

A longer view of this triumph of the countess became insufferable; alleging a sudden attack of illness, she immediately took leave of the regent, and ordered her carriage.

Tears of anger and love stood in her eyes as Razumovsky approached to aid her in entering it. Hurling away his hand, she entered the carriage without assistance.

"And may I not accompany you in the carriage as usual?" asked Alexis, with tenderness in his tone.

"No," she curtly said, "go back into the hall, and again admire the handsomest woman in the empire!"

Then, jealousy getting the better of anger, she beckoned to Alexis, who was about departing in sadness, and commanded him to enter the carriage without delay.

As soon as the carriage door was closed, with an angry movement she seized both of Razumovsky's hands.

"Look at me," said she—"look me directly in the eye, and then tell me, is Eleonore Lapuschkin handsomer than I?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PENCIL-SKETCH.

It was the day after the court ball. Princess Elizabeth was in her dressing-room, and occupied in enveloping herself in a very charming and seductive *négligé*. She was to-day in very good humor, very happy and free from care, for Alexis Razumovsky had, with the most solemn asseverations, assured her of his truth and devotion, and Elizabeth had

been soothed and reconciled by his glowing language. It was for him that she wished to appear especially attractive to-day, that Alexis, by the sight of her, might be made utterly to forget the Countess Eleonore Lapuschkin. In these coquettish efforts of her vanity she had utterly forgotten all the plans and projects of her friends and adherents; she thought no more of becoming empress, but she would be the queen of beauty, and in that realm she would reign alone with an absolute sway.

A servant announced Lestocq.

A cloud of displeasure lowered on the brow of the princess. Startled from her sweet dreams by this name, she now for the first time recollected the fatal conversation she had had on the previous evening with the regent. In her love and jealousy she had totally forgotten the occurrence, but now that she was reminded of it, she felt her head throb with anxiety and terror.

Dismissing her attendants with an imperious nod, she hastened to meet the entering physician.

"Lestocq," said she, "it is well you have come at this moment, else, perhaps, I might have forgotten to say to you that it is all over with the conjuration spun and woven by you and the French marquis. We must give it up, for the affair is more dangerous than you think it, and I may say that you have reason to be thankful to me for having, by my foresight and intrepidity, saved you from the torture, and a possible transportation to Siberia. Ah, it is very cold in Siberia, my dear Lestocq, and you will do well silently and discreetly to build a warm nest here, instead of inventing ambitious projects dangerous to all of us."

"And whence do you foresee danger, princess?" asked Lestocq.

"The regent knows all! She knows our plans and combinations. In a word, she knows that we conspire, and that you are the principal agent in this conspiracy."

"Then I am lost!" sighed Lestocq, gliding down upon a chair.

"No, not quite," said Elizabeth, with a smile, "for I have saved you. Ah, I should never have believed that the playing of comedy was so easy, but I tell you I have played one in a masterly manner. Fear was my teacher; it taught me to appear so innocent, to implore so affectingly, that Anna herself was touched. Ah, and I wept whole streams of tears, I tell you. That quite disarmed the regent. But you must bear the blame if my eyes to-day are yet red with weeping, and not so brilliant as usual."

And Princess Elizabeth ran to the toilet-table to examine critically her face in the glass.

"Yes, indeed," she cried, with a sort of terror, "it is as I feared. My eyes are quite dull. Lestocq, you must give me a means, a quick and sure means, to restore their brightness."

Thus speaking, Elizabeth looked constantly in the glass, full of care and anxiety about her eyes.

"I shall appear less beautiful to him to-day," she murmured; "he will, in thought, compare me with Eleonore Lapuschkin, and find her handsomer than I. Lestocq, Lestocq!" she then called aloud, impatiently stamping with her little foot, "I tell you that you must immediately prescribe a remedy that will restore the brilliancy of my eyes."

"Princess," said Lestocq, with solemnity, "I beseech you for a moment to forget your incomparable beauty and the unequalled brilliancy of your eyes. Be not only a woman, but be, as you can, the great czar's great daughter. Princess, the question here is not only of the diminished brilliancy of your eyes, but of a real danger with which you are threatened. Be merciful, be gracious, and relate to me the exact words of your yesterday's conversation with the regent."

The princess looked up from her mirror, and turned her head toward Lestocq.

"Ah, I forgot," she carelessly said, "you are not merely my physician, but also a revolutionist, and that is of much greater importance to you."

"The question is of your head, princess, and as a true physician I would help you to preserve it. Therefore, dearest princess, I beseech you, repeat to me that conversation with the regent."

"Will you then immediately give me a recipe for my eyes?"

"Yes, I will."

"Well, listen, then."

And the princess repeated, word for word, to the breathless Lestocq, her conversation with Anna Leopoldowna. Lestocq listened to her with most intense interest, taking a piece of paper from the table and mechanically writing some unmeaning lines upon it with an appearance of heedlessness. Perhaps it was this mechanical occupation that enabled him to remain so calm and circumspect. During the narration of the princess his features again assumed

their expression of firmness and determination; his eyes again flashed, and around his mouth played a saucy, scornful smile, such as was usually seen there when, conscious of his superiority, he had formed a bold resolution.

"This good regent has executed a stroke of policy for which Ostermann will never forgive her," said he, after the princess had finished her narration. "She should have kept silence and appeared unconstrained—then *we* should have been lost; but now it is *she*."

"No," exclaimed the princess, with generous emotion, "the regent has chosen precisely the best means for disarming us! She has manifested a noble confidence in me, she has discredited the whisperings of her minister and counselors, and instead of destroying me, as she could have done, she has warned me with the kindness and affection of a sister. I shall never forget that, Lestocq; I shall ever be grateful for that! Henceforth the Regent or Empress Anna Leopoldowna shall have no truer or more obedient subject than I, the Princess Elizabeth!"

"By this you would not say, princess—"

"By this I mean to say," interposed Elizabeth, "that this conspiracy is brought to a bloodless conclusion, and that, from this hour, there is but one woman in this great Russian realm who has any claim to the title of empress, and that woman is the Regent Anna Leopoldowna!"

"You will therefore renounce your sacred and well-grounded claims to the imperial throne?" asked Lestocq, continuing his scribbling.

"Yes, that will I," responded Elizabeth. "I will no longer be plagued with your plans and machinations—I

will have repose. In the interior of my palace I will be empress; there will I establish a realm, a realm of peace and enjoyable happiness; there will I erect the temple of love, and consecrate myself as its priestess! No, speak no more of revolutions and conspiracies. I am not made to sit upon a throne as the feared and thundering goddess of cowardly slaves, causing millions to tremble at every word and glance! I will not be empress, not the bugbear of a quaking, kneeling people; I will be a woman, who has nothing to do with the business and drudgery of men; I will not be plagued with labor and care, but will enjoy and rejoice in my existence!"

"For that you will be allowed no time!" said Lestocq, with solemnity. "When you give up your plans and renounce your rights, then, princess, it will be all over with the days of enjoyment and happiness. It will then no longer be permitted you to convert your palace into a temple of pleasure, and thenceforth you will be known only as the priestess of misfortune and misery!"

"You have again your fever-dreams," said Elizabeth, smiling. "Come, I will awaken you! I have told you my story; it is now for you to give me a recipe for my inflamed eyes."

"Here it is," earnestly answered Lestocq, handing to the princess the paper upon which he had been scribbling.

Elizabeth took it and at first regarded it with smiling curiosity; but her features gradually assumed a more serious and even terrified expression, and the roses faded from her cheeks.

"You call this a recipe for eyes reddened with weep-

ing," said she, with a shudder, "and yet it presents two pictures which make my hair bristle with terror, and might cause one to weep himself blind!"

"They represent our future!" said Lestocq, with decision. "You see that man bound upon the wheel—that is myself! Now look at the second. This young woman who is wringing her hands, and whose head one of these nuns is shearing, while the other is endeavoring, in spite of her struggling resistance, to envelop her in the black veil;—that is you, princess. For you the cloister, for me the wheel! That will be our future, Princess Elizabeth, if you now hesitate in your forward march in the path upon which you have once entered."

"And to persevere in this conspiracy is to give ourselves up to certain destruction, for doubt not they will be able to convict us. Among Grünstein's enlisted friends there are drunkards enough who would betray you for a flask of brandy! Princess Elizabeth, would you be a nun or an empress? Choose between these two destinations. There is no middle course."

"Then I would be an empress!" said Elizabeth, with flashing eyes, trembling with anxiety and excitement, and still examining the two drawings. "Ah, you are an accomplished artist, Lestocq, you have designed this picture with a horrible truth of resemblance. How I stand there! how I wring my hands, the pale lips opened for a cry of terror, and yet silenced by a view of those dreadful shears before whose deadly operations my hair falls to the earth, and that veil entombs me while yet living!"

And casting away the drawings, the princess trod them

under foot, declaring in a loud and imperious tone: "These drawings are false, Lestocq, and that will I prove to you—I, the Empress Elizabeth!"

"All hail, my empress!" cried Lestocq, throwing himself at her feet and kissing the hem of her robe; "blessings upon you, for you have now rescued me from the hands of the executioner! You have saved my life, in return for which I will this day place an imperial crown upon your heavenly brows." *

"This day?" asked Elizabeth, with a shudder.

"Yes, it must be done this very night! We must improve the moment, for only the moment is ours. Every hour of delay but brings us nearer to our destruction. Yet one night of hesitation, and they will already have rendered our success impossible. Ah, the Regent Anna has sworn to believe only you, and never to doubt you, and yet she has ordered three battalions of the guards to march early in the morning to join the army in Viborg. Our friends and confidants are in these three battalions. Judge, then, how very much Anna Leopoldowna confides in you!"

"Ah, if it be really so," said Elizabeth, "then can I no longer have any regard for her. Anna will remove my friends from here, and that is a betrayal of the friendship she has sworn for me. I have therefore no further obligations toward her! I am free to act as I think best. Lestocq, I will be no nun, but an empress! You now have my word, and are at liberty to make all necessary arrange-

* Leveque, vol. v., p. 227.—"Voyage en Sibérie, par l'Abbé Chappe d'Auteroche," vol. i., p. 184.

ments. If it must be done, let it be done quickly and unhesitatingly. I have yet to-day the courage to dare any enormity, therefore let us utilize this day!"

"Expect me to-night at twelve o'clock!" said Lestocq, rising; "I will then be here to bring you the imperial crown."

This firm confidence made Elizabeth tremble again. Until now all had seemed like a dream, a play of the imagination; but when she read in Lestocq's bold and resolved features that it was a reality, she shook with terror, and an anxious fear overpowered her soul.

"And if it miscarry?" said she, thoughtfully.

"It will not and cannot miscarry!" responded Lestocq. "The right is on your side, and God will watch over the daughter of the great czar."

"And then, when I am really empress," said Elizabeth, thoughtfully, to herself, "what then? There is no happiness in it! They will give me another title, they will place a crown upon my head, and bind me to a throne. I shall be no longer free to act according to my will, to live as I would. Thousands of spies will lurk around me. Thousands of eyes will follow my steps, thousands of ears will listen for my every word, in order to interpret and attach a secret meaning to it! They will call me an empress, but I shall be a slave bound with golden fetters, upon whose head sits a golden crown of thorns. And this toil and weariness! These tiresome sittings of the ministers, this law-making and the signing of orders and commands! How horrible!—Lestocq," suddenly cried the princess, aloud, "if I must always labor, and make laws, and sub-

scribe my name, and command and govern, then I will be no empress, no, never!"

"You shall be empress only to enjoy life in its highest splendor. We, your servants and slaves, we will work and govern for you!" said Lestocq.

"Swear that to me! Swear to me that I shall not be constrained to labor, swear that you will govern for me, that I may devote my time to the enjoyment of life!"

"I swear it to you by all that is most sacred to me."

"Well, then, I will be your empress!" said Elizabeth, satisfied.

At this moment a secret door opened and gave admission to Alexis Razumovsky.

By his entrance Elizabeth was reminded of her inflamed eyes, and of the fair Countess Eleanore Lapuschkin.

She gave Alexis a searching, scrutinizing glance, and it seemed to her that he appeared less tender and ardent than usual.

"Oh," she proudly said, motioning her favorite to approach her and lightly kissing him upon the forehead, "oh, I will yet compel you to adore me. When an imperial crown encircles my brow, then will you be obliged to confess that I am the fairest of women! Alexis, on this night shall I become an empress!"

With a cry of joy Alexis sank to her feet.

"Hail to my adored empress!" he exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "Hail Elizabeth, the fairest of all women!"

"With the exception of the beautiful Countess Lapuschkin!" said Elizabeth, with a bitter smile—"ah, when I am empress, I shall at least have the power to render that

woman harmless, and to annihilate her!—You turn pale, Alexis," she continued with more vehemence—"your hand trembles in mine! You must therefore love her very much, this exalted queen of godlike beauty? Ah, I shall know how to punish her for it!"

"Princess!" reproachfully exclaimed Alexis—"Elizabeth, you, my august and gentle empress, you will not sacrifice an innocent woman to a momentary jealous vagary!"

"Ah, he ventures to intercede for her!" cried Elizabeth, with a hoarse laugh, and, turning to Lestocq, she continued, with anger-flashing eyes: "Lestocq, I have yet a condition to make before consenting to become an empress."

"Name your condition, princess, and if it be within the compass of human power it shall be fulfilled."

Casting an angry glance at Razumovsky, Elizabeth said, with a sinister smile:

"Swear to me, by all you hold most sacred, to find some fault in this Countess Lapuschkin which shall give me the right to condemn her to death!"

"I swear it by all I hold most sacred," solemnly responded Lestocq.

"And you will do well in that!" exclaimed Alexis. "For when a crime rests upon her, and she, only with a word or look, offends against my fair and noble empress, she will deserve such condemnation."

"You will, then, defend her no longer?" asked the somewhat appeased princess, bending down to her kneeling lover.

"What is Countess Lapuschkin to me?" tenderly re-

sponded Alexis. "For me there is but one woman, one empress, and one beauty, and that is Elizabeth!"

The princess smiled with satisfaction. "Lestocq," said she, "this time I keep my word. I am ready to dare all, in order to place the imperial crown upon my head. I must and will be empress, that I may have the power to reward you all, and to raise you, my Alexis, to me!"

And drawing the handsome Alexis up to herself, she gave him her hand to kiss.

"I now go to make all necessary preparations," said Lestocq. "At midnight I will come for you. Be ready at that time, Elizabeth!"

"I will then be ready!" said Princess Elizabeth, nodding a farewell to Lestocq.

"At midnight!" she then thoughtfully continued. "Well, we have twelve hours until then, which will suffice for the invention of a suitable toilet. Alexis, tell me what sort of dress I shall wear. What color best becomes me and in what shall I best please the soldiers? The toilet, my Alexis, is often decisive in such cases; an unsuitable costume might cause me to displease the conspirators, and lead them to give up the enterprise. You must aid me, Alexis, in choosing a costume. Come, let us repair to the wardrobe, and call my women. I will try on all my dresses, one after the other; then you shall decide which is most becoming, and that will we choose."

The princess and her lover betook themselves to the wardrobe, and called her women to assist in selecting a suitable revolution-toilet.