

sell to England the dearest interests of Russia. She permitted her ministers to govern with unrestricted power, and was rejoiced when no one came to trouble her about affairs of state or the interests of her people.

CHAPTER XIX.

ELEONORE LAPUSCHKIN.

Two years had elapsed since Elizabeth's accession to the throne; for her, two years of pleasure and enjoyment, only troubled here and there with occasional small clouds of ill-humor—but those clouds overshadowed only her domestic peace. It was not the affairs of state, not the interests of her people, that troubled and saddened Elizabeth; she asked not how many of her subjects the war with Sweden had swept away; how many had fallen a sacrifice to hunger in the southern provinces of her realm. She had quite other cares and anxieties than those which concerned only her ministers, not herself. What have princes to do with the happiness of their people.

Elizabeth was a consummate princess; she thought only of her own happiness, only of herself and her own sorrows. And it was a very severe, very incurable sorrow that visited her—a sorrow that often brought tears of anger into her eyes and curses upon her lips. Elizabeth was jealous—jealous not of this or that woman, but of the whole sex. She glowingly desired to be the fairest of all women, and constantly trembled lest some one should come to rob her of

the prize of beauty. And were there not, in her own court, women who might venture to enter the lists with her? Was there not, before all, one woman whose aspect filled the heart of the empress with a thirst for vengeance, of whom she was compelled to say that she was younger, handsomer, and more attractive than herself—and this one, was it not Eleonore Lapuschkin?

For two long years had Elizabeth borne about with her this hatred and jealousy; for two long years had she in vain sought to discover some punishable fault in her rival; for two long years had she in vain reminded Lestocq of his promise to find Eleonore Lapuschkin guilty of some crime. She had come out pure from all these persecuting pursuits, and even the eyes of the most zealous spy could find no blot upon her escutcheon. Like a royal lily she proudly bloomed with undisputed splendor in the midst of this court, whose petty cabals and intrigues could not soil her fair fame. Her presence spread around her a sort of magic. The most audacious courtier, the most presumptuous cavalier, approached her with only reverence; they ventured not in her presence to use such words and jests as but too well pleased the empress; there was something in Eleonore's glance that commanded involuntary respect and awe; an elevation, a mildness, a soft feminine majesty was shed over her whole being that enchanted even those who were inimical to her. Elizabeth had perceived that, with her eyes sharpened by jealousy; her envy was yet more mighty than her vanity, and her envy told her Eleonore Lapuschkin is handsomer than the Empress Elizabeth; wherever Eleonor appears, there all hearts fly to meet her, all glances in-

cline to her; every one feels a sort of ecstasy of adoration whom she greets with a word or a smile, for that word or that smile sanctifies him as it were, and enrolls him among the noblest and best.

And even Alexis had been unable to withstand this magic! Oh, Elizabeth narrowly watched him; she had analyzed his every word and every glance; she had seen how he always pressed near her, how he blushed with joy when she remarked his presence and returned his salutation! Yea, she, and perhaps only she, had seen Alexis covertly possess himself of the glove which Eleonore had lost the previous evening at the grand court ball, had seen him press that glove to his lips and afterward conceal it in his bosom.

As Elizabeth thought of these things her eyes filled with tears, and her whole form shook with rage. She felt unable to be angry with or to punish him, but she was resolved that Eleonore Lapuschkin should feel the whole weight of her vengeance.

"Oh," said she, while pacing her boudoir in a state of violent excitement, "I shall know how to punish this presumptuous woman! She ventures to defy me, but I will humble her! Ha, does she not give herself the appearance of not remarking that I constantly have for her a clouded brow and an unfriendly greeting? How! will she not take the pains to see that her empress looks upon her with disfavor? But she shall see and feel that I hate, that I abhor her. Oh, what a powerless creature is yet an empress! I hate this woman, and she has the impudence to think I cannot punish her unless she is guilty."

And weeping aloud, Elizabeth threw herself upon the divan. A low knock at the door recalled her attention from her angry grief. Rising, she bade the person at the door to enter.

It was Lestocq, the privy councillor and president—Lestocq, the confidant of the empress, who came with a joyful face and cheerful smile.

Elizabeth felt annoyed by this cheerfulness of her physician. With an angry frown she turned her back upon him.

"Why were you not at the court ball last evening?" she then roughly said.

"I was there," answered Lestocq.

"Ah, that is not true," cried the empress with vehemence, glad at least to have some one on whom she could discharge her anger. "It is false, I say; no one saw you there! Ah, you dare, then, to impose a falsehood upon your empress? You would—"

"I was at the court ball," interposed Lestocq; "I saw and noted all that occurred there. I saw that my empress beamed in all the splendor of beauty, and yet with her amiable modesty she thought Eleonore Lapuschkin handsomer than herself. I read in Elizabeth's noble brow that she was pained by this, and that she promised to punish the presumption of the insolent countess."

"And to what end have you read all that," responded Elizabeth, with vehemence, "to what end, since you are so sluggish a servant that you make no effort to fulfil any wish of your mistress? To what end, since you are so disregarding of your word as not to hold even your oath sacred?"

"I was at the ball precisely because I remembered my oath," said Lestocq, "because I was intent upon redeeming my word and delivering over to you this Countess Lapuschkin as a criminal! But you could not recognize me, as I was in the disguise of a lackey of the Countess Eleonore Lapuschkin."

Elizabeth springing up from her seat, stared with breathless curiosity into Lestocq's face.

"Well?" she anxiously asked, as Lestocq remained silent. "Speak on; then what further?"

"Illustrious empress," said Lestocq, "I am now here to redeem my word. This Countess Eleonore Lapuschkin is a criminal!"

"Ah, thank God!" cried Elizabeth, breathing more freely.

"By various intrigues and stratagems, by bribery of her servants, I have finally succeeded in spying out her secrets, and last evening, when as her lackey I conducted her from the ball and afterward waited at table at an entertainment given by her husband to some confidential friends, last evening her whole plan was made clear to me. It is a great and very important conspiracy that I have detected! This Countess Eleonore Lapuschkin is guilty of high-treason; she conspires against her legitimate empress!"

"Ah, she conspires!" exclaimed Elizabeth, with a fierce laugh. "For whom, then, does she conspire?"

"For one whose name I dare not utter without the express permission of my empress!"

"Speak, speak quickly!"

Lestocq bent down close to the ear of the empress. "She conspires for the Schlüsselburg prisoner Ivan!" said he.

"I shall therefore be able to punish her," said Elizabeth, smilingly. "I shall no longer be obliged to suffer this hated woman within the walls of my capital!"

"Siberia has room for her and her fellow-conspirators!" replied Lestocq. "For this fair countess is not alone guilty, although she is the soul of the conjuration, as it is love that animates her. Eleonore Lapuschkin conspires for her lover!"

"Oh, this adored saint has, then, a lover!" exclaimed the empress. "And I believed her spotless as a lily, so pure that I felt abashed in her presence!"

"You have banished her lover to Siberia, the lover of Eleonore, Count Löwenwald. You may believe that that has caused her a mortal grief."

"Ah," joyfully exclaimed Elizabeth, "I have, therefore, unknowingly caused her tears to flow! But I will yet do it with a perfect consciousness! Relate to me in detail exactly what you know of this conspiracy!"

And Lestocq related that Eleonore Lapuschkin, in connection with her husband, the chamberlain Lilienfeld, and Madame Bestuscheff, who was the sister of the condemned Golopkin, had entered into a conspiracy for the overthrow of Elizabeth and the placing of Ivan upon the throne, and thus releasing the prisoners banished to Siberia.

"Oh, they were very gay at the yesterday's dinner of the conspirators," said Lestocq. "The husband of Countess Lapuschkin even ventured to drink the health of the Emperor Ivan, and to his speedy liberation!"*

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

"But that is high-treason!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "Ah, I had cause to tremble and eternally to stand in fear of my murderers! I already see them lurking around me, encircling me on all sides, to destroy me! Lestocq, save me from my murderers!"

And with a cry of anguish the empress clung convulsively to the arm of her physician.

"The incautiousness of these conspirators has already saved you, empress," said Lestocq. "They have delivered themselves into our hand, they have made us masters of the situation. What would you more? You will punish the traitors; that is all!"

"And I cannot kill them!" shrieked Elizabeth, with closed fists. "I have tied my own hands in my unwise generosity! Ah, they call me an empress, and yet I cannot destroy those I hate!"

"And who denies you that right?" asked Lestocq. "Destroy their bodies, but kill them not! Wherefore have we the knout, if it cannot flay the back of a beauty?"

"Yes, wherefore have we the knout?" exclaimed Elizabeth, with a joyous laugh. "Ah, Lestocq, you are an exquisite man, you always give good advice. Ah, this beautiful Countess Eleonore shall be made acquainted with the knout!"

"You have a double right for it," said Lestocq, "for she has dared to speak of your majesty in unseemly language!"

"Has she done that?" cried Elizabeth. "Ah, I almost love her for it, as that gives me the right to chastise her. Lestocq, what punishment is prescribed for a subject who

dares revile his empress? You must know it, you are familiar with the laws! Therefore tell me quickly, what punishment?"

"It is written," said Lestocq, after a moment's reflection, "that any one who dares so misuse his tongue as to revile the sublime majesty of his emperor or empress with irreverent language, such criminal shall have the instrument of his crime, his tongue, torn out by the roots!"

"And this time I will exercise no mercy!" triumphantly exclaimed Elizabeth.

She kept her word—she exercised no mercy! Count Lapuschkin, with his fair wife, the wife of Bestuscheff, the Chamberlain Lilienfeld, and some others, were accused of high-treason and brought before the tribunal.

It was not difficult to convict the countess of the crime charged; incautiously enough had she often expressed her attachment to the cause of the imprisoned Emperor Ivan, and her contempt for the Empress Elizabeth. And in what country is it not a crime to speak disrespectfully of the prince, though he be a criminal and one of the lowest of men?

She was therefore declared guilty; she was sentenced to be scourged with the knout, to have her tongue torn out, and to be transported to Siberia!

Elizabeth did not pardon her. She was a princess—how, then, could she pardon one who had dared to revile her? Every crime is easier to pardon than that of high-treason; for every other there may be extenuating circumstances—for that, never; it is a capital crime which a prince never pardons; how, then, could Elizabeth have done so?—

Elizabeth, Empress by the grace of God, as all are princes and kings by the grace of God!

The people were running to and fro in the wildest confusion in the streets of St. Petersburg; they cried and shouted *vivas* to their empress who to-day accorded to them the splendid spectacle of the knouting of some respectable ladies and gentlemen! Ah, that was a very gracious and condescending empress to provide once more a delightful spectacle for her serfs at the expense of the nobility! That was an empress after their own hearts—real Russian blood!

Shrieking and shouting they rushed to the place of execution, pressing against the barriers that separated the central point from the spectators. There stood the bearded assistants of the executioner, there lay the knouts and other instruments, and with eager glances the people devoured all: they found all these preparations admirable, they rejoiced with unrestrained delight in the prospect of seeing the handsomest woman in the realm flayed with the knout. And not the common people alone, the *noblesse* must also be present; the great magnates of the court must also come, if they would avoid exciting a suspicion that they commiserated the condemned and revolted at their punishment. They all came, these slavish magnates, perhaps with tears in their hearts, but with smiles upon their lips; perhaps murmuring secret curses, but aloud applauding the just sentence of the empress.

Now the closed carriages of the condemned were seen approaching in a long, lingering train; the train halted, the doors were opened, and in the centre of the place of execu-

tion appeared Eleonore Lapuschkin, radiant with the brilliancy of the purest beauty, her noble form enveloped in a full, draping robe, which lent to her loveliness an additional charm. She looked around with an astonished and interrogating glance, as if awaking from a confused dream. Young, amiable, the first and most celebrated lady of the court, of which she was the most brilliant ornament, she now sees herself, instead of the admirers who humbly paid their court to her, surrounded by these rough executioners, who regard her with bold and insolent glances, eagerly stretching forth their hands for their prey. One of them, approaching her, ventures to rend from her bosom the kerchief that covers it. Eleonore, shuddering, shrinks back, her cheeks are pale as marble, a stream of tears gushes from her eyes. In vain she implores, in vain her lamentations, in vain her trembling innocence, in vain her efforts to cover herself anew. Her clothes are torn off, and in a few moments she stands there naked to the girdle, with all the upper portion of her person exposed to the eager glances of the masses, who in silence stare at this specimen of the purest feminine beauty.

The proud lily is broken, shattered; she bows her head, the storm has crushed her. Incapable of resistance, she is seized by one of the executioners, who, by a sudden movement, throws her upon her back. Another then approaches and places her in the most convenient position for receiving the punishment. Soon, with rough brutality, he lays his broad hand upon her head, and places it so that it may not be hit by the knout, and then, like a butcher who is about to throttle a lamb, he caresses that snow-white back, as if

taking pleasure in the contemplation of the wonderful fairness of his victim.

Now is she in the right position; he steps back, and raising the knout, brings it down upon Eleonore's back with such accuracy that it takes off a strip of skin from her neck to her girdle. Then he swings the knout anew, with the same accuracy and the same result. In a few moments her skin hangs in shreds over her girdle, her whole form is dripping with blood, and the shuddering spectators venture not a single bravo for this dexterous executioner.*

The work is finished! With a flayed back Eleonore is raised upon the shoulders of the executioner. She has not screamed, she has not moaned, she has remained dumb and without complaint, but she has prayed to God for vengeance and expiation for the shame inflicted upon her.

And again advances the executioner, with a pair of pincers in his hand. Eleonore looks at him through eyes flaming with anger.

"What would you?" she coldly asks.

"Tear out your tongue!" answers he, with a rude laugh. Two of the executioner's assistants then seizing her, grasp her head.

This time Eleonore defends herself—despair lends her strength. Freeing herself from the grasp of these barbarous executioners, she falls upon her knees, and, raising her bloody arms toward heaven, implores the mercy of God; glancing at the spectators, she implores their pity and their aid; turning her eyes toward the proud imperial palace,

* L'Abbé Chappe d'Auteroche, "Voyage en Sibérie," vol. ii., p. 370.

where Elizabeth sits enthroned, she begs there for grace and mercy.*

But as all remained silent, and as neither God nor man, nor yet the empress, had mercy upon her, a wild rage took possession of Eleonore's soul.

Raising her eyes toward heaven with flaming glances, she exclaimed:

"Woe to this merciless Elizabeth! Woe to this woman who has no compassion for another woman! What she now does to me, do Thou also to her, my God and Lord! Grant that she be flayed as she has now flayed me! Grant her a daughter, and let that daughter before her mother's eyes suffer what I now suffer, O my God! Woe to Elizabeth, and woe to you, ye cowardly slaves, who can look on and see a woman flayed and tortured! Shame and perdition to Russia and its Empress Elizabeth!"

These were Eleonore's last words. With a wild rage her executioners seized her for the purpose of tearing out her tongue. And when that was accomplished, and her husband and son had suffered a similar martyrdom, all three were placed upon a *kibitka*, to be conveyed to Siberia.

Eleonore could no longer speak with her tongue, but her eyes spoke, and those eyes continued to repeat the prayer for vengeance she had addressed to Heaven: "Grant to this Empress Elizabeth a daughter, and let that daughter's sufferings be like mine."

* Levecque, vol. v., p. 242.