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PRINCE EUGENE AND HIS TIMES

BOOK I

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PRINCE EUGENE AND HIS TIMES.

BOOK I.

PRINCE EUGENE, THE LITTLE ABBÉ.

CHAPTER I.

THE COUNTESS OF SOISSONS.

"Is that your last word, madame?" said Louvois, in a tone so emphatic as to be almost threatening.

"My last word," replied the countess, haughtily. "My daughter is too young to marry, and were she older, I would not impose a husband upon her who was not the man of her choice. She shall bestow her hand and heart together."

"Do you mean that it is impossible for your daughter to love my son?" asked Louvois, hastily.

The countess raised her shoulders and smiled superciliously, while from her large black eyes there darted forth a glance that spoke volumes to the mind of the irritated minister.

"It would appear," said she, "that there can be no sympathy between the Mancinis and the Louvois, and that their antipathies are to be perpetuated from generation to generation."

"You would remind me of the similarity which the fate of my son as a wooer bears to that of his father?" asked Louvois. "I do not deny it; the repulse which twenty-one years ago I received from Olympia Mancini, she repeats to-day in the person of her daughter. But it may be that on some other occasion the Mancinis shall be repulsed by the Louvois."

"A threat?" said the countess, angrily.

Now it was the shoulders of the minister that were raised. "I have sowed love and reaped hate," said he, quietly.

The countess laughed. "Ah," said she, "I see that you have remodelled your speech according to the pious formulary of Madame de Maintenon, and that you seek for your troubadours among the prophets."

"Yes—the Scriptural prophets satisfy *my* cravings for knowledge," replied Louvois, smiling. "Pity that everybody else is not as orthodox as I!"

"What do you mean?" asked the countess, uneasily.

"I mean that it would be better for the Countess de Soissons if she imitated the discretion of Madame de Maintenon, and eschewed association with those unholy prophets who draw their inspiration from the stars."

"Do you think so? And yet the book of the stars is inspired and contains truth, for therein it stands written that our two families will never be united by the bonds of love. What is the use of striving against destiny? Fate has willed our enmity, and we must submit with resignation," said the countess, with an affected drawl. "You see," added she, pathetically, "how beautifully I fall into your new-fashioned dialect, and how harmoniously my dulcet notes mingle with those of the court chorus."

"I remember the dulcet notes of a poem written years ago, which were wont to edify the court with a strain that would sound inharmonious there to-day. What would De Montespan and De Maintenon say to such discordant lines as these?" And Louvois began to hum the following:

"La belle Olympe n'a point de seconde,
Et l'Amour a bien réuni
Dedans l'infante Mancini
Par un avantage suprême
Tout ce qui force à dire: J'aime!
Et qui l'a fait dire à nos dieux!"*

"What they would say?" replied the countess; "why, they would listen approvingly to a rhapsody which time has falsified, and imagine that I wince to hear it sung. But they would be in error. I thank you for recalling to my mind the golden vision of the past, wherein a king knelt at my feet, and

* "Les Nièces de Mazarion," par Renée, p. 177.

Louvois lived upon my smiles. She who can look back upon conquests such as these, can afford to despise the contrarieties of the present, while she plumes her victorious wings for future flight, wherein she shall attain indemnification for the trifling vexations of to-day."

"I wish you may realize your joyous anticipations," replied Louvois, with a sneer. "But if you will allow me to draw your horoscope, you will confess that I am a wiser seer than your dear friend La Voisin."

For one moment the features of the countess contracted painfully, but she mastered her emotion and was able to reply with a tranquil smile,—*"Do so, your excellency, I am all attention."*

"I read in the stars that snares encompass you, Countess de Soissons. You have enemies, numerous, powerful, and crafty. At their head stands the queen, who can never forgive you for having opened one of her letters, and having stolen thence a note addressed to the king, which accused her of secret machinations with Spain. Then there is poor Louise de la Vallière, who for your cruel sarcasms shed such oceans of tears—"

"She is in a convent."

"True, but the scars of your persecutions are upon her heart; and although she may be a Christian, think you that she has ceased to be a woman? Third—among the number of those who hate you is the Marquise de Montespan, to whom the brilliant assemblages at the Hôtel de Soissons are a source of mortification, for she can never forget that, on more than one occasion, the king has forgotten his rendezvous with her, to linger at the side of his fascinating hostess. And we must not overlook the pious De Maintenon, who lives in constant terror lest some day or other your presence should recall to the king that golden vision of his youth, whereof Olympia Mancini was the enshrined divinity. For this reason you are more obnoxious to the ex-governess than De Montespan herself. The star of the latter favorite is already on the wane, whereas yours may rise again at the bidding of Memory. These four women have long meditated your destruction, and many are the thorns with which they have strewn your path in life. But, to compass your ruin, there was wanting *one*

strong arm that could concentrate their scattered missiles, and hurl them in *one* great bomb at your head. Countess de Soissons, that arm is mine—I, Louvois, the trusted minister of the king, the friend of De Maintenon, the mightiest subject in France—I am the man whose arm shall strike on behalf of your enemies, of whom in me behold the chief! You have thrown me your gauntlet, and I raise it. I proclaim myself your foe, and since there must be war between our races, we shall see whether for the future the Mancinis may not be made to suffer through the Louvois! This is my horoscope, and now mark well my last words: La Voisin the soothsayer was arrested last night."

All the self-control which she could gather to meet this sinister disclosure, could not smother the groan which was upheaved from Olympia's sinking heart.

Louvois affected not to hear it. He bowed low and prepared to take his leave. The countess made no effort to detain him; she was too frightened for circumspection, and she followed his retreating figure with eyes that were all aflame with hate. Nor did their fiery glow abate when, having reached the door, Louvois turned and confronted her.

He surveyed her calmly, but his eye returned hate for hate, and so for a moment they stared at each other, while there passed between the two a silent challenge, which both felt was to be fought out to the death.

After a pause Louvois spoke. His mouth dilated with a cruel smile, which, when its mocking light was seen, betokened peril to those who offended him.

"Madame," said he, "not only has La Voisin been arrested, but her private papers have been seized." So saying, he bowed again and disappeared behind the portière.

CHAPTER II.

THE LABORATORY.

THE countess listened to his echoing footsteps until they were no longer audible, nor did she move until she heard the roll of the carriage which bore him away.

Gradually the sound of the receding vehicle melted into distance, and a deep silence ensued. This silence first roused the countess from her lethargy. A tremor convulsed her limbs; her dilated orbs which had been fixed upon the door relaxed, and wandered from the silken hangings of the walls to the gilded furniture around her; from the tables of Florentine marble to the rainbow-tinted chandeliers, whose pendants swayed to and fro in the sunshine. And now they rested dreamily upon a picture which, conspicuous for size and beauty, hung immediately opposite to the sofa whereon she was reclining. It was the full length portrait of a handsome youth. He was not tall, but he was gracefully proportioned. His shoulders were broad; and, rising from the midst of a slender throat, adorned with a fall of lace, appeared his stately head crowned with a wealth of long, brown curls. His face was of a beautiful oval, his complexion clear, his mouth wreathed with happy smiles. The brow was high and arched, and the fine gray eyes beamed with hope and energy. In one hand he held a rose, which he extended to a person not represented in the picture; the other hand, half-veiled by its overhanging fall of gossamer lace, rested carelessly on the table, while close by lay two rose-buds, which seemed just to have been dropped from the half-open fingers. Over an arm-chair in the background was thrown a mantle of royal ermine, which partially concealed the kingly crown that surmounted its high carved back.

The eyes of the countess were fixed upon this picture with an expression of tender sadness, and slowly, as if yielding to an influence altogether objective, she rose from her seat and advanced toward the portrait, where she remained gazing

until her sight was dimmed by tears, while the youth smiled ever, and ever held out the rose.

What golden tribute had his homage brought to her ambition! What ecstasy had it poured into her heart! How truly had she loved that princely boy, who, careless, happy, and fickle, was bestowing upon other women the roses which for her had withered years ago, leaving upon their blighted stems the sharp and cruel thorns of his inconstancy!

Since then, twenty-three years had gone by; she had become a wife and the mother of seven children, but the wound still festered; the old sorrow still sang its mournful dirge within a heart which to-day beat as wildly as ever, and felt a pang as keen as when it first grew jealous, and learned that not she, but Marie, had become the divinity whom Louis worshipped.

Marie, too, had been forsaken, and had stifled the cries of her despairing heart by marriage with another. The fate of both sisters had been the same—a short dream of gratified ambition, followed by long years of humiliation. It seemed that the prosperity and happiness of Cardinal Mazarin's nieces had been coexistent with his life, for when the eyes of their uncle closed in death, the light of their fortunes grew dim and expired.

The portrait of Louis XIV., which was calling up the spectres of so many buried joys, had been painted expressly for Olympia Mancini. It represented his first declaration of love to her, and had been sent as a souvenir of "the brightest hour of his life." He had barely reached his thirty-seventh year, and yet this winsome youth had been transformed into a demure devotee, who, despising the vanities of the world, had turned his heart toward heaven, and spent his life doing penance for the sins of his early manhood!

And this transformation was the work of a woman who had neither beauty, youth, nor birth to recommend her to the favor of a monarch—a woman who had been the paid governess of the king's bastards, and was not even gifted with intellect enough to cover her other deficiencies!

These last thoughts brought a smile to the face of the countess. Turning suddenly away from the portrait she crossed the room with rapid steps, and placed herself directly

in front of a large Venetian mirror which occupied the space between two windows. It gave back the reflection of an exquisite figure, whose outlines contributed much to the grace with which the folds of a blue satin dress fell in rich profusion around it. The white shoulders were scarcely concealed by a shawl of superb lace, and the arms, still round, were set off by costly bracelets. The raven hair, with not a trace of time's finger to discolor its glossy blackness, fell around her face in curls as delicate as the tendrils of a grape. Her brow was smooth and polished, her eyes aglow with passionate longing, and, as her lips curved into a complacent smile, they disclosed two rows of pearly teeth, compact and without a fleck.

Yes, she was not deceived. Olympia de Soissons was a handsome woman, and with so much comeliness, such ready wit, and such unrivalled powers of conversation, she might gird up her loins to do battle with her rivals. Was not Madame de Maintenon her elder by three years? And as for De Montespan, was she not wasting away into an old woman? If they had found it possible to win the heart of this sensual Louis, why not she? This heart had once been all her own, and why should not she, who combined the beauty of one mistress with the shrewdness of the other, dispossess them both, and re-enter into possession of her old domains?

She smiled again, and saw how well her smiles became her. "Yes," said she to herself, "yes, I will recall this truant merlin, and he shall return to perch upon the hand he used to love! I will be mistress of his heart and mistress of his realms. She foretold it all, and gave me the charm wherewith to work the spell."

But as she gave utterance to these last words, her lips began to quiver, and her fine features were distorted by some sudden pain. She had just called to mind the fearful intelligence of La Voisin's arrest.

"Great God! If my letters should have been found among her papers! What, oh what would be *my* fate?"

She shuddered—and in place of the triumphant vision of a heart recaptured, a monarch at her feet, there arose the fearful spectacle of an execution which, four years before, she had witnessed at the bloody Place de Grève. Once more she saw

the square, black with a mass of human beings, who, jeering, shouting, and cursing, moved hither and thither like the waves of a turbulent ocean; at every window that looked out upon the place, she saw gayly-dressed ladies who peered anxiously out to catch a glimpse of one gloomy object that loomed darkly up from its centre. She saw the crowd give way and part, as, keeping pace with the dull sound of a muffled drum, a sad procession entered upon the scene. At its head marched a battalion of soldiers, and behind them, seated in the felon's cart, came a pale, beautiful woman, who ever and anon pressed to her quivering lips the crucifix held out to her by a priest—that last link of sympathy between the convict and his fellow-creatures. At the criminal's side, in symbolic robes of sanguinary red, was the executioner that was to sever this slender tie, and wrench the spirit from the body to whose guardianship God had committed it on earth. Silently the hideous cortège moved on, while the crowd fell back to let it pass, until the scaffold came to view. How joyously the sun's rays seemed to play around the glittering axe that was to end a career of secret crime! How eagerly the high-born dames bend forward to catch sight of the criminal, as, leaning on the arm of the priest, she tottered to her doom! Olympia remembered only too well the moment when the drum ceased its "discordant sound," and when the silence was so oppressive that the low voice of the condemned was heard uttering her last prayer. She knelt beside the block—a circle of light was described upon the air—and the head fell upon the blood-sprinkled sand.

The Countess de Soissons sickened as she remembered that the woman whom she had seen executed was one of high position, no less a personage than the beautiful and fascinating Marquise de Brinvilliers. Neither her rank, her charms, nor the strenuous efforts of her powerful friends, had been adequate to save her from the headsman's axe. She had been convicted of poisoning, and had shared the fate of other malefactors of less repute. Her confidante La Voisin had been arrested at the time, but as nothing proved her to have been an accomplice of her former mistress she had escaped conviction.

Something new with regard to the fortune-teller must have

transpired, for Louvois had considered her arrest as an ill-omen for the Countess de Soissons. Not only for Olympia, however, was the arrest of Catherine a calamity, for she was the trusty counsellor of many a noble lady who, before suspicion had sullied her name, had been the dear and intimate associate of the Marquise de Brinvilliers.

The countess had turned away from the contemplation of her mellow charms, and was on her way to her boudoir. She bolted the door within, and, crossing the room, mounted a chair that stood by the side of a tall mirror set in a thick gilt frame. She touched a spring, when the mirror glided noiselessly aside, revealing a dark recess within the wall.

Olympia slipped through the opening, which closed behind her, darted up a narrow staircase, and, hastily drawing a key from a pocket concealed within the folds of her dress, she unlocked the door of a room whose aspect was anything but appropriate to the pursuits of a lady of quality.

It was to all appearances a kitchen, for one entire side of it was occupied by a hearth full of recesses, each one of which contained a furnace fitted up with iron utensils for cooking. On the mantel, which corresponded to this immense hearth, were ranged pipkins and other vessels of different sizes, interspersed with rows of phials and flasks containing liquids of every imaginable color. On a massive oaken table, in the centre of the apartment, were placed a number of bowls and dishes, and near them lay a disorderly pile of papers, books, and pamphlets.

Olympia approached the hearth, stooped over one of the furnaces, and from a fagot lying near gathered a few small sticks. Over these sticks she poured a fluid from one of her flasks, and then rubbing them briskly together, they began to emit sparks. She placed them under the furnace, added a little more fuel, and in a few moments had a good fire.

She now sprang to her feet, and hastily pushing aside a row of pipkins, opened a small door which had been concealed behind them, above the mantel. From a recess within the wall she took a brass-bound casket, which she placed upon the table.

The casket contained some books, papers, and several di-

minutive phials. One of these phials she held up to the light, contemplating its contents with manifest satisfaction.

"Herein lies the spell that is to lure my faithless monarch back again. La Voisin may rot in prison, but her mantle of science has fallen upon me, and her secrets are mine. Her last, best gift shall restore me to my throne. Not only did she leave me the means of success, but she foretold the certainty of that success besides. It must be so: La Voisin never erred in her predictions, and I shall triumph!"

Pressing the phial to her lips, Olympia hid it beneath the folds of her lace tucker, murmuring the while, "I shall sip of this nectar anon; for the present, I must provide for discovery."

She took the papers that lay in the casket, and weighing them in her hand said musingly:

"How light they are, and yet how heavy was the gold with which I purchased them! 'Tis a pity they should be destroyed: what if I should forget? But no! oblivion of their treasured secrets were impossible to me; so away with you! You might turn traitors, and I had best anticipate treachery by destruction."

Then followed the books and the contents of the phials remaining in the casket. The blue flames leaped high as these last were added to the cremation, and the room became oppressive with their unwholesome vapor.

"The window must be opened," said Olympia. "This odor might betray me. People might suspect me of having cooked arsenic in my kitchen instead of onions."

With these words she opened the casement, and the noxious cloud passed slowly out into the air.

"Now all is safe. Louvois can send as many bailiffs as he lists, and should they poke their inquisitive noses into my sanctum, they will find nothing for their pains but an innocent laboratory wherein the Countess de Soissons prepares her cosmetics, and makes experiments in the chemistry of the toilet."

She replaced her casket, searched the mantel carefully, and then glanced sharply around the room to assure herself that she was alone and undiscovered.

Yes! Alone, the witnesses of her guilt consumed, and their ashes etherealized throughout space.

The countess smiled, and, as she locked the door of her laboratory, her spirits revived and her thoughts once more reverted to the ambitious dreams of the morning. When she had reached her boudoir again, and the complaisant mirror had resumed its place, she drew the flask from her bosom, removed the glass stopper, inhaled for a moment its perfume, and then, raising it to her lips, drained the contents to their last drop.

"And this philter is to make me mistress of your heart, King Louis! How I long to begin my reign!"

A slight rustling was heard outside, and the guilty woman trembled anew. She concealed the phial, and listened breathlessly, while her straining eyes were fixed upon the door as though they had hoped to see through its panels of oak whether friend or foe stood without.

A slight knock was heard, and now, in spite of herself, the Countess de Soissons grew pale and shivered. What if the myrmidons of Louvois had come with a *lettre de cachet*? What if—No! not even *he* would go so far in his enmity to the niece of the great cardinal, the relative of the reigning Duke of Savoy, and the daughter-in-law of the Princess Calignan.

So she summoned resolution enough to cross the room, draw back the bolt, and to say in a loud, imperious tone: "Come in."

The door opened, and admitted a young man. The countess no sooner recognized him than she smiled, and, with a slight elevation of her shoulders, said, "Nobody but you."

"Nobody but me," replied the youth, sadly. "I come to ask of my gracious mother an interview."