

CHAPTER IX.

PRINCESS ELIZABETH.

WHILE a Mecklenburg princess had attained to the regency of Russia, and while her son was hailed as emperor, the Princess Elizabeth lived alone and unnoticed in her small and modestly-furnished palace. German princes sat upon the Russian throne, and yet in St. Petersburg was living the only rightful heir to the empire, the daughter of Czar Peter the Great! And as she was young, beautiful, and amiable, how came she to be set aside to make room for a stranger upon the throne of her father, which belonged to her alone?

Princess Elizabeth had voluntarily kept aloof from all political intrigues and all revolutions. In the interior of her palace she passed happy days; her world, her life, and her pleasures were there. Princess Elizabeth desired not to reign; her only wish was to love and be loved. The intoxicating splendor of worldly greatness was not so inviting to her as the more intoxicating pleasure of blessed and happy love. She would, above all things, be a woman, and enjoy the full possession of her youth and happiness.

What cared she that her own rightful throne was occupied by a stranger—what cared she for the blinding shimmer of a crown? Ah, it troubled her not that she was poor, and possessed not even the means of bestowing presents upon her favorites and friends. But she felt happy in her poverty, for she was free to love whom she would, to raise to herself whomsoever she might please.

It was a festival day that they were celebrating in the humble palace of the emperor's daughter Elizabeth—certainly a festival day, for it was the name-day of the princess.

The rooms were adorned with festoons and garlands, and all her dependants and friends were gathered around her. Elizabeth saw not the limited number of this band; she enjoyed herself with those who were there, and lamented not the much greater number of those who had forgotten her.

She was among her friends, in her little reception-room. Evening had come, the household and the less trusted and favored of her adherents had withdrawn, and only the most intimate, most favored friends now remained with the princess.

They had conversed so long that they now recurred to the enjoyment of that always-ready, always-pleasing art, music. A young man sang to the accompaniment of a guitar.

Elizabeth listened, listlessly reclining upon her divan. Behind her stood two gentlemen, who, like her, were delightedly listening to the singing of the youth.

Elizabeth was a blooming, beautiful woman. She was to-day charming to the eye in the crimson-velvet robe, embroidered with silver, that enveloped her full, voluptuous form, leaving her neck and *gorge* free, and displaying the delicate whiteness of her skin in beautiful contrast with the purple of her robe. Perhaps a severe judge might not have pronounced her face handsome according to the rules of the antique, but it was one of those faces that please and be-

witch the other sex; one of those beauties whose charm consists not so much in the regularity of the lines as in the ever-varying expression. There was so much that was winning, enticing, supercilious, much-promising, and warm-glowing, in the face of this woman! The full, swelling, deep-red lips, how charming were they when she smiled; those dark, sparkling eyes, how seducing were they when shaded by a soft veil of emotional enthusiasm; those faintly-blushing cheeks, that heaving bosom, that voluptuous form, yet resplendent with youthful gayety—for Elizabeth had not yet reached her thirtieth year—whom would she not have animated, excited, transported?

Elizabeth knew she was beautiful and attractive, and this was her pride and her joy. She could easily pardon the German princess, Anna Leopoldowna, for occupying the throne that was rightfully her own, but she would never have forgiven the regent had she been handsomer than herself. Anna Leopoldowna was the most powerful woman in Russia, but she, Elizabeth, was the handsomest woman in Russia, which was all she coveted, and she had nothing more to desire.

But at this moment she thought neither of Anna Leopoldowna nor of her own beauty, but only of the singer who was warbling to her those Russian popular songs so full of love and sadness that they bring tears into the eyes and fill the heart with yearning.

Elizabeth had forgotten all around her—she heard only him, saw only him; her whole soul lay in the glances with which she observed him, and around her mouth played one of those bewitching smiles peculiar to her in moments of

joy and satisfaction, and which her courtiers knew and observed.

He was very handsome, this young singer, and as Elizabeth saw him in this moment, she congratulated herself that her connoisseur-glance had quickly remarked him, when, some weeks previously, she had first seen him as the preceptor of the imperial chapel.

Surprised and excited by the beauty of his form and the sweetness of his voice, Elizabeth had begged him of the lord-marshal for her private service, and since then Alexis Razumovsky had entered her house as her private secretary and the manager of her small estate.*

While Alexis was singing with his sweetly-melting tones, Elizabeth turned her swimming eyes to the two men who were standing in respectful silence behind her.

“You must acknowledge,” said she in a low tone, and as if oppressed by internal commotion, “that you never saw nor heard any thing finer than my Alexis.”

“Oh, yes,” said one of these men, with a low bow, “we have seen *you!*”

“And did we not yesterday hear you sing this same charming slumber-song, princess?” asked the other.

Elizabeth smiled. “It is already well known that Woronzow and Grünstein must always flatter!” said she.

“No, we do not flatter,” responded Woronzow, the chamberlain of the princess, “we only love truth! You ask if we have ever seen any thing more beautiful than your private secretary, and we answer that we have seen *you!*”

* Masson, “Mémoires Secrètes,” vol. ii.

"Well, now, you have all so often assured me that I am the handsomest woman in Russia, that at length I am compelled to believe you. But Alexis is fortunately a man, and therefore not my rival; you may, then, fearlessly confess that Alexis is the handsomest of all men! But how is this?" exclaimed the princess, interrupting herself, as the handsome young singer suddenly sprang up and threw his guitar aside with an indignant movement; "do you sing no more, Alexis?"

"No," frowardly responded the young man, "I sing no more, when my princess no longer listens!"

"There, see the ungrateful man," said the princess, with a charming smile—"he was occupying all my thoughts, and yet he dares complain! You are a malefactor deserving punishment. Come here to me, Alexis; kneel, kiss my hand, and beg for pardon, you calumniator!"

"That is a punishment for which angels might be grateful!" responded Alexis Razumovsky, kneeling to the princess and pressing her hand to his burning lips. "Ah, that I might oftener incur such punishment!"

"Do you then prefer punishment to reward?" asked Elizabeth, tenderly bending down to him and looking deep into his eyes.

"She loves him!" whispered Grünstein to the chamberlain Woronzow. "She certainly loves him!"

Elizabeth's fine ear caught these words, and, slowly turning her head, she slightly nodded. "Yes," said she, "Grünstein is right—she loves him! Congratulate me, therefore, my friends, that the desert void in my heart is at length filled—congratulate me for loving him. Ah, noth-

ing is sweeter, holier, or more precious than love; and I can tell you that we women are happy only when we are under the influence of that divine passion. Congratulate me, then, my friends, for, thank God, I am in love! Now, Alexis, what have you to say?"

"There are no words to express such a happiness," cried Alexis, pressing the feet of the princess to his bosom.

"Happiness, then, strikes you dumb," laughed the princess, "and will not allow you to say that you love me? Such are all you men. You envelope yourselves with a convenient silence, and would make us poor women believe the superabundance of feeling deprives you of utterance."

At this moment the door was softly opened, and a lackey, who made his appearance at the threshold, beckoned to Woronzow.

"What is it, Woronzow?" asked the princess, while, wholly unembarrassed by the presence of the lackey, she played with the profuse dark locks of the kneeling Razumovsky.

"An invitation from the Regent Anna to a court-ball, which is to take place fourteen days hence," said Woronzow.

"Ah, our good cousin is, then, so gracious as to remember us," cried the princess, with a somewhat clouded brow. "It will certainly be a very magnificent festival, as we are invited so many days in advance. How sad that I cannot have the pleasure of being present!"

"And why not, if one may be allowed to ask, princess?" asked Woronzow.

"Why?" sighed Elizabeth. "Ask my waiting-woman;

she will tell you that the Princess Elizabeth, daughter of the great Czar Peter, has not one single robe splendid enough to render her presentable, without mortification, at a court-ball of the regent."

"Whatever robe you may wear," passionately interposed Alexis, "you will still be resplendent, for your beauty will impart a divine halo to any dress!"

That was precisely the kind of flattery pleasing to Elizabeth.

"Think you so, flatterer?" asked Elizabeth. "Well, for once I will believe your words, and assume that the Princess Elizabeth may be fair without the aid of splendor in dress. We therefore accept the invitation, Woronzow. Announce that to the regent's messenger. But still it is sad and humiliating," continued Elizabeth after a pause, a cloud passing over her usually so cheerful countenance, "yes, it is still a melancholy circumstance for the daughter of the great Peter to be so poor that she is not able to dress herself suitably to her rank. Ah, how humiliating is the elevation of my high position, when I cannot even properly reward you, my friends, for your fidelity and attachment!"

"You will one day be able to reward us," significantly remarked Grünstein. "One day, when an imperial crown surmounts your fair brows, then will your generous heart be able to act according to its noble instincts."

"Still the same old dreams!" said Elizabeth, shaking her head and letting Razumovsky's long locks glide through her fingers. "Pay no attention to him, Alexis, he is an enthusiast who dreams of imperial crowns, while I desire

nothing but a ball-dress, that in it I may please you, my friend!"

"Oh, you always please me," whispered Alexis, "and most pleasing are you when—"

The conclusion of his flattering speech he whispered so low that it was heard by no one but the princess.

Patting his cheek with her little round hand, she blushed, but not for shame, as she did not cast down her eyes, but answered with a glowing glance the tender looks of her lover. She blushed only from an internal passionate excitement, while her bosom stormily rose and fell.

"You are very saucy, Alexis," said she, but at the same time lightly kissing him upon the forehead, and smiling; but then her brow was suddenly clouded, for the door was again opened and once more the lackey appeared upon the threshold.

"The French ambassador," said he, "the Marquis de la Chetardie, begs the favor of an audience."

"Ah, the good marquis!" cried the princess, rising from her reclining position. "Conduct him in, he is very welcome."

The lackey opened both wings of the folding-door, and the marquis entered, followed by several servants with boxes and packets.

"Ah, you come very much like a milliner," laughingly exclaimed Elizabeth, graciously advancing to receive the ambassador.

Dropping upon one knee, the marquis kissed her offered hand.

"I come, illustrious Princess Elizabeth, to beg a favor of you!" he said.

"You wish to mortify me," responded Elizabeth. "How can the ambassador of a great and powerful nation have a favor to ask of the poor, repudiated, and forgotten Princess Elizabeth?"

"In the name of the king my master come I to demand this favor!" solemnly answered the marquis.

"Well, if you really speak in earnest," said the princess, "then I have only to respond that it will make me very happy to comply with any request which your august king or yourself may have to make of me."

"Then I may be allowed, on this occasion of the celebration of your name-day, to lay at your feet these trifling presents of my royal master," said the ambassador of France, rising to take the boxes and packages from the lackeys and place them before Elizabeth.

"They are only trifles," continued he, while assiduously occupied in opening the boxes, "trifles of little value—only interesting, perhaps, because they are novelties that have as yet been worn in Paris by no lady except the queen and madame!

"This mantelet of Valenciennes lace," continued the busy marquis, unfolding before the princess a magically fine lace texture, "this mantelet is sent by the Queen of France to the illustrious Princess Elizabeth. Only two such mantelets have been made, and her majesty has strictly commanded that no more of a similar pattern shall be commenced."

Princess Elizabeth's eyes sparkled with delight. Like a

curious child she fluttered from one box to the other, and in fact they were very costly, tasteful, and charming things which their majesties of France had sent to the Princess Elizabeth, who prized nothing higher than splendor in dress and ornaments.

There were the most beautiful gold-embroidered velvet robes, light crape and lace dresses, and hats and topknots of charming elegance.

Elizabeth examined and admired all; she clapped her hands with delight when any one of these precious presents especially pleased her, calling Alexis, Grünstein, and Woronzow to share her joy and admiration.

"Now will it be a triumph for me to appear at this ball!" said Elizabeth, exultingly; "ah, how beautiful it is of your king that he has sent me these magnificent presents to-day, and not eight days later! I shall excite the envy of the regent and all the court ladies with these charming things, which no one besides myself will possess."

And the princess was constantly renewing her examination of the presents, and breaking out into ecstasies over their beauty.

The Marquis de la Chetardie smilingly listened to her, told her much about Paris and its splendors, declaring that even in Paris there was no lady who could be compared to the fair Princess Elizabeth.

"Ah," remarked Elizabeth, smilingly threatening him with her finger, "you would speak differently if the queen or some other lady of your court were standing by my side!"

"No," seriously replied the marquis, "I would fall at the

feet of my queen and say: 'You are my queen, judge me, condemn me, my life is in your hand. You are the Queen of France, and as such I bend before you; but Princess Elizabeth is the queen of beauty, and as such I adore her!'"

Princess Elizabeth smiled, and with harmless unconstraint chatted yet a long time with the shrewd and versatile ambassador of the French king.

"I have yet one more request to make," said the marquis, when about to take leave. "But it is a request that no one but yourself must hear, princess!"

Elizabeth signed to her friends to withdraw into the open anteroom.

"Well, marquis," she then said with some curiosity, "let me now hear what else you have to ask."

"My king and master has learned with regret that the noble Princess Elizabeth is not surrounded with that wealth and splendor which is her due as the daughter of the great emperor and the rightful heir to the Russian throne. My king begs the favor of being allowed to make good the delinquency toward you of the present Russian regency, and that he may have the pleasure of providing you with the means necessary to enable you to establish a court suitable to your birth and position. I am provided with sufficient funds for these purposes. You have only to send me by your physician in ordinary, Lestocq, a quittance signed by you, and any sum you may require will be immediately paid!"*

"Oh," said the princess, with emotion, "I shall never be able sufficiently to testify my gratitude to the generous

* Levecque, vol. v., p. 224.

King of France. I am a poor, insignificant woman, who can thankfully accept but never requite his kindness."

"Who knows?" said the marquis significantly. "You may one day become the most powerful woman in Europe, for your birth and your destiny call you to the throne."

"Oh, I know you are Lestocq's friend, and share his dreams," said the princess. "But let us not now speak of impossibilities, nor idly jest, while I am deeply touched by the generous friendship of your sovereign. That I accept his offer, may prove to him and you how much I love and respect him; for we willingly incur obligations only to those who are so highly estimated that we gratefully subordinate ourselves to them. Write this to your king."

"And may I also write to him," asked the marquis, "that this conversation will remain a secret, of which, above all things, the regent, Anna Leopoldowna, is to know nothing?"

"My imperial word of honor," said the princess, "that no one except ourselves and Lestocq, whom you yourself propose as a medium, shall know anything of this great generosity of your sovereign. God grant that a time may one day come when I may loudly and publicly acknowledge my great obligations to him!"

"That time will have come when you are Empress of Russia!" said the ambassador, taking his leave.

"Already one more who has taken it into his head to make an empress of me," said the princess, as her three favorites again entered. "Foolish people that you are! It does not satisfy you to be the friend of a Princess Elizabeth, but I must become an empress for your sakes."

"How well the diadem would become that proud pure brow!" exclaimed Alexis, with animation.

"How happy would this poor Russia be under your mild sceptre!" said the chamberlain, Woronzow.

"Yes, you owe it to all of us, to yourself and your people, to mount the throne of your fathers," said Grünstein.

"But if I say to you that I will not?" cried the princess, reclining again upon her divan. "The duties of an empress are very difficult and wearing. I love quiet and enjoyment; and, moreover, this throne of my father, of which you speak so pathetically, is already occupied, and awaits me not. See you not your sublime Emperor Ivan, whom the regent-mother is rocking in his cradle? That is your emperor, before whom you can bow, and leave me unmolested with your imperial crown. Come, Alexis, sit down by me upon this tabouret. We will take another look at these magnificent presents. Ah! truly they are dearer to me than the possession of empire."

"The Princess Elizabeth can thus speak only in jest," said an earnest voice behind them.

"Ah, Lestocq!" cried the princess, with a friendly nod. "You come very late, my friend."

"And yet too soon to bring you bad news!" said Lestocq, with a profound and respectful bow to the princess.

"Bad news?" repeated Elizabeth, turning pale. "*Mon Dieu*, am I, then, one too many for them here? Would they kill me, or send me in exile to Siberia?"

"Yet worse!" laconically responded Lestocq. "But, first of all, let us be cautious, and take care that we have no listeners." And, crossing the room, Lestocq closed all the

doors, and carefully looked behind the window curtains to make sure that no one was concealed there. "Now, princess," he commenced, in a tone of solemnity, "now listen to what I have to say to you."

CHAPTER X.

A CONSPIRACY.

A MOMENTARY pause followed. Princess Elizabeth silently motioned her friends to be seated, and drew her favorite Alexis nearer to her.

Lestocq, her physician and confidant, with a solemn countenance, took a place opposite her.

"We are ready to hear your bad news," said the princess.

"The regent, Anna Leopoldowna, will have herself crowned as empress," laconically responded Lestocq.

Elizabeth looked at him interrogatively and with curiosity for the continuation of his bad news. But as Lestocq remained silent, she asked with astonishment: "Is that all you have to tell us?"

"Preliminarily, that is all," answered Lestocq.

Princess Elizabeth broke out with a joyous laugh.

"Well, this is, in fact, very comic. With a real Job's mien you announce to us the worst news, and then inform us that Anna Leopoldowna is to be crowned empress! Let her be crowned! No one will interfere to prevent it, and she will be none the happier for it. No woman who has taken possession of the Russian throne as an independent