

may be may have an occasion to accuse us of using force.' Thus did Catharine speak to her favorite; he understood her and swore to execute her commands, as he did when Catharine ordered him to throttle her husband, the Emperor Peter; as he also did when she ordered him to shoot poor Ivan, the son of Anna Leopoldowna, for the criminal reason that he had a greater right to the imperial crown of Russia than this little German princess of Zerbst!"

"And he shot that poor innocent Ivan?" shudderingly asked Natalie. "Ah, this Catharine is bloodthirsty as a hyena, and her friends and favorites are hangmen's servants—ah, history will brand this murderer of Ivan!"

"It will," solemnly responded Cardinal Bernis, "and people will shudder when they hear the name of the man who strangled the Emperor Peter, who shot Ivan, and who, at the command of Catharine, has come to Italy to ensnare the noble and innocent Princess Tartaroff with cunning and flatteries and convey her to St. Petersburg. Shall I tell you this man's name? He is called Alexis Orloff!"

The young maiden sprang up from her seat, her eyes flashed, and her cheeks glowed.

"That is false," said she—"a shameful, malicious falsehood!"

"Would to God it were so!" cried the cardinal. "But it is too true, princess! Oh, listen to me, and close not your ears to the truth. Remember that I am an old man, who has long observed men, and long studied life. I know this Russian diplomacy, and this Russian craft; they have in them something devilish; and these Russian diplomatists, they poison and confound the shrewdest with their deceitful

smiles and infernal cunning. Guard yourself, princess, against this Russian diplomacy, and, above all things, be on your guard against this ambassador of the Russian empress, Alexis Orloff!"

"Ah, you dare to defame him!" cried the young maiden, trembling with anger. "You have, therefore, never seen him; you have never read in his noble face that Count Alexis Orloff can never betray. He is a hero, and a hero never descends to a murder! Ah, if the whole world should rise up against him, if it should point the finger at him and say: 'That is a murderer!' I would cry in the face of the whole world: 'Thou liest! Alexis Orloff can never be a murderer! I know him better, and know that he is pure and clear of every crime. You may continue to call him a betrayer! I know why he suffers himself to be so called! I know the secret of his conduct, and a day will come when you will all learn it; when you will all feel compelled to fall down at his feet and confess, 'Alexis Orloff is no false betrayer!' For the sake of her to whom he has vowed fidelity has he borne this shame. For her whom he loved has he staked his blood and his life! Alexis Orloff is a hero!"

She was strangely beautiful while speaking with such spirit and animation. The cardinal observed her noble and excited features with an admiration mingled with the most painful emotions.

"Poor child!" he murmured, dropping his head—"poor child, she loves him, and is therefore lost!"

"You, then, do not believe me?" he asked aloud.

"No," said she, with a glad smile—"no, all the happiness I ever expect, all the good that may hereafter come

to me, I shall receive only from the hands of Alexis Orloff!"

"Poor child!" sighed the cardinal. "In many a case even death may prove a blessing!"

"Then will I also joyfully receive even that from his hands!" cried the young maiden, with enthusiasm.

"It is in vain, she is not to be helped!" murmured the cardinal, with a melancholy shake of the head, and, grasping the hand of the young maiden, with a compassionate glance at her fair face, he continued: "I would gladly aid you, and thereby expiate the evil you once suffered at my festival! But you will not consent to be aided. You rush to your destruction, and it is your noblest qualities, your innocence, and your generous confidence, which are preparing your ruin! May God bless you and preserve you! How glad I should be to find myself a liar and false prophet!"

"And you will so find yourself!" exclaimed Natalie.

"You believe it, because you are in love, and when a woman loves she believes in the object of her love, and smilingly offers up her life for him! Like all women, you will do so! You will sacrifice your life to your love; and when this barbarian thrusts the dagger in your heart, you will say with a smile: 'I did it! I, myself—'"

And, bowing to her with a sad smile, slowly and sighing, the cardinal left the room.

Some hours later came Alexis Orloff. Natalie received him with an expression of the purest pleasure, and, extending both hands to him, smilingly said:

"Know you yet what my mother said to her lover?"

Looking at her, he read his happiness in her face. With an exclamation of ecstasy he fell at her feet.

"I know it well, but you, Natalie, do you also know it?" he passionately asked.

Natalie smiled. "Alexis," said she, "I love you, and therefore will I raise you to my side as my husband!" and with a charming modest blush she drew the count up to her arms

"You do not deceive me, and this is no dream?" he cried, while glowingly embracing her.

"No," said she, "it is the truth, and I owe you this satisfaction. You have been slandered to me to-day. Ah, they shall see how little I believe them. Alexis, call a priest to bless our union, and make me your wife. Whatever then may come, we will share it with each other. If I am one day empress, you will be the emperor, and I will always honor and obey you as my lord and master."

On the evening of this day a very serious and solemn ceremony took place in the boudoir of Princess Natalie. An altar wreathed with flowers stood in the centre of the room, and before the altar stood Natalie in a white satin robe, the myrtle-crown upon her head, the long bridal veil waving around her delicate form. She was very beautiful in her joyful, modest emotion, and Count Alexis Orloff, who, in a rich Russian costume stood by her side, viewed her with ecstatic and warm desiring glances. The inhuman executioner led the lamb to the slaughter without pity or compunction!

At the other side of the altar stood the priest, a reverend old man, with long flowing silver hair and beard. Near

him the sacristan, not less reverend in appearance. No one else was present except Marianne, who, in tears, knelt behind her mistress, and with folded hands prayed for her beloved princess, who was now marrying Count Alexis Orloff.

The solemn ceremony was at an end, and the young wife sank weeping into the arms of her husband, who, with tenderest whisperings, led her into the next room.

Marianne, overcome by her tears and emotions, hastened to her own room, and the reverend priest remained alone with his sacristan.

They silently looked at each other, and their faces were distorted by a knavish, grinning laugh.

"It was a wonderful scene," said the priest, who was no other than Joseph Ribas. "In earnest, I was quite affected by it myself, and I came near weeping at my own sublime homily. Confess, Stephano, that a consecrated priest could not have better gone through the ceremony."

"We have both performed our parts," simpered Stephano, the sacristan, "and I think the count must be satisfied with us."

At that moment the count returned to the room. Natalie had begged to be left alone—she needed solitude and prayer.

The priest, Joseph Ribas, and the sacristan, Stephano, gave him sly, interrogating glances.

"I am satisfied with you," said Orloff, with a smile. "You are both excellent actors. This new little countess was pleased and touched by your discourse, Joseph, my very worthy priest. Where did you learn this new villainy?"

"In the high school of the galleys, your excellency," said Ribas. "Only there is one taught such precious things. We had a priest there, a real consecrated priest, who was sentenced for life. From *ennui* he gave lessons to the smartest among us in his art, and taught us how to fold the hands, roll the eyes, and render the voice tremulous. But now, your excellency, one thing! You desired to know who it was that warned your princess to-day. I can now give you information on that point. It was the French Cardinal Bernis!"

"They are, therefore, beginning to observe our movements," thoughtfully remarked Orloff, "and these gentlemen diplomatists wish to take a hand in the game. Ah, we understand the French policy. It is the same now that it was when they helped to make the Princess Elizabeth empress. At that time they interposed, that Russia might be so occupied with her own affairs as to have no time for looking into those of France. Precisely so is it to-day. They would compassionate the daughter as they did the mother. With the help of Natalie they would again bless Russia with a revolution, that we might not have time to observe the events now fermenting in France. But this time we shall be more cautious, my shrewd French cardinal. Stephano, let every preparation be made for our immediate departure. We are no longer safe and unobserved here. Therefore we will go to Leghorn."

"We alone, or with the princess?" asked Stephano.

"My wife will naturally accompany me," said Orloff, with a derisive smile.

"Will she consent to leave Rome?" asked Joseph Ribas.

"I shall request her to do so," proudly replied Orloff, "and I think my request will be a command to her."

And the proud count was not mistaken. His request was a command for her. He told her she must leave Rome because she was no longer in safety there, and Princess Natalie believed him.

"We will go to Leghorn, and there await the arrival of the Russian fleet," said he. "When that fleet shall have safely arrived, then our ends will be attained, then we shall have conquered, for then it will be evident that the empress has conceived no suspicion; and I am the commander of that fleet, which is wholly manned with conspirators who all await you as their empress. Will you follow me to Leghorn, Natalie?"

She clung with tender submissiveness to his bosom.

"I will follow you everywhere," murmured she, "and any place to which you conduct me will be a paradise for me!"

## CHAPTER XLVI.

### THE RUSSIAN FLEET.

UNSUSPECTINGLY had she followed Orloff to Leghorn; full of devoted tenderness, full of glowing love, she was only anxious to fulfil all his wishes and to constantly afford him new proofs of her affection.

And how? Did he not deserve that love? Was he not constantly paying her the most delicate attentions? Was he not always as humbly submissive as he was tender? Did

it not seem as if the lion was subdued, that the Hercules was tamed, by his tender Omphale, whom he adored, at whose feet he lay for the purpose of looking into her eyes, to read in them her most secret thoughts and wishes?

She was not only his wife, she was also his empress. Such he called her, as such he respected her, and surrounded her with more than imperial splendor.

The house of the English Consul Dyke was changed into an imperial palace for Natalie, and the young and beautiful wife of the consul was her first lady of honor. She established a court for the young imperial princess, she surrounded her with numerous servants and a splendid train of attendants whose duty it was to follow the illustrious young empress everywhere, and never to leave her!

And Natalie suspected not that this English consul received from the Empress of Russia a million of silver rubles, and that his wife was rewarded with a costly set of brilliants for the hospitality shown to this Russian princess, which was so well calculated to deceive not only Natalie herself, but also the European courts whose attention had been aroused. Natalie suspected not that her splendid train, her numerous servants—that all these who apparently viewed her as their sublime mistress, were really nothing more than spies and jailors, who watched her every step, her every word, her every glance. Poor child, she suspected nothing! They honored and treated her as an empress, and she believed them, smiling with delight when the people of Leghorn—whenever she with her splendid retinue appeared at her husband's side—shouted with every demonstration of respect for her as an empress.