

"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

was heard through the whole realm, of lamentation and longing, a cry for her, the Russian princess, the granddaughter of Peter the Great, the daughter of the beloved Elizabeth.

"You are called for by all these millions of your oppressed subjects now trodden in the dust," said he; "toward you they stretch forth their trembling hands, from you they expect relief and consolation, from you they expect happiness!"

"And I will bring them happiness," exclaimed Natalie, with emotion. "I will dry the tears of misery and console the suffering. Oh, my people shall love me as my mother once did!"

"The noblest of the land have pledged their property and their lives to give you back to your people," said Orloff; "we have solemnly sworn it upon the altar of God, and for the attainment of this end no one of us will shun want or death, treason or revolt. Look at me, Natalie! I stand before you as a traitor to this empress, to whom I have sworn faith and obedience; she has heaped favors upon me, and at one time I was even passionately devoted to her! But Count Paulo awoke me from that intoxication; he roused me from the condition of a favorite of the empress; he taught me to see the cruel, bloodthirsty empress in her true form; he spoke to me of your sacred rights, and when I recognized and comprehended them, I collected myself, vowed myself your knight, devoting myself to the defence of your rights, and swore to leave no artifice, no dissimulation, nor even treason itself, unessayed for the promotion of this great, this sublime object! Prin-

cess Natalie, for your sake I have become a traitor! The admiral of the Russian fleet, he whom the world calls the favorite of the empress, Count Alexis Orloff, lies at your feet and swears to you eternal faith, devotion, and adoration!"

"Alexis Orloff!" she joyfully exclaimed, "at length, then, I have a name by which I can call you! Alexis, was not that the name of my father? Oh, that is a good omen! You bear the name of my father, whom my mother so dearly loved!"

"And whom the empress, impelled by love, raised to the position of her husband," whispered Orloff, bending nearer to her and pressing her hand to his bosom. Could you, indeed, love as warmly and devotedly as your mother loved her Alexis?"

The young maiden blushed and trembled, but a sweet smile played upon her lips, and although she cast down her eyes and did not look at him, yet Count Orloff saw that he had given no offence, and might venture still further.

He gently encircled her delicate form with his arm, and, inclining his mouth so close to her ear that she felt his hot breath upon her cheek, whispered: "Will Natalie love her Alexis as Elizabeth loved Alexis Razumovsky? Ah, you know not how boundlessly, how immeasurably I love you! Yes, immeasurably, Natalie. You are my happiness, my life, my future. Command me, rule me, make of me a traitor, a murderer! I will do whatever you command; at your desire I could even murder my own father! Only tell me, Natalie, that you do not hate me; tell me that my love will not be rejected by you; that this passion, under which

I almost succumb, has found an echo in your heart, and that you will one day say to me, as Elizabeth said to your father, 'Alexis, I love you, and will therefore make you my husband!' You are silent, Natalie; have you no word of sympathy, of compassion for me? Ah, I offer up all to you, and you—"

He could proceed no further; he saw her turn toward him; he suddenly felt a glowing kiss upon his lips, and then, springing up from her seat, she fled through the rooms like a frightened roe, and took refuge in her boudoir, which she locked behind her.

Orloff glanced after her with a triumphant smile. "She is mine," thought he; "I am here living through a charming romance, and Catharine will be satisfied with me!"

Yes, she was his; she now knew that she loved him, and with joyful ecstasy she took this new and delightful feeling to her heart; she welcomed it as the joy-promising dawn of a new day, a precious new life. She permitted this feeling to stream through her whole being, her whole soul; she made it a worship for her whole existence.

"You see," she said to Marianne, "so had I dreamed the man whom I should one day love. So brave, so proud, so beautiful. Ah, it is so charming to be obliged to tremble before the man one loves; it is so sweet to cling to him and think: 'I am nothing of myself, but all through thee! I am the ivy and thou the oak; thou wilt hold and sustain me, and if a storm-wind comes, thou wilt not waver, but stand firm and great in thy heroic strength, and protect me, and impart courage and confidence even to me!'"

She loved him, and clung to him with boundless confi-

dence, but she was yet so full of tender maiden timidity that she could confess to him nothing of this love; and since that kiss she shyly avoided him, and constantly left his often-renewed love-questions unanswered.

At this Alexis secretly laughed. "She will come round," said he; "she will finally be compelled to it by her own feelings. I will give her time and leisure to come to a knowledge of herself!"

And for some days he kept away from the villa, pretending pressing business, and left the poor isolated princess to her languishing love-dreams.

It was precisely in these days that, on one forenoon, a carriage of indifferent appearance, adorned with no heraldic arms, stopped before the villa; a man closely enveloped in a mantle, his hat pressed deeply down over his forehead, issued from the carriage and rang the bell.

Of the servant who answered the bell he hastily inquired if the princess was at home and alone; these questions being answered in the affirmative, and the servant having asked his name in order to announce him, the stranger said, almost in a commanding tone: "The princess knows my name, and will gladly welcome me; therefore lead me directly to her!"

"The princess receives no one," said the servant, placing himself in a position to prevent the stranger's entrance.

"She will receive me," said the unknown, dropping some gold-pieces into the servant's hand.

"I will conduct you to her," said the suddenly mollified servant, but I do it on your own responsibility."

Princess Natalie was in her boudoir. She was alone,

and thinking, in a languishing reverie, of her friend, who had now been two days absent. On hearing a light knock at the door, she sprang up from her seat.

"It is he!" she murmured, and with glowing cheeks she hastened to the door.

But on finding there a strange and closely-enveloped form, Natalie timidly drew back.

The stranger entered, closing the door behind him, threw back his mantle and took off the hat that shaded his face.

"Cardinal Bernis!" cried Natalie, with surprise.

"Ah, then you yet recognize me, princess!" said Bernis. "That is beautiful in you, and therefore you will not be angry with me for calling upon you unannounced. I knew that I should find you alone, and this was a too fortunate circumstance for me to let it pass unimproved. I must speak to you, princess, even at the hazard of proving tiresome."

Natalie said, with a soft smile: "You were the friend of Count Paulo, and therefore can never prove tiresome to me! I bid you welcome, cardinal!"

"It is precisely because I was Count Paulo's friend, that I have come!" said Bernis, seriously. "The count loved you, princess, and what I did not know at the time is known to me now. Because he loved and was devoted to you, he hazarded his life, and more than his life, his liberty."

"And they have robbed him of that precious liberty," sighed Natalie. "For his fidelity to me they have condemned him to a shameful imprisonment!"

"You know that!" exclaimed Bernis, with astonishment, "you know that, and nevertheless—" Then, interrupting himself, he broke off, and after a pause continued: "Pardon me one question, and if you deem it indiscreet, please remember that it is put to you by an old man and a priest, and that his only object is, if possible to be useful to you. Do you love Count Paulo Rasczinsky?"

"I love him," said she, "as one loves a father. I shall always be grateful to him, and shall never esteem myself happy until I have liberated him and restored him to his country!"

"You liberate him!" sadly exclaimed Bernis. "Ah, then you know not, you do not once dream, that you are yourself surrounded by dangers, that your own liberty, indeed your life itself, is threatened."

"I know it," calmly responded the young maiden, "but I also know that strong and powerful friends stand by my side, who will protect and defend me with their lives."

"But how if these friends are deceiving you—if precisely they are your bitterest enemies and destroyers?"

"Sir Cardinal!" exclaimed Natalie, reddening with indignation.

"Oh, I may not anger you," he continued, "but it is my duty to warn you, princess! They have undoubtedly deceived you with false pretensions, and in some deceitful way obtained your confidence. Tell me, princess, do you know the name of this count whom you daily receive here?"

"It is Count Alexis Orloff," said the young maiden, blushing.

"You know him, know his name, and yet you confide in him!" exclaimed the cardinal. "But it cannot be that you know his history: have you any idea to whom he is indebted for his prosperity and greatness?"

"The Empress Catharine, his mistress," said Natalie, without embarrassment.

The cardinal looked, with increasing astonishment, into her calm, smiling face. "I now comprehend it all," he then said; "they have laid a very shrewd and cunning plan. They have deceived you while telling you a part of the truth!"

"No one has deceived me," indignantly responded Natalie. "I tell you, Sir Cardinal, that I am neither deceived nor overreached, easy as you seem to think it to deceive me!"

"Oh, it is always easy to deceive innocence and nobleness," sadly remarked the cardinal. "Listen to me, princess, and think, I conjure you, that this time a true and sincere friend is speaking to you."

"And how shall I recognize that?" asked the young maiden, with a slight touch of irony. "How shall I recognize a friend, when, as you say, it is precisely my pretended friends who are my enemies!"

"Recognize me by this!" said the cardinal, drawing a folded paper from his bosom and handing it to the princess.

"That is Count Paulo's handwriting!" she joyfully exclaimed.

"Ah, you recognize the handwriting," said the cardinal, "and you see that this letter is addressed to me. Count Paulo therefore considers me his friend!"

"May I read this letter?"

"I beg you to do so."

Natalie unfolded the letter and read: "Warn the Princess Tartaroff; danger threatens her!"

"That is all?" she asked with a smile.

"That is all!" said the cardinal; "but when Paulo considered these few words of sufficient importance to send them to me, you may well suppose they are of the utmost significance."

"Count Paulo is in Siberia," said Natalie, shaking her head; "how could he have written you from thence?"

"How he succeeded in doing so, I know not, but the firm, determined will of man often conquers supposed impossibilities! Enough—in a mysterious, enigmatical manner was this letter put into the hands of our ambassador at St. Petersburg, with the most urgent prayer that he would immediately send it to me by a special courier, with all the necessary particulars."

"And was that done?" asked Natalie.

"It was done! I know why your life is threatened! Princess Tartaroff, you are the daughter of the Empress Elizabeth; and therefore it is that this Empress Catharine, upon her usurped throne, trembles with fear of you—therefore was it that she said to her favorite: 'Go, and deliver me from this troublesome pretender. But do it in a sly, cautious, and noiseless manner. Avoid attracting attention, murder her not, threaten her not; I wish not to give people new reasons for calling me a bloodthirsty woman. Entice her with flatteries into our net, induce her to follow you voluntarily, that the people of no country in which she