unfolded the plan to her and to Madame de Brousson, they overruled my scruples. Najine was eager to embrace any opportunity to aid her lover, and my wife saw the advantages of the situation in the same light that they had appeared to Catherine. So it was that between the women I found myself of small consequence, and was forced to yield to their wishes. It was arranged that I should first introduce the testimony of Apraxin, and that then Najine Zotof would appear to make her own appeal. Meanwhile Apraxin was a prisoner at my quarters, and a sullen scapegrace I found him. His indignation against Najine knew no bounds, and I think that the little love he had for her, in those hours, turned to resentment. As I had anticipated, his attendant carried the tidings of his capture to M. Zotof, and in the course of the day I received a sharp message from him that my treatment of his relative would be reported to the czar; to which I replied that I should myself inform his Majesty of my

action and of the cause of it,—a message which I thought carried confusion into the enemy's lines, for I heard no more that day, and M. Apraxin remained biding my pleasure in my upper room, although in truth I had no relish for my task of jailer, and would have been glad to find another way out of my embarrassments. The impossibility of reaching M. de Lambert made me doubly uneasy. I had a genuine affection for the young man, and felt responsible for his safety. I did not go to the Kremlin that day, but even in the city the tidings had spread that the czar was to go again to the house of Mentchikof. Straws show the way of the wind, and it was easy to see the unhappiness of the sycophants who had deserted the favorite in his temporary obscurity. It is these miserable creatures who find the changing tide of court favor such a cause for tribulation, and overturn each other in their eagerness to arrive first at the gates of the fortunate. I was amused when I approached Mentchikof's house in the evening to find the court, that a few days before had been deserted, full to overflowing with these poor butterflies that had flown at the little cloud of imperial displeasure and now returned. They were not, however, admitted. For some reason the favorite chose to have but a few present at the arrival of the czar, and when I entered the ante-rooms I found but a small attendance. Peter and his suite had already arrived, and a few

of the imperial guards were at the doors. When I reached the *salon*, I found the czar surrounded by a larger party than I had at first supposed to be present, but there was no one there of the faction favorable to Zotof except the Field-Marshal Sheremetief. Madame Golovin, both the Arsenief sisters, their aunt Madame Tolstoi, and Mademoiselle Shavronsky were all at the farther end of the apartment, holding a little court of their own, while the czar was in the midst of his immediate friends, Mentchikof, Repnin, Sheremetief, and a dozen more. I saw at a glance that Peter was in an excellent humor. When I entered, he was standing with his hand on Mentchikof's shoulder, and was laughing heartily at some jest that he had made at the favorite's expense. As I advanced, the czar saw me, and there was a change — slight and almost imperceptible, but still a change — in his expression. Doubtless, I was unwelcome enough at the moment, and it may be that his keen wit instantly suspected a concealed motive in the occasion, for he could not have been ignorant of Mentchikof's dealings with me and with M. de Lambert. However, he received me with courtesy, and at once asked a direct question in his usual blunt fashion.

“Well, M. l'Ambassadeur,” he said, “have you found M. de Lambert?”

“I have not, your Majesty,” I replied, “but I have certain information concerning him.”

A peculiar expression gleamed in his eyes for an instant, but he smiled.

"You speak gravely, sir," he said lightly. "What is the information?"

I was standing directly before the czar, in the midst of many spectators, and I answered him deliberately.

"I am glad," I said suavely, "of this opportunity to inform your Majesty of the outrage that has been perpetrated upon one of my suite. M. de Lambert was seized by a palace guard, betrayed into his hands by M. Zotof's relative, M. Apraxin."

There was a pause, and I saw the lightning in the czar's glance, and Mentchikof stirred uneasily. The mine was fired, and we awaited the explosion.

"You must have been misinformed, M. l'Ambassadeur," Peter said after a moment. "It is impossible that one of my guards could have dealt with that fellow. Produce your proofs."

"Your Majesty," I replied quietly, "M. Apraxin admitted his share of the transaction in my presence this morning, and he is at this time within call."

The czar bit his lip. He was in a peculiar position, and I think regretted his folly in having meddled with M. de Lambert.

"Be kind enough, M. le Vicomte," he said, "to produce M. Apraxin, whom I supposed long since departed from Moscow."

This was the order that I had hoped for, and I despatched Pierrot to bring him, with a couple of Mentchikof's followers to prevent his escape. In the interval before his arrival, the czar refused to be entertained, waiting with impatience for the coming scene. That he was violently angry at Apraxin's interference, I did not doubt, but just what he intended to do it was difficult to imagine. His mood had changed, and his face was deeply flushed. He walked down the room to a chair near where the women stood, and, seating himself, leaned his head upon his hand and stared gloomily down the length of the *salon*, but with eyes that did not seem to notice the gay courtiers who filled it. The change in his mood affected the humor of the assemblage, and there was a general cessation of conversation, and every eye was turned towards his face. It was, perhaps, half an hour before one of the ushers announced that Apraxin was under guard in one of the adjoining rooms, and the czar immediately ordered that he should be brought before him. There was a little ripple of excitement when Zotof's protégé entered and was marched down the room between two of Mentchikof's men. His expression was as sullen as usual, and he made but a slight obeisance as he paused opposite the czar. Peter eyed him with angry contempt.

"I find that instead of being where you ought to be, in Archangel, Apraxin," the czar said

sharply, "you are here, and meddling with one of M. de Brousson's party."

He paused as if expecting a reply; but Apraxin made none, maintaining his attitude of sullen silence. The czar looked at him fiercely.

"Have you a tongue?" he demanded.

The blood rose to Apraxin's hair.

"You are the Czar of Russia," he said passionately, "but I am not your slave, but a freeman! By what right am I arrested by the Vicomte de Brousson, and dragged from place to place without any formal charge?"

"You were brought here by my order," the czar replied sternly, "and you will do well to answer the questions that I put to you with civility, or we will presently find the means to give you a lesson."

The czar meant the secret-chancery of Preobrazhensky, and Apraxin knew it, for I saw the color recede from his cheek and the look of a hunted animal show in his eyes.

"Briefly, Apraxin," Peter continued, "by whose order did you betray M. de Lambert into the hands of the imperial guard?"

For a moment Apraxin was silent, and then he spoke with more manhood than I had anticipated.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I am a nephew by adoption of Madame Zotof, and was affianced in boyhood to her husband's niece, Najine Zotof. She has lately departed from the house of her

uncle, and fled to that of the Vicomte de Brousson, the secret envoy of France; encouraged in her disobedience, and aided by her lover, M. de Lambert. For that reason, and for no other, I did endeavor to seize him, and succeeded in delivering him into the hands of an officer of the guard charged by your Majesty to arrest him."

The mine had exploded, and the czar flushed crimson, while his eyes flashed. He had evidently trusted to the discretion of his officer and had been betrayed. I stood discreetly silent, but I caught the eye of Mademoiselle Catherine and saw that she was keenly anxious.

"Upon my faith," exclaimed the czar, with passion, "it is like your impertinence to charge me with being your accomplice. Officer, remove the prisoner."

As Apraxin was led out, Peter turned upon me sharply.

"So, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said, "mademoiselle is at your house?"

"I do not now deny the charge, your Majesty," I said quietly.

His lip curled scornfully. "You would have me believe that she was not there before?" he exclaimed.

I returned his gaze quietly. "It is difficult to know what to believe about the matter, your Majesty," I replied dryly.

As I spoke, there was some confusion at the

further end of the room, and the czar glancing in that direction, his reply to me was stayed upon his lip. I turned with an intuition of the cause, and saw the crowd part, leaving a wide aisle down the center of the long *salon*, and through this walked Madame de Brousson and Mademoiselle Zotof. My wife, who was yet a beautiful woman, moved along with easy dignity, her fine figure and rich dark robes making her a sharp contrast to Najine, so slender in her pure white garment, untrimmed save for the sable that edged it as it fell about her feet, and the sable about her shoulders making her white neck look yet more white. Her face was pale, but her eyes darkly blue and fearless in expression. Her whole appearance and manner were extremely maidenly, and yet she advanced without embarrassment. As she approached, Peter rose, and the nobles about him drew back a little, so that he stood quite alone and faced mademoiselle, a strange expression on his face. That he was astonished was manifest enough, but he was also strongly moved and looked at her without a word. Zénaïde paused beside me, and whispered that they had just received evil tidings, that M. de Lambert's life had been attempted, and that he was in great peril. Troubled as I was at the information, I almost forgot it in my eagerness to watch mademoiselle and the czar. She addressed him in the quaint Russian fashion.

"I come to you, little father, as a suppliant," she said in a low voice, but in the silence it was audible to all; "I have a suit which is too pressing to brook delay, and I crave indulgence."

"I am fortunate to see you, Najine," the czar replied slowly. "Of late, not even your uncle could find you."

Her pale cheeks flushed, but she looked up bravely. "Your Majesty must pardon my faults," she said earnestly; "so sure am I of your goodness — of your kingly generosity, that I have come to ask a favor at your Majesty's hands."

Whether he suspected her motive or not, I could not tell, but he looked at her keenly.

"What is this favor?" he asked gravely; "have I been a hard master to you that you fear to ask it?"

"No, sire," she said gently, her eyes fixed earnestly upon his face; "but when a boon is near the heart, it is difficult to ask. I beg a man's liberty — his life, for they tell me it is in danger."

"A man's life and liberty?" the czar repeated sternly; "you choose a strange time, Najine Alexeievna; and is there no one else who can plead for it to me?"

The color swept up to her hair, and she suddenly knelt at his feet.

"No one can plead as I can, little father," she said almost inaudibly, "because to no one else is his life so dear."

"Ah!" the czar ejaculated sharply, his brows

bending in a dark frown and his lips twitching; "and who is this prisoner, madam?"

"Guillaume de Lambert, an officer of the household troops of the King of France," she replied in a clear voice.

"There is the Ambassador of France," said the czar coldly, pointing at me; "why not let him prefer this suit?"

She was still kneeling, and looked up at him with an earnest appeal in her blue eyes.

"Turn not a deaf ear, your Majesty," she exclaimed with feeling. "M. de Lambert is an innocent man, and it is your duty to do justice to the innocent, for are you not an anointed king? Judgment and mercy belong to you, little father, and it is to your honor to show justice to the foreigner. He has been betrayed into prison; they tell me that his life has been attempted. Show mercy, sire, and set him free."

The czar looked at her keenly, strong emotions contending in his passionate face.

"You plead with eloquence, Najine," he said, still coldly. "Of what interest is this young man's fate to you? Answer me freely, if you hope for mercy for him!"

Najine looked up into Peter's dark face, and her lips quivered.

"Your Majesty," she replied in a low voice, but every ear was strained to catch her words, "I ask his liberty — because I love him."

The czar drew a deep breath, and the *tic* convulsed his features.

"You speak boldly, girl," he said sternly. "Are you not ashamed?"

Najine rose and stood before him, her face as white as her robe, but her eyes shone like two stars.

"I am not ashamed, sire," she answered proudly, "to love a brave and loyal gentleman."

Peter uttered an exclamation under his breath, regarding her with an expression in which anger and admiration were mingled. Never before had any woman faced him with the declaration of her loyalty to another man, and it must have made a strong impression upon him. It was a strange picture. The nobles about him had drawn back until the two stood in the center of a large space, the massive figure of the czar overshadowing the slight form of mademoiselle, but there was a simple dignity in the pose of her young figure that was striking. Peter was silent for some moments, and then spoke with bitterness.

"By my faith, Najine Alexeievna," he said, "I did not know that you were asking a bridegroom at my hands!"

The blood rose to her hair, but she answered him in an unfaltering voice.

"Oh, little father," she said, "I ask his liberty — his life!"

"And if I refuse, what then?" the czar asked

sternly, his dark eyes searching her face and his lips closing in a hard line.

She turned pale and cast a bewildered glance at me, and I saw that her courage was sorely tried, and fancied that she was distressed by the tidings that she had heard before coming there. She took a step forward, and held out her hands with a gesture that was pathetic in its appeal.

“I dare not think of your Majesty’s refusal,” she said; “I will not believe it.”

At this point she was reinforced; with a swift movement Catherine Shavronsky passed through the circle of spectators and knelt at the czar’s feet. He started, glancing from one woman to the other in amazement.

“What is this?” he exclaimed sharply; “I did not come here to hold a tribunal of justice.”

“But of mercy, little father,” Catherine said quietly. “I kneel here to second mademoiselle’s appeal. M. de Lambert is a stranger, he can claim our forbearance. It is your kindness that has abolished forced marriages, and made happier unions a possibility. Your Majesty has always been good to the young. Here, then, are two lovers, separated by misfortune — is it not a royal prerogative to give them happiness? I also ask a boon: the life — liberty — happiness of a French soldier of the czar of all the Russias — of Peter the magnanimous!”

She had touched upon a delicate point, but the

czar controlled his emotion. He stood looking at the two women as if he were mentally contrasting them, and the whole court looked also and marvelled, for they were singularly beautiful and singularly unlike. Catherine's beauty was of the feline type, and coarser but more striking than Najine's; hers was refined and charming and spirited, and her face was clouded with anxiety, while Catherine's was kindled with excitement. Mademoiselle stood, while the Livonian continued to kneel until the czar took her hand and raised her to her feet, and then, turning to the other petitioner, spoke with affected carelessness.

"Your request is granted, Najine," he said; "I cannot resist so much eloquence. Mentchikof, let the captain of the guard release M. de Lambert at once and deliver him to M. de Brousson."

Najine took a step forward, and, kneeling, kissed the czar's hand; and the blood left his cheek, and his face was as white as her own.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DUEL WITH SWORDS.

MENTCHIKOF lost no time in executing the czar's order, and signaled to me to follow him as he left the *salon*. I made my way out as rapidly and quietly as I could, and reached the ante-room in time to find him transmitting the order to one of the guard.

"M. de Brousson will accompany you," he said to the officer as I entered; and then, calling me aside, he added: "Make what haste you can, the czar's mood may change. He yielded because of the peculiarity of his position, and Najine Zotof's appeal before so many touched his pride, but he may repent his order at any moment. Get the young man out of the country, and also the young woman."

"I see the wisdom of your advice, monsieur," I replied; "but the last is not so easy."

"I know it, M. de Brousson," he said in a low voice; "but I tell you that the imperial mood is tempestuous, and — in a word — he loves Najine."

"I see that," I admitted gravely, "but the matter is difficult; nevertheless, with your aid, I will do what I can."

He walked with me to the stairs, and then, pausing, laid his hand upon my arm and looked into my face with those keen eyes full of quiet meaning.

“Marriage, M. l’Ambassadeur,” he said in a low tone, “speedy and secret marriage, is possible, and it alone will cut the knot.”

We were practically alone; a few attendants were below, at the foot of the stairs, and three or four guards lingered in the corridor observing us with curious eyes, but no one could overhear our conversation. I looked at the favorite searchingly.

“And the risk to mademoiselle?” I said slowly.

He snapped his fingers. “It would not amount to that!” he replied. “His Majesty will forgive her—after a while; but for the present,” he laughed, “a pair of fleet horses, monsieur; I will look well to the pursuers and the pursuit.”

He took a signet ring from his finger, and placed it in my hand.

“I trust it to your honor, M. le Maréchal,” he said significantly; “use it, whenever the name of Alexander Mentchikof may speed your errand, and remember that the imperial mood will change.”

And with this caution he parted from me, and I went out into the night attended by Pierrot and the captain of the guard. We turned our steps immediately toward the Kremlin, walking rapidly and in silence. I did not need Mentchikof’s

assurance to convince me that there was no time to lose. I had read the czar's mood almost as easily as the favorite, and knew that he was unwilling to betray to the whole court that he, the czar, was jealous of a young French soldier with no fortune but his sword and the favor of the King of France. That Peter was intensely angry at Najine's open avowal of her loyalty to her lover was manifest enough, and I did not doubt his speedy repentance of his consent to release his prisoner. Meanwhile I had the order which would give M. de Lambert freedom, and a few hours in which to get him out of the city; but how to accomplish this was not so clear unless I found him in a more yielding mood than usual, or I could prevail upon mademoiselle to facilitate matters. I trusted to Madame de Brousson's wit and courage to bring Najine safely away from Mentchikof's house, but how long she could evade Madame Zotof was another question. I hoped much from the fact that Najine would find her position so difficult that it would be more simple to follow Mentchikof's suggestion than to face her uncle's displeasure. The favorite's signet was on my finger, and I reflected that he had shown more confidence in me than I felt in him, for I was doubtful of following his advice.

When we reached the Kremlin, the imperial officer took the lead and conducted us to the Miracle Monastery; here we were admitted to the

refectory, and Pierrot and I were left while the soldier had a long private conference with a gentleman of the imperial household, and finally departed with him, requesting us to remain there half an hour. Impatient as I was, I had no choice but to await his return, and occupied the time with some reflections upon the folly of taking a young gallant on a diplomatic errand, and resolving that I would never again find myself in so unhappy a position, — for I resented the covert affront to France without seeing any way to avenge it. M. de Lambert had been guilty of rash indifference to the imperial amour, and I could scarcely expect the czar to respect his person as a member of a French embassy. My meditations were interrupted by Pierrot, who had been trying all the doors to reassure himself as to their intentions towards us.

“Do you think they will return, monsieur?” he asked significantly.

“I think so, Pierrot,” I replied dryly; “one can never be sure, but I do not think there were any instructions except those that were given in my presence.”

He shook his head gravely. “They have been gone some time,” he remarked, and looked at me with manifest doubt of the wisdom of a longer wait upon their pleasure.

But at this moment we heard steps without, and the officer throwing open the door entered,

followed by Guillaume de Lambert, whose face looked pale and haggard with anxiety, but lighted up at the sight of us, and he met me with an exclamation of joy. I was too anxious, however, to get him out to waste time on words, and, thanking the officer for his services, I hurried M. de Lambert off, and it was not until we were in the street that I permitted him to speak.

"This has been an outrage," he exclaimed fiercely; "I have been mewed up and half starved in a regular dungeon, and I believe that they had designs on my life."

"So we have been told," I replied dryly; "but it seems to me, M. de Lambert, that you have been to blame. You walked into the snare all too easily, and mademoiselle has won your freedom at the cost of a personal appeal to the czar."

He stopped short. "Mademoiselle?" he said in a tone of wonder; "she is at Troïtsa."

"Pardon me, monsieur," I returned quietly, "she is in Moscow. Tidings travel rapidly, and she was informed of your misfortune, and came — on the wings of love, and her personal appeal to Peter obtained the order for your release."

"Alas!" he exclaimed, "I am unfortunate, since it is I, after all, who brought her back to the czar. I would rather be deprived of my liberty than purchase it at such a price."

"You are a thankless man," I said; "few could have had so lovely a woman to plead for them.

Now that you have your liberty, you must make good use of it;" and I told him briefly of the perils of the situation and the possibilities of evading the czar.

Mentchikof's proposal of a speedy marriage met with instant approval, as I had anticipated, and he was all impatience to urge it upon Najine. In a few words he told me of his capture, which fitted in with Apraxin's story of it, and he gave a clear view of the discomforts of a Russian prison; yet he had been treated with tolerable moderation although in solitary confinement. His worst fear had been of an attempt to poison him, since he had not anticipated any actual violence on account of his nationality. On the whole, the rumors which had reached Madame de Brousson and Najine had evidently been exaggerated; but he had had but little food, and had been kept in rigid imprisonment, which would have speedily accomplished the work without the aid of more open measures.

As we approached my lodgings, we both scanned them eagerly for indications of Madame de Brousson's return; but when we reached the door, found that she was still absent, and there was nothing to do but wait. We entered one of the lower rooms, and Pierrot went at once for food and wine for our returned prisoner, while I laid aside my cloak and sword and sat down by the fire. M. de Lambert was still standing by the table, when the

outer door was suddenly opened, without a summons, and we heard a quick step in the hall, and in a moment Apraxin rushed into the room and confronted M. de Lambert. I looked at the intruder in amazement; he was without hat or cloak, and his disordered dress told of a recent struggle, and he carried a naked sword in his hand. How had he escaped the guards? He looked at M. Guillaume with furious eyes.

"So!" he exclaimed, "I find you at last! You have evaded me and baffled me at every turn, but you shall fight me now."

M. de Lambert gave him a cold glance, measuring him with a contemptuous face.

"I do not fight with assassins and traitors," he replied with cutting scorn.

Apraxin took a step forward, and struck at his face with his open hand.

"You are a coward!" he exclaimed.

M. de Lambert caught him by the throat and flung him back against the wall with a force that made his sword fly from his hand; then Guillaume folded his arms upon his breast and looked at him with a smile.

"If you need further chastisement," he said coldly, "you can have it."

Apraxin had recovered himself, and, picking up his sword, made a desperate lunge at his antagonist, and I sprang to my feet.

"We have had enough of this," I exclaimed;

but M. de Lambert had taken my sword from the table.

“Nay, M. le Maréchal,” he said, “permit me to settle with this fool;” and he parried another blow that Apraxin aimed at him.

I stood and looked on. M. de Lambert was an expert swordsman, and I saw that Apraxin was no contemptible adversary; but he was wild with jealousy and passion, and attacked his antagonist with blind fury, while M. Guillaume was cool, and, although he had felt his imprisonment, his nerve was steady. Apraxin made fierce thrusts and quick blows, while M. de Lambert was graceful, dexterous, wary. They were nearly matched in height. The Frenchman had the greater breadth of shoulder and depth of chest; the Russian was more lithe and cat-like in his motions. Guillaume was fair, with light brown locks, wildly dishevelled, for his powdered peruke had fallen off; Apraxin’s face was white, and his hair blue black, and there was eager hatred in the tense expression of his features. He began the fight with furious eagerness; then, finding his antagonist composed and fearfully skilful at fencing, he began to husband his strength and watch for an opportunity to strike under M. de Lambert’s guard. He was a good swordsman and used the point to advantage, but he was unsteady with passion, and I saw the wrist falter more than once when he tried to drive a blow home; and while

Guillaume was still collected, the beads of perspiration gathered thick on his assailant's brow, and I saw his eyes dilate and his nostrils stretch and quiver as he labored for breath. M. de Lambert was on the defensive, parrying the other's eager blows and watching him with an unfaltering eye until the Russian began to waver and struck wildly. So hot grew the fight that their swords flashed in a circle of light and I could scarcely follow their play. Suddenly Apraxin made a mad lunge at his antagonist's heart, and M. de Lambert, parrying it with a quick movement, gave him a blow that stretched him on the floor. But he sprang up like a tiger, and flew at his adversary's throat; for a moment they grappled and wrestled, then M. de Lambert, lifting him from his feet, threw him the third time and knelt upon his breast.

"The fellow is mad," Guillaume said, his own breath coming short, for the struggle though brief had been fierce.

The last fall was severe, and Apraxin had lost consciousness, and after a glance at him M. de Lambert rose and threw water on his face.

"I hope I have not killed the fool," he said gravely; "he fought like a demon."

I joined him, and together we made some efforts to revive him, but with poor success; he had struck the back of his head and lay quite still.

"This is unfortunate," I remarked thought-

fully; "we do not want him here. He must have escaped from Mentchikof, and to Mentchikof he must be returned."

I stood reflecting upon a proper course of action, and was relieved to see signs of returning animation in the fellow. At this instant Pierrot announced that the carriage had come with Madame de Brousson and mademoiselle, and a plan flashed upon me.

"Go out to meet them, M. de Lambert," I said at once, "and say nothing of this. I will send Apraxin back to Mentchikof in the carriage with Pierrot and Touchet; there is no other way of evading unpleasant consequences. Happily, your chastisement was so thorough that he is not likely to want another."

There was no need for more words, for M. de Lambert went out to meet Najine, and Pierrot helped me to raise Apraxin. As soon as we heard madame and mademoiselle pass on up the stairs, we called Touchet, and we three managed to place the half-conscious youth in the carriage, and I despatched them to Mentchikof with strict injunctions to convey the prisoner into the house in a secret manner and explain the matter to Mentchikof alone and so relieve me of the embarrassment of this troublesome boy. I could trust their devotion, and watched the carriage roll away in the darkness with a sigh of relief.

I was out of one difficulty, but there was another

in the upper room, and a far more delicate one, since there was a woman in it, and that woman young, beautiful, spirited, and ill to guide; was ever man in more perplexing situation? I looked up at the skies, which were clouded, and I sighed; truly, the annoyances of life are many. I entered the house and, barring the door, walked slowly and thoughtfully up the stairs. It rested with me to get M. de Lambert away; to rescue mademoiselle's happiness; to outwit Zotof; and, last not least, to defeat, disappoint, and baffle the czar! What were my weapons? Najine's love for Guillaume de Lambert, his devoted courage, my own wit, and Mentchikof's signet ring.

CHAPTER XXV.

NAJINE AND HER LOVER.

ON reaching the head of the stairs, I opened the door upon a pretty picture. Madame de Brousson had discreetly left the lovers alone, and they were standing together before the fire, M. de Lambert's arm around Najine, and the firelight shining on their faces. They started at my unexpected entrance, and her cheeks were rosy with blushes as she saw the smile in my eyes; but she came up to me, and clasped my hand in both hers.

"I have to thank you, monsieur," she said, "for all you have done for me and for M. de Lambert."

I laughed softly. "Nay, mademoiselle," I replied gently, "M. de Lambert owes more to you than to any one, and I trust that he has properly thanked you."

She laughed a little at this, and glanced mischievously at her lover. "I believe he is grateful, monsieur," she said archly.

"Jesting aside, mademoiselle," I went on gravely, "we have no time to lose; M. de Lambert must leave Moscow to-night."

She started and glanced sadly at her lover, and he looked back at her with eager interrogation.

"Alas!" she exclaimed, "so soon! Do you believe it necessary, M. le Maréchal?"

"Mademoiselle," I replied, "do you yourself believe that the czar is likely to stand by his action to-night?"

She was silent for a moment, and then shook her head. "I cannot tell," she said sadly; "he is a passionate and changeful man, and acts, I fear, too often on the impulse of the moment."

"Mademoiselle," I replied, "I have the assurance of Alexander Mentchikof that the czar may change at any moment. M. de Lambert must leave Moscow at once, and for all time, if he would be safe; and you must bid him farewell unless —"

I paused and glanced at Guillaume.

"I have told her," he said, "and she raises a thousand objections to the haste and the danger."

"I thought you a brave woman, mademoiselle," I remarked.

"It is not for myself," she cried with feeling; "it is for him."

I looked from one to the other. "Ah, mademoiselle," I said quietly, "I see how it is. I will leave you to M. de Lambert's persuasion; but time presses, and I shall presently return;" and I went out to find my wife, for I saw that Najine was on the point of yielding, and that her lover would be a far more effective argument than my best eloquence.

I found Zénaïde waiting with impatience for the

return of Pierrot. She had arranged everything in her own mind, and was full of impatience to carry out her designs.

“They must be married at once,” she said with decision; “every hour counts, and Najine has selected this time to hesitate and increase our embarrassments, while I have been looking for Madame Zotof at any moment.”

I smiled. “A more terrible infliction than the czar,” I admitted; “but mademoiselle will yield. We must go straight to the Kremlin, find a priest, and have the knot tied.”

“There will be a difficulty about the priest,” Zénaïde said.

I showed her Mentchikof’s signet, and explained briefly his cautions and fears.

“The signet will probably help us,” she said thoughtfully. “Meanwhile we must prevail upon Najine to consent at once.”

As she spoke, there was a hasty tap upon the door, and I opened it to admit Pierrot.

“Monsieur and madame,” he said hurriedly, “the Zotofs are coming. I left Touchet with the carriage at some distance that they might not see us approach, and I have put out the lights at the front of the house.”

“Wise Pierrot,” I said, “put out all the lights that show at the windows;” and then I turned to my wife for suggestions.

“It is, as I thought,” she said; “the czar intends

that Madame Zotof shall undo all that he has done. We must get mademoiselle and M. de Lambert out by the rear door."

"Will that be possible, Pierrot?" I asked.

"If no time is lost, monsieur. They will first try the front door, and it is possible that they may believe that we have already departed."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Not while Madame Zotof is of the party," I said.

Zénaïde had already gone to hasten mademoiselle's decision, and I followed. At the first note of danger Najine's spirit awoke, and she was as quick to act as we could desire. I saw by M. de Lambert's face that he had overcome her scruples to a hasty marriage, and I felt that we could now proceed without further delays. In a few moments both women were cloaked and hooded for the street, and preceded by Pierrot we crept down the stairs to the door at the rear. We were half-way down when we were startled by a loud knock at the front.

"They have come!" exclaimed mademoiselle beneath her breath, pausing to listen.

"The more reason for haste," I said, taking her hand and leading her forward. Then I called to Pierrot, "Is there any one at this entrance?"

He was listening at the door, and in a moment opened it and looked out. "Safe as yet, monsieur," he said.

We hurried down and out, for there was now

quite an uproar at the front door. We stood a moment listening, Najine's hand in mine.

"We must run for it!" I exclaimed. And we all ran down the lane like a party of children, and reached the carriage without hindrance. As soon as we were seated within it, the horses started at a round pace, and I laughed as I thought of Madame Zotof beating upon my door for admittance.

"Have a care, monsieur," Zénaïde said warningly; "do not laugh too soon."

"You think my mirth premature?" I replied thoughtfully; "it may be so, but I saw so plainly Madame Zotof before that door. I beg your pardon, mademoiselle, but your aunt's energy is amusing."

"They will follow us to the Kremlin," she rejoined quietly. "My aunt never gives up."

"A worthy quality, mademoiselle," I remarked, "and madame may follow as soon as the marriage is consummated. She cannot prevail against the church."

"In any case, madame will not prevail," remarked M. de Lambert, quietly; "Najine has consented to be my wife, and I trust that I am able to fight her battles as well as my own."

"There is no doubt about your ability to fight your own, monsieur," I remarked, laughing to myself as I thought of his duel with Apraxin; but neither Zénaïde nor Najine understood my reference, and I felt M. de Lambert stir uneasily,

probably afraid of alarming his *fiancée*. I laughed the more, knowing how she admired her lover's prowess and how little she esteemed the vanquished, for she had a spirit that despised all cowardice and meanness. In spite of my anxieties, I found much food for amusing reflection, — the embarrassment of the czar, finding mademoiselle as a suppliant for her lover; the mad folly of M. Apraxin, and the fury of that shrew Madame Zotof. Meanwhile we had been driving rapidly, and in a quarter of an hour the carriage stopped within the Gate of the Redeemer, and, leaving the women in charge of M. de Lambert, I went to find a priest whom I could trust with this delicate affair. After a little inquiry I was directed to the Cathedral of the Assumption, and, returning for the others, we went there together, and I found the priest whom I sought. It was, however, not an easy matter to induce him to perform the ceremony; our nationality, the haste, and the hour — it was now long past midnight — aroused his suspicions, and he looked long and searchingly at mademoiselle's muffled figure. It was certain that I would never have prevailed over his scruples without Mentchikof's signet ring. The sight of it had an immediate effect upon him, and shook his resolution; he dared not offend the all-powerful favorite, and in ignorance of the extent of the risk involved, he finally yielded a reluctant consent to my persuasions, and went into

the center of the church for the ceremony. Najine was agitated, and clung to my wife for support and encouragement, realizing that it was a decisive step, and that she was imperilling her lover's liberty and perhaps his life, for if the czar's mood changed it might be the simplest way to make her a widow. M. de Lambert's own face was pale, but with emotion rather than anxiety, and he stood beside his bride, the picture of a gallant soldier. Mademoiselle had thrown back her hood, and I thought, as I looked at her in the light of the tapers that they held in their hands, that I had never seen a bride more lovely in all the splendid attire of the court, than this young girl in her long gray cloak that fell from throat to feet, the fur-lined hood thrown back, and her face fair and pale as a white lily against the gloom of the vast interior of the cathedral. There were no lights behind us, only those before the altar; and they served to increase the darkness of the nave while illuminating the splendid golden iconostase, blazing with precious jewels around the faces of Madonnas; above was the great dome, about us were the mighty pillars with their images of saints and martyrs, rising one above another, while on every side from the golden background loomed the dark forms of pictured angels and archangels; and on the pavement beneath our feet had knelt, generation after generation, the Grand Dukes of Muscovy and the Czars of all the Russias.

My wife and I and our attendants stood a little apart to witness the ceremony, while the white-haired priest united the lovers. Softly intoning the service, he placed two golden crowns upon their heads and, clasping their hands in his, led them three times around the great taper that he had lighted in the center of the church, and which shone like a star. I looked at the picture that they made with strange reflections: here was a young and beautiful woman willing to forego the splendors of a throne to become the wife of a French soldier, preferring his love to a power that might have been almost absolute with the czar; for I had seen enough to be convinced that Peter loved Najine with all the strength of his fierce nature, and that she could have swayed him as no other woman ever would. How strange is the course of destiny! Here was a woman who might have been Empress of all the Russias and she preferred to be the wife of a gallant gentleman of the French King's household. After all, was not her choice wise? For her undoubtedly, but for some women impossible. There are souls that covet the slippery heights of power, that long to rule the destinies of men, and there are women to whom a lot of domestic obscurity would mean bitter unhappiness. I could not imagine Catherine Shavronsky content with such a fate; she would fight for power, while she lived, and wade through the mire of personal degradation to obtain

her goal. No cost would be too great, no sacrifice too supreme, for her consuming ambition. Such were my thoughts while I stood listening to the solemn words that made Najine Zotof the wife of Guillaume de Lambert, — strange reflections, no doubt, yet I believe that my wife's were nearly identical, only that she had a woman's quick sympathy for the young girl's emotion; a woman's appreciation of her purity and truth, which not even the most splendid temptations of a court could sully or corrupt. As for the two lovers themselves, they were too absorbed in each other, too devoutly attentive to the priest, to be conscious of any world outside their own, and I saw Zénaïde's eyes moist with sympathy as she watched them. The last words of the benediction spoken, M. de Lambert turned to us with radiant eyes, and Najine threw herself into my wife's arms with a little sob of deep emotion.

“I owe all to you, monsieur,” M. de Lambert said warmly, as he clasped my hand; “I have been a rash fool, and without you would have failed miserably.”

“Nay,” I replied, smiling, “you were no fool in the one quarter where wisdom was most desired, monsieur; and you owe much, too, to Madame de Lambert.”

He smiled at the name, and glanced at Najine, who turned now to me with her own sweet manner, thanking me for all my kindness to her until I

was myself embarrassed, feeling that I scarcely deserved so much, and so turned it aside with a jest.

“Nay, madame,” I said, “do not thank me too much for making you the wife of a poor man, when,” I added in a low tone, “you might have been an empress.”

She looked up at her husband with a glance of proud affection.

“Not so, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she said with spirit. “I owe you the more thanks, since no queen could be more happy than the wife of a brave and loyal man.”

M. de Lambert bent his head gracefully and kissed her hand. “I am more fortunate than an emperor,” he replied.

“You are both more fortunate,” Madame de Brousson said quietly; “a loyal heart is richer than a crown, and you are happier in each other than either emperors or kings.”

Meanwhile the priest who had performed the ceremony was eager to be rid of us, and, knowing the perils of delay, I too became impatient, and urged upon M. de Lambert the necessity of immediate departure. We had previously decided upon the road that they should travel, and I sent Touchet to Mentchikof with a verbal message that would inform him that the deed was done, and nothing now remained but to get the pair off as speedily as might be. Events had crowded upon each other,

but it was now near dawn, and it was necessary for them to leave Moscow while the darkness remained. Mentchikof had furnished me with a pass that would open the gates for them, and I had previously arranged a change of horses for M. de Lambert, anticipating the necessity of his departure, whether he married mademoiselle or not. The priest hurried us out of the cathedral, and Zénaïde and I rode with them a little way to a spot where we could leave the carriage and go to our quarters with Pierrot, while Touchet was to overtake them with the woman, Neonila, and attend them on their hurried journey to France. Najine parted from my wife with tears, for, after all, she had been sorely tried, and was young and estranged from her kindred, and about to go to a strange land to begin a new life far from family and friends; yet so great and so trusting is the love of woman that it will endure all things and believe all things for him who has won it. It touched both Zénaïde and me to observe M. de Lambert's tender appreciation of her fears and her regrets, for he had that fine gentleness that belongs to the greatest courage, — the tenderness that is a part of a noble spirit. When my wife bade Najine adieu, she turned to him with grave admonition.

“Be considerate of her, monsieur,” she said warmly, “for she is leaving her guardians, her country, her friends, for your sake alone — and there is no richer gift than a good woman's heart.”

M. de Lambert took my wife's hands in his, and pressed them to his lips.

"Madame," he replied, with a thrill of strong emotion in his voice, "I love you for your own goodness and, most of all, for your love for Najine. Fear not that I shall fail in appreciation, for, madame, I value her love above all the riches of this world, as the one gift without price."

With these words we parted from them and stood watching the carriage as it rolled away with Najine's fair face outlined dimly in the darkness. They went off together into the night upon a perilous and uncertain journey, but as happy in their confidence as the most fortunate of married pairs; and my wife and I watched and listened, and then we looked up and saw the clouds drifting away and the stars shining. It seemed a happy omen.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MADAME ZOTOF.

MADAME DE BROUSSON and I walked slowly toward our quarters, attended by Pierrot. As we approached the house, I heard Zénaïde laugh softly.

“Now we must face Madame Zotof,” she said in an amused tone. “I have no doubt that she is waiting for us.”

“Unless she has gone in search of us elsewhere,” I replied.

“She is there, I think,” Zénaïde said quietly; “I can see some persons at the door. Madame has the patience of obstinacy.”

“I trust that it is only madame,” I remarked gravely; “it is a long time for her to wait, for the dawn is breaking in the east.”

“You will find that it is she,” Zénaïde returned.

In a few moments her words were verified. There were three figures at the door; and as we approached, a woman came forward, and we were greeted by madame’s high voice.

“So you have come at last, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she exclaimed shrilly. “M. Zotof is searching the

town for you, but I simply waited here. Who is that with you?"

"It is I, Madame Zotof," Zénaïde replied pleasantly. "I did not expect visitors at this early hour, but I will endeavor to receive you with appropriate courtesy."

"I thank you," madame replied with mocking suavity. "I remember yet the cordiality of your last reception, Madame de Brousson, but I am even forced to trespass upon your hospitality once more."

Remembering that I had protested against the former visit, I smiled a little, especially when I thought that they had not dared to force an entrance, although they must have been full of impatience and furious at the delay. Pierrot had entered at the rear, and coming through the house opened the door for us. The gray light of early dawn was breaking through the darkness without, but within the tapers were still burning, and their radiance seemed dingy and yellowish in contrast to the growing light at the windows, from which Pierrot was removing the shutters. Zénaïde led the way up the stairs, and, entering the small *salon*, laid aside her mantle and turned calmly to Madame Zotof.

"And now, madame," she said quietly, "I am at your service."

"I come on the old quest, Madame de Brousson," she replied haughtily; "where is my niece?"

Zénaïde smiled. "Not here certainly," she returned, with a glance at the vacant room.

"That is the old story," Madame Zotof exclaimed with impatience. "She is never here; yet I know that she went with you to Mentchikof's house, and there made herself notorious by an appeal to the czar in the behalf of M. de Lambert. It is time that she came to me and behaved as becomes a modest maiden."

"Mademoiselle is incapable of any but modest and maidenly behavior," Zénaïde replied with spirit; "you are scarcely just to her."

Madame Zotof laughed scornfully. "I have the longer acquaintance, madame," she said, "but I ask you with all courtesy to inform my niece that I await her pleasure, and it will be well to add that the czar desires that she shall return to her guardians."

Zénaïde cast a quick glance at me of mingled amusement and dismay.

"Frankly, Madame Zotof," she rejoined, "I cannot deliver your message, for mademoiselle is not here. She did indeed accompany me to Mentchikof's house, but she is no longer with us."

"However, you know where she is, madame," Madame Zotof exclaimed with impatience; "it is useless to deny it."

"At this moment I really do not know where she is," Zénaïde replied calmly, determined to delay the other woman's discovery of the secret

as long as possible; but a sudden inspiration came to Madame Zotof, and she turned sharply upon my wife.

“Where is M. de Lambert?” she demanded.

I felt that it was time for me to interfere.

“M. de Lambert has been but lately liberated by his imperial Majesty’s commands,” I said, “and I have to inform you, madame, that your nephew, M. Apraxin, came here and made a murderous attack upon him.”

“And was it not provoked, M. l’Ambassadeur?” she exclaimed; “did you not entrap him for the sole purpose of inflaming the czar against him, and so blinding his Majesty to the true state of affairs?”

“You heap one accusation upon another, madame,” I replied gravely. “M. Apraxin betrayed M. de Lambert into the hands of the guard, and I only desired to obtain his liberty. Your kinsman’s repeated attacks upon him were unprovoked and unmerited.”

Madame’s temper was rising, and she looked at me with flashing eyes.

“You take high ground, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she said cuttingly; “you are injured, you are badly used, but you forget altogether M. de Lambert’s pursuit of my niece in the face of my opposition and of Zotof’s, and you forget your own encouragement of her unmaidenly disobedience. It was natural that Yury Apraxin should be

deeply incensed against this foreigner, and I do not blame him."

"You do not blame a man for striking another in the back, madame?" I repeated with feigned surprise. "I should have looked for more justice at your hands."

She bit her lip. "You choose to misunderstand me," she replied petulantly. "I am not responsible for the passionate anger of a boy, but I do insist that the provocation was extreme. M. de Lambert had no right to seek my niece against the wishes of her guardians."

"And yet, madame," I said suavely, "I remember the days when I, like M. de Lambert, believed that you favored his suit."

I was referring to the period before the czar turned his eyes in the direction of mademoiselle; and madame, understanding the covert taunt, flushed crimson with anger.

"We waste words, M. de Brousson," she said; "all this does not tell me where M. de Lambert is, and I have a right to ask to see him."

"You have a right certainly, madame," I replied, smiling when I thought of their new relationship, "and I am sorry that I cannot gratify your desire to see him. M. de Lambert has been unfortunate enough, as you know, to fall under the czar's displeasure, and it was not desirable for him to remain longer as a member of my party. Therefore he has departed."

She stood a moment looking at me, her thoughts coming too rapidly for her to entirely grasp the situation, although she began to see it with growing distinctness. Her face was crimson, and her breath came short.

“He has departed?” she repeated vaguely. “M. de Lambert has left Moscow? You do not mean that he has gone on his way to France?” she added, with almost a scream.

I smiled and bowed gravely. “Yes, madame,” I said quietly, “M. de Lambert is now on his way to Versailles.”

“That Frenchman has gone — has left Moscow?” she cried; and then she went to my wife, grasping her arm almost with violence. “Woman,” she exclaimed fiercely, “where is my niece?”

Zénaïde shook off her hand with a haughty gesture.

“I must tell you plainly, madame,” she said, “that I am not responsible for your niece. Mademoiselle Zotof is able to act for herself.”

“You are both trifling with me,” madame cried with passion. “There is some mystery behind all this — and I will have my niece. You shall not defy me — you dare not!”

Zénaïde turned a glance upon her that was at once cold and contemptuous.

“Dare, madame?” she repeated with hauteur; “it would be strange indeed if I feared the anger of Madame Zotof.”

Madame felt the retort keenly, for she knew that Zénaïde was a Russian and a Ramodanofsky, one of a family beside which the Zotofs were as mushrooms. Happily, at this moment I heard steps without, and Pierrot came to the door to usher in M. Zotof. He was flushed and panting from the ascent of the stair, and I saw at a glance that he had heard bad tidings; but, unlike madame his wife, he was always inclined to propitiate, and, I think, had a natural distaste for a quarrel. He responded to my greeting with civility, although I fancied that he was somewhat embarrassed by the recollection of his former visit. Madame Zotof did not give him time or opportunity to speak, but commenced her attack upon him at once.

“M. de Lambert has left Moscow,” she exclaimed, “and they will not tell me where Najine is.”

He started at her first words, and cast a quick glance of interrogation at me.

“Is it true that M. de Lambert has left Moscow?” he asked gravely.

I bowed my head. “He obeyed the order of his Majesty the Czar,” I replied with composure.

“And my niece has gone with him?” Zotof exclaimed. “I assume this, because I have learned that you were all together at a late hour last night.”

Madame interrupted him with a storm of abuse,

directed against him for his stupidity, and against her niece, whom she did not spare, putting no curb upon her shrewish tongue, and astonishing even her husband, who stood staring at her as if her mood passed his slow comprehension. But my wife checked her with a gesture of disdain.

“Have done, madame!” she said in a tone of authority. “Your language is an injury to your niece. Najine did indeed leave Moscow with this Frenchman, whom you detest, and she was attended by her woman; but she left it as the wedded wife of Guillaume de Lambert.”

“His wife!” screamed madame, furiously. “I do not believe it; it is false!”

Zénaïde made her a curtsy. “I thank you, madame,” she said mockingly; “your courtesy to me passes all reason. You intrude upon me at most unseemly hours; you search my house; you insult my hospitality, and now accuse me of falsehood! I am overwhelmed with your kindness.”

Zotof turned to me. I think, for the moment, he was too astonished to resent my share in the affair as intensely as did his wife.

“My niece wedded to M. de Lambert!” he exclaimed; “where, and at what hour?”

“In the Cathedral of the Assumption, monsieur,” I replied courteously, “past midnight, and in my presence, so that I can bear witness to the ceremony.”

He crimsoned with rage. “This passes my en-

durance, M. l'Ambassadeur," he exclaimed furiously. "It shall be immediately reported to the czar. My niece shall be brought back to Moscow, and M. de Lambert shall answer for this! You presume too far upon the forbearance of the Russians. We have endured much, but this exceeds all. My niece will find that this marriage avails nothing."

I looked from one to the other with unruffled composure, finding it difficult to suppress a smile when I saw madame's furious face.

"Come, monsieur and madame," I said persuasively, "we were all younger once, and we all know that love plays strange tricks. Would it not be better to forget and forgive? The deed is done; M. de Lambert and Najine are man and wife in the eyes of the church, and it is not for you or me to bind or loose those whom the church has united. They are on their way to Versailles — see! the day has dawned — the sun has risen on their married life; of what avail is violence? If you drag them back to Moscow and excite the czar against M. de Lambert, it will indeed bring wretchedness, but what else? I know mademoiselle — I beg her pardon — Madame de Lambert, and neither prison nor death will prevail against her loyal and devoted spirit — and she is his wife!"

I think that my words had some effect upon M. Zotof, for he heard me to the end, but to madame they were sown upon the wind. Before I had

finished she had her spouse by the arm and was drawing him toward the door; but she stopped long enough to fling another bitter reproach at me, and never looked more perfectly the shrew than at that moment.

“It is well for you to use fine words now, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she exclaimed, “when you have so far succeeded; but the time will come when you will regret this interference — the czar shall know the truth.”

“You forget, madame,” I retorted calmly, “that I am not a subject of the czar.”

But she took no further notice of me, checking her husband as he was about to reply.

“Waste no more time, Zotof,” she exclaimed in a shrill tone; “there are fleet horses yet in Moscow. You are a man, and can pursue this runaway.”

And she hurried him from the room and from the house. We could hear her belaboring him with her sharp tongue all the way down the stairs, and even in the street below the windows. Zénaïde stood watching them as they departed, and turned to me with anxiety on her face.

“Do you think there is danger of their overtaking M. de Lambert?” she asked.

I shook my head. “It is not probable; he has the advantage of a fair start, and all is arranged for the relays of horses.”

“Why did you tell them that he was going to

Versailles?" she went on, still troubled; "I thought to hear you mislead them."

"And so I did," I replied, smiling; "they go, indeed, to Versailles, but by a circuitous route. Mentchikof and I planned it all. They go direct to Poland, and so through Sweden to France."

"And they will pursue on the straight road to France?" exclaimed Zénaïde, with relief.

"Exactly, madame," I replied gently, "and meanwhile much time is lost, for they will quarrel twenty times upon the way to the czar."

My wife laughed softly. "Poor M. Zotof," she exclaimed, "I find it in my heart to pity him. Madame his wife will never forgive him for his negligence; and what torture to live with that woman's tongue!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CZAR'S EQUERRY.

I WAS resting after my night of continued effort and anxiety when there was another interruption. Pierrot came to me with a troubled face, and announced the arrival of a messenger from the czar.

“He will take no gainsaying, monsieur,” he said; “I made a hundred excuses, but he must see your Excellency at once.”

I rose from my couch with a sigh, and Pierrot helped me to dress.

“Imperial messengers are unfortunately always importunate,” I remarked wearily; “and I have no doubt that this fellow has pressing business,” I added with a smile.

Pierrot's face changed a little, too, and I think he enjoyed the situation.

“They had a fair start, monsieur,” he remarked quietly, “and M. de Lambert knows how to carry matters through.”

I laughed. “In love affairs he is at least conspicuously successful,” I said, “and he knows how to chastise a villain. How fared it with M. Apraxin when you reached Mentchikof's house?”

“He had recovered enough to curse us and groan, monsieur,” Pierrot replied gravely; “he was badly bruised, I think, but he was also furious.”

“Not more so than any man would have been in like case,” I said; “he had been knocked about until there was but little breath left in him. A miserable knave he is, too, and deserved it all. By the way, Pierrot,” I added with a sudden resolution, “where is Prince Dolgoruky’s man Tikhon? I had forgotten him.”

“I have him yet, monsieur,” Pierrot replied, with his usual imperturbable calm; “he is below, in the ironed room, and I have seen to his comfort.”

I laughed a little. “The rascal deserved punishment,” I said; “but it seems to me that he has received a fair portion. You must let him go, Pierrot; he can do no harm now, and a longer detention will only increase the ill-will of the prince his master, and I have enough of that already, without going on to accumulate it.”

“I will let him go immediately, M. le Vicomte,” Pierrot replied quietly; “but I think he richly merited all he has received and more. He is but a spy and a coward, in any case.”

“We must show mercy if we expect it, Pierrot,” I said gravely, “and Tikhon will surely reap his own reward. A man who has no higher aim than to be another’s spy and tale-bearer and hired assas-

sin soon finds his compensation. If he does not die by a pistol-shot or a knife-thrust, he will presently get his head into a halter; therefore let him go with a light heart."

My toilet being now accomplished, I left my bedroom, and, walking leisurely through the ante-rooms, entered the *salon*, where the imperial messenger awaited me with great impatience. He was a young man by the name of Shein, a relative of the Boyar Shein, whom I knew to be close to the person of the czar; he was chafing under the delay which on my part was intentional. He greeted me with the respect due to my person, but came immediately to the substance of his errand.

"M. de Brousson," he said, with an air of importance, "I am charged with a message from his imperial Majesty the Czar, bidding M. de Lambert, a gentleman of your suite, to be present at the palace this morning by ten o'clock to receive certain instructions and commands from his Majesty."

I listened with a composure that ruffled the young fellow, who was elated with the importance of his errand. Without immediately replying, I seated myself in the great chair by the hearth, and, looking around at him, allowed him to see that I was so little disturbed by the order that I could take time to reflect upon my reply.

"Your master should have sent this message twelve hours ago," I remarked calmly. "His Majesty had impressed upon me his desire that

M. de Lambert should leave Moscow, and, acting solely from deference to his wishes, I endeavored to fulfil his commands to the letter; therefore this order is unhappily too tardy for me to respond to it with the alacrity that I should desire to show to any command of the czar."

Shein looked at me anxiously. "Do you mean, M. le Vicomte, that the bird has flown?" he asked eagerly.

"I should scarcely refer to M. de Lambert in that language," I replied, smiling; "but I do mean that he left Moscow in obedience to the czar's wishes."

The young man looked thoroughly nonplussed and badly frightened. He saw that they had been outwitted, and saw too, probably, the inevitable consequences. Knowing so well Peter's violent nature, I remarked Shein's open consternation with extreme amusement.

"He must come back immediately," he exclaimed, assuming an air of tremendous importance; "he can be overtaken. By which road did he travel, monsieur? It behooves me to know, that I may obey the czar's orders, which are absolutely imperative and permit no evasion."

I shrugged my shoulders, aware that my unshaken composure was exasperating the boy beyond endurance.

"M. de Lambert is on the road to Versailles," I replied, telling him half the truth, and suppress-

ing the other half with keen enjoyment of the probable bewilderment of the pursuers. "You had best return to the czar, M. Shein," I added calmly, "for fuller instructions. Pursuit at this late hour would be fruitless and foolish; I do not believe that his Majesty would authorize it."

The boy bit his lip, and frowned at me with a perplexed countenance. He was not entirely convinced that I spoke the truth, and scarcely knew what course to pursue. It was evident that he scarcely dared to return to the czar with empty hands, and he fretted under my cool and smiling glance. I was amused even while I felt it cruel to torment an inexperienced youth; he stood in the middle of the room, fingering the hilt of his sword and moving uneasily.

"Take my advice, M. Shein," I said gravely: "return to his Majesty for instructions. The loss of an hour can harm you but little, and many a wiser man has met with disaster by running too wildly upon a thankless errand. The royal mind is large, and grasps so many schemes that there is constant shifting; the wind may set in another quarter by the time that you return from a fruitless errand, and you will earn no thanks. A wise man trims his sails to the breeze; take the advice of one who has piloted through many a stormy sea at court: neither neglect your instructions nor exceed them, — either course is dangerous. You are a young man, M. Shein, be warned."

He shot a glance at me of mingled anger and doubt, and it was manifest that he began to waver in his original determination. There was no one more uncertain in temper than Peter, and the young man saw evil results on either hand. However, after a little hesitation he evidently decided that nothing was gained by delay and turned to leave the room, but on reaching the door, paused suddenly and addressed me.

"I was also instructed, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said, "to inquire if Najine Zotof was still under Madame de Brousson's protection."

I shook my head, smiling at the thought of my late interview with Madame Zotof.

"Mademoiselle is no longer with us," I replied with frankness; "she left us at a late hour last night."

"And is with her guardians?" he asked persistently.

"You must ask Madame Zotof," I said calmly.

He flushed with anger at my indifference to his importance.

"I ask for his imperial Majesty," he declared haughtily.

But I only continued to regard him with a smile. "I understand that, M. Shein," I replied composedly, "but I cannot perform miracles even for the czar. I cannot produce mademoiselle when she is not with us; neither can I tell you where she may be at this moment."

He had his hand upon the door, but made me an obeisance.

"I have discharged my errand, your Excellency," he said gravely, "and shall return to the czar and report the result of my endeavors."

"You will do well to do so before going on a thankless errand, monsieur," I replied cheerfully.

"I am not sure of the wisdom of that, M. l'Ambassadeur," he retorted tartly; "I only trust that it may not be my painful duty to return here shortly with more stringent orders."

There was a veiled threat in his words and look, and I rose from my chair.

"You are young, M. Shein," I said haughtily, "therefore I will treat you with forbearance; but you forget that you address a marshal of France."

"And you forget also, M. l'Ambassadeur," he replied, "that I am the messenger of his Majesty the Czar of all the Russias."

"On the contrary, I remember, young sir," I said curtly, "else I should scarcely have listened with such patience to your questions, which were at once fruitless and impertinent."

The young fellow flushed deeply, and I was half sorry that his arrogance had merited such a rebuke, for I saw that he was burning for that revenge which he could not obtain from my years and my rank.

"You have the advantage of me, M. le Vi-

comte," he said gravely; "you rejoice in personal impunity."

"Pshaw!" I replied with more good-humor, "you should respect my years, M. Shein. Go upon your errand, and remember that young men must endure something before they learn the lessons of life."

But my forbearance did not restore his good-humor, and he withdrew with a flushed and angry face, which, however, only amused me, for he was, after all, a harmless enough young man, and merely elated with the importance of his errand and the imperial confidence; for those close about the person of the czar felt for him an almost exaggerated reverence and affection.

After Shein left me, I sat for some time reflecting on the probabilities of M. de Lambert making good his escape; the chances were all in his favor. It was true that he had only a few hours' advantage, for I knew that the Zotofs would lose no time, but I had taken pains to mislead them, and they would probably start upon the road to Versailles, while M. de Lambert and his bride were travelling rapidly to Poland, and he had the additional advantage of having his passports on his person. What had been intended as an insult would probably be an assistance: such are the happy accidents of fate. I had arranged that a message should be sent to me at the first stop for a change of horses, and while I was thinking

of the matter, Pierrot brought me word that the men had arrived with a message from M. de Lambert. They had reached the first post in safety and without pursuit; so far all was well. The messenger had seen them start out with fresh horses before leaving to bring the tidings; they had therefore the advantage of several hours, and would probably outstrip all pursuit. These were good tidings, and I felt that I had cause to rejoice, but knew that I should presently have a second message from the czar which might be of quite another character. In the mean time I received word from Mentchikof that he desired to see me, and, knowing that this might mean a fresh complication, I lost no time in obeying, rather glad of the opportunity to be rid of his signet ring, which having served its turn was becoming a burden to me. It was a bad day when I went out, and, the wind striking my face, I lowered my head and hurried on unattended. The streets were slippery, and more than once I nearly lost my footing, but, at last reaching Mentchikof's palace, I was glad to find the warmth and glow of the fire in the great hall. Leaving my cloak below, I went up the stairs and was at once admitted to the presence of the favorite.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SON OF MISFORTUNE.

MENTCHIKOF was standing in the center of the great *salon* when I entered, and I was, at the moment, impressed by the conspicuous figure, and afterwards mentally contrasted it with that of his master. Peter's favorite was one of those handsome men who attach great importance to their dress; and this morning he was arrayed for the court and was a gorgeous picture, from his white silk stockings and white satin breeches and lace-trimmed brocaded waistcoat to his coat of violet velvet. Peter had created several orders, and half a dozen glittered on Mentchikof's breast, with the blue ribbon of Saint Andrew. His full white peruke was curled and perfumed, and his hands covered with splendid rings; he was the perfect picture of a courtier, and his naturally charming manners fitted him for the place that he held, and was to hold in the future, as the personal representative of the czar; although the spoiled favorite of fortune, he was also keen, brilliant, profoundly ambitious. If the scandalous rumors of the court were true, and he was indeed the son of a pastry-cook, he had reason to

be proud of the singular ability which had enabled him to reach the pinnacle of success. He met me with cordiality, embracing me three times, in the Russian fashion.

“So far all goes well, M. le Maréchal,” he said, smiling; “the bird has safely flown, and I believe will evade pursuit, although old Madame Zotof and her corpulent spouse are upon the track, but happily upon the wrong track. As for his Majesty, you and I will presently have a bad quarter of an hour, but I think Najine’s appeal for M. de Lambert mortified the imperial vanity so much that he is likely to restrain his ardor.”

“Nevertheless, your Excellency, I have but just rid myself of the equerry Shein, who was sent by his imperial Majesty to my quarters to arrest M. de Lambert and also, I fancy, mademoiselle.”

“Ah, sets the wind in that quarter?” Mentchikof exclaimed; “then, as I anticipated, he repented very quickly of his lenity. Prince Dolgoruky and a dozen more are probably at work; yet, nevertheless, M. l’Ambassadeur, ours was a *coup d’état*, for with mademoiselle safely out of the country he is likely to forget her. We have little to fear, for kings can afford to be fickle.”

“His Majesty does not so impress me,” I replied thoughtfully; “his is a mighty personality, and I have sometimes been amazed that Najine should prefer a young French soldier to Peter Alexeivitch.”

Mentchikof smiled that slow, brilliant smile that made his dark eyes light up and showed his white teeth.

“Women are strange creatures, M. l’Ambassadeur,” he said slowly; “they are governed largely by impulse, and ruin their own best-laid schemes by some outburst of feeling. Najine Zotof saw before her, not Peter as you and I see him, — a great man, a soldier, a statesman, a reformer; she saw only the cold-hearted husband of Eudoxia Lopukhin, the lover of Anna Mons.”

I started; how had the man read Najine’s heart so perfectly? Najine, who would not have spoken to him of any feeling of hers, who looked upon Catherine Shavronsky as a bold woman of the court! How far those keen eyes of his must have seen into the young girl’s mind; how quick must be his understanding to recognize, at a glance, her repugnance to the czar’s violence and his sensuality! I replied to him, however, without betraying my surprise at his intuition.

“Women like *mademoiselle* are governed by their hearts, I think, monsieur,” I remarked; “she loved Guillaume de Lambert, and a loyal, simple nature like hers is not to be corrupted even by the dazzling temptations of a throne. There are other women who are neither so simple nor so devoted.”

Mentchikof laughed. “You mean especially Catherine Shavronsky,” he said frankly; “truly,

monsieur, she is made for the hour. A remarkable woman," he added thoughtfully; "of the humblest origin and yet moulded on grand outlines. She is ambitious, but she is generous; she is beautiful, but also strong-minded — if the czar — well, M. le Vicomte, we will not forecast the future — yet look at the state of the empire. The czar has divorced his wife, and there is only the Czarevitch Alexis, a boy of thirteen, — and between you and me, M. l'Ambassadeur, not a hopeful boy; morose, bigoted, small-minded, like his mother, — and next in succession are the children of the late czar Ivan, himself an imbecile. In case of his Majesty's death, — which the saints delay! — what would it be to Russia to have a czarina of intellect and force and several children in the direct line of succession? No one sees this more plainly than Peter himself; and if —"

Mentchikof paused and glanced at me obliquely. I smiled without replying. I understood him, but my mind reverted to the stories of the days of the great Henry, when Gabrielle d'Estrées quarrelled with the Duc de Sully because her son could not be baptized as a child of France, and Henry then was without legitimate heirs, and I recollected the "fat bankersess of Florence," and the birth of Louis XIII. After all, the child of the despised queen had reigned in France, and I wondered a little if they could set aside the son of Eudoxia. My mind had then no conception of that frightful

tragedy that was to clear the path to the throne for the child of Catherine Shavronsky. With strange thoughts I drew Mentchikof's signet from my finger, and gave it to him with an acknowledgment of my indebtedness for his ready assistance.

"I am, nevertheless, glad to be rid of the signet," I added, smiling, "for it has burned upon my finger as a symbol of responsibility. Without it I should have found it impossible to secure a priest."

"And it will go hard with the priest if the czar finds him," Mentchikof said dryly; "however, the imperial displeasure may pass away when it appears how completely Najine has evaded all efforts to detain her."

I was not so sanguine as he, for I feared a possible capture of the wedded lovers at the frontier; but he was carried away with the success of his diplomacy, and foresaw probably, too, the return of Mademoiselle Catherine to favor. I saw that he had sent for me mainly to rejoice at our apparent good fortune, and he did not regard Peter's probable displeasure now that mademoiselle was removed from his sight. Judging from his relief at her departure, I concluded that he had attached grave importance to the czar's passion for her, dreading the influence of the faction who supported Zotof. It was natural that a man who had so long enjoyed the sunshine of royal favor should

fear its eclipse, and he was one to make enemies who would scheme for his overthrow. From him I learned that Apraxin was slowly recovering from the effects of M. de Lambert's chastisement, and had been ordered into temporary exile at Archangel by the czar, which seemed to me a light punishment for the cowardly knave; but, no doubt, the Zotofs had interceded for him.

At parting, I sent a message of congratulation to Mademoiselle Shavronsky, and Mentchikof laughed.

"So," he said, "you are wise, M. l'Ambassadeur, and know which way to look for the rising sun."

"Nay," I replied smiling, "I but do homage to a beautiful woman, monsieur."

But I left him still laughing at me and in a humor of confidence, seeing no doubt before his mental vision success and triumph.

When I quitted the palace, I found it still storming, and the streets so slippery that I made my way with care. I passed Zotof's house, and smiled a little as I looked at it, for its deserted aspect suggested the absence of its inmates, and I fancied them in hot pursuit upon one road while the fugitives were speeding along upon the other. Which would progress the more rapidly? One on the wings of love, the other upon those of wrath; a common spectacle in life, and not without a lesson in it. So absorbed was I in thought that on

turning the sharp angle of the courtyard wall, I was startled at coming suddenly upon a group of men who were standing about two combatants. A street brawl, and I was passing, for I saw that one of them was tipsy, when suddenly I heard a cry of "Let him go, you villain! what right have you to fight a Russian?" and then a shout, "A foreigner — a Swede! a Swede!" I stopped and looked back. The stouter of the two wrestlers had the other, who was intoxicated, down in the mud; but the exertion had torn off the victor's hat and cloak and I recognized Gustavus Lenk. As I did so, the Russians set upon him and dragged him off his adversary.

"A Swede, I tell you!" cried one fellow loudly, in answer to a doubt.

"He is no Russian, at least," replied another, "and has no business to whip an honest man."

"Take him to the guard," cried a third; and they fell upon him with violence.

They were common brawlers and ignorant men, and I saw my opportunity to requite the spy's kindness and save him from a fate that would be inevitable if he fell into the hands of the authorities.

"Stand back!" I exclaimed in a stern voice, stepping in their midst and laying my hand on the Swede; "you will have to account for this brawl. This man belongs to my suite."

My appearance and manner were sufficient to

dash their impudence, but they were sullen and inclined to stand their ground.

"Who are you?" one of the leaders asked boldly; "this fellow has fought an honest man, and ought to go to the provost."

"I will examine into this matter, sirrah," I retorted sharply; "it is not for you to argue with your betters."

"He shall not go," the knave persisted, holding the Swede, "until I know who you are who dare to take a man from the officers?"

I looked at him with a mocking smile. "Sir justice," I said, "I am the Vicomte de Brousson, a marshal of France."

He let go his hold on the Swede and fell back abashed, for he was an ignorant knave and feared some punishment for his audacity; but I was too eager to take advantage of my opportunity to get the Swede safely away to waste words upon him. He muttered an apology, but I cut him short.

"Learn the deference that is due your superiors," I said sharply, and, signing to Lenk to follow me, I hurried him out of reach of the crowd.

"What folly is this?" I asked, as soon as we were out of sight; "have you not learned wisdom enough to avoid street brawls?"

"The fellow was tipsy, M. le Vicomte," the Swede replied ruefully, "and set upon me about some trifle, but I am again indebted to you, for if

I had fallen into the hands of the guard, nothing would have saved my neck."

"Your neck!" I remarked dryly; "you would have tasted the joys of the torture-rooms at Preobrazhensky, and after this you are not safe here another day. That knave let you go because he dared not gainsay me, but I saw the ire in his eyes and he will be revenged, and the drunken hound you whipped will be also, and how can you conceal your nationality?"

"I was about to leave the city, in any case," he said thoughtfully, "and I must leave sooner than I intended, for, as your Excellency says, there will be no safety for me in Moscow."

"I cannot understand," I said with impatience, "how a man like you can be so easily betrayed into folly. A street brawl, and you a secret agent of Charles of Sweden! I cannot do much for you, it is not consistent with my honor, but I owe you much for M. de Lambert's sake; therefore come to my lodgings, hide there until nightfall, and then leave Moscow. This much I will do, and no more."

"It is enough, M. de Brousson," he replied quietly, "and I thank you. You have been twice the means of saving my life, and I believe that you know I do not forget."

I glanced at his face thoughtfully. "Lenk," I said gravely and kindly, "you are of too honest stuff for your profession, — you a Swedish spy!

There is no profession more contemptible. Is there no higher service in the gift of Charles of Sweden for an honest man?"

The spy's face flushed crimson, and his lips quivered.

"M. le Vicomte," he said slowly, in a tone of deep emotion, "to you I owe much, and from you I forgive the taunt, though it is bitter. I am a ruined man, and I have an aged mother;—the fortunes of our family were destroyed by the malice and deviltry of an enemy, and I was without means to keep my mother from want. The king offered money—a large sum, enough to keep her gray hairs from destitution—for this service here. M. de Brousson, poverty is cruel; a man who is penniless is blasted in the world's regard; he is without the weapons to fight the battle of life; he must needs fawn upon the hand of power; he must eat the bread of humiliation; he must bear insults, curiosity, misrepresentation, and all the world's contumely. His shabby dress brings him scorn; his empty purse denies him bread; his broken spirit falls far below the effort that commands success. Such was I—and I sold my honorable employment—I laid down a soldier's sword and took up a spy's mask—to feed my mother!"

There were tears in the young fellow's eyes, and his face from the crimson of embarrassment was white with shame. I turned and took his hand.

“My boy,” I said, “take up the battle of life, — cast behind you your shame, forget the sting of poverty. Take your sword and carve out a new future. To the noble soul there is always the star of hope. Go to your king and serve him openly, and forget — live down the past.”

He bent his head and kissed my hand, and I felt his hot tears upon it; from my heart I pitied him, and resolved that when we parted, he should have cause to remember that Philippe de Brousson was neither ungrateful nor ungenerous. More than once in my career I have seen young men crushed by the cruel load of poverty that others fought with a better heart. We are not all made in the same mould, happily; for if we were, there would be too great a press upon the road to fame, and the less hope for individual success. The trial that burns the dross from one soul consumes another, and not all of us can look fate in the face or laugh at destiny.

The walk to my quarters was concluded in silence, and on reaching our destination I fortunately sent the Swede to the rear door, else he would have stumbled upon the guest whom I found waiting, thus leaping into the teeth of another danger; for when I opened my door I found within the imperial equerry, M. Shein.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GREATEST ROMANOFF.

M. SHEIN was standing at the foot of the stairs, and there was an expression of triumph on his face. After all, he was but a boy, and my treatment of him had wounded his pride; doubtless, he rejoiced at this opportunity to return to the charge. My own feeling at seeing him was one of relief that I had sent the Swede to the other door; Shein was not keen, but was observant enough to detect Lenk's nationality in his blond face.

"We meet soon again, M. Shein," I remarked calmly; "I trust that you have not waited long."

"A quarter of an hour only, your Excellency," he replied with an air of importance. "His Majesty the Czar desires your presence immediately at the palace."

"I am at his Majesty's disposal," I said at once, "and will not delay you a moment."

Leaving him, I gave a few hurried directions to Pierrot in regard to the Swede, and then, returning, went without further delay to the Kremlin. I knew well the significance of the czar's summons,

and prepared myself for the ordeal. I was not without some doubt as to the safety of M. de Lambert and his bride; if by any evil chance they were overtaken or betrayed, I could not judge what would be their fate. My reflections were therefore of a nature that did not permit me to converse with my young companion or even to feel amusement at his evident triumph. He undoubtedly believed that I would have to give a clear account to the czar for all the facts that I had practically refused to give to him, and rejoiced thereat. When we reached the palace, he conducted me to an ante-room off the czar's private apartments, where he left me to announce my arrival. In a few moments I was admitted to Peter's presence, and found him sitting in a large chair by the fire. There were one or two attendants in the room, but he dismissed them at my entrance. He was wearing the dress of a common sailor, and his shirt was unbuttoned at the top and without a collar; he had laid aside his peruke, and his dark hair was ruffled as I had often seen it in his stormy moods. In an instant I contrasted him with Mentchikof, in his splendid dress; but the czar's huge figure had a dignity of its own, which no garb could disguise; there was something in his personality which was profoundly impressive. I advanced within a few feet of him, and, making my salutation, apologized for my appearance, for my boots were splashed from the miry streets.

"I crave your Majesty's indulgence," I said, "but I have been out the greater part of the morning, and the weather is intolerable."

"You are a Frenchman, M. l'Ambassadeur," Peter replied, "and you are too dainty for the storms of the north. However, you have been active, it seems, or else I am grossly misinformed. I sent to your lodgings for M. de Lambert, and learn that you have hurried him from Moscow; is this true?"

"Your Majesty was urgent about his departure," I replied calmly, "and it was incumbent upon me to comply; therefore I sent him to Versailles at once."

The czar was leaning his face upon his hand so that it was shaded from my observation, and I could not read his expression.

"This sounds well, M. le Vicomte," he said gravely; "but, after all, were you not endeavoring rather to defy me than to obey my wishes? And where is Najine?"

Was it possible that the Zotofs had not applied to him for assistance? I began to feel my way cautiously.

"At this moment, your Majesty, I do not know where she is," I replied.

He laughed unpleasantly.

"Words, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said, still shading his face. "Not many hours since Madame Zotof came to me for help to recover her run-

away niece, and you claim — I assume — to know nothing of this?”

“Nay, your Majesty,” I returned boldly, “that I do not claim. Mademoiselle Zotof had no great reason to love her aunt, and —”

He interrupted me with an impatient gesture. “You need not tell me that she loves M. de Lambert,” he said harshly, “for she told us all that herself. Her aunt charges her with having gone away with the Frenchman; is it true, M. le Maréchal?”

“It is true,” I rejoined quietly; “failing to obtain her uncle’s consent, she went without it.”

“And also without the ceremony of marriage, her aunt fears,” he said slowly.

“Madame Zotof is cruel,” I exclaimed; “she knows better!”

“Ah!” he ejaculated in a fierce tone, “she was married — where?”

“In the Cathedral of the Assumption,” I answered.

He let his hand fall heavily upon the arm of his chair, and I saw his face plainly, for the first time. It was twitching with that unfortunate convulsion that distorted his features, making his eyes horrible.

“By a priest of my church?” he asked sharply.

I bowed my head in assent, beginning to understand his mood and see the dangers of it.

“What priest of mine dared to perform that

ceremony without my consent?" he cried passionately; and I saw that his violent mood was threatening to overwhelm him, yet I regarded him with composure.

"I beg your Majesty's pardon," I said calmly, "but it is impossible for me to give you the priest's name."

"Impossible!" he thundered, staring at me like an infuriated lion; "you forget that I am the Czar of Russia."

I made a profound obeisance. "I do not forget it even for a moment, your Majesty," I replied gravely, "neither can I forget my honor;" and I folded my arms upon my breast and gave him look for look.

"And you dream of defeating my purpose by withholding the man's name?" he exclaimed with passion.

"Nay, sire," I returned quietly, "I do not measure my strength with yours, but I will not violate my honor or my word."

"And yet," he said fiercely, "you stood by and saw Najine Zotof marry against her uncle's wishes and without my consent, with no apparent violence to your feelings." His tone was full of contempt.

"Your Majesty," I replied quietly, "I judged that you understood mademoiselle's sentiments after her open declaration for M. de Lambert, and that in giving her his liberty you intended also to

give her happiness, since that seems to me the most royal prerogative of kings. To be empowered by the King of kings to give joy to His creatures appears, to my poor mind, the one supreme gift of His anointed. Here were two young people who loved each other, and your Majesty's benevolence liberated him; it was the completion of your Majesty's generosity to unite them. I must crave pardon if I have fallen into any error."

The czar had listened with unusual patience, and was looking at me with keenly observant eyes when I finished speaking.

"You are eloquent, M. l'Ambassadeur," he said deliberately, "but you see only one side of the question. You forget altogether the feelings of Zotof and his wife, their aims and ambitions for their niece. Najine is a wayward girl, and should have been compelled to obey her natural guardians. It is in my mind to demand that the king my brother return her to me as a rebel against my authority."

There was nothing for me to say, so that I remained silent and observed him closely, seeing that his mood was changing and that he was swayed by deep emotion. After a moment's pause he turned upon me abruptly, his eyes flashing.

"What did she see in that boy to love?" he exclaimed with impatience.

I smiled involuntarily. "That is a difficult

question, your Majesty," I remarked. "How can I divine what a young maid sees in her lover? The poorest of us is likely to be loved by some woman."

"All men but the king!" he cried passionately, rising from his seat and striding back and forth before the fire, — "all men but the king! And he must satisfy his soul with the fawning of the poor creatures who would mount upon his shoulders; must quench his thirst with falsehood and feed on treachery. He, of all men, cannot find one honest heart to love him for himself; he, of all men, must live amidst deceit and flattery, with the poisoner's cup in his kitchen and the assassin's knife by his pillow. Yet all men envy him!"

He laughed a discordant laugh; nothing could be more passionately bitter than his voice and manner. He paused and gazed at the fire, that was burning low; his great figure looming enormous in the gloomy room, and his head bowed; his breast was heaving with emotion, and his hands were clenched. It was the storm of a great spirit, and I knew that I saw the Romanoff face to face; a man with a man's heart, imbittered by his disappointment. What thoughts must have been in his mind, — he, the autocrat, outrivalled in a young girl's heart by a French soldier!

"All men envy the king," he went on in a deep voice, speaking, it seemed, to himself; "but, by our Lady, there is no beggar more destitute of friends,

no beggar more thirsty for the truth! Watched by all men — at once their envy and their dupe; flattered by all — loved by none! Failing to do the work of a god upon earth, he must die at last, cursed by men and welcomed by devils as their vicegerent. Breathing in life the essence of flattery — the greatest of men, the best beloved, the most magnanimous; cursed, behind his back, as the chiefest butcher, the most unjust of judges, the oppressor of the poor and the widow! Accountable for all things in the sight of men and of angels; and, after all, only human — alone, unloved — ay! hated, feared, betrayed. A king on earth, a thief in Paradise!”

He seemed to have forgotten me. His breast heaved, and his strong face quivered. Was this indeed the hour of a king's reckoning? I watched him with many thoughts crowding into my mind. I saw how deeply he had craved Najine's love, how much a good woman's loyal regard would have been to this tempestuous soul. For a time he stood silent, his eyes upon the ground, and then, suddenly awakening from his reverie, he directly addressed me.

“ M. l'Ambassadeur,” he said in a scornful tone, “ you have the reputation of having won a bride at the point of the sword — advise me. Of what effect would be the separation of Najine from her new-made bridegroom? She is a woman; doubtless she would forget him.”

I shook my head. "Nay, your Majesty," I replied, "she is not of such poor stuff. Hers is a loyal nature, pure and true. She would not forget her husband, and—"

"And what?" he asked quickly, as I paused. "Speak with candor, M. de Brousson."

"And she would abhor the man who separated them," I concluded briefly.

He started, and his cheek flushed darkly. "In plain words, monsieur would say that she would abhor me," he exclaimed.

"We do not so speak to kings, your Majesty," I said gravely.

"No," he replied harshly, "to kings all men lie. I sometimes think that they also lie when they pray; for if they strive so hard to appear fair to their sovereigns here, how much more so at the bar of Heaven! Pah! false witnesses and knaves, I would give my right hand for the love of one honest heart!"

"Doubtless, your Majesty has that of many," I replied suavely; "and from gratitude is born the purest regard."

"You would suggest that I could merit her gratitude?" he said in a strange voice; then he turned to me with a gesture of passionate despair. "Man," he cried, "I loved her!"

I stood amazed, and found no words. I felt myself as awkward as the veriest boy. He had declared his unrequited passion, and yet, undignified

as it seemed, I had never seen him so imperial. All that was violent and coarse was lost to sight. He stood there in his simple dress, his dark hair disordered, his face pale, and his eyes burning. It was the sorrow, the isolation, the passionate disappointment of a great heart; for the Romanoff was, first of all, a man,—genuine, simple, emotional.

“I loved her,” he repeated in his deep voice, “and she is another man’s wife. I, the czar, craved the love of a simple heart, and it is denied me. But,” he added with a sudden fierce change, “it is not yet too late to tear her from her lover’s arms!”

“Your Majesty,” I said slowly, with what composure I could command, “it would be a revenge unworthy of a king, and most unworthy of you. Grief you can bring to her, if the saints permit, for not even you can defy heaven. Earthly loss and desolation you might achieve for her, but rather than her love, you would have her hatred. Czar of the Russias, there is but One, and He is mightier than thou, the King of kings, who alone can dispose the heart of man or woman. Let this young girl go in peace with her husband, and so merit her blessing and her prayers, which will be richer to you than the poor revenge of seeing her broken in spirit and in heart, dreading your name as her greatest scourge; not a loyal subject, but a slave.”

He was silent, and I saw that he struggled with himself.

“A man who can conquer his own heart,” I added, as if speaking to myself, “is worthy indeed to be a king.”

He turned and stood with his back toward me, seeming to look out of the window, and I was silent. There was no sound in the room except the crackle of the log that burned upon the hearth, having fallen among the embers; and I could hear, far off, the murmur of voices, the attendants talking in the ante-room. What would come next? I could not conjecture, but hoped much from his strange mood. I have never forgotten that moment or the scene; the great chamber hung with costly silks, the narrow Russian bed, the imaged figure of Saint Peter suspended above it, and the gray light of a gloomy Russian day shining through the windows. A solitary raven, beaten by the storm, alighted on the window-sill and perched there, looking in and croaking ominously, like some black-gowned and cowled preacher. And the czar — that man whose personality was so great and so peculiar — treated me with the simple familiarity that was one of his characteristics. It was a full quarter of an hour before he turned and faced me; he was strangely pale, and his dark eyes — except in his nervous paroxysms always beautiful — were brilliant with

emotion. He waved his hand with a gesture of dismissal.

“Go, M. l’Ambassadeur,” he said; “it is over. Najine shall go in peace. Love and hate cannot touch my heart,” he added with supreme bitterness. “I am not a man—I am the czar!”

CHAPTER XXX.

A FUTURE EMPRESS.

THE few weeks that followed were eventful. I received the long-expected summons from France to return, for as yet the hour for a Russian alliance was not ripe, and Peter was not held in high esteem until after the victory of Poltava, which was yet to come. At this time Charles XII. was in Poland intriguing with the Primate Radziejowski, and intimidating the Diet at Warsaw. Augustus of Saxony had been deposed, and Charles was engaged in selecting a sovereign for Poland who would be his creature. It was already apparent that his choice would be Stanislas Leczynski; and in the following July, in the field of Wola near Warsaw, a few electors, surrounded by Swedish troops, proclaimed Stanislas King of Poland. It was one of the comedies of the King of Sweden, and the two dupes, Augustus and Stanislas, continued their rôles, quarrelling for the Polish crown and being, in fact, mere puppets, while Russia and Sweden wrestled for supremacy. Meanwhile the Neva, precious to the heart of the czar, had been threatened by land and sea, and there was the

promise of sufficient occupation to keep the northern princes out of the War of the Spanish Succession.

I was anxious to depart, for my own position at court was embarrassing. Prince Dolgoruky and the faction opposed to Mentchikof were intensely angry at my successful manœuvre, and M. Zotof and madame his wife were feeding the flames. They had returned from their fruitless pursuit, frantic with rage and disappointment, and both desired to wreak some vengeance upon my devoted head. Indeed, madame lost no opportunity of assailing me with her sharp tongue, — an annoyance which, while failing of great harm, was yet offensive; however, I could endure it with serenity since I had received the tidings of M. de Lambert's safe arrival in France with his bride. I did not lose the opportunity to inform madame of her niece's safety, and she replied that Najine would doubtless soon be as glad to run away from France and her French husband as she had been eager to leave her guardians. To which sally I replied that it was a fair land, full of brave men and gentle women; and madame, finding that the shaft was intended for her, darted a glance of withering scorn at me, and swept on. In my heart, I was sorry for the "prince pope," for his wife cast all the blame upon him, making him the scapegoat of the faction. Her protégé Apraxin was in exile, — a miserable tale-bearer and spy,

not worth the angry contempt that Peter felt for him.

The Swedish spy was not a little troublesome to me; the day after my interview with the czar, it was bruited about that there was a Swede in Moscow on some secret errand. Doubtless the knave who had quarrelled with him spread the report, and I found it difficult enough to keep suspicion from my quarters, and more so to despatch the man in safety, for he had found it impossible to get away at once. I owed him much, and both Zénaïde and I felt a keen interest in him, so that we managed to send him away at last under cover of darkness and with a full purse, which had been increased by a contribution from M. de Lambert. I had no desire to meddle with a Swedish spy, but the man Lenk had my pity, and I gave him help with a free hand, although if he had been taken with my money upon him it would have been a serious matter. The world is a hard school, and the young man in a shabby doublet has the harder battle because of its shabbiness. When we march up the road to the Eternal City, will the gay coat of the cavalier precede the ragged shirt of the beggar? Sometimes, methinks, I see the Angel with the flaming sword, who keeps the Gate of Paradise, look strangely on the bedizened gallant of the court, as upon one whose face he knows not. I am an old man now, and I have stood on many a stricken field,—with Turenne, with the Prince

de Condé, with Luxembourg, Villars, Villeroi, Catinat, and many more. I have seen thousands die, and, truly, the poor camp follower makes as brave an end as the gallant gentleman: Nothing do we bring into the world, neither take we anything from it; and the naked soul before its Maker can give small account of the estates of earth. An emperor and a slave are equal at the bar of Heaven; yet men still contend for the kingdoms of this world, and the greatness thereof! And what is the end but the grave and corruption?

In a few weeks it was manifest that there was a change at the Russian Court. Mentchikof loomed up once more triumphant; the Austrian emperor had lately made him a Count of Hungary, and two years later he created him a prince of the Holy Roman Empire, and from that time honors and emoluments were showered upon him. Almost immediately after Najine's marriage, Catherine Shavronsky was made conspicuous by the czar's notice, and there were rumors that she would be even more powerful at court than Anna Mons; as yet no man dreamed that this Livonian peasant who was to become Peter's mistress would wear the crown of Russia, that she would be untiring in her efforts, and never swerve until she reached the goal of her ambition. I have often thought that those years must have had their bitter humiliation for her; that she must have hated that forlorn figure, the "nun Helen," as

the Czarina Eudoxia was named, who stood like a shadow between her and the crown, even when the czar acknowledged her children,—as bitter to Catherine in her triumph as humiliation and exile must have been bitter to the unfortunate Eudoxia behind her convent walls.

It was the day before we finally left Moscow that Catherine Shavronsky sent for me, and I responded to her summons. Madame de Brousson and I had taken formal leave of the czar, and our preparations were complete, so that nothing remained but to leave Moscow on the morrow, and in the evening I went to Mentchikof's palace to hear what Mademoiselle Catherine had to say. There was to be a fête that night, but when I went, no one had yet arrived, and I was ushered into the empty *salon*, and, while I waited, observed idly the splendid decorations of the apartment, its magnificent hangings and long mirrors, which reflected every object in the room. It was the house of a prince, indeed, and I did not marvel that Mentchikof's debts often overwhelmed him, arousing even the czar's displeasure. Yet in the years to come, when he was Duke of Ingermannland and Prince of Izhora, with an immense income and almost royal revenues from the many high offices that he held, the favorite still ran into debt. He had few of Peter's simple tastes, although he had shared the czar's hardy education; like all the favorites of royalty, he was the victim of over-

indulgence; yet he was to owe his continuance in favor, more than once, to the intercession of his own protégée Catherine Shavronsky, long after she had outstripped him on the path to power; but she was generous enough never to forget the debt that she owed him. "The journeyman pastry-cook," as Mentchikof was sometimes called in malice, and "the servant-maid" were to be the powers behind the throne.

I had waited but a few moments, when the door opened at the farther end of the *salon*, and Catherine came in alone. As she walked up the long apartment toward me, I thought that I had never seen her more queenly in her bearing. She wore a rich robe of some pale blue material that clung to her figure and swept about her feet; her rich complexion contrasted well with her fine dark eyes, and her smile was captivating; in her light hair shone a single jewel, an opal that was radiant in its varying hues, and on her breast was a miniature of the czar surrounded with diamonds, — his gift, and a conspicuous token of his favor. Her disposition was naturally amiable, and she had all the charm of youth, and it was said that her soft voice had a peculiar attraction for Peter. I made my salutation, and she responded with graciousness.

"You are welcome, M. le Maréchal," she said, smiling. "I sent for you that I might be assured of the safe arrival in France of Madame de Lambert."

“She is quite safe, mademoiselle,” I responded, “and also her husband.”

Catherine laughed. “Her husband,” she repeated slowly; “it seems strange that we accomplished that marriage in the face of such difficulties. It has been in my mind often, and you, M. l’Ambassadeur, you saw the czar.”

She looked at me questioningly, and in an instant I divined her object. She desired to fathom the matter, and to know just how much the czar had cared for her rival; here, at least, I could be a match for her.

“I had the honor to bid his Majesty farewell but yesterday, mademoiselle,” I replied gravely, “I leave Moscow on the morrow.”

“Ah! but I intended to say that you saw the czar immediately after Najine’s flight and while his Majesty was still angry,” she said simply, searching my face with her dark eyes. “Is it true that he threatened to seize them, declare the marriage illegal, and throw M. de Lambert into prison?”

I raised my brows in feigned surprise. “Mademoiselle astonishes me,” I remarked; “I do not hear all these rumors.”

She cast an indignant glance at me, but smiled at the same moment.

“M. l’Ambassadeur, you never forget to be a diplomat,” she said archly; “do you ever speak with candor?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Frequently, made-

moiselle," I returned, smiling also; "but an old fellow like me cannot wear his heart upon his sleeve."

"Alas!" she cried with feigned surprise, "have you a heart? It seems to me that courtiers have none."

"Nay, mademoiselle," I said gravely; "but soldiers have, and I am a soldier."

"So is the czar," she rejoined at once. "Truly, monsieur, do you think he loved mademoiselle so deeply?"

She had assumed a coaxing manner, laying her white hand upon my arm; but I am accustomed to woman's wiles, and hardened my heart.

"How should I know, mademoiselle?" I asked her tormentingly, "being but a weather-beaten veteran? Ask some fair dame of the court. Never saw I yet a king who could not love."

She stamped her foot impatiently upon the floor. "Ah, M. le Vicomte," she cried, "you mock me. You saw the czar alone—and in a moment of passionate vexation: he showed his feelings to you, doubtless, and why not admit it?"

"Mademoiselle," I replied gravely, "when you have lived as long as I, you will know that it is a perilous thing to know a king's heart and far more perilous to betray it. Moreover, you forget that to a soldier his honor is as dear as his life."

She looked at me a moment in silence, and then a smile broke over her handsome, passionate face.

“Yet you have told me, M. l’Ambassadeur,” she said with a woman’s triumph. “I know that he loved her — but she is gone!”

She paused, and stood there a picture of triumphant beauty; a woman with the tigress in her nature, passionate, bold, ambitious; a peasant, a slave, an empress to be. I have never forgotten her, her haughty head erect, her eyes sparkling with emotion, her full red lips parted and showing her teeth; young and handsome, and marked out by a strange destiny to be the favorite, the mistress, the secretly wedded wife of Peter the Great, and, at last, Empress of all the Russias.

She took a step toward a door near her, and I saw that, failing to draw all the secret from me, she intended to cut short the interview.

“Najine is no longer here,” she said in a tone of exultation, “and I owe much to you. The day of my evil fortune is past, and I will remember always those who were kind to me. No man shall call Catherine ungrateful. M. l’Ambassadeur, I kiss your hands!”

With these words we parted. From that day she continued to ascend the path of ambition that was to lead her up the blood-stained steps of a throne. The Livonian peasant girl died an empress.

THE END.

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