

CHAPTER XX.

A WEDDING.

THE people dispersed. The great returned to their palaces, and also Alexis Razumovsky, who, that he might not excite the anger of the empress, had likewise attended the execution, returned to the imperial palace.

Elizabeth was standing before a large Venetian mirror, scrutinizing a toilet which she had to-day changed for the fourth time.

"Well," she asked of Alexis, as he entered, "was it an interesting spectacle? Was the handsome countess soundly whipped?"

And, while so asking, she was smilingly occupied in attaching a purple flower to her hair.

"She was flayed," laconically replied Alexis. "Her blood streamed down a back that was as red as your beautiful lips, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth offered him her lips to kiss.

"Now," she jestingly asked, "who is now the handsomest woman in my realm?"

"You are and always were!" responded Alexis, embracing her.

"And now tell me," said she, with curiosity, "what did this proud countess do? How did she behave, what did she say?"

Alexis, seating himself upon a tabouret at her feet, related to her all about the fair Eleonore, and what a terrible curse she uttered.

"Ah, nonsense!" replied Elizabeth, shrugging her shoulders, "How can one make such a stupid prayer to God! I shall never marry, and therefore never have a daughter to be scourged with the knout."

But while thus speaking, her eyes suddenly became fixed and her cheek pale. She laid her trembling hand upon her heart—tears gushed from her eyes.

Under her heart she had felt the movement of a new and mysterious life! Heaven itself seemed to contradict her words! Elizabeth felt that she was a mother, and Eleonore's words now filled her with awe and terror!

Fainting, she sank into Razumovsky's arms.

A few weeks later, a great and magnificent court festival was celebrated at the imperial palace in St. Petersburg. It was not enough that Elizabeth had chosen a successor in the person of Peter, Duke of Holstein, she must also give this successor a wife, that the throne might be fortified and assured by a numerous progeny.

She chose for him the Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, the young and beautiful Sophia Augusta, who, embracing the Greek religion, received the name of Catharine.

It was the marriage festival of this young German princess with the heir to the Russian throne which was celebrated in the imperial palace at St. Petersburg—a festival of splendor and enthusiasm, as it was attended by two women of the most exciting beauty, Elizabeth the present and Catharine the future empress—the one gorgeous with the splendor of the present, the other irradiated with the glory of the future. People looked at the fair youthful

face of Catharine, and sought to read in her majestic high forehead the hopes that Russia might cherish of her! It was, therefore, a festival of the present and future that was there and then celebrated, and the magnates humbly prostrated themselves before this new star, and threw themselves upon the earth before the ever-new sun of imperial majesty which shone upon them in the person of Elizabeth.

Catharine with a joyful spirit and a proud smile laid her hand in that of Peter, and as she stepped with him to the altar she thought: "I do this that I may one day be empress! and as I can reach that position in no other way—well, then, let them call me the wife of this under-aged boy! I will suffer it until the time comes when I shall no longer suffer, but command."

With such thoughts did Catharine become the wife of the Grand-duke Peter, who, as he with a loud and solemn "yes" vowed eternal truth to his young wife, looked at the Countess Woronzow, and both exchanged a stolen smile and a glowing glance of love.

"They may henceforth call this proud Catharine my wife," thought Peter, "but I shall never love her, as my heart will ever belong to my dear Woronzow! But Elizabeth has decided that Catharine shall be my wife. I accommodate myself to her command, and obey now, that I may one day command! But then woe to the wife this day forced upon me!"

And when the ceremony was ended, the new-married pair received with smiling faces and radiant glances the congratulations of the court, which in loud and ecstatic ex-

clamations commended the love and happiness of this young princely pair.

On the same day a second marriage was celebrated in this same imperial palace, perhaps not so splendid, but certainly a happier one, for it was love that united the two—love had overcome Elizabeth's aversion to marriage, and decided her to raise her dear Alexis Razumovsky to the position of her husband—love, and also a little superstition! As the son born to Elizabeth some months previously had died soon after its birth, and in this dispensation Elizabeth recognized the punishment of heaven in disapproval of her connection with Alexis, she shudderingly remembered the words spoken by Eleonore Lapuschkin, and her heart was filled with fear for the children which the future might bring to her.

"I will destroy the curse which this Countess Lapuschkin has pronounced against my children," thought Elizabeth, as she now for the second time felt herself to be a mother. "If God blesses my children, the curse of no human being can affect them, and this revengeful prayer of the countess will have no more power when the priest of God has consecrated and blessed the child now quietly reposing under my heart!"

This was the reason why Elizabeth resolved to marry Alexis Razumovsky; this was the reason why she, in a solitary chapel, accompanied only by Lestocq and the priest, stood before the marriage-altar with Alexis, and became his wife.

She breathed freer when the priest had pronounced his blessing upon her; an oppressive weight was lifted from

her heart; the child she was about to bear was saved and sheltered, and Eleonore's curse had no longer any power over it!

On the next day Elizabeth appointed Alexis field-marshal, and raised him in the ranks of the nobility.

"We must at any rate give our son a respectable father," said she. "I hope we shall have a son, who will be as beautiful as his father; whom I will overload with honors, and place high above all the magnates of my court. Ah, a son! No daughter, Alexis!"

"And why no daughter?" smilingly asked Razumovsky.

Elizabeth shuddered, and, clinging to her beloved, whispered:

"Has not Eleonore Lapuschkin said, 'Give her a daughter, and let her, before the eyes of her mother, experience what I now suffer!' Oh, Alexis, wish me therefore no daughter! I should always tremble for her!"

And God seemed to have listened to the anxious prayer of the empress. Again she bore a son, but again the son died shortly after his birth.

"It is very sad to lose a child, and especially a son," sighed Elizabeth, and involuntarily she thought of Anna, that poor mother whom she had robbed of her son, that he might grow up in eternal joyless imprisonment, that he might be morally murdered, and from a man be converted into an idiot!

"This is God's vengeance!" whispered something in her breast, but Elizabeth shrank from these low whisperings of her conscience, and she tremulously said: "I will not

listen to it! Away, ye intrusive thoughts! I am an empress—for me there are no crimes, no laws! An empress is exalted above all law, and whatever she does is right! Away, away, therefore, ye troublesome thoughts! This boy Ivan must remain in prison; I cannot restore him to his mother. May she bear other children, and then new joys will bloom for her!"

But these thoughts would not be thus banished, they constantly haunted her; they left not her nightly couch; they constantly renewed their dismal, awful whisperings; and this all-powerful empress would loudly shriek with mortal anguish, and she was dismayed at being left alone with her thoughts.

"I will have society around me," said she, "and will never be alone; the people about me shall always laugh and jest, to cheer me and distract my thoughts. Hasten, hasten—call my court; the most jovial men shall be most welcome! And, do you hear, above all things, bring me wine, the best and strongest wine. When I drink plenty of it, I shall again become gay and happy; it drives away all cares, and renders the heart light and free!"

And they came, the merriest gentlemen of the court; it also came, the strong, fiery wine; and, after an hour, Elizabeth's brow beamed with renewed pleasure, while her heavy tongue with difficulty stammered:

"How beautiful it yet is to be an empress—for an empress there is only joy and delight, and endless pleasures!"

CHAPTER XXI.

SCENES AND PORTRAITS.

YEARS passed—famous and glorious years for Russia. Peace within her borders, and splendid victories gained over foreign enemies, particularly over the Prussians. In songs of jubilee the people praised and blessed their empress, whose wisdom had brought all to such a glorious conclusion, and had made her country great, triumphant, and happy.

The good Elizabeth! What had she to do with the victories of her soldiers, with the happiness of her realm? She knew nothing of it, and if peace prevailed throughout the Russian empire, it was absolutely unknown in the imperial palace, where there was eternal war, a never-ending feud! There the young Catharine contended with her husband, whom she hated and abhorred; with Elizabeth, who saw in her a dangerous rival. But it was an unequal struggle in which these two women were engaged, for Elizabeth had on her side the power and dominion, while Catharine had only her youth, her beauty, and her tears!

Elizabeth hated Catharine because she dared to remain young and handsome, while she, the empress, saw that she was growing old, and her charms were withering; and Catharine hated Elizabeth because the latter denied her a right which the empress daily claimed for herself—the right to choose a lover, and to love him as long as he pleased her. She hated Elizabeth because the latter surrounded her with spies and watchers, and required of her a strict

virtue, a never-violated matrimonial fidelity—fidelity to the husband who so far derided and insulted his wife as to demand that she should receive into her circle and treat with respect and kindness his own mistress, the Countess Woronzow—fidelity to this husband, who had never shown her any thing but contempt and neglect, and who had no other way of entertaining her than teaching her to march in military fashion, and stand as a sentinel at his door!

Wounded in her inmost being and her feminine honor, tired of the eternal pin-prickings with which Elizabeth tormented her, Catharine retreated into her most retired apartment, there in quiet to reflect upon her dishonorable greatness, and yearningly to dream of a splendid future. “For the future,” said she, with sparkling eyes to her confidante, Princess Daschkow, “the future is mine, they cannot deprive me of it. For that I labor and think and study. Ah, when *my* future shall have become the present, then will I encircle my brows with a splendid imperial diadem, and astonish you all with my greatness and magnificence.”

“But you forget your husband!” smilingly interposed Princess Daschkow. “He will a little obscure the splendor of your imperial crown, as he will always be the first in the realm. He is the all-powerful emperor, and you will be powerless, although an empress!”

Catharine proudly tossed her head, and her eyes flashed.

“I shall one day remember all the mortifications he has inflicted upon me,” said she, “and an hour will come when I shall have a reckoning with him, and full retribution! Ah, talk not to me of my husband—Russian emperors have never been immortal, and why should he be so?”

"Catharine!" exclaimed the Princess Daschkow, turning pale, "you cannot think—"

"I think," interposed Catharine, with an unnatural smile, "I think the Russian emperors are not immortal, and that this good Empress Elizabeth is very fortunate in having no emperor who presumes to stand over her and have a will more potent than her own!"

"Ah, Elizabeth has no will at all!" laughingly responded the princess.

"But I shall have a will!" said Catharine, proudly.

The Princess Daschkow had spoken the truth. Elizabeth had no longer any will; she let Bestusheff govern, and was herself ruled by Alexis Razumovsky, the field-marshal, her husband. She did whatever these two required, willingly yielding to them in all cases demanding no personal effort on her part. On this point only had she a will of her own, which she carried through with an iron hand.

"I have not become empress that I might labor, but that I might amuse myself," said she. "I have not set the crown upon my head for the purpose of governing, but for the purpose of enjoying life. Spare me, therefore, the labor of signing your documents. I will sign nothing more, for my hand is not accustomed to holding the pen, and the ink soils my fingers, which is unworthy of an empress!"

"It is only one signature that I implore of you to-day," said Bestusheff, handing her a letter. "Have the great kindness to make an exception of this one single case, by signing this letter to King Louis XV. of France."

"What have I to write to this King of France?" fret-

fully asked Elizabeth. "Why should I do it? It is a long time since he has sent me any new dresses, although he might well know that nothing is more important for an empress than a splendid and varied wardrobe! Why, then, should I write to this King of France?"

"Your majesty, it is here question of a simple act of courtesy," said Bestusheff, pressingly; "an act the omission of which may be attended with the most disagreeable consequences, perhaps indeed involve us in a war. Think of the peace of your realm, the welfare of your people, and sign this letter!"

"But what does it contain that is so important?" asked the empress, with astonishment. "I now remember that for a year past you have been importuning me about this!"

"Yes, your majesty, I have been for the last three years daily imploring of you this signature, and you have refused it to me; and yet the letter is so necessary! It is against all propriety not to send it! For it is a letter of congratulation to the King of France, who in an autograph letter announced to you the birth of his grandson. Reflect, your majesty, that he wrote you with his own hand, and for three years you have refused to give yourself the small trouble to sign the answer I have prepared.* This prince, for whose birth you are to congratulate the king, is now old enough to express his own thanks for the sympathy you manifest for him."

Elizabeth laughed. "Well," said she, "I shall finally be obliged to comply with your wishes, that you may leave me

* Mannstein, Mémoires, vol. iii., p. 98.

in peace. For three years I have patiently borne your importunities for this signature. My patience is now at an end, and I will sign the letter, that I may be freed from your solicitations. Give me, therefore, that intolerable pen, but first pour out a glass of Malvoisie, and hold it ready, that I may strengthen myself with it after the labor is accomplished."

Elizabeth, sighing, took the pen and slowly and anxiously subscribed her name to this three-years-delayed letter of congratulation to the King of France.

"So," said she, throwing down her pen after the completion of her task—"so, but you must not for a long time again trouble me with any such work, and to-day I have well earned the right to a very pleasant evening. Nothing more of business—no, no, not a word more of it! I will not have these delightful hours embittered by your absurdities! Away with you, Bestuscheff, and let my field-marshal, Count Razumovsky, be called!"

And when Alexis came, Elizabeth smilingly said to him: "Alexis, the air is to-day so fine and fresh that we will take a ride. Quick, quick! And know you where?"

Razumovsky nodded. "To the villa!" said he, with a smile.

"Yes, to the villa!" cried Elizabeth, "to see my daughter at the villa!"

She therefore now had a daughter, and this daughter had not died like her two sons. She lived, she thrived in the freshness of childhood, and Elizabeth loved her with idolatrous tenderness!

But precisely on account of this tenderness did she care-

fully conceal the existence of this daughter, keeping her far from the world, ignorant of her high birth, unsuspecting of her mother's greatness!

The fatal words of the Countess Lapuschkin still resounded in the ears of the empress: "Give this Elizabeth a daughter, and let that daughter experience what I now suffer!"

Such had been the prayer of the bleeding countess, flayed by the executioners of the empress, and the words were continually echoing in Elizabeth's heart.

Ah, she was indeed a lofty empress; she had the power to banish thousands to Siberia, and was yet so powerless that she could not banish those words from her mind which Eleonore Lapuschkin had planted there.

Eleonore was therefore avenged! And while the countess bore the torments of her banishment with smiling fortitude, Elizabeth trembled on her throne at the words of her banished rival—words that seemed to hang, like the sword of Damocles, over the head of her daughter!

Perhaps it was precisely for the reason that she so much feared for her daughter, that she loved her so very warmly. It was a passionate, an adoring tenderness that she felt for the child, and nevertheless she had the courage to keep her at a distance from herself, to see her but seldom, that no one might suspect the secret of her birth.

Eleonore's words had brought reflection to Elizabeth. She comprehended that her legitimate daughter would certainly be threatened with great dangers after her death; she had shudderingly thought of poor Ivan in Schlüsselburg, and she said to herself: "As I have held him impris-

oned as a pretender, so may it happen to my daughter, one day, when I am no more! Ivan had but a doubtful right to my throne, but Natalie is indisputably the grand-daughter of Peter the Great—the blood of the great Russian czar flows in her veins, and therefore Peter will fear Natalie as I feared Ivan; therefore will he imprison and torment her as I have imprisoned and tormented Ivan!”

By this affectionate anxiety was Elizabeth induced to make a secret of the existence of her daughter, which was imparted to but a few confidential friends.

The little Natalie was raised in a solitary country-house not far from the city, and her few servants and people were forbidden under pain of death to admit any stranger into the constantly-closed and always-watched house. No one was to enter it without a written order of the empress, and but few such written orders were given.

Elizabeth, then, as it were to recompense herself for the trouble of signing the letter to the King of France, resolved to visit her daughter to-day with her husband.

“Rasczinsky may precede and announce us,” said she. “We will take our dinner there, and he may say to our major-domo that we are going to Peterhoff. Then no one will be surprised that we make a short halt at my little villa in passing, or, rather, they will know nothing of it. Call Rasczinsky!”

Count Rasczinsky was one of the few who were acquainted with the secret, and might accompany the empress in these visits. Elizabeth had unlimited confidence in him; she knew him to be a silent nobleman, and she estimated him the more highly from the fact that he seemed much

attached to the charming, beautiful, and delicate child, her daughter. She remarked that he appeared to love her as a brother, that he constantly and fondly watched over her, and that he was never better pleased than when, as a child, he could jest and play with her.

“Rasczinsky, we are about to ride out to the villa on a visit to Natalie!” she said, when the count entered.

The count’s eyes beamed with pleasure. “And I may be permitted to accompany your majesty?” he hastily asked.

The empress smiled. “How impetuous you are!” said she. “Would not one think you were a dying lover, a sighing shepherd, and it was question of seeking your tender shepherdess, instead of announcing to a child of eleven years the speedy arrival of her mother?”

“Your majesty,” said Count Rasczinsky, laughing, “I am not in love, but I adore this child as my good angel. I can never do or think any thing bad in Natalie’s presence. She is so pure and innocent that one casts down his eyes with shame before her, and when she glances at me with her large, deep, and yet so childish eyes, I could directly fall upon my knees and confess to her all my sins!”

“You would not have many to confess,” said Elizabeth, “for your sins are few. You are the pride of my court, and, as I am told, a true pattern of all knightly virtues. Remain so, and who knows, my fair young count, what the future may bring you? Love my Natalie now only as an angel of innocence; let her grow up as such, and then—”

“And then?” asked the count, as the empress stopped.

"Then we shall see!" smilingly responded Elizabeth. "But now hasten forward to announce us."

"Your majesty forgets that, to enable one to penetrate into this enchanted castle, your written command is required!"

"Ah, that is true!" said Elizabeth, stepping to her writing-table. This time she was not too indolent to write; no representations nor prayers were needed. It concerned the seeing of her daughter—how, then, could she have thought writing painful or troublesome?

With the same pen with which, a short time before, she had so unwillingly signed the congratulatory letter, she now wrote upon a sheet of paper, provided with her seal these words:

"The Count Raszinsky may be admitted.

ELIZABETH."

She handed the paper to the count, who pressed it to his lips.

"You can retain this paper for all time," said the empress, as she dismissed him. "I know that I can wholly confide in you. You will never sell or betray my Natalie?"

"Never!" protested the count, taking his leave.

Hastily mounting his horse, he galloped through the streets, and when, having left the city behind him, he found himself in the open country where no one could observe him, he drew the paper Elizabeth had given him from his bosom, and waving it high in the air, shouted:

"Good fortune, good fortune! This paper is my talisman and my future! With this paper I will give Russia an empress, and make myself her emperor!"

CHAPTER XXII.

PRINCES ALSO MUST DIE.

YES, even princes must die, glorious and lofty as they are, proudly as they stand over their trembling subjects! Even to them comes the dark hour in which all the borrowed and artistically-combined tinsel of their lives falls from them; a dark hour, in which they tremble and repent, and pray to God for what they seldom granted to their fellow-men—mercy! Mercy for those false tales which they have imposed upon the people, for those false tales of the higher endowments of princes, of inherited wisdom which raises them above the rest of mankind—mercy for their arbitrariness, their pride, and their insolence—mercy for a poor beggar, who, until then, had called himself a rich and powerful prince.

And this hour came for Elizabeth. After twenty years of splendor, of absolute, unlimited power, of infallibility, of likeness to the gods, came the depressing hour in which Elizabeth ceased to be an empress, and became only a trembling earth-worm, imploring mercy, aid, amelioration of her sufferings from her Creator!

She suffered much, this poor empress, dethroned by death; she suffered, although reposing upon silken cushions, with a gold-embroidered covering for her shaking limbs.

And she was yet so young, hardly fifty, and she loved life so intensely! Oh, she would have given the half of her empire for a few more years of life and enjoyment. But what cares Death for the wishes of an empress? Here ends