

"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.

And finally, one day, the long-expected Russian fleet arrived!

Radiant with joy, Alexis Orloff rushed into Natalie's apartment.

"We have now attained our end," said he, dropping upon one knee before his wife; "I can now in truth greet you as my empress and mistress! Natalie, the Russian fleet is here, and only waits to convey you in triumph to your empire, to the throne that is ready for you, to your people who are languishing for your presence! Ah, you are now really an empress, and marvellous will you be when the imperial crown encircles your noble head!"

"I shall be an empress," said Natalie, "but you, Alexis, will always be my lord and emperor!"

"Natalie," continued the count, "your people call for you!—your soldiers languish for you, the sailors of all these ships direct their eyes to the shore where their empress lingers. The admiral's ship will be splendidly adorned for your reception, and Admiral Gluck will be the first to pay homage to you. Therefore adorn yourself, my charming, beautiful empress—adorn yourself, and show yourself to your faithful subjects in all the magnificence of your imperial position. Ah, it will be a wonderful and intoxicating festival when you celebrate the first day of your greatness!"

And Count Orloff called her attendants. Smiling, perfectly happy at seeing the pleasure and satisfaction of her husband, Natalie suffered herself to be adorned, to be enveloped in that costly gold-embroidered robe, those pearls and diamonds, that sparkling diadem, those chains and bracelets.

She was dressed, she was ready! With a charming smile she gave her hand to her husband, who viewed her with joyous glances, and loudly praised the beauty of her celestial countenance.

"They will be enchanted with the sight of you," said he.

Natalie smilingly said: "Let them be so! I am only happy when I please you!"

In an open carriage, attended by her retinue, she proceeded to the haven, and all the people who thronged the streets shouted in honor of the beautiful princess, astonished at the splendor by which she was surrounded, and estimating Count Orloff a very happy man to be the husband of such an empress!

And when she appeared upon the shore, when the carriages stopped and Princess Natalie rose from her seat, there arose from all the ships the thousand-voiced cheers of their crews. Russian flags waved from every spar, cannon thundered and drums rolled, and all shouted: "Hail to the imperial princess! Hail, Natalie, the daughter of Elizabeth!"

It was a proud, an intoxicating moment, and Natalie's eyes were filled with tears. Trembling with proud ecstasy, she was compelled to lean upon Orloff's arm to preserve herself from falling.

"No weakness now!" said he, and for the first time his voice sounded harsh and rough. Surprised, she glanced at him—there was something in his face that she did not understand; there was something wild and disagreeable in the expression of his features, and he avoided meeting her glance.

He looked over to the ships. "See," said he, "they are letting down the great boat; Admiral Gluck himself is coming for you. And see that host of gondolas, that follow the admiral's boat! All his officers are coming to do homage to you, and when you, in their company, reach the admiral's ship, they will let down the golden arm-chair to take you on board. That is an honor they pay only to persons of imperial rank!"

Her glance passed by all these unimportant things; she saw only his face; she thoughtfully and sadly asked herself what change had come over Alexis, and what was the meaning of his half-shy, half-angry appearance.

The boats came to the shore, and now came the admiral with his officers; prostrating themselves before her, they paid homage to this beautiful princess, whom they hailed as their mistress.

Natalie thanked them with a fascinating smile; and, graciously giving her hand to the admiral, suffered herself to be assisted by him into the great boat.

As soon as her foot touched it, the cannon thundered, flags were waved on all the ships, and their crews shouted, "Viva Natalie of Russia!"

Her eyes sought Orloff, who, with a scowling brow and gloomy features, was still standing on the shore.

"Count Alexis Orloff!" cried she, with her silvery voice, "we await you!"

But Alexis came not at her call. He hastily sprang into an officer's boat, without giving her even a look.

"Alexis!" she anxiously cried.

"He follows us, your highness," whispered the wife of

Consul Dyke, while taking her place near the princess. "It would be contrary to etiquette for him to appear at the side of the empress at this moment. See, he is close behind us, in the second gondola!"

"Shove off!" cried Admiral Gluck, he himself taking the rudder in honor of the empress.

The boats moved from the land. First, the admiral's boat, with the princess, the admiral, and the English-woman; and then, in brilliant array, the innumerable crowd of adorned gondolas containing the officers of the fleet.

It was a magnificent sight. The people who crowded the shore could not sufficiently admire the splendid spectacle.

When they reached the admiral's ship the richly-gilded arm-chair was let down for Natalie's reception. She tremblingly rose from her seat—a strange, inexplicable fear came over her, and she anxiously glanced around for Orloff. He sat in the second boat, not far from her, but he looked not toward her, not even for a moment, and upon his lips there was a wild, triumphant smile.

"Princess, they wait for you; seat yourself in the arm-chair!" said Madame Dyke, in a tone which to Natalie seemed to have nothing of the former humility and devotion—all seemed to her to be suddenly changed, all! Shudderingly she took her seat in the swinging chair—but, nevertheless, she took it.

The chair was drawn up, the cannon thundered anew, the flags were waved, and again shouted the masses of people on the shore.

Suddenly it seemed as if, amid the shouts of joy and the thundering of the cannon, a shriek of terror was heard, loud, penetrating, and heartrending. What was that? What means that tumult upon the deck of the admiral's ship? Seems it not as if they had roughly seized this princess whose feet had just now touched the ship? as if they had grasped her, as if she resisted, stretching her arms toward heaven? and hark, now this frightful cry, this heart-rending scream!

Shuddering and silent stand the people upon the shore, staring at the ships. And the cannon are silenced, the flags are no longer waved, all is suddenly still.

Once more it seems as if that voice was heard, loudly shrieking the one name—"Alexis!"

Trembling and quivering, Alexis Orloff orders his boat to return to the shore!

In the admiral's ship all is now still. The princess is no longer on the deck. She has disappeared! The people on shore maintained that they had seen her loaded with chains and then taken away! Where?

All was still. The boats returned to the shore. Count Orloff gave his hand to the handsome Madame Dyke, to assist her in landing.

"To-morrow, madame," he whispered, "I will wait upon you with the thanks of my empress. You have rendered us an essential service."

The people at the landing received them with howls, hisses, and curses!—but Count Orloff, with a contemptuous smile, strewed gold among them, and their clamors ceased.

Tranquil and still lay the Russian fleet in the haven. But the ports of the admiral's ship were opened, and the yawning cannon peeped threateningly forth. No boats were allowed to approach the ship; but some, impelled by curiosity, nevertheless ventured it, and at the cabin window they thought they saw the pale princess wringing her hands, her arms loaded with chains. Others also asserted that in the stillness of the night they had heard loud lamentations coming from the admiral's ship.

On the next day the Russian fleet weighed anchor for St. Petersburg! Proudly sailed the admiral's ship in advance of the others, and soon became invisible in the horizon.

On the shore stood Count Alexis Orloff, and, as he saw the ships sailing past, with a savage smile he muttered: "It is accomplished! my beautiful empress will be satisfied with me!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

CONCLUSION.

SHE was satisfied, the great, the sublime empress—satisfied with the work Alexis Orloff had accomplished, and with the manner in which it was done.

In the presence of her confidential friends she permitted Orloff's messenger, Joseph Ribas, to relate to her all the particulars of the affair from the commencement to the end, and to the narrator she nodded her approval with a fell smile.

"Yes," said she to Gregory Orloff, "we understand women's hearts, and therefore sent Alexis to entrap her. A handsome man is the best jailer for a woman, from whom she never runs away." And, bending nearer to Gregory's ear, she whispered: "I, myself, your empress, am almost your prisoner, you wicked, handsome man!"

And ravished by the beauty of Gregory Orloff, the third in the ranks of her recognized favorites, the empress leaned upon his arm, whispering words of tenderness in his ear.

"And what does your sublime majesty decide upon respecting your prisoner?" humbly asked Joseph Ribas.

"Oh, I had almost forgotten her," said the empress, with indifference. "She is, then, yet living, this so-called daughter of Elizabeth?"

"She is yet alive."

The empress for some time thoughtfully walked back and forth, occasionally turning her bold eagle eye upon her two favorite pictures, hanging upon the wall. They were battle-pieces from Casanova's master-hand — battle-pieces full of terrible truth; they displayed the running blood, the trembling flesh, the rage of the opponents, and the death-groans of the defeated. Such were the pictures loved by Catharine, and the sight of which always inspired her with bold thoughts.

As she now glanced at these sanguinary pictures, a pleasant smile drew over the face of this Northern Semiramis. She had just come to a decision, and, being content with it, expressed her satisfaction by a smile.

"That bleeding feminine torso," said she, pointing to one of the pictures, "look at it, Gregory, that wonderful

feminine back reminds me of the vengeance Elizabeth took for the beauty of Eleonore Lapuschkin. Well, Elizabeth's pretended daughter shall find me teachable; I will learn from her mother how to punish. Let this criminal be conducted to the same place where the fair Lapuschkin suffered, and as she was served so serve Elizabeth's daughter! Only the knout may be swung a little more powerfully. We have no desire to tear out the tongue of this child. Whip her, that is all, but whip her well and effectually. You understand me?"

And while she said this, that animated smile deserted not Catharine's lips for a moment, and her features constantly displayed the utmost cheerfulness.

"I think," said she, turning to Gregory, "that is bringing an expiatory offering to the fair Eleonore Lapuschkin, and we here exercise justice in the name of God!—As to you," she then said to Joseph Ribas, "we have reason to be satisfied with you, and you shall not go without your reward. Moreover, our beloved Alexis Orloff has especially recommended you to us, and spoken very highly of your information and talents. You shall be satisfied."*

It was a dark and dreadfully cold night. St. Petersburg slept; the streets were deserted and silent. But there,

* Joseph Ribas was rewarded by the empress with the place of an officer and teacher in the corps of cadets. Afterward, upon the recommendation of Betzkoi, he was made the tutor of Bobrinsky, one of the sons of the empress by Gregory Orloff. "He accompanied Bobrinsky in all his travels," says Massen, "and inoculated the prince with all the terrible vices he himself possessed." At a later period, as we have already said, he became an admiral and a favorite of Potemkin, the fourth of Catharine's lovers.

upon the place where Elizabeth once caused the beautiful Lapuschkin to be tortured, there torches glanced, there dark forms were moving to and fro, there a mysterious life was stirring. What was being done there?

No spectators are to-night assembled around these barriers. Catharine has commanded all St. Petersburg to sleep at this hour, and accordingly it slept. Nobody is upon the place—nobody but the cold, unfeeling executioners and their assistants—nobody but that pale, feeble, and shrunken woman, who, in her slight white dress, kneels at the feet of her executioners. She yet lives, it is true, but her soul has long since fled, her heart has long been broken. The chains and tortures of her imprisonment have done that for her. It was Alexis Orloff who murdered Natalie's heart and soul. For him had she wept until her tears had been exhausted—for him had she lamented until her voice had become extinct. She now no longer weeps, no longer complains; glancing at her executioners, she smiles, and, raising her hands to God, she thanks him that at last she is about to die.

She is yet praying when her executioners approach and roughly raise her up, when they tear off her light robe, and devour with their brutal eyes her noble naked form. Her soul is with God, to whom she yet prays. But when they would rend from her bosom the chain to which Paulo's papers are attached, she shudders, her eyes flash, and she holds the papers in her convulsively clinched hands.

"I have sworn to defend them with my life!" she exclaims aloud. "Paulo, Paulo, I will keep my word!"

And with the boldness of a lioness she defends herself against her executioners.

"Leave her those papers!" commanded Joseph Ribas who was present by order of the empress. "She may keep them now—they will directly be ours!"

"Oh, Paulo, I have kept the promise I made thee!" murmured Natalie. She then implores to be allowed to read them, and Joseph Ribas grants her the desired permission.

With trembling hands she breaks the seal and reads by the light of a torch held up for her. A melancholy smile flits over her features, and her arms fall powerless.

"Ah, they are the proofs of my imperial descent, nothing further. How little is that, Paulo!"

And now lifting her up, they raise her high upon the backs of the executioners.

The knout whistles as it whirls through the air, the noble blood flows in streams. She makes no complaint, she prays. Only once, overcome by pain, only once she loudly screams: "*Mercy, mercy for the daughter of an empress!*"

THE END.