

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. Wherever 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-

day of my beloved! He will know it, he will understand why his Anna has chosen this particular day, and he will thank me with one of those proud and glowing glances which always made my heart tremulous with overpowering happiness. Oh, my Lynar, what a blessed moment will be that when I see you again!"

A slight knock at the door interrupted the imaginings of the princess. It was Julia von Mengden, who came to announce the old Count Ostermann.

"And is it for him that you disturb my delightful solitude?" asked the princess, somewhat reproachfully. "Is this Count Ostermann, is this whole miserable realm of so much importance to me as the sweet contemplation of a letter from my friend? When I am reading his letter it seems to me that my beloved himself is at my side, and therefore you must clearly see that I cannot receive Count Ostermann, as Lynar is with me!"

"Put your letter and your lover in your bosom," said Julia, with a laugh; "he will be very happy there, and then you can receive the old count without betraying your lover's presence! The count has so pressingly begged for an audience that I finally promised to intercede with you for him."

"Ah, this eternal business!" angrily exclaimed the princess. "They will never let me have any peace; they harass me the whole day. Even now, when it is time to be making my toilet for the ball—even now I must be tormented with affairs of state."

"Shall I, then, send away Count Ostermann?" sulkily asked Julia.

"That I may, consequently, for the whole evening see you with a dissatisfied face? No, let him come; but forget not that I submit to this annoyance only to please you."

With a grateful smile, Julia kissed the regent's hand, and then hastened to bear to Count Ostermann the favorable answer.

In a few minutes, Count Ostermann, painfully supporting himself upon two crutches, entered the regent's cabinet.

Anna Leopoldowna received him, sitting in an arm-chair, and listlessly rummaging in a band-box filled with various articles of dress and embroidery, which had just been brought to her.

"Well," said she, raising her eyes for a moment to glance at Ostermann, "you come at a very inconvenient hour, Herr Minister Count Ostermann. You see that I am already occupied with my toilet, and am endeavoring to find a suitable head-dress. Will you aid me in the choice, sir count?"

Ostermann had until now, painfully and with many suppressed groans, sustained himself upon his feet; at a silent nod from the princess he glided down into a chair, and staring at Anna with his piercing and wonderfully-flashing eyes, he said:

"Your highness would select a head-dress? Well, as you ask my advice in the matter, I will give it; choose a head-dress so firm and solid as to prove a fortification for the defence of your head. Choose a head-dress that will protect you against conspiracies and revolutions, against false friends and smiling enemies! Choose a head-dress that will keep your head upon your shoulders!"

"Count Ostermann speaks in riddles," said Anna, smiling, and at the same time arranging a wreath of artificial roses. "Or no, it was not Count Ostermann, but a toad singing his hoarse song. Drive away that toad, Ostermann, it is broad day—why, then, have we the croaking of such night-birds?"

"Listen to the croaking of this toad," anxiously responded the old man. "Believe me, princess, when the toads croak in broad daylight, it betokens an approaching misfortune. Let it warn you, Madame Regent Anna! You have called me a toad—very well, toads always have correctly prophesied misfortune, and if they can never avert it, it is because otherwise people will not listen to such oracular voices of all-wise Nature! Let me be your toad, your highness, and listen to me! I foresee misfortune for you. Believe my prophecy, and that misfortune may yet be averted. Mark the signs by which fate would warn you! Did you not yesterday see Elizabeth driving through the streets, chatting and jesting with the soldiers, who crowded around her sledge? Have you not heard how the grenadiers of the Preobrajensky regiment shouted after her? Has it not been told you that Lestocq holds secret intercourse with the French ambassador, and know you not that Lestocq is the confidential servant of the princess? Guard yourself against Princess Elizabeth, your highness!"

"Are you in earnest?" smilingly asked Anna, drawing her silver toilet-glass nearer to her person, and placing a bouquet of flowers in her hair to examine its effect in the glass.

"Oh, Heavens!" cried Count Ostermann, "you adorn

yourself with flowers, while I am telling you that you are threatened with a conspiracy!"

"A conspiracy!" laughed the regent, "and Princess Elizabeth to be at the head of it! Believe me, you otherwise men, with all your wisdom, never learn rightly to understand women. I, however, am a woman, and I understand Elizabeth. You think that when she kindly chats with the soldiers, and admits the handsome stately grenadiers into her house, it is done for the purpose of conspiring with them. Go to, Count Ostermann, you are very innocent. Princess Elizabeth has but one passion, but it is not the desire of ruling; and when she chats with handsome men, she speaks not of conspiracy, believe me." And, laughing, the regent essayed a new head-dress.

"And how do you explain the secret meetings of Lestocq and the Marquis de la Chetardie?" asked Ostermann, with painfully-suppressed agitation.

"Explain? Why should I seek an explanation for things that do not at all interest me? What is it to me what the surgeon Lestocq has to do with the constantly-ailing French ambassador? Or do you think I should trouble myself about the *lavements* administered to an ambassador by a surgeon?"

"Well, then, your highness will allow me to explain their meetings from a less medical point of view? France is your enemy, France meditates your destruction, and the Marquis de la Chetardie is exciting the princess and Lestocq to an insurrection."

"And to what end, if I may be allowed to ask?" scornfully inquired Anna.

"France, struggling with internal and foreign enemies, at war with Austria, involved in disputes with Holland and Spain, France would wish at any price to see the Russian government so occupied with her own domestic difficulties as to have no time to devote to international affairs. She would provide you with plenty of occupation at home, that you may not actively interfere with the affairs of the rest of the world. That is the shrewd policy of France, and it would fill me with admiration were it not fraught with the most terrible danger to us. The Marquis de la Chetardie has it in charge to bring about a revolution here at any price, and as an expert diplomatist, he very well comprehends that Princess Elizabeth is the best means he can employ for that purpose; for she, as the daughter of Czar Peter, has the sympathies of the old Russians in her favor, and they will flock to her with shouts of joy whenever she may announce to the people that she is ready to drive the foreign rulers from Russia!"

"Ah, our good Russians," laughingly exclaimed the regent, "they shout only for those who make them drunk, and for that the poor princess lacks the means!"

"The Marquis de la Chetardie has, in the name of his king, offered her an unlimited credit, and she is already provided with almost a million of silver rubles."

"You have a reason for every thing," laughed the regent. "The princess is poor; let the French ambassador quickly provide her with his millions. The good princess, I wish she had these millions, and then she could indulge her love of ornaments and magnificent dresses."

"The marquis has brought her rich dresses and stuffs from Paris," said Ostermann, laconically.

The regent burst into a clear, ringing laugh.

"The marquis is a real *deus ex machina*," exclaimed she. "Wherever you need him, he appears and helps you out of your trouble. But seriously, my dear count, let it now suffice with these gloomy suspicions. They are already commencing the dance-music, and you will put me out of tune with your croaking. A ball, my dear count, requires that one should be in and not out of tune, and you are pursuing the best course to frighten the smiles from my lips."

"Oh, could I but do that!" cried Ostermann, wringing his hands—"could I but cry in your ear with a voice of thunder: 'Princess, awake from this slumber of indifference, force yourself to act, save your son, your husband, your friends; for we are all, all lost with you!'"

"Oh, speaking of my son," smilingly interposed the regent, "you must see a splendid present which the Emperor Ivan has this day received."

With this she took from a carton a small child's dress, embroidered with gold and sparkling with brilliants, which she handed to the count.*

"Only look at this splendor," said she. "The ladies of Moscow have embroidered this for the young emperor, and it has to-day been presented by a deputation. Will not the little emperor make a magnificent appearance in this brilliant dress?"

Count Ostermann did not answer immediately. His

* Leveeque, vol. v., p. 225.

face had assumed a very painful expression, and deep sighs escaped his agitated breast. Slowly rising from his seat, with a sad glance at the princess, he said :

"I see that your destruction is inevitable, and I cannot save you ; you will be ruined, and we all with you. Well, I am an old man, and I pardon your highness, for you act not thus from an evil disposition, but because you have a noble and confiding heart. Believe me, generosity and confidence are the worst failings with which a man can be tainted in this world—failings which always insure destruction, and have only mockery and derision for an epitaph. You are no longer to be helped, duchess. You are on the borders of an abyss, into which you will smilingly plunge, dragging us all after you. Well, peace be with you ! My sufferings have lately been so great, that I can only thank you for furnishing me with the means of quickly ending them ! Madame, we shall meet again on the scaffold, or in Siberia ! Until then, farewell !"

And, without waiting for an answer from the regent, the old man, groaning, tottered out of the room.

"Thank Heaven that he is gone !" said Anna, drawing a long breath when the door closed behind him. "This old ghost-seer has tormented me for months with his strange vagaries, which weigh upon his soul like the nightmare ! Happily, thy letter, my beloved, has filled my whole heart with the ecstasy of joy, else would his dark and foolish prophecies be sufficient to sadden me."

Thus speaking, the princess again drew Count Lynar's letter from her bosom and pressed it to her lips. Then she called her women to dress her for the ball.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COURT BALL.

SOME hours later the *élite* of the higher Russian nobility were assembled in the magnificent halls of the regent. Princes and counts, generals and diplomatists, beautiful women and blooming maidens, all moved in a confused intermixture, jesting and laughing with each other. They were all very gay on this evening, as the regent had herself set the example. With the most unconstrained cheerfulness, radiant with joy, did she wander through the rooms, dispensing smiles and agreeable words among all whom she approached. She bore in her bosom the glowing and cherished letter of her lover, and at its lightest rustling she seemed to feel the immediate presence of the writer. That was the secret of her gayety and her joyous smiles. People, perhaps, knew not this secret, but they saw its effects, and, as the all-powerful regent deigned this day to be cheerful and smiling, it was natural for this host of slavish nobility, who breathe nothing but the air of the court, to adopt for this evening's motto, "Gayety and smiles."

As we have said, only smiling lips and faces beaming with joy were to be seen ; all breathed pleasure and enjoyment, all jested and laughed ; it seemed as if all care and sorrow had fled from this happy, select circle, to give place to the delights of life. They had, with submissive humility, repressed all discontent and disaffection, all envyings and enmities ; they chatted and laughed, while every one knew or suspected that they were standing on a volcano, whose