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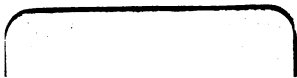
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“REMAIN HERE,” SAID THE DUCHESS, ADDRESSING  
HER TWO ATTENDANTS.

*“By Neva’s Waters.”*

*(Page 146) Frontispiece.*



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NEVA'S WATERS

Being an Episode in the Secret History of  
Alexander the First, Czar of All the Russias

BY  
JOHN R. CARLING

AUTHOR OF  
"THE SHADOW OF THE CZAR," "THE VIKING'S SKULL"  
"THE WEIRD PICTURE," ETC.

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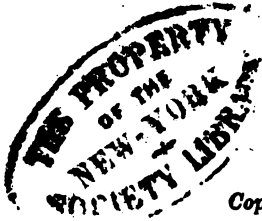
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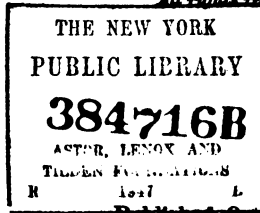
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TO  
MY DAUGHTER, WINIFRED

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# BY NEVA'S WATERS

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## CHAPTER I

### A MODERN FREE-LANCE

ON a cold January night in the first year of the nineteenth century, a state ball, given by command of the fair young queen, Louisa, was held in the Royal Palace at Berlin.

Of those who attended this fête, many, chiefly of the masculine sex, were indifferent to polonaise or waltz, finding their entertainment in the galleries where, somewhat after the fashion of a modern restaurant, stood little tables, at which parties of two or more, while glancing at the dancers, could at the same time regale themselves with a supper and converse upon the topics of the day. This was a feature recently introduced by the Russian Count Wengersky, and though Court fossils stood aghast at the innovation, it had met with the approval of Queen Louisa and had brought immense popularity to the Count.

In one of these balconies sat round a table some officers, who, though of youthful aspect, were more interested in politics than in the charms of the ladies. Their talk, which was extremely animated, turned chiefly upon the question whether their sovereign lord, Frederick William III., would permit himself to be drawn into the confederacy formed by the four Powers, France, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark — a confederacy



whose object was to resist by armed force the right claimed by Great Britain of searching on the high seas all vessels suspected of carrying contraband of war.

As these fire-eaters talked, they cast cautious glances in the direction of Viscount Courtenay, an Englishman, who sat alone at a table sipping his wine. A member of a famous historic house and patriotic to the backbone, the quick-spirited viscount was not the man to allow any disparagement of his country to pass unchallenged, and as his reputation for swordsmanship was such as not to be disputed even by "Fighting Fitzgerald," then in the height of his glory, the Prussian officers took good care that any remark uncomplimentary to his native land should be spoken in a low tone.

Wilfrid Courtenay's life should have been cast in the Middle Ages. He was a romantic freelance, whose ideas were more akin to the age of chivalry than to the nineteenth century. The spirit that finds a zest in danger, the spirit that made the vikings the terror of all coasts from the North Cape to Sicily, the spirit that sent the Crusaders forth to do battle with the Paynim beneath the blazing sun of Syria, the spirit that has caused Englishmen to plant colonies in the very teeth of hostile savages — that spirit still ran strong in the blood of the Courtenays. Accordingly, on the attainment of his majority, Wilfrid, leaving to his widowed mother the care of his patrimonial acres, had set out like a knight-errant to wander over Europe in search of adventure, in which quest he had fleshed his sword in more than one campaign, earning thereby from no less a personage than the Count d'Artois, himself a pattern of chivalry, the proud title of *Le Bayard de l'Angleterre*.

To this taste for fighting was added another, in singular contrast with it. Just as Frederick the Great, in the intervals of campaigning, found a strange pleasure in writing what his admirers called poetry, so Wilfrid was wont to devote some of his leisure to the study of painting, but whereas Frederick in his art never rose above mediocrity, Wilfrid, in his, succeeded in attaining a high degree of excellence.

For the rest he was tall, with fair hair, blue eyes, and

that indefinable air that is always the accompaniment of aristocratic birth: shapely and muscular in limb; a giant in strength; a stranger to fear; chivalrous in his dealings. Among his faults was that of acting upon impulse rather than upon the cooler dictates of reason. But where would be the great deeds of history if their authors had always paused to weigh consequences?

Now as Viscount Courtenay sat alone toying with his wine glass, a familiar voice suddenly broke in upon his reverie.

"Wilfrid, that our respective countries, or shall we say our stupid cabinets, are at war with each other, is surely no ground for breaking off our personal friendship?"

"Prince Ouaroff! You in Berlin!" exclaimed Wilfrid, his face brightening; and, somewhat apprehensive lest the other should salute him, continental-fashion, with a hearty kiss, he quickly extended his hand, and was relieved to find Ouaroff content with the English mode of greeting.

"'Prince' do you say?" returned Ouaroff in a tone of quasi-reproach. "It was 'Serge' in the old days."

"Then let it be Serge still. I am glad to see a familiar face."

The newcomer was of Russian nationality, with a countenance decidedly unhandsome, a genuine Kalmuck physiognomy, though its ugliness was redeemed by the mild expression of the dark eyes. But however unprepossessing in face, his figure was tall and well proportioned, and arrayed in the blue uniform of the Preobrazhenski Guards, who formed, in 1801 at least, the *corps d'élite* of the Czar's army.

During his term of service as *attaché* to the Russian Embassy in London, the Prince had become well-known in West End salons, where he had met Wilfrid, who, in spite of an unreasoning prejudice against Muscovites, made an exception in favour of Prince Ouaroff, appreciating his sterling qualities. The two had, therefore, become fast friends.

There was a mystery attending Ouaroff. He had been brought up by a boyar of high rank, who would

never, even on his deathbed, reveal to his adopted son the secret of his parentage.

"Your father lives and knows of your existence. 'Tis for him to speak—not me," were almost the last words of his guardian.

The matter troubled Ouvaroff a good deal. He had often talked it over with his English friend, and now, their first greetings over, that friend reverted to the old theme.

"Any nearer to—to the discovery?"

The Prince's face assumed a somewhat sombre look.

"No nearer, and, truth to tell, I hope I may never be any nearer than I am at present."

Wilfrid lifted his eyebrows in genuine surprise.

"Do you remember," continued the Prince, "that old gipsy fortune-teller, whom you and I once met near your place in Surrey? She predicted that my father would become known to me in the very moment of my killing him."

"My dear Serge, surely you don't attach any importance to her words?"

"I do, and—fear. Her prophecies were three—first, that on my return to Russia I should be created a prince; second, that I should become *aide-de-camp* to the Czarovitch Alexander. Both these have come to pass. Why should I refuse to believe the third?"

"Why? Because the old sibyl assured me that within a year I should save the life of the fairest princess in Europe, gaining her love by that act. Eight years have passed since then, and so far I haven't saved the life of any woman, whether princess or peasant. Since she can prophesy falsely as well as truthfully, dismiss your gloomy forebodings."

Ouvaroff changed the conversation.

"What's this I hear you've been doing at Paris?" he observed. "I am told that a picture of yours exhibited there last Christmas almost created a riot."

"A riot? Nonsense!"

"I see you do not like to—what do you say in England?—blow your own trumpet. But for once lay aside your modesty, and let me have this story."

“Well, since you insist on being bored. You are referring, I suppose, to my picture, ‘The Last Moments of Marie Antoinette?’ Despite what French newspapers may say, I had no political motive. The work was done merely to please my own fancy. When finished my poor old drawing master saw it, and begged for the loan of it, to place it among a small exhibition of his own pictures. I consented. The result was marvellous. Thousands came to view the picture. Republicans who had once yelled for the head of ‘The Austrian,’ and had gleefully seen her perish on the scaffold, now melted to tears at sight of her image on the canvas. Bonaparte got wind of the affair, and, on the ground that it was creating a sentiment in favour of Royalism, ordered the picture to be destroyed. The *gendarmes* were stoutly opposed. Shouts of *A bas Napoleon* were raised, a struggle ensued, and the gallery had to be cleared with fixed bayonets.”

“And is it true that you challenged Napoleon to a duel?”

“I demanded compensation for the loss of my picture or — satisfaction at the sword’s point.”

Ouvaroff could not help smiling at his friend’s colossal audacity.

“And General Bonaparte’s answer —?”

“Was a police order to cross the frontier within forty-eight hours.”

“You went?”

“I stayed. You see, the First Consul’s sister, the dark-eyed Pauline, with whom I had had some love passages — platonic, of course — had invited me to a ball a fortnight later. My dear Serge, how could I refuse? On the evening of the dance I presented myself, greatly to the dismay of my friends, who were aware that the First Consul was expected. I had purposely arranged to take my departure at the moment of his arrival.”

“He saw you?”

“Certainly. Figure his rage as he saw me raising Pauline’s hand to my lips as I took my leave! The music, the dancing, the conversation — all stopped. The stillness was painful. ‘Did you not receive an order to

quit France a fortnight ago?' he thundered. 'Why have you not gone?' 'And did you not receive a challenge to fight a fortnight ago?' I answered. 'Why have you not fought?'

"He couldn't speak for passion.

"'As to quitting France, Citoyen Bonaparte,' I continued, 'in such matters as coming and going, we Courtenays are accustomed to please ourselves. I had fixed upon to-night as the time of my departure, and, as you now perceive, I—er—depart. Adieu, citoyen.'

"With that I passed, by preconcerted arrangement, through a circle of friends, and before he had time to order my arrest I had reached a private gateway, where a carriage was awaiting me. As I had taken the precaution to have relays of horses in readiness, I succeeded in crossing the Eastern frontier a few hundred yards ahead of the pursuing carabineers."

"And so General Bonaparte declined to measure swords with you?"

"Bonaparte is a Corsican—that is to say an Italian bravo, who prefers darker methods. Listen to the sequel. A few days later, as I was sitting at the card table in the *kursaal* at Homburg, a man suddenly rose, accused me of cheating, and ended his remarks by flinging the contents of his wine glass in my face. Of course, a meeting was inevitable. It was to be a duel to the death. Later that night my second came to me in great distress, advising me to cry off. He had discovered that my adversary was a secret agent of the First Consul—none other, in fact, than the famous, or infamous, Abbé Spada."

"I have heard of him. The first swordsman of France?"

"So-called. Well, we met, and considering the many men whom Spada has killed in his day, I felt justified in giving him his passport to Gehenna."

"You killed him!"

"Within three minutes."

Ouvaroff regarded the speaker with admiration.

"That's Bonaparte's way of dealing with the objects of his displeasure," concluded Wilfrid. "But I'll be

even yet with the Little Corsican for destroying my picture."

Now, as Wilfrid gazed down upon the dancers swaying rhythmically to the sound of the music, his eye was caught by a lofty figure standing, solitary and contemplative, within an arched entrance that opened upon the ballroom. It was a middle-aged man with silvering hair, whose cold, handsome face wore a somewhat sombre expression. He was clad in Court costume, carried his hat under his arm, and sparkled all over with diamonds from his powdered *queue* to his shoe buckles. It was the diamonds that attracted Wilfrid's attention; he did not like to see a man so bedizened.

"Do you know that gentleman, Serge?" asked Wilfrid, indicating the magnate in question. "His face seems familiar to me."

"Count Arcadius Baranoff, one of the Czar's ministers. You must have seen him in London, for he was formerly ambassador at the Court of St. James's. As rich as Croesus. One of the men," the Prince went on in tones of contempt, "who in the last reign climbed to power through the bedroom of the Empress Catharine. He is a proof of the power of the personal equation in international politics."

"How so?"

"He is a rank barbarian, whose polish is but skin deep. When he was in London his *brusquerie* offended the men, his coarseness the women, and he left England burning with a desire to do her hurt, and now the time has come, he thinks."

"Thinks!"

"You are aware that, after fighting each other for a year or more, the Czar Paul and Consul Bonaparte are now fast friends. This is mainly due to the diplomacy of Count Baranoff, who was sent to Paris as the Czar's envoy: it was his hand that signed the Franco-Russian treaty. While in the French capital he tickled the Parisian fancy with a pamphlet, 'Is it possible for an Englishman to possess sense?'"

"Oh, indeed!" muttered Wilfrid, with a glance at the distant pamphleteer.

"And now, on his way back to St. Petersburg, he tarries at Berlin in the hope of persuading the Prussian King to join the league against England."

"Humph! Is he likely to succeed?"

"There's no telling. He has had two interviews with the King. Frederick William is an amiable, weak-minded man. Were it not that Queen Louisa insists upon being present at these interviews, Baranoff might have carried his point. He is to have a final interview on the fourth day from this, and — mark this significant point — the Queen knows nothing of this intended meeting."

"And Prince Ouvaroff as a Muscovite patriot," smiled Wilfrid, "hopes that Baranoff will gain his ends?"

"By no means," responded the other quickly. "Personally, I am opposed to the war, and — but let this be kept secret — so is the Czarovitch. Why should we give an opportunity to your Nelson to earn fresh laurels at Russia's expense? But a truce to politics — I shall be letting out more than I ought," he continued with a laugh, and then, by way of changing the subject, he added —

"You are not married yet?"

"No, nor likely to be. Waiting for the promised princess," said Wilfrid mockingly. "But you —? What of the lady you loved five years ago?"

"I love her still," replied the Prince moodily.

"She remains unwed?"

"So far. But she is ice to me."

"Take heart. The Neva is not always frozen. That she does not marry should encourage you to continue your suit."

"Give me your face and figure and I might succeed. Is it likely that she, confessedly the most beautiful woman in Moscow, will marry an ugly fellow like me?"

"What have looks to do with love? What says your own Russian proverb: 'I do not love thee because thou art pretty, but thou art pretty because I love thee.'"

These words failed to arouse Ouvaroff.

"I have discovered of late that I have a rival, and a successful one. There is peril in aspiring to her hand."

Before Wilfrid had time to ask the meaning of these mysterious words a liveried attendant approached, carrying a silver salver, upon which lay a sealed envelope. This with a bow he presented to the Prince, who, upon opening it, found therein a card inscribed with the words:—

*“He who now speaks with you is the man.*  
**ARCADIUS BARANOFF.”**



## CHAPTER II

### BARANOFF'S PROPOSAL

FOR a moment Ouvaroff fastened his gaze upon the card which he so held as to be seen by none but himself; then, raising his eyes, he looked at Wilfrid. There was a sudden coldness in the Prince's demeanour, and Wilfrid intuitively felt that the writing on the card had something to do with it.

"The next dance is a Hungarian waltz, I perceive," said Ouvaroff in a changed voice. "I am reminded by this card that a lady is waiting for me. Excuse my absence for a few minutes. I am so ugly, you see," he added with an uneasy smile, "that when I *do* obtain the favour of a dance I cannot afford to miss it."

As honest a fellow as ever lived was Ouvaroff, but the words he had just spoken were a "white lie," as Wilfrid quickly proved; for, upon looking down during the whole course of the waltz, he did not see the Prince among the dancers.

While Wilfrid was puzzling himself to account for Ouvaroff's conduct, he saw Count Baranoff coming along the gallery, smilingly exchanging a word here and there with those to whom he was known.

Wilfrid watched him and took the measure of the man. His eyes, more oval in shape than those seen in Western Europe, had the deceitful, furtive glance of the Asiatic.

"Were I a Czar, that is not the sort of man I should choose for my minister," was Wilfrid's comment.

"Do I address Viscount Courtenay?" said the Count with a bow as he drew near to Wilfrid.

Yes, he did address Viscount Courtenay. This somewhat bluntly. Wilfrid had not asked for the diploma-

tist's acquaintance, nor was he disposed to be over polite to an enemy of England).

But the envoy was not to be rebuffed by Wilfrid's frigid manner. He sat down in the chair lately occupied by Ouvaroff. The little group of Prussian officers stared at the pair, wondering what there could be in common between the Czar's representative and the eccentric young Englishman.

As Baranoff seated himself a diamond dropped from his coat. Wilfrid picked it up and presented it to its owner, who gracefully waved it off.

"It is beneath the dignity of a Baranoff to resume what he has once let fall."

"And beneath that of a Courtenay to accept it," replied Wilfrid, placing the gem in the exact spot where it had fallen.

This diamond-dropping was an old trick of Baranoff's whenever he wished to gain the good graces of a stranger. He had always found the method very successful — with Russians. It didn't seem to answer with an Englishman.

The Count called for a bottle of Chartreuse and helped himself to a glass, first pouring in from a phial that he produced a few drops of a liquid that Wilfrid knew to be "diavolino," one of those Italian nostrums much in vogue a century ago, as warranted to keep in tone the constitutions of those given to dissipation.

Wilfrid's dislike of the man increased.

"You have business with me, sir?"

"Ah, how delightfully English! You come to the point at once. Business? Yes, we may call it that. At any rate I have an offer — a magnificent offer to make."

He eyed Wilfrid curiously, dubious as to how his words would be received. And indeed it was on Wilfrid's tongue to tell the envoy to take himself and his offer to Samarcand, or further, but he refrained for the moment, thinking that he might as well hear what the offer was.

"I wish," continued the Count, "to give you the opportunity of earning three hundred thousand roubles.

Such is the price I am willing to pay for a service to be done by you."

Three hundred thousand roubles, or, roughly speaking, £50,000 in English money, would be a welcome gift to Wilfrid, whose family estate had a heavy mortgage upon it. But, mindful of the character of the speaker, he determined to learn first whether the proposal could be honourably entertained by an English gentleman and a patriot.

"Three hundred thousand roubles! It must be a very substantial service to be worth so much."

"You speak truth. It is a substantial service."

"There are thousands of suitable men in Europe. Why select me for the purpose?"

"Thousands of men—true. But only one Courtenay."

Wilfrid did not controvert a remark so obviously just.

"The work," continued the Count, "is one requiring a spirit that will dare great things."

"Then, who more qualified for the task than Count Baranoff?"

"You are very good," smiled the envoy. "But I was not at Saxony in the summer of 1792—you were."

"So, too, were many other men in the year you mention."

"True, but you were the central figure in a certain affair, forgotten by you, perhaps, but remembered by others. I will explain anon."

The summer of 1792 was about eight and a half years back. Wilfrid hurriedly reviewing his brief sojourn in the kingdom of Saxony, could recall nothing to explain Baranoff's words.

"What I require for my three hundred thousand roubles is that you shall make love—successful love, mark you—to a certain lady."

Wilfrid gave a scornful laugh.

"I thought the enterprise was one demanding a high degree of courage!"

"And so it does. There's great danger in it."

"That makes it interesting. Where is this Lady Perilous to be found?"

- "In the city of St. Petersburg."
- "Is the lady young or old?"
- "She is in her twenty-third year."
- "Seven years my junior. Ill-favoured, perhaps, and therefore unable to obtain a suitor?"
- "She has the loveliest face in St. Petersburg."
- "Not ill-favoured? The daughter of a vulgar merchant, or of some wealthy serf desirous of obtaining a nobleman for his son-in-law?"
- "On the contrary, her father is a prince."
- Wilfrid started. He thought of the gipsy's prophecy.
- "Is the lady of fallen fortunes?"
- "She can command millions of roubles."
- "A prisoner immured within a fortress from which you would have me rescue her?"
- "Nothing of the sort."
- "A cloistered nun, repentant of her vows?"
- "Not at all. She moves freely in Court circles."
- "Demented, or that way inclined?"
- "As sane as women in general."
- "Subject to some hereditary taint? Epileptic or the like?"
- "As sound in physique as yourself."
- "Then by all that's holy!" cried Wilfrid, in a paroxysm of perplexity, "explain why a lady of princely birth, beautiful, and rich, can lack suitors among her own nation? Why must a foreigner from distant England play the lover?"
- "Because there is no one in St. Petersburg bold enough to take upon himself that *rôle*, since discovery means certain death to the lover, death perhaps to her."
- "Death!" queried Wilfrid, somewhat startled at the word.
- "At the hands of the State."
- "Ah!" said Wilfrid, beginning to receive a glimmer of light. "She is a lady important politically?"
- "Very much so," replied the diplomatist with a look that confirmed his statement.
- "What prospect have I of winning this lady's affections?"

"I have discovered, no matter how, that you are the only man in Europe who can succeed."

"Really! That's very flattering to my vanity," laughed Wilfrid. "The lady did not send you on this mission, I trust?"

"She is modesty itself, and would die rather than commission any one on such an errand."

"I ask her pardon for wronging her in thought. Have you got her portrait?"

The Count hesitated for a moment, and then drew forth an ivory miniature.

"Painted three months ago. It scarcely does her justice."

As Wilfrid's eyes fell on the miniature he fairly held his breath. It was a face more beautiful than any he had ever seen. The soft violet eyes and the lovely delicate features, with their sweet grave expression that spoke of a nature, pensive and *spirituelle*, might well inspire love in the heart even of the coldest; much more then in that of a romantic character like Wilfrid.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Baranoff.

"It is the face of an angel," replied Wilfrid as he returned the miniature. "What is her name?" he added.

"You do not recognise her?"

"No."

"I thought perhaps you *might* have recognised the face. Her name? Pardon me, I will give it if you are prepared to undertake the *rôle* of lover — if not, 'twere best, in the lady's interests, to keep it secret."

Wilfrid reflected. A lady of political consequence, Baranoff had called her, threatened by the State with death if she listened to love-vows! Wilfrid was sufficiently versed in Russian history to know that the reigning dynasty was a younger branch of the House of Romanoff, and that a return to the rights of primogeniture would deprive the present Czar of his crown. Was the lady with the angel-face a descendant of the elder line, and thus so nearly related to the throne that, in the Court of the gloomy and suspicious Paul the First, it would be perilous for any man, even the highest among

Russia's nobility, to aspire to her hand? Imbued with this idea Wilfrid began to weave a whole political romance around the person of the beautiful unknown. Was she, though nominally at liberty, a virtual prisoner at the Czar's Court, watched by a hundred suspicious eyes — pining for affection, yet forbidden to marry?

To try to set her free from such gloomy environment was no more than his duty.

And Wilfrid, if Baranoff had spoken truly, was certain of gaining her love! To woo and carry off a fair princess from the power of a jealous Czar was just the sort of enterprise that appealed to his knightly and romantic character. He could no longer hesitate.

“Do you assent?”

“Assent!” echoed Wilfrid. “Is it possible to dissent? You say that provided I succeed in marrying this lady you will add to the pleasure by paying me the sum of three hundred thousand roubles! Really, your proposal is so extraordinary, so captivating, that I am almost inclined to think that you are trifling with me. ‘And,’ he added in a graver tone, “it is not wise, sir, to trifle with a Courtenay.”

“No trifling is intended. But, pardon me, I have not, it seems, made my meaning quite clear. You are labouring under a slight misapprehension. I spoke of *love*: I did not speak of *marriage*.”

Wilfrid stared hard at the speaker, upon whose lips there now appeared a sinister smile. Then, vivid as fire upon a dark night, the full meaning of the proposal flashed upon him. He was deliberately to set to work to corrupt a woman's innocence! The lady in question had given some offence to the powerful diplomatist, who chose this diabolical method of revenge. The fall from purity, the shame that is worse than death, would destroy whatever influence she possessed in Court circles, and probably at the same time remove a political obstacle from Baranoff's path.

Now whatever sins might be imputed to Wilfrid, he had not yet played the rake. In an age when gallantry was considered one of the marks of a gentleman, and even the clergy were not conspicuous for purity of

morals, he had kept his name stainless, thanks to the influence of a good mother, who had bidden him see in every woman a saint.

His anger, then, can be imagined. He blamed himself for holding converse with so cold-blooded a barbarian.

"I deserve this insult," he muttered. "What else could I expect? Can one meddle with pitch and not be defiled?"

"You must not talk of marriage," resumed Baranoff. "What I require is that the lady shall be induced to compromise herself."

"So that all the world shall hear of her fall?" said Wilfrid, smiling dangerously.

"Why, truth to tell, 'twill not avail me much if the *amour* remain secret."

The candour with which Baranoff spoke showed that he was quite convinced that Wilfrid had consented to his scheme.

"But you have said," commented Wilfrid, "that the affair, if discovered, may bring upon her the penalty of death."

"So it may, if it be discovered while she is on Russian ground. But I will so arrange matters that both you and she shall have every facility for escape. Once over the frontier you are safe. As I have said, the danger is great. But so, too, is the reward. Think! Three hundred thousand roubles!"

"Your Excellency," said Wilfrid with the air of one who has formed an irrevocable decision, "I will at once depart for St. Petersburg."

"Good!"

"I will seek out the lady."

"Excellent!"

"And I will warn her of your damnable designs."

"Ha!" muttered Baranoff, looking thunderstruck.

As he caught the angry sparkle of Wilfrid's eye, it suddenly dawned upon him that he had mistaken his man. Reared in the atmosphere of Catharine's Court, in its day the most licentious in Europe, Baranoff had become dead to all sense of honour, and failed to under-

stand how a man could resist the twin temptation of a pleasant *amour* and a rich bribe.

"Do I take it that you refuse my offer?"

"To the devil with your offer!"

Baranoff elevated his eyebrows and affected the extreme of amazement.

"I hold out to you the prospect of an *amour* with a beautiful and charming woman, to be followed by a free gift of three hundred thousand roubles, and you refuse!"

"Repeat your infamous offer, and I'll—yes, by heaven! I'll fling you over the rails of this balcony!"

Unconsciously Baranoff backed a little from the table, for Wilfrid looked quite capable of putting his threat into execution.

There was a brief silence. Then Baranoff spoke.

"So you will visit St. Petersburg and put the lady on her guard," sneered he, mightily pleased that he had withheld her name. "I fear that if you seek to enter Russia at this present juncture you will be taken for a spy of Pitt's. As minister of the Czar it would be my duty to order your arrest."

"Oh, indeed! Do you really entertain the hope of returning to Russia?"

"What is to prevent me?"

"Myself."

"You!" exclaimed Baranoff disdainfully.

Wilfrid laughed pleasantly.

"I shall certainly do my best to provide you with a grave in Brandenburg's sand. In seeking to make me the agent of an infamous deed you have offered an insult not to be passed over by an English gentleman. You will have to defend your conduct with the sword."

There was a very palpable start on the part of Baranoff, and his face paled. Though well versed in the art of fencing he durst not measure swords with the man who, inside of three minutes, had transfixed the Abbé Spada, the champion duellist of France.

He sought to shield himself behind the privileges of his high offices.

"It would be contrary to etiquette," he remarked



loftily, "for a *chargé d'affaires* to accept a challenge. My imperial master would never forgive me for putting my life to the hazard of a duel while engaged in conducting a diplomatic mission, otherwise ——"

"Now you are talking nonsense," interrupted Wilfrid, bluntly. "The Czar loves a duel, for only a few weeks ago he invited all the sovereigns of Europe to his Court to settle their international disputes by single combat."

And Baranoff, well knowing that the eccentric Czar had so acted, felt himself deprived of his argument.

"Fight me you must! I will force you."

"Force me? indeed!" said the Count. "In what way?"

"By publicly branding you as a coward; by putting affronts upon you in every assembly you frequent. For example, if you are among men I shall walk up to you with a pair of scissors, and after asking, 'Why do these Muscovites wear their beards so long?' I shall proceed to clip yours. If you are sitting with ladies I shall relate in their hearing and in yours the story of how you propose to deal with one of their sex. It may be that through fear of me you will keep within your hotel, in which case I shall have to affix a notice at the chief entrance, stating the reason of your enforced seclusion! In short, sir, I shall make your life at Berlin so abominably unpleasant that for very shame you will have to fight. There must be a meeting unless you wish to see the name of Baranoff turned into a byword for a coward."

The Count listened with secret consternation, feeling certain that this obstinate pig of an Englishman would keep his word. A man who had not shrunk from defying the First Consul to his face was not likely to pay much respect to the status of a diplomatic envoy.

And to whom could he look for protection? Not to Frederick William. So long as Queen Louisa was by his side that monarch would avow, rightly or wrongly, that he was powerless to control the actions of one who was not a native-born subject. Not to the British Ambassador at Berlin. That magnate, in view of the hostile relations between Great Britain and Russia, would be

highly amused at the mortification of the Muscovite envoy.

While he was thinking of all this Wilfrid, too, was thinking, and it suddenly occurred to him that there was another and better way of punishing Baranoff — one that would likewise strike a blow at Bonaparte.

“As your Excellency seems to have no liking for the duel, I give you the alternative of quitting Berlin within twenty-four hours.”

An instant feeling of relief swept over Baranoff. Here was a way of escape. Then he began to reflect that if he should depart within the time prescribed he must sacrifice the promised interview with King Frederick, and go back to St. Petersburg without gaining the adhesion of Prussia to the Northern Confederacy — a sad blow to his hopes!

Disposed to take a favourable view of matters, he had that very day sent off a despatch to the Czar stating that King Frederick seemed slowly coming over to Russian views. He must now return to report the failure of his mission, and, if he should speak the whole truth, to confess that he had been frightened from Berlin by a single Englishman! The neutrality of Prussia meant the loss of so many war vessels to the Confederacy, and was practically equivalent to a bloodless naval victory on the part of Wilfrid.

Some such thought as this caused Wilfrid to smile. Baranoff, quick to read his thoughts, was consumed with secret rage.

No, he would not withdraw from Berlin at Wilfrid's bidding, and he said as much.

“Go you shall,” retorted Wilfrid. “As General Bonaparte, your dear ally, banished me from France, so I in turn do banish you from Prussia. ‘Tit for tat,’ as our English children say.”

Baranoff gave a scowl of baffled hatred.

“How much has Louisa paid you for this business?” he sneered.

With disdain on his face Wilfrid rose.

“When next you take to pamphleteering let the theme be, ‘Is it possible for a Russian to be a gentleman?’ My

present address is the Hôtel du Nord. If by to-morrow evening at six of the clock you have neither left Berlin nor sent me your second, you may prepare for humiliation. I take my leave. *Adieu* or *Au revoir*, whichever you please."

And so saying Wilfrid withdrew to the quietude of his room in the hotel to think over matters.

It was a fascinating thought that during a brief stay in Saxony he had been seen by a girlish and beautiful princess, upon whose imagination he had made an impression so powerful that after the lapse of eight years she still retained him in mind. True, Baranoff was a person upon whose statements little reliance could be placed, but in the present instance Wilfrid was convinced that he had not spoken falsely.

"The lady has a real existence," he muttered. "Now how ought I to act in this affair?"

It was hard that a princess who cherished his memory with affection should meet with no return. Yet, on the other hand, it would be embarrassing for both if he should be unable to requite her love.

If he went it was doubtful whether he would find her, so slight were the clues he held.

Would his friend Ouvaroff be able to identify her? The thought had no sooner entered Wilfrid's mind than he recalled the Prince's strange saying in connection with his own love suit. "There is deadly peril in aspiring to her hand." This could scarcely be a coincidence — Ouvaroff's lady must be Baranoff's princess.

"Humph! if Serge were first in the field," thought Wilfrid, "it seems unfair to cut him out. But, if the princess *won't* have him —"

Early on the following morning he called at Ouvaroff's quarters. To his extreme disappointment he found that the Prince had taken his departure, leaving a note to the effect that he had been hastily summoned to St. Petersburg by command of the Czarovitch. "Pardon my running off without a farewell," he wrote, "but Alexander's service brooks no delay."

Ouvaroff was not the only Muscovite to leave Berlin that day, for in the evening the political circles were

surprised, and probably relieved, by the news that Count Baranoff had suddenly departed for St. Petersburg, thus relinquishing his attempt to make Prussia a member of the Armed Neutrality.

And now was Wilfrid continually haunted by the lovely face in the miniature. It filled his mind by day; by night it mingled with his dreams. Sometimes he saw the face, its lips curved into a witching smile as if inviting a kiss; sometimes the eyes would assume a sad, wistful look, as if appealing to him for aid.

To visit St. Petersburg, or not to visit it? was the question to which for a long time he could discover no answer. Still in doubt he looked one night from his hotel window, and saw the face of the sky as one dark cloud. But while he gazed, there presently came a rift, and through the rift one planet sparkling bright.

Hesperus, the star of Love!

It seemed like an answer to his thoughts. Love in the shape of a fair princess was beckoning to him. His mind was made up — he would go to her!

## CHAPTER III

### THE INN OF THE SILVER BIRCH

A WINTER night, frosty and still. The northern stars, set in a sky of steely blue, twinkled over a plain of frozen snow — a plain so vast that its visible border touched the horizon. In all the wide landscape no town, no hamlet, not even a solitary dwelling was to be seen; the view, a monotonous blank, relieved here and there by clumps of dark firs, the darker by contrast with the surrounding white.

Lofty posts, painted with alternate bands of black and white, and situated a verst distant from one another, indicated the ordinary line of route over the wintry waste, and along this route a hooded sledge was moving with all the speed that three gallant mares could supply, the bells upon the duga, or wooden arch, ringing out musically over the crisp snow.

Two persons occupied this sledge, one, the *yamchik* or driver, Izak by name, an active little Russian, who sat partly upon the shaft, in order when necessary to steady the vehicle by thrusting out a leg upon the snow; the other, Wilfrid Courtenay, who, voluminous in fur wrappings, sat, or rather reclined at the rear under cover of the hood.

It was over Russian ground that the car was speeding, its goal being St. Petersburg, distant now about one hundred miles.

Wilfrid had met with considerable difficulty in entering the Czar's dominions. Twenty days had he been detained at the frontier-town of Kowno for no reason whatever as far as he could see, save the caprice of petty officials, whose insolence and greed had so galled the spirit of the Englishman that several times he was on

the point of turning back. However, he thought better of it, and when at last leave *was* granted him to go forward, forward he went. Having learned by experience that travelling in one's own equipage is more convenient, and, in the end more economical, than the ordinary method of posting, Wilfrid had purchased at Kowno a covered car, together with three steeds to draw it, accepting at the same time the proffered services of a yamchik, who boasted that he knew every verst of the way from Kowno to St. Petersburg.

And here he was speeding along at the rate of twelve miles an hour. The keen cold air, combined with the rapid swaying of the car, caused him to fall into a semi-slumber, from which he was roused by the voice of Izak.

"If the little father will condescend to look, he will see the village of Gora," he cried, pointing with his whip to a light shining far off like a star.

Welcome news to the cold and hungry Wilfrid. Gora should be his stopping-place for the night.

Fifteen minutes more and they reached the silent, sleeping village, which, like most of its kind in Russia, consisted merely of a line of wooden cabins on each side of the post-road with a row of trees in front.

At one end of the village stood its only house of entertainment, the Inn of the Silver Birch — an inn very different externally from the generality of its class. As a matter of fact, it had originally been the seat of a rich boyar, the lord of the village and of the surrounding land. It was a large and handsome structure of timber, pillared and balconied, and with much carving about its eaves and gables. On three sides grew lofty birch trees with silvery bark; the fourth side lay open to the gaze of the travellers.

"This is the twentieth inn I've seen painted red," remarked Wilfrid.

"'Tis the will of the Czar," answered the yamchik. "Some weeks ago he gave a ball, and to it came a lady wearing a red dress. 'What a pretty colour!' said Paul. And lo! at once a law that all post-houses and bridges shall be painted red. Great is the word of the Czar! He wills, and — pouf! 'tis done."

"A pity he doesn't will a spell of warm weather, then," growled Wilfrid, as he set his half-frozen feet upon the hard ground.

As was the village, so was the inn, still and silent as the tomb. Wilfrid's summons, however, soon brought to the door the landlord, a somewhat melancholy-looking man. He was accompanied by a tall and pretty girl of about eighteen, sufficiently like him to be recognizable as his daughter.

Though wrapped in sheepskins they shivered as the keen, icy air from without, chilling the warmer air within, produced an instant fall of sleet, a phenomenon which, familiar enough to the four, was witnessed without surprise.

Now as the girl caught sight of Wilfrid there came into her eyes a sudden light. It was not the light of recognition, for she could never previously have seen Wilfrid, but it was a look that seemed to say she had been expecting him, and was glad he had come. Such at least was the impression that Wilfrid derived from her odd manner.

Turning from her to the landlord Wilfrid requested accommodation for the night, but at this the landlord put on a lugubrious look of refusal, explaining that it was neither for lack of room nor of victuals that he was compelled to turn the little father away, but the fact was the whole inn had been hired for the night by a small party, now fast asleep, whose grandeur was such that they had insisted that no other traveller should be received, lest the noise, however light, which must necessarily accompany his presence, should disturb their slumbers.

"Did they look under their pillow for a rose-leaf?" asked Wilfrid.

But this classical allusion was lost upon the landlord. It grieved him, he continued, to refuse a traveller at so late an hour of the night, but what could he do? He had given his word. There was another inn some twenty *versts* farther on; would not his Excellency ——?

No, his Excellency wouldn't, especially when he no-

ticed on the face of the pretty girl a look of disappointment, evidently occasioned by her father's words.

"Your name?" asked Wilfrid, addressing the landlord.

"Boris, son of Peter."

"Good Boris, your guests' command applies only to noisy and drunken roysterers, not to a gentleman so orderly and quiet as myself. Lead on—I'll not disturb their slumbers."

Boris hesitated, but a whisper from the girl seemed to decide him.

"His Excellency may enter," said he.

The girl's eyes danced; she could not have looked more glad had she herself, and not Wilfrid, been the traveller. While Boris conducted the yamchik with the car and horses across a courtyard to the stables, Wilfrid followed the girl—whose name she told him was Nadia—to a large room on the ground floor, a room not warmed by the ugly-looking closed-up stove, the usual accompaniment of a Russian room, but by a fire of pine-logs blazing upon the stone hearth, the ruddy glow forming a cheerful contrast to the snowy prospect without, which could be dimly discerned through the panes of the double lattice.

In one corner of the apartment hung a small painting of the Madonna, before which a taper was burning.

Wilfrid was passing this negligently by when Nadia gave a little scream.

"Ah! you are a heretic!" she cried. "Come, you must bow before the picture—so." She showed him how to do it, and, to please her, Wilfrid bowed. "Now you make the sign of the cross, with your fingers bent thus." Wilfrid imitated her action. "That's right. Now you are a member of the True Church."

She smiled so prettily that Wilfrid could not help smiling too.

Throwing a huge bearskin over the back and seat of a chair, Nadia drew it to the fire, and bidding her guest be seated, she began to bustle about, saying that all the servants were asleep and that it would be a pity to awaken them, so she herself would prepare his supper.



'As Wilfrid seated himself, the innkeeper entered from the kitchen, where he had left the yamchik, who, when his meal was over, would curl himself up and sleep, peasant-fashion, upon the stove.

"Your Excellency has travelled far to-day?" asked Boris. His manner was in striking contrast with Nadia's free and lively style. He stood in humble fashion, as if not liking, even in his own house, to sit down in the presence of his guest; but, invited by Wilfrid to a seat near the fire, he sat down, mentally contrasting the Englishman's affability with the hauteur of the Russian grandees sleeping above.

"You have come far to-day?" he repeated.

"From," replied Wilfrid, as he set to work with knife and fork, "from a place called — let me think — Via — Via —"

"Viaznika?" interjected Nadia.

"Ah! that's the name — Viaznika."

"You set off late in the day?" pursued the innkeeper.

"About noon."

Boris looked as if Wilfrid had made a very puzzling statement.

"Your horses seem fleet enough," he murmured.

"Have you any reason to doubt their fleetness?" smiled Wilfrid.

"Why, see here, gospodin. It is now midnight, and since you say you set off at noon, you have taken twelve hours to come thirty-six versts."

Reckon a verst at about two-thirds of the English mile, and it will thus be seen that Wilfrid had been travelling at the magnificent rate of about two miles an hour! But how could this be when the horses had been kept going at a fair trot the whole of the time? Nadia sat silent, her eyes fixed upon the ground. Odd, but Wilfrid somehow derived the impression that the talk had taken a turn distasteful to her. Why should this be?

"Have you mistaken the distance between Viaznika and here?" said Wilfrid to the innkeeper.

Now whatever faults English travellers may have to find with Russia and her ways, all will bear witness to the excellence of her posting-maps. One of these, placed

before Wilfrid, quickly convinced him that Boris was right. The distance by the post-road between Viaznika and Gora was a little more than twenty-four miles. The three-horse car had occupied twelve hours over a journey that a pedestrian could have performed in half the time. It was clear that the yamchik had not followed the ordinary route; in fact, Wilfrid had known thus much at the time, for on pretext of taking a short cut, Izak had frequently deviated, now to the right and now to the left. Wilfrid's suspicions being thus aroused he began to study the map, and found that the preceding day's journey could have been accomplished in a considerably less space of time than that actually taken by the yamchik. That worthy's conduct was certainly puzzling. His motive could hardly be a pecuniary one since Wilfrid, alive to the disadvantages of paying by the day, had by mutual arrangement fixed upon a definite sum for the whole journey, so that manifestly it was to Izak's interest not to retard, but to accelerate, Wilfrid's progress.

"Where did you pick up the man?" asked Boris.

"At Kowno. He came to me of his own accord, saying that as he had heard I was about to make the journey to St. Petersburg would I accept his services? According to his own account he has performed the journey from Kowno to St. Petersburg more than a hundred times during the past ten years."

"His face is strange to me. He has never stopped at the Silver Birch."

"Nay, father," interposed Nadia. "I remember him on two or three occasions."

She caught Wilfrid's eye as she spoke, and coloured. Wilfrid wondered why.

"Let's have the fellow in here, and we'll question him," said he.

"He'll be asleep by this time," said Nadia gently. "Twill be a pity to disturb him."

Thus advised, Wilfrid put off his cross-examination of the yamchik till the morning, and the conversation flowed into other channels.

"Are you a *witch* or an *off*?" asked Nadia, suddenly.

"I am not quite sure that I understand."

"Why, look you, my father being the son of one Peter, is Boris Petroff. Now if he were a boyar he would be Boris Petrovitch."

"I see. Well, I suppose I must put myself down among the *vitches*, for I am a nobleman in my own country."

Nadia's face fell when she heard this. In a voice that seemed to savour of resentment, she asked:—

"How many souls have you?"

"We in England are limited to one. Is it different in Russia?"

"One!" echoed Nadia. "Some of our great boyars have ten thousand souls."

"They must take an unconscionable time in dying! And how many has Nadia?"

"None," replied the girl with a flash of her eyes as if detecting some hidden insult in the question. "We are souls ourselves, my father and I."

"It is the fashion of our boyars," explained Boris, "to call their serfs 'souls.'"

"A good name," added Nadia in a bitter tone, "for they have us, body as well as soul."

"And there are twenty million like us," said Boris.

It came upon Wilfrid as a painful shock to learn that this dignified innkeeper and his pretty daughter were serfs. That serfage existed in Russia was, of course, no news to him, but it had existed as something remote, and therefore as shadowy as the helotry of ancient Sparta. It was a very different thing to be brought vividly face to face with the system, to know that Boris, head man of the village, the lessee of a government post-house, and therefore himself a master of servants and the owner of many roubles, was of no account in the eye of the law. He and Nadia could be summoned back at any time to their lord's estate, clothed in peasant attire, put to degrading tasks, and, like domestic animals, could be whipped or sold at the pleasure of their owner.

No wonder, with such fears as these always present to their mind, that Boris should wear an habitual look of melancholy, and that Nadia's flashes of liveliness should alternate with moods of gloom!

Now if Wilfrid had been some blockhead of a Russian boyar he would have disdained all further conversation with the innkeeper and his daughter, but being an English gentleman it never occurred to him that he was losing caste by conversing with a serf, and so he continued to talk on, and under his sympathetic words Nadia seemed to brighten again.

"Do you know," she remarked, looking up with a half-smile, "that you have been talking treason? You have used the word 'free' several times. It's a prohibited word."

"Prohibited?"

"I do not jest, gospodin. The Czar Paul would regulate the language of his people, so he has issued a ukase forbidding the utterance of certain words. Among such come 'freedom' and 'liberty.'"

"The devil!" muttered Wilfrid.

"You may say that. That's not a prohibited word."

"Twere well, Nadia, to give me a list of these forbidden vocables."

"I don't know them all. However, you mustn't use the word 'revolution.'"

Wilfrid began now to understand why the officials of Kowno had confiscated from his small travelling library a book bearing the title of "The Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies." Evidently it was regarded as a dangerous political work!

"Anything more?"

"Well, 'snub' is forbidden."

"Heavens! what treason lurks in that simple word?"

"It will be taken as a reflection on the Czar, whose nose has a skyward tendency."

"Anything more?"

"Beware of the word 'bald.'"

"Ah!"

"Because if the Czar were to swear by the hair of his head the oath would not be binding. Do you know he once had a soldier knouted to death for speaking of him as the 'baldhead?'"

To the truth of Nadia's remarks history can bear witness. The last of them was not very encouraging to

Wilfrid, for if the Czar could put a man to death for an offence so slight, he would surely do the like with one who had defeated his envoy at Berlin. And Wilfrid's coming to St. Petersburg would quickly become known to Baranoff's underlings, since it was required of every stranger that he should report himself at the Police Bureau. Was it likely, then, that Count Baranoff would neglect the opportunity of exposing him to the vengeance of the Czar? But though Wilfrid began to realize more vividly than before the dangerous character of his enterprise, he was still resolute to go on with it, trusting that as he had emerged triumphantly from previous perils, so, too, he would from this.

He sought to turn the conversation from politics by making inquiries as to the other guests in the house.

The innkeeper, with a shake of his head, gave it as his opinion that there was something mysterious about them, since one and all had declined to disclose their names, a statement that did but serve to stimulate Wilfrid's curiosity.

"To-day about noon," said Boris, proceeding to tell all he knew, "there drove up to the inn door a troika containing four persons, two equerries attired in blue and silver livery, and two women, who——"

"Who," interposed Nadia, "from their dress might have been taken for grand-duchesses, but who proved in the end to be only ladies' maids."

"The four had been sent on to prepare for the coming of their mistress, a boyarine, so they said, of the highest rank. They wished to engage the whole inn for the night. They insisted that the time of their lady's sleep must be free from the slightest noise, to ensure which they stipulated that I must exclude all other visitors, and to this I agreed, as they promised to pay well. They then went the round of the inn, selecting such rooms as they deemed suitable."

"And the airs and graces of the maids!" said Nadia. "They strutted about with their noses held high. Nothing was good enough for them."

"They selected the Tapestryed Chamber as the bedroom of their lady," continued Boris.

"Yes, and grumbled because there was no room communicating directly with it. They wished to be near their lady, and actually wanted us to connect the Tapestryed Chamber with the adjoining room by there and then cutting a doorway through the wall."

"And when I refused," pursued Boris, "on the ground that I could not make any alteration in government property without the consent of the government, I thought they would never cease laughing, though for my part I could see nothing to laugh at. In the evening about seven of the clock the boyarine and her party arrived."

"And how sweet and gracious she was!" commented Nadia. "Different altogether from her retinue. Do you mind that ugly haughty man in uniform, with the long spurs and the fierce moustaches. He's a fire-eater, if you like! He spent an hour after dinner in fencing with another officer, as lordly as himself. One of the maids so far condescended to me as to say that he practised this sword-play every day in order to be able to kill a certain Englishman."

"He must take care that the Englishman doesn't kill him," smiled Wilfrid. — "They have all gone to bed, I suppose?"

"All," replied Boris. "The boyarine in the Tapestryed Chamber; in the room on her right the two maids, in that on the left the — the ——"

"The Ugly One," interjected Nadia.

"And the rest here and there in different rooms."

"And they are staying for the night only?" asked Wilfrid.

"For the night only. They set off at ten in the morning for St. Petersburg."

"You didn't hear the boyarine's name?"

"We didn't hear the names of any of them. They wish to remain unknown. 'The name,' said the officer with the spurs, who seems to be the boyarine's right-hand man, 'the name by which we choose to be known is Pay-well. Ask questions and it shall be Pay-not.'"

"It is the fashion," remarked Nadia, "with some of our noble ladies to spend a week or two of religious

seclusion in some convent. From a few words let fall by one of the party I believe the boyarine is returning from some such a visit."

"It may be," responded Wilfrid. "Is she young or old?"

"Not much past twenty," replied Nadia.

"And her appearance?"

"Her appearance!" repeated Nadia with enthusiastic warmth. "Her appearance! Ah! gospodin, how can one describe what is indescribable? I am told that there lives a German duchess so beautiful that once, when passing through a certain village of Italy, the simple-minded peasants knelt, believing her to be the Madonna. I think our boyarine must be that duchess, so sweet and beautiful is she."

"Dark or fair?"

"As fair as the day, with golden hair and blue eyes."

"Then she resembles you."

Nadia gave a scornful little laugh.

"My eyes are light blue; hers are of a lovely, dark azure and shine like stars. At a distance our hair may seem alike, but look closer. Mine is straw-coloured tow; hers waven sunbeams and as soft as silk. But the way she arranges it! She must be very much afraid of the Czar."

"Why so?"

"Her *coiffure* shows it."

"What! has that old autocrat been dictating in what way ladies shall wear their hair?"

"That is so, gospodin." And here Nadia, twisting her long hair into a number of thick plaits, disposed them in ludicrous fashion around her head, saying with a smile, "This is Paul's ideal *coiffure*, and this is how ladies must appear at Court. But we, who do not go to Court, may wear it as we please." And with that she let her hair fall around her like a shower of golden threads, and pushing some aside, looked smilingly at Wilfrid.

## CHAPTER IV

### IN THE PRINCESS'S BEDCHAMBER

A FEW more words passed and then Wilfrid, with a glance at his watch, opined that it was high time for him to go to bed.

"Will you show the gospodin to his room, Nadia?" said the innkeeper.

"He had better pull off those heavy boots first," suggested the girl.

And Wilfrid, knowing her reason, good-humouredly complied.

"And you'll not get up till after ten?" pleaded Boris. "The boyarine must not know that I have broken my word. And I must keep your yamchik out of the way till she has taken her departure."

"Very good. To please you I'll prolong my slumbers," assented Wilfrid, "though I confess I should like to have a peep at the fair boyarine." And bidding the innkeeper "good-night," Wilfrid followed Nadia, who led the way with lighted lamp.

"Tread softly," she said with a subdued laugh. "Don't disturb the repose of the Ugly One, whatever you do. So savage-looking is he that he'll think nothing of running you through the body with his long sword if he should be waked before his time."

Mindful more of the boyarine than of the Ugly One, Wilfrid stepped with noiseless tread.

"Your room," said Nadia, as they ascended a staircase, "is exactly over the boyarine's bedchamber, so you must move about as silently as a ghost."

Conversing thus in whispers she turned down the corridor that led from the second landing.



"This is your room," she said, pausing before a closed door.

Wilfrid, taking the lamp from her hand, wished her "good night."

"The last Englishman parted from me very differently." There was no mistaking the saucy invitation of her eye and lip. Pretty faces were made to be kissed, and Wilfrid did what any other sensible fellow would have done similarly situated, in which pleasing business the lamp became accidentally extinguished.

"There now! You yourself must re-light it," she said, thrusting a tinder-box into his hand. "I cannot stay longer," and pushing him into the room, she closed the door upon him and hurried away.

Wilfrid's first act on finding himself alone was to lock the door, his practice always at a strange inn; his next, the room being in total darkness, was to obtain a light, a somewhat difficult feat, owing to the dampness of the rag in the tinder-box. Not till after the lapse of ten minutes did he succeed in producing a flame sufficient for the rekindling of the lamp.

While kneeling on the floor at this task he more than once fancied that he caught a sound like a sigh, and at the moment of obtaining the light he became convinced of the reality of the sounds.

A regular succession of light breathings gave audible proof that he was not the only person in the room. Rising to his feet and holding the lamp on high, Wilfrid looked about him, and discovered that the breathings came from a bed a little distance off. Curtains hanging around the bed prevented him from seeing the sleeper. It was clear that through some strange blunder Nadia had shown him to the wrong room.

Then —

"By Jove!" muttered Wilfrid.

His eyes had fallen upon a startling sight — startling, that is, in the sense of being unexpected.

There, orderly disposed upon a chair by the dressing-table was a pile of fair undergarments, while beneath the same chair there peeped forth a pair of satin shoes formed only for the smallest of feet.



RISING TO HIS FEET AND HOLDING THE LAMP ON HIGH, WILFRED  
LOOKED ABOUT HIM.

*"By Neva's Waters."*

*Page 34.*

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The person behind the curtains was not a man! Fortunately Wilfrid's movements had been so noiseless as not to disturb the occupant. His obvious course, then, was immediate retirement.

He was on the point of stealing off when his eye was caught by sparkles of light coming from a jewel-case that lay upon the dressing-table. It did not require the knowledge of a lapidary to pronounce that the rich gems and the wrought gold represented a very large amount of money. The owner was obviously a lady of wealth, and—Shrine of Venus!—there could not be a doubt about it; he was standing in the very bedchamber of the fair boyarine!

Nadia, paying too much attention, perhaps, to Wilfrid's talking, had not noticed that instead of ascending to the *third* landing and taking the corridor that led from that, she had mistakenly stopped and turned when upon the *second* landing, with the result that Wilfrid, instead of being in the room immediately above that of the boyarine, was in the boyarine's room itself!

"What would the Ugly One with the spurs and moustaches think," muttered Wilfrid grimly, "if he knew of my presence here?"

The sooner he withdrew the better. He had already been in the room more than ten minutes. If Nadia should recall her error, and should come flying back with clamour, the issue might be awkward, both for the lady and himself.

Just as he was about to make for the door his ear detected a movement in the bed.

His heart almost leaped to his throat. Some instinct told him that the movement was not an unconscious stirring in slumber; the lady was wide awake, and remembering that she had gone to sleep in the dark, was doubtless puzzling herself to account for the light now shining through her bed-curtains.

His first impulse, to extinguish the light, was checked by the thought that the fear occasioned by the sudden darkness might elicit a scream from her. Better to stand still and be openly seen than to glide, a terrifying black shape, from the room.

A glance toward the bed showed him a hand coming forth from between the curtains — a hand as white as the sleeve of the nightdress that clothed the arm of the wearer.

The drapery parted, revealing a beautiful face and figure — the living original of the miniature!

Overwhelmed with surprise Wilfrid stood, as breathless and as still as if he had suddenly fallen under a spell of enchantment.

He had loved her from the first moment of setting eyes upon her portrait, but now the actual sight of the living princess increased that love tenfold. Could it be true that he, and he only, held a place in her heart, and that for a space of more than eight years? If eight years previously in Saxony he had exercised so powerful an impression upon her girlish imagination, she should surely know him again? But though he hoped and looked for it, she betrayed no sign of recognition. Indeed, the only emotion expressed in her widening eyes was wonder.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Her voice — and one more soft and musical had never fallen upon Wilfrid's ear — seemed to have the effect of breaking the spell that had held him.

He bowed with all the grace he was capable of.

“I am an English traveller, a midnight arrival, who has been erroneously led to believe that this was his bedroom. I cannot sufficiently express my regret at having disturbed you in this unceremonious fashion.”

There was about Wilfrid that air of good breeding that marked him as a gentleman, and gave to his words the stamp of truth.

Her suspicions, if she had had any, were gone in a moment.

“Then, sir, please to withdraw,” she said, in a tone of gentle dignity.

“At once,” replied Wilfrid, turning to the door, “trusting I may be permitted to pay my respects to you in the morning, and to apologise more at length.”

Just the faintest shade of fear passed over her face.

“No, no, you must not do that! As you love your

life keep this meeting a secret! I speak with good reason. Go! But stay — one moment. Your name?"

"Wilfrid, Lord Courtenay."

A faint cry escaped the Princess as Wilfrid so held the lamp that its light fell clearly upon his face.

She knew at least his name, if she did not recognise him; that much was certain. Equally certain was it that his name or his presence filled her with some deep emotion. She caught her breath; her colour came and went. If these symptoms were due to love it was a love mingled with dismay, and the dismay seemed to predominate.

Though prudence told Wilfrid that it was high time to go, he could not resist the temptation of lingering to ask, "Have we met before?"

"Once," answered the Princess in a softened voice, "and once only, when you saved me from death!"

It must have been in his sleep, then, for he had no recollection of it! Adventures he had known in plenty, but to save the life of either woman or girl was a pleasure that had never yet fallen to his lot, and he said so.

The Princess gave a half-smile.

"It was an event so strange that I do not wonder at your failing to connect me with it."

A more puzzling statement, this, since the very strangeness of the affair should surely be an additional reason for stamping it upon his memory.

As Wilfrid looked intently at her in the vain attempt to discover her meaning, he saw an awful change pass over her face. Dilated eyes, lips drawn apart, and cheeks perfectly bloodless — all showed her to be seized by a sudden sense of fear.

A moment more and Wilfrid, too, felt fear, not on his own account, but on hers.

A murmuring of voices and the sound of footsteps were audible on the other side of the bedroom door. A little crowd was congregating in the corridor without. What was the cause of the gathering? His striking of the flint had been accompanied by very little noise. The voices of both the Princess and himself had been scarcely loud enough to penetrate beyond the room. Why, then,

was attention becoming drawn to the Princess's bed-chamber? Had Nadia become aware of her error? Was she outside, testifying to others that she had mistakenly conducted an English traveller to this chamber? Had the Princess's retinue gone to the bedroom intended as his and found it empty? Had they then decided to search the Princess's bedchamber? The discovery of a man at the dead of night in the bedroom of a lady, who had let fifteen minutes elapse without raising an alarm, would certainly place her in a compromising situation.

The confused murmur outside ceased. Then came a gentle tapping upon the panels of the door.

Now if Wilfrid had followed his own impulse he would at once have opened the door, and explained the matter precisely as it had happened, being of opinion that the truthful way is always the best way, but on glancing at the Princess he saw her with her finger upon her lips, which action he took as a sign that he was not to speak.

In the silence of that trying moment he could almost hear the beating of her heart.

The knocking was renewed, being followed this time by a turning of the handle and a pressure against the door, which did not yield since, as previously stated, Wilfrid upon entering had locked it.

"What is it?" cried the Princess, striving to subdue the tremors of her voice.

"Did not your highness call us?" was the reply, delivered in a deep bass voice, which Wilfrid immediately recognised to be that of Prince Ouvaroff, or, as Nadia had impolitely called him, the Ugly One.

The voice came both as a surprise and a pleasure to Wilfrid — a pleasure, because his present position would now admit an explanation, certain to be received by the Prince, who would not be likely to impute dishonourable motives to his old friend. Indeed, Wilfrid was almost on the point of answering, but thought it more prudent to await the pleasure of the Princess.

"I did not call, Prince. I would have rung had I wanted anything."

Wilfrid groaned in spirit. The deed was done. If the

Princess were not compromised before she certainly was now, and by her own action. Her words were tantamount to saying that nothing unusual was occurring — in effect, a tacit denial of his presence.

“But had you rung we could not have come to you,” said a feminine voice, belonging evidently to one of the Princess’s maids, “since your Highness has locked the door against us.”

“A wise precaution in a strange house. I did not call, nor do I want anything. Return to bed, silly ones. You — you are interrupting my rest.”

There was a brief whispering, followed by the sound of receding footsteps, and though all became silent in the corridor again, Wilfrid was troubled with the horrible suspicion that the speakers had merely moved off to some distant place of observation, there to wait for his appearing. If so, how was it possible for him to escape discovery?

The only other exit from the room lay through the window, but Wilfrid was well aware that Russian windows are, at the beginning of winter, so firmly secured against the cold without as to be opened with extreme difficulty. Moreover, if he should succeed in crawling through the lattice and in dropping to the ground below — honourable doings for a Courtenay! — his footprints in the snow would betray him. And how was he to re-enter the inn without attracting notice? It was impossible for him to remain all night in the bedchamber, even if the Princess, yielding to necessity, should permit it, for in the morning discovery must ensue upon the entering of the maids. He could leave only by the door, but again came the disquieting thought that there might be watchers in the corridor without, determined to see the end of the matter, even though they should have to wait all night. If this last were the case, then each moment of his stay would but deepen — nay, confirm — suspicion.

He was still standing in the place where he had first stood after lighting the lamp, hesitating to stir lest the moving of the light or the sound of his feet should lead to his betrayal. But now the Princess beckoned him to approach. She wished to speak, and for obvious reasons



to speak in a whisper. Wilfrid moved forward in silence. The Princess pointed to a chair by the bedside, and Wilfrid, sitting down, placed the lamp upon the dressing-table, and bent his head to listen.

What the Princess said was almost inaudible to Wilfrid: it was more by the motion of her lips than by the actual sound proceeding from them that he understood her to say:—

“I said what I did”—alluding to her implied denial of his presence, surely a pardonable evasion considering the circumstances—“to save you from being cut to pieces before my eyes—your fate if found here. Do not go—till—till they have had time to fall asleep again.”

With that she sank back upon her pillow.

To be sitting by the bedside of a fair and youthful princess was a very charming situation, but it had its drawbacks. Should discovery ensue, then, unless the Princess had the nature of an angel, how could she ever forgive the man who had made her innocence appear as guilt? From her, whose love he was so anxious to win, what could he now look for but resentment? The endearing impression made on her mind by his saving of her life, though confessedly he had no recollection of the event, would now be completely effaced by this unfortunate blundering into the wrong room at night.

As Baranoff's face, with its sneering smile, rose vividly before him, Wilfrid turned cold at the thought that he had done the very thing the minister had wanted him to do! Should this affair come to his ears how he would triumph in the Princess's shame! How quick he would be to reveal it to the world! Wilfrid recalled his words: “Death at the hands of the State for the Princess as well as for her lover.” That there was truth in this utterance seemed evidenced by the words of the Princess herself; that he would be slain before her eyes if found in her bedchamber. Such a fear spoke but too plainly of her position, for if she were powerless to prevent her retinue from butchering him, it was clear that she was not really their mistress. She was, in fact, a sort of honourable prisoner of State, free to travel if she chose, but at-

tended by an escort, told off to watch for any suspicious act. In forecasting his probable doom she had not touched upon her own. Was it possible that he was really bringing upon her a like fate?

He ventured to steal a glance at her face. How beautiful it was, with its soft violet eyes shaded by long dark lashes? Whatever may have been the arrangement of her hair earlier in the evening, it now lay upon the pillow like a bright aureole around her face, one golden tress twining about her white throat like a vine tendril clasping a marble column.

If ever woman had cause to be angry with Wilfrid that woman was this princess, and yet her face betrayed not the faintest sign of resentment; on the contrary, there was something in her look assuring him that, come what might, she would be the last person in the world to reproach him for an act unwittingly committed, a forgiving tenderness of spirit on her part that, while it endeared her the more to Wilfrid, at the same time enhanced, rather than lessened, his despair.

Half an hour passed without a word spoken on either side. Then the Princess bent forward till her golden hair was so close to his own that he could feel her warm breath on his cheek.

"Lord Courtenay," she said in the faintest of whispers, "before you go, a few words. You have heard me called 'Highness.' Do you know my name and rank?"

"I regret to answer no," replied Wilfrid, speaking in a tone similarly subdued.

As she did not seek to enlighten him it was clear that she preferred to remain unknown.

"You will keep this meeting a secret?"

Wilfrid bowed assent.

"When you have found the right room let me entreat you to remain there till after ten in the morning."

Ten o'clock, he remembered, was the time arranged for the resumption of her journey.

"My meaning is that if a certain one among my suite should learn that you have passed a night at this inn, the consequences to me may be," she hesitated as to the choice of a word, finally selecting "hurtful."

Wilfrid had no doubt that the person she meant was Ouvaroff, and for the moment he felt that he would like to do for Ouvaroff what he had done for the Abbé Spada.

"Your Highness, say no more. I stir not from my room till after the hour named."

"What other persons besides myself know that you are here?"

"The innkeeper and his daughter, but for their own sake they will not speak of me to your suite. There is my yamchik, too, but they will take good care to keep him out of the way."

Though the Princess had hinted that it was time for him to go, she did not seek to hasten his departure.

"Why do you, an Englishman, travel in Russia at a time so perilous as the present?" An embarrassing question, but before he had time to consider what answer he should give, the Princess spoke again.

"Lord Courtenay," she said in a grave earnest tone, "I am glad in one sense to have met you, for I can give you a warning. It has become known to me that your life is not safe in Russia. Leave the country with all speed. Take another name; assume a disguise; forge a fresh passport; go anywhere rather than to St. Petersburg, where you have an enemy who will not spare you."

"You allude to Count Baranoff?"

"To one greater than Baranoff."

But when Wilfrid asked for the name of this person, the Princess shrank back with a strange and troubled look, so that Wilfrid refrained from repeating the question, for he could very well guess who was meant, though why she should hesitate at naming him was a mystery.

One greater than Baranoff? Who but the Czar could be greater than the Czar's minister? And the cause of the Czar's enmity was doubtless to be found in the defeat at Berlin of his policy, a defeat due to Wilfrid alone. And yet it seemed improbable that Baranoff would have the courage to tell the story of his own cowardice and flight. It might be, however, that he had related the matter in such a way as to exculpate himself, representing that his triumph would have been certain but for a

secret emissary of Pitt's, Lord Courtenay by name, who, insinuating himself into the confidences of Frederick William, had induced that monarch to side with Great Britain.

The warning given by the Princess more than ever convinced Wilfrid that his journey to St. Petersburg was likely to end in his arrest. Yet turn back he would not, now that he had once met with the Princess, whose whole manner showed that she moved in an environment of suspicion and peril, from which, if possible, he would deliver her.

"You will not go to St. Petersburg?" she said in a soft pleading tone that vibrated to his heart.

Wilfrid felt that to say he was bent on going would but increase the look of sadness on her fair face. He therefore temporised.

"I will think over the matter."

"I have warned you. If you will not take my warning you are lost. I have no more to say," she added—words that Wilfrid interpreted as a hint to go.

"Your Highness," he said, rising, "you know my name. Will you not favour me with yours ere I go?"

She shook her bright flowing hair in tantalising fashion.

"What good will it do you?" she said with a sad smile. "Let me remain unknown. Now go, and Heaven watch over you!"

"And over you, too, Princess!"

Wilfrid bowed, took up the lamp, and walked to the door. Arrived there, he cast one last lingering glance at the Princess. She was sitting up in bed watching him, her hand pressed to her side as if to repress the accelerated beating of her heart. Was its quickening due to fear, or to love, or to a mingling of both?

He extinguished his lamp, conscious that even in the darkness the Princess's eyes were upon him.

He cautiously turned the key of the door, the steel tongue of the lock moved back almost silently. Wilfrid paused a few moments, fearing lest the sound, faint though it was, should have attracted attention.

Finding that all remained still, he ventured to open

the door and to look forth. By aid of a faint light shed by a lamp hung from the ceiling, he saw that the corridor was empty. His trained hearing caught neither the hasty movement of feet nor the sound of closing doors; nothing whatever occurred to suggest that any of the Princess's retinue had been on the watch.

Thus assured, he stepped out into the passage, quietly closing the door behind him.

It was a new thing for Wilfrid to be stealing along a corridor at night like a thief, fearful of being seen or heard — an altogether humiliating experience, made endurable only by the thought that it was necessary for the honour, the safety, perhaps even the life, of the Princess. Twenty paces — he had a reason for taking accurate measurement — brought him to a landing, whence a short staircase led to the floor above, where was a corridor, similar in all respects to the one he had just left.

Moving forward twenty paces along this, Wilfrid paused before a certain door.

"Directly above the Princess's room, Nadia said. Then this should be it. Now, pray Heaven, I am not disturbing some other person's sleep."

He cautiously opened the door, and quietly exploring his way through the darkness, reached the bed. It was empty. Re-lighting the lamp he found himself in a room whose appointments seemed to show that it was intended for the use of a male visitor.

Whether or not it was the room that Nadia had meant for him mattered little; he was not going to look for any other; so locking the door he went to bed, and was soon sound asleep.

## CHAPTER V.

### DISCOVERED, OR NOT DISCOVERED?

"It is past ten o'clock, gospodin."

The words came from Nadia, who, having tried for some time to arouse Wilfrid by knocking at his bedroom door, had at last succeeded.

"Past ten o'clock!" echoed Wilfrid, realising what these words meant. "Then the Prin—I mean the boyarine and her party have gone?"

"Half an hour ago."

It was with considerable mortification that Wilfrid heard this news. It had been his intention to secrete himself at some loop-hole of observation in order to watch the departure of the Princess and her train. Prolonged slumber, however, had debarred him from this pleasure.

On coming down to breakfast his mortification soon yielded to a new feeling, namely, curiosity as to whether Nadia was aware of the blunder she had made. Had she discovered her error shortly afterwards, but, overcome with confusion and fear, had left him to extricate himself from the difficulty as he best might?

If she were not aware of her mistake it would be better to let her continue in ignorance of it — so much the safer would be the Princess's secret. But in what way was he to question Nadia without revealing what he wanted to hide? A lawyer might be equal to the task, but Wilfrid wasn't a lawyer, for he was too impulsive in speech, which is a fault, and too transparent in motive, which is a virtue.

As he sat down to breakfast he eyed Nadia keenly, who coloured on observing his gaze as any maiden might, whose last parting from a man had been marked by a kiss, so that her sudden blush told him nothing of what

he wished to know. She was the sole attendant at table, her father at that moment being engaged in superintending the delivery of a wagon-load of fagots.

"The gospodin slept well?" she asked.

"Excellently. Five minutes after leaving you," said Wilfrid, fixing his eyes intently upon her face, "five minutes after leaving you I was fast asleep."

If she had been among the little gathering outside the Princess's bedroom she must have known that he was not keeping to the truth. If she knew it she did not betray her knowledge by any change in her manner.

"There is nothing like a long drive in the frosty air for making one sleep," was her quiet remark.

"By the way," added Wilfrid with a careless air, "just as I was dropping off I fancied I heard a disturbance on the floor beneath me — a talking, or a moving of feet — muffled sounds of some sort. Was I dreaming?"

"The floor directly beneath yours would be the boyarine's room," said Nadia, opening her eyes wide with surprise. "Do you say the noise came from there?"

"There or near it, so at least it seemed to me. Did you hear the noise?"

"I! I was down in the kitchen getting ready some nice things for the boyarine's breakfast."

"Did any of the boyarine's party complain of a noise during the night?"

"None."

"Ah! Then I *must* have been dreaming."

During this brief dialogue Wilfrid had kept his eyes on Nadia's face, and became convinced by her natural and artless manner that she was unconscious of her blunder of the previous night.

That she was looking somewhat pale was nothing to the point, seeing that she had been up all night preparing with her own hand dainty dishes for the boyarine and her party.

At this point, having finished with his timber, Boris entered to see what services he could render. Naturally enough Wilfrid was desirous of learning all he could about the Princess.

"You waited on the boyarine at breakfast, I pre-

sume?" he said, addressing the pair. "How was she looking?"

"Rather pale and anxious," replied Boris. "She scarcely spoke. In fact, her lively manner of last night was altogether gone."

"And Ouva — I mean him whom Nadia calls the Ugly One? He breakfasted too, I suppose?"

"Sitting opposite to the boyarine," replied Boris, who seemed to have kept a keen eye on his visitors. "He, too, looked rather grave. I caught him more than once watching her curiously. Her eyes would droop when she became conscious of it."

"In short," said Wilfrid with a mirthless laugh, "she might have been taken for a child that has done wrong, and he for a parent that had been scolding her."

The innkeeper with some surprise murmured that Wilfrid's words exactly hit off the situation.

For appearance's sake Wilfrid went on eating, but his appetite had gone. He was possessed by a horrible sinking of heart; he suspected, nay, he felt sure, that his long stay in the Princess's bedchamber had become known, and that Prince Ouvaroff was disposed to put the worst construction upon the event.

The picture of the fair and innocent Princess, sitting mute and wretched amid her escort, exposed to coldness and suspicion, and unable to vindicate herself, filled Wilfrid with almost intolerable anguish.

Upon the woman whose love it was the one desire of his life to gain he had brought cruel reproach. Already in imagination Wilfrid heard the mocking laugh and ribald jest directed against the Princess by the immoral circle at the Court of the Czar. "She is only like the rest of us."

Second thoughts, however, induced Wilfrid to believe that perhaps after all he was disquieting himself without reason.

The apparent lack of cheerfulness on the part both of the Princess and of Ouvaroff might be due to an entirely different cause. It came suddenly upon Wilfrid that the Princess was none other than the lady to whom Ouvaroff himself had once aspired, till a State warning had bidden



him put a check upon his presumption. Perhaps, regardless of the State's inderdict, Ouvaroff had once more ventured — it might even have been on the previous night — to renew his suit with the same result as heretofore. Hence the meeting between her and him this very morning would necessarily be quiet and somewhat embarrassing.

There could be no doubt that the Englishman who had so roused the deadly ire of Ouvaroff was none other than Wilfrid himself, though it was somewhat difficult to see how the Prince could have learned that his former friend had become his rival, since if the Princess really cherished a secret affection for Wilfrid, she would be the last person in the world to divulge it.

There was one circumstance which disposed Wilfrid to think that his interview with the Princess had escaped observation, and that was the peculiar forbearance of Ouvaroff. Surely, if the Prince had suspected anything he would have sought Wilfrid out and have demanded an explanation of the nocturnal incident. But the Prince had done nothing of the kind; on the contrary, he had set off next morning apparently ignorant that his old friend was beneath the roof of the Silver Birch.

But no sooner did this favourable view present itself than it vanished. Ouvaroff, aware of Wilfrid's destination, was perhaps leaving him to the vengeance of the authorities at St. Petersburg.

The breakfast over, Boris, who took considerable pride in his hostelry, made the suggestion that perhaps his Excellency would like to be shown over the building; if so, Nadia would be pleased to take him round.

Wilfrid readily fell in with this offer, moved solely by the wish to see again the chamber in which the Princess had passed the night. He accordingly accompanied Nadia through the various rooms, listening, it must be confessed, with very little interest to her remarks, till at last they reached the Tapestried Chamber. And a daintily furnished little chamber it was; but now, void of its fair occupant, how desolate it seemed!

Wilfrid's eyes roved reminiscently and mournfully around. Here was the dressing-table upon which he

had set his lamp, and there the chair over which her fair attire had been cast; here, the seat in which he had sat by her bedside, and there the pillow still retaining the hollow made by the nestling of her golden head.

The faint perfume that Wilfrid had noticed on the previous night still hovered around the pillow. Moved by a sudden impulse, he lifted it, and with surprise and delight saw beneath a folded handkerchief.

On the principle of "Findings, keepings," as children say, Wilfrid took possession of the article, which was of the finest cambric, delicately perfumed, and edged with beautiful lace.

Now, although the title of princess is sometimes borne — in Russia, at least — by persons of doubtful station, Wilfrid had felt that this was not the case with *his* princess; and on unfolding the handkerchief he received a startling proof of the correctness of his opinion, for the centre of the cambric exhibited the figure of a double-headed eagle wrought in gold thread.

"The Imperial Arms!" muttered Wilfrid.

His look of blank surprise was as nothing compared with that of Nadia's. She, indeed, seemed not only amazed, but quite frightened by the discovery.

"The Czar's Arms!" she gasped. "Is she a member of the Imperial house — A Grand Duchess?"

It seemed so, if the handkerchief were to be taken as proof, but how near to the throne there was no means of telling. She might be a very distant relative of the Czar; on the other hand, she might be a niece, or even a daughter! Wilfrid's head swam at the thought. No wonder he ran the risk of being slaughtered by her suite if found in her bedroom!

That eagle in gold thread was not only a startling sight, but an unwelcome one to Wilfrid; it seemed to put a sudden stop to his love-dream. For him to think of mating with a princess of the Imperial house of Romanoff would indeed be the height of audacity; and yet, if the lady herself were willing — and the tender glance of her dark-blue eyes had given him a lover's hope — he was quite ready to brave all risks on her behalf. If she were a Romanoff, was he not a Courtenay,

with imperial blood in his veins, descended from the Byzantine emperors and permitted by the Garter king-at-arms to bear the proud title of *Æquus Cæsarius*—equal to Cæsars?

But soon his thoughts took a lower flight.

"We have jumped to conclusions too hastily," he said to Nadia. "The possession of the handkerchief doesn't necessarily prove that she is a Grand Duchess. It may have been a gift of the Czar."

This way of looking at the matter seemed to relieve Nadia's mind somewhat, though why she should look so troubled over the discovery was a puzzle to Wilfrid.

"Besides," he continued, "if she were an Imperial Duchess, her suite would select, as her stopping-place for the night, the castle of some grand boyar, rather than a wayside hostelry."

But Nadia opined there was no force in this argument, seeing that the great Catharine herself had on one occasion stopped at the Silver Birch, and had slept in that very chamber. And Wilfrid was forced to admit to himself that it was an argument in favour of the Imperial theory that the chief of her escort was no less a personage than the Czarovitch's own aide-de-camp, namely, Prince Oubaroff. If she were not a Grand Duchess she must at least be some one of distinguished rank.

Folding the handkerchief, now the most precious of all his belongings, he placed it carefully within his breast, and descended again to the breakfast-room.

"And now," said he, "send me my yamchik, and I'll ask the scoundrel what he means by taking twelve hours to drive twenty-four miles."

Nadia departed, and presently returned, leading in the yamchik, who stood, cap in hand, smiling and fawning.

Yes, shame to him, he *had* taken a long time in coming from Viaznika to Gora. Ah! why did he ever deviate from the post-road, thinking to take a shorter cut? He didn't like to tell the gospodin so at the time, but he knew he had lost his way, and he had wandered, and wandered—oh! how he had wandered!

"Just as you are doing now," interrupted Wilfrid.

“And yet you say you have performed this same journey a hundred times?”

Yes, that was the most wonderful part of it — that he, who had travelled this route one hundred times, should go wrong at the one hundred and first. But there, man must make a certain number of mistakes in his life-time; even the mighty Czar sometimes made mistakes, much more, then, a poor yamchik.

But when it was pointed out by means of the map that he had similarly lengthened the stages on other days, the yamchik, while venturing to deny the impeachment, became less glib of tongue; professed that, being unable to read, he could not understand the condemnatory map, and finally grew so dense that Wilfrid, despairing of getting any clear ideas into the fellow's thick skull, bade him go and harness the horses for the next stage.

Was the fellow a fool or a knave?

Wilfrid was disposed to rank him among the latter class, having a suspicion that all these manœuvres on the part of the yamchik had been prompted by some interested motive, a motive, however, that Wilfrid was utterly unable to fathom.

It was hardly worth while now to dismiss the fellow, when only three or four days' journey from St. Petersburg; but, while retaining him, Wilfrid determined not to leave these final stages to his judgment. So, after a brief study of the map, he selected both the route and the stages; and since, from motives of prudence, he did not wish either to overtake the Princess or to appear as if following immediately upon her track, he chose a somewhat circuitous road to the capital in lieu of the direct one.

And now, from without, came a jingle of bells and neighing of steeds to tell him that his car was in waiting.

Wilfrid rose, called for his bill, and paid it with a liberal overplus. Boris and his daughter accompanied him to the inn door, where a little crowd of servants had assembled to watch the departure of the rich Englishman.

Wilfrid turned to say “Good-bye” to Nadia. Her manner plainly showed that she was sorry to part with

her guest, who, moved by a generous impulse, drew the pretty serf-maiden to one side.

"Nadia," he whispered, "take heart. How long I shall be in St. Petersburg, I know not; but when I return again this way I will redeem you and your father from serfdom — yes, if it cost me fifty thousand roubles."

He had thought to see her cheek colour with delight, her eyes to sparkle, and her lips to quiver with thankfulness; it was all the reward he wanted.

But, to his surprise, her emotion took a very different shape. She shrank back, staring at him, her cheek as white as the dead; in her eyes a look of wild, haunting horror.

"Isn't that promise worth a kiss?" smiled Wilfrid,

She did not give him one; instead, she presented her cheek, and on touching it with his lips he found it as cold as marble.

Somewhat mortified by this strange reception of his offer, an offer made in all good faith, Wilfrid waved his hand to Boris, sprang into the sledge, and the next moment was speeding off along the frozen highway.

Nadia staggered, rather than walked, to her own little sitting room.

"What did the Anglisky say to you?" asked Boris, somewhat suspiciously.

"Say?" gasped Nadia, who seemed scarcely able to speak for emotion — "words that he meant to be words of hope, but to me they are words of despair. I would rather he had stabbed me. And he looked at me, oh! so pityingly. My God! if he only knew the truth!"

A shudder shook her from head to foot.

Her wondering father repeated his question.

"He promised to buy us our freedom, yours and mine."

"Glory to God!" cried Boris, clasping his hands fervently together. "Glory to God who has put this thought into the heart of the Englishman! My prayer for you, Nadia, my prayer day and night for years, is answered at last. He'll keep his word, this Englishman. An Englishman always does. And he shall not lose by his goodness. I will work, work night and day, till I

have paid him our ransom twice, yea, three times over. But, Nadia, Nadia, why do you grieve? Is this a thing to grieve about?"

"The offer comes a day too late, my father."

"A day too late?"

"We are already free," she replied, with a laugh dreadful in its want of mirth. "Free by the grace of the nether fiend, who is now mocking me with a deed that need not have been done."

## CHAPTER VI

### HEIRESS TO THE THRONE!

ON the fifth morning after leaving Gora, Wilfrid and his yamchik were speeding over a landscape that presented to the eye little more than a vast expanse of virgin white, sparkling beneath the rays of a pale, northern sun, that gave light, but not warmth.

"St. Petersburg!" cried the yamchik suddenly, pointing with his whip to the far-off northern horizon, which, presenting hitherto a smooth line, began now to have its continuity broken by a series of irregularities.

As the horses raced onwards, higher and ever higher out of the illimitable sea of white, there rose to view a curious and, to an occidental eye, fantastic mingling of palaces and minarets, of cupolas and crosses, each gradually becoming more clearly defined against the pale lilac of the Arctic sky.

Now, more than ever, did Wilfrid realise the madness of his enterprise.

He was hastening to a city that held two at least of his enemies, namely, Count Baranoff and the recently alienated Ouvaroff; to whom must probably be added a third, in the shape of the Czar Paul — which was tantamount to saying that he had a whole empire against him.

Now with the aid of friends, a man has often succeeded, despite police and spies, in eluding the vigilance of the Government; but no such hope sustained Wilfrid, seeing that in all the wide city there was not one man to whom he could look for refuge.

"I am entering St. Petersburg," he mused. "Shall I ever leave it? 'Tis doubtful. I feel, for all the world, like a prisoner riding to the guillotine. No matter! Honour forbids me to go back. That my princess is to

be found here is a sufficient reason for going forward. If her life is threatened, let them take mine as well."

And he consoled himself with that aphorism of the desperate, "What is to be, will be."

They were now leaving the silence and monotony of the steppe. Wooden cabins, with blue smoke rising from them, began to appear by the roadside, few at first, but by-and-by increasing in number, till they formed a continuous line. Soon the appearance of stone houses and handsome shops, of vehicles and pedestrians, told Wilfrid that he had entered upon the suburbs of the city.

"Hôtel d'Angleterre," was his reply to the yamchik's question as to whither the gospodin would be driven.

The hotel in question, a palatial structure, was kept by an Englishman, who bore the homely name of John Smith, a rosy-cheeked, rotund little personage, but having at this time a most lugubrious air, due to the bad state of business. His hotel, he remarked to Wilfrid, was mainly patronised by English visitors, all of whom had taken to flight on the declaration of war, leaving the vast building almost empty.

It was doubtless a very fine thing for patriotic Britons at home to read of their victories by sea and land, but the war fell hard on the English resident in St. Petersburg.

All this, and much more, was detailed by John Smith, whose gloomy prospects Wilfrid tried to brighten with the assurance that it was simply a game of bluff on the part of Paul, who, as soon as he should learn that the tall sails of Nelson's fleet were coming up the Gulf of Finland, would quickly make peace.

Having paid and dismissed the yamchik, Wilfrid asked for a file of daily newspapers that should cover the period of the previous three weeks. He had found it impossible to procure a newspaper at any of the post-inns on the way; and hence he was in a state of ignorance as to how the world had wagged.

Going out, the landlord soon returned with a file of Russian journals, and, looking cautiously around, said: "If your lordship cares for news fourteen days old, I have here a file of the English *Times*, and that's what you won't find in any other hotel in St. Petersburg. I



get them from the English Club, who contrive to have them introduced into Russia without their being seen and 'blacked' by the censor. Say nothing about this, or I shall be having a domiciliary visit from the police."

Taking the papers, Wilfrid sat down and began with the file of the *Times*, skimming the contents with a quick eye, in the course of which operation he came across a paragraph that caused him for the space of a full minute to sit dumbfounded with surprise.

The paragraph which the Russian censor would certainly have "blacked" out, had the journal in question fallen into his hands, purported to come from the *Times* correspondent in St. Petersburg, and was worded as follows:—

"A strange story, to be received with some caution, is being whispered among political circles here, to the effect that the unfortunate Czar, Ivan VI., whose life, it will be remembered, was spent wholly in a dungeon, contracted a secret marriage with his gaoler's daughter, a girl of exquisite beauty.

"The sole descendant of this union is a grand-daughter, now in her twenty-third year, and said to be of surpassing grace and loveliness. Till lately she has been living at Moscow, carefully concealing the secret of her romantic origin; but, through no act of her own, the story, by some means or other, has transpired.

"The Czar Paul is said to be convinced by documentary evidence of her legitimacy and Imperial lineage, a matter to him of grave import, since, as there is no Salic law in Russia, if the rule of primogeniture be followed, this grand-daughter of Ivan VI., as the eldest surviving representative of the House of Romanoff, should now be wearing the diadem of the Czars.

"With a view of keeping a watch over her, Paul some months ago removed her from Moscow to his Court at St. Petersburg, conferring upon her the title of Grand Duchess, and placing her among the ladies in immediate attendance upon the Czarina. Assuming that this story is true, he would be a bold prophet who, in view of the gloomy and suspicious nature of Paul, would venture to

predict length of days to a lady so dangerous politically to him and his heirs."

The paper fluttered from Wilfrid's hands. He had no desire to read anything more that day. The political and military affairs of the Continent sank into insignificance beside this startling paragraph. The English readers of *The Times* might regard the story as a romantic fabrication; Wilfrid had reasons for believing otherwise.

The newspaper paragraph had closed with a sinister prediction, a prediction that had sent a thrill of fear to his mind. The only way of preventing its fulfilment was the removal of the duchess from Russia; but how could he, single-handed, effect the escape of a lady watched day and night as she undoubtedly must be?

"Matters are growing interesting," he muttered. "A grand-daughter of a Czar! Lineal heiress to the throne! So that is why the lady must have no suitors; she must be prevented from transmitting her rights. And Ouvreff and I, and all would-be lovers are to be 'warned off.' Well, for my part, I decline to take the warning. Having more than a liking for the lady, I intend to carry on my suit; for, if her eyes said anything the other night, they said love."

A few questions to his host elicited the fact that the Czarina Mary, the Czarovna Elizavetta, the Grand Duchesses, and the ladies of the Imperial Household, were accustomed to take a drive every afternoon at two o'clock along the Nevski Prospekt.

Thinking that *his* grand duchess — the *Times* correspondent had, unfortunately, forgotten to name her — might form one of this party, Wilfrid resolved to take his stand near the entrance of the Michaelhof, in the hope of obtaining a fleeting glimpse of her.

Aware that in St. Petersburg a man in civilian attire is deemed of little account, Wilfrid resolved to don the uniform of a certain Austrian regiment in which he held the honorary rank of colonel, a reward conferred upon him by the Viennese Court for his bravery at the battle of the Devil's Bridge, where he had fought side by side with Russians, as well as with Austrians.

The picturesque uniform of dark blue, rich with gold braiding, was admirably adapted to set off his graceful figure to advantage, and when, after assuming his cloak and a jewel-hilted sabre, he took a glance in the mirror, he was satisfied that he had made the best of himself.

Thus attired, he set off on foot to view the Michaelovsky Palace, the new residence of the Czar Paul.

The building, when seen, proved quite a revelation to Wilfrid, whose very brief acquaintance with the city had hitherto shown him but two main styles of architecture, the barbaric, semi-oriental style, seen chiefly in its churches, and the *façades* copied from the boulevards of Paris, seen chiefly in its hotels and mansions.

But the Michaelhof differed from both styles. Here, in the very heart of St. Petersburg, was a feudal castle, with donjon and towers, battlements and loopholes, portcullises and drawbridges; and, finally, a surrounding moat, which, however, just then availed little for defensive purposes, inasmuch as it was frozen over.

Wilfrid had seen numerous fantastic castles in his time, but none to compare with this bizarre-looking pile. One might have fancied that a mediæval architect, given to wine, had fallen asleep and dreamed; and that this palace was the petrification of his dream-fortress, although the bristling cannon and sentinels with their bayoneted rifles comported somewhat incongruously with this relic of a bygone age.

The building had for Wilfrid a fascination due not so much to its strange character as to the fact of its being the residence of his princess. Which of those gloomy towers did she inhabit? Over which drawbridge would the Czarina and her ladies come forth?

"An Englishman, I perceive," said a voice close to Wilfrid's ear. He turned and saw beside him a cloaked and sworded figure, wearing the uniform of a general in the Preobrajanski Guards; a man tall and strong, broad and burly, with somewhat vulgar-looking features, and with a rich, florid complexion, evidently due to a liking for ardent spirits; as a matter of fact, his breath exhaled an aroma at that very moment. He had eyes of a light blue, a snub nose, and a truculent tawny moustache, and

he carried himself with a kind of bluff swagger, probably mistaken by him for ease.

Wilfrid might well wonder how so commonplace a man should be wearing a general's uniform; yet the man was to be a history-maker; in the time to come he was to surprise Europe, and perhaps himself, by the brilliancy of his campaigns against the invading French.

"An Englishman, I perceive," he repeated smilingly.

"What is the evidence?" asked Wilfrid.

"You go on foot. A Russian gentleman never walks when he can ride."

"By the same rule you are not a Russian — ah — gentleman."

"You are right. I am a Hanoverian — General Benningsen. At your service, sir," replied the other, raising his hand in military salute.

The name might well strike Wilfrid with surprise, for Benningsen was a man great in his family connections, if in nothing else. As a youth, he had wandered forth from Hanover to seek his fortune, and entering the Russian military service, had the good fortune to attract the notice of the great Catharine, ultimately marrying a natural daughter of that Empress.

But though a sort of brother-in-law to the Czar, Benningsen was not in favour at Court. As a matter of fact, he had been exiled for a time, and though recalled and restored to his rank as general, he was excluded from the Council of the Empire, the membership of which his Imperial family connections might naturally entitle him to expect. It was openly whispered that this exclusion, together with his banishment, had made Benningsen disposed to favour a change of Government, no matter what, so long as it was a change. Indeed, it was even asserted that he had been heard to say he would have his revenge on the "little orang-outang," his name for the Czar Paul.

"As an Englishman and a soldier, you are my brother," exclaimed the Hanoverian theatrically.

The Czar being at variance with England, it pleased Benningsen to patronise everything and everybody coming from that country.

On learning the name of his new "brother," Benning-sen was loud in his admiration and delight at meeting with one who had shown the Russian troops how to pass the Devil's Bridge by scaling the rocks above it, leading the way in the very fire of the enemy.

"Your gallant feat of arms," he assured Wilfrid, "is remembered with gratitude and admiration by every officer in St. Petersburg."

It was characteristic of Wilfrid that he thought, not of the effect that his deed might have upon the Czar, but upon — some one else. If his feat of arms had given pleasure to the Princess, it mattered little to him how Paul and others viewed it.

Benning-sen, with a sweep of his arm, directed Wilfrid's attention to the Michaelhof.

"In my father's house are many mansions," he remarked. "And that's the style of them," he continued pointing to the palace. "Truly the angels have curious ideas respecting architecture."

As Wilfrid's face showed that he was quite in the dark as to the other's meaning, the General proceeded to explain.

"Evidently you are not aware that my august brother-in-law received a visit one night from the Archangel Michael, who, showing him the plans and elevation of a palace, bade him build one like it. Fact! At least," he added with a side glance at Wilfrid, "it's a fact that Paul says so, and it is never prudent to doubt the word of a Czar."

"You speak freely."

"Why, one may speak freely with an Englishman. With a Grand Duke 'twere otherwise. To return to Paul. As soon as he had received the Archangel's commission he was in a devil of a hurry to carry it out. Five thousand men were at work daily. To dry the walls more quickly red-hot plates were affixed to them. All to no purpose. The place is so damp that the dear Czar, the Empress, and the Grand Duchesses, are in a continual state of coughing. And the price of all this? — Eighteen million roubles!"

Wilfrid let him rattle on without interruption, perceiv-

ing that he was one of those men who are never better pleased than when hearing the sound of their own voice.

"You see that window facing us on the third story," continued Benningsen, pointing it out. "What sort of room do you suppose lies behind it?"

"A prison, if one must judge by its numerous cross-bars."

"Wrong. Paul's bedroom. Difficult to enter from the outside, eh?"

"Are you contemplating the feat?" smiled Wilfrid, for Benningsen really looked as if he had some such idea in his head.

"The window barred," murmured the General, as if following out some train of thought rather than addressing Wilfrid, "and the bedroom-door difficult of access, since to reach it one must traverse a network of corridors so like a maze that to find one's way requires the thread of Ariadne."

"Are such precautions necessary?"

"The dear Czar thinks so."

On learning for what purpose Wilfrid had come to the Michaelovski Square, Benningsen made the disappointing announcement that a distressing cough on the part of the Empress—"due to the damned palace"—prevented her and the Imperial ladies from driving forth that afternoon.

Benningsen, who was a member of the English Club situated on the Minerva Prospekt, suggested that Wilfrid should accompany him thither, to which proposal Wilfrid assented, moved more by the hope of there getting rid of the General than by any other reason. So the two set off, on foot, because, as Benningsen remarked, it was "so English."

The Minerva Prospekt, when reached, turned out to be a wide and noble *boulevard*, alive with pedestrians of the lower orders and with the sleighs of the wealthier classes. The barbaric, yet handsome, costume of the boyars, the gay dresses and rich furs of the ladies, with their bright eyes and laughing voices, the furious galloping of steeds and the jingling of silver bells made a scene of colour, movement, and sound, that offered a

striking contrast to the stillness, the emptiness, the monotony of the Michaelovski Square.

Then, in a moment, all was changed!

*"Gossudar zdes! Gossudar zdes!"*

Such was the cry — "The Czar is coming!" — that flew from mouth to mouth along the Prospekt.

Pedestrians stopped short in their walk; vehicles were hastily reined in, and dismay appeared on the faces of all, as with a crash of military music there suddenly debouched upon the Minerva Prospekt a regiment of footguards, in front of whom, and keeping time to the music with the waving of his cane, strutted an odd little figure, who was evidently taking a huge delight in the soldiers, in the marching, in the music.

## CHAPTER VII

### WILFRID DEFIES THE CZAR

"THE orang-outang, confound him!" muttered Benningsen savagely, catching sight of the odd little figure. "Run, before he sees us. Quick! This way!"

"Why should I run?" demanded Wilfrid haughtily. He received no answer. Benningsen, holding his cloak over his face as if to prevent recognition, was running down a side street as fast as his legs could carry him. Wilfrid watched him in amazement.

"Afraid to face the Czar, his brother-in-law! Is the fellow an impostor, assuming the name of Benningsen for the purpose of fooling me?"

But as Wilfrid turned again he saw in a moment why Benningsen with some few others had vanished down the side streets; saw, too, why the square in front of the Michaelovski Palace had been deserted by all but the sentinels and those officials whose duty took them there.

For the truth was that even loyal Muscovites had come to regard a meeting with the Czar as little short of a calamity, since it was required by him that whenever he passed through a street all traffic must be suspended, pedestrians must cease their promenading, the occupants of vehicles must dismount, and everybody, from the serf to the boyar, must kneel bareheaded, be the wind never so cutting or the snow never so deep, till the "Little Father" — the expression is not meant to be ironic — had passed by. This practice, an old usage belonging to the barbarous days of the Empire, had been abolished by the good sense of Peter the Great; but Paul, on his accession, had revived the custom in all its rigour, so that Wilfrid, glancing along the Prospekt, saw two lines of kneeling people, some of whom even, with a



servility truly Oriental, were touching the slush with their foreheads.

Close to Wilfrid was a landau from which there had alighted two ladies, the one aged and feeble, the other young and delicate, both obviously of noble blood since the panels of their carriage bore an armorial device; yet there they were, side by side with their coachmen and footmen, kneeling in the roadway upon a horrible mixture of snow and mud that chilled their limbs and stained their fur cloaks.

And woe to them and to any other person who should rise too quickly after the Czar had gone by! If detected by a backward glance of the Imperial eye it was well for the offenders if they escaped the knout or Siberia.

As Wilfrid beheld the obvious discomfort of these two ladies, a fierce anger flamed in his breast against the sovereign who required such humiliating obeisance. During all this time the regiment, marching twelve abreast, was drawing nearer to the place where Wilfrid stood.

Some of the kneeling throng, conjecturing from his attitude that he was a foreigner, ventured to give him good-natured advice.

"Kneel to the Czar, little father!" they cried. "Kneel if you would escape the knout. See! his eye is upon you."

That fact made no difference in Wilfrid's attitude. Determined to assert his English manhood he stood erect as a palm.

Other Englishmen besides Wilfrid had declined to bow the knee, but they had been strong in the knowledge that they could obtain the protection of Lord Whitworth, the British Ambassador. Wilfrid had no such hope to sustain him, since the withdrawal of that minister, on the outbreak of the war, had left Paul free to do as he liked with those obstinate Englishmen who refused to acknowledge his divinity.

"Halt!" yelled the little figure, who, for his size, possessed marvellous lung power. "Halt! Stop that music!"

The regiment ceased its marching, the band its playing.

There was a terrible silence as the Czar, with a glare in his eye, marched straight up to Wilfrid. A shiver of expectancy ran through the throng. Some wriggled forward upon their knees with a view of getting into a better position for watching the sequel.

Wilfrid, who had seen not a few kings in his day, thought that the being now advancing towards him was the sorriest specimen of sovereignty he had ever met with—a very Caliban of royalty. He could scarcely bring himself to believe that the grotesque creature to whom all were kneeling as to a god could really be the crowned head of a vast empire.

He beheld a man, short of stature, bald and wrinkled, with a leaden complexion and large, glaring, dark eyes. The countenance was of the true Kalmuck type, so frightfully ugly that, if history speak truly, its owner shrank from looking into a mirror. (His wife, it is said, fainted at the first sight of him.) Certain it is that, differing from his predecessors, he forbade his likeness to be stamped on the coinage, with the result that since his time the Czar's head has not figured on the Russian currency.

As if he were some character in a comic opera, whose part it was to burlesque royalty, he wore a shabby old military surtout reaching down to his heels, jack-boots with immense spurs, and an enormous cocked hat carried beneath his arm. No matter how many degrees of frost the thermometer might register, that hat was never seen upon his head. It seemed as if he had set himself to contradict the current opinion that St. Petersburg is the coldest capital in Europe. Cold? when a man can walk about in the open air without furs and without a hat! Pooh, don't talk such stuff as that, sir!

Thus arrayed he was accustomed to play at soldiering by parading through the streets at the head of a regiment of footguards, flourishing a baton, marching on tip-toe with mincing air, and looking so like a little bantam that if he had flapped his arms and cried, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" one would have felt little surprise.

The regiment that accompanied him was the famous Paulovski Guards, a creation of his own and worthy of

him. The face of every soldier, like that of his Imperial master, carried the ornament of a snub, up-turned nose; and, as if to render the face still more grotesque, the moustaches were brushed upwards to the ears.

Not only did Wilfrid's erect attitude give displeasure, but his six feet of handsome and athletic manhood was likewise an affront to a ruler, who, on account of his diminutive and ugly appearance, had been so sneered at by his mother's tall and shapely courtiers that he had come at last to hate the sight of a well-favoured person, and was jealous even of his own son's stature and beauty.

Directing a terrible glance at Wilfrid, the Czar spoke, and by that act, Wilfrid, did he but know it, had become a very illustrious character. "There are but two great men in Russia," Paul had once said, "myself, and he to whom I happen to be speaking at the moment."

"Why," demanded the Czar—and though Wilfrid had never before seen or heard him, there seemed something oddly familiar, both in his face and voice—"why do you refuse to us the homage of the knee?"

"Because, Sire," replied Wilfrid, bringing his hand up to the salute, "I revere the memory of the great Peter, who was wont to employ his stick upon the bodies of those who knelt to him!"

This was hitting Paul full in the teeth, for if there was one thing upon which he prided himself it was the imitating of his great-grandfather.

"We follow," frowned the Czar, "a custom more ancient than the reign of Peter." And then, confident that Wilfrid's boldness could spring from but one nationality, he added, "You are an Englishman?"

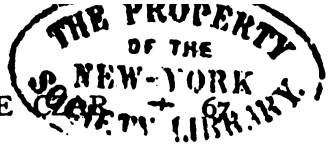
"A man cannot choose his own parents, Sire."

"Your name?" cried Paul, growing more angry.

"Wilfrid, Lord Courtenay."

The Czar closed his eyes in thought. He seemed as if trying to recollect something. Wilfrid wondered whether the Emperor was connecting his name with that of the Princess. Suddenly opening his eyes again sharply, Paul said—"We have heard of you from Baranoff. You are the artist who tried by a picture to create an outbreak against established order?"

WILFRID DEFIES THE



"I painted a picture portraying the murder of that royal lady, whose daughter till lately was under your protection, Sire."

Paul winced, recalling first with what state he had welcomed the daughter of Marie Antoinette, and then, how he had sent her packing at a moment's notice, merely to please his new ally Napoleon.

"We have heard of you," he repeated. "A spy of Pitt's, with whose gold you bribed Frederick William to hold aloof from the Russian alliance."

The charge of being a spy came with a good grace, Wilfrid thought, from the very head and front of the spy system.

"No Courtenay was ever a spy. Question your own officers, Sire, and they will tell you that I have shed my blood in the service of Russia."

"The more effectually to disguise your calling. A spy of Pitt's. Silence! Do you brave the Czar to his face? On your knees, rascal, or ——"

And up went the stick that had been often applied to the bodies of his subjects.

Wilfrid, his face somewhat pale, stepped back and half unsheathed his sword, and thus the two stood looking at each other. There was in Wilfrid's eye a gleam which seemed to say that, if struck, he would strike back, and strike hard. As if realising this the miserable little man slowly lowered his stick, and just as slowly Wilfrid's blade went down into its scabbard again, finishing its descent with a little clang.

During this episode no man moved, whether among soldiers or civilians — not a hand was put forth to defend the Czar. The significance of this fact, which did not escape Paul's notice, served only to increase his fury.

"You would see your Czar murdered?" he cried, turning upon his regiment. "Lieutenant Voronetz, arrest this man."

A young officer, motioning four men to follow him, approached Wilfrid.

"You are my prisoner," he said, with a look that entreated the captive to give as little trouble as possible.

For one moment Wilfrid hesitated. The wild blood of

his viking ancestors danced in his veins, urging him to defy his enemies. He was convinced now that in any case death would be his lot; then why not die heroically, with his trenchant blade whirling round his head?

"Give me his sword," cried Paul, who had taken a fancy to the weapon. He was a collector of swords, and kept a little store of them in his bedroom.

"This sword," said Wilfrid, drawing forth the blade, "the gift of the Prussian Queen, shall never be handled by a Muscovite barbarian."

And ere his guards could stop him, Wilfrid snapped the blade in half, and flung the two fragments upon the snow.

"An honourable way of treating a Queen's gift," sneered Paul; and then, addressing the officer, he added, "To the Citadel with him. To be brought to the Red Square at the first parade to-morrow. Your life for his, if he escapes. Forward," he cried, addressing the regiment and waving his cane.

The band struck up a march, and the grotesque Paulovski Guards, with the Czar at their head, moved onward again; and as they passed the wearied Petersburgers rose and straightened their stiffened limbs. They took care to keep at a respectful distance from Wilfrid, and to maintain silence. It was dangerous to express sympathy.

At a signal from Voronetz, the four soldiers fell into position, two before Wilfrid and two behind, the lieutenant taking his place at the prisoner's right hand.

"Draw sabres. March."

Four swords flashed simultaneously from their scabbards; and, as the guard moved forward, Wilfrid mechanically moved forward with them, scarcely able to realise that he was a prisoner, so quickly had the event happened.

"Gospodin," said Voronetz, "when the monkey plays the flute you should dance. You have acted foolishly."

"Wisely; for I have maintained the dignity of an Englishman."

"And put yourself into prison."

"No more in prison than yourself, good Voronetz. Russia is a prison."

"'Tis a pretty large one, then. Gospodin, if one is not prepared to obey the laws of Russia, one should keep out of Russia."

"There's something in that argument," laughed Wilfrid. "Whither are you taking me?" he asked presently.

"To the Petropaulovski Fortress."

"The Pet—? 'Tis a melodious name."

"'Tis called the Citadel for shortness."

"Where situated?"

"On the other side of the Neva."

"Far or near?"

"Three versts away. If the gospodin likes, he may hire a vehicle to take us thither."

"Thanks; but I'm in no particular hurry to reach your polysyllabic fortress. Who is the governor of it?"

"Count Arcadius Baranoff."

"The devil!"

"I believe he is, or a near relative. The post was given him as a sort of reward for his successful mission to France. There's a fine salary attached to it."

The thought that he was to be put into the power of his enemy, Baranoff, was a somewhat disquieting one to Wilfrid. A dark cell and irons was the least merciful punishment he could expect from the malignant governor.

Wilfrid's position seemed to weigh little with the chatty lieutenant; for, as they marched along, he took upon himself to point out to his prisoner various buildings of note, thinking, perhaps, that as Wilfrid was not long for this world, it would be a pity for him to pass out of it without taking with him some knowledge of so fine a city. "See Petersburg, and then die," was evidently his motto. And as it is better to be cheerful than gloomy, Wilfrid tried to take an interest in the proffered remarks.

"And what place is this?" he asked, as they passed by a wide, open space.

"This is known as the Red Square."

"And that hillock in the centre ——?"

"Is where the condemned criminal stands."

"And the wooden pillar ——?"

"The post to which he is tied while receiving the knout."

"The knout. What is that?" asked Wilfrid with assumed innocence.

"Now you jest, gospodin. 'Tis a whip."

"Does it — ah! — hurt?"

"You'll soon be in a position to judge."

"How so?"

"You heard the Czar say that you are to be brought to the Red Square at the first parade in the morning."

"You mean that I am to be knouted?"

"As surely as the sun will rise to-morrow. If the gospodin has any money or jewelry upon him, he had better entrust them to me."

"For what purpose?"

"To bribe the executioner, so that he may accommodate you according to your taste."

"I fail somewhat to grasp your meaning."

"Why, look you, knouted you must be in some way or other, for the Czar will be present to see his orders carried out. Now, there are three ways of swinging the lash."

"Really? You interest me."

"First, there is the merciful way. The strokes are made to descend upon the back only; in which case one has a chance of surviving the lash, even though gunpowder be rubbed into the wounds and set on fire."

"Is that one of the features of the merciful way?"

"The people sometimes demand it; it pleases them, and need not hurt you."

"How is the pain to be avoided?"

"A bribe to the knouter, and he will, before beginning business, administer to you unseen a stupefying drug."

"Good! And the second way ——?"

"Ah, that is terrible, gospodin, terrible! The executioner causes the lash to coil entirely round the body, cutting the flesh as with the edge of a razor, laying the very bones and bowels bare. No one can survive this

method, which is the one he'll adopt, unless bribed to act otherwise."

"And the third way?"

"Is the happy despatch; he kills at the very first stroke by breaking the spine. You have but to say which method you prefer and Vladimir will oblige. You'll always find the friends of the condemned at Vladimir's door on the eve of a knouting."

Wilfrid had no fear of death, as such, provided it should come in swift and painless guise. But death by knouting! To stand half-naked, on a grey, wintry morning in sight of a gaping crowd, his flesh hanging in strips from ribs and spine, was an end so dreadful that it might well have shaken the iron nerves of Zeno himself.

Just as he was preparing to make a dash for liberty at some side street, gateway, or any other convenient opening, and was looking keenly ahead of him with a view to this contingency, he noticed, not far off, and on his side of the road, a man wearing the livery of some nobleman; a man who commanded attention by reason of his stature, for he was fully seven feet high and proportionately broad. He stood smoking a cigar, and lounging at the foot of a flight of steps that led up to the door of a stately mansion. Though attentive, apparently, to nothing but his cheroot, this man was in reality keeping a watchful eye upon the advancing escort, whose lieutenant was walking on the side remote from the steps.

Though struck somehow by the man's manner, Wilfrid was not prepared for his action.

As the little party came up and was in the act of passing, the hitherto listless giant displayed a sudden and remarkable activity. Putting forth his mighty hands, he grasped the two near guards, namely, the one who marched before Wilfrid, and the one who marched behind, and hurled them, each against his neighbour, with such force that all four went sprawling to the ground, their sabres flying with them. At the same moment, Wilfrid found his wrist clasped by the hand of a young lady, clad in a handsome set of sables.

"Quick," she said, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Up these steps, and you are safe. Quick!"



Wilfrid required no second bidding. Pulled by the lady upon one side, and by the giant upon the other, he was swung up the steps towards the door; it opened at a touch, and the three disappeared before the very eyes of the astonished escort. The rapidity of the feat was the most astonishing part of it: the affair had not taken more than six seconds.

Recovering from his surprise, Voronetz called upon his men to follow him, and flourishing his sabre he sprang up the steps, bent on forcing his way into the mansion, when he suddenly stopped short at sight of some letters upon the glass lamp above the door.

"We cannot enter here," he said, his sword-arm dropping limply to his side; and then, realising the consequences of Wilfrid's escape, he muttered, "Holy St. Nicholas! I shall lose my head for this."

While Voronetz stood there, irresolute and despairing, Wilfrid, having passed the double doors of the mansion, found himself in a stately entrance-hall with a gilt gallery supported on marble pillars. The tapestries and mirrors, the statues and pictures, rivalled the splendour of Versailles.

Four lackeys in gold-laced liveries, stationed at different points, gave an additional touch of grandeur to the scene. Two well-dressed gentlemen, conjectured by Wilfrid to be secretaries, passing through the hall at this moment, glanced curiously in his direction.

The lady who had rescued Wilfrid was about twenty-five years of age, with dark hair and dark eyes. Wilfrid, who, it must not be forgotten, was an artist, contemplated her tall and graceful person with secret pleasure. He had seen only *one* face more beautiful; and it was quite possible that if his princess and this stranger were to stand side by side, an impartial judge might have awarded the palm for beauty to the latter.

She laughed with all the gaiety of a schoolgirl at the feat she had just performed.

"I was a witness of your arrest," she said, "and hurried on before you. I knew your guards would take the Nevski Prospekt, because it is the direct route to the Citadel; and I knew, too, they would take this side of

the Prospekt, as being the sunnier. So I stationed François at the foot of the steps with orders to snatch you from their hands. And we have succeeded. You are safe here. The Czar and all his armies dare not enter."

"What place is this, then?"

"Monsieur le vicomte," she said, with a graceful little curtsy, "welcome to the French Embassy."

Wilfrid's face clouded at these words.

"I thank you, mademoiselle," said he, folding his cloak around him, and taking a step towards the entrance, "but I must wish you adieu. An enemy to France, I cannot in honour accept this asylum."

"Stay a moment," she replied, raising her forefinger with a pretty air. "There is a twofold France, royalist and republican. For which are you?"

"For royalist France, undoubtedly."

"You hate Bonaparte?"

"I do not love him."

"Let me whisper a secret. I hate Bonaparte; yes, that is the word — hate. Is not this a dreadful confession to come from the daughter of the Ambassador that represents him? *Mon père* is a republican, a servant of the Consulate; but as for me — '*Vive le roi*' is my motto. Now, if I, a foe of the Republic, do not scruple to reside under the roof of the French Embassy, why should you not accept its hospitality, at least for a day or two?"

"Will you let me see Monsieur l'Ambassadeur?"

"At present he is out. He will return shortly."

"It is generous of you to offer me an asylum, but — your father may object. My presence here is certain to bring trouble upon him. The Czar will demand my surrender, and —"

The young lady drew herself up proudly.

"You are my guest, for I invite you here. *Mon père* is a gentleman, and will not hand his daughter's guest over to death merely because he has had the manliness not to kneel to a tyrant."

Wilfrid began to waver. Why should he not accept her invitation? Not only would he be escaping a terrible fate, but there would be in this new situation a piquant

charm that appealed to his love of mischief. He pictured the First Consul's rage on learning that the Englishman who had defied him to his face, slain his fencing-master, and defeated his policy at Berlin, had now put the finishing touch to his audacity by taking refuge for a few days under the very roof of the French Embassy! "It will turn his hair grey," thought Wilfrid.

"Come, you must not go from here. Will you deprive me of your society, when I have been expecting it these many days?"

"The deuce you have," thought Wilfrid.

The young lady here drew forth a letter, and directed Wilfrid's attention to the signature, "Louisa R."

"Do you know this handwriting?" she asked.

"I think I recognise the autograph signature of my friend, the Queen of Prussia."

"As children we were friends together," said the Ambassador's daughter, "and though our lives now lie far apart, we still correspond with each other. In this letter she bids me exercise surveillance over a favourite knight of hers, Lord Courtenay, now on his way to Russia: for, to quote her very words, 'If I have rightly gauged his character, he will not be twenty-four hours in St. Petersburg without coming into collision with the authorities.' See how excellently she has judged you," smiled the young lady, as she folded up the letter and put it away. "You haven't been a day in the capital, and yet you have already got, as you English say, into hot water. The good queen having charged me to watch over you, it is my intention to fulfil the trust."

Her smile was so arch and her manner altogether so charming that Wilfrid could no longer resist. He would accept her hospitality, conditional, of course, on its being sanctioned by her father, the Ambassador.

"That is well," said the young lady on hearing his decision.

She now informally introduced herself as Pauline de Vaucluse, daughter of Henrion, the Marquis de Vaucluse.

"But you mustn't give him his title," she added. "He is a *çi-devant*, that is, an ex-noble, a Republican. He has

dropped the '*de*,' and must be addressed as Citoyen Henrion."

"And you are the Citoyenne Pauline," smiled Wilfrid.

"My faith, no!" replied the young lady, with a flash of energy. "I am the Baroness de Runö in my own right; and claim the title due to my rank." Then, turning to Wilfrid's rescuer, who, during this dialogue, had been standing near by, but out of ear-shot, she said, "François, conduct Viscount Courtenay to the Porphyry Suite. My lord," she added, with a graceful inclination of her head, "I hope to see you again within half an hour."

"Truly, my lines have fallen in pleasant places," thought Wilfrid, as he followed François to the apartments assigned him.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A CHARMING TÊTE-À-TÊTE

As Pauline was about to leave the entrance-hall, the double doors leading from the street suddenly opened, and in walked her father, the Citoyen Henrion, Ambassador of the Republic.

He was a man close upon his sixtieth year, with silver hair and a dignified presence. His countenance expressed mildness and amiability, rather than force of character or diplomatic subtlety; in truth, his appointment was due more to his polished manners than to anything else. The *parvenu* ambassadors of the Republic had often, from lack of dignity and ignorance of etiquette, excited the sneers and laughter of foreign courts. The Marquis de Vaucluse was sent to St. Petersburg to show that the race of gentlemen was not extinct in France, and that the new government could count among its sons men distinguished both by birth and manners. He conscientiously strove to do his duty to the Republic, and when reproached for relinquishing the traditions of his order, he was wont to say, "I serve France, not Napoleon: a nation, and not a government."

There was at this moment a cloud on his brow, and Pauline perceived its cause in the shape of Lieutenant Voronetz, who, with a very lugubrious face, followed hard upon the heels of the Ambassador.

"This may be fun to you, Baroness," he remarked, "but it means death to me."

"And, naturally, you don't want to die," answered Pauline. "But, then, neither does Lord Courtenay."

"So the story this lieutenant tells me is true?" said the Ambassador, looking in perplexity from one to the other.

"Quite true, *mon père*."

"Where is the man?" said the Marquis, casting a look around.

"Probably at this moment admiring the Gobelins in the Porphyry Suite, where he must abide till this storm be blown over."

"You have lodged him in the suite kept only for our illustrious visitors!"

"Well, he's an illustrious visitor. Comes of one of the oldest families in Europe. Counts the Greek emperors among his ancestors. Can Napoleon say as much?"

"He must be surrendered to Lieutenant Voronetz."

"He shall *not* be surrendered," said Pauline firmly.

The Marquis grew uneasy. When his daughter assumed that look and that tone, he knew full well that she would have her way in spite of him. Has he been the only man to be ruled by his daughter?

"Why did you do this thing?" he asked, smiting his gloves together in a helpless fashion.

"To teach a tyrant that liberty is not yet dead in St. Petersburg."

The Marquis gave her a glance intended as a caution not to speak too freely in the presence of the Czar's lieutenant. Then, after a moment's pause, he drew her aside out of the hearing of Voronetz.

"Of course, *matiushka*," he said, using the endearing term which the foreigner in Russia soon learns to apply indiscriminately to all women, "of course, little mother, we know, between ourselves, that this kneeling to the Czar is a degrading piece of servility, and I can quite sympathise with Lord Courtenay in his attitude. But your action, Pauline, has put us all in the wrong. If you desired him to be set free it should have been done in proper form. A joint note from the ambassadors would have procured his release. As matters now stand, Paul will be justified in demanding Lord Courtenay's surrender. The meekest ruler in the world cannot submit to have his authority flouted as you have flouted it. *Nom de Dieu!* Pauline, what were you thinking of?"

"Not of the niceties of diplomatic observance, you

may be sure. But do not look so troubled, *mon père*. The Czarovitch shall get us out of our difficulty. Go and lay the matter before him. Ask him to persuade his father to pardon the Englishman. He is sure to succeed. You know how Paul—it's his only good point—respects the judgment of Alexander. 'I must consult the Grand Duke,' he says, when in a state of doubt. 'He has a fine sense of justice.' Go at once, before Paul has had time to learn that his prisoner has been rescued. The work of persuading him will be easier then."

"Alexander certainly *could* effect this for us," said the Marquis musingly. "The question is, will he?"

"He will, if you say that it is the wish of Pauline."

The Ambassador gave her a sharp, penetrating look, as if he would fain learn the reason for this belief of hers.

"Was he not present at our ball here last week?" remarked Pauline, answering her father's unspoken question. "He danced with me four times, and was extremely gracious; nay, did he not say if ever I should have a grievance that he could set right, I was not to hesitate to apply to him? *Mon père*, we'll make him redeem that promise. Tell him that Pauline de Vaucluse is a prisoner in her father's Embassy, unable to stir out, because she has made herself amenable to arrest by thwarting the Czar's will. He'll soon set matters right, and you'll return with a free pardon both for Lord Courtenay and your mischievous daughter. But first you'll see our visitor?"

Her father assented, and bidding the lackeys supply Voronetz with wine he requested the lieutenant to await his return.

Then, with old-fashioned courtesy, he offered his arm and conducted his daughter to the daintily-furnished chamber that served as her boudoir.

"Now, remember," cautioned Pauline, "that Lord Courtenay will require delicate handling, for he is patriotically proud and quick to take fire. If he should come to believe that his presence here, though personally agreeable to us, is from a political point of view embarrassing, he'll make his *congé* at once. As soon as he

learned that this was the French Embassy, he was for walking out again, his honour forbidding him to take refuge here. He required some persuading to remain. So, *mon père*, be careful."

"Now, Heaven forbid," said the Marquis, "that I should say aught to embarrass him."

And the Ambassador was as good as his word, for upon Wilfrid's entering, he greeted him in a manner so courteous and affable that Wilfrid was at once placed at his ease. Pauline looked at her visitor with a smile that plainly said, "Did I not say my father would take your part?"

"Monsieur l'Ambassadeur," said Wilfrid, "our respective countries being at war, my position beneath the roof of the French Embassy is certainly a singular one."

"And for me a happy one," replied the Marquis, with a bow. "Still, whatever the situation, it is not of your creating, but of Pauline's. You are her guest and mine; and here you must remain till we have persuaded the Czar to see matters in another light."

After a few more words of gracious import, De Vaucluse, taking Voronetz with him, went off on his conciliatory errand, leaving his daughter to entertain the stranger.

And a charming entertainer she made, quite fascinating Wilfrid with the vivacity and intelligence of her conversational powers. Part of the time was spent in showing her guest the various objects of interest contained in her boudoir, among them being a piece of silk embroidery wrought by her own hand and set as a picture in a silver frame. It represented a castle, quaint, yet pretty.

"Castle Runö," explained Pauline. "Built upon one of the islands of the Neva by Peter the Great, to satisfy a fancy of his wife, Catharine. I hope to have the honour of entertaining you there some day, for castle and island are both mine, my very own, inherited from my Russian mother. Its possession carries with it a title that makes me a baroness in my own right."

"Then you are half a Russian?" smiled Wilfrid.



Though by her own showing this must be so, the Baroness nevertheless seemed to resent the idea.

"No, indeed, I am wholly French, as I can soon prove. Vera, come here a moment," she said, addressing her maid.

The girl came forward, and at her mistress's request knelt upon the hearth.

"Vera is a pure Muscovite," said the Baroness. "Now, look at her ear," she continued, touching it caressingly. "You see it? Look at mine, and tell me the difference."

"Her ear has no lobe," remarked Wilfrid, in some surprise.

"True. Have you not noticed the like before?" asked Pauline. "No? O, unobservant man! Well, after this take due note, and you will find that every true-born Russ is without a lobe to his ear."

Wilfrid wondered whether his grand duchess was distinguished by this peculiarity. He hoped not, for Pauline's pearly little shell of an ear was prettier than Vera's.

"I suppose," he observed, "that all the members of the Imperial Family bear this Muscovite mark?"

"Not so, for the dynasty has scarcely a drop of true Russian blood, and is rather proud of the fact. 'I am a German, not a Russian,' said the Czar Ivan; and so have all his descendants said."

Pauline hitherto had been bright and lively, but all her brightness and liveliness went in a moment when she saw Wilfrid open a small album that lay upon the table.

"You may look," she said, with a heavy sigh, for Wilfrid, on seeing the nature of its contents, had closed the book.

"Indeed, I would rather that you read it."

Wilfrid opened the album again, and found it to contain melancholy souvenirs of the Reign of Terror in the shape of private letters written by some of Pauline's friends, who had fallen victims to the guillotine; written, many of them, on the very eve of execution. Their style, direct from the heart, as was natural with persons at

the point of death, gave to these letters a pathos that would have touched the heart of the least emotional.

"Those letters are dear to me," said Pauline. "They are the fuel that keeps the fire of my patriotism burning. Every day I read them, in order to prevent me from ever loving the Republic, that Republic that put my friends to death."

With somewhat melancholy feelings, Wilfrid closed the album, admiring, as he did so, the creamy white of the binding.

"Is this the famous Torjek leather," he asked, passing his forefinger over its smooth surface.

Pauline's answer took a singular shape. She bent forward, and laying hold of Wilfrid's hand lifted it and drew the finger that had touched the book slowly down her cheek, accompanying her action with a weird smile.

"Is not the touch the same?" she asked; and, without giving him time to answer, she continued, "You have heard of the Princess Lamballe?"

"Good heavens! Do you mean that — ?"

"Did you ever see her at the Tuileries in the days of the old *régime*?"

"No, but —"

"Well, from to-day you can say that you have had the honour of touching her skin!"

Knowing that among the eccentricities of horror produced by the French Revolution human tanneries had a place, Wilfrid had no need to ask more with that binding, white and lustrous, staring him in the face.

"There is all that is left of the Princess Lamballe," said Pauline, her eyes set with a stony grief, a grief too deep for tears. "We were brought up from girlhood together. She was my dearest friend. She was young; she was beautiful; she was good. And you know her end? Taken to the prison of La Force, her only crime being that she was a friend of the Queen's, she was flung forth from the prison-gate into the hands of a howling mob. And then . . . My God! it will not bear thinking of. . . Pieces of the body put on the end of pikes were paraded through the streets. . . Some found their way to the tanyard. . ."

Overcome by the recollection, she was silent for a few moments, and when she spoke again it was in a mood fierce and dark.

"Do you wonder now why I hate the Republic? Let my father serve it, if he will. For my part, I work for its downfall."

It was clear to Wilfrid from this, as well as from previous remarks made by her, that the one passionate aim of Pauline's life was the subversion of the Republic and the restoration of the Bourbons, an aim laudable enough in itself, were she any other than she was, but scarcely compatible with her position as the daughter of the Ambassador of the French Republic.

"To work for its downfall," she repeated. "And I shall succeed," she continued, with a smile as of coming triumph. "Mark me," she added, "smile, doubt, call it vaunting, if you will, but when the secret history of to-day comes to be written, it will be found that I, Pauline de Vauclose, Baroness of Runö, have been the chief cause of Bonaparte's downfall."

But when Wilfrid asked in what way she intended to accomplish this, he was met by a tantalising shake of her head.

However strange her words, there was in her manner something which led him to believe that they were no mere boast. Still, great as was his desire to witness the fulfilment of them, he did not like to see a daughter working in opposition to her father, especially if — he trusted he was not wronging her by the supposition — she should be availing herself of the political secrets acquired by her residence in the Embassy.

However, being as yet not sufficiently advanced in her friendship, he refrained from taking upon himself the office of Mentor.

At a sign from the Baroness, her maid, Vera, withdrew, returning with a bright samovar or tea-urn.

"Do you take sugar?" asked Pauline, who seemed to have recovered from the gloom occasioned by her reminiscences. "Yes? I fear I can offer you none but Barth's."

"And who is Barth?"

"A man who is making his fortune out of beetroot. We have to rely upon him ever since Paul forbade the import of your colonial sugar."

"It seems to me," grumbled Wilfrid, "that this Paul lays his despotic finger upon every department of life."

"Too true. And he treats his own family no more indulgently than he treats the public. He has kept his daughters under restraint for a week upon a diet of bread and water merely for yawning at church. And in the Greek Church, you must know, one has to stand, and not sit; and the service usually lasts three hours."

"Who would be a grand duchess?" smiled Wilfrid.

"Times will be different when little Sasha comes to the throne."

"And who is little Sasha?" asked Wilfrid absently.

"The Czarovitch, to be sure — Alexander."

"Of course — called little because he is like his father in stature?"

This remark drew a laugh from the Baroness and a smile from her maid.

"'Little' is a term of endearment. He stands six feet two inches high in his boots."

"My height exactly," remarked Wilfrid.

Pauline paused with her cup half-way to her lips, and looked doubtfully at Wilfrid.

"I don't think that you are *quite* as tall as Alexander."

"Six feet two in my boots," asseverated Wilfrid.

Pauline drank her tea thoughtfully. Presently she said: —

"You'll think me silly, but I am quite curious to know which is the taller, you or Alexander."

"How shall we settle this weighty matter?"

"Easily enough. Alexander's exact height is to be seen on the panel behind that curtain. He called at the Embassy last week, and, *mon père* being out, it fell to me to entertain his Imperial Highness. He had tea here, just as you and I are having it now, and, if you'll believe it, the conversation took a similar turn to ours — that is to say, we talked of his stature. I was actually so daring as to doubt the word of a Czarovitch, so just to convince me, he laughingly stood against yonder wall,

like a recruit about to be measured, while I, with a piece of black crayon, marked his height upon a panel, and found it to be, as I have said, six feet two inches. See!" Walking to the place indicated, Pauline drew aside the tapestry, revealing upon the white panel behind a short black horizontal line, and something more as well that she had not mentioned, for the line rested upon the life-size silhouette of a human profile, drawn with black crayon, presumably the profile of Alexander.

"Now, if you want to measure yourself with little Sasha—?" said Pauline.

So, to please her, Wilfrid stood with his back against the panel, and Pauline saw that the crown of his head was on a level with the charcoal line, showing that his stature differed little, if at all, from that of the Czaro-vitch.

"And this, I presume, is his profile," said Wilfrid, falling back to obtain a better view. "Drawn by—?"

"Your humble servant. As Alexander stood there, he said, 'I wonder you don't draw my profile also!' 'Why, so I will,' was my reply, and placing a lamp on this column here, I made him stand in such a position that his side-face was silhouetted upon the panel, and—there you have it! Now, Lord Courtenay, you are an artist, that is to say, one who has, or ought to have, a keen eye for beauty. Don't you think that Alexander's profile is perfect?"

Wilfrid ventured to dissent, though with some diffidence, because it was clear that his fair hostess regarded it as an ideal head.

"Well, Sir Critic, what are the faulty points?"

"To meet the requirements of my ideal of beauty—and mine, of course, may be a wrong ideal—the line of the forehead should be brought slightly nearer to the perpendicular. The nose would be perfect but for this slight depression near the bridge, and the chin, in my opinion, recedes a little more than it ought."

"And your opinion of his character, so far as it can be deduced from this silhouette?"

"An amiable and intellectual youth, disposed to do good, but likely to fail for want of a strong will. Of

course," laughed Wilfrid, "this opinion of mine is open to correction. One should see the whole face with its expression, before passing judgment."

Pauline's pout showed that she was not altogether pleased with Wilfrid's views.

"Shall I criticise the critic?" she said, and calling upon Vera to place the lamp exactly where it had been during her sketching of Alexander, she adjusted Wilfrid's position, little by little, till at last his profile — brow, nose, lip, chin — became coincident as far as was possible, with Alexander's.

"That's it; now don't move," she said. "Let us see how much difference there is, and whom the difference favours."

Taking up a piece of black crayon, she outlined Wilfrid's profile upon that of Alexander's, with a result as surprising to Wilfrid as to herself.

The defects, or assumed defects, that he had pointed out in Alexander's profile were remedied in his own. The line of the forehead had become vertical, imparting a more intellectual character to the face; the depression of the nose had vanished, and the chin had taken a firmer touch.

Though Wilfrid tried not to be conceited, his own judgment told him that the second profile was preferable to the first, and so thought Pauline.

"H'm, an improvement, certainly," she said, holding her head upon one side and surveying her handiwork. "So I am to read your character thus," she added quizzically. "Amiable and intellectual, herein running parallel with Alexander, but differing from Alexander in having a strong will. I trust that in Alexander's case you are in error, for 'twill be a pity if weakness of will should prevent him from carrying out the good reforms he has in mind."

They returned to their chairs and to their tea.

"Since you know the Czarovitch so well," said Wilfrid, "I presume you know also his *aide-de-camp*, Prince Ouvaroff?"

"Do *you* know him?" she asked.

"Serge and I are friends of several years' standing,"

replied Wilfrid, very much doubting, however, whether the term "friends" was any longer applicable to the relationship between himself and Ouvaroff.

Pauline's face assumed a somewhat whimsical expression. "Poor Ouvaroff!"

"Why that sigh?" smiled Wilfrid.

"Lovers may come, and lovers may go, but Ouvaroff remains faithful for ever."

This to Wilfrid was a most surprising piece of news.

"When last we met the Prince spoke of a nameless lady who for some years past had been saying him nay. Can it be that——"

"He will not take my 'No.'"

Her words showed Wilfrid that he had been holding a wrong opinion. Pauline, and not the nameless duchess, was Ouvaroff's inamorata. So far, good! There was no rivalry in love between them. But why, then, was the Prince daily practising swordsmanship? Was the object of his resentment some other Englishman, and not Wilfrid at all? And what had he meant by saying he had recently discovered that it was death to court the lady of his choice, language identical with that used by Baranoff when speaking of the "Princess"? Were there, then, at St. Petersburg two ladies whom it was death to court? Now, though it might very well be that peril would befall the unauthorised suitor who should venture to make love to the grand-daughter of Ivan VI., yet why an *aide-de-camp* of the Czarovitch should not pay his addresses to an ambassador's daughter without having the fear of death before his eyes was a question that set Wilfrid thinking.

It may seem strange that Wilfrid, being now *tête-à-tête* with one who knew Ouvaroff intimately, did not ask whether she was acquainted with the lady to whom the Prince had acted as escort, but the truth was, Pauline had so fascinating and seductive a manner that Wilfrid hesitated to touch upon this theme lest she should draw from him an account of the nocturnal incident at the inn of the Silver Birch, a disclosure which would have been a breaking of his word to the Princess. Upon that matter, therefore, he determined to keep a silent tongue.

"Another cup of tea, Lord Courtenay?" said Pauline, breaking in upon his reverie. "No? You really have finished? Well then ——"

Taking the porcelain cup used by Wilfrid, she held it for a moment above the tiled hearth, and then let it fall. It was shivered to pieces.

Wilfrid wondered in what light he was to take this action.

"It means," said Pauline, responsive to his thoughts, "that no one else shall ever drink from that cup. 'Tis a Muscovite way of honouring a guest. You see, I *am* half a Russian, after all. With our grand boyars it is often the practice after a feast to cast all the plate out at the windows upon the heads of the expectant crowd below, it being thought undignified to make use of the same dishes a second time. Paul has done his best by ukase to abolish this custom, chiefly with a view to the saving of his own plate."

Wilfrid acknowledged the high honour conferred upon him, adding —

"This must be a somewhat expensive habit on your part?"

"Not so, my lord," replied Pauline with a charming curtsy. "It is not *every* guest I treat in this way."



## CHAPTER IX.

### A DOCUMENT MISSING

WHILE Wilfrid was thinking that if Pauline's ways with Ouvaroff were as fascinating as her ways with him, it was no wonder that the poor Prince's head was turned, the maid Vera, who had gone off on some errand for her mistress, now re-entered, bearing a salver, upon which lay two name-cards.

"Visitors, my lady."

Just the trace of a frown appeared upon Pauline's face as she took the cards in her hand. Wilfrid's society was much more interesting than that of Count Baranoff and General Benningsen. She was on the point of feigning some excuse for not receiving them when Vera remarked,

"They say they have startling news."

"In that case I'd better see them."

And bidding Wilfrid excuse her absence for a short time she descended to that same entrance-hall in which she had held her first interview with him.

Baranoff and Benningsen had met by chance upon the steps of the Embassy, each bringing the same piece of news, the Count intending to communicate it to the Ambassador, the General to Pauline.

Though apprised of Wilfrid's arrival, Baranoff knew nothing whatever of his arrest and escape, and it was only in the interval of waiting that he heard the story from Benningsen. The news filled the Count with secret rage. Hitherto hating Pauline a little, he now began to hate her more. To think that but for her he might this night have had Wilfrid a prisoner in the Citadel, subjecting him to insult and degradation! Instead of which Wilfrid had now found powerful champions in the Ambassador and his daughter!

Mingled with Baranoff's ire was a high degree of fear. Self-interest had prompted him to withhold from Paul the reason of his failure at Berlin, and in thus hoodwinking the Czar he had committed a kind of treason. Now should Wilfrid have given Pauline the correct version of that affair, it would perhaps go the round of St. Petersburg society, bringing upon him ridicule and mortification, to say nothing of dismissal from office — or worse, should the matter reach the ears of the Czar.

Had he not sent in his card to the Ambassador's daughter, he would now have retreated. A coward at heart, he glanced apprehensively at the door by which Pauline would enter. Supposing she should appear in company with Wilfrid, and he with taunting tongue should renew the challenge! Outside the Embassy Baranoff was a great man, a man to be feared, a man who, with a few strokes of his pen, could send an opponent to Siberia; but his power stopped at the door of the Embassy; inside it he was helpless, and no match for the mocking Baroness and the devil-may-care Englishman.

It was a relief to him when Pauline entered alone.

Pauline had no great liking for the coarse burly Benningsen, but was compelled by parity of political interests to keep on friendly terms with him.

Far different was the case with Baranoff: him she loathed, as every pure woman was bound to loathe the ex-lover of the dissolute Catharine. It always cost Pauline an effort to treat him with ordinary civility.

"Aha, Baroness!" cried Benningsen. "What is this you've been doing? Rescuing in broad daylight a prisoner of the Czar, and whisking him into the Embassy. By Heaven, you're a bold one!"

"And you're not," replied Pauline, whose habit it was to speak her mind freely to the General, who was accustomed to speak freely to her. "I marked you, running from the face of Paul, putting life before honour."

"Faith, my dear!" said he with a grin, and not a whit abashed by her reproach, "honour, when lost, may be recovered; one's life, never."

"You come with news, I understand?"

"Unpleasant news," returned Baranoff, affecting a mournful air, in reality secretly delighted, as knowing that the tidings would alarm her. "Unpleasant news I regret to —"

"Hold! the Baroness must pay toll for our tidings. Toll," added Benningsen, significantly. "You know what I want."

"I do, but unfortunately the knout is not here, but at the Citadel. The Count will be but too pleased to accommodate you."

The jest was a true one. Nothing would have pleased Baranoff more than to see Benningsen tied up to the knouting-post. Baranoff gloried in the fact that it was he, and he alone, that had persuaded Paul to make war with England. Benningsen was sneeringly confident that the Count would be the first to sign a peace as soon as ever the British fleet appeared in Finland waters.

"Toll!" repeated Benningsen. "A bottle of — what shall it be? Who was it that said, 'Port for boys, claret for men, brandy for heroes'?"

"Louis, a bottle of port for the General," said Pauline sweetly.

"Ach! but you're down on me to-night," grinned Benningsen.

However, the bottle when brought, was labelled cognac.

"A corkscrew? No," said Benningsen, staying the hand of the servitor. And drawing his sabre, with one stroke he cut clean through the neck of the bottle, sending the glass fragments flying to the other end of the salon.

"That's the way we do it in camp."

The liqueur being poured out and watered to taste, Baranoff ventured to drink to the fair Pauline.

"You are guilty of treason," said she. "You know that Little Paul claims the first toast."

"O, damn Little Paul!" cried Benningsen savagely, and speaking with a recklessness that led Pauline to wonder whether he had not been taking brandy at other places besides the Embassy. "Little! Humph, that's true, but what there is of him is quite enough! Damn

the powers that be! Here's to the powers that will be, eh?" he added, raising his glass with a significant wink at Pauline, who tried by a warning frown to check the license of his tongue.

"Your tidings?" she asked.

"The English consols are going up, and the Russian are going down," answered the General.

"Tis very like, thanks to the Count," said Pauline, "but you didn't come here merely to tell me that."

"No. What think you is Little Paul's latest craze? You'll never guess, so I'll tell you. This afternoon he put the Czarovitch under arrest!"

"Our little Sasha!" faltered Pauline, with concern in her looks.

"Ay, our little Sasha!" repeated Benningsen. "And Constantine also. Both brothers are prisoners, each in his own apartment. To-morrow they are to be sent to a fortress."

"And *mon père* has just gone to the Michaelhof to have an interview with Alexander."

"Faith, then, he'll return without it!"

Alas for Pauline's hope of obtaining pardon for Wilfrid and herself through the mediation of Alexander! Her father's errand to the palace was like to end in failure.

Matters began to wear a serious look. Having done a deed certain to incense the Czar, she durst not leave the Embassy for fear of arrest. And what would happen to her father if he should defy the Czar's command to surrender Lord Courtenay?

"What have the two youths done, or rather what does Paul say they have done?"

"No one knows his reason," said Benningsen. "But this is what he said on giving orders for their arrest, 'Before many days be past men will be astonished to see heads fall that once were very dear to me.' It's my belief he'll keep his word," continued the General. "He has a craze for imitating his great-grandfather, Peter. And Peter put *his* son to death, you know."

Pauline's look of concern deepened.

"Let the Russians reproach Paris for its Reign of

Terror," she said. "It was but a brief season. But at St. Petersburg life has now become one long reign of terror. One rises from bed of a morning with no certainty of returning to it at night. Our lives are made miserable by a series of vexatious edicts. Our commerce is destroyed; the national credit sinking; the treasury empty. Wars on all sides; Cossacks assembling at Astrakhan for an overland march to India; troops massing upon the Prussian frontier to compel King Frederick to join the Armed Neutrality. And ere long we shall have a foe in the Baltic, for I presume," she added, turning to Baranoff, "the report is true that Nelson's fleet has set sail."

The Count, with a sour look, opined that it was correct.

"Then with the breaking-up of the ice will come the bombardment of Cronstadt."

"Thousand devils!" cried Benningsen, "and I've just bought a villa at Oranienbaum. Right in the line of fire. Thirty thousand roubles clean thrown away! Count, this war is of your creation. Undo your work. Persuade Paul to make peace. This morning's text ought to dispose him to it."

"Text?" said Pauline inquiringly.

"Text!" repeated Benningsen. "His latest craze is to turn the Bible into a book of holy divination. Each morning he opens the Scriptures, and the first verse his eye lights upon is taken as a direct message from Heaven. To-day's text was, '*Thou shalt bruise his heel.*' Not quite seeing its application to himself straight he goes with the verse to Archbishop Plato. 'The passage, Sire, is to be taken in connection with the preceding clause, '*It shall bruise thy head.*' The head is a vital part; not so the heel. The meaning, therefore, is that your enemies, the English, will do you more hurt than you will do them.'"

"Trust Plato for making the Scriptures speak his own views," said Baranoff with a sneer.

"The text," continued Benningsen, ignoring the Count's remark, "has made our little Czar thoughtful. All day long he has been saying at intervals, '*Thou shalt bruise his heel,*' so that—but here comes Monsieur

l'Ambassadeur," he said, breaking off in the middle of a sentence. "Now, perhaps," he whispered in Pauline's ear, "I shall be able to have a word with you on — start not — on a matter touching our personal safety."

The Marquis de Vacluse had entered the reception-hall wearing a perturbed look, due to the discovery that the Czarovitch was a close prisoner in his own apartments, and forbidden to hold any communication with the outside world.

For a few moments the four discussed in common this latest phase of Imperial politics, and then Baranoff, desirous of conversing privately with De Vacluse, drew him on one side, leaving Benningsen free to talk with Pauline.

"How long, think you," said Baranoff to the Marquis, "shall we be able to keep the Czar alive?"

De Vacluse, not understanding the other's meaning, regarded him with a startled look.

"I am alluding, dear citizen, to the privately-expressed opinion of Paul's chief physician, Wylie."

The Ambassador's brow cleared. He had thought the other was about to announce the existence of a conspiracy for the assassination of the Czar.

"Physicians' forecasts are not always right. What has the Scotsman been saying?"

"Paul has had of late several strokes of apoplexy, each one more serious than the last. In Wylie's opinion the next is likely to prove fatal. Now, neither you nor I can afford to see Paul go, for Alexander's accession will mean the end of the Franco-Russian Alliance."

This was a fact as well-known to the Marquis as it was to Baranoff.

"Any undue excitement," continued the Count, "any undue rage will carry him off."

"The remedy is obvious," smiled De Vacluse. "His immediate *entourage* must take every precaution to prevent him from exciting himself."

"That is very good counsel of yours," said Baranoff in a dry tone, "but, unfortunately, your charming but too generously-impulsive daughter has this day done a

deed likely to raise the Czar's wrath to a dangerous point."

"And, therefore," said the Marquis, "he must be kept in ignorance of Pauline's act."

"But when he demands his prisoner in the morning — what then?"

"Why, then, it will be advisable for you, the Governor of the Citadel, to take upon yourself to affirm that the prisoner died during the night."

De Vaucuse, being a diplomat, had no more scruple in suggesting a lie to Baranoff than Baranoff, in other circumstances, would have had in adopting it.

"It seems to me, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur," said the Count loftily, "that you are neglecting the safest way out of the difficulty."

"And that is —?"

"To surrender the person of Lord Courtenay to be taken to the Petropaulovski Fortress in accordance with the Czar's wish."

"I should be most happy to meet your suggestion, dear Count, were it not for one little circumstance."

"Ah!"

"I have pledged my word of honour to Lord Courtenay that I would not surrender him."

The Ambassador's manner plainly showed that he meant what he said, and that further arguments directed against his decision would be so much wasted breath.

"Of course Monsieur l'Ambassadeur would not talk thus unless he were sure that his action will have the approval of the First Consul?" Baranoff's smile was not that of a friend. It was a sudden revelation to the Marquis, showing how sinister the Count could be when crossed in his purpose. "You will mention this matter in your next despatch to him, eh?"

"This man means mischief," thought De Vaucuse. "He will take care that General Bonaparte hears of this matter. And then —?"

The Ambassador did not like to think of the "then." Never before in his diplomatic career had he been in such a strait as the present, and all due to that wayward Pauline! He glanced somewhat darkly at his daughter,

little thinking that at that moment she had far greater grounds for uneasiness than he had.

"General, you are drunk!" had been her frank utterance to Benningsen as soon as she had found opportunity to converse with him privately.

"Heigh-ho! I wish I were," replied the warrior.

"You must be, or you would never, in the presence of Baranoff, have drunk to the powers that will be."

"Pooh! what matters?"

"Much. He'll be guessing our secret. He's mean enough to report your words to Paul. Do you want to be sent into exile a second time?"

"It's a case of exile for all patriots, I'm thinking. I leave the city to-night. By the waters of Finland I'll sit down and weep when I remember thee, O Petropolis, for I shall have to leave all behind me, including my villa at Oranienbaum. I'm glad it isn't paid for."

"Speak more clearly, General," said Pauline looking startled.

"Humph, haven't I spoken clearly enough? Cannot you guess why little Sasha has been put under arrest?"

She understood clearly now, and drew a deep breath, born of fear.

"Paul has discovered ——?"

"I fear so."

There followed a significant silence, during which both sat looking at each other.

"Who has betrayed us?" she said at last.

"No one. It was an accident. You know — you have reason for knowing — that there is in existence a weighty document containing the autograph signatures of those who have pledged themselves to ——"

She interrupted him with a gesture of impatience.

"Why tell me what I know already?"

"Our dear friend, Count Pahlen," continued Benningsen, naming the Foreign Minister, next to the Czar the most powerful man in the Empire, "was the person to whom we all agreed to entrust our common document, a document so precious that he durst not keep it at his bureau, locked in an escritoire, lest it should be detected



by some prying secretary. He therefore carried it about on his person."

"An unwise thing to do."

"So it has proved, for he has lost our great charter."

"Lost it!" said Pauline in dismay.

"It was on his person at one o'clock; at two it was gone. Either he dropped it, or it was stolen from him. The question for us is — Into whose hands has it fallen? It may have been picked up by some mujik, who, too ignorant to read and therefore unable to appreciate its value, may use it to light his pipe. Some one, not over friendly to Paul's rule, may have found it, in which case he may hand over the document to one of the signatories occurring therein, or, at the least, he may keep a silent tongue on the matter. But I sadly fear that the document has been found, if not by an enemy, by one at any rate who, seeing in the discovery the prospect of a reward, has hurried with it to Paul. At all events three hours after Pahlen's discovery of his loss little Sasha was put under arrest."

"That proves nothing. Is he the only one? Why are not all the others arrested?"

"Who knows what may be happening at this very moment? I have come to warn you. You will do well this night to set off with me for Finland, lest in the morning Little Paul should be found demanding your head."

"Fly! And leave Alexander to his fate! No, I'll not do that. Having drawn him into a conspiracy, I'll stand by him to the last, and, if need be, share his doom."

There was a brief interval of silence.

"If Paul would but die!" murmured Benningsen.

"Oh, if he would only die to-night, our necks would be safe! But then, men never will die when they are wanted to. Look at my rich uncle now, that ——"

"Hasn't Count Pahlen determined upon any plan of action?"

"Within an hour from now he holds a meeting at his house to consider the state of affairs. But, mark my words, nothing will be done. All their resolutions will end in smoke. Fear will fall upon them when they hear

that the incriminating document is in the hands of the enemy. Every man will look to his own safety. There will be a general flight. Nay, some, thinking to save their own necks, will voluntarily come forward to betray their fellows. And then, what will Monsieur l'Am-  
bassadeur think, when he learns that his trusted daughter is a member of a conspiracy to dethrone the Czar, and more — has made use of the Embassy as a meeting-place for the conspirators?"

## CHAPTER X

### THE DOCUMENT FOUND

OF the two visitors to the Embassy, Count Baranoff was the first to take his departure.

"To the Citadel," he said on stepping into his carriage, and the next moment he was being whirled along the Prospekt in the direction of the Neva.

The handsome stone bridges that now span that broad river were non-existent in the early years of the nineteenth century, the present Troitzkoi Bridge being then represented by a chain of pontoons, which, overlaid with smooth planks, afforded a level road from one bank to the other.

So long as the water continued frozen, and again after the current had resumed its free flow, one could rely upon finding the bridge in position, but the case was very different in early spring (and it was now the twenty-third of March), when the breaking up of the ice and the drifting of the bergs would cause the bridge to be taken to pieces and put together again two or three times in the course of a day.

The bridge was in position when Baranoff's carriage came up, and he was driven rapidly over the shaking timbers to its northern end, where rose the Fortress of Peter and Paul, a building as familiar to the Petersburgers as the Tower to Londoners, with this difference, however, that whereas the latter is a memorial of the dead past the former is, to the Petersburgers, an object of present fear.

The edifice, a work of Peter the Great, was built originally to defend his new capital, but has become useless for such purpose, being now in the very heart of the city. In reality a brick fabric, it is faced externally

with granite, and with its five bastions rising from the water's edge has a somewhat majestic appearance.

Entering by the Ivanskaia Gate, whose sentinels presented arms as he passed, the minister made his way to his official study, where, somewhat to his surprise, he found awaiting him a visitor in the person of his brother Loris, his junior by two years.

A medium-sized man was Loris Baranoff, with a cold, hatchet-shaped face and grey eyes that in their keenness seemed capable of reading one's thoughts. His appearing in any assembly — and all assemblies in St. Petersburg were open to him — was sufficient to send a thrill of uneasiness to the heart of any man or woman who in talking had been so rash as to touch, however remotely, upon State affairs. For Loris Baranoff was Chief of the Secret Police. "Let a man speak but three words," said Richelieu, "and I will undertake to find treason in them." Loris Baranoff would find treason if a man did not speak at all!

He was reclining at his ease in an arm-chair by a bright fireside, his legs stretched out before him at full length, his hands clasped at the back of his head. Usually impassive in his bearing, he had at this time a light in his eyes that told of some inward excitement; at least, so the elder brother judged.

"You have news, Loris?" said he, taking a seat that stood opposite. "Good news?"

"News!" echoed the other with a sort of fierce exultation. "News! Ay! Dame Fortune is smiling on us at last."

"Time she did. She has dealt us some reverses of late. What happy discovery have you made?"

"Let us dispose first of little matters before we come to the big," said Loris, taking out a pocket-book and referring to some notes therein, written in a shorthand of his own. "First, my spy Izak the yamchik arrived this morning with your Englishman, Lord Courtenay."

"I am already aware of that."

"This afternoon Lord Courtenay happening to meet the Czar ——"

"I know the whole story; his refusal to kneel, his

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arrest, and his rescue by that marplot, Pauline de Vaucluse."

"Oh, so you know! Well, what's to be done? for so long as he keeps where he is, the Czar himself cannot lay finger upon him."

"Let him abide. His arrest is but a question of time. You have the place under observation?"

"Trust me for that! He can't sneeze without my knowing it. Let him but take six steps outside the Embassy and he is a prisoner. — To return to our useful friend Izak. He timed his journey admirably, arriving at the Silver Birch on the very night and at the very hour appointed by you, without creating any suspicion apparently in the mind of Lord Courtenay."

"That, too, I know. Lord Courtenay has graciously obliged me by doing for nothing what I was willing to pay him three hundred thousand roubles for. So much the better for my pocket! Everything fell out precisely as I planned it. Thanks to Nadia the affair seems to have moved as smoothly as a piece of clockwork. Now, Grand Duchess Marie, proud and virtuous beauty, we will see how you look when you hear that your reputation is gone."

As Loris caught the vindictive sparkle of his brother's eye he said —

"You have never yet told me why you hate her so."

Arcadius hesitated, then said with a sneer —

"The wisest man commits at the least one big error in his lifetime. I committed mine when I made love to her."

No man was better able to control his emotion than Loris Baranoff. On the present occasion, however, he sat perfectly agast.

"*You — made — love — to — her!*"

"Why not?"

"An Imperial Duchess!"

"Pouf! A condescension on my part! Hasn't an empress welcomed me to her arms?"

"Bah! don't compare the damnable old hag Catharine with the young and beautiful duchess. So — you made love to her! And her answer?"

As if he would give it!—give it, that is, word for word. No, not even to his brother. He would have braved the rigours of Siberia first. His cheek, seldom touched by the colour of shame, coloured now as he recalled the Duchess's flaming words of scorn.

"She took my offer of love as a deadly affront."

Loris did not wonder at it, though regard for his brother kept him from saying so.

"That day," continued Arcadius, "I made an enemy, and a dangerous one. It is her aim to expel me from office, and to see that I do not return to it. Either I must destroy her, or she will destroy me. Now you see my reason for throwing this Englishman in her way. Why do you smile?"

"At the amount of unnecessary trouble you have been taking."

"Unnecessary?"

"Entirely so. Now we stand too high in Paul's regard for her to prejudice him against us?"

"Granted."

"It is through the medium of Alexander that she hopes to do us hurt?"

"Through none other."

"Ah, well; if her power is dependent only upon Alexander, you will see, after hearing my news, that you need no longer fear either him or her."

"Let me hear the news," said Arcadius, doubtfully, as he settled himself in his chair to listen, "and I shall be the better able to judge."

Loris put up his pocket-book and began his story with commendable directness.

"This morning as I was at the Michaelhof on business the Czar chanced to see me, called me to his side, and began a conversation, while walking, in that restless fashion of his, from room to room, I keeping pace with him. Entering a certain cabinet we came suddenly upon Pahlen standing by a window engaged in the study of some document. Before the Count was aware of our presence, Paul, with that *brusquerie* so characteristic of him, had snatched the document from his hand, demanding to know what it was. The sudden fall in Pahlen's

countenance told me that it was a paper whose contents he would fain hide; as a matter of fact, though I did not know it at the time, his life was hanging upon a thread, for if Paul had once begun the reading of that paper it would have been all over with the mighty Chancellor of the Empire. However, as you know, it takes a good deal to disconcert Pahlen. He was equal to the occasion.

“‘One moment, Sire,’ said he, venturing to take the paper from the Czar’s hand, ‘the document is odorous of tobacco, whose scent I know you dislike. Permit me.’ And taking out a perfume-bottle he began to besprinkle the document, and while casually directing the Czar’s attention to something happening outside the palace-window he——”

“Substituted another and more innocent document.”

“Just so. ’Twas neatly done, but it didn’t escape me. Convinced that the document must be one of great moment I determined to become the possessor of it. Knowing that Pahlen was about to proceed to the Mint to receive a deputation of merchants, I made some excuse for accompanying him, first, however, secretly sending a note to the Police Bureau.”

“What did the note contain?”

“These words—‘Send Godovin to me at once. I am at the Mint.’”

“And who in the devil’s name is Godovin?”

“Once the most expert pick-pocket in St. Petersburg, now an honest—ahem!—police officer!”

“I see your design.”

“Towards the close of the meeting, just as Pahlen was ending his speech to the merchants, my man entered. ‘Godovin,’ I whispered, ‘within Pahlen’s breast-pocket is a paper that I must have. Can you take it without his knowledge?’ The fellow smiled and nodded.”

“And he succeeded?”

“Godovin never fails. I’ve employed him before. Just as Pahlen was passing out Godovin simply brushed by him, and the next moment he was pushing beneath my cloak the document I wanted.”

"A useful knave! And the contents of this document?"

"Are eminently adapted to make us rejoice."

"Why so?"

"Because the document — hold your breath — relates to a plot for the deposing of the Czar; it contains the autograph signatures of the conspirators; and, as many of them happen to be obstacles in the way to our future advancement, we have but to denounce them to Paul, and Siberia or death will be their doom."

Arcadius slapped his thigh savagely.

"I knew it," he cried. "I guessed there was something of the sort afoot when Benningsen took to damning the Czar in my presence, and drinking to the powers that will be! Of course that German pig is one of the conspirators! At last I have him in my power! You have brought the document with you?"

For answer Loris drew forth a roll of vellum, which he proceeded to unfold.

"Read it."

"The devil! You don't ask me to read all this, do you?" protested Loris, exhibiting the document to his brother's gaze. "It's infernally long and prosy, but it's unimpeachable in its treason, and that's all we want. It starts with a statement drawn up by a body styling itself 'The Committee for the Public Weal.'"

"What's the gist of it?"

"The Committee begin by affirming that they are neither revolutionaries nor republicans, and proceed to enumerate the advantages of a hereditary monarchy. At the same time, they admit that occasions may arise to justify the setting aside of the legitimate occupant of the throne; as, for example, when a ruler shows signs of madness. Such a crisis is now occurring in Russian affairs, and the Committee proceed to point out the strange words, ukases, and acts of Paul, all which, it is alleged, sufficiently prove that the Czar has lost his reason."

This was what all men in St. Petersburg had been thinking for a long time, but none had durst say so openly.



"In these melancholy circumstances it becomes the duty of all good patriots to unite for the peaceful deposing of Paul, who shall be maintained in honourable captivity till such time as he shall recover his reason; failing its recovery, he shall remain a captive till the day of his demise."

"Speciously put, but the conspirators know that they are signing Paul's death-warrant."

"How so?"

"What sovereign ever lived long after his dethronement?"

"The probity of Alexander is a sure guarantee for his father's safety."

"Circumstances will prove too strong for Alexander. The conspirators will take good care that Paul shall not live long to trouble the new reign. One morning he will be found dead in bed, and people will say, 'Alas! for the Little Father! He has died of apoplexy. His physicians always said he would.' Dr. Wylie is already preparing the public mind for the event. — Well, we'll defeat their plans. In the morning this document shall be put into Paul's hands. But you spoke of autograph signatures. Of course, the Czarovitch's name figures there?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Men would not plot to put Alexander upon the throne unless they had first gained his consent; they would require his signature as a guarantee for their future safety."

"You're right. Alexander's name heads the list."

"'Tis his death-warrant; and let him die! We want no reforming Czars. And, as a man's foes are those of his own household, I warrant that the second signature is that of the Grand Duke Constantine."

"Correct. He follows his brother. Here is his name in Greek characters."

"Grandmother Catharine hoped that he would one day be King of Greece," said Arcadius. "That day will never come now. Whose is the next signature?"

"Count Pahlen's."

A savage joy mantled the face of Arcadius.

"Good! A powerful rival swept from my path. I may yet live to be Dictator of Russia. And the next?"

"Is the autograph of that venerable father of the church, Archbishop Plato. Did his conscience trouble him? 'Tis a somewhat shaky signature."

"I warrant the conspirators moved heaven and earth to obtain it. Who henceforth would stand aloof from an enterprise hallowed by the Church? He is an Anglo-phil; let him perish!"

"Next comes Prince Ouaroff. After him the Czar's ministers."

"All of them?" said Arcadius, with an emphasis on the first word.

"You are the sole exception."

Arcadius smiled bitterly.

"Their act in keeping from me all knowledge of the plot is a clear proof that I am to have no place in the new Ministry. They hate me as the author of the Franco-Russian Alliance. Let them talk as they will of Paul's madness; their real aim in dethroning him is to conciliate England."

"Here's a name that you love — General Benning-sen!"

"Bragging ass! Drunken wassailer! A Hanoverian, almost an Englishman! Paul did ill not to follow my counsel. He *would* recall him from exile. Here's his gratitude!"

"Next comes a name almost illegible, but I have a strong suspicion it's meant for James Wylie."

"Paul's own physician in the plot?"

"It seems so," said Loris, scanning the name. "It's a vile scrawl."

"His Scottish cunning. If the plot miscarry, he'll be in a position to deny his signature."

"Likely enough," assented Loris. "Would it surprise you to learn that there are women in this affair?"

"Not at all. And the leading spirit among them is Pauline de Vacluse."

"Right. There's no hesitation about *her* signature. Here it is, large, firm, bold, and differing from the others as being written in red ink."

"Ink?" said Arcadius, examining the signature. "It's my belief it's written with her own blood. I doubt not that it was she who started the plot. She hates Paul; she hates me; she hates the war with England. Conspirators can meet safely beneath her roof, since spies are unable to get a footing there. Besides, who would ever suspect a Foreign Embassy of hatching treason against the Czar. She would act as an excellent decoy, too, seeing that half the young men in St. Petersburg are in love with her. Hence the many balls given of late at the Embassy."

"By the by, why wait till morning before showing this document to Paul? Why not take it to-night?"

"Need we be so precipitate?"

"Yes, in view of Pahlen's desperate strait. When he discovers — and he must have discovered it ere this — that his treasonable document is missing, what will he do? Aware that the plot has become known to others, he and his fellow-conspirators will see the necessity of striking the blow before Paul has time to learn of their treason. It behoves them to act, and to act at once. Delay will be fatal to them."

This conclusion, so startling, yet so palpably obvious, filled Arcadius with sudden dismay.

"A thousand devils!" he muttered. "What may not be happening now at the Michaelovski Palace? We must — ah! what the devil's that?"

Hitherto quiet had prevailed outside the Citadel, but now in a moment the air became filled with a series of sounds, eerie enough and loud enough to startle the boldest. As if subjected to a well-directed fusilade of heavy artillery the fortress trembled to its very foundations, amid a confused shouting of voices, a grinding of timber, and a crashing of ice, intermingled with the dull plunge of heavy bodies into deep water.

"By heaven! the bridge is down!" cried Loris.

The bridge! Their only way to the Michaelovski Palace! The two brothers rushed to the nearest window. Finding it difficult to open, Loris shattered the glass with his sword-hilt.

Dark and starless as was the night, they could never-

theless see that not a single pontoon remained in the place where the bridge had lately been. Nature had played havoc with man's work. Between the Citadel and the opposite bank intervened a broad expanse of black water, upon whose rapid current ghostly bergs tumbled and crashed, danced and whirled, as if in glee at the destruction wrought. Here and there, in mid-stream and clinging to fragments of timber, human forms could be heard uttering cries for help.

The brothers looked at each other with pale faces, and eyes full of baffled rage.

The catastrophe had put an end to the proposed visit to the Michaelhof. No boat could live on such a tide. For hours, and it might be days, the pair would be cut off from the Imperial quarter as effectually as if they were in far-off Siberia.

"No crossing to-night," said Loris. "Now, Pahlen, do as you list. There is none to stay your hand."

## CHAPTER XI

“ THOU SHALT BRUISE HIS HEEL ”

UPON the departure of General Benningsen from the Embassy, Pauline de Vacluse was left, a victim to troubling thoughts.

Dear to her father's heart was the Franco-Russian Alliance, and yet she, his daughter and *confidante*, had been secretly working to bring it to nought; and all to no purpose, so it seemed.

To be a successful traitress is bad enough, but to be an unsuccessful one ——!

In too melancholy a mood to seek Wilfrid's society again, she left her father to entertain him; and, on the plea of a headache, retired to her own room, wondering what the morrow would bring forth. Apart from the uneasiness arising from the loss of the incriminatory document, she was troubled with a feeling of self-reproach, due to an indefinable something in Wilfrid's manner. It had not taken her long to discover that he was one to whom deception of any kind was distasteful, his character in this respect affording a striking contrast with her own. If any one had reproached her with duplicity, she would have asked with a smile how it was possible to succeed in this world without lying; but now, as she recalled the grave air with which Wilfrid had received the hints that she was secretly working in opposition to her father, she grew first uneasy and then angry; though why she should let Wilfrid's opinion trouble her was a question that found no answer in her mind. There the fact was: her attitude towards her father, now, for the first time, appeared in an unfilial and hateful light, and it was mainly Wilfrid that had made it look so.

Another circumstance, though in itself absurdly trifling, added to her annoyance. Hitherto, she had been accustomed to regard the Czarovitch as her ideal of a hero, handsome and brave, courteous and charming; and lo, here was an Englishman handsomer and braver — had he not, even at the risk of his life, refused to bow to a tyrant? — more courteous and more charming, and, above all, truth-speaking, the last epithet being *not* always applicable to Alexander, as history can testify. She grew vexed with Wilfrid, as if it were a fault in him to be better than Alexander!

This odd frame of mind prevented her from obtaining her usual amount of sleep; and when she arose in the morning she started at sight of the wan face and heavy eyes reflected in the mirror.

Summoning her maid, Pauline proceeded to make her toilet, selecting her prettiest and daintiest attire; and never did Vera find her mistress more hard to please than on this particular morning. She was positively more critical of herself than on the day of her receiving the Czarovitch!

On her way down stairs she chanced to meet one of her father's oldest secretaries, who had been out for an early drive, and she stopped for a moment's chat with him. They might have been in England; they talked of the weather!

“A most remarkable thaw, this,” observed the secretary. “The oldest inhabitant of St. Petersburg cannot remember one so rapid.”

“When did the change begin?” asked Pauline.

“The thermometer began to go up a little before midnight, and has been going steadily up ever since. The Troitzkoi Bridge has been carried off by the moving ice.”

“Then Count Baranoff, if he's in his Citadel, will not be able to do any mischief this side of the Neva for some days to come.”

“His isolation will not last long,” smiled the secretary. “In the opinion of experts, the river, before the lapse of many hours, will be passable for boats.”

“Then we shall be having the ceremony of the Golden

Goblet," said Pauline to herself, as she continued her way down. "A quaint custom, which I would like Lord Courtenay to see; but here we are, debarred from going out."

Pauline moved onward and was passing through the entrance hall when she stopped short in surprise upon seeing Benningsen suddenly enter. He wore a somewhat haggard look, having, in fact, the jaded appearance of a man who has spent the night out of bed; and Pauline was quick to notice that, though his step had been steady enough on the previous evening, he now walked with a slight limp.

"What! General," she cried. "Not gone to Finland after all?"

"Pahlen persuaded me to stay," said Benningsen, with a smile that set Pauline's heart bounding; for it was a smile that augured good things. "He and I, with a great many of the ministers, went to the Michaelhof last night to have that long-meditated interview with Paul."

"To get him to abdicate?" she said breathlessly.

"Just so."

"How did he take the proposal?"

"'Tis a world of surprises," said the General. "We might have spared ourselves the visit. Paul had already abdicated."

"You are jesting," she said, angrily.

"Fact!" smiled the General. "Abdicated in favour of Alexander."

"Why this graceful act on his part?"

"Well, to be plainer ——"

Here Benningsen bent his head and whispered a short sentence. Pauline received it with a keen, cold, steady look that seemed somewhat to disconcert him.

"A fortunate ending for us," she remarked drily, "seeing the strait we were in. It matters little now who has found our lost document."

"The finder will be well advised to burn it," said Benningsen. "Alexander won't thank him for making it public."

"When is the event to be proclaimed?"

"Within an hour from now. Alexander himself is to make the announcement from the balcony of the Winter Palace. The people are already gathering in the square."

"How? They know?" she asked, in some surprise.

"They know nothing except that Alexander with his own lips is going to make public some great event. Hence, there is great excitement in the streets. The Foreign Ambassadors are already assembling at the Winter Palace. Where is Monsieur le Marquis? I must tell him the news. He must not be absent while others are tendering their congratulations to the new ruler."

"My faith! no," returned Pauline. "*Mon père* will be found in his study at this moment, inspecting his morning's correspondence. Louis shall take you to him," she added; and addressing a lackey she bade him conduct Benningsen to the Ambassador's study. "But stay, General," she continued, with a laugh that was not all a laugh, "what dreadful boots yours are, dropping mud and wet! Respect our carpets. You must leave those great Hessians behind you."

Benningsen stared oddly at her, hesitated for a moment, and then, perceiving that she was in earnest, he laughed, slipped out of his boots, and followed in the wake of the lackey.

"He did not limp like that last night, though wearing the same boots," thought Pauline, as she watched the General ascending the staircase. "It is the right foot that seems to be hurt."

As soon as Benningsen was out of sight, Pauline, much to the surprise of her maid, lifted one of the long boots and, for better inspection, held it up to the light.

Her next act was more surprising still. Drawing forth her handkerchief, she carefully wiped from the heel its caking of mud and snow. And there, in the leather just above the heel, was a double row of perforations, obviously caused by something sharp that had penetrated the leather from without.

"Vera," said Pauline, with a strange look, "tell me what you think was the cause of these marks?"



The maid regarded them attentively for a moment, and then said, "They seem to me very like teeth-bites, my lady. See!" So saying, Vera slipped off her pretty little shoe, and by giving the heel a hearty bite, produced in the red leather a double row of marks, very similar in appearance to those in Benningsen's Hessians. "He had strong teeth who bit this boot," she added.

"My God!" murmured Pauline. "What has happened?" And the boot dropped from her trembling hand.

"My lady, you are ill."

She had reason for her remark in Pauline's sudden pallor. But the Baroness made no answer. She stood, silent and motionless, deep in thought; and when, after an interval of five minutes, Benningsen reappeared, she regarded him with a look so strange and repelling that he intuitively felt that his secret had become known to her.

"Now can one keep a thing from a woman?" he thought, as he drew on his Hessians.

"General, what Bible-verse did Paul hit upon yesterday?" she asked in a careless manner; and the General, off his guard for the moment, replied—

"*'Thou shalt bruise his heel.'*"

"There has been a quick fulfilment of that text."

"True," said Benningsen with a side-glance at the maid, who stood by, wondering what it all meant, "and the less said about it before others, the better."

There was in his manner something approaching to the nature of a threat, that caused Pauline's eyes to blaze angrily.

"You have brought dishonour upon a noble enterprise," she said. "Henceforth, we are no longer friends. Pay no more visits to the Embassy, or I'll have you whipped forth."

"*L'Ambassade, c'est moi!*" said Benningsen, with something between a laugh and a sneer; and striking a Louis Quatorze attitude as he spoke. "But if the Marquis chooses to receive me——"

"I'll have you whipped," she repeated, making the last word sound like the lashing of a thong, "like the

savage that you are. As for *mon père* — have you told him the whole story? No! you dare not. You have lied to him, as you have lied to me. *Mon père* is a gentleman, and when he hears the truth, he, too, will forbid your presence here. Go, coward!” she added, with a stamp of her foot, and pointing to the door.

Benningesen’s great face reddened as he saw that two clerks of the Embassy, passing through the hall to their daily duties, had stopped to listen to this piquant dialogue between a brother-in-law of the Czar and their chief’s daughter.

“Coward?” said Benningesen, repeating the word. “But bah! one is a fool to bandy words with a woman. If only you were a man ——!” he added, turning away.

“Stay a moment, General,” she said, sweetly, “I’ll bring you a man.”

He knew that she meant Wilfrid, whose sword he durst not meet; and without more ado he stalked off.

Almost at the same moment the Marquis de Vacluse was seen descending the stairs in a state of perturbation very unusual with him.

“Has Benningesen told you?” he began. “Do you know that ——”

“He has told me, *mon père*,” replied Pauline. “I know — more than you think,” she added to herself.

The Ambassador was too much excited to notice how dejected his daughter was looking.

“Horses to the door!” he cried; and while the order was being executed he walked to and fro, muttering, “This event, I fear, will bring no good to the First Consul.”

And it was with a very rueful look that he drove to the Winter Palace. If the Ambassador were gloomy, so, too, was his daughter. Wrapped in moody thought, she remained standing where her father had left her, till Wilfrid’s voice put an end to her reverie. And very curious it was to notice how quickly Pauline’s face brightened as soon as she became aware of his presence.

“Dare you venture abroad with me this morning?” was her first question; in the circumstances, a surprising one to Wilfrid.

"Is not this a somewhat rash act on your part?" he objected. "In rescuing a prisoner of the Czar, you made yourself amenable to arrest."

"The Czar," replied Pauline, without naming *what* Czar, "is about to issue an amnesty to all political prisoners."

"And we come under that term?"

"I believe so. At any rate, we may go forth without fear of arrest. I have received this assurance from — from an authoritative source."

"Good. The Czar is not such a bad fellow, after all."

"No, indeed he is not," said Pauline, with a laugh, perplexing in its merriment; "though you spoke somewhat hardly of him yesterday."

In his own opinion, Wilfrid had not spoken half so hardly as had Pauline.

"What has caused this sudden change in him?"

"Come with me, and you shall learn," said Pauline, with a charming air of mystery. "I could tell you now, but I prefer to be dramatic with you. The Czar himself shall proclaim what the Czar will do."

And Pauline, having ordered her carriage, retired to put on her hat and mantle, while Wilfrid, attracted by an unusual hubbub outside the Embassy, went to the door.

The Nevski Prospekt was alive with a throng of men and women, all moving in one direction, all animated by the same impulse.

The crowd was composed mainly of the lower orders, but now and again there appeared the stately equipage of some lordly boyar.

At times there would trot past little bands of Cossacks, who, carrying immensely long lances and mounted on shaggy ponies, sought to quicken the pace of the people by crying, "To the Winter Palace! To the Winter Palace!"

"Now, I wonder what all this excitement is about?" said Wilfrid, re-entering the Embassy.

"You do? Well, then, let us go to the Winter Palace, and discover the reason," answered Pauline, who had returned, looking more charming than ever in her hand-some furs.

As for Wilfrid, having no choice in the matter of attire, he was wearing the same Austrian uniform as on the previous day. Pauline, studiously critical, noticed that he was without the ornament of a sword, and thinking it a pity that he should go forth without his full equipment, procured a handsome weapon from her father's collection, and even went so far as to help him in girding it on.

Having assisted Pauline into the carriage, Wilfrid was about to take his place by her side, when she cried, with a little gesture of impatience —

“There! I have left my vinaigrette in the hall.”

While Wilfrid went back to fetch it a troop of guards came riding by. At their head was Prince Ouvaroff, looking, so Pauline thought, pale, ill, and melancholy.

“Now what is troubling *him?*” she murmured.

No sooner did Ouvaroff catch sight of Pauline than his melancholy seemed to vanish. There came upon his face a smile, never seen there except when she was in view.

He halted his troop, drew near to Pauline, and, saluting her with his sword as though she were the Czarina herself, said: —

“Like the rest of us, you are bound for the Winter Palace, I presume?” And on learning that such was the case he continued, “You must permit me to be your escort. Place your carriage amid my gallant band and we'll clear the way for you through the crowd.”

“I thank you, Prince, but my escort is already chosen,” replied Pauline, pointing to Wilfrid, who at that moment was descending the steps of the Embassy.

Wilfrid cast a smile at his old friend, the very man he wanted to see. There was much that Ouvaroff could tell him about the mysterious Grand Duchess.

“You and Lord Courtenay are friends, I understand,” said Pauline.

“We used to be.”

The Prince's air was so cutting and contemptuous that Wilfrid, whose high spirit could ill brook an affront, compressed his lips ominously. The cause of Ouvaroff's disdain was plain enough to him. That Prince must

have seen him stealing from the Duchess's bedchamber. Wilfrid's face darkened, and his hand sought the hilt of his sword, but recognising the unwisdom of entering into explanations he turned his back upon the Prince and waited till Pauline should have finished her talk with him. In troubled surprise she glanced from one to the other, wondering what Wilfrid had done to alienate his old friend.

"Do you know, Prince, that when you frown so you remind me — yes, of Paul."

This remark, spoken with no ulterior motive, produced a very strange effect upon Prince Ouvaroff. As if detecting a hidden meaning in her words he started sharply, as a man may start who is unexpectedly confronted with his guilt, glared at her for a moment with a wild eye that made him look more like Paul than ever, and then, putting spurs to his steed, he suddenly set off at a gallop, leaving his astonished troop to follow or not as they chose. Pauline watched him with a troubled face. She knew something now unknown to her a moment ago.

## CHAPTER XII

### A GRIM BEGINNING OF A REIGN

"WHAT are we to do now?" asked Pauline of Wilfrid, when, as their carriage drew near to the Imperial Square, they found approach to the Winter Palace impossible by reason of the dense crowd. "We can't expect these good people to open a way for us to the front, and yet, as we are, we shall see nothing!"

Her situation at that moment contrasted singularly with that of her father. While *he* was within the stately palace and occupying a high place among the Imperial *entourage*, she was outside in the open square upon the skirts of a tumultuous swaying crowd.

Her glance, wandering around, rested upon the façade of the Hôtel de l'Etat Major, the seat of various governmental departments. Situated upon the south side of the Imperial Square, its front, nearly two furlongs in length, sweeps round in a magnificent arc, and faces the south side of the Winter Palace. The windows and balconies of this vast edifice were occupied by groups of well-dressed men and women, whose elevated position gave them a good view of all that was going on.

"That's where we'll go," said Pauline, glancing up at one of these windows.

She drove up to the chief entrance of the hotel, and, being well known to those in authority there, soon obtained for herself and Wilfrid a place among a little group upon one of the upper balconies.

As Wilfrid gazed downwards it seemed to him that all the city's five hundred thousand inhabitants must be gathered together in the space fronting the Winter Palace. They were prevented from getting too near the Imperial edifice by serried ranks of cavalry and in-

fantry, whose numbers were being increased minute by minute.

Wilfrid, with his semi-military tastes, took pleasure in watching the advent of the various regiments that from different points kept continually debouching into the square. Ever and anon from some new quarter the rolling of drums and the wild strains of martial music heralded the approach of some fresh band, till it seemed that not only must all the civilian population of St. Petersburg be there, but the whole of the Czar's vast army as well.

And the variety and oddity of the uniforms!

Circassians were there, whose burnished helmets with steel veil falling upon the shoulder, shirts of linked mail, and long lances, seemed to recall the days of mediæval chivalry; Polish heydukes, whose upper lips were adorned by triple moustaches, the first twisted upwards, the second quite straight, and the third twisted downwards; Zaporogian Cossacks, whose trousers were smeared with tar to show the wearer's contempt for the costly scarlet cloth of which they were composed.

"A soldier's pride should be in his arms, not in his dress," remarked Pauline in reference to these last-named warriors, adding that this strange practice was permitted by the government.

The marchings, wheelings, and evolutions of these troops were all directed towards the formation of three main bodies, the first extending along the entire front of the Palace; at each end a shorter division was thrown forward at right angles to the main body, so that the arrangement formed three sides of a rectangle.

The fourth side of the rectangle was formed by the front ranks of the people, who were kept from pressing into the interior space by mounted Cossacks, who, whenever the crowd was pushed forward by the pressure from behind, did not hesitate to ply their whips with merciless vigour.

Upon the open ground thus kept clear by the lash of the Cossacks were numerous mounted officers, who rode leisurely to and fro, now conversing with one another, now issuing some order.

Conspicuous among these was General Benningsen on his famous black steed Pluto; and there, too, was Prince Ouvaroff in command of the Preobrezjanski Guards.

These two, being the only officers known to Wilfrid, came in for a good deal of his attention, and watching them for some time by the aid of a lorgnette, he observed that though Benningsen seemed to have a word for nearly every one among his equals and subalterns, he paid no attention whatever to Ouvaroff, who, on his part, seemed to ignore the General. It was evident that there was some estrangement between the two men, who, till the previous day, had been on good terms; and Wilfrid could not help wondering to what it was due.

Of the three divisions, that on the right hand, which stood, as previously said, at right angles with the main body, consisted of infantry, whose snub noses and up-turned moustaches proclaimed them to be the Paulovski Regiment.

"I don't see my friend Voronetz among them," muttered Wilfrid. "I trust he has not been cashiered."

Surveying these troops through his lorgnette, he observed that the face of each, without exception, was marked by a sullen expression, a fact to which Benningsen was keenly alive, for he eyed them from time to time as if apprehending some disturbance on their part.

"The Paulovski Guards seem dissatisfied this morning?" remarked Wilfrid to Pauline.

"Naturally, seeing that they are about to be disbanded."

"Paul's favourite regiment to be disbanded! Why?"

"Because they are too faithful to his interests."

Wilfrid elevated his eyebrows.

"Fidelity is an extraordinary reason for disbanding a regiment."

"Nevertheless it is the true reason," replied Pauline.

Though somewhat annoyed at this mystification on her part Wilfrid curbed his curiosity.

From the crowd his gaze wandered to the rear of the Winter Palace where flowed the Neva, a broad winding stream of vivid blue. On its surface floated miniature icebergs, varying in tint from white to rose colour. Car-



ried along by the current, and assuming every conceivable shape, they crashed, and dived, and mounted one upon another as if they were trying each to be first in the race to the sea.

The sounds produced by the collision were like the sharp rattle of artillery, and could be heard above the hubbub of the crowd.

On the other side of the river, and grimly grey in the morning sun-light, rose the Petropaulovski Fortress, an object of interest to Wilfrid as being the place in which he would at that moment have been a prisoner but for Pauline's bold rescue.

On the waters of the river before the principal gate of the Citadel floated a sort of state barge, rich with gilding, and gay with coloured flags. This Bucentaur was being rapidly filled with officials from the Citadel, conspicuous among them being the Governor, Count Baranoff.

As soon as he had taken his place in the barge a puff of white smoke issued from the ramparts, accompanied by salvos of artillery, that were repeated at regular intervals.

"That gun is a signal that the river is becoming passable for boats," said Pauline. "We are about to witness an interesting ceremony."

"Of what nature?"

"On reaching this side of the river the Governor will proceed to the Winter Palace, taking with him a goblet containing water from the Neva. No matter upon what business the Czar may be engaged, custom enjoins that he shall come forth and drink from the goblet in sight of all the people. He then returns the cup filled with gold pieces. The ceremony is a kind of homage paid to the Neva, an acknowledgment of the advantages to be derived from the free course of commerce."

"Petersburgers think a good deal of the Neva, then?"

"So much so that I have seen a youth welcomed home from his travels, not with champagne or the like, but with a goblet of Neva water."

Wilfrid watched the progress of the Bucentaur. While its rowers plied their oars, men stationed at the prow and provided with poles kept the passage clear

from the floating ice. In the wake of the state barge followed a long train of boats, filled with merchants and citizens clad in gala attire.

Count Baranoff, in his seat of honour, was in a jubilant mood that morning, as became a man who saw the elements conspiring to favour his interests. A break-up of the ice in a single night was a phenomenon almost without parallel in the history of the Neva.

He carried with him a secret, the disclosure of which would remove all enemies from his path, and open a way for him to the highest offices in the State. Fondly refusing to believe that any ill *could* have happened to Paul — though his brother who sat in the boat with him, was troubled with doubts — he purposed after the Czar should have performed the customary ceremony in the matter of the goblet, to ask for a private interview, in the course of which he would put the treasonable document into Paul's hands with the words, "Read that, Sire."

Eager for the coming of this moment, Baranoff urged the rowers to greater speed, and as soon as the barge grated against the steps of the granite quay he sprang hastily ashore, and taking his place among the detachment of military sent to escort him, he moved onward to the Imperial Square.

His coming drew a satirical smile from Pauline.

"There are surprises for you, Sir Count," she murmured.

He had now arrived at the principal entrance of the Winter Palace, an entrance lofty and arched, and surmounted by a spacious balcony, upon which Paul, whenever the humour took him, was accustomed to show himself to his people. Against this archway there had been set a staircase, covered with scarlet cloth, leading to the balcony above it.

Assuming an air of dignity suitable to the occasion, Baranoff ascended the staircase, bearing in both hands the historic golden goblet filled with water taken from the Neva.

As he slowly mounted aloft he became the mark of all eyes in and around the square. His appearance was

greeted with a loud "*Hourra!*" from the crowd. Their long waiting was over. Usage prescribed that the Czar must come forth without delay to drink from that notable cup.

In truth, before Baranoff had gained the top stair the troops were presenting arms, and a military band, stationed beneath the balcony, broke forth into the soul-stirring music of Russia's national anthem.

A tall window giving access to the balcony was flung wide, and there stepped forth a lofty and majestic figure, arrayed in a rich uniform. Behind him came a train of magnates, civil, military, and ecclesiastical; among this last and bearing in his hands a tall golden cross was the Archbishop Plato, conspicuous by his long snowy hair and beard, his stately person and majestic flowing robes.

The train paused while the figure in the rich uniform advanced to the edge of the balcony, and bowed to the populace, who greeted the action with thunders of applause.

But though the figure was far distant Wilfrid, without having recourse to the lorgnette, could tell that it was not Little Paul. Who was it that thus assumed to himself all the honours of Czardom?

Wilfrid's feeling was one of surprise merely; that of Baranoff's was absolute, overwhelming dismay.

First on the list of conspirators to be denounced by him came the hateful name of the imprisoned Alexander, and lo! it was Alexander himself that faced him and put forth his hand for the goblet!

"None but the Czar can drink from this cup," said Baranoff huskily, drawing back a pace or two.

"True, and the Czar is before you," returned the other.

"Yesterday it was Paul."

"And to-day it is Alexander. To-morrow it may be — who can tell? Is Fortune ever constant?"

Mechanically Baranoff surrendered the goblet to Alexander, who, turning to the now silent people, cried with a loud voice —

"To the health of the Russian nation!"

## A GRIM BEGINNING OF A REIGN 123

He drank, and returned the goblet to Baranoff, first calling upon one in attendance to fill it with gold coins in conformity with ancient usage.

The populace looked on in silent wonderment. What mood had come over Paul that he should depute this duty to the Czarovitch? Was any explanation to be given? Yes, there was. Hush! little Sasha is speaking.

“People of St. Petersburg, my father Paul——” His voice shook with emotion. He stopped, and turned to a minister in his rear, as if desiring him to act as speaker. Count Pahlen, for he it was, proceeded to make the momentous announcement.

“People of St. Petersburg, it is my melancholy duty to state that last night our little father Paul was seized with apoplexy, and died at a quarter to twelve.” He made a pause, and then added, “The Czar is dead” — and, pointing to Alexander — “Long live the Czar!”

For a moment the people were dumb with surprise. The news seemed too good to be true. Then a mighty shout rent the air.

“Long live little Sasha!”

The cavalry spontaneously waved their sabres in an ecstasy of loyalty; among the infantry helmets danced aloft upon the points of bayonets; a remark, however, not applicable to the Paulovski Guards, who, in spite of the addresses of their officers, could not be made to show the least token of enthusiasm.

The civilian crowd, however, were wild with delight; it seemed as if their cheering would never cease. There could be no doubt as to the popularity of Alexander with the great mass of the people, and the ministers upon the balcony, who, for reasons best known to themselves, had feared that the news of Paul’s death might provoke a very different feeling, began to be relieved, a relief somewhat discounted when they noticed the demeanour of the Paulovski Guards, many of whom, having grounded their rifles, were leaning upon them with a sullen and moody air.

Their action was, of course, unseen by the greater part of the people, who, after the fashion of crowds, began to make comments upon what they had just heard.

"The great Catharine was right. She said that Paul would not long outlive her."

"True. He hasn't reigned five years."

"A terrible blow this — to the Empress Mary."

"A blow! Say rather a piece of good luck! But yesterday, so 'tis said, Paul threatened to put her into a convent for life."

"Lucky, too, for Alexander. To think that he was a prisoner yesterday, threatened with death, and to-day the Czar!"

There was no disputing the fact that Paul's departure from this world had been very opportunely timed for Alexander by that particular angel who has the arrangement of such matters; very opportunely indeed — so opportunely that, perhaps, it may not have been an angel at all, but —

There was less cheering now. Men began to stare suspiciously at one another. But what each thought he kept to himself, mindful of the Muscovite saying, "If three persons be seen conversing, one of them is a spy." How many spies must there be, then, in a crowd so vast! In Russia the wise man is the silent man.

Wilfrid's remote situation had prevented him from hearing the announcement made by Count Pahlen, but he quickly became apprised of it by the thunderous shouts of "Hourra, Alexander! Hourra, the new Czar!"

"Paul dead!" he exclaimed, turning to the Baroness. "So this is the secret you have been keeping from me? When did he die?"

"Late last night, suddenly of apoplexy, so Benningsen says. We shall see a full account of it in to-day's *Journal de Petersbourg*."

Wilfrid, aided by the lorgnette, took a long and critical survey of the new Emperor.

He beheld a man as different in appearance from his father Paul as the day is from the night. Alexander exhibited in his person all the beauty of the Romanoff family. His figure, over six feet in height, was well proportioned and graceful in movement; his hair, light brown in colour, with a tendency to curl. His face was

singularly handsome; he had eyes of a dark blue, a profile purely Grecian, and a complexion as clear and almost as colourless as marble. In short, it was no wonder that all the ladies in St. Petersburg were in love with him, for, externally, he was just the sort of man to captivate a woman's imagination. To add to his attractiveness the graces of his mind were, according to Pauline, far superior to those of his person. His conversation was lively and charming. In scholarship he far surpassed his equals in age; indeed, his grandmother Catharine had kept him to his studies so closely as somewhat to impair his eyesight.

Wilfrid listened with some indifference as Pauline ran over the list of the Czar's accomplishments. Truth to tell, Wilfrid felt a latent spirit of antagonism to the new ruler, finding — somewhat absurdly it must be confessed — a ground of complaint in the very fact that he should owe his recovered freedom to the action of this Czar, for the power to set free implies likewise the power to imprison. That the liberty of an Englishman and a Courtenay should depend upon the irresponsible will of an autocrat of twenty-three was galling to his high spirit. That young man, without consulting either judge or jury, could banish Wilfrid from his dominions, and, if he chose, could order Pauline to receive the knout. There was nothing in Russia to stop him. The wealth, the liberty, the lives of sixty millions were at his absolute disposal.

When Pauline went on to speak of Alexander's swordsmanship, and of how, in that art, he excelled every officer in his army, Wilfrid became more than ever critical and depreciatory. Empire might belong to the Romanoffs, but when it came to a question of swordsmanship, let them not presume too much.

"Can beat every officer in his army, can he?" muttered Wilfrid. "Humph! I shall never be happy till I have crossed swords with his Czarship."

Alexander did not retire immediately upon his proclamation as Emperor, but remained upon the balcony for the space of two or three minutes, possibly with the

object of giving the people time to take a good look at their new ruler.

And then came a grim and significant incident, never forgotten by those who witnessed it.

Just as the Archimandrite Plato was preparing to pronounce a benediction upon the people, and with this view had raised his hand, an action which produced a solemn hush over the vast assembly, there came a sound like the shivering of glass. The panes of a window in the lower part of the palace were falling outward by reason of blows dealt from within, and through the opening thus caused there leaped forth a wild figure.

Alighting upon all fours in the rear of a squadron of horse, he sprang to his feet immediately, and though hands, and even sabres, were put forth to stay his progress, he contrived, by adroitly turning and twisting beneath the horses' bellies, to elude capture and to gain the open space fronting the palace, thus becoming visible to the Czar and his staff upon the balcony. The incident was not lost upon Wilfrid, who turned his lorgnette upon this sudden apparition.

Some twenty hours previously Wilfrid had seen the man's face, but now, disfigured all over with medical plasters, it was barely recognisable.

"My God! it's Lieutenant Voronetz!" said a lady sitting next to Pauline.

"And who's Lieutenant Voronetz?" asked her companion.

"The officer whose duty it is to guard Paul's bedroom at night."

Lieutenant Voronetz it was, and a more ghastly figure was never seen.

Moved by some overpowering impulse he had evidently escaped from the bed in which he had been put by the kindly, or perfunctory, care of the physician. He wore no clothing except swathings and bandages, which, criss-crossed all over trunk and limbs, suggested the idea that he had been hacked and slashed by sharp weapons from head to foot. The exertion of moving had caused his wounds to open afresh; his linen swath-

ings had lost all their whiteness — from neck to ankle he was one red hue!

There was death in his face, death within a very short time; why then, instead of remaining peacefully on his bed, had he chosen to come forth in this startling fashion?

Voronetz, casting a wild glance around, had no sooner caught sight of the group upon the balcony than he raised his right arm and fiercely shook it at Alexander. With a thrill of horror Wilfrid perceived that the arm thus raised was without a hand — it had been severed at the wrist!

Those who at that moment happened to be looking at the Czar whispered afterwards that he trembled and turned pale. The benediction that the Archimandrite was about to pronounce died upon his lips.

Turning from the balcony the grim red figure ran, or, to put it more correctly, reeled forward in the direction of the Paulovski Guards. Trotting quietly in his rear, as if to keep an eye upon him, came Benningsen upon his black horse Pluto.

“Men of the Paulovski Guards,” gasped Voronetz in a hollow voice, “do not . . . shout for . . . Alexander! Listen! I have a tale . . . to . . . tell . . .”

“Tell it, then, in hell!” growled Benningsen, as he whirled his sabre on high.

Men talked for days afterwards of that mighty stroke. When Benningsen lifted his sabre again Voronetz lay on the ground, cloven from skull to breast!

Angry cries broke from the Paulovski Guards. Many of them levelled their rifles at Benningsen, who, to do him justice, did not flinch at this critical moment.

“Eyes right!” he yelled.

So well had these troops been drilled that in a moment their eyes, in spite of their will, turned to the right.

There was no need for Benningsen to say more. The Guards saw what he wanted them to see.

A body of infantry near by had suddenly receded some six paces or more, revealing the startling fact that they had been posted as a sort of screen to mask a battery of twenty cannon, whose gleaming nozzles, obliquely turned, were trained full upon the whole line



of the Paulovski Guards. Beside each piece stood a gunner ready with lighted match. If that battery should be discharged it was certain that, though many civilians in the rear would at the same time fall, the Paulovski Guards themselves would be blown out of existence, and with the recognition of that fact vanished, for that day at least, all hope of revolt.

"Pile arms, ye snub-noses! — Paulovski Guards that were!" said Benningsen with an insulting smile.

Slowly and sullenly the discomfited regiment proceeded to obey, and defiled from the square, escorted on each side by mounted Cossacks, who grinned rejoicingly that an end had come to the favoured regiment with its high privileges and high pay.

The young Emperor turned away, his face already shadowed by that melancholy that was never to leave it.

"What a beginning to a reign!" he murmured.

"Sire, its future glory shall make men forget its beginning," said Count Pahlen.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE TRIUMPH OF BARANOFF

FROM the balcony the Czar withdrew to a stately hall to receive in audience his late father's ministers.

As they advanced, one by one, Alexander with gracious air bade each continue in the exercise of his office. When, however, Baranoff approached, the Czar's countenance underwent a change, and the Count recognised that his dismissal was at hand. The Franco-Russian Alliance had been mainly due to him, and it was no secret that Alexander had viewed it with disapproval.

"Count," the Emperor began, "your policy in the past——"

But at this point Baranoff, though it be contrary to all Court etiquette to stop a sovereign in the middle of a remark, boldly made interruption, recognising that if his dismissal were once pronounced Alexander could not, without loss of dignity, revoke it.

"My policy, Sire," said he, emphasising the first word. "Your Majesty errs in ascribing to me a policy of any character soever, other than this, 'The King's will is the highest law.' He surely is the best minister who obeys his sovereign without questioning."

Alexander wavered. There could be no doubt that the war with England had been the policy of his father.

Baranoff took courage from Alexander's hesitancy.

"Let me retire from office. I stipulate only that you shall write across my *cong *, 'Dismissed for being faithful to a Czar.'"

"Fidelity to a sovereign may be carried too far," said Alexander, who had not forgotten the lessons of his Republican tutor, La Harpe.

"True, Sire," replied Baranoff, who knew how to

trim his sails to meet the changing breeze. "And, therefore, when fidelity ceased to be a virtue I withdrew my allegiance."

"Since when did you withdraw your allegiance from Paul?" sneered Benningsen.

"Since yesterday at three in the afternoon," retorted Baranoff. "Sire, in dismissing me you dismiss the man to whom you owe both life and throne."

"Why, this is the language of treason," said Benningsen, fingering the hilt of his sabre and much regretting that he could not deal with Baranoff as he had dealt with Voronetz.

"Speak on," said Alexander, mentally contrasting the Count's deference with the General's *brusquerie*.

Benningsen and Pahlen were both disposed to play the master; it might be well, then, to have in the ministry a counterforce in the person of Baranoff.

"Seeing that your father Paul," continued Baranoff, addressing the Czar, "imprisoned you and the Grand Duke Constantine for a trifling breach of military etiquette, to what point would his anger have risen had he known that you were at the head of a conspiracy formed to deprive him of his crown?"

The ministers interchanged significant glances.

"I repeat it, Sire, that you and all here present owe your lives to my forbearance."

"Explain."

Baranoff drew forth the document containing the signatures of the conspirators, and laid it upon the table before the Czar.

"This paper came into my hands yesterday at three in the afternoon."

As a matter of fact he had not seen it till eight hours afterwards, but he wanted to make the best of his case.

"Had I shown this to the Czar Paul, what would have been the result?"

"Why *did* you suppress it if you were so faithful to him?" asked Alexander, toying with the paper.

"Consider, Sire!" returned Baranoff with an air of lofty disinterestedness. "Had I so acted, your life as well as the lives of the other signatories, would have

been forfeited. I shrank from filling the city with the noblest blood of the State. And yet, to throw in my lot with your party would have been ingratitude to my Imperial master. Hence I took the only course consistent with honour. I remained neutral."

"Among the Athenians," remarked Pahlen, "he who remained neutral received punishment."

"The usage of an ancient heathen city is no precedent for a modern Christian state," was the reply, a reply that drew a secret curse from Pahlen, who saw that the Czar was being won over by Baranoff's tongue.

"Yes, Sire, the triumph of either side being distasteful to me, I held aloof from both. Happily, the course of nature has prevented you from lifting an unfilial hand against your sire. Who is so dull as not to see the hand of Providence in this sudden demise of his Majesty?"

While speaking, Baranoff cast at the ministers a covert smile, that caused Pahlen to murmur in Benningsen's ear:—

"This fellow suspects."

"What matters, so long as the Czar condones."

Baranoff was an accomplished hypocrite. None who saw his bearing in the presence of Alexander would have suspected that only two hours before he had set off from the Citadel, intent on destroying the very Prince whose favour he was now so anxious to win.

Entirely deceived by Baranoff's air of sincerity, Alexander was more than half disposed to retain him among his ministers, though well aware how displeasing this would be to the rest.

Baranoff, growing more elated as he beheld the disconcerted looks of the ministers, now ventured upon a very bold stroke indeed.

"How faithfully I have watched over, not only Paul's interests, but your own, I can clearly show, if your Majesty will permit me to speak with you only."

A murmur of protest arose from the Ministry.

"Let what you have to say be said openly," remarked Pahlen.

"The matter is for the Czar's ear only," retorted Baranoff, with an air of dignity. "It is for his Majesty

to disclose it afterwards if he pleases. I trust your Majesty will grant me this favour, the last perhaps that I may ask."

There was in Baranoff's manner something that convinced the Czar that he *had* an important matter to communicate, that were better heard secretly, too.

"We will humour you," said Alexander, who proceeded to make good his word by calling upon the rest of the Ministry to retire to the ante-chamber.

"What tale hath that knave to tell?" muttered Pahlen. "His subtle tongue will be our undoing. He'll keep his place, and we shall see a continuance of the war."

In which forecast the chancellor was destined to prove a true prophet.

"Now, Count," said Alexander, as soon as the door had closed, "we are alone. What is it you would say?"

"The matter is one that concerns your honour, Sire. Hence my reason for this secrecy."

"Be brief."

"It is with pain and regret, your Majesty, that I bring an accusation against one of the Imperial house."

For a moment the Czar looked as if he doubted his own hearing.

"Accusation?" he exclaimed haughtily. "Of what nature?"

"Ah! Sire, I fear to say, knowing what a blow it will be."

"Tush! Am I a child? The weakling king who desires to hear nothing but what is pleasant will never hear the truth. What is this accusation?"

"It concerns the honour of a lady, who — how shall I say it?"

"Go on," said Alexander sharply, as Baranoff paused again.

"Your Majesty will surely understand me when I say that she whom the Czar loves should keep herself sacred to the Czar."

His Majesty *didn't* seem to understand, to judge by his perplexed looks.

"What would you imply?"

"Knowing, Sire, how great is your love for the Grand Duchess Marie — your pardon, I ought to call her ——"

"Is this a time for titles? You would accuse *her*? Of what? Speak out, and speak the truth; for, as there is a God above us, you receive a stroke of the knout for every false word." He spoke in real anger, but beneath it all it was easy to see there lurked a fear that what Baranoff would say might prove true. "Of what would you accuse her?"

"Of letting her love wander from the Czar."

"To whom?"

"To an Englishman."

"His name."

"Lord Courtenay."

It seemed as if the name were familiar to the Czar; at any rate he asked no question as to who Lord Courtenay might be.

"Your proofs?" he asked, affecting a disdain that did not deceive Baranoff.

"She wears at her heart a locket containing his portrait."

"Natural that she should preserve some souvenir of a man who once saved her life."

"Sire, a fortnight ago she obtained Paul's sanction to leave St. Petersburg for a few days. Why?"

"For prayer and meditation in the Convent of the Ascension."

Baranoff smiled satirically.

"In returning she stopped at a wayside hamlet, named Gora, and stayed for the night at an inn called the Silver Birch."

"You are telling me what I already know."

"Do you know this, Sire, that Lord Courtenay was at this inn on that self-same night?"

No, the Czar did not know that, if one must judge by his startled look.

"Did they see each other?"

"Sire, in the dead of the night he was seen stealing from her bedchamber."

"A lie as black as hell!" cried Alexander in a sudden blaze of wrath, the more striking from his previous en-

forced calmness. Unable longer to control himself he sprang to his feet, at the same time half-unsheathing his sword, as if with the intention of striking the other dead. Then, as reason asserted itself, the weapon slid from his relaxed fingers down into its scabbard again, and the Emperor resumed his seat, glancing at the door as if fearing lest his voice should have reached the ears of his ministers in the antechamber.

"If it be a lie, ascribe it not to me, but to Prince Ouaroff, from whom I receive the story."

"I will hear Ouaroff. I will examine him — by torture if necessary. If you and he are found to be liars, you die. If you speak truth — But I'll not think *that*, yet. Where is this Lord Courtenay at the present time?"

"In St. Petersburg, Sire, at the French Embassy."

"The French Embassy! How comes he to be there?"

Baranoff explained the circumstances.

"What was the Baroness' motive for this act?"

The Count shrugged his shoulders.

"Mischief, pure mischief! Pauline de Vaucluse is sometimes a woman, and sometimes a girl. As a girl she delights in offering defiance to established authority. 'Twas unwise of the Marquis to countenance his daughter's action, for whatever secret this Englishman happens to pick up at the Embassy will soon be transmitted to his own government."

"How? You think him to be a spy?"

"I *know* him to be such," replied Baranoff, who, always able to lie like truth, was on this particular morning quite surpassing himself. "This Lord Courtenay, who wanders about Europe, ostensibly in search of adventure, whose rank procures him admission to the highest circles, is in reality a secret agent of the British Government. Young, handsome, accomplished, and of noble birth, he is the very person to take a woman's fancy. By some means he has got to know of the Duchess Marie's infatuation for him, and he comes to St. Petersburg with the subtle view of using her as a medium for acquiring State secrets. Be sure, Sire, that whatever matters you

communicate to her will soon become his, to be transmitted to his master, Pitt."

"That same Pitt," said the Czar, darkly, "with whom Pahlen bids me make peace!"

"Bids, or — advises?"

The Czar compressed his lips significantly. Baranoff smiled to himself. It was clear to him that Pahlen was disposed to play the master over the youthful sovereign, and that the youthful sovereign did not like the yoke.

"I have shown you, Sire, the infamous methods to which an English premier resorts. And yet you will make peace with him, merely because Pahlen urges you? — An ill precedent to set at the beginning of a reign! The ministers of a Czar are his servants, not his counsellors. The sovereign who accepts advice is not the ruler, but the ruled."

And then, in defiance of his own words, Baranoff proceeded to give advice.

"Will you reverse your father's policy all in a moment? despatch a courier to the First Consul to break off the alliance, even before your royal sire is laid in his grave? Will this be decent?"

Much more to the same point flowed from his lips. His specious pleading, but especially his lies concerning Wilfrid, began to tell upon Alexander, causing his young and plastic mind to waver from its friendly attitude towards Britain. Why not let the war continue — for a time at least, if only to teach his peace-advising ministers that the Czar's will must be supreme?

Wilfrid's love-affair was a matter unknown to the European chancelleries of that day. It would have surprised them — it certainly would have surprised Wilfrid — to know that it was a potent factor in shaping the foreign policy of the Czar. Another proof that great events spring from trifling causes. Did not all the wars of the Grand Monarch originate in a dispute about a window?

At this juncture there came a knock at the folding-doors followed by the entrance of two chamberlains, who, bowing low, announced that the new Czarina de-



sired to speak with the Czar, whom she had not seen since his accession.

Alexander received this message with a frown.

"I am occupied on matters of State, and cannot see her now."

In the ante-chamber, arrayed in deep mourning that enhanced, rather than detracted from her beauty, stood Alexander's wife, the youthful Elizavetta, receiving with a gracious air the congratulations of the ministers on her accession to Imperial rank.

Upon this little circle the Emperor's cold and curt message fell like a bolt from the blue.

Too proud to venture into Alexander's presence after such a rebuff, the Empress turned away, affecting an air of unconcern, though in her eyes could be seen the glitter of tears.

"The devil!" growled Benningsen. "Baranoff has the laugh on us. He has become of more moment than the Czarina herself!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

ON the second night after the death of the Czar Paul, it happened that Wilfrid was sitting over a newspaper in his private room at the Hôtel d'Angleterre, when a sound caused him to look up.

There, a few paces off, stood a young man, wrapped in a long cloak that glistened with the moisture deposited, apparently, by a heavy fog. He was perhaps not more than twenty years of age, singularly mild and placid of countenance, and with light blue eyes marked by a somewhat odd expression; they appeared to be looking straight at Wilfrid without seeing him.

"Do I address Lord Courtenay?"

His voice was like his looks. He had a subdued air altogether.

"My name, sir," replied Wilfrid, somewhat resenting this sudden intrusion. "And yours?"

"Alexis Voronetz."

"Voronetz, Voronetz," repeated Wilfrid thoughtfully.

"Any relative of a certain lieutenant of that name?"

"His brother."

"That cannot be."

"Why not?"

"I understand that the man who killed him still lives."

"I am blind," answered the stranger with a sigh.

"Your pardon, good Alexis. I was not aware of that."

Wilfrid guided the stranger to a chair, and offered him wine. "And what does the brother of Lieutenant Voronetz want with me?" he asked, when the other had set down his glass.

"My errand is a strange one. I am sent by a certain

person, whose will is that I should escort you to a place, not far hence, where your coming is awaited."

"What place?"

"I am forbidden to reveal its name. You will learn, if you come."

"Without doubt," smiled Wilfrid. "But why should I go to this person? If he wish to see me, here I am, easily accessible."

"It is impossible for ——" he hesitated for a word — "for the person to visit you."

"Why not? Is he on a sick bed? Dying? In prison? Who is he?"

"I am on oath not to reveal the name of my principal. You are suspicious, I see; and your suspicions are, perhaps, natural; but in the name of God" — and here the speaker lifted his hand — "no hurt is intended you."

Wilfrid knew that when a Muscovite swears by the name of God, he may usually be trusted. Still ——

"I don't doubt your word, good Alexis, but I strongly suspect the motives of a principal who clothes himself with such secrecy. It is now close upon twelve o'clock. Why may I not go with you to-morrow, and in daylight?"

"To-morrow will be too late."

"Too late for what?"

"That is the answer I was told to give. It must be to-night or never."

"You do not know, then, for what purpose I am wanted?"

Alexis signified that he did not.

Wilfrid mused. Was it safe to pay a visit at midnight to a strange house for the purpose of meeting a man who declined to state beforehand either his name or business? It was certain he had in the city one enemy, Baranoff, if not more; and this errand of Alexis might be the initial step for putting him into that enemy's hand. A little reflection, however, caused Wilfrid to dismiss this theory. Why should Baranoff employ all this secrecy? If he wanted to remove an enemy he had simply to sign an

order for that enemy's deportation to Siberia, and the thing was done.

Then there occurred to him an idea that set his blood tingling with a pleasurable excitement.

"So," said he to Alexis, "you will not give me the name of *the lady* that has sent you?"

It was a chance statement, but it found verification in Alexis' sudden look of surprise.

"I have not said that my principal is a lady."

True, but he had shown a scrupulous avoidance of the masculine pronoun, and hence Wilfrid's conclusion. Who was this lady, if not the mysterious duchess?

The atmosphere of peril in which she moved had doubtless left her no other way of seeing him except at midnight and in secrecy.

She wanted him, and that at once: to-morrow would be too late! Was it to give warning of some danger that threatened him, or her, or, possibly, both?

"Had the lady any reason for selecting you as her messenger?"

"My brother's death was mentioned, and I was told to be earnest in persuading you to accompany me, for it might lead to the punishment of his murderer."

As Alexis spoke he set his sightless eyes appealingly upon Wilfrid. There was something pathetic in the picture of this youth, whose infirmity rendered him unable to avenge himself. The brutal slaughter of Lieutenant Voronetz had filled Wilfrid with disgust, a feeling that, in a degree scarcely less strong, included the Czar likewise, when that ruler, instead of punishing the savage, gave him a place in the Ministry. Wilfrid hesitated no longer when he heard that his going with Alexis might bring about the downfall of Benningsen, against whom Pauline had whispered certain dark hints. In what way this was to be brought about, Wilfrid did not stop to inquire. Arming himself with a sword and a brace of pistols, he declared himself ready for the journey.

Sallying forth from the hotel, Wilfrid found the city wrapped in a fog so thick as to prevent him from seeing anything distant more than an arm's length.

No voices: no footsteps: no wheels: not the faintest sound anywhere. There was something weird in the silence that hung over all. Petersburg was like a city of the dead.

Wilfrid soon began to see that he was with a guide of peculiar excellence; the real reason, perhaps, why he had been selected for the trust. On a foggy night blindness is better than sight.

In walking down the staircase of the hotel Wilfrid had guided Alexis; in the street it became the turn of Alexis to guide Wilfrid. Linking Wilfrid's arm within his own he walked forward with no more hesitation than an ordinary man would have shown in traversing the street in broad daylight. It was marvellous to mark the ease with which he steered his course, now to right, and now to left. To him darkness was no darkness at all.

Twenty minutes of silent walking, and then the two were brought to a sudden standstill by a startling challenge. "Who goes there? Halt!"

Barely discernible, there loomed up out of the fog a figure clad in a long grey coat with cross-belt, and armed with a bayoneted rifle.

Alexis whispered something that Wilfrid did not catch, and the soldier, apparently satisfied, melted into the fog again.

"A sentinel, and a watchword," thought Wilfrid. "Either a Government building or an Imperial palace. I incline to the palace."

The two went forward, treading upon a wooden flooring that gave forth a hollow sound. Moved by curiosity, Wilfrid drew forth a coin and flung it sideways in air. Its descent, as he had expected, was accompanied by a slight splash.

"A bridge and water," he thought. "The Fontanka Canal, or the moat round the Michaelhof? The moat, I fancy."

At the end of the supposed bridge they were challenged by a second sentinel. Alexis whispered, and, as before, the two were permitted to pass on, walking now over a pavement of flagstones.

"The courtyard of the Michaelhof," murmured Wilfrid.

Presently Alexis stopped and put forth his hand; so did Wilfrid, who found his fingers touching damp stone, doubtless the actual wall of the palace itself. Turning to the right Alexis began to follow the course of this wall, stopping at last before what seemed to be a small arched entrance, and producing a key he applied it to the lock of an iron-studded door. Unlocking this, Alexis passed within, followed by Wilfrid. The place was as black as night.

"Make as little noise as possible," said Alexis in a low tone.

He moved forward through the darkness, and Wilfrid followed in silence, his hand and foot telling him that he was traversing a passage whose walls and floor were of stone.

In a few moments they had come to a wide staircase of oak, dimly visible in the faint light proceeding from some unseen point above.

This staircase gave access to a long and broad gallery, decorated with tapestry and paintings. A few lamps, ranged at regular intervals along the wall, did little more than make the darkness visible.

With the belief, right or wrong, that every corridor in a Czar's palace is tenanted by an armed sentinel, Wilfrid wondered to see this gallery left unwatched, till it struck him that perhaps this absence of a guard was due to some secret manœuvring on the part of those employing Alexis. Half-way down this gallery Alexis paused, and, opening a door, said:—

"My orders are that you wait here."

The "here" was a lofty apartment, very richly furnished, its recesses piled high with books, showing that it served the purpose of a library. A handsome reading lamp of bronze with a very bright flame stood upon the central table.

But why it should be ordained that night must for ever rest upon this apartment was a mystery to Wilfrid; yet such was the case. Windows there were none, the spaces that had once let in daylight being now closed with

masonry, a walling-up that, judged by appearances, had taken place but recently. Alexis offered no explanation of this singularity; perhaps, being blind, he was not aware of it. Wilfrid could not help noticing how odd was his manner at this moment; he seemed to be under a spell of nervousness, if not of actual fear, his eyes being riveted upon a certain door at the far end of the apartment, as if, blind though he was, he could see something that the other could not see. Turning away, he said:—

“I must leave you for a time. I go to announce your arrival.”

With this he stepped from the apartment, closing the door behind him.

Too much excited to spend the interval in sitting down, Wilfrid paced to and fro for a few minutes.

Suddenly, he stopped short in his walk, and, without knowing why, shot a suspicious glance at the distant door. What lay on the other side of it he did not know, but he felt a sense of satisfaction in having come equipped with sword and pistols.

He resumed his pacing, though more slowly now, and even when his back was turned to the door, he moved, as a Spaniard would say, with his beard upon his shoulder.

That door haunted him!

It was in vain that he tried to divert his mind from it by examining the objects of art contained in the room: a rectangle of wood, seven feet by three, proved a greater attraction than oriental alabaster or porphyry vases. Many minutes had now passed, yet Wilfrid still remained the only person in the apartment.

Growing impatient at this long delay he went to the door by which he had entered, and peeped out into the gallery.

He could not see anybody, nor could he hear the sound of coming footsteps. No sound at all, far or near.

“Truly, they are quiet people in the Michaelhof,” muttered Wilfrid, as he closed the door again.

The midnight hour and the deadly silence, the mysterious character of this chamber, with its windows

sealed against the light of day, but above all, the strange door, began to tell upon Wilfrid's nerves.

Was it fancy merely, or did he catch a glimpse of it in the act of closing, just as he was withdrawing his gaze from the gallery?

The more he dwelt upon Alexis' oddity of manner, the stronger became his suspicion that the door gave access to something strange, something that was a matter of fear to Alexis.

If the mystery were one to be solved merely by opening the door, then Wilfrid would solve it; if the door were locked, his curiosity would, of course, be baffled; even *his* boldness would hardly proceed to the length of breaking the lock of a door belonging to the Czar's palace.

Lifting the lamp, the only one in the apartment, from the table, Wilfrid, albeit somewhat slowly, went forward, fancying as he did so that he saw the door vibrate, an illusion due, perhaps, to the oscillating lamp.

Reaching the door he stood there for a time, hesitating, for all his boldness. He held his ear close to the panels, but failed to detect either sound or movement; he applied his eye to the keyhole; darkness was upon the other side.

He drew his sword as a precaution against he knew not what. As it is somewhat difficult for a man holding an object in each hand to turn the knob of a door, Wilfrid resolved to place the lamp on the floor in such a position that its rays would illumine the room beyond as soon as he should have swung the door open.

As he stooped to lower the lamp, his eye was caught by some dark stains, varying in shape and size. He raised the lamp again, and looked round about. The stains were nowhere else, only there, just around the door, and along one side of the wall at the foot of the arras.

Something had happened there, and it was the knowledge of that event that had put fear upon the mind of Alexis.

Setting the lamp upon the floor, Wilfrid rose to his full height, and placing his fingers upon the knob turned



it, and at the same time with a push of his foot he sent the door flying wide.

The next moment a cry of vexation broke from him, as he realised when too late his want of foresight.

The sudden opening of the door had produced an indraught of air sufficiently strong to extinguish the flame of the lamp before he could catch even the briefest glimpse of the chamber. Being without flint and steel he was unable to rekindle the flame.

As a precaution against being transfixed by hostile blades Wilfrid, on opening the door, had recoiled a few steps, and he now stood with his sword on guard, half-expecting to be attacked, or at the least to be addressed, by some unseen foe. There was neither movement nor speech; the chamber was soundless, its darkness seeming to be not the ordinary darkness of night, but something far blacker, an effect due, Wilfrid intuitively felt, to the fact that the windows of this place, too, were walled up.

Now, while he was hesitating whether to go forward a few paces, just to ascertain whether this supposed chamber might not be a corridor, his ear was startled by the sound of something coming through the doorway, something moving low down, a slow, gliding rustle along the floor at the foot of the wall. Wilfrid did not doubt that some one was stealing into the chamber with some deadly design against him, else why this secret and voiceless action?

Wilfrid put no question; he gave no warning.

Swift as the electric flash his sword descended edge-wise upon the quarter whence came the sound, and he had the grim satisfaction of knowing that he had not struck in vain. His sense of feeling told him that the edge of the blade had not only cut the tapestry, but had also passed through some fleshy obstacle, severing it in twain.

But the strangeness of the thing!—the victim had uttered no cry!

A sensation, such as he had never before known, passed over Wilfrid. For a moment he hesitated; then, impelled almost against his will, he stooped, not neglecting,

however, to keep on guard against a possible attack, and, feeling with his left hand in the place where his blade had struck, he grasped something that he immediately relinquished on realising what it was.

*A human hand!*

And the man thus maimed had endured the pain without a groan! an apathy so utterly opposed to human nature that Wilfrid recoiled with an eerie thrill.

And there he stood, staring at the place where he knew the hand to be, fancying he could see it looking ghastly white through the darkness. If that, outlined beside it, were really a human shape, and not merely a figure woven upon the tapestry, there could be but one solution of the mystery. The victim must be a dumb man, belonging perhaps to the class of those tongueless eunuchs often to be found in the seraglios of the East, though seldom, if ever, in the palace of a Czar.

Was he writhing in silent agony?

Wilfrid listened for any sound indicative of human presence. But there was no movement; there was not even a breath audible in the place where the handless man should be.

Recovering from his spell of fear, Wilfrid came slowly forward and passed the point of his sword along the foot of the wainscoting without lighting upon the owner of the hand. What had become of him? It was impossible to believe that the man, on receiving the sword-stroke, had risen to his feet and glided off without a sound. Where, then — ?

Once more Wilfrid stooped, and, repressing the natural repugnance engendered by such a task, he began to search for the severed hand, which he was not long in finding. His gloved fingers could not tell whether the hand were warm or cold, but a touch of the mutilated member against his cheek told him that it was icy-cold. When held to his nostrils, it emitted a decaying odour, thus proving that some hours, if not some days, must have elapsed since its severance from the parent limb.

It had been lying near the door at the foot of the wall, hidden, perhaps, by the fringe of tapestry, and Wilfrid, when aiming the downward stroke of his imag-

inary foe, had, by a singular chance, lighted upon this dead hand, the keen edge of his blade slicing a part of the wrist. The sound mistaken by him for a stealthy human movement had perhaps been nothing more than the return of a hungry rat towards a meal that had been disturbed by the entrance of himself and Alexis.

Resisting the temptation to fling the ghastly relic from him, Wilfrid laid it upon the table, with the words:—

“This may have been the hand of a brave man.”

He had just closed the door of the supposed inner chamber and restored the lamp to its place, when his ear caught the sound of footsteps in the gallery.

“Friends or foes?” he muttered, keeping the table between himself and the door, and laying his hand upon his sword. His eyes, so long in darkness, blinked with a sudden radiance, as the door opened.

“In the dark!” said a sweet voice in a tone expressive of reproachful surprise. “Did you leave Lord Courtenay here without a light?”

“Your Highness, no,” replied Alexis.

The voice of the first speaker sent a thrill to Wilfrid’s heart, for it was the voice of the lady he was longing to meet.

Graceful in figure, and stately in bearing, she moved forward with all the dignity of an Imperial princess. In Wilfrid’s eyes she seemed more beautiful than ever, attired as she was in a clinging robe of the richest silk, her face and hair framed in a dainty lace wrap. Radiant and youthful, what did she want in a chamber so grim with suggestions of tragedy? He was glad to note that at that moment the dead hand lay in shadow. Beside the Duchess on her right walked Alexis, as faithful a servitor as his blindness would permit; in the rear, and carrying a small silver lamp that shed a soft glow around, came a third person, whom Wilfrid took to be a lady-in-waiting.

“Remain here,” said the Duchess, addressing her two attendants, and with that she moved forward towards Wilfrid. Her reason for keeping her attendants in the room was obvious. When a youthful duchess holds an interview with a man in the dead of night it is well to

have a witness by to prove that such meeting is all that it should be.

The Duchess's first question was personal, and to the point.

"Lord Courtenay, have you learned yet who I am?"

"Am I wrong in concluding that you are a Grand Duchess?"

She hesitated, an odd smile on her lips.

"I was — once."

"Once? Yet your attendant has called you Highness!"

"Alexis forgets that —" And then she stopped.

"No matter. Call me by that title. 'Twill do as well as any other."

A duchess no longer! What did she mean? Had the jealous Alexander deprived her of the title conferred by Paul? *That* he could do, but he could not take away her Imperial descent, nor the regal beauty that accompanied it. It was clear that, so far as Wilfrid was concerned, she wished still to remain *incognita*.

"Were you," said the Duchess — to call her still by that name — "were you expecting to see me to-night, when you accompanied Alexis?"

"Presumptuous of me, perhaps," smiled Wilfrid, "but I was not without hope that the summons *might* have come from you."

It was with a certain touch of hauteur in her manner that the Duchess replied:—

"Learn, then, that it was not *I* who called you to this meeting." — Wilfrid's hopes fell. — "Not till an hour ago was it told me that you had been sent for." Wilfrid's hopes rose. Her coming to see him immediately on hearing of his arrival was proof that she took *some* interest in his fate. "Is it likely," she continued gravely, and speaking more as if to herself than to him, "that I should invite you to a meeting like this, when death would be your lot should you be seen here by my enemies?"

Her enemies? Wilfrid wished he could have them all in line and fight with them, one by one, from sunrise

to sunset, with due intervals for rest and refreshment. He'd have left none alive!

"Then, since you did not send for me, will your Highness condescend to tell me who did?"

"The Empress."

"Elizavetta?" asked Wilfrid, naming the youthful wife of Alexander.

"No, Paul's widow. The Dowager Empress, I should have said. She was desirous of seeing you in person, but circumstances preventing her, I act as her ambassadress."

Wilfrid breathed a silent benison on the head of the ex-Czarina for her choice of ambassadress.

"And what is the will of the Empress with me?"

"To do a work that — but your question will best be answered in that room," replied the Duchess, pointing to the door of the mysterious chamber. "Countess, bring the light."

## CHAPTER XV

### HOW PAUL DIED

THE lady addressed as countess came forward with the lamp, and the little party moved towards the ante-chamber—for such it was—Wilfrid himself opening the door.

The Duchess, as if claiming precedence, was the first to enter, and Wilfrid noticed that as she passed the threshold she looked downwards, seemingly careful as to where she stepped.

Wilfrid followed. The Countess and Alexis stood by the door, and as before, beyond earshot.

The chamber was one that had no exit save the door by which they had entered. As in the other apartment every window had been walled up. A plain camp bed in the middle showed that the place had been used as a sleeping-chamber. The rest of the furniture was of the simplest kind, quite in keeping with the bed.

“You are treading,” said the Duchess, solemnly, “where, after to-morrow, the foot of man will never tread again.”

“Then this is ——?”

“The death-chamber of the Czar Paul.”

Then did Wilfrid remember that it is a usage in the Russian Court on the death of a Czar to wall in the windows and to seal the doors of his private apartments, a process which, if repeatedly carried on, must in course of time expel the living Czar from the palace of his ancestors.

“To-morrow will be too late,” had been Alexis’ argument for inducing Wilfrid to accompany him. A true remark, if applied to the seeing of this chamber, but wherein lay the necessity for his seeing it?

“Yes, Paul died here,” said the Duchess. “But why

do I say 'died?' That is not the word. Died! They do well to shut the light from this room! Let there be perpetual darkness; it will be a fitting symbol of — of the work done here. If these walls could speak!"

She was silent for a moment, and then turning to Wilfrid with eyes that spoke of an inward horror, she said,

"Do you know how Paul died?"

"Your words lead me to suspect the official account that he died of apoplexy."

"It is false — false!" she cried with a vehemence that surprised Wilfrid. "Paul was murdered in this very chamber — cruelly and barbarously murdered. And they that did the deed still live. Live, do I say? They are the Czar's ministers, highest in the State, honoured of all men! And Paul's physicians are not ashamed to sign lying proclamations that he died of apoplexy; they are posted all over the city. And editors print the story, and people believe it — all save a few, and these dare not open their mouths, for it is a crime against the State to speak the truth. It is only in Russia that such things can be."

Overcome by emotion she sank down upon a chair by the bedside. Wilfrid thought she was going to faint, and made a sign for the Countess to come forward. Her help, however, was not required.

"Whence did you learn this?" asked Wilfrid.

"From one who, till his dying day, will be haunted by the memory of the deed — from Prince Ouvaroff."

"Will not your Highness tell me the story?"

"It is the will of the Empress that you *should* be told it."

Wilfrid could not help wondering why Paul's widow should honour him, of all persons in the world, with this confidence, seeing that, only two days before, he had given dire offence to her husband. Doubtless he would receive an explanation ere long of a circumstance that at present was altogether inexplicable.

Pausing for a time before she began her narrative, and often pausing after she *had* begun, the Duchess pro-

ceeded to describe Paul's death, one of the grimmest stories in the annals of Czardom.

Two nights before — to tell the tale more connectedly than it was told by the Duchess — upon the stroke of eleven, twenty cloaked men presented themselves at one of the gates of the palace. They were the ministers, relatives, and friends of the Czar, among them being Count Pahlen, the chief of the conspiracy; General Benningsen, a savage when roused to anger; and Prince Ouvaroff, a patriot actuated by the best and purest of motives.

The soldier on guard permitted them to pass, never suspecting that treason lurked beneath those brilliant uniforms and the decorations that attested rank and dignity. Once within the palace they silently ascended to the Emperor's apartments.

On guard before the bedroom door stood Lieutenant Voronetz. Guessing their errand, he shouted "Treason!" and, faithful to his trust, he drew his sabre, though well knowing that resistance meant death.

"We have no quarrel with you," said Benningsen. "Stand aside from that door! You will not? Well, then, if you prefer to die —"

A dozen blades were stabbing and slashing at Voronetz; his hand was hewn off; mutilated and moaning he fell.

The door was fastened on the inside; a violent kick burst it open, and in rushed the conspirators.

The Czar was not to be seen.

"He cannot have fled far," said Benningsen. "His bed is still warm. Ah! Yon screen!"

From behind the screen there stepped a little figure clad only in a dressing-gown.

The conspirators, about to rush forward, checked themselves. There was in the figure a certain air of dignity that awed them in spite of their resolve. However insignificant in person, he was nevertheless the Czar, descendant of a long line of Czars, only son of the great Catharine, and nearest in blood to the mighty Peter himself. His picture hung in a million homes; tyrant though he were, ten million persons would weep



if hurt befel the Little Father; ten million voices would demand vengeance upon the slayers!

Appalled at the magnitude of their intended deed some of the conspirators shrank back, and with averted faces stole towards the door.

But the master-spirit of the scene, Benningsen, intercepted them with drawn sabre.

"No weakness, or I slay you."

The figure spoke.

"By whose authority do you come here thus?"

"By the authority of the Czar Alexander."

Paul's eye flashed.

"Alexander is not Czar."

"He will be when—you have signed this," said Benningsen, holding forth a paper. "'Tis your act of abdication."

"I will never abdicate!"

"Sign!" said Benningsen, menacing the Czar with his sabre.

Paul defied them. As often as they repeated their demand so often did he refuse. At last he seemed to yield.

"Give me the paper."

The document was handed to him. He rent it to fragments and tossed them at their feet.

The smile of triumph accompanying the act provoked Benningsen to fury; in a moment of forgetfulness he smote Paul upon the face. Too late he realised what he had done.

"I have struck the Czar! We are all lost—if *he does not die!*"

The conspirators shuddered; there was now no retreat.

Flinging himself upon the Czar, Benningsen brought him to the floor. Emboldened by his example the others crowded around. There was a flash of steel.

"Hold!" cried Benningsen. "No bloodshed. No disfiguring mark on the body. A sash, some one!"

Paul, not realising till that moment that resistance might end in death, suddenly lost courage. His words were no longer threatening, but supplicatory.

“Spare — me — I will — abdicate —!”

He could get out the words in gasps only. Benningsen's great hand was pressing upon his windpipe.

“Too late! Will no one lend a hand?” said Benningsen, for the Czar was making desperate efforts to fling his adversary off. “Must I do the work alone?”

Several knelt and pinned the struggling Paul to the floor. Benningsen rose, and directed their movements. A sash was slipped loosely round the Czar's throat, but in his deadly agony he succeeded in getting his left hand through the noose, and drew it across his chin.

“Give me time — for God's sake — a minute only — to say a prayer!”

His misty glance, wandering around in search of pity, suddenly fell upon Prince Ouaroff, who, with a troubled look on his face, had come forward, bent, even at the cost of his life, on making an attempt to stay the deed.

“Ouaroff — *my own son!* — among these men! — will you see your father — murdered?”

The Prince, his mind absolutely frozen with horror at this sudden and unlooked for revelation — a revelation that he felt to be true — stared with ghastly look at the Czar. The assassins, in the surprise of the moment, stopped in their work. Then the Prince, with a wild laugh like that of a man who has suddenly become insane, swayed feebly forward and fell senseless.

“I didn't know we had a woman among us,” laughed Benningsen. “Good Lord!” he continued, apostrophising the struggling Czar, “did ever man yell so?”

He set the sole of his great boot upon the mouth of the victim; the heel slipped between the jaws of the Czar, who bit with such fury that the teeth penetrated the leather and entered the flesh. With a snarl of pain Benningsen withdrew his foot. Till his dying day he carried on his heel the mark left by the Czar.

They got the noose around his neck at last, and two men, one on each side, tugged at the loose ends. The work was hard and long; fully ten minutes passed before they rose from their knees.

And now that the deed was over their courage fell again, and they stared at one another in a sort of stupor. There would be a tribunal to face, namely, the nation, and what would it say to this deed of darkness?

Benningsen still maintained his hardihood, at least outwardly.

"Who'd have thought the little ape had so much life in him?" he sneered, looking down upon the body. "We have damaged him a little. But some paint and the doctor's art will soon make him presentable to the public. You are all witnesses that he died of apoplexy."

As they stole from the dimly-lighted chamber leaving Ouaroff to awaken beside the body of his murdered Sire, they caught the faint moaning of the prostrate Voronetz.

"A lad of brave spirit!" commented Benningsen. "'Tis a pity he should die. We'll send Dr. Wylie to him to see whether he can be mended. But he'll have to hold his peace."

Making their way to another quarter of the now alarmed palace the ministers sought the chamber where the two Grand Dukes, Alexander and Constantine, were confined — under sentence of death, so it was believed — and setting the two brothers free gave them an account of their father's *execution*, seeking to pacify their grief and indignation by the argument, doubtless a true one, that since Paul would not sign the abdication, no alternative was left but killing. For let them but retire from his bed-chamber, and Paul would at once have called upon his guard to slaughter them; and, having now learned that his two sons were parties to the conspiracy, he would doubtless have included them in the slaughter. It was Alexander's death or Paul's, and they chose it should be Paul's.

"And thus," said the Duchess, concluding her story, "thus did Paul die. His body lies in state in St. George's Hall. A solemn mass is chanted twice a day — and twice a day the murderers bend in prayer beside the bier! The mockery of it! Does God sleep that such things can be?"

The Duchess's narration, correct in the main, as the

historian can testify, set Wilfrid's nerves a-quivering with a variety of emotions. Horror was followed by indignation, and indignation by loathing. The deed itself was black enough in all conscience, but blacker still were the cowardice, the hypocrisy, the lying employed to conceal it.

"In England," he remarked, "these assassins would be swinging. In Russia they are ministers. Truly, Alexander the Amiable merits his name. He is amiable — very — towards his fathers' murderers!"

The Duchess seemed to resent this disparagement of Alexander.

"Consider his position," she answered. "Is he to begin his reign by degrading the men who have put him on the throne? They who slew one Czar may slay another."

"And can a man die better than in the attempt to avenge his father's murder? If fear of the assassin's dagger keeps Alexander from doing an act of justice then have the Russians a Czar, but scarcely a hero."

"You are bold, sir, in the absence of Alexander."

"Nay, I would say the same in his presence."

And the Duchess did not doubt it when she remembered how Wilfrid had faced the fiery Paul — nay, had half-drawn his sword upon him.

Wilfrid ventured at this point to remind the Duchess of an earlier remark of hers.

"You said, I think, that the Empress had a work for me to do?"

"True. The Empress, well knowing your character, appeals to you to do what the boldest in St. Petersburg would shrink from doing, namely, to make known to the world the truth respecting Paul's death."

"I am indeed honoured, but in doing her will I shall be trenching on the Czar's ground. It is his duty, not mine."

"The Czar remains silent from a mistaken sense of honour. Looking upon Paul's death as a regrettable accident, Alexander would deem it a breach of faith on his part were he to denounce those with whom he was equally a conspirator. He had pledged his written word

that the ministers should retain office. That word he will not break. But he must be made to break it. And the Empress sees but one way. There is something greater than even the power of a Czar, and that is, the will of a united people. Why do the ministers conceal their crime? Because they fear the people. Let the millions of Russia learn how Paul came by his end, and there will arise a flood of indignation strong enough to sweep the ministers from power. But that day will not come till a man be found bold enough to proclaim the truth."

"And does the Empress invite *me* to be the avenger of that Czar who, for no fault at all, would have had me knouted to death?"

"Yes, for she judges that Lord Courtenay is too noble to refuse an act of justice to a fallen foe."

"Humph!" said Wilfrid, immensely flattered; "is Alexander a party to this scheme?"

"No. It is of the Empress's own devising."

"She leaves it to an Englishman to teach her son his duty?"

The Duchess winced.

"How hard you are on Alexander!"

He was, and that because he wished to disillusion her of her idea that Alexander was a hero. "Women are all alike," he thought; by "women" meaning the Duchess and Pauline. "A crown dazzles them. A king can do no wrong."

"Has her majesty," he continued aloud, "any plan for me, or am I left to follow my own devices?"

"In view of the peril attendant upon the enterprise — for those who slew a Czar may not hesitate to slay the man who publishes their crime — the Empress has thought of a plan that can be carried out with secrecy, and yet with effect. What you did once, the Empress bids you do again."

The Duchess proceeded to make clear her meaning by words spoken in a subdued key. The communication, whatever its nature, caused Wilfrid's eyes to brighten and his lips to take a smile as of coming triumph. He accepted the office, not so much because justice required

it or the Empress wished it, as because he saw that success would give pleasure to the Duchess.

"You understand, now," continued she, "why the Empress has summoned you to this death-chamber. It is needful that you should see it with your own eyes, and to-morrow would have been too late."

"Not a feature of it has escaped me," said Wilfrid. And, indeed, he was confident that if he should live for a century the aspect of the little bedroom would never fade from his mind.

"Besides the ministers," she continued, "there are others to be made a mark for public hatred."

"Among them being ——?"

"Pauline de Vaucluse."

Wilfrid turned upon her a look of wonder.

"The Baroness was not with the assassins."

"In spirit she was. She was the very soul of the plot. The conspirators, aiming as they thought for a better Government, were in reality dupes, ministering to her selfish and wicked ends."

Wilfrid frowned. Selfish and wicked? He did not like to hear such terms in connection with Pauline, whose character he thought he understood much better than did the Duchess.

"I fail to see what she has personally gained by Paul's death."

"Her reward, so she hopes, is yet to come."

The Duchess, as she spoke, compressed her lips with an air which plainly said that the reward, whatever it might be, would not come if *she* could prevent it.

"I greatly fear," said Wilfrid, taking a decisive stand, "that even were I persuaded that Pauline de Vaucluse was the wickedest of all the conspirators, I could not treat her in the way you suggest."

"Why, you must love her!"

Her tone implied pitying scorn for any one who could be captivated by a Pauline de Vaucluse.

"My sentiment toward the Baroness is not love, but friendship. Caring nothing for Paul's anger she rescued me from the hands of his soldiers. Shall I then requite

her good deed by holding her up to the people's hate? No, I cannot do that, your Highness."

"She ran no risk. It suited her to play the heroine, knowing that Paul was to die that same night. But I speak to deaf ears, I see." And then abruptly changing the subject, she added:—

"Lord Courtenay, the Empress bids you ask a reward for your coming service."

It somewhat piqued Wilfrid to think that the Empress should hold him as one incapable of doing a just and generous deed without hope of payment. She was forgetting that he was an Englishman, and a Courtenay.

"Ah, yes! my reward," he murmured, wondering what answer to make. Then, all in a moment, a romantic and daring idea suggested itself.

"The reward I claim — nay, insist upon — is one that the Empress cannot give. It must come from you."

"From *me*?" she said, in a tone that somehow thrilled Wilfrid to the heart.

"It is that if I succeed in deposing the Ministry, you will give me —"

"What?" as he hesitated.

"A kiss."

Strange that it cost Wilfrid a greater effort to say these two little words than it did to face the fiery Paul.

But the Duchess!

First she drew a sharp breath; then she started back, in her eyes a look of anger so deep that it made Wilfrid almost regret his bold request.

"Do you think because Catharine has reigned that there is no modesty left in Russia?"

"How can I think that, your Highness, when I look upon you?"

"Ask, instead, for fifty thousand roubles; you shall have them."

"I prefer something more precious."

"You — prefer — a — kiss — to — fifty — thousand — roubles!" she said, pausing in surprise between each word.

"If the kiss come from you."

"It shall never come," she said breathlessly.

"Your highness, 'tis yours to refuse; 'tis mine also."

"You mean that you will decline the Empress's wish."

Wilfrid's grim smile implied that he would; and at this the Duchess's face assumed a look of dismay, for she knew Wilfrid to be the only man qualified for the task required of him.

"Why do you ask this — this silly thing?" she faltered.

"That I may return home with the knowledge that I have kissed the fairest lady in Russia."

There was silence for a brief interval, during which the Duchess seemed to become reconciled to the enormity of being kissed.

"And nothing but a kiss will content you?"

"I will add a second condition; you must at the same time tell me your name, your rank, your history, and how it happened that I could save your life, as you say I did, and yet retain no remembrance of the event."

"To gain my ends I must consent to your humour. Thus then do I pledge my word. Rid the Czar of his wicked Ministry, and" — her eyes drooped, and a beautiful colour stole over her cheek — "and . . . you . . . shall . . . take . . . a . . . kiss . . . from . . . me."

"Pardon me. There must be no taking on my part. The kiss must be freely given by you."

"You are a hard taskmaster," she smiled. "Well, it shall be as you wish."



## CHAPTER XVI

### THE FALL OF THE REGICIDES

It was a usage of the Russian Ministry, in 1801 at least, for each member to present himself at the Winter Palace once a week on a stated day for the purpose of reporting on the affairs of his office.

Count Pahlen's hour for meeting the Czar coincided with that of General Benningsen, and hence, on the forenoon of a certain day in early summer, seated in a three-horse car, they were making their way towards St. Petersburg after a night spent at Strelna.

Upon entering the suburbs the two ministers were immediately struck by the unusual number of people abroad. Like other cities St. Petersburg has its artisan class that rises early and works till late. On this particular morning, however, the toilers had apparently taken leave of work, and were standing in knots about the streets and squares.

As the day was not marked in the calendar as a feast, some affair of great moment must have caused them to suspend their labours. They looked, by their grave air and subdued voices, as men look when hearing of the death of a king.

As the Petersburgers caught sight of the carriage, their whisperings ceased, and they eyed the ministers with an air that sent misgiving to the heart of the timid Pahlen; for, if ever hatred was seen in the eyes of men, it was seen in the eyes of the Petersburgers that morning.

On the previous day their appearance in public had elicited cheers and other tokens of good-will. Now all was changed; in one night they seemed to have toppled from the height of their popularity.

Interpreting this in his own way, Pahlen concluded that in his absence some ill news must have reached the city; that devil of a Nelson—he was known to be in the Baltic—had perhaps been bombarding Revel.

When Pahlen turned into the Nevski Prospekt, he met with a fresh shock. As high minister of the Czar, he might surely look for recognition and respect from the fashionable and wealthy crowd, whose daily habit it was to drive to and fro along that grand thoroughfare. But no!

A boyar of princely rank, seated in a splendid equipage, drew near. He was well known to Pahlen, who waved his hand in greeting. Looking straight before him, the boyar drove past, altogether ignoring the presence of the chancellor and the general.

This disdainful indifference towards men with whom lay the power of banishment to Siberia, kindled the anger of the two ministers, anger that increased as they continued their way.

They smiled at this fair lady; they saluted that grandee, but met with no recognition whatever. It was clear that the *élite* of St. Petersburg had made up its mind to ignore them. Why?

Fallen ministers have no friends—in Russia. Was it possible that the Czar had made up his mind to dismiss them, and that his determination had somehow become known to the people?

Glancing ahead Benningsen saw coming along the Prospekt a mounted colonel of his own regiment.

“Muscovitz,” muttered he, fingering his sabre. “Let the fellow fail to salute, and I’ll run him through.”

However, Colonel Muscovitz in passing brought a hand up to his helmet, though in a somewhat perfunctory manner.

“Halt!” yelled Benningsen; and the colonel, with a somewhat queer look, reined in his steed.

“Are we still ministers of the Czar?”

“I have heard of nothing to the contrary, General.”

“Then will you tell me what has happened during the past twenty-four hours to cause everybody in St. Petersburg to look as black as the devil?”

"Pardon, General; I carry a message from the Czar, and may not tarry in his service. The answer to your question is to be seen at the Orphan Asylum."

So saying, Muscovitz saluted with the same indifferent air as before and rode off quickly, much as if it were a disgrace to be seen talking with the two ministers.

The Orphan Asylum? The two looked inquiringly at each other. The edifice in question was a foundation of the ex-Empress Mary, and the ex-Empress Mary, as both well knew, had good reason for hating the existing Ministry.

"Now, what devilry has that old bedlam been up to?" said Benningsen. "Drive to the Orphan Asylum," he cried, turning to the coachman.

"Better not," murmured Pahlen. "A crowd may be there, and I like not the people's looks this morning. They would do us mischief if they dared. Besides, the Czar awaits us."

But Benningsen scoffed at the other's fears, and swore he would go there though the place should contain ten thousand devils.

Arrived within sight of the building, they found the space fronting it filled with a vast throng, drawn mainly from the lower orders, a throng jostling, excited, garrulous. Women and children were there, as well as men, all animated apparently with the one object of pushing their way to the fore, in order to obtain a glimpse of something exposed to view behind the railings that guarded the façade of the Orphan Asylum. Everybody in the crowd was talking at once, making it impossible for the ministers to gather anything intelligible. The hubbub was loudest in front where those in full enjoyment of the view clung to the railings, refusing to give place to their fellows in the rear.

"A nice disorderly mob!" growled Benningsen, standing up in the carriage and surveying the crowd as it swayed to and fro like waves of the sea. "Where is the Governor of the city or the Chief of the Police? Asleep?"

"If the object behind those railings be to our hurt,

Baranoff and his brother will not be over-eager to disperse the throng."

Pahlen's suspicion was well founded. The Governor of the city and the Chief of the Police, having a foreknowledge of what was to take place, had arranged that the people were not to be interfered with.

At this point a man on the outskirts of the crowd suddenly caught sight of the two ministers.

"See, see! — Pahlen and Benningsen," he cried excitedly, extending his forefinger towards them.

Those beside the speaker turned, and, observing at whom he pointed, took up the cry —

"Pahlen and Benningsen!"

There was a wild rush of feet over the pavement, and before the terrified driver could set his steeds in motion the carriage was surrounded by a crowd of fierce-eyed men. Pahlen, his cheeks blanched, shrank back. Benningsen, familiar with the rush of bayonets on the battlefield, lost nothing of his presence of mind.

Whipping out a brace of pistols, he pointed them, the one to the right, the other to the left.

"I'll make a dead man of the first that comes within a yard of the car."

Those advancing with a fell purpose instantly stopped short, and strove to stem the pressure in their rear. They knew that, happen to him what might, Benningsen would keep his word. Had he not cut down a soldier in the very teeth of a hostile regiment?

Benningsen took advantage of the momentary lull to single out with his eye a young man whose dress showed him to be a student of the university, a youth distinguished likewise from the rest of the crowd by his bold, not to say defiant, bearing.

"Hearken, sirrah, your name?"

"Nikon, son of Andreas."

"Well, Nikon son of Andreas, you seem a more sensible sort of fellow than those around you. Just tell us in a few words to what all this excitement is due?"

"To the picture."

"What picture?"

"The picture placed at dawn before the Orphan

Asylum by command of the Empress Mary. Does that picture tell the truth?" he added with a threatening look.

"How the devil should I know when I haven't seen it."

"Come and see it then," said the student.

This was deemed a good idea by the crowd, who seemed to have taken fresh courage from the student's bold attitude.

"Yes, yes!" they cried. "Bring them face to face with it. Show them their wickedness."

The student gave the ministers no alternative. Forgetting or ignoring Benningsen's threat to shoot, he took hold of the horses by the bridle, turned their heads in the direction of the asylum, and motioned the bystanders aside with his hand, crying, "Way there for Pahlen and Benningsen."

The voice and gesture of the student caused the crowd to open a path, and thus the ministers passed slowly through a lane of people, who received them with a running fire of threats.

"Down with the regicides!"

"Death to the murderers of the Czar!"

"The liars who told us that Paul died of apoplexy!"

"Pull Benningsen from the car!"

"Stamp on his mouth, as he stamped on Paul's!"

And but for the dissuasive words of the student the crowd would have made good their threats.

The student, having arrived at the railings that guarded the front of the Orphan Asylum, halted and cried —

"Behold your work!"

Pahlen gave a strange gasp. Benningsen looked on with an air of scornful indifference.

If the Ministry had hoped their crime would never be revealed to the public, that hope was now gone. For there, exposed to view behind the railings, was an expanse of canvas, twenty feet by ten, painted with a tableau, vivid and grim in its realism. It represented the interior of a dimly-lit bed-chamber with furnishings of the simplest. Within this chamber were human fig-

ures, drawn to life-size, their faces limned with a fidelity that made them instantly recognisable. Benningsen, gazing, saw himself standing with the heel of his boot planted upon the mouth of a struggling figure held down by four grim-faced men, two of whom were drawing the fatal noose around the throat of their victim.

The artist had dealt fairly with Prince Ouvaroff, who was making an attempt to stay the deed. Count Pahlen, more scrupulous, or more craven, than his agents, was represented as standing outside the chamber listening at the partly-opened door, at his feet the wounded body of the faithful Voronetz.

The helplessness of the victim, and the brutal strength of the assassins, formed a contrast that would have moved the least emotional to a sense of horror, pity, and indignation; and, as if to drive home the moral of the picture, there was written at its foot, in Russian, what were erroneously supposed by the crowd to be Paul's last words, words well adapted to quicken the blood of the coldest Muscovite —

“I LOOK TO MY PEOPLE TO AVENGE ME!”

Whatever weakening of the sentiment may take place in the twentieth century, certain it is that in the early part of the nineteenth the feeling towards the Czar was a sort of religion with the Muscovites of the lower classes. Rule he never so ill, still a Czar *was* a Czar and his murder the greatest of crimes. So at least the crowd seemed to think, if their looks and words meant anything.

“This is true,” said the student, pointing to the picture, “for the good Empress would never put forth a lie. Ye are murderers! And what saith Holy Writ of such? ‘Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.’”

“It seems, then, that this is a court of justice,” said Benningsen.

He could afford to sneer, for he saw at that moment what the other apparently did not see.

“It is an assembly of the people, who adjudge you

both to be worthy of death. You shall be hanged from these railings."

"Lying prophet!" said Benningsen with a sardonic grin. "Look there!"

"The soldiers! the soldiers!" was the cry that suddenly rose from all sides.

And the student, looking in the direction indicated by Benningsen, saw glinting over the heads of the people the plumed helmets of a posse of cavalry, who, laying about them with the flat of their sabres, were endeavouring to open a way to the spot where the ministers were.

There was a moment of irresolution on the part of the crowd, and then, with a howl, they rushed at the carriage.

Well was it for Benningsen that disguised police existed, otherwise he would have made a tragic ending then and there.

It so happened, however, that a number of these secret agents of the Government had been slowly edging their way to the front, with the result that the crowd suddenly found the carriage girt by a ring of men, armed with batons and pistols, who, in the quickness of their appearing, seemed to have sprung from the ground. Their resolute attitude cowed the mob as if by magic, and as the trampling of horse-hoofs and the waving of sabres were now close at hand, to be far from the ministers and not near them, now became the object of the crowd.

Benningsen made no attempt at taking reprisals. At a word from him the cavalry closed in order round the carriage, and, escorted thus, the two ministers made their way to the Winter Palace.

Here, in the ante-chamber where it was their custom to await the pleasure of the Emperor, they found the rest of the ministers assembled, Count Baranoff alone excepted, a very significant exception. They had all received a special summons to attend the Imperial presence, and were looking somewhat downcast, an aspect due to the belief that the coming interview would end in their dismissal.

From the vast crowd that had gathered in front of the palace there came with regular iteration, the cry of

“Down with the Ministry!” — a cry plainly heard by those within the ante-chamber.

“Alexander will throw us to the wolves to save himself,” said Plato Zuboff, an old lover of Catharine’s, and one of the two actual assassins that had drawn the fatal sash around the throat of her son Paul.

“Think you that he will listen to the cry of the *canaille*?” said Pahlen. “That were to show himself a weakling — to set a premium upon future disorder.”

“But the intellectuals, too, are clamouring for our downfall,” answered Zuboff. “What! have you not seen to-day’s issue of the *Journal de Petersbourg*? Read that.”

And producing a copy of the newspaper he directed Pahlen’s attention to a column containing an article to the effect that the continuance in office of the regicidal ministry was a public scandal, certain to alienate the sympathies of the European chancelleries. In any other country but Russia, concluded the writer, with a boldness rarely found in the Muscovite press, the ministers would now be on their trial for murder.

“What was the censor doing,” frowned Pahlen, “to let language like this go forth to the world?”

“Doing! The will of the Empress Mary,” replied Zuboff, in a lower tone, glancing, as he spoke, at the door of the presence chamber, where, as he knew, the ex-Czarina was sitting in conference with her son Alexander. “Her one aim is to send us to the gibbet. Since Paul’s death she has never ceased intriguing against us. The picture is her latest weapon. Before daybreak this morning her hirelings were traversing the city with the cry, ‘Go, see the picture at the Orphan Asylum.’ And when the Black People had seen, and were cursing us, then her agents raised the further cry, ‘To the Winter Palace, and shout for the downfall of the Ministry.’ You hear them singing her tune.”

“And when you remember,” chimed in another minister, “who the Governor of the city is, and who is the Chief of the Police, you can understand why the people have been allowed to march at will through the streets.”



"Then the hand of Baranoff is in all this," said Pahlen, biting his nails.

"Without doubt," returned the other. "The picture-idea emanated from him, and was eagerly adopted by the Empress. We should have made him a partner in the abdication-plot. We thought to exclude him from the Ministry; it is he who is excluding us. To-day Baranoff triumphs all along the line. We go; he remains."

As the speaker ended, the chamberlain appeared to summon them to the Czar's presence.

Entering the chamber the ministers stood in a respectful semi-circle at a little distance from Alexander, who was seated at a table. Beside him was his mother, the ex-Empress Mary, whose presence was a new feature at ministerial meetings. She scarcely deserved the disrespectful term "beldam," applied to her by Benningsen, for she had not yet reached her forty-second year, and still retained much of the magnificent beauty of her youthful days.

Alexander's face wore a troubled look; it was evident that he and his mother had been divided upon some question, and her barely suppressed smile of triumph showed in whose favour the dispute had ended.

For a few moments the Emperor did not speak. His head was turned to a large window that commanded a view of the vast crowd outside, whose voices had all joined in singing the national anthem.

The Czar's eyes kindled as he listened. His people were with him — whom, then, should he fear?

"'Tis a loyal crowd," said the Empress-mother.

"Loyalty to the Czar," broke in Pahlen, "should also include loyalty to the ministers appointed by him. I make request, Sire, that a certain picture be withdrawn from the front of the Orphan Asylum."

"For what reason?" said the Empress. "Does it not tell the truth?"

"It has made us ministers odious in the eyes of the people. They have attempted our life."

"Terrible!" said the Empress. "One may kill a Czar, but when it comes to killing a minister —"

She paused, as if unable to express in words the enormity of such a deed.

"But," continued she, "this is a matter over which the Czar hath no jurisdiction. The Orphan Asylum is my own private property, and if I choose to decorate its exterior with a historic picture, who shall say me nay?"

"My mother speaks truly," said Alexander. "If you would have the picture withdrawn, it is to her you must address your persuasions."

"You will choose, Sire," said Pahlen, "between the removal of the picture or the resignation of your chancellor."

The Empress laughed contemptuously.

"Chancellors are cheap enough!"

The singing of the national anthem, having now come to an end, was superseded by various cries, the most frequent being, "Down with the Ministry!"

"The voice of the people is the voice of God," said the Empress. "Go forth! Show yourself! Give them the answer they desire. Tell them that Czar and justice are the same word."

Her authority over the Emperor was great, and she seemed pleased that the ministers should see it.

He rose, walked to a window and, opening it, stepped out upon the balcony. No sooner was he seen than the air rang with cries of greeting.

The lifting of the Czar's hand was like the lifting of a magic wand. An instant hush fell upon the crowd.

"Good-day, my children."

Like a roar of thunder came the answer —

"Good-day, Little Father!"

"What is your will with me?"

Almost before the words had left the Czar's lips a man, evidently desirous of shaping the people's answer, cried —

"Justice on the regicides!"

The cry was immediately taken up; it rolled from mouth to mouth through the length and breadth of the crowd, and was repeated again and again —

"Justice on the regicides!"

Then, as if surprised by their own boldness, the crowd

became quiet again, waiting for the Czar's answer. Would he grant the request thus irregularly made?

Alexander hesitated for a moment, as if reflecting, and then replied:—

“Depart quietly to your homes. The Czar will do justice.”

With simple and touching faith the crowd accepted this assurance of the Imperial tribune.

“The Little Father will punish the murderers! Hourra! Hourra! Now let us go. He will not let his word fall to the ground.”

Alexander, believing that his own withdrawal would accelerate the departure of the crowd, turned and entered the council-chamber.

He seemed to have derived fresh courage from this brief interview with his people. His air of restraint had vanished; he spoke with authority and dignity.

“*Messieurs les Ministres*, it must ever be the aim of a ruler to hold by the good-will of his subjects. You see for yourselves that I shall forfeit that good-will by retaining you in office. It behoves me, therefore, for the sake of public peace, to dispense with your services. Perhaps,” he continued, as if desirous of softening the humiliation of this dismissal, “perhaps, at some future day—it may be—that——”

Here he paused, not willing to make a rash promise.

“In thus dismissing us,” said Pahlen, “you break your written pledge.”

“Not so. My pledge to retain you in office was made dependent upon my father's deposition. But you took from him not his crown only, but his life. As you have broken faith with me, I count it no wrong to break faith with you. Gentlemen, you will retire from the city to your country seats.”

“No greater punishment than *that?*” said the Empress.

“And there await my further pleasure,” Alexander added.

The discomfited ministers withdrew.

“The slave of his mother,” sneered Benningsen.

"Our power is over. Dismissal to-day; to-morrow Siberia, if that old hag has her way."

The ministers gone, Alexander turned a gratified face upon the Empress.

"Mother, you have done well," he said, stooping to kiss her. "Thanks to a picture I enjoy a sense of freedom unknown before. Who is the artist that has done us such good service?"

"The Englishman, Lord Courtenay."

The Czar's face fell. His new-found pleasure vanished as he heard that name.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It may interest those readers, unversed in Russian history, to know that the murder of Paul took place in a manner differing little from that described in Chap. XV., and that the fact, concealed at first from the public, was made known by means of a picture painted by the command of the Empress Mary. The downfall of the Pahlen Ministry immediately followed.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A VOW TO SLAY!

ON the day following the dismissal of the Pahlen Ministry Wilfrid received a visit at his hotel from Pauline; a welcome visit, for he was not so foolishly enamoured of the Grand Duchess as to be altogether insensible to the charms of other fair ladies, and Pauline with her bright smile looked very charming indeed at that moment.

"I have been on a two days' visit to Peterhof," said she, "and returned only this morning to find all the city talking about you and your pictorial feat. I offer you my congratulations. You are a maker of history," she continued admiringly. "*Ma foi!* if some of the ladies of St. Petersburg could only see me now! How they would envy me my friendship with *le brav' Anglais!*"

Wilfrid's mind turned to the one lady. Would *she* feel envy, he wondered, could she have seen Pauline at this moment in confidential chat with him?

"Now, at last," continued Pauline, "I have learned why for three months you have lived an unsocial life, working mysteriously in an attic at the top of the hotel, any why, whenever I have called, you have looked cross at my coming, and glad of my going; and ——"

"I assure you, Baroness," began Wilfrid, laughing, "that ——"

"Hush!" said Pauline, raising her forefinger playfully. "Don't say it wasn't so. I am not blaming you. You were engaged on a noble work."

Naturally Pauline was all curiosity to know whence he had learned the true account of Paul's death. Wilfrid enlightened her; but, desirous of keeping his love-story a secret, he referred to the Empress's intermediary as

“a lady whose name I do not know, because she declined to give it” — herein stating nothing but what was true.

“The Empress Mary,” he explained, “was very desirous that I should repeat the feat done by me at Paris. There, though my paint-brush failed in upsetting a government, it might succeed here in upsetting a ministry; and, you see, it has done so.”

“But how came you to hit off the likenesses so well, for I am told the faces are perfect portraits?”

“That’s easily explained. You know that for the space of a fortnight Paul’s body lay in state in St. George’s Hall. Twice a day the Court and the ministers heard mass beside the bier. By favour of the Empress I was provided with a coign of vantage where, unobserved, I could take surreptitious sketches of the ministers, to be reproduced on canvas. When the picture was finished, I placed, by preconcerted arrangement, a blue lamp in my attic window, and that same night the picture was fetched away by two men. Now you know the whole story,” he said in conclusion. “My patroness, the Empress, I have never seen; and, as for her fair intermediary, I have seen her but once only, namely on that strange night in the Michaelhof.”

“But,” objected Pauline, “if you attended the masses held in St. George’s Hall, you must have seen the Empress Mary every day.”

“Doubtless, and the young Czarina as well, and the Imperial Duchesses. But I don’t call it seeing a woman when her face is covered with a mourning veil.”

In truth, Wilfrid, from his secret place of espial, had breathed anything but a blessing upon the heavy veils worn by the Court ladies on the occasion in question, since the wearing of them prevented him from identifying the mysterious Duchess who, he doubted not, formed one of the group.

“And Ouvaroff, you say, is Paul’s son?” remarked Pauline. “A natural son, of course? It was long suspected — the likeness between the two was so remarkable — but Ouvaroff himself appears to have been almost the last to learn it, and that at a dreadful moment. Poor Ouvaroff! No wonder he looked so ghastly and wild

next morning! Do you know he has not been seen since that day?"

"A pity that, for there was a matter I would fain discuss with him," said Wilfrid, thinking of the night at the Silver Birch.

"No one knows where he is. Some say that in penitence he has turned monk." And then, coming back to the subject of the picture again, she continued, "And you didn't fear to set your name to the picture?"

"Fear! Do you take me for Alexander?"

Pauline thought it prudent to ignore this reflection upon her hero. She could not help inwardly acknowledging that while Alexander had walked in darkness, assenting to a course of deceit in the matter of his father's death, Wilfrid, though well aware that grim fortresses and Siberian mines awaited those who should give umbrage to ministers, had not shrunk from proclaiming the truth in the light of day.

"Three months' toil!" she said, her eyes round with wonder. "Did you do all this without hope of reward? from a mere abstract love of justice?"

"No—o! not exactly. I am to receive a sort of—of *douceur*," said Wilfrid. "Very much *douce*," he added, with a smile. "It's nature? Your pardon, Baroness. You shall know, but not yet. After it has been received."

Pauline thought Wilfrid was becoming very mysterious all at once. It was hard for her to put a curb upon her curiosity. After a short pause she murmured with a glad light in her eyes:—

"Well, thanks to you, Benningsen and Pahlen have had to go."

"True," grumbled Wilfrid, "but it's rather mortifying to find that one result of my work is to confirm in office the very man whose confusion both you and I desire to see. Count Baranoff, having had no part in Paul's murder, is not included in the list of disgraced ministers, and still retains his post."

"But not for long," replied Pauline. "His power is on the wane. His counsels are already being ignored by the Czar."

"In what way?"

"As regards the war with England. What! you do not know? Ah! I am forgetting. The story is not in the newspapers, since our editors must publish only what is pleasing. Of course, living at an Embassy, I often learn matters unknown to the outside public. Well, here's a secret for you. Our Russian admiral, knowing himself to be no match for the hero of the Nile, has declined an engagement, and is coming fast to Cronstadt. 'Tis the old story; leaky ships, cracked cannon, and an unpaid crew, sullen to the verge of mutiny. The result of this flight is to place all the towns on the Finland Gulf at the mercy of the English guns. Nay, the very gate of the city, Cronstadt itself, is liable to bombardment. Hence, let Baranoff protest as he may, the Czar is bent on making peace. So magnificently sure were your Government that victory would crown their arms, that along with their fleet they sent an envoy with plenipotentiary power to arrange the terms of a treaty. That envoy will arrive at St. Petersburg in the course of a few days. Should peace be established, and there is little doubt that it will be, the envoy remains here in the character of British Ambassador."

"Who is this envoy?"

"Lord St. Helens. What! you know him?" asked Pauline, observing Wilfrid's peculiar smile.

"My uncle."

"Your uncle?" she repeated, incredulously.

"My mother's brother. Baroness, you are indeed the bearer of good news."

The uncle in question was one who held, among other views, that the only business worthy of an English peer is the study of diplomacy; and hence he had often growled at his nephew's taste for painting and swordsmanship.

It would be pleasant now to show the old gentleman that his nephew's swordsmanship had defeated the policy of Baranoff at Berlin, while a painting had largely contributed to the downfall of a Russian Ministry. And both these events within the space of six months! Could the most accomplished diplomatist have done more in the time?



"With the coming peace," said Pauline, "the first half of my work is accomplished: Czar and Consul fight side by side no more. I call it my work, because it is mine. If you have wrecked the Czar's Ministry, I have had the chief hand in shaping his war-policy. How? Ah! that is my secret," she continued, with a peculiar smile. "The second and more difficult part of my task now remains — namely, to set the Czar in arms against Napoleon."

Wilfrid longed to give her a severe lecture, but refrained, convinced of its uselessness. It was clear from her words that she was still pursuing her course of working in secret against her father's policy, an undaughterly action on her part, and one with which Wilfrid could not sympathise.

"But a truce to politics!" exclaimed Pauline. "Have you received your ticket yet from Prince Sumaroff?"

"I have yet to learn who that grandee is."

"Here's ignorance, forsooth, from a three months' resident in St. Petersburg! Why, Prince Sumaroff's palace and gardens by the Nevka are one of the sights of St. Petersburg. A fortnight from to-day he gives a fancy dress ball, to which you are certain to be invited, by reason of your rank."

"How so?"

"The Prince's aim is to gather to the ball every titled personage in St. Petersburg, whether native or foreign, ranking from baron upwards. 'I am perhaps prejudiced,' he is credited with saying, 'but for me, mankind begins with the rank of baron.' So, you see, the ball is to consist of the *crème de la crème* of Society. To add to its splendour, Alexander himself and the young Czarina have consented to be present."

"And the Court ladies?"

Pauline replied in the affirmative, wondering at the quickness with which Wilfrid put the question. Then divining the cause, she added with a smile —

"So, possibly, you may meet your fair *incognita* there."

This was the hope that had just entered Wilfrid's mind. Since the Duchess was one of the Court ladies,

what more likely than that she would be present at this fête in company with the Czarina? What woman, especially a Russian woman, can resist the attraction of a dance? Now that the Pahlen Ministry had fallen, it would be a matter of honour with her to redeem her word by bestowing upon him the promised kiss; and since every guest must be masked, such disguise would enable him to approach the Duchess without attracting attention or creating suspicion.

To this fête, then, it behoved him to go, and next day he received a ticket of invitation.

At nightfall there came something still more agreeable, in the shape of a visit from the blind Alexis Voronetz, who brought with him a pretty blue scarf embroidered with silver.

“Wear this at the masquerade.”

And without any more words he withdrew, ignoring Wilfrid's request for an explanation, though, in truth, one was scarcely required. From whom did this favour come, if not from the Duchess? It was a proof that she intended to be present at the approaching fête, and was desirous of fixing some token upon Wilfrid to enable her to distinguish him from among the crowd of masked dancers.

Thirteen days yet before he would meet her! How was he to live through them all?

The first four, measured by Wilfrid's feelings, seemed more like four months: on the fifth, however, came a welcome diversion in the arrival of Lord St. Helens, the British plenipotentiary, sent to consider the peace proposals of the Czar.

There was assigned to him and his suite a stately mansion on the Nevski Prospekt, at the point where it is crossed by the Fontanka Canal.

Wilfrid lost no time in calling upon the old gentleman, who was delighted to see his nephew, and proud likewise of his late achievements in the political arena.

“Ah! my boy,” said he, “since you can do great things in an unofficial capacity, what would you do as a diplomatist?”

“Much less,” replied Wilfrid drily.

Lord St. Helens had frequent interviews with Count Panine, the new chancellor of the Empire, and from each interview he returned more hopeful. He condescended now and again to favour Wilfrid, under the seal of secrecy, with the course taken by the negotiations.

"Peace is agreed to," he remarked, upon the seventh day after his arrival. "Nelson will be disappointed at having to take his ships home again. The Russians think so much of Cronstadt that naturally our admiral is burning to show that their much-vaunted fortress is not impregnable. Its capture would be the crowning-piece of his life."

But a man in love has no sense of historic perspective. Living in a pleasant day-dream Wilfrid paid little attention to his uncle's political remarks. A single golden hair from the head of the Duchess had more interest for him than the departure of the British fleet from Revel. It was often in his mind to tell his uncle the story of the Duchess, but yet somehow he forbore. Supposing, in spite of the diplomatic caution upon which he prided himself, Lord St. Helens should, through some inadvertence, let fall a remark concerning her in the presence of any of the Czar's ministers, she might receive from Court circles a supervision not at all agreeable to her. Her going to the masquerade, for example, might be stopped.

"Two days more," he thought, "and from her own lips I shall hear her name and story. I shall know then whether the case warrants the taking of my uncle into confidence."

On the morning of the day fixed for the masquerade Wilfrid, calling upon his uncle, found the latter looking so grave that he thought at first the peace-proposals must have fallen through. He soon found that the envoy's gravity was due to a very different cause.

"Is your swordsmanship as good as ever?"

"I shall be happy to meet the man that questions it," replied Wilfrid.

"You are likely to do so. Have you seen Prince Ouvaroff since you came to St. Petersburg?"

"Once, and that for a moment only, on the morning of

'Alexander's accession. The Prince has not been seen since that day. Taken to a monastic life, some say."

"Nothing of the sort. He has been living quietly at his country seat in company with two or three of the best fencing-masters in Europe. During the past three months he has spent the greater part of every day in nothing but sword-practice. Yesterday he returned to St. Petersburg."

"With what object?"

"To kill you."

Wilfrid's smile implied that the Prince was welcome to try.

"He evidently imagines he has some grievance against you. I don't ask for confidences, but I suppose some woman is the cause of it all?"

"It's probable. He thinks that — but no matter what he thinks," muttered Wilfrid, with a dark frown, as he recalled the night at the Silver Birch. If Ouvaroff could believe *that* of the Duchess, there would be a pleasure in slaying him.

"Well," continued Lord St. Helens, "Ouvaroff now considers himself sufficiently skilled in his art, and it's his intention to be present at this masquerade with the object of forcing a quarrel upon you."

"You seem pretty well versed in his movements."

"I have learned all this from a friendly minister, whose name I am not at liberty to disclose. He was not aware that you are my nephew, and referred to you as that eccentric Englishman, Lord Courtenay. He seems to have a kindly feeling towards you, for he suggested to me that to avoid a possible scandal, it might be as well if I were to exert my influence in persuading you to leave St. Petersburg secretly."

"'Twas very kind of him! And your answer?"

"Can you not guess it? — 'Our house does not breed cowards, Monsieur le Comte. It is not our fashion to run away from any man. My nephew has no quarrel with Ouvaroff, but if Ouvaroff be bent upon forcing a quarrel with him, he'll find he has the devil to deal with.'"

"Precisely my sentiments," commented Wilfrid.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE MASQUERADE

THE night, long-looked for, had come, and Wilfrid, throwing a cloak over his fancy costume, was driven off in a covered carriage to the French Embassy, in fulfilment of a promise to escort Pauline to the masquerade.

While waiting for her in the entrance hall he was somewhat struck by the oddity of the situation that he, the nephew of Great Britain's representative, should be awaiting the daughter of one who stood for a power hostile to Great Britain, a thought quickly cut short by the entering of Pauline, fresh from the hands of her maid.

Naturally the first thing each did was to look at the dress of the other.

Pauline showed over Wilfrid's costume the simple delight of a schoolgirl. And in truth he presented a majestic figure, equipped, as he was, in a lofty silver helmet with silver wings, a corselet of silver mail, a rich baldric, a horn, a sword, and all the accompaniments of a Norse warrior; his look and bearing gave proof of his descent: he was the very ideal of a Viking chief.

Pauline was moved with a thrill of pride at having for her escort one so handsome in person and dress as Wilfrid, while he in turn felt a similar pleasure as he viewed Pauline's graceful and stately figure. She was dressed to represent Night, in a dainty robe of darkest blue glittering with stars, a silver crescent gleaming in her raven hair.

Conscious of Wilfrid's look of admiration Pauline coloured with secret pleasure, becoming somewhat pale again as she noticed his eyes resting upon the figure of an Imperial crown embroidered upon her sleeve.

“A secret token by which you are to be known to some favoured one?”

Her smiling assent gave Wilfrid a momentary pang of jealousy, a feeling strange and illogical; for, seeing that he had his own lady to meet, what did Pauline's doings matter to him?

“I am as you are,” said she, touching the scarf upon his left arm. “That is not worn without a purpose?”

Offering his arm Wilfrid escorted her to the carriage, and they drove off to the masquerade.

On the northern side of that river-arm known as the Great Nevka, and fronting the Aptekarski Island, there now stands a long line of Government buildings, whose site in the opening years of the nineteenth century was occupied by the Sumaroff Palace and its beautiful gardens, gardens ample enough to furnish a camping ground for all the Czar's armies.

On this particular night, a warm lovely night in July, the halls and gardens of the palace were gay with a throng of picturesquely-clad masqueraders, drawn from the noblest blood in the land.

Some good people had affected to be scandalised at the holding of such a fête, with Paul but four months dead. Their criticisms vanished, however, when it became known that Prince Sumaroff had not only obtained Alexander's sanction for the fête, but a promise also that the Imperial family itself would be present.

“There is a time to mourn and a time to dance,” had been the Emperor's remark — so it was said — and the time for mourning might be considered as fairly past.

On arriving at the palace Wilfrid and Pauline, both closely masked, entered the reception room, where their cards were scrutinised by liveried officials, after which the two were free to go whither they would. Their steps were immediately directed to the famous ballroom, known as the Hall of Mirrors, the glory of the Sumaroff Palace. Crystal columns sustained the roof of this hall, a hall that seemed far more spacious than its actual size, due to the fact that its walls consisted of mirrors, whose multiplying reflections created the illusion of endless vistas of twinkling lights and swaying dancers. Rare

flowers glowing from porphyry vases perfumed the air with their fragrance. Here and there were fountains that diffused a refreshing coolness around. The tall windows, ranged along a colonnaded wall, were left open to the night, revealing the moonlit gardens, fair with marble terraces and statuary, gleaming white amid the dark foliage.

Wilfrid, familiar as he was with the various capitals of Europe, had seen nothing to rival the splendour of this ballroom, which, filled as it was with a crowd of masqueraders, all dressed in fanciful costumes, made a picture full of colour, brilliance, and movement.

The gigantic bronze chandelier, hanging from the middle of the ceiling was a superb work of art, radiant as a sun, a mass of flowers and foliage, and — what? Wilfrid turned his ear to listen more attentively: yes, from it came the orchestral music that regulated the steps of the dancers. The chandelier was large enough both to hold and to hide the musicians!

"Big as it is," said Pauline, "the one in the Hermitage is bigger."

The dance — it was the first of the night — had come to an end, and while a few couples had seated themselves, the greater number were slowly promenading around the ballroom. As they passed by in gay talk Wilfrid scanned the shape of each fair masker, and tried to catch the sound of her voice in the hope that he might hear the Duchess speaking; nor did he neglect to hold his arm in such a position that his lady's favour might be clearly seen.

Now, during this promenading, Wilfrid's attention was struck by a tall gentleman — he was more than six feet high — clad in the glittering dress of a Crusader. This individual, while going by, fixed a keen glance both upon Pauline and Wilfrid. Through the holes of his mask a pair of steely blue eyes seemed to flash anger; the next moment their owner had passed by.

"Prince Ouvaroff, or my name isn't Courtenay," murmured Wilfrid.

"Which is Ouvaroff?" asked Pauline.

"He in the dress of a Crusader," replied Wilfrid, indicating the receding figure.

"Yes, that is Ouvaroff."

She spoke with a sort of hesitancy that gave Wilfrid the impression that while she herself did not really believe that it *was* Ouvaroff, she was desirous that Wilfrid should! An odd impression, certainly, but there it was.

The music, suspended after the first dance, now started again. Eager as Wilfrid was to begin his search for the Duchess, he nevertheless realised that it would be unmannerly to escort Pauline to the ball without offering to tread one measure at least with her.

"The second dance is beginning. It is a waltz. Shall we ——"

Pauline's manner was odd, not to say perplexing. She hesitated; nay, Wilfrid fancied he could detect a look of fear in her eyes; then she gave a grateful smile, and the next moment to the sound of sweetest melody she was floating around in the dreamy mazes of a waltz, the very dance in which Wilfrid had no superior.

The waltz is the most voluptuous of dances, and Pauline drank fully of its charms. She had no need to look where she was going. Wilfrid's touch, strong yet tender, steered her gracefully and lightly through the moving throng. The ballroom, the lights, the dancers — all seemed to vanish. She and Wilfrid were the sole beings in a Paradise of their own. With her lips parted into an unconscious smile she yielded herself to the delicious spell of intoxication; her eyes half-closed, she rested on his arm, swaying to and fro on a billowy sea of pleasure. Could her wish at that moment have had its fulfilment this dance would have lasted for ever.

Wilfrid, to his shame be it said, felt little of this fascination; his pulse beat, perhaps, two or three above the normal; no more. His attention to Pauline was more apparent than real; his mind was dwelling on the Duchess, and whenever any lady, golden-haired and blue-eyed, floated past, she was sure to receive from him a scrutinising glance.

Then came a sudden surprise.

"*Baroness!*"



The word, though but faintly whispered, was nevertheless heard not only by the person for whose ear it was intended, but also by Wilfrid. The voice was a man's, and it was marked, so Wilfrid thought, by an intonation expressive of reproach at her evident pleasure in the waltz.

Wilfrid looked around, curious to discover who had been the speaker. Among the masked forms circling about them was that very Crusader whom he half-suspected to be Ouvaroff. Doubtless it was he who had spoken; at any rate, the voice was not unlike that of the Prince.

..He glanced at his partner, but Pauline, though conscious that Wilfrid had heard the name, made no remark, and Wilfrid, responsive to her mood, refrained from comment. It seemed, however, a safe conclusion to draw that the speaker, whether Ouvaroff or not, was the man in whom Pauline was interested, and that he had recognised her by the sign upon her sleeve.

The name had roused Pauline from her dreamy state; she continued dancing, but its pleasure was gone. The little hand within his own was trembling very much. The waltz over, he led her to a seat.

"I will release you now; it is time you looked for — for *her!*" said Pauline, indicating the scarf upon his arm. "Please, go," she added, as he hesitated.

There was something odd in her manner, a sort of defying and scorning of herself, and yet withal a touch of sadness in her voice, as though, in spite of her command, she was reluctant to part from him.

"Farewell, Baroness — for a time," said Wilfrid, and with a bow he turned away, leaving her seated upon a lounge.

He did not at once quit the ballroom, but, making his way to one of the open windows that gave egress to the gardens, stood there in a somewhat conspicuous position, his embroidered favour clearly showing, to the end that if the Duchess should be in the ballroom, it might certify her of his presence.

While standing there he could not help wondering what had caused Pauline to take so strange an interest

in Ouvaroff—that is, supposing the Crusader to *be* Ouvaroff. What was implied by his whispered word, “Baroness!” so meaningly emphasised? Reproach that she should be found dancing with one so dishonourable as Wilfrid? Had he seen Pauline recently and given her *his* version of the affair at the Silver Birch, openly avowing that he would take vengeance upon Wilfrid? Was Pauline going to use her influence over Ouvaroff with the object of getting him to desist from the attempt? If so, she had chosen a strange time and a strange place for endeavours that, however well-meant on her part, would not be very acceptable to Wilfrid, who much preferred to punish with a little blood-letting the presumed traducer of the fair and innocent Duchess.

From time to time he turned his eyes in the direction of Pauline, who, seated where he had left her, seemed intent only on watching him.

Then it suddenly struck him that, so long as he stood there, Pauline would not be approached by Ouvaroff. Not wishing, therefore, to deprive her of the desired interview, Wilfrid walked slowly out upon the terrace, thinking that, if the Duchess were really in the ballroom, and had seen the embroidered scarf, she would perhaps, after a reasonable time, follow in his wake.

From the terrace a flight of steps descended to the palace gardens, now in all the glory of their summer foliage. Voices and laughter from near and far showed that many of the masqueraders preferred the purer air of night to the atmosphere of the ballroom. And then, too, the gardens with their shady walks, winding here and there beside silver lakes, formed an ideal place for love-making.

As he did not appear to be followed by the Duchess, Wilfrid resolved to make a tour of these gardens in the hope of meeting her.

Rapidly traversing this or that path, as chance directed, he came in the course of his search upon a terrace over-hanging the Neva. A little group was looking down upon the smooth-flowing water.

“There goes my fan!” said a fair masker, lamenting

the loss of that article, accidentally dropped by her into the river. "A hundred roubles floating away."

"Ask the Baroness Runö to restore it you to-morrow," said a gentleman beside her.

This chance mention of Pauline's name caused Wilfrid to listen for a moment.

"I don't understand ——" began the lady.

"Why, look you," replied her companion, "she goes to-morrow to her summer residence, the castle on her little island of Runö, some three miles down the river."

"You mean that ——"

"The current of the river strikes directly upon the eastern side of Runö, upon the shore called the Silver Strand. Things carried down by the river are always ——"

"Always?"

"Well, say usually, cast ashore upon this same strand. There's a romantic story that a former Prince Sumaroff, being in love with a daughter of a former Baron Runö, used to communicate with her by putting a letter into the cleft of a stick and throwing it into the river. An hour afterwards the lady would be reading the message. So, perhaps, your fan ——"

An interesting anecdote, but as it had nothing to do with the whereabouts of the Duchess, Wilfrid passed on, coming finally to a lonely and quiet spot, a spot as far as he could judge, the most remote from the palace. Just as he was on the point of turning back, his ear was suddenly caught by the sound of voices coming from the other side of some shrubbery against which he was standing.

"The Neva's waters are deep!"

It was not the oddity of the speaker's remark so much as his voice that attracted Wilfrid. That voice he could have sworn to out of ten thousand. The speaker was none other than Izak, the driver, the companion of his long wintry journey from Kowno to St. Petersburg. What was he doing in these gardens upon a night when entrance was denied to all save persons of rank? Perhaps he had left off his profession of driver to become one of the many servitors of Prince Sumaroff.

Peering warily through the shrubbery Wilfrid caught a glimpse of four men, three sitting upon a rustic seat and a fourth, Izak, standing in the attitude of addressing them. All were masked, and all clad in the chocolate-coloured velvet and gold lace that marked the livery of Prince Sumaroff. But something told Wilfrid that, in spite of this attire, Izak was no lackey; the dress was assumed for that night only. The man no longer carried himself with an obsequious and servile air. He spoke with authority, and even with dignity, leading Wilfrid to suspect that he was a spy of the Government, and one occupying as high a post as is bestowed upon these agents. Desirous as Wilfrid was of finding the Duchess, there was something in the talk of these men that fixed him to the spot.

"The Neva's waters are deep!" repeated Izak.

"Hush, speak low," said one of the men.

"We are safe enough here," returned Izak. "No one will wander so far as this from the palace. That is why I have chosen this nook for our little meeting. Now, what would you say if I were to talk of a thousand roubles to each?"

"That you are lying!"

"I guessed you would say so. You see what I am lifting with my hands?"

"Earth!"

"Earth it is, our common mother. I place it upon my head, and what does that signify?"

"That you are on oath."

"So; the most solemn oath known among us. By this, then, know that I am speaking the truth when I say that, if we do it, a thousand roubles to each will be our reward."

An interval of silence followed this promise.

"How did he find out that she was here?" asked one of the men presently.

"Her mask accidentally slipped off."

"But if it's now on her face again how are we to recognise her?"

"By her dress. There are five hundred ladies here

to-night, so I'm told, but only one with her costume. She wears a grey domino —”

“So do many other ladies.”

“Let me finish. There *are* many grey dominoes here — true, but look well at them, and you will see that their material is velvet, silk, or something equally costly, whereas hers is modest serge trimmed with silver cord, the simplest costume of the whole ball. Her mask, too, is of grey silk.”

“What made her venture here to-night?”

“She wishes to see the Czarina.”

“And she may be having her wish at this moment.”

“Hardly. She must wait till the supper-hour comes.”

“Why so?”

“O silly! Aren't all the ladies masked? No one knows who's who till the general unmasking at supper-time.”

“And when she sees the Czarina — what then?”

“She's bent on giving her a letter. It's our business to see that it be not given, and the sooner we set about our work the better.”

Thus advised, the three men rose and moved off, Izak leading the way, bent, as his words showed, on preventing some girl or woman from giving a letter to the Empress; but how was it possible to stop its presentation without the employment of questionable methods?

Wilfrid by chance had evidently lighted upon some sinister plot. Ever ready to oppose knavery, he put aside the Duchess for a time, determined to follow the men, and to defend, at the sword's point if necessary, the woman against whom this plot was directed.

Now, had the men's way lain parallel with the course of the shrubbery, it would have been an easy matter for Wilfrid to shadow them; but it so happened that they turned off in a line almost at right angles to this thicket, which was too densely set to permit the passage of a human body. Wilfrid ran, now to the right and now to the left, and when at last he *did* come upon a gap the men were out of sight.

With no clear idea as to the direction taken by them,

Wilfrid, nevertheless, hurried forward, but his attempt to discover them proved a failure.

His good fortune took him again to the terrace fronting the river and there, a few paces off, with one hand lightly resting upon the marble balustrade, stood a graceful figure, dressed in a simple grey domino, with silver cording. Silent and motionless she stood, as if absorbed in the beauty of the night.

Wilfrid's mind felt a sudden relief. Thank heaven, the knaves had failed, so far, in their purpose; the lady, whoever she might be, was still safe, and would continue to be so, as long as his trenchant blade swung by his side.

At Wilfrid's approach the lady turned her head, and, as her eyes fell upon the blue scarf, she gave a start as of recognition.

That start raised a sudden hope in his mind, a hope confirmed as he received through the holes of her grey mask the attentive glance of a pair of dark blue eyes.

Wilfrid thrilled, first with pleasure, and then with amazement, as he recognised that the lady, sought for by Izak and his confederates, was none other than his own duchess!

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE PRINCESS'S KISS

"FAIR lady," said Wilfrid, bowing as he spoke, "you are alone, though it be the unwritten law of a masquerade that every one must have a companion."

"Then are you breaking that law," replied the lady; "for you, too, seem alone."

"A Courtenay is ambitious, you see; he will have for his companion none but the fairest."

"And have you not found her in Pauline de Vaucluse?"

Her tone was slightly satirical. Had she seen him in the ballroom, he wondered, and recognised with whom he was dancing?

"Your highness, it was not for Pauline de Vaucluse that I wrought for three months in a solitary attic."

"No; it was for a wronged and widowed empress," replied the Duchess, feigning not to see his meaning.

"Lord Courtenay, the Empress is unspeakably grateful for your good work. The one desire of her heart was to see the fall of the wicked Ministry, and, thanks to you, she has been enabled to see it. You wanted no reward, but the Empress prays you to name one."

"Why, I thought I *had* named one."

"Foolish Englishman," she murmured, averting her head, "have you not forgotten *that*?"

And then, as if wishful to divert his thoughts from herself, she said, with her eyes set upon the river:—

"Have you any scene like this in England?"

Patriotic as he was, Wilfrid was fain to confess that his own land could never at any time show a scene so fairy-like as that presented by St. Petersburg on a mid-summer night.

It was now on the stroke of twelve, and though the glow of the setting sun had scarcely faded from the western sky, yet the eastern horizon was already becoming shot with golden streaks. This intermingling of dusk and dawn illumined by the glory of a full moon, produced a light soft and clear, poetic and dreamlike.

The river flowed, silent and majestic, breaking here and there into silver ripples. Its long line of quays and palaces, fading away in dim perspective, seemed like the fabrics of a vision too lovely to be real.

Enchanting as was the scene, it was made still more so to Wilfrid by the presence of the young Duchess, attractive both by her beauty and by the romantic air of mystery surrounding her.

It filled him with pleasure to learn that while he had been seeking *her*, she had been seeking *him*.

"I saw you leave the ballroom," she observed, "and as soon as I could conveniently do so, I stole away. Not finding you in ——"

She paused. They were no longer alone. Merely a gallant and his innamorata in close conversation, and apparently so enwrapped in each other, as to be oblivious of everybody else. Nevertheless, the Duchess turned her face riverward again; and, evidently fearing lest her voice, if overheard, should lead to her recognition, she refrained from speaking till the two had fairly passed by.

"I fear a spy in every one I see to-night," she murmured.

"Is our meeting, then, a crime?"

"My enemies would endeavour to make it such."

"Let me know who these enemies are, that I may make them mine, too."

"Shall I take you at your word?" she said gravely. "Yes? Then mark. The one whose enmity I have most cause to dread is the woman with whom you have danced to-night."

"Pauline de Vaucluse."

"None other."

"That is a hard saying."

"But a true one."

"That Pauline de Vaucluse would use this meeting to



your hurt, and to mine? Nay, I cannot so think of the Baroness. I would that I could bring your highness face to face with her for a few minutes. I feel certain that such interview would end in your becoming the best of friends."

"Having full proof of her guilt, I have no desire for such an interview," she answered coldly.

It seemed clear from this that the Duchess must be known to Pauline. What act had Pauline committed against the Duchess that it should be called by the strong term "guilt"?

"That your Highness *has* enemies," he said, after an interval of silence, "is, alas! but too true. They, or rather their agents, are here to-night."

"How do you know this?"

"Concealed behind some shrubbery I overheard four men talking."

"Of me? But not knowing my name how could you tell I was the person meant?"

"Because they spoke of a lady wearing a grey mask and a grey serge domino trimmed with silver cord, such as I see yours to be. One question will show whether you are the lady meant by them. Tell me, are you not seeking to present a letter to the Czarina?"

The Duchess looked a little oddly at Wilfrid, as if surprised at this knowledge on his part.

"It is true. I have upon me a letter addressed to the Czarina," she murmured, speaking with a certain hesitancy.

"At this very moment these four men are looking for you, determined to prevent you, by means fair or otherwise, from giving that letter to the Czarina."

"Lord Courtenay, you must not leave me till I am safe in the ballroom again. This letter must not be taken from us." — The "us" thrilled Wilfrid. — "I say us," she continued, with a smile, as pleasant as it was mysterious, "because the letter is of vital consequence to you as well as to me."

"Your Highness is safe with me; have no fear. But since you seem to live in an atmosphere of peril, why not seek to escape from it?"

"How?"

"There is a way open to you," said Wilfrid, with a sudden and bold inspiration. "The British Embassy is about to be re-established at St. Petersburg. Let that be your asylum. Come with me this night. Tell the Ambassador your secret history. Make him the guardian of your person. Under the protection of England you will be safe."

"Lord Courtenay," she said decisively, "yours is an impossible remedy."

"I will believe so only when you have proved it to be such."

"Were I to take refuge there, the Czar would demand my surrender."

"Very likely; and my good uncle, the Ambassador, would meet the demand with a refusal."

"I think not. Let the refusal be given, however; that would not prevent the Czar from entering with his troops."

"Not so. Such an act were an outrage upon the law of nations. The Czar would have to face an immediate renewal of the war with England."

"And he would be ready to face it, were I to act as you suggest."

Was she really a person so great in the political world that her detention at the British Embassy would be a sufficient cause for war between two empires? It was an amazing statement, and yet her air, quiet and grave, somehow carried conviction with it.

"Your Highness," said Wilfrid, with a sort of reproachful despair, "have you not mystified me long enough? May I not know who you are? You promised at our last meeting to reveal to me your name and history."

"Let me redeem my word, then."

She sat down within a hemicycle that formed part of the parapet of the terrace, and motioned Wilfrid to a place beside her.

At their back flowed the shining river; before them, and bordering the whole length of the terrace, rose a grove of dark pines whose leaves rippled to the night-

breeze. From the far-off ballroom came the faint sound of the orchestral music.

Though attentive to every word spoken by the Duchess, Wilfrid, mindful of the four men in the chocolate-coloured liveries, kept a watchful eye upon all sides, though he doubted very much whether the quartette would show themselves so long as he was with her.

Now and again groups of laughing masqueraders would make their appearance; and, at their approach, the Duchess either suspended her talk or continued in a whisper till the revellers had gone by.

"I am at your service, Lord Courtenay. Question me."

"First, then, explain the puzzling mystery of how I came to save your life without retaining any remembrance of that event."

"That is easily answered. More than eight years ago — I was then a girl of fourteen — my sister and I were staying at the Castle of Silverstein in Saxony. One evening, among other diversions, there happened to be a series of *tableaux vivants*, in one of which my sister and I took part, each clad in the garb of a forester; and," added the Duchess, with a touch of vanity, "if all that was said of us be true, we made a pair of handsome lads. — The next morning, before breakfast, my sister, always full of mischief, proposed an especial piece of daring. 'Let us put on the dress we wore in the *tableau vivant*, and take a walk outside the castle grounds.' I laughingly consented; and, escaping the eyes of our elders, we two girls sallied forth in male garb. The keeper of the lodge, past whom we boldly marched, failed to penetrate our disguise, and doubtless wondered why we laughed so, when at a safe distance from the gate. It was a sunny morning, and we turned our steps to the forest that lay eastward of the castle. Forgetful of time, we wandered onward till at last it began to dawn upon us that we were a long way from home, and were, perhaps, doing a foolish thing, for we now suddenly remembered that a bear had recently been seen in this wood.

"Scarcely had the thought seized us when we actually

came upon two little black cubs rolling over each other at the foot of a hollow tree. The sight turned our blood cold, for one glance showed that this hollow trunk was a bear's den, and we did not doubt that its savage tenant was not far off. Then came a heavy pattering upon the fallen leaves, and a moment afterwards the mother bear appeared, growling and making directly for us. Too terrified to move, my sister and I clung to each other, uttering wild screams."

Wilfrid himself could now have related the sequel, but preferred to hear it from her lips. It was a pleasure to listen to her voice. The Duchess saw his smile, and smiled in turn.

"Need I tell you what happened? The report of a musket rang out, and the bear rolled over dead. The shot had been fired by a young man who came forward with a smile in which I fancied there lurked a trace of contempt. Of course, Lord Courtenay, you took us for what we seemed to be, namely, two youths, and as such, we doubtless looked very silly, screaming and making no attempt to save ourselves; and yet, perhaps, if you had been without a musket, you might not have looked so brave as you did just then."

"Quite true, your Highness."

"Naturally, we did not like to say that we were girls, and so, after thanking you, we hastened off and reached Silverstein without our escapade having become known.

"Now, in our confusion we had forgotten to ask the name of our deliverer.

"'We must try to find out who he is,' said my sister, 'and show our gratitude by something more than words.'

"So, later in the day, and this time dressed in a manner suitable to good girls, we drove forth in our carriage accompanied by our duenna.

"Fortune favoured us, for as we were proceeding along the high road that skirts one side of the forest, my sister pressed my arm with the words, 'There he is.'

"Sure enough it was our rescuer coming out of the Kronprinz, a pretty little hostelry by the roadside. He mounted a phaeton that had been standing at the inn door, and drove off. The innkeeper was known to us,

and from him we learned that the stranger was an English nobleman, Viscount Courtenay by name, who had been staying in the neighbourhood during the previous fortnight. He had received the Prince's permission to shoot upon the castle lands and to fish in its waters.

"We hesitated to put further questions, lest our duenna should ask us the reason for our interest in this stranger; but as soon as we returned to the Schloss we got from the library a book on the British Peerage, and learned what little we could concerning Lord Courtenay, his family, and his ancestry.

"We went on the following day to take a look at the bear's den; this time armed foresters accompanied us. While I was walking round the spot, my eye was caught by a sparkle amid the fallen leaves. I stooped, and picked up a golden locket. We knew at once by whom it had been lost when we found within a miniature of yourself."

Wilfrid had often wondered what had become of that locket, a locket he had ordered to be wrought after a special design, intending it as a gift to his mother.

"The restoring of this locket," said my sister, "will give us an opportunity of speaking with Lord Courtenay. We will take it to the 'Kronprinz,' and tell him that we are the two youths whom he saved from the bear." But on coming to the inn we found you had that very day left for England; so the locket remained with me."

"And you have kept it ever since?"

For answer, she pointed to her throat, and Wilfrid saw the long lost locket hanging from a slender gold chain.

"Is it necessary at this late day to restore it?" she asked, making as if to detach the locket from its chain.

But Wilfrid gently restrained her.

"It could not be in a fairer place."

The Duchess's story cast light upon some matters hitherto dark; it explained, for example, her recognition of him at the inn of the Silver Birch.

And she had kept his miniature for more than eight years, ever since she was a girl of fourteen! It was upon her breast now! Was that its usual place? If so,

and if the fact had become known to Baranoff, it would explain why that minister had concluded that the Duchess must be in love with Wilfrid; if love, a seemingly hopeless case, since it was not probable that she would ever meet again the man that had saved her life. Did she often look at the portrait within the locket? he wondered. And now that the original was beside her, with what sentiments did she regard him? Gratitude for saving her life? gratitude deep and sincere, but nothing more? Wilfrid made up his mind that he would find out that very night.

"Question one having been answered in full," he smiled, "there comes question two — your name?"

"I should like first to hear whom you think me to be? You must have formed some notion."

"Am I right in supposing that you are a grand-daughter of the Czar, Ivan VI.?"

The Duchess received this question with a merry laugh, the first Wilfrid had heard from her, a laugh so rippling and sweet that he was sorry when it had ceased.

"What gave you that idea?" she asked.

"A paragraph in the English *Times*," replied Wilfrid, repeating the passage; for, under the belief that it referred to the Duchess, it had been no task, but a pleasure, to learn it by heart.

"And you took me to be the lady meant? She never had any existence. If you had seen the *Times* just a week later you would have found that same correspondent withdrawing the story as an idle rumour, and apologising to his English readers for having led them astray. A grand-daughter of Ivan! I have not a drop of Muscovite blood in my veins. I am as you are — a foreigner in Russia."

Somehow Wilfrid was pleased to think that she was of a nationality other than Russ, although her statement increased his perplexity since, as she was not connected by blood with the Imperial house of Romanoff, how came she to be politically so great, as she undoubtedly was, according to the account both of herself and of Baranoff? Was she a member of some other royal house of Europe, and being, for some reason or other, viewed

with jealousy by the reigning head, had she been sent into a sort of quasi-banishment to the Russian Court, whose orders were to exercise a strict surveillance over her conduct, and, above all, to see that she did not fall in love? Why would she not explain, and end all this mystery?

"I was born Princess Marie," she continued, "and Princess Marie is the name I love, and the name my friends still call me by."

"Then you shall be Princess Marie to me, and ——"

He paused. The clock-tower of the Sumaroff Palace chimed the hour.

"One o'clock!" said Princess Marie—to use the name favoured by her—speaking with a sort of dismay in her voice. "I have stayed too long. I must return, Lord Courtenay, will you escort me to the ballroom, and there—there we must part."

"Part! We have but just met. If we part, when are we to meet again?"

"Never, I fear."

"Never is a hard word."

"Do you think it is not hard for me to say it?" murmured the Princess, as she rose to her feet, evidently bent on going.

"Stay, Princess. You have not yet redeemed all your promise. There is your present name, and—the—the kiss."

"You will not let me off?"

"I kept *my* word, Princess. Will you not keep yours?"

As Wilfrid rose to his feet she receded a pace or two, with hands put forward as if to keep him off.

"What pleasure will you have in a kiss given on compulsion?"

"Shall you give the kiss, then, from no other feeling than to get rid of the duty?"

"In what other spirit should I give it?"

"If the Princess can give only a reluctant kiss, let her give none at all."

Princess Marie hesitated for a moment.

"I . . . I will keep my promise," she said. "But not

. . . not here . . . on the open terrace. There . . . in the shadows. It is death if . . . if we are seen!"

Wilfrid took her little hand—how it trembled!—within his own, led her across the terrace, and stood beside her under the gloom of the pine trees.

"It was not stipulated that you should wear a mask," said he.

She withdrew her vizard, revealing her beautiful face, made more beautiful by the sweet colour that mantled it.

She looked round on all sides to make sure that no one was within sight. Satisfied that they were alone she turned to Wilfrid. Never had he so trembled as at this moment when the Princess set her hands lightly upon his shoulders and looked him full in the face with eyes that, striving to be bold, were yet full of timidity.

Her lovely face drew near to his; he caught the fragrance of her breath; their lips met in a kiss, given on her part with a warmth that could spring from but one feeling. The tender glance of her dark-blue eyes told him, as plainly as words, what place he held in her heart. Moved by an uncontrollable impulse he clasped her in his arms. She did not resent the action; on the contrary she clung to him in that wild, sweet, thrilling embrace that comes but once in a life-time.

"Princess!" he whispered in a voice trembling with emotion, "you love me—is it not so? I will not let you go back to your old life. You must come with me—"

"Oh no, no!" she gasped, seeking to unwind his arms. "My God! what am I doing? Lord Courtenay . . . let me go . . . Do not tempt me . . . This . . . this cannot be!"

"Why not?"

She gave a wild laugh.

"You would not ask, if you knew me. I am the—"

The words suddenly froze on her lips. Wilfrid, gazing upon her face, saw its loveliness distorted by a terrible change. With blanched cheek and open mouth she was staring at something or somebody behind him. Her strange set expression almost suggested the wild fancy that there had risen from out the foliage the head of Medusa, whose chilling stare could turn the beholder to



stone. Something of her feeling communicated itself to Wilfrid; for a few seconds he stood, still holding the Princess in his arms, scarcely daring to turn lest he should see at his elbow some awful apparition.

## CHAPTER XX.

### WILFRID RECEIVES A CHALLENGE

WHEN at last Wilfrid *did* turn his head he beheld a tall masked figure, motionless, silent, watchful; the very Crusader who had glanced angrily at him in the ballroom.

Now when one gentleman comes upon another in the act of kissing a lady, politeness suggests immediate retirement on the part of the first. But this was a course the intruder did *not* take; instead, he kept his ground as if he had come there for no other purpose than to watch the pair, manifestly indifferent as to whether his presence caused embarrassment or not.

Wilfrid could have slain him without the least compunction.

Here was a lovely princess, clinging to his embrace, listening to his love-avowal, and lo! the charming situation must come to an end—for a time at least—by reason of the new-comer's clownishness!

As he withdrew one arm from the Princess she made a movement as if to flee.

"Stay, Princess," he whispered. "Do not go. You are safe with me. Do you know this man? Who is he?"

She seemed too frightened to make reply; she glanced, now to the right and now to the left, along the moonlit terrace, apparently deliberating which way to flee; finally, with a strength born of despair, she suddenly broke away, and before the surprised Wilfrid could stop her, Princess Marie was lost to view among the darkness of the pines. For a moment he hesitated whether to follow or not, but as running off might look like cowardice, he chose to remain, and turned upon the Crusader, with whom he was now doubly angry.

The new-comer moved forward from the shadow of

the trees, and, with an air of dignity, now stood in the clear moonlight, looking at the other as if requiring from him an explanation of his recent conduct.

"Qualifying for the spy service, sir?" Wilfrid asked. "I am told 'tis a remunerative profession."

"In dealing with dishonourable persons," was the reply, "nice rules of courtesy must be laid aside."

Wilfrid was convinced that the speaker was Ouvaroff, and that, for some reason or other, the Prince was seeking to disguise his voice.

It was not so much the voice, however, to which he gave heed as the words. Dishonourable? As Wilfrid recalled the Princess's sweet face and innocent eyes, still greater grew his anger against the man who thus ventured to charge her with wrong-doing.

"Dishonourable, my eavesdropper?" he repeated with a dangerous gleam in his eye.

"I said the word, sir."

"To whom do you apply it — to me or to the lady?"

"To both."

"'Tis a word you shall withdraw, or justify."

"The lady's last action justifies it. If innocent, why flee? She knows me, and knowing, dares not face me."

"In knowing you she has the advantage of me. Let me declare myself. I am an Englishman, Viscount Courtenay; my face you may see," and as he spoke Wilfrid removed his mask. "May I ask for a similar return on your part?"

For though Wilfrid had little doubt that the other was Ouvaroff, still the lifting of the mask would bring certainty.

"Is it possible that you do not recognise me?"

"Can *your* eyes see through a silk mask?"

The Crusader hesitated for a moment.

"You do not know me? It is well!" He seemed to derive satisfaction from Wilfrid's failure to identify him. "To-morrow morning you shall see my face and learn my name."

"And why not to-night, my Crusader?"

"It is my pleasure for the present to reserve my identity."

"But how if it be mine to know it now? How if I do not choose to wait till the morning? How if I take off your mask, and compel you at the sword's point to reveal your name?"

"You are welcome to try," responded the other, moving backward a pace or two to prevent Wilfrid from snatching off his mask.

"Good! got the right sort of stuff in him," thought Wilfrid as he saw the other grasp his sword-hilt and prepare to defend himself.

"In the morning," continued the stranger, "when you shall have learned my name you will readily acknowledge that I have valid reasons for preserving to-night my *incognito*."

"Egad, you are very mysterious, my one-time friend," thought Wilfrid.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," continued the other, "than to cross swords with you here and now, but that in so doing we should be abusing the hospitality of our princely host, Sumaroff. Moreover, the clash of our steel is certain to draw around us a crowd who would seek to stop our fighting; and," added he, with a grim and deadly earnestness, "when we have once begun there must be no stopping till we make an end."

In Wilfrid's opinion Ouvaroff must have attained considerable proficiency in swordsmanship to hold language such as this. Always having a respect for the man willing to fight, he replied with a bow—

"Be it so; since you wish it, retain your mask and your *incognito*, which," added he to himself, "is no *incognito*." Aloud he continued, "Your desire to cross swords with me meets with a ready response. May I point out, however, that it is somewhat unusual to invite a man to a duel without assigning due cause. You have not yet justified your reflection on my honour."

"Honour!" sneered the other in a voice quivering with suppressed passion. "Honour! Are clandestine meetings consistent with the honour of an English gentleman? You meet—" He looked cautiously round as he spoke—"Let her be nameless, for who knows what ears may be within hearing? You meet her

secretly at midnight in the Michaelovski Palace; you meet her with kisses and embraces at this masquerade; you are seen leaving her bedchamber in the inn at Gora. You, who have brought shame upon her — do you talk of honour?"

Through the holes of his mask the man's eyes glowed like fire; a great rage seemed to hold him. He fingered his sword-hilt, as if longing to hurl himself upon Wilfrid and end his life there and then, without troubling to wait for the morning.

As for Wilfrid, the words of the other fell upon him with the shock of a thunderbolt, filling him with a dreadful dismay, not so much on his own account as on Marie's. What had hitherto been a haunting suspicion was now converted to a black truth; the bedchamber incident was known to Ouvaroff, might be known to others! All innocent as the Princess was, the finger of scorn would now be pointed to her as one fallen from maidenly purity. And the bitterest thought of all was there seemed no way of refuting the slander. Vain would it be for him or for her to deny. The mocking nobility, reared in the tainted atmosphere of Catharine's Court, and accustomed to measure others by their own standard, would accept as true neither his word nor that of the Princess. She was branded with the mark of shame, and the cause of it all was himself — Wilfrid Courtenay!

Well, he could have one satisfaction at least, the satisfaction of seeing the original traducer fall dead at his feet, for he would give him no quarter in the morning.

"The fight cannot come too soon," he said, between his set teeth. "You have cast a black slander on an innocent lady, and by Heaven! you die for it."

"Innocent! Am I to take the kisses and embraces of to-night as proofs of innocence?"

"Why should *not* the lady kiss me if she choose?"

The other drew a breath as of amazement, and for a few moments stared, as if he doubted whether there were not something wrong with Wilfrid's mental calibre.

"You speak thus, knowing who the lady is?"

"Your pardon, I do not know who the lady is. I am

under no obligation to offer explanations to you, sir, but thus much may be tendered, that I know the lady only by the name of Princess Marie — a name that conveys no meaning to me.”

Wilfrid did not ask the other to enlighten him in any way respecting the Princess; in his present haughty mood he would take no favours from him.

The Crusader looked at Wilfrid as if doubting his statement.

“Can this be true?” he muttered.

“It might not be, were I a Russian prince.”

As if confronted with some new and startling problem, the man turned aside and took a few steps to and fro before he spoke again.

“Your statement sounds so improbable that I may well hesitate to accept it. If the lady has *not* told you her name, if you have been acting in ignorance of her rank, then is the guilt hers, and not yours. Nay,” he added in a milder tone, “I am ready to withdraw my reflections upon your honour.”

“You are very good. But if I am honourable how can the lady be dishonourable?”

“That will be seen in the morning.”

“Before the duel, I trust?”

“Why, truly,” said the other with a significant smile, “you will hardly be in a condition to apprehend an explanation *after* the duel.”

“That’s to be seen. But methinks you are somewhat inconsistent, for, surely in admitting — as you have admitted — that my honour is stainless, you have, from your point of view, removed all cause for the duel?”

“So one might think,” returned the other, who seemed to be growing more calm, “but it is not so. Matters are in a fairer state than I had thought them. This scandal may yet be kept quiet; it need not become the talk of Europe. None the less, Lord Courtenay, you must pay the penalty of your daring. You have done — unwittingly it is true — that which can be atoned for only by death.”

“Where shall the place of our meeting be?” asked

Wilfrid with some impatience, for he was eager to hasten after the Princess.

"You know the Viborg Road running northwards from the city? Good! A little way beyond the eighth verst-post on the right-hand side of the road is a path leading to a small glade. At eight o'clock — seven hours from now — I shall be there, attended by a friend. And you?"

"Will not be a laggard in seeking the spot. And our weapons?"

"The choice belongs to you as the challenged."

Wilfrid, mindful of Ouvaroff's recent devotion to swordsmanship, and willing to accommodate him in the matter, made the reply:—

"What say you to swords of three feet?"

"Accepted," said the other with evident satisfaction in his tone. "My second shall bring the weapons with him. A doctor," he added significantly, "we shall *not* require."

"If you will put that last remark in the singular," said Wilfrid, "I will have no fault to find with it. Why, then, matters being thus arranged, we need *not* prolong this interview. The rendezvous, a glade near the eighth verst-post on the Viborg Road; the time, eight o'clock. Till then, farewell."

With that Wilfrid turned away, in an agony of suspense as to what might have happened to the Princess should she have come within view of the four liveried hirelings. And now for the first time he began to realise what a tool he had been in the hands of Count Baranoff. He had done the very thing that Baranoff wanted. His coming into Russia with the chivalrous purpose of defending a lady from the wicked intrigues of that minister had ended in compromising her name and imperilling her safety! She had given him the kiss of love in spite of her belief, "It is death if we are seen!"

And they *had* been seen, and that by an enemy!

Death might perhaps have been Wilfrid's lot a few days earlier, but the re-establishment of the British Embassy put a different complexion upon matters. The

Czar, the Court-party, the ministers, or whoever Marie's mysterious enemies might be, could not very well arrest the nephew of Great Britain's representative for a fault which, at its worst, was merely an irregular *amour*; still, bent on compassing his end, they sought to dispose of him in a manner speciously fair and open, by getting Prince Ouvaroff, the newly-expert swordsman, to challenge him to a duel to the death.

Well, *that* part of the plot should fail; the combat had no terrors for Wilfrid.

But what of Marie, the Princess of the sorrowful eyes, who in the presence of a witness had given unequivocal proof of her love for an Englishman? She was not a British subject; her liberty and life were at the mercy of the Russian authorities.

Would the royal house to which she belonged, pleased rather than otherwise, enjoin that the penalty for her fault must be seclusion for life in a fortress or a nunnery?

Wilfrid's immediate object was to find the Princess again, and he determined, when he should have found her, not to leave her side till he had seen her to a place of safety; and the safest place he could think of just then was the British Embassy. True, she had already refused that asylum, but fear, occasioned by the recent incident, might cause a change in her resolve.

Not more than fifteen minutes had passed since she had fled from the terrace, but in fifteen minutes one may do much in the matter of hiding one's self; and the Princess had hidden herself so effectually that Wilfrid could not find her, though he several times traversed the gardens as well as the ballroom.

Although tormented by the fear that she *might* have fallen into the hands of the four hirelings, Wilfrid adopted the more probable conclusion that the Princess had retired altogether from the masquerade. Was it likely that she would remain to run the chance of another meeting with Prince Ouvaroff, of whom she evidently stood in fear? But no sooner had Wilfrid formed this opinion than he dismissed it. The Princess had with her a letter meant for the Czarina. Did she still adhere



to her intention of presenting it? Then, unless she knew the secret of the Czarina's costume, she would have to wait till the Empress had publicly disclosed herself at the general unmasking, which was timed to take place at two o'clock.

And here again Wilfrid was met by a perplexing thought. Why should the Princess, presumably a member of the Court circle, choose the occasion of a public masquerade for presenting a letter which, one would think, might have been more suitably presented in private? And that letter, so she had averred, contained something of vital interest, not only to her own welfare, but also to Wilfrid's. It was strange — passing strange — but then so was everything else happening that night. Wilfrid had never known a more mystifying time.

When the hand of the clock was upon the stroke of two he repaired to the Hall of Mirrors, and, ascending a gallery, looked down upon the crowd of masked revellers. He hoped in a minute or two more to obtain a view of the Czar, and what was of more interest to him, of the Czarina, in case the Princess should be by to present her letter.

But at the general unmasking, when everybody was looking expectantly around for the imperial pair, Prince Sumaroff mounted the dais and gave out that the pressure of State affairs had prevented the Czar from honouring the masquerade with his presence; a slight touch of illness had likewise kept the Czarina from attending. Wilfrid was, perhaps, the only one present that did not hear this disappointing announcement, his attention at that moment being absorbed by a fact of no importance whatever to the thousand and one guests, but constituting for him a startling discovery.

A moment before the unmasking he had caught sight of Pauline, recognisable, of course, by her costume. She was leaning upon the arm of a tall and majestic figure clad in the glittering mail of a Byzantine warrior. Earlier in the evening when first entering the ballroom Wilfrid had noticed the man, and had called Pauline's attention to his splendid and striking costume.

The lifting of his mask gave Wilfrid a sort of shock.

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The Byzantine warrior was none other than Prince Ouvaroff!

Clearly, then, unless Ouvaroff had changed his costume — a most unlikely event — he could not have been the Crusading knight whom Wilfrid had met upon the terrace.

What man was it, then, with whom he had to fight at eight in the morning?

## CHAPTER XXI.

### "YOUR OPPONENT IS AN EMPEROR"

THE unmasking of the guests was followed by a simultaneous movement toward the supper-tables, set forth in an adjoining room, a room scarcely inferior in size and grandeur to the Hall of Mirrors.

Tormented by the thought of the Princess, Wilfrid was in no trim for eating, even when the far-famed Sumaroff *cuisine* offered its temptations.

Having satisfied himself that neither Marie nor the Crusading knight was among the guests, he withdrew from the palace, having first sent to Pauline a servant with a brief note, in which, without stating the cause, he expressed regret at finding it impossible to escort her home.

It was now past two o'clock. He had by eight of the clock to be at a spot distant six miles from the city, and in the interval he must find a second, and try to snatch a short repose. He had no time to waste.

Making his way to the entrance of the Sumaroff Palace he procured a car and drove to his hotel, where he changed his antique garb for one more modern, and this done, he went off at once to the British Embassy, with a view of getting one of his uncle's secretaries to act as his second.

"Unless indeed the old boy himself will volunteer, which isn't very likely," thought Wilfrid. "He'd be compromising his diplomatic office."

On reaching the Embassy Wilfrid learned that, late as the hour was, the "old boy" had not yet gone to bed, but was sitting alone in his study.

Making his way thither Wilfrid found the Ambassador seated at a table, upon which, in addition to cigars and

wine, was a very large parchment with seals attached thereto, and bearing every appearance of being an important State document.

"Pouf! windows closed and curtains drawn this hot July night?" said Wilfrid, glancing at the heavily-draped casements.

"Put your head out of the window, and you'll soon scent the reason. Fontanka Canal below. What do the Russian Government mean by putting me in this malodorous hole? Damme! they'll have to find me fresh quarters. See my new Diana over there? Winkelman! Bought it yesterday. Cost seven hundred roubles—think it's worth it?" And then, seeing Wilfrid's eyes attracted by the document upon the table, he continued, "Ah! the editor of the *Journal de St. Petersbourg* would give much for a copy of this."

"It is, I presume——?"

"A duplicate of the secret Anglo-Russian Treaty of Peace. I am studying it for the twentieth time. Must leave no loophole for the enemy to creep through."

"The Czar hasn't signed it yet?"

"He signs to-morrow night, or rather, as it's long past midnight, to-day. And yet," continued the Ambassador, a queer look coming over his face, "and yet—who knows?—he may never sign it."

"His autocratic Majesty is so changeable?"

"No, but life is. The Czar may be dead by to-morrow."

"For the matter of that so may I," remarked Wilfrid, thinking of the coming duel. "So may you; so may all of us."

"Ah! but in the Czar's case there is special cause for fear. But there! I'm talking too fast. I mustn't betray State secrets."

This assumption of reticence was a mere preliminary to disclosure, as Wilfrid very well knew. The Ambassador had a tale to unfold, and was burning to unfold it, and, anxious as Wilfrid was to get to the subject of the coming duel, he was not unwilling to be a listener, impressed by his uncle's air of subdued excitement.

"It was told to me in confidence," continued Lord St.

Helens, "but I see no reason why I should not tell you. The story is certain to be made public property within four and twenty hours. Well, here it is then. Like the rest of the diplomatic body, I received an invitation to this Sumaroff fête, and looked in for a short time just before supper; and am not sorry at having gone, for there, in spite of his mask, I recognised my old friend Panine. He was in a state of great agitation, caused by something he had just heard from Alexander."

"Alexander was at the fête, then?"

"Of course he was."

"Prince Sumaroff publicly announced that he wasn't."

"Never believe public announcements — in Russia. He *was* there, but retired before supper-time. As you will see he had very good reason for wishing to be alone with his thoughts. Talking of Alexander, I suppose you know that he was married when only sixteen years old — that is, at an age scarcely capable of forming a just judgment. As a matter of fact he had no voice in the choosing of his wife; she was chosen for him by his grandmother Catharine, and our poor Alexander had no alternative but to obey.

"It is obvious that a marriage of this sort, contracted for political reasons merely, cannot yield that happiness arising from a union based on mutual affection. Far be it from me to speak one word adverse to the young Czarina Elizavetta; she is beautiful, she is charming, she is good; but still, you know the remark of the old Roman to the persons who were praising his wife: 'This to you may seem an excellent sandal,' he said, taking it off. 'I alone know where it pinches.' So of the Czarina. To us she may seem an ideal consort; Alexander alone knows where the sandal pinches."

"It is easy to see to what all this is preliminary."

"Just so. The usual result when kings are forced to mate from policy. Our Alexander looks round to find a companion more to his taste."

"And the lady's name?"

"Is a secret unknown to Panine, and therefore to me."

"Has the intrigue reached a guilty stage? — but no, it cannot have."

Lord St. Helens wondered at the husky voice and at the strange look with which his nephew put this question.

“Panine thinks not. In fact, judging from what happened to-night at the masquerade, it must be inferred that the love is on the Czar’s side only.”

“Why, what *did* happen?”

“A masquerade, as you know, affords excellent facilities for an intrigue. The Czar, aware that his inamorata would be at this fête, determined himself to be present. He came without state, masked, and costumed, and sought eagerly, as we may suppose, for his lady-love, and at last found her.”

“Alone?”

“Hardly. She was with another man, and — one can scarcely refrain from smiling — the pair were in the act of kissing each other as the Czar came upon them.”

“How did you learn this?”

“It was witnessed by Panine.”

“By Panine!” repeated Wilfrid.

“He was meditatively walking amid a grove of trees when he happened to see the lady bestow a kiss upon a gentleman, no unusual occurrence at a masquerade, but this affair began to assume a serious aspect when there stepped forth into the moonlight a figure whom Panine recognised to be that of the Emperor. At sight of him the lady instantly fled as if in fear, leaving the Emperor and the man together.

“An animated conversation followed, inaudible to Panine, who, out of respect, kept his distance, nor did he venture forward till the man had left the Czar’s presence.

“‘Count,’ began Alexander — I repeat Panine’s words to me as nearly as I can remember them — ‘Count, you know that in the abstract I am opposed to duelling; but occasionally it may happen that a gentleman has no other way of defending his honour. Now there is a certain man who wishes to fight a duel to-morrow. As his cause is just, will you do him the favour of acting as his second?’

“Panine, naturally concluding that the Czar’s recent interlocutor was the man referred to, made reply: —

"Your Majesty's command is my pleasure."

"You promise to be this man's second?"

"Most certainly, Sire."

"Look to it, then, that you keep your word," said Alexander with a face sterner than Panine had ever before seen it, 'for I am the duellist. Honour leaves me no alternative but to fight. Stop! no words, I pray you. I know beforehand what you would say; that, if any one offends me, it is within my power to banish, to imprison, to execute the offender. Granted: but that were an ignoble vengeance. None hereafter shall say that Alexander took advantage of his position in order to slay a rival. The man must die, and his death shall come by my hand in fair and open fight. I waive my imperial prerogative, and meet him as one gentleman, when affronted, should meet another. My opponent's name? — let it remain a secret. The rendezvous? Well, that you'll learn when we set out. Be at the palace at seven this morning ready to attend me. And, as you value your life, not a word of this to any one.' And with that the Emperor strode away."

"Did Panine tell his tale to any besides you?"

"When I left him he was in doubt whether or not to communicate it to his fellow ministers."

"And he doesn't know who the Czar's opponent is?"

"Hasn't the least notion. The man was masked, you see."

"But his costume should serve to identify him."

"It would, if Panine could remember what the fellow wore. I should very much like to know the name of the man. To cut the Czar out in love, and then to stand up to him in a duel! Gad! the fellow must have the audacity of the devil!"

"Audacity, my dear uncle, was always the mark of a Courtenay."

For a moment the Ambassador stared blankly at Wilfrid; then the truth burst upon him.

"Good God!" he gasped. "You don't mean that — that —!"

"The Czar's opponent is distant from you by no more than the length of a table."

It would not be true to say that Lord St. Helens's hair rose on end, but it very nearly accomplished that feat.

“I accepted the challenge to-night,” continued Wilfrid, “from a masked stranger, whose anger apparently had been kindled at seeing me receive a kiss from a certain lady. The fellow refused his name, but from his voice I took him to be Prince Ouvaroff. It seems now that I was wrong, and that my opponent is a much more august character.”

Overwhelmed by the startling news the Ambassador could do nothing for a few moments but gaze in a sort of speechless terror at his nephew. Finding his voice at last he said: “This is a devilishly awkward affair. Let me know how it all happened?”

Wilfrid related the whole story from his first meeting with Baranoff in Berlin down to that night's scene at the masquerade, adding:—

“How was I to know it was the Czar? He talked exactly like an ordinary mortal. You told me yesterday that it was Ouvaroff's intention to pick a quarrel with me, and as the stranger had a voice very like Ouvaroff's I naturally concluded——”

“Alexander and Ouvaroff are half-brothers, as you know. Their voices *are* very similar. Now, what's to be done in this matter?” continued the Ambassador with a thoughtful regard for his nephew's safety.

“My first care must be to communicate with Panine. It will relieve him to know that the duel will not come off.”

“But why shouldn't it come off?”

“Your opponent is an emperor.”

“And are not we Courtenays the descendants of emperors? ‘Equal to Cæsars,’ is not that our motto?”

“Come! this is mere bravado. You cannot really be serious in saying you will fight the Czar.”

“The Archangel Gabriel himself, if he came between me and the woman I love. It is easy to see how matters stand with the Princess. She hates the Czar's addresses, but does not know how to repel them. And diplomatists like you would bid me stand aside and let him work his libertine will with the sweet lady who loves me, because,



forsooth, he is a Czar, between whom and me an awful gulf is fixed! Czar me no Czar! On this condition only will I withdraw, that he hands the Princess over to me; if not, he fights."

Lord St. Helens became full of dismay, as he realised that Wilfrid was perfectly serious in his utterance. If Alexander were equally determined there was no power on earth to stay the duel; and since Wilfrid had no peer in swordsmanship, what but ill would befall the Czar in a mortal combat? In cooler moments Wilfrid might not wish to kill the Emperor, but in the hot excitement of the duel, when he saw before him the man who was persecuting the Princess with unwelcome attentions, there was no knowing what might happen, especially if Wilfrid's anger should be aggravated by the smarting of a wound.

"And pray, sir," said the Ambassador after vainly expostulating with his nephew, "pray, sir, who is to be your second in this infamous business?"

"I am going to ask *you* to officiate in that capacity."

The Ambassador felt as if he were choking.

"Go to Gehenna!" he yelled.

"You won't? What will the family think when they hear that you have refused to stand by me in an affair of honour. Who's to conduct my funeral if I fall?"

"I'd be most infernally happy to conduct your funeral at this present moment. Cease this foolery, and talk sense — if you can. Should this freak end in the wounding or it may be, the killing of the Czar — which heaven forbid! — to whom do you intend to look for safety?"

"To you, of course."

"To me?"

"Most certainly. Doesn't the nation pay you £10,000 a year to look after British subjects in Russia, of whom I am one?"

"I to protect you?"

"If you don't the British public will want to know the reason! Remember that the duel is not of *my* seeking; he challenged me, not I him. In an autocratic realm what can a man do when its ruler insists on fighting him? It's useless to go against the will of a fellow who can send you

to Siberia for disobedience. And if he fall, whose is the blame?" "Well, I must be off," continued Wilfrid, glancing at his watch; "but before going I should like — of course, with your permission — to see young Mulgrave," naming his uncle's chief secretary. "He is a man of spirit, and will stand by me in this affair."

"Do you think ——?" began the Ambassador angrily, and then broke off as if hit by some sudden thought. "Well, I'll send for him, and you'll hear what he thinks. Perhaps you'll listen to him, if not to me."

He pencilled a few words upon a card and touched a hand-bell, whose chime immediately brought in a servitor in livery. Handing him the card, and pointing to the name upon it, the Ambassador said with a meaning look, "Tell him to come at once."

The man had no sooner set eyes upon the card than he gave a slight start, glanced oddly at Wilfrid, and withdrew without a word.

"Oho, my uncle," thought Wilfrid, who had observed this little by-play, "why did you give a written message, when an oral one would have sufficed? There is something on that card you do not wish me to see. Very good! Forewarned is forearmed."

After a brief interval there came a tapping at the door. "Wait a moment, Williams," cried Lord St. Helens. "Stay outside till I call."

"Williams? Why, I thought it was Mulgrave you sent for?" said Wilfrid in mock surprise.

Ignoring this question, the Ambassador said with a stern air:—

"I am to take it, then, that you have quite made up your mind to fight this duel?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I have made up my mind that you shall not."

"And how do you propose to stop me?"

"You are not in Russia now, remember. This Embassy is Great Britain, or rather, a part of Great Britain in Russia. As the representative of His Majesty King George, I am, so long as you are in this house, your sovereign, and you are my subject. In the exercise of my lawful authority ——"

"You'll put me under arrest," said Wilfrid, smiling amiably. "Yes, I thought that was the idea when you sent out that little note."

Somewhat disconcerted at Wilfrid's guessing his intention, and uneasy, too, at his air of unconcern, the Ambassador called out: "Come in."

At the summons there trooped in five athletic men, lackeys apparently. Their attire, consisting of shirt and breeches only, showed that they had been hastily roused from sleep. They advanced a little way into the room, and then stood still, awaiting orders. Wondering what the trouble was about, they glanced alternately from the flushed uncle to the cool nephew.

"This madman," said Lord St. Helens, indicating Wilfrid, who bowed sarcastically, "my nephew, I regret to say, is an enemy to Great Britain. In the name of the King, I call upon you to arrest him and to take him to the Green Chamber, where he must remain till he has renounced his treasonable designs. Sorry, Wilfrid, my boy," he added, in a side whisper; "but I've no other course. Go quietly, like a sensible fellow," he added, as he saw the fighting spirit gleam from Wilfrid's eye. "You can't contend against five men."

But Wilfrid, having formed his plan, proceeded to act. The only light in the room came from the six tapers in the chandelier above his head. As the five men moved slowly forward, Wilfrid, with one swift bound, sprang aloft and hung his whole weight upon the chandelier. Down it came in an instant, and almost before it reached the floor he had extinguished the six lights by the easy process of flinging the table-cloth over them.

By this action, the work of not more than four seconds, the room was plunged into sudden darkness.

"Look to the door," screamed the Ambassador.

Tumbling over each other in their haste the five raced back, and ranged themselves in fighting order before the door, the only exit from the room.

In the dead silence that followed, the Ambassador and his satellites strained eye and ear, endeavouring to discover by sight or sound what Wilfrid's next movement would be.

They had not long to wait.

From the far end of the apartment there suddenly darted intermittent rays of light, apparently caused by the wavering of a heavy curtain that draped one of the windows overlooking the canal. Simultaneously all were seized with the same idea. Wilfrid was going to —

Crash!

The sound was like that of a sheet of glass shattered to atoms by the impact of a heavy body, and was instantly followed by the splash of water.

“Good God! He’s leaped into the Fontanka, through glass and all,” cried the Ambassador.

Men falling into that shallow canal have been known never to rise again from its deep deposit of mud!

The Ambassador ran to the window, thrusting the heavy curtain on one side. Moved by a common impulse, the five men ran too.

The Ambassador unfastened the catch, flung open the window, and, with his body half out, looked down upon the water, whose surface had upon it a rippling ring that grew wider and wider each moment, a ring obviously caused by the fall of a body.

The watchers kept their eyes fixed upon the centre of this ring, waiting for Wilfrid’s head to appear. The circle spread outward farther and farther, till it became imperceptible to the sense of sight. The surface of the water grew smooth again; one minute passed, two, three, and still Wilfrid was not to be seen, nor any trace of him.

“By God! he’s gone! Caught in the mud at the bottom,” said the Ambassador in awe-struck tones.

“Still alive, dear uncle!” said a voice, coming from the direction of the door.

So deep was the amazement of the Ambassador and his lackeys at hearing the voice of one whom they had just taken for dead that for the moment they were powerless to do anything except to stare, vacant-eyed and open-mouthed, at Wilfrid’s smiling face, which in the dim light could be seen peeping in at them from the other side of the half-open door.

“I knew that crash would fetch ’em from the door.

Your attempt to imprison me, dear uncle, has cost you seven hundred roubles, for your marble Diana is lying at the bottom of the Fontanka. Well, good-bye! I'm off to that meeting!"

Recovering from their stupor, the five men, mortified at being thus fooled, rushed forward, too late, however, to repair their blunder.

During their three minutes' watch at the window, Wilfrid had quietly removed the key from the inner side of the room to the outer, and before his foes had time to reach him, he shut the door, locked it, put the key in his pocket, walked downstairs, and escaped safely to the street.

## CHAPTER XXII

### “THIS DUEL MUST NOT BE”

WILFRID'S statement that he would face the Czar in duel was no boast, but who should be his second?

Having no very high opinion of the Czar's honour, Wilfrid considered it advisable to have a friendly witness to see fair play. But who would care to be his companion in a venture so perilous? He rapidly ran over in his mind the limited circle of friends, or rather of acquaintances, he had made in St. Petersburg, and knew full well there was not one upon whose spirit he could rely. Second the Czar's adversary! The very idea would take away their breath.

Without knowing it he had stopped short before the French Embassy, a fact of which he was made aware by observing a covered carriage whose panels bore the armorial device of the Marquis de Vacluse.

A moment afterwards the French Ambassador appeared, descending the steps of his mansion.

“Ah!” murmured Wilfrid, an idea striking him. “Perhaps M. de Vacluse can recommend a man bold enough to act as my second.”

The Marquis, about to step into his carriage, stopped on seeing Wilfrid, and advanced with outstretched hand.

“I must apologise,” said Wilfrid, “for returning from the masquerade without the Baroness, but a grave event has called me away. Can you favour me with a word in private?”

De Vacluse led the way into the entrance hall, and thence into a small cabinet.

“To be brief, Monsieur, I have been challenged to a duel. It is to take place within four hours, and at some distance from St. Petersburg. At so short a notice I have a difficulty in finding a second, especially as I have

but few friends in this city. Can you recommend a gentleman, one of resolute courage, inasmuch as my adversary is a high political personage?"

"Supposing that I cannot name one?"

"In that case I must proceed alone."

"That shall not be. It shall never be said that a *seigneur* of old France was lacking in chivalry. Permit me to have the honour."

"The honour is mine; but will you not be compromising your own character as ambassador?"

"Hasn't Pauline told you what has happened? No? France has at the present moment no representative in St. Petersburg. Two weeks ago I forwarded my resignation to the Consulate. It was accepted, and my successor will arrive within a few days. My resignation," he continued in answer to Wilfrid's look of inquiry, "has no connection with politics. It has been made on purely personal grounds. I desire Pauline to leave Russia, and I see no other way of accomplishing my end than by leaving it myself."

While speaking he glanced keenly at Wilfrid, as if to mark the effect of his words, and seemed to derive satisfaction from Wilfrid's blank look; for, the Princess excepted, there was no one in St. Petersburg whom Wilfrid liked better than Pauline, and therefore he heard the news with deep regret.

"Your offer to be my second is extremely generous, but you will do well to refrain till you shall have heard the name of my adversary."

"A *seigneur* of France knows not fear. I am your second whoever be your adversary. A high political personage? Humph! One of the Czar's ministers, I suppose?"

"Higher than a minister."

"*Ciel!* Surely not a Grand Duke?"

"Higher than a Grand Duke."

The Marquis looked hard at Wilfrid.

"There is no one higher than a Grand Duke except the Czar."

"Incredible as it may appear, my adversary is the Czar!"

The Marquis showed surprise, yet that surprise was not so great as Wilfrid had expected. There was about him an air of satisfaction, as if he were pleased at the situation.

“ With what weapons do you fight? ”

“ With swords.”

“ And you are deadly with the sword, I understand,” said the Marquis. “ As most duels are caused by a lady,” he went on, “ I presume yours is no exception to the rule? ”

“ No exception.”

He begged for a little light on the matter, and Wilfrid accordingly gave a hurried account of the events that had brought him into connection with the Princess Marie, making no mention, however, of the compromising adventure at the Silver Birch. The Marquis was deeply interested, and — a puzzling point to Wilfrid — even pleased. He seemed to brighten more and more as the story reached its climax.

“ I thought I was well acquainted with all the personalities of the Russian court,” he remarked at the close of Wilfrid’s narration, “ but I must confess that this Princess Marie is to me an unknown person. And the duel is to be to the death? ”

“ So said the Czar.”

“ Then I hope you will kill him! ”

“ Monsieur! ” said Wilfrid, surprised at the vehemence of the other’s utterance.

“ I hope,” repeated the Marquis, slowly emphasising each word, “ that — you — will — kill — him! ”

“ You have suffered a wrong at his hand? ”

“ Not yet, but it is certain to come if his life continue. It were better for — for some of us that he were dead. Therefore, as I have said, I hope you will kill him.”

“ He mayn’t give me the opportunity,” smiled Wilfrid. “ Should I find myself his superior, I shall just show him what I *could* do with his life if I chose; but as to killing him, what would Paul — the Baroness say if I were to slay the Czar? Is he not her hero? But, monsieur, on reflection I will ask you to withdraw from this affair. Though Alexander may pardon my wounding him his



ministers may not prove so chivalrous. Should the Czar be brought home injured there will be a hue and cry for his assailants. Why should I imperil your life as well as my own?"

"In asking me to be your second you have conferred a high honour upon me. This affair is certain to be famous. We shall live in history — you and I. You see," he went on with a smile, "that vanity has something to do with my motives. Now, as your second, let me urge you to leave St. Petersburg at once, lest your uncle or Panine should communicate this matter to the police. The Czar they dare not meddle with, but they would not hesitate to seize his opponent. Did you tell your uncle the place of the rendezvous? You did not? And Panine does not know it? Good! Set off this minute. Take my carriage; it is drawn by my two fleetest horses. A little beyond the eighth verst-post you say? Ah! that is very fortunate, since near that same verst-post, but on this side of it, lives Ruric, the charcoal burner. He is one of Pauline's freed serfs. You have but to mention her name, and there is nothing he will not do to serve you."

"I do not understand."

"To meet the Czar you must be near the rendezvous, but not too near."

"Why so?"

"Supposing the secret of the rendezvous has become known, what more likely than that a band of Cossacks will be despatched to the spot to carry you off before the Czar arrives? Now this Ruric resides a little way past the seventh verst-post in a hut not visible from the road, which at this point is bordered on both sides by dense forest. He dwells on the left side of the road; the appointed glade, you say, is on the right. While you remained concealed within his hut, he can reconnoitre for you without exciting suspicion. Should he report the presence of police or soldiers, you will know that you have been betrayed, in which case you will do well not to show yourself. As for me, I will join you later, not leaving the city till the last moment to mark if anything suspicious takes place. When you are passing the

seventh verst-post Ivor will drive the carriage close to the trees, and when opposite the path spring out without stopping the carriage, and by following the path you'll come to the hut. Meanwhile, the carriage will drive on, returning to the city by a circuitous route, so that should any mounted spies be following, they'll be thrown off the scent. For the present, farewell, and good fortune attend you.”

With that the Marquis wrung Wilfrid's hand and accompanied him to the door, and having first taken a precautionary glance along the street he pushed Wilfrid into the carriage.

“ I am unarmed, monsieur,” observed Wilfrid. “ A sword would be —— ”

“ No, no! Don't play into the enemy's hand. They'll do no hurt to a nephew of the British Ambassador if you yield quietly. But offer resistance, and that'll be a convenient excuse for putting a bullet through your head. Your single sword will be no match for a dozen carbines.”

He whispered a few words of instruction in the driver's ear, and Ivor set off at the furious gallop common to all Muscovite coachmen.

“ So he intends merely to wound him,” murmured De Vaucuse as he walked slowly back to the cabinet. “ Ah, but accidents may happen! It were better for Pauline that he were dead. It is the only way to save her from —— ”

The sound of light footsteps came tripping along outside the cabinet, and the next moment his daughter appeared.

On seeing her father Pauline sprang forward to kiss him. Full of a pleasurable excitement, she did not notice that he gave her but a cold reception.

“ Ah! *mon père*, why were you not at the masquerade to-night to witness my triumph? See, I bring home the tiara given as the prize for the daintiest costume. Do I not look beautiful?” she added, placing the ornament upon her dark hair and glancing with pardonable pride at her image in the mirror.

“ Twere better if you were less beautiful! ”

There was in his words an intonation that caused Pauline to look hard at him as if she were trying to read his thoughts. He returned her look, and for a few moments they stood gazing at each other.

Pauline did not, however, seem at all disconcerted.

"*Mon père*, how grave you are! I will show you by and by that you have reason for joy."

"Pauline, my mind is made up. Within a few hours we set out for Lovisa."

"Lovisa! In Finland?"

"And thence to Sweden. You and I are leaving St. Petersburg for ever."

"For ever! That is a long time, *mon père*, especially when I have the best reason in the world for remaining in Russia."

"Your reason — I know it well — for remaining is the very reason that induces me to remove you."

A smile of triumph appeared on her lips.

"I fear that you misapprehend the situation. Nay, I am sure you do. When you hear all I have to say you will change your mind."

"Nothing that you can say will induce me to change my mind. You will set out first; I will follow later. Lord Courtenay will perhaps accompany us: at least, I will do my best to persuade him. It will not be safe for him to remain any longer in Russia."

"Why, what new piece of mischief has that knight-errant been doing?"

"This morning at eight o'clock he commits the most daring deed of his life."

Pauline elevated her pretty eyebrows in surprise.

"A daring deed! He did not tell me of it to-night. You are more in his confidence than I am. You have a story to tell, is it not so? Eh, *bien*, tell it me. See, I am listening. I am, as the English say, all ears."

"Had you returned two minutes earlier you would have met Lord Courtenay."

"What! has he been here?"

"He was in this room with a story that should interest you — you, perhaps, more than any other person," said

her father drily. "At the masquerade Lord Courtenay chanced to meet a certain lady."

"I was hoping that he would."

"A lady whose true name he has never been able to learn."

"Her reticence on that point is a high tribute to his sense of virtue. She knows very well that on his hearing it he would have no more to do with her."

"What! you know this lady?"

"My enemy. Siberia would now be my home could she have her way."

"Who is she?"

"That's a surprise I'll keep in reserve. You shall learn by and by. Continue your story, *mon père*."

"Do you know that this lady is loved by Alexander?"

"You should put that remark in the past tense," said Pauline with an odd smile.

"This favourite of the Czar was so gracious as to bestow a kiss upon Lord Courtenay, and, unfortunately for her, the Czar himself witnessed the act."

Pauline laughed softly.

"The very result desired by me," she said.

"You are pleased. Yes, I can quite comprehend your motive in wishing that this lady should forfeit the Czar's regard. You will not find the sequel so pleasing. The Czar and Lord Courtenay came to words."

"Over the lady! Strange, when matters were taking a course acceptable to all three! And I suppose that Lord Courtenay, so bold before Paul, was equally bold with Paul's son?"

"He did not know at the time that he was speaking to Paul's son, since Alexander would neither remove his mask nor disclose his identity. But Lord Courtenay has learned his name since."

"And what was the end of the affair?"

"The end comes this morning at eight, when the Czar and Lord Courtenay cross swords!"

In a moment Pauline's airy manner was gone. She rose from her seat, trembling in every limb, but sank down again apparently powerless.

"A duel!" she gasped.

"To the death! Such is Alexander's determination."

"A duel!" she repeated in hollow tones. "Between those two! Oh, it can't be! You say this to frighten me. Emperors don't fight duels."

"Alexander acted, perhaps, on the spur of the moment in giving a challenge to the finest swordsman of the day, but having given it he will keep his word."

"Lord Courtenay must be persuaded to withdraw."

"Pshaw! As well bid the sun not shine! That his opponent is the Czar lends added zest to the fight."

Pauline shuddered.

"He dare not kill the Czar."

"Not purposely, perhaps, but in the hot excitement of——"

"Speak the truth, *mon père*," interrupted Pauline with an indignant flash of her eyes. "Say that you are hoping to see the Czar killed!"

"That is my hope."

"Why?"

"Can you ask why?" returned the Marquis. "To preserve the honour of Pauline de Vaucluse. And that is the reason why I, her father, am acting as Lord Courtenay's second. Can he have a more suitable one?"

"Your daughter's honour was never at hazard," said Pauline haughtily, rising to her full stature and facing her father. "Do you think that I would ever consent to become the Czar's mistress? You doubt my word, I see."

Taking from her bosom a small scroll of parchment, she unfolded it, and held it before the eyes of the Marquis.

"Perhaps this will convince you. Here you have the reason why I have consorted so much with Alexander."

The Marquis took the scroll in both hands, which trembled with suppressed agitation. Though there was not much writing on the scroll he had to read it several times before he could grasp its meaning. And when at last its meaning *was* grasped, his face wore a ghastly smile, the half-believing, half-sceptical smile of the pauper, when suddenly told that he is heir to stores of gold.

"You see what a traitress I have been to your diplomatic policy? But you forgive me, *mon père*; is it not so? You give up Bonaparte from this day henceforth. The Bourbons must be your friends now as they once were."

"Can this be true?" murmured the Marquis hoarsely, lifting his eyes from the document to his daughter's face.

"There is the signature. You have seen it many a time, and should know whether it is genuine."

Bewildered, the Marquis sank upon a sofa. A new feeling stole over him as he contemplated his beautiful daughter — a feeling of admiration bordering upon awe.

"Then," said he, "who on earth is the lady whom Lord Courtenay met at the masquerade?"

"Did you say that Lord Courtenay has been here?"

"Yes."

"In this room?"

"Nowhere else."

"And didn't notice that?" said Pauline, pointing to a lady's portrait hanging upon the wall.

"My God!" gasped the Marquis, more startled than ever. "Is *that* the lady?"

"None other. Now you see why this duel must not be."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### WILFRID'S ABDUCTION

It was past five o'clock when Wilfrid sprang from the coach on the Viborg Road and disappeared down the narrow path that wound through a forest of pines, while the vehicle continued on its way northwards.

After a few hundred paces the path opened out into a little clearing, in the middle of which stood a rough log cabin, such as the Russian peasant raises with his own hand. Ornamental carving marked the eaves and door-posts, and on the straw thatch rested heavy stones, placed there to prevent the cottage from being unroofed by tempest.

The tenant was already at work preparing a pile of timber for charcoal burning. Wilfrid liked the look of the man, and felt that any trust placed in him would not be betrayed.

First hailing the fellow with a cheery "Good-morning," Wilfrid went on to speak of the Baroness Runö, at the mention of whose name the peasant's eyes glistened with a grateful light. It was clear that if he could do anything to serve her or her friends he would do it. So Wilfrid in a few words explained the object of his visit, without, however, mentioning the name of his august opponent.

"Now, good Ruric, you understand my position. The Baroness's father, who is my second, advised me to leave the city before him lest the authorities should stop the duel by arresting me."

"Surely, surely," nodded the man. "'Twas wise."

"To keep a clear head and eye I must have two hours' sleep. But while I sleep what is to prevent my enemies from coming upon me?"

"Little father, they shall not do that. I will keep watch for you."

"Good! Well, then, while I rest in your hut, do you from the shelter of the trees keep an eye upon the road near the eighth verst-post, and should anything suspicious occur come at once and rouse me. You shall have roubles for your trouble."

"It is enough reward for me," returned Ruric, "to know that I am serving a friend of the Lady Pauline."

He led the way into his hut, which consisted of one room only, with furniture of a primitive type. Ruric lived all alone, it seemed, having neither wife nor child.

Left to himself Wilfrid sat down upon a wooden bench and soon dropped off into unconsciousness.

He was roused from sleep by the touch of a hand upon his shoulder. Lifting his head he was startled to see, standing around him, nine men. Their flat features and peculiar dress seemed to bespeak a Finnish origin, a remark not applicable to the one who acted as chief, for he was a man of handsome and aristocratic appearance, middle-aged, and wearing a costume that might have belonged to a French gentleman of the old *régime*.

"You are Lord Courtenay, I presume?" said this gentleman, bowing politely and speaking in French.

"That is a name I never deny."

"I am Dr. Beauvais, physician at one time to his late majesty Louis XVI."

"And why this visit? 'They that be whole need not a physician —' You know the rest."

"Pardon me, monsieur, it is my humble wish that you accompany me to a carriage that stands hard by."

"And how if I decline to come?"

Dr. Beauvais shrugged his shoulders.

"Monsieur will surely not oblige us to use force?"

Force? Oh, why had De Vaucluse refused him a sword? With that in his hand he would have faced the nine. But without a weapon he was entirely in their power. Good-bye now to his hopes of a duel with the Czar! He saw that some one, friendly to Alexander, had got to know of the coming fight, and, with a view of preventing it, had sent these men to carry him off.



"Use force," he said, repeating the other's words. "That may bring trouble upon you. I am here to meet the Czar by his special desire. Remove me, and you make a mock of his majesty."

"It is because we know the nature of this intended meeting that we are here to prevent it."

"You are prepared to face the Czar's displeasure?"

"We are prepared to do the bidding of the person that sent us. Time presses; I must ask you to accompany me."

Vain would it be for Wilfrid to threaten Beauvais with the name of his uncle, Lord St. Helens. If the doctor cared little for an emperor, he was likely to care still less for an ambassador. Physical resistance was certain to end in his humiliation, at least in the hut; but outside in the free air it might be possible to break through the ring of his captors and escape by fleetness of foot.

But the doctor had read his thoughts.

"You must pledge your word of honour as an English gentleman that you will not seek to escape; that when in the coach you will raise no cry for help, make no sign to passers-by; nay, that you will not venture even to peer through the blinds. Of course, if monsieur, instead of travelling pleasantly and comfortably, prefers to be corded and gagged——"

Wilfrid gave the required pledge, adding, with a hard smile:—

"Lead on. At present you are master of the situation; ere long I may be; in which case, Dr. Beauvais, a mere apology will not content me."

The little procession moved out of the hut into the open sunshine, traversed the winding path, and came to the high road, where stood a covered carriage with drawn blinds. Wilfrid stepped into the vehicle, followed by the doctor only, who closed the door after him. It seemed that the eight men were not accompanying them, a fact that showed Beauvais' faith in Wilfrid's word of honour. The horses' heads were set in the direction of St. Petersburg, and since the carriage moved off without turning round, Wilfrid concluded that he was being taken back to the city. After half an hour's riding the sound of other

vehicles blending with the hum of human voices convinced him that he had now reached the outskirts of the capital. Noting the slant of the sun's rays as they came through the carriage windows he was of the opinion that the vehicle was going due west. If it continued in this direction long he would soon be out of the city again and in the district known as "The Islands," or delta of the Neva, a region of groves and waters, adorned here and there with bungalows. These islands, left in winter to snow and wolves, become, in summer, flowering and leafy paradises, the favourite resort of the fashionable world of St. Petersburg.

The coach stopped at last without having deviated much from its westerly course. Beauvais alighted, and Wilfrid following suit, found himself in a quiet spot upon the northern shore of the Neva, close to the water's edge.

Westwards, as far as the horizon, stretched an expanse of blue sea, the bay conducting to the island-fortress of Cronstadt, distant about eighteen miles. Southwards, and separated from them by a channel not more than a furlong wide, was a small isle consisting of green lawns and pine woods; and, rising prettily above them, a castle, built in true Gothic style.

Wilfrid recognised the edifice in a moment as being the original of the needlework picture that hung in Pauline's boudoir. He was casting eyes for the first time upon her island and Castle of Runö, the insular demesne that furnished her with the title of baroness.

A real old feudal castle, with Pauline for its queen, would have been welcomed at any other time; but, as matters were then, Wilfrid was possessed by a feeling of bitterness towards its fair owner, for it scarcely admitted a doubt that he had been carried off by her orders. On her return from the masquerade she had learned from her father of the intended duel, and had planned this abduction for the purpose of preventing it.

On the river bank, waiting for Beauvais and his companion, were two sturdy Finlanders in charge of a small rowing-boat. It would have been easy for Wilfrid to take to his heels; but, honouring his plighted word, he stepped

with the doctor into the boat, was rowed across the channel, and was soon treading the green turf of Runö.

Entering the castle, Wilfrid was led through several corridors and apartments, till his conductor stopped at last before a certain door, at which he tapped thrice.

"Come in," said a sweet and familiar voice.

Beauvais drew aside, and Wilfrid entered the room alone.

Of the size, character, and furnishings of this apartment, he took no note; his eye rested on one object alone, the figure of Pauline, the sole occupant of the room. She had risen to receive him, and stood looking somewhat paler than usual. Her half-smile of greeting died away as she beheld his stern glance.

"So it is to *you*, then, that I owe this abduction?"

"Am I not acting for the best?" she said, in a faint voice.

"I compliment you upon your new greatness," he continued sarcastically.

"My new greatness?" she faltered.

"Yes. If the Czar may not fight a duel when he is so disposed, then it is not the Czar that rules, but the Baroness Runö."

She looked at him with a sort of fear in her eyes, as if detecting some hidden meaning in his words.

"Do you know that you have made me lose my honour?" he continued.

"In what way?"

"You have caused me to break my word to be at a certain spot by eight this morning. My absence will be attributed to fear."

At this point Pauline's pent up excitement bubbled over in a quick agitated flow of words.

"You have no right," she cried, "to undertake this duel. A chance slip of your blade, and all might be over with Alexander. And how would you save yourself from death? Whither would you flee? To the British Embassy? Do you think that the people of St. Petersburg, roused to fury by the death of the Czar, would care anything for the law of nations? You, and the uncle that gave you protection, and all the English within the build-

ing, would be dragged forth into the streets and massacred. Think of others, if you will not think of yourself. The Czar, in condescending to waive his rank and to meet you in duel, is acting like a gentleman, but you are not acting as such in taking advantage of his condescension. Indifferent as to whether you kill Alexander, indifferent as to whether the Peace Treaty be signed, indifferent as to whether you plunge an empire into mourning, or cover European politics with inextricable confusion, you wish for the duel merely to boast of being the only man in history to cross swords with a Czar, merely to be talked about. Not honour, or truth, or justice, calls you to this duel, but sheer vanity, and vanity alone."

She paused, completely out of breath, with her rapid speaking. Never had Wilfrid seen her looking so angry; and he was fain to confess that her lifted hand, the unstudied grace of her figure, the sparkling of her eye, and the colour that burned on her cheek, gave a new aspect to her beauty.

"I want to be talked about?" said he, taking up her words with a feeling that he had been somewhat hard hit by them. "Well, and what if I do? Call it vanity, if you like. The poet will style it fame; the soldier glory; the statesman ambition. As to this idol of yours, this unclean thing called a Czar, the craven who shrank from punishing his father's assassins, who let a printed lie go forth to the world, who continued his father's war, and then made peace as soon as he heard the British fleet was coming — whether he be worthy of your fiery defence is a question I shall leave to the judgment of history."

At the word "unclean," the scarlet glow of anger on Pauline's face gave way to a deathly white. Wilfrid could see that her teeth were set, and that she breathed hard. Her look of anguish was so keen that he almost regretted his use of the word. And yet, was it not applicable?

She was silent for a few moments, and when she spoke it was in a humbler key.

"The one desire of my life, as you know, is to see the Bourbons restored to the throne of France. Alexander

has advanced a step in this direction by breaking with the First Consul, Napoleon; his next will be to declare war against him. If, then, Alexander should fall by your hand, and such accident *might* happen, that barbarian Constantine would be Czar, and then, good-bye to my bright hopes, for he favours Bonaparte. No, Lord Courtenay, you shall not imperil my plans. For this seizure of your person I have the sanction of the British Government —— ”

“What?” cried Wilfrid incredulously.

“That is, if Lord St. Helens be the representative of the British Government, as I suppose he is. I had a ten-minutes’ interview with him early this morning, and he approved this plan of mine.”

“He did, did he?” muttered Wilfrid, a little confounded to find that Pauline was acting with a sort of quasi-legality. “And pray, how long do you propose to detain me here?”

She hesitated; and then, adopting a gentler tone, she said, with a persuasive look:—

“Promise me—promise that you will give up all thoughts of this duel, and you are free now.”

“Such promise I will never give.”

“Then here you will remain,” she said firmly, “till you be of a better mind.”

“That answer cancels all friendship between us. Baroness, I have said my last word to you.”

With a look that cut her to the heart, he turned his back upon her; and then, seized with the sudden hope of being able to force his way from the castle, he made quickly for the door by which he had entered, only to find that it had been locked on the outside by Beauvais. He turned back just in time to see Pauline disappear through the only remaining door. Ere he could cross the room she had closed this door and turned the key in the lock.

Foiled in his attempt Wilfrid looked angrily round upon the place appointed for his detention. It was an apartment dainty with pictures and tapestry, with velvet carpeting and costly furniture. The bookcase contained the works of those English authors for whom he had once expressed a preference in Pauline’s hearing. Upon a

table was an epergne crowned with fruit of different kinds. Various sorts of wines glowed in decanters, and Wilfrid, reading the silver labels, saw in them another tribute to Pauline's memory. A box of fragrant Havanas was likewise to be seen. It was evidently the aim of the Baroness to make his captivity as pleasant as possible.

To avail himself of these luxuries would, to a certain extent, placate Pauline; for this very reason he resolved to abstain from them.

After a long and careful scrutiny of the apartment, with its barred windows, locked doors, solid walls, and flooring of oak, Wilfrid sat down to think out some plan of escape; but whatever shape the attempt might take, its execution must be deferred till night-fall. The numerous servants, moving in and around the castle, would make his flight in the face of day difficult, if not impossible.

His natural longing for freedom was intensified by the wish to see the Princess again, the desired of the Czar! As he contemplated his position, nameless terrors for her safety seized him. He was tormented with a mixed sensation of love and jealousy, fear and despair; in this mood he sprang to his feet again, and paced the apartment, inwardly raging against the Czar, Lord St. Helens, Beauvais, and above all, against Pauline, the originator of his present misfortune.

The grating of a key caused him to sink quietly with folded arms into a chair that faced one of the open windows, through which came a pleasant breeze.

He did not even turn his head to notice who was entering, but the rustle of silken skirts showed that the new-comer was a woman, and he supposed that it was Pauline. He would abide by his word, and treat her with silence.

Pauline — for it was she — suddenly stopped. The fruit and the wine had been arranged by her own hand; she saw that neither had been touched. She turned her eyes to the bookcase; not one volume had been lifted from its shelf. With a strange sinking of heart she realised that he would take no favour at her hands.

Though well aware that Pauline was standing by his

chair, Wilfrid took not the least notice of her, but continued to gaze fixedly through the window over the Cronstadt Bay, whose waters glittered in the rays of the afternoon sun.

"Lord Courtenay," she said, with an air of humility, very rare in her, "I regret that this — this state of affairs should have arisen between us. Promise that you will not seek to renew this duel, and I will let you go."

The colour of shame tinged her cheek as she spoke. What right had she to detain him a prisoner against his will? Even the sanction of that great potentate, Lord St. Helens, was proving but a sorry salve to her conscience. Her cheek paled again when she found that Wilfrid remained indifferent both to her presence and to her words.

"Give me your parole not to attempt escape, and you are free to wander at will through the castle and the isle."

There was no reply. With a fresh sinking of heart she recalled Wilfrid's utterance that he had spoken his last word to her.

"You are angry, I see; but I, too, have cause for anger in your resolve to do hurt to the Czar. Give me credit for good intentions. I am acting for the best interests of both parties. Why should two good men seek to slay each other?"

Still Wilfrid sat staring stonily at the sea.

Observing in what direction his eyes were set she drew near to the window, ostensibly to arrange a curtain, in reality to come within the sphere of his vision. It would be a pleasure if only she could attract his look. His glance fell on her form, apparently without noticing it; his eyes seemed to look through and beyond her.

Humiliated beyond measure Pauline turned away, and with a quick step quitted the apartment.

The moment she had gone Wilfrid allowed his hitherto grim face to relax into a smile.

"You are not so hard in grain as I thought, Mistress Pauline. You are beginning to feel remorse, and that remorse, if I err not, will work for my good."

Time flowed quietly on. The sunlight stole from point

to point along the tapestried wall, till finally it took its leave of the room altogether, and still Wilfrid sat in silent meditation.

Again the grating of the key and an opening of the door; and again Wilfrid showed his indifference by not turning his head.

This time it was two prettily attired maids who entered, each bearing a tray laden with hot dishes, which they proceeded to arrange upon the table.

"Will the little father be pleased to dine?"

The little father paid no attention, though being mightily hungry he had secretly to confess that the savour arising from the dishes was very appetising.

The maids repeated their words. Receiving no reply they glanced in surprise at each other, whispered together for a moment, and then withdrew.

"They will tell their mistress that the Englishman refuses to eat. She will come here again."

Nor was he wrong. Ere the lapse of an hour Pauline was again in the room, and saw that the repast was cold and untouched.

"You cannot live on air."

Wilfrid sat, the same impassive figure as before; to her eye it looked as if he had not moved a muscle since her previous visit.

She contemplated him with secret terror. This grim silence, the silence of one who seemed to have taken a vow upon him; this abstention from food, served vividly to bring to her mind an anecdote he had once told her of a certain Viking ancestor of his, who, enraged at some insult, went home, sat by his fireside, refused to take food, and so died! Was Wilfrid going to do the like?

Though secretly piqued, grieved, angered — there is no one word to describe properly her strange feeling — by Wilfrid's manner, she could not refrain from addressing additional remarks to him, remarks whose tenor showed an interest, and even a tenderness, in his welfare.

She might as well have talked to a statue. Animated by a spirit of despair she at last put the question point blank: —

"Lord Courtenay, will you not speak?"



No! he would not; and to hide her vexation and tears, she flung herself from the room.

"The woman is yielding," was his thought. "Her next coming will be to set me free."

An opinion that proved correct. From the moment when she had first locked the door upon Wilfrid, Pauline had been miserable. She could not see him mortified without being mortified herself. What her head bade her do, her heart bade her not do. All day long this struggle had been going on in her mind, and when night came the struggle was too great to be borne any longer.

The key turned in the lock, the door swung wide, and Pauline entered. With timid steps she drew near to Wilfrid.

"Lord Courtenay," she said humbly, "forgive me for carrying matters with so high a hand. It has been done with good intent, to avert bloodshed; but it — it pains me to keep you a prisoner. See! the door is open. My Finland henchmen are withdrawn. You are free."

Then, overcoming a sort of shame that had hitherto kept her from the act, she knelt before him.

"Say that you forgive me, for I — I have been most wretched all the day."

Hard indeed would have been the mortal who could have resisted the wistful light of her dark eyes when added to the pleading tone of her voice.

Moved by a sudden and natural impulse, Wilfrid took her hands within his own and carried them to his lips; and by that act Pauline knew that she was forgiven.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE FIGURE IN THE GREY DOMINO

"I HAVE tasted nothing all the day," said Pauline, "I could not eat while you were fasting; but now, if you will give me your arm, Lord Courtenay, you shall conduct me to a chamber below, where there is a dinner set forth for us."

Wilfrid, who received this news with a good deal of pleasure, for he happened to be terribly hungry, escorted Pauline to the room in question.

The two maids who were preparing to station themselves at the table, were dismissed by their impulsive mistress.

"Let me be your serving maid," she whispered to Wilfrid.

There was about her an odd yet pretty air of penitence, an air that gave place at times to soft laughter when some jest fell from Wilfrid; then, as if conscious that gaiety did not become her so soon after her ill-treatment of him, she would become grave again; and so, what with her obvious desire to please him, and what with her winning glances, the last trace of resentment faded from Wilfrid's mind.

He could not help thinking it strange that Pauline, who had evidently learned from her father all about the proposed duel, should betray no curiosity as to the lady that had caused it, but so it was; and, since she was silent on the matter, he himself maintained a similar reserve.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "if the Czar attended the rendezvous?"

"Not if he believed in the lie of Lord St. Helens."

"What was that?"

"A lie to which — what will you think of me? — I gave my sanction. At six this morning your uncle was to

repair to the Czar with the news that Lord Courtenay, having discovered his opponent's identity, had not only retired from the combat, but was travelling post haste to Narva, intending to take ship for his own country. In fact, it is your uncle's plan that you be kept here under my care while he arranges to have you shipped and carried off to England. And in so doing he thinks he is consulting your best interests. *My part of the plan,*" added Pauline, with a mock-mournful air, "has broken down. Now that you are free how do you intend to act?" she added, a little nervously.

"The Czar must learn that I have not played the coward. I shall go to St. Petersburg and somehow let him know that I am still in his capital, ready to meet him in duel, if he be so disposed."

Pauline sighed over Wilfrid's romantic obstinacy.

"The Czar will learn," said she, with a rueful little smile, "that you were spirited away by Pauline de Vaucluse."

"No, Baroness, no. I will suppress your name. You shall remain hidden under the title of a — a — ahem! a misguided patriot."

"You are not going to set off for St. Petersburg to-night, I presume, seeing that it is now past ten o'clock?"

"No, I'll defer my journey till the morning."

Pauline sat in silence for a few moments, and then an odd light came into her eyes, and she smote her forehead with a pretty little gesture.

"*Ciel!* how stupid of me!" she exclaimed. "Strange, is it not, that ideas the most obvious never seem to strike one at the time they should."

"And what," smiled Wilfrid, "is the obvious idea that you have overlooked?"

"That I need not have taken the trouble to imprison you when a sentence, one short sentence, would extinguish in you all desire for this duel."

She spoke with a confidence such as half-disposed Wilfrid to believe her statement true. But though pressed as to her meaning, she refused just then to satisfy his curiosity.

"I will explain in the morning. You have had gloom enough for one day. Let me not act the part of a kill-joy to-night."

The dinner being over, Pauline sent for Dr. Beauvais, — her steward, as well as physician — who, on entering, seemed surprised at beholding the two on friendly terms again.

"Now mind, sir," said Pauline to Wilfrid, with an air of mock command, "no duelling with Dr. Beauvais, for I hear that you threatened him with one this morning."

"Dr. Beauvais, as a loyal servant of the Baroness, is a man for whom I have the highest respect."

"Then, in that case," she smiled, "I can leave you safely with him. You will pardon my retiring, but I have not closed my eyes since the masquerade."

Upon her withdrawal Beauvais proposed a cigar, and the pair sallied forth from a portcullised archway.

"I did not expect to see a feudal-looking castle in this part of Europe," remarked Wilfrid.

"An architectural whim of the first Catharine," returned Beauvais. "Built in imitation of one in Livonia, that she had often admired when a peasant girl."

Before them in that faint, lovely twilight, which is the only night St. Petersburg has in the month of July, lay a smooth, verdant lawn, fringed by a dark pine-wood, whose vistas terminated in a distant shimmer of blue water.

"If you are hesitating which way to go," observed Wilfrid, "let us turn to the Silver Strand."

"Ah! Good! The view from that point is particularly fine."

It was not the view that Wilfrid was thinking of, but the remark overheard at the masquerade that the lady's fan that had dropped into the river would be carried by the current to this strand; and an unaccountable impulse came upon him to verify the statement.

Smoking and conversing, the two men strolled leisurely onward through a woodland path that finally opened upon a beach of glistening grey sand.

The view from it, as the doctor had said, was very fine, so fine that Wilfrid forgot all about the fan.

Pauline's island of Runö was situated near the entrance of one of the deltoid arms of the Neva. Standing upon the Silver Strand and looking eastwards Wilfrid had before him a long perspective of broad water, its shores on each side dark with woods of birch and pine. Amid this night of groves gleamed many a white villa, whose twinkling lights were mirrored in the water. The beauty of the night had drawn the dwellers forth; gondolas glided to and fro; the laughter of men and women, mingling with the sweet strains of the guitar, came, mellowed by the distance, over the smooth, blue water.

"A midsummer night's dream," murmured Wilfrid.

Turning to his companion he found that *his* eyes were set, not upon the river-view, but upon a part of the Silver Strand itself, and following the direction of the doctor's gaze, Wilfrid saw, some distance away, and a few feet from the water's edge, a recumbent figure bearing resemblance to that of a woman.

She was lying at full length upon her left side, her face being turned from them, lying in a somewhat singular attitude, Wilfrid thought; for both arms were extended behind her back in such fashion as almost to suggest that they were tied at the wrists; distance and the twilight prevented him from seeing clearly whether such were the case.

"One of the Baroness's girls asleep?" said Beauvais, taking the cigar from his teeth. "*Parbleu!* she chooses an odd hour and an odd place for sleeping."

Thinking to rouse her, he gave utterance to a shout, loud enough, one would have thought, to awaken the soundest sleeper.

The woman did not stir.

The doctor looked at Wilfrid; Wilfrid looked at the doctor. There was something weird in the sight of this lonely figure as it lay there, silent and motionless, in the ghostly starlight, with the river plashing faintly at its feet, above its head the night-wind sighing through the pines.

Strange that both men hesitated to take the few paces necessary to solve their doubts!

The doctor perhaps would have been puzzled to give

*his* reason. Far different was it with Wilfrid; he hung back from facing the truth. All the fear he had ever known, gathered up and sublimated into one tense, overwhelming sensation, would have failed to equal the dread that fell upon him at this moment as he discerned that the figure had fair, sunny hair and a costume whose silvery grey colour was scarcely distinguishable from the sand it touched!

What if it should be ——?

Suddenly the doctor, throwing away his cigar, set off at a brisk run in the direction of the figure, an action that caused Wilfrid to run likewise.

He was the first to reach the silent woman, and saw that her ankles and wrists were bound with cords. The face was hidden by a mask of grey silk that had lost its crispness, apparently by saturation in water, for it adhered to her features like a second skin. It had slipped downwards a little, so that the eyes and mouth were hidden.

Wilfrid stooped and lifted the mask.

And it was the Princess, cold and dead!

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE DOCTOR'S PLOT

WHEN Wilfrid saw the Princess manifesting every sign of death, there came over him that strange feeling that often follows a fall from a great height, a numbing of the limbs and a dulling of the senses.

He could hear the melancholy lap-lap of the water upon the sands and the distant strains of music, without understanding the origin of the sounds; he knew that he was supporting the head of the Princess, not because his arm felt the weight of what he was holding, but because he could see the arm performing the task; he knew that he was looking down upon a face, beautiful and still, but could not for the moment tell why the sight of this face should cause him to feel a gnawing pain at his heart.

As for Beauvais, he, too, looked quite confounded when the mask was lifted; indeed, his expression of fear at the sight of the dead countenance seemed somewhat out of place in a physician, especially in one who, having lived through the September Massacres and the Reign of Terror, should have grown familiar with death in whatever shape it came.

Wilfrid, wrapped in stupor, saw nothing of this strange perturbation on the part of Beauvais.

The latter, becoming suddenly conscious of his professional duty, drew forth a penknife, severed the cord that bound Marie's wrists, and applied his trained fingers to the pulse, while Wilfrid, dimly comprehending what the other was about, waited in a state of suspense more dreadful than any he had ever known.

"She is past my art," said Beauvais, in an awe-struck tone. He rose to his feet, and eyed Wilfrid curiously, as if wondering what effect the statement would have upon him. One might have thought that he knew something

of the relationship previously existing between Wilfrid and the Princess.

As Wilfrid realised the fell meaning of Beauvais' words, there broke from him a cry of anguish; his arm relaxed its hold, and the Princess's golden head slid gradually down on his arm to the sands again.

Brought by the swift-flowing river to the Silver Strand, she must have reached it alive, for the body was too high upon the beach to have been cast there by the current.

"Syncope!" murmured Beauvais. "The joy of having escaped from the waters proved too much for her, and she dropped dead upon the sands."

Wilfrid, who had never once removed his eyes from the Princess's face, suddenly thrilled with a new sensation. For the first time in his life he found it a struggle to speak. He could get his words out only in husky, staccato tones.

"Doctor . . . she's . . . not . . . dead . . . I . . . saw . . . this eyelid . . . quiver."

Beauvais dropped like a stone upon his knees, lifted the lid, and scrutinised the eye while holding her pulse again.

"The *rigor mortis*, and yet not dead? Catalepsy, by heaven!" he cried. "She's just rousing from it. There's life in her. But — but, it may ebb. Brandy, hot water, chafing — without delay."

"Will it do hurt to carry her thus?" asked Wilfrid, tenderly lifting the still form.

"Not at all."

"Then in heaven's name run on first to the castle, and rouse the women-folk."

Beauvais required no second bidding; he set off with fleet feet, while Wilfrid, bearing the Princess in his arms, followed as fast as he was able.

At the castle-entrance he was met by a wondering-eyed maid, who, apprised of his coming, asked no questions but at once led the way to a bed-chamber that was being rapidly prepared for the reception of the patient. Two other maids were there under the doctor's directions, getting ready the necessary restoratives.

"Now, girls, to work!" said he cheerfully. "It's a



struggle betwixt life and death, and we're not going to let death be the winner."

Leaving the still comatose Princess to their ministrations Wilfrid withdrew to the corridor, and there met Vera, Pauline's chief maid, and, it may be added, confidante.

"My lady is in a sleep so sweet that it would be a pity to awake her," she observed. "Still, if you think—"

"Let her sleep on. Why should we disturb her? She can do no more good than is being done. Besides——"

But Wilfrid thought it best to let his next thought remain unspoken. He recalled the Princess's expressed aversion for Pauline, and though he doubted whether that aversion had any real justification, still it might tend to retard her recovery if, upon opening her eyes, the first person seen by her should be the one whom she regarded as her deadliest enemy.

So Pauline was permitted to continue her sleep in ignorance of what was happening.

While the doctor was busied in his work, Wilfrid, sitting in the corridor without, tried to picture the circumstances that had brought the Princess to the shores of Runö.

Though her clothing had felt quite dry to his touch, it bore the appearance of having been saturated, proof that the body of the Princess had been carried to the Silver Strand by the current of the Nevka.

That her plight was due neither to accident nor to attempted suicide was shown by the fact that her hands had been fixed behind her back in such a fashion as to preclude the possibility of their being self-tied. As she was still wearing her mask and domino, it scarcely admitted a doubt that, falling into the hands of the four hirelings, she had been flung into the river from the terrace of the Sumaroff gardens before the *bal masque* had come to an end.

Her white satin shoes, he had noticed, were deep stained with black ooze, matter not to be found on any part of the Silver Strand; hence her feet must have touched the bed of the river, once at least. As the Nevka is remarkably deep, it followed, in Wilfrid's opinion,

that her feet could not have descended so far, unless they had been attached to some heavy weight; this must have somehow slipped from its fastenings, with the result that the body of the Princess rose immediately to the surface. She was evidently versed, to a greater or less extent, in the art of swimming, for though bound hand and foot, and weighted by heavy clothing, she had contrived to maintain her breathing during a course of three miles. Swimming or floating as she best could, her head now above water and now below it, blinded by her mask that had slipped down over her eyes, battling desperately for life, she was borne along on the broad bosom of the rushing river till, by happy chance, she found her feet touching ground, and making her way through the lessening depth of water, ended her course by crawling up the shelving shore.

The sudden revulsion of joy at this escape from death proved too much for her; catalepsy supervened.

So, by a singular destiny, during the whole term of Wilfrid's captivity, and for some time before and after it, the Princess had been on this island, separated from him by a distance of less than a quarter of a mile!

While he had been anxiously wondering what had become of her, there, upon the warm sandy shore, the Princess had lain all day long, nature alone attentive to her. The sunlight had dried her clothing, the breeze had played with the tangles of her golden hair, but till night-fall no denizen of the isle had drawn near. As for passing boats, their occupants, unless they had come very near the shore indeed, would have been unable to distinguish the silver grey of her costume from the silver grey of the hollow in which she lay.

Such was the train of thought pursued by Wilfrid during the suspense of waiting.

By means of Vera he was kept informed as to the state of the patient. After a lapse of two hours a turn for the better was announced; each succeeding report became more and more favourable, till at last, his work apparently over, Beauvais himself made his appearance, his face expressive of pleasure at having come off victor in his wrestle with death.

"A tough struggle," he said, "but we've won it. Talk? No, she didn't talk much. Wanted to, but I enjoined silence. She's sleeping peacefully now, a natural, healthful sleep. She'll wake up as bright as a new silver rouble."

This was all Wilfrid wanted to know. With a sense of relief he bade the doctor good-night, and, under the guidance of one of the maids, repaired to the room appointed him.

Upon Wilfrid's departure Beauvais went back to the Princess's bed-chamber and dismissed the second maid, by which act Vera was left the sole attendant. Standing at some distance from the bed the doctor beckoned her to approach. She came forward on tip-toe. Keeping a watchful eye upon the sleeper, Beauvais said in a whisper:—

"I saw that you recognised her, and cannot sufficiently commend your prudence in keeping a silent tongue. Those who attempted her life may attempt it again, should they find that their plan miscarried. Hence we must exercise caution, and keep her name and whereabouts a secret. So far you and I are the only two to recognise her. The Baroness will make a third, and perhaps we shall have to admit Lord Courtenay into our confidence, but that's my business; yours is to be mute and to know nothing. It may be that our patient herself for reasons of her own will wish to keep her identity a secret, even from Lord Courtenay. In such case not a word to him. You may be quite sure that I should not give you this advice were it not for the good of the Baroness. Now show me where you have put our patient's clothing."

Vera indicated the place, and the doctor, walking thither, proceeded to examine the Princess's garments. Discovering a pocket within the domino, he placed his hand within and drew forth a sealed envelope, crumpled and discoloured. Its exterior was a blank.

"Now what does this envelope contain?" muttered Beauvais pressing it between his fingers. "I must know its contents. Perhaps it's the key to the mystery. It may — or may not — explain how she came to be in the

river. Vera, should our patient or Lord Courtenay question you on this point, you will be pleased to say that you searched the clothing and found — nothing." He moved towards the door as he spoke. "I will send you a companion, and as soon as our patient awakens let me know, for I must have a talk with her before the Baroness or Lord Courtenay sees her."

Having summoned another maid Beauvais betook himself to his own room.

"In the Baroness's service," he remarked, "everything is lawful."

And without the least hesitation he broke the seal of the envelope, and read the letter it contained.

"A very useful document," he observed with a smile of wonder and delight. "The one thing wanting to round off my plan and make its success sure."

He laid the missive aside. Its contents had set him thinking, and so absorbed was he that he let the hours pass without taking any rest.

A message coming from Vera caused him to repair once more to the Princess's bed-chamber, from which, after the lapse of half an hour, he emerged with a triumphant smile.

"Better and better!" he murmured. "Who'd have thought it? Why, there's little need to plot. Matters are taking of themselves the very course I want."

An hour later, when Pauline issued from her dressing-room, beautiful for the day, she was surprised to see Beauvais waiting for her in the corridor.

"A story for you, Baroness," said he. "One that you must hear without delay."

His air brooked no refusal, and so with a little shrug of her shoulders she took a seat within an embrasured window.

Her look of indifference vanished with his first sentence, and as he proceeded her interest finally passed into vivid horror.

"Consider who she is," concluded the doctor, "and then picture her lying alone on that shore for nearly twenty hours, and a whole castleful of people close by."

"Tied hand and foot, and flung into the Neva!"

Pauline gasped. "My God! This must be Alexander's work!"

"Not so, Baroness."

"But I say yes. Who would dare lay a finger on *her* except by his order?"

"Be calm, dear Baroness. Alexander is guiltless. The truth is, the assassins made a terrible mistake. Did you not tell me that she went to this masquerade in gold-brocaded silk? Just so! Well, when discovered by us she was wearing a grey domino of common serge, which is a clear proof that she must have exchanged her costume with some other woman, her aim probably being to conceal more effectually her interview with Lord Courtenay, and I strongly suspect that this other woman was one Nadia Borovna, of the Inn of the Silver Birch. It is easy to see how one woman might meet the fate intended for the other. In fact, the ruffians appear to have made so sure of their victim that they did not even remove her mask. This letter, written by the said Nadia and found upon the dress of the victim, will partly help to prove my theory."

Pauline took the missive and read it slowly.

"It must have been Baranoff's doings," she remarked, looking up from the letter, intensely relieved to find her suspicions against Alexander groundless.

"Seemingly. At any rate he is the one most interested in seeing that both the letter and its writer are destroyed. When he learns what a mistake his hirelings have made he'll be ready to cut his throat. The Czar will show him no mercy."

"I never believed in Lord Courtenay's guilt at the Inn of the Silver Birch," said Pauline, glancing over the missive again, "and this letter vindicates my opinion."

"True, but you'll be unwise to show it to him."

"Why?"

"Because if that event is allowed to receive an innocent interpretation, it will be still easier to explain away the kiss given by her at the masquerade. It was simply a reward for service done to the State. No, no, Baroness; it must be our duty to see that her return to Alexander is made an impossibility, and as matters are

at present the way is still open for a reconciliation between them."

"What, then, do you advise?"

"Why, this. Let her remain here for a time in concealment. She'll not object. She is evidently in love with Lord Courtenay; he with her. Let matters, then, take their natural course. Isn't it to your interest to promote this love affair?"

"Didn't you tell Lord Courtenay last night who she was?"

"I kept it a secret for — for reasons."

"Lord Courtenay is a man of honour. When he learns the truth his love will cease."

"Just so, and therefore we must not let him know the truth, till — till it be too late."

"You talk foolishly. How can he be kept any longer in ignorance?"

Beauvais smiled mysteriously and triumphantly.

"My dear Baroness, everything is working beautifully for our ends, so beautifully that I am tempted almost to think that Providence —"

"Providence!" she repeated significantly.

"I'll say fate, to please you. Fate must have had a hand in bringing her and Lord Courtenay under this roof."

"You are not answering my question. How can we keep him from learning her name, if she chooses to reveal it?"

"There's the point, the very point in our favour. She *can't* reveal it."

"In heaven's name, why not?"

"Because, though her intellect be otherwise as clear and as bright as your own — and that's saying a good deal, Baroness — it is accompanied by one defect. The awful shock occasioned by her sudden plunge into the waters of the Neva has had the effect of depriving her, not of her whole memory, but of a part of it — that part relating to her personal identity. She cannot recall her own name. You don't believe it, I see," smiled the doctor, noting her look of scepticism, "but you can soon test my words. Go and see your rival. She won't know you!"

## CHAPTER XXVI

### WITHOUT A MEMORY!

WHILE Pauline repaired to the Princess's chamber, the doctor went off to Wilfrid's room to acquaint him with the strange news.

Being new to mental phenomena of this sort, Wilfrid received the announcement with every token of unbelief.

"Do you mean to say," he asked in amazement, "that she cannot tell how she came to be in the Neva?"

"Has no recollection whatever of the event. Her mind is a complete blank as to her past: cannot recall the name of a friend or the name of any place where she has dwelt."

"In what mood is she. Sad?"

"Not at all. Smiles at her own perplexity — in fact, her loss of memory seems rather to amuse her."

"And how long is this state likely to last?"

Beauvais shrugged his shoulders.

"One cannot say. A week: a month: a year. Perhaps for the rest of her life."

"And you have no idea who she is?"

"Not in the least; nor has the Baroness. Am I justified in supposing from your agitation last night that she is the lady that set you and the Czar at feud?"

Wilfrid replied that such was the case.

"Ah! Then of course you give up all thoughts of this duel?"

"Honour calls me to it."

"But the lady's safety calls you from it. Now that, thanks to your uncle, the name of the Czar's opponent is known to Count Panine, your appearance in St. Petersburg will be instantly followed by your arrest and deportation to the frontier. In such case what help can you give the lady, should her enemies discover that she

is still alive? Her state calls for a protector, and your past relations with her entitle you to assume that rôle."

This way of putting the case modified Wilfrid's views, and — "Postponed indefinitely," became his decision on the question of the duel.

The Princess's loss of memory filled Wilfrid with extreme disquietude. When he last saw her she had been in a vein bordering upon love; this new state of mind on her part would now cause her to be ignorant of his very existence. He would have to begin his love-making all over again, and might — fail!

He breakfasted with the doctor, who, the meal ended, paid another visit to his patient, returning almost immediately with the good news that she was strong enough to be up and dressed.

So, as soon as word came that the Princess's toilet was completed, Wilfrid sought her presence.

Attired in a dainty sarafan of soft muslin, supplied from Pauline's wardrobe, she was reclining in a deep *fauteuil* with the Baroness by her side.

Although she had occupied so large a space in his mind Wilfrid had seen her but four times, and, by a singular coincidence, at night only. Her beauty underwent no diminution by day; on the contrary it seemed to be enhanced by the soft morning light. Her delicate pallor was the only evidence of her recent grapple with death.

It was the same Marie, and yet different. The pensive melancholy hitherto marking her aspect had vanished; a new and happier light glanced from her eyes; the passing of her memory seemed to have brought with it the passing of sorrow.

As Wilfrid recalled the bitter language which the Princess had applied to Pauline, it was with a somewhat odd feeling that he now beheld the two conversing with the familiarity of old friends. It was difficult to believe that the sudden return of the Princess's memory would be accompanied by hostility to Pauline again.

A slight movement on his part caused the Princess to lift her head and look at him.

It was with a sense of disappointment that Wilfrid met



her calm, quiet gaze. He had been fondly hoping that whomsoever else she might have forgotten she could not have forgotten *him*. But alas! her dark blue eyes betrayed no sign of recognition; their expression was simply one of curiosity to know who he was. Her manner differed in nothing from that of a woman meeting with a stranger, a manner that Wilfrid felt to be genuine on her part, and not assumed.

"This is the Lord Courtenay of whom I have been speaking," said Pauline.

Wilfrid bowed gravely. That he should need an introduction to her!

"I am sorry," smiled the Princess, "at having to meet you in the present circumstances. You must think me a very stupid person not to be able to recall my name and history; yet so it is. Try as I will I cannot carry my memory farther back than this morning. That I awoke a few hours ago in a certain bedroom of this castle is all I know of myself. Unless I have dropped ready-made from the skies I must have lived for twenty years and more, and yet of this long time I can remember nothing! Is it not absurd?"

So absurd that she broke out into a laugh; and one more sweet and silvery never rippled from woman's lips, at least in Wilfrid's opinion.

"The Baroness has been telling me that you can perhaps help to revive my memory, as you have seen me amid other surroundings."

"You have been known to me as the Princess Marie."

"Yes, but on looking into the Court Register," she answered, pointing to a book at her feet, "we cannot discover that there is a Princess Marie."

"Whose suggestion was the Court Register?" asked Beauvais, who had accompanied Wilfrid to the presence of the Princess.

"Mine!" answered Marie.

The doctor tapped his forehead significantly at Wilfrid to intimate that, however defective her power of remembering might be, that of reasoning remained intact. Indeed, but for her own confession no one would ever have supposed that any faculty of her mind lay dormant.

Princess Marie was now all eagerness to know on what occasions she and Wilfrid had met, a request that put him in a somewhat embarrassing situation. Was she to be told, for example, that he had once spent an hour in her bedroom? — that she had kissed him at their last meeting? and that she had always expressed enmity towards Pauline?

He looked at Pauline for guidance, who in turn looked at the doctor, while the Princess herself looked from one to another, wondering why there should be such hesitation in telling her a plain story.

“It will be as well,” said Beauvais, addressing Wilfrid, “to tell all you know, while the Princess follows you in mind, striving to recall the situations in which your story places her. Such effort will perhaps stimulate her memory.”

So spoke the hypocrite, hoping that her efforts would do nothing of the sort.

After a moment's reflection Wilfrid proceeded to relate not all, but as much as he thought needful, for the Princess to know; and it was with a strange sensation of pleasure that he found her eyes fastened on him with a wistful attention, that never once wavered during his recital. Leaving out Baranoff and his infamous proposal Wilfrid began with the bedroom incident; then went on to tell how he had been requested by her to paint his now historic picture, saying nothing, however, as to the reward he had demanded; and coming finally to the masquerade, he led Marie to suppose that the meeting was merely a formal one on her part to thank him for his services. As for the Czar and his presumed aim towards her, Wilfrid suppressed this part of the story altogether.

“How long ago is it since this fête in the Sumaroff Gardens?” she asked.

“Only two nights ago.”

“Only two nights ago!” she repeated with breathless incredulity. “And I have no recollection whatever of it!”

She closed her eyes, knitted her brows thoughtfully, pressed her forefinger hard upon her forehead, evidently

making a strong effort to recall the past, but could not succeed.

She was silent for a few minutes, pondering her mental state, which was not only inexplicable to her, but also to Beauvais, the student of psychology. For, observe the contradictory nature of the case: her struggle in the water had formed a dividing-line in her history; over this dividing-line she was able to bring into her new life all, or most, of the knowledge acquired in the old, and yet she was unable to bring with it the knowledge of her own personality. Why her mind, able to retain so much of the past, should become an absolute blank upon one point—there was the mystery that humbled, nay, frightened her. Better for her to lose, say, her knowledge of languages or of music, than to lose the knowledge of herself. A gulf seemed to separate her from her three companions; they could carry *their* minds back to childhood's days; for her life began with that morning only. Her previous history lay hidden behind a black curtain. A native from the planet Mars, new-dropped upon the earth, could not have felt less at home than did Princess Marie at that moment.

"What is this that has come upon me?" she murmured with fear in her voice. "If I lose my memory, what is to prevent me from losing my reason?"

"Now, you are distressing yourself unnecessarily," said the doctor, cheerily. "Why did I ply you this morning with so many questions upon this, that and the other topic, but to ascertain whether there is any ground for what you fear. And the result? My dear lady, if all the heads in the Czar's cabinet were half as sound as yours, Russia would be well governed. Your mind is perfectly sane, have no fear upon that point. As to your loss of memory—humph! I'll call it a misfortune, to please you. But there are many persons, Prince Ouvaroff for example, who would be glad to obtain an oblivion as complete as yours. Patience, my good lady, patience. Time will restore your memory."

These optimistic remarks, and many more of the same sort from Beauvais, combined with Pauline's caresses,

gradually brought the distressed Princess to a calmer state.

"I am justly punished," she said with a sad smile, addressing Wilfrid. "I have so long kept my name a secret from you that it is now a secret from myself. And you say I was found last night lying insensible upon the shores of this island? How did I come there?"

Pauline and the doctor could both have answered this question more fully than Wilfrid, but for reasons of their own they chose to be silent, leaving him to tell as much as he knew of the matter. To his story Marie listened with a troubled air.

"Have I enemies so malignant that they seek to murder me?"

"It would seem so," replied Wilfrid, adding for her consolation, "but since they must now look upon you as dead they will molest you no more."

"It is not for me," said Pauline, "to dictate your course of action, but in view of the recent attempt upon your life, you will do well to remain in hiding here, for a few days at least, until we learn what is best to be done. In the meantime you must look upon the castle and the isle as your own."

A proposal that found a warm seconder in Wilfrid, who foresaw the facilities it would afford him for pushing his suit with the Princess.

So it was settled that she should stay at Runö.

Now, although Marie's companions were three in number, it was to Wilfrid principally that her remarks were addressed, and Pauline and the doctor, well pleased to have it so, presently withdrew to another part of the room, and had a little *tête-à-tête* on their own account.

"Our plan promises to work smoothly," said Beauvais. "She favours him as much in the new state as in the old."

"Yes, but how long can we keep her here in concealment? She has now been absent from the palace for more than a day. By this time the Czar's agents must be swarming everywhere on the look-out for her. Not a spot, not a house, in and around St. Petersburg will remain unvisited."

"We must keep them from visiting Runö," said Beauvais.

"How can it be done?"

"Very easily. Will not Count Baranoff and his brother Loris, Chief of the Secret Police, have the direction of this affair? And have we not in our possession a letter containing matter enough to hang them ten times over? We must go at once to St. Petersburg and make this compact with them, that unless they are prepared to do our bidding we shall reveal their guilt to the Czar. And our bidding is that they instruct their subordinates to let this island alone. We need not shrink from stating the reason. Has it not been Baranoff's aim to make yonder pair fall in love with each other? What are we doing but pursuing the same plan, though for a different reason? Freed from the intrusion of police agents Runö thus becomes a sacred asylum, an enchanted garden, in which our two wards may make love to their hearts' content without the knowledge of the Court."

"And the end of it all?"

"When her love is sufficiently strong she will be willing to fly with him from Russia. Cronstadt harbour is distant by water but eighteen miles. A swift boat and a dark night, and they are on board a vessel bound for England."

"But should we in the meantime be detected in our plot by Alexander ——"

"What then? Will he be very much vexed when we are supplying him with the pretext he wants?"

Pauline sighed.

"Ah me! If only I had told Lord Courtenay yesterday who his inamorata is, it would have prevented me from beginning this course of deception. Not till night-fall did it suddenly occur to me that knowledge of this fact would have been the best way of making him cease from the duel; and then from very pity I refrained from the telling, knowing what pain the revelation would bring him, and now — now it is too late! What will he think when he learns — as learn he must — how basely I am deceiving him?"

"Pooh! what matters what he thinks?"

"Much — to me," she answered moodily.

At this point the pair found themselves appealed to by Wilfrid.

"Was there not a letter in the Princess's dress-pocket?" he asked, giving his reason for the question.

"I can of myself testify that there was not," said the unabashed doctor, "for I examined her clothing in the hope of finding some clue to her identity. If it were the object of the four ruffians to get hold of a compromising letter we can scarcely expect them to leave it upon her person."

A specious argument that answered the purpose intended.

The Princess here put to Wilfrid a very sensible suggestion.

"This Prince Ouvaroff, who as you say acted as my escort from some unknown place to St. Petersburg, must surely know who I am. Is it not possible to communicate with him?"

"You echo my thoughts," said Pauline. "Dr. Beauvais and I will go to St. Petersburg this very day for the purpose of seeing the Prince upon this matter."

This proposal on the part of Pauline was more acceptable to the Princess than it was to Wilfrid.

"Supposing," he whispered to Pauline, "that Ouvaroff suspects the motive of your questioning, and springs to the conclusion that Princess Marie must be at Runö?"

"Why, in that case," whispered Pauline in turn, "she would be restored to her old surroundings. But have no fear. I'll approach the matter so cautiously that he shall suspect nothing. I must not delay, however, lest I be too late, for he told me at the masquerade that the Czar was about to send him on a diplomatic mission to Berlin."

So, accompanied by Beauvais, Pauline went the same day to St. Petersburg, but made no attempt to see Prince Ouvaroff.

While the doctor was transacting some private business, Pauline visited first the British Ambassador, and had an interview with him, which terminated with these

words on her part: "Never mind how he was persuaded to give up the duel; you have my word for it that St. Petersburg and the Czar will see him no more. *That* surely ought to content you."

And it did, the Ambassador breathing a sigh of relief that the awkward business was over.

The bureau of Loris Baranoff, Chief of the Secret Police, was the next place to receive a call from her, and to judge by her smile as she quitted his office the result of her mission was a complete success.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE CZAR'S PORTRAIT

WHILE Pauline was absent on her mission to St. Petersburg Wilfrid was spending a pleasant time with the Princess, who, avowing herself to be quite well again, refused in defiance of the orders left by Dr. Beauvais, to remain any longer confined to her chamber, but went forth, under Wilfrid's escort, for a ramble around Pauline's insular demesne.

It was a still summer day, and the island with its pine-groves and green lawns lay like a lovely garden upon the bosom of the Neva, whose waters were tinted with the delicate sapphire of the sky.

Wilfrid was certainly a fortunate fellow. Resident at the fairest season of the year in a picturesque old castle upon an island lovely by day, more lovely perhaps by night, with a beautiful young Princess for his companion — what more could he desire?

The pair had reached in their rambling a blue tarn, so smooth and beautiful as to have received from Pauline the pretty name of the Fairies' Mirror. By the water's edge was a rustic seat, and here the two sat down.

"Lord Courtenay," said the Princess, turning her deep serious eyes upon him, "let me hear again the story you told this morning. I am naturally curious to learn all I can about myself."

Compliant with her wish Wilfrid repeated his narrative, finding a pleasure in the telling of it, partly because he loved to dwell upon everything connected with Marie, partly because it was pleasant to have so fair and interested a listener.

"You seem to have remembered my words very well," she murmured, noting that he had repeated her utterances with little or no variation.



"I trust you do not impute that to me as a fault?"

"And have you told me all? Have you kept nothing back?"

Just a trace of embarrassment appeared upon Wilfrid's face, but, faint as it was, it did not escape her quick glance.

"I can see it! No, do not equivocate. You are hiding something from me."

Wilfrid's manner confirmed the Princess in her opinion. What was he to do? Tell her that she was suspected of being the Czar's favourite? No, much as he hated deceit he would rather tell a downright lie than let a thought such as that rankle in her mind!

"Why do you hesitate to tell me all?" she asked.

"In telling all, I must tell of my own folly."

"Folly in which we were both participants? Yes? Then I must know it. It is not fair to hide my past doings from me. What was this folly?"

"Well, since you will have it. In asking me to paint *The Death of Paul*, you made offer of fifty thousand roubles, which I declined in favour of a sweeter guerdon."

"And that was ——?"

"Perhaps you will show as great anger now as you did when you first heard the proposal."

"Tell me, and you can judge."

"I declined to paint the picture except on promise of — a kiss from you."

"And what was my answer?"

"You gave the promise."

The colour stole over Marie's cheek. Was ever woman so unfortunately circumstanced as she — compelled to accept whatever this Englishman said about her? If he should go farther yet and say that she had promised to marry him, how could she refute his statement?

"Did I redeem my promise?"

Wilfrid assented.

The Princess's colour deepened. She longed to deny the action attributed to her, and yet — and yet — the story brought with it a certain relief to her perplexed mind. With drooping eyes, and speaking in a low tone, she said:—

"I am glad you have told me this. It seems to settle a — a certain question. Seeing that I must be twenty-three or twenty-four years old, Pauline has — we have both — been wondering whether — you must not smile — whether . . . I . . . am . . . married. And now I think I know. Were I a wife, a true wife, I could not have acted as you say I did."

Wilfrid thought this reasoning just, and was very glad to think it such.

"You speak," he smiled, "as if a husband would be a calamity."

"He might be — in present circumstances. You forget there are two Mariés, the old and the new. The new, through no fault of her own, may turn her face from what the old one liked. Would it not be dreadful to be claimed as wife by a man whose appearance, in my present state of mind, might fill me with aversion? And I . . . I . . . kissed . . . you? We were alone, I trust?"

"Humph! I regret to say that in the very act we were surprised by no less a dignitary than the Czar, who, for reasons best known to himself, appears to have been playing the spy."

Here Wilfrid proceeded to relate how he had been challenged by the Czar, and how the duel had been averted by Pauline's action; and to every part of the story Marie listened in wonder mingled with regret that she should have been the cause, however unwitting, of such trouble to Wilfrid.

Vainly did she try to force her mind to recall the incident in the Sumaroff Gardens, and as Wilfrid saw her knitted brow and pained look, and guessed their cause, he urged her to cease troubling herself over the loss of her memory, but to leave its recovery to Time's remedial hand.

He himself tried his best to divert her thoughts, and by resorting to a string of pleasantries, he succeeded after a time in moving her to smiles, and once or twice to laughter, laughter so soft and sweet as quite to captivate Wilfrid, and to make him wish — for he never for a moment forgot the person of his great rival — that the Czar had been present to hear it.

On betaking themselves to the castle again they found Pauline and Beauvais just returned from their visit to St. Petersburg. Great was Marie's disappointment to learn that Prince Ouvaroff had, on the previous day, left for Berlin, being sent thither on some diplomatic business by Alexander.

"So Princess Marie," smiled Pauline, addressing her guest, "must remain a mystery to us for some time longer. It is unfortunate, but patience: Time reveals all things."

As the two guests had not yet seen all that the castle contained, Pauline proposed to spend an hour in sauntering through its apartments, a proposal to which both readily assented, and so, with Beauvais accompanying them, they set out on the round; and as the doctor kept close to Pauline's side, it of course fell to Wilfrid's lot to escort the Princess.

As became a place that had once been the residence of an empress, and that had seen little change in its furnishings since her death, Castle Runö contained much to interest the new-comers.

With dramatic reserve Pauline kept to the last her fairest surprise, namely, the Hall of the Czars, a gallery so called because its walls were decorated with all the procurable portraits of the Russian emperors. To Catharine's original collection additions had been made by the castle's successive tenants, including Pauline herself, whose contribution was represented by two pictures, one being the likeness of the late Paul, and the other that of his son Alexander.

Of the many portraits the last-named was naturally the one to attract most attention. Very keen was the look bestowed both by Pauline and the doctor upon Marie as she gazed at the face of the reigning Czar. To judge from their manner one might almost have thought them imbued with the belief that the sight of this portrait would effect the instant restoration of Marie's memory, and they felt a sense of relief on finding themselves wrong. Certainly the Princess stayed longer before this portrait than any other, but her lingering was due to the story told her by Wilfrid. This

was the Czar who had challenged him to a duel for a fault—if fault it were—that was hers and not Wilfrid's. Thinking of this, she felt more than ever drawn towards the daring young Englishman who had gone forth to vindicate her honour with his sword. She contrasted Wilfrid's countenance with the Czar's as portrayed on the canvas before her, and unhesitatingly gave the preference to Wilfrid's. If the character of a man is to be learned from his personal exterior, then in her opinion Wilfrid's disposition was frank and open, Alexander's secretive and ambiguous. A similar conclusion forced itself upon Pauline, for she, too, had been making a mental comparison between the two men. Her sigh, noticed only by Beauvais, drew from him the whispered comment:—

“You are repenting?”

“Never!” she exclaimed emphatically.

“For the sake of *la belle France*,” murmured Beauvais encouragingly.

“What,” said Pauline, addressing Marie, “what is your opinion of Alexander's face?”

“It is a handsome one, but—but there is something about it I do not like,” she replied, speaking in a somewhat lower tone as if afraid that the portrait, overhearing the remark, might do something to show its resentment. “See how cold the eyes are! It—seems to be frowning at me,” she continued timidly. “What do you think of it, Lord Courtenay?” she added, turning to Wilfrid.

“Our hostess,” he replied, bowing towards Pauline, “has so high an opinion of Alexander that in her presence I hesitate to say anything derogatory even of his portrait.”

To this Pauline did not reply, but continuing to address Marie, she said with an odd smile:—

“Then I may take it that you would not like to be his wife?”

“His wife!” echoed Marie, opening her eyes wide, as if it had been seriously proposed to marry her to Alexander. “What a strange question!”—To judge by his quiet chuckle it was one in which the doctor

seemed to find some amusement. — "After what I have said of his portrait you can guess my answer. Besides, has he not a wife already?"

"A wife whom he is ceasing to love," remarked Pauline quietly.

"Why?"

"A childless empress is always a disappointment both to her husband and to his people. Hence the reason, according to this morning's newspapers, of her visit this week to the Convent of the Holy Madonna, not the first of such pilgrimages. There, prone upon the cold stone pavement, before the picture of Our Lady, she will spend nights of devotion, praying that her husband's desire, her own, her people's, may be answered. If Heaven will not take pity on her tears, then will the Czar grow colder and colder."

Marie shivered all over with sudden fear. If the Czar's alienation from the Czarina should reach a point such as to cause him to obtain a divorce, he would be free to set his love upon any woman he pleased. What if he had already made her his choice? What if his anger at the masquerade was prompted by a jealousy that saw in Wilfrid a successful rival? How could she, one weak woman, offer resistance to the will of the mighty Czar? She glanced again at his likeness, deriving from it a more distasteful impression than before. During her course round the hall she had surveyed more than twenty portraits, but none of them had exercised so strange a fascination over her as this one. It seemed to defy her to remove her gaze from it. Whether she stepped to the right or whether she stepped to the left, its eyes, like those of a living being, would follow her movements with the stare as of a person reproaching her for some wrong suffered at her hands; and the longer she gazed, the more this fancy grew upon her.

"Perhaps," said Wilfrid, in answer to Pauline's remarks, "it is as well that Alexander should have no children."

"Why?" asked Pauline, with an intonation so sharp as to show Wilfrid that he had said something

to offend her, and he wondered wherein lay his offence.

"There must be a touch of madness in his blood," replied he.

"Why *must* there be?" asked Pauline, looking almost as much concerned as if it were her own mental state that was in question.

"If the father Paul were mad is it reasonable to believe that the son Alexander can be altogether sane?"

"And so you think that if Alexander should have a son ——?"

"That son might develop the madness that may be dormant only, not extinguished, in Alexander. Such a fear would ever be present to the Empress. Picture her, in the long, slow course of months and years, hanging over her child, studying every look and every word of his, every mood and every act, watching and waiting for the fatal sign ——"

"That might never come," interrupted Pauline, in her voice a touch of contempt, very unusual with her, at least when speaking to Wilfrid.

"Quite so, but to a mother's heart this suspense would be almost killing, and the Empress Elizavetta would do well to consider this point."

These words seemed to put Pauline in a state of uneasiness.

"M. Beauvais," said she, "there is a portrait, in feature and in expression faithful to the original. Can you, as a physician and disciple of Lavater, read insanity in that face?"

"One cannot judge of a man's sanity merely from seeing his portrait," replied the doctor. "Let it suffice that Alexander, now in his twenty-fifth year, has so far shown not the faintest sign of a disordered intellect."

Marie was disposed to regard the Czar's quixotic challenge to Wilfrid as a sign pointing in this direction, but perceiving the theme to be a distasteful one to Pauline she refrained from expressing her opinion.

As they had now seen everything contained in the Hall of the Czars they withdrew. Marie could not resist the temptation of casting a backward glance at

Alexander's portrait, and observed that it seemed still to be following her with eyes of reproach; in fact, so strange an impression did this picture make upon her mind that she resolved for the future to keep out of the Hall of the Czars.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### PAULINE REPENTS

A MONTH passed, during which Runō remained untroubled by visits from police or soldiery, nor did anything occur to create a suspicion that the isle was under espionage.

This month had been a time of the purest happiness both to Marie and to Wilfrid. Their intercourse was not confined to the walls of the castle; they went out daily, keeping, for safety's sake, to the woods and never venturing within sight of the shore. These walks were necessarily circumscribed, but, as Pauline remarked, they suffered far less hardship in that respect than the voyagers on the deck of an East Indiaman.

The loss of her memory had ceased to trouble the Princess: nay, she was now apprehensive lest the revelation consequent upon its recovery should cause a return to her former life. With very little knowledge of that former life she had, nevertheless, a profound belief that it fell far short of her present happy state. At any rate it had been a life apart from Wilfrid, and Wilfrid was now the chief, if not the sole, object of her thoughts. It was no secret to her that she was loved by him, for though he had not said it, his homage showed his feelings as plainly as if he had spoken.

It was sweet to have such power over him; a source of pride to her that she should be preferred to all others. It was wonderful, for example, that he had not fallen in love with the beautiful Pauline, but it was certain that he had not. In his eyes Pauline was a friend—the dearest, staunchest friend, it might be—but still no more than that. At least, that is what Marie usually thought, but, once or twice, when she was sitting close to Wilfrid, Pauline had drawn near,



in her eyes a wistful look, as if yearning for the affection that was being bestowed upon another.

One day when Wilfrid was in the armoury teaching Beauvais some secrets in swordsmanship, Marie ventured to question the Baroness on this matter. And she came to the point without any skirmishing.

"Pauline, do you love Lord Courtenay?"

The Baroness gave a start.

"Have I ever shown that I do?"

"No," answered Marie, not altogether truthfully.

"Then why should you ask?"

"Because," said Marie evasively, "Lord Courtenay is so brave, so handsome, so — so winning — that's the word — that — that —"

"It is difficult for woman to avoid falling in love with him. Is that what you would say?" smiled Pauline. "Well, you see, it would be foolish to love one that does not love me."

"Ah, but you are not answering my question!"

"Would it please you if my answer were, 'I do love him?'"

Marie coloured and was silent.

"Ah! you are not answering *my* question," smiled Pauline. And then after a pause she continued:—

"Lord Courtenay is never likely to ask me to be his wife, but if he were to ask, my answer would be, 'No.'"

She spoke in a tone that carried instant conviction to Marie's heart.

"Why?" she asked simply.

"Because I have promised myself to another."

This was indeed a surprise to Marie—a welcome one, as her looks testified. Pauline was not her rival, then.

"I am willing," said Pauline, "to tell you his name, on one condition."

"And that is —?"

"That you will keep it a secret, especially from Lord Courtenay."

Marie thought it hard that Wilfrid must not be permitted to share this new knowledge with her.

"I should not tell the name, even to you," continued Pauline, "but that it will prove beyond a doubt that I am not aiming at the affections of Lord Courtenay."

This remark decided Marie; she consented to observe secrecy as to the name.

"Learn, then, that I am pledged to marry the Czar Alexander!"

If Pauline had said that she was pledged to marry the Archangel Gabriel, Marie could not have been more startled. Her bewilderment was at first too great for words. The fact that Pauline was not of royal blood did not make her statement doubtful, for had not the great Peter mated with a peasant girl? But — but —

"How can that be, when the Czar is already married?"

"An emperor can always find an archbishop willing to pronounce sentence of divorce."

Marie, unconsciously perhaps, drew away from the speaker.

"You are trying to steal a husband from his wife! You would put an innocent woman away in order to gratify your ambition! Oh, Pauline!"

There was on Marie's face a look that went directly to Pauline's heart.

"Listen, Marie, and see whether there be not some justification for me. It is some months ago since I first guessed Alexander's feelings towards me. Knowing the love of a wedded Czar to be dishonour I avoided all places where I was likely to meet him. But one night, quite by accident, we met at a masquerade. No, not the Sumaroff fête; this was one that took place a few days before Paul's death. — Before I had seen Lord Courtenay," she murmured to herself. — "He came upon me when I was alone; he held my hands in his, and asked why I had of late avoided him. Then all in a moment he uttered a flow of wild passionate words that — that — well, I will not deny it, they were sweet to me. But, remembering from whom they came, I strove to put them aside. 'Your love must be given to Elizavetta,' I murmured, 'and to her only.' Ah! if you could have seen his look of sorrow. 'Elizavetta,' he answered, 'has already taken to herself a lover.' If this be true, if the

Czarina be faithless to her husband, is he justified in retaining her as his wife?"

"You are dealing in 'ifs,'" replied Marie. "Have you any proof that the Czarina is false?"

"The Empress has been under espionage for some time; her conduct is very equivocal. When she has given clear proof of guilt her divorce will come."

"In other words you and Alexander are waiting for her to take the irrevocable step?"

"Something of the sort."

"And will she?"

"I think so."

"And you will be pleased when it is taken?"

Pauline was silent.

"She is gliding on towards wrong, and you are letting her! You can stop her by a word of warning, and yet will not! Pauline!"

Marie could not have spoken with more touching earnestness had she been pleading her own cause. Involuntarily Pauline turned from the look of disapproval in those grave, innocent eyes.

"If the Czarina," said Pauline — and none knew better than she the sophistical character of the self-justification she was now attempting, "if the Czarina knew that a hundred eyes were secretly on the watch for her fall, she would of necessity be virtuous. But why should she, more than other women exposed to similar temptation, be put on her guard? Respect for her fair name, the memory of her altar-vows, the imperial diadem itself, should each be a sermon to her. To warn her would be to put her into a state of enforced virtue. Why should Alexander retain a wife willing to go wrong but kept in the right only by the fear of discovery? No! let her be tried by the fire of temptation. She must fulfil her destiny, as I must fulfil mine."

The Princess was silent, not knowing very well how to refute what she felt to be sophistry. No wonder Pauline was anxious to keep the matter a secret from Wilfrid! The knowledge of it might lead him, with his sense of honour, to decline any longer the hospitality of a hostess so questionable in her ways.

"You may gain a crown, but you will not gain a hero," said Marie with a touch of scorn. "A man who sets spies to watch his wife, and, before his suspicions are verified, promises to wed another woman, cannot be a very honourable character."

In her haste Marie forgot that the same charge was equally applicable to her hostess. Pauline felt the point of the rebuke.

"I cannot imagine Lord Courtenay acting so," continued Marie proudly.

Nor could Pauline. Wilfrid was a man of very different stamp from Alexander.

"How can you trust one that acts so dishonourably?" continued Marie. "What guarantee have you that Alexander will fulfil his promise?"

"I have here his written pledge," said Pauline, taking from her bosom that same scroll of parchment whose contents had evoked such emotion on the part of her father.

This secret document would certainly have sent a thrill of amazement throughout the various European chancelleries, for it was nothing less than a statement to the effect that, in certain circumstances, the Empress Elizavetta should be divorced in favour of Pauline de Vaucluse! The document was signed, "Alexander Paulovitch, Czar and Autocrat."

That her friend Pauline might one day wear the diadem did not appear to afford much gratification to Marie.

"You aspire to a crown," she said. "Remember the fate of the Hungarian King Bela; his throne one day broke beneath him and its pieces crushed him in their fall—an apt illustration of the dangers attending a throne. It will bring you more sorrow than joy, especially if gained by the means you contemplate. Pauline, will you let me destroy this?" she continued, seeming as if about to tear the document in two.

The Baroness hastily recovered the scroll.

"Why," asked Marie, "did you not destroy it on first receiving it?"

"Why should I have done so?"

"To show your trust in Alexander. What sort of love

is it that needs a written guarantee? Pauline, you dare not burn it, and that very fact shows you have no real faith in him."

It was true, poignantly true. Though it had not appeared to her in this light before, Pauline began now to realise that the satisfaction arising from the possession of this document and the care with which she guarded it, were but so many proofs of distrust in Alexander. Nor could she help reflecting, at the moment, that she could have implicitly trusted Wilfrid's spoken word.

As Pauline contrasted the English peer and the Muscovite Czar, a pang of jealousy seized her that Marie should be the chosen of Wilfrid, while she herself, though the chosen of an emperor, could find little joy in the fact. The diadem that had looked so splendid, when viewed from afar, seemed a bauble now that it was well-nigh within her grasp.

"What have you been saying to Marie?" said Wilfrid later in the day, on finding himself alone with Pauline. "She is quite grave and pensive."

"She is wondering, perhaps, whether Lord Courtenay's attentions to her are to be interpreted merely in the light of friendship. Are all Englishmen so cold and tardy in their wooing? You love, and yet you hesitate to say so to her, who would be but too willing to listen."

"It is precisely because I *do* love her that I hesitate to say it. Her present state of mind is not normal. Supposing that with the recovery of her memory there should come a reversal of her sentiments towards me?"

"You are over-scrupulous," answered Pauline. "A return to her former state should not be so very unfavourable, if she voluntarily kissed you in the Sumaroff Gardens. The fairest woman in Russia is waiting for your love, and by your hesitancy you are adding to her suspense. See, yonder is your Princess taking her way to the woods. Go with her, and on your return let me hear that you have said the words that will gladden her heart."

Wilfrid went off, bent on following this advice, and

Pauline, knowing this, watched him, at her heart a pain such as she had never before known.

Turning, she saw Dr. Beauvais by her side.

"There was a time," she said to him, "when I hated her, or thought I did; you know for what reason. And now ——"

"And now?" repeated Beauvais as she paused in her utterance.

"And now, during the past month, she has won her way to my heart and this makes my task difficult. I have been telling her of my ambition, and she has been pleading prettily with me to save the Empress Elizavetta from dishonour, little thinking that she was pleading for herself! What a shock when she learns how I have deceived her! when she realises the guilt from which a word of mine could have saved her!"

"Her own fault. If blame is to be apportioned, she must take the initial share; for, to her encouragement of Lord Courtenay is due our present imbroglio. We are but helping her onward in the path she entered of her own accord."

"True," assented Pauline, glad to snatch at any argument in justification of her wrong-doing. "And to-day the goal is in sight, for to-day she entrusts herself and her future to his keeping."

"That's good," murmured the doctor. "I have all but completed the arrangements for their departure, and her flight will prevent the Empress Elizavetta from ever returning to her husband."

"The sooner they go the better," observed Pauline, "or I shall be repenting my share in the plot."

She turned from him and, entering the castle, proceeded to a little oratory which, originally Byzantine in character, had been altered by Pauline to a style more in harmony with Latin art.

The sunlight, coloured as it passed through stained glass, slanted upon an altar surmounted by an ivory crucifix, a symbol forbidden by the Greek Church.

To this place came Pauline in a devotional spirit. For, as Italian bandits put up prayers to the saints for a successful haul, and as Cornish wreckers of old went

straight from church to kindle beacons on the cliffs, so did Pauline attend daily to pray to the Virgin for the furtherance of a scheme that required for its success a continuous course of deception.

She was about to light a candle in honour of the Madonna, when a voice seemed to whisper, "Hypocrite!"

The taper dropped from her hand and she sank trembling upon a seat, her gaze wandering slowly around as if expecting to encounter some speaker.

For the first time she became conscious of the incongruity of her devotions. There broke in upon her mind a light that revealed her past doings in their true character. She was at the parting of the ways. If she must pray let her cease deceiving; if she must deceive, let her cease praying.

Her eyes, moving slowly round as if in the hope of receiving guidance from some object in the oratory, rested finally upon the western oriel, whose stained glass showed a divine face, lit up by the setting sun. She had seen this face many a time, but never before had it exercised so potent an attraction. The eyes seemed to be looking at her with infinite pity. Pauline thrilled.

Her intrigue for the diadem of empire was receiving a silent rebuke from a crown of thorns!

Vera, her face white and her eyes full of fear, came flying along the corridor that led to the oratory.

She tapped at the door once — twice — thrice.

Receiving no answer she entered and found her mistress in a swoon on the marble floor. Vera stopped short, her hands partly raised.

"She must have seen! But no! She could not from these windows."

She flew to Pauline, dropped at her side, and, happening by good fortune to have her *vinaiquette* with her, employed it with such effect that before long Pauline opened her eyes and smiled faintly.

"Dear Baroness, what has happened? You are looking like the dead."

"It is nothing," replied Pauline as she rose with the help of her maid. "Only a swoon."

Vera could see that for herself; she wanted to know its cause.

"Your coming has been so timely," observed Pauline, "that I must not scold you for disobedience. Tell me why you are here when I have said that I am not to be disturbed at my devotions?"

This question reminded Vera of her mission.

"My lady, if I tell my news you will swoon again."

Pauline's face became transfigured with a smile, such as Vera had never before seen, a smile that perplexed and awed her.

"Speak on, Vera," she said gently. "Nothing that you may say can alarm me now."

Vera hesitated, and then, taking courage from her mistress's manner, said:—

"My lady, the Czar is in the castle!"

To Vera's surprise the Baroness did not faint. True, she gave a great start, but grew calm again in a moment.

"Is this an answer to my prayer?" she murmured to herself. "An invitation from heaven to speak the truth and fear not?" Aloud she said, "What brings him here? Does he suspect that——?"

"I think not, my lady. He is taking a quiet sail on the Neva in his gondola with his equerries, Princes Ouvaroff and Volkonski, and has pulled up off Runö for the purpose of paying his *devoir* to the Baroness. He is in the entrance hall awaiting *me*, lady."

"Where is Lord Courtenay. and— and—?"

It was with a ghastly smile that Vera replied—

"Lord Courtenay is by the lake making love to the Czarina!"



## CHAPTER XXIX

### WOOING A CZARINA

WILFRID and his Princess occupied their favourite seat by the Fairies' Mirror. Marie was musing upon her kinsfolk — she supposed she had such — and, with a mind dominated by her love for Wilfrid, had come to the conclusion that should they now appear with intent to restore her to her former life she would be disposed to resist their action. Her life at Runö had been so happy that she felt that any change must be for the worse.

"You saw me in my old life," she remarked. "Tell me, did I seem very happy in it?"

"Truth compels me to say you did not."

"How did I appear?"

"You looked like — like — well, like the moonlight, beautiful, but sad."

"And now —?"

"Now I may liken you to — to the sunshine."

"Radiant and happy?" smiled she. "Yes, I feel so. The difference must be due to changed conditions," she continued, "and I am resolved not to return to the old state. What I lose by this resolve, I do not know; therefore, I do not grieve. I — heaven forgive me, if my act be a wrong one! — but I am bent on separating myself entirely from the past."

Prompted by a sudden thought, she rose to her feet.

"Which way does St. Petersburg lie?"

Wilfrid pointed to the east.

"St. Petersburg! city that was once my home, you are my home no more."

And she flung out her arms as if casting something from her.

"Friends and relatives, if such there be to me, you are discarded."

She repeated her action.

"My old life, farewell! I turn my back upon you."

Suiting the action to the word, she turned upon her heel and stood facing the west. Wilfrid being an artist could not help admiring the curves of her graceful figure. Her hat had fallen off and some golden rays glancing obliquely through her hair seemed to illumine it as with an aureole. Wilfrid saw in this last attitude a happy augury for his hopes; she was facing the west, and the west was the direction of his home.

Though her words and gestures were not in any way meant to influence Wilfrid, being entirely spontaneous on her part, they none the less appealed to his sense of chivalry. Her new state required that she should have a protector; and who should that protector be, if not Wilfrid?

"If you are really bent on severing all connection with your former life," said Wilfrid, as Marie again sat beside him, "we must not leave this spot without settling what your future course must be. For, to remain at Runö is to run the risk of being drawn back again into those old surroundings that you seem to dread. Now, I am going to suggest a plan that I trust will be for your welfare."

He certainly *had* a plan, a delightful one; the difficulty was to find courage enough to put it into words. A delicious sensation of expectancy stole over Marie. Her eyes dared not meet his.

"Well, what *is* this plan?" she murmured, after waiting for a while.

"I am beginning to think that you might not accept it."

"How can I say till I hear it?"

"Cannot you guess its nature?"

"I might guess wrongly. *Please* tell me," she said, stealing a witching glance at him from beneath her dark eyelashes, and encouraging him with a smile that showed a dazzling set of teeth.

Wilfrid still fenced with the question, making it a matter of wonder to Marie that he, who had never been

lacking in courage, should show such hesitation with her. How sweet to have such power over him! but how much sweeter it would be if he would only say the words she was longing to hear!

"You said just now," he remarked, "that you have been happy here. What has made you so?"

"Many things. The malicious joy of being alive, when my enemies think me dead; the beautiful summer air; the waving woods of Runö; the quaint old castle, with its books and antiquities; the sweet doing-nothing all day long; the sense of freedom and irresponsibility; above all, Pauline's kindness."

"Nothing more?"

"Your — your friendship."

"You put that last, I see."

"No, Lord Courtenay, I put that first," she said softly. "And then —!"

Who made the first movement towards the other neither ever knew. Certain it is that Marie suddenly found herself returning Wilfrid's passionate kiss and clinging to his embrace as if she meant never to part from it.

In the stillness that followed, she could hear the wild beating of her heart above the ripple of the forest leaves.

"And do you really love me?" asked Marie, breaking the long spell of silence.

"Do you doubt it?"

"No, but you have not yet *said* it. It will be sweet to hear it."

So Wilfrid said it, not once, but many times.

"And is this," she asked, with a significant pressure of her arms, "is this the plan you were speaking of?"

"Yes; that you will entrust your future to my keeping: that you will come with me to England and be the Countess Courtenay."

The sound of this name gave her a sweeter sensation of pleasure than any she had yet felt.

"And you will marry me, knowing so little of me?"

"I see you to be beautiful, and I know you to have a sweet, lovable nature — what more can I desire?"

He turned her happy glowing face upward to his own, kissed it again, and softly stroked her hair. She thrilled at his caresses, finding it the most natural thing in the world to nestle in his arms.

"I never realised till now," he said, gazing downwards upon her face, "the full force of the poet's words —

‘When I lie tangled in her hair,  
And fettered to her eye.’”

"What a pretty hand yours is!" he continued, taking it in his own. "Snow, thou art not so white, after all. Will you hold it up for me?"

And Marie the next instant found her finger encircled with a ring.

For a moment she was dumb with a new pleasure, all her soul sparkling from her eyes.

"Now I am linked to you," she said, kissing the gift.

"For ever. The ring was my mother's. The stones are amethysts. See how they mock the violet lustre of your eyes!"

Marie laughed softly.

"Am I the first woman you have ever loved, Wilfrid?"

"The first and the last. Why do you ask?"

"Because you seem to speak so well for a novice."

She accompanied her words with a smile, but the smile soon gave place to a pensive expression.

"Dearest, why that sorrowful look?"

"You have made me so happy," she said, "and yet, amid my happiness there comes a thought that fills me with fear. I am not mistress of my true mind. Supposing I should recover my memory and forget my present self, I — I —"

Wilfrid finished the sentence for her.

"You might not regard me in the same light as now? Is not that what you would say? Well, I am willing to take the risk. But ease your mind, dearest, on that point. I do not think that in your former state you viewed me with indifference. Is not your kiss at the masquerade a proof?"

Though Marie took courage from this last incident, she was still troubled with doubts of another sort.

"I have cast aside all former ties. I want to be yours, and yours only." She clung to him as if he were her life itself. "But supposing a father or a guardian should appear, forbidding our union?"

"They may forbid: they won't prevent!"

"Or one saying that I had betrothed myself to him?"

"He must resign you."

"You will not hand me over to any one who shall claim me?"

"Not even to the Czar himself if he should want you."

"Remember this promise," she said, raising her forefinger with a pretty air. "You do not know how soon you may be put to the test."

And so in happy talk they sat, drawing bright pictures of the future, till the coming-on of twilight reminded them of the passing of time.

"Shall we return to the castle?" said Wilfrid. "I am eager to present Countess Courtenay to Pauline."

Marie rose and took Wilfrid's arm. As she quitted the dell she cast a backward lingering look at the spot, now rendered sacred in her eyes by reason of Wilfrid's love-vows there.

They emerged from the wood to the open space surrounding the castle, from whose windows twinkled numerous lights, more numerous than usual, Wilfrid thought.

Upon entering the castle they soon learned the cause. A very distinguished visitor was beneath its roof. The Czar had paid the Baroness Runö the high honour of an unpremeditated visit, and was now holding converse with her in an apartment that, from the colour of its upholstery, was known as the Blue Chamber, while in the entrance hall his equerries Princes Ouvaroff and Volonski were discussing some excellent wines with Dr. Beauvais.

Wilfrid was one of the very few men who are not dazzled by titles, a sentiment arising, perhaps, from a magnificent faith in his own lineage.

"The Czar!" he whispered to Marie. "The very

gentleman I am wanting to see, since he can explain who you are. You do not fear to face him?"

"Not if you are with me."

As it would be contrary to Court etiquette to enter the Czar's presence unbidden, or to send a message into the Blue Chamber while he was conversing with the Baroness, Wilfrid's plan was to wait till that interview was over, and then, when the Czar should return along the grand corridor to the castle entrance, step forward and ask for the favour of a few words.

"And then," he remarked in philosophic vein, "we shall see what we shall see."

With a view to keeping an eye upon departing majesty Wilfrid chose as his place of vigil a chamber whose door opened upon the corridor.

Among other ornaments decorating the walls of this chamber were several sabres. Carefully inspecting these he selected one, and girded it at his side, while Marie tremblingly asked his reason for this act.

"One may as well be prepared for emergencies," he smiled.

Beneath the mask of his light and careless air Marie could see that he apprehended there might be danger, and she began to realise more vividly the nature of the coming ordeal.

What if the Czar, on seeing the man who had mocked him by not appearing at the rendezvous, should order his attendants or Pauline's to arrest Wilfrid? Wilfrid, she well knew, would fight for his liberty against any odds. Or supposing the Czar should be tempted to renew his duelling proposal, what could Wilfrid do but respond to the challenge? Or what, too, if the Czar, in the exercise of his legitimate authority, should insist upon her returning with him to St. Petersburg?

Wilfrid, true to the promise she had exacted from him, would endeavour to prevent this; but what could his single sword achieve against the power of the Czar? Her lively imagination began to picture scenes of altercation and fighting, of bloodshed and death.

Let the mystery of her origin remained unsolved for

ever if its attempted solution must bring danger upon the head of Wilfrid.

Her quick changing colour, the trembling of her hand within his, spoke eloquently of her fears.

Folding her within his arms Wilfrid tried both by words and caresses to infuse her with some of his own spirit.

"It is for you I fear," she said, as she clung convulsively to him. "Let us leave the castle till the Czar be gone. Nothing but harm will come of this meeting." All in a moment that frowning portrait in the Hall of the Czars rose vividly before her. If a mere picture could fill her mind with a nameless terror, what would be the effect of the living original? "Oh, Wilfrid, don't—*don't* make me face him!" she gasped. "I dare not—I don't know why, but I dare not! If he sees me . . . there is something . . . something at my heart . . . that tells me this embrace . . . will be our last! Let us . . . My God! he is coming . . . it is too late!"

## CHAPTER XXX

### BEHIND THE CURTAIN

THE door by which Wilfrid and Marie had entered was not the only one giving access to the room; at the opposite end was a second, partly open, and along the corridor leading to this came the sound of voices, two in number, a woman's and a man's.

Pauline and the Czar were approaching. A moment more and they would be within the room.

Marie's terrified air alarmed Wilfrid. She must be kept from the trying ordeal of facing the Czar. As it was too late, however, to escape from the room, he hastily drew her behind a curtain that hung across the entrance of an alcove, and, seating her in a *fauteuil* that happened by good fortune to be there, placed his finger upon her lips as a warning for her to be silent, a warning that was scarcely needed.

A moment afterwards the Czar and Pauline were in the room.

The drapery of the alcove consisted of two curtains, hung so as to leave from top to bottom an opening of about an inch in width, that enabled Wilfrid to see the Czar.

Tall and handsome, Alexander was endowed with a presence that, majestic in itself, was rendered more so by a grand and brilliant uniform. Wilfrid, despite his prejudice, was compelled to admit that here was a *man* as well as an emperor. His stately aspect seemed to breathe a sort of challenge to Wilfrid, upon whom there stole that elemental feeling that made the old heathen warrior raise his clenched fist to the skies with the cry of, "I defy thee, O Odin! Come down from heaven and let us try which is the better man!"



But Wilfrid's desire to try conclusions with the Czar was immediately lost in a new interest as he viewed that monarch's manner towards Pauline.

As she entered, her hand resting lightly upon his arm, he was bending over her with eyes that plainly spoke of love, though her reserved air showed that she did not return the feeling.

Wilfrid's gorge rose. Not content with making love to Marie, this imperial libertine sought to lure Pauline also to his arms! Was this the business of an emperor? Fortunately he seemed as little likely to succeed in the one case as the other.

On seeing the two entering, Wilfrid thought that the Czar's visit was over, and that Pauline was conducting him through this apartment as being the shortest way out of the castle. He was wrong. The two had come to this apartment for a private talk, for the Czar, having led Pauline to an ottoman, took his place beside her.

This was a development which Wilfrid had not anticipated. To continue longer in concealment would be to play the spy, yet remain there he must, on Marie's account, since there was no way of quitting the alcove except by revealing himself.

At first, with an odd sense of preserving his honour, Wilfrid tried not to listen, endeavouring to fix his attention on other matters. But the attempt was a failure; against his wish he was attracted by the words of the speakers, and as the dialogue grew, so, too, did his interest.

"You were praying in the oratory," said Alexander to Pauline. "Did my name mingle with your prayers?"

"Yes, Sire," answered Pauline gravely. "I prayed for you more earnestly than ever I prayed before."

The melancholy, seldom absent from the Czar's face since his father's death, brightened into a smile.

"And what was the petition on my behalf?"

"That your Majesty might have a right judgment," replied Pauline with a meaning plain enough to Wilfrid, though not to the Czar.

"Sire! 'Majesty!'" repeated Alexander, with what in a woman would be called a pout. "Leave this formal

style to ministers and courtiers. With you I am Sasha. Ah! shall I ever forget the night when first you called me by that name? Never did it sound so pretty as when coming from your lips! And you said that your name to me must be no more Baroness but Pauline. Do you remember?"

"I remember," she answered with a sigh.

Becoming conscious of this restraint in her manner, Alexander eyed her wistfully, failing, however, to divine the reason for her altered demeanour.

He was not much more than a youth and a somewhat simple-minded one to boot, but he had a high sense of his sovereignty, and it never occurred to him that the gallantries of an emperor could be other than acceptable to the object of them.

"Pauline, how beautiful you are!" he murmured after a moment's silence.

Time was when she would have thrilled at such language. But to-night his words had lost their old charm.

"Your Majesty must not speak thus."

"'Majesty' again? But I let it pass. Why must I refrain from speaking the truth?"

"You must reserve such language for Elizavetta only."

"Elizavetta!" said Alexander, his face darkening with a noble but mistaken scorn. "Elizavetta! A wife who from her wedding-day never loved her husband."

"I think your Majesty is wrong."

"Nay, I will prove myself to be right. Do princesses ever marry for love? Is it not their duty to take the suitor whom political interest prescribes? Princess Marie of Baden was only fourteen when her parents bade her prepare for her wedding. The Empress Catharine desired that she should be the wife of her grandson Alexander, then a youth of fifteen."

*Princess Marie!* The title dropped lightly from the lips of the speaker, but upon the woman behind the curtain it fell with a shock more startling, perhaps, than if it had been the voice of the archangel calling her to her final doom.

In one swift moment all the sweetness and brightness of life was extinguished for Marie by the ghastly revela-

tion that she was already a wife. What booted it that her consort was a Czar? Better, far better, so ran her wild thoughts, had she gone down in the waters of the Nevka, or died on reaching the Silver Strand, than live to see this sudden mockery of all her sweet hopes.

Her fingers were still locked within Wilfrid's, but as she realised that her love for him was now a sinful thing, that henceforth she must live apart from him, that she must be handed over to a husband, who, at that very moment was playing her false, a husband, who, in her present state of mind was a stranger to her, nay more, utterly abhorrent, there broke from her a low wail of anguish, which the Czar and Pauline would surely have heard had not their attention been absorbed in each other.

As for Wilfrid, he, too, was completely stunned, as much by the thought of losing Marie, as by the discovery that, purposing to deliver a beautiful princess from the attentions of a too-amorous Czar, he was really guilty of attempting to steal a wife from her husband. In the matter of the duel it was now clear that the right had been on the side of the Czar, a mortifying and humiliating thought for Wilfrid. Still, his position was a blameless one, as far as he was concerned, being due, not to intentional wrong-doing, but to ignorance.

"How could a girl of fourteen," Alexander continued, "be expected to love a man whom she had never seen? She married me because she was told to do so. Without a murmur she accepted a new religion, the Greek; a new name, Elizavetta. In the same way she would have accepted the Sultan and Islamism."

"In blaming her you blame yourself, who were equally submissive to Catharine's will."

"For her submission I blame her not, but for — you shall hear.

"We married and at first were happy: — at least *I* was. Her beauty, her sweetness, charmed me. Yes, I truly loved her till — till I discovered that I held only the second place in her heart."

"I think your Majesty errs. How did you discover it?"

"In the early days of our betrothal she spoke to me of a certain Englishman, Wilfrid Courtenay, and earnestly begged that she might be permitted to continue wearing a locket containing his portrait on the plea that he had saved her life.

"As heaven is my witness, I bore this man no jealousy: nay, I told her I would love him for her sake, that when I was Czar I would invite him to my Court and pay him high honour as one who had preserved for me a sweet and fair bride.

"But mark the sequel.

"One night—it is now about two years ago—I entered her bed-chamber at a late hour, and found her fast asleep. As I bent over her, admiring her beauty, a smile curved her lips, and from them came a word softly spoken. That word was—'Wilfrid'!

"I started back as from the hiss of a serpent. The Englishman was in her thoughts, his name was on her lips, his image within a locket lay upon her breast!

"That night was the beginning of my suspicions."

"Suspicions which Baranoff did his best to fan," interjected Pauline.

"Baranoff has been the zealous guardian of my honour. 'Twas he who bade me observe. And I observed. I watched and waited and found my suspicions verified. Her guilt at the Inn of the Silver Birch rests on the testimony of others, but at the Sumaroff Masquerade I had the evidence of my own eyes. In a retired part of the gardens I surprised her, wrapped in Lord Courtenay's arms, submitting to his caresses. Detected in the very act of guilt she durst not face me: she durst not return to the palace. She fled that very night. Lord Courtenay disappeared at the same time. Is it not plain that they went together?"

"Is that the talk of St. Petersburg?"

"Neither St. Petersburg nor the Court itself is aware of her flight. Would you have me make my humiliation the theme of every gossip's tongue? No! the matter is kept a secret. The public journals have received notification that the Czarina is spending a few weeks in religious seclusion at the Convent of the

Ascension. Meantime the police agents have received their orders—to make diligent search for Lord Courtenay. Where he is, there will Marie be found.”

“And when they are found?”

“For her, the nun’s cell; for him, the headsman’s axe.”

“Your Majesty is somewhat severe upon them. Seeing you have resolved that Plato shall pronounce your divorce, why should she not be left free to go with Lord Courtenay, if she will?”

“An ex-Czarina to re-marry! That were to put a premium upon adultery and set a dangerous precedent. Let her have her lover? Give her the prize she has been guiltily striving for? Let him parade Europe with an ex-empress for his bride, boasting how he had won her from Alexander? That were a humiliation too much to be borne. No! Death for him; for her, life-long penitence in a convent.—She has chosen to forfeit my affection and my throne; let me think no more of her.”

He took Pauline’s hand; she did not resist, but let her fingers rest passively within his.

“Pauline, you know our compact?”

She knew, and the memory of it troubled her.

“I have not forgotten,” said he, “your sudden start when first I confessed my love to you, your grave look, your pleading for Marie, your little homily on virtue: ‘I may be the wife, I will never be the mistress of a Czar.’ I loved you all the more for that saying. It was then I told you of Marie’s secret longing, and you agreed that if guilt should be found in her, and I should put her away, you would be my wife. Was it not so? To prove how much I was in earnest did I not commit my promise to writing?”

“You did, Sire. It is here,” she replied, withdrawing her hand from his and taking the document from her bosom. “Let me return it to you. Or, better still—”

She rose from the ottoman and, placing one end of the scroll to a lighted taper in the chandelier, let the parchment burn till the flame all but touched her fin-

gers. The charred fragment floated from her hand to the floor.

"It was a dishonourable compact. It shames me to recall it."

The writer of the document had watched her action with a troubled look.

"Pauline," he said gently, "in what have I offended? What has caused this difference in you? Why are you so cold to-day? Speak, as you spoke at our last meeting, or I—I——"

His voice trembling with emotion, he rose to his feet and, taking both her hands within his own, strove to look into her averted face.

"Nay, do not turn from me," said he. "It is a Czar that offers you his love. Among the royal princesses of Europe is there one but would thrill with pleasure to be as you are to me? All that I have is yours—palaces, gold, jewels. You will be above queens. At my coming coronation you shall sit beside me on the throne amid a blaze of glory, admired and worshipped by all. Ten thousand swords will flash from their scabbards, ten thousand of the noblest in the Empire will swear to shed their last drop of blood in your defence. My ministers shall be nothing to me; it is your sweet counsel I shall follow. Your policy shall be my policy. Do I not know that the dearest wish of your heart is to see the exiled Bourbons restored to the throne of France? That wish shall become a reality; at your word armies shall march to overturn this Corsican adventurer."

Pauline caught her breath at this last—of all his arguments the only one that had power to move her. But her hesitation lasted for a moment only. Strengthened by prayer, purified in mind, she had come forth from the oratory a new creature, armed with a power that enabled her to set aside the ambitious hopes that had dazzled her during so many months.

"It is useless to tempt me, Sire," she said firmly, seeking to withdraw her hands. "It must not be."

"Why not?"

"I will not wrong Marie. I will not deprive an inno-

cent woman of a husband's love, of an imperial diadem, to gratify my own ambition! Once — with shame I confess it — I desired her to walk in the ways of guilt; nay, I have plotted for that very end; her fall should be my stepping-stone to glory and power; but now my eyes have become opened. Equivocal as the Empress's conduct may have seemed, I do not believe that her love has ever seriously wandered from you. If your Majesty will sit calmly down and listen to me, I will so prove her innocence that ——”

The sentence was never finished.

Marie, overwhelmed by emotion, at this moment clutched at the *portière*, and the curtain fell.

The fabric, though light, made a swish that caused the Czar to turn his head toward the alcove. And there, clearly revealed in the brilliant light, stood Wilfrid and the missing Czarina!

## CHAPTER XXXI

“ I BELONG TO WILFRID, NOT TO YOU ”

THERE was a spell of terrible silence, followed by an impulsive cry from the Czar.

“ Marie ! ”

More dead than alive the Czarina leaned against the side of the alcove, her eyes set with a dreadful stare upon the face of the man whom she could not think of as her husband. To her he seemed a veritable stranger. And yet he had the right to take her from Wilfrid and do with her as he listed; and as her dazed mind realised this there broke from her bloodless lips a shivering mournful cry, like water reeds when thrilled by the evening breeze.

As for the Czar, his mind was filled with consternation, rage, and embarrassment. Though he saw before him his missing wife secreted in an alcove with her lover, he was conscious of the ludicrousness of posing as an injured husband, seeing that he was himself caught in the very act of making love to Pauline.

The latter was scarcely less agitated than Marie herself. The deception practised by her during the preceding month was now laid bare to Wilfrid. She had hoped, by making a voluntary confession that night, to dull the edge of his anger. Too late now! After her first hasty glance at the alcove she stood with averted eyes, fearing to meet his reproachful gaze.

Of the four Wilfrid was the least embarrassed, though he scarcely knew how to act in this dilemma.

By the law of God and of man Marie belonged to her husband. Yet a rapid review of the facts — in particular the Czar's illicit love-making — made Wilfrid hesitate to resign her unconditionally to a man whom she abhorred,



and who had vowed his intention of immuring her for life within a convent.

The Czar was the first to break the silence.

"An interesting tableau!" he said with a bitter sneer. "The guilty wife and her paramour hiding from the husband's gaze."

Wilfrid's eyes flashed dangerously, though he was compelled to admit that the accusation was natural in the circumstances.

"A word of caution, Sire. We Courtenays are not accustomed to take insults, even from emperors."

"Brave words from the hero that fled the duel!"

"There was no fleeing on the part of Lord Courtenay," said Pauline. "He would have met your Majesty, but when on his way to the rendezvous he was seized by my orders and brought to Runö."

"An act of treason!" commented the Czar, the autocrat asserting himself above the lover.

"It was the saving of your life," was Pauline's answer, a tacit assumption of Wilfrid's superior swordsmanship that galled Alexander's vanity.

"Stand aside from my wife!" he cried angrily to Wilfrid.

"Your wife! How can that be when but a few minutes ago you disowned her?"

The charge was true and the Czar could not deny it.

Scarcely knowing what to say or do in his embarrassment he looked hard at his wife, she at him. Usually so loving she now seemed a veritable piece of marble. It was impossible to understand so strange a change. Pauline in refusing his love had shown some pity for him, but Marie, in holding aloof, displayed not a trace of affection or regret; her manner was as though she had never known him.

As he looked, a new feeling stole over his heart. Four weeks' absence seemed to have made her more beautiful. With that inconsistency characteristic of human nature he now began to desire what but a short time before he had been willing to discard.

Whether this change of feeling was due to Marie's very coldness, or to Pauline's rejection of him, or to

jealousy of Wilfrid, or to all three causes working together, certain it is that Alexander found his affection, long-suspended, beginning to revive; if Marie had made but one step towards him he would have been willing to receive her. It was hard to believe that he had lost her for ever. He wished that Pauline and Wilfrid were not present that he might take her by the hand and speak the tender words of the old days; surely, then, her hardness would relent?

An impulsive step forward on his part caused the Czarina to cling shudderingly to her new protector.

"Wilfrid!" she gasped. "Remember your promise! Do not — do not give me up to this man. I shall die if he touch me! God forgive me . . . if I do wrong! I cannot . . . I cannot let you go. I am yours . . . yours only."

The rigid moralist, reasoning from a distance, will say that it was Wilfrid's duty to retire immediately in favour of the husband: but let that moralist be in the like situation, with a beautiful woman clinging to him, her lovely eyes appealing for aid, the perfume of her dress casting an intoxicating spell around her, and he would do as Wilfrid did, who, casting aside nice ethical consideration, silently vowed that Marie should not be led off against her will.

The Czar stood perfectly confounded at his wife's declaration.

"She calls him 'Wilfrid'! Says she is 'his alone'! My God! is this the language of innocence?"

"She is not in her right mind," intervened Pauline hastily. "She —"

But the emperor cut her short before she could make the necessary explanation.

"It is easy to see that. He has corrupted her nature."

"The Czarina," said Wilfrid, though it grated upon him to use the title, "has lived at Runö as purely as a vestal maiden. My word of honour upon it."

In view of Marie's attitude at that moment the Czar might be pardoned for declining to accept Wilfrid's statement.

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"Your word! Yours!" he retorted with ineffable disdain.

"Mine," returned Wilfrid. "And never yet did Courtenay speak falsely, or—sign a placard that his father had died of apoplexy!"

"By heaven, you die for that saying!" cried Alexander, clapping his hand upon his sword-hilt.

"Faith! 'tis hard if one must die for speaking the truth!"

"Get you from the side of that lady," said the Czar, his eyes blazing with wrath.

"Do not leave me, Wilfrid!" murmured Marie.

"The Czar bids, but the Czarina *forbids!*" returned Wilfrid. "Honour enjoins me to obey the lady."

"By what right do you constitute yourself her champion?"

"By the right of every man to protect a woman, even the wife of another, from injustice."

"Injustice?"

"You have threatened an innocent lady with life-long imprisonment in a convent. From such fate it shall be my duty to defend her."

Emboldened by these words, and moved by a sudden impulse, Marie kissed Wilfrid, placed her arms about his neck, and, facing the Czar, said, with a proud light shining from her eyes:—

"I belong to Wilfrid, not to you."

She was never dearer to Wilfrid than at that moment as she stood with her arms about him—to the Czar, proud and defiant, to him, all tenderness and trust. However questionable the nature of his triumph, Wilfrid would have been more than human had he not felt a thrill of pleasure. His dashing audacity could rise no higher: henceforth it must descend; he could never hope to surpass the feat of hearing an empress declare her love for him in the very presence of her husband.

Alexander drew his sword with intent to wreak vengeance upon the man who had stolen his wife's heart.

Pauline, trembling all over, threw herself in his way.

"No, no!—for God's sake—your Majesty—you are risking your life! Consider your rank—*Sasha!*"



WILFRED DREW HIS OWN BLADE AND ASSUMED AN ATTITUDE  
OF DEFENCE.

*"By Neva's Waters."*

*Page 299.*

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Putting aside her detaining grasp Alexander, his blade gleaming in his hand, advanced towards the alcove amid the screams of the two women.

With a movement, as swift as it was gentle, Wilfrid detached himself from Marie's arms, placed her behind him, drew his own blade and assumed an attitude of defence.

" Leave this apartment to me and to the Empress!" cried Alexander, pointing with his sword the way Wilfrid should go.

" If the Empress bids me," replied Wilfrid.

But no such bidding came from the white lips of the Empress, who had sunk half-fainting upon the seat within the alcove.

Wilfrid's words, the Czarina's attitude, put the finishing touches to the Emperor's fury. With a cry of " Look to yourself!" he rushed upon the defiant Englishman, but, on the very point of making a savage lunge, he stopped short; his sabre dropped; and then, his face flushing purple and his eyes rolling in their orbits, he fell prostrate on the floor.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### FLIGHT

STARTLED at the strange turn of events the three spectators stood, staring in doubt and fear at the unconscious figure. Was this collapse the stroke of death?

Before they had time to ascertain for themselves there came an insistent knocking at the door, as of someone attracted by the screaming.

Wilfrid walked forward and, opening the door just wide enough to ascertain who the new-comer was, beheld Beauvais standing without.

"The very man we want," he said, pulling the surprised doctor within and locking the door. "The Czar requires your aid."

Beauvais, being a wise man, spent no time in asking irrelevant questions. Hurrying forward he knelt down, and examined the body of the fallen emperor.

"An apoplectic stroke. Takes after his father Paul," said Beauvais, as he loosened the Czar's military collar and bade Wilfrid bring him a carafe of water.

"Is it serious?" asked Pauline.

"I think not, but one never knows."

"How long will it be before consciousness returns?" she continued.

"I cannot say. He may recover in an hour; in two hours; five; perhaps more. It is impossible to tell. Let me have help, Baroness."

With Wilfrid's aid Beauvais laid the Czar upon the ottoman, while Pauline summoned two maids to assist the doctor's ministrations.

This done she gently drew Wilfrid and the Empress to a small anteroom and, with downcast eyes and humble air, knelt before the latter.

"Your Majesty ——" she began.

"Majesty!" exclaimed the other. It frightened her to see Pauline suppliant at her feet.

"Yes, for you are in truth the Czarina ——"

"Is this a conspiracy to mock me, or is it really the truth? I cannot — I *cannot* believe it. It is so strange that I — that I should be — Ah! would to heaven that I were not! What do I gain by the change? — Would that I were dead!" she murmured with a look of unutterable anguish. "O Wilfrid, Wilfrid, we are lost to each other."

If Pauline ever felt remorse, she felt it at that moment as she contemplated these two, with whose affections she had wantonly sported for the sake of her own ambition.

"Yes, reproach me," she said, observing Wilfrid's grave eyes set upon her. "I deserve your bitterest censure. My only excuse is that it was done for France — for France. I have acted wickedly, yet I repented, but — but it was too late! And I, too, have suffered ——"

She swayed and would have fallen had not the Czarina held her up by the wrists. For a few moments they continued in this attitude, till the Czarina, pitying Pauline's unhappy look, stooped and kissed her.

"I forgive you," she murmured, raising the other.

"Alas! I cannot forgive myself," murmured Pauline bitterly.

An embarrassing silence followed, broken at length by Marie.

"If I am Empress," she said with a sad smile, addressing Wilfrid, "show your loyalty by doing my will. Aid me to escape. When the Czar recovers he will order your arrest and mine. I will not lose my liberty. I must fly at once."

Wilfrid was quite alive to the necessity for her immediate flight. Her relation with the Czar was, in his opinion, a question to be decided at some other time; for the present she must not remain at Runö while the Czar's anger and jealousy were still hot upon him.

Yet how could he give her aid when police and spies — as the Czar had said — were everywhere on the look-out for him? Should he be recognised, not only his own flight, but that of the Empress would be frustrated.



"Your Majesty," said he after awhile, "the only asylum that I can think of is the British Embassy, which we can reach by water along the Neva and Fontanka Canal, and thus perchance elude the police. Lord St. Helens will be honoured by your confidence. Within the Embassy you may remain concealed till some plan be devised for your escape, or till friends shall have effected a reconciliation between you and the Czar." — Marie shivered. — "Even supposing your presence at the Embassy should become known, you cannot be removed by force, nor can the Czar enter without leave. You will, in fact, be able to treat with him on equal terms."

Marie caught eagerly at Wilfrid's suggestion. To get away at once was her one desire. Pauline, too, approved of the scheme.

"A boat shall be ready at Silver Point within ten minutes," she said, and gave an order to that effect.

It now occurred to Wilfrid that to accompany the Empress would give a tongue to scandal, and confirm the Czar in his suspicions. He whispered this much into Pauline's ears.

"I have thought of that," she murmured, "and the Czarina's brother-in-law shall go with you, to see," she added with an air of shame, "that there be no more love-making between you."

"The Czarina's brother-in-law!" said Wilfrid.

"I refer to Prince Ouvaroff," explained Pauline, "who is now beneath my roof."

"Ouvaroff will be more likely to intercept than to assist her flight."

"Because he misjudges her. But I will undeceive him. Escort the Empress to the Silver Strand and wait there for me."

Wilfrid, taking the Empress under his care, stepped through the French window and set off for the appointed place, while Pauline made her way to the entrance hall.

Here the Czar's equerries, Princes Ouravoff and Volkonski, were whiling away the time over a game of chess.

Upon her entering the two arose and bowed.

"The Czar ——?" began Volkonski.

"Is taking a short sleep," answered Pauline. "Prince Ouvaroff, may I have a word with you?"

The Prince was only too pleased at such an honour. She drew Ouvaroff, much to Volkonski's surprise, from the entrance hall to the moonlight outside and began to whisper her tidings.

"*She* here!" muttered the Prince, confounded, "and preparing to fly."

"She has been living in concealment here since the night of the Sumaroff Masquerade. Now before you pronounce her guilty read this."— She handed him a letter. — "It is a confession written by Nadia, once maid at the Inn of the Silver Birch."

By the light of the harvest moon Ouvaroff rapidly ran his eye over the document. His face wore at first an expression of surprise that finally merged into joy.

"This establishes her innocence," he said looking up from the paper, "at least as regards the affair at the inn." And then, with a look of deep dismay, he added in a stammering voice, "And I — it was I who accused her to Alexander —"

"Well, you can atone for that error by helping her now."

"But — but," exclaimed the perplexed Prince, as he handed back the letter, "since she can now prove her innocence what need is there for flight?"

"Because the Empress has lost her memory, and — But we've no time to lose. Come with me and I'll explain matters as we go along."

He followed Pauline, and, as they went, she put him in possession of the chief events of the story, finishing her recital just as they reached the Silver Strand.

Close to the shore with which it was connected by a broad plank, lay a handsome gondola, *The Pauline*, capable of holding eight or ten persons. Within it and resting upon their oars were four sturdy Finlanders, ready to undertake any charge, however perilous, at the bidding of their mistress.

Marie had no more recollection of Ouvaroff than she had of the Czar, and gazed wonderingly at him as he knelt before her upon the sands.

"Prince Ouaroff," whispered Wilfrid for her enlightenment.

"Your Majesty," said the Prince, "I—I have done you a grievous wrong, for which I know not how to atone. If the taking of my life can afford you any satisfaction it is yours to take."

The Empress put forth her hand and raised the Prince. "Aid me to escape, good Ouaroff, and you are forgiven."

The Prince vowed that he would do all he could to further her wish, for he perceived that, till the recovery of her memory, it would be unjust and cruel to force her return to the Czar. For his part, zealous to retrieve his error, he desired nothing better than to die in her service.

"As I am of like mind with you," said Wilfrid, addressing Ouaroff, "what is to prevent us from being the best of friends as once we were?"

The Prince grasped Wilfrid's outstretched hand and thus the two, so long estranged, were at one again.

"Are you not coming with us?" said Marie to Pauline.

The Baroness shook her head.

"Have you the courage," continued the other, "to face the Czar's anger when he awakes and finds us gone?"

"I must try to repair the wrong I have done. I remain to act as conciliator between you and the Czar."

The Empress shook her head, kissed Pauline and, turning away, was guided across the plank by Ouaroff and Wilfrid. She seated herself beside the latter in the bow of the boat, while the Prince took his place in the stern and busied himself with the tiller. The oars dipped, and the next moment the boat was shooting forward into deep water.

As Marie silently watched the castle fade in the distance and thought of the happy time spent there, her eyes suffused with tears.

Wilfrid, too, was silent. He was glad of the presence of Prince Ouaroff and the four Finlanders; there could be no love-making so long as they were by. A beautiful woman is a beautiful peril and she becomes doubly per-

ilous when in distress. Wilfrid, in spite of the claims of honour, felt that he durst not trust himself alone with her, lest passion should usurp the place of reason.

"Wilfrid," said the Czarina softly. "How is this to end?"

"Your Majesty ——" he began.

"Majesty!" she repeated reproachfully. "It was Marie once."

"A treasonable word, for which I humbly ask your pardon."

"Pardon, for giving me pleasure?"

There was fire in Wilfrid's blood when she spoke like that, and he was gladder than ever that they were not alone.

"It must be our aim to do the right," he remarked. "There is something higher in life than love — there is honour."

"That means that you have ceased to love me," she said; in her voice a pathos that thrilled him to the heart.

"Your Majesty, I would gladly resign life itself to ensure your happiness."

"I know it and am grateful. But," she faltered sorrowfully, "that feeling is loyalty, not love." There was a brief interval of silence, and then she resumed:—

"The Czar loves Pauline; he will obtain a divorce and then — then — what is to prevent us from being — happy?"

"That were to justify men's suspicions of our relations. Your fair name would be gone. No, your Majesty. You are an Empress and shall remain such. The Czar will forget his fancy for Pauline when he finds that she is set against him. He shall believe in your innocence — how, I do not at present know, but all will come right in the end."

Deep down in her heart Marie was fain to confess the justice of what she felt was Wilfrid's final decision, but — the hardness of it! Without Wilfrid the future seemed black and joyless. What was the diadem of an empress without Wilfrid's love?

Under the vigorous strokes of the four oarsmen *The*

*Pauline* moved onwards at a fair pace, Ouvaroff keeping to mid-stream, the better to escape notice from the shore.

Heavy with thought the Empress took little heed of external things, but was roused from her reverie by a sudden whisper from Wilfrid.

"The Sumaroff Palace."

With some show of interest she turned her eyes towards the broad extent of gardens stretching backwards from the river and gazed at the long marble terrace from which, according to what had been told her, she must have been flung on that dreadful night exactly four weeks ago. For the hundredth time she thought how strange it was that her mind should preserve no memory of that event.

With his eye still upon the terrace Wilfrid observed a tall figure standing at the head of a short flight of steps leading down to the water. He had an impression that it was none other than Prince Sumaroff, a personal friend, and a very great one, too, of the Czar. He had just taken leave of a gentleman, wrapped in a long cloak, who had entered a small boat that was now being vigorously pulled by two men, not in a transverse, but in an oblique line, that would bring them within a few minutes across the bows of *The Pauline*.

As the gondola drew near, the two rowers in the other boat, without any apparent reason, suddenly changed their course. With a warning yell Ouvaroff swung the rudder round as far as it would go. All too late! A snapping of oars and a grinding crash of woodwork, cries of men and a woman's scream — and the next moment both boats turned completely over, their occupants being precipitated into the Neva, not, however, before Ouvaroff had recognised the cloaked figure in the other boat.

It was Count Baranoff.

Wilfrid, seated in the bow of *The Pauline* talking with Marie, had not noticed the proximity of the other boat till roused by Ouvaroff's shout. Turning his head and seeing the danger, he made a sudden clutch at Marie, but at that very moment came the shock of collision; her form eluded his fingers, and he went down into the water without her.

Being an excellent swimmer he rose at once to the surface and looked about for her. The two boats, keel uppermost, were a few yards away, moving off upon the fast-flowing current. Two of the Finlanders were clinging to *The Pauline*; the two others were struggling desperately in the water; so, too, was one of the rowers in Baranoff's boat. The five, unable apparently to swim, were uttering piteous cries.

These five were all that Wilfrid could see. There should be four more. Then, near by, arose the dripping head of Prince Ouvaroff. Like Wilfrid, a swimmer, it was no trouble for him to keep afloat.

"The Czarina!" he gasped, treading water and staring around.

"I'm looking for her. She hasn't risen yet."

Seeing that Marie, though tied hand and foot, had yet contrived to drift safely all the way to Runö, Wilfrid did not feel any alarm for a few seconds, but as the moments passed without sign of her, his easy feeling vanished.

Was she held a struggling captive, under one of the upturned boats? Hardly, he thought; so good a swimmer as she could surely extricate herself from such a position, unless she had been struck and rendered senseless.

Filled with this fear he was about to dash off after the two boats when a cry from Ouvaroff stopped him.

Looking where the Prince looked he saw a face, ghastly in the moonlight, the face of Arcadius Baranoff.

"Save me," he gurgled, his mouth full of water. "I cannot swim; I'm drowning!"

"The Count must take his chance," thought Wilfrid, and he was on the point of turning away when he caught a gleam as of floating gold locks beneath the hands of Baranoff. It was a sight that filled Wilfrid's heart with horror and sent a cry of vengeance to his tongue.

The coward Count was clinging to the struggling Empress! Unable to swim, he was seeking to gain a foothold in the water by resting his hands upon the head and shoulders of the Czarina, indifferent as to *her* fate, provided *he* might be rescued. But for this grip Marie could easily have made her way to the shore.

She slipped from his grasp and rose above the surface, fighting desperately for breath. A moment only was her white face visible; Baranoff had caught her again by the shoulders and the two immediately sank.

"The coward! He'll drown her!" cried Wilfrid.

A few strokes brought him to the place of their disappearance. Fearing that she might rise no more Wilfrid swam downwards without coming upon either of them. Unable to hold his breath longer he rose to the surface and saw Baranoff, a few feet away, drifting with the current, still clinging to the Czarina.

"I'm drowning! I'm drowning!" he screamed in a paroxysm of terror.

In another moment Wilfrid and Ouvaroff were by his side.

"Let go your hold, or I'll kill you!" said the furious Prince, and, clutching the Count by the back of his collar, he forced his head under the water, a diversion that caused Baranoff to relax his grasp, while at the same time Wilfrid seized the unconscious Czarina and holding her head above the surface, struck out immediately for the shore.

Prince Sumaroff, who had witnessed the catastrophe without being able to render any aid, descended the steps as Wilfrid drew near with his burden.

"I trust the lady lives," he said preparing to assist her from the water.

"If not, Russia will mourn its Empress," replied Wilfrid, revealing the Czarina's face to the gaze of the petrified Prince.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### RECONCILIATION

FOR three hours the unconscious Czarina lay as one dead; then life began slowly to return, news received with feelings of intense relief by Wilfrid and Ouvaroff, who, seated by the cheerful light of a log-fire—Prince Sumaroff, it seemed, hated the national stove—were discussing the situation.

“It’s satisfactory to know that Baranoff has gone to his long account,” remarked Wilfrid.

“It’s impossible to be sorry,” returned Ouvaroff, “though I would have saved the unworthy wretch if I could, but he sank like lead, and never rose again.”

The entrance of Prince Sumaroff put an end to this conversation.

“Gentlemen,” he said, taking a seat between them, “that the Empress has been spending a month of religious seclusion in the Convent of the Ascension, a story I have hitherto believed, is evidently untrue. You, I think, can clear up this mystery. As you shall see by-and-by, I do not ask this from idle curiosity.”

Thereupon Wilfrid frankly told the whole story of his dealings with the Czarina, beginning with Baranoff’s offer at Berlin, and ending with the events of that very night, Ouvaroff confirming him in such parts as he was able.

When Wilfrid had finished, Sumaroff rose to his feet.

“Pardon my absence for a few minutes. When I return I shall have a pleasant surprise for you.”

Wilfrid and Ouvaroff resumed their interrupted talk.

“And your suspicion of me ——?” said Wilfrid.

“Was the prompting of Baranoff. Long before I met you at Berlin he had assured me that the Czarina, the



Grand Duchess Elizavetta she was then, had a secret lover in some Englishman. He refrained from giving the name, however, till the night of that ball. 'To-night,' said he, 'I will point out to you the favourite of the Grand Duchess.'"

"And he did it," said Wilfrid, "by writing my name upon a card and sending it to you as we sat together. And you could believe him! Serge, my boy —"

Wilfrid stopped on seeing the Prince enter, leading by the hand a girl who seemed reluctant to come forward.

It was Nadia of the Silver Birch, as pretty as ever, but deadly pale and so timid that after one glance at Wilfrid she averted her eyes, and did not look at him again.

"Now, Nadia, tell your tale," said Prince Sumaroff. "It is the only way to set matters right."

So Nadia told how, bribed by Baranoff with the price of her own and her father's freedom, she had introduced the Englishman into the bedroom of the Czarina — whom she then only knew as a great lady. Immediately upon doing so she had apprised the Czarina's maids, who (themselves in the plot) were awaiting her summons. Then, having done the work assigned her, Nadia had fled to a room above, where the removal of a knot of wood in the flooring had enabled her to observe all that passed in the chamber below. She could thus testify to the lady's innocence and the Englishman's honour. Her father having died shortly afterwards, Nadia had come to St. Petersburg and entered the service of Prince Sumaroff. One day when she was on the Nevski Prospekt there rode by in state a lady, whom she recognised with fear and trembling, and who, she learned from a bystander, was the new Czarina. After a long struggle with herself she resolved to confess her misdeed and chose for the occasion the night of the masquerade. Putting her statement into writing and having incidentally learned from the Princess Sumaroff in what costume the Czarina intended to appear, Nadia had watched her opportunity to present the letter to her, saying no more about it than that its contents would exonerate her and Lord Courtenay from a false charge. The Czarina eagerly took the missive, but said she would

reserve the reading of it till she should have returned to the Winter Palace. " 'And,' she added, 'since I am known to you by my costume, I may be known to others, and therefore, good Nadia, in order that I may be *incognita*, you and I in this quiet nook here must exchange costumes for a time.' " It was agreed that they should meet again in the same spot an hour after midnight; and so the two parted, the Empress in the plain grey domino and Nadia in the rich brocaded silk. The Czarina, however, failed to appear at the time and place appointed, a fact that puzzled Nadia very much. The Empress during a whole month having taken no notice of her and her writing though the matter was one of vital interest to her good name that very day, Nadia, moved by some indefinable fear, had revealed all to the Prince and Princess of Sumaroff.

"And you are willing to tell this story in the presence of the Czar himself?" asked Ouvaroff.

Nadia expressed her willingness, even though the telling should end in her exile to Siberia.

"I will answer for it that no hurt shall befall you," said Ouvaroff. "The Czar will be more pleased than angry to hear your tale. But it's as well for Baranoff that he has gone to his account."

At a sign from Prince Sumaroff, Nadia disappeared.

"I invited the Count here this evening," he said, "and in Nadia's presence taxed him with his guilt. Unable to deny it and rendered craven by fear, he implored me to keep the matter a secret from the Czar. Moved by his entreaties, I said, 'Write me out a confession and I'll give you three days within which to get out of Russia.' I little thought when he stepped into the boat that the hand of Death was already upon him. Heaven, you see, would not let him escape."

"He met with a just doom," commented Wilfrid, "dying by the very death he had appointed for another."

For it was evident now that the four liveried ruffians at the masquerade were Baranoff's hirelings and that it was not the Czarina's life they sought, but Nadia's.

"I think," mused Sumaroff, "that we are now in a

position to effect a reconciliation between the Czar and Czarina."

"I would give much to see it," remarked Wilfrid. "Through me," he added moodily, "an empress seems destined to forfeit both husband and crown."

"You have nothing to reproach yourself with," said Sumaroff cheerfully. "You have acted throughout as an honourable man. Let us review the points in your favour. First, there's the affair at the Silver Birch. *That's* satisfactorily explained."

"The kiss in the garden witnessed by the Czar," said Wilfrid.

"Merely a reward for a great service to the State."

"She lingered very much over it."

"Still the Czar must overlook it. Doubtless," he added, with a twinkle in his eye, "he, too, has lingered considerably over the kisses he has bestowed upon the fair Pauline."

"The four weeks of love-making at Castle Runō?"

"To be pardoned, when the circumstances are considered. *She* had forgotten her identity; *you* believed her to be an unwedded woman. The Baroness can testify to the truth of this — is testifying, perhaps, at this very moment."

"All very good," returned Wilfrid. "But there's another difficulty — the greatest. The Czarina herself is opposed to a reconciliation. In her present state of mind, Alexander is an object of dread to her."

"He'll soon cease to be so," replied Sumaroff with a mysterious smile. "But the hour is late; let us to bed. If the plan I have in view succeeds, by this time tomorrow all will be in harmony again."

And so ended the most memorable day in Wilfrid's career, a day in which he had won and lost the love of a wedded empress! It was a pleasure to think, as Prince Sumaroff had remarked, that through it all his honour had remained stainless.

Late in the forenoon of the following day Wilfrid was summoned to the presence of the Czarina. At first he demurred. Better, he thought, for the interests and happiness of both that they should never meet again.

"You had better see her," said Prince Sumaroff, appreciating Wilfrid's hesitation. "The sequel will, I trust, prove the wisdom of this advice."

So persuaded, Wilfrid was conducted to a small cabinet where, the Prince retiring, he found himself alone with the Czarina.

She was seated, pale and stately, in an antique high-backed chair, her eyes grave and sorrowful. Her manner was in singular contrast with that of the previous evening. She was no longer the "Princess Marie" of his love-dream; she seemed to have waked up to the consciousness that she was an empress, between whom and Wilfrid was an impassable gulf. He had been hoping that she might forget her love for him, and yet, now that his wish was realised, it sent a pang to his heart.

"Be seated, Lord Courtenay."

Grimly contrasting this formal title with the caressingly spoken "Wilfrid" of the previous evening, he sat down and waited for her to proceed.

She set her beautiful eyes upon him and said in a tone approaching almost to awe:—

"Do you know who it was that came upon us last night in the Sumaroff Gardens?"

*Last night!* The event was distant by four weeks, yet she spoke of it as occurring but a few hours previously. For a moment Wilfrid stared blankly at her. Then the truth flashed upon him, and he realised the cause of her altered manner.

There had happened to her mind one of those phenomena which, by no means rare, are yet extremely puzzling to students of psychology.

The shock of her second immersion in the Neva had nullified the effects of the first, and had caused the return of her memory, with this defect, however, that the intervening period was a complete blank. She had no recollection whatever of the love episodes at Runö.

Wilfrid's silence, due to his surprise, drew from the Empress a reiteration of her question.

"Do you know who he was?"

"I shall be pleased to learn his name from you."

"He was my husband — the Czar, Alexander Paulovitch!"

She watched him keenly as if to mark the effect of her words. Wilfrid, therefore, endeavoured to simulate amazement.

"You are the Czarina Elizavetta?" he said in a tone of feigned incredulity.

"I am," she answered proudly. "And you have dared to address words of love to me, words heard by — by *him!*"

"He will surely pardon on learning that I was ignorant of your name and rank?"

"You he may pardon; will he forgive me — me, who listened to you? It was but for a minute, I know. For a minute only I was tempted to forget my duty to him, when I remembered how he was neglecting me for the smiles of Pauline de Vacluse. One brief minute, yet I fear it will be a fatal one for me!"

It was with a keen sense of anguish that Wilfrid marked her mournfulness.

"Why," she murmured, "ah! why did I withhold my name on first meeting you at the Silver Birch? It would have prevented many complications. But, believing that I should never see you again, I deemed it best to keep my identity a secret. And when I met you a second time, on that night in the Michaelovski Palace and would have told you my name, you spoke so hardly, so contemptuously of Alexander that somehow I shrank, foolishly shrank, from telling you that I was his wife."

"Your Majesty, had I known that, I should have refrained from all comment, still less would I have dared to exact a kiss from —"

At this point he was interrupted by the Empress, eager to learn the result of the interview between Alexander and Wilfrid.

"The Czar spoke to you," she said breathlessly. "What did he say or do?"

"He did precisely what I should have done if I possessed a wife and saw a stranger kiss her. He challenged me to a duel."

The Czarina's face showed signs of the liveliest dis-

quietude; in her agitation she half rose from her seat.

"Oh, but you did not fight! You have not accepted!"

"Your Majesty, do not distress yourself. The duel has not come off — never will. Now, may I make so bold as to ask your Majesty what strange event befell you after leaving me. How came you to be in the Neva?"

The Czarina trembled, partly with fear, partly with indignation.

"The recollection turns me cold. I, the Czarina, to be handled so! They could not have known who I was. They could not have meant to kill their Empress. I was seized by four men; one pressed his palm upon my mouth — the others tied my hands and feet. It was the work of a few moments; then I was lifted up and flung into the river. I have a faint recollection of rising to the surface, of battling for life; but everything at this point fades away into oblivion. It seems like a dreadful dream." She shuddered and added, "I am told by Prince Sumaroff that my life is due to you."

"I — I had a hand in saving you," said Wilfrid, referring to the second immersion, while she, of course, was thinking of the first — to her the only one. "I saw you floating on the water and brought you ashore."

"Then this will be the second time you have saved my life," she said with a sort of resentment in her tone. "It makes it harder for me to say what I *must* say. Lord Courtenay, you must leave Russia at once. You are anxious to serve me, I know. It is a cold saying, but the best service you can do me is to put a thousand miles between us. Your continuance in St. Petersburg exposes me to suspicion. You have been the means, though innocently, of setting the Czar against me."

Around her throat she still wore the gold chain with the locket attached, containing Wilfrid's miniature. She hesitated for a moment and then detached the locket.

"The original cause of all the misunderstanding," she murmured softly. "But for this Alexander, prompted by Baranoff, would never have begun to suspect me."

She held forth the locket though her eyes told Wilfrid that she parted from it with sorrow.

He rose, took the locket and remained standing, perceiving that her interview with him was all but over. That pledge of his ill-starred love, the gold ring that he had given her on the previous day, was not now on her finger, and he wondered what had become of it.

"You will leave Russia without delay?"

"Your Majesty, I will."

He had barely given this promise when he suddenly caught sight of a startling apparition behind the Empress's chair. Alexander himself!—no longer the furious being of the previous night, but mild and gracious of aspect: nay, with a half-smile upon his lips.

Secreted near he had heard every word freely and spontaneously uttered by the speakers unaware of his presence, and thus had received convincing proof that Wilfrid's relations with the Czarina had been, from beginning to end, of an honourable character.

The Czarina, apprised of strange happenings by Wilfrid's stare, turned to ascertain the cause and beheld—her husband!

Startled, she shrank back, hesitating, shivering, terrified, as she recalled the kiss and the embrace in the garden; then, re-assured by his tender and forgiving look, she gasped—

"*Sasha!*"

"Marie," he whispered bending over her, "I have come to take you back to my heart!"

Trembling with wild joy she rose to her feet and fell within the arms that opened eagerly to receive her.

"Plainly I'm not wanted here," thought Wilfrid, and he vanished from the apartment.

He had not gone far before he met Prince and Princess Sumaroff, to whom he gave an account of his interview and its dramatic termination.

They received his tidings with smiles of satisfaction.

"So my innocent little artifice has succeeded," said the Prince. "Early this morning I went to Runö and saw Alexander. The lapse of a few hours had made him more amenable to reason. The Baroness had already half-persuaded him of the Czarina's innocence. I brought him here and he listened to Nadia's story

and read Baranoff's confession. That convinced him. 'If you require further proof,' said I, 'why not secrete yourself and watch Lord Courtenay as he takes his farewell of the Empress? You will be able to judge by their language whether their relations have been guilty or not.' For I knew, Lord Courtenay, that you would say nothing to the Czarina but what would become an honourable man. You have vindicated my opinion of you, with the happiest results.

"All's well that ends well," remarked Wilfrid philosophically.

"But the end has not *quite* come," said Princess Sumaroff with a peculiar smile. "You must put the finishing touch to this reconciliation by making it impossible for Alexander's thoughts ever to wander again towards the Baroness Runö."

"And how can I do that?"

The Princess laughed sweetly.

"By making her Countess Courtenay, of course!"

Wilfrid started. Such an idea had never before occurred to him. How could it, with his mind full of Marie? But now that love had become part of his nature, who more capable of satisfying that sentiment than Pauline, in whom he had always taken an interest bordering on affection? Her recent course of deception, censurable as it was, had done little to diminish his regard for her, seeing that she had not sought her own aggrandisement, but the supposed welfare of France.

Princess Sumaroff drew forth a gold ring, set with amethysts, and gave it to Wilfrid.

"Yours. I took it last night from the Czarina's finger while she slept. She might have been asking awkward questions about it, and it will be better for her to remain in ignorance. Now, why not bestow this ring upon the Baroness? She loves you,—not that she has ever said so—at least to me. I judge by the warmth with which she speaks of your bravery, your honour, your good looks, your accomplishments, your heaven-knows what. It is my firm belief that you are the cause of her refusing an empress's crown when it



was within her grasp. Don't let her make the sacrifice in vain. The Baroness is walking in the gardens at this moment, miserable because she thinks she has lost your good opinion. Seek her, and on your return let us have the pleasure of greeting her as the future Countess Courtenay."

Wilfrid, his heart beating with pleasurable sensations, walked out into those gardens which four weeks before had been the scene of so much mystery and romance.

He found Pauline alone, walking on the terrace that overlooked the river. Her face, sad and pensive, brightened at his approach; and still more when she learned the result of his final interview with the Czarina.

"That is good," she murmured.

Side by side the two slowly paced the terrace in silence.

Wilfrid was thinking of the words spoken by Princess Sumaroff, Pauline of Wilfrid's coming departure. He had told her of his intention to leave Russia within a few days; she received the news with a strange sinking of heart. How desolate her future if deprived of his presence! Yet what had she done to deserve his companionship? Nothing! but much to forfeit it; and yet, if the true working of her mind could be known to him, he would see that she was not *quite* so bad as he perhaps thought her.

"And you have no word of reproach for me?" she said gently.

"It was wrong of you, but I am willing to forgive you on one condition."

She looked at him, uneasy in mind as to what his next words would be.

"The condition is that you consent to be Countess Courtenay."

Greatly daring, he put his left arm around her, and, taking her left hand within his right, drew her towards him.

He had need to hold her: but for his strong grasp she would have fallen to the ground in sheer amazement at words so unexpected.

Recovering somewhat, she strove to put aside his

arms, saying many times over, what she sincerely believed, that she was not worthy of him.

"Do you *really* love me?" she said at last, raising to him eyes in which tears were glittering.

"You are the dearest woman in the world to me — now," he replied, encircling her finger with a ring that had once adorned the hand of an empress. "It would not be true to say that you are my first love, but then, perhaps," he added, thinking of Alexander, "neither am I yours."

But Pauline repudiated this with warmth.

"I have never loved any one but you."

And with this answer Wilfrid was content.

**THE END.**



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