

Love affairs of the Courts of Europe

Thornton Hall

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Title: Love affairs of the Courts of Europe

Author: Thornton Hall

Release Date: May 9, 2004 [EBook #12309]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

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LOVE AFFAIRS
OF THE COURTS OF EUROPE

BY

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TO

MY COUSIN,

LENORE

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LOVE AFFAIRS OF THE COURTS OF EUROPE

CHAPTER I

A COMEDY QUEEN

"It was to a noise like thunder, and close clasped in a soldier's embrace, that Catherine I. made her first appearance in Russian history."

History, indeed, contains few chapters more strange, more seemingly impossible, than this which tells the story of the maid-of-all-work--the red-armed, illiterate peasant-girl who, without any dower of beauty or charm, won the idolatry of an Emperor and succeeded him on the greatest throne of Europe. So obscure was Catherine's origin that no records reveal either her true name or the year or place of her birth. All that we know is that she was cradled in some Livonian village, either in Sweden or Poland, about the year 1685, the reputed daughter of a serf-mother and a peasant-father; and that her numerous brothers and sisters were known in later years by the name Skovoroshtchenko or Skovronski. The very Christian name by which she is known to history was not hers until it was given to her by her Imperial lover.

It is not until the year 1702, when the future Empress of the Russias was a girl of seventeen, that she makes her first dramatic appearance on the stage on which she was to play so remarkable a part. Then we find her acting as maid-servant to the Lutheran pastor of Marienburg, scrubbing his floors, nursing his children, and waiting on his resident pupils, in the midst of all the perils of warfare. The Russian hosts had for weeks been laying siege to Marienburg; and the Commandant, unable to defend the town any longer against such overwhelming odds, had announced his intention to blow up the fortress, and had warned the inhabitants to leave the town.

Between the alternatives of death within the walls and the enemy without, Pastor Glueck chose the latter; and sallying forth with his family and maid-servant, threw himself on the mercy of the Russians who promptly packed him off to Moscow a prisoner. For Martha (as she seems to have been known in those days) a different fate was reserved. Her red lips, saucy eyes, and opulent figure were too seductive a spoil to part with, General Sheremetief decided, and she was left behind, a by no means reluctant hostage.

Peter's soldiers, now that victory was assured, were holding high revel of feasting and song and dancing. They received the new prisoner literally with open arms, and almost before she had wiped the tears from her eyes, at parting from her nurslings, she was capering gaily to the music of hautboy and fiddle, with the arm of a stalwart soldier round her waist.

"Suddenly," says Waliszewski, "a fearful explosion overthrew the dancers, cut the music short, and left the servant-maid, fainting with terror, in the arms of a dragoon."

Thus did Martha, the "Siren of the Kitchen," dance her way into Russian history, little dreaming, we may be sure, to what dizzy heights her nimble feet were to carry her. For a time she found her pleasure in the attentions of a non-commissioned officer, sharing the life of camp and barracks and making friends by the good-nature which bubbled in her, and which was always her chief charm. When her sergeant began to weary of her, she found a humble place as laundry-maid in the household of Menshikoff, the Tsar's favourite, whose shirts, we are told, it was her privilege to wash; and who, it seems, was by no means insensible to the buxom charms of this maid of the laundry. At any rate we find Menshikoff, when he was spending the Easter of 1706 at Witebsk, writing to his sister to send her to him.

But a greater than Menshikoff was soon to appear on the scene--none other than the Emperor Peter himself. One day the Tsar, calling on his favourite, was astonished to see the cleanliness of his surroundings and his person. "How do you contrive," he asked, "to have your house so well kept, and to wear such fresh and dainty linen?" Menshikoff's answer was "to open a door, through which the sovereign perceived a handsome girl, aproned, and sponge in hand, bustling from chair to chair, and going from window to window, scrubbing the window-panes"--a vision of industry which made such a powerful appeal to His Majesty that he begged an introduction on the spot to the lady of the sponge.

The most daring writer of fiction could scarcely devise a more romantic meeting than this between the autocrat of Russia and the red-armed, bustling cleaner of the window-panes, and he would certainly never have ventured to build on it the romance of which it was the prelude. What it was in the young peasant-woman that attracted the Emperor it is impossible to say. Of beauty she seems to have had none--save perhaps such as lies in youth and rude health.

We look at her portraits in vain to discover a trace of any charm that might appeal to man. Her pictures in the Romanof Gallery at St Petersburg show a singularly plain woman with a large, round peasant-face, the most conspicuous feature of which is a hideously turned-up nose. Large, protruding eyes and an opulent bust complete a presentment of the typical household drudge--"a servant-girl in a German inn." But Peter the Great, who was ever abnormal in all his tastes and appetites, was always more ready to make love to a woman of the people than to the most beautiful and refined of his Court ladies. His standard of taste, as of manners, has not inaptly been likened to that of a Dutch sailor.

But whatever it was in the low-born laundry-woman that attracted the Tsar of Russia, we know that this first unconventional meeting led to many others, and that before long Catherine (for we may now call her by the name she made so famous) was removed from his favourite's household

and installed in the Imperial harem where, for a time at least, she seems to have shared her favours indiscriminately between her old master and her new--"an obscure and complaisant mistress"--until Menshikoff finally resigned all rights in her to his sovereign.

When Catherine took up her residence in her new home, Waliszewski tells us, "her eye shortly fell on certain magnificent jewels. Forthwith, bursting into tears, she addressed her new protector: 'Who put these ornaments here? If they come from the other one, I will keep nothing but this little ring; but if they come from you, how could you think I needed them to make me love you?'"

If Catherine lacked physical graces, this and many another story prove that she had a rare gift of diplomacy. She had, moreover, an unflinching cheerfulness and goodness of heart which quickly endeared her to the moody and capricious Peter. In his frequent fits of nervous irritability which verged on madness, she alone had the power to soothe him and restore him to sanity. Her very voice had a magic to arrest him in his worst rages, and when the fit of madness (for such it undoubtedly was) was passing away she would "take his head and caress it tenderly, passing her fingers through his hair. Soon he grew drowsy and slept, leaning against her breast. For two or three hours she would sit motionless, waiting for the cure slumber always brought him, until at last he awoke cheerful and refreshed."

Thus each day the Livonian peasant-woman took deeper root in the heart of the Emperor, until she became indispensable to him. Wherever he went she was his constant companion--in camp or on visits to foreign Courts, where she was received with the honours due to a Queen. And not only were her presence and her ministrations infinitely pleasant to him; her prudent counsel saved him from many a blunder and mad excess, and on at least one occasion rescued his army from destruction.

So strong was the hold she soon won on his affection and gratitude that he is said to have married her secretly within three years of first setting eyes on her. Her future and that of the children she had borne to him became his chief concern; and as early as 1708, when he was leaving Moscow to join his army, he left behind him a note: "If, by God's will, anything should happen to me, let the 3000 roubles which will be found in Menshikoff's house be given to Catherine Vassilevska and her daughter."

But whatever the truth may be about the alleged secret marriage, we know that early in 1712, Peter, in his Admiral's uniform, stood at the altar with the Livonian maid-servant, in the presence of his Court officials, and with two of her own little daughters as bridesmaids. The wedding, we are told, was performed in a little chapel belonging to Prince Menshikoff, and was preceded by an interview with the Dowager-Empress and his Princess sisters, in which Peter declared his intention to make Catherine his wife and commanded them to pay her the respect due to her new rank. Then followed, in brilliant sequence, State dinners, receptions, and balls, at all of which the laundress-bride sat at her husband's right hand and received the homage of his subjects as his Queen.

Picture now the woman who but a few years earlier had scrubbed Pastor Glueck's floors and cleaned Menshikoff's window-panes, in all her new splendours as Empress of Russia. The portraits of her, in her unaccustomed glories, are far from flattering and by no means

consistent. "She showed no sign of ever having possessed beauty," says Baron von Poellnitz; "she was tall and strong and very dark, and would have seemed darker but for the rouge and whitening with which she plastered her face."

The picture drawn by the Margravine of Baireuth is still less attractive: "She was short and huddled up, much tanned, and utterly devoid of dignity or grace. Muffled up in her clothes, she looked like a German comedy-actress. Her old-fashioned gown, heavily embroidered with silver, and covered with dirt, had been bought in some old-clothes shop. The front of her skirt was adorned with jewels, and she had a dozen orders and as many portraits of saints fastened all along the facings of her dress, so that when she walked she jingled like a mule."

But in the eyes of one man at least--and he the greatest in all Russia--she was beautiful. His allegiance never wavered, nor indeed did that of his army, which idolised her to a man. She might have no boudoir graces, but at least she was the typical soldier's wife, and cut a brave figure, as she reviewed the troops or rode at their head in her uniform and grenadier cap. She shared all the hardships and dangers of campaigns with a smile on her lips, sleeping on the hard ground, and standing in the trenches with the bullets whistling about her ears, and men dropping to right and left of her.

Nor was there ever a trace of vanity in her. She was as proud of her humble origin as if she had been cradled in a palace. To princes and ambassadors she would talk freely of the days when she was a household drudge, and loved to remind her husband of the time when his Empress used to wash shirts for his favourite. "Though, no doubt, you have other laundresses about you," she wrote to him once, "the old one never forgets you."

The letters that passed between this oddly assorted couple, if couched in terms which could scarcely see print in our more restrained age, are eloquent of affection and devotion. To Peter his kitchen-Queen was "friend of my Heart," "dearest Heart," and "dear little Mother." He complains pathetically, when away with his army, "I am dull without you--and there is nobody to take care of my shirts." When Catherine once left him on a round of visits, he grew so impatient at her absence that he sent a yacht to bring her back, and with it a note: "When I go into my rooms and find them deserted, I feel as if I must rush away at once. It is all so empty without thee."

And each letter is accompanied by a present--now a watch, now some costly lace, and again a lock of his hair, or a simple bunch of dried flowers, while she returns some such homely gift as a little fruit or a fur-lined waistcoat. On both sides, too, a vein of jocularly runs through the letters, as when Catherine addresses him as "Your Excellency, the very illustrious and eminent Prince-General and Knight of the crowned Compass and Axe"; and when Peter, after the Peace of Nystadt, writes: "According to the Treaty I am obliged to return all Livonian prisoners to the King of Sweden. What is to become of thee, I don't know." To which she answers, with true wifely (if affected) humility: "I am your servant; do with me as you will; yet I venture to think you won't send me back."

Quite idyllic, this post-nuptial love-making between the great Emperor and his low-born Queen, who has so possessed his heart that no other woman, however fair, could wrest it from her. And in her exalted

position of Empress she practised the same diplomatic arts by which she had won Peter's devotion. Politics she left severely alone; she turned a forbidding back on all attempts to involve her in State intrigues, but she was ever ready to protect those who appealed to her for help, and to use her influence with her husband to procure pardon or lighter punishment for those who had fallen under his displeasure.

Nor did she forget her poor relations in Livonia. One brother, a postillion, she openly acknowledged, introduced to her husband, and obtained a liberal pension for him; and to her other brothers and sisters she sent frequent presents and sums of money. More she could not well do during her husband's lifetime, but when she in turn came to the throne, she brought the whole family--postillion, shoemaker, farm-labourer and serf, their wives and families--to her capital, installed them in sumptuous apartments in her palaces, decked them in the finest Court feathers, and gave them large fortunes and titles of nobility.

When the Tsar's quarrel with his eldest son came to its tragic denouement in Alexis' death, her own son became heir presumptive to the throne of Russia. And thus the chain that bound Peter to his Empress received its completing link. It only remained now to place the crown formally on the head of the mother of the new heir, and this supreme honour was hers in the month of May, 1729.

Wonderful tales are told of the splendours of Catherine's coronation. No existing crown was good enough for the ex-maid-of-all-work, so one of special magnificence was made by the Court jewellers--a miracle of diamonds and pearls, crowned by a monster ruby--at a cost of a million and a half roubles. The Coronation gown, which cost four thousand roubles, was made at Paris; and from Paris, too, came the gorgeous coach with its blaze of gold and heraldry, in which the Tsarina made her triumphal progress through the streets of the capital from the Winter Palace. The culminating point of this remarkable ceremony came when, after Peter had placed the crown on his wife's head, she sank weeping at his feet and embraced his knees.

Catherine, however, had not worn her crown many months when she found herself in considerable danger of losing not only her dignities but even her liberty. For some time, it is said, she had been engaged in a liaison with William Mons, a handsome, gay young courtier, brother to a former mistress of the Tsar. The love affair had been common knowledge at the Court--to all but Peter himself, and it was accident that at last opened his eyes to his wife's dishonour. One moonlight night, so the story is told, he chanced to enter an arbour in the palace gardens, and there discovered her in the arms of her lover.

His vengeance was swift and terrible. Mons was arrested the same night in his rooms, and dragged fainting into the Tsar's presence, where he confessed his disloyalty. A few days later he was beheaded, at the very moment when the Empress was dancing a minuet with her ladies, a smile on her lips, whatever grief was in her heart. The following day she was driven by her husband past the scaffold where her lover's dead body was exposed to public view--so close, in fact, that her dress brushed against it; but, without turning her head, she kept up a smiling conversation with the perpetrator of this outrage on her feelings.

Still not content with his revenge, Peter next placed the dead man's head, enclosed in a bottle of spirits of wine, in a prominent place in

the Empress's apartments; and when she still smilingly ignored its horrible proximity, his anger, hitherto repressed, blazed forth fiercely. With a blow of his strong fist he shattered a priceless Venetian vase, shouting, "Thus will I treat thee and thine"--to which she calmly responded, "You have broken one of the chief ornaments of your palace; do you think you have increased its charm?"

For a time Peter refused to be propitiated; he would not speak to his wife, or share her meals or her room. But she had "tamed the tiger" many a time before, and she was able to do it again. Within two months she had won her way back into full favour, and was once more the Tsar's dearest _Katierinoushka._

A month later Peter was dead, carrying his love for his peasant-Empress to the grave, and Catherine was reigning in his stead, able at last to conduct her amours openly--spending her nights in shameless orgies with her lovers, and leaving the rascally Menshikoff to do the ruling, until death brought her amazing career to an end within sixteen months of mounting her throne.

CHAPTER II

THE "BONNIE PRINCE'S" BRIDE

In the pageant of our history there are few more attractive figures than that of "Bonnie Prince Charlie," the "yellow-haired laddie" whose blue eyes made a slave of every woman who came under their magic, and whose genial, unaffected manners turned the veriest coward into a hero, ready to follow him to the death in that year of ill-fated romance, "the forty-five."

The very name of the "Bonnie Prince," the hope of the fallen Stuarts, the idol of Scotland--leading a forlorn hope with laughter on his lips, now riding proudly at the head of his rabble army, now a fugitive Ishmael among the hills and caves of the Highlands, but ever the last to lose heart--has a magic still to quicken the pulses. That later years proved the idol's feet to be of clay, that he fell from his pedestal to end his days an object of contempt and derision, only served to those who knew him in the pride of his youth to mingle pity with the glamour of romance that still surrounds his name.

In the year 1772, when this story opens, Charles Edward, Count of Albany, had already travelled far on the downward road that led from the glory of Prestonpans to his drunkard's grave. A pitiful pensioner of France, who had known the ignominy of wearing fetters in a French prison, a social outcast whose Royal pretensions were at best the subject of an amused tolerance, the "laddie of the yellow hair" had fallen so low that the brandy bottle, which was his constant companion night and day, was his only solace.

Picture him at this period, and mark the pathetic change which less than thirty years had wrought in the Stuart "darling" of "the forty-five," when many a proud lady of Scotland would have given her life for a smile from his bonnie face. A middle-aged man with dropsy in his limbs, and with the bloated face of the drunkard; "dull, thick, silent-looking

lips, of purplish red scarce redder than the skin; pale blue eyes tending to a watery greyness, leaden, vague, sad, but with angry streakings of red; something inexpressibly sad, gloomy, helpless, vacant, and debased in the whole face."

Such was this "Young Chevalier" when France took it into her head to make a pawn of him in the political chess-game with England. As a man he was beneath contempt; as a "King"--well, he was a *_Roi pour rire_*; but at least the Royal House he represented might be made a useful weapon against the arrogant Hanoverian who sat on his father's throne. That rival stock must not be allowed to die out; his claims might weigh heavily some day in the scale between France and England. Charles Edward must marry, and provide a worthier successor to his empty honours.

And thus it was that France came to the exiled Prince with the seductive offer of a pretty bride and a pension of forty thousand crowns a year. The besotted Charles jumped at the offer; left his brandy bottle, and, with the alacrity of a youthful lover, rushed away to woo and win the bride who had been chosen for him.

And never surely was there such a grotesque wooing. Charles was a physical wreck of fifty-two; his bride-elect had only seen nineteen summers. The daughter of Prince Gustav Adolf of Stolberg and the Countess of Horn, Princess Louise was kin to many of the greatest houses in Europe, from the Colonnas and Orsinis to the Hohenzollerns and Bruces. In blood she was thus at least a match for her Stuart bridegroom.

She had spent some years in the seclusion of a monastery, and had emerged for her undesired trip to the altar a young woman of rare beauty and charm, with glorious brown eyes, the delicate tint of the wild rose in her dimpled cheeks, a wealth of golden hair, and a figure every line and movement of which was instinct with beauty and grace. She was a fresh, unspoilt child, bubbling with gaiety and the joy of life, and her dainty little head was full of the romance of sweet nineteen.

Such then was the singularly contrasted couple--"Beauty and the Beast" they were dubbed by many--who stood together at the altar at Macerata on Good Friday of the year 1772--the bridegroom, "looking hideous in his wedding suit of crimson silk," in flaming contrast to the virginal white of his pretty victim. It needed no such day of ill-omen as a Friday to inaugurate a union which could not have been otherwise than disastrous--the union of a beautiful, romantic girl eager to exploit the world of freedom and of pleasure, and a drink-sodden man old enough to be her father, for whom life had long lost all its illusions.

It is true that for a time Charles Edward was drawn from his bottle by the lure of a pretty and winsome wife, who should, if any power on earth could, have made a man again of him. She laughed, indeed, at his maudlin tales of past heroism and adventure in love and battle; to her he was a plaster hero, and she let him know it. She was "mated to a clown," and a drunken clown to boot--and, well, she would make the best of a bad bargain. If her husband was the sorriest lover who ever poured thick-voiced flatteries into a girl-wife's ears, there were others, plenty of them, who were eager to pay more acceptable homage to her; and these men--poets, courtiers, great men in art and letters--flocked to her *_salon_* to bask in her beauty and to be charmed by her wit.

After all, she was a Queen, although she wore no crown. She had a Court,

although no Royalties graced it. From the Pope to the King of France, no monarch in Europe would recognise her husband's kingship. But at such neglect, the offspring of jealousy, of course, she only smiled. She could indeed have been moderately happy in her girlish, light-hearted way, if her husband had not been such an impossible person.

As for Charles Edward, he soon wearied of a bride who did nothing but laugh at him, and who was so ready to escape from his obnoxious presence to the company of more congenial admirers. He returned to his brandy bottle, and alternated between a fuddled brain and moods of wild jealousy. He would not allow his wife to leave the door without his escort; if she refused to accompany him, he turned the key in her bedroom door, to which the only access was through his own room.

He took her occasionally to the theatre or opera, his brandy bottle always making a third for company. Before the performance was half through he was snoring stertorously on the couch which he insisted on having in his box; and, more often than not, was borne to his carriage for the journey home helplessly drunk. And this within the first year of his wedded life.

If any woman had excuse for seeking elsewhere the love she could not find in her husband it was Louise of Albany. There were dames in plenty in Rome (where they were now living) who, not content with devoted husbands, had their *_cisibeos_* to play the lover to them; but Louise sought no such questionable escape from her unhappiness. Her books and the clever men who thronged her *_salon_* were all the solace she asked; and under temptation such as few women of that country and day would have resisted, she carried the shield of a blameless life.

From Rome the Countess and her husband fared to Florence in 1774; and here matters went from bad to worse. Charles was now seldom sober day or night; and his jealousy often found expression in filthy abuse and cowardly assaults. Hitherto he had been simply disgusting; now he was a constant menace, even to her life. She lived in hourly fear of his brutality; but in her darkest hour sunshine came again into her life with the coming of Vittorio Alfieri, whose name was to be linked with hers for so many years.

At this time Alfieri was in the very prime of his splendid manhood, one of the handsomest and most fascinating men in all Europe. Some four years older than herself, he was a tall, stalwart, soldierly man, blue-eyed and auburn-haired, an aristocrat to his finger-tips, a daring horseman, a poet, and a man of rare culture--just the man to set any woman's heart a-flutter, as he had already done in most of the capitals of the Continent.

He was a spoilt child of fortune, this Italian poet and soldier, a man who had drunk deep of the cup of life, and to whom all conquests came with such fatal ease that already he had drained life dry of its pleasures.

Such was the man who one autumn day in the year 1777 came into the unhappy life of the Countess of Albany, still full of the passions and yearnings of youth. It was surely fate that thus brought together these two young people of kindred tastes and kindred disillusion; and we cannot wonder that, of that first meeting, Alfieri should write, "At last I had met the one woman whom I had sought so long, the woman who could inspire my ambition and my work. Recognising this, and prizing so

rare a treasure, I gave myself up wholly to her."

Those were happy days for the Countess that followed this fateful meeting--days of sweet communion of twin souls, hours of stolen bliss, when they could dwell apart in a region of high and ennobling thoughts, while the besotted husband was sleeping off the effects of his drunken orgies in the next room. To Alfieri, Louise was indeed "the anchor of his life," giving stability to his vacillating nature, and inspiring all that was best and noblest in him; while to her the association with this "splendid creature," who so thoroughly understood and sympathised with her, was the revelation of a new world.

Thus three happy years passed; and then the crisis came. One night the Prince, in a mood of drunken madness, inflamed by jealousy, attacked his wife, and, after severely beating her, flung her down on her bed and attempted to strangle her. This was the crowning outrage of years of brutality. She could not, dared not, spend another day with such a madman. At any cost she must leave him--and for ever.

When morning came, with Alfieri's assistance, the plan of escape was arranged. In the company of a lady friend--and also of her husband, now scared and penitent, but fearing to let her out of his sight--she drove to a neighbouring convent, ostensibly to inspect the nuns' needlework. On reaching her destination she ran up the convent steps, entered the building, and the door was slammed and bolted behind her in the very face of Charles Edward, who had followed as fast as his dropsical legs would carry him up the steps. The Prince, blazing at such an outrage, hammered fiercely at the door until at last the Lady Abbess herself showed her face at the grating, and told him in no ambiguous words that he would not be allowed to enter! His wife had come to her for protection; and if he had any grievance he had better appeal to the Duke of Tuscany.

Thus ended the tragic union of the "Bonnie Prince" and his Countess. Emancipation had come at last; and, while Louise was now free to devote her life to her beloved Alfieri, her brutal husband was left for eight years to the company of his bottle and the ministrations of his natural daughter, until a drunkard's grave at Frascati closed over his mis-spent life. The pity and the tragedy of it!

Louise of Albany and her poet-lover were now free to link their lives at the altar--but no such thought seems to have entered the head of either. They were perfectly happy without the bond of the wedding-ring, of which the Countess had such terrible memories; and together they walked through life, happy in each other and indifferent to the world's opinion.

Now in Florence, now in Rome; living together in Alsace, drifting to Paris; and, when the Revolution drove them from the French capital, seeking refuge in London, where we find the uncrowned Queen of England chatting amicably with the "usurper" George in the Royal box at the opera--always inseparable, and Louise always clinging to the shreds of her Royal dignity, with a throne in her ante-room, and "Your Majesty" on her servants' lips. Thus passed the careless, happy years for Countess and poet until, in 1803, Alfieri followed the "Bonnie Prince" behind the veil, and left a desolate Louise to moan amid her tears, "There is no more happiness for me."

But Louise was not left even now without the solace of a man's love,

which seemed as indispensable to her nature as the air she breathed. Before Alfieri had been many months in his Florence tomb his place by the Countess's side had been taken by Francois Xavier Fabre, a good-looking painter of only moderate gifts, whose handsome face, plausible tongue, and sunny disposition soon made a captive of her middle-aged heart. At the time when Fabre came thus into her life Madame la Comtesse had passed her fiftieth birthday--youth and beauty had taken wings; and passion (if ever she had any--for her relations with Alfieri seem to have been quite platonic) had died down to its embers.

But a man's companionship and homage were always necessary to her, and in Fabre she found her ideal cavalier. Her salon now became more popular even than in the days of her young wifehood. It drew to it all the greatest men in Europe, men of world-wide fame in statesmanship, letters, and art, all anxious to do homage to a woman of such culture and with such rare gifts of conversation.

That she was now middle-aged, stout and dowdy--"like a cook with pretty hands," as Stendhal said of her--mattered nothing to her admirers, many of whom remembered her in the days of her lovely youth. She was, in their eyes, as much a Queen as if she wore a crown; and, moreover, she was a woman of magnetic charm and clever brain.

And thus, with her books and her salon and her cavalier, she spent the rest of her chequered life until the end came one day in 1824; and her last resting-place was, as she wished it to be, by the side of her beloved Alfieri. In the Church of Santa Croce, in Florence, midway between the tombs of Michael Angelo and Machiavelli, the two lovers sleep together their last sleep, beneath a beautiful monument fashioned by Canova's hands--Louise, wife of the "Bonnie Prince" (as we still choose to remember him) and Vittorio Alfieri, to whom, to quote his own words, "she was beyond all things beloved."

CHAPTER III

THE PEASANT AND THE EMPRESS

Many an autocrat of Russia has shown a truly sovereign contempt for convention in the choice of his or her favourites, the "playthings of an hour"; and at least three of them have carried this contempt to the altar itself.

Peter, the first, as we have seen, offered a crown to Martha Skovronski, a Livonian scullery-maid, who succeeded him on the throne; the second Catherine gave her hand as well as her heart to Patiomkin, the gigantic, ill-favoured ex-sergeant of cavalry; and Elizabeth, daughter of Peter and his kitchen-Queen, proved herself worthy of her parentage when she made Alexis Razoum, a peasant's son, husband of the Empress of Russia. You will search history in vain for a story so strange and romantic as this of the great Empress and the lowly shepherd's son, whom her love raised from a hovel to a palace, and on whom one of the most amorous and fickle of sovereign ladies lavished honours and riches and an unwavering devotion, until her eyes, speaking their love to the last, were closed in death.

It was in the humblest hovel of the village of Lemesh that Alexis Razoum drew his first breath one day in 1709. His father, Gregory Razoum, was a shepherd, who spent his pitiful earnings in drink--a man of violent temper who, in his drunken rages, was the terror not only of his home but of the entire village. His wife and children cowered at his approach; and on more than one occasion only accident (or Providence) saved him from the crime of murder. On one such occasion, we are told, the child Alexis, who from his earliest years had a passion for reading, was absorbed in a book, when his father, in ungovernable fury, seized a hatchet and hurled it at the boy's head. Luckily, the missile missed its mark, and Alexis escaped, to find refuge in the house of a friendly priest, who not only gave him shelter and protection, but taught him to write, and, above all, to sing--little dreaming that he was thus paving the way which was to lead the drunken shepherd's lad to the dizzy heights in Russia. For the boy had a beautiful voice. When he joined the choir of his village church, people flocked from far and near to listen to the sweet notes that soared, pure and liquid as a nightingale's song, above the rest. "It was," all declared, "the voice of an angel--and the face of an angel," for Alexis was as beautiful in those days as any child of picture or of dreams.

One day a splendidly dressed stranger chanced to enter the Lemesh church during Mass--none other than Colonel Vishnevsky, a great Court official, who was on his way back to Moscow from a diplomatic mission; and he listened entranced to a voice sweeter than any he had ever heard. The service over, he made the acquaintance of the young chorister, interviewed his guardian, the "good Samaritan" priest, and persuaded him to allow the boy to accompany him to the capital. Thus the shepherd's son took weeping farewell of the good priest, of his mother, and of his brothers and sisters; and a few weeks later the Empress and her ladies were listening enchanted to his voice in the Imperial choir at Moscow--but none with more delight than the Princess Elizabeth, daughter of Peter the Great, to whom Alexis' beauty appealed even more strongly than his sweet singing.

Elizabeth, true daughter of her father, had already, young as she was, counted her lovers by the score--lovers chosen indiscriminately, from Royal princes to grooms and common soldiers. She was already sated with the licence of the most dissolute Court of Europe, and to her the young Cossack of the beautiful face and voice, and rustic innocence, opened a new and seductive vista of pleasure. She lost her heart to him, had him transferred to her own Court as her favourite singer, and, within a few years, gave him charge of her purse and her properties.

The shepherd's son was now not only lover-elect, but principal "minister" to the daughter of an Emperor, who was herself to wear the Imperial crown. And while Alexis was thus luxuriating amid the splendour of a Court, he by no means forgot the humble relatives he had left behind in his native village. His father was dead; his mother was reduced for a time to such a depth of destitution that she had to beg her bread from door to door. His sisters had found husbands for themselves in their own rank; and the favourite of an Imperial Princess had for brothers-in-law a tailor, a weaver, and a shepherd. When news came to Alexis of his mother's destitution he had sent her a sum of money sufficient to install her in comfort as an innkeeper: the first of many kindnesses which were to work a startling transformation in the fortunes of the Razoum family.

Events now hurried quickly. The Empress Anna died, and was succeeded on

the throne by the infant Ivan, her grand-nephew, who had been Emperor but a few months when, in 1741, a coup d'etat gave the crown to Elizabeth, mistress of the Lemesh peasant. Alexis was now husband in all but name of the Empress of all the Russias; honours and riches were showered on him; he was General, Grandmaster of the Hounds, Chief Gentleman of the Bedchamber, and lord of large estates yielding regal revenues.

But all his grandeur was powerless to spoil the man, who still remained the simple peasant who, so many years earlier, had left his low-born mother with streaming eyes. His great ambition now was to share his good-fortune with her. She must exchange her village inn for the luxuries and splendours of a palace. And thus it was that one day a splendid carriage, with gay-liveried postillions, dashed up to the door of the Lemesh inn and carried off the simple peasant woman, her youngest son, Cyril, and one of her daughters, to the open-mouthed amazement of the villagers. At the entrance to the capital she was received by a magnificently attired gentleman, in whom she failed to recognise her son Alexis, until he showed her a birthmark on his body.

Picture now the peasant-woman sumptuously lodged in the Moscow palace, decked in all the finery of silks and laces and jewels, receiving the respectful homage of high Court officials, caressed and petted by an Empress, while her splendid son looks smilingly on, as proud of his cottage-mother as if she were a Princess of the Blood Royal. That the innkeeper was not happy in her gilded cage, that her thoughts often wandered longingly to her cronies and the simple life of the village, is not to be wondered at.

It was all very well for such a fine gentleman as her son, Alexis; but for a poor, simple-minded woman like herself--well, she was too old for such a transplanting. And we can imagine her relief when, on the removal of the Court to St Petersburg, she was allowed to bring her visit to an end and to return to her inn with wonderful stories of all she had seen. Her son and daughter, however, elected to remain. As for Cyril, a handsome youth, almost young enough to be his brother's son, he was quick to win his way into the favour of the Empress. Before he had been many months at Court he was made a Count and Gentleman of the Bedchamber. He was given for bride a grand-niece of Elizabeth; and at twenty-two he was Viceroy of the Ukraine, virtual sovereign of a kingdom of his own, with his peasant-mother, who declined to share his palace, comfortably installed in a modest house near his gates.

Cyril, in fact, was to his last day as unspoiled by his unaccustomed grandeur as his brother Alexis. Each was ready at any moment to turn from the obsequious homage of nobles to hobnob with a peasant friend or relative. How utterly devoid of false pride Alexis was is proved by the following anecdote. One day when, in company with the Empress, he was paying a visit to Count Loewenwolde, he rushed from Elizabeth's side to fling his arms round the neck of one of his host's footmen. "Are you mad, Alexis?" exclaimed the Empress, in her astonishment. "What do you mean by such senseless behaviour?" "I am not mad at all," answered the favourite. "He is an old friend of mine."

But although no man ever deposed the shepherd from the first place in Elizabeth's favour, it must not be imagined that he was her only lover. The daughter of the hot-blooded Peter and the lusty scullery wench had always as great a passion for men as the second Catherine, who had almost as many favourites in her boudoir as gowns in her wardrobes. She

had her lovers before she was emancipated from the schoolroom; and not the least favoured of them, it is said, was her own nephew, Peter the Second, whom she would no doubt have married if it had been possible.

She turned her back on one great alliance after another, preferring her freedom to a wedding-ring that brought no love with it; and she found her pleasure alike among the gentlemen of the Court and among her own servants. In the long list of her favourites we find a General succeeded by a Sergeant; Boutourlin, the handsome courtier, giving place to Lialin, the sailor; and Count Shouvalov retiring in favour of Voytshinsky, the coachman. Thus one liaison succeeded another from girlhood to middle-age--indeed long after she had passed the altar. But through all these varying attachments her heart remained constant to her shepherd-lover, to whom she was ever the devoted wife, and, when he was ill, the tenderest of nurses. To please him, she even accompanied him on a visit to his native village, smiling graciously on his humble friends of other days, and partaking of the hospitality of the poorest cottagers; while on all who had befriended him in the days of his obscurity she lavished her favours.

Of one man who had been thus kind she made a General on the spot; the friendly priest was given a highly paid post at Court; high rank in the army was given to many of his humble relatives; and a husband was found for a favourite niece in Count Ryoumin, the Chancellor's son.

As for Alexis himself, nothing was too good for him. Although he had probably never handled a gun in his life she made him Field-Marshal and head of her army; and, at her request, Charles VII. dubbed him Count of the Holy Roman Empire, a distinction which Gregory Orloff in later years prized more than all the honours Catherine II. showered on him; while the estates of which she made him lord were a small kingdom in themselves. Alexis, the shepherd's son, was now, beyond any question, the most powerful man in Russia. If he would, he might easily have taken the sceptre from the yielding hands of the Empress and played the autocrat, as Patiomkin played it under similar circumstances in later years. But Alexis cared as little for power as for rank and wealth. He smiled at his honours. "Fancy," he said, with his hearty laugh, "a peasant's son, a Count; and a man who ought to be tending sheep, a Field-Marshal!"

When courtly genealogists spread before him an elaborate family-tree, proving that he sprang from the princely stock of Bogdan, with many a Grand Duke of Lithuania among his lineal ancestors, he laughed loud and long at them for their pains. "Don't be so ridiculous," he said. "You know as well as I that my parents were simple peasants, honest enough, but people of the soil and nothing else. If I am Count and Field-Marshal and Viceroy, I owe it all to the good heart of your Empress and mine, whose humble servant I am. Take it away, and let me hear no more of such foolery."

Such to the last was the unspoiled, child-like nature of the man who so soon was to be not merely the first favourite but husband of an Empress. Probably Alexis would have lived and died Elizabeth's unlicensed lover had it not been for the cunning of the cleverest of her Chancellors, Bestyouzhev, who saw in his mistress's infatuation for her peasant the means of making his own position more secure. Elizabeth was still a young and attractive woman, who might pick and choose among some of the most eligible suitors in Europe for a sharer of her throne; for there were many who would gladly have played consort to the good-looking

autocrat of Russia.

Such a husband, especially if he were a strong man, might seriously imperil the Chancellor's position; might even dispense with him altogether. On the other hand, he was high in the favour of the shepherd's son, who had such a contempt for power, and who thus would be a puppet in his hands. Why not make him husband in name as well as in fact? It was, after all, an easy task the Chancellor thus set himself. Elizabeth was by no means unwilling to wear a wedding-ring for the man who had loved her so loyally and so long; and any difficulties she might raise were quickly disposed of by her father-confessor, who was Bestyouzhev's tool. Thus it came to pass that one day Elizabeth and Alexis stood side by side before the village altar of Perovo; and the words were spoken which made the shepherd's son husband of the Empress. The secrecy with which the ceremony was performed was but a fiction. All the world knew that Alexis Gregorovitch was Emperor by right of wedlock, and flocked to pay homage to him in his new and exalted character.

He now had sumptuous apartments next to those of his wife; he sat at her right hand on all State occasions; he was her shadow everywhere; and during his frequent attacks of gout the Empress ministered to him night and day in his own rooms with the tender devotion of a mother to a child. Two children were born to them, a son and a daughter, the latter of whom, after a life of strange romance and vicissitude, ended her days in a loathsome dungeon of the fortress of Saints Peter and Paul, the victim of Catherine II.'s vengeance--miserably drowned, so one story goes, by an inundation of her cell.

On Elizabeth's death, in the year 1762, her husband was glad to retire from the Court in which he had for so long played so splendid a part. "None but myself," he said, "can know with what pleasure I leave a sphere to which I was not born, and to which only my love for my dear mistress made me resigned. I should have been happier far with her in some small cottage far removed from the gilded slavery of Court life." He was happy enough now leading the peaceful life of a country gentleman on one of his many estates.

Catherine II. had mounted the throne of Russia--the Empress who, according to Masson, had but two passions, which she carried to the grave--"her love of man, which degenerated into libertinage; and her love of glory, which degenerated into vanity." A woman with the brain of a man and the heart of a courtesan, Catherine's fickle affection had flitted from one lover to another, until now it had settled on Gregory Orloff, the handsomest man in her dominions, whom she was more than half disposed to make her husband.

This was a scheme which commended itself strongly to her Chancellor, Vorontsov. There was a most useful precedent to lend support to it--the alliance of the Empress Elizabeth with a man of immeasurably lower rank than Catherine's favourite; but it was important that this precedent should be established beyond dispute. Thus it was that one day, when Count Alexis was poring over his Bible by his country fireside, Chancellor Vorontsov made his appearance with ingratiating words and promises. Her Majesty, he informed the Count, was willing to confer Imperial rank on him in return for one small favour--the possession of the documents which proved his marriage to her predecessor, Elizabeth.

On hearing the request, the ex-shepherd rose, and, with words of quiet scorn, refused both the request and the proffered honour. "Am not I," he

said, "a Count, a Field-Marshal, a man of wealth? all of which I owe to the kindness of my dear, dead mistress. Are not such honours enough for the peasant's son whom she raised from the mire to sit by her side, that I should purchase another bauble by an act of treachery to her memory?"

"But wait one moment," he continued; and, leaving the room, he returned carrying a small bundle of papers, which he proceeded to examine one by one. Then, collecting them, he placed the bundle in the heart of the fire, to the horror of the onlooking Chancellor; and, as the flames were reducing the precious documents to ashes, he said, "Go now and tell those who sent you, that I never was more than the slave of my august benefactress, the Empress Elizabeth, who could never so far have forgotten her position as to marry a subject."

Thus with a lie on his lips--the last crowning evidence of loyalty to his beloved Queen and wife--Alexis Razoum makes his exit from the stage on which he played so strangely romantic a part. A few years later his days ended in peace at his St Petersburg palace, with the name he loved best, "Elizabeth," on his lips.

CHAPTER IV

A CROWN THAT FAILED

Henri of Navarre, hero of romance and probably the greatest King who ever sat on the throne of France, had a heart as weak in love as it was stout in war. To his last day he was a veritable coward before the battery of bright eyes; and before Ravailac's dagger brought his career to a tragic end one May day in the year 1610 he had counted his mistresses to as many as the years he had lived.

But of them all, fifty-seven of them--for the most part lightly coming and lightly going--only one ever really reached his heart, and was within measurable distance of a seat on his throne--the woman to whom he wrote in the hey-day of his passion, "Never has man loved as I love you. If any sacrifice of mine could purchase your happiness, how gladly I would make it, even to the last drop of my life's blood."

Gabrielle d'Estrees who thus enslaved the heart of the hero, which carried him to a throne through a hundred fights and inconceivable hardships, was cradled one day in the year 1573 in Touraine. From her mother, Francoise Babou, she inherited both beauty and frailness; for the Babou women were famous alike for their loveliness and for a virtue as facile even as that of Marie Gaudin, the pretty plaything of Francois I., who left Francois' arms to find a husband in Philip Babou and thus to transmit her charms and frailty to Gabrielle.

Her father, Antoine, son of Jean d'Estrees, a valiant soldier under five kings, was a man of pleasure, who drank and sang his way through life, preferring Cupid to Mars and the *_joie de vivre_* to the call of duty. It is perhaps little wonder that Antoine's wife, after bearing seven children to her husband, left him to find at least more loyalty in the Marquess of Tourel-Alegre, a lover twenty years younger than herself.

Thus it was that, deserted by her mother, and with a father too addicted

to pleasure to spare a thought for his children, Gabrielle grew to beautiful girlhood under the care of an aunt--now living in the family chateau in Picardy, now in the great Paris mansion, the Hotel d'Estrees; and with so little guidance from precept or example that, in later years, she and her six sisters and brothers were known as the "Seven Deadly Sins."

In Gabrielle at least there was little that was vicious. She was an irresponsible little creature, bubbling over with mischief and gaiety, eager to snatch every flower of pleasure that caught her eyes; a dainty little fairy with big blue "wonder" eyes, golden hair, the sweetest rosebud of a mouth, ready to smile or to pout as the mood of the moment suggested, with soft round baby cheeks as delicately flushed as any rose.

Such was Gabrielle d'Estrees on the verge of young womanhood when Roger de Saint-Larry, Duc de Bellegarde, the King's grand equerry, and one of the handsomest young men in France, first set eyes on her in the chateau of Coeuvres; and, as was inevitable, lost his heart to her at first sight. When he rode away two days later, such excellent use had he made of his opportunities, he left a very happy, if desolate maiden behind; for Gabrielle had little power to resist fascinations which had made a conquest of many of the fairest ladies at Court.

When Bellegarde returned to Mantes, where Henri was still struggling for the crown which was so soon to be his, he foolishly gave the King of Navarre such a rapturous account of the young beauty of Picardy and his conquest that Henri, already weary of the faded charms of Diane d'Audouins, his mistress, promptly left his soldiering and rode away to see the lady for himself, and to find that Bellegarde's raptures were more than justified.

Gabrielle, however, flattered though she was by such an honour as a visit from the King of Navarre, was by no means disposed to smile on the wooing of "an ugly man, old enough to be my father." And indeed, Henri, with all the glamour of the hero to aid him, was but a sorry rival for the handsome and courtly Bellegarde. Now nearing his fortieth year, with grizzled beard, and skin battered and lined by long years of hard campaigning, the future King of France had little to appeal to the romantic eyes of a maid who counted less than half his years; and the King in turn rode away from the Coeuvres Castle as hopelessly in love as Bellegarde, but with much less encouragement to return.

But the hero of Ivry and a hundred other battles was no man to submit to defeat in any lists; and within a few weeks Gabrielle was summoned to Mantes, where he told her in decisive words that he loved her, and that no one, Bellegarde or any other, should share her with him. "Indeed!" she exclaimed, with a defiant toss of the head, "I will be no man's slave; I shall give my heart to whom I please, and certainly not to any man who demands it as a right." And within an hour she was riding home fast as her horse could gallop.

Henri was thunderstruck at such defiance. He must follow her at once and bring her to reason; but, in order to do so, he must risk his life by passing through the enemy's lines. Such an adventure, however, was after his own heart; and disguising himself as a peasant, with a bundle of faggots on his shoulder, he made his way safely to Coeuvres, where he presented himself, a pitiable spectacle of rags and poverty, to be greeted by his lady with shouts of derisive laughter. "Oh dear!" she

gaped between her paroxysms of mirth, "what a fright you look! For goodness' sake go and change your clothes." But though the King obeyed humbly, Gabrielle shut herself in her room and declined point-blank to see him again.

Such devotion, however, expressed in such fashion, did not fail in its appeal to the romantic girl; and when, a little later, Gabrielle visited the Royalist army then besieging Chartres, it was a much more pliant Gabrielle who listened to the King's wooing and whose eyes brightened at his stories of bravery and danger. Henri might be old and ugly, but he had at least a charm of manner, a frank, simple manliness, which made him the idol of his soldiers and in fact of every woman who once came under its spell. And to this charm even Gabrielle, the rebel, had at last to submit, until Bellegarde was forgotten, and her hero was all the world to her.

The days that followed this slow awaking were crowded with happiness for the two lovers; when Gabrielle was not by her King's side, he was writing letters to her full of passionate tenderness. "My beautiful Love," "My All," "My Trueheart"--such were the sweet terms he lavished on her. "I kiss you a million times. You say that you love me a thousand times more than I love you. You have lied, and you shall maintain your falsehood with the arms which you have chosen. I shall not see you for ten days, it is enough to kill me." And again, "They call me King of France and Navarre--that of your subject is much more delightful--you have much more cause for fearing that I love you too much than too little. That fault pleases you, and also me, since you love it. See how I yield to your every wish."

Such were the letters--among the most beautiful ever penned by lover--which the King addressed to his "Menon" in those golden days, when all the world was sunshine for him, black as the sky was still with the clouds of war. And she returned love for love; tenderness for passion. When he was lying ill at St Denis, she wrote, "I die of fear. Tell me, I implore you, how fares the bravest of the brave. Give me news, my cavalier; for you know how fatal to me is your least ill. I cannot sleep without sending you a thousand good nights; for I am the Princess Constancy, sensible to all that concerns you, and careless of all else in the world, good or bad."

Through the period of stress and struggle that still separated Henri from the crown which for nearly twenty years was his goal, Gabrielle was ever by his side, to soothe and comfort him, to chase away the clouds of gloom which so often settled on him, to inspire him with new courage and hope, and, with her diplomacy checking his impulses, to smooth over every obstacle that the cunning of his enemies placed in his path.

And when, at last, one evening in 1594, Henri made his triumphal entry into Paris, on a grey horse, wearing a gold-embroidered grey habit, his face proud and smiling, saluting with his plume-crowned hat the cheering crowds, Gabrielle had the place of honour in front of him, "in a gorgeous litter, so bedecked with pearls and gems that she paled the light of the escorting torches."

This was, indeed, a proud hour for the lovers which saw Henri acclaimed at "long last" King of France, and his loyal lady-love Queen in all but name. The years of struggle and hardship were over--years in which Henri of Navarre had braved and escaped a hundred deaths; and in which he had been reduced to such pitiable straits that he had often not known where

his next meal was to come from or where to find a shirt to put on his back.

Gabrielle was now Marquise de Monceaux, a title to which her Royal lover later added that of Duchesse de Beaufort. Her son, Cesar, was known as "Monsieur," the title that would have been his if he had been heir to the French throne. All that now remained to fill the cup of her ambition and her happiness was that she should become the legal wife of the King she loved so well; and of this the prospect seemed more than fair.

Charming stories are told of the idyllic family life of the new King; how his greatest pleasure was to "play at soldiers" with his children, to join in their nursery romps, or to take them, like some bourgeois father, to the Saint Germain fair, and return loaded with toys and boxes of sweetmeats, to spend delightful homely evenings with the woman he adored.

But it was not all sunshine for the lovers. Paris was in the throes of famine and plague and flood. Poverty and discontent stalked through her streets, and there were scowling and envious eyes to greet the King and his lady when they rode laughing by; or when, as on one occasion we read of, they returned from a hunting excursion, riding side by side, "she sitting astride dressed all in green" and holding the King's hand.

Nor within the palace walls was it all a bed of roses for Gabrielle; for she had her enemies there; and chief among them the powerful Duc de Sully, her most formidable rival in the King's affection. Sully was not only Henri's favourite minister; he was the Jonathan to his David, the man who had shared a hundred dangers by his side, and by his devotion and affection had found a firm lodging in his heart.

Between the minister and the mistress, each consumed with jealousy of the other, Henri had many a bad hour; and the climax came when de Sully refused to pass the extravagant charges for the baptism of the Marquise's second son, Alexander. Gabrielle was indignant and appealed angrily and tearfully to the King, who supported his minister. "I have loved you," he said at last, roused to wrath, "because I thought you gentle and sweet and yielding; now that I have raised you to high position, I find you exacting and domineering. Know this, I could better spare a dozen mistresses like you than one minister so devoted to me as Sully."

At these harsh words, Gabrielle burst into tears. "If I had a dagger," she exclaimed, "I would plunge it into my heart, and then you would find your image there." And when Henri rushed from the room, she ran after him, flung herself at his feet, and with heart-breaking sobs, begged for forgiveness and a kind word. Such troubles as these, however, were but as the clouds that come and go in a summer sky. Gabrielle's sun was now nearing its zenith; Henri had long intended to make her his wife at the altar; proceedings for divorce from his wife, Marguerite de Valois, were running smoothly; and now the crowning day in the two lives thus romantically linked was at hand.

In the month of April, 1599, Gabrielle and Henri were spending the last ante-nuptial days together at Fontainebleau; the wedding was fixed for the first Sunday after Easter, and Gabrielle was ideally happy among her wedding finery and the costly presents that had been showered on her from all parts of France--from the ring Henri had worn at his Coronation and which he was to place on her finger at the altar, to a statue of the

King in gold from Lyons, and a "giant piece of amber in a silver casket from Bordeaux."

Her wedding-dress was a gorgeous robe of Spanish velvet, rich in embroideries of gold and silver; the suite of rooms which was to be hers as Queen was already ready, with its splendours of crimson and gold furnishing. The greatest ladies in France were now proud to act as her tire-women; and princes and ambassadors flocked to Fontainebleau to pay her homage.

The last days of Holy Week it had been arranged that she should spend in devotion at Paris, and Henri was her escort the greater part of the way. When they parted on the banks of the Seine they wept in each other's arms, while Gabrielle, full of nameless forebodings, clung to her lover and begged him to take her back to Fontainebleau. But with a final embrace he tore himself away; and with streaming eyes Gabrielle continued her journey, full of fears as to its issue; for had not a seer of Piedmont told her that the marriage would never take place; and other diviners, whom she had consulted, warned her that she would die young, and never call Henri husband?

Two days later Gabrielle heard Mass at the Church of St Germain l'Auxerrois; and on returning to the Deanery, her aunt's home, became seriously ill. She grew rapidly worse; her sufferings were terrible to witness; and on Good Friday she was delivered of a dead child. To quote an eye-witness, "She lingered until six o'clock in very great pain, the like of which doctors and surgeons had never seen before. In her agony she tore her face, and injured herself in other parts of her body." Before dawn broke on the following day she drew her last breath.

When news of her illness reached the King, he flew to her swift as his horse could carry him, only to meet couriers on his way who told him that Madame was already dead; and to find, when at last he reached St Germain l'Auxerrois, the door of the room in which she lay barred against him. He could not take her living once more into his arms; he was not allowed to see her dead.

Henri was as a man who is mad with grief; he was inconsolable.. None dared even to approach him with words of pity and comfort. For eight days he shut himself in a black-draped room, himself clothed in black; and he wrote to his sister, "The root of my love is dead; there will be no Spring for me any more." Three months later he was making love to Gabrielle's successor, Henriette d'Entragues!

Thus perished in tragedy Gabrielle d'Estrees, the creature of sunshine, who won the bravest heart in Europe, and carried her conquest to the very foot of a throne.

CHAPTER V

A QUEEN OF HEARTS

If ever woman was born for love and for empire over the hearts of men it was surely Jeanne Becu, who first opened her eyes one August day in the year 1743, at dreary Vaucouleurs, in Joan of Arc's country, and who was

fated to dance her light-hearted way through the palace of a King to the guillotine.

Scarcely ever has woman, born to such beauty and witchery, been cradled less auspiciously. Her reputed father was a scullion, her mother a sempstress. For grandfather she had Fabien Becu, who left his frying-pans in a Paris kitchen to lead Jeanne Husson, a fellow-servant, to the altar. Such was the ignoble strain that flowed in the veins of the Vaucouleurs beauty, who five-and-twenty years later was playfully pulling the nose of the fifteenth Louis, and queening it in his palaces with a splendour which Marie Antoinette herself never surpassed.

From her sordid home Jeanne was transported at the age of six to a convent, where she spent nine years in rebellion against rules and punishments, until "the golden head emerged at last from black woollen veil and coarse unstarched bands, the exquisite form from shapeless, hideous robe, the perfect little feet from abominable yellow shoes," to play first the role of lady's maid to a wealthy widow, and, when she wearied (as she quickly did) of coiffing hair, to learn the arts of millinery.

"Picture," says de Goncourt, "the glittering shop, where all day long charming idlers and handsome great gentlemen lounged and ogled; the pretty milliner tripping through the streets, her head covered by a big, black _caleche_, whence her golden curls escaped, her round, dainty waist defined by a muslin-frilled pinafore, her feet in little high-heeled, buckled shoes, and in her hand a tiny fan, which she uses as she goes--and then imagine the conversations, proposals, replies!"

Such was Jeanne Becu in the first bloom of her dainty beauty, the prettiest grisette who ever set hearts fluttering in Paris streets; with laughter dancing in her eyes, a charming pertness at her red lips, grace in every movement, and the springtide of youth racing through her veins.

When Voltaire first saw her portrait, he exclaimed, "The original was fashioned for the gods." And we cannot wonder, as we look on the ravishing beauty of the face that wrung this eloquent tribute from the cold-blooded cynic--the tender, melting violet of the eyes, with their sweeping brown lashes, under the exquisite arch of brown eyebrows, the dainty little Greek nose, the bent bow of the delicious tiny mouth, the perfect oval of the face, the complexion "fair and fresh as an infant's," and a glorious halo of golden hair, a dream of fascinating curls and tendrils.

It was to this bewitching picture, "with the perfume and light as of a goddess of love," that Jean du Barry, self-styled Comte, adventurer and roue, succumbed at a glance. But du Barry's tenure of her heart, if indeed he ever touched it at all, was brief; for the moment Louis XV. set eyes on the ravishing girl he determined to make the prize his own, a superior claim to which the Comte perforce yielded gracefully.

Thus, in 1768, we find Jeanne Becu--or "Mademoiselle Vaubarnier," as she now called herself--transported by a bound to the Palace of Versailles and to the first place in the favour of the King, having first gone through the farce of a wedding ceremony with du Barry's brother, Guillaume, a husband whom she first saw on the marriage morning, and on whom she looked her last at the church door.

Then followed for the maid of the kitchen a few years of such Queendom

and splendour as have seldom fallen to the lot of any lady cradled in a palace--the idolatrous worship of a King, the intoxication of the power that only beauty thus enshrined can wield, the glitter of priceless jewels, rarest laces, and richest satins and silks, the flash of gold on dinner and toilet-table, an army of servants in sumptuous liveries, the fawning of great Court ladies, the courtly flatteries of princes--every folly and extravagance that money could purchase or vanity desire.

Six years of such intoxicating life and then--the end. Louis is lying on his death-bed and, with fear in his eyes and a tardy penitence on his lips, is saying to her, "Madame, it is time that we should part." And, indeed, the hour of parting had arrived; for a few days later he drew his last wicked breath, and Madame du Barry was under orders to retire to a convent. But her grief for the dead King was as brief as her love for him had been small; for within a few months, we find her installed in her beautiful country home, Lucienne, ready for fresh conquests, and eager to drain the cup of pleasure to the last drop. Nor was there any lack of ministers to the vanity of the woman who had now reached the zenith of her incomparable charms.

Among the many lovers who flocked to the country shrine of the widowed "Queen," was Louis, Duc de Cosse, son of the Marechal de Brissac, who, although Madame du Barry's senior by nine years, was still in the prime of his manhood--handsome as an Apollo and a model of the courtly graces which distinguished the old *_noblesse_* in the day of its greatest pride, which was then so near its tragic downfall.

De Casse had long been a mute worshipper of Louis' beautiful "Queen," and now that she was a free woman he was at last able to pay open homage to her, a homage which she accepted with indifference, for at the time her heart had strayed to Henry Seymour, although in vain. The woman whose beauty had conquered all other men was powerless to raise a flame in the breast of the cold-blooded Englishman; and, realising this, she at last bade him farewell in a letter, pathetic in its tender dignity. "It is idle," she wrote, "to speak of my affection for you--you know it. But what you do not know is my pain. You have not deigned to reassure me about that which most matters to my heart. And so I must believe that my ease of mind, my happiness, are of little importance to you. I am sorry that I should have to allude to them; it is for the last time."

It was in this hour of disillusion and humiliation that she turned for solace to de Cosse, whose touching constancy at last found its reward. It was not long before friendship ripened into a love as ardent as his own; and for the first time this fickle beauty, whose heart had been a pawn in the game of ambition, knew what a beautiful and ennobling thing true love is.

Those were halcyon days which followed for de Cosse and the lady his loyalty had won; days of sweet meetings and tender partings--of a union of souls which even death was powerless to dissolve. When they could not meet--and de Cosse's duties often kept him from her side--letters were always on the wing between Lucienne and Paris, letters some of which have survived to bring their fragrance to our day.

Thus the lover writes, "A thousand thanks, a thousand thanks, dear heart! To-day I shall be with you. Yes, I find my happiness is in being loved by you. I kiss you a thousand times! Good-bye. I love you for ever." In another letter we read, "Yes, dear heart, I desire so ardently to be with you--not in spirit, my thoughts are ever with you, but

bodily--that nothing can calm my impatience. Good-bye, my darling. I kiss you many and many times with all my heart." The curious may read at the French Record Office many of these letters written in a bold, flowing hand by de Cosse in the hey-day of his love. The paper is time-stained, the ink is faded; but each sentence still palpitates with the passion that inspired it a century and a quarter ago.

And with this great love came new honours for de Cosse. His father's death made him Duc de Brissac, head of one of the greatest houses in France, owner of vast estates. He was appointed Governor of Paris and Colonel of the King's own body-guard. He had, in fact, risen to a perilous eminence; for the clouds of the great Revolution were already massing in the sky, and the *sans-culotte* crowds were straining to be at the throats of the cursed "aristos," and to hurl Louis from his throne. Brissac (as we must now call him) was thus an object of special hatred, as of splendour, standing out so prominently as representative of the hated *noblesse*.

Other nobles, fearful of the breaking of the storm, were flying in droves to seek safety in England and elsewhere. But when the Governor of Paris was urged to fly, he answered proudly, "Certainly not. I shall act according to my duty to my ancestors and myself." And, heedless of his life, he clung to his duty and his honour, presenting a smiling face to the scowls of hatred and envy, and spending blissful hours at Lucienne with the woman he loved.

Nor was she any less conscious of her danger, or less indifferent to it. She also had become a target of hatred and scarcely veiled threats. Watchful eyes marked every coming and going of Brissac's messengers with their missives of love; it was discovered that Brissac's aide-de-camp, whose life they sought, was in hiding in her house; that she was supplying the noble emigrants with money. The climax was reached when she boldly advertised a reward of two thousand louis for a clue to the jewellery of which burglars had robbed her--jewels of which she published a long and dazzling list, thus bringing to memory the days when the late King had squandered his ill-gotten gold on her.

The Duc, at last alarmed for her--never for himself--begged her either to escape, or, as he wrote, to "come quickly, my darling, and take every precaution for your valuables, if you have any left. Yes, come, and your beauty, your kindness and magnanimity. I am ashamed of it, but I feel weaker than you. How should I feel otherwise for the one I love best?"

But already the hour for flight had passed. The passions of the mob were breaking down the barriers that were now too weak to hold them in check; the Paris streets had their first baptism of blood, prelude to the deluge to follow; hideous, fierce-eyed crowds were clamouring at the gates of Versailles; and de Brissac was soon on his way, a prisoner, to Orleans.

The blow had fallen at last, suddenly, and with crushing force. When "Louis Hercule Timoleon de Cosse-Brissac, soldier from his birth," was charged before the National High Court with admitting Royalists into the Guards, he answered: "I have admitted into the King's Guards no one but citizens who fulfilled all the conditions contained in the decree of formation": and no other answer or plea would he deign to his accusers.

From his Orleans prison, where he now awaited the inevitable end, he wrote daily to his beloved lady; and every day brought him a tender and

cheering letter from her. On 11th August, 1792, he writes: "I received this morning the best letter I have had for a long time past; none have rejoiced my heart so much. Thank you for it. I kiss you a thousand times. You indeed will have my last thought. Ah, my darling, why am I not with you in a wilderness rather than in Orleans?"

A few days later news reached Madame du Barry that her lover, with other prisoners, was to be brought from Orleans to Paris. He would thus actually pass her own door; she would at least see him once again, under however tragic conditions. With what leaden steps the intervening hours crawled by! Each sound set her heart beating furiously as if it would choke her. Each moment was an agony of anticipation. At last she hears the sound of coming feet. She flies to the window, piercing the dark night with straining eyes. The sound grows nearer, a tumult of trampling feet and hoarse cries. A mob of dark figures surges through her gates, pours riotously up the steps and through the open door. In the hall there is a pandemonium of cries and oaths; the door of her room is burst open, and something is flung at her feet. She glances down; and, with a gasp of unspeakable horror, looks down on the severed head of her lover, red with his blood.

The sans-culottes had indeed taken a terrible revenge. They had fallen in overwhelming numbers on the prisoners and their escort; the soldiers had fled; and de Brissac found himself the centre of a mob, the helpless target of a hundred murderous blows. With a knife for sole weapon he fought valiantly, like the brave soldier he was, until a cowardly blow from behind felled him to the ground. "Fire at me with your pistols," he shouted, "your work will the sooner be over." A few moments later he drew his last gallant breath, almost within sight of the house that sheltered his beloved.

* * * * *

United in life, the lovers were not long to be divided. "Since that awful day," Madame du Barry wrote to a friend, "you can easily imagine what my grief has been. They have consummated the frightful crime, the cause of my misery and my eternal regrets--my grief is complete--a life which ought to have been so grand and glorious! Good God, what an end!"

Thus cruelly deprived of all that made life worth living, she cared little how soon the end came. "I ask nothing now of life," she wrote, "but that it should quickly give me back to him." And her prayer was soon to be granted. A few months after that night of horrors she herself was awaiting the guillotine in her cell at the conciergerie.

In vain did an Irish priest who visited her offer to secure her escape if she would give him money to bribe her jailers. "No," she answered with a smile, "I have no wish to escape. I am glad to die; but I will give you money willingly on condition that you save the Duchesse de Mortemart." And while Madame de Mortemart, daughter of the man she loved, was making her way to safety under the priest's escort, Jeanne du Barry was being led to the scaffold, breathing the name of the man she had loved so well; and, however feeble the flesh, glad to follow where he had led the way.

THE REGENT'S DAUGHTER

Many unwomanly women have played their parts in the drama of Royal Courts, but scarcely one, not even those Messalinas, Catherine II. of Russia and Christina of Sweden, conducted herself with such a shameless disregard of conventionality as Marie Louise Elizabeth d'Orleans, known to fame as the Duchesse de Berry, who probably crowded within the brief space of her years more wickedness than any woman who was ever cradled in a palace.

It is said that this libertine Duchesse was mad; and certainly he would be a bold champion who would try to prove her sanity. But, apart from any question of a disordered brain, there was a taint in her blood sufficient to account for almost any lapse from conventional standards of pure living. Her father was that Duc d'Orleans who shocked the none too strait-laced Europe of two centuries ago by his orgies; her grandfather was that other Orleans Duke, brother of Louis XIV., whose passion for his minions broke the heart of his English wife, the Stuart Princess Henrietta; and she had for mother one of the daughters of Madame de Montespan, light-o'-love to le Roi Soleil.

The offspring of such parents could scarcely have been normal; and how far from normal Marie Louise was, this story of her singular life will show. When her father, the Duc de Chartres, took to wife Mademoiselle de Blois, Montespan's daughter, there were many who significantly shrugged their shoulders and curled their lips at such a union; and one at least, the Duc's mother, Elizabeth Charlotte, Princess Palatine, was undisguisedly furious. She refused point-blank to be present at the nuptials, and when her son, fresh from the altar, approached her to ask her blessing, she retorted by giving the bridegroom a resounding slap on the face.

Such was the ill-omened opening to a wedded life which brought nothing but unhappiness with it and which gave to the world some of the most degenerate women (in addition to a son who was almost an idiot) who have ever been cradled.

The first of these degenerates was Marie Elizabeth, who was born one August day in the year 1695, and who from her earliest infancy was her father's pet and favourite. His idolatry of his first-born child, indeed, is one of the most inscrutable things in a life full of the abnormal, and in later years afforded much material for the tongue of scandal. He was inseparable from her; her lightest wish was law to him; he nursed her through her childish illnesses with more than the devotion of a mother; and, as she grew to girlhood, he worshipped at the shrine of her young beauty with the adoration of a lover and put her charms on canvas in the guise of a pagan goddess.

The Duc's affection for his daughter, indeed, was so extravagant that it was made the subject of scores of scurrilous lampoons to which even Voltaire contributed, and was a delicious morsel of ill-natured gossip in all the salons and cabarets of Paris. At fifteen the princess was already a woman--tall, handsome, well-formed, with brilliant eyes and the full lips eloquent of a sensuous nature. Already she had had her initiation into the vices that proved her undoing; for in a Court noted for its free-living, she was known for her love of the table and the wine-bottle.

Such was the Duc's eldest daughter when she was ripe for the altar and became the object of an intrigue in which her scheming father, the Royal Duchesses, the Duc de Saint-Simon, the King himself, and the Jesuits all took a part, and the prize of which was the hand of the young Duc de Berry, a younger son of the Dauphin, the grandson of King Louis.

Over the plotting and counterplotting, the rivalries and jealousies which followed, we must pass. It must suffice to record that the King's consent was at last won by the Orleans faction; Madame de Maintenon was persuaded to smile on the alliance; and, one July day, the nuptials of the Duc de Berry and the Orleans Princess were celebrated in the presence of the Royal family and the Court. A regal supper followed; and, the last toast drunk, the young couple were escorted to their room with all the stately, if scarcely decent, ceremonial which in those days inaugurated the life of the newly-wedded.

Seldom has there been a more singular union than this of the Duc d'Orleans' prodigal daughter with the almost imbecile grandson of the French King. The Duc de Berry, it is true, was good to look upon. Tall, fair-haired, with a good complexion and splendid health, he was physically, at twenty-four, no unworthy descendant of the great Louis. He had, too, many amiable qualities calculated to win affection; but he was mentally little better than a clown. His education had been shamefully neglected; he had been suppressed and kept in the background until, in spite of his manhood, he had all the shyness, awkwardness and dullness of a backward child.

As he himself confessed to Madame de Saint-Simon, "They have done all they could to stifle my intelligence. They did not want me to have any brains. I was the youngest, and yet ventured to argue with my brother. Afraid of the results of my courage, they crushed me; they taught me nothing except to hunt and gamble; they succeeded in making a fool of me, one incapable of anything and who will yet be the laughing-stock of everybody."

Such was the weak-kneed husband to whom was now allied the most precocious, headstrong young woman in all France; who, although still short of her sixteenth birthday, was a past-mistress of the arts of pleasure, and was now determined to have her full fling at any cost. She had been thoroughly spoiled by her too indulgent father, who was even then the most powerful man in France after the King; and she was in no mood to brook restraint from anyone, even from Louis himself.

The pleasures of the table seem now to have absorbed the greater part of her life. Read what her grandmother, the Princess Palatine, says of her: "Madame de Berry does not eat much at dinner. How, indeed, can she? She never leaves her room before noon, and spends her mornings in eating all kinds of delicacies. At two o'clock she sits down to an elaborate dinner, and does not rise from the table until three. At four she is eating again--fruit, salad, cheese, etc. She takes no exercise whatever. At ten she has a heavy supper, and retires to bed between one and two in the morning. She likes very strong brandy." And in this last sentence we have the true secret of her undoing. The Royal Princess was, even at this early age, a confirmed dipsomaniac, with her brandy bottle always by her side; and was seldom sober, from rising to retiring.

To such a woman, a slave to the senses, a husband like the Duc de Berry, unredeemed by a vestige of manliness, could make no appeal. She wanted

"men" to pay her homage; and, like Catherine of Russia, she had them in abundance--lovers who were only too ready to pay court to a beautiful Princess, who might one day be Queen of France. For the Dauphin was now dead; his eldest son, the Duc de Bourgogne, had followed him to the grave a few months later. Prince Philip had renounced his right to the French crown when he accepted that of Spain; and, between her husband and the throne there was now but one frail life, that of the three-year-old Duc d'Anjou, a child so delicate that he might easily not survive his great-grandfather, Louis, whose hand was already relaxing its grasp of the sceptre he had held so long.

On the intrigues with which this Queen _in posse_ beguiled her days, it is perhaps well not to look too closely. They are unsavoury, as so much of her life was. Her lovers succeeded one another with quite bewildering rapidity, and with little regard either to rank or good-looks. One special favourite of our Sultana was La Haye, a Court equerry, whom she made Chamberlain, and who is pictured by Saint-Simon as "tall, bony, with an awkward carriage and an ugly face; conceited, stupid, dull-witted, and only looking at all passable when on horseback."

So infatuated was the Duchesse with her ill-favoured equerry that nothing less would please her than an elopement to Holland--a proposal which so scared La Haye that, in his alarm, he went forthwith to the lady's father and let the cat out of the bag. "Why on earth does my daughter want to run away to Holland?" the Due exclaimed with a laugh. "I should have thought she was having quite a good enough time here!" And so would anyone else have thought.

And while his Duchesse was thus dallying with her multitude of lovers and stupefying herself with her brandy bottle, her husband was driven to his wits' end by her exhibitions of temper, as by her infidelities. In vain he stormed and threatened to have her shut up in a convent. All her retort was to laugh in his face and order him out of her apartment. Violent scenes were everyday incidents. "The last one," says Saint-Simon, "was at Rambouillet; and, by a regrettable mishap, the Duchesse received a kick."

The Duc's laggard courage was spurred to fight more than one duel for his wife's tarnished fame. Of one of these sorry combats, Maurepas writes, "Her conduct with her father became so notorious that His Grace the Duc de Berry, disgusted at the scandal, forced the Duc d'Orleans to fight a duel on the terrace at Marly. They were, however, soon separated, and the whole affair was hushed up."

But release from such an intolerable life was soon coming to the ill-used Duc. One day, when hunting, he was thrown from his horse, and ruptured a blood-vessel. Fearful of alarming the King, now near the end of his long life, he foolishly made light of his accident, and only consented to see a doctor when it was too late. When the doctors were at last summoned he was a dying man, his body drained of blood, which was later found in bowls concealed in various parts of his bedroom. With his last breath, he said to his confessor, "Ah, reverend father, I alone am the real cause of my death."

Thus, one May day in 1714, the Duchesse found herself a widow, within four years of her wedding-day; and the last frail barrier was removed from the path of self-indulgence and low passions to which her life was dedicated. When, with the aged King's death in the following year, her father became Regent of France, her position as daughter of the virtual

sovereign was now more splendid than ever; and before she had worn her widow's weeds a month, she had plunged again, still deeper, into dissipation, with Madame de Mouchy, one of her waiting-women, as chief minister to her pleasures.

It was at this time, before her husband had been many weeks in his grave, that the Comte de Riom, the last and most ill-favoured of her many lovers, came on the scene. Nothing but a perverted taste could surely have seen any attraction in such a lover as this grand-nephew of the Duc de Lauzun, of whom the austere and disapproving Palatine Duchess draws the following picture: "He has neither figure nor good-looks. He is more like an ogre than a man, with his face of greenish yellow. He has the nose, eyes, and mouth of a Chinaman; he looks, in fact, more like a baboon than the Gascon he really is. Conceited and stupid, his large head seems to sit on his broad shoulders, owing to the shortness of his neck. He is shortsighted and altogether is preternaturally ugly; and he appears so ill that he might be suffering from some loathsome disease."

To this unflattering description, Saint-Simon adds the fact that his "large, pasty face was so covered by pimples that it looked like one large abscess." Such, then, was the repulsive lover who found favour in the eyes of the Regent's daughter, and for whom she was ready to discard all her legion of more attractive wooers.

With the coming of de Riom, the Duchesse entered on the last and worst stage of her mis-spent life. Strange tales are told of the orgies of which the Luxembourg, the splendid palace her father had given her, was now the scene--orgies in which Madame de Mouchy and a Jesuit, one Father Ringle, took a part, and over which the evil de Riom ruled as "Lord of merry disports." The Duchesse, now sunk to the lowest depths of degradation, was the veriest puppet in his strong hands, flattered by his coarse attentions and submitting to rudeness and ridicule such as any grisette, with a grain of pride, would have resented.

When these scandalous "carryings-on" at the Luxembourg Palace reached the Regent's ears and he ventured to read his daughter a severe lecture on her conduct, she retaliated by snapping her fingers at him and telling him in so many words to mind his own business. And to the tongue of scandal that found voice everywhere, she turned a contemptuous ear. She even locked and barred her palace gates to keep prying eyes at a safe distance.

But, although she thus defied man, she was powerless to stay the steps of fate. Her health, robust as it had been, was shattered by her excesses; and when a serious illness assailed her, she was horrified to find death so uncomfortably near. In her alarm she called for a priest to shrive her; and the Abbe Languet came at the summons to bring her the consolations of the Church. He refused point-blank, however, to give the sinner absolution until the palace was purged of the presence of de Riom and Madame de Mouchy, the arch-partners in her vices.

To this suggestion the Duchesse, perilous as her condition was, returned an uncompromising "No!" If the Abbe would not absolve her--well, there were other priests, less exacting, who would; and one such priest of elastic conscience, a Franciscan friar, was summoned to her bedside. Then ensued an unseemly struggle around the dying woman's bed, in which the Regent, Cardinal Noailles, Madame de Mouchy, and the rival clerics all played their parts.

While the obliging friar remained in the room awaiting an opportunity to administer the last Sacrament, the Abbe and his curates kept watch at the bedroom door to see that he did no such thing; and thus the siege lasted for four days and nights until, the patient's crisis over, the services of the Church were summarily dispensed with.

With the return of health, the Duchesse's piety quickly evaporated. It is true that she had had a fright; and, by way of modified penitence, she vowed to dress herself and her household in white for six months and also to make a husband of her lover. Within a few weeks, de Riom led the Regent's daughter to the altar, thus throwing the cloak of the Church over the licence of the past.

Now that our Princess was once more a "respectable" woman, she returned gladly to her old life of indulgence; until the Duchess Palatine exclaimed in alarm, "I am afraid her excesses in drinking and eating will kill her." And never was prediction more sure of early fulfilment. When she was not keeping company with her brandy bottle, she was gorging herself with delicacies of all kinds, from patties and fricassees to peaches and nectarines, washed down with copious draughts of iced beer.

As a last desperate effort to reform her, at the eleventh hour, the Regent packed de Riom off to his regiment. A few days later, the Duchesse invited her father to a sumptuous banquet on the terrace at Meudon, at which, regardless of her delicate health, she ate and drank more voraciously than ever. The same evening she was taken ill; and when, on the following Sunday, her mother-in-law, the Duchess, visited her, she found the patient in a deplorable condition--wasted to a "shadow" and burning with fever. "She was suffering such horrible pains in her toes and under the feet," says the Duchess, "that tears came to her eyes. She looked so very bad that three doctors were called in consultation. They resolved to bleed her; but it was difficult to bring her to it, for her pains were so great that the least touch of the sheets made her shriek."

A few days later, in the early hours of 17th July, 1719, the Duchesse de Berry passed away in her sleep. The life which she had wasted with such shameless prodigality closed in peace; and at the moment when she was being laid to rest in the Church of St Denis, Madame de Mouchy, blazing in the dead woman's jewels, was laughing merrily over her champagne-glass at a dinner-party to which she had invited all the sharers in the orgies which had made the Palace of the Luxembourg infamous!

The moral of this pitifully squandered life needs no pointing out. And on reviewing it one can only in charity echo the words spoken by Madame de Meilleraye of another sinner, the Chevalier de Savoie, "For my part, I believe the good God must think twice before sending one born of such parents to the nether regions."

CHAPTER VII

A PRINCESS OF MYSTERY

In the spring of the year 1772 the fashionable world of Paris was full of speculation and gossip about a stranger, as mysterious as she was beautiful, who had appeared from no one knew where, in its midst, and who called herself the Princess Aly Emettee de Vlodimir. That she was a woman of rank and distinction admitted of no question. Her queenly carriage and the graciousness and dignity of her deportment were in keeping with the Royal character she assumed; but more remarkable than these evidences of high station was her beauty, which in its brilliance eclipsed that of the fairest women of Versailles and the Tuileries.

Tall, with a figure of exquisite modelling and grace, her daintily poised head crowned with a coronal of golden-brown hair, with a face of perfect oval, dimpled cheeks as delicately tinted as a rose, her chief glory lay in her eyes, large and lustrous, which had the singular quality of changing colour--"now blue, now black, which gave to their dreamy expression a peculiar, mysterious air."

Who was she, this woman of beauty and mystery? It was rumoured that she was a Circassian Princess, "the heroine of strange romances." She was living luxuriously in a fine house in the most fashionable quarter of Paris, in company with two German "Barons"--one, the Baron von Embs, who claimed to be her cousin; the other, Baron von Schenk, who appeared to play the role of guardian. To her _salon_ in the Ile St Louis were flocking many of the greatest men in France, infatuated by her beauty, and paying homage to her charms. To a man, they adored the mysterious lady--from Prince Ojinski and other illustrious refugees from Poland to the Comte de Rochefort-Velcourt, the Duke of Limburg's representative at the French Court, and the wealthy old _beau_ M. de Marine, who, it was said, placed his long purse at her disposal.

But while the men were thus her slaves, the women tossed their heads contemptuously at their dangerous rival. She was an adventuress, they declared with one voice; and great was their satisfaction when, one day, news came that the Baron von Embs had been arrested for debt and that, on investigation, he proved to be no Baron at all, but the good-for-nothing son of a Ghent tradesman.

The "bubble" had soon burst, and the attentions of the police became so embarrassing that the Princess was glad to escape from the scene of her brief triumphs with her cavaliers (Von Embs' liberty having been purchased by that "credulous old fool," de Marine) to Frankfort, leaving a wake of debts behind.

Arrived at Frankfort, the fair Circassian resumed her luxurious mode of life, carrying a part of her retinue of admirers with her, and making it known that she was daily expecting a large remittance from her good friend, the Shah of Persia. And it was not long before, thanks to the offices of de Rochefort-Velcourt, she had at her feet no less a personage than Philip, Duke of Limburg, and Prince of the Empire, one of those petty German potentates who assumed more than the airs and arrogance of kings. Though his duchy was no larger than an English county, Philip had his ambassadors at the Courts of Vienna and Versailles; and though he had neither courtiers, army, nor exchequer, he lavished his titles of nobility and surrounded himself with as much state and ceremonial as any Tsar or Emperor.

But exalted and serene as was His Highness, he was caught as helplessly in the toils of the Princess Aly as any lovesick boy; and within a week of making his first bow had her installed in his Castle of Oberstein,

after satisfying the most clamorous of her creditors with borrowed money. That there might be no question of obligation, the Princess repaid him with the most lavish promises to redeem his heavily mortgaged estate with the millions she was daily expecting from Persia, and to use her great influence with Tsar and Sultan to support his claim to the Schleswig and Holstein duchies. And that he might be in no doubt as to her ability to discharge these promises, she showed him letters, addressed to her in the friendliest of terms by these august personages.

Each day in the presence of this most alluring of princesses forged new fetters for the susceptible Duke, until one day she announced to him, with tears streaming down her pretty cheeks, that she had received a letter recalling her to Persia--to be married. The crucial hour had arrived. The Duke, reduced to despair, begs her to accept his own exalted hand in marriage, vowing that, if she refuses, he will "shut himself up in a cloister"; and is only restored to a measure of sanity when she promises to consider his offer.

When Hornstein, the Duke's ambassador to Vienna, appears on the scene, full of suspicion and doubts, she makes an equally easy conquest of him. She announces to his gratified ears her wish to become a Catholic; flatters him by begging him to act as her instructor in the creed that is so dear to him; and she reveals to him "for the first time" the true secret of her identity. She is really, she says, the Princess of Azov, heiress to vast estates, which may come to her any day; and the first use she intends to make of her millions is to fill the empty coffers of the Limburg duchy.

Hornstein is not only converted; he becomes as ardent an admirer as his master, the Duke. The Princess takes her place as the coming Duchess of Limburg, much to the disgust of his subjects, who show their feelings by hissing when she appears in public. Her hour of triumph has arrived--when, like a bolt from the blue, an anonymous letter comes to Hornstein revealing the story of her past doings in several capitals of Europe, and branding her as an "impostor."

For a time the Duke treats these anonymous slanders with scorn. He refuses to believe a word against his divinity, the beautiful, high-born woman who is to crown his life's happiness and, incidentally, to save him from bankruptcy. But gradually the poison begins to work, supplemented as it is by the suspicions and discontent of his subjects. At last he summons up courage to ask an explanation--to beg her to assure him that the charges against her are as false as he believes them.

She listens to him with quiet dignity until he has finished, and then replies, with tears in her eyes, that she is not unprepared for disloyalty from a man who is so obviously the slave of false friends and of public opinion, but that she had hoped that he would at least have some pity and consideration for a woman who was about to become the mother of his child. This unexpected announcement, with its appeal to his manhood, proves more eloquent than a world of proofs and protestations. The Duke's suspicions vanish in face of the news that the woman he loves is to become the mother of his child, and in a moment he is at her knees imploring her pardon, and uttering abject apologies. He is now more deeply than ever in her toils, ready to defy the world in defence of the Princess he adores and can no longer doubt.

It is at this stage that a man who was to play such an important part in

the Princess's life first crosses her path--one Domanski, a handsome young Pole, whose passionate and ill-fated patriotism had driven him from his native land to find an asylum, like many another Polish refugee, in the Limburg duchy. He had heard much of the romantic story of the Princess Aly, and was drawn by sympathy, as by the rumour of her remarkable beauty, to seek an interview with her, during her visit to Mannheim. Such a meeting could have but one issue for the romantic Pole. He lost both head and heart at sight of the lovely and gracious Princess, and from that moment became the most devoted of all her slaves.

When she returned to Oberstein he was swift to follow her and to install himself under her castle walls, where he could catch an occasional glimpse of her, or, by good-fortune, have a few blissful moments in her company. Indeed, it was not long before stories began to be circulated among the good folk of Oberstein of strange meetings between the mysterious young stranger who had come to live in their midst and an equally mysterious lady. "The postman," it was rumoured, "often sees him on the road leading to the castle, talking in a shadow with someone enveloped in a long, black, hooded cloak, whom he once thought he recognised as the Princess."

No wonder tongues wagged in Oberstein. What could be the meaning of these secret assignations between the Princess, who was the destined bride of their Duke, and the obscure young refugee? It was a delicious bit of scandal to add to the many which had already gathered round the "adventuress."

But there was a greater surprise in store for the Obersteiners, as for the world outside their walls. Soon it began to be rumoured that the Duke's bride-to-be was no obscure Circassian Princess; this was merely a convenient cloak to conceal her true identity, which was none less than that of daughter of an Empress! She was, in fact, the child of Elizabeth, Tsarina of Russia, and her peasant husband, Razoum; and in proof of her exalted birth she actually had in her possession the will in which the late Empress bequeathed to her the throne of Russia.

How these rumours originated none seemed to know. Was it Domanski who set them circulating? We know, at least, that they soon became public property, and that, strangely enough, they won credence everywhere. The very people who had branded her "adventuress" and hissed her in the streets, now raised cheers to the future Empress of Russia; while the Duke, delighted at such a wonderful transformation in the woman he loved, was more eager than ever to hasten the day when he could call her his own. As for the Princess, she accepted her new dignities with the complaisance to be expected from the daughter of a Tsarina. There was now no need to refer the sceptics to Circassia for proof of her station and her potential wealth. As heiress to one of the greatest thrones of Europe, she could at last reveal herself in her true character, without any need for dissimulation.

The curtain was now ready to rise on the crowning act of her life-drama, an act more brilliant than any she had dared to imagine. Russia was seething with discontent and rebellion; the throne of Catherine II. was trembling; one revolt had followed another, until Pugatchef had led his rabble of a hundred thousand serfs to the very gates of Moscow--only, when success seemed assured, to meet disaster and death. If the ex-bandit could come so near to victory, an uprising headed by Elizabeth's own daughter and heiress could scarcely fail to hurl

Catherine from her throne.

It would have been difficult to find a more powerful ally in this daring project than Prince Charles Radziwill, chief of Polish patriots, who was then, as luck would have it, living in exile at Mannheim, and who hated Russia as only a Pole ever hated her. To Radziwill, then, Domanski went to offer the help of his Princess for the liberation of Poland and the capture of Catherine's throne.

Here indeed was a valuable pawn to play in Radziwill's game of vengeance and ambition. But the Prince was by no means disposed to snatch the bait hurriedly. Experience had taught him caution. He must count the cost carefully before taking the step, and while writing to the Princess, "I consider it a miracle of Providence that it has provided so great a heroine for my unhappy country," he took his departure to Venice, suggesting that the Princess should meet him there, where matters could be more safely and successfully discussed. Thus it was that the Princess said her last good-bye to her ducal lover, full of promises for the future when she should have won her throne, and as "Countess of Pinneberg" set forth with a retinue of followers to Venice, where she was regally received at the French embassy.

Here she tasted the first sweets of her coming Queendom--holding her Courts, to which distinguished Poles and Frenchmen flocked to pay homage to the Empress-to-be, and having daily conferences with Radziwill, who treated her as already a Queen. That her purse was empty and the bankers declined to honour her drafts was a matter to smile at, since the way now seemed clear to a crown, with all it meant of wealth and power. When the Venetian Government grew uneasy at the plotting within its borders, she went to Ragusa, where she blossomed into the "Princess of all the Russias," assumed the sceptre that was soon to be hers, issued proclamations as a sovereign, and crowned these regal acts by sending a ukase to Alexis Orloff, the Russian Commander-in-Chief, "signed Elizabeth II., and instructing him to communicate its contents to the army and fleet under his command."

Once more, however, fortune played the Princess a scurvy trick, just when her favour seemed most assured. One night a man was seen scaling the garden-wall of the palace she was occupying. The guard fired at him, and the following morning Domanski was found, lying wounded and unconscious in the garden. The tongues of scandal were set wagging again, old suspicions were revived, and once again the word "adventuress"--and worse--passed from mouth to mouth. The men who had fawned on her now avoided her; worse still, Radziwill, his latent suspicions thoroughly awakened, and confirmed by a hundred stories and rumours that came to his ears, declined to have anything more to do with her, and returned in disgust to Germany.

But even this crushing rebuff was powerless to damp the spirits and ambition of the "adventuress," who shook the dust of Ragusa off her dainty feet, and went off to Rome, where she soon cast her spell over Sir William Hamilton, our Ambassador there, who gave her the warmest hospitality. "For several days," we learn, "she reigns like a Queen in the _salon_ of the Ambassador, out of whose penchant for beautiful women she has no difficulty in wiling a passport that enables her to enter the most exclusive circles of Roman society."

In Rome she lays aside her regal trappings, and wins the respect of all by her unostentatious living and her prodigal charities. She becomes a

favourite at the Vatican; Cardinals do homage to her goodness, with perhaps a pardonable eye to her beauty. But behind the brave and pious front she thus shows to the world her heart is growing more heavy day by day. Poverty is at her door in the guise of importunate creditors, her servants are clamouring for overdue wages, and consumption, which for long has threatened her, now shows its presence in hectic cheeks and a hacking cough. Fortune seems at last to have abandoned her; and it requires all her courage to sustain her in this hour of darkness.

In her extremity she appeals to Sir William Hamilton for a loan, much as a Queen might confer a favour on a subject, and Hamilton, pleased to be of service to so fair and pious a lady, sends her letter to his Leghorn banker, Mr John Dick, with instructions to arrange the matter.

* * * * *

While the Princess Aly was practising piety and cultivating Cardinals in Rome, with an empty purse and a pain-racked body to make a mockery of her claim to a crown, away in distant Russia Catherine II. was nursing a terrible revenge on the woman who had dared to usurp her position and threaten her throne. The succession of revolutions, at which she had at first smiled scornfully, had now roused the tigress in her. She would show the world that she was no woman to be trifled with, and the first victim of her vengeance should be that brazen Princess who dared to masquerade as "Elizabeth II."

She sent imperative orders to her trusted and beloved Orloff, fresh from his crushing defeat of the Turkish fleet, to seize her at any cost, even if he had to raze Ragusa to the ground; and these orders she knew would be executed to the letter. For was not Orloff the man whose strong hands had strangled her husband and placed the crown on her head; also her most devoted slave? He was, it is true, the biggest scoundrel (as he was also one of the handsomest men) in Europe, a man ready to stoop to any infamy, and thus the best possible tool for such an infamous purpose; but he was also her greatest admirer, eager to step into the place of "chief favourite" from which his brother Gregory had just been dismissed.

When, however, Orloff went to Ragusa, with his soldiers at his back, he found that the Princess had already flown, leaving no trace behind her. He ransacked Sicily in vain, and it was only when Sir William Hamilton's letter to his Leghorn banker came to his hands that he discovered that she was in Rome, a much safer asylum than Ragusa. It was hopeless now to capture her by force; he must try diplomacy, and, by the hands of an aide-de-camp, he sent her a letter in which he informed her that he had received her ukase and was anxious to pay due homage to the future Empress of Russia.

Such was the "Judas" message Kristenef, Orloff's emissary, carried to the Princess, whom he found in a pitiful condition, wasted to a shadow by disease and starvation--"in a room cold and bare, whose only furniture was a leather sofa, on which she lay in a high fever, coughing convulsively." To such pathetic straits was "Elizabeth II." reduced when Kristenef came with his fawning airs and lying tongue to tell her that Alexis Orloff, the greatest man in Russia, had instructed him to offer her the throne of the Tsars, and, as an earnest of his loyalty, to beg her acceptance of a loan of eleven thousand ducats.

In vain did Domanski, who was still by her side, warn her against the

smooth-tongued envoy. She was flattered by such unexpected homage, her eyes were dazzled by the near prospect of the coveted crown which was to be hers, at last, just when hope seemed dead. She would accept Orloff's invitation to go to Pisa to meet him. "As for you," she said, "if you are afraid, you can stay behind. I am going where Destiny calls me."

This revolution in her fortunes acted like magic. New life coursed through her veins, colour returned to her cheeks, and brightness to her eyes, as one February day in 1775 she left Rome, with the devoted Domanski for companion and a brilliant escort, for Pisa, where Orloff greeted her as an Empress. He gave regal fetes in her honour and filled her ears with honeyed and flattering words.

Affecting to be dazzled by her beauty, he even dared to make passionate love to her, which no man of his day could do more effectively than this handsomest of the Orloffs; and so infatuated was the poor Princess by the adoration of her handsome lover and the assurance of the throne he was to give her, that she at last consented to share that throne with him, and by his side went through a marriage ceremony, at which two of his officers masqueraded as officiating priests.

Nothing remained now between her and the goal of her desires, except to make the journey to Russia as speedily as possible, and a few hours after the wedding banquet we see her in the Admiral's launch, with Orloff and Domanski and a brilliant suite of officers, leaving Leghorn for the Russian flagship, where she was received with the blare of bands and the booming of artillery. The crowning moment arrived when, as she was being hoisted to the deck in a gorgeous chair suspended from the yard-arm, her future sailors greeted her with thunders of shouts, "Long live the Empress!"

The moment she set foot on deck she was seized, handcuffs were snapped on her wrists, and she was carried a helpless captive to a cabin. At the same moment Domanski was overpowered before he had time to use his sword, and made a prisoner.

The Princess's cries for Orloff, her husband and saviour, are met with derision. Orloff she is told is himself a prisoner. He has, in fact, vanished, his dastardly mission executed; and she never saw him again. Two months later the victim of a man's treachery and a woman's vengeance is looking with tear-dimmed eyes on "her capital" through a barred window of a cell in the fortress of Saints Peter and Paul.

Over the tragic closing of her days we may not dwell long. The scene is too pitiful, too harrowing. In vain she implores an interview with Catherine, who blazes into anger at the request. "The impudence of the wretch," she exclaims, "is beyond all bounds! She must be mad. Tell her if she wishes any improvement in her lot to cease the comedy she is playing." Prince Galitzin, Grand Chancellor, exerts all his skill in vain to force a confession of imposture from her. To his wiles and threats alike she opposes a dignified and calm front. She persists in the story of her birth; refuses to admit that she is an impostor.

Even when she is flung into a loathsome cell, with bread and water for diet, she does not waver a jot in her demeanour of dignity or in her Royal claims. Only when she is charged with being the daughter of a Prague innkeeper does she allow indignation to master her, as she retorts, "I have never been in Prague in my life, and if I knew who had thus slandered me I would scratch his eyes out." Domanski, too, proves

equally intractable; even the promise of marriage to her will not wring from him a word that might discredit his beloved Princess.

But although the Princess keeps such a brave heart under conditions that might well have broken it, her spirit is powerless against the insidious disease that is working such havoc with her body. In her damp, noisome cell consumption makes rapid headway. Her strength ebbs daily; the end is coming swiftly near. She makes a last dying appeal to Catherine to see her if but for a few moments, but the appeal falls on deaf ears. When she sends for a priest to minister to her last hours, and, by Catherine's orders, he makes a final attempt to wrest her secret from her, she moans with her failing breath, "Say the prayers for the dead. That is all there is for you to do here."

Four days later death came to her release. Catherine's throne was safe from this danger at least, and she was left to dalliance with her legion of lovers, while the woman on whom she had wreaked such terrible vengeance lay deeply buried in the courtyard of her prison, the very soldiers who dug her grave being sworn to secrecy. Thus in mystery her life opened, and in secrecy it closed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KING AND THE "LITTLE DOVE"

A savage murmur ran through the market-place of Bergen, one summer morning in the year 1507, as Chancellor Valkendorf made his pompous way along the avenues of stalls laden with their country produce, his passage followed by scowling eyes and low-spoken maledictions.

There could not have been a more unwelcome visitor than this cold-eyed, supercilious Chancellor, unless it were his master, Christian, the Danish Prince who had come to rule Norway with the iron hand, and to stamp out the fires of rebellion against the alien rule that were always smouldering, when not leaping into flame. Bergen itself had been the scene of the latest revolt against oppressive and unjust taxes, and the insolent Valkendorf, who was now taking his morning stroll in the market-place, was fresh from suppressing it with a rough hand which had left many a smart and longing for vengeance behind it.

But the Chancellor could afford to smile at such evidences of unpopularity. He knew that he was the most hated man in Norway--after his master--but he had executed his mission well and was ready to do it again. And thus it was with an air, half-amused, half-contemptuous, that he made his progress this July morning among the booths and stalls of the market, with eyes scornfully blind to frowns, but very wide open for any pretty face he might chance to see.

He had not strolled far before his eyes were arrested by as strangely contrasted a picture as any he had ever seen. Behind one of the stalls, heaped high with luscious, many-coloured fruits and mountains of vegetables, were two women, each so remarkable in her different way that, almost involuntarily, he stood rooted to the spot, gazing open-eyed at them. The elder of the two was of gigantic stature, towering head and shoulders over her companion, with harsh, masculine

face, massive jaw, coarse protruding lips, and black eyes which were fixed on him in a magnetic stare, defiant and scornful--for none knew better than she who the stranger was, and few hated him more.

But it was not to this grim, hard-visaged Amazon that Valkendorf's eyes were drawn, compelling as were her stature and her basilisk stare. They quickly turned from her, with a motion of contempt, to feast on the vision by her side--that of a girl on the threshold of young womanhood and of a beauty that dazzled the eyes of the old voluptuary. How had she come there and in such company, this ravishing girl on whom Nature had lavished the last touch of virginal loveliness, this maiden with her figure of such supple grace, the proud little oval face with its complexion of cream and roses, the dainty head from which twin plaits of golden hair fell almost to her knees, and the eyes blue as violets, now veiled demurely, now opening wide to reveal their glories, enhanced by a look of appeal, almost of fear.

The Chancellor, who was the last man to pass by a flower so seductively beautiful, approached the stall, undaunted by the forbidding eyes of the giantess, Frau Sigbrit, by name, and, after making a small purchase, sought to draw her into amiable conversation. "No," she said in answer to his inquiries, "we are not Norwegian. We come from Holland, my daughter and I, and we are trying to earn a little money before returning there. But why do you ask?" she demanded almost fiercely, putting a protecting arm around the girl, as if she would shield her from an enemy. "You are in such a different world from ours!"

Little by little, however, the grim face began to relax under the adroit flatteries and courtly deference of the Chancellor--for none knew better than he the arts of charming, when he pleased; and it was not long before the Amazon, completely thawed, was confiding to him the most intimate details of her history and her hopes.

"Yes, my daughter is beautiful," she said, with a look of pride at the girl which transfigured her face. "Many a great man has told me so--dukes, princes, and lords. She is as fair a flower as ever grew in Holland; and she is as sweet as she is fair. She is Dyveke, my "little dove," the pride of my heart, my soul, my life. She is to be a Queen one day. It has been revealed to me in my dreams. But when the day dawns it will be the saddest in my life." And with further amiable words and a final courtly salute, Valkendorf continued his stroll, secretly promising himself a further acquaintance with the dragon and her "little dove."

This was the first of many morning strolls in the Bergen market, in which the Chancellor spent delightful moments at Frau Sigbrit's stall, each leaving him more and more a slave to her daughter's charms; for he quickly found that to her physical perfections were allied a low, sweet voice, every note of which was musical as that of a nightingale, a quiet dignity and refinement as far removed from her station as her simple print frock with the bunch of roses nestling in the white purity of her bosom, and a sprightliness of wit which even her modesty could not always repress.

Thus it was that, when Valkendorf at last returned to Upsala and the Court of his master, Christian, his tongue was full of the praises of the "market-beauty" of Bergen, whose charms he pictured so glowingly that the Prince's heart became as inflamed by a sympathetic passion as his mind by curiosity to see such a siren. "I shall not rest," he said

to his Chancellor, "until I have seen your 'little dove' with my own eyes; and who knows," he added with a laugh, "perhaps I shall steal her from you!"

It was in vain that Valkendorf, now alarmed by his indiscretion, began to pour cold water on the flames he had lit. Christian had quite lost his susceptible heart to the rustic and unknown beauty, and vowed that he could not rest until he had seen her with his own eyes. And within a month he was riding into Bergen, with Valkendorf by his side, at the head of a brilliant retinue.

As the Prince made his way through the crowded avenues of the Bergen streets to an accompaniment of scowls punctuated by feeble, forced cheers, he cut a goodly enough figure to win many an admiring, if reluctant, glance from bright eyes. With his broad shoulders, his erect, well-knit figure clothed in purple velvet, his stern, swarthy face crowned by a white-plumed hat, Christian looked every inch a Prince.

To-day, too, he was in his most amiable mood, with a smile ready to leap to his lips, and many a gracious wave of the hand and sweep of plumed hat to acknowledge the grudging salutes of his subjects. He could be charming enough when he pleased, and this was a day of high good-humour; for his mind was full of the pleasure that awaited him. Even Frau Sigbrit's scowl was chased away when his eyes were drawn to her towering figure, and with a swift smile he singled her out for the honour of a special salute.

When the Prince at last arrived in the market-square, he was greeted by a procession of the prettiest maidens in Bergen who, in white frocks and with flower-wreathed hair, advanced to pay him the homage of demure eyes. But among them all, the loveliest girls of the city, Christian saw but one--a girl younger than almost any other, but so radiantly lovely that his eyes fixed themselves on her as if entranced, until her cheeks flamed a vivid crimson under the ardour of his gaze. "No need to point her out," he whispered delightedly to Valkendorf, "I see your 'little dove,' and she is all you have told me and more."

Before many hours had passed, a Court official appeared at Frau Sigbrit's cottage door with a command from the Prince to her and her daughter to attend a State ball the following evening. If the poor market-woman had had a crown laid at her feet, her surprise and consternation could scarcely have been greater. But she would make a bigger sacrifice of inclination than this for the "little dove" who filled her heart, and who, she remembered, was destined to be a Queen; and decking her in all the finery her modest purse could command and with a taste of which few would have suspected she was capable, the market stall-keeper stalked majestically through the avenue of gorgeous flunkeys, her little Princess with downcast eyes following demurely in her wake.

All the fairest women of Bergen were gathered at this ball, the host of which was their coming King, but it was to the fruit-seller's daughter that all eyes were turned, in homage to such a rare combination of beauty, grace, and modesty. Many a fair lip, it is true, curled in mockery, recognising in the belle of the ball the low-born girl of the market-place; but it was the mockery of jealousy, the scornful tribute to a loveliness greater than their own.

As for Prince Christian, he had no eyes for any but the "little dove"

who outshone all her rivals as the sun pales the stars. It was the maid of the market whom he led out for the first dance, and throughout the long night he rarely left her side, whirling round the room with her, his arm close-clasped round her slender waist, not seeing or indifferent to the glances of envy and hate that followed them; or, during the intervals, drinking in her beauty as he poured sweet flatteries into her ears. As for Dyveke, she was radiantly happy at finding herself thus transported into the favour of a Prince and the Queendom of fair women, for whose envy she cared as little as for the danger in which she stood.

If anything had remained to complete Christian's infatuation, this intoxicating night of the ball supplied it. The "little dove" had found a secure nesting-place in his heart. She must be his at any cost. She and her mother alone, of all the guests, were invited to spend the rest of the night at the castle as the Prince's guests; and when he parted from her the following day, it was with vows on his part of undying love and fidelity, and a promise on hers to come to him at Upsala as soon as a suitable home could be found for her.

Thus easily was the dove caught in the toils of one of the most amorous Princes of Europe; but it must be said for her that her heart went with the surrender of her freedom, for the Prince, with his ardent passion, his strength and his magnetism, had swept her as quickly off her feet as she had made a quick conquest of him.

Thus, before many weeks had passed, we find Dyveke installed with her mother in a sumptuous home in the outskirts of Upsala, queening it in the Prince's Court, and every day forging new fetters to bind him to her. And while Dyveke thus ruled over Christian's heart, her strong-minded mother soon established a similar empire over his mind. With the clever, masterful brain of a man, the Amazon of the market-place developed such a capacity for intrigue, such a grasp of statesmanship and such arts of diplomacy that Christian, strong man as he thought himself, soon became little more than a puppet in her hands, taking her counsel and deferring to her judgment in preference to those of his ministers. The fruit-seller thus found herself virtual Prime Minister, while her daughter reigned, an uncrowned Queen.

When the Prince was summoned to Copenhagen by his father's failing health, Frau Sigbrit and her daughter accompanied him, one in her way as indispensable as the other; and when King James died and Christian reigned in his stead, the women of the Bergen market were installed in a splendid suite of apartments in his palace. So hopeless was his subjection to both that his subjects, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders, accepted them as inevitable.

For a time, it is true, their supremacy was in danger. Now that Christian was King, it became important to provide him with a Queen, and a suitable consort was found for him in the Austrian Princess, Isabella, sister of the Emperor Charles V., a well-gilded bride, distinguished alike for her beauty and her piety. Isabella, however, was one of the last women to tolerate any rivalry in her husband's affection, and before the marriage-contract was sealed, she had received a solemn pledge from Christian's envoys that his relations with the pretty flower-girl should cease.

But even Christian's word of honour was seldom allowed to bar the way to his pleasure, and within a few weeks of Isabella's bridal entry into Copenhagen, Dyveke and her mother resumed their places at his Court, to

his Queen's unconcealed disgust and displeasure. More than this, he established them in a fine house near his palace gates; and when he was not dallying there with Dyveke, he was to be found by her side at the Castle of Hvideur, of which he had made her chatelaine.

The remonstrances of Valkendorf and his other ministers were made to deaf ears; his wife's reproaches and tears were as futile as the strongly worded protestations of his Royal relatives. Pleadings, arguments, and threats were alike powerless to break the spell Dyveke and her mother had cast over him. But Dyveke's day of empire was now drawing to a tragic close. One day, after eating some cherries from the palace gardens, she was seized with a violent pain. All the skill of the Court doctors could do as little to assuage her agony as to save her life; and within a few hours she died, clasped to the breast of her distracted lover!

Such was Christian's distress that for a time his reason trembled in the balance. He vowed that he would not be separated from her even by death; he threatened to put an end to his own life since it had been reft of all that made it worth living. And when cooler moments came, he swore a terrible vengeance against those who had robbed him of his beloved. She had been poisoned beyond a doubt; but who had done the dastardly deed?

The finger of suspicion pointed to the steward of his household, Torbern Oxe, who, it was said, had been among the most ardent of Dyveke's admirers, and had had the audacity to aspire to her hand. It was even rumoured that he had had more intimate relations with her. Such were the stories and suspicions that passed from mouth to mouth in Christian's clouded Court before Dyveke's beautiful body was cold; and such were the tales which Hans Faaborg, the King's Treasurer, poured into his master's ears.

Hans Faaborg little dreamt that when he was thus trying to bring about the downfall of his rival he was sealing his own fate. Christian lent an eager ear to the stories of his steward's iniquities; but, when he found there was no shred of proof to support them, his anger and disappointment vented themselves on the informer. He had long suspected Faaborg of irregularities in his purse-holding, and in these suspicions found a weapon to use against him. Faaborg was arrested; an examination of his ledgers showed that for years he had been waxing rich at his master's expense, and he had to pay with his life the penalty of his fraud and his unproved testimony.

But Faaborg, though thus removed from his path, was by no means done with. Rumours began to be circulated that a strange light appeared every night above the dead man's head as he swung on the gallows. The city was full of superstitious awe and of whisperings that Heaven was thus bearing witness to the Treasurer's innocence. And even the King himself, when he too saw the unearthly light forming a halo round his victim's head, was filled with remorse and fear to such an extent that he had Faaborg's body cut down and honoured with a State funeral.

He was still, however, as far as ever from solving the mystery of Dyveke's death; and the longer his desire for vengeance was baffled, the more clamorous it became. Although nothing could be proved against Torbern Oxe, Christian was by no means satisfied of his innocence, and he decided to discover by guile the secret which all other means had failed to reveal. He would, if possible, make his steward his own betrayer. One day, at a Court banquet, he turned in jocular mood to the

minister and said, "Tell me now, my dear Torbern, was there really any truth in what Faaborg told me of your relations with my beautiful Lady! Don't hesitate to tell the truth, which only you know, for I assure you no harm shall come to you from it."

Thus thrown off his guard and reassured, the steward, who, like his master, had probably drunk not wisely, confessed that he had loved Dyveke, and had asked her to be his wife. "But, sire," he added, "that was the extent of my offence. I was never intimate with her." During the remainder of the banquet Christian was most affable to the indiscreet steward, not only showing no trace of resentment, but treating him with marked friendliness.

The following day, however, Torbern was flung into prison, and charged, not only with his confession, but with the murder of the woman he had so vainly loved; and, in spite of the storm of indignation that swept over Denmark, the pleadings of the Papal Legate, Arcimbaldo, and the tears of the Queen, was sentenced to death for a crime of which there was no scrap of evidence to point to his guilt.

This gross act of injustice proved to be the beginning of Christian's downfall. His cruelties and oppressions had long made him odious to his subjects, and the climax came when a popular uprising hurled him from his throne and drove him an exile to Holland. An attempt to recover his crown ended in speedy disaster, and his last years were spent, in company with his favourite dwarf, in a cell of the Holstein Castle of Sondeborg.

As for Sigbrit, the woman who had played such a conspicuous and baleful part in Christian's life, she deserted her benefactor at the first sign of his coming ruin and ended her days in her native Holland, bemoaning to the last the loss of her "little dove," whom she had seen raised almost to a throne and had lost so tragically.

CHAPTER IX

THE ROMANCE OF THE BEAUTIFUL SWEDE

Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, owes his place in the world's memory to his brawny muscles and to his conquest of women. Like the third Alexander of Russia of later years, he could, with his powerful arms, convert a thick iron bar into a necklace, crush a pewter tankard by the pressure of a mighty hand, toss a heavy anvil into the air and catch it as another man would catch a ball, or with a wrench straighten out the stoutest horse-shoe ever forged.

And his strength of muscle was matched by his skill in the lists of love. No Louis of France could boast such an array of conquests as this Saxon Hercules, who changed his mistresses as easily as he changed his coats; the fairest women in Europe, from Turkey to Poland, succeeded each other in bewildering succession as the slaves of his pleasure, and before he died he counted his children to as many as the year has days.

Of all these fair and frail women who thus ministered to the pleasure of the "Saxon Samson," none was so beautiful, so gifted, so altogether

alluring as Marie Aurora, Countess of Koenigsmarck, the younger of the two daughters of Conrad of Koenigsmarck. Born in the year 1668, Aurora was one of three children of the Swedish Count Conrad and his wife, the daughter of the great Field-Marshal Wrangel. Her elder sister, little less fair than herself, found a husband, when little more than a child, in Count Axel Loewenhaupt; her brother Philip, the handsomest man of his day in Europe, was destined to end his days tragically as the price of his infatuation for a Queen.

Betrayed by a jealous woman, the Countess Platen, whose overtures he spurned, this too gallant lover of Sophia Dorothea of Celle, wife of the first of our Georges, was foully done to death in a corridor of the Leine Schloss by La Paten's hired assassins, while she looked smilingly on at his futile struggle for life, and gloated over his dying agonies.

On the death of her father, when she was but a child of three, Aurora was taken by her mother from her native Sweden to Hamburg, where she grew to beautiful young womanhood; and when, in turn, her mother died, she found a home with her married sister, the Countess Loewenhaupt. And it is at this period of her life that her romantic story opens.

If we are to believe her contemporaries, the world has seldom seen so much beauty and so many graces enshrined in the form of woman as in this daughter of Sweden. Her description reads like a catalogue of all human perfections. Of medium height and a figure as faultless in its exquisite modelling as in its grace and suppleness; her hair, black as a raven's plumage, and falling, like a veil of night, below her knees, emphasised the white purity of face and throat, arms, and hands. Her teeth, twin rows of pearls, glistened between smiling crimson lips, curved like Cupid's bow. Her face of perfect oval, with its delicately moulded features, was illuminated by a pair of large black eyes, now melting, now flaming, as mood succeeded mood.

To these graces of body were allied equal graces of mind and character. Her conversation sparkled with wit and wisdom; she could hold fluent discourse in half a dozen tongues; she played and sang divinely, wrote elegant verses, and painted dainty pictures. Her manner was caressing and courteous; she was generous to a fault, with a heart as tender as it was large. And the supreme touch was added by an entire unconsciousness of her charms, and an unaffected modesty which captivated all hearts.

Such was Aurora of Koenigsmarck who, in company with her sister, set forth one day to claim the fortune which her ill-fated brother, Philip, was said to have left in the custody of his Hanoverian bankers--a journey which was to make such a dramatic revolution in her own life.

Arrived at Hanover the sisters found themselves faced by no easy task. The bankers declared that they had nothing of the late Count's effects beyond a few diamonds, which they declined to part with, unless evidence were forthcoming that the Count had died and had left no will behind him--evidence which, owing to the secrecy surrounding his murder, it was impossible to furnish. And when a discharged clerk revealed the fact that the dishonest bankers had actually all the Count's estate, valued at four hundred thousand crowns, in their possession, the sisters were unable to make them disgorge a solitary mark.

In their extremity, they decided to appeal to the Elector of Saxony, who had known Count Philip well and who would, they hoped, be the champion of their rights; and, with this object, they journeyed to Dresden, only

to find themselves again baffled. Augustus was away on a hunting excursion, and would not return for a whole month. His wife and mother, however, gave them a gracious reception, as charmed by their beauty and sweetness as sympathetic in their trouble.

When at last Augustus made his tardy appearance at his capital, the fair petitioners were presented to him by the Dowager Electress with words of strong recommendation to his favour. "These ladies, my son," she said, "have come to beg for your protection and help, to which they are entitled both by birth and their merits. I beg that you will spare no effort to ensure that justice is done to them."

His mother's pleading, however, was not necessary to ensure a favourable hearing from the Elector, whose eyes were eloquent of the admiration he felt for the two fairest women who had ever visited his land. Aurora's beauty, enhanced by her attitude of appeal, the mute craving for protection, was irresistible. From the moment she entered his presence he was her slave, as anxious to do her will as any lovesick boy.

And it was to her that, with his courtliest bow, he answered, "Be assured, dear lady, that I shall know no rest until your wrongs are repaired. If I fail, I myself will make reparation in full. Meanwhile, may I beg you and your sister to be my guests, that I may prove how deep is my sympathy, and how profound the respect I feel for you."

Thus it was that by the magic of beauty Aurora and her Countess sister found themselves installed at the Dresden Court, feted like Queens, receiving the caresses of the Court ladies, and the homage of every man, from Augustus himself to the youngest page, of whom a smile from their pretty lips made a veritable slave. As for the Elector, sated as he was with the easy smiles and favours of fair women, he gave to the Swedish beauty, from the first, a homage he had never paid to any of her predecessors in his affection.

But Aurora was no woman to be easily won by any man. She listened smilingly to the Elector's honeyed words, and received his attentions with the gracious complaisance of a Queen. When, however, he ventured to tell her that "her charms inspired him with a passion such as he had never felt for any woman," she answered coldly, "I came here prepared for your generosity, but I did not expect that your kindness would assume a form to cause me shame. I beg you not to say anything that can lessen the gratitude I owe you, and the respect I feel for you."

Here indeed was a rebuff such as Augustus was little prepared for, or accustomed to. The beauty, of whom he had hoped to make an easy conquest, was an iceberg whom all his ardour could not thaw. He was in despair. "I am sure she hates and despises me, while I love her dearer than life itself," he confessed to his favourite Beuchling, who vainly tried to console and cheer him. He confided his passion and his pain to Aurora's sister, whose hopeful words were alike powerless to dispel his gloom.

When Aurora held aloof from him, he sent letter after letter of passionate pleading to her by the hand of the trusty Beuchling. "If you knew the tortures I am suffering," he wrote, "your kindness of heart could not resist pitying me. I was mad to declare my passion so brutally to you. Let me expiate my fault, prostrate at your feet; and, if you wish for my death, let me at least receive my sentence from your own sweet lips."

To such a desperate state was Augustus brought within a few days of setting eyes on his new divinity! As for Aurora of the tender heart, her lover's distress thawed her more than a year of passionate protestations could have done. She replied, assuring him of her gratitude, her esteem and respect, and begging him to dismiss such unworthy thoughts of her. But she had no word of encouragement to send him in the note which her lover kissed so rapturously before placing it next his heart.

So alarmed, indeed, was Aurora, that she announced her intention of leaving forthwith a Court in which she was exposed to so much danger--a project to which her sister gave a reluctant approval. But the Countess Loewenhaupt was little disposed to leave a Court where she at least was having such a good time; for she, too, had her lovers, and among them the Prince of Fuerstenberg, the handsomest man in Saxony, whose devotion was more than agreeable to her. She preferred to play the part of Cupid's agent--to exercise her diplomacy in bringing together those two foolish persons, her sister and the Elector.

And so skilfully did she play her part, appealing to Aurora's pity, and assuring Augustus of her sister's love in spite of her seeming coldness, that before many weeks had passed Aurora had yielded and was listening with no unwilling ear to the vows of her exalted lover, now transported to the seventh heaven of happiness. One condition she made, when their mutual troth was plighted, that it should, for a time at least, remain a secret from the Court, and to this the Elector gratefully assented.

Such was the strange wooing of Augustus and the Countess Aurora, in which passion had its response in a pity which, in this case at least, was the parent of love.

It was with no very light heart that Aurora set forth to Mauritzburg, a few days later, to keep "honeymoon tryst" with Augustus, who had preceded her, to make, as she understood, the necessary preparations for her reception. With her sister and a mounted escort of the most beautiful ladies of the Court, she had ridden as far as the entrance to the Mauritzburg forest, when her carriage suddenly came to a halt in front of a magnificent palace. From the open door emerged Diana with her attendant nymphs to greet her with words of welcome, and to beg her to tarry a while to accept the hospitality of the forest gods.

In response to this flattering invitation Aurora left her carriage and was escorted in stately procession to a saloon, richly painted with sylvan scenes, in which a sumptuous banquet was spread. No sooner were she and her ladies seated at the table than, to the strains of beautiful music, the god Pan (none other than the Elector himself), with his retinue of fawns and other richly and quaintly garbed forest gods, made his entry, and took his seat at the right hand of his goddess. Then, to the deft ministry of Diana and her satellites, and to the soft accompaniment of pipes and hautboys, the feasting began, while Pan whispered love to the lady for whom he had prepared such a charming hospitality.

The banquet had scarcely come to an end when the jubilant sound of horns was heard from the forest. A stag dashed by a window in full flight, and Aurora and her ladies, rushing excitedly to the door, saw horses awaiting them for the hunt.

In a moment they are mounted, and, gaily laughing, with Pan leading the

way, they are galloping through the forest glades in the wake of the flying stag and the music of the hounds, until the stag, hotly pursued, dashes into a lake, in the centre of which is a beautiful wooded island. Dismounting, the ladies enter the gondolas which are so opportunely awaiting them, and are rowed across the strip of water just in time to witness the death of the gallant animal they have been chasing.

The hunt over, Aurora and her ladies are conducted to the leafy heart of the island, where, as by the touch of a magician's wand, a gorgeous Eastern tent has sprung up, and here another sumptuous entertainment is prepared for them. Seated on soft-cushioned divans, in the many-hued environment of Oriental luxury, rare fruits and delicacies are brought to them in silver baskets by turbaned Turks. The island Sultan now appears, ablaze with gems, with his officers little less gorgeous than himself, and with deep obeisances craves permission to seat himself by Aurora's side, a favour which she was not likely to refuse to a Sultan in whom she recognised her lover, the Elector. Troupes of dancing-girls follow, and the moments fly swiftly to the twinkling of dainty feet, the gliding and posturing of supple bodies, and the strains of sensuous music.

Another hour spent in the gondolas, dreamily gliding under the light of the moon, and horses are again mounted; and Aurora, with Augustus riding proudly by her side, heads the splendid procession which, with laughter, and in the gayest of spirits, rides forth to the Mauritzburg Castle at the close of a day so full of delights.

"Here," was the Elector's greeting, as he conducted his bride to her room with its furnishing of silver and rich damask, and its pictured Cupid showering roses on the silk-curtained bed, "you are the Queen, and I am your slave."

Such was the beginning of Aurora's reign over the heart of the Elector of Saxony--a reign of unclouded splendour and happiness for the woman in whom pity for her lover was soon replaced by a passion as ardent as his own. Fetes and banquets and balls succeeded each other in swift sequence, at all of which Aurora was Queen, the focus of all eyes, and receiving universal homage, won no more by her beauty and her position as the Elector's favourite than by her sweetness and graciousness to the humblest. No mistress of a King was ever more beloved than this daughter of Sweden. Even the Elector's mother, a pattern of the most rigid propriety, had ever a kind word and a caress for her; his neglected wife made a friend and confidante of the woman of whom she said, "Since I must have a rival, I am glad she should be one so sweet and lovable."

We must hasten over the years that followed--years during which Augustus had no eyes for any other woman than his "uncrowned Queen," and during which she bore him a son who, as Maurice of Saxony, was to win many laurels in the years to come. It must suffice to say that never was Royal liaison conducted with so much propriety, or was marked by so much mutual devotion and loyalty.

But it was not in the nature of Augustus the Strong to remain always true to any woman, however charming; and although Aurora's reign lasted longer than that of any half-dozen of her rivals, it, too, had its ending. Within a month of the birth of her son, Augustus, now King of Poland, was caught in the toils of another enslaver, the beautiful Countess Esterle. Aurora realised that her sun had set, and relinquishing her sceptre without a murmur, she retired to the convent

of Quedlinburg, of which Augustus had appointed her Abbess.

Thus in an atmosphere of peace and piety, beloved of all for her sweetness and charity, Aurora of Koenigsmarck spent her last years until the end came one day in the year 1728; and in the crypt of the convent she loved so well she sleeps her last sleep.

CHAPTER X

THE SISTER OF AN EMPEROR

When Napoleon Bonaparte, the shabby, sallow-faced, out-of-work captain of artillery, was kicking his heels in morose idleness at Marseilles, and whiling away the dull hours in making love to Desiree Clary, the pretty daughter of the silk-merchant in the Rue des Phoceens, his sisters were living with their mother, the Signora Letizia, in a sordid fourth-floor apartment in a slum near the Cannebiere, and running wild in the Marseilles streets.

Strange tales are told of those early years of the sisters of an Emperor-to-be--Elisa Bonaparte, future Grand Duchess of Tuscany; Pauline, embryo Princess Borghese; and Caroline, who was to wear a crown as Queen of Naples--high-spirited, beautiful girls, brimful of frolic and fun, laughing at their poverty, decking themselves out in cheap, home-made finery, and flirting outrageously with every good-looking young man who was willing to pay homage to their *_beaux yeux_*. If Marseilles deigned to notice these pretty young madcaps, it was only with the cold eyes of disapproval; for such "shameless goings-on" were little less than a scandal.

The pity of it was that there was no one to check their escapades. Their mother, the imposing Madame Mere of later years, seemed indifferent what her daughters did, so long as they left her in peace; their brothers, Kings-to-be, were too much occupied with their own love-making or their pranks to spare them a thought. And thus the trio of tomboys were left, with a loose rein, to indulge every impulse that entered their foolish heads. And a right merry time they had, with their dancing, their private theatricals, the fun behind the scenes, and their promiscuous love affairs, each serious and thrilling until it gave place to a successor.

Of the three Bonaparte "graces" the most lovely by far (though each was passing fair) was Pauline, who, though still little more than a child, gave promise of that rare perfection of face and figure which was to make her the most beautiful woman in all France. "It is impossible, with either pen or brush," wrote one who knew her, "to do any justice to her charms--the brilliance of her eyes, which dazzled and thrilled all on whom they fell; the glory of her black hair, rippling in a cascade to her knees; the classic purity of her Grecian profile, the wild-rose delicacy of her complexion, the proud, dainty poise of her head, and the exquisite modelling of the figure which inspired Canova's 'Venus Victrix.'"

Such was Pauline Bonaparte, whose charms, although then immature, played such havoc with the young men of Marseilles, and who thus early began

that career of conquest which was to afford so much gossip for the tongue of scandal. That the winsome little minx had her legion of lovers from the day she set foot in Marseilles, at the age of thirteen, we know; but it was not until Freron came on the scene that her volatile little heart was touched--Feron, the handsome coxcomb and arch-revolutionary, who was sent to Marseilles as a Commissioner of the Convention.

To Pauline, the gay, gallant Parisian, penniless adventurer though he was, was a veritable hero of romance; and at sight of him she completely lost her heart. It was a *_grande passion_*, which he was by no means slow to return. Those were delicious hours which Pauline spent in the company of her beloved "Stanislas," hours of ecstasy; and when he left Marseilles she pursued him with the most passionate protestations.

"Yes," she wrote, "I swear, dear Stanislas, never to love any other than thee; my heart knows no divided allegiance. It is thine alone. Who could oppose the union of two souls who seek to find no other happiness than in a mutual love?" And again, "Thou knowest how I worship thee. It is not possible for Paulette to live apart from her adored Stanislas. I love thee for ever, most passionately, my beautiful god, my adorable one--I love thee, love thee, love thee!"

In such hot words this child of fifteen poured out her soul to the Paris dandy. "Neither mamma," she vowed, "nor anyone in the world shall come between us." But Pauline had not counted on her brother Napoleon, whose foot was now placed on the ladder of ambition, at the top of which was an Imperial crown, and who had other designs for his sister than to marry her to a penniless nobody. In vain did Pauline rage and weep, and declare that "she would die--*_voila tout!_*" Napoleon was inexorable; and the flower of her first romance was trodden ruthlessly under his feet.

When Junot, his own aide-de-camp, next came wooing Pauline, he was equally obdurate. "No," he said to the young soldier; "you have nothing, she has nothing. And what is twice nothing?" And thus lover number two was sent away disconsolate.

Napoleon's sun was now in the ascendant, and his family were basking in its rays. From the Marseilles slums they were transported first to a sumptuous villa at Antibes; then to the Castle of Montebello, at Naples. The days of poverty were gone like an evil dream; the sisters of the famous General and coming Emperor were now young ladies of fashion, courted and fawned on. Their lovers were not Marseilles tradesmen or obscure soldiers and journalists (like Junot and Freron), but brilliant Generals and men of the great world; and among them Napoleon now sought a husband for his prettiest and most irresponsible sister.

This, however, proved no easy task. When he offered her to his favourite General, Marmont, he was met with a polite refusal. "She is indeed charming and lovely," said Marmont; "but I fear I could not make her happy." Then, waxing bolder, he continued: "I have dreams of domestic happiness, of fidelity, virtue; and these dreams I can scarcely hope to realise in your sister." Albert Permon, Napoleon's old schoolfellow, next declined the honour of Pauline's hand, although it held the bait of a high office and splendid fortune.

The explanation of these refusals is not far to seek if we believe Arnault's description of Pauline--"An extraordinary combination of the most faultless physical beauty and the oddest moral laxity. She had no

more manners than a schoolgirl--she talked incoherently, giggled at everything and nothing, mimicked the most serious personages, put out her tongue at her sister-in-law.... She was a good child naturally rather than voluntarily, for she had no principles."

But Pauline was not to wait long, after all, for a husband. Among the many men who fluttered round her, willing to woo if not to wed the empty-headed beauty, was General Leclerc, young and rich, but weak in body and mind, "a quiet, insignificant-looking man," who at least loved her passionately, and would make a pliant husband to the capricious little autocrat. And we may be sure Napoleon heaved a sigh of relief when his madcap sister was safely tied to her weak-kneed General.

Pauline was at last free to conduct her flirtations secure from the frowns of the brother she both feared and adored, and she seems to have made excellent use of her opportunities; and, what was even more to her, to encourage to the full her passion for finery. Dress and love filled her whole life; and while her idolatrous husband lavishly supplied the former, he turned a conveniently blind eye to the latter.

Remarkable stories are told of Pauline's extravagant and daring costumes at this time. Thus, at a great ball in Madame Permon's Paris mansion, she appeared in a dress of classic scantiness of Indian muslin, ornamented with gold palm leaves. Beneath her breasts was a cincture of gold, with a gorgeous jewelled clasp; and her head was wreathed with bands spotted like a leopard's skin, and adorned with bunches of gold grapes.

When this bewitching Bacchante made her appearance in the ballroom the sensation she created was so great that the dancing stopped instantly; women and men alike climbed on chairs to catch a glimpse of the rare and radiant vision, and murmurs of admiration and envy ran round the _salon_. Her triumph was complete. In the hush that followed, a voice was heard: "_Quel dommage!_" How lovely she would be, if it weren't for her ears. If I had such ears, I would cut them off, or hide them." Pauline heard the cruel words. The flush of mortification and anger flamed in her cheeks; she burst into tears and walked out of the room. Madame de Coutades, her most jealous rival, had found a rich revenge.

General Leclerc did not live long to play the slave to his little autocrat; and when he died at San Domingo, the beautiful widow returned to France, accompanied by his embalmed body, with her glorious hair, which she had cut off for the purpose, wreathing his head! She had not, however, worn her weeds many months before she was once more surrounded by her court of lovers--actors, soldiers, singers, on each of whom in turn she lavished her smiles; and such time as she could spare from their flatteries and ogling she spent at the card-table, with fortune-tellers, or, chief joy of all, in decking her beauty with wondrous dresses and jewels.

But the charming widow, sister of the great Napoleon, was not long to be left unclaimed; and this time the choice fell on Prince Camillo Borghese, a handsome, black-haired Italian, who allied to a head as vain and empty as her own the physical graces and gifts of an Admirable Crichton, and who, moreover, was lord of all the famed Borghese riches.

Pauline had now reached dizzy heights, undreamed of in the days, only ten short years earlier, when she was coquetting in home-made finery with the young tradesmen of Marseilles. She was a Princess, bearing the

greatest name in all Italy; and to this dignity her gratified brother added that of Princess of Gustalla. All the world-famous Borghese jewels were hers to deck her beauty with--a small Golconda of priceless gems; there was gold galore to satisfy her most extravagant whims; and she was still young--only twenty-five--and in the very zenith of her loveliness.

Picture, then, the pride with which, one early day of her new bridehood, she drove to the Palace of St Cloud in the gorgeous Borghese State carriage, behind six horses, and with an escort of torch-bearers, to pay a formal call on her sister-in-law, Josephine, Empress-to-be. She had decked herself in a wonderful creation of green velvet; she was ablaze from head to foot with the Borghese diamonds. Such a dazzling vision could not fail to fill Josephine with envy--Josephine, who had hitherto treated her with such haughty patronage.

As she sailed into the salon in all her Queen of Sheba splendour, it was to be greeted by her sister-in-law in a modest dress of muslin, without a solitary gem to relieve its simplicity; and--horror!--to find that the room had been re-decorated in blue by the artful Josephine--a colour absolutely fatal to her green magnificence! It was thus a very disgusted Princess who made her early exit from the palace between a double line of bowing flunkeys, masking her anger behind an affectation of ultra-Royal dignity.

Still, Pauline was now a grande dame indeed, who could really afford to patronise even Napoleon's wife. Her Court was more splendid than that of Josephine. She had lovers by the score--from Blanguini, who composed his most exquisite songs to sing for her ears alone, to Forbin, her artist Chamberlain, whose brushes she inspired in a hundred paintings of her lovely self in as many unconventional guises. Her caskets of jewels were matched by the most wonderful collection of dresses in France, the richest and daintiest confections, from pearl embroidered ball-gowns which cost twenty thousand francs to the mauve and silver in which she went a-hunting in the forest of Fontainebleau. At Petit Trianon and in the Faubourg St Honore, she had palaces that were dreams of beauty and luxury. The only thorn in her bed of roses was, in fact, her husband, the Prince, the very sight of whom was sufficient to spoil a day for her.

When, at Napoleon's bidding, she accompanied Borghese to his Governorship beyond the Alps, she took in her train seven wagon-loads of finery. At Turin she held the Court of a Queen, to which the Prince was only admitted on sufferance. Royal visits, dinners, dances, receptions followed one another in dazzling succession; behind her chair, at dinner or reception, always stood two gigantic negroes, crowned with ostrich plumes. She was now "sister of the Emperor," and all the world should know it!

If only she could escape from her detested husband she would be the happiest woman on earth. But Napoleon on this point was adamant. In her rage and rebellion she tore her hair, rolled on the floor, took drugs to make her ill; and at last so succeeded in alarming her Imperial brother that he summoned her back to France, where her army of lovers gave her a warm welcome, and where she could indulge in any vanity and folly unchecked.

Matters were now hastening to a tragic climax for Napoleon and the family he had raised from slumdom in Marseilles to crowns and coronets. Josephine had been divorced, to Pauline's undisguised joy; and her place

had been taken by Marie Louise, the proud Austrian, whom she liked at least as little. When Napoleon fell from his throne, she alone of all his sisters helped to cheer his exile in Elba; for the brother she loved and feared was the only man to whom Pauline's fickle heart was ever true. She even stripped herself of all her jewels to make the way smooth back to his crown. And when at last news came to her at Rome of his death at St Helena it was she who shed the bitterest tears and refused to be comforted. That an empire was lost, was nothing compared with the loss of the brother who had always been so lenient to her failings, so responsive to her love.

Two years later her own end came at Florence. When she felt the cold hand of death on her, she called feebly for a mirror, that she might look for the last time on her beauty. "Thank God," she whispered, as she gazed, "I am still lovely! I am ready to die." A few moments later, with the mirror still clutched in her hand, and her eyes still feasting on the charms which time and death itself were powerless to dim, died Pauline Bonaparte, sister of an Emperor and herself an Empress by the right of her incomparable beauty.

CHAPTER XI

A SIREN OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

When Wilhelmine Encke first opened her eyes on the world one day in the year 1754, he would have been a bold prophet who would have predicted that she would one day be the uncrowned Queen of the Court of Russia, *plus Reine que la Reine*, and that her children would have in their veins the proudest blood in Europe. Such a prophecy might well have been laughed to scorn, for little Wilhelmine had as obscure a cradle as almost any infant in all Prussia. Her father was an army bugler, who wore private's uniform in Frederick the Great's army; and her early years were to be spent playing with other soldiers' children in the sordid environment of Berlin barracks.

When her father turned his back on the army, while Wilhelmine was still nursing her dolls, it was to play the humble role of landlord of a small tavern, from which he was lured by the bait of a place as French-horn player in Frederick's private band; and the goal of his modest ambition was reached when he was appointed trumpeter to the King.

This was Herr Encke's position when the curtain rises on our story at Potsdam, and shows us Wilhelmine, an unattractive maid of ten, the Cinderella of her family, for whom there seemed no better prospect than a soldier-husband, if indeed she were lucky enough to capture him. She was, in fact, the "ugly duckling" of a good-looking family, removed by a whole world from her beautiful eldest sister Charlotte, who counted among her many admirers no less exalted a wooer than Prince Frederick William, the King's nephew and heir to his throne.

There was, indeed, no more beautiful or haughty damsel in all Potsdam than this trumpeter's daughter who had caught the amorous fancy of the Prince, then, as to his last day, the slave of every pretty face that crossed his path. But Charlotte Encke was much too imperious a young lady to hold her Royal lover long in fetters. He quickly wearied of her

caprices, her petulances, and her exhibitions of temper; and the climax came one day when in a fit of anger she struck her little sister, in his presence, and he took up the cudgels for Wilhelmine.

This was the last straw for the disillusioned and disgusted Prince, who sent Charlotte off to Paris, where as the Countess Matushke she played the fine lady at her lover's cost, while the Prince took her Cinderella sister under his protection. He took her education into his own hands, provided her with masters to teach her a wide range of accomplishments, from languages to dancing and deportment, while he himself gave her lessons in history and geography. Nor did he lack the reward of his benevolent offices; for Wilhelmine, under his ministrations, not only developed rare gifts and graces of mind, like many another Cinderella before her; she blossomed into a rose of girlhood, more beautiful even than her imperious sister, and with a sweetness of character and a winsomeness which Charlotte could never have attained.

On her part, gratitude to her benefactor rapidly grew into love for the handsome and courtly Prince; on his, sympathy for the ill-used Cinderella, into a passion for the lovely maiden hovering on the verge of a still more beautiful womanhood. It was a mutual passion, strong and deep, which now linked the widely contrasted lives of the King-to-be and the trumpeter's daughter--a passion which, with each, was to last as long as life itself.

Wilhelmine was now formally installed in the place of the deposed Charlotte as favourite of the heir to the throne; and idyllic years followed, during which she gave pledges of her love to the man who was her husband in all but name. That her purse was often empty was a matter to smile at; that she had to act as "breadwinner" to her family, and was at times reduced to such straits that she was obliged to pawn some of her small stock of jewellery in order to provide her lover with a supper, was a bagatelle. She was the happiest young woman in Prussia.

Even what seemed to be a crowning disaster, fortune turned into a boon for her. When news of this unlicensed love-making came to the King's ears, he was furious. It was intolerable that the destined ruler of a great and powerful nation should be governed and duped by a woman of the people. He gave his nephew a sound rating--alike for his extravagance and his amour; and packed off Wilhelmine to join her sister in Paris.

But, for once, Frederick found that he had made a mistake. The Prince, robbed of the woman he loved, took the bit in his teeth, and plunged so deeply into extravagant dallying with ballet-dancers and stars of the opera that the King was glad to choose the lesser evil, and to summon Wilhelmine back to her Prince's arms. One stipulation only he made, that she should make her home away from the capital and the dangerous allurements which his nephew found there.

Now at last we find Cinderella happily installed, with the King's august approval, in a beautiful home which has since blossomed into the splendours of Charlottenburg. Here she gave birth to a son, whom Frederick dubbed Count de la Marke in his nurse's arms, but who was fated never to leave his cradle. This child of love, the idol of his parents, sleeps in a splendid mausoleum in the great Protestant Church of Berlin.

As a sop to Prussian morality and to make the old King quite easy, a complaisant husband was now found for the Prince's favourite in his

chamberlain, Herr Rietz, son of a palace gardener; and Frederick William himself looked on while the woman he loved, the mother of his children, was converted by a few priestly words into a "respectable married woman"--only to leave the altar on his own arm, his wife in the eyes of the world.

The time was now drawing near when Wilhelmine was to reach the zenith of her adventurous life. One August day in 1786 Frederick the Great drew his last breath in the Potsdam Palace, and his nephew awoke to be greeted by his chamberlain as "Your Majesty." The trumpeter's daughter was at last a Queen, in fact, if not in name, more secure in her husband's love than ever, and with long years of splendour and happiness before her. That his fancy, ever wayward, flitted to other women as fair as herself, did not trouble her a whit. Like Madame de Pompadour, she was prepared even to encourage such rivalry, so long as the first place (and this she knew) in her husband's heart was unassailably her own.

Picture our Cinderella now in all her new splendours, moving as a Queen among her courtiers, receiving the homage of princes and ambassadors as her right, making her voice heard in the Council Chamber, and holding her salon, to which all the great ones of the earth flocked to pay tribute to her beauty and her gifts of mind. It was a strange transformation from the barracks-kitchen to the Queendom of one of the greatest Courts of Europe; but no Queen cradled in a palace ever wore her honours with greater dignity, grace, and simplicity than this daughter of an army bandsman.

The days of the empty purse were, of course, at an end. She had now her ten thousand francs a month for "pin-money," her luxuriously appointed palace at Charlottenburg, and her Berlin mansion, "Unter den Linden," with its private theatre, in which she and her Royal lover, surrounded by their brilliant Court, applauded the greatest actors from Paris and Vienna. It is said that many of these stage-plays were of questionable decency, with more than a suggestion of the garden of Eden in them; but this is an aspersion which Madame de Rietz indignantly repudiates in her "Memoirs."

While Wilhelmine was thus happy in her Court magnificence, varied by days of "delightful repose," at Charlottenburg, France was in the throes of her Revolution, drenched with the blood of her greatest men and fairest women; her King had lost his crown and his head with it; and Europe was in arms against her. When Frederick William joined his army camped on the Rhine bank, Wilhelmine was by his side to counsel him as he wavered between war and peace. The fate of the coalition against France was practically in the hands of the trumpeter's daughter, whose voice was all for peace. "What matters it," she said, "how France is governed? Let her manage her own affairs, and let Europe be saved from the horrors of bloodshed."

In vain did the envoys of Spain and Italy, Austria and England, practise all their diplomacy to place her influence in the scale of war. When Lord Henry Spencer offered her a hundred thousand guineas if she would dissuade her husband from concluding a treaty with France, she turned a deaf ear to all his pleading and arguments. Such influence as she possessed should be exercised in the interests of peace, and thus it was that the vacillating King deserted his allies, and signed the Treaty of Bale, in 1795.

Such was the triumphant issue of Madame Rietz's intervention in the

affairs of Europe; such the proof she gave to the world of her conquest of a King. It was thus with a light heart that she turned her back on the Rhine camp; and with her husband's children and a splendid retinue set out on her journey to Italy, to see which was the greatest ambition of her life. At the Austrian Court she was coldly received, it is true, thanks to her part in the Treaty of Bale; but in Italy she was greeted as a Queen. At Naples Queen Caroline received her as a sister; the trumpeter's daughter was the brilliant centre of fetes and banquets and receptions such as might have gratified the vanity of an Empress: while at Florence she spent days of ideal happiness under the blue sky of Italy and among her beauties of Nature and Art.

It was at Venice that she wrote to her King lover, "Your Majesty knows well that, for myself, I place no value on the foolish vanities of Court etiquette; but I am placed in an awkward position by my daughter being raised to the rank of Countess, while I am still in the lowly position of a bourgeoisie." She had, in fact, always declined the honour of a title, which Frederick William had so often begged her to accept; and it was only for her daughter's sake, when the question of an alliance between the young Countess de la Marke and Lord Bristol's heir arose, that she at last stooped to ask for what she had so long refused.

A few weeks later her brother, the King's equerry, placed in her hands the patent which made her Countess Lichtenau, with the right to bear on her shield of arms the Prussian eagle and the Royal crown.

Wherever the Countess (as we must now call her) went on her Italian tour she drew men to her feet by the magnetism of her beauty, who would have paid no homage to her as *_chere amie_* of a King; for she was now in the early thirties, in the full bloom of the loveliness that had its obscure budding in the Potsdam barrack-rooms. Young and old were equally powerless to resist her fascinations. She had, indeed, no more ardent slave and admirer than my Lord Bristol, the octogenarian Bishop of Londonderry, whose passion for the Countess, young enough to be his granddaughter, was that of a lovesick youth.

From "dear Countess and adorable friend," he quickly leaps in his letters to "my dear Wilhelmine." He looks forward with the impatience of a boy to seeing her at "that terrestrial paradise which is called Naples, where we shall enjoy perpetual spring and spend delightful days in listening to the divine *_Paesiello_*. Do you know," he adds, "I passed two hours of real delight this morning in simply contemplating your elegant bedroom where only the elegant sleeper was missing."

"It is in *_Crocelle_*," he writes a little later, "that you will make people happy by your presence, and where you will recuperate your health, regain your gaiety, and forget an Irishman; and a holy Bishop, more worthy of your affection, on account of the deep attachment he has for you, will take his place."

In June, 1796, this senile lover writes, "In an hour I depart for Germany; and, as the wind is north, with every step I take I shall say: 'This breeze comes perhaps from her; it has touched her rosy lips and mingled its scent with the perfume of her breath which I shall inhale, the perfume of the breath of my dear Wilhelmine.'"

But these days of dallying with her legion of lovers, of regal fetes and pleasure-chasing, were brought to an abrupt conclusion when news came to her at Venice that her "husband," the King, was dying, with the Royal

family by his bedside awaiting the end. Such news, with all its import of sorrow and tragedy, set the Countess racing across the Continent, fast as horses could carry her, to the side of her beloved King, whom she found, if not *in extremis*, "very dangerously ill and pitifully changed" from the robust man she had left. Her return, however, did more for him than all the skill of his doctors. It gave him a new lease of life, in which her presence brought happiness into days which, none knew better than himself, were numbered.

For more than a year the Countess was his tender nurse and constant companion, ministering to his comfort and arranging plays and tableaux for his entertainment. She watched over him as jealously as any mother over her dying child; but all her devotion could not stay the steps of death, which every day brought nearer. As the inevitable end approached, her friends warned her to leave Charlottenburg while the opportunity was still hers--to escape with her jewels and her money (a fortune of L150,000)--but to all such urging she was deaf. She would stay by her lover's side to the last, though she well knew the danger of delay.

One November day in 1797 Frederick William made his last public appearance at a banquet, with the Countess at his right hand; and seldom has festival had such a setting in tragedy. "None of the guests," we are told, "uttered a word or ate a mouthful of anything; the plates were cleared at the hasty ringing of a bell. A convulsive movement made by the sick man showed that he was suffering agonies. Before half-past nine every guest had left, greatly troubled. The majority of those who had been present never saw the unfortunate monarch again. They all shared the same presentiment of disaster, and wept."

From that night the King was dead, even to his own Court. The gates of his palace were closed against the world, and none were allowed to approach the chamber in which his life was ebbing away, save the Countess, his nurse, and his doctors. Even his children were refused admittance to his presence. As the Marquis de Saint Mexent said, "The King of Prussia ends his days as though he were a rich benefactor. All the relations are excluded by the housekeeper."

A few days before the end came the Countess was seen to leave the palace, carrying a large red portfolio--a suspicious circumstance which the Crown Prince's spies promptly reported to their master. There could be only one inference--she had been caught in the act of stealing State papers, a crime for which she would have to pay a heavy price as soon as her protector was no more! As a matter of fact the portfolio contained nothing more secret or valuable than the letters she had written to the King during the twenty-seven years of their romance, letters which, after reading, she consigned to the flames in her boudoir within an hour of the suspected theft of State documents.

A few days later, on the night of the 16th of November (1797), the King entered on his "death agony," one fit of suffocation succeeding another, until the Countess, unable to bear any longer the sight of such suffering, was carried away in violent convulsions. She saw him no more; for by seven o'clock in the morning Frederick William had found release from his agony in death, and his son had begun to reign in his stead.

At last the long-delayed hour of revenge had come to Frederick William III., who had always regarded his father's favourite as an enemy; and his vengeance was swift to strike. Before the late King's body was cold, his successor's emissaries appeared at the palace door, *Unter den*

Linden, with orders to search her papers and to demand the keys of every desk and cupboard. Even then she scorned to fly before the storm which she knew was breaking. For three days and nights her carriage stood at her gates ready to take her away to safety; but she refused to move a step.

Then one morning, before she had left her bed, a major of the guards, with a posse of soldiers, appeared at her bedroom door armed with a warrant for her arrest; and for many weeks she was a closely guarded prisoner in her own house, subject to daily insults and indignities from men who, a few weeks earlier, had saluted her as a Queen.

At the trial which followed some very grave indictments were preferred against her. She was charged with having betrayed State secrets; with having robbed the Royal Exchequer; stolen the King's portfolio; and removed the priceless solitaire diamond from his crown, and the very rings from his fingers as he lay dying. To these and other equally grave charges the Countess gave a dignified denial, which the evidence she was able to produce supported. The diamond and the rings were, in fact, discovered in places indicated by her where they had been put, by the King's orders, for safe custody.

The trial had a happier ending than, from the malignity of her enemies, especially of the King, might have been expected. After three months of durance she was removed to a Silesian fortress. Her houses and lands were taken from her; but her furniture and jewels were left untouched, and with them she was allowed to enjoy a pension of four thousand thalers a year. Such was the judgment of a Court which proved more merciful than she had perhaps a right to expect. And two months later, the influence and pleading of her friends set her free from her fortress-prison to spend her life where and as she would.

The sun of her splendour had indeed set, but many years of peaceful and not unhappy life remained for our ex-Queen, who was still in the prime of her womanhood and beauty and with the magnetism that, to her last day, brought men to her feet. At fifty she was able to inspire such passion in the breast of a young artist, Francis Holbein, that he asked and won her hand in marriage. But this romance was short-lived, for within a year he left her, to spend the remainder of her days in Paris, Vienna, and her native Prussia. Here her adventurous career closed in such obscurity, at the age of sixty-eight, that even those who ministered to her last moments were unaware that the dying woman was the Countess who had played so dazzling a part a generation earlier, as favourite of the King of Prussia and Queen of her loveliest women.

CHAPTER XII

THE CORSICAN AND THE CREOLE

Of the many women who succeeded one another with such bewildering rapidity in the favour of the first Napoleon, from Desiree Clary, daughter of the Marseilles silk-merchant, the "little wife" of his days of obscurity, to Madame Walewska, the beautiful Pole, who so fruitlessly bartered her charms for her country's salvation, only one really captured his fickle heart--Josephine de Beauharnais, the woman whom he

raised to the splendour of an Imperial crown, only to fling her aside when she no longer served the purposes of his ambition.

It was one October day in the year 1795 that Josephine, Vicomtesse de Beauharnais, first cast the spell of her beauty on the "ugly little Corsican," who had then got his foot well planted on the ladder, at the summit of which was his crown of empire. At twenty-six, the man who, but a little earlier, was an out-of-work captain, eating his heart out in a Marseilles slum, was General-in-Chief of the armies of France, with the disarmed rebels of Paris grovelling at his feet.

One day a handsome boy came to him, craving permission to retain the sword his father had won, a favour which the General, pleased by the boy's frankness and manliness, granted. The next day the young rebel's mother presented herself to thank him with gracious words for his kindness to her son--a creature of another world than his, with a beauty, grace and refinement which were a new revelation to his bourgeois eyes.

The fair vision haunted him; the music of her voice lingered in his ears. He must see her again. And, before another day had passed, we find the pale-faced, grim Corsican, with the burning eyes, sitting awkwardly on a horse-hair chair of Madame's dining-room in her small house in the Rue Chantereine, nervously awaiting the entry of the Vicomtesse who had already played such havoc with his peace of mind. And when at last she made her appearance, few would have recognised in the man, who made his shy, awkward bow, the famous General with whose name the whole of France was ringing.

It was little wonder, perhaps, that the little Corsican's heart went pit-a-pat, or that his knees trembled under him, for the lady whose smile and the touch of whose hand sent a thrill through him, was indeed, to quote his own words, "beautiful as a dream." From the chestnut hair which rippled over her small, proudly poised head to the arch of her tiny, dainty feet, "made for homage and for kisses," she was, "all glorious without." There was witchery in every part of her--in the rich colour that mantled in her cheeks; the sweet brown eyes that looked out between long-fringed eyelids; the small, delicate nose; "the nostrils quivering at the least emotion"; the exquisite lines of the tall, supple figure, instinct with grace in every moment; and, above all, in the seductive music of a voice, every note of which was a caress.

Sixteen years earlier, Josephine had come from Martinique to Paris as bride of the Vicomte de Beauharnais, with whom she had led a more or less unhappy life, until the guillotine of the Revolution left her a widow, with two children and an empty purse. But even this crowning calamity was powerless to crush the sunny-hearted Creole, who merely laughed at the load of debts which piled themselves up around her. A little of the wreckage of her husband's fortune had been rescued for her by influential friends; but this had disappeared long before Napoleon crossed her path. And at last the light-hearted widow realised that if she had a card left to play, she must play it quickly.

Here then was her opportunity. The little General was obviously a slave at her feet; he was already a great man, destined to be still greater; and if he was bourgeois to his coarse finger-tips, he could at least serve as a stepping-stone to raise her from poverty and obscurity.

As for Napoleon, he was a vanquished man--and he knew it--before ever he

set foot in Madame's modest dining-room. When he left, he "trod on air," for the Vicomtesse had been more than gracious to him. The next day he was drawn as by a magnet to the Rue Chantreine, and the next and the next, each interview with his divinity forging fresh links for the chain that bound him; and at each visit he met under Madame's roof some of the great ones of that other world in which Josephine moved, the old noblesse of France--who paid her the homage due to a Queen.

Thus vanity and ambition fed the flames of the passion which was consuming him; and within a fortnight he had laid his heart and his fortune, which at the time consisted of "his personal wardrobe and his military accoutrements" at the feet of the Creole widow; and one March day in 1796 Napoleon Bonaparte, General, and Josephine de Beauharnais, were made one by a registrar who obligingly described the bride as twenty-nine (thus robbing her of three years), and added two to the bridegroom's twenty-six years.

After two days of rapturous honeymooning Napoleon was on his way to join his army in Italy, as reluctant a bridegroom as ever left Cupid at the bidding of Mars. At every change of horses during the long journey he dispatched letters to the wife he had left behind--letters full of passion and yearning. In one of them he wrote, "When I am tempted to curse my fate, I place my hand on my heart and find your portrait there. As I gaze at it I am filled with a joy unutterable. Life seems to hold no pain, save that of severance from my beloved."

At Nice, amid all the labours and anxieties of organising his rabble army for a campaign, his thoughts are always taking wings to her; her portrait is ever in his hand. He says his prayers before it; and, when once he accidentally broke the glass, he was in an agony of despair and superstitious foreboding. His one cry was, "Come to me! Come to my heart and to my arms. Oh, that you had wings!"

Even when flushed with the surrender of Piedmont after a fortnight's brilliant fighting, in which he had won half a dozen battles and reaped twenty-one standards, he would have bartered all his laurels for a sight of the woman he loved so passionately. But while he was thus yearning for her in distant Italy, Madame was much too happy in her beloved Paris to lend an ear to his pleadings. As wife of the great Napoleon she was a veritable Queen, fawned on and flattered by all the great ones in the capital. Hers was the place of honour at every fete and banquet; the banners her husband had captured were presented to her amid a tumult of acclamation; when she entered a theatre the entire house rose to greet her with cheers. She was thus in no mood to leave her Queendom for the arms of her husband, whose unattractive person and clumsy ardour only repelled her.

When his letters calling her to him became more and more imperative, she could no longer ignore them. But she could, at least, invent an excellent excuse for her tarrying. She wrote to tell him that she was expecting to become a mother. This at least would put a stop to his importunity. And it did. Napoleon was full of delight--and self-reproach at the joyful news. "Forgive me, my beloved," he wrote. "How can I ever atone? You were ill and I accused you of lingering in Paris. My love robs me of my reason, and I shall never regain it.... A child, sweet as its mother, is soon to lie in your arms. Oh! that I could be with you, even if only for one day!"

To his brother Joseph he writes in a similar strain: "The thought of her

illness drives me mad. I long to see her, to hold her in my arms. I love her so madly, I cannot live without her. If she were to die, I should have absolutely nothing left to live for."

When, however, he learns that Madame's illness is not sufficient to interfere with her Paris gaieties, a different mood seizes him. Jealousy and anger take the place of anxious sympathy. He insists that she shall join him--threatens to resign his command if she refuses. Josephine no longer dares to keep up her deception. She must obey. And thus, in a flood of angry tears, we see her starting on her long journey to Italy, in company with her dog, her maid, and a brilliant escort of officers. Arrived at Milan, she was welcomed by Napoleon with open arms; but "after two days of rapture and caresses," he was face to face with the great crisis of Castiglione. His army was in imminent danger of annihilation; his own fate and fortune trembled in the balance. Nothing short of a miracle could save him; and on the third day of his new honeymoon he was back again in the field at grips with fate.

But even at this supreme crisis he found time to write daily letters to the dear one who was awaiting the issue in Milan, begging her to share his life. "Your tears," he writes, "drive me to distraction; they set my blood on fire. Come to me here, that at least we may be able to say before we die we had so many days of happiness." Thus he pleads in letter after letter until Josephine, for very shame, is forced to yield, and to return to her husband, who, as Masson tells us, "was all day at her feet as before some divinity."

Such days of bliss were, however, few and far between for the man who was now in the throes of a Titanic struggle, on the issue of which his fortunes and those of France hung. But when duty took him into danger where his lady could not follow, she found ample solace. Monsieur Charles, Leclerc's adjutant, was all the cavalier she needed--an Adonis for beauty, a Hercules for strength, the handsomest soldier in Napoleon's army, a past-master in all the arts of love-making. There was no dull moment for Josephine with such a squire at her elbow to pour flatteries into her ears and to entertain her with his clever tongue.

But Monsieur Charles had short shrift when Napoleon's jealousy was aroused. He was quickly sent packing to Paris; and Josephine was left to write to her aunt, "I am bored to extinction." She was weary of her husband's love-rhapsodies, disgusted with the crudities of his passion. She had, however, a solace in the homage paid to her everywhere. At Genoa she was received as a Queen; at Florence the Grand Duke called her "cousin"; the entire army, from General to private, was under the spell of her beauty and the graciousness that captivated all hearts. She was, too, reaping a rich harvest of costly presents and bribes, from all who sought to win Napoleon's favour through her.

The Italian campaign at last over, Madame found herself back again in her dear Paris, raised to a higher pinnacle of Queendom than ever, basking in the splendours of the husband whose glories she so gladly shared, though she held his love in such light esteem. But for him, at least, there was no time for dallying. Within a few months he was waving farewell to her again, from the bridge of the Ocean which was carrying him off to the conquest of Egypt, buoyed by her promise that she would join him when his work was done. And long before he had reached Malta she was back again in the vortex of Paris gaiety, setting the tongue of scandal wagging by her open flirtation with one lover after another.

It was not long before the news of Madame's "goings-on" reached as far as Alexandria. The dormant jealousy in Napoleon, lulled to rest since Monsieur Charles had vanished from the scene, was fanned into flame. He was furious; disillusion seized him, and thoughts of divorce began to enter his brain. Two could play at this game of falseness; and there were many beautiful women in Egypt only too eager to console the great Napoleon.

When news came to Josephine that her husband had landed at Frejus, and would shortly be with her, she was in a state bordering on panic. She shrank from facing his anger; from the revelation of debts and unwifely conduct which was inevitable. Her all was at stake and the game was more than half lost. In her desperation she took her courage in both hands and set forth, as fast as horses could take her, to meet Napoleon, that she might at least have the first word with him; but as ill-luck would have it, he travelled by a different route and she missed him.

On her return to Paris she found the door of Napoleon's room barred against her. "After repeated knocking in vain," says M. Masson, "she sank on her knees sobbing aloud. Still the door remained closed. For a whole day the scene was prolonged, without any sign from within. Worn out at last, Josephine was about to retire in despair, when her maid fetched her children. Eugene and Hortense, kneeling beside their mother, mingled their supplications with hers. At last the door was opened; speechless, tears streaming down his cheeks, his face convulsed with the struggle that had rent his heart, Bonaparte appeared, holding out his arms to his wife."

Such was the meeting of the unfaithful Josephine and the husband who had vowed that he would no longer call her wife. The reconciliation was complete; for Napoleon was no man of half-measures. He frankly forgave the weeping woman all her sins against him; and with generous hand removed the mountain of debt her extravagance had heaped up--debts amounting to more than two million francs, one million two hundred thousand of which she owed to tradespeople alone.

But Napoleon's passion for his wife, of whose beauty few traces now remained, was dead. His loyalty only remained; and this, in turn, was to be swept away by the tide of his ambition. A few years later Josephine was crowned Empress by her husband, and consecrated by the Pope, after a priest had given the sanction of the Church to her incomplete nuptials.

She had now reached the dazzling zenith of her career. At the Tuileries, at St Cloud, and at Malmaison, she held her splendid Courts as Empress. She had the most magnificent crown jewels in the world; and at Malmaison she spent her happiest hours in spreading her gems out on the table before her, and feasting her eyes on their many-hued fires. Her wardrobes were full of the daintiest and costliest gowns of which, we are told, more than two hundred were summer-dresses of percale and of muslin, costing from one thousand to two thousand francs each.

Less than six years of such splendour and luxury, and the inevitable end of it all came. Napoleon's eyes were dazzled by the offer of an alliance with the eldest daughter of the Austrian Emperor. His whole ambition now was focused on providing a successor to his crown (Josephine had failed him in this important matter); and in Marie Louise of Austria he not only saw the prospective mother of his heir, but an alliance with one of the great reigning houses of Europe, which would lend a much-needed

glamour to his bourgeois crown.

His mind was at last inevitably made up. Josephine must be divorced. Her pleadings and tears and faintings were powerless to melt him. And one December day, in the year 1809, Napoleon was free to wed his Austrian Princess; and Josephine was left to console herself as best she might, with the knowledge that at least she had rescued from her downfall a life-income of three million francs a year, on which she could still play the role of Empress at the Elysee, Malmaison, and Navarre, the sumptuous homes with which Napoleon's generosity had dowered the wife who failed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ENSLAVER OF A KING

More than fifty years have gone since the penitent soul of Lola Montez took flight to its Creator; but there must be some still living whose pulses quicken at the very mention of a name which recalls so much mystery and romance and bewildering fascination of the days when, for them, as for her, "all the world was young."

Who was she, this woman whose beauty dazzled the eyes and whose witchery turned the heads of men in the forties and fifties of last century? A dozen countries, from Spain to India, were credited with her birth. Some said she was the daughter of a noble house, kidnapped by gipsies in her infancy; others were equally confident that she had for father the coroneted rake, Lord Byron, and for mother a charwoman.

Her early years were wrapped in a mystery which she mischievously helped to intensify by declaring that her father was a famous Spanish toreador. Her origin, however, was prosaic enough. She was the daughter of an obscure army captain, Gilbert, who hailed from Limerick; her mother was an Oliver, from whom she received her strain of Spanish blood; and the names given to her at a Limerick font, one day in 1818, two months after her parents had made their runaway match, were Marie Dolores Eliza Rosanna.

When Captain Gilbert returned, after his furlough-romance, to India, he took his wife and child with him. Seven years later cholera removed him; his widow found speedy solace in the arms of a second husband, one Captain Craigie; and Dolores was packed off to Scotland to the care of her stepfather's people until her schooldays were ended.

In the next few years she alternated between the Scottish household, with its chilly atmosphere of Calvinism, and schools in Paris and London, until, her education completed, she escaped the husband, a mummified Indian judge, whom her mother had chosen for her, by eloping with a young army officer, a Captain James, and with him made the return voyage to India.

A few months later her romance came to a tragic end, when her Lothario husband fell under the spell of a brother-officer's wife and ran away with her to the seclusion of the Neilgherry Hills, leaving his wife stranded and desolate. And thus it was that Dolores Gilbert wiped the

dust of India finally off her feet, and with a cheque for a thousand pounds, which her good-hearted stepfather slipped into her hand, started once more for England, to commence that career of adventure which has scarcely a parallel even in fiction. She had had more than enough of wedded life, of Scottish Calvinism, and of a mother's selfish indifference. She would be henceforth the mistress of her own fate. She had beauty such as few women could boast--she had talents and a stout heart; and these should be her fortune.

Her first ambition was to be a great actress; and when she found that acting was not her forte she determined to dance her way to fame and fortune, and after a year's training in London and Spain she was ready to conquer the world with her twinkling feet and supple body.

Of her first appearance as a danseuse, before a private gathering of Pressmen, we have the following account by one who was there: "Her figure was even more attractive than her face, lovely as the latter was. Lithe and graceful as a young fawn, every movement that she made seemed instinct with melody. Her dark eyes were blazing and flashing with excitement. In her pose grace seemed involuntarily to preside over her limbs and dispose their attitude. Her foot and ankle were almost faultless."

Such was the enthusiastic description of Lola Montez (as she now chose to call herself) on the eve of her bid for fame as a dancer who should perhaps rival the glories of a Taglioni. A few days later the world of rank and fashion flocked to see the debut of the danseuse whose fame had been trumpeted abroad; and as Lola pirouetted on to the stage--the focus of a thousand pairs of eyes--she felt that the crowning moment of her life had come.

Almost before her twinkling feet had carried her to the centre of the stage an ominous sound broke the silence of expectation. A hiss came from one of the boxes; it was repeated from another, and another. The sibilant sound spread round the house; it swelled into a sinister storm of hisses and boos. The light faded out of the dancer's eyes, the smile from her lips; and as the tumult of disapprobation rose to a deafening climax the curtain was rung down, and Lola rushed weeping from the stage. Her career as a dancer, in England, had ended at its birth.

But Lola Montez was not the woman to sit down calmly under defeat. A few weeks later we find her tripping it on the stage at Dresden, and at Berlin, where the King of Prussia himself was among her applauders. But such success as the Continent brought her was too small to keep her now depleted purse supplied. She fell on evil days, and for two years led a precarious life--now, we are told, singing in Brussels streets to keep starvation from her side, now playing the political spy in Russia, and again, by a capricious turn of fortune's wheel, being feted and courted in the exalted circles of Vienna and Paris.

From the French capital she made her way to Warsaw, where stirring adventures awaited her, for before she had been there many days the Polish Viceroy, General Paskevitch, cast his aged but lascivious eyes on her young beauty and sent an equerry to desire her presence at the palace. "He offered her" (so runs the story as told by her own lips) "the gift of a splendid country estate, and would load her with diamonds besides. The poor old man was a comic sight to look upon--unusually short in stature; and every time he spoke he threw his head back and opened his mouth so wide as to expose the artificial gold roof of his

palate. A death's head making love to a lady could not have been a more horrible or disgusting sight. These generous gifts were most respectfully and very decidedly declined."

But General Paskevitch was not disposed to be spurned with impunity. The contemptuous beauty must be punished for her scorn of his wooing; and, when she made her appearance on the stage the same night it was to a greeting of hisses by the Viceroy's hirelings. The next night brought the same experience; but when on the third night the storm arose, "Lola, in a rage, rushed down to the footlights and declared that those hisses had been set at her by the director, because she had refused certain gifts from the old Prince, his master. Then came a tremendous shower of applause from the audience, and the old Princess, who was present, both nodded her head and clapped her hands to the enraged and fiery little Lola."

A tumultuous crowd of Poles escorted her to her lodgings that night. She was the heroine of the hour, who had dared to give open defiance to the hated Viceroy. The next morning Warsaw was "bubbling and raging with the signs of an incipient revolution. When Lola Montez was apprised of the fact that her arrest was ordered she barricaded her door; and when the police arrived she sat behind it with a pistol in her hand, declaring that she would certainly shoot the first man who should dare to break in." Fortunately for Lola, her pistol was not used. The French Consul came to her rescue, claiming her as a subject of France, and thus protecting her from arrest. But the order that she should quit Warsaw was peremptory, and Warsaw saw her no more.

Back again in Paris, Lola found that even her new halo of romance was powerless to win favour for her dancing. Again she was to hear the storm of hisses; and this time in her rage "she retaliated by making faces at her audience," and flinging parts of her clothing in their faces. But if Paris was not to be charmed by her dainty feet it was ready to yield an unstinted homage to her rare beauty and charm. She found a flattering welcome in the most exclusive of salons; the cleverest men in the capital confessed the charm of her wit and surrounded her with their flatteries.

M. Dujarrier, the most brilliant of them all, young, rich, and handsome, fell head over ears in love with her and asked her to be his wife. But the cup of happiness was scarcely at her lips before it was dashed away. Dujarrier was challenged to a duel by Beauvallon, a political enemy; and when Lola was on her way to stop the meeting she met a mournful procession bringing back her dead lover's body, on which she flung herself in an agony of grief and covered it with kisses. At the subsequent trial of Beauvallon she electrified the Court by declaring with streaming eyes, "If Beauvallon wanted satisfaction I would have fought him myself, for I am a better shot than poor Dujarrier ever was." And she was probably only speaking the truth, for her courage was as great as the love she bore for the victim of the duel.

As a child Lola had shocked her puritanical Scottish hosts by declaring that "she meant to marry a Prince," and unkindly as fate had treated her, she had by no means relinquished this childish ambition. It may be that it was in her mind when, a year and a half after the tragedy that had so clouded her life in Paris, she drifted to Munich in search of more conquests.

Now in the full bloom of her radiant loveliness--"the most beautiful

woman in Europe" many declared--mingling the vivacity of an Irish beauty with the voluptuous charms of a Spaniard--she was splendidly equipped for the conquest of any man, be he King or subject; and Ludwig I., King of Bavaria, had as keen an eye for female beauty as for the objects of art on which he squandered his millions.

It was this Ludwig who made Munich the fairest city in all Germany, and who enriched his palace with the finest private collection of pictures and statues that Europe can boast. But among all his treasures of art he valued none more than his gallery of portraits of fair women, each of whom had, at one time or another, visited his capital.

Such was Ludwig, Bavaria's King, to whom Lola Montez now brought a new revelation of female loveliness, to which his gallery could furnish no rival. At first sight of her, as she danced in the opera ballet, he was undone. The next day and the next his eyes were feasting on her charms and her supple grace; and within a week she was installed at the Court and was being introduced by His Majesty as "my best friend."

And not only the King, but all Munich was at the feet of the lovely "Spaniard"; her drives through the streets were Royal progresses; her receptions in the palace which Ludwig presented to her were thronged by all the greatest in Bavaria; on Prince and peasant alike she cast the spell of her witchery. As for Ludwig, connoisseur of the beautiful, he was her shadow and her slave, showering on her gifts an Empress might well have envied. Fortune had relented at last and was now smiling her sweetest on the adventuress; and if Lola had been content with such triumphs as these the story of her later life might have been very different. But she craved power to add to her trophies, and aspired to take the sceptre from the weak hand of her Royal lover.

Never did woman make a more fatal mistake. On the one hand was arrayed the might of Austria and of Rome, whose puppet Ludwig was; on the other hand was a nation clamouring for reforms. Revolution was already in the air, and it was reserved to this too daring woman to precipitate the storm.

Her first ambition was to persuade Ludwig to dismiss his Ministry, to shake himself free from foreign influence, and to inaugurate the era of reform for which his subjects were clamouring. In vain did Austria try to win her to its side by bribes of gold (no less than a million florins) and the offer of a noble husband. To all its seductions Lola turned as deaf an ear as to the offers of Poland's Viceroy. And so strenuous was her championship of the people that the Cabinet was compelled to resign in favour of the "Lola Ministry" of reformers.

So far she had succeeded, but the price was still to pay. The reactionaries, supported by Austria and the Romish Church, were quick to retaliate by waging remorseless war against the King's mistress; and, among their most powerful weapons, used the students' clubs of Munich, who, from being Lola's most enthusiastic admirers, became her bitterest enemies.

To counteract this move Lola enrolled a students' corps of her own--a small army of young stalwarts, whose cry was "Lola and Liberty," and who were sworn to fight her battles, if need be, to the death. Thus was the fire of revolution kindled by a woman's vanity and lust of power. Students' fights became everyday incidents in the streets of Munich, and on one occasion when Lola, pistol in hand, intervened to prevent

bloodshed, she was rescued with difficulty by Ludwig himself and a detachment of soldiers.

The climax came when she induced the King to close the University for a year--an autocratic step which aroused the anger not only of every student but of the whole country. The streets were paraded by mobs crying, "Down with the concubine!" and "Long live the Republic!" Barricades were erected and an influential deputation waited on the King to demand the expulsion of the worker of so much mischief.

In vain did Ludwig declare that he would part with his crown rather than with the Countess of Landsfeld--for this was one of the titles he had conferred on his favourite. The forces arrayed against him were too strong, and the order of expulsion was at last conceded. It was only, however, when her palace was in flames and surrounded by a howling mob that the dauntless woman deigned to seek refuge in flight, and, disguised as a boy, suffered herself to be escorted to the frontier. Two weeks later Ludwig lost his crown.

The remainder of this strange story may be told in a few words. Thrown once more on the world, with a few hastily rescued jewels for all her fortune, Lola Montez resumed her stage life, appearing in London in a drama entitled "Lola Montez: or a Countess for an Hour." Here she made a conquest of a young Life Guardsman, called Heald, who had recently succeeded to an estate worth £5000 a year; and with him she spent a few years, made wretched by continual quarrels, in one of which she stabbed him. When he was "found drowned" at Lisbon she drifted to Paris, and later to the United States, which she toured with a drama entitled "Lola Montez in Bavaria." There she made her third appearance at the altar, with a bridegroom named Hull, whom she divorced as soon as the honeymoon had waned.

Thus she carried her restless spirit through a few more years of wandering and growing poverty, until a chance visit to Spurgeon's Tabernacle revolutionised her life. She decided to abandon the stage and to devote the remainder of her days to penitence and good works. But the end was already near. In New York, where she had gone to lecture, she was struck down by paralysis, and a few weeks before she had seen her forty-second birthday she died in a charitable institution, joining fervently in the prayers of the clergyman who was summoned to her death-bed.

"When she was near the end, and could not speak," the clergyman says, "I asked her to let me know by a sign whether she was at peace. She fixed her eyes on mine and nodded affirmatively. I do not think I ever saw deeper penitence and humility than in this poor woman."

CHAPTER XIV

AN EMPRESS AND HER FAVOURITES

When Sophie Augusta Frederica of Anhalt-Zerbst was romping on the ramparts or in the streets of Stettin with burghers' children for playmates, he would have been a bold prophet who would have predicted that one day she would be the most splendid figure among Europe's

sovereigns, "the only great man in Europe," according to Voltaire, "an angel before whom all men should be silent"; and that, while dazzling Europe by her statesmanship and learning, she would afford more material for scandal than any woman, except perhaps Christina of Sweden, who ever wore a crown.

There is much, it is true, to be said in extenuation of the weakness that has left such a stain on the memory of Catherine II. of Russia. Equipped far beyond most women with the beauty and charms that fascinate men, and craving more than most of her sex the love of man, she was mated when little more than a child to the most degenerate Prince in all Europe.

The Grand Duke Peter, heir to the Russian throne, who at sixteen took to wife the girl-Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, was already an expert in almost every vice. Imbecile in mind, he found his chief pleasure in the company of the most degraded. He rarely went to bed sober--in fact, his bride's first sight of him was when he was drunk, at the age of ten. He was, too, "a liar and a coward, vicious and violent; pale, sickly, and uncomely--a crooked soul in a prematurely ravaged body."

Such was the Grand Duke Peter, to whom the high-spirited, beautiful Princess Sophie (thenceforth to be known as "Catherine") was tied for life one day in the year 1744--a youth the very sight of whom repelled her, while his vices filled her with loathing. Add to this revolting union the fact that she found herself under the despotic rule of the Empress Elizabeth, who made no concealment of her hatred and jealousy of the fair young Princess, surrounded her with spies, and treated her as a rebellious child, to be checked and bullied at every turn--and it is not difficult to understand the spirit of recklessness and defiance that was soon roused in Catherine's breast.

There was at the Russian Court no lack of temptation to indulge this spirit of revolt to the full. The young German beauty, mated to worse than a clown, soon had her Court of admirers to pour flatteries into her dainty ears, and she would perhaps have been less than a woman if she had not eagerly drunk them in. She had no need of anyone to tell her that she was fair. "I know I am beautiful as the day," she once exclaimed, as she looked at her mirrored reflection in her first ball finery at St Petersburg, with a red rose in her glorious hair; and the mirror told no flattering tale.

See the picture Poniatowski, one of her earliest and most ardent slaves, paints of the young Grand Duchess. "With her black hair she had a dazzling whiteness of skin, a vivid colour, large blue eyes prominent and eloquent, black and long eyebrows, a Greek nose, a mouth that looked made for kissing, a slight, rather tall figure, a carriage that was lively, yet full of nobility, a pleasing voice, and a laugh as merry as the humour through which she could pass with ease from the most playful and childish amusements to the most fatiguing mathematical calculations."

With the brain, even in those early years, of a clever man, she was essentially a woman, with all a woman's passion for the admiration and love of men; and one cannot wonder, however much one may deplore, that while her imbecile husband was guzzling with common soldiers, or playing with his toys and tin cannon in bed, vacuous smiles on his face, his beautiful bride should find her own pleasures in the homage of a Soltykoff, a Poniatowski, an Orloff, or any other of the legion of

lovers who in quick succession took her fancy.

The first among her admirers to capture her fancy was Sergius Soltykoff, her chamberlain, high-born, "beautiful as the day," polished courtier, supple-tongued wooer, to whom the Grand Duchess gave the heart her husband spurned. But Soltykoff's reign was short; the fickle Princess, ever seeking fresh conquests, wearied of him as of all her lovers in turn, and his place was taken within a year by Stanislas Poniatowski, a fascinating young Pole, who returned to St Petersburg with a reputation of gallantry won in almost every Court of Europe.

Poniatowski had not perhaps the physical perfections of his dethroned predecessor, but he had the well-stored brain that made an even more potent appeal to Catherine. He could talk "like an angel" on every subject that appealed to her, from art to philosophy; and he had, moreover, a magnetic charm of manner which few women could resist.

Such a lover was, indeed, after her heart, for he brought romance and adventure to his wooing; and whether he found his way to her boudoir disguised as a ladies' tailor or as one of the Grand Duke's musicians, or made open love to her under the very nose of her courtiers, he played his role of lover to admiration. Once Peter, in jealous mood, threatened to run his rival through with his sword, and, in his rage, "went into his wife's bedroom and pulled her out of bed without leaving her time to dress." An hour later his anger had changed to an amused complaisance, and he was supping with the culprits, and with boisterous laughter was drinking their healths.

When at last a political storm drove Poniatowski from Russia, Catherine, who never forgot a banished lover, secured for him the crown of Poland.

Thus the favourites come and go, each supreme for a time, each inevitably packed off to give place to a successor. With Poniatowski away in Poland, Catherine cast her eyes round her Court to find a third favourite, and her choice was soon made, for of all her army of admirers there was one who fully satisfied her ideal of handsome manhood.

Of the five Orloff brothers, each a Goliath in stature and a Hercules in strength, the handsomest was Gregory, "the giant with the face of an angel." Towering head and shoulders over most of his fellow-courtiers, with knotted muscles which could fell an ox or crush a horse-shoe with the closing of a hand, Gregory Orloff was reputed the bravest man in Russia, as he was the idol of his soldiers. He was also a notorious gambler and drinker and the hero of countless love adventures.

No greater contrast could be possible than between this dare-devil son of Anak and the cultured, almost feminine Poniatowski; but Catherine loved, above all things, variety, and here it was in startling abundance. Nor was her new lover any the less desirable because he was some years younger than herself, or that his grandfather had been a common soldier in the army of Peter the Great.

And Gregory Orloff proved himself as bold in wooing as he was brave in war. For him there was no stealing up back stairs, no masquerading in disguises. He was the elect favourite of the future Empress of Russia, and all the world should know it. He was inseparable from his mistress, and paid his court to her under the eyes of her husband; while Catherine, thus emboldened, made as little concealment of her partiality.

But troublous days were coming to break the idyll of their love. The Empress Elizabeth, as was inevitable, at last drank herself to death, and her nephew Peter, now a besotted imbecile of thirty-four, put on the Imperial robes, and was free to indulge his madness without restraint. The first use he made of his freedom was to subject his wife to every insult and humiliation his debased brain could suggest. He flaunted his amours and vices before her, taunted her in public with her own indiscretions, and shouted in his cups that he would divorce her.

Not content with these outrages on his Empress, he lost no opportunity of disgusting his subjects and driving his soldiers to the verge of mutiny. Such an intolerable state of things could only have one issue. The Emperor was undoubtedly mad; the Emperor must go.

Over the coup d'etat which followed we must pass hurriedly--the conspiracy of Catherine and the Orloffs, the eager response of the army which flocked to the Empress, "kissing me, embracing my hands, my feet, my dress, and calling me their saviour"; the marching of the insurgent

troops to Oranienbaum, with Catherine, astride on horseback, at their head; and Peter's craven submission, when he crawled on his knees to his wife, with whimpering and tears, begging her to allow him to keep "his mistress, his dog, his negro, and his violin."

The Emperor was safe behind barred doors at Mopsa; Catherine was now Empress in fact as well as name. Three weeks later Peter was dead; was he done to death by Catherine's orders? To this day none can say with certainty. The story of this tragedy as told by Castella makes gruesome reading.

One day Alexis Orloff and Teplof appeared at Mopsa to announce to the deposed sovereign his approaching deliverance and to ask a dinner of him. Glasses and brandy were ordered, and while Teplof was amusing the Tsar, Orloff filled the glasses, adding poison to one of them.

"The Tsar, suspecting no harm, took the poison and swallowed it. He was soon seized with agonising pains. He screamed aloud for milk, but the two monsters again presented poison to him and forced him to take it. When the Tsar's valet bravely interposed he was hurled from the room. In the midst of the tumult there entered Prince Baratinski, who commanded the Guard. Orloff, who had already thrown down the Tsar, pressed upon his chest with his own knees, holding him fast at the same time by the throat. Baratinski and Teplof then passed a table-napkin with a sliding knot round his neck, and the murderers accomplished the work of death by strangling him."

Such is the story as it has come down to us, and as it was believed in Russia at the time. That Gregory Orloff was innocent of a crime in which his own brother played a leading part is as little to be credited as that Catherine herself was in ignorance of the design on her husband's life. But, however this may be, we are told that when the news of her husband's death was brought to the Empress at a banquet, she was to all appearance overcome with horror and grief. She left the table with streaming eyes and spent the next few days in unapproachable solitude in her rooms.

Thus at last Catherine was free both from the tyranny of Elizabeth and from the brutality of her bestial husband. She was sole sovereign of all

the Russias, at liberty to indulge any caprice that entered her versatile brain. That her subjects, almost to a man, regarded her with horror as her husband's murderer, that this detestation was shared by the army that had put her on the throne, and by the nobles who had been her slaves, troubled her little. She was mistress of her fate, and strong enough (as indeed she proved) to hold, with a firm grasp, the sceptre she had won.

High as Gregory Orloff had stood in her favour before she came to her crown, his position was now more splendid and secure. She showered her favours on him with prodigal hand. Lands and jewels and gold were squandered on her "First Favourite"--the official designation she invented for him; and he wore on his broad chest her miniature in a blazing oval of diamonds, the crowning mark of her approval. And to his brothers she was almost equally generous, for in a few years of her ascendancy the Orloffs were enriched by vast estates on which forty-five thousand serfs toiled, by palaces, and by gold to the amount of seventeen million roubles. Such it was to be in the good books of Catherine II., Empress of Russia.

With riches and power, Gregory's ambition grew until he dreamt of sitting on the throne itself by Catherine's side; and in her foolish infatuation even this prize might have been his, had not wiser counsels come to her rescue. "The Empress," said Panine to her, "can do what she likes; but Madame Orloff can never be Empress of Russia." And thus Gregory's greatest ambition was happily nipped in the bud.

The man who had played his cards with such skill and discretion in the early days of his love-making had now, his head swollen by pride and power, grown reckless. If he could not be Emperor in name, he would at least wield the sceptre. The woman to whom he owed all was, he thought, but a puppet in his hands, as ready to do his bidding as any of his minions. But through all her dallying Catherine's smiles masked an iron will. In heart she was a woman; in brain and will-power, a man. And Orloff, like many another favourite, was to learn the lesson to his cost.

The time came when she could no longer tolerate his airs and assumptions. There was only one Empress, but lovers were plentiful, and she already had an eye on his successor. And thus it was that one day the swollen Orloff was sent on a diplomatic mission to arrange peace between Russia and Turkey. When she bade him good-bye she called him her "angel of peace," but she knew that it was her angel's farewell to his paradise.

How the Ambassador, instead of making peace, stirred up the embers of war into fresh flame is a matter of history. But he was not long left to work such mad mischief. While he was swaggering at a Jassy fete, in a costume ablaze with diamonds worth a million roubles, news came to him of a good-looking young lieutenant who was not only installed in his place by Catherine's side, but was actually occupying his own apartments. Within an hour he was racing back to St Petersburg, resting neither night nor day until he had covered the thousand leagues that separated him from the capital.

Before, however, his sweating horses could enter it, he was stopped by Catherine's emissaries and ordered to repair to the Imperial Palace at Gatshina. And then he realised that his sun had indeed come to its setting. His honours were soon stripped from him, and although he was

allowed to keep his lands, his gold and jewels, the spoils of Cupid, the diamond-framed miniature, was taken away to adorn the breast of his successor, the lieutenant.

Under this cloud of disfavour Orloff conducted himself with such resignation--none knew better than he how futile it was to fight--that Catherine, before many months had passed, not only recalled him to Court, but secured for him a Princedom of the Holy Empire. "As for Prince Gregory," she said amiably, "he is free to go or stay, to hunt, to drink, or to gamble. I intend to live according to my own pleasure, and in entire independence."

After a tragically brief wedded life with a beautiful girl-cousin, who died of consumption, Orloff returned to St Petersburg to spend the last few months of his life, "broken-hearted and mad." And to his last hour his clouded brain was tortured with visions of the "avenging shade of the murdered Peter."

CHAPTER XV

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CINDERELLA

It was to all seeming a strange whim that caused Cardinal Mazarin, one day in the year 1653, to summon his nieces, daughters of his sister, Hieronyme Mancini, from their obscurity in Italy to bask in the sunshine of his splendours in Paris.

At the time of this odd caprice, Richelieu's crafty successor had reached the zenith of his power. His was the most potent and splendid figure in all Europe that did not wear a crown. He was the avowed favourite and lover of Anne of Austria, Queen of France, to whose vanity he had paid such skilful court--indeed it was common rumour that she had actually given him her hand in secret marriage. The boy-King, Louis XIV., was a puppet in his strong hands. He was, in fact, the dictator of France, whose smiles the greatest courtiers tried to win, and before whose frowns they trembled.

In contrast to such magnificence, his sister, Madame Mancini, was the wife of a petty Italian baron, who was struggling to bring up her five daughters on a pathetically scanty purse--as far removed from her magnificent brother as a moth from a star. There was, on the face of things, every reason why the great and all-powerful Cardinal should leave his nieces to their genteel poverty; and we can imagine both the astonishment and delight with which Madame Mancini received the summons to Paris which meant such a revolution in life for her and her daughters.

If the Mancini girls had no heritage of money, they had at least the dower of beauty. Each of the five gave promise of a rare loveliness--with the solitary exception of Marie, Madame's third daughter, who at fourteen was singularly unattractive even for that awkward age. Tall, thin, and angular, without a vestige of grace either of figure or movement, she had a sallow face out of which two great black eyes looked gloomily, and a mouth wide and thin-lipped. She was, in addition, shy and slow-witted to the verge of stupidity. Marie, in

fact, was quite hopeless, the "ugly duckling" of a good-looking family, and for this reason an object of dislike and resentment to her mother.

Certainly, said Madame, Marie must be left behind. Her other daughters would be a source of pride to their uncle; he could secure great matches for them, but Marie--pah! she would bring discredit on the whole family. And so it was decided in conclave that the "ugly duckling" should be left in a nunnery--the only fit place for her. But Marie happily had a spirit of her own. She would not be left behind, she declared; and if she must go to a nunnery, why there were nunneries in plenty in France to which they could send her. And Marie had her way.

She was not, however, to escape the cloister after all, for to a Paris nunnery she was consigned when her Cardinal uncle had set eyes on her. "Let her have a year or two there," was his verdict, "and, who knows, she may blossom into a beauty yet. At any rate she can put on flesh and not be the scarecrow she is." And thus, while her more favoured sisters were revelling in the gaieties of Court life, Marie was sent to tell her beads and to spend Spartan days among the nuns.

Nearly two years passed before Mazarin expressed a wish to see his ugly niece again; and it was indeed a very different Marie who now made her curtsy to him. Gone were the angular figure, the awkward movements, the sallow face, the slow wits. Time and the healthy life of the cloisters had done their work well. What the Cardinal now saw was a girl of seventeen, of exquisitely modelled figure, graceful and self-possessed; a face piquant and full of animation, illuminated by a pair of glorious dark eyes, and with a dazzling smile which revealed the prettiest teeth in France. Above all, and what delighted the Cardinal most, she had now a sprightly wit, and a quite brilliant gift of conversation. It was thus a smiling and gratified Cardinal who gave greeting to his niece, now as fair as her sisters and more fascinating than any of them. There was no doubt that he could find a high-placed husband for her, and thus--for this was, in fact, his motive for rescuing his pretty nieces from their obscurity--make his position secure by powerful family alliances.

It was not long before Mazarin fixed on a suitor in the person of Armande de la Porte, son of the Marquis de la Meilleraye, one of the most powerful nobles in France. But alas for his scheming! Armande's heart had already been caught while Marie was reciting her matins and vespers: He had lost it utterly to her beautiful sister, Hortense; he vowed that he would marry no other, and that if Hortense could not be his wife he would prefer to die. Thus Marie was rescued from a union which brought her sister so much misery in later years, and for a time she was condemned to spend unhappy months with her mother at the Louvre.

To this period of her life Marie Mancini could never look back without a shudder. "My mother," she says, "who, I think, had always hated me, was more unbearable than ever. She treated me, although I was no longer ugly, with the utmost aversion and cruelty. My sisters went to Court and were fussed and feted. I was kept always at home, in our miserable lodgings, an unhappy Cinderella."

But Fortune did not long hide his face from Cinderella. Her "Prince Charming" was coming--in the guise of the handsome young King, Louis XIV. himself. It was one day while visiting Madame Mancini in her lodgings at the Louvre that Louis first saw the girl who was to play such havoc with his heart; and at the first sight of those melting dark eyes and that intoxicating smile he was undone. He came again and

again--always under the pretext of visiting Madame, and happy beyond expression if he could exchange a few words with her daughter, Marie; until he soon counted a day worse than lost that did not bring him the stolen sweetness of a meeting.

When, a few weeks later, Madame Mancini died, and Marie was recalled to Court by her uncle, her life was completely changed for her. Louis had now abundant opportunities of seeking her side; and excellent use he made of them. The two young people were inseparable, much to the alarm of the Cardinal and Madame Mere, the Queen. The young King was never happy out of her sight; he danced with her (and none could dance more divinely than Marie); he listened as she sang to him with a voice whose sweetness thrilled him; they read the same books together in blissful solitude; she taught him her native Italian, and entranced him by the brilliance of her wit; and when, after a slight illness, he heard of her anxious inquiries and her tears of sympathy, his conquest was complete. He vowed that she and no other should be his wife and Queen of France.

But these halcyon days were not to last long. It was no part of Mazarin's scheming that a niece of his should sit on the throne. The prospect was dazzling, it is true, but it would inevitably mean his own downfall, so strongly would such an alliance be resented by friends as well as enemies; and Anne of Austria was as little in the mood to be deposed by such an obscure person as the "Mancini girl." Thus it was that Queen and Cardinal joined hands to nip the young romance in the bud.

A Royal bride must be found for Louis, and that quickly; and negotiations were soon on foot to secure as his wife Margaret, Princess of Savoy. In vain did the boy-King storm and protest; equally futile were Marie's tearful pleadings to her uncle. The fiat had gone forth. Louis must have a Royal bride; and she was already about to leave Italy on her bridal progress to France.

It was, we may be sure, with a heavy heart that Marie joined the cavalcade which, with its gorgeous procession of equipages, its gaily mounted courtiers, and its brave escort of soldiery, swept out of Paris on its stately progress to Lyons, to meet the Queen-to-be. But there was no escape from the humiliation, for she must accompany Anne of Austria, as one of her retinue of maids-of-honour. Arrived too soon at Lyons, Louis rides on to give first greeting to his bride, who is now within a day's journey; and returns with a smiling face to announce to his mother that he finds the Princess pleasing to his eye, and to describe, with boyish enthusiasm, her grace and graciousness, her magnificent eyes, her beautiful hair, and the delicate olive of her complexion, while Marie's heart sinks at the recital. Could this be the lover who, but a few days ago, had been at her feet, vowing that she was the only bride in all the world for him?

When he seeks her side and shamefacedly makes excuses for his seeming recreancy, she bids him marry his "ugly bride" in accents of scorn, and then bursts into tears, which she only consents to wipe away when he declares that his heart will always be hers and that he will never marry the Italian Princess.

But Margaret of Savoy was not after all to be Queen of France. She was, as it proved, merely a pawn in the Cardinal's deep game. It was a Spanish alliance that he sought for his young King; and when, at the eleventh hour, an ambassador came hurriedly to Lyons to offer the

Infanta's hand, the Savoy Duke and his sister, the Princess, had perforce to return to Italy "empty-handed."

There was at least a time of respite now for Louis and Marie, and as they rode back to Paris, side by side, chatting gaily and exchanging sweet confidences, the sun once more shone on the happiest young people in all France. Then followed a period of blissful days, of dances and fetes, in brilliant succession, in which the lovers were inseparable; above all, of long rambles together, when, "the world forgetting," they could live in the happy present, whatever the future might have in store for them.

Meanwhile the negotiations for the Spanish marriage were ripening fast. Louis and Marie again appeal, first to the Cardinal, then to the Queen, to sanction their union, but to no purpose; both are inflexible. Their foolish romance must come to an end. As a last resource Marie flies to the King, with tender pleadings and tears, begging him not to desert her; to which he answers that no power on earth shall make him wed the Infanta. "You alone," he swears, "shall wear the crown of Queen"; and in token of his love he buys for her the pearls that were the most treasured belongings of the exiled Stuart Queen, Henrietta Maria. The lovers part in tears, and the following day Marie receives orders to leave Paris and to retire to La Rochelle.

At every stage of her journey she was overtaken by messengers bearing letters from Louis, full of love and protestations of unflinching loyalty; and when Louis moved with his Court to Bayonne, the lovers met once more to mingle their tears. But Louis, ever fickle, was already wavering again. "If I must marry the Infanta," he said, "I suppose I must. But I shall never love any but you."

Marie now realised that this was to be the end. In face of a lover so weak, and a fate so inflexible, what could she do but submit? And it was with a proud but breaking heart that she wrote a few days later to tell Louis that she wished him not to write to her again and that she would not answer his letters. One June day news came to her that her lover was married and that "he was very much in love with the Infanta"; and even her pride, crushed as it was, could not restrain her from writing to her sister, Hortense, "Say everything you can that is horrid about him. Point out all his faults to me, that I may find relief for my aching heart." When, a few months later, Marie saw the King again, he received her almost as a stranger, and had the bad taste to sing the praises of his Queen.

But Marie Mancini was the last girl in all France to wed herself long to grief or an outraged vanity. There were other lovers by the score among whom she could pick and choose. She was more lovely now than when the recreant Louis first succumbed to her charms--with a ripened witchery of black eyes, red lips, the flash of pearly teeth revealed by every dazzling smile, with glorious black hair, the grace of a fawn, and a "voluptuous fascination" which no man could resist.

Prince Charles of Lorraine was her veriest slave, but Mazarin would have none of him. Prince Colonna, Grand Constable of Naples, was more fortunate when he in turn came a-wooing. He bore the proudest name in Italy, and he had wealth, good-looks, and high connections to lend a glamour to his birth. The Cardinal smiled on his suit, and Marie, since she had no heart to give, willingly gave her hand.

Louis himself graced the wedding with his presence; and we are told, as the white-faced bride "said the 'yes' which was to bind her to a stranger, her eyes, with an indescribable expression, sought those of the King, who turned pale as he met them."

Over the rest of Marie Mancini's chequered life we must hasten. After a few years of wedded life with her Italian Prince, "Colonna's early passion for his beautiful wife was succeeded by a distaste amounting to hatred. He disgusted her with his amours; and when she ventured to protest against his infidelity, he tried to poison her." This crowning outrage determined Marie to fly, and, in company with her sister, Hortense, who had fled to her from the brutality of her own husband, she made her escape one dark night to Civita Vecchia, where a boat was awaiting the runaways.

Hotly pursued on land and sea, narrowly escaping shipwreck, braving hardships, hunger, and hourly danger of capture, the fugitives at last reached Marseilles where Marie (Hortense now seeking a refuge in Savoy) began those years of wandering and adventure, the story of which outstrips fiction.

Now we find her seeking asylum at convents from Aix to Madrid; now queening it at the Court of Savoy, with Duke Charles Emmanuel for lover; now she is dazzling Madrid with the Almirante of Castille and many another high-placed worshipper dancing attendance on her; and now she is in Rome, turning the heads of grave cardinals with her witcheries. Sometimes penniless and friendless, at others lapped in luxury; but carrying everywhere in her bosom the English pearls, the last gift of her false and frail Louis.

Thus, through the long, troubled years, until old-age crept on her, the Cardinal's niece wandered, a fugitive, over the face of Europe, alternately caressed and buffeted by fortune, until "at long last" the end came and brought peace with it. As she lay dying in the house of a good Samaritan at Pisa, with no other hand to minister to her, she called for pen and paper, and with failing hand wrote her own epitaph, surely the most tragic ever penned--"Marie Mancini Colonna--Dust and Ashes."

CHAPTER XVI

BIANCA, GRAND DUCHESS OF TUSCANY

More than three centuries have gone since Florence made merry over the death of her Grand Duchess, Bianca. It was an occasion for rejoicing; her name was bandied from lips to lips--"La Pessima Bianca"; jeers and laughter followed her to her unmarked grave in the Church of San Lorenzo. But through the ages her picture has come down to us as she strutted on the world's stage in all her pride and beauty, with a vividness which few better women of her time retain.

It was in the year 1548, when our boy-King, the sixth Edward, was fresh to his crown, that Bianca Capello was cradled in the palace of her father, one of the greatest men of Venice, Senator and Privy Councillor. As a child she was as beautiful as she was wilful; the pride of her

father, the despair of his wife, her stepmother--her little head full of romance, her heart full of rebellion against any kind of discipline or restraint.

Before she had left the schoolroom Capello's daughter was, by common consent, the fairest girl in her native city, with a beauty riper than her years. Tall, and with a well-developed figure of singular grace, she carried her head as proudly as any Queen. Her fair hair fell in a rippling cascade far below her waist; her face, hands, and throat, we are told, were "white as lilies," save for the delicate rose-colour that tinted her cheeks. Her eyes were large and dark, and of an almost dazzling brilliance; and her full, pouting lips were red and fragrant as a rose.

Such was Bianca Capello on the threshold of womanhood, as you may see her pictured to-day in Bronzino's miniature at the British Museum, with a loveliness which set the hearts of the Venetian gallants a-flutter before our Shakespeare was in his cradle. She might, if she would, have mated with almost any noble in Tuscany, had not her foolish, wayward fancy fallen on Pietro Bonaventuri, a handsome young clerk in Salviati's bank, whose eyes had often strayed from his ledgers to follow her as, in the company of her maid, the Senator's daughter took her daily walk past his office window.

At sight of so fair a vision Pietro was undone; he fell violently in love with her long before he exchanged a word with her, and although no one knew better than he the gulf that separated the daughter of a nobleman and a Senator from the drudge of the quill, he determined to win her. Youth and good-looks such as his, with plenty of assurance to support them, had done as much for others, and they should do it for him. How they first met we know not, but we know that shortly after this momentous meeting Bianca had completely lost her heart to the knight of the quill, with the handsome face, the dark, flashing eyes, and the courtly manner.

Other meetings followed--secret rendezvous arranged by the duenna herself in return for liberal bribes--to keep which Bianca would steal out of her father's palace at dead of night, leaving the door open behind her to ensure safe return before dawn. On one such occasion, so the story runs, Bianca returned to find the door closed against her by a too officious hand. She dared not wake the sleepers to gain admittance--that would be to expose her secret and to cover herself with disgrace--and in her fears and alarm she fled back to her lover.

However this may be, we know that, for some urgent reason or other, the young lovers disappeared one night together from Venice and made their way to Florence to find a refuge under the roof of Pietro's parents. Here a terrible disillusion met Bianca at the threshold. Her husband--for, on the runaway journey, Pietro had secured the friendly services of a village priest to marry them--had told her that he was the son of noble parents, kin to his employers, the Salviatis. The home to which he now introduced her was little better than a hovel, with poverty looking out of its windows.

Here indeed was a sorry home-coming for the new-made bride, daughter of the great Capello! There was not even a drudge to do the housework, which Bianca was compelled to share with her bucolic mother-in-law. It is even said that she was compelled to do laundry-work in order to keep the domestic purse supplied. Her husband had forfeited his meagre

salary; she had equally sacrificed the fortune left to her by her mother. Sordid, grinding poverty stared both in the face.

To return to her own home in Venice was impossible. So furious were her father and stepmother at her escapade that a large reward was advertised for the capture of her husband, "alive or dead," and a sentence of death had been procured from the Council of Ten in the event of his arrest. More than this, a sentence of banishment was pronounced against Pietro and Bianca; the maid who had connived at their illicit wooing and flight paid for her treachery with her life; and Pietro's uncle ended his days in a loathsome dungeon.

Such was the vengeance taken by Bartolomeo Capello. As for the runaways, they spent a long honeymoon in concealment and hourly dread of the fate that hung over them. It was well known, however, in Florence where they were in hiding; and curious crowds were drawn to the Bonaventuri hovel to catch a glimpse of the heroes of a scandal with which all Italy was ringing. Thus it was that Francesco de Medici first set eyes on the woman who was to play so great a part in his life.

There could be no greater contrast than that between Francesco de Medici, heir to the Tuscan Grand Dukedom, and the beautiful young wife of the bank-clerk, now playing the role of maid-of-all-work and charwoman. It is said that Francesco was a madman; and indeed what we know of him makes this description quite plausible. He was a man of black brow and violent temper, repelling alike in appearance and manner. He was, we are told, "more of a savage than a civilised human being." His food was deluged with ginger and pepper; his favourite fare was raw eggs filled with red pepper, and raw onions, of which he ate enormous quantities. He drank iced water by the gallon, and slept between frozen sheets. He was a man, moreover, of evil life, familiar with every form of vicious indulgence. His only redeeming feature was a love of art, which enriched the galleries of Florence.

Such was the Medici--half-ogre, half-madman, who, riding one day through a Florence slum, saw at the window of a mean dwelling the beautiful face of Bianca Bonaventuri, and rode on leaving his heart behind. Here indeed was a dainty dish to set before his jaded appetite. The owner of that fair face, with the crimson lips and the black, flashing eyes, must be his. On the following day a great Court lady, the Marchesa Mondragone, presents herself at the Bonaventuri door, with smiles and gracious words, bearing an invitation to Court for the lady of the window. "Impossible," bluntly answers Signora Bonaventuri; her daughter-in-law has no clothes fit to be seen at Court. "But," persists the Marchesa, "that is a matter that can easily be arranged. It will be a pleasure to me to supply the necessary outfit, if the Signora and her daughter-in-law will but come to-morrow to the Mondragone Palace." The bride, when consulted, is not unwilling; and the following day, in company with her mother-in-law, she is effusively received by the Marchesa, and is feasting her eyes on exquisite robes and the glitter of rare gems, among which she is invited to make her choice. A moment later Francesco enters, and with courtly grace is kissing the hand of his new divinity....

Then followed secret meetings such as marked Bianca's first unhappy wooing in Venice--hours of rapture for the Tuscan Duke, of flattered submission by the runaway bride; and within a few weeks we find Bianca installed in a palace of her own with Francesco's guards and equipage ever at its door, while his newly made bride, Giovanna, Archduchess of

Austria, kept her lonely vigil in the apartments which so seldom saw her husband.

Francesco, indeed, had no eyes or thought for any but the lovely woman who had so completely enslaved him. As for her, condemn her as we must, much can be pleaded in extenuation of her conduct. She had been basely deceived and betrayed. On the one side was a life of sordid poverty and drudgery, with a husband for whom she had now nothing but dislike and contempt; on the other was the ardent homage of the future ruler of Tuscany, with its accompaniment of splendour, luxury, and power. A fig for love! ambition should now rule her life. She would drain the cup of pleasure, though the dregs might be bitter to the taste.

She was now in the very prime of her beauty, and a Queen in all but the name. Between her and her full Queendom were but two obstacles--her lover's plain, unattractive wife, and her own worthless husband; and of these obstacles one was soon to be removed from her path.

Pietro, who had been made chamberlain to the Tuscan Court, was more than content that his wife should go her own way, so long as he was allowed to go his. He was kept very agreeably occupied with love affairs of his own. The richest widow in Florence, Cassandra Borgianni, was eager to lavish her smiles and favours on him; and the knowledge that two of his predecessors in her affection had fallen under the assassin's knife only lent zest to a love adventure which was after his heart. Warnings of the fate that might await him in turn fell on deaf ears. When his wife ventured to point out the danger he retorted, "If you say another word I will cut your throat." The following night as he was returning from a visit to the widow, a dagger was sheathed in his heart, and Pietro's amorous race was run.

Such was the end of the bank-clerk and his eleventh-hour glories and love adventures. Now only Giovanna remained to block the way to the pinnacle of Bianca's ambition; and her health was so frail that the waiting might not be long. Giovanna had provided no successor to her husband (who had now succeeded to his Grand Dukedom); if Bianca could succeed where the Grand Duchess had failed, she could at least ensure that a son of hers would one day rule over Tuscany.

Thus one August day in 1576 the news flashed round Florence that a male child had been born in the palace on the Via Maggiore. Francesco was in the "seventh heaven" of delight. Here at last was the long-looked-for inheritor of his honours--the son who was to perpetuate the glories of the Medici and to thwart his brother, the Cardinal, who had so confidently counted on the succession for himself. And Madame Bianca professed herself equally delighted, although her pleasure was qualified by fear.

She had played her part with consummate cleverness; but there were two women who knew the true story of the birth of the child, which had been smuggled into the palace from a Florence slum. One was the changeling's mother, a woman of the people, whom a substantial bribe had induced to part with her new-born infant; the other was Bianca's waiting woman. These witnesses to the imposture must be silenced effectually.

Hired assassins made short work of the mother. The waiting-maid was "left for dead" in a mountain-pass, to which she had been lured; but she survived long enough at least to communicate her secret to the Grand Duke's brother, the Cardinal Ferdinand de Medici.

Bianca was now in a parlous plight. At any moment her enemy, the Cardinal, might betray her to her lover, and bring the carefully planned edifice of her fortunes tumbling about her ears. But she proved equal even to this emergency. Taking her courage in both hands, she herself confessed the fraud to the Grand Duke, who not only forgave her (so completely was he under the spell of her beauty) but insisted on calling the gutter-child his son.

The tables, however, were soon to be turned on her, for Giovanna, who had long despaired of providing an heir to her husband, gave birth a few months later to a male child. Florence was jubilant, for the Grand Duchess was as beloved as her rival was detested; and the christening of the heir was made the occasion of festivities and rejoicing. Bianca's day of triumph seemed at last to be over. For a time she left Florence to hide her humiliation; but within a year she was back again, to be received with open arms of welcome by the Duke. During her absence she had made peace with her family, and when her father and brother came to Florence to visit her, they were received by Francesco with regal entertainments, and sent away loaded with presents and honours.

Bianca had now reached the zenith of her power and splendour. Before she had been back many months the Grand Duchess died, to the undisguised relief of her husband, who hastened from her funeral to the arms of her rival. Her position was now secure, unassailable; and before Giovanna had been two months in the family vault, Bianca was secretly married to her Grand ducal lover.

Florence was furious. But what mattered that? The Venetian Senate had recognised Bianca as a true daughter of the Republic. She was the legal wife of the ruler of Tuscany. She was Grand Duchess at last, and she meant all the world to know it. That she was cordially hated by her husband's subjects, that the air was full of stories of her extravagance, her intemperance, and her cruelty, gave her no moment's unhappiness. For eight years she reigned as Queen, wielding the sceptre her husband's hands were too weak or indifferent to hold. Giovanna's son had followed his mother to the grave; and the child of the slums, who had been so fruitlessly smuggled into her palace, had been legitimated.

The only thorn now left in her bed of roses was the enmity of the Grand Duke's brother, the Cardinal; and her greatest ambition was to win him to her side. In the autumn of 1787 he was invited to Florence, and as the culmination of a series of festivities, a grand banquet was given, at which he had the place of honour, at her right hand. The feast was drawing near to its end. Bianca, with sparkling eyes and flushed face, looking lovelier than she had ever looked before, was at her happiest, for the Cardinal had at last succumbed to her bright eyes and honeyed words. It was the crowning moment of her many triumphs, when life left nothing more to desire.

Then it was, at the supreme moment, that tragedy in its most terrible form fell on the scene of festivity and mirth. While Bianca was smiling her sweetest on the Cardinal she was seized by violent pains, "her mouth foams, her face is distorted by agony; she shrieks aloud that she is dying. Francesco tries to go to her aid, but his steps are suddenly arrested. He too is seized by the same terrible anguish. A few hours later both she and he breathe their last breath."

"Poison" was the word which ran through the palace and soon through Florence from blanched lips to blanched lips. Some said it was the Cardinal who had done the deed; others whispered stories of a poisoned tart designed by Bianca for the Cardinal, who refused to be tempted. Whereupon the Grand Duke had eaten of it, and Bianca, "seeing that her plot had so tragically miscarried, seized the tart from her husband's hand and ate what was left of it."

The truth will never be known. What we do know is that within a few hours of the last joke and the last drained glass of that fatal banquet the bodies of Francesco and Bianca were lying in death side by side in an adjacent room, the door of which was locked against the eyes of the curious--even against the physicians.

In the solemn lying-in-state that followed Bianca had no place. Francesco alone, by his brother's orders, wore his crown in death. As for Bianca, her body was hurried away and flung into the common vault of San Lorenzo, with the light of two yellow wax torches to bear it company, and the jibes and jeers of Florence for its only requiem.

CHAPTER XVII

RICHELIEU, THE ROUE

In the drama of the French Court many a fine-feathered villain "struts his brief hour" on the stage, dazzling eyes by his splendour, and shocking a world none too easily shocked in those days of easy morals by his profligacy; but it would be difficult among all these gilded rakes to find a match for the Duc de Richelieu, who carried his villainies through little less than a century of life.

Born in 1696, when Louis XIV. had still nearly twenty years of his long reign before him, Louis Francois Armand Duplessis, Duc de Richelieu, survived to hear the rumblings which heralded the French Revolution ninety-two years later; and for three-quarters of a century to be known as the most accomplished and heartless roue in all France. Bearer of a great name, and inheritor of the splendours and riches of his great-uncle, the Cardinal, who was Louis XII.'s right-hand man, and, in his day, the most powerful subject in Europe, the Duc was born with the football of fortune at his feet; and probably no man who has ever lived so shamefully prostituted such magnificent opportunities and gifts.

As a boy, still in his teens, he had begun to play the role of Don Juan at the Court of the child-King, Louis XV. The most beautiful women at the Court, we are told, went crazy over the handsome boy, who bore the most splendid name in France; and thus early his head was turned by flatteries and attentions which followed him almost to the grave.

The young Duchesse de Bourgogne, the King's mother, made love to him, to the scandal of the Court; and from Princesses of the Blood Royal to the humblest serving-maid, there was scarcely a woman at Court who would not have given her eyes for a smile from the Duc de Fronsac, as he was then known.

How he revelled in his conquests he makes abundantly clear in the

Memoirs he left behind him--surely the most scandalous ever written--in which he recounts his love affairs, in long sequence, with a cold-blooded heartlessness which shocks the reader to-day, so long after lover and victims have been dust. He revels in describing the artifices by which he got the most unassailable of women into his power--such as the young and beautiful Madame Michelin, whose religious scruples proved such a frail barrier against the assaults of the young Lothario. He chuckles with a diabolical pride as he tells us how he played off one mistress against another; how he made one liaison pave the way to its successor; and how he abandoned each in turn when it had served its purpose, and betrayed, one after another, the women who had trusted to his nebulous sense of honour.

A profligate so tempted as the Duc de Richelieu was from his earliest years, one can understand, however much we may condemn; but for the man who conducted his love affairs with such heartlessness and dishonour no language has words of execration and contempt to describe him.

From his earliest youth there was no "game" too high for our Don Juan to fly at. Long before he had reached manhood he counted his lady-loves by the score; and among them were at least three Royal Princesses, Mademoiselle de Charolais, and two of the Regent's own daughters, the Duchesse de Berry and Mademoiselle de Valois, later Duchess of Modena, who, in their jealousy, were ready to "tear each other's eyes out" for love of the Duc. Quarrels between the rival ladies were of everyday occurrence; and even duels were by no means unknown.

When, for instance, the Duc wearied of the lovely Madame de Polignac, this lady was so inflamed by hatred of her successor in his affections, the Marquise de Nesle, that she challenged her to a duel to the death in the Bois de Boulogne. When Madame de Polignac, after a fierce exchange of shots, saw her rival stretched at her feet, she turned furiously on the wounded woman. "Go!" she shrieked. "I will teach you to walk in the footsteps of a woman like me! If I had the traitor here, I would blow his brains out!" Whereupon, Madame de Nesle, fainting as she was from loss of blood, retorted that her lover was worthy that even more noble blood than hers should be shed for him. "He is," she said to the few onlookers who had hurried to the scene on hearing the shots, "the most amiable _seigneur_ of the Court. I am ready to shed for him the last drop of blood in my veins. All these ladies try to catch him, but I hope that the proofs I have given of my devotion will win him for myself without sharing with anyone. Why should I hide his name? He is the Duc de Richelieu--yes, the Duc de Richelieu, the eldest son of Venus and Mars!"

Such was the devotion which this heartless profligate won from some of the most beautiful and highly placed ladies of France. What was the secret of the spell he cast over them it is difficult to say. It is true that he was a handsome man, as his portraits show, but there were men quite as handsome at the French Court; he was courtly and accomplished, but he had many rivals as clever and as skilled in courtly arts as himself. His power must, one thinks, have lain in that strange magnetism which women seem so powerless to resist in men, and which outweighs all graces of mind and physical perfections.

The Duc's career, however, was not one unbroken dallying with love. Thrice, at least, he was sent to cool his ardour within the walls of the Bastille--on one occasion as the result of a duel with the Comte de Gace. His lady-loves were desolate at the cruel fate which had overtaken

their idol. They fell on their knees at the Regent's feet, and, with tears streaming down their pretty cheeks, pleaded for his freedom. Two of the Royal Princesses, both disguised as Sisters of Charity, visited the prisoner daily in his dungeon, carrying with them delicacies to tempt his appetite, and consolation to cheer his captivity.

In vain did Duc and Comte both declare that they had never fought a duel; and when, in the absence of proof, the Regent insisted that their bodies should be examined for the convicting wounds, the impish Richelieu came triumphantly through the ordeal as the result of having his wounds covered with pink taffeta and skilfully painted!

It was a more serious matter that sent him again to the Bastille in 1718. False to his country as to the victims of his fascinations, he had been plotting with Spain, France's bitterest enemy, for the seizure of the Regent and the carrying him off across the Pyrenees; and certain incriminating letters sent to him by Cardinal Alberoni had been intercepted, and were in the Regent's hands. The Regent's daughter, Mademoiselle de Valois, warned her lover of his danger, but too late. Before he could escape, he was arrested, and with an escort of archers was safely lodged in the Bastille.

Our Lothario was now indeed in a parlous plight. Lodged in the deepest and most loathsome dungeon of the Bastille--a dungeon so damp that within a few hours his clothes were saturated--without even a chair to sit on or a bed to lie on, with legions of hungry rats for company, he was now face to face with almost certain death. The Regent, whose love affairs he had thwarted a score of times, and who thus had no reason to love the profligate Duc, vowed that his head should pay the price of his treason.

Once more the Court ladies were reduced to hysterics and despair, and forgot their jealousies in a common appeal to the Regent for clemency. Mademoiselle de Valois was driven to distraction; and when tears and pleadings failed to soften her father's heart, she declared in the hearing of the Court that she would commit suicide unless her lover was restored to liberty. In company with her rival, Mademoiselle de Charolais, she visited the dungeon in the dark night hours, taking flint and steel, candles and bonbons, to weep with the captive.

She squandered two hundred thousand livres in attempts to bribe his guards, but all to no purpose: and it was not until after six months of duration that the Regent at last yielded--moved partly by his daughter's tears and threats and partly by the pleadings of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris--and the prisoner was released, on condition that the Cardinal and the Duchesse de Richelieu would be responsible for his custody and good behaviour.

A few days later we find the irresponsible Richelieu climbing over the garden-walls of his new "prison" at Conflans, racing through the darkness to Paris behind swift horses, and making love to the Regent's own mistresses and his daughter!

But such facilities for dalliance with the Regent's daughter were soon to be brought to an end. Mademoiselle de Valois, in order to ensure her lover's freedom, had at last consented to accept the hand of the Duke of Modena, an alliance which she had long fought against; and before the Duc had been a free man again many weeks she paid this part of his ransom by going into exile, and to an odious wedded life, in a far

corner of Italy--much, it may be imagined, to the Regent's relief, for his daughters and their love affairs were ever a thorn in his side.

It was not long, however, before the new Duchess of Modena began to sigh for her distant lover, and to bombard him with letters begging him to come to her. "I cannot live without your love," she wrote. "Come to me--only, come in disguise, so that no one can recognise you."

This was indeed an adventure after the Lothario Duc's heart--an adventure with love as its reward and danger as its spur. And thus it was that, a few weeks after the Duchess had sent her invitation, two travel-stained pedlars, with packs on their backs, entered the city of Modena to find customers for their books and pamphlets. At the small hostelry whose hospitality they sought the hawkers gave their names as Gasparini and Romano, names which masked the identities of the knight-errant Duc and his friend, La Fosse, respectively.

The following morning beheld the itinerant hawkers in the palace grounds, their wares spread out to tempt the Court ladies on their way to Mass, when the Duchess herself passed their way and deigned to stop to converse graciously with the strangers. To her inquiries they answered that they came from Piedmont; and their curious jargon of French and Italian lent support to the story. After inspecting their wares she asked for a certain book. "Alas! Madame," Gasparini answered, "I have not a copy here, but I have one at my inn." And bidding him bring the volume to her at the palace, the great lady resumed her devout journey to Mass.

A few hours later Gasparini presented himself at the palace with the required volume, and was ushered into the august presence of the Duchess. A moment later, on the closing of the door, the Royal lady was in the "hawker's" arms, her own flung around his neck, as with tears of joy she welcomed the lover who had come to her in such strange guise and at such risk.

A few stolen moments of happiness was all the lovers dared now to allow themselves. The Duke of Modena was in the palace, and the situation was full of danger. But on the morrow he was going away on a hunting expedition, and then--well, then they might meet without fear.

On the following day, the coast now clear, behold our "hawker" once more at the palace door, with a bundle of books under his arm for the inspection of Her Highness, and being ushered into the Duchess's reading-room, full of souvenirs of the happy days they had spent together in distant Paris and Versailles. Among them, most prized of all, was a lock of his own hair, enshrined on a small altar, and surmounted by a crown of interlocked hearts. This lock, the Duchess told him, she had kissed and wept over every day since they had parted.

Each day now brought its hours of blissful meeting, so seemingly short that the Princess would throw her arms around her "hawker's" neck and implore him to stay a little longer. One day, however, he tarried too long; the Duke returned unexpectedly from his hunting, and before the lovers could part, he had entered the room--just in time to see the pedlar bowing humbly in farewell to his Duchess, and to hear him assure her that he would call again with the further books she wished to see.

Certainly it was a strange spectacle to greet the eyes of a home-coming Duke--that of his lady closeted with a shabby pedlar of books; but at

least there was nothing suspicious in it, and, getting into conversation with the "hawker," the Duke found him quite an entertaining fellow, full of news of what was going on in the world outside his small duchy.

In his curious jargon of French and Italian, Gasparini had much to tell His Highness apart from book-talk. He entertained him with the latest scandals of the French Court; with gossip about well-known personages, from the Regent to Dubois. "And what about that rascal, the Duc de Richelieu?" asked the great man. "What tricks has he been up to lately?" "Oh," answered Gasparini, with a wink at the Duchess, who was crimson with suppressed laughter, "he is one of my best customers. Ah, Monsieur le Duc, he is a gay dog. I hear that all the women at the Court are madly in love with him; that the Princesses adore him, and that he is driving all the husbands to distraction."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked the Duke, with a laugh. "He is a more dangerous fellow even than I thought. And what is his latest game?"

"Oh," answered the hawker, "I am told that he has made a wager that he will come to Modena, in spite of you; and I shouldn't be at all surprised if he does!"

"As for that," said the Duke, with a chuckle, "I am not afraid. I defy him to do his worst; and I am willing to wager that I shall be a match for him. However," he added, "you're an entertaining fellow; so come and see me again whenever you please."

And thus, by the wish of the Duchess's husband himself, the ducal "hawker" became a daily visitor at the palace, entertaining His Highness with his chatter, and, when his back was turned, making love to his wife, and joining her in shrieks of laughter at his easy gullibility.

Thus many happy weeks passed, Gasparini, the pedlar, selling few volumes, but reaping a rich harvest of stolen pleasure, and revelling in an adventure which added such a new zest to a life sated with more humdrum love-making. But even the Duchess's charms began to pall; the ladies he had left so disconsolate in Paris were inundating him with letters, begging him to return to them--letters, all forwarded to him from his chateau at Richelieu, where he was supposed to be in retreat. The lure was too strong for him; and, taking leave of the Duchess in floods of tears, he returned to his beloved Paris to fresh conquests.

And thus it was with the gay Duc until the century that followed that of his birth was drawing to its close; until its sun was beginning to set in the blood of that Revolution, which, if he had lived but one year longer, would surely have claimed him as one of its first victims. Three wives he led to the altar--the last when he had passed into the eighties--but no marital duty was allowed to interfere with the amours which filled his life; and to the last no pity ever gave a pang to the "conscience" which allowed him to pick and fling away his flowers at will, and to trample, one after another, on the hearts that yielded to his love and trusted to his honour.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE INDISCRETIONS OF A PRINCESS

It was an ill fate that brought Caroline, Princess of Brunswick-Wolfenbuettel to England to be the bride of George, Prince of Wales, one April day in the year 1795; although probably no woman has ever set forth on her bridal journey with a lighter or prouder heart, for, as she said, "Am I not going to be the wife of the handsomest Prince in the world?" If she had any momentary doubt of this, a glance at the miniature she carried in her bosom reassured her; for the pictured face that smiled at her was handsome as that of an Apollo.

No wonder the Princess's heart beat high with pride and pleasure during that last triumphal stage of her journey to her husband's arms; for he was not only the handsomest man, with "the best shaped leg in Europe," he was by common consent the "greatest gentleman" any Court could show. Picture him as he made his first appearance at a Court ball. "His coat," we are told, "was of pink silk, with white cuffs; his waistcoat of white silk, embroidered with various-coloured foil and adorned with a profusion of French paste. And his hat was ornamented with two rows of steel beads, five thousand in number, with a button and a loop of the same metal, and cocked in a new military style." See young "Florizel" as he makes his smiling and gracious progress through the avenues of courtiers; note the winsomeness of his smiles, the inimitable grace of his bows, his pleasant, courtly words of recognition, and say if ever Royalty assumed a form more agreeable to the eye and captivating to the senses.

"Florizel" was indeed the most splendid Prince in the world, and the most "perfect gentleman." He was also, though his bride-to-be little knew it, the most dissolute man in Europe, the greatest gambler and voluptuary--a man who was as false to his friends as he was traitor to every woman who crossed his path, a man whom no appeal of honour or mercy could check in his selfish pursuit of pleasure.

"I look through all his life," Thackeray says, "and recognise but a bow and a grin. I try and take him to pieces, and find silk stockings, padding, stays, a coat with frogs and a fur collar, a star and blue ribbon, a pocket handkerchief prodigiously scented, one of Truefitt's best nutty brown wigs reeking with oil, a set of teeth and a huge black stock, under-waistcoats, more under-waistcoats, and then--nothing. French ballet-dancers, French cooks, horse-jockeys, buffoons, procuresses, tailors, boxers, fencing-masters, china, jewel and gimcrack-merchants--these were his real companions."

Such was the husband Princess Caroline came so light-heartedly, with laughter on her lips, from Brunswick to wed, little dreaming of the disillusion and tears that were to await her on the very threshold of the life to which she had looked forward with such high hopes.

We get the first glimpse of Caroline some twelve years earlier, when Sir John Stanley, who was making the grand tour, spent a few weeks at her father's Court. He speaks of her as a "beautiful girl of fourteen," and adds, "I did think and dream of her day and night at Brunswick, and for a year afterwards I saw her for hours three or fours times a week, but as a star out of my reach." Years later he met her again under sadly changed conditions. "One day only," he writes, "when dining with her and her mother at Blackheath, she smiled at something which had pleased her, and for an instant only I could have fancied she had been the Caroline of fourteen years old--the lovely, pretty Caroline, the girl my eyes had

so often rested on, with light and powdered hair hanging in curls on her neck, the lips from which only sweet words seemed as if they would flow, with looks animated, and always simply and modestly dressed."

Lady Charlotte Campbell, too, gives us a glimpse of her in these early and happier years, before sorrow had laid its defacing hand on her. "The Princess was in her early youth a pretty girl," Lady Charlotte says, "with fine light hair--very delicately formed features, and a fine complexion--quick, glancing, penetrating eyes, long cut and rather small in the head, which gave them much expression; and a remarkably delicately formed mouth."

It was in no happy home that the Princess had been cradled one May day in 1768. Her father, Charles William, Duke of Brunswick, was an austere soldier, too much absorbed in his military life and his mistress, to give much thought to his daughters. Her mother, the Duchess Augusta, sister of our own George III., was weak and small-minded, too much occupied in self-indulgence and scandal-talking to trouble about the training of her children.

Princess Caroline herself draws an unattractive picture of her home-life, in answer to Lady Charlotte Campbell's question, "Were you sorry to leave Brunswick?" "Not at all," was the answer; "I was sick tired of it, though I was sorry to leave my fader. I loved my fader dearly, better than any oder person. But dere were some unlucky tings in our Court which made my position difficult. My fader was most entirely attached to a lady for thirty years, who was in fact his mistress. She was the beautifulest creature and the cleverest, but, though my fader continued to pay my moder all possible respect, my poor moder could not suffer this attachment. And de consequence was, I did not know what to do between them; when I was civil to one, I was scolded by the other, and was very tired of being shuttlecock between them."

But in spite of these unfortunate home conditions Caroline appears to have spent a fairly happy girlhood, thanks to her exuberant spirits; and such faults as she developed were largely due to the lack of parental care, which left her training to servants. Thus she grew up with quite a shocking disregard of conventions, running wild like a young filly, and finding her pleasure and her companions in undesirable directions. Strange stories are told of her girlish love affairs, which seem to have been indiscreet if nothing worse, while her beauty drew to her many a high-placed wooer, including the Prince of Orange and Prince George of Darmstadt, to all of whom she seems to have turned a cold shoulder.

But the wilful Princess was not to be left mistress of her own destiny. One November day, in 1794, Lord Malmesbury arrived at the Brunswick Court to demand her hand for the Prince of Wales, whom his burden of debts and the necessity of providing an heir to the throne of England were at last driving reluctantly to the altar. And thus a new and dazzling future opened for her. To her parents nothing could have been more welcome than this prospect of a crown for their daughter; while to her it offered a release from a life that had become odious.

"The Princess Caroline much embarrassed on my first being presented to her," Malmesbury enters in his diary--"pretty face, not expressive of softness--her figure not graceful, fine eyes, good hands, tolerable teeth, fair hair and light eyebrows, good bust, short, with what the French call 'des epaules impertinentes,' vastly happy with her future expectations."

Such were Malmesbury's first impressions of the future Queen of England, whom it was his duty to prepare for her exalted station--a duty which he seems to have taken very seriously, even to the regulating of her toilette and her manners. Thus, a few days after setting eyes on her, his diary records: "She will call ladies whom she meets for the first time 'Mon coeur, ma chere, ma petite,' and I am obliged to rebuke and correct her." He lectures her on her undignified habit of whispering and giggling, and impresses on her the necessity of greater care in her attire, on more constant and thorough ablution, more frequent changes of linen, the care of her teeth, and so on--all of which admonitions she seems to have taken in excellent part, with demure promises of amendment, until he is impelled to write, "Princess Caroline improves very much on a closer acquaintance--cheerful and loves laughing. If she can get rid of her gossiping habit she will do very well."

Thus a few months passed at the Brunswick Court. The ceremonial of betrothal took place in December--"Princess Caroline much affected, but replies distinctly and well"; the marriage-contract was signed, and finally on 28th March the Princess embarked for England on her journey to the unseen husband whose good-looks and splendour have filled her with such high expectations. That she had not yet learnt discretion, in spite of all Malmesbury's homilies, is proved by the fact that she spent the night on board in walking up and down the deck in the company of a handsome young naval officer, conduct which naturally gave cause for observation and suspicion in the affianced bride of the future King of England.

It was well, perhaps, that she had snatched these few hours of innocent pleasure: for her first meeting with her future husband was well calculated to scatter all her rosy dreams. Arrived at last at St James's Palace, "I immediately notified the arrival to the King and Prince of Wales," says Malmesbury; "the last came immediately. I accordingly introduced the Princess Caroline to him. She very properly attempted to kneel to him. He raised her gracefully enough, and embraced her, said barely one word, turned round and retired to a distant part of the apartment, and calling to me said: 'Harris, I am not well; pray get me a glass of brandy.' I said, 'Sir, had you not better have a glass of water?' Upon which he, much out of humour, said with an oath: 'No; I will go directly to the Queen,' and away he went. The Princess, left during this short moment alone, was in a state of astonishment; and, on my joining her, said, 'Mon Dieu, is the Prince always like that? I find him very fat, and not at all as handsome as his portrait.'"

Such was the Princess's welcome to the arms of her handsome husband and to the Court over which she hoped to reign as Queen; nor did she receive much warmer hospitality from the Prince's family. The Queen, who had designed a very different bride for her eldest son, received her with scarcely disguised enmity, while the King, although, as he afterwards proved, kindly disposed towards her, treated her at first with an amiable indifference. And certainly her attitude seems to have been calculated to create an unfavourable impression on her new relatives and on the Court generally.

At the banquet which followed her reception, Malmesbury says, "I was far from satisfied with the Princess's behaviour. It was flippant, rattling, affecting raillery and wit, and throwing out coarse, vulgar hints about Lady----, who was present. The Prince was evidently disgusted, and this unfortunate dinner fixed his dislike, which, when left to herself, the

Princess had not the talent to remove; but by still observing the same giddy manners and attempts at cleverness and coarse sarcasm, increased it till it became positive hatred."

"What," as Thackeray asks, "could be expected from a wedding which had such a beginning--from such a bridegroom and such a bride? Malmesbury tells us how the Prince reeled into the Chapel Royal to be married on the evening of Wednesday, the 8th of April; and how he hiccuped out his vows of fidelity." "My brother," John, Duke of Bedford, records, "was one of the two unmarried dukes who supported the Prince at the ceremony, and he had need of his support; for my brother told me the Prince was so drunk that he could scarcely support himself from falling. He told my brother that he had drunk several glasses of brandy to enable him to go through the ceremony. There is no doubt that it was a _compulsory_ marriage."

With such an overture, we are not surprised to learn that the Royal bridegroom spent his wedding-night in a state of stupor on the floor of his bedroom; or that at dawn, when he had slept off the effects of his debauch, "pages heard cries proceeding from the nuptial chamber, and shortly afterwards saw the bridegroom rush out violently."

Nor, we may be sure, was the Prince's undisguised hatred of his bride in any way mitigated by the stories which Lady Jersey and others of her rivals poured into his willing ears--stories of her attachment to a young German Prince whom she was not allowed to marry; of a mysterious illness, followed by a few weeks' retreat; of that midnight promenade with the young naval officer; of assignations with Major Toebingen, the handsomest soldier in Europe, who so proudly wore the amethyst tie-pin she had presented to him--these and many another story which reflected none too well on her reputation before he had set eyes on her. But it needed no such whispered scandal to strengthen his hatred of a bride who personally repelled him, and who had been forced on him at a time when his heart was fully engaged with his lawful wedded wife, Mrs Fitzherbert, when it was not straying to Lady Jersey, to "Perdita" or others of his legion of lights-o'-love.

From the first day the ill-fated union was doomed. One violent scene succeeded another, until, before she had been two months a wife, the Prince declared that he would no longer live with her. He would only wait until her child was born; then he would formally and finally leave her. Thus, three months after the birth of the Princess Charlotte, the deed of separation was signed, and Caroline was at last free to escape from a Court which she had grown to detest, with good reason, and from a husband whose brutalities and infidelities filled her with loathing.

She carried with her, however, this consolation, that the "great, hearty people of England loved and pitied her." "God bless you! we will bring your husband back to you," was among the many cries that greeted her as she left the palace on her way to exile. But, to quote Thackeray again, "they could not bring that husband back; they could not cleanse that selfish heart. Was hers the only one he had wounded? Steeped in selfishness, impotent for faithful attachment and manly enduring love--had it not survived remorse, was it not accustomed to desertion?"

For a time the outcast Princess, with her infant daughter, led a retired life amid the peace and beauty of Blackheath, where she lived as simply as any bourgeoisie, playing the "lady bountiful" to the poor among her neighbours. Her chief pleasure seems to have been to surround herself

with cottage babies, converting Montague House into a "positive nursery, littered up with cradles, swaddling-bands, feeding bottles, and other things of the kind."

But even to this rustic retirement watchful eyes and slanderous tongues followed her; and it was not long before stories were passing from mouth to mouth in the Court of strange doings at Blackheath. The Princess, it was said, had become very intimate with Sir John Douglas and his lady, her near neighbours, and more especially with Sydney Smith, a good-looking naval captain, who shared the Douglas home, a man, moreover, with whom she had had suspicious relations at her father's Court many years earlier. It was rumoured that Captain Smith was a frequent and too welcome guest at Montague House, at hours when discreet ladies are not in the habit of receiving their male friends. Nor was the handsome captain the only friend thus unconventionally entertained. There was another good-looking naval officer, a Captain Manby, and also Sir Thomas Lawrence, the famous painter, both of whom were admitted to a suspicious intimacy with the Princess of Wales.

These rumours, sufficiently disquieting in themselves, were followed by stories of the concealed birth of a child, who had come mysteriously to swell the numbers of the Princess's proteges of the creche. Even King George, whose sympathy with his heir's ill-used wife was a matter of common knowledge, could not overlook a charge so grave as this. It must be investigated in the interests of the State, as well as of his family's honour; and, by his orders, a Commission of Peers was appointed to examine into the matter and ascertain the truth.

The inquiry--the "Delicate Investigation" as it was appropriately called--opened in June, 1806, and witness after witness, from the Douglasses to Robert Bidgood, a groom, gave evidence which more or less supported the charges of infidelity and concealment. The result of the investigation, however, was a verdict of acquittal, the Commissioners reporting that the Princess, although innocent, had been guilty of very indiscreet conduct--and this verdict the Privy Council confirmed.

For the Princess it was a triumphant vindication, which was hailed with acclamation throughout the country. Even the Royal family showed their satisfaction by formal visits of congratulation to the Princess, from the King himself to the Duke of Cumberland who conducted his sister-in-law on a visit to the Court.

But the days of Blackheath and the amateur nursery were at an end. The Princess returned to London, and found a more suitable home in Kensington Palace for some years, where she held her Court in rivalry of that of her husband at Carlton House. Here she was subjected to every affront and slight by the Prince and his set that the ingenuity of hatred could devise, and to crown her humiliation and isolation, her daughter Charlotte was taken from her and forbidden even to recognise her when their carriages passed in the street or park.

Can we wonder that, under such remorseless persecutions, the Princess became more and more defiant; that she gave herself up to a life of recklessness and extravagance; that, more and more isolated from her own world, she sought her pleasure and her companions in undesirable quarters, finding her chief intimates in a family of Italian musicians; or that finally, heart-broken and despairing, she determined once for all to shake off the dust of a land that had treated her so cruelly?

In August, 1814, with the approval of King and Parliament, the Princess left England to begin a career of amazing adventures and indiscretions, the story of which is one of the most remarkable in history.

CHAPTER XIX

THE INDISCRETIONS OF A PRINCESS--_continued_

When Caroline, Princess of Wales, shook the dust of England off her feet one August day in the year 1814, it was only natural that her steps should first turn towards the Brunswick home which held for her at least a few happy memories, and where she hoped to find in sympathy and old associations some salve for her wounded heart.

But the fever of restlessness was in her blood--the restlessness which was to make her a wanderer over the face of the earth for half a dozen years. The peace and solace she had looked for in Brunswick eluded her; and before many days had passed she was on her way through Switzerland to the sunny skies of Italy, where she could perhaps find in distraction and pleasure the anodyne which a life of retirement denied her. She was full of rebellion against fate, of hatred against her husband and his country which had treated her with such unmerited cruelty. She would defy fate; she would put a whole continent between herself and the nightmare life she had left behind, she hoped for ever. She would pursue and find pleasure at whatever cost.

In September, within five weeks of leaving England, we find her at Geneva, installed in a suite of rooms next to those occupied by Marie Louise, late Empress of France, a fugitive and exile like herself, and animated by the same spirit of reckless revolt against destiny--Marie Louise, we read, "making excursions like a lunatic on foot and on horseback, never even seeming to dream of making people remember that, before she became mixed up with a Corsican adventurer, she was an Archduchess"; the Princess of Wales, equally careless of her dignity and position, finding her pleasure in questionable company.

"From the inn where she was stopping she heard music, and, quite unaccompanied, immediately entered a neighbouring house and disappeared in the medley of dancers." A few days later, at Lausanne, "she learned that a little ball was in progress at a house opposite the 'Golden Lion,' and she asked for an invitation. After dancing with everybody and anybody, she finished up by dancing a Savoyard dance, called a _fricassee_, with a nobody. Madame de Corsal, who blushed and wept for the rest of the company, declares that it has made her ill, and that she feels that the honour of England has been compromised." Thus early did Caroline begin that career of indiscretion, to call it by no worse name, which made of her six years' exile "a long suicide of her reputation."

In October we find the Princess entering Milan, with her retinue of ladies-in-waiting, chamberlains, equerry, page, courier, and coachman, and with William Austin for companion--a boy, now about thirteen, whom she treated as her son, and who was believed by many to be the child of her imprudence at Blackheath, although the Commission of the "Delicate Investigation" had pronounced that he was son of a poor woman at Deptford. At Milan, as indeed wherever she wandered in Italy, the

"vagabond Princess" was received as a Queen. Count di Bellegarde, the Austrian Governor, was the first to pay homage to her; at the Scala Theatre, the same evening, her entry was greeted with thunders of applause, and whenever she appeared in the Milan streets it was to an accompaniment of doffed hats and cheers.

One of her first visits was to the studio of Giuseppe Bossi, the famous and handsome artist, whom she requested to paint her portrait. "On Thursday," Bossi records, "I sketched her successfully in the character of a Muse; then on Friday she came to show me her arms, of which she was, not without reason, decidedly vain--she is a gay and whimsical woman, she seems to have a good heart; at times she is ennuyee through lack of occupation." On one occasion when she met in the studio some French ladies, two of whom had been mistresses of the King of Westphalia, the poor artist was driven to distraction by the chatter, the singing, and dancing, in which the Princess especially displayed her agility, until, as he pathetically says, "the house seemed possessed of the devil, and you can imagine with what kind of ease it was possible for me to work."

Before leaving Milan the Princess gave a grand banquet to Bellegarde and a number of the principal men of the city--a feast which was to have very important and serious consequences, for it was at this banquet that General Pino, one of her guests, introduced to Caroline a new courier, a man who, though she little dreamt it at the time, was destined to play a very baleful part in her life.

This new courier was a tall and strikingly handsome man, who had seen service in the Italian army, until a duel, in which he killed a superior officer, compelled him to leave it in disgrace. At the time he entered the Princess's service he was a needy adventurer, whose scheming brain and utter lack of principle were in the market for the highest bidder. "He is," said Baron Ompteda, "a sort of Apollo, of a superb and commanding appearance, more than six feet high; his physical beauty attracts all eyes. This man is called Pergami; he belongs to Milan, and has entered the Princess's service. The Princess," he significantly adds, "is shunned by all the English people of rank; her behaviour has created the most marked scandal."

Such was the man with whose life that of the Princess of Wales was to be so intimately and disastrously linked, and whose relations with her were to be displayed to a shocked world but a few years later. It was indeed an evil fate that brought this "superb Apollo" of the crafty brain and conscienceless ambition into the life of the Princess at the high tide of her revolt against the world and its conventions.

When Caroline and her retinue set out from Milan for Tuscany it was in the wake of Pergami, who had ridden ahead to discharge his duties as avant courier; but before Rome was reached his intimacy and familiarity with his mistress were already the subject of whispered comments and shrugged shoulders. At a ball given in her honour at Rome by the banker Tortonia, the Princess shocked even the least prudish by the abandon of her dancing and the tenuity of her costume, which, we are told, consisted of "a single embroidered garment, fastened beneath the bosom, without the shadow of a corset and without sleeves." And at Naples, where King Joachim Murat gave her a regal reception, with a sequel of fetes and gala-performances in honour of the wife of the Regent of England, she attended a rout, at the Teatro San Carlo, so lightly attired "that many who saw her at her first entrance looked her

up and down, and, not recognising her, or pretending not to recognise her, began to mutter disapprobation to such an extent that she was compelled to withdraw.... The English residents soon let her understand, by ceasing to frequent her palace, that even at Naples there were certain laws of dress which could not be trampled underfoot in this hoydenish manner."

While Caroline was thus defying convention and even decency, watchful eyes were following her everywhere. A body of secret police, whose headquarters were at Milan, was noting every indiscretion; and every week brought fresh and damaging reports to England, where they were eagerly welcomed by the Regent and his satellites. And while the Princess was thus playing unconsciously, or recklessly, into the hands of the enemy, Pergami was daily making his footing in her favour more secure. Before Caroline left Naples he had been promoted from courier to equerry, and in this more exalted and privileged role was always at her side. So marked, in fact, was the intimacy even at this early stage, that the Princess's retinue, one after another, and on one flimsy pretext or another, deserted her in disgust, each vacancy, as it occurred, being filled by one of Pergami's relatives--his brother, his daughter, his sister-in-law (the Countess Oidi), and others, until Caroline was soon surrounded by members of the ex-courier's family.

From Naples she wandered to Genoa, and from Genoa to Milan and Venice, received regally everywhere by the Italians and shunned by the English residents. From Venice she drifted to Lake Como, with whose beauties she was so charmed that she decided to make her home there, purchasing the Villa del Garrovo for one hundred and fifty thousand francs, and setting the builders to work to make it a still more splendid home for a future Queen of England. But even to the lonely isolation of the Italian lakes the eyes of her husband's secret agents pursued her, spying on her every movement--"uncertain shadows gliding in the twilight along the paths and between the hedges, and even in the cellars and attics of the villa"--until the shadowy presences filled her with such terror and unrest that she sought to escape them by a long tour in the East.

Thus it was that in November, 1815, the Princess and her Pergami household set forth on their journey to Sicily, Tunis, Athens, the cities of the East and Jerusalem, the strange story of which was to be unfolded to the world five years later. How intimate the Princess and her handsome, stalwart courier had by this time become was illustrated by the Attorney-General in his opening speech at her memorable trial. "One day, after dinner, when the Princess's servants had withdrawn, a waiter at the hotel, Gran Brettagna, saw the Princess put a golden necklace round Pergami's neck. Pergami took it off again and put it jestingly on the neck of the Princess, who in her turn once more removed it and put it again round Pergami's neck."

As early as August in this year Pergami had his appointed place at the Princess's table, and his room communicating with hers, and on the various voyages of the Eastern tour there was abundant evidence to prove "the habit which the Princess had of sleeping under one and the same awning with Pergami."

But it is as impossible in the limits of space to follow Caroline and her handsome cavalier through every stage of these Eastern wanderings, as it is unnecessary to describe in detail the evidence of intimacy so lavishly provided by the witnesses for the prosecution at the trial--evidence much of which was doubtless as false as it was venal.

That the Princess, however, was infatuated by her cavalier, and that she was in the highest degree indiscreet in her relations with him, seems abundantly clear, whatever the precise degree of actual guilt may have been.

Pergami had now been promoted from equerry to Grand Chamberlain to Her Royal Highness, and as further evidence of her favour, she bought for him in Sicily an estate which conferred on its owner the title of Baron della Francina. At Malta she procured for him a knighthood of that island's famous order; at Jerusalem she secured his nomination as Knight of the Holy Sepulchre; and, to crown her favours, she herself instituted the Order of St Caroline, with Pergami for Grand Master. Behold now our ex-courier and adventurer in all his new glory as Grand Chamberlain and lover of a future Queen of England, as Baron della Francina, Knight of two Orders and Grand Master of a third, while every post of profit in that vagrant Court was held by some member of his family!

The Eastern tour ended, which had ranged from Algiers and Egypt to Constantinople and Jerusalem, and throughout which she had progressed and been received as a Queen, Caroline settled down for a time in her now restored villa on Lake Como, celebrating her return by lavish charities to her poor neighbours, and by popular fetes and balls, in one of which "she danced as Columbine, wearing her lover's ear-rings, whilst Pergami, dressed as harlequin and wearing her ear-rings, supported her."

But even here she was to find no peace from her husband's spies, whose evidence, confirmed on oath by a score of witnesses, was being accumulated in London against the longed-for day of reckoning. And it was not long before Caroline and her Grand Chamberlain were on their wanderings again--this time to the Tyrol, to Austria, and through Northern Italy, always inseparable and everywhere setting the tongue of scandal wagging by their indiscreet intimacy. Even the tragic death in childbirth of her only daughter, the Princess Charlotte, which put all England in mourning, seemed powerless to check her career of folly. It is true that, on hearing of it, she fell into a faint and afterwards into a kind of protracted lethargy, but within a few weeks she had flung herself again into her life of pleasure-chasing and reckless disregard of convention.

But matters were now hurrying fast to their tragic climax. For some time the life of George III. had been flickering to its close. Any day might bring news that the end had come, and that the Princess was a Queen. And for some time Caroline had been bracing herself to face this crisis in her life and to pit herself against her enemies in a grim struggle for a crown, the title to which her years of folly (for such at the best they had been) had so gravely endangered. Over the remainder of her vagrant life, with its restless flittings, and its indiscretions, marked by spying eyes, we must pass to that February morning in 1820 when, to quote a historian, "the Princess had scarcely reached her hotel (at Florence) when her faithful major-domo, John Jacob Sicard, appeared before her, accompanied by two noblemen, and in a voice full of emotion announced, 'You are Queen.'"

The fateful hour had at last arrived when Caroline must either renounce her new Queendom or present a bold front to her enemies and claim the crown that was hers. After a few indecisive days, spent in Rome, where news reached her that the King had given orders that her name should be excluded from the Prayer Book, her wavering resolution took a definite and determined shape. She would go to London and face the storm which

she knew her coming would bring on her head.

At Paris she was met by Lord Hutchinson with a promise of an increase of her yearly allowance to fifty thousand pounds, on condition that she renounced her claim to the title of Queen, and consented never to put foot again in England--an offer to which she gave a prompt and scornful refusal; and on the afternoon of 5th June she reached Dover, greeted by enthusiastic cheers and shouts of "God save Queen Caroline!" by the fluttering of flags, and the jubilant clanging of church-bells. The wanderer had come back to the land of her sorrow, to find herself welcomed with open arms by the subjects of the King whose brutality had driven her to exile and to shame.

The story of the trial which so soon followed her arrival has too enduring a place in our history to call for a detailed description--the trial in which all the weight of the Crown and the testimony of a small army of suborned witnesses--"a troupe of comedians in the pay of malevolence," to quote Brougham--were arrayed against her; and in which she had so doughty a champion in Brougham, and such solace and support in the sympathy of all England. We know the fate of that Bill of Pains and Penalties, which charged her with having permitted a shameful intimacy with one Bartolomeo Pergami, and provided as penalty that she should be deprived of the title and privilege of Queen, and that her marriage to King George IV. should be for ever dissolved and annulled--how it was forced through the House of Lords with a diminishing majority, and finally withdrawn. And we know, too, the outburst of almost delirious delight that swept from end to end of England at the virtual acquittal of the persecuted Caroline. "The generous exultation of the people was," to quote a contemporary, "beyond all description. It was a conflagration of hearts."

We also recall that pathetic scene when Caroline presented herself at the door of Westminster Abbey to demand admission, on the day of her husband's coronation, to be received by the frigid words, "We have no instructions to allow you to pass"; and we can see her as, "humiliated, confounded, and with tears in her eyes," she returned sadly to her carriage, the heart crushed within her. Less than three weeks later, seized by a grave and mysterious illness, she laid down for ever the burden of her sorrows, leaving instructions that her tomb should bear the words:

CAROLINE
THE INJURED QUEEN OF ENGLAND.

As for Pergami, the idol with the feet of clay, who had clouded her last years in tragedy, he survived for twenty years more to enjoy his honours and his ill-gotten gold; while William Austin, who had masqueraded as a Prince and called Caroline "mother," ended his days, while still a young man, in a madhouse.

CHAPTER XX

THE LOVE-AFFAIRS OF A REGENT

When Louis XIV. laid down, one September day in the year 1715, the crown

which he had worn with such splendour for more than seventy years, his sceptre fell into the hands of his nephew Philippe, Duc d'Orleans, who for eight years ruled France as Regent, and as guardian of the child-King, the fifteenth Louis.

Seldom in the world's history has a reign, so splendid as that of the Sun-King, closed in such darkness and tragedy. The disastrous war of the Spanish Succession had drained France of her strength and her gold. She lay crushed under a mountain of debt--ten thousand million francs; she was reduced to the lowest depths of wretchedness, ruin, and disorder, and it was at this crisis in her life as a nation that fate placed a child of four on her throne, and gave the reins of power into the hands of the most dissolute man in Europe.

Not that Philippe of Orleans lacked many of the qualities that go to the making of a ruler and a man. He had proved himself, in Italy and in Spain, one of the bravest of his country's soldiers, and an able, far-seeing leader of armies; and he had, as his Regency proved, no mean gifts of statesmanship. But his kingly qualities were marred by the taint of birth and early environment.

Such good qualities as he had he no doubt drew from his mother, the capable, austere, high-minded Elizabeth of Bavaria, who to her last day was the one good influence in his life. To his father, Louis XIV.'s younger brother, who is said to have been son of Cardinal Mazarin, Anne of Austria's lover, and who was the most debased man of his time in all France, he just as surely owed the bias of sensuality to which he chiefly owes his place in memory.

And not only was he thus handicapped by his birth; he had for tutor that arch-scoundrel Dubois--the "grovelling insect" who rarely opened his mouth without uttering a blasphemy or indecency, and who initiated his charge, while still a boy, into every base form of so-called pleasure.

Such was the man who, amid the ruins of his country, inaugurated in France an era of licentiousness such as she had never known--an incomprehensible mass of contradictions--a kingly presence with the soul of a Caliban, statesman and sinner, high-minded and low-living, spending his days as a sovereign, a role which he played to perfection, and his nights as a sot and a sensualist.

It was doubtless Dubois who was mostly responsible for the baseness in the Regent's character--Dubois who had taught him a contempt for religion and morality, the cynical view of life which makes the pleasure of the moment the only thing worth pursuing, at whatever cost; and who had impressed indelibly on his mind that no woman is virtuous and that men are knaves. And there was never any lack of men to continue Dubois' teaching. He gathered round him the most dissolute gallants in France, in whose company he gave the rein to his most vicious appetites. His "roues" he dubbed them, a title which aptly described them; although they affected to give it a very different interpretation. They were the Regent's roues, they said, no doubt with the tongue in the cheek, because they were so devoted to him that they were ready, in his defence, to be broken on the wheel (la roue)!

Each of these boon-comrades was a past-master in the arts of dissipation, and each was also among the most brilliant men of his day. The Chevalier de Simiane was famous alike for his drinking powers and his gift of graceful verse; De Fargy was a polished wit, and the

handsomest man in France, with an unrivalled reputation for gallantry; the Comte de Noce was the Regent's most intimate friend from boyhood--brother-in-law he called him, since they had not only tastes but even mistresses in common. Then there were the Marquis de la Fare, Captain of Guards and *_bon enfant_*; the Marquis de Broglio, the biggest debauchee in France, the Marquis de Canillac, the Duc de Brancas, and many another--all famous (or infamous) for some pet vice, and all the best of boon-companions for the pleasure-loving Regent.

Strange tales are told of the orgies of this select band which the Regent gathered around him--orgies which shocked even the France of the eighteenth century, when she was the acknowledged leader in licence. At six o'clock every evening Philippe's kingship ended for the day. He had had enough--more than enough--of State and ceremonial, of interviewing ambassadors, and of the flatteries of Princes and the obsequious homage of courtiers. Pleasure called him away from the boredom of empire; and at the stroke of six we find him retiring to the company of his mistresses and his rousés to feast and drink and gamble until dawn broke on the revelry--his laugh the loudest, his wit the most dazzling, his stories the most piquant, keeping the table in a roar with his infectious gaiety. He was Regent no longer; he was simply a *_bon camarade_*, as ready to exchange familiarities with a "lady of the ballet" as to lead the laughter at a joke at his own expense.

At nine o'clock, when the fun had waxed furious and wine had set the slowest tongue wagging and every eye a-sparkle, other guests streamed in to join the orgy--the most beautiful ladies of the Court, from the Duchesse de Gesores and Madame de Mouchy to the Regent's own daughter, the Duchesse de Berry, who, young as she was, had little to learn of the arts of dissipation. And in the wake of these high-born women would follow laughing, bright-eyed troupes of dancing and chorus-girls from the theatres with an escort of the cleverest actors of Paris, to join the Regent's merry throng.

The champagne now flowed in rivers; the servants were sent away; the doors were locked and the fun grew riotous; ceremony had no place there; rank and social distinctions were forgotten. Countesses flirted with comedians; Princes made love to ballet-girls and duchesses alike. The leader of the moment was the man or woman who could sing the most daring song, tell the most piquant story, or play the most audacious practical joke, even on the Regent himself. Sometimes, we are told, the lights would be extinguished, and the orgy continued under the cover of darkness, until the Regent suddenly opened a cupboard, in which lights were concealed--to an outburst of shrieks of laughter at the scenes revealed.

Thus the mad night hours passed until dawn came to bring the revels to a close; or until the Regent would sally forth with a few chosen comrades on a midnight ramble to other haunts of pleasure in the capital--the lower the better. Such was the way in which Philippe of Orleans, Regent of France, spent his nights. A few hours after the carouse had ended he would resume his sceptre, as austere and dignified a ruler as you would find in Europe.

It must not be imagined that Philippe was the only Royal personage who thus set a scandalous example to France. There was, in fact, scarcely a Prince or Princess of the Blood Royal whose love affairs were not conducted flagrantly in the eyes of the world, from the Dowager Duchesse de Bourbon, who lavished her favours on the Scotch financier, John Law,

of Lauriston, to the Princesse de Conte, who mingled her piety with a marked partiality for her nephew, Le Kalliere.

As for the Regent's own daughters, from the Duchesse de Berry, to Louise, Queen of Spain, each has left behind her a record almost as scandalous as that of her father. It was, in fact, an era of corruption in high places, when, in the reaction that followed the dismal and decorous last years of Louis XIV.'s reign, Pleasure rose phoenix-like from the ashes of ruin and flaunted herself unashamed in every guise with which vice could deck her.

It must be said for the Regent, corrupt as he was, that he never abused his position and his power in the pursuit of beauty. His mistresses flocked to him from every rank of life, from the stage to the highest Court circles, but remained no longer than inclination dictated. And the fascination is not far to seek, for Philippe d'Orleans was of the men who find easy conquests in the field of love. He was one of the handsomest men in all France; and to his good-looks and his reputation for bravery he added a manner of rare grace and courtliness, a supple tongue, and that strange magnetic power which few women could resist.

No King ever boasted a greater or more varied list of favourites, in which actresses and duchesses vied with each other for his smiles, in a rivalry which seems to have been singularly free from petty jealousy. Among the beauties of the Court we find the Duchesse de Fedari, the Duchesse de Gesores, the Comtesse de Sabran at one extreme; and actresses like Emilie, Desmarre, and La Souris at the other, pretty butterflies of the footlights who appealed to the Regent no more than Madame d'Averne, the gifted pet of France's wits and literary men, the most charming "blue-stockings" of her day. And all, without exception--duchesses, countesses, and actresses--were as ready to give their love to Philippe, the man, as to the Duc d'Orleans, Regent of France.

Even in his relations with these ministers of pleasure, the Regent's better qualities often exhibit themselves agreeably. To the pretty actress, Emilie, whose heart was so completely his, he always acted with a characteristic generosity and forbearance; and her conduct is by no means less pleasing than his. Once, we are told, when he expressed a wish to give her a pair of diamond ear-rings at a cost of fifteen thousand francs, she demurred at accepting so valuable a present. "If you must be so generous," she pleaded, "please don't give me the ear-rings, which are much too grand for such as me. Give me, instead, ten thousand francs, so that I may buy a small house to which I can retire when you no longer love me as you now do."

Emilie had scarcely returned home, however, when a Court official appeared with a package containing, not ten thousand, but twenty-five thousand francs, which her lover insisted on her keeping; and when she returned fifteen thousand francs, he promptly sent them back again, declaring that he would be very angry if she refused again to accept them.

His love, indeed, for Emilie seems to have been as pure and deep as any of which he was capable. It was no fleeting passion, but an affection based on a sincere respect for her character and mental gifts. So highly, indeed, did he think of her judgment that she became his most trusted counsellor. She sat by his side when he received ambassadors; he consulted her on difficult problems of State; and it was her advice

that he often followed in preference to the wisdom of all his ministers; for, as he said to Dubois, "Emilie has an excellent brain; she always gives me the best counsel."

When at last he had to part from the modest and accomplished actress it was under circumstances which speak well for his generosity. A former lover, the Marquis de Fimarcon, on his return from fighting in Spain, sought Emilie out, and, blazing with jealousy, insisted that she should leave the Regent and return to his protection. He vowed that, if she refused, he would murder her; and when, in her alarm, she sought refuge in a convent at Charenton, he threatened to burn the nuns alive in their cells unless they restored her to him. Thus it was that, rather than allow Emilie to run any risks from her revengeful and brutal lover, the Regent relinquished his claim to her; and only when Fimarcon's continued brutality at last made intervention necessary, did he order the bully to be arrested and consigned to the prison of Fort l'Eveque.

It is, however, in the story of Mademoiselle Aisse, the Circassian slave, that we find the best illustration of the chivalry which underlay the Regent's passion for women, and which he never forgot in his wildest excesses. This story, one of the most touching in French history, opens in the year 1698, when a band of Turkish soldiers returned to Constantinople from a raid in the Caucasus, bringing with them, among many other captives, a beautiful child of four years, said to be the daughter of a King. So lovely was the little Circassian fairy that when the Comte de Feriol, France's Ambassador to Turkey, set eyes on her, he decided to purchase her; and she became his property in exchange for fifteen hundred livres.

That she might have every advantage of training to fit her for his seraglio in later years, the child was sent to Paris, to the home of the Ambassador's brother, President de Feriol, where she grew to beautiful girlhood as a member of the family, as fair a flower as ever was transplanted to French soil. Thus she passed the next thirteen years of her young life, charming all by her sweetness of disposition, as she won the homage of all by her remarkable beauty and grace.

Such was Ayesha, or Aisse, the Circassian maid, when at last her "owner" returned to Paris to fall under the spell of her radiant beauty and to claim her as his chattel, bought with good gold and trained at his cost to adorn his harem. In vain did Aisse weep and plead to be spared a fate from which every fibre of her being shrank in horror. Her "master" was inexorable. "When I bought you," he said, "it was my intention to make you my daughter or my mistress. I now intend that you shall become both the one and the other." Friendless and helpless, she was obliged to yield; and for six years she had to submit to the endearments of her protector, a man more than old enough to be her father, until his death brought her release.

At twenty-four, more lovely than ever, combining the beauty of the Circassian with the graces of France, Aisse had now every right to look forward at least to such happiness as was possible to a stranger in a strange land. But no sooner was one danger to her peace removed than another sprang up to take its place. The rumour of her beauty and her sweetness had come to the ears of the Regent, and strong forces were at work to bring her to his arms. Madame de Tencin was the leader in this base conspiracy, with the power of the Romish Church at her back; for with the fair Circassian high in the Regent's favour and a pliant tool in their hands, the Jesuits' influence at Court would be greatly

strengthened. Dubois was won over to the unholy alliance; and the Due's _maitresse en titre_ was bribed, not only to withdraw all opposition to her proposed rival, but to arrange a meeting between the Regent and the victim.

Success seemed to be assured. Mademoiselle Aisse was to exchange slavery to her late owner for an equally odious place in the harem of the ruler of France. Her tears and entreaties were all in vain; when she begged on her knees to be allowed to retire to a convent Madame de Feriol turned her back on her. Her only hope of rescue now lay in the Regent himself; and to him she pleaded her cause with such pathetic eloquence that he not only allowed her to depart in peace, but with words of sympathy and promises of his protection in the pure and noble sense of the word.

Thus by the chivalry of the most dissolute man of his age the Circassian slave-girl was rescued from a life which to her would have been worse than death--to spend her remaining years, happy in the love of an honest man, the Chevalier d'Aydie, until death claimed her while she still possessed the beauty which had been at once her glory and her inevitable shame.

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The close of the Regent's mis-spent life came with tragic suddenness. Worn out with excesses, while still young in years, his doctors had warned him that death might come to him any day; but with the light-heartedness that was his to the last, he laughed at their gloomy forebodings and refused to take the least precautions to safeguard his health. Two days before the end came he declined point-blank to be bled in order to avert a threatened attack of apoplexy. "Let it come if it will," he said, with a laugh. "I do not fear death; and if it comes quickly, so much the better!"

On the evening of 2nd December, 1720, he was chatting gaily to the young Duchesse de Falari, when he suddenly turned to her and asked: "Do you think there is any hell--or Paradise?" "Of course I do," answered the Duchesse. "Then are you not afraid to lead the life you do?" "Well," replied Madame, "I think God will have pity on me."

Scarcely had the words left her lips when the Regent's head fell heavily on her shoulder, and he began to slip to the floor. A glance showed her that he was unconscious; and, rushing out of the room, the terrified Duchesse raced through the dark, deserted corridors of the palace shrieking for help. When at last help arrived, it came too late. The Regent had gone to find for himself an answer to the question his lips had framed a few minutes earlier--"is there any hell--or Paradise?"

CHAPTER XXI

A DELILAH OF THE COURT OF FRANCE

It was a cruel fate that snatched Gabrielle d'Estrees from the arms of Henri IV., King of France and Navarre, at the moment when her long devotion to her hero-lover was on the eve of being crowned by the bridal veil; and for many a week there was no more stricken man in Europe than

the disconsolate King as he wailed in his black-draped chamber, "The root of my love is dead, and will never blossom again."

No doubt Henri's grief was as sincere as it was deep, for he had loved his golden-haired Gabrielle of the blue eyes and dimpled baby-cheeks as he had never loved woman before. It was the passion of a lifetime, the passion of a strong man in his prime, that fate had thus nipped in the fullness of its bloom; and its loss plunged him into an abyss of sorrow and despair such as few men have known.

But with the hero of Ivry no emotion of grief or pleasure ever endured long. He was a man of erratic, widely contrasted moods--now on the peaks of happiness, now in the gulf of dejection; one mood succeeding another as inevitably and widely as the pendulum swings. Thus when he had spent three seemingly endless months of gloom and solitude, reaction seized him, and he flung aside his grief with his black raiment. He was still in the prime of his strength, with many years before him. He would drink the cup of life, even to its dregs. He had long been weary of the matrimonial chains that fettered him to Marguerite of Valois. He would strike them off, and in another wife and other loves find a new lease of pleasure.

Thus it was with no heavy heart that he turned his back on Fontainebleau and his darkened room, and fared to Paris to find a new vista of pleasure opening to him at his palace doors, and his ears full of the praises of a new divinity who had come, during his absence, to grace his Court--a girl of such beauty, sprightliness, and wit as his capital had not seen for many a year.

Henriette d'Entragues--for this was the divinity's name--was equipped by fate as few women were ever equipped, for the conquest of a King. Her mother, Marie Touchet, had been "light-o'-love" to Charles IX.; her father was the Seigneur d'Entragues, member of one of the most blue-blooded families of France, a soldier and statesman of fame; and their daughter had inherited, with her mother's beauty and grace, the clever brain and diplomatic skill of her father. A strange mixture of the bewitching and bewildering, this daughter of a King's mistress seems to have been. Tall and dark, voluptuous of figure, with ripe red lips, and bold and dazzling black eyes, she was, in her full-blooded, sensuous charms, the very "antipodes" to the childish, fairy-like Gabrielle who had so long been enshrined in the King's heart. And to this physical appeal--irresistible to a man of such strong passion as Henri, she added gifts of mind which "baby Gabrielle" could never claim.

She had a wit as brilliant as the tongue which was its vehicle; her well-stored brain was more than a match for the most learned men at Court, and she would leave an archbishop discomfited in a theological argument, to cross swords with Sully himself on some abstruse problem of statesmanship. When Sully had been brought to his knees, she would rush away, with mischief in her eyes, to take the lead in some merry escapade or practical joke, her silvery laughter echoing in some remote palace corridor. A bewildering, alluring bundle of inconsistencies--beauty, savant, wit, and madcap--such was Henriette d'Entragues when Henri, fresh from his woes, came under the spell of her magnetism.

Here, indeed, was an escape from his grief such as the King had never dared to hope for. Before he had been many hours in his palace, Henri was caught hopelessly in the toils of the new siren, and was intoxicated by her smiles and witcheries. Never was conquest so speedy, so dramatic.

Before a week had flown he was at Henrietta's feet, as lovesick a swain as ever sighed for a lady, pouring love into her ears and writing her passionate letters between the frequent meetings, in which he would send her a "good night, my dearest heart," with "a million kisses."

In the days of his lusty youth the idol and hero of France had never known passion such as this which consumed him within sight of his fiftieth birthday, and which was inspired by a woman of much less than half his years; for at the time Henri was forty-six, and Henriette was barely twenty.

He quickly found, however, that his wooing was not to be all "plain sailing." When Henriette's parents heard of it, they affected to be horrified at the danger in which their beloved daughter was placed. They summoned her home from the perils of Court and a King's passion; and when Henri sent an envoy to bring them to reason they sent him back with a rebuff. Their daughter was to be no man's--not even a King's--plaything. If Henri's passion was sincere, he must prove it by a definite promise of marriage; and only on this condition would their opposition be removed.

Even to such a stipulation Henri, such was his infatuation, made no demur. With his own hand he wrote an agreement pledging himself to make Demoiselle Henriette his lawful wife in case, within a certain period, she became the mother of a son; and undertaking to dissolve his marriage with his wife, Marguerite of France, for this purpose. And this agreement, signed with his own hand, he sent to the Seigneur d'Entragues and his wife, accompanied by a *_douceur_* of a hundred thousand crowns.

But before it was dispatched a more formidable obstacle than even the lady's natural guardians remained to be faced--none other than the Duc de Sully, the man who had shared all the perils of a hundred fights with Henri and was at once his chief counsellor and his *_fidus Achates_*. When at last he summoned up courage to place the document in Sully's hands, he awaited the verdict as nervously as any schoolboy in the presence of a dreaded master. Sully read through the paper, was silent for a few moments, and then spoke. "Sire," he said, "am I to give you my candid opinion on this document, without fear of anger or giving offence?" "Certainly," answered the King. "Well then, this is what I think of it," was Sully's reply, as he tore the document in two pieces and flung them on the floor. "Sully, you are mad!" exclaimed Henri, flaring into anger at such an outrage. "You are right, Sire, I am a weak fool, and would gladly know myself still more a fool--if I might be the only one in France!"

It was in vain, however, that Sully pointed out the follies and dangers of such a step as was proposed. Henri's mind was made up, and leaving his friend, in high dudgeon, he went to his study and re-wrote his promise of marriage. The way was at last clear to the gratification of his passion. Henriette was more than willing, her parents' scruples and greed were appeased, and as for Sully--well, he must be left to get over his tantrums. Even to please such an old and trusted friend he could not sacrifice such an opportunity for pleasure and a new lease of life as now presented itself!

Halcyon months followed for Henri--months in which even Gabrielle was forgotten in the intoxication of a new passion, compared with which the memory of her gentle charms was but as water to rich, red wine. That Henriette proved wilful, capricious, and extravagant--that her vanity

drained his exchequer of hundreds of thousands of crowns for costly jewellery and dresses, was a mere bagatelle, compared with his delight in her manifold allurements.

But Sully had by no means said his last word. The decree for annulling Henri's marriage with Marguerite de Valois was pronounced; and it was of the highest importance that she should have a worthy successor as Queen of France--a successor whom he found in Marie de Medicis.

The marriage-contract was actually sealed before the King had any suspicion that his hand was being disposed of, and it was only when Sully one day entered his study with the startling words, "Sire, we have been marrying you," that the awakening came. For a few moments Henri sat as a man stunned, his head buried in his hands; then, with a deep sigh, he spoke: "If God orders it so, so let it be. There seems to be no escape; since you say that it is necessary for my kingdom and my subjects, why, marry I must."

It was a strange predicament in which Henri now found himself. Still more infatuated than ever with Henriette, he was to be tied for life to a Princess whom he had never even seen. To add to the embarrassment of his position, the condition of his marriage promise to Henriette was already on the way to fulfilment; and he was thus pledged to wed her as strongly as any State compact could bind him to stand at the altar with Marie de Medicis. One thing was clear, he must at any cost recover that fatal document; and, while he was giving orders for the suitable reception of his new Queen, and arranging for her triumphal progress to Paris, he was writing to Henriette and her parents demanding the return of his promise of marriage agreement--to her, a pleading letter in which he prays her "to return the promise you have by you and not to compel me to have recourse to other means in order to obtain it"; to her father, a more imperious demand to which he expects instant obedience.

As some consolation to his mistress, whose alternate tears, rage, and reproaches drove him to distraction, he creates her Marquise de Verneuil and promises that, if he should be unable to marry her, he will at least give her a husband of Royal rank, the Due de Nevers, who was eager to make her his wife.

But pleadings and threats alike fail to secure the return of the fatal document, and Henri is reduced to despair, until Henriette gives birth to a dead child and his promise thus becomes of as little value as the paper it was written on. The condition has failed, and he is a free man to marry his Tuscan Princess, while Henriette, thus foiled in her great ambition, is in danger not only of losing her coveted crown, but her place in the King's favour. The days of her wilful autocracy are ended; and, though her heart is full of anger and disappointment, she writes to him a pitiful letter imploring him still to love her and not to cast her "from the Heaven to which he has raised her, down to the earth where he found her." "Do not let your wedding festivities be the funeral of my hopes," she writes. "Do not banish me from your Royal presence and your heart. I speak in sighs to you, my King, my lover, my all--I, who have been loved by the earth's greatest monarch, and am willing to be his mistress and his servant."

To such humility was the proud, arrogant beauty now reduced. She was an abject suppliant where she had reigned a Queen. Nor did her pleadings fall on deaf ears. Her Royal lover's hand was given, against his will, to his new Queen, but his heart, he vowed, was all Henriette's--so much

so that he soon installed her in sumptuous rooms in his palace adjoining those of the Queen herself.

Was ever man placed in a more delicate position than this King of France, between the rival claims of his wife and mistress, who were occupying adjacent apartments, and who, moreover, were both about to become mothers? It speaks well for Henri's tactfulness that for a time at least this *menage a trois* appears to have been quite amiably conducted. When Queen Marie gave birth to a son it was to Henriette that the infant's father first confided the good news, seasoning it with "a million kisses" for herself. And when Henriette, in turn, became a mother for the second time, the double Royal event was celebrated by fetes and rejoicings in which each lady took an equally proud and conspicuous part.

It was inevitable, however, that a woman so favoured by the King, and of so imperious a nature, should have enemies at Court; and it was not long before she became the object of a conspiracy of which the Duchesse de Villars and the Queen were the arch-leaders. One day a bundle of letters was sent anonymously to Henri, letters full of tenderness and passion, addressed by his beloved Marquise, Henriette, to the Prince de Joinville. The King was furious at such evidence of his mistress's disloyalty, and vowed he would never see her again. But all his storming and reproaches left the Marquise unmoved. She declared, with scorn in her voice, that the letters were forgeries; that she had never written to Joinville in her life, nor spoken a word to him that His Majesty might not have heard. She even pointed out the forger, the Duc de Guise's secretary, and was at last able to convince the King of her innocence.

The Duchesse de Villars and Joinville were banished from the Court in disgrace; the Queen had a severe lecture from her husband; and Henriette was not only restored to full favour, but was consoled by a welcome present of six thousand pounds.

But the days of peace in the King's household were now gone for ever. Queen Marie, thus humiliated by her rival, became her bitter enemy and also a thorn in the side of her unfaithful husband. Every day brought its fierce quarrels which only stopped on the verge of violence. More than once in fact Henri had to beat a retreat before his Queen's clenched fist, while she lost no opportunity of insulting and humiliating the Marquise.

It is impossible altogether to withhold sympathy from a man thus distracted between two jealous women--a shrewish wife, who in her most amiable mood repelled his advances with coldness and cutting words, and a mistress who vented on him all the resentment which the Queen's insults and snubs roused in her. Even all Sully's diplomacy was powerless to pour oil on such vexed waters as these.

The Queen, however, had not long to wait for her revenge, which came with the disclosure of a conspiracy, at the head of which were Henriette's father and her half-brother, the Comte d'Auvergne, and in which, it was proved, she herself had played no insignificant part. Punishment came, swift and terrible. Her father and brother were sentenced to death, herself to perpetual confinement in a monastery.

But even at this crisis in her life, Henriette's stout heart did not fail her for a moment. "The King may take my life, if he pleases," she

said. "Everybody will say that he killed his wife; for I was Queen before the Tuscan woman came on the scene at all." None knew better than she that she could afford thus to put on a bold front. Henri was still her slave, to whom her little finger was more than his crown; and she knew that in his hands both her liberty and her life were safe. And thus it proved; for before she had spent many weeks in the Monastery of Beaumont-les-Tours, its doors were flung open for her, and the first news she heard was that her father was a free man, while her brother's death-sentence had been commuted to a few years in the Bastille.

Thus Henriette returned to the turbulent life of the palace--the daily routine of quarrels and peacemaking with the King, and undisguised hostility from the Queen, through all of which Henri's heart still remained hers. "How I long to have you in my arms again," he writes, when on a hunting excursion, which had led him to the scene of their early romance. "As my letter brings back the memory of the past, I know you will feel that nothing in the present is worth anything in comparison. This, at least, was my feeling as I walked along the roads I so often traversed in the old days on my journey to your side. When I sleep I dream of you; when I wake my thoughts are all of you." He sends her a million kisses, and vows that all he asks of life is that she shall always love him entirely and him alone.

One would have thought that such a conquest of a King and such triumph over a Queen would have gratified the ambition of the most exacting of women. But the Marquise de Verneuil seems to have found small satisfaction in her victories. When she was not provoking quarrels with Henri, which roused him to such a pitch of anger that at times he threatened to strike her, she received his advances with a coldness or a sullen acquiescence calculated to chill the most ardent lover. In other moods she would drive him to despair by declaring that she had long ceased to love him, and that all she wanted from him was a dowry to carry in marriage to one or other of several suitors who were dying for her hand.

But Madame's day of triumph was drawing much nearer to an end than she imagined. The end, in fact, came with dramatic suddenness when Henri first set eyes on the radiantly lovely Charlotte de Montmorency. Weary at heart of the tempers and exactions of Henriette, it needed but such a lure as this to draw him finally from her side; and from the first flash of Charlotte's beautiful eyes this most susceptible of Kings was undone. Madame de Verneuil's reign was ended; the next quarrel was made the occasion for a complete rupture, and the Court saw her no more.

Already she had lost the bloom of her beauty; she had grown stout and coarse through her excessive fondness for the pleasures of the table, and the rest of her days, which were passed in friendless isolation, she spent in indulging appetites, which added to her mountain of flesh while robbing her of the last trace of good-looks. When the knife of Ravillac brought Henri's life and his new romance to a tragic end, the Marquise was among those who were suspected of inspiring the assassin's blow; and although her guilt was never proved, the taint of suspicion clung to her to her last day.

After fruitless angling for a husband--the Duc de Guise, the Prince de Joinville, and many another who, with one consent, fled from her advances, she resigned herself to a life of obscurity and gluttony, until death came, one day in the year 1633, to release her from a world of vanity and disillusionment.

CHAPTER XXII

THE "SUN-KING" AND THE WIDOW

Search where you will in the record of Kings, you will find nowhere a figure more splendid and more impressive than that of the fourteenth Louis, who for more than seventy years ruled over France, and for more than fifty eclipsed in glory his fellow-sovereigns as the sun pales the stars. Nearly two centuries have gone since he closed his weary and disillusioned eyes on the world he had so long dominated; but to-day he shines in history in the galaxy of monarchs with a lustre almost as great as when he was hailed throughout the world as the "Sun-King," and in his pride exclaimed, "I am the State."

Placed, like his successor, on the greatest throne in Europe, a child of five, fortune exhausted itself in lavishing gifts on him. The world was at his feet almost before he had learned to walk. He grew to manhood amid the adulation and flatteries of the greatest men and the fairest of women. And that he might lack no great gift, he was dowered with every physical perfection that should go to the making of a King.

There was no more goodly youth in France than Louis when he first practised the arts of love-making, in which he later became such an adept, on Mazarin's lovely niece, Marie Mancini. Tall, with a well-knit, supple figure, with dark, beautiful eyes illuminating a singularly handsome face, with a bearing of rare grace and distinction, this son of Anne of Austria was a lover whom few women could resist.

Such conquests came to him with fatal ease, and for thirty years at least, until satiety killed passion, there was no lack of beautiful women to minister to his pleasure and to console him for the lack of charms in the Spanish wife whom Mazarin thrust into his reluctant arms when he was little more than a boy, and when his heart was in Marie Mancini's keeping.

Among all the fair and frail women who succeeded one another in his affection three stand out from the rest with a prominence which his special favour assigned to each in turn. For ten early years it was Louise de la Baume-Leblanc (better known to fame as the Duchesse de Lavalliere) who reigned as his uncrowned Queen, and who gave her life to his pleasure and to the care of the children she bore to him. But such constancy could not last for ever in a man so constitutionally inconstant as Louis. When the Marquise de Montespan, in all her radiant and sensuous loveliness, came on the scene, she drew the King to her arms as a flame lures the moth. Her voluptuous charms, her abounding vitality and witty tongue, made the more refined beauty and the gentleness of the Duchesse flavourless in comparison; and Louise, realising that her sun had set, retired to spend the rest of her life in the prayers and piety of a convent, leaving her brilliant rival in undisputed possession of the field.

For many years Madame de Montespan, the most consummate courtesan who ever enslaved a King, queened it over Louis in her magnificent apartments at Versailles and in the Tuileries. He was never weary of

showering rich gifts and favours on her; and, in return, she became the mother of his children and ministered to his every whim, little dreaming of the day when she in turn was to be dethroned by an insignificant widow whom she regarded as the creature of her bounty, and who so often awaited her pleasure in her ante-room.

* * * * *

When Françoise d'Aubigné was cradled, one November day in the year 1635, within the walls of a fortress-prison in Poitou, the prospect of a Queendom seemed as remote as a palace in the moon. She had good blood in her veins, it is true. Her ancestors had been noblemen of Normandy before the Conqueror ever thought of crossing the English Channel, and her grandfather, General Theodore d'Aubigné, had won distinction as a soldier on many a battlefield. It was to her father, profligate and spendthrift, who, after squandering his patrimony, had found himself lodged in jail, that Françoise owed the ignominy of her birthplace, for her mother had insisted on sharing the captivity of her ne'er-do-well husband.

When at last Constant d'Aubigné found his prison doors opened, he shook the dust of France off his feet and took his wife and young children away to Martinique, where at least, he hoped, his record would not be known. On the voyage, we are told, the child was brought so near to death's door by an illness that her body was actually on the point of being flung overboard when her mother detected signs of life, and rescued her from a watery grave. A little later, in Martinique, she had an equally narrow escape from death as the result of a snakebite. A child thus twice miraculously preserved was evidently destined for better things than an early tomb, more than one declared; and so indeed it proved.

When the father ended his mis-spent days in the West Indian island, the widow took her poverty and her fledgelings back to France, where Françoise was placed under the charge of a Madame de Villette, to pick up such education as she could in exchange for such menial work as looking after Madame's poultry and scrubbing her floors. When her mother in turn died, the child (she was only fifteen at the time) was taken to Paris by an aunt, whose miserliness or poverty often sent her hungry to bed.

Such was Françoise's condition when she was taken one day to the house of Paul Scarron, the crippled poet, whose satires and burlesques kept Paris in a ripple of merriment, and to whom the child's poverty and friendless position made as powerful an appeal as her budding beauty and her modesty. It was a very tender heart that beat in the pain-racked, paralysed body of the "father of French burlesque"; and within a few days of first setting eyes on his "little Indian girl," as he called her, he asked her to marry him. "It is a sorry offer to make you, my dear child," he said, "but it is either this or a convent." And, to escape the convent, Françoise consented to become the wife of the "bundle of pains and deformities" old enough to be her father.

In the marriage-contract Scarron, with characteristic buffoonery, recognises her as bringing a dower of "four louis, two large and very expressive eyes, a fine bosom, a pair of lovely hands, and a good intellect"; while to the attorney, when asked what his contribution was, he answered, "I give her my name, and that means immortality." For eight years Françoise was the dutiful wife of her crippled husband, nursing

him tenderly, managing his home and his purse, redeeming his writing from its coarseness, and generally proving her gratitude by a ceaseless devotion. Then came the day when Scarron bade her farewell on his death-bed, begging her with his last breath to remember him sometimes, and bidding her to be "always virtuous."

Thus Françoise d'Aubigné was thrown once more on a cold world, with nothing between her and starvation but Scarron's small pension, which the Queen-mother continued to his widow, and compelled to seek a cheap refuge within convent walls. She had however good-looks which might stand her in good stead. She was tall, with an imposing figure and a natural dignity of carriage. She had a wealth of light-brown hair, eyes dark and brilliant, full of fire and intelligence, a well-shaped nose, and an exquisitely modelled mouth.

Beautiful she was beyond doubt, in these days of her prime; but there were thousands of more beautiful women in France. And for ten years Madame Scarron was left to languish within the convent walls with never a lover to offer her release. When the Queen-mother died, and with her the pitiful pension, her plight was indeed pitiful. Her petitions to the King fell on deaf ears, until Montespan, moved by her tears and entreaties, pleaded for her; and Louis at last gave a reluctant consent to continue the allowance.

It was a happy inspiration that led Scarron's widow to the King's favourite, for Madame de Montespan's heart, ever better than her life, went out to the gentle woman whom fate was treating so scurvily. Not content with procuring the pension, she placed her in charge of her nursery, an office of great trust and delicacy; and thus Madame Scarron found herself comfortably installed in the King's palace with a salary of two thousand crowns a year. Her day of poverty and independence was at last ended. She had, in fact, though she little knew it, placed her foot on the ladder, at the summit of which was the dazzling prize of the King's hand.

Those were happy years which followed. High in the favour of the King's mistress, loving the little ones given into her charge as if they were her own children, especially the eldest born, the delicate and warm-hearted Duc de Maine, who was also his father's darling, Madame had nothing left to wish for in life. Her days were full of duty, of peace, and contentment. Even Louis, as he watched the loving care she lavished on his children, began to thaw and to smile on her, and to find pleasure in his visits to the nursery, which grew more and more frequent. There was a charm in this sweet-eyed, gentle-voiced widow, whose tongue was so skilful in wise and pleasant words. Her patient devotion deserved recognition. He gave orders that more fitting apartments should be assigned to Madame--a suite little less sumptuous than that of Montespan herself; and that money should not be lacking, he made her a gift of two hundred thousand francs, which the provident widow promptly invested in the purchase of the castle and estate of Maintenon.

Such marked favours as these not unnaturally set jealous tongues wagging. Even Montespan began to grow uneasy, and to wonder what was coming next. When she ventured to refer sarcastically to the use "Scarron's widow" had made of his present, Louis silenced her by answering, "In my opinion, Madame de Maintenon has acted very wisely"; thus by a word conferring noble rank on the woman his favourite was already beginning to fear as a rival.

And indeed there were soon to be sufficient grounds for Montespan's jealousy and alarm. Every day saw Louis more and more under the spell of his children's governess--the middle-aged woman whose musical voice, gentle eyes, and wise words of counsel were opening a new and better world to him. She knew, as well as himself, how sated and weary he was of the cup of pleasure he had now drained to its last dregs of disillusionment; and he listened with eager ears to the words which pointed to him a surer path of happiness. Even reproof from her lips became more grateful to him than the sweetest flatteries from those of the most beautiful woman who counted but half of her years.

The growing influence of the widow Scarron over the "Sun-King" had already become the chief gossip of the Court. From the allurements of Montespan, of Mademoiselle de Fontanges, and of de Ludre he loved to escape to the apartments of the soft-voiced woman who cared so much more for his soul than for his smiles. "His Majesty's interviews with Madame de Maintenon," Madame de Sevigne writes, "become more and more frequent, and they last from six in the morning to ten at night, she sitting in one arm-chair, he in another."

In vain Montespan stormed and wept in her fits of jealous rage; in vain did the beautiful de Fontanges seek to lure him to her arms, until death claimed her so tragically before she had well passed her twentieth birthday. The King had had more than enough of such Delilahs. Pleasure had palled; peace was what he craved now--salve for his seared conscience.

When Madame de Maintenon was appointed principal lady-in-waiting to the Dauphine and when, a little later, Louis' unhappy Queen drew her last breath in her arms, Montespan at last realised that her day of power was over. She wrote letters to the King begging him not to withdraw his affection from her, but to these appeals Louis was silent; he handed the letters to Madame de Maintenon to answer as she willed.

The Court was quick to realise that a new star had risen; ministers and ambassadors now flocked to the new divinity to consult her and to win her favour. The governess was hailed as the new Queen of Louis and of France. The climax came when the King was thrown one day from his horse while hunting, and broke his arm. It was Madame de Maintenon alone who was allowed to nurse him, and who was by his side night and day. Before the arm was well again she was standing, thickly veiled, before an improvised altar in the King's study, with Louis by her side, while the words that made them man and wife were pronounced by Archbishop de Harlay.

The prison-child had now reached the loftiest pinnacle in the land of her birth. Though she wore no crown, she was Queen of France, wielding a power which few throned ladies have ever known. Princes and Princesses rose to greet her entry with bows and curtsies; the mother of the coming King called her "aunt"; her rooms, splendid as the King's, adjoined his; she had the place of honour in the King's Council Room; the State's secrets were in her keeping; she guided and controlled the destinies of the nation. And all this greatness came to her when she had passed her fiftieth year, and when all the grace and bloom of youth were but a distant memory.

The King himself, two years her junior, and still in the prime of his manhood, was her shadow, paying to the plain, middle-aged woman such deference and courtesy as he had never shown to the youth and beauty of

her predecessors in his affection. And she--thus translated to dizzy heights--kept a head as cool and a demeanour as modest as when she was "Scarron's widow," the convent protegee. For power and splendour she cared no whit. Her ambition now, as always, was to be loved for herself, to "play a beautiful part in the world," and to deserve the respect of all good men.

Her chief pleasure was found away from the pomp and glitter of the Court, among "her children" of the Saint Cyr Convent, which she had founded for the education of the daughters of poor noblemen, over whom she watched with loving and unflagging care. And yet she was not happy--not nearly as happy as in the days of her obscure widowhood. "I am dying of sorrow in the midst of luxury," she wrote. And again. "I cannot bear it. I wish I were dead." Why she was so unhappy, with her Queendom and her environment of love and esteem, and her life of good works, it is impossible to say. The fact remains, inscrutable, but still fact.

Twenty-five years of such life of splendid sadness, and Louis, his last days clouded by loss and suffering, died with her prayers in his ears, his coverlet moistened by her tears. Two years later--years spent in prayers and masses and charitable work--the "Queen Dowager" drew the last breath of her long life at St Cyr, shortly after hearing that her beloved Due de Maine, her pet nursling of other days, had been arrested and flung into prison.

CHAPTER XXIII

A THRONED BARBARIAN

The dawn of the eighteenth century saw the thrones of France and Russia occupied by two of the most remarkable sovereigns who ever wore a crown--Louis XIV., the "Sun-King," whose splendours dazzled Europe, and whose power held it in awe; and Peter I. of Russia, whose destructive sword swept Europe from Sweden to the Dardenelles, and whose clever brain laid sure the foundation of his country's greatness. Each of these Royal rivals dwarfed all other fellow-monarchs as the sun pales the stars; and yet it would scarcely have been possible to find two men more widely different in all save their passion for power and their love of woman, which alone they had in common.

Of the two, Peter is unquestionably to-day the more arresting, dominating figure. Although nearly two centuries have gone since he made his exit from the world, we can still picture him in his pride, towering a head higher than the tallest of his courtiers, swart of face, "as if he had been born in Africa," with his black, close-curling hair, his bold, imperious eyes, his powerful, well-knit frame--"the muscles and stature of a Goliath"--a kingly figure, with majesty in every movement.

We see him, too, wilfully discarding the kingliness with which nature had so liberally dowered him--now receiving ambassadors "in a short dressing-gown, below which his bare legs were exposed, a thick nightcap, lined with linen, on his head, his stockings dropped down over his slippers"--now walking through the Copenhagen streets grotesque in a green cap, a brown overcoat with horn buttons, worsted stockings full of

darns, and dirty, cobbled shoes; and again carousing, red of face and loud of voice, with his meanest subjects in some low tavern.

As the mood seizes him he plays the role of fireman for hours together; goes carol-singing in his sledge, and reaps his harvest of coppers from the houses of his subjects; rides a hobby-horse at a village fair, and shrieks with laughter until he falls off; or plies saw and plane in a shipbuilding yard, sharing the meals and drinking bouts of his fellow-workmen.

The French Ambassador, Campredon, wrote of him in 1725:--"It is utterly impossible at the present moment to approach the Tsar on serious subjects; he is altogether given up to his amusements, which consist in going every day to the principal houses in the town with a suite of 200 persons, musicians and so forth, who sing songs on every sort of subject, and amuse themselves by eating and drinking at the expense of the persons they visit." "He never passed a single day without being the worse for drink," Baron Poellnitz tells us; and his drinking companions were usually chosen from the most degraded of his subjects, of both sexes, with whom he consorted on the most familiar terms.

When his muddled brain occasionally awoke to the knowledge that he was a King, he would bully and hector his boon-comrades like any drunken trooper. On one occasion, when a young Jewess refused to drain a goblet of neat brandy which he thrust into her hand, he promptly administered two resounding boxes on her ears, shouting, "Vile Hebrew spawn! I'll teach thee to obey."

There was in him, too, a vein of savage cruelty which took remarkable forms. A favourite pastime was to visit the torture-chamber and gloat over the sufferings of the victims of the knout and the strappado; or to attend (and frequently to officiate at) public executions. Once, we are told, at a banquet, he "amused himself by decapitating twenty Streltsy, emptying as many glasses of brandy between successive strokes, and challenging the Prussian envoy to repeat the feat."

Mad? There can be little doubt that Peter had madness in his veins. He was a degenerate and an epileptic, subject to brain storms which terrified all who witnessed them. "A sort of convulsion seized him, which often for hours threw him into a most distressing condition. His body was violently contorted; his face distorted into horrible grimaces; and he was further subject to paroxysms of rage, during which it was almost certain death to approach him." Even in his saner moods, as Waliszewski tells us, he "joined to the roughness of a Russian _barin_ all the coarseness of a Dutch sailor." Such in brief suggestion was Peter I. of Russia, half-savage, half-sovereign, the strangest jumble of contradictions who has ever worn the Imperial purple--"a huge mastodon, whose moral perceptions were all colossal and monstrous."

It was, perhaps, inevitable that a man so primitive, so little removed from the animal, should find his chief pleasures in low pursuits and companionships. During his historic visit to London, after a hard day's work with adze and saw in the shipbuilding yard, the Tsar would adjourn with his fellow-workmen to a public-house in Great Tower Street, and "smoke and drink ale and brandy, almost enough to float the vessel he had been helping to construct."

And in his own kingdom the favourite companions of his debauches were common soldiers and servants.

"He chose his friends among the common herd; looked after his household like any shopkeeper; thrashed his wife like a peasant; and sought his pleasure where the lower populace generally finds it." His female companions were chosen rather for their coarseness than their charms, and pleased him most when they were drunk. It was thus fitting that he should make an Empress of a scullery-maid, who, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, had no vestige of beauty to commend her to his favour, and whose chief attractions in his eyes were that she had a coarse tongue and was a "first-rate toper."

It was thus a strange and unhappy caprice of fate that united Peter, while still a youth, to his first Empress, the refined and sensitive Eudoxia, a woman as remote from her husband as the stars. Never was there a more incongruous bride than this delicately nurtured girl provided by the Empress Nathalie for her coarse-grained son. From the hour at which they stood together at the altar the union was doomed to tragic failure; before the honeymoon waned Peter had terrified his bride by his brutality and disgusted her by the open attentions he paid to his favourites of the hour, the daughters of Botticher, the goldsmith, and Mons, the wine-merchant.

For five years husband and wife saw little of each other; and when, in 1694, Nathalie's death removed the one influence which gave the union at least the outward form of substance, Peter lost no time in exhibiting his true colours. He dismissed all Eudoxia's relatives from the Court, and sent her father into exile. One brother he caused to be whipped in public; another was put to the torture, which had its horrible climax when Peter himself saturated his victim's clothes with spirits of wine, and then set them on fire. For Eudoxia a different fate was reserved. Not only had he long grown weary of her insipid beauty and of her refinement and gentleness, which were a constant mute reproach to his own low tastes and hectoring manners--he had grown to hate the very sight of her, and determined that she should no longer stand between him and the unbridled indulgence of his pleasure.

During his visit to England he never once wrote to her, and on his return to Moscow his first words were a brutal announcement of his intention to be rid of her. In vain she pleaded and wept. To her tearful inquiries, "What have I done to offend you? What fault have you to find with me?" he turned a deaf ear. "I never want to see you again," were his last inexorable words. A few days later a hackney coach drove up to the palace doors; the unhappy Tsarina was bundled unceremoniously into it, and she was carried away to the nunnery of the "Intercession of the Blessed Virgin," whose doors were closed on her for a score of years.

Pitiful years they were for the young Empress, consigned by her husband to a life that was worse than death--robbed of her rank, her splendours, and luxuries, her very name--she was now only Helen, the nun, faring worse than the meanest of her sister-nuns; for while they at least had plenty to eat, the Tsarina seems many a time to have known the pangs of hunger. The letters she wrote to one of her brothers are pathetic evidence of the straits to which she was reduced. "For pity's sake," she wrote, "give me food and drink. Give clothes to the beggar. There is nothing here. I do not need a great deal; still I must eat."

It is not to be wondered at, that, in her misery, she should turn anywhere for succour and sympathy; and both came to her at last in the guise of Major Glebof, an officer in the district, whose heart was

touched by the sadness of her fate. He sent her food and wine to restore her strength, and warm furs to protect her from the iciness of her cell. In response to her letters of thanks, he visited her again and again, bringing sunshine into her darkened life with his presence, and soothing her with words of sympathy and encouragement, until gratitude to the "good Samaritan" grew into love for the man.

When she learned that the man who had so befriended her was himself poor, actually in money difficulties, she insisted on giving him every rouble she could wring, by any abject appeal, out of her friends and relatives. She became his very slave, grovelling at his feet. "Where thy heart is, dearest one," she wrote to him, "there is mine also; where thy tongue is, there is my head; thy will is also mine." She loved him with a passion which broke down all barriers of modesty and prudence, reckless of the fact that he had a wife, as she had a husband.

When Major Glebof's visits and letters grew more and more infrequent, she suffered tortures of anxiety and despair. "My light, my soul, my joy," she wrote in one distracted letter, "has the cruel hour of separation come already? O, my light! how can I live apart from thee? How can I endure existence? Rather would I see my soul parted from my body. God alone knows how dear thou art to me. Why do I love thee so much, my adored one, that without thee life is so worthless? Why art thou angry with me? Why, my _batioushka_, dost thou not come to see me? Have pity on me, O my lord, and come to see me to-morrow. O, my world, my dearest and best, answer me; do not let me die of grief."

Thus one distracted, incoherent letter followed another, heart-breaking in their grief, pitiful in their appeal. "Come to me," she cried; "without thee I shall die. Why dost thou cause me such anguish? Have I been guilty without knowing it? Better far to have struck me, to have punished me in any way, for this fault I have innocently committed." And again: "Why am I not dead? Oh, that thou hadst buried me with thy own hands! Forgive me, O my soul! Do not let me die.... Send me but a crust of bread thou hast bitten with thy teeth, or the waistcoat thou hast often worn, that I may have something to bring thee near to me."

What answers, if any, the Major vouchsafed to these pathetic letters we know not. The probability is that they received no answer--that the "good Samaritan" had either wearied of or grown alarmed at a passion which he could not return, and which was fraught with danger. It was accident only that revealed to the world the story of this strange and tragic infatuation.

When the Tsarevitch, Alexis, was brought to trial in 1718 on a charge of conspiracy against his father, Peter, suspecting that Eudoxia had had a hand in the rebellion, ordered a descent on the nunnery and an inquiry. Nothing was found to connect her with her son's ill-fated venture; but the inquiry revealed the whole story of her relations with the too friendly officer. The evidence of the nuns and servants alone--evidence of frequent and long meetings by day and night, of embraces exchanged--was sufficiently conclusive, without the incriminating letters which were discovered in the Major's bureau, labelled "Letters from the Tsarina," or Eudoxia's confession which was extorted from her.

This was an opportunity of vengeance such as exceeded all the Tsar's hopes. Glebof was arrested and put on his trial. Evidence was forced from the nuns by the lashing of the knout, so severe that some of them died under it. Glebof, subjected to such frightful tortures that in his

agony he confessed much more than the truth, was sentenced to death by impalement. In order to prolong his suffering to the last possible moment, he was warmly wrapped in furs, to protect him from the bitter cold, and for twenty-eight hours he suffered indescribable agony, until at last death came to his release.

As for Eudoxia, her punishment was a public flogging and consignment to a nunnery still more isolated and miserable than that in which she had dragged out twenty years of her broken life. Here she remained for seven years, until, on the Tsar's death, an even worse fate befell her. She was then, by Catherine's orders, taken from the convent, and flung into the most loathsome, rat-infested dungeon of the fortress of Schlussenberg, where she remained for two years of unspeakable horror.

Then at last, after nearly thirty years of life that was worse than death, the sun shone again for her. One day her dungeon door flew open, and to the bowing of obsequious courtiers, the prisoner was conducted to a sumptuous apartment. "The walls were hung with splendid stuffs; the table was covered with gold-plate; ten thousand roubles awaited her in a casket. Courtiers stood in her ante-chamber; carriages and horses were at her orders."

Catherine, the "scullery-Empress," was dead; Eudoxia's grandson, Peter II., now wore the crown of Russia; and Eudoxia found herself transported, as by the touch of a magic wand, from her loathsome prison-cell to the old-time splendours of palaces--the greatest lady in all Russia, to whom Princesses, ambassadors, and courtiers were all proud to pay respectful homage. But the transformation had come too late; her life was crushed beyond restoration; and after a few months of her new glory she was glad to find an asylum once more within convent walls, until Death, the great healer of broken hearts, took her to where, "beyond these voices, there is peace."

* * * * *

While Eudoxia was eating her heart out in her convent cell, her husband was finding ample compensation for her absence in Bacchanalian orgies and the company of his galaxies of favourites, from tradesmen's daughters to servant-maids of buxom charms, such as the Livonian peasant-girl, in whom he found his second Empress.

Of the almost countless women who thus fell under his baneful influence one stands out from the rest by reason of the tragedy which surrounds her memory. Mary Hamilton was no low-born maid, such as Peter especially chose to honour with his attentions. She had in her veins the blood of the ducal Hamiltons of Scotland, and of many a noble family of Russia, from which her more immediate ancestors had taken their wives; and it was an ill fate that took her, when little more than a child, to the most debased Court of Europe to play the part of maid-of-honour, and thus to cross the path of the most unprincipled lover in Europe.

Peter's infatuation for the pretty young "Scotswoman," however, was but short-lived. She had none of the vulgar attractions that could win him to any kind of constancy; and he quickly abandoned her for the more agreeable company of his _dienshtchiks_, leaving her to find consolation in the affection of more courtly, if less exalted, lovers--notably the young Count Orloff, who proved as faithless as his master.

Such was Mary's infatuation for the worthless Count that, under his

influence, she stooped to various kinds of crime, from stealing the Tsarina's jewels to fill her lover's purse, to infanticide. The climax came when an important document was missing from the Tsar's cabinet. Suspicion pointed to Orloff as the thief; he was arrested, and, when brought into Peter's presence, not only confessed to the thefts and to his share in making away with the undesirable infants, but betrayed the partner of his guilt.

There was short shrift for poor Mary Hamilton when she was put on her trial on these grave charges. She made full confession of her crimes; but no torture could wring from her the name of the man for love of whom she had committed them, and of whose treachery to her she was ignorant. She was sentenced to death; and one March day, in the year 1719, she was led to the scaffold "in a white silk gown trimmed with black ribbons."

Then followed one of the grimmest scenes recorded in history. Peter, the man who had been the first to betray her, and who had refused her pardon even when her cause was pleaded by his wife, was a keenly interested spectator of her execution. At the foot of the scaffold he embraced her, and exhorted her to pray, before stepping aside to give place to the headsman. When the axe had done its deadly work, he again stepped forward, picked up the lifeless and still beautiful head which had rolled into the mud, and calmly proceeded to give a lecture on anatomy to the assembled crowd, "drawing attention to the number and nature of the organs severed by the axe." His lecture concluded, he kissed the pale, dead lips, crossed himself, and walked away with a smile of satisfaction on his face.

CHAPTER XXIV

A FRIEND OF MARIE ANTOINETTE

There is scarcely a spectacle in the whole drama of history more pathetic than that of Marie Antoinette, dancing her light-hearted way through life to the guillotine, seemingly unconscious of the eyes of jealousy and hate that watched her every step; or, if she noticed at all, returning a gay smile for a frown.

Wedded when but a child, full of the joy of youth, with laughter bubbling on her pretty lips and gaiety dancing in her eyes, to a dull-witted clown to whom her fresh young beauty made no appeal; surrounded by Court ladies jealous of her charms; feared for her foreign sympathies, and hated by a sullen, starving populace for her extravagance and her pursuit of pleasure, the Austrian Princess with all her young loveliness and the sweetness of her nature could please no one in the land of her exile. Her very amiability was an offence; her unaffected simplicity a subject of scorn; and her love of pleasure a crime.

Had she realised the danger of her position, and adapted herself to its demands, her story might have been written very differently; but her tragedy was that she saw or heeded none of the danger-signals that marked her path until it was too late to retrace a step; and that her most innocent pleasures were made to pave the way to her doom.

Nothing, for instance, could have been more harmless to the seeming than Marie Antoinette's friendship for Yolande de Polignac; but this friendship had, beyond doubt, a greater part in her undoing than any other incident in her life, from the affair of the "diamond necklace" to her innocent infatuation for Count Fersen; and it would have been well for the Queen of France if Madame de Polignac had been content to remain in her rustic obscurity, and had never crossed her path.

When Yolande Gabrielle de Polastron was led to the altar, one day in the year 1767, by Comte Jules de Polignac, she never dreamt, we may be sure, of the dazzling role she was destined to play at the Court of France. Like her husband, she was a member of the smaller *_noblesse_*, as proud as they were poor. Her husband, it is true, boasted a long pedigree, with its roots in the Dark Ages; but his family had given to France only one man of note, that Cardinal de Polignac, accomplished scholar, courtier, and man of affairs, who was able to twist Louis XIV. round his dexterous thumb; and Comte Jules was the Cardinal's great-nephew, and, through his mother, had Mazarin blood in his veins.

But the young couple had a purse as short as their descent was long; and the early years of their wedded life were spent in Comte Jules' dilapidated chateau, on an income less than the equivalent of a pound a day--in a rustic retirement which was varied by an occasional jaunt to Paris to "see the sights," and enjoy a little cheap gaiety.

Comte Jules, however, had a sister, Diane, a clever-tongued, ambitious young woman, who had found a footing at Court as lady-in-waiting to the Comtesse d'Artois, and whom her brother and his wife were proud to visit on their rare journeys to the capital. And it was during one of these visits that Marie Antoinette, who had struck up an informal friendship with the sprightly, laughter-loving Diane, first met the woman who was to play such an important and dangerous part in her life.

It was, perhaps, little wonder that the French Queen, craving for friendship and sympathy, fell under the charm of Yolande de Polignac--a girl still, but a few years older than herself, with a singular sweetness and winsomeness, and "beautiful as a dream." The beauty of the young Comtesse was, indeed, a revelation even in a Court of fair women. In the extravagant words of chroniclers of the time, "she had the most heavenly face that was ever seen. Her glance, her smile, every feature was angelic." No picture could, it was said, do any justice to this lovely creature of the glorious brown hair and blue eyes, who seemed so utterly unconscious of her beauty.

Such was the woman who came into the life of Marie Antoinette, and at once took possession of her heart. At last the Queen of France, in her isolation, had found the ideal friend she had sought so long in vain; a woman young and beautiful like herself, with kindred tastes, eager as she was to enjoy life, and with all the qualities to make a charming and sympathetic companion. It was a case of love at first sight, on Marie Antoinette's part at least; and each subsequent meeting only served to strengthen the link that bound these two women so strangely brought together.

The Comtesse must come oftener to Court, the Queen pleaded, so that they might have more opportunities of meeting and of learning to know each other; and when the Comtesse pleaded poverty, Marie Antoinette brushed the difficulty aside. That could easily be arranged; the Queen had a

vacancy in the ranks of her equerries. M. le Comte would accept the post, and then Madame would have her apartments at the Court itself.

Thus it was that Comte Jules' wife was transported from her poor country chateau to the splendours of Versailles, installed as *_chere amie_* of the Queen in place of the Princesse de Lamballe, and with the ball of fortune at her pretty feet. And never did woman adapt herself more easily to such a change of environment. It was, indeed, a great part of the charm of this remarkable woman that, amid success which would have turned the head of almost any other of her sex, she remained to her last day as simple and unaffected as when she won the Queen's heart in Diane de Polignac's apartment.

So absolutely indifferent did she seem to her new splendours, that, when jealousy sought to undermine the Queen's friendship, she implored Marie Antoinette to allow her to go back to her old, obscure life; and it was only when the Queen begged her to stay, with arms around her neck and with streaming tears, that she consented to remain by her side.

If the Queen ever had any doubt that she had at last found a friend who loved her for herself, the doubt was now finally dissipated. Such an unselfish love as this was a treasure to be prized; and from this moment Queen and waiting-woman were inseparable. When they were not strolling arm-in-arm in the corridors or gardens of Versailles, Her Majesty was spending her days in Madame's apartments, where, as she said, "We are no longer Queen and subject, but just dear friends."

So unhappy was Marie Antoinette apart from her new friend that, when Madame de Polignac gave birth to a child at Passy, the Court itself was moved to La Muette, so that the Queen could play the part of nurse by her friend's bedside.

Such, now, was the Queen's devotion that there was no favour she would not have gladly showered on the Comtesse; but to all such offers Madame turned a deaf ear. She wanted nothing but Marie Antoinette's love and friendship for herself; but if the Queen, in her goodness, chose to extend her favour to Madame's relatives--well, that was another matter.

Thus it was that Comte Jules soon blossomed into a Duke, and Madame perforce became a Duchess, with a coveted tabouret at Court. But they were still poor, in spite of an equerry's pay, and heavily in debt, a matter which must be seen to. The Queen's purse satisfied every creditor, to the tune of four hundred thousand livres, and Duc Jules found himself lord of an estate which added seventy thousand livres yearly to his exchequer, with another annual eighty thousand livres as revenue for his office of Director-General of Posts.

Of course, if the Queen *_would_* be so foolishly generous, it was not the Duchesse's fault, and when Marie Antoinette next proposed to give a dowry of eight hundred thousand livres to the Duchesse's daughter on her marriage to the Comte de Guiche, and to raise the bridegroom to a dukedom--well, it was "very sweet of Her Majesty," and it was not for her to oppose such a lavish autocrat.

Thus the shower of Royal favours grew; and it is perhaps little wonder that each new evidence of the Queen's prodigality was greeted with curses by the mob clamouring for bread outside the palace gates; while even her father's minister, Kaunitz, in far Vienna, brutally dubbed the Duchesse and her family, "a gang of thieves."

Diane de Polignac, the Duchesse's sister-in-law, had long been made a Countess and placed in charge of a Royal household; and the grateful shower fell on all who had any connection with the favourite. Her father-in-law, Cardinal de Polignac's nephew, was rescued from his rustic poverty to play the exalted role of ambassador; an uncle was raised *_per saltum_* from *_cure_* to bishop. The Duchesse's widowed aunt was made happy by a pension of six thousand livres a year; and her son-in-law, de Guiche, in addition to his dukedom, was rewarded further for his fortunate nuptials by valuable sinecure offices at Court.

So the tide of benefactions flowed until it was calculated that the Polignac family were drawing half a million livres every year as the fruits of the Queen's partiality for her favourite. Little wonder that, at a time when France was groaning under dire poverty, the volume of curses should swell against the "Austrian panther," who could thus squander gold while her subjects were starving; or that the Court should be inflamed by jealousy at such favours shown to a family so obscure as the Polignacs.

To the warnings of her own family Marie Antoinette was deaf. What cared she for such exhibitions of spite and jealousy? She was Queen; and if she wished to be generous to her favourite's family, none should say her nay. And thus, with a smile half-careless, half-defiant, she went to meet the doom which, though she little dreamt it, awaited her.

The Duchesse was now promoted to the office of governess of the Queen's children, a position which was the prerogative of Royalty itself, or, at least, of the very highest nobility. With her usual modesty, she had fought long against the promotion; but the Queen's will was law, and she had to submit to the inevitable as gracefully as she could. And now we see her installed in the most splendid apartments at Versailles, holding a *_salon_* almost as regal as that of Marie Antoinette herself.

She was surrounded by sycophants and place-seekers, eager to capture the Queen's favour through her. And such was her influence that a word from her was powerful enough to make or mar a minister. She held, in fact, the reins of power and was now more potent than the weak-kneed King himself.

It was at this stage in her brilliant career that the Duchesse came under the spell of the Comte de Vaudreuil--handsome, courtly, an intriguer to his finger-tips, a man of many accomplishments, of a supple tongue, and with great wealth to lend a glamour to his gifts. A man of rare fascination, and as dangerous as he was fascinating.

The woman who had carried a level head through so much unaccustomed splendour and power became the veriest slave of this handsome, honey-tongued Comte, who ruled her, as she in turn ruled the Queen. At his bidding she made and unmade ministers; she obtained for him pensions and high offices, and robbed the treasury of nearly two million livres to fill his pockets. When Marie Antoinette at last ventured to thwart the Comte in his ambition to become the Dauphin's Governor, he retaliated by poisoning the Duchesse's mind against her, and bringing about the first estrangement between the friends.

Torn between her infatuation for Vaudreuil and her love of the Queen, the Duchesse was in an awkward dilemma. It became necessary to choose between the two rivals; and that Vaudreuil's spell proved the stronger,

her increasing coldness to Marie Antoinette soon proved. It was the "rift within the lute" which was to make the music of their friendship mute. The Queen gradually withdrew herself from the Duchesse's _salon_, where she was sure to meet the insolent Vaudreuil; and thus the gulf gradually widened until the severance was complete.

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Evil days were now coming for Marie Antoinette. The affair of the diamond necklace had made powerful enemies; the Polignac family, taking the side of Vaudreuil and their protectress, were arrayed against her; France was rising on the tide of hate to sweep the Austrian and her husband from the throne. The horrors of the Revolution were being loosed, and all who could were flying for safety to other lands.

At this terrible crisis the Queen's thoughts were less for herself than for her friend of happier days. She sought the Duchesse and begged her to fly while there was still time. Then it was that, touched by such unselfish love, the Duchesse's pride broke down, and all her old love for her sovereign lady returned in full flood. Bursting into tears, she flung herself at Marie Antoinette's feet, and begged forgiveness from the woman whose friendship she had spurned, and whose life she had, however innocently, done so much to ruin.

A few hours later the Duchesse, disguised as a chambermaid and sitting by the coachman's side, was making her escape from France in company with her husband and other members of her family, while the Queen who had loved her so well was left to take the last tragic steps that had the guillotine for goal.

Just before the carriage started on its long and perilous journey, a note was thrust into the "chambermaid's" hand--"Adieu, most tender of friends. How terrible is this word! But it is necessary. Adieu! I have only strength left to embrace you. Your heart-broken Marie."

Then ensued for the Duchesse a time of perilous journeying to safety. At Sens her carriage was surrounded by a fierce mob, clamouring for the blood of the "aristos." "Are the Polignacs still with the Queen?" demanded one man, thrusting his head into the carriage. "The Polignacs?" answered the Abbe de Baliviere, with marvellous presence of mind. "Oh! they have left Versailles long ago. Those vile persons have been got rid of." And with a howl of baffled rage the mob allowed the carriage to continue its journey, taking with it the most hated of all the Polignacs, the chambermaid, whose heart, we may be sure, was in her mouth!

Thus the Duchesse made her way through Switzerland, to Turin, and to Rome, and to Venice, where news came to her of the fall of the monarchy and Louis' execution. By the time she reached Vienna on her restless wanderings, her health, shattered by hardships and by her anxiety for her friend, broke down completely. She was a dying woman; and when, a few months later, she learned that Marie Antoinette was also dead--"a natural death," they mercifully told her--"Thank God!" she exclaimed; "now, at last, she is free from those bloodthirsty monsters! Now I can die in peace."

Seven weeks later the Duchesse drew her last breath, with the name she still loved best in all the world on her lips. In death she and her beloved Queen were not divided.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RIVAL SISTERS

It was an unkind fate that linked the lives of the fifteenth Louis of France and Marie Leczinska, Princess of Lorraine, and daughter of Stanislas, the dethroned King of Poland; for there was probably no Princess in Europe less equipped by nature to hold the fickle allegiance of the young French King, and no Royal husband less likely to bring happiness into the life of such a consort.

When Princess Marie was called to the throne of France, she found herself transported from one of the most penurious and obscure to the most splendid of the Courts of Europe--"frightened and overwhelmed," as de Goncourt tells us, "by the grandeur of the King, bringing to her husband nothing but obedience, to marriage only duty; trembling and faltering in her queenly role like some escaped nun lost in Versailles." Although by no means devoid of good-looks, as Nattier's portrait of her at this time proves, her attractions were shy ones, as her virtues were modest, almost ashamed.

She shrank alike from the embraces of her husband and the gaities of his Court, finding her chief pleasure in music and painting, in long talks with the most serious-minded of her ladies, in Masses and prayers--spending gloomy hours in her oratory with its death's head, which she always carried with her on her journeys. Such was the nun-like wife whom Louis XV. led to the altar shortly after he had entered his sixteenth year, and had already had his initiation into that career of vice which he pursued with few intervals to the end of his life.

Already, at fifteen, the King, who has been mockingly dubbed "le bien aime," was breaking away from the austere hands of his boyhood's mentor, Cardinal Fleury, and was beginning to snatch a few "fearful joys" in the company of his mignons, such as the Duc de La Tremouille, and the Duc de Gesvres, and a few gay women of whom the sprightly and beautiful Princesse de Charolois was the ringleader. But he was still nothing more than "a big and gloomy child," whose ill-balanced nature gravitated between fits of profound gloom and the wild abandonment of debauch; one hour, torn and shaken by religious terrors, fears of hell and of death; the next, the very soul of hysterical gaiety, with words of blasphemy on his lips, the gayest member of a band of Bacchanals in some midnight orgy.

To such a youth, feverishly seeking distraction from his own black moods, the demure, devout Princess, ignorant of the caresses and coquetry of her sex, moving like a spectre among the brilliant, light-hearted ladies of his Court, was the most unsuitable, the most impossible of brides. He quickly wearied of her company, and fled from her sighs and her homilies to seek forgetfulness of her and of himself in the society of such sirens of the Court as Mademoiselle de Beaujolais, Madame de Lauraguais, and Mademoiselle de Charolois, whose coquetries and high spirits never failed to charm away his gloomy humours.

But although one lady after another, from that most bewitching of madcaps, Mademoiselle de Charolois, to the dark-eyed, buxom Comtesse de Toulouse, practised on him all their allurements, strove to awake his senses "by a thousand coquetries, a thousand assaults, the King's timidity eluded these advances, which amused and alarmed, but did not tempt his heart; that young monarch's heart was still so full of the aged Fleury's terrifying tales of the women of the Regency."

Such coyness, however, was not long to stand in the way of the King's appetite for pleasure which every day strengthened. One day it began to be whispered that at last Louis had been vanquished--that, at a supper at La Muette, he had proposed the health of an "Unknown Fair," which had been drunk with acclamation by his boon-companions; and the Court was full of excited speculation as to who his mysterious charmer could be. That some new and powerful influence had come into the young sovereign's life was abundantly clear, from the new light that shone in his eyes, the laughter that was now always on his lips. He had said "good-bye" to melancholy; he astonished all by his new vivacity, and became the leader in one dissipation after another, "whose noisy merriment he led and prolonged far into the night."

It was not long before the identity of the worker of this miracle was revealed to the world. She had been recognised more than once when making her stealthy way to the King's apartments; she was his chosen companion on his journey to Compiègne; and it was soon public knowledge that Madame de Mailly was the woman who had captured the King's elusive heart. And indeed there was little occasion for surprise; for Madame de Mailly, although she would never see her thirtieth birthday again, was one of the most seductive women in all France.

Black-eyed, crimson-lipped, oval-faced, Madame de Mailly was one of those women who "with cheeks on fire, and blood astir, eyes large and lustrous as the eyes of Juno, with bold carriage and in free toilettes, step forward out of the past with the proud and insolent graces of the divinities of some Bacchanalia." With the provocative and sensual charm which is so powerful in its appeal, she had a rare skill in displaying her beauty to its fullest advantage. Her cult of the toilette, the Duc de Luynes tells us, went with her even by night. She never went to bed without decking herself with all her diamonds; and her most seductive hour was in the morning, when, in her bed, with her glorious dishevelled hair veiling her pillow, a-glitter with her jewels, she gave audience to her friends.

Such was the ravishing, ardent, passionate woman who was the first of many to carry Louis' heart by storm, and to be established in his palace as his mistress--to inaugurate for him a new life of pleasure, and to estrange him still more from his unhappy Queen, shut up with her prayers and her tears in her own room, with her tapestry, her books of history, and her music for sole relaxation. "The most innocent pleasures," Queen Marie wrote sadly at this time, "are not for me."

Under Madame de Mailly's rule the Court of Versailles awoke to a new life. "The little apartments grow animated, gay to the point of licence. Noise, merriment, an even gayer and livelier clash of glasses, madder nights." Fete succeeded fete in brilliant sequence. Each night saw its Royal debauch, with the King and his mistress for arch-spirits of the revels. There were nightly banquets, with the rarest wines and the most costly viands, supplemented by salads prepared by the dainty hands of Mademoiselle de Charolois, and ragouts cooked by Louis himself in silver

saucepans. And these were followed by orgies which left the celebrants, in the last excesses of intoxication, to be gathered up at break of day and carried helpless to bed.

Such wild excesses could not fail sooner or later to bring satiety to a lover so unstable as Louis; and it was not long before he grew a little weary of his mistress, who, too assured of her conquest, began to exhibit sudden whims and caprices, and fits of obstinacy. Her jealous eyes followed him everywhere, her reproaches, if he so much as smiled on a rival beauty, provoked daily quarrels. He was drawn, much against his will, into her family disputes, and into the disgraceful affairs of her father, the dissolute Marquis de Nesle.

Meanwhile Madame de Mailly's supremacy was being threatened in a most unexpected quarter. Among the pupils of the convent school at Port Royal was a young girl, in whose ambitious brain the project was forming of supplanting the King's favourite, and of ruling France and Louis at the same time. The idle dream of a schoolgirl, of course! But to Felicite de Nesle it was no vain dream, but the ambition of a lifetime, which dominated her more and more as the months passed in her convent seclusion. If her sister, Madame de Mailly, had so easily made a conquest of the King, why should she, with less beauty, it is true, but with a much cleverer brain, despair? And thus it was that every letter Madame received from her "little sister" pleaded for an invitation to Court, until at last Mademoiselle de Nesle found herself the guest of Louis' mistress in his palace.

Thus the first important step was taken. The rest would be easy; for Mademoiselle never doubted for a moment her ability to carry out her programme to its splendid climax. It was certainly a bold, almost impudent design; for the girl of the convent had few attractions to appeal to a monarch so surrounded by beauty as the King of France. What the courtiers saw, says the Duc de Richelieu, was "a long neck clumsily set on the shoulders, a masculine figure and carriage, features not unlike those of Madame de Mailly, but thinner and harder, which exhibited none of her flashes of kindness, her tenderness of passion."

Even her manners seemed calculated to repel, rather than attract the man she meant to conquer; for she treated him, from the first, with a familiarity amounting almost to rudeness, and a wilfulness to which he was by no means accustomed. There was, at any rate, something novel and piquant in an attitude so different from that of all other Court ladies. Resentment was soon replaced by interest, and interest by attraction; until Louis, before he was aware of it, began to find the society of the impish, mocking, defiant maid from the convent more to his taste than that of the most fascinating women of his Court.

The more he saw of her, the more effectually he came under her spell. Each day found her in some new and tantalising mood; and as she drew him more and more into her toils, she kept him there by her ingenuity in devising novel pleasures and entertainments for him, until, within a month of setting eyes on her, he was telling Madame de Mailly, he "loved her sister more than herself." One of the first evidences of his favour was to provide her with a husband in the Comte de Vintimille, and a dower of two hundred thousand livres. He promised her a post as lady-in-waiting to Madame la Dauphine and gave her a sumptuous suite of rooms at Versailles. He even conferred on her husband the honour of handing him his shirt on the wedding-night, an evidence of high favour such as no other bridegroom had enjoyed.

It was thus little surprise to anyone to find the Comtesse-*bride* not only her sister's most formidable rival, but actually usurping her place and privileges. Nor was it long before this place, on which she had set her heart first within the walls of the Port Royal Convent, was unassailably hers; and Madame de Mailly, in tears and sadness, saw an unbridgeable gulf widen between her and the man she undoubtedly had grown to love.

That Felicite de Nesle had not over-estimated her powers of conquest was soon apparent. Louis became her abject slave, humouring her caprices and submitting to her will. And this will, let it be said to her credit, she exercised largely for his good. She weaned him from his vicious ways; she stimulated whatever good remained in him; she tried, and in a measure succeeded in making a man of him. Under her influence he began to realise that he was a King, and to play his exalted part more worthily. He asserted himself in a variety of directions, from looking personally after the ordering of his household to taking the reins of State into his own hands.

Nor did she curtail his pleasures. She merely gave them a saner direction. Orgies and midnight revelry became things of the past, but their place was taken by delightful days spent at the Chateau of Choisy, that regal little pleasure-house between the waters of the Seine and the Forest of Senart, with all its marvels of costly and artistic furnishing. Here one entertainment succeeded another, from the hunting which opened, to the card-games which closed the day. A time of innocent delights which came sweet to the jaded palate of the King.

Thus the halcyon months passed, until, one August day in 1741, the Comtesse was seized with a slight fever; Louis, consumed by anxiety, spending the anxious hours by her bedside or pacing the corridor outside. Two days later he was stooping to kiss an infant presented to him on a cushion of cramoisi velvet. His happiness was crowned at last, and life spread before him a prospect of many such years. But tragedy was already brooding over this scene of pleasure, although none, least of all the King, seemed to see the shadow of her wings.

One early day in December, Madame de Vintimille was seized with a severe illness, as sudden as it was mysterious. Physicians were hastily summoned from Paris, only, to Louis' despair, to declare that they could do nothing to save the life of the Comtesse. "Tortured by excruciating pain," says de Goncourt, "struggling against a death which was full of terror, and which seemed to point to the violence of poison, the dying woman sent for a confessor. She died almost instantly in his arms before the Sacraments could be administered. And as the confessor, charged with the dead woman's last penitent message to her sister, entered Madame de Mailly's _salon_, he dropped dead."

Here, indeed, was tragedy in its most sudden and terrible form! The King was stunned, incredulous. He refused to believe that the woman he had so lately clasped in his arms, so warm, so full of life, was dead. And when at last the truth broke on him with crushing force, he was as a man distraught. "He shut himself up in his room, and listened half-dead to a Mass from his bed." He would not allow any but the priest to come near him; he repulsed all efforts at consolation.

And whilst Louis was thus alone with his demented grief, "thrust away in a stable of the palace, lay the body of the dead woman, which had been

kept for a cast to be taken; that distorted countenance, that mouth which had breathed out its soul in a convulsion, so that the efforts of two men were required to close it for moulding, the already decomposing remains of Madame de Vintimille served as a plaything and a laughing-stock to the children and lackeys."

When the storm of his grief at last began to abate, the King retired to his remote country-seat of Saint Leger, carrying his broken heart with him--and also Madame de Mailly, as sharer of his sorrow; for it was to the woman whom he had so lightly discarded that he first turned for solace. At Saint Leger he passed his days in reading and re-reading the two thousand letters the dead Comtesse had written to him, sprinkling their perfumed pages with his tears. And when he was not thus burying himself in the past, he was a prey to the terrors that had obsessed his childhood--the fear of death and of hell.

At supper--the only meal which he shared with others, he refused to touch meat, "in order that he might not commit sin on every side"; if a light word was spoken he would rebuke the speaker by talk of death and judgment; and if his eyes met those of Madame de Mailly, he burst into tears and was led sobbing from the room.

The communion of grief gradually awoke in him his old affection for Madame de Mailly; and for a time it seemed not unlikely that she might regain her lost supremacy. But the discarded mistress had many enemies at Court, who were by no means willing to see her re-established in favour--the chief of them, the Duc de Richelieu, the handsomest man and the "hero" of more scandalous amours than any other in France--a man, moreover, of crafty brain, who had already acquired an ascendancy over the King's mind.

With Madame de Tencin, a woman as scheming and with as evil a reputation as himself, for chief ally, the Due determined to find another mistress who should finally oust Madame de Mailly from Louis' favour; and here he found in a woman, devoted to himself and his interests, and of such surpassing loveliness that, when the King first saw her at Petit Bourg, he exclaimed, "Heavens! how beautiful she is!"

Such was the involuntary tribute Louis paid at first sight to the charms of Madame de la Tournelle, who was now fated to take the place of her dead sister, Madame de Vintimille, just as the Comtesse had supplanted another sister, Madame de Mailly.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RIVAL SISTERS--_continued_

Louis XV.'s involuntary exclamation when he first set eyes on the loveliness of Madame de la Tournelle, "Heavens! how beautiful she is!" becomes intelligible when we look on Nattier's picture of this fairest of the de Nesle sisters in his "Allegory of the Daybreak," and read the contemporary descriptions of her charms.

"She ravished the eye," we are told, "with her skin of dazzling whiteness, her elegant carriage, her free gestures, the enchanting

glance of her big blue eyes--a gaze of which the cunning was veiled by sentiment--by the smile of a child, moist lips, a bosom surging, heaving, ever agitated by the flux and reflux of life, by a physiognomy at once passionate and mutinous." And to these seductions were added a sunny temperament, an infectious gaiety of spirit, and a playful wit which made her infinitely attractive to men much less susceptible than the amorous Louis.

It is little wonder then that in the reaction which followed his stormy grief for his dead love, the Comtesse de Vintimille, he should turn from the lachrymose companionship of Madame de Mailly to bask in the sunshine of this third of the beautiful sisters, Madame de la Tournelle, and that the wish to possess her should fire his blood. But Madame de la Tournelle was not to prove such an easy conquest as her two sisters, who had come almost unasked to his arms.

At the time when she came thus dramatically into his life she was living with Madame de Mazarin, a strong-minded woman who had no cause to love Louis, who had thwarted and opposed him more than once, and who was determined at any cost to keep her protegee and pet out of his clutches. And his desires had also two other stout opponents in Cardinal Fleury, his old mentor, and Maurepas, the most subtle and clever of his ministers, each of whom for different reasons was strongly averse to this new and dangerous liaison, which would make him the tool of Richelieu's favourite and Richelieu's party.

Thus, for months, Louis found himself baffled in all his efforts to win the prize on which he had set his heart until, in September, 1742, one formidable obstacle was removed from his path by the death of Madame de Mazarin. To Madame de la Tournelle the loss of her protectress was little short of a calamity, for it left her not only homeless, but practically penniless; and, in her extremity, she naturally turned hopeful eyes to the King, of whose passion she was well aware. At least, she hoped, he might give her some position at his Court which would rescue her from poverty. When she begged Maurepas, Madame de Mazarin's kinsman and heir, to appeal to the King on her behalf, his answer was to order her and her sister, Madame de Flavacourt, to leave the Hotel Mazarin, thus making her plight still more desperate.

But, fortunately, in this hour of her greatest need she found an unexpected friend in Louis' ill-used Queen, who, ignorant of her husband's infatuation for the beautiful Madame de la Tournelle, sent for her, spoke gracious words of sympathy to her, and announced her intention of installing her in Madame de Mazarin's place as a lady of the palace. Thus did fortune smile on Madame just when her future seemed darkest. But her troubles were by no means at an end. Fleury and Maurepas were more determined than ever that the King should not come into the power of a woman so alluring and so dangerous; and they exhausted every expedient to put obstacles in her path and to discover and support rival claimants to the post.

For once, however, Louis was adamant. He had not waited so long and feverishly for his prize to be balked when it seemed almost in his grasp. Madame de la Tournelle should have her place at his Court, and it would not be his fault if she did not soon fill one more exalted and intimate. Thus it was that when Fleury submitted to him the list of applicants, with la Tournelle's name at the bottom, he promptly re-wrote it at the head of the list, and handed it back to the Cardinal with the words, "The Queen is decided, and wishes to give her the place."

We can picture Madame de Mailly's distress and suspense while these negotiations were proceeding. She had, as we have seen in the previous chapter, been supplanted by one sister in the King's affection; and just as she was recovering some of her old position in his favour, she was threatened with a second dethronement by another sister. In her alarm she flew to Madame de la Tournelle, to set her fears at rest one way or the other. "Can it be possible that you are going to take my place?" she asked, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Quite impossible, my sister," answered Madame, with a smile; and Madame de Mailly, thus reassured, returned to Versailles the happiest woman in France--to learn, a few days later, that it was not only possible, it was an accomplished fact. For the second time, and now, as she knew well, finally, she was ousted from the affection of the King she loved so sincerely; and again it was a sister who had done her this grievous wrong. She was determined, however, that she would not quit the field without a last fight, and she knew she had doughty champions in Fleury and Maurepas, who still refused to acknowledge defeat.

Although Madame de la Tournelle was now installed in the palace, the day of Louis' conquest had not arrived. The gratification of his passion was still thwarted in several directions. Not only was Madame de Mailly's presence a difficulty and a reproach to him; his new favourite was by no means willing to respond to his advances. Her heart was still engaged to the Due d'Agenois, and was not hers to dispose of. Richelieu, however, was quick to dispose of this difficulty. He sent the handsome Duc to Languedoc, exposed him to the attractions of a pretty woman, and before many weeks had passed, was able to show Madame de la Tournelle passionate letters addressed to her rival by her lover, as evidence of the worthlessness of his vows; thus arming her pride against him and disposing her at last to lend a more favourable ear to the King.

As for Madame de Mailly, her shrift was short. In spite of her tears, her pleadings, her caresses, Louis made no concealment of his intention to be rid of her. "No sorrow, no humiliation was lacking in the death-struggle of love. The King spared her nothing. He did not even spare her those harsh words which snap the bonds of the most vulgar liaisons." And the climax came when he told the heart-broken woman, as she cringed pitifully at his feet, "You must go away this very day." "My sacrifices are finished," she sobbed, a little later to the "Judas," Richelieu, when, with friendly words, he urged her to humour the King and go away at least for a time; "it will be my death, but I will be in Paris to-night."

And while Madame de Mailly was carrying her crushed heart through the darkness to her exile, the King and Richelieu, disguised in large perukes and black coats, were stealing across the great courtyards to the rooms of Madame de la Tournelle, where the King's long waiting was to have its reward. And, the following day, the usurper was callously writing to a friend, "Doubtless Meuse will have informed you of the trouble I had in ousting Madame de Mailly; at last I obtained a mandate to the effect that she was not to return until she was sent for."

"No portrait," says de Goncourt, referring to this letter, "is to be compared with such a confession. It is the woman herself with the cynicism of her hardness, her shameless and cold-blooded ingratitude.... It is as though she drives her sister out by the two shoulders with those words which have the coarse energy of the lower orders."

Louis, at last happy in the achievement of his desire, was not long in discovering that in the third of the Nesle sisters he had his hands more full than with either of her predecessors. Madame de Mailly and the Comtesse de Vintimille had been content to play the role of mistress, and to receive the King's none too lavish largesse with gratitude. Madame de la Tournelle was not so complaisant, so easily satisfied. She intended--and she lost no time in making the King aware of her intention--to have her position recognised by the world at large, to reign as Montespan had reigned, to have the Treasury placed at her disposal, and her children, if she had any, made legitimate. Her last stipulation was that she should be made a Duchess before the end of the year. And to all these proposals Louis gave a meek assent.

To show further her independence, she soon began to drive her lover to distraction by her caprices and her temper: "She tantalised, at once rebuffed and excited the King by the most adroit comedies and those coquetries which are the strength of her sex, assuring him that she would be delighted if he would transfer his affection to other ladies." And while the favourite was thus revelling in the insolence of her conquest, her supplanted sister was eating out her heart in Paris. "Her despair was terrible; the trouble of her heart refused consolation, begged for solitude, found vent every moment in cries for Louis. Those who were around her trembled for her reason, for her life.... Again and again she made up her mind to start for the Court, to make a final appeal to the King, but each time, when the carriage was ready, she burst into tears and fell back upon her bed."

As for Louis, chilled by the coldness of his mistress, distracted by her whims and rages, his heart often yearned for the woman he had so cruelly discarded; and separation did more than all her tears and caresses could have done, to awake again the love he fancied was dead.

When Madame de la Tournelle paid her first visit as *Maitresse en titre* to Choisy, nothing would satisfy her but an escort of the noblest ladies in France, including a Princess of the Blood. Her progress was that of a Queen; and in return for this honour, wrung out of the King's weakness, she repaid him with weeks of coldness and ill-humour. She refused to play at *cavagnol* with him; she barricaded herself in her room, refusing to open to all her lover's knocking; and vented her vapours on him with, or without, provocation, until, as she considered, she had reduced him to a becoming submission. Then she used her power and her coquetries to wheedle out of him one concession after another, including a promise by the King to return unopened any letters Madame de Mailly might send to him. Nor was she content until her sister was finally disposed of by the grant of a small pension and a modest lodging in the Luxembourg.

Before the year closed Madame de la Tournelle was installed in the most luxurious apartments at Versailles, and Louis, now completely caught in her toils, was the slave of her and his senses, flinging himself into all the licence of passion, and reviving the nightly debauches from which the dead Comtesse had weaned him. And while her lover was thus steeped in sensuality, his mistress was, with infinite tact, pursuing her ambition. Affecting an indifference to affairs of State, she was gradually, and with seeming reluctance, worming herself into the position of chief Counsellor, and while professing to despise money she was draining the exchequer to feed her extravagance.

Never was King so hopelessly in the toils of a woman as Louis, the

well-beloved, in those of Madame de la Tournelle. He accepted as meekly as a child all her coldness and caprices, her jealousies and her rages; and was ideally happy when, in a gracious mood, she would allow him to assist at her toilette as the reward for some regal present of diamonds, horses, or gowns.

It was after one such privileged hour that Louis, with childish pleasure, handed to his favourite the patent, creating her Duchesse de Chateauroux, enclosed in a casket of gold; and with it a rapturous letter in which he promised her a pension of eighty-thousand livres, the better to maintain her new dignity!

Having thus achieved her greatest ambition, the Duchesse (as we must now call her) aspired to play a leading part in the affairs of Europe. France and Prussia were leagued in war against the forces of England, Austria, and Holland. This was a seductive game in which to take a hand, and thus we find her stimulating the sluggard kingliness in her lover, urging him to leave his debauches and to lead his armies to victory, assuring him of the gratitude and admiration of his subjects. Nothing less, she told him, would save his country from disaster.

To this appeal and temptation Louis was not slow to respond; and in May, 1744, we find him, to the delight of his soldiers and all France, at the seat of war, reviewing his troops, speaking words of high courage to them, visiting hospitals and canteens, and actually sending back a haughty message to the Dutch: "I will give you your answer in Flanders." No wonder the army was roused to enthusiasm, or that it exclaimed with one voice, "At last we have found a King!"

So strong was Louis in his new martial resolve that he actually refused Madame de Chateauroux permission to accompany him. France was delighted that at last her King had emancipated himself from petticoat influence, but the delight was short-lived, for before he had been many days in camp the Duchesse made her stately appearance, and saws and hammers were at work making a covered way between the house assigned to her and that occupied by the King. A fortnight later Ypres had fallen, and she was writing to Richelieu, "This is mighty pleasant news and gives me huge pleasure. I am overwhelmed with joy, to take Ypres in nine days. You can think of nothing more glorious, more flattering to the King; and his great-grandfather, great as he was, never did the like!"

But grief was coming quickly on the heels of joy. The King was seized with a sudden and serious illness, after a banquet shared with his ally, the King of Prussia; and in a few days a malignant fever had brought him face to face with death. Madame de Chateauroux watched his sufferings with the eyes of despair. "Leaning over the pillow of the dying man, aghast and trembling, she fights for him with sickness and death, terror and remorse." With locked door she keeps her jealous watch by his bedside, allowing none to enter but Richelieu, the doctors, and nurses, whilst outside are gathered the Princes of the Blood and the great officers of the Court, clamouring for admittance.

It was a grim environment for the death-bed of a King, this struggle for supremacy, in which a frail woman defied the powers of France for the monopoly of his last hours. And chief of all the terrors that assailed

her was the dread of that climax to it all, when her lover would have to make his last confession, the price of his absolution being, as she well knew, a final severance from herself.

Over this protracted and unseemly duel, in which blows were exchanged, entrance was forced, and Princes and ministers crowded indecently around the King's bed; over the Duchesse's tearful pleadings with the confessor to spare her the disgrace of dismissal, we must hasten to the crowning moment when Louis, feeling that he was dying, hastily summoned a confessor, who, a few moments later, flung open the door of the closet in which the Duchesse was waiting and weeping, and pronounced the fatal words, "The King commands you to leave his presence immediately."

Then followed that secret flight to Paris, "amidst a torrent of maledictions," the Duchesse hiding herself from view as best she could, and at each town and village where horses were changed, slinking back and taking refuge in some by-road until she could resume her journey. Then it was that in her grief and despair she wrote to Richelieu, "Oh, my God! what a thing it all is! I give you my word, it is all over with me! One would need to be a poor fool to start it all over again."

But Louis was by no means a dead man. From the day on which he received absolution from his manifold sins he made such haste to recover that, within a month, he was well again and eager to fly to the arms of the woman he had so abruptly abandoned with all other earthly vanities. It was one thing, however, to dismiss the Duchesse, and quite another to call her back. For a time she refused point-blank to look again on the King who had spurned her from fear of hell; and when at last she consented to receive the penitent at Versailles she let him know, in no vague terms, that "it would cost France too many heads if she were to return to his Court."

Vengeance on her enemies was the only price she would accept for forgiveness, and this price Louis promised to pay in liberal measure. One after the other, those who had brought about her humiliation were sent to disgrace or exile--from the Duc de Chatillon to La Rochefoucauld and Perusseau. Maurepas, the most virulent of them all, the King declined to exile, but he consented to a compromise. He should be made to offer Madame an abject apology, to grovel at her feet, a punishment with which she was content. And when the great minister presented himself by her bedside, in fear and trembling, to express his profound penitence and to beg her to return to Court, all she answered was, "Give me the King's letters and go!"

The following Saturday she fixed on as the day of her triumphant return--"but it was death that was to raise her from the bed on which she had received the King's submission at the hands of his Prime Minister." Within twenty-four hours she was seized with violent convulsions and delirium. In her intervals of consciousness she shrieked aloud that she had been poisoned, and called down curses on her murderer--Maurepas. For eleven days she passed from one delirious attack to another, and as many times she was bled. But all the skill of the Court physicians was powerless to save her, and at five o'clock in the morning of the 8th December the Duchesse drew her last tortured breath in the arms of Madame de Mailly, the sister she had so cruelly wronged.

Two days later, de Goncourt tells us, she was buried at Saint Sulpice, an hour before the customary time for interments, her coffin guarded by soldiers, to protect it from the fury of the mob.

As for Madame de Mailly, she spent the last years of her troubled life in the odour of a tardy sanctity--washing the feet of the poor,

ministering to the sick, bringing consolation to those in prison; and she was laid to rest amongst the poorest in the Cimetiere des Innocents, wearing the hair-shirt which had been part of her penance during life, and with a simple cross of wood for all monument.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MISTRESS OF INTRIGUE

"On 11th September," Madame de Motteville says, "we saw arrive from Italy three nieces of Cardinal Mazarin and a nephew. Two Mancini sisters and the nephew were the children of the youngest sister of his Eminence; and of the sisters Laure, the elder, was a pleasing brunette with a handsome face, about twelve or thirteen years of age; the second (Olympe), also a brunette, had a long face and pointed chin. Her eyes were small, but lively; and it might be expected that, when fifteen years of age, she would have some charm. According to the rules of beauty, it was impossible to grant her any, save that of having dimples in her cheeks."

Such, at the age of nine or ten, was Olympe Mancini, who, in spite of her childish lack of beauty, was destined to enslave the handsomest King in Europe; and, after a life of discreditable intrigues, in which she incurred the stigma of witchcraft and murder, to end her career in obscurity, shunned by all who had known her in her day of splendour.

It was a singular freak of fortune which translated the Mancini girls from their modest home in Italy to the magnificence of the French Court, as the adopted children of their uncle, Cardinal Mazarin, the virtual ruler of France, and the avowed lover (if not, as some say, the husband) of Anne of Austria, the Queen-mother. "See those little girls," said the wife of Marechal de Villeroi to Gaston d'Orleans, pointing to the Mancini children, the centre of an admiring crowd of courtiers. "They are not rich now; but some day they will have fine chateaux, large incomes, splendid jewels, beautiful silver, and perhaps great dignities."

And how true this prophecy proved, we know; for, of the Cardinal's five Mancini nieces (for three others came, later, as their uncle's protegees), Laure found a husband in the Duc de Mercoeur, grandson of Henri IV.; two others lived to wear the coronet of Duchess; Olympe, as we shall see, became Comtesse de Soissons; and Marie, after narrowly missing the Queendom of France, became the wife of the Constable Colonna, one of the greatest nobles of Italy.

Nor is there anything in such high alliances to cause surprise; for their future was in the hands of the most powerful, ambitious, and wealthy man in France. From their first appearance as his guests they were received with open arms by Louis' Court. They were speedily transferred to the Palais Royal, to be brought up with the boy-King, Louis XIV., and his brother, the Prince of Anjou; while the Queen herself not only paid them the most flattering attentions and treated them as her own children, but herself undertook part of their education.

It was under such enviable conditions that the young daughters of a

poor Roman baron grew up to girlhood--the pets of the Queen and the Court, the playfellows of the King, and the acknowledged heiresses of their uncle's millions; and of them all, not one had a keener eye to the future than Olympe of the long face, pointed chin, and dimples. It was she who entered with the greatest zest into the romps and games of her playmate, Louis XIV., who surrounded him with the most delicate flatteries and attentions, and practised all her childish arts and coquetries to win his favour. And she succeeded to such an extent that it was always the company of Olympe, and not of her more beautiful sisters, Hortense, Laure, or Marie, that Louis most sought.

Not that Olympe was always to remain the plain, unattractive child Madame de Motteville describes in 1647. Each year, as it passed, added some touch of beauty, developed some latent charm, until at eighteen she was very fair to look upon. "Her eyes now" says Madame de Motteville, "were full of fire, her complexion had become beautiful, her face less thin, her cheeks took dimples which gave her a fresh charm, and she had fine arms and beautiful hands. She certainly seemed charming in the eyes of the King, and sufficiently pretty to indifferent spectators."

That she had wooers in plenty, even before she was so far advanced in the teens, was inevitable; but her personal preferences counted for little in face of the Cardinal's determination to find for her, as for all his nieces, a splendid alliance which should shed lustre on himself. And thus it was that, without any consultation of her heart, Olympe's hand was formally given to Prince Eugene de Savoie, Comte de Soissons, a man in whose veins flowed the Royal strains of Savoy and France.

It was a brilliant match indeed for the daughter of a petty Italian baron; and Mazarin saw that it was celebrated with becoming magnificence. On the 20th February, 1657, we see a brilliant company repairing to the Queen's apartments, "the Comte de Soissons escorting his betrothed, dressed in a gown of silver cloth, with a bouquet of pearls on her head, valued at more than 50,000 livres, and so many jewels that their splendour, joined to the natural eclat of her beauty, caused her to be admired by everyone. Immediately afterwards, the nuptials were celebrated in the Queen's chapel. Then the illustrious pair, after dining with the Princesse de Carignan-Savoie, ascended to the apartments of his Eminence, the Cardinal, where they were entertained to a magnificent supper, at which the King and Monsieur did the company the honour of joining them."

Then followed two days of regal receptions; a visit to Notre Dame to hear Mass, with the Queen herself as escort; and a stately journey to the Hotel de Soissons, where the Comtesse's mother-in-law "testified to her, by her joy and the rich presents which she made her, how great was the satisfaction with which she regarded this marriage."

Thus raised to the rank of a Princess of the Blood, Olympe was by no means the proud and happy woman she ought to have been. She had, in fact, aspired much higher; she had had dreams of sharing the throne of France with her handsome young playmate, the King; and to Louis, wife though she now was, she had lost none of the attraction she possessed when he called her his "little sweetheart" in their childish games together. "He continued to visit her with the greatest regularity," to quote Mr Noel Williams; "indeed, scarcely a day went by on which His Majesty's coach did not stop at the gate of the Hotel de Soissons; and Olympe, basking in the rays of the Royal favour, rapidly took her place as the brilliant, intriguing great lady Nature intended her to be."

It is little wonder, perhaps, that Olympe's foolish head was turned by such flattering attentions from her sovereign, or that she began to give herself airs and to treat members of the Royal family with a haughty patronage. Even La Grande Mademoiselle did not escape her insolence; for, as she herself records, "when I paid her a thousand compliments and told her that her marriage had given me the greatest joy and that I hoped we should always be good friends, she answered me not a word."

But Olympe's supremacy was not to remain much longer unchallenged. The King's vagrant fancy was already turning to her younger sister, Marie, whose childish plainness had now ripened to a beauty more dazzling than her own--the witchery of large and brilliant black eyes, a complexion of pure olive, luxuriant, jet-black hair, a figure of singular suppleness and grace, and a sprightliness of wit and a *_gaiete de coeur_* which the Comtesse could not hope to rival. It soon began to be rumoured in Court that Louis spent hours daily in the company of Mazarin's beautiful niece; a rumour which Hortense Mancini supports in her "Memoirs." "The presence of the King, who seldom stirred from our lodging, often interrupted us," she says; "my sister, Marie, alone was undisturbed; and you can easily understand that his assiduity had charms for her, who was the cause of it, because it had none for others."

And as Louis' visits to the Mancini lodging became more and more frequent, each adding a fresh link to the chain that was binding him to her young sister, Madame de Soissons saw less and less of him, until an amused tolerance gave place to a genuine alarm. It was nothing less than an outrage that she, who had so long held first place in the King's favour, should be ousted by a "mere child," the last person in the world whom she could have thought of as a rival. But the Comtesse was no woman to be easily dethroned. Although at every Court ball, fete, or ballet, Louis was now inseparable from her sister, she affected to ignore these open slights and lost no opportunity in public of vaunting her intimacy with His Majesty, even to the extent on one occasion, as Mademoiselle records, of taking Louis' seat at a ball supper and compelling him to share it with her.

But such shameless arrogance only served to estrange the King still further, and to make him seek still more the company of the young sister, who had already captured his heart as the Comtesse had never captured it. When Louis made his memorable journey to Lyons to meet the Princess Margaret of Savoy, it was to Marie that he paid the most courtly and tender attentions. "During the journey," says Mademoiselle, "he did not address a word to the Comtesse de Soissons"; and, indeed, on more than one occasion he showed a marked aversion to her.

At St Jean d'Angely, Louis not only himself escorted Marie to her lodging; he stayed with her until two o'clock in the morning. "Nothing," her sister Hortense records, "could equal the passion which the King showed, and the tenderness with which he asked of Marie her pardon for all she had suffered for his sake." It was, indeed, no secret at Court that he had offered her marriage, and had taken a solemn vow that neither Margaret of Savoy nor the Infanta of Spain should be his wife. But, as we have seen in a previous chapter, both the Queen and Mazarin were determined that the Infanta should be Queen of France; and that his foolish romance with the Mancini girl should be nipped in the bud.

There was also another powerful influence at work to thwart his passion for Marie. The indifference of the Comtesse de Soissons had given place

to a fury of resentment; and she needed no instigation of her uncle to determine at any cost to recover the place she had lost in Louis' favour. She brought all her armoury of coquetry and flatteries to bear on him, and so far succeeded that, we read, "the King has resumed his relations with the Comtesse; he has recommenced to talk and laugh with her; and three days since he entertained M. and Madame de Soissons with a ball and a play, and afterwards they partook of _medianoche_ (a midnight banquet) together, passing more than three hours in conversation with them."

Meanwhile Marie, realising the hopelessness of her passion in face of the opposition of her uncle and the Queen, and of Louis' approaching marriage to the Spanish Princess, had given him unequivocally to understand that their relations must cease, and the rupture was complete when the Comtesse told the King of her sister's dallying with Prince Charles of Lorraine, of their assignations in the Tuileries, of their mutual infatuation, and of the rumours of an arranged marriage. "_Cela est bien_" was all Louis remarked, but the dark flush of anger that flooded his face was a sweet reward to the Comtesse for her treachery.

A few days later her revenge was complete when, in the King's presence, she rallied her sister on her low spirits. "You find the time pass slowly when you are away from Paris," she said; "nor am I surprised, since you have left your lover there"; to which Marie answered with a haughty toss of the head, "That is possible, Madame."

One formidable rival thus removed from her path, Madame de Soissons was not long left to enjoy her triumph; for another was quick to take the place abandoned by the broken-hearted Marie--the beautiful and gentle La Valliere, who was the next to acquire an ascendancy over the King's susceptible heart. Once more the Comtesse, to her undisguised chagrin, found herself relegated to the background, to look impotently on while Louis made love to her successor, and to meditate new schemes of vengeance. It was in vain that Louis, by way of amende, found for her a lover in the Marquis de Vardes, the most handsome and dissolute of his courtiers, for whom she soon developed a veritable passion. Her vanity might be appeased, but her bitterness--the _spretoe injuria formoe_--remained; and she lost no time in plotting further mischief.

With the help of M. de Vardes and the Comte de Guiche, she sent an anonymous letter to the Queen, containing a full and intimate account of her husband's amour with La Valliere--the letter enclosed in an envelope addressed in the handwriting of the Queen of Spain. Fortunately for Maria Theresa's peace of mind the letter fell into the hands of Louis himself, who was naturally furious at such treachery and determined to make those responsible for it suffer--when he should discover them. As, however, the investigation of the matter was entrusted to de Vardes, it is needless to say that the culprits escaped detection.

Madame de Soissons' next attempt to bring about a rupture between the King and La Valliere, by bringing forward a rival in the person of the seductive Mlle de la Motte-Houdancourt, proved equally futile, when Louis discovered by accident that she was but a tool in Madame's designing hands; and for a time the Comtesse was sent in disgrace from the Court to nurse her jealousy and to devise more effectual plans of vengeance.

What form these took seems clear from an investigation held at the close of 1678 into a supposed plot to poison the King and the Dauphin--a

plot of which La Voisin, one of the greatest criminals in history, was suspected of being the ringleader. During this inquiry La Voisin confessed that the Comtesse de Soissons had come to her house one day "and demanded the means of getting rid of Mile de la Valliere"; and, further, that the Comtesse had avowed her intention to destroy not only Louis' mistress, but the King himself.

Such a confession was well calculated to rouse a storm of indignation in France, where Madame de Soissons had made many powerful enemies. The Chambre unanimously demanded her arrest; but before it could be effected, Madame, stoutly declaring her innocence, had shaken the dust of Paris off her feet, and was on her way to Brussels.

During her flight to safety, we are told, "the principal inns in the towns and villages through which she passed refused to receive her"; and more than once she was compelled to sleep on straw and suffer the insults of the populace, which reviled her as sorceress and poisoner. "We are assured," Madame de Sevigne writes, "that the gates of Namur, Antwerp, and other towns have been closed against the Countess, the people crying out, 'We want no poisoner here!'" Even at Brussels, whenever she ventured into the streets she was assailed by a storm of insults; and on one occasion, when she entered a church, "a number of people rushed out, collected all the black cats they could find, tied their tails together, and brought them howling and spitting into the porch, crying out that they were devils who were following the Comtesse."

In the face of such chilling hospitality Madame de Soissons was not tempted to make a long stay in Brussels; and after a few months of restless wandering in Flanders and Germany, she drifted to Spain where she succeeded in ingratiating herself with the Queen. She found little welcome however from the King, who, as the French Ambassador to Madrid wrote, "was warned against her. He accused her of sorcery, and I learn that, some days ago, he conceived the idea that, had it not been for a spell she had cast over him, he would have had children.... The life of the Comtesse de Soissons consists in receiving at her house all persons who desire to come there, from four o'clock in the evening up to two or three hours after midnight. There is, sire, everything that can convey an air of familiarity and contempt for the house of a woman of quality."

That Carlos' suspicions were not without reason was proved when one day his Queen, after, it is said, drinking a glass of milk handed to her by the Comtesse, was taken suddenly ill and expired after three days of terrible suffering. That she died of poison, like her mother, the ill-fated sister of our second Charles, seems probable; but that the poison was administered by the Comtesse, whose friend and protectress she was and who had every reason to wish her well, is less to be believed, in spite of Saint-Simon's unequivocal accusation. Certainly the crime was not proved against her; for we find her still in Spain in the following spring, when Carlos, his patience exhausted, ordered her to leave the country.

After a short stay in Portugal and Germany, Madame de Soissons was back in Brussels, where she spent the brief remainder of her days--"all the French of distinction who visited the City" (to quote Saint-Simon) "being strictly forbidden to visit her." Here, on the 9th October, 1690, her beauty but a memory, bankrupt in reputation, friendless and poor, the curtain fell on the life so full of mis-used gifts and baffled ambitions.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN ILL-FATED MARRIAGE

Few Kings have come to their thrones under such brilliant auspices as Milan I. of Servia; few have abandoned their crowns to the greater relief of their subjects, or have been followed to their exile by so much hatred. But a fortnight before Milan's accession, his cousin and predecessor, Prince Michael, had been foully done to death by hired assassins as he was walking in the park of Topfschider, with three ladies of his Court; and the murdered man had been placed in a carriage, sitting upright as in life, and had been driven back to his palace through the respectful greetings of his subjects, who little knew that they were saluting a corpse.

There was good reason for this mockery of death, for Prince Alexander Karageorgevitch had long set ambitious eyes on the crown of Servia, and resolved to wrest it by fair means or foul from the boy-heir to the throne; and it was of the highest importance that Michael's death, which he had so brutally planned, should be concealed from him until the succession had been secured to his young rival, Milan. And thus it was that, before Karageorgevitch could bring his plotting to the head of achievement, Milan was hailed with acclamation as Servia's new Prince, and, on the 23rd June, 1868, made his triumphal entry into Belgrade to the jubilant ringing of bells and the thunderous cheers of the people.

Twelve days later, Belgrade was en fete for his crowning, her streets ablaze with bunting and floral decorations, as the handsome boy made his way through the tumults of cheers and avenues of fluttering handkerchiefs to the Metropolitan Church. The men, we are told, "took off their cloaks and placed them under his feet, that he might walk on them; they clustered round him, kissing his garments, and blessing him as their very own; they worshipped his handsome face and loved his boyish smile." And when his young voice rang clearly out in the words, "I promise you that I shall, to my dying day, preserve faithfully the honour and integrity of Servia, and shall be ready to shed the last drop of my blood to defend its rights," there was scarcely one of the enthusiastic thousands that heard him who would not have been willing to lay down his life for the idolised Prince.

It was by strange paths that the fourteen-year-old Milan had thus come to his Principality. The son of Jefrenn Obrenovitch, uncle of the reigning Michael, he was cradled one August day in 1854, his mother being Marie Catargo, of the powerful race of Roumanian "Hospodars," a woman of strong passions and dissolute life. When her temper and infidelities had driven her husband to the drinking that put a premature end to his days, Marie transferred her affection, without the sanction of a wedding-ring, to Prince Kusa, a man of as evil repute as herself. In such a home and with such guardians her only child, Milan, the future ruler of Servia, spent the early years of his life--ill-fed, neglected, and supremely wretched.

Thus it was that, when Prince Michael summoned the boy to Belgrade, in order to make the acquaintance of his successor, he was horrified to see

an uncouth lad, as devoid of manners and of education as any in the slums of his capital. The heir to the throne could neither read nor write; the only language he spoke was a debased Roumanian, picked up from the servants who had been his only associates, while of the land over which he was to rule one day he knew absolutely nothing. The only hope for him was his extreme youth--he was at the time only twelve years old--and Michael lost no time in having him trained for the high station he was destined to fill.

The progress the boy made was amazing. Within two years he was unrecognisable as the half-savage who had so shocked the Court of Belgrade. He could speak the Servian tongue with fluency and grace; he had acquired elegance of manners and speech, and a winning courtesy of manner which to his last day was his most marked characteristic; he had mastered many accomplishments, and he excelled in most manly exercises, from riding to swimming. And to all this remarkable promise the finishing touches were put by a visit to Paris under the tutorship of a courtly and learned professor.

Thus when, within two years of his emancipation, he came to his crown, the uncouth lad from Roumania had blossomed into a Prince as goodly to look on as any Europe could show--a handsome boy of courtly graces and accomplishments, able to converse in several languages, and singularly equipped in all ways to win the homage of the simple people over whom he had been so early called to rule. As Mrs Gerard says, "They idolised their boy-Prince. Every day they stood in long, closely packed lines watching to see him come out of the castle to ride or drive; as he passed along, smiling affectionately on his people, blessings were showered on him. There was, however, another side to this picture of devotion. There were those who hated the boy because he had thwarted their plans." And this hatred, as persistent as it was malignant, was to follow him throughout his reign, and through his years of unhappy exile, to his grave.

But these days were happily still remote. After four years of minority and Regency, when he was able to take the reins of government into his own hands, his empire over the hearts of his subjects was more firmly based than ever. His youth, his modesty, and his compelling charm of manner made friends for him wherever his wanderings took him, from Paris to Constantinople. He was the "Prince Charming" of Europe, as popular abroad as he was idolised at home; and when the time arrived to find a consort for him he might, one would have thought, have been able to pick and choose among the fairest Princesses of the Continent.

But handsome and gallant and popular as he was, the overtures of his ministers were coldly received by one Royal house after another. Milan might be a reigning Prince and a charming one to boot, but it was not forgotten that the first of his line had been a common herdsman, and the blood of Hapsburgs and Hohenzollerns could not be allowed to mingle with so base a strain. Even a mere Hungarian Count, whose fair daughter had caught Milan's fancy, frowned on the suit of the swineherd's successor. But fate had already chosen a bride for the young Prince, who was more than equal in birth to any Count's daughter; who would bring beauty and riches as her portion; and who, after many unhappy years, was to crown her dower with tragedy.

It was at Nice, where Prince Milan was spending the winter months of 1875, that he first set eyes on the woman whose life was to be so tragically linked with his own. Among the visitors there was the family

of a Russian colonel, Nathaniel Ketschko, a man of high lineage and great wealth. He claimed, in fact, descent from the Royal race of Comnenus, which had given many a King to the thrones of Europe, and whose sons for long centuries had won fame as generals, statesmen, and ambassadors. And to this exalted strain was allied enormous wealth, of which the Colonel's share was represented by a regal revenue of four hundred thousand roubles a year.

But proud as he was of his birth and his riches, Colonel Nathaniel was still prouder of his two lovely daughters, each of whom had inherited in liberal measure the beauty of their mother, a daughter of the princely house of Stourza; and of the two the more beautiful, by common consent, was Natalie, whose charms won this spontaneous tribute from Tsar Nicholas, when first he saw her, "I would I were a beggar that I might every day ask your alms, and have the happiness of kissing your hand." She had, says one who knew her in her radiant youth, "an irresistible charm that permeated her whole being with such a harmony of grace, sweetness, and overpowering attraction that one felt drawn to her with magnetic force; and to adore her seemed the most natural and indeed the only position."

Such was the high tribute paid to Servia's future Queen at the first dawning of that beauty which was to make her also Queen of all the fair women of Europe, and which at its zenith was thus described by one who saw her at Wiesbaden ten years or so later: "She walked along the promenade with a light, graceful movement; her feet hardly seemed to touch the ground, her figure was elegant, her finely cut face was lit up by those wonderful eyes, once seen never forgotten--brilliant, tender, loving; her luxuriant hair of raven black was loosely coiled round the well-set head, or fell in curls on the beautifully arched neck. For each one she had a pleasant smile, a gracious bow, or a few words, spoken in a musical voice." No wonder the Germans, who looked at this apparition of grace and beauty, "simply fell down and adored her."

Such was the vision of beauty of which Prince Milan caught his first glimpse on the promenade at Nice in the winter of 1875, and which haunted him, day and night, until chance brought their paths together again, and he won her consent to share his throne. That such a high destiny awaited her, Natalie had already been told by a gipsy whom she met one day in the woods of her father's estate near Moscow--a meeting of which the following story is told.

At sight of the beautiful young girl the gipsy stooped in homage and kissed the hem of her dress. "Why do you do that?" asked Natalie, half in alarm and half in pleasure. "Because," the woman answered, "I salute you as the chosen bride of a great Prince. Over your head I see a crown floating in the air. It descends lower and lower until it rests on your head. A dazzling brilliance adorns the crown; it is a Royal diadem."

"What else?" asked Natalie eagerly, her face flushed with excitement and delight. "Oh! do tell me more, please!" "What more shall I say," continued the gipsy, "except that you will be a Queen, and the mother of a King; but then--"

"But then, what?" exclaimed the eager and impatient girl; "do go on, please. What then?" and she held out a gold coin temptingly. "I see a large house; you will be there, but--take care; you will be turned out by force.... And now give me the coin and let me go. More I must not tell you."

Such were the dazzling and mysterious words spoken by the gipsy woman in the Russian forest, a year or more before Natalie first saw the Prince who was destined to make them true. But it was not at Nice that opportunity came to Milan. It was an accidental meeting in Paris, some months later, that made his path clear. During a visit to the French capital he met a young Servian officer, a distant kinsman, one Alexander Konstantinovitch, who confided to him, over their wine and cigarettes, the story of his infatuation for the daughter of a Russian colonel, who at the time was staying with her aunt, the Princess Murussi. He raved of her beauty and her charm, and concluded by asking the Prince to accompany him that he might make the acquaintance of the Lieutenant's bride-to-be.

Arrived at their destination, the Prince and his companion were graciously received by the Princess Murussi, but Milan had no eyes for the dignified lady who gave him such a flattering reception; they were drawn as by a magnet to the girl by her side--"a child with a woman's grace and an angel's soul smiling in her eyes"; the incarnation of his dreams, the very girl whose beauty, though he had caught but one passing glimpse of it, had so intoxicated his brain a few months earlier at Nice.

"Allow me," said the Lieutenant, "to introduce to Your Highness Natalie Ketschko, my affianced wife." Milan's face flushed with surprise and anger at the words. What was this trick that had been played on him? Had Konstantinovitch then brought him here only to humiliate him? But before he could recover from his indignation and astonishment, the Princess said chillingly, "Pardon me, Monsieur Konstantinovitch, you are not speaking the truth. My niece, Colonel Ketschko's daughter, is not your affianced wife. You are too premature."

Thus rebuffed, the Lieutenant was not encouraged to prolong his stay; and Milan was left, reassured, to bask in the smiles of the Princess and her lovely niece, and to pursue his wooing under the most favourable auspices. This first visit was quickly followed by others; and before a week had passed the Prince had won the prize on which his heart was set, and with it a dower of five million roubles. Now followed halcyon days for the young lovers--long hours of sweet communion, of anticipation of the happy years that stretched in such a golden vista before them. It was a love-idyll such as delighted the romantic heart of Paris; and congratulations and presents poured on the young couple; "the very beggars in the streets," we are told, "blessing them as they drove by."

"Happy is the wooing that is not long a-doing," and Milan's wooing was as brief as it was blissful. He was all impatience to possess fully the prize he had won; preparations for the nuptials were hastened, but, before the crowning day dawned, once more the voice of warning spoke.

A few days before the wedding, as Milan was leaving the Murussi Palace, he was accosted by a woman, who craved permission to speak to him, a favour which was smilingly accorded. "I know you," said the woman, thus permitted to speak, "although you do not know me. You are the Prince of Servia; I am a servant in the household of the Princess Murussi. Your Highness, listen! I love Natalie. I have known and loved her since she was a child; and I beg of you not to marry her. Such a union is doomed to unhappiness. You love to rule, to command. So does Natalie; and it is she who will be the ruler. You are utterly unsuited for each other, and nothing but great unhappiness can possibly come from your union."

To this warning Milan turned a smiling face and a deaf ear, as Natalie had done to the voice of the gipsy. A fig for such gloomy prophecy! They were ideally happy in the present, and the future should be equally bright, however ravens might croak. Thus, one October day in 1875, Vienna held high holiday for the nuptials of the handsome Prince and his beautiful bride; and it was through avenues densely packed with cheering onlookers that Natalie made her triumphal progress to the altar, in her flower-garlanded dress of white satin, a tiara of diamonds flashing from the blackness of her hair, no brighter than the brilliance of her eyes, her face irradiated with happiness.

That no Royalty graced their wedding was a matter of no moment to Milan and Natalie, whose happiness was thus crowned; and when at the subsequent banquet Milan said, "I wish from my very heart that every one of my subjects, as well as everybody I know, could be always as happy as I am this moment," none who heard him could doubt the sincerity of his words, or see any but a golden future for so ideal a union of hearts.

By Servia her young Princess was received with open arms of welcome. "Her reception," we are told, "was beyond description. The festivities lasted three days, and during that time the love of the people for their Prince, and their admiration of the beauty and charm of his bride, were beyond words to describe." Never did Royal wedded life open more full of bright promise, and never did consort make more immediate conquest of the affections of her husband's subjects. "No one could have believed that this marriage, which was contracted from love and love alone, would have ended in so tragic a manner, or that hate could so quickly have taken the place of love."

But the serpent was quick to show his head in Natalie's new paradise. Before she had been many weeks a wife, stories came to her ears of her husband's many infidelities. Now the story was of one lady of her Court, now of another, until the horrified Princess knew not whom to trust or to respect. Strange tales, too, came to her (mostly anonymously) of Milan's amours in Paris, in Vienna, and half a dozen of his other haunts of pleasure, until her love, poisoned at its very springing, turned to suspicion and distrust of the man to whom she had given her heart.

Other disillusionments were quick to follow. She discovered that her husband was a hopeless gambler and spendthrift, spending long hours daily at the card-tables, watching with pale face and trembling lips his pile of gold dwindle (as it usually did) to its last coin; and often losing at a single sitting a month's revenue from the Civil List. Her own dowry of five million roubles, she knew, was safe from his clutches. Her father had taken care to make that secure, but Milan's private fortune, large as it had been, had already been squandered in this and other forms of dissipation; and even the expenses of his wedding, she learned, had been met by a loan raised at ruinous interest.

Such discoveries as these were well calculated to shatter the dreams of the most infatuated of brides, and less was sufficient to rouse Natalie's proud spirit to rebellion. When affectionate pleadings proved useless, reproaches took their place. Heated words were exchanged, and the records tell of many violent scenes before Natalie had been six months Princess of Servia. "You love to rule," the warning voice had told Milan--"to command. So does Natalie"; and already the clashing of strong wills and imperious tempers, which must end in the yielding of one or the other, had begun to be heard.

If more fuel had been needed to feed the flames of dissension, it was quickly supplied by two unfortunate incidents. The first was Milan's open dallying with Fraeulein S----, one of Natalie's maids-of-honour, a girl almost as beautiful as herself, but with the *_beaute de diable_*. The second was the appearance in Belgrade of Dimitri Wasseljevitchca, who was suspected of plotting to assassinate the Tsar. Russia demanded that the fugitive should be given up to justice, and enlisted Natalie's co-operation with this object. Milan, however, was resolute not to surrender the plotter, and turned a deaf ear to all the Princess's pleadings and cajoleries. "The most exciting scene followed. Natalie, abandoning entreaties, threatened and even commanded her husband to obey her"; and when threats and commands equally failed, she gave way to a paroxysm of rage in which she heaped the most unbridled scorn and contempt on her husband.

Thus jealousy, a thwarted will, and Milan's low pleasures combined to widen the breach between the Royal couple, so recently plighted to each other in the sacred name of love, and to prepare the way for the troubled and tragic years to come.

CHAPTER XXIX

AN ILL-FATED MARRIAGE--_continued_

If anything could have restored happiness to Milan of Servia and his Princess, Natalie, it should surely have been the birth of the baby-Prince, Alexander, whom both equally adored and equally spoiled. But, instead of linking his parents in a new bond of affection "Sacha" was from his cradle the innocent cause of widening the breach that severed them.

For a time, fortunately, Milan had little opportunity of continuing the feud of recrimination with his high-spirited and hot-tempered spouse. More serious matters claimed him. Servia was plunged into war with Turkey, and his days were spent in camp and on the battlefield, until the intervention of Russia put an end to the long and hopeless struggle, and Milan found himself one February day in 1882, thanks to the Berlin Conference, hailed the first King of his country, under the title of Milan I.

Then followed a disastrous war with Bulgaria into which the headstrong King rushed in spite of Natalie's warning--"Draw back, Milan, and have no share in what will prove a bloody drama. You have no chance of conquering, for Alexander is made of the stuff of the Hohenzollerns." And indeed the struggle was doomed to failure from the first; for Milan was no man to lead an army to victory. Read his method of conducting a campaign, as described by one of his aides-de-camp--

"Our troops continue to retreat--I never imagined a campaign could be so jolly. We do nothing but dance and sing and fiddle. Yesterday the King had some guests and the champagne literally flowed. We had the Belgrade singers, who used to delight us in the theatre-cafe. They sang and danced delightfully. The last two days we have had plenty of fun, and yesterday a lot of jolly girls came to enliven us." Such was Milan's

method of conducting a great war, on which the very existence of his kingdom hung. Wine and women and song were more to his taste than forced marches, strategy, and hard-fought battles. But once again foreign intervention came to his rescue; and his armies were saved from annihilation.

When his sword was finally sheathed, if not with honour, he returned to Belgrade to resume his gambling, his dallings with fair women--and his daily quarrels with his Queen, whose bitterness absence had done nothing to assuage. So far from Natalie's spirit being crushed, it was higher and prouder than ever. She would die before she would yield; but she was in no mood to die, this autocratic, fiery-tempered, strong-willed daughter of Russia. She gave literally a "striking" proof of the spirit that was in her at the Easter reception of 1886, when the wife of a Greek diplomat--a beautiful woman, to whom her husband had been more than kind--presented herself smilingly to receive the "salute courteous" from Her Majesty. With a look of scorn Natalie coolly surveyed her rival from head to foot; and then, in the presence of the Court, gave her a resounding slap on the cheek.

But the Grecian lady was only one of many fair women who basked successively (or together) in Milan's favour. A much more formidable rival was Artemesia Christich, a woman as designing as she was lovely, who was quick to envelop the weak King in the toils of her witchery. Not content with his smiles and favours she aspired to take Natalie's place as Queen of Servia; and, it is said, had extorted from him a promise that he would make her his Queen as soon as his existing marriage tie could be dissolved. And to this infamous compact Artemesia's husband, a man as crafty and unscrupulous as herself, consented, in return for his promotion to certain high and profitable offices in the State.

In vain did the Emperor and the Crown Prince of Austria, with many another high-placed friend, plead with Milan not to commit such a folly. He was driven to distraction between such powerful appeals and the allurements of the siren who had him so effectually under her spell, until in his despair he entertained serious thoughts of suicide as escape from his dilemma. Meanwhile, we are told, "a perfect hell" raged in the castle; each day brought its scandalous scene between his outraged Queen and himself. His unpopularity with his subjects became so acute that he was hissed whenever he made his appearance in the streets of his capital; and Artemesia was obliged to have police protection to shield her from the vengeance of the mob.

As for Natalie, this crowning injury decided her to bear her purgatory no longer. She would force her husband to abdicate and secure her own appointment as Regent for her son; or, failing that, she would leave her husband and seek an asylum out of Servia. And with the object of still further embittering his subjects against the King she made the full story of her injuries public, and enlisted the sympathy, not only of Milan's most powerful ministers, but of the entire country.

"The castle is in utter confusion," wrote an officer of the Belgrade garrison, in October, 1886. "The King looks ill, and as if he never slept. Poor fellow! he flies for refuge to us in the guard-house, and plays cards with the officers. Card-playing is his worst enemy. He loves it passionately, and plays excitedly and for high points--and he always loses."

Matters were now hastening to a crisis. Hopelessly in debt, scorned by

his subjects, and hated by his wife, Milan's plight was pitiful. The scenes between the King and the Queen were becoming more violent and disgraceful every day. "There was no peace anywhere, nor did anyone belonging to the Court enjoy a moment of tranquillity." So intolerable had life become that, early in 1887, Milan decided to dissolve his marriage; and it was only at the pleading of the Austrian Emperor that he consented to abandon this design, on condition that his wife left Servia; and thus it was that one day in April Queen Natalie left Belgrade, accompanied by her son "Sacha," ostensibly that he might continue his education in Germany.

But, although husband and wife were thus at last separated, Milan's resolve to divorce her remained firm. "I have to inform you," he wrote shortly after her departure, "that I have this day sent in my application to our Holy National Church for permission to dissolve our marriage." And that nothing might be lacking to Natalie's suffering and humiliation, he sent General Protitsch to Wiesbaden with a peremptory demand that his son, "Sacha," should return to Servia.

In vain did Natalie protest against both indignities. Milan might divorce her; but at least he should not rob her of her son, the only solace left to her in life. And when General Protitsch, seeing that milder measures were futile, gave orders for the Prince to be removed by force, the distracted mother flung one protecting arm round her boy; and, pointing a loaded pistol with the other, threatened to shoot dead the man who dared approach her.

Opposition, however, was futile; the following evening the boy-Prince was in his father's arms, and the weeping mother was left disconsolate. Thus robbed of her darling "Sacha," it was not long before the second blow fell. The divorce proceedings were rushed through the Synod. A deaf ear was turned to Natalie's petition to be allowed, at least, to defend herself in person; and on the 12th October, 1888, the "marriage between King Milan I. and Natalie, born Ketschko," was formally dissolved. Well might this most unhappy of Queens write, "The position is embittered by my conscience assuring me that I have neglected no duty, and that there is not a single action of my life which could be cited against me as a grave offence, or could put me to shame were it brought before the whole world. My fate should draw tears from the very stones; but I do not ask for pity; I demand justice."

If anything could have increased Milan's unpopularity it was this brutal treatment of his Queen. The very men who, at his coronation, had taken off their cloaks that he might walk on them, and the women who had kissed his garments, now hissed him in the streets of his capital. In his own Court he had no friend except the infamous Christitch; the general hatred even took the form of repeated attempts on his life. If he would save it, he realised he must abandon his crown; and one March morning in 1889, after informing his ministers of his intention to abdicate, he awoke his twelve-year-old son with the greeting, "Good morning, Your Majesty!" Milan was no longer King of Servia; his son, Alexander, reigned in his stead.

Probably no King ever laid down his crown more willingly. He had put aside for ever his Royal trappings, with all their unhappy memories, and their present discomforts and danger; but in distant Paris he knew a life of new pleasure awaited him, remote from the wranglings of Courts and the assassin's knife. And within a week of greeting his successor as King, he was gaily riding in the Bois, attending the theatres, supping

hilariously with ladies of the ballet, or dining with his friends at Verrey's "where his somewhat rough manner and coarse jokes (the legacy of his swineherd ancestry) caused him sometimes to be mistaken for a parvenu," until a waiter would correct the impression by a whispered, "That gentleman with the dark moustache is Milan, ex-King of Servia."

While her husband was thus drinking the cup of Paris pleasure, his wife was still doomed to exile from her kingdom and her son, with permission only to pay two brief visits each year. But Natalie, who had so long defied a King, was not the woman to be daunted by mere Regents. She would return to Belgrade, and at least make her home where she could catch an occasional glimpse of her boy. And to Belgrade she went, to make her entry over flower-strewn streets, and through a tornado of cheers and shouts of "Zivela Rufe!" It was a truly Royal welcome to the great warm heart of the Servian people; but no official of the Court was there to greet her coming, and as she drove past the castle which held all she counted dear in life, not even the flutter of a handkerchief marked the passing of Servia's former Queen.

Had she but played her cards now with the least discretion, she might have been allowed to remain in Belgrade in peace. But Natalie seems fated to have been the harbinger of storm. For a time, it is true, she was content to lie perdue, entertaining her friends at her house in Prince Michael Street, driving through the streets of her capital behind her pair of white ponies, or walking with her pet goat for companion, greeted everywhere with respect and affection. But her restless, vengeful spirit, still burning from the indignities she had suffered, would not allow her to remain long in the background. She threw herself into political agitation, and thus brought herself into open conflict with the Regents; she inaugurated a campaign of abuse against her husband, whom she still pursued with a relentless hatred; and generally made herself so objectionable to the authorities that the Skupshtina was at last compelled to order her banishment.

When the deputies presented themselves before her with the decree of expulsion, she laughed in their very faces, declaring that she would only submit to force. "I refuse to go," she said defiantly, "unless I am expelled by the hands of the police." A few hours later she was forcibly removed from her weeping and protesting ladies, hurried into a carriage, and driven off, with a strong escort of soldiers, on her journey to exile.

But the good people of Belgrade, who had got wind of the proposed abduction, were by no means disposed to look on while their beloved Queen was thus brutally taken from them. When the cortege reached the Cathedral Square, it was stopped by a formidable and menacing mob; the escort, furiously assailed with sticks and showers of stones, was beaten off; the horses were taken from the carriage, and the Queen was drawn back in triumph by scores of willing hands, to her residence.

Natalie's victory, however, was short-lived. At midnight, when her stalwart champions were sleeping in their beds, the police, crawling over the roofs of the houses in Prince Michael Street, and descending into the Queen's courtyard, found it a very simple matter to complete their dastardly work. The Queen was again bundled unceremoniously into a carriage, and before Belgrade was well awake, she was far on her way to her new exile in Hungary. A few days later a formal decree of banishment was pronounced against her, forbidding her, under any pretext whatever, to enter Servia again without the Regent's permission.

Only once more did Natalie and Milan set eyes on each other--when the ex-King presented himself at Biarritz, to bring her news of their son's projected coup d'etat, by which he designed to depose the Regents and to take the reins of government into his own hands. Taken by surprise, the Queen received Milan, but when she saw him standing before her, an aged, broken man, her composure gave way. She could not speak; she trembled like a leaf.

With Alexander's dramatic accession to his full Kingship a new, if brief, era of happiness opened to Natalie. The Regents were no longer able to exclude her from Servia, and by her son's invitation she returned to Belgrade to resume her old position of Queen.

Still beautiful, in spite of all her suffering, she played for a time the role of Queen-mother to perfection, holding her Courts, presiding at balls and soirees, taking a prominent part in affairs of State, and gradually acquiring more power than her easy-going son himself enjoyed. At last, after long years of unrest and unhappiness, she seemed assured of peaceful years, secure in the affection of her son and her people, and far removed from the husband who had brought so much misery into her life.

But Natalie was fated never to be happy long, and once more her evil Destiny was to snatch the cup from her lips, assuming this time the form of Draga Maschin, one of her own ladies-in-waiting, under the spell of whose black eyes and voluptuous charms her son quickly fell, after that first dramatic incident at Biarritz, when she plunged into the sea to his rescue and saved him from drowning.

Many months earlier a clairvoyante at Paris had told Natalie, "Your Majesty is cherishing in your bosom a poisonous snake, which one day will give you a mortal wound." She had smiled incredulously at the warning, but she was soon to learn what truth it held. Certainly Draga Maschin was the last person she would have suspected of being a source of danger--a woman many years older than her son, the penniless widow of a drunken engineer--a woman, moreover, of whose life, before Natalie had taken pity on her poverty, many strange stories were told--how, for instance, she had often been seen in low resorts, "with the arm of a forester or a tradesman round her, singing the old Servian songs."

But she had not taken into account Draga's sensuous beauty, before which her son was powerless. Each meeting left him more and more involved in her toils, until, to the consternation of Servia and the horror of his mother, he announced his intention of making her his Queen. Even Milan, degraded as he was, was horror-struck when the news came to him in Paris. "And this," he exclaimed, "is the act of 'Sacha'--my own son. He is a monster, a thing of evil in the eyes of all men! The Maschin will be Queen of Servia. What a reproach! What an evil! A creature like her! A sordid creature! Could he not have put aside his love for this low-born woman? But I could never make the fool understand that a King has duties; he has something else to think of but love-making."

When taking leave of the friend who had brought him this evil news Milan said, "I shall never see Servia again. My experience has been a bitter one--everywhere treachery and deceit. And now my own son--that has broken my heart." A few months later, worn out by his excesses, prematurely old and broken-hearted, the man who had prostituted life's best gifts drew his last breath at Vienna at the age of forty-six.

As for Natalie, this crowning calamity of her son's disgrace did more than all her past sufferings to crush her proud spirit. But fate had not yet dealt the last and most cruel blow of all. That fell on that fatal June day of 1902 when her beloved "Sacha's" mutilated body was flung by his assassins out of his palace window, to be greeted with shouts of derisive laughter and cries of "Long live King Peter," from the dense crowds who had come to gloat over this last scene in the tragedy of the House of the Obrenvoie.

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