

concealed under her luxuriant locks! Wonderfully beautiful is she. Dares he to touch that arm and breathe a kiss, a very light kiss, upon those fragrant lips? Why not? No one sees him, nor will Count Alexis Orloff ever know that his commands have been disobeyed.

But as he bent down, as his breath comes only in light contact with her cheek, she stirs! Maiden modesty never slumbers; it watches over the sleeping girl, it protects her. It is her good genius who never deserts her.

Drawing herself up, Natalie opens her eyes and starts up from her couch. Then she sees a large, threatening masculine form close before her, close before her that wildly-laughing face.

A shriek of terror and anguish bursts from her lips, and in a tone of alarm she calls: "Carlo, Carlo! Help! help! Carlo! Save—"

More she did not say. With a wild rage, angry, and ashamed of his own folly, Joseph Ribas rushes upon her.

"One more cry!" he threateningly said—"one more call for help, and I will murder you!"

But at this moment a small curtained door which Ribas had not remarked and hence not fastened, was suddenly opened, and Carlo rushed in.

"I am here, Natalie!—I am here!"

Rushing upon the stranger, and grasping him with gigantic strength, he thrust him down from the bed.

Joseph Ribas turned toward his new and unexpected enemy. The lamp lighted his face, and falling back Carlo shrieked, "My brother!"

Joseph Ribas broke out into a loud, savage laugh. "At

length we meet, my brother," said he. "But this time you shall not hinder me in my work. This time I am the conqueror!"

"No, no, that you are not!" cried Carlo, beside himself with pain and rage. "Confess what you want in this house—confess, or you are a dead man!"

And with a drawn dagger he rushed upon his opponent!

A frightful struggle ensued. Natalie, in her night-dress, pale as a lily, knelt upon her bed and prayed. She had folded her hands over her breast, directly over the place where the papers confided to her by Paulo, in a little silken bag, always hung suspended by a golden chain.

"Grant, O my God," prayed she—"grant that I may keep my promise to Paulo, and that I may defend these papers with my life!"

And the two brothers were still struggling and contending; like two serpents they had coiled around each other, and held each other in their toils.

"Flee, flee, Natalie!" groaned Carlo, with a weakened voice—"flee away from here! I yet hold him, you are yet safe! Flee!"

But in this moment the maiden thought not of her own danger. She thought only of Carlo. Springing from her bed, with flashing eyes she boldly threw herself between the contending men.

"No, no," said she, courageously, "I will not flee—I shall at least know how to die!"

A shriek resounded from Carlo's lips, his arms relaxed and fell from his enemy, leaving his brother free.

"Ah, finally, finally!" gasped the panting Joseph. "That was an amusing carnival farce, my virtuous brother! Farewell! I am this time triumphant!"

With a wild leap he sprang to the door; brandishing his bloody dagger in his right hand, he ran through the corridor, down the stairs, and out into the garden.

"Saved!" said he, breathing more freely. "I think this Russian will be satisfied with me! I bring the money and the diamonds, and at the same time have effectually opened a vein for this troublesome protector! Ah, it seems to me I have very successfully put in practice my studies in the high-school of the galleys!"

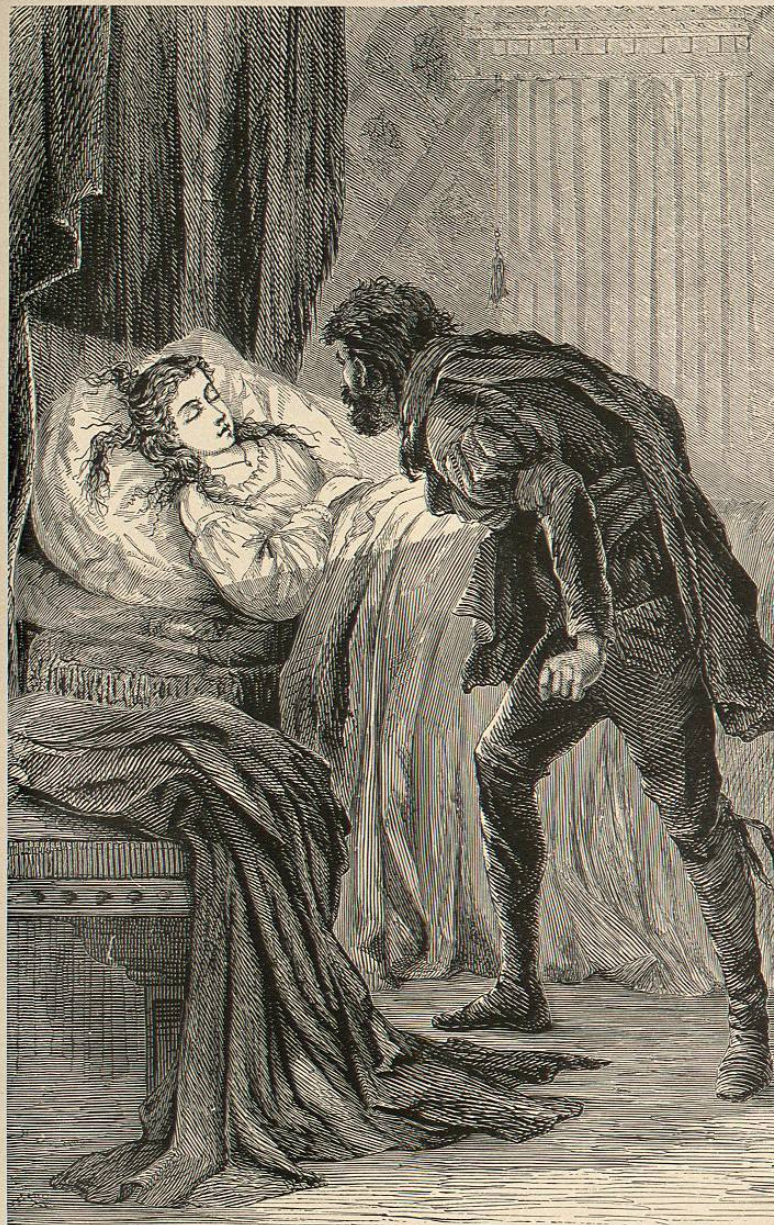
And, humming a jovial song, Joseph Ribas swung himself into a tree close to the wall, and let himself down on the other side.

Above, in Natalie's chamber, Carlo long lay stretched on the floor, pale, with the death-rattle in his throat. In a bright stream flowed the blood from the wound made by his brother's dagger. Natalie knelt by him. No tear was in her eye, no lamentation escaped her lips. She seemed perfectly calm and collected in her excess of sorrow; she only sought with her robe and her hair to cover Carlo's wound and stop the flow of blood.

A happy smile played upon Carlo's blue lips.

"I die," he murmured, "but I die for thee! Thy *vapo* has kept his word, he has defended thee until his last breath! How good is God! He lets me die in thy service!"

"No, no, you must not die!" cried Natalie, her calmness giving way to the wildest sorrow. "No, Carlo, you



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must live! Oh, say not that you die! Ah, you love me, and yet you would leave me alone! Only live, and I also will love you, Carlo, as warmly and as glowingly as you love me! Do but remain with me, and my heart, my life shall be yours!”

“Too late! too late!” murmured Carlo, with dying lips. Remember me, Natalie—I have dearly loved you. I die happy, for I die in your arms!”

“No, no, you shall live in my arms!” sobbed she. “I will be yours—your bride!”

“Kiss me, my bride,” he falteringly stammered.

She bent over him, and with hers she touched his lips, already stiffening in death. She laid her warm, glowing cheek to his cold and marble-pale face; that full, fresh life pressed that which was cold and expiring to her bosom in an ardent struggle with death! In vain!

Death is inexorable. What he has once touched with his hand, that is past recovery, it is his.

The blood no longer flowed from Carlo's wound, the breath no longer rattled in his throat—it was silent; but a blessed smile still lay upon his lips. With this smile had he died, happy, blessed in the embrace of her he had so truly loved.

When Marianne, after long and vain efforts to open the door, had finally managed, by tying her bed-clothes together, to let herself down into the garden, and had thence hastened into the house, and up into Natalie's chamber, she found there all silent and still. Nothing stirred. Natalie lay in a deathlike swoon.

He, Carlo, already stiffened in death, and she, the sense-

less Natalie, with her head reclining against the marble face of her friend!

Poor Natalie! Why must Marianne succeed in awaking thee from thy swoon? Why did you not let her continue in her insensibility, Marianne? In sleep, she at least would not have realized that she was now left entirely alone, entirely abandoned, with no one to defend her against her cruel and artful enemies, of whose existence she never once dreamed!

CHAPTER XL.

INTRIGUES.

COUNT ORLOFF lay in a comfortable, careless position upon his divan, leisurely smoking his long Turkish pipe. Before him stood Joseph Ribas, laughingly relating in his own comic manner the occurrences of the preceding night.

"You are a wonderful man," said Orloff, when Joseph had finished. "You have honestly earned your epaulets, and to-day you will for the first time appear at my dinner-table as a Russian officer. Ah, I prophesy a great future for you. You have the requisite skill and address to make your fortune. You are shrewd, daring, and you recoil from no means, finding them all good and useful when they forward your aims. With such principles one may go far in this world, and Russia in fact offers you the best opportunity for bringing all these fine talents into use."

"And, moreover, I commenced my Russian career with

a good omen," said Joseph. "I have placed a murder at the head of my Russian deeds! That is a promising commencement, is it not, Sir Count? You must know that better than any one."

"Indeed yes, I must best know that," said the count, laughing, and continually stroking his long black beard. "By a fair and well-timed murder one can always make his fortune in Russia. A well-timed and well-executed murder is with us often rewarded with a barony and the title of count. Indeed, sometimes with the highest and tenderest imperial favor and grace. Ah, a murder at the right moment is an excellent thing, only one must be quite sure of himself, and not fail of hitting the right man. An unsuccessful murder is a very bad, and, indeed, a very dangerous thing. I would have nothing to do with one, and never have had any thing to do with one. Whatever I have undertaken I have always boldly and successfully accomplished. The good Emperor Peter III. knew that, and consequently trembled when I, with Passeb and Bariatinsky, entered his chamber. The good emperor! He did not tremble long, it was soon finished. Yes, yes, that was a deed done at the right time, and therefore has the great Catharine been so grateful to us, and honoured us above all the illustrious grandees of her empire."*

"My little opening murder has, indeed, less significance," sighed Joseph Ribas. "What was it but to help a

* Of the tragic and horrible events connected with Catharine's accession to the throne, and of the strangulation of Peter, in which he took so active a part, Orloff spoke in Rome with the greatest freedom and evident pleasure.—Gorani, vol. ii., p. 23.