

conversation. Strange thoughts flitted through the soul of the young maiden, and when she saw the two thus wandering, arm in arm, she thoughtfully asked herself: "Which is it, then, that I most love? Is it Carlo, is it Paulo?"

"I now understood you perfectly," said Count Paulo, as they again approached the house after a long and earnest conversation. "Yes, it seems to me I know you as myself, and know I can confide in you. You have perfectly tranquillized me, and I thank you for your confidence. It was then Corilla, that vain improvisatrice, who would have destroyed her? That is consoling, and I can now depart with a lighter heart. Against such attacks you will be able to protect her."

"I will protect her against every attack," responded Carlo. "You have my oath that the secret you have confided to me shall be held sacred, and you have thereby secured her from every outbreak of my passion. She stands so high above me that I can only adore her as my saint, can love her only as one loves the unattainable stars!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AN HONEST BETRAYER.

AT about the same time Cecil was hastening through the streets of Rome, often looking back to see if any one was following him, and viewing with suspicious eyes every one whom he met. He finally stopped before the backdoor of a palace, and, after having satisfied himself that he had

not been followed, he lightly knocked three times at the door. Upon its being opened, a grim, bearded Russian face presented itself.

Cecil drew a ring from his bosom and showed it to the porter.

"Quick! conduct me to his excellency," said he.

The Russian nodded his recognition of the token, and beckoned Cecil to follow him. After a short reflection, Cecil entered and the door was closed.

Guided by his conductor through a labyrinth of rooms and corridors, Cecil finally succeeded in reaching a little boudoir, whose heavily-curtained windows hardly admitted a ray of dim twilight.

The conductor, bidding Cecil to wait here, left him alone.

In a few moments a concealed door was opened, and a man of a tall, proud form entered.

"At length!" he said, on perceiving Cecil. "I had begun to doubt your coming."

"I waited until I could bring you decisive intelligence, your excellency," said Cecil.

"And you bring it to-day?" quickly asked the unknown.

"In an hour we leave Rome for St. Petersburg!"

Uttering a loud cry of joy, the stranger walked the room in visible commotion. Cecil followed him with timid, anxious glances, and, as he still kept silence, Cecil said:

"Your excellency, I have truly performed what you required of me. I have persuaded the count to make the journey, notwithstanding his opposition to it, and, as you

commanded, his ward remains behind in Rome, alone and unprotected."

"Ah, you praise your acts because you desire your reward," said his excellency, contemptuously opening his writing-desk, and drawing forth a well-filled purse. "You there have your pay, good man!"

Cecil indignantly rejected the money. "I am no Judas, who betrays his master for money," said he. "Please remember, your excellency, for what I promised to fulfil your excellency's commands, and what reward you promised me!"

"Ah, I now remember! You required my promise that no harm should befall the count!"

"Only on that condition did I promise my assistance," said Cecil. "When your emissary sought me and called me to you, I only followed him, as you well know, most noble count, because you gave me to understand that my master's life and safety were concerned. I came to you. Allow me, your excellency, to repeat your own words. You said: 'Cecil, you have been represented to me as a true friend of your master. Fidelity is so rare a virtue, that it deserves reward. I will reward you by saving your life. Quickly leave this traitorous count, and break off all connection with him, else you are lost. I am secretly sent here in order to capture the count and his criminal ward, and take them to St. Petersburg. What there awaits the count may easily be imagined.' Thus speaking, your excellency then showed me the command for the count's arrest, signed by the empress. Upon which I asked: 'Is there no means of saving the count?' 'There is one,' said you. 'Persuade the count

to return immediately to St. Petersburg, leaving his ward behind him here, and I swear to you, in the name of the empress, that no harm shall come to him."

"Well," impatiently cried the count, "what is the use of repeating all that, as I know it already?"

"Only because your excellency seems to forget that what I did was not done for your miserable gold, but for a totally different reward—the safety of a man whom I love as my own son."

"You have my word—no harm shall come to him."

"I doubt not your excellency's word," firmly and decidedly responded Cecil, "your word is all-powerful, and when you let your commanding voice be heard, all Russia trembles and bows before you. But here your voice resounds only between these walls, and nobody hears it but I alone. Give me an evidence of your word—a safety-pass, signed by your own hand, for my master, and then destroy the order for his arrest which you now hold!"

"Ah, it seems you would prescribe conditions?" said the count, proudly.

"Certainly I will," said Cecil. "I have complied with your conditions, and now it is your turn, Sir Count, to comply with mine, for you knew them before!"

A dark glow of anger showed itself in the count's face, and, passionately starting up, he approached Cecil, raising his arm threateningly against him.

"Sir Count," said Cecil, stepping back, "you mistake! I am no Russian serf, I am a free man, and no one has a right so to threaten me!"

The count had already let his arm fall, seeming suddenly

to have changed his mind, and in a more friendly manner he said :

“You are right, Cecil, and what you desire shall be done.”

Taking a large sealed paper from a drawer in his writing-desk, he handed it to Cecil.

“That is the order for the arrest; destroy it yourself!” said he.

Taking the paper, Cecil read it with attention. “It is, as you say, the order for the arrest. It is destroyed!”

With a satisfied smile, he tore the paper into a thousand pieces, and placed these in his bosom.

The count had stepped to the table and hastily written a few lines upon another piece of paper. This he handed to Cecil. “I hope you are now satisfied,” said he.

Cecil took the paper and read it.

“This is a safety-pass in due form,” said he—“a valid instruction to all boundary guards and officials to let us pass without molestation. Your excellency, we are quits. I complied with your wish, as you now have with mine, and my dear master is saved!”

“It being understood that you start immediately,” said the count.

“The post-horses are already ordered, and we shall set out as soon as I return home. Farewell, therefore, Sir Count; I thank you for enabling me to save the man whom I most loved. I thank you!”

Cecil was approaching the door, when he suddenly stopped, and his face took a sad expression. “I have deceived my dear master, in order to save him,” said he, “and

in order to redeem the promise I made his father on his death-bed, swearing that I would watch over and protect the son at the risk of my heart's blood. But if the son knew what I have done, he would call me a betrayer and curse me, for he holds his ward dearer than his own life! He leaves the princess in the belief that it is necessary for her safety, and repairs to Russia, to return with increased wealth. Sir Count, what is to become of Natalie?”

“That,” low and mysteriously replied the count, “that can be decided only by the will of her who has sent me. Until that decision no hair of her head can be touched, and the princess will follow me to Russia, only with her own free will! But you must know that the empress hates no one more than her own son. How, then, if she should be disposed to pass him over, and select another as her successor?”

“Oh, would to God that I rightly understand you!” exclaimed Cecil.

“We shall, one day, perfectly understand each other,” said the count, with a significant smile. “Now, hasten to redeem your word, and leave Rome with your master!”

As soon as Cecil left the room, the count's face assumed a knavishly malicious expression. With a loud laugh he threw himself upon the silken divan.

“Thus are all these so-called good men real blockheads, stupid fools, who believe every word spoken to them with a friendly mien! This honest man really believes that his highly-prized master is now saved, because he bears in his bosom the fragments of the order for his arrest. Worthy dunce; as if there were no duplicate, and as if every prom-

ise were countersigned by the Divinity himself! Go home with your count—my word shall be fulfilled. No hair of his head shall be touched, but his proud back shall be curled, and in the mines of Siberia he may learn to bow before a higher power!”

Thus speaking, the count pulled a bell whose silken cord hung over the divan, and, as no one instantly appeared, he pulled it again, this time more violently. But yet some minutes passed, and still the bell was unanswered. The count gnashed his teeth with rage, and muttered vehement curses.

At length the door opened, and with an imploring face a servant appeared upon the threshold.

“Miserable hound, where were you?” cried the count to him.

The servant fell upon his knees and crept like a dog to his master’s feet.

“Excellency, we had, as your grace commanded, so long as the gentleman was with you, withdrawn from the ante-room and waited in the corridor, where the bell could not be heard,” stammered the servant.

“I will teach you wretches to keep me waiting,” exclaimed the count, and seizing the knout that lay upon the table before him, he laid it with merciless rage upon the poor servant, until his own arm sank powerless, and he felt himself exhausted with fatigue.

“Now go, you hound!” said he, replacing the knout upon the table; and the flagellated serf, rising respectfully, with his hand wiped away the blood which ran in streams from his wounds.

“Now go and send my officers to me!” cried the count. The servant staggered out to obey the command, and soon the persons thus ordered made their appearance and remained standing in silence at the door.

The count lay stretched out upon the divan, playing with the knout, whose leathern thongs were still dripping with his servant’s blood.

“Let a courier take horse immediately, and give him the order countersigned by her imperial majesty for the arrest of Count Paulo Raszinsky. The courier will follow him with it to the Russian frontier, and then by virtue of this order arrest him at the next station and send him to St. Petersburg in chains! This is the command for the courier; he will answer with his head for its execution!”

One of the officers bowed, and went to dispatch the courier.

“Is our reconnoitrer returned?” asked the count of the two who remained.

“He is.”

“What news brings he? Does he know the cause of the murderous attack at the festival of the French cardinal? Yet why do I ask you? Make yourselves scarce, and let him come to speak for himself!”

The officers were no sooner gone, than a wild-looking, bearded churl made his appearance upon the threshold of the door and greeted the count with a grinning laugh.

“What know you of the murderous attack?” asked the count, in Italian.

“A friend of mine was charged with the affair,” said the bravo. “He is in the pay of the most holy Cardinal

Albani. We served long together under the same chief, and I know him intimately. He carries the most skilful dagger in all Rome, and it is the greatest wonder that he missed on this occasion."

"Was it done by order of the cardinal?"

"No! The lord cardinal had lent this bravo to the celebrated improvisatrice Corilla—the order came from her."

"It is well!" said the count. "Do you know all the *bravi* in Rome?"

"All, your excellency. They are all my good friends."

"Well, now listen to what I have to say to you. You must hold the life of the Princess Tartaroff as sacred as your own! Know that she is no moment unwatched; that wherever she appears she is surrounded by secret protectors. Whoever touches her is lost—my arm will reach him! Say that to your friends, and tell them that the Russian count keeps his word. Four thousand sequins are yours in four weeks, if until then the princess meets with no accident. Away with you, and forget not my words!"

"Ah, these words, your excellency, are worth four thousand sequins, and these one does not so easily forget!" said the bandit, leaving the room.

Again the count rang, and ordered his private secretary, Stephano, to be called.

"Stephano," said the count to him, "the first step is taken toward the accomplishment of our object. The work must succeed; I have pledged my word for it to the empress, and who can say that Alexis Orloff ever failed to redeem his word? This princess is mine! Count Paulo

Rasczinsky is just now leaving Rome, and she has no one to protect her!"

"But it is not yet to be said that she is already yours!" said Stephano, shrugging his shoulders. "As you will not employ force, your excellency, you must have recourse to stratagem. I have hit upon a plan, of which I think you will approve. They describe this so-called little princess as exceedingly innocent and confiding. Let us take advantage of her confiding innocence—that will be best! Now hear my plan."

Stephano inclined himself closer to the ear of the count, and whispered long and earnestly; it seemed as if he feared that even the walls might listen to him and betray his plans; he whispered so low that even the count had some trouble in understanding him.

"You are right," said the count, when Stephano had ended; "your plan must and will succeed. First of all, we must find some one who will incline her in our favor, and render her confiding."

"Oh, for that we have our good Russian gold," said Stephano, laughing.

"And besides," continued the count, "our incognito is at an end. All Rome may now learn that I am here! Ah, Stephano, what a happy time awaits me! This Natalie is beautiful as an angel!"

"God grant that you may not fall in love with her!" sighed Stephano. "You are always very generous when you are in love."