

"You gave me your word!"

"I gave it as Duke of Courland! The regent is not bound by the promise of the duke."

"I made you regent!"

"And I do *not* make you generalissimo!"

"You forfeit your word of honor?"

"No, ask something else, and I will grant it. But this is not feasible. I must myself be the generalissimo of my own troops, or I should no longer be the ruler! Ask, therefore, for something else."

Münnich was silent. His features indicated a frightful commotion, and his bosom heaved violently.

"I have nothing further to ask," said he, after a pause.

"But I will confer upon you a favor without your asking it!" proudly responded the duke. "Count Münnich, I confirm you in your offices and dignities, and, to prove to you my unlimited confidence, you shall continue to be what you were under the Empress Anna, field-marshal in the Russian army!"

"I thank you, sir duke," calmly replied Münnich. "It is very noble in you that you do not send me into banishment for my presumptuous demand."

Clasping the offered hand of the duke, he respectfully pressed it to his lips.

"And now go, to kiss the hand of the young emperor, that you may not be accused of disrespect," smilingly added Biron; "one must always preserve appearances."

Münnich silently bowed, while walking backward toward the door.

"We part as friends?" asked the duke, nodding an adieu.

"As friends for life and death!" said Münnich, with a smile.

But no sooner had the door closed behind him than the smile vanished from his features, and was replaced by an expression of furious rage. He threateningly shook his fist toward the door which separated him from the duke, and with convulsively compressed lips and grating teeth he said: "Yes, we now part as friends, but we shall yet meet as enemies! I shall remember this hour, sir duke, and shall do my best to prevent your forgetting it. Ah, you have not sent me to Siberia, but I will send you there! And now to the Emperor Ivan. I shall there meet his parents, the shamefully-slighted Ulrich of Brunswick, and his wife Anna Leopoldowna. I think they will welcome me."

With a firm step, rage and vengeance in his heart, but outwardly smiling and submissive, Field-Marshal Count Münnich betook himself to the palace of the Duke of Brunswick to kiss the hand of the cradled Emperor Ivan.

---

### CHAPTER III.

COUNT OSTERMANN.

FOUR weeks had passed since Biron, Duke of Courland, had commenced his rule over Russia, as regent, in the name of the infant Emperor Ivan. The Russian people had

with indifference submitted to this new ruler, and manifested the same subjection to him as to his predecessor. It was all the same to them whoever sat in godlike splendor upon the magnificent imperial throne—what care that mass of degraded slaves, who are crawling in the dust, for the name by which their tyrants are called? They remain what they are, slaves; and the one upon the throne remains what he is, their absolute lord and tyrant, who has the right to-day to scourge them with whips, to-morrow to make them barons and counts, and perhaps the next day to send them to Siberia, or subject them to the infliction of the fatal knout. Whoever proclaims himself emperor or dictator, is greeted by the Russian people, that horde of creeping slaves, as their lord and master, the supreme disposer of life and death, while they crawl in the dust at his feet.

They had sworn allegiance to the Regent Biron, as they had to the Empress Anna; they threw themselves upon the earth when they met him, they humbly bared their heads when passing his palace; and when the magnates of the realm, the princes and counts of Russia, in their proud equipages, discovered the regent's carriage in the distance, they ordered a halt, descended from their vehicles, and bowed themselves to the ground before their passing lord. In Russia, all distinctions of rank cease in the presence of the ruler; there is but one lord, and one trembling slave, be he prince or beggar, and that lord must be obeyed, whether he commands a murder or any other crime. The word and will of the emperor purify and sanctify every act, blessing it and making it honorable.

Biron was emperor, although he bore only the name of

regent; he had the power and the dominion; the infant nurseling Ivan, the minor emperor, was but a shadow, a phantom, having the appearance but not the reality of lordship; he was a thing unworthy of notice; he could make no one tremble with fear, and therefore it was unnecessary to crawl in the dust before him.

Homage was paid to the Regent Biron, Duke of Courland; the palace of Prince Ulrich of Brunswick, and his son, the Emperor Ivan, stood empty and desolate. No one regarded it, and yet perhaps it was worthy of regard.

Yet many repaired to this quiet, silent palace, to know whom Biron would perhaps have given principedoms and millions! But no one was there to betray them to the regent; they were very silent and very cautious in the palace of the Prince of Brunswick and his wife the Princess Anna Leopoldowna.

It was, as we have said, about four weeks after the commencement of the regency of the Duke of Courland, when a sedan-chair was set down before a small back door of the Duchess Anna Leopoldowna's palace; it had been borne and accompanied by four serfs, over whose gold-embroidered liveries, as if to protect them from the weather, had been laid a tolerably thick coat of dust and sweat. Equally splendid, elegant, and unclean was the chair which the servants now opened for the purpose of aiding their age-enfeebled master to emerge from it. That person, who now made his appearance, was a shrunken, trembling, coughing old gentleman; his small, bent, distorted form was wrapped in a fur cloak which, somewhat tattered, permitted a soiled and faded under-dress to make itself perceptible, giving to

the old man the appearance of indigence and slovenliness. Nothing, not even the face, or the thin and meagre hands he extended to his servants, was neat and cleanly; nothing about him shone but his eyes, those gray, piercing eyes with their fiery side-glances and their now kind and now sly and subtle expression. This ragged and untidy old man might have been taken for a beggar, had not his dirty fingers and his faded neck-tie, whose original color was hardly discoverable, flashed with brilliants of an unusual size, and had not the arms emblazoned upon the door of his chair, in spite of the dust and dirt, betrayed a noble rank. The arms were those of the Ostermann family, and this dirty old man in the ragged cloak was Count Ostermann, the famous Russian statesman, the son of a German preacher, who had managed by wisdom, cunning, and intrigue to continue in place under five successive Russian emperors or regents, most of whom had usually been thrust from power by some bloody means. Czar Peter, who first appointed him as a minister of state, and confided to him the department of foreign affairs, on his death-bed said to his successor, the first Catharine, that Ostermann was the only one who had never made a false step, and recommended him to his wife as a prop to the empire. Catharine appointed him imperial chancellor and tutor of Peter II.; he knew how to secure and preserve the favor of both, and the successor of Peter II., the Empress Anna, was glad to retain the services of the celebrated statesman and diplomatist who had so faithfully served her predecessors. From Anna he came to her favorite, Baron of Courland, who did not venture to remove one whose talents had gained for him so distinguished a

reputation, and who in any case might prove a very dangerous enemy.

But with Count Ostermann it had gone as with Count Münnich. Neither of them had been able to obtain from the regent any thing more than a confirmation of their offices and dignities, to which Biron, jealous of power, had been unwilling to make any addition. Deceived in their expectations, vexed at this frustration of their plans, they had both come to the determination to overthrow the man who was unwilling to advance them; they had become Biron's enemies because he did not show himself their friend, and, openly devoted to him and bowing in the dust before him, they had secretly repaired to his bitterest enemy, the Duchess Anna Leopoldowna, to offer her their services against the haughty regent who swayed the iron sceptre of his despotic power over Russia.\*

A decisive conversation was this day to be held with the duchess and her husband, Prince Ulrich of Brunswick, and therefore, an unheard-of case, had even Count Ostermann resolved to leave his dusty room for some hours and repair to the palace of the Duchess Anna Leopoldowna.

"Slowly, slowly, ye knaves," groaned Ostermann, as he ascended the narrow winding stairs with the aid of his servants. "See you not, you hounds, that every one of your movements causes me insufferable pain? Ah, a fearful illness is evidently coming; it is already attacking my limbs, and pierces and agonizes every part of my system! Let my bed be prepared at home, you scamps, and have a strength-

\* Levecque, "Histoire de Russie," vol. v., p. 241.

ening soup made ready for me. And now away, fellows, and woe to you if, during my absence, either one of you should dare to break into the store-room or wine-cellar! You know that I have good eyes, and am cognizant of every article on hand, even to its exact weight and measure. Take care, therefore, take care! for if but an ounce of meat or a glass of wine is missing, I will have you whipped, you hounds, until the blood flows. That you may depend upon!"

And, dismissing his assistants with a kick, Count Ostermann ascended the last steps of the winding stairs alone and unaided. But, before opening the door at the head of the stairs, he took time for reflection.

"Hem! perhaps it would have been better for me to have been already taken ill, for if this plan should miscarry, and the regent discover that I was in this palace to-day, how then? Ah, I already seem to feel a draught of Siberian air! But no, it will succeed, and how would that ambitious Münnich triumph should it succeed without me! No, for this time I must be present, to the vexation of Münnich, that he may not put all Russia in his pocket! The good man has such large pockets and such grasping hands!"

Nodding and smiling to himself, Ostermann opened the door of the anteroom. A rapid, searching glance satisfied him that he was alone there, but his brow darkened when he observed Count Münnich's mantle lying upon a chair.

"Ah, he has preceded me," peevishly murmured Ostermann. "Well, well, we can afford once more to yield the

precedence to him. To-day he—to-morrow I! My turn will come to-morrow!"

Quite forgetting his illness and his pretended pains, he rapidly crossed the spacious room, and, throwing his ragged fur cloak upon Münnich's mantle, said:

"A poor old cloak like this is yet in condition to render that resplendent uniform invisible. Not a spangle of that magnificent gold embroidery can be seen, it is all overshadowed by the ragged old cloak which Münnich so much despises! Oh, the good field-marshal will rejoice to find his mantle in such good company, and I hope my old cloak may leave some visible memento upon its embroidered companion. Well, the field-marshal is a brave man, and I have given him an opportunity to make a campaign against his own mantle! The fool, why does he dislike these good little animals, and would yet be a Russian!"

As, however, he opened the door of the next room, his form again took its former shrunken, frail appearance, and his features again bore the expression of suffering and exhaustion.

"Ah, it is you," said Prince Ulrich, advancing to meet the count, while Münnich stood near a writing-table, in earnest conversation with Anna Leopoldowna, to whom he seemed to be explaining something upon a sheet of paper.

"We have waited long for you, my dear count," continued the prince, offering his hand to the new-comer, with a smile.

"The old and the sick always have the misfortune to arrive too late," said Count Ostermann, "pain and suffering are such hinderances, your grace. And, moreover, I

have come only in obedience to the wishes of your highness, well knowing that I am superfluous here. What has the feeble old man to do in the councils of the strong?"

"To represent wisdom in council," said the prince, "and for that, you are precisely the man, count."

"Ah, Count Ostermann," at this moment interposed Münnich, "it is well you have come. You will be best able to tell their excellencies whether I am right or not."

"Field-Marshal Münnich is always right," said Ostermann, with a pleasant smile. "I unconditionally say 'yes' to whatever you may have proposed, provided that it is not a proposition of which my judgment cannot approve."

"That is a very conditional yes!" exclaimed the duchess, laughing.

"A 'yes,' all perforated with little back doors through which a 'no' may conveniently enter," laughed the prince.

"The back doors are in all cases of the greatest importance," said Count Ostermann, earnestly. "Through back doors one often attains to the rooms of state, and had your palace here accidentally had no back door for the admission of us, your devoted servants, who knows, your highness Anna, whether you would on this very night become regent!"

"On this night!" suddenly exclaimed Münnich. "You see, your highness, that Count Ostermann is wholly of my opinion. It must be done this night!"

"That would be overhaste," cried the duchess; "we are not yet prepared!"

"Nor is the regent, Biron of Courland," thoughtfully

interposed Ostermann; "and, therefore, our overhaste would take Biron by surprise."

"Decidedly my opinion," said Münnich. "All is lost if we give the regent time and leisure to make his arrangements. If we do not annihilate him to-day, he may, perhaps, send us to Siberia to-morrow."

The duchess turned pale; a trembling ran through her tall, noble form.

"I so much dread the shedding of blood!" said she.

"Oh, I am not at all vain," said Ostermann. "I find it much less unpleasant to see the blood of others flowing than my own. It may be egotism, but I prefer keeping my blood in my veins to exposing it to the gaping curiosity of an astonished crowd!"

"You think, then, that he already suspects, and would murder us?"

"You, us, and also your son, the Emperor Ivan."

"Also my son!" exclaimed Leopoldowna, her eyes flashing like those of an enraged lioness. "Ah, I should know how to defend my son. Let Biron fall this night!"

"So be it!" unanimously exclaimed the three men.

"He has driven us to this extremity," said the princess. "Not enough that he has banished our friends and faithful servants, surrounding us with his miserable creatures and spies—not enough that he wounds and humiliates us in every way—he would rend the young emperor from us, his parents, his natural protectors. We are attacked in our holiest rights, and must, therefore, defend ourselves."

"But what shall we do with this small Biron, when he is no longer the great regent?" asked Ostermann.

"We will make him by a head smaller," said Münnich, laughing.

"No," vehemently exclaimed Leopoldowna—"no, no blood shall flow! Not with blood shall our own and our son's rights be secured! Swear this, gentlemen, or I will never give my consent to the undertaking."

"I well knew that your highness would so decide," said Münnich, with a smile, drawing a folded paper from his bosom. "In proof of which I hand this paper to your highness."

"Ah, what is this?" said the duchess, unfolding the paper; "it is the ground plan of a house!"

"Of the house we will have built for Biron in Siberia," said Münnich; "I have drawn the plan myself."\*

"In fact, you are a skilful architect, Count Münnich," said Ostermann, laughing, while casting an interrogating glance at the paper which Anna was still thoughtfully examining. "How well you have arranged it all! How delightful these snug little chambers will be! There will be just space enough in them to turn around in. But these small chambers seem to be a little too low. They are evidently not more than five feet high. As Biron, however, has about your height, he will not be able to stand upright in them."

"Bah! for that very reason!" said Münnich, with a cruel laugh. "He has carried his head high long enough; now he may learn to bow."

"But that will be a continual torment!" exclaimed the Duke of Brunswick.

\* Levecque, vol. v., p. 214.

"Oh, has he not tormented us?" angrily responded Münnich. "We need reprisals."

"How strange and horrible!" said Anna Leopoldowna, shuddering; "this man is now standing here clothed with unlimited power, and we are already holding in our hands the plan of his prison!"

"Yes, yes, and with this plan in his pocket will Count Münnich now go to dine with Biron and enjoy his hospitality!" laughingly exclaimed Ostermann. "Ah, that must make the dinner particularly piquant! How agreeable it must be to press the regent's hand, and at the same time feel the rustling in your pocket of the paper upon which you have drawn the plan of his Siberian prison! But you are in the right. The regent has deeply offended you. How could he dare refuse to make you his generalissimo?"

"Ah, it is not for that," said Münnich with embarrassment; and, seeking to give the conversation a different turn, he continued—"ah, see, Count Ostermann, what a terrible animal is crawling there upon your dress!"

"Policy, nothing but policy," tranquilly responded Ostermann, while the princess turned away with an expression of repugnance.

"Well," cried the prince, laughing, "explain to us, Count Ostermann, what those disgusting insects have to do with policy or politics?"

"We are all four Germans," said Ostermann, "and consequently are all familiar with the common saying, 'Tell me the company you keep, and I will tell you what you are!' I have always kept that in mind since I have been in Russia; and to make this good people forget that I am a

foreigner, I have taken particular pains to furnish myself with a supply of their dirt and of these delicate insects. If any one asks me who I am, I show him these creatures with whom I associate, and he immediately concludes that I am a Russian."

Ostermann joined in the laugh that followed this explanation, but suddenly he uttered a piercing cry, and sank down upon a chair.

"Ah, these pains will be the death of me!" he moaned—"ah, I already feel the ravages of death in my blood; yes, I have long known that a dangerous malady was hovering over me, and my death-bed is already prepared at home! I am a poor failing old man, and who knows whether I shall outlive the evening of this day?"

While Ostermann was thus lamenting, and the prince with kindly sympathy was occupied about him, Münnich had returned the drawing to his pocket, and was speaking in a low tone to the duchess of some yet necessary preparations for the night. Count Ostermann, notwithstanding his lamentations and his pretended pains, had yet a sharp ear for every word they spoke. He very distinctly heard the duchess say: "Well, I am satisfied! I shall expect you at about two o'clock in the morning, and if the affair is successful, you, Count Münnich, may be sure of my most fervent gratitude; you will then have liberated Russia, the young emperor, and myself, from a cruel and despotic tyrant, and I shall be eternally beholden to you."

Count Münnich's brow beamed with inward satisfaction. "I shall, then, attain my ends," thought he. Aloud he said: "Your highness, I have but one wish and one re-

quest; if you are willing to fulfil this, then will there be nothing left on earth for me to desire."

"Then name your request at once, that I may grant it in advance!" said the princess, with a smile.

"The man is getting on rapidly, and will even now get the appointment of generalissimo," thought Ostermann. "That must never be; I must prevent it!"

And just as Münnich was opening his mouth to prefer his request, Ostermann suddenly uttered so loud and piteous a cry of anguish that the compassionate and alarmed princess hastened to offer him her sympathy and aid.

At this moment the clock upon the wall struck four. That was the hour for which Münnich was invited to dine with the regent. It would not do to fail of his engagement to-day—he must be punctual, to avoid exciting suspicion. He, therefore, had no longer the time to lay his request before the princess; consequently Count Ostermann had accomplished his object, and secretly triumphing, he loudly groaned and complained of his sufferings.

Count Münnich took his leave.

"I go now," he smilingly said, "to take my last dinner with the Duke of Courland. I shall return this night at the appointed hour. We shall then convert the duke into a Siberian convict, which, at all events, will be a very interesting operation."

Thus he departed, with a horrible laugh upon his lips, to keep his appointment with the regent.

Count Ostermann had again attained his end—he remained alone with the princely pair. Had Münnich been the first who came, Ostermann was the last to go.

"Ah," said he, rising with apparent difficulty, "I will now bear my old, diseased body to my dwelling, to repose and perhaps to die upon my bed of pain."

"Not to die, I hope," said Anna.

"You must live, that you may see us in our greatness," said the prince.

Ostermann feebly shook his head. "I see, I see it all," said he. "You will liberate yourself from one tyrant, your highness, to become the prey of another. The eyes of the dying see clear, and I tell you, duchess, you were already on the point of giving away the power you have attained. Know you what Münnich's demand will be?"

"Well?"

"He will demand what Biron refused him, and for which refusal Münnich became his enemy. He will ask you to appoint him generalissimo of all your forces by land and sea."

"Then will he demand what naturally belongs to me," said the prince, excitedly, "and we shall of course refuse it."

"Yes, we must refuse it," repeated the princess.

"And in that you will do well," said Count Ostermann. "I may venture to say so, as I have no longer the least ambition—death will soon relieve me from all participation in affairs of state. I am a feeble old man, and desire nothing more than to be allowed occasionally to impart good counsels to my benefactors. And this is now my advice: Guard yourselves against the ambition of Count Münnich."

"We shall bear your counsel in mind," said the prince.

"We will not appoint him generalissimo!" exclaimed

the princess. "He must never forget that he is our servant, and we his masters."

"And now permit me to go, your highness," said Ostermann. "Will you have the kindness, prince, to command your lackeys to bear me to my sedan-chair? It is impossible for me to walk a step. Yes, yes, while you are this night contending for a throne. I shall, perhaps, be struggling with death."

And with a groan, sinking back into the arms of the lackeys whom the prince had called, Ostermann suffered himself to be carried down to his chair, which awaited him at the door. He groaned and cried out as they placed him in it, but as soon as its doors were closed and his serfs were trotting with him toward his own palace, the suffering expression vanished from Ostermann's face, and a sly smile of satisfaction played upon his lips.

"I think I have well employed my time," he muttered to himself. "The good Münnich will never become generalissimo, and poor old failing Ostermann may now, unsuspected, go quietly to bed and comfortably await the coming events. Such an illness, at the right time, is an insurance against all accidents and miscarriages. I learned that after the death of Peter II. Who knows what would then have become of me had I not been careful to remain sick in bed until Anne had mounted the throne? I will, therefore, again be sick, and in the morning we shall see! Should this conjuration succeed, very well; then, perhaps, old Ostermann will gradually recover sufficient health to take yet a few of the burdens of state upon his own shoulders, and thus relieve the good Münnich of a part of his cares!"