

"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

princess has ever yet been happy. Or do you think that Catharine, my lofty step-mother, was so? Believe me, upon the throne she trembled with fear of assassins; for it is well known that this Russian throne is surrounded by murderers, awaiting only the favorable moment. Ah, whenever I have stood in front of this imperial throne, it has always seemed to me that I saw the points of a thousand daggers peeping forth from its soft cushions! And you would have me seat myself upon such a dagger-beset throne? No, no, leave me my peace and my repose. Let Anna Leopoldowna declare herself empress—what should I care? I should have to bend before her with my congratulations. That is all!”

And the princess, letting her head glide upon Razumovsky's shoulder, as if exhausted by this long speech, closed her fatigued eyelids.

“Ah, if Czar Peter, your great father, could hear you,” sadly said Lestocq, “he would spurn you for such pusillanimity, princess.”

“It is, therefore, fortunate for me that he is dead,” said the princess, with a smile. “And now, my dear Lestocq, if you know nothing further, let this suffice you: I tell you, once for all, that I have no desire for this imperial throne. I would crown my head with roses and myrtles, but not with that golden circle which would crush me to the earth. Therefore, trouble me no more on this subject. Be content with what I am, and if you cannot, well—then I must be reconciled to being abandoned by you!”

“I will never desert you, even if I must follow you to suffering and death!” exclaimed Alexis Razumovsky, casting himself at the feet of the princess.

“We will remain true and faithful to you unto death!” cried Woronzow and Grünstein.

“Well, and you alone remain silent, Lestocq?” asked the princess, with tears in her eyes.

“I have not yet come to the end of my bad news,” said Lestocq, with a clouded brow.

“Ah!” jestingly interposed the princess, “you would, perhaps, as further bad news, inform us that the Emperor Ivan has cut his first tooth!”

“No,” said Lestocq, “I would only say to you, that the 18th of December, the day on which the regent is to be crowned as empress, the 18th of December is the day assigned for the marriage of the Princess Elizabeth with Prince Louis of Brunswick, the new Duke of Courland!”

The princess sprang up from her seat as if stung by an adder. Alexis Razumovsky, who still knelt at her feet, uttered loud lamentations, in which Woronzow and Grünstein soon joined. With calm triumph Lestocq observed the effect produced by his words.

“What are you saying there?” at length Elizabeth breathlessly asked.

“I say that on the 18th of December the Princess Elizabeth is to be married to Prince Louis of Brunswick, who has already come to St. Petersburg for that purpose,” calmly answered Lestocq.

“And I say,” cried the princess, “that no such marriage will ever take place!”

Lestocq shrugged his shoulders. “Princess Elizabeth is a gentle, peace-loving, always suffering lamb,” he said.

“But Princess Elizabeth can become a tigress when it

concerns the defence of her holiest rights!" exclaimed the princess, pacing the room in violent excitement.

"Ah," she continued, "they are not then satisfied with delivering me over to poverty and abandonment; it does not suffice them to see me so deeply humiliated as to receive alms from this regent who occupies the throne that belongs to me. They would rob me of my last and only remaining blessing, my personal freedom! They would make my poor heart a prisoner, and bind it with the chains and fetters of a marriage which I abhor! No, no, I tell you that shall they never do."

And the princess, quite beside herself with rage, stamped her feet and doubled up her little hands into fists. Now was she her father's real and not unworthy daughter; Czar Peter's bold and savage spirit flashed from her eyes, his scorn and courageous determination spoke from her wildly excited features. She saw not, she heard not what was passing around her; she was wholly occupied with her own angry thoughts, and with those dreadful images which the mere idea of marriage had conjured up.

Her four favorites stood together at some distance, observing her with silent sympathy.

"It is now for you, Alexis Razumovsky, to complete the work we have begun," whispered Lestocq to him. "Elizabeth loves you; you must nourish in her this abhorrence of a marriage with the prince. You must make yourself so loved, that she will dare all rather than lose you! We have long enough remained in a state of abjectness; it is time to labor for our advancement. To the work, to the work, Alexis Razumovsky! We must make

an empress of this Elizabeth, that she may raise us to wealth and dignities!"

"Rely upon me," whispered Alexis, "she must and shall join in our plans."

He approached the princess, who was walking the room in a state of the most violent agitation, giving vent to her internal excitement and anger in loud exclamations and bitter curses.

"I must therefore die!" sighed Alexis, pressing Elizabeth's trembling hand to his lips. "Kill me, princess, thrust a dagger in my heart, that I at least may not live to see you married to another!"

"No, you shall not die," cried Elizabeth, with fierce vehemence, throwing her arms around Razumovsky's neck. "I will know how to defend you and myself, Alexis! Ah, they would shackle me,—they would force me to marry, because they know I hate marriage. Yes, I hate those unnatural fetters which would command my heart, force it into obedience to an unnatural law, and degrade divine free love, which would flutter from flower to flower, into a necessity and a duty. It is an unnatural law which would compel us forever to love a man because he pleased us yesterday or may please us to-day, and who perhaps may not please us to-morrow, while on the next day he may excite only repugnance! Would they forge these matrimonial chains for me? Ah, Regent Anna, you are this time mistaken; you may be all-powerful in this empire, but you cannot and shall not extend that power over me!"

"And how," asked Lestocq, shrugging his shoulders,

"how will Princess Elizabeth oppose the regent or empress? What weapon has she with which to contend?"

"If it must be so, I will oppose power to power!" passionately exclaimed the princess. "Yes, when it comes to the defence of my freedom and my personal rights I will then have the courage to dare all, defy all; then will I shake off the lethargy of contented mediocrity, and upon the throne will find that freedom which Anna would tread under foot!"

"Long live our future empress! Long live Elizabeth!" cried the men with wild excitement.

"I have long withstood you, my friends," said Elizabeth, "I have not coveted this imperial Russian crown, but much less have I desired that crown of thorns a compulsory marriage. I am now ready for the struggle, and, if it must be so, let a revolution, let streams of blood decide whether the Regent Anna Leopoldowna or the daughter of Peter the Great has the best right to govern this land and prescribe its laws!"

"Ah, now are you really your great father's great daughter!" cried Lestocq, and bending a knee before the princess, he continued: "Let me be the first to pay you homage, the first to swear eternal fidelity to you, our Empress Elizabeth."

"Receive also my oath, Empress Elizabeth," said Alexis, falling upon his knees before her, "receive the oaths of your slaves who desire nothing but to devote their bodies and souls to your service!"

"Let me, also, do homage to you, Empress Elizabeth!" exclaimed Woronzow, falling to the earth.

"And I, too, will lie at your feet and declare myself your slave, Empress Elizabeth!" said Grünstein, kneeling with the others.

But Elizabeth's anger was already past; only a momentary storm-wind had lashed her gently flowing blood into the high foaming waves of rage; now all again was calm within her, and consequently this solemn homage scene of her four kneeling friends made only a comic impression upon her.

She burst into a loud laugh; astonished and half angry, the kneeling men looked up to her, and that only increased her hilarity.

"Ah, this is infinitely amusing," said the princess, continuing to laugh; "there lie my vassals, and what vassals! Herr Lestocq, a physician; Herr Grünstein, a bankrupt shopkeeper and now under-officer; Herr Woronzow, chamberlain; and Alexis Razumovsky, my private secretary. And here am I, the empress of such vassals, and what sort of an empress? An empress of four subjects, an empress without a throne and without a crown, without land and without a people—an empress who never was and never will be an empress! And in this solemn buffoonery you cut such serious faces as might make one die with laughter."

The princess threw herself upon the divan and laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks.

"Princess," said Lestocq, rising, "these four men, at whom you now laugh, will make you empress, and then it will be in your power to convert this chirurgeon into a privy councillor and court physician, this bankrupt merchant into a rich banker, this chamberlain into an imperial

lord-marshal, and your private secretary into a count or prince of the empire."

The eyes of the princess shone yet brighter, and with a tender glance at Alexis Razumovsky she said: "Yes, I will make him a prince and overload him with presents and honors. Ah, that is an object worth the pains of struggling for an imperial crown."

"No, no," interposed Alexis, kissing her hand, "I need neither wealth nor titles; I need nothing, desire nothing but to be near you, to be able to breathe the air that has fanned your cheek. I desire nothing for myself, but everything for my friends here, with whose faithful aid we shall soon be enabled to greet you a real empress."

Elizabeth's brow beamed with the purest blessedness. "You are as unselfish as the angels in heaven, my Alexis," said she. "It suffices you that I am Elizabeth, you languish not for this imperial title which these others would force upon me."

Alexis smilingly shook his fine head. "You err, princess," said he; "I would freely and joyfully give my heart's blood, could I this day but salute you as empress!" I should then, at least, have no more to fear from this strange prince whom they would compel you to marry!"

A cloud passed over the brow of the princess. "Yes, you are right," said she, "we must avoid that at all events, and if there are no other means, very well, I shall know what to decide upon—I shall venture an attempt to dethrone the regent and make myself empress! But, my friends, let that now suffice. I need rest. Call my women to undress me, Woronzow. Good-night, good-night, my high and

lofty vassals, your great and powerful empress allows you to kiss her hand!"

With a pleasing graciousness she extended her fair hands to her friends, who respectfully pressed them to their lips and then departed.

"Alexis!" called the princess, as Razumovsky was about to withdraw with the others—"Alexis, you will remain awhile. While my women are undressing me, you shall sing me to sleep with that charming slumber-song you sing so splendidly!"

Alexis smiled and remained.

A quarter of an hour later deep silence prevailed in the dark palace of Elizabeth, and through the stillness of the night was heard only the sweetly-melodious voice of the handsome Alexis, who was singing his slumber-song to the princess.

From this day forward her four trusted friends left the princess no peace. They so stormed her with prayers and supplications, Alexis so well knew how to represent his despair at her approaching and unavoidable marriage, that the amiable princess, to satisfy her friends and be left herself at peace, declared herself ready to sanction the plans of her confidants and enter into a conspiracy against the regent.

Soon a small party was formed for the cause of the princess. Grünstein—who, as the princess had said, from a bankrupt merchant had attained the position of subordinate officer—Grünstein had succeeded in winning for the cause of the princess some fifty grenadiers of the Preobrajensky regiment, to which he belonged; and these people,

drunkards and dissolute fellows, were the principal props upon which Elizabeth's throne was to be established! They were neither particular about the means resorted to for the accomplishment of the proposed revolution, nor careful to envelop their movements in secrecy.

Elizabeth soon began to find pleasure and distraction in exciting the enthusiasm of the soldiers. She often repaired to the caserns of the guards, and her mildness and affability won for her the hearts of the rough soldiers accustomed to slavish subjection. When she rode through the streets, it was not an unusual occurrence to see common soldiers approach her sledge and converse familiarly with her. Whenever she showed herself, there the soldiers received her with shouts, and the palace of the princess was always open to them. In this way Elizabeth made herself popular, and the Regent Anna, who was informed of it, smiled at it with indifference.

Just as incautiously did Elizabeth's fanatical political manager, Lestocq, set about his work. He made no secret of his intercourse with the French ambassador, and in the public coffee-houses he was often heard in a loud voice to prophesy an approaching political change.

But with regard to all these imprudences it seemed as if the court and the regent were blinded by the most careless confidence, as if they could not see what was directly before their eyes. It was as if destiny covered those eyes with a veil, that they might not see, and against destiny even the great and the powerful of the earth struggle in vain.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WARNING.

THE 4th of December, the day of the court-ball, to which Elizabeth had looked forward with a longing heart because of her anxiety to display at court her new Parisian dresses, at length had come. A most active movement prevailed in the palace of the regent. The lord-marshal and the chamberlains on service passed up and down through the rooms, overlooking with sharp eyes the various ornaments, festoons, garlands, and draperies, to make sure that all was splendid, and tasteful, and magnificent.

Anna Leopoldowna troubled herself very little about these busy movements in her palace. She was in her boudoir, delightedly reading a letter from her distant lover, which had just been received under Julia's address. She had already read this letter several times, but ever recommenced it, and ever found some new word, some new phrase that proved to her the glowing love of her absent friend.

"Ah, he still loves me," murmured she, pressing the letter to her lips; "he really loves me, and this short separation will not estrange his heart, but cause it to glow with warmer passion! Oh, what a happiness will it be when he again returns! And he will return! Yes, he will be with me again on the 18th of December, and, animated by his glances, I shall for the first time appear in all the splendor of an imperial crown. Ah, they have no presentiment, my councillors and ministers, that I have selected the 18th of December for the ceremony precisely because it is the birth-