

riotous proceedings referred to in the notes which the ambassador of the French Republic has addressed to him this evening. The minister will report the whole affair to his imperial majesty, and entertains no doubt that the emperor will be very indignant at the occurrence. The ambassador may rest assured that nothing will be left undone in order to ferret out the perpetrators of this outrage, and to punish them with the whole severity of the laws, and with the sincere desire which the Austrian government has always entertained to maintain the friendship so happily established between the two countries."*

"Well, why do you dare to laugh, Hübschle?" asked Thugut, when he took the pen in order to sign the note.

"Your excellency, I am laughing at the many fine words in which this dispatch says: 'Mr. Ambassador, ask for your passports; you may depart.'"

Thugut smiled. "When you are drunk, Hübschle, you are exceedingly shrewd, and for that reason, I pardon your impertinence. Your rubicund nose has scented the matter correctly. The ambassador has demanded his passports already. But go now. Take this dispatch to the second courier and tell him to carry it immediately to the French embassy. As for yourself, you must hasten to the commander of Vienna, and take this paper to him. You may say to him, 'The gates are to be closed in order to prevent the populace of the suburbs from reaching the city. The Preiss regiment shall occupy the house of the ambassador and the adjoining streets, and fire at whosoever offers resistance or wants to raise a disturbance.' Vienna must be perfectly quiet in the course of an hour. Begone!"

Hübschle rushed out, and Thugut remained alone. He slowly and deliberately sat down in an arm-chair, and pondered serenely over the events of the night.

"It is true I have not wholly accomplished my purpose," he muttered, "but M. Bernadotte will try no longer to injure me. He shall have his passports to-morrow morning."

*The French ambassador really left Vienna in consequence of this riot. The emperor vainly tried to pacify him. Bernadotte persisted in his demands. He wanted the Austrian Government to restore the banner and to have it displayed on his balcony by a staff officer. In reply to these repeated demands, Thugut sent him his passports, and the legation left Vienna.—Vide Hauser, "German History," vol. ii., p. 180. "Mémoires d'un Homme d'État," vol. v.

LAST DAYS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

CHAPTER XXVI.

VICTORIA DE POUTET.

NEARLY a year had elapsed since the departure of the French ambassador from Vienna, but the rupture of the peace with France, so ardently desired by Minister Thugut, had not yet taken place. A strong party in the emperor's cabinet had declared against Thugut, and this time obtained a victory over the minister who had been believed to be all-powerful. This party was headed by the empress and Archduke Charles. Thugut, therefore, was compelled to suppress his wrath, and defer his revenge to some later time.

But although the dark clouds of the political thunderstorm had been removed for the time being, they were constantly threatening, like a gloomy spectre on the horizon, casting sinister shadows on every day and on every hour.

The merry people of Vienna, owing to the incessant duration of these gloomy shadows, had become very grave, and loudly and softly denounced Minister Thugut as the author and instigator of all the evils that were menacing Austria. In fact, Baron Thugut was still the all-powerful minister; and as the emperor loved and feared him, the whole court, the whole capital, and the whole empire bowed to him. But while bowing, every one hated him; while obeying, every one cursed him.

Thugut knew it and laughed at it. What did he care for the love and hatred of men? Let them curse him, if they only obeyed him.

And they obeyed him. The machine of state willingly followed the pressure of his hand, and he conducted the helm with a vigorous arm. He directed from his cabinet the destinies of Austria; he skilfully and ingeniously wove there the nets with which, according to his purposes, he wanted to surround friend or foe.

To-day, too, he had worked in his cabinet until evening, and he had only just now dismissed his two private secretaries, Heinle and

Hübschle. This was the hour at which Thugut was in the habit of repairing either to the emperor or to his gardens in the Währinger Street. His *valet de chambre*, therefore, awaited him in the dressing-room, and his carriage was in readiness below in the court-yard. To-day, however, the minister apparently wished to deviate from his custom, and instead of going to the dressing-room, he violently rang the bell.

"Germain," he said, to the entering *valet de chambre*, "no uniform to-day, no gala-dress, but my Turkish garments. Light up the Turkish cabinet, kindle amber in the lamps, and place flowers in the vases. In the course of an hour supper for two persons in the Turkish cabinet. Arrange every thing in a becoming manner."

Germain bowed silently and withdrew, in order soon to return with the ordered Turkish costume. Thugut silently suffered himself to be clad in the costly Turkish dressing-gown, and in the golden slippers, the wonderful Cashmere shawl to be wrapped around his waist, and the Turkish fez to be placed on his head. Germain then brought a Turkish pipe with a splendidly carved amber tip, and handed it to the minister.

"Now open the door," said Thugut, laconically. Germain touched the frame of the large painting on the wall, and Thugut stepped through the small door into the hall. With rapid steps he hastened down the hall, and soon stood at its end in front of the narrow wall on which a painting of the Virgin, illuminated by a perpetually burning lamp, was hanging. Thugut again touched an artificial rose on the frame, the painting turned around, and a door became visible behind it.

The minister opened this door, and, crossing the threshold, carefully closed it again.

He now was in his Turkish cabinet; all these beautiful gold brocades on the low sofas, these costly hangings covering the walls, these precious carpets on the floor and on the tables, these silver lamps of strange forms, hanging down from the ceiling, and filled with amber, all these richly gilt vessels arranged along the walls, were delightful reminiscences to Thugut—reminiscences of the happiest period of his life, for he had brought all these things from Constantinople, where he had lived for ten years as Austrian ambassador. Thugut, therefore, never entered this cabinet without a pleasant smile lighting up his hard features, and he only went thither when he wished to permit himself an hour of happiness amidst the perplexing occupations and cares of his official position.

On this occasion, too, as soon as he had crossed the threshold, his face had assumed a mild and gentle expression, and the harsh, repulsive stamp had disappeared from his features. He walked across

the room with a smile, and quickly touched a golden knob, fixed in the opposite wall. After a few minutes he repeated this four times. He then raised his eyes to a small silver bell hanging above him in the most remote corner of the wall, and looked at it steadfastly. While he was doing so, a small side door had opened, and Germain, in the rich costume of a servant of the harem, had entered. Thugut had not once looked round toward him; he had not once glanced at the silver vases with the most splendid flowers, which Germain had placed on the marble tables; his nose was apparently indifferent to the sweet perfumes of the amber which Germain had kindled in the silver lamps, and which was filling the room with fragrant bluish clouds. He only looked at the small bell, and seemed to expect a signal from it in breathless suspense. But Germain had long since finished the decoration of the room and withdrawn again, and yet the bell was silent. A cloud passed over Thugut's brow, and the smile disappeared from his lips.

"She was not there, perhaps, and consequently did not hear my signal," he murmured. "I will ring the bell once more."

He stretched out his hand toward the golden knob in the wall, when suddenly a clear, pure sound was heard. It was the small bell that had been rung.

Thugut's countenance lighted up in the sunshine of happiness, and he looked up to the bell again in silent suspense. For a few minutes it hung motionless again, but then it resounded quickly three times in succession. "In thirty minutes she will be here," whispered Thugut, with a happy smile. "Let us await her, then."

He approached the small table on which he had laid his pipe, and near which Germain had placed a small silver vessel with burning amber. With the bearing and calmness of a genuine Turk he lighted his pipe and then sat down on the low square sofa. Crossing his legs, supporting his right elbow on the cushions of gold brocade, in a half-reclining attitude, Thugut now abandoned himself to his dreams and to the sweet enjoyment of smoking. He was soon surrounded by a blue cloud from which his black eyes were glistening and glancing up to the large clock on the mantelpiece.

On seeing now that the thirty minutes had elapsed, Thugut rose with youthful vivacity, and laid his pipe aside. He then approached the large and strangely formed arm-chair, standing immediately under the silver bell. When he had vigorously pushed back the arm-chair, a small door became visible behind it. Thugut opened it and placed himself by it in a listening position.

Suddenly it seemed to him as though he heard a slight noise in the distance. It came nearer, and now there appeared in the aperture of the door a lady of wonderful loveliness and surpassing

beauty. The eye could behold nothing more charming than this head with its light-brown ringlets, surrounding the face as if by a ring of glory, and contrasting so strangely with the large black eyes, which were sparkling in the fire of youth and passion. Her enchanting lips were of the deepest red, and a delicate blush, like the beautiful tint of the large purple shell, mantled the cheeks. Her nose, of the purest Roman style, was slightly curved, and her expansive forehead imparted a noble and serious air to the charming youthful face. The beholder saw in these eyes, ardor and passion; on this forehead, thought and energetic resolutions; and on this swelling mouth, archness, overflowing spirits, and wit. And the figure of this lovely woman was in full harmony with her ravishing head. She was *petite*, delicate, and ethereal, like a sylph, and yet her form was well developed and beautiful; if she had been somewhat taller, she might have been compared with Juno.

She remained standing in the door, and with her flaming eyes glanced over the room; then she fixed them on Thugut, and burst into a loud and merry laugh.

"Ah, ah, that is the song of my bulbul, the ringing voice of my oriental nightingale," exclaimed Thugut, drawing the laughing lady with gentle force into the room and pushing the arm-chair again before the closed door. "Now tell me, my bulbul, why do you laugh?"

"Must I not laugh?" she exclaimed, in a clear and sonorous voice. "Is not this a surprise as if it were a scene from the Arabian Nights? You told me six months ago you were going to have a passage made, by which one might go unseen from my rooms in the *Burg* to your apartments in the chancery of state. I had no doubt of the truth of what you told me, for fortunately the chancery of state is close to the *Burg*, and there are enough secret staircases and doors here as well as there. I was, therefore, by no means surprised when one day, in the silence of the night, I heard soft hammering at the wall of my bedroom, and suddenly beheld a hole in the wall, which, in the course of a few hours, had been transformed into a door with an arm-chair before it, just like that one there; in the next night, a locksmith made his appearance and hung up a small silver bell in my room, concealing it behind a lamp; and yesterday you whispered to me: 'Await the signal to-morrow! I have to talk to you about important affairs.' I therefore waited with all the impatience of curiosity; at last the bell resounded six times; I answered the signal and hastened through the narrow halls and ascended the never-suspected small staircase, perfectly satisfied that I was going to a diplomatic conference. And what do I find? A little Turkish paradise, and in it a pacha—"

"Who was yearning only for his charming *houri* in order to be entirely in paradise," said Thugut, interrupting her. "Every thing has its time, my Victoria, state affairs as well as happiness."

"The question only is, my cold-hearted friend, whether you prefer state affairs or happiness," she replied, smilingly threatening him with her finger.

"Happiness, if you bring it to me, Victoria!" he exclaimed, pressing the beautiful woman impetuously against his bosom.

She leaned her head on his shoulder and looked up to him with an air of arch enthusiasm. "Are you happy now?" she asked, in a low voice.

He only replied by means of glowing kisses and whispered words of intense passion into her ear. She did not resist him; she listened with smiling satisfaction to his whispers, and a deeper blush mantled her cheeks.

"Ah, I like to hear you talk thus," she said, when Thugut paused; "it delights me to sip the honey of oriental poetry from the lips of my wild bear. Even the Belvederian Apollo is not as beautiful as you in your genial and wondrous ugliness when you are talking about love."

Thugut laughed. "Then you think I am very ugly, Victoria?" he asked.

"Yes, so ugly that your ugliness in my eyes is transformed into the most inconceivable beauty," she said, passing her rosy fingers across his dark and bronzed face. "Sometimes, my friend, when I see you in the imperial halls, with your strange smile and your grave bearing, I believe it is the god of darkness himself whom I behold there, and who has descended upon earth in order to catch in person a few human souls that he is very anxious to have in his power. Ah, I would not have you an iota more handsome, nor a single year younger. I like your demoniacal ugliness; and the infernal ardor, hidden under the snow of your hair, truly delights me. To be beloved by young men with the fickle straw-fire of passion is a very common thing; but when an old man loves as intensely as a youth, when he always illuminates the beloved with the glory of a fire that he has snatched from hell, ah! that is something enchanting and divine! Love me, therefore, in your own way, my beautiful, ugly prince of darkness!"

"I love you in my own way, my charming angel, whom nobody believes to be a demon," said Thugut, laughing. "I feel precisely like you, my beautiful Victoria; I love you twice as ardently, because I penetrated your true nature; because, when you are smiling upon others, I alone perceive the serpent, while others only behold the roses, and because I alone know this angelic figure to conceal the

soul of a demon. Thus we love each other because we belong to each other, Victoria; you call me the prince of darkness, and you are assuredly the crown-princess of hell. After my death you will occupy my throne."

"Then it is in hell just as in Austria?" asked Victoria. "The women are not excluded from the throne."

"Well, sometimes it really seems to me as though it were in Austria as it ought to be in hell, and as though the small devils of stupidity, folly, and ignorance, had chosen Austria for their particular play-ground."

"Let us expel them, then, my friend," exclaimed Victoria; "I should think that we were powerful enough to accomplish that."

"Will you assist me in expelling them?" asked Thugut, quickly.

"How can you ask me?" she said, reproachfully. "So you have forgotten every thing? Our whole past is buried under the dust of your ministerial documents?"

"No, I have forgotten nothing!" exclaimed Thugut, almost enthusiastically. "I remember every thing. Oh, how often, Victoria, do I see you in my dreams, just as I saw you for the first time! Do you yet remember when it was?"

"It was in the camp in front of Giurgewo."

"Yes, in the camp in front of Giurgewo, at the time that the Turks surprised our trenches.* All of our officers completely lost their senses; the general-in-chief, Prince Coburg, rode off in the most cowardly manner; and Count Thun had been killed, while General Anfsess was dangerously wounded. Oh, it was a terrible day; terror and dismay spread through the whole camp. A wild panic seized the soldiers, they fled in all directions; every one was shouting, howling, and trembling for his own miserable existence. I had just gone to headquarters, and I may say that I was the only one who did not tremble, for nature has not imparted fear to me. I witnessed the growing confusion with dismay, when I suddenly beheld a woman, an angel, who appeared with dishevelled hair, and eyes flashing with anger, addressing the soldiers and admonishing them in glowing words to do their duty. No, what she said were no words, it was a torrent of enthusiasm, bursting from her lips like heavenly flames. And the soldiers listened in amazement; the stragglers rallied round their colors, the cowards were ashamed, and the trembling and downcast took heart again when they heard the ringing, bold words of the beautiful woman. Reason obtained its sway; they were able once more to hear and consider what we said to them, and thanks to you and to myself, the ignominious rout was transformed into an orderly and quiet retreat. Both of us

* In 1790.



THUGUT'S INTERVIEW WITH VICTORIA DE POUTET.

saved every thing that was yet to be saved. Ah, it is a funny thing that all the soldiers in the large camp had lost their wits, and that only a civilian and a woman kept theirs.* On that day, in my enthusiasm, I vowed eternal friendship to you."

"We vowed it to each other!" exclaimed Victoria.

"And we have kept our vows. I sent you to Vienna with a recommendation to my friend, Count Colloredo, and he honored my recommendation. He introduced you to the court; he related your heroic deed to the emperor, and the whole court did homage to the intrepid heroine of Giurgewo. Your bold husband, the handsome captain of hussars, Charles de Poutet, having been killed in Belgium at the assault upon Aldenhoven, I came to you and renewed my vow of eternal fidelity and friendship. Did I keep my word?"

"You did. Thanks to you and to Colloredo, I have become the friend of the empress, and the *aja* of her first-born daughter, the Archduchess Maria Louisa. But, on obtaining this position, I renewed to you, too, my vow of eternal friendship and eternal fidelity. Did I not also keep my word?"

"You did. Thanks to you and to Colloredo, I have become prime minister and ruler of Austria!"

"And now, my friend, a question. Did you invent this Turkish cabinet, the secret staircases and halls, and the mysterious language of the bells, for the sole purpose of relating to me here the history of our past feelings toward each other?"

"No, Victoria, in order to build here the edifice of our future. Here, in this secret cabinet, we will lay the foundation of it, and draw up the plans. Victoria, I stand in need of your assistance—will you refuse it to me?"

"Stretch out your hand with the sceptre, my god of darkness, command, and I shall obey!" said Victoria, gliding down on the sofa, crossing her arms on her breast, and looking up to Thugut with languishing eyes.

He sat down by her side, and laid his hand over her eyes.

"Do not look at me so charmingly as to make my blood rush like fire through my veins," he said. "Let us first speak of business affairs, and then we will forget every thing in draughts of fiery sherbet. So listen to me, Victoria, be a little less of the enchanting angel now, and a little more of the malicious demon."

"Is there a minister to overthrow, a powerful man to be trampled under foot?" asked Victoria, her black eyes flashing like dagger-points. "Have we got an enemy whom we want to lead across the *Ponte dei Sospiri* to an eternal prison? Speak quickly, my friend; I am waiting for the music of your words."

*Vide "Kaiser Franz und Metternich: Ein Fragment," p. 33.

"There are two enemies for you to fathom," said Thugut, slowly.

"To fathom! Is that all? A little spying, nothing further?"

"But some bloodshed might attend that spying."

"I like blood, it has such a beautiful purple color," said Victoria, laughing. "Who are the two enemies I am to fathom?"

"France and Prussia!"

"Oh, you are joking."

"No, I am in sober earnest. France and Prussia are the two enemies whose innermost thoughts you are to fathom."

"But France and Prussia are not here in Vienna."

"No, not here in Vienna, but they are at the fortress of Rastadt."

"I do not understand you, my friend."

"Listen to me, and you will understand me. You know that I hate France, and that I abhor the peace we were compelled to conclude with her. France is a hydra, whose head we must cut off, or by whom we must allow ourselves to be devoured. I am in favor of cutting off her head."

"So am I!" exclaimed Victoria, laughing. "Have you got a sword sharp enough to cut off the hydra's head? Then give it to me—I will behead her."

"The hydra believes she has a sword with which she might kill me. Listen to me. I was once in my life foolish enough to sign a paper which might prove dangerous to me in case it should be submitted to the emperor. This paper is in the hands of France."

"France has got a large hand. Which of her fingers holds the paper?"

"A year ago, the paper was in Bernadotte's hands, and he had already applied for an interview with the empress, in order to deliver to her the paper, which she had promised to hand to the emperor. I learned it in time, and sent out a few friends to bring the papers out of his own rooms."

"Ah, I understand. It was on the day of the festival of the volunteers, and of the inauguration of the French banner."

"Yes, it was on that day. The *coup* was not entirely successful; we gave Bernadotte a good lesson—we compelled him to leave Vienna, but he took these papers along."

"And where is Bernadotte?"

"At Rastadt, where he attends the sessions of the congress as the military plenipotentiary of France."

"I shall go there, too, as your plenipotentiary, my friend!" exclaimed Victoria, smiling. "But, in order to obtain the papers, we shall not make an assault upon his house; we shall only assail his heart, and that I shall open a breach there large enough to let the dangerous papers pass through it, I hope my skill will warrant—"

"Your skill and your beauty," said Thugut, interrupting her.

"But I believe my beautiful Victoria will not have to assail Bernadotte, but another man. Bernadotte took warning from that scene in his house; he understands very well that the possession of those papers is dangerous, and he has, therefore, transferred the danger to other shoulders. He has intrusted another man with the papers."

"Whom? If it be a man of flesh and blood name him, and I shall make the assault upon him," said Victoria.

"It is doubtless one of the three ambassadors of the French Republic, and I have reason to believe that it is the haughty and impudent Bonnier. It was he at least who spoke to Count Cobenzl about certain papers that might become dangerous to me, and who inquired stealthily if Cobenzl would feel inclined to deliver them to the emperor."

"Let me depart, my friend; I must have the papers," said Victoria, rising.

"Ah, how beautiful you are in your impetuosity!" exclaimed Thugut, smiling; "but we are not through yet with our conference, dear Victoria. For the sole purpose of obtaining those miserable papers, I should not beg my angel to unfold his demon's wings and to assist me. If my interests alone were at stake, I should allow fate to take its course, and leave every thing to its decision. But the interests of Austria are equally at stake; and I do not say this in the sense in which my great predecessor, Prince Kaunitz, used to say: 'He who attacks me, attacks Austria, for Austria cannot exist without me. She would fall down if my strong hand did not hold her.' No, I know very well that no man is indispensable; that we are only machines in the hands of fate, and that, as soon as one of these machines is worn out and unnecessary, fate casts it aside and substitutes a new one. But the state is something more exalted and important than a mere individual; in order to defend it, we must collect our whole energy, our whole ability, and it is a matter of indifference if, by doing so, we endanger some human lives and shed some blood. There is an abundance of human lives in the world, and the blood that has been shed is restored in the course of a few hours. Victoria, you shall not merely assist me; you shall aid the state too, and make an effort for its welfare."

"Only he who dares wins!" exclaimed Victoria, with a fascinating smile. "Tell me what I am to do, my friend."

"To be fascinating, to avail yourself of the power of your charms, that is all. To tame a bear, in order to draw his secrets from him."

"In what forest shall I find this bear?"

"At Rastadt, and his name is Roberjot, or Bonnier, or Debry,

for aught I know. Try all three of them. One of them at least will have a heart capable of falling in love, and eyes to admire your beauty. Chain that man to your triumphal car, fathom him, try to become his confidante, and sift his secrets."

"For a special purpose, or only in general?"

"For a special purpose. I have reason to believe that France is deceiving us, and that, while seeking an alliance with us, and assuring us every day of her friendship, she is secretly plotting against us."

"Plotting with whom?"

"With Prussia, Austria's mortal enemy. France has promised us not to grant any further aggrandizement to Prussia. I am satisfied that she has secretly made similar promises to Prussia in relation to us, and that she is trying as eagerly, and by means of as many assurances, to obtain the alliance of Prussia, as that of Austria. It is, however, of the highest importance for us to know what France may have promised to Prussia, and how far the negotiations between the two powers have gone. To fathom this, either by amicable or violent means, by shrewdness or by compulsion, by bribery or by threats, will be your task, my heavenly demon."

"It is a beautiful task, because it is a difficult one," said Victoria, proudly. "It is a matter of life and death, this duel I am to fight with one of those French bears."

"But my beautiful Victoria shall not lack seconds to furnish her weapons, and to do every thing she wants them to do."

"Who are my seconds?"

"Count Lehrbach and Colonel Barbaczy."

"Ah, Barbaczy, whose acquaintance we made at Giurgewo?"

"The same. A bold, intrepid man, who is not afraid of anybody—neither of God nor of the devil."

"Lehrbach and Barbaczy, your two bloodhounds," said Victoria, musingly. "If *they* are to be my seconds, I am afraid the duel will not merely remain a spiritual one, and not merely hearts will be wounded. I am afraid real blood will be shed, and there will be carnal wounds."

"I must have the papers!" exclaimed Thugut, "either by means of cunning or by measures of open violence, do you understand? And as to the wounds and blood, I wish with all my heart to give these impudent republican fellows who are putting on such airs at Rastadt, as though they were masters of Germany, a sound and bloody lesson, and thus give France an unmistakable proof of our opinion."

"Good, my dear Satan, I shall assist you in performing this little infernal comedy. Two weighty questions, however, remain

to be asked. On what pretext shall I ask my imperial mistress to grant me leave of absence?"

"Have you not got a sister, who is married to a rich country gentleman, in the grand-duchy of Baden, and who informed you yesterday that she had been suddenly taken dangerously ill?"

"I have a sister!" exclaimed Victoria, laughing. "I who never knew a paternal roof, or family—I who dropped upon earth like a ripe peach-blossom, and would have been crushed there, if my handsome and generous Charles de Poutet had not accidentally passed by while the wind was driving me along, and if he chivalrously had not picked me up and placed me in his button-hole. I never knew my family—I was an orphan since my earliest childhood. No, my friend, I have no sister."

"Oh, try to recollect, Victoria; it is your sister who has called you to her death-bed, and for whose sake the empress will give you leave of absence."

"Ah, *vraiment*, I recollect now! Of course, I must go and see my sister. The good, dear sister—how she will long to see me again in order to recover from her sickness! Oh, I must repair to my sister—nothing must detain me here. The kind-hearted empress will not refuse me leave of absence, for I have to fulfil a sacred duty. Family ties are more sacred than any other."

"Ah, you are really a most affectionate sister; the empress will readily grant you leave of absence, and you will set out to-morrow evening. I shall provide fresh horses for you at every station, and I shall send you to-morrow morning a comfortable travelling-coach. Your first question, then, is answered. Now for the second."

"Yes, my friend, I will briefly state my second question. After accomplishing my task, after chivalrously fighting my duel, and conquering the papers, what will be my reward?"

"Your reward will be the only one I dare offer to a beautiful young widow," said Thugut, with a diabolical smile. "A husband who will bestow upon you a distinguished name, who will strengthen your position at court, and who will one day bequeath to you a princely inheritance."

"What!" exclaimed Victoria, joyfully, "you will marry me, my friend?"

"I?" asked Thugut, almost in terror. "Who spoke of me? Am I able to offer you wealth and a distinguished name? My fortune would be too insignificant for your pin-money, and although the ship-builder's son has acquired quite a distinguished name, he lacks the dust of ten dead ancestors. I am my own ancestor, and my pedigree contains but my own name. No, Victoria, I have something better in store for you. I shall make you the wife of

the minister, Count Colloredo. He is a member of the old aristocracy, and his wife will outrank at court all the ladies of the ministers and of the lower nobility. He is, moreover, very wealthy, and a favorite of the emperor. I shall give him to understand that he loves you ardently, and that he would pine away if you should reject him. The dear count does not like to hear people talk about pining away and dying, and he will consider himself saved if you accept him and allow him to grow young again in your arms. To induce him to marry you, and to direct him correctly, let me alone for that. On the day on which you bring me the papers, even if they should be somewhat blood-stained, on that day I shall have the honor to lead you to the altar, and greet you by the name of Countess Colloredo."

"The scheme is good and feasible," said Victoria, musingly, "and yet I do not like it altogether. To be frank with you, my friend, if you really believe that I ought to marry again, why will not you marry me? What shall I do with the childish, conceited, and proud Count Colloredo, who is already seventy years of age? Why cannot I have my god of darkness? Thugut, I ask you, why do not you want to marry me?"

Thugut replied to the flaming glance of the charming lady by a loud laugh.

"I marry you? Ah, my heavenly demon! that would be very imprudent, for in that case I should have to require you to lead a devout and chaste life, and to keep my name unsullied."

"Ah, you insult me," exclaimed Victoria, feelingly. "You want to insinuate that I am unworthy of being your wife."

"You are worthy of being much more, dearest, for you are a demon of love; but my wife ought only to be a matron of chastity."

"Oh, how tiresome!" sighed Victoria.

"Yes, how tiresome!" repeated Thugut. "And our own heavenly *liaison*, the last romantic dream of my life, would it not also be broken off if you were to become my wife? Why would we then stand in need of secrecy—of hidden staircases and doors, and of this Turkish cabinet?—inasmuch as I should have the right to enter your rooms before the eyes of the whole world. Besides, we would be unable to be useful to each other. My wife, of course, would have to side with me and defend me everywhere, while, in case you are married to another man, you are at liberty to act for me and to favor me. I could not promote the interests of my wife at court; I could not speak of her in terms of praise to the empress, and recommend that fresh honors and distinctions be conferred upon her. My wife, therefore, would remain the *aja* of the little Archduchess Maria Louisa, while my influence will be able to secure to the

Countess Victoria Colloredo the position of a first lady of honor of the duchess."

"First lady of honor!" exclaimed Victoria, joyfully, and with glowing cheeks. "You are right, my friend, it is better for me to marry Count Colloredo. Colloredo has great power over the emperor; I have great power over the empress, and shall have the same power over Colloredo. But I am again under your control, and thus you will rule us all, and rule Austria, for I shall always remain your faithful servant and friend."

"Women's oaths are as fitful as the wind, they are as fleeting as the clouds," said Thugut, shrugging his shoulders. "But I believe you, Victoria, for you are no woman like other women. If I were ever to discover that you had deceived me, I should take a terrible revenge!"

"What sort of revenge, my friend?" asked Victoria, embracing him smilingly and tenderly.

"I know but one punishment for a faithless woman," said Thugut, "and if I envy any thing, my friend, Sultan Mustapha, is able to do it, it is his power of publicly inflicting this punishment. A faithless woman is drowned in a sack, that is all. She is placed in a sack—gagged, of course, so as to be unable to scream—and in the dead of night she is rowed out into the sea, which silently opens its waves in order to receive the silent victim. I have witnessed this romantic spectacle three times in Constantinople, and it always filled me with delight. It is so noiseless, so simple, and yet so significant! It is true we have no sea here, but we have the Danube, and there is room in it for many faithless women. Beware, therefore, Victoria! But now a truce to business and politics. Now, my demon, unfold your angel wings, and let me pass an hour with you in paradise. Will you do me the honor, Countess Colloredo *in spe*, to take supper with me here?"

"Here?" said Victoria, looking around wonderingly. "Where is the supper-table?"

"You will see it directly."

Thugut stooped and vigorously pressed a golden knob, fixed in the floor, close to the sofa. Immediately a creaking and rattling noise was heard; the floor opened, and a large aperture became visible. After a few minutes a table, covered with the most luxurious dishes and sparkling wines, and glittering with silver and crystal, slowly and majestically arose.

"Splendid!" shouted Victoria, dancing like a fairy around the magic table—"splendid! The prince of darkness commands, hell opens, and by the fire, over which the souls of the wicked are roasting, the most savory dishes have been prepared for Satan! But first

swear to me, my friend, that this pheasant is filled with truffles, and not with human souls."

"My dear Victoria," replied Thugut, laughing, "human souls have only too often the same fate as truffles—hogs discover them! Come, I drink this glass of sherbet to the health of the Countess Coloredo *in spe!*"

CHAPTER XXVII.

RASTADT.

THE congress of Rastadt had been in session for nearly two years. For nearly two years the German ambassadors had been quarrelling with France about the ancient boundaries of the empire, and had been quarrelling among each other about a few strips of land, a few privileges which one state demanded, while another would not grant.

It was a sorrowful and humiliating spectacle this congress of Rastadt presented to the world, and all Germany was looking on with feelings of pain and shame, while France pointed at it with scornful laughter, and exclaimed:

"It is not France that destroys and dissolves Germany, but Germany is annihilating herself. She is dissolving away, owing to her own weakness, and the dissensions of her rulers will kill her!"

Yes, indeed, Germany bore the germ of death and dissolution in her sick, lacerated breast, and the first symptoms of putrefaction already made their appearance. These first symptoms were the envy, jealousy, and hatred the rulers of Germany felt toward each other, and the malicious joy with which one saw another die, without pitying his torments, and only mindful of the fact that he would be the dying state's heir.

The first section of Germany which succumbed under these circumstances, embraced the bishoprics and ecclesiastical states. They exhibited most of all the corruption and putrefaction of German affairs. Hence, such German states as expected to be benefited by their dissolution, voted for secularization, while such as were threatened with losses voted against it. A new apple of discord had been thrown into the German empire; the last spark of German unity was gone, and two hostile parties, bitterly menacing each other, were formed. Austria loudly raised her voice against the secularization of the ecclesiastical possessions, because she could derive no benefit from it; while Prussia declared in favor of secularization, because she believed she would be able to aggrandize her territory in consequence; and the secondary princes demanded the dissolution of the

bishoprics even more urgently than Prussia, because they knew that a portion of those dominions would fall to their own share.

Covetousness caused the German princes to overlook all other interests, and to act contrary to all correct principles; covetousness caused them first to shake the decaying ancient German empire; covetousness caused them to destroy the old political organization of the country, and German hands were the first to tear down the edifice of the imperial constitution.

The German ambassadors at Rastadt forgot, therefore, the original object of their mission; they had come thither to secure the continued existence of the German empire, and to protect Germany from the encroachments of France, and now they were threatening the German empire themselves. They had come thither to establish the boundaries of Germany, and now they were attacking the boundaries of the single sections and states of the empire themselves.

No wonder that France sought to profit by these dissensions of the Germans among each other; no wonder that she thought she might seize a piece of Germany, too, seeing, as she did, that the German states were quarrelling among themselves about the division of the spoils. France, therefore, advanced her troops farther on the right bank of the Rhine, and claimed the fortresses of Kehl, Ehrenbreitstein, and Castel.

This fresh and unparalleled exaction silenced the domestic quarrels among the Germans for a moment, and all voices united to protest loudly and solemnly against the new demand of the French Republic.

But the French replied to the solemn protests of the German ambassadors at Rastadt by cold sneers and violent threats. Ehrenbreitstein not being surrendered to them after the first summons, they blockaded the fortress, levied contributions on the right bank of the Rhine, and declared the possessions of the nobility to be forfeited to the French Republic.* The German ambassadors at Rastadt complaining of these oppressive proceedings, the French declared, "the magnanimity of the French had exceeded all expectations. They were able to take every thing, and they had contented themselves with very little."

The congress had met at Rastadt in order to conclude peace, but so far the negotiations had produced nothing but exasperation and a strong probability of ultimate war. The arrogance and scornful bearing of France became every day more intolerable, and the desire of Austria became proportionately more evident to punish France for her insolence, and to take revenge for the numerous and galling insults she had heaped upon Germany. Prussia hesi-

* Vide Häusser's "History of Germany," vol. ii., p. 201.