

CHAPTER IV.

THE NIGHT OF THE CONSPIRACY.

It was a splendid dinner, that which the regent had this day prepared for his guests. Count Münnich was very much devoted to the pleasures of the table, and, sitting near the regent, he gave himself wholly up to the cheerful humor which the excellent viands and delicate wines were calculated to stimulate. At times he entirely forgot his deep-laid plans for the coming night, and then again he would suddenly recollect them in the midst of his gayest conversation with his host, and while volunteering a toast in praise of the noble regent, and closing it by crying—"A long life and reign to the great regent, Biron von Courland!" he secretly and with a malicious pleasure thought: "This is thy last dinner, sir duke! A few hours, and those lips, now smiling with happiness, will be forever silenced by our blows!"

These thoughts made the field-marshal unusually gay and talkative, and the regent protested that Münnich had never been a more agreeable *convive* than precisely to-day. Therefore, when the other guests retired, he begged of Münnich to remain with him awhile; and the field-marshal, thinking it might possibly enable him to prevent any warning reaching the regent, consented to stay.

They spoke of past times, of the happy days when the Empress Anne yet reigned, and when all breathed of pleasure and enjoyment at that happy court; and perhaps it was these recollections that rendered Biron sad and thought-

ful. He was absent and low-spirited, and his large, flashing eyes often rested with piercing glances upon the calm and smiling face of Münnich.

"You all envy me on account of my power and dominion," said he to Münnich; "of that I am not ignorant. But you know not with what secret pain and anguish these few hours of splendor are purchased!—the sleepless nights in which one fears seeing the doors open to give admission to murderers, and then the dreams in which blood is seen flowing, and nothing is heard but death-shrieks and lamentations! Ah, I hate the nights, which are inimical to all happiness. In the night will misfortune at some time overtake me—in the night the evil spirit reigns!"

With a drooping head the regent had spoken half to himself; but suddenly raising his head and looking Münnich sharply in the eye, he said: "Have you, Mr. Field-Marshal, during your campaigns, never in the night foreseen any important event?"

Münnich shuddered slightly, and the color forsook his cheeks. "He knows all, and I am lost," thought he, and his hand involuntarily sought his sword. "I will defend myself to the last drop of my blood," was his first idea.

But Biron, although surprised, saw nothing of the field-marshal's strange commotion—he was wholly occupied with his own thoughts, and only awaited an answer to his question.

"Well, Mr. Field-Marshal," he repeated, "tell me whether in the night you have ever had the presentiment of any important event?"

"I was just considering," he calmly said. "At this

moment I do not recollect ever having foreseen any extraordinary event by night. But it has always been a principle of mine to take advantage of every favorable opportunity, whether by day or night." *

Münnich remained with the regent until eleven o'clock in the evening, and then they separated with the greatest kindness and the heartiest assurances of mutual friendship and devotion.

"Ah, that was a hard trial!" said Münnich, breathing easier and deeper, as he left the palace of the duke behind him. "I was already convinced that all was lost, but this Biron is unsuspecting as a child! Sleep now, Biron, sleep!—in a few hours I shall come to awaken you, and realize your bloody dream!"

With winged steps he hastened to his own palace. Arrived there, he summoned his adjutant, Captain von Mannstein, and, after having briefly given him the necessary orders, took him with him into his carriage for the purpose of repairing to the palace of the Prince of Brunswick.

It was a cold November night of the year 1740. The deserted streets were hushed in silence, and no one of the occupants of the dark houses, no one on earth, dreamed that this carriage, whose rumbling was only half heard in sleep, was in a manner the thundering herald of new times and new lords.

Münnich had chosen his time well. For if it was forbidden to admit any one whatever, during the night, to the palace occupied by the young czar, and if also the regent had

* Mannstein's Memoirs, p. 211; Leveque, vol. v., p. 240.



ANNA LEOPOLDOWNA PROCLAIMS HERSELF REGENT.

given the guards strict orders to shoot any one who might attempt, in spite of these commands, to penetrate into the forbidden precincts, this day made an exception for Münich, as a portion of one of his own regiments was to-day on duty at the imperial palace.

Unimpeded, stayed by no one, Münnich penetrated to the apartments of Anna Leopoldowna. She was awaiting him, and at his side she descended to receive the homage of the officers and soldiers, who had been commanded by Münnich to submit themselves to her.

With glowing words she described to the listening soldiers all the insults and injuries to which the regent had subjected herself, her husband, and their son the emperor.

“Who can say that this miserable, low-born Biron is called to fill so exalted a place, and to lord it over you, my beloved friends and brothers? To me, as the niece of the blessed Empress Anne, to me, as the mother of Ivan, chosen as emperor by Anne, to me alone belongs the regency, and by Heaven I will reconquer that of which I have been nefariously robbed! I will punish this insolent upstart whose shameful tyranny we have endured long enough, and I hope you, my friends, will stand by me and obey the commands of your generals.”*

A loud *viva* followed this speech of Anna Leopoldowna, who tenderly embraced the enraptured officers, commanding them to follow her.

Accompanied by Marshal Münnich and eighty soldiers, Anna then went out into the streets. In silence they ad-

* Levecque, vol. v., p. 241.

vanced to within a hundred steps of Biron's palace. Here, making a halt, Mannstein alone approached the palace to command the officers of the guard in the name of the new regent, Anna Leopoldowna, to submit and pay homage to her. No opposition was made; accustomed always to obey, they had not the courage to dispute the commands of the new ruler, and declared themselves ready to assist her in the arrest of the regent.

Mannstein returned to Anna and Münnich with this joyful intelligence, and received orders to penetrate into the palace with twenty men, to capture the duke, and even kill him if he made resistance.

Without opposition Mannstein again returned to the palace with his small band, carefully avoiding making the least noise in his approach. All the soldiers in the palace knew him; and as the watch below had permitted him to pass, they supposed he must have an important message for the duke, and no one stopped him.

He had already wandered through several rooms, when an unforeseen difficulty presented itself. Where is the sleeping-room of the duke? Which way must he turn, in order to find him? He stood there undecided, not daring to ask any of the attendants in the anterooms, lest perhaps they might suspect him and awaken the duke! He finally resolved to go forward and trust to accident. He passed two or three chambers—all were empty, all was still!

Now he stands before a closed door! What if that should prove the chamber of the duke? He thinks he hears a breathing.

He cautiously tries the door. Slightly closed, it yields

to his pressure, and he enters. There stands a large bed with hanging curtains, which are boldly drawn aside by Mannstein.

Before him lies the regent, Duke Biron of Courland, with his wife by his side.

"Duke Biron, awake!" called Mannstein, with a loud voice. The ducal pair started up from their slumber with a shriek of terror.

Biron leaps from the bed, but Mannstein overpowers him and holds him fast until his soldiers come. The duke defends himself with his hands, but is beaten down with musket-stocks. They bind his hands with an officer's scarf, they wrap him in a soldier's mantle, and so convey him down to Field-Marshal Münnich's carriage which is waiting, below, to transport him to the winter palace.

While Mannstein and the soldiers were occupied with the duke, his duchess had found an opportunity to make her escape. With only her light night-dress, shrieking and lamenting, she had rushed into the street.

She was seized by a soldier, who, conducting her to Mannstein, asked what he should do with her.

"Take her back into the palace!" said Mannstein, hastening past.

But the soldier, only anxious to rid himself of an encumbrance, threw the now insensible duchess into the snow, and hurried away.

In this situation she was found by a captain of the guard, who lifted her up and conveyed her into the palace to give her over to the care of her women, that she might be restored to consciousness and dressed. But she no longer

had either women or servants! Her reign is over; they have all fled in terror, as from the house of death, that they may not be involved in the disaster of those whose good fortunes they have shared. The slaves had all decamped in search of new masters, and the regent's palace, so often humbly and reverently sought, is now avoided as a pest-house.

With trembling hands the duchess enveloped herself in her clothes, and then followed her husband into the winter palace.

And while all this was taking place the court and nation yet trembled at the names of these two persons who had just been so deeply humbled. The Princess Anna Leopoldowna, accompanied by the shouting soldiery, made a triumphant progress through the streets of the city, stopping at all the caserns to receive the oaths and homage of the regiments.

This palace-revolution was consummated without the shedding of blood, and the awaking people of St. Petersburg found themselves with astonishment under a new regency and new masters!*

But a population of slaves venture no opposition. Whoever may have the power to declare and maintain himself their ruler, he is their master, and the slavish horde bow humbly before him.

As, hardly four weeks previously, the great magnates of the realm had hurried to the Duke of Courland to pay their homage and prostrate themselves in the dust before

* Levecque, vol. v., p. 241, and following.

him, so did they now hasten to the palace of the new regent, humbly to pay their court to her. The same lips that even yesterday swore eternal fidelity to the Regent Biron, and sounded his praise to the skies, now condemned him, and as loudly commended their august new mistress, Anna Leopoldowna! The same knees which had yesterday bent to Biron, now bent before Anna; and, with tears of joy, men now again sank into the arms of each other, loudly congratulating their noble Russia upon which the sun of happiness had now risen, giving her Anna Leopoldowna as regent!

And while all was jubilation in the palace of the new regent, that of the great man of yesterday stood silent and deserted—no one dared to raise a voice in his favor! Those who yesterday revelled at his table and sang his praises were to-day his bitterest enemies, cursing him the louder the more they had lauded him yesterday.

Magnificent festivals were celebrated in St. Petersburg in honor of the new regent, while they were at the same time trying the old one and condemning him to death. But Anna Leopoldowna mitigated his punishment—what a mitigation!—by changing the sentence of death into that of perpetual banishment to Siberia!

CHAPTER V.

HOPES DECEIVED.

TRANQUILLITY was again established in Russia. Once again all faces were lighted up with joy at this new state of affairs, and again the people congratulated themselves on the good fortune of the Russian empire! All this was done four weeks previously, when Biron took upon himself the regency, and the same will be done again when another comes to overthrow the Regent Anna!

It was on the day after this new revolution, when Münnich, entering the palace with a proud step and elevated head, requested an interview with the regent.

"Your highness," he said, not bending the knee before his sovereign as custom demanded, but only slightly pressing her hand to his lips—"your highness, I have redeemed my word and fulfilled my promise. I promised to liberate you from Biron and make you regent, and I have kept my word. Now, madame, it is for you to fulfil your pledge! You solemnly promised that when I should succeed in making you regent, you would immediately and unconditionally grant me whatever I might demand. Well, now, you are regent, and I come to proffer my request!"

"It will make me happy, field-marshal, to discharge a small part of my obligations toward you, by yielding to your demand. Ask quickly, that I may the sooner give!" said Anna Leopoldowna, with an engaging smile.

"Make me the generalissimo of your forces!" responded Münnich in an almost commanding tone.

A cloud gathered over the smiling features of the regent.

"Why must you ask precisely this—this one only favor which it is no longer in my power to bestow?" she sadly said. "There are so many offices, so many influential positions—ah, I could prove my gratitude to you in so many ways! Ask for money, treasures, landed estates—all these it is in my power to give. Why must you demand precisely that which is no longer mine!"

Münnich stared at her with widely opened eyes, trembling lips, and pallid cheeks. His head swam, and he thought he could not have rightly heard.

"I hope this is only a misunderstanding!" he stammered. "I must have heard wrong; it cannot be your intention to refuse me."

"Would to God it were yet in my power to gratify you!" sighed the regent. "But I cannot give what is no longer mine! Why came you not a few hours earlier, field-marshal? then would it have been yet possible to comply with your request. But now it is too late!"

"You have, then, appointed another generalissimo?" shrieked Münnich, quivering with rage.

"Yes," said Anna, smiling; "and see, there comes my generalissimo!"

It was the regent's husband, Prince Ulrich von Brunswick, who that moment entered the room and calmly greeted Münnich.

"You have here a rival, my husband," said the princess, without embarrassment; "and had I not already signed your diploma, it is very questionable whether I should now

do it, now that I know Count Münnich desires the appointment."

"I hope," proudly responded the prince, "Count Münnich will comprehend that this position, which places the whole power of the empire in the hands of him who holds it, is suitable only for the father of the emperor!"

Count Münnich made no answer. Already so near the attainment of his end, he saw it again elude his grasp. Again had he labored, struggled, in vain. This was the second revolution which he had brought about, with this his favorite plan in view: two regents were indebted to him for their greatness, and both had refused him the one thing for which he had made them regents; neither had been willing to create him generalissimo!

In this moment Münnich felt unable to conceal his rage under an assumed tranquillity; pretending a sudden attack of illness, he begged permission to retire.

Tottering, scarcely in possession of his senses, he hastened through the hall thronged with petitioners. All bowed before him, all reverently saluted him; but to him it seemed that he could read nothing but mockery and malicious joy upon all those smiling faces. Ah, he could have crushed them all, and trodden them under his feet, in his inextinguishable rage!

When he finally reached his carriage, and his proud steeds were bearing him swiftly away—when none could any longer see him—then he gave vent to furious execrations, and tears of rage flowed from his eyes; he tore out his hair and smote his breast; he felt himself wandering, frantic with rage and despair. One thought, one wish had

occupied him for many long years; he had labored and striven for it. He wished to be the first, the most powerful man in the Russian empire; he would control the military force, and in his hands should rest the means of giving the country peace or war! That was what he wanted; that was what he had labored for—and now. . . .

"Oh, Biron, Biron," he faintly groaned, "why must I overthrow you? You loved me, and perhaps would one day have accorded me what you at first refused! Biron, I have betrayed you with a kiss. It is your guardian angel who is now avenging you!"

Thus he reached his palace, and the servants who opened the door of his carriage started back with alarm at the fearful expression of their master's face. It had become of an ashen gray, his blue lips quivered, and his gloomily-gleaming eyes seemed to threaten those who dared approach him.

Alighting in silence, he strode on through the rows of his trembling servants. Suddenly two of his lackeys fell upon their knees before him, weeping and sobbing; they stretched forth their hands to him, begging for mercy.

"What have they done?" asked he of his major-domo.

"Feodor has had the misfortune to break your excellency's drinking-cup, and Ivanovitch bears the blame of suffering your greyhound Artemisia to escape."

A strange joy suddenly lighted up the brow of the count.

"Ah," said he, breathing more freely, and stretching himself up—"ah, I thank God that I now have some one on whom I can wreak my vengeance!"

And kicking the unfortunate weeping and writhing servants, who were crawling in the dust before him, Münnich cried :

“No mercy, you hounds—no, no mercy! You shall be scourged until you have breathed out your miserable lives! The knout here! Strike! I will look on from my windows, and see that my commands are executed! Ah, I will teach you to break my cups and let my hounds escape! Scourge them unto death! I will see their blood—their red, smoking blood!”

The field-marshal stationed himself at his open window. The servants had formed a close circle around the unhappy beings who were receiving their punishment in the court below. The air was filled with the shrieks of the tortured men, blood flowed in streams over their flayed backs, and at every new stroke of the knout they howled and shrieked for mercy; while at every new shriek Münnich cried out to his executioners :

“No, no mercy, no pity! Scourge the culprits! I would, I must see blood! Scourge them to death!”

Trembling, the band of servants looked on with folded hands; with a savage smile upon his face, stood Count Münnich at his window above.

Weaker and weaker grew the cries of the unhappy sufferers—they no longer prayed for mercy. The knout continued to flay their bodies, but their blood no longer flowed—they were dead!

The surrounding servants folded their hands in prayer for the souls of the deceased, and then loudly commended the mild justice of their master!

Retiring from the window, Count Münnich ordered his breakfast to be served!*

From that time forward, however, Münnich's life was a continuous chain of vexations and mortifications. As his inordinate ambition was known, he was constantly suspected, and was reprehended with inexorable severity for every fault.

It is true the regent raised him to the post of first minister; but Ostermann, who recovered his health after the successful termination of the revolutionary enterprise, by various intrigues attained to the position of minister of foreign affairs; while to Golopkin was given the department of the interior, so that only the war department remained to the first minister, Münnich. He had originated and accomplished two revolutions that he might become generalissimo, and had obtained nothing but mortifications and humiliations that embittered every moment of his life!

* Such horribly cruel punishments of the serfs were at that time no uncommon occurrence in Russia. Unhappy serfs were daily scourged to death at the command of their masters. Moreover, princes and generals, and even respectable ladies, were scourged with the knout at the command of the emperor. Yet these punishments in Russia had nothing dishonoring in them. The Empress Catharine II. had three of her court ladies stripped and scourged in the presence of the whole court, for having drawn some offensive caricatures of the great empress. One of these scourged ladies, afterward married to a Russian magnate, was sent by Catharine as a sort of ambassadress to Sweden, for the purpose of inducing the King of Sweden to favor some of her political plans.—“*Mémoires Secrètes sur la Russie, par Masson,*” vol. iii., p. 392.