

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE INVASION.

CORILLA had kept her word. She had sent to Alexis Orloff, Carlo's brother, Joseph Ribas, the galley-slave, and with a malicious smile she had said to the latter, "You will avenge me on your treacherous brother?"

Count Orloff warmly welcomed Corilla's *protégé*.

"If you give me satisfaction," said he, "you may expect a royal recompense, and the favor of the exalted Empress of Russia. First of all, tell me what you can do?"

"Not much," said Joseph Ribas, laughing, "and the little I can will yet be condemned as too much. I can very dexterously wield the dagger, and reach the heart through the back! Because I did that to a successful rival at Palermo, I was compelled by the police to flee to Naples. There a good friend taught me how to make counterfeit money, an art which I brought to some perfection, and which I successfully practised for some years. But the police, thinking my skill too great, finally relieved me from my employment, and gave me free board and lodging for ten years in the galleys. Ah, that was a happy time, your excellency. I learned much in the galleys, and something which I can now turn to account in your service. I learned to speak the Russian language like a native of Moscow. Such a one was for seven years my inseparable friend and chain-companion, and as he was too stupid or too lazy to learn my language, I was forced to learn his, that I might be able to converse with him a little. That, your excellen-

cy, is about all I know; to wield the dagger, make counterfeit money, speak the Russian language, and some other trifling tricks, which, however, may be of no service to your excellency."

"Who knows?" said Orloff, laughing. "Do you understand, for example, how to break into a house and steal gold and diamonds, without being caught in the act?"

"That," said Joseph, thoughtfully, "I should hope to be able to accomplish. I have, indeed, as yet had no experience in that line, but in the galleys I have listened to the soundest instructions, and heard the experiences of the greatest master of that art, with the curiosity of an emulous student!"

Orloff laughed. "You are a sly fellow," said he, "and please me much. If you act as well as you talk, we shall soon be good friends! Well, to-morrow night you make your first essay. The business is an invasion."

"And that shall be my masterpiece!" responded Joseph Ribas.

"If you succeed, I will, in the name of my illustrious empress, immediately take you into her service, and you become an officer of the Russian marine."

Joseph Ribas stared at him with astonishment. "That is certainly an immense honor and a great good fortune," said he, "only I should like to know if the Russian marine engages in sea-fights, and if the officers are then obliged to stand under fire?"

"Yes, indeed," cried Orloff, laughing, "but in such cases you can conceal yourself behind the cannon until the fight is over!"

"I shall remember your wise suggestion in time of need!" seriously responded Joseph Ribas, bowing to the count.* "And where, your excellency, is to be the scene of my present activity? Where am I to gain my epaulets?"

"I will myself conduct you to the spot and show you the house where a rich set of diamonds and some thousands of scudi are lying in company with you epaulets!"

"And as I have rather long fingers, I shall be able to grasp both the epaulets and the treasure," laughingly responded Ribas.

It was in the evening after this conversation of Orloff with Joseph Ribas, a wonderfully brilliant evening, such as is known only under Italian skies.

Natalie inhaled the soft air with delight, and drank in the intoxicating odor of the flowers which poured out their sweetest fragrance in the cool of the evening. She was on this evening unusually cheerful; with a smiling brow and childish gayety, as in happier days, she skipped down the alleys, or, with her guitar upon her arm, reposed upon her favorite seat under the myrtle-bush near the murmuring fountains.

* And, in fact, Ribas did remember it! At a later period, having become a Russian admiral, he was intrusted with the command of the flotilla which was to descend the Danube to aid in the capture of Kilia and Ismail. But during the investment of Ismail (December 21, 1790), Ribas concealed himself among the reeds on the bank of the Danube, and did not reappear until the danger was over and he could in safety share in the booty taken by his sailors. But this cowardice and avarice of their admiral very nearly caused a mutiny among the sailors. It was not suppressed without the greatest efforts.—(See "Mémoires Secrètes sur la Russie, par Masson," vol. iii., p. 381.)

"I am to-day so happy, ah, so happy," said she, "in consequence of having dreamed of Paulo—in my dream he was near me, spoke to me, and that is a sure sign of his speedy return! Oh, certainly, certainly! In my dream he announced it to me, and I distinctly heard him say: 'We shall meet again, Natalie. I shall soon be with you!'"

"Ah, may this dream but prove true!" sighed Marianne, Natalie's faithful companion. She was standing, not far from her mistress, with Carlo, and both were tenderly observing the young maiden, who now smilingly grasped her guitar and commenced a song of joy for Paulo's expected return!

"I have no faith in our count's return!" whispered Marianne while Natalie was singing. "It is a bad sign that no news, not a line, nor even the shortest message, has yet come from him. Something unusual, some great and uncontrollable misfortune, must have prevented his writing!"

"You do not think they have imprisoned him?" asked Carlo.

"I fear it," sighed Marianne. "And if so, what fate then awaits our poor princess? Helpless, alone, without means! For if the count is imprisoned, he will no longer be in a condition to send money, as he promised. And we now possess only a thousand scudi, with double that amount in diamonds!"

"Then we are still rich enough to keep off deprivations for a time!" said Carlo.

"But when at length these last resources are ex-

hausted?" asked Marianne—"when we no longer have either money or diamonds—how then?"

"Oh, then," exclaimed Carlo, with a beaming face, "then will we labor for her! That, also, will be a pleasure, Marianne!"

While the two were thus conversing, Natalie, with a happy smile and cheerful face, was still singing her hymn of joy for Paulo's approaching return to the accompaniment of the rustling trees, the murmuring fountains, and the chirping birds in the myrtle-bush. It was a beautiful night, and as the bright full moon now advanced between the pines, illuminating Natalie's face and form, the partially intoxicated and perfectly happy Carlo whispered: "Only look, Marianne! does she not resemble a blessed angel ready to spread her wings, and with the moonlight to mount up to the stars? Only look, seems it not as if the moonbeams tenderly embraced her for the purpose of leading an angel back to its home?"

"May she, at least, one day, with such a happy smile, take her departure for the skies!" sighed Marianne, piously folding her hands.

At this moment a shrill, cutting wail interrupted Natalie's song. A string of her guitar had suddenly snapped asunder; frightened, almost angry, Natalie let the instrument fall to the earth, and again the strings resounded like lamentations and sighs.

"That is a bad omen," sighed Natalie. "How, if that should be true, and not my dream?"

And trembling with anxiety, the young maiden stretched forth her hands toward her friends.

"Carlo—Marianne," she anxiously said, "come here to me, protect me with your love from this mortal fear and anguish which has suddenly come over me. See, the moon is hiding behind the clouds. Ah, the whole world grows dark and casts a mourning veil over its bright face!"

And the timid child, clinging to Marianne's arm, concealed her face in the bosom of her motherly friend.

"And you call that an omen!" said Carlo, with forced cheerfulness. "This time, princess, I am the *fatum* which has alarmed you! It is my own fault that this string broke. It was already injured and half broken this evening when I tuned the guitar, but I hoped it would suffice for the low, sad melodies you now always play. Yes, could I have known that you would have so exulted and shouted, I should have replaced it with another string, and this great misfortune would not have occurred."

While speaking, he had again attached the string and drawn it tight.

"The defective string is quickly repaired, and you can recommence your hymn of joy," he said, handing back the guitar to Natalie.

She sadly shook her head. "It is passed," said she, "I can exult and sing no more to-day, and have an aversion to this garden. See how black and threatening these pines rise up, and do not these myrtle-bushes resemble large dark graves? No, no; it frightens me here—I can no longer remain among these graves and these watchers of the dead! Come, let us go to our rooms! It is night—we will sleep and dream! Come, let us immediately go into the house."

And like a frightened roe she fled toward the house, the others following her.

In an hour all was silent in the villa. The lights were successively extinguished in Natalie's and Marianne's chambers; only in Carlo's little chamber yet burned a dull, solitary lamp, and occasionally the shadow of the uneasy singer passed the window as he restlessly walked his room. At length, however, this lamp also was extinguished, and all was dark and still.

About this time a dark shadow was seen creeping slowly and cautiously through the garden. Soon it stood still, and then one might have supposed it to be a deception, and that only the wind shaking the pines had caused that moving shadow. But suddenly it again appeared in a moonlighted place, where no bush or tree threw its shade, and, as if alarmed by the brightness, it then again moved aside into the bushes.

This shadow came constantly nearer and nearer to the house, and as the walks were here broader and lighter, one might distinctly discern that it was a human being, the form of a tall, stately man, that so cautiously and stealthily approached the house. And what is that, sparkling and flashing in his girdle—is it not a dagger, together with a pistol and a long knife? Ah, a threatening, armed man is approaching this silent, solitary house, and no one sees, no one hears him! Even the two large hounds which with remarkable watchfulness patrol the garden during the night, even they are silent! Ah, where, then, are they? Carlo had himself unchained them that they might wander freely—where, then, can they be?

They lie in the bushes far from the house, cold, stiff, and lifeless. Before them lies a piece of seductively smelling meat. That was what had enticed them to forget their duty, and, instead of growling and barking, they had with snuffling noses been licking this tempting flesh. Their instinct had not told them it was poisoned, and therefore they now lay stiff and cold near the food that had destroyed them.

No, from those hounds he had nothing more to fear, this bold, audacious man; the hounds will no more betray him, nor warningly announce that Joseph Ribas, the venturesome thief and galley-slave, is lurking about the house to steal or murder, as the case may be.

He has now reached the house. He listens for a moment, and as all remains still, no suspicious noise making itself heard, with pitch-covered paper, brought with him for the purpose, he presses in one of the window panes. Then, passing his hand through the vacancy caused by the absent pane of glass, he opens one wing of the French window, and, by a bold leap springing upon the parapet, he lets himself glide slowly down into the room.

Again all is still, and silent lies the solitary, peaceful villa. Suddenly appears a small but bright light behind one of these dark windows.

That is the thief's lantern, which Joseph Ribas has lighted to illuminate his dark, criminal way.

He cautiously ascends the stairs leading to the second story, and not a step jars under his feet, not one, nor does the slightest noise betray him.

He is now above, in the long corridor. Approaching the first door, he listens long. He hears a loud breathing—

some one sleeps within. With one sole quick movement he turns the key remaining in the lock. The door is now locked, and the sleeper within remains undisturbed. Joseph creeps along to the next door, and again he listens to ascertain if there be anything stirring within. But no, he hears nothing! All is still behind this door.

He draws a pistol from his girdle, cocks it, and, thus prepared to resist every attack, he suddenly opens the door. No one is in the room, no one but Joseph Ribas the thief, who, with flashing eyes, suspiciously and carefully examines every hole and corner.

But no, no one is there. Calm and sure, Joseph Ribas, steps into the room, drawing and bolting the door behind him. No one can now surprise him, no one can fall upon him from behind. But yes, there is also a door on each side, right and left. He listens at the first, he think she hears a light breathing; here also he quickly shoves a bolt and passes over to the other door, which stands ajar. Cautiously he pushes it open and looks in. A small, dull lamp is burning there, lighting the lovely face of the sleeping Princess Natalie.

"That is she!" low murmured Ribas, as with eager glances he observes the young and charming maiden. He is drawn forward as if with invisible bands—he penetrates into this sacred asylum of the slumbering maiden. But he forcibly checks his advance. "I have sworn not to touch her, and I will keep my word, that I may secure my epaulets!" he muttered to himself, and, retreating into the first chamber, he bolts the door, to make all sure, that leads into Natalie's chamber.

"Now to the work!" said he, with decision. "Here stands the bureau, the treasure must be here."

And, placing his dark lantern upon a table, he draws forth his picklock and chisels, and commences breaking open the bureau. Right—his thievish instinct has not deceived him, he has found all, all. Here is the little box of sparkling diamonds, and here the full purses of money.

With a knavish smile, Joseph Ribas conceals the brilliants in his bosom, and deposits the money in his capacious pockets.

"It is a pity that this is not mine," he muttered with a grin, "but toward this count I must act as an honorable thief, and I have promised to bring it all truly to him."

The work is completed, the malicious criminal act is performed. He can now go, can again creep away from the house his feet have soiled.

Why goes he not? Why does he linger in these rooms? Why directs he such wild and eager glances to the door behind which Natalie sleeps?

He cannot withstand the temptation, and even at the risk of awaking Natalie, he must see her once more! And, moreover, what had he to fear from an isolated young girl? He will only have one more look at her. Nothing more!

He noiselessly pushes back the bolt; noiselessly, upon tiptoe, with closed lantern, he creeps into the room and to Natalie's bedside.

She is wonderfully beautiful, and she smiles in her slumber. How charming is that placid face, that half-uncovered shoulder, that arm thrown up over her head, where it is half