

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 Colorado *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 hesitated to join

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

Austria, and to declare in favor of open hostilities against France; she deemed such a war injurious to her particular interests, and desired to maintain peace; the secondary German states, however, allowed themselves to be intimidated by the threats of France to devour all of them, and they were quite willing to expose Germany to further humiliations, provided that their own petty existence should not be endangered.

The work of pacification, therefore, made no progress whatever, but only became a disgrace to Germany, and the congress of Rastadt was nothing but a symptom of the disease of which Germany was soon to perish. Germany seemed destined to die, like an aged and decrepit man, of her own weakness and exhaustion.

This weakness was every day on the increase. In January, 1799, Ehrenbreitstein succumbed, and the French occupied the fortress.

Still the peace commissioners remained in session at Rastadt, and continued their negotiations with the French, who just now had again perfidiously violated the treaties, and appropriated German possessions.

If the German ambassadors, perhaps, were lost to all sense of honor and of their disgraceful position, the representatives of France were fully conscious of their dignity. They treated the ambassadors of Germany in the most scornful manner; they dared haughtily and arrogantly to meddle with the domestic affairs of Germany; they constantly trumped up new claims in the most overbearing attitude, and in their habitual imperious tone, and the representatives of the German empire scarcely dared to refuse their exactions even in the most timid manner.

Only one of the three French ambassadors, for the last few weeks, had been less supercilious than his colleagues; he had participated less than formerly in the affairs of the German congress, and while Roberjot and Jean Debry were raising their arrogant and haughty voices in every session of congress, Bonnier kept aloof. He even held no further intercourse with his own countrymen; and his tall and imposing figure, with the proud and gloomy countenance, was seen no longer every night as heretofore in the drawing-rooms of the wives of Roberjot and Debry. He kept aloof from society as he kept aloof from the congress, and the French ladies smilingly whispered to each other that something strange, something unheard of, had happened to the austere republican. To the man who heretofore had proudly resisted the blandishments of beautiful women, they said he had fallen in love with that wondrously lovely and strange lady who had been at Rastadt for the last few weeks, but who was living in such seclusion that the public had only occasionally got a sight of her. No one knew who this strange lady was,

and what she wanted at Rastadt; she had paid visits to no one, and left her card nowhere. She had arrived only attended by a footman and a lady's maid; but in advance, a brilliant suite of rooms and a box at the theatre had been retained for her. In this box every night the beautiful strange lady was seen closely veiled, and the gloomy pale face of Bonnier had been repeatedly beheld by her side.

Victoria de Poutet, therefore, had accomplished her purpose; she had tamed one of the French bears, and surrounded him with the magic nets of her beauty. She was the mysterious strange lady whose appearance had created so great a sensation in the drawing-rooms of Rastadt for the last few weeks; she was the lady whom Bonnier was following as though he were her shadow.

She had come to him as a refugee, as a persecuted woman, with tears in her eyes. She had told him a tragic story of Thugut's tyranny and wanton lust. Because she had refused to submit to the voluptuous desires of the Austrian minister, he had sworn to ruin her, and his love had turned into furious hatred. She further stated the minister had threatened her with the confiscation of her property, with imprisonment, death, and disgrace, and she had only succeeded by her courage and cunning in saving herself and in escaping from Austria. Now she came to Bonnier to invoke the protection and assistance of generous France, and to flee from the rude violence of a German minister to the chivalrous ægis of the French Republic.

How beautiful she was in her tears, with the mournful smile on her swelling lips! But how much more beautiful when a deep blush mantled her cheeks, and when her large dark eyes were sparkling in the glow of revenge and anger!

For Victoria de Poutet did not only want protection—she also sought revenge—revenge on that tyrant Thugut, who had dared to threaten her innocence and virtue, and to assail her honor and happiness. She was not only persecuted—she was also insulted, and she wished to chastise the Austrian minister for these insults. Bonnier was to lend her his assistance for this purpose. He was to procure means for her to overthrow Thugut.

How eloquently and enthusiastically did she speak to Bonnier about her misfortunes, her anger, and her thirst of revenge! How much truthfulness there was depicted in her face—what a demoniacal ardor in her eyes; how much energy in her whole bearing, so indicative of bold determination and of an indomitable spirit!

Bonnier gazed at her in wondering delight, in timid awe. He who had hated women because they were so weak, so peevish, and insignificant, now saw before him a woman with the energy of a hatred such as he had scarcely known himself, with the enthusiasm of

a revengefulness that shrank back from no dangers and no obstacles. Under this delicate, ethereal female form there was concealed the spirit and firm will of a man; bold thoughts were written on her forehead, and an enchanting smile was playing on her full lips. While Bonnier was listening to the dithyrambs of her hatred and revenge, love glided into his own heart; she had fascinated him by her revengeful hymns as others fascinate by their love-songs.

Victoria was conscious of her triumph; her eagle eye had watched every motion, every step of this innocent lamb she was going to strangle; she had seen him fall into the glittering nets she had spread out for him; she knew that he was a captive in her meshes without being aware of it himself.

Her bearing now underwent a change; she was no longer merely a woman thirsting for revenge, but also a tender, loving woman; she was no longer merely filled with hatred, but she also seemed susceptible of gentler emotions; she lowered her eyes before Bonnier's ardent glances and blushed. To his timid and faltering protestations of love she replied by subdued sighs, and by a dreamy smile; and when Bonnier at length dared to approach her with a bold confession of his passion—when he was on his knees before her, all aglow with love and enthusiasm, Victoria bent over him with a sweet smile, and whispered: "Give me the papers that are to ruin Thugut; surrender that vile man to my revenge, and my love, my life are yours!"

Bonnier looked up to her with a triumphant smile. "You are mine, then, Victoria," he said, "for you shall have those papers! I surrender that infamous and treacherous man to your revenge!"

She stretched out her hands toward him with a cry of boundless joy. "Give me the papers," she exclaimed; "give them to me, and I will thank you as only love is able to thank!"

Bonnier looked a long while at her, and his face, usually so gloomy, was now radiant with happiness and delight.

"To-morrow, my charming fairy," he said, "to-morrow you shall have the papers which are to open hell to your enemy, and heaven to your enraptured friend. But you must give me also a proof of your confidence and love; you must come to me and call in person for the papers. I give you the highest proof of my love by delivering to you documents that do not belong to me, but to the republic. Then give me likewise the highest proof of your love. Come to me!"

She cast a long and glowing glance on him. "I shall come!" she whispered.

And Victoria kept her word. Early on the following morning a closely-veiled lady was seen to glide into the castle of Rastadt, where the three French ambassadors were living at that time. Bonnier

received her in person at the foot of the wide staircase, and gave her his arm in order to conduct her to the rooms occupied by himself.

They exchanged not a word with each other, but walked silently through the sumptuous apartments and finally entered Bonnier's study.

"We are at the goal—here I bid you welcome, my fairy queen!" exclaimed Bonnier. "Remove now these odious veils. Let me now at length see your beautiful features!"

He violently tore off her black veils, and Victoria suffered it smilingly, and looked at him with a wondrous air of joy and happiness.

"Are you content now?" she asked, in her superb, sonorous voice. "Has the proud lord of creation now prepared a new and satisfactory triumph for himself? The poor slave whom he loves must come to him and beg him for love and happiness!"

She had crossed her hands on her breast, and half kneeling down before Bonnier, she looked up to him with a fascinating mixture of archness and passion.

Bonnier lifted her up and wanted to imprint a kiss upon her lips, but she violently pushed him back.

"No," she said, "let us be sensible as long as we can. First we must attend to our business."

"Business!" exclaimed Bonnier. "What have we to do with business? Leave business to the diplomatists and their clerks. Why should lips so charming and beautiful pronounce this cold and dismal word?"

"If I spoke of business, I meant revenge," said Victoria, fervently. "Give me the papers, Bonnier—the papers that are to ruin Thugut!"

Bonnier took her head between his hands and looked at her with flaming eyes.

"Then you hate him still? You still desire to take revenge on him?" he asked.

"Yes, I hate him!" she exclaimed, "and the happiest day of my life will be the one on which I see him hurled down from his proud eminence, and sneaking alone, miserable, and despised into obscurity."

"One might, indeed, really believe that she is in earnest, and that truth alone could utter such words," muttered Bonnier, who constantly held her head in his hands, and thus gazed at her. "Swear to me, Victoria, swear to me by what is most sacred to you, that you hate Thugut, and that you desire to ruin him!"

"I swear it by what is most sacred to me," she said, solemnly; "I swear it by your love!"

"That is the best and most unequivocal oath, and I will believe you," said Bonnier, laughing.

"Then you will now give me those papers?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, bluntly, "I will give them to you. Come, my angel, you are right—let us first speak of business matters. There, sit down here at my desk. Oh, henceforth this spot will be sacred to me, for your heavenly person has consecrated it. Let me sit down here by your side, and thus we will lay our dispatches before each other, like two good and conscientious diplomatists. Look here! this portfolio contains your revenge and your satisfaction. This portfolio contains the papers proving that Thugut has received large sums of money from Russia and England for the purpose of instigating the Emperor of Austria against France, and that his pretended patriotic indignation is after all nothing but the paid rôle of a comedian. I have abstracted this portfolio from the archives of our embassy. Do you understand me, Victoria? I have stolen it for you!"

"Let me see the papers!" exclaimed Victoria, trembling with impatience.

Bonnier opened the portfolio and drew a paper from it. But on looking at it, a dark cloud passed over his face, and he shook his head indignantly.

"What a miserable fool I was to make such a mistake!" he ejaculated angrily. "I have taken the wrong portfolio. This one does not contain the papers you are looking for."

"That is," said Victoria, with cutting coldness—"that is, you have intentionally deceived me. You decoyed me hither under false pretences. You told me a story about important papers that were in your possession, and with which you were to intrust me for the purpose of gratifying my revenge. And now when I come to you, nobly trusting your chivalrous word, now it turns out that you have deceived me, and that those important papers do not exist at all."

"Ah, believe me, there are papers here perhaps even more important than the documents you are looking for," said Bonnier, shrugging his shoulders. "Believe me, Baron Thugut would give many thousands if he could get hold of the papers contained in this portfolio. They are, perhaps, even more important than those other documents."

A flash burst forth from Victoria's eyes, and the angry air disappeared at once from her features. She turned to Bonnier with a fascinating smile.

"What sort of papers are those?" she asked.

"Papers that do not interest you, my charming fairy," he said, smilingly; "for what have love and revenge to do with the negoti-

ations of diplomacy? This portfolio contains only diplomatic documents, only the secret correspondence between ourselves and the Prussian government, and the negotiations concerning an alliance between France and Prussia—that is all. They do not interest you, my beautiful Victoria, but Thugut would gladly purchase these papers for those which you are so anxious to obtain."

Victoria's eyes were fixed on the portfolio with a glowing expression, and her hand was involuntarily approaching it. Bonnier saw it, and a peculiar smile overspread his gloomy face for a moment.

"Happy for me," he said, "that I discovered my mistake before giving you the portfolio. The loss of these papers would have compromised me irretrievably. But you are silent, Victoria—you do not utter a word. Then you do not yet believe in the truthfulness of my words? I swear to you, my fascinating sorceress, it was a mere mistake—I only seized the wrong portfolio."

"Do not swear, but convince me," said Victoria. "Go and fetch the other portfolio."

"And I should leave you here all alone so long?" he asked, tenderly. "I should be such a prodigal as to squander these precious minutes during which I am permitted to be by your side!"

Victoria rose and looked at him with flaming, imperious eyes.

"Fetch the papers," she shouted, "or I leave you this very moment, and you shall never see me again!"

"That is a word by which you would drive me even into the jaws of hell!" said Bonnier, ardently. "Wait for me here, Victoria—I am going for the papers."

He greeted her with a rapid nod, and placing the portfolio under his arm, he hastily walked to the door. Here he turned around toward her and his eyes met hers steadfastly fixed upon him.

He kissed his hand to her, and while doing so, the portfolio softly glided from under his arm and fell upon the floor. Bonnier took no notice of it; his whole attention was riveted on the beautiful lady. But she saw it, and her eyes sparkled with delight.

"Return as soon as possible," she said, with an enchanting smile, and Bonnier left the room. She anxiously looked after him until the door had closed, and then she listened to the sound of his footsteps. Now the latter were no longer audible, and every thing about her was silent.

Victoria did not stir; she only swept with her large eyes searchingly over the whole room; she fixed them upon every curtain, upon every piece of furniture. But nothing was there to arouse her suspicions; a profound stillness reigned around her.

Now she rose slowly from her seat and made a few steps forward. The rustling of her heavy silk dress alone interrupted the silence.

She paused again and listened, and her eyes fixed themselves longingly upon the portfolio lying at the door. Why were not her eyes endowed with the power of a loadstone? Why were they not able to attract the portfolio to her?

The portfolio lay there quietly and immovably; Victoria vainly stretched out her hands toward it—she was unable to reach it.

Once more she impetuously glanced round the room; then she bounded forward like a lioness rushing toward her prey.

She grasped the portfolio and raised it with a triumphant smile. Her small hands quickly plunged into it and drew forth the papers. There were but a few letters, and besides several closely written pages. Victoria did not take time to look at them; she rapidly pushed the papers into the pocket of her dress, and arranged the folds of the latter so as to conceal the contents of her pocket. She then closed the portfolio and replaced it on the floor, precisely on the spot where Bonnier had dropped it.

Her purpose was accomplished! How her face was glowing with delight! How deep a blush was burning on her cheeks! How her eyes were sparkling with diabolic exultation!

With light, inaudible steps she now crossed the room again, and resumed her seat at the desk. And it was fortunate that she had done so, for steps were approaching in the adjoining room; the door opened, and Bonnier entered.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE JUSTIFICATION.

BONNIER paused for a moment on the threshold, fixing his eyes on Victoria, who greeted him with a sweet, fascinating smile. But the smile disappeared from her lips when she beheld the threatening angry glance with which he was staring at her, and the air of gloomy indignation depicted on his countenance. She might be mistaken, however, and perhaps it was merely the anguish of her conscience which made her tremble.

"And you bring me the papers, my beloved friend?" asked Victoria, with an air of fascinating kindness.

"Yes," said Bonnier, still remaining on the threshold, "I bring you the papers. But just look what a fool love has made of me! For your sake, I forgot the portfolio with those other papers, and dropped it on the floor there. Do you now perceive your power over me? For I believe I told you that the loss of those papers would ruin me irretrievably."

"Yes, you told me so," said Victoria, smiling.

"And yet I forgot them here!" exclaimed Bonnier, stooping to pick them up. But Victoria immediately rose and hastened to him.

"To punish you for your carelessness, you shall now leave the portfolio on the floor," she said, smiling; "nor shall you think of it again as long as I am with you. Tell me, will that be too hard for you?"

She bent her beautiful face over him, and with flaming glances looked deeply into his eyes.

Bonnier dropped the portfolio again and smiled.

"It may lie there," he said; "it has performed its part anyhow. And now, I suppose, we will talk again about our business?"

"Yes, we will," replied Victoria. "Give me the papers."

"No, madame; no one gives up such important papers without witnesses," said Bonnier. "Permit me therefore to call my witnesses."

He hastily turned to the door and pushed it open.

"Come in, gentlemen!" he shouted, and his two colleagues, Roberjot and Debry, immediately appeared on the threshold. Without greeting Victoria, merely eyeing her with cold, contemptuous glances, the two gentlemen entered and walked directly to the desk. Bonnier locked the door and put the key into his pocket.

Victoria saw it, and a slight pallor overspread her rosy face for a moment.

"Will you tell me, sir, what all this means?" she asked, in a threatening voice.

"You will learn it directly," said Bonnier. "Please sit down again in your arm-chair, for we are going to resume our diplomatic negotiations. You, gentlemen, take seats on both sides of the lady; I shall sit down opposite her, and at the slightest motion she makes, either to jump out of the window there, or to interrupt us by an exclamation, I shall shoot her as sure as my name is Bonnier!"

He drew a pistol from his bosom and cocked it. "I command you to be silent and not to interrupt us," he said, turning to Victoria. "The pistol is loaded, and, unless you respect my orders, I will most certainly inflict upon you the punishment you have deserved; I shall take your life like that of any other spy who has been caught in a hostile camp."

He dropped his right hand with the pistol on the table, and then turned to the two gentlemen, who had listened to him in gloomy silence.

"Yes, my friends," he said, throwing back his head in order to shake away his long black hair, surrounding his face like a mane—"now, my friends, I beg you to listen to my justification. You

have latterly believed me to be a fool, a prodigal son of the republic, who, for the sake of a miserable love-affair with a flirt, neglected the most sacred interests of his country. You shall see and acknowledge now that, while I seemed to be lost, I was only working for the welfare and glory of our great republic, and that this woman with her beautiful mask did not make me forget for a single moment my duties to my country. These papers contain my justification—these papers, madame, with which you hoped to revenge yourself. Pardon me, my fairy queen, I have made another mistake, and again brought a wrong portfolio; these are not the documents either which you would like to obtain. Perhaps they are after all in the portfolio lying on the floor there!"

He looked at Victoria with a scornful smile; she fixed her large eyes steadfastly upon him; not a muscle of her face was twitching—not the slightest anxiety or fear was depicted on her features.

Bonnier opened the portfolio and drew the papers from it.

"I shall only briefly state to you the contents of those papers," he said, "you may afterward peruse them at leisure. This first paper is a letter I received by a courier from Vienna, without knowing who sent it to me. The letter only contains the following words:

"Be on your guard. A very dangerous spy will be sent to you—a lady who is the most intimate friend of a distinguished statesman. Receive her well, and let no one see these lines. It will promote the welfare of France."

"As a matter of course, I said nothing about it, not even to you, my friends; I was silent, and waited for further developments. Two days later I received this second paper. It was a note from a lady, who wrote to me that she had just arrived at Rastadt, and was very anxious to see me, but under the seal of the most profound secrecy. I followed the invitation, and repaired to the designated house. I found there this lady, who introduced herself to me as Madame Victoria de Poutet; and if you now look at her you will comprehend why that refined half-Turk Thugut, as well as the mad rake Count Lehrbach, are both in love with her, for she is more beautiful than the loveliest *odalisque* and the most fascinating Phryne!"

The three men fixed their eyes upon Victoria, and ogled her with an impudent leer. Victoria sat erect and immovable, and even her eye-lashes did not move; she apparently did not see the glances fixed upon her; nor even heard what Bonnier had said about her, for her countenance remained calm and almost smiling.

Bonnier continued: "The lady told me a very pretty little story, the particulars of which I shall not relate to you. In short, Thugut had attacked her innocence and her honor—her innocence and her honor, do not forget that!—and she wanted to revenge herself upon

him. She asked me to lend her my assistance for this purpose. I feigned to believe every thing she told me, and promised to protect her.

"This third paper here I found on my desk on returning home from my visit to the lady. A stranger had delivered it. It was written by the same man who had addressed the first letter to me. It read as follows: 'A romance is to be played with you; let them proceed without interfering with their doings. The fascination of beauty is very powerful, and the lady is going to fascinate you, for the purpose of obtaining important papers from you. Pretend to be fascinated, and you will penetrate the intrigue.'

"The advice was good, and I followed it. I feigned to be fascinated; I played the enthusiastic lover of this lady; and although I doubtless acted my part in a very clumsy manner, she was kind enough to believe me; for she is well aware that no one is able to withstand the power of her beauty. But in order to perform my rôle in a really truthful manner, not only Madame de Poutet, but also all Rastadt, had to be convinced of my ardent love for her, for Victoria is very shrewd; Thugut has educated a worthy pupil in her. Hence I had to wear the mask of my love everywhere, even before you, my friends. I had to make up my mind to pass for a fool until I was able to prove to you that I was a man of sense; I had to wear *my* mask until I was able to tear this woman's mask from her face. Oh, I assure you, it is not an easy task to be this lady's lover! She demands a great deal of courting, a great deal of ardor, a great deal of passion; she has got very warm blood herself, and, if I am not mistaken, she is a great-granddaughter of that beautiful Roman lady, Messalina."

Now, for the first time, a slight tremor pervaded Victoria's frame, and a deep blush suffused her cheeks. But this lasted only a moment, and then she sat again quite erect and immovable.

"In spite of the difficulty of your task, you have played your part in a masterly manner," said Jean Debry, in a rude and stern voice. "All of us believed you were in love, and this modern Messalina certainly did not doubt it, either."

"No, she did not doubt it," said Bonnier, with a disdainful smile. "She surrounded herself with spies, who had to watch me, but fortunately I knew them, and did not betray myself."

"How did you know them?" asked Roberjot.

"My unknown correspondent pointed them out to me. He had given up his incognito, and came to me, satisfying me of his identity by writing a few lines, which proved him to be the author of the two previous letters. He offered for a brilliant compensation to assist me in unravelling the intrigue, and I promised him five

thousand francs. He was one of our most astute and skilful spies, and he wanted this affair to be his masterpiece, in order to obtain from me a recommendation to General Bonaparte, who has just returned from Egypt. I shall give him to-day the promised sum and the recommendation, for he has honestly earned both, and faithfully assisted me in unmasking this woman.* I received every morning a written report from him about every thing Madame Poutet had done during the previous day. All these reports are in this portfolio, and you will examine them, my friends. You will see from them that Madame Victoria, who had come to me in order to revenge herself upon Thugut, nevertheless kept up a good understanding with his most intimate friend, Count Lehrbach, for every night, as soon as I had left Victoria, the noble count repaired to her house and spent several hours with her, although Victoria had assured me Count Lehrbach did not even suspect her presence at Rastadt. However, there was a possibility that my spy was deceiving me just as well as he had deceived Madame de Poutet. In order to ascertain that, I informed Victoria one evening that a courier would set out for Paris in the morning, and forward to the Directory papers of the highest importance, concerning an alliance with Russia. We sent a courier to Paris in the morning, but not far from Rastadt he was arrested by Austrian hussars, robbed of his papers, and taken to the headquarters of the Austrian Colonel Barbaczy, at Gernsbach, although our courier was provided with a French passport and an official badge, enabling him fully to prove that he was in our service."†

"This was an unheard-of violation of international law, for which we have vainly sought redress," said Jean Debry, gloomily. "These German cowards are not even courageous enough to acknowledge their own acts. They deny having robbed our courier, but they cannot deny having imprisoned him, contrary to international law."

"Just as little as Victoria can deny that she was the person who had informed Lehrbach and Barbaczy of the courier's departure," said Bonnier; "for, fifteen minutes before setting out, the courier himself did not know any thing about his mission; and the dispatches, of course, were of the most harmless description. But my pretty lady-bird there had gone into the trap I had set for her, and

* This spy was the famous Schulmeister, afterward Bonaparte's most adroit and intrepid spy. He boasted of the rôle he had played at Rastadt, and which had brought him double pay; first from Count Lehrbach, whom he had informed that there were important papers in the hands of the French, and then from the French ambassadors, whom he had cautioned against Count Lehrbach, and given the advice to burn their papers and to be on their guard.

† Historical.

I kept her in it without her knowing any thing about it. She was quite unsuspecting, and, thanks to my talents as a comedian, and to my love, I finally found out the real purpose of her visit to Rastadt. Yesterday I promised her to deliver to her to-day the papers that endanger Thugut's position at the head of the Austrian government, and prove him to be a hireling of England. In the evening Count Lehrbach sent a courier to Vienna; then we retaliated, caused the courier to be arrested and took his papers from him. He had, however, only a small note, addressed to Minister Thugut. Here it is. It contains only the following words:

'I shall get the papers to-morrow.

'VICTORIA.'

But these words were written by the beautiful hand of the same lady who latterly had penned so many tender love-letters to myself. I had promised her those papers if she would call for them to-day, and you see, my friends, that she has come. But I desired to know if this really was the only object for which Baron Thugut had sent his most beautiful and sagacious agent to Rastadt, or if there were not some secondary objects at the bottom of this mission. I therefore resolved to ascertain this to-day. My astute spy had told me that Madame de Poutet was also anxious to get hold of some other important papers. I therefore feigned to-day to have abstracted the wrong papers and to have brought here a portfolio containing our correspondence with the Prussian minister and documents in relation to an alliance between France and Prussia. I told my fair friend that the loss of these papers would ruin me irretrievably, and yet I was such a love-sick fool as to drop the portfolio with the papers while engaged in tenderly kissing my hand to my dulcinea. Look, gentlemen, the portfolio is yet lying on the floor, but the papers are no longer in it. They are carefully concealed in Madame Victoria's pocket. Oh, it was a very pretty scene, when she stole them. I watched her through a small hole which I had bored through the door this morning, and through which I could plainly see every motion of my beautiful Victoria. Yes, my beautiful Victoria stole the papers, although she knew that this loss would seriously embarrass me. However, my friends, it will be unnecessary for the republic to punish me for this theft. Madame de Poutet has committed, for the papers she has got in her pocket are nothing but the faithful diary of my daily intercourse with Victoria de Poutet. I have carefully noted in it every conversation I had with her, and every favor she granted to me, and I have no objection whatever to this diary being transmitted to Minister Thugut. If he is not jealous, he will not complain of it. And now I am through with my justification, and I ask you, did I not act as a good and faithful son

of the republic should? Have I done my duty? Will the country be content with me?"

"Yes," said Roberjot, solemnly, "you have acted as a good and faithful son of the republic. You have intrepidly followed the enemy who had approached you on secret paths, into his hiding-places, and you have skilfully exposed the perfidious intrigues he had carried on against France. You have done your duty."

"Yes, the republic will thank you for your zeal," exclaimed Jean Debry; "you have run great risks for her sake. For a beautiful, voluptuous, and intriguing woman is even more dangerous than a venomous serpent. Like St. Anthony, you have withstood the temptress by praying to our holy mother, the great French Republic! Yes, the country will be content with you."

"I thank you, my friends," said Bonnier, with a happy smile; "I now stand again before you with a clear conscience, and without a blush of shame on my cheeks. You have accepted my atonement. As for this woman, we will inflict no further punishment on her. She was only a tool in Thugut's hands; that was all. This hour has punished her sufficiently, and our profound contempt shall be the only penalty she will take away with her."

"Yes, our profound contempt shall be the penalty she will take with her," exclaimed Roberjot and Jean Debry at the same time.

"There is nothing more disgraceful under the sun than a woman who sells her charms," said Roberjot.

"There is nothing more dreadful and dishonorable than an ambitious and heartless wanton!" added Jean Debry, in a voice of profound disdain.

"Victoria de Poutet," said Bonnier, throwing the pistol aside, "every thing between us was a comedy, even this pistol, the pretended bullet of which frightened and silenced you. It was not loaded. The comedy is now at an end, and there remains nothing for you but to go to your stage-manager and to tell him that you utterly failed in performing your part. You may go now; nothing further detains you here."

"I beg your pardon," said Victoria, in a perfectly calm and sonorous voice: "you forget that you put the key of the door into your pocket; go, therefore, and unlock it."

She pointed at the door with an imperious gesture, and Bonnier went to unlock it. Victoria, remaining still erect and calm in her arm-chair, looked at him while he was doing so, and only when Bonnier had opened the door and returned to the table, she rose slowly from her seat.

Now she stood there, drawing herself up to her full height, her face glowing with indignation, a deep blush mantling her cheeks,

a disdainful smile playing on the slightly parted lips, the expansive white forehead deeply wrinkled, as cold as marble, and yet concealing under this marble surface a torrent of molten lava, which, as soon as it should burst forth, could not but produce death and destruction. Hers was now a diabolic beauty, and when she turned her eyes toward the three republicans, they glistened like dagger-points.

"I have to make but a brief reply to M. Bonnier's long speech," she said, proudly and calmly. "This is my answer: I shall obtain those papers in spite of you, and I shall revenge myself for this hour! To your last high-sounding sentences, I answer by another sentence: there is nothing more dangerous than an irritated and insulted woman, for she will revenge herself and imbrue her hands in the blood of those who have insulted her. Roberjot, Bonnier, and Debry, you have insulted me, and I tell you I shall revenge myself. Before three times three days have passed, you will have atoned with your blood for this hour, and may God have mercy on your poor souls!"

She greeted all of them with a haughty nod, and slowly turning around, she proudly crossed the room. The three men looked at her with pale and gloomy faces, and a slight shudder pervaded for a moment the hearts of the republicans, usually so bold and undaunted.

"She looked like an evil demon predicting our future!" murmured Roberjot.

"She will fulfil her word; she will try to assassinate us," said Bonnier. "Did you not see it? Her eyes were moist; no tears were glistening in them, however, only the venom she will discharge at us. Let us be on our guard!"

"Yes, let us beware of the serpent's venom!" exclaimed Jean Debry, with gloomy energy—"let us beware, and most of all, let us be men who cannot be intimidated by the furious threats of a woman."

But Jean Debry knew neither the energy nor the power of this woman whose threats he despised. He did not know that, her anger once aroused, she would not rest until she had taken her revenge. Late in the evening of that day, when all Rastadt was sleeping, Victoria received in her house her two powerful assistants, Count Lehrbach and Colonel Barbaczy, the latter having been invited by a mounted messenger to come to her from Gernsbach.

A long and portentous conference these three persons held in the course of that night, during which they consulted about the best way to punish the French ambassadors, and to take from them the papers which Thugut wished to obtain.

"We must have those papers at any price!" exclaimed Victoria, with flashing eyes.

"Oh, it will only cost a little blood!" shouted Count Lehrbach, in a hollow voice, and laughing hoarsely. "These overbearing French have trampled us under foot for two long years, and tormented us by pricking us with pins. Now we will also trample them under foot and prick them, and if our pins are longer than theirs, who will complain?"

"Thugut wants those papers, and he has forgiven us in advance if they should be a little blood-stained," said Victoria, looking up smilingly to old Colonel Barbaczy, who, with his hands folded on his back, his large shaggy eyebrows gloomily contracted, was slowly pacing the room.

"Barbaczy! Barbaczy!" he muttered, in a low voice, "what will the world say of your old head?"*

"The world will not grudge these hot-blooded French a little blood-letting, and it will praise your surgical skill, my dear Barbaczy," exclaimed Lehrbach, laughing. "The responsibility, besides, does not fall on your shoulders. Who will blame you if your hot-blooded hussars commit some excesses—some highway robberies? You do not order them to assassinate anybody; you only order them to take the papers from the ambassadors, and only to use force if it cannot be helped."

"I shall send fifty hussars to the city to-morrow," said Barbaczy, thoughtfully. "They shall encamp in front of the Ettlinger Gate, so that no one, whosoever it may be, will be able to cross the bridges connecting the city with the suburbs without passing through their ranks."

Victoria approached him, and laying her hands on his shoulders, she looked up to him with a fascinating smile.

"And you will send some of your most intrepid hussars to Lehrbach and to me, that we may tell the brave men what rewards are in store for them if they perform their duty in a satisfactory manner? No, my beautiful god of war, do not shake your silvery locks so wildly—do not threaten me with your frowning brow! Think of Gurgewo, my friend! Do you remember what you swore to me at that time in the trenches when I dressed with my own hands the wound for which you were indebted to a Turkish sabre? Do you remember that you swore to me at that time you would reciprocate my service as soon as it was in your power?"

"I know it, and I am ready to fulfil my oath," said Barbaczy, heaving a sigh.

* Barbaczy's own words.—Vide "Literarischer Lodiacus." Edited by Theod. Mundt, 1835. Third number, p. 208.

"Well, my friend, all I ask is this: send to-morrow six of your bravest and wildest hussars to my house, and order them faithfully to carry out what Count Lehrbach and I shall tell them."

"The hussars shall halt at your door to-morrow morning at nine o'clock," said Barbaczy, resolutely.

"And I will admit them!" exclaimed Victoria, smiling. "You will be here, Count Lehrbach, I suppose?"

"I shall be here in order to listen to the wise lessons which the goddess Victoria will teach the sons of Mars," replied Lehrbach, fixing his small, squinting eyes with an admiring air on Victoria's beautiful face. "You will need no other means but your smiles and your beauty in order to inspire those brave soldiers with the most dauntless heroism. Who would not be willing to shed a little French blood, if your lips should promise him a reward?"

"And what reward are you going to promise to the soldier?" asked Barbaczy, turning to Madame de Poutet. "What are you going to ask them to do?"

"Only to seize all the papers of the ambassadors," said Victoria.

"And to examine their bodies if any papers should be concealed there," added Count Lehrbach, laughing.

"And their reward shall be that the hussars will be allowed to look for some other spoils," said Victoria.

"Highway robbery and murder, then," sighed Barbaczy, "and perpetrated by soldiers of my regiment! Highway robbery and murder!"

"Fie, what ugly words those are! and who thinks of murder?" exclaimed Victoria. "Did we Germans die, then, of the numerous kicks and blows which the French have given us for the last few years? We will only return those kicks and blows, and the French will assuredly not be so thin-skinned as to die of them on the spot."

"Do as you please," sighed Barbaczy. "Count Lehrbach has the right to issue orders to myself and to my troops, and I owe you the fulfilment of my oath. My hussars will occupy the city to-morrow, and I shall order the French ambassadors to depart forthwith. What is to be done after their departure you may settle with the hussars I shall send to you. I shall take no notice of it."

"And that is a very wise resolution of yours, colonel," said Lehrbach. "'To know too much gives us the headache,' says our gracious emperor, whenever he returns the dispatches to Baron Thugut without having read them. Send us, then, your hussars to-morrow, and whatever may happen, colonel, we shall not betray each other."

"No, we shall not betray each other!" repeated Victoria and Barbaczy, with uplifted hands.

"To-morrow, then!" said Victoria. "Now, good-night, gentlemen!"