

"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

her earthly supremacy! Groaning and writhing, the earth-worm tremblingly submits.

Where, now, were all her favorites—those high lords of the court, those grand noblemen, created from soldiers, grooms, lackeys, and serfs—where were they now? Why stood they not around the death-bed of their empress? Why were they not there, that the remembrance of the benefits conferred upon them might drive away those terrible reminiscences of the torments she had inflicted upon others? Where were they, her counts, barons, field-marschals, and privy councillors, whom she had raised from nothing to the first positions in the realm?

None were with her! They had all hastened thence for the preservation of their ill-gotten wealth, to crawl in the dust before Peter, to be the first to pay him homage, that he might pardon their greatness and their possessions! From the death-bed they had fled to Peter, and kneeling before him, they praised God for at length bestowing upon the happy realm the noblest and best ruler, Peter III.!

But where were Elizabeth's more particular friends, who had made her an empress?

Where was Lestocq?

Him the empress had banished to Siberia. Yielding to the prayers and calumnies of his enemies, which she was too weak to withstand, she had given him up; she had sacrificed him to procure peace and quiet for herself, and in the same hour in which she had tenderly pressed his hand, and called him her friend, had she signed his sentence of banishment! Lestocq had for nine years languished in Siberia.

Where was Grünstein? Banished, cast off, like Lestocq.

Where was Alexis Razumovsky?

Ah, well for her! He stood at her bedside, he pressed her cold hand in his; he yet, in the face of death, thanked her for all the benefits she had heaped upon him. But, alas! she was also surrounded by others—by wild, pale, terrible forms, which were unseen by all except the dying empress! She there saw the tortured face of Anna Leopoldowna, whom she had let die in prison; there grinned at her the idiotic face of Ivan, whose mind she had destroyed; there saw she the angry-flashing eye and bloody form of Eleonore Lapuschkin, and, springing up from her bed, the empress screeched with terror, and folded her trembling hands in prayer to God for grace and mercy for her daughter, for Natalie, that He would turn away the horrible curse that Eleonore had hurled at her child.

Alexis Razumovsky stood by her bedside, weeping. Overcome, as it seemed, by his sorrow, another left the death-chamber of the empress, and rushed to his horse, standing ready in the court below! This other was Count Rasczinsky, the confidant of the empress.

The bells rang in St. Petersburg, the cannon roared; there were both joy and sorrow in what the bells and cannon announced!

The Empress Elizabeth was dead; the Emperor Peter III. ascended the throne of the czars as absolute ruler of the Russian realm. The first to bow before him was his wife. With her son of five years old in her arms, she had thrown herself upon her knees, and touching the floor with

her forehead, she had implored grace and love for herself and her son; and Peter, raising her up, had presented her to the people as his empress.

In St. Petersburg the bells rang, the cannon thundered—"The empress is dead, long live the emperor!"

Before the villa stopped a foam-covered steed, from which dismounted a horseman, who knocked at the closed door. To the porter who looked out from a sliding window he showed the written order of Elizabeth for his admission. The porter opened the door, and with the loud cry, "Natalie, Natalie!" the Count Raszinsky rushed into the hall of the house.

The bells continued to ring, the cannon to thunder. There was great rejoicing in St. Petersburg.

Issuing from the villa, Count Raszinsky again mounted his foaming steed.

Like a storm-wind swept he over the plain—but not toward St. Petersburg, not toward the city where the people were saluting their new emperor!

Away, away, far and wide in the distance, his horse bounded and panted, bleeding with the spurs of his rider. Excited constantly to new speed, he as constantly bounds onward.

Like a nocturnal spectre flies he through the desert waste; the storm-wind drives him forward, it lifts the mantle that enwraps him like a cloud, and under that mantle is seen an angel-face, the smile of a delicate little girl, two tender childish arms clasping the form of the count, a slight elfish form tremblingly reposing upon the count's breast.

"You weep not, my angel," whispered the count, while rushing forward with restless haste.

"No, no, I neither weep nor tremble, for I am with you!" breathed a sweet, childish voice.

"Cling closer to me, my sweet blossom, recline your head against my breast. See, evening approaches!—Night will spread its protecting veil over us, and God will be our conductor and safeguard! I shall save you, my angel, my charming child!"

The steed continues his onward course.

The child smilingly reclines upon the bosom of the rider, over whom the descending sun sheds its red parting beams.

Like a phantom flies he onward, like a phantom he disappears there on the border of the forest. Was it only a delusive appearance, a *fata morgana* of the desert?

No, again and again the evening breeze raises the mantle of the rider, and the charming angelic brow is still seen resting upon the bosom of the count.

No, it is no dream, it is truth and reality!

Like a storm-wind flies the count over hill and heath, and on his bosom reposes Natalie, *the daughter of the empress!*
