

of this noble unknown hero to be so severely tried, and the baseness of mankind to trouble him.

"That is it, then," Ribas would often say; "he diffuses happiness everywhere around him, while he himself has it not! He makes glad and cheerful faces wherever he appears, and his own is the only serious and sad brow. Mankind have made him hopeless, and for himself he no longer believes in happiness!"

Ah, how then did the heart of this innocent child tremble, and how she longed to find some means for restoring his belief in happiness.

"But why does he not come to those who love him?" asked she. "Why does he decline the thanks of those whose hearts are truly devoted to him? Ah, in our humid eyes and joy-beaming faces he would recognize the truthfulness of our feelings! Why, then, comes he not?"

"I will tell you," said Ribas, with a smile; "he hates women, because the only one he ever loved was false to him, and now his love is changed to ardent hatred of all women!"

"I shall therefore never see him!" sighed the girl, hanging her head with the sadness of disappointment.

This expectation, this constantly increasing impatience, rendered her inaccessible to any other feeling, any other thought. He of whom she did not know even the name, was sent by Paulo, and therefore had she believed and confided in him from the first. Now had she already forgotten that she had confided in him on Paulo's account; she believed in him on his own account, and Paulo had retreated

into the background. Occasionally also the bloody image of poor Carlo presented itself to her mind, and she secretly reproached herself for having mourned him for so short a time, for having so soon forgotten that faithful, self-sacrificing friend.

But even these reproaches were soon silenced when with a throbbing bosom she thought of this new friend, who like a divinity hovered over her at an infinite and unattainable distance, and whose mysteriously active nearness replaced both of those friends she had lost, and for whom she could no longer mourn.

CHAPTER XLIV.

HE!

"It is now high time!" said Joseph Ribas, one day, as, coming from Natalie, he entered the boudoir of Count Alexis Orloff. "Now, your excellency, the right moment has come! You must now show yourself, or this curious child will consume herself with a longing that has changed her blood to fire! She thinks of nothing but you; with open eyes she dreams of you, and without the least suspicion that any one is listening to her, she speaks to you, ah, with what modest tenderness and with what humble devotion! I tell you, your excellency, you are highly blessed. There is no child more innocent, no woman more glowing with love. And she knows it not; no, she has not the least suspicion that she already loves you with enthusiasm, and thirsts for

your kisses as the rose for the morning dew! She knows nothing of her love!"

"She shall learn something of it!" said Orloff, laughing. "It will be a pleasant task to enlighten this little unknowing one as to her own feelings. And I flatter myself I understand how to do that."

"Endeavor, above all things, your excellency, to realize the ideal she bears in her heart. She expects to see nothing less than an Apollo, whose radiant beauty will annihilate her as Jupiter did Semele!"

"Well, in that, I hope she has not deceived herself," responded Orloff, with a self-satisfied glance into the mirror. "If I am not Jupiter, yet they call me Hercules, and he, you know, was the son of Jupiter, and, indeed, his handsomest son!"

"And be you not only a Hercules, but a Zephyr and Apollo, at the same time. Make her tremble before your heroic character, and at the same time win her confidence in your humble, modest love—then is she yours. You must cautiously and noiselessly spread your nets, you must not wound her delicate sensitiveness by a word or look, or she will flee from you like a frightened gazelle!"

"Oh, should she wish to flee, my arms are strong enough to hold her!"

"Yet it is better to hold her so fast by her own enthusiasm, that she shall not wish to flee," said Ribas. "You must entirely intoxicate her with your humble and respectful love—then is she yours!"

"Does she know I am coming?" thoughtfully asked Orloff.

"No, she knows nothing of it. She sits in the garden and sighs, occasionally grasping the golden guitar that lies on her arm, and asks of the flowers: 'What is the name of my unknown friend? In what star does he dwell, and how shall I invoke him?'"

"I will, then, surprise her!" said Orloff. "Let her anticipate my coming, but do not promise it. It begins to grow dark. Where is she, evenings?"

"Always in the garden. There she sighs and dreams of you!"

"Persuade her to go into the house, and let it be well lighted up! I would appear to her in the full splendor of the lights! Ha, you ragamuffins, you hounds, bring me my oriental costume, the richest, handsomest; hasten, or I will throttle you!"

And Count Orloff hurried into his toilet-chamber, to the trembling slaves who there awaited him.

With a sly smile Joseph Ribas returned to the villa. As he had previously said, he found Natalie dreaming in the garden, the guitar upon her arm.

"You ought to go into the house this evening," said he, "the air is damp and cold, and may injure you."

"Of what consequence would that be?" she sadly responded. "Who would ask whether I was ill or not? Who would weep for my death?"

"He!"

"Oh, he!" sighed she. "He hates all women!"

"Excepting you!" whispered Ribas. "Princess, go into the house! Take care of your precious life. It is not I who beg it of you!"

"Who is it, then?" she hastily interposed.

"It is he! He begs it of you!"

Natalie, springing up, hurried into the house.

"I will never again go into the garden in the evening!" said she. "It is his command! Thank God, there is yet something in which I can obey, and he commands it of me! But why these lights?" asked she, almost blinded by the brilliancy of the girandoles and chandeliers, the mirrors, and jewels.

"The count has so commanded!" said Ribas. "He loves a bright light! But, princess, cannot you remain in this boudoir for one evening? Only see how beautiful it is, how enticingly cool, with these fountains that refresh the air and diffuse fragrance! How delightfully still and snug it is! Reposing upon these velvet cushions, you can look through the whole suite of rooms, which in fact, to-night, flash and sparkle like the heavens, and yet in this boudoir there is a sweet twilight, refreshing to eye and heart!"

"No, no," said she, with a charming smile. "I also like brightness and light! It is too dusky here!"

"Nevertheless, remain here!"

"And why?"

"He wishes it!" said Ribas mysteriously.

"He wishes it?" cried Natalie, turning pale, and trembling. Then, suddenly, a purple flush spread over her brow, and, reeling, she was obliged to hold by a chair to prevent falling. "Ah," she stammered, "can it be possible? Can this happiness be intended? Is it true, what I read in your eyes? Is it? Comes he here?"

"Hope always!" said Ribas, suddenly disappearing through a side-door.

Natalie, benumbed by surprise, sank down upon the divan. A feeling of boundless anxiety, of immeasurable ecstasy suddenly overcame her. She could have fled, but she felt as if spell-bound; she could have concealed herself from him, and yet was joyfully ready to purchase with her life the happiness of seeing him. It was a strange mixture of delight and terror, of happiness and despair. She spread her arms toward heaven, she sought to pray, but she had no words, no thoughts, not even tears!

A slight rustle made her rise. Almost with terror flew her glance through the suite of rooms. There below she saw the approach of something strange, singular, magical. It was a never-before-seen form, but surrounded by a wonderfully bright halo, enveloped in rich, glittering garments, such as she had never before seen. It was a strange, unknown face, but of a sublime, heroic beauty, proud and noble, bold and mild.

"That is he!" she breathlessly and sadly murmured—"yes, that is he! That is a man and a hero! Ah, I shall die under his glance!"

He still continued to approach, and with every forward step he made she felt her heart contract with anxiety, admiration, and a feverish sadness.

Now he stood on the threshold of the boudoir—his glance fell upon her. And she? She lay, or rather half knelt upon the divan, motionless, pale as a marble statue, with that divine smile which we admire in ancient sculpture.

Touching was she to behold, white and delicate as a lily, so humble and devoted, so shelter-needing and love-imploreing!

But Count Orloff felt neither sympathy nor compassion. He saw only that she was beautiful as an angel, an admirable woman, whom he desired to possess!

Proud as a king, and at the same time very reverential and submissive, he approached and sank upon his knee before the divan upon which she reclined in trembling yet blissful sadness.

"Princess Natalie," he murmured low, "will you be angry with your slave for daring to intrude upon you without knowing whether he would be welcome?"

She breathed freer. It was a relief to her to hear his voice—it made her feel easier. He was no magician, no demon, he was a man, and spoke to her with human words! That gave her courage and strength, it gave her back the consciousness of her own dignity. She was ashamed of her anxiety, her trembling, her childish helplessness. Yet she could say nothing, answer nothing. She only gave him her hand, with a charming smile, an inimitable grace, and welcomed him with a silent inclination of the head.

Taking her hand he pressed it to his lips. His touch seemed to kindle in her an electric glow, and with something like alarm she withdrew her hand.

"Are you, then, angry with me?" he asked in a tone of sadness.

"No," said she, "I am not angry, but I fear you. You are so great a hero, and your sword has done so many brave deeds. I looked at your sword, and it alarmed me."

Count Orloff gave her a surprised and interrogating glance. Why said she that? Had she some suspicion, some mistrust, or was it only a presentiment, an inexplicable instinct, that made her tremble at his sword?

"No, she suspects nothing," thought he, as he gazed upon that pure, innocent, childish brow, which was turned toward him in pious confidence, and yet with timid hesitation.

He loosened his sword from his girdle, sparkling with diamonds, and humbly laid both at Natalie's feet.

"Princess," said he, "the empress herself girded me with this sword, and I swore it should never leave my side but with my life. You are dearer to me than my life or my honor, and I therefore break my sacred oath. Take my sword, I am now without arms, and you will no longer have occasion to tremble before me."

She smilingly shook her head. "You still remain a hero, though without arms—it lies in your eyes!"

"I would close my eyes," said he, "but then I should not see you, princess, and I have already so long languished for a sight of you!"

"Why, then, came you not sooner?" she asked, now feeling herself entirely cheerful and unembarrassed. "Oh, did you but know how impatiently I have awaited you!"

And with childish innocence she began to relate how much she had thought of him, how often she had dreamed of him, how she had sometimes spoken aloud to him, and almost thought she heard his answers!

Count Orloff listened to her with surprise and delight. Thus had he not expected to find her, so childishly cheer-

ful, so charmingly innocent, and yet at the same time with so much maidenly reserve, so much natural dignity. Now she laughed like a child, now was her face serious and proud, now again tender and timid. She was at once a timid child and a glowing woman; she was innocent as an angel, and yet so full of sweet, unconscious maiden coquetry. She enchanted, while inspiring devotion, she excited passions and desires, while, with a natural maiden dignity, she kept one within the bounds of respect. She was entirely different from what Orloff had expected; perhaps less beautiful, less dazzling, but infinitely more lovely. She enchanted him with her smile, and her innocent childish face touched him.

"Speak on, speak on!" said he, when she became silent. "It is delightful to listen to you, princess."

"Why do you call me so?" asked she, with a slight contraction of her brow. "It is such a strange, cold word! It does not at all belong to me, and it is only within the last few months that I have been thus addressed. With wise and tender forbearance, Paulo long delayed informing me that I was a princess, and that was beautiful in him. To be a princess and yet an orphan, a poor, deserted, helpless child, living upon the charity of a friend, and tremulously clinging to his protecting hand! See, that is what I am, a poor orphan; why, then, do you call me princess!"

"Because you are so in reality," responded Orloff, pressing the hem of her garment to his lips—"because I am come to lead you to your splendid and powerful future!—because I will glorify you above all women on earth, and make you mistress of this great empire."

She regarded him with a dreamy smile. "You speak as Paulo often spoke to me," said she. "He also swore to me that he would one day place an imperial crown upon my head, and elevate me to great power! I understood him as little as I understand you!"

A slight scornful smile momentarily passed over Orloff's features. "Catharine has therefore rightly divined," thought he, "and her wise mind rightly understood this Rasczinsky. There was, indeed, question of an imperial crown, and this was to have been the new little empress!"

Aloud he said: "You will soon understand me, princess, and it is time you knew of what crown Paulo spoke."

"I know it not," said she, "nor do I desire to know it! Perhaps it was a jest, with which he sought to console me when I complained of being a homeless orphan, a poor child, who knew not even the name of her mother!"

"Do you not know that?" exclaimed Orloff, with astonishment.

She sadly shook her head. "They would never tell it me," said she. "But I have her image in my heart, and that, at least, I shall never lose or forget!"

"I knew your mother," said Orloff; "she was beautiful as you are, and mild and merciful."

"You knew her!" exclaimed the young maiden, grasping his hand and looking at him with a confiding friendliness. "Oh, you knew her! You will now be doubly dear to me, for those bright eyes have seen my mother, and perhaps this hand which now rests in mine has also touched hers!"

"That," said Count Orloff, with a smile, "I should not have dared to do; it would have been high-treason!"

"Was she, then, so great and sublime a princess?" asked Natalie.

"She was an empress!"

"An empress!" And the young maiden, sprang up with beaming eyes and glowing cheeks. "My mother was an empress!" said she, breathing hard.

"Empress Elizabeth of Russia."

Overcome by the feelings suddenly excited by this news, Natalie sank again upon her seat and covered her face with her hands. Tears gushed out between her delicate, slender fingers; her whole being was in violent, feverish commotion. Then, raising her arms toward heaven, with a celestial smile, while the tears overflowed her face, she said: "I am, then, no longer a homeless orphan; I have a fatherland, and my mother was an empress!"

Count Orloff respectfully kissed the hem of her garment.

"You are the daughter of an empress," said he, "and will yourself be an empress! That was what Paulo wished, and therefore have they condemned him as a criminal. What he was unable to accomplish must be done by me, and for that purpose have I come. Princess Natalie, your fatherland calls you, your throne awaits you! Follow me to your crowning in the city of your fathers—follow me, that I may place the crown of your grandfather, Peter the Great, upon your noble and beautiful head!"

CHAPTER XLV.

THE WARNING.

FROM this time forward Alexis Orloff was the inseparable companion of Natalie. With the most reverential submission, and at the same time with the tenderest affection, seemed he to be devoted to her, and equally to adore her as his empress and his beloved.

He took pains to represent to her that she was necessarily and inevitably destined to become an empress.

And she had comprehended him but too well. Ambition was awakened in this young maiden of eighteen years; it was an imperial crown that called her—why should she not listen to this call coming from the lips of one in whom she had unlimited confidence, and toward whom she felt infinitely grateful?

He had unfolded and explained all to her. He had told her of her mother, the good Empress Elizabeth, who had made Russia so great and happy; he had explained to her how Count Paulo Rasczinsky had flown with her on the day of her mother's death, in order to preserve her from the pursuits of her mother's successor, the cunning and cruel Peter III., and to insure her the realm at a later period. He had then spoken to her of Catharine, who had forcibly possessed herself of the throne of her unworthy husband, and taken the reins of government into her own hands. He had spoken to her of Catharine's cruelty and despotic tyranny; he had told her that all Russia groaned under the oppression of this foreigner, and that a universal cry