Sophy of Kravonia

by Anthony Hope

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SOPHY OF KRAVONIA

A Novel

BY ANTHONY HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE PRISONER OF ZENDA," "THE INTRUSIONS OF PEGGY," ETC.

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INTRODUCTION

The following narrative falls naturally into three divisions, corresponding to distinct and clearly marked periods of Sophy's life. Of the first and second—her childhood at Morpingham and her sojourn in Paris—the records are fragmentary, and tradition does little to supplement them. As regards Morpingham, the loss is small. The annals of a little maid-servant may be left in vagueness without much loss. Enough remains to show both the manner of child Sophy was and how it fell out that she spread her wings and left the Essex village far behind her. It is a different affair when we come to the French period. The years spent in and near Paris, in the care and under the roof of Lady Margaret Duddington, were of crucial moment in Sophy's development. They changed her from what she had been and made her what she was to be. Without Paris, Kravonia, still extraordinary, would have been impossible.

Yet the surviving history of Paris and the life there is scanty. Only a sketch is possible. A record existed—and a fairly full one—in the Julia Robins correspondence; that we know from Miss Robins herself. But the letters written from Paris by Sophy to her lifelong friend have, with some few exceptions, perished. Miss Robins accounts for this—and in view of her careful preservation of later correspondence, her apology must be accepted—by the fact that during these years—from 1866 to 1870—she was constantly travelling from town to town and from lodging to lodging, as a member of various theatrical companies; this nomadic existence did not promote the careful and methodical storage of her letters. It may, of course, be added that no such obvious interest attached to these records as gathered round Sophy's doings after she had exchanged Paris and the Rue de Grenelle for Slavna and the Castle of Praslok.

When this migration has been effected, the historian is on much firmer ground; he is even embarrassed sometimes by the abundance of material of varying value. Apart from public records and general memory (both carefully consulted on the spot), the two main sources flow from Sophy's own hand. They are the Robins correspondence and the diary. Nearly to the end the letters are very constant, very full, very instructive; but they are composed with an obvious view to the tastes and interests of their recipient, and by no means always devote most space to what now seems of greatest interest. In one point, however, Miss Robins's tastes prove of real service. This lady, who rose to a respectable, if not a high, position as a Shakespearian actress, was much devoted to the study of costume, and Sophy, aware of this hobby, never omits to tell her with minute care what she herself wore on every occasion, what the other ladies wore, and what were the uniforms, military or civil, in which the men were arrayed. Trivial, perhaps, yet of great value in picturing the scenes!

In her letters Sophy is also copious in depicting places, houses, and landscapes—matters on which the diary is naturally not so full. So that, in spite of their great faults, the letters form a valuable supplement to the diary. Yet what

faults—nay, what crimes! Sophy had learned to talk French perfectly and to write it fairly well. She had not learned to write English well or even decently; the letters are, in fact, a charnel-house of murdered grammar and broken-backed sentences. Still there emerge from it all a shrewdness and a rural vigor and raciness which show that the child of the little Essex farm-house survived in the writer.

But for this Kravonian period—the great period—the diary is the thing. Yet it is one of the most unconscientious diaries ever written. It is full of gaps; it is often posted up very unpunctually; it is sometimes exasperatingly obscure—there may be some intention in that; she could not tell into what hands it might fall. But it covers most of the ground; it begins almost with Sophy's arrival in Slavna, and the last entry records her discovery of Lord Dunstanbury's presence in Kravonia. It is written for the most part in French, and she wrote French, as has been said, decently—nay, even forcibly, though not with elegance; yet she frequently relapses into English—often of a very colloquial order: this happens mostly under the influence of anger or some other strong emotion. And she is dramatic—that must be allowed to her. She concentrates her attention on what she conceives (nor is her instinct far out) to be her great scenes; she gives (or purports to give) a verbatim report of critical conversations, and it is only just to say that she allows her interlocutors fair play. She has candor—and that, working with the dramatic sense in her, forbids her to warp the scene. In the earlier parts of the story she shows keen appreciation of its lighter aspects; as times grow graver, her records, too, change in mood, working up to the tense excitement, the keen struggle, the burning emotions of her last days in Kravonia. Yet even then she always finds time for a laugh and a touch of gayety.

When Sophy herself ceases to be our guide, Lord Dunstanbury's notes become the main authority. They are supplemented by the recollection of Mr. Basil Williamson, now practising his profession of surgery in Australia; and this narrative is also indebted to Colonel Markart, sometime secretary to General Stenovics, for much important information which, as emanating from the enemy's camp, was not

accessible to Sophy or her informants. The contributions of other actors in the drama, too numerous to mention here, will be easily identified in their place in the story.

A word seems desirable on one other subject, and no mean one; for it is certain that Sophy's physical gifts were a powerful ally to her ambition, her strong will, and her courage; it is certain, too, that she did not shrink from making the most of this reinforcement to her powers. All the authorities named above—not excepting Sophy herself—have plenty to say on the topic, and from their descriptions a portrait of her may be attempted. Of actual pictures one only exists—in the possession of the present Lord Dunstanbury, who succeeded his father—Sophy's Earl—a few years ago. It is a pastel, drawn just before she left Paris—and, to be frank, it is something of a disappointment; the taste of the 'sixties is betrayed in a simper which sits on the lips but is alien to the character of them. Still the outline and the color are there.

Her hair was very dark, long, and thick; her nose straight and fine, her lips firm and a trifle full. Her complexion was ordinarily very pale, and she did not flush save under considerable agitation of mind or exertion of body. She was above the middle height, finely formed, and slender. It was sometimes, indeed, objected that her shape was too masculine—the shoulders a trifle too square and the hips too small for a woman. These are, after all, matters of taste; she would not have been thought amiss in ancient Athens. All witnesses agree in describing her charm as lying largely in movement, in vivacity, in a sense of suppressed force trying to break out, or (as Mr. Williamson puts it) of "tremendous driving power."

The personality seems to stand out fairly distinct from these descriptions, and we need the less regret that a second picture, known to have been painted soon after her arrival in Kravonia, has perished either through carelessness or (more probably) by deliberate destruction; there were many in Kravonia not too anxious that even a counterfeit presentment of the famous "Red Star" and its wearer should survive. It

would carry its memories and its reproach.

"The Red Star!" The name appears first in a letter of the Paris period—one of the few which are in existence. Its invention is attributed by Sophy to her friend the Marquis de Savres (of whom we shall hear again). He himself used it often. But of the thing we hear very early—and go on hearing from time to time. Sophy at first calls it "my mark," but she speedily adopts Monsieur le Marquis's more poetical term, and by that description it is known throughout her subsequent career. The polite artist of the 'sixties shirked it altogether by giving a half-profile view of his subject, thus not showing the left cheek where the "star" was situated.

It was, in fact, a small birth-mark, placed just below the cheek-bone, almost round, yet with a slightly indented outline. No doubt a lover (and M. de Savres was one) found warrant enough for his phrase. At ordinary times it was a very pale red in color, but (unlike the rest of her face) it was very rapidly sensitive to any change of mood or temper; in moments of excitement the shade deepened greatly, and (as Colonel Markart says in his hyperbolic strain) "it glowed like angry Venus." Without going quite that length, we are bound to allow that it was, at these moments, a conspicuous and striking mark, and such it clearly appeared to the eyes of all who saw it. "La dame à l'étoile rouge," says the Marquis. "The Red-starred Witch," said the less courteous and more hostile citizens and soldiers of Kravonia. Sophy herself appears proud of it, though she feigns to consider it a blemish. Very probably it was one of those peculiarities which become so closely associated and identified with the personality to which they belong as at once to heighten the love of friends and to attract an increased dislike or hatred from those already disposed or committed to enmity. At any rate, for good or evil, it is as "Red Star" that the name of Sophy lives to-day in the cities and mountains of Kravonia.

So much in preface; now to the story. Little historical importance can be claimed for it. But amateurs of the picturesque, if yet there be such in this business-like world,

may care to follow Sophy from Morpingham to Paris, to share her flight from the doomed city, to be with her in the Street of the Fountain, at venerable Praslok, on Volseni's crumbling wall, by the banks of the swift-flowing Krath at dawn of day—to taste something of the spirit that filled, to feel something of the love that moved, the heart of Sophy Grouch of Morpingham, in the county of Essex. Still, sometimes Romance beckons back her ancient votaries.

SOPHY OF KRAVONIA

PART I

MORPINGHAM

I

ENOCH GROUCH'S DAUGHTER

Grouch! That is the name—and in the interest of euphony it is impossible not to regret the fact. Some say it should be spelled "Groutch," which would not at all mend matters, though it makes the pronunciation clear beyond doubt—the word must rhyme with "crouch" and "couch." Well might Lady Meg Duddington swear it was the ugliest name she had ever heard in her life! Sophy was not of a very different opinion, as will be shown by-and-by. She was Grouch on both sides—unmixed and unredeemed. For Enoch Grouch married his uncle's daughter Sally, and begat, as his first child, Sophy. Two other children were born to him, but they died in early infancy. Mrs. Grouch did not long survive the death of her little ones; she was herself laid in Morpingham church-yard when Sophy was no more than five years old. The child was left to the sole care of her father, a man who had

married late for his class—indeed, late for any class—and was already well on in middle age. He held a very small farm, lying about half a mile behind the church. Probably he made a hard living of it, for the only servant in his household was a slip of a girl of fifteen, who had, presumably, both to cook and scrub for him and to look after the infant Sophy. Nothing is remembered of him in Morpingham. Perhaps there was nothing to remember—nothing that marked him off from thousands like him; perhaps the story of his death, which lives in the village traditions, blotted out the inconspicuous record of his laborious life.

Morpingham lies within twenty-five miles of London, but for all that it is a sequestered and primitive village. It contained, at this time at least, but three houses with pretensions to gentility—the Hall, the Rectory, and a smaller house across the village street, facing the Rectory. At the end of the street stood the Hall in its grounds. This was a handsome, red-brick house, set in a spacious garden. Along one side of the garden there ran a deep ditch, and on the other side of the ditch, between it and a large meadow, was a path which led to the church. Thus the church stood behind the Hall grounds; and again, as has been said, beyond the church was Enoch Grouch's modest farm, held of Mr. Brownlow, the owner of the Hall. The church path was the favorite resort of the villagers, and deservedly, for it was shaded and beautified by a fine double row of old elms, forming a stately avenue to the humble little house of worship.

On an autumn evening in the year 1855 Enoch Grouch was returning from the village, where he had been to buy tobacco. His little girl was with him. It was wild weather. A gale had been blowing for full twenty-four hours, and in the previous night a mighty bough had been snapped from one of the great elms and had fallen with a crash. It lay now right across the path. As they went to the village, her father had indulged Sophy with a ride on the bough, and she begged a renewal of the treat on their homeward journey. The farmer was a kind man—more kind than wise, as it proved, on this occasion. He set the child astraddle on the thick end of the bough,

then went to the other end, which was much slenderer. Probably his object was to try to shake the bough and please his small tyrant with the imitation of a see-saw. The fallen bough suggested no danger to his slow-moving mind. He leaned down towards the bough with out-stretched hands—Sophy, no doubt, watching his doings with excited interest—while the wind raged and revelled among the great branches over their heads. Enoch tried to move the bough, but failed; in order to make another effort, he fell on his knees and bent his back over it.

At this moment there came a loud crash—heard in the Rectory grounds and in the dining-room at Woodbine Cottage, the small house opposite.

"There's another tree gone!" cried Basil Williamson, the Rector's second son, who was giving his retriever an evening run.

He raced through the Rectory gate, across the road, and into the avenue.

A second later the garden gate of Woodbine Cottage opened, and Julia, the ten-years-old daughter of a widow named Robins who lived there, came out at full speed. Seeing Basil just ahead of her, she called out: "Did you hear?"

He knew her voice—they were playmates—and answered without looking back: "Yes. Isn't it fun? Keep outside the trees—keep well in the meadow!"

"Stuff!" she shouted, laughing. "They don't fall every minute, silly!"

Running as they exchanged these words, they soon came to where the bough—or, rather, the two boughs—had fallen. A tragic sight met their eyes. The second bough had caught the unlucky farmer just on the nape of his neck, and had driven him down, face forward, onto the first. He lay with his neck close pinned between the two, and his arms spread out over the undermost. His face was bad to look at; he was quite dead, and apparently death must have been instantaneous. Sobered and appalled, the boy and girl stood looking from the terrible sight to each other's faces.

"Is he dead?" Julia whispered.

"I expect so," the boy answered. Neither of them had seen death before.

The next moment he raised his voice and shouted: "Help, help!" then laid hold of the upper bough and strove with all his might to raise it. The girl gave a shriller cry for assistance and then lent a hand to his efforts. But between them they could not move the great log.

Up to now neither of them had perceived Sophy.

Next on the scene was Mr. Brownlow, the master of the Hall. He had been in his greenhouse and heard the crash of the bough. Of that he took no heed—nothing could be done save heave a sigh over the damage to his cherished elms. But when the cries for help reached his ears, with praiseworthy promptitude he rushed out straight across his lawn, and (though he was elderly and stout) dropped into the ditch, clambered out of it, and came where the dead man and the children were. As he passed the drawing-room windows, he called out to his wife: "Somebody's hurt, I'm afraid"; and she, after a moment's conference with the butler, followed her husband, but, not being able to manage the ditch, went round by the road and up the avenue, the servant coming with her. When these two arrived, the Squire's help had availed to release the farmer from the deadly grip of the two boughs, and he lay now on his back on the path.

"He's dead, poor fellow," said Mr. Brownlow.

"It's Enoch Grouch!" said the butler, giving a shudder as he looked at the farmer's face. Julia Robins sobbed, and the boy Basil looked up at the Squire's face with grave eyes.

"I'll get a hurdle, sir," said the butler. His master nodded, and he ran off.

Something moved on the path—about a yard from the thick end of the lower bough.

"Look there!" cried Julia Robins. A little wail followed. With an exclamation, Mrs. Brownlow darted to the spot. The child lay there with a cut on her forehead. Apparently the impact of the second bough had caused the end of the first to fly

upward; Sophy had been jerked from her seat into the air, and had fallen back on the path, striking her head on a stone. Mrs. Brownlow picked her up, wiped the blood from her brow, and saw that the injury was slight. Sophy began to cry softly, and Mrs. Brownlow soothed her.

"It's his little girl," said Julia Robins. "The little girl with the mark on her cheek, please, Mrs. Brownlow."

"Poor little thing! Poor little thing!" Mrs. Brownlow murmured; she knew that death had robbed the child of her only relative and protector.

The butler now came back with a hurdle and two men, and Enoch Grouch's body was taken into the saddle-room at the Hall. Mrs. Brownlow followed the procession, Sophy still in her arms. At the end of the avenue she spoke to the boy and girl:

"Go home, Basil; tell your father, and ask him to come to the Hall. Good-night, Julia. Tell your mother—and don't cry any more. The poor man is with God, and I sha'n't let this mite come to harm." She was a childless woman, with a motherly heart, and as she spoke she kissed Sophy's wounded forehead. Then she went into the Hall grounds, and the boy and girl were left together in the road. Basil shook his fist at the avenue of elms—his favorite playground.

"Hang those beastly trees!" he cried. "I'd cut them all down if I was Mr. Brownlow."

"I must go and tell mother," said Julia. "And you'd better go, too."

"Yes," he assented, but lingered for a moment, still looking at the trees as though reluctantly fascinated by them.

"Mother always said something would happen to that little girl," said Julia, with a grave and important look in her eyes.

"Why?" the boy asked, brusquely.

"Because of that mark—that mark she's got on her cheek."

"What rot!" he said, but he looked at his companion uneasily. The event of the

evening had stirred the superstitious fears seldom hard to stir in children.

"People don't have those marks for nothing—so mother says." Other people, no wiser, said the same thing later.

"Rot!" Basil muttered again. "Oh, well, I must go."

She glanced at him timidly. "Just come as far as our door with me. I'm afraid."

"Afraid!" He smiled scornfully. "All right!"

He walked with her to the door of Woodbine Cottage, and waited till it closed behind her, performing the escort with a bold and lordly air. Left alone in the fast-darkening night, with nobody in sight, with no sound save the ceaseless voice of the angry wind essaying new mischief in the tops of the elm-trees, he stood for a moment listening fearfully. Then he laid his sturdy legs to the ground and fled for home, looking neither to right nor left till he reached the hospitable light of his father's study. The lad had been brave in face of the visible horror; fear struck him in the moment of Julia's talk about the mark on the child's cheek. Scornful and furious at himself, yet he was mysteriously afraid.

II

THE COOK AND THE CATECHISM

Sophy Grouch had gone to lay a bunch of flowers on her father's grave. From the first Mrs. Brownlow had taught her this pious rite, and Mrs. Brownlow's deputy, the gardener's wife (in whose cottage Sophy lived), had seen to its punctual performance every week. Things went by law and rule at the Hall, for the Squire was a man of active mind and ample leisure. His household code was a marvel of intricacy and minuteness. Sophy's coming and staying had developed a multitude of new clauses, under whose benevolent yet strict operation her youthful mind had been trained in the way in which Mr. Brownlow was of opinion that it should go.

Sophy's face, then, wore a grave and responsible air as she returned with steps of decorous slowness from the sacred precincts. Yet the outer manner was automatic—the result of seven years' practice. Within, her mind was busy: the day was one of mark in her life; she had been told her destined future, and was wondering how she would like it.

Her approach was perceived by a tall and pretty girl who lay in the meadow-grass (and munched a blade of it) which bordered the path under the elm-trees.

"What a demure little witch she looks!" laughed Julia Robins, who was much in the mood for laughter that day, greeting with responsive gleam of the eyes the sunlight which fell in speckles of radiance through the leaves above. It was a summer day, and summer was in her heart, too; yet not for the common cause with young maidens; it was no nonsense about love-making—lofty ambition was in the case to-day.

"Sophy Grouch! Sophy Grouch!" she cried, in a high, merry voice.

Sophy raised her eyes, but her steps did not quicken. With the same measured paces of her lanky, lean, little legs, she came up to where Julia lay.

"Why don't you say just 'Sophy'?" she asked. "I'm the only Sophy in the village."

"Sophy Grouch! Sophy Grouch!" Julia repeated, teasingly.

The mark on Sophy's left cheek grew redder. Julia laughed mockingly. Sophy looked down on her, still very grave.

"You do look pretty to-day," she observed—"and happy."

"Yes, yes! So I tease you, don't I? But I like to see you hang out your danger-signal."

She held out her arms to the little girl. Sophy came and kissed her, then sat down beside her.

"Forgive?"

"Yes," said Sophy. "Do you think it's a very awful name?"

"Oh, you'll change it some day," smiled Julia, speaking more truth than she knew. "Listen! Mother's consented, consented, consented! I'm to go and live with Uncle Edward in London—London, Sophy!—and learn elocution—"

"Learn what?"

"E-lo-cu-tion—which means how to talk so that people can hear you ever so far off—"

"To shout?"

"No. Don't be stupid. To—to be heard plainly without shouting. To be heard in a theatre! Did you ever see a theatre?"

"No. Only a circus. I haven't seen much."

"And then—the stage! I'm to be an actress! Fancy mother consenting at last! An actress instead of a governess! Isn't it glorious?" She paused a moment, then added, with a self-conscious laugh: "Basil's awfully angry, though."

"Why should he be angry?" asked Sophy. Her own anger was gone; she was plucking daisies and sticking them here and there in her friend's golden hair. They were great friends, this pair, and Sophy was very proud of the friendship. Julia was grown up, the beauty of the village, and—a lady! Now Sophy was by no means any one of these things.

"Oh, you wouldn't understand," laughed Julia, with a blush.

"Does he want to keep company with you—and won't you do it?"

"Only servants keep company, Sophy."

"Oh!" said Sophy, obviously making a mental note of the information.

"But he's very silly about it. I've just said 'Good-bye,' to him—you know he goes up to Cambridge to-morrow?—and he did say a lot of silly things." She suddenly caught hold of Sophy and kissed her half a dozen times. "It's a wonderful thing that's happened. I'm so tremendously happy!" She set her little friend free with a last kiss

and a playful pinch.

Neither caress nor pinch disturbed Sophy's composure. She sat down on the grass.

"Something's happened to me, too, to-day," she announced.

"Has it, Tots? What is it?" asked Julia, smiling indulgently; the great events in other lives are thus sufficiently acknowledged.

"I've left school, and I'm going to leave Mrs. James's and go and live at the Hall, and be taught to help cook; and when I'm grown up I'm going to be cook." She spoke slowly and weightily, her eyes fixed on Julia's face.

"Well, I call it a shame!" cried Julia, in generous indignation. "Oh, of course it would be all right if they'd treated you properly—I mean, as if they'd meant that from the beginning. But they haven't. You've lived with Mrs. James, I know; but you've been in and out of the Hall all the time, having tea in the drawing-room, and fruit at dessert, and—and so on. And you look like a little lady, and talk like one—almost. I think it's a shame not to give you a better chance. Cook!"

"Don't you think it might be rather nice to be a cook—a good cook?"

"No, I don't," answered the budding Mrs. Siddons, decisively.

"People always talk a great deal about the cook," pleaded Sophy. "Mr. and Mrs. Brownlow are always talking about the cook—and the Rector talks about his cook, too—not always very kindly, though."

"No, it's a shame—and I don't believe it'll happen."

"Yes, it will. Mrs. Brownlow settled it to-day."

"There are other people in the world besides Mrs. Brownlow."

Sophy was not exactly surprised at this dictum, but evidently it gave her thought. Her long-delayed "Yes" showed that as plainly as her "Oh" had, a little while before, marked her appreciation of the social limits of "keeping company." "But she can settle it all the same," she persisted.

"For the time she can," Julia admitted. "Oh, I wonder what'll be my first part, Tots!" She threw her pretty head back on the grass, closing her eyes; a smile of radiant anticipation hovered about her lips. The little girl rose and stood looking at her friend—the friend of whom she was so proud.

"You'll look very, very pretty," she said, with sober gravity.

Julia's smile broadened, but her lips remained shut. Sophy looked at her for a moment longer, and, without formal farewell, resumed her progress down the avenue. It was hard on tea-time, and Mrs. James was a stickler for punctuality.

Yet Sophy's march was interrupted once more. A tall young man sat swinging his legs on the gate that led from the avenue into the road. The sturdy boy who had run home in terror on the night Enoch Grouch died had grown into a tall, good-looking young fellow; he was clad in what is nowadays called a "blazer" and check-trousers, and smoked a large meerschaum pipe. His expression was gloomy; the gate was shut—and he was on the top of it. Sophy approached him with some signs of nervousness. When he saw her, he glared at her moodily.

"You can't come through," he said, firmly.

"Please, Mr. Basil, I must, I shall be late for tea."

"I won't let you through. There!"

Sophy looked despairful. "May I climb over?"

"No," said Basil, firmly; but a smile began to twitch about his lips.

Quick now, as ever, to see the joint in a man's armor, Sophy smiled too.

"If you'd let me through, I'd give you a kiss," she said, offering the only thing she had to give in all the world.

"You would, would you? But I hate kisses. In fact, I hate girls all round—big and little."

"You don't hate Julia, do you?"

"Yes, worst of all."

"Oh!" said Sophy—once more the recording, registering "Oh!"—because Julia had given quite another impression, and Sophy sought to reconcile these opposites.

The young man jumped down from the gate, with a healthy laugh at himself and at her, caught her up in his arms, and gave her a smacking kiss.

"That's toll," he said. "Now you can go through, missy."

"Thank you, Mr. Basil. It's not very hard to get through, is it?"

He set her down with a laugh, a laugh with a note of surprise in it; her last words had sounded odd from a child. But Sophy's eyes were quite grave; she was probably recording the practical value of a kiss.

"You shall tell me whether you think the same about that in a few years' time," he said, laughing again.

"When I'm grown up?" she asked, with a slow, puzzled smile.

"Perhaps," said he, assuming gravity anew.

"And cook?" she asked, with a curiously interrogative air—anxious apparently to see what he, in his turn, would think of her destiny.

"Cook? You're going to be a cook?"

"The cook," she amended. "The cook at the Hall."

"I'll come and eat your dinners." He laughed, yet looked a trifle compassionate. Sophy's quick eyes tracked his feelings.

"You don't think it's nice to be a cook, either?" she asked.

"Oh yes, splendid! The cook's a sort of queen," said he.

"The cook a sort of queen? Is she?" Sophy's eyes were profoundly thoughtful.

"And I should be very proud to kiss a queen—a sort of queen. Because I shall be only a poor sawbones."

"Sawbones?"

"A surgeon—a doctor, you know—with a red lamp, like Dr. Seaton at Brentwood."

She looked at him for a moment. "Are you really going away?" she asked, abruptly.

"Yes, for a bit—to-morrow."

Sophy's manner expanded into a calm graciousness. "I'm very sorry," she said.

"Thank you."

"You amuse me."

"The deuce I do!" laughed Basil Williamson.

She raised her eyes slowly to his. "You'll be friends, anyhow, won't you?"

"To cook or queen," he said—and heartiness shone through his raillery.

Sophy nodded her head gravely, sealing the bargain. A bargain it was.

"Now I must go and have tea, and then say my catechism," said she.

The young fellow—his thoughts were sad—wanted the child to linger.

"Learning your catechism? Where have you got to?"

"I've got to say my 'Duty towards my Neighbor' to Mrs. James after tea."

"Your 'Duty towards your Neighbor'—that's rather difficult, isn't it?"

"It's very long," said Sophy, resignedly.

"Do you know it?"

"I think so. Oh, Mr. Basil, would you mind hearing me? Because if I can say it to you, I can say it to her, you know."

"All right, fire away."

A sudden doubt smote Sophy. "But do you know it yourself?" she asked.

"Yes, rather, I know it."

She would not take his word. "Then you say the first half, and I'll say the second."

He humored her—it was hard not to—she looked so small and seemed so capable. He began—and tripped for a moment over "'To love, honor, and succor my father and mother.'" The child had no chance there. But Sophy's eyes were calm. He ended, "'teachers, spiritual pastors, and masters.' Now go on," he said.

"'To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters; to hurt nobody by word nor deed; to be true and just in all my dealing; to bear no malice nor hatred in my heart; to keep my hands from picking and stealing, and my tongue from evil-speaking, lying, and slandering; to keep my body in temperance, soberness, and chastity [the young man smiled for an instant—that sounded pathetic]; not to covet nor desire other men's goods, but to learn and labor truly to get mine own living and to do my duty in that state of life unto which it has pleased God to call me.'"

"Wrong!" said Basil. "Go down two!"

"Wrong?" she cried, indignantly disbelieving.

"Wrong!"

"It's not! That's what Mrs. James taught me."

"Perhaps—it's not in the prayer-book. Go and look."

"You tell me first!"

"'And to do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me.'" His eyes were set on her with an amused interest.

She stood silent for a moment. "Sure?" she asked then.

"Positive," said he.

"Oh!" said Sophy, for the third time. She stood there a moment longer. Then she smiled at him. "I shall go and look. Good-bye."

Basil broke into a laugh. "Good-bye, missy," he said. "You'll find I'm right."

"If I do, I'll tell you," she answered him, generously, as she turned away.

His smile lasted while he watched her. When she was gone his grievance revived,

his gloom returned. He trudged home with never a glance back at the avenue where Julia was. Yet even now the thought of the child crossed his mind; that funny mark of hers had turned redder when he corrected her rendering of the catechism.

Sophy walked into Mrs. James's kitchen. "Please may I read through my 'Duty' before I say it?" she asked.

Permission accorded with some surprise—for hitherto the teaching had been by word of mouth—she got the prayer-book down from its shelf and conned her lesson. After tea she repeated it correctly. Mrs. James noticed no difference.

III

BEAUTIFUL JULIA—AND MY LORD

"It seemed somehow impossible, me going to be cook there all my days." So writes Sophy at a later date in regard to her life at Morpingham Hall. To many of us in our youth it has seemed impossible that we should pass all our days in the humdrum occupations and the mediocre positions in which we have in fact spent them. Young ambitions are chronicled only when they have been fulfilled—unless where a born autobiographer makes fame out of his failures. But Sophy had a double portion of original restlessness—this much the records of Morpingham years, scanty as they are, render plain. Circumstances made much play with her, but she was never merely the sport of chance or of circumstances. She was always waiting, even always expecting, ready to take her chance, with arm out-stretched to seize Occasion by the forelock. She co-operated eagerly with Fate and made herself a partner with Opportunity, and she was quick to blame the other members of the firm for any lack of activity or forwardness. "You can't catch the train unless you're at the station—and take care your watch isn't slow," she writes somewhere in the diary. The moral of the reflection is as obvious as its form; it is obvious, too, that a

traveller so scrupulous to be in time would suffer proportionate annoyance if the train were late.

The immediate result of this disposition of hers was unhappy, and it is not hard to sympathize with the feelings of the Brownlows. Their benevolence was ample, but it was not unconscious; their benefits, which were very great, appeared to them exhaustive, not only above what Sophy might expect, but also beyond what she could imagine. They had picked her up from the road-side and set her on the way to that sort of kingdom with the prospect of which Basil Williamson had tried to console her. The Squire was an estimable man, but one of small mind; he moved among the little—the contented lord of a pin-point of the earth. Mrs. Brownlow was a profoundly pious woman, to whom content was a high duty, to be won by the performance of other duties. If the Squire detected in the girl signs of ingratitude to himself, his wife laid equal blame on a rebellion against Heaven. Sophy knew—if not then, yet on looking back—what they felt; her references to them are charged with a remorse whose playful expression (obstinately touched with scorn as it is) does not hide its sincerity. She soon perceived, anyhow, that she was getting a bad character; she, the cook in posse, was at open war with Mrs. Smilker, the cook in esse; though, to be sure, "Smilker" might have done something to reconcile her to "Grouch!"

Mrs. Brownlow naturally ranged herself on the side of constituted authority, of the superior rank in the domestic hierarchy. Moreover, it is likely that Mrs. Smilker was right in nine cases out of ten, at all events; Sophy recognized that probability in after-life; none the less, she allows herself more than once to speak of "that beast of a Smilker." Mere rectitude as such never appealed to her; that comes out in another rather instructive comment, which she makes on Mrs. Brownlow herself, "Me being what I was, and she what she was, though I was grateful to her, and always shall be, I couldn't love her; and what hit me hardest was that she didn't wonder at it, and, in my opinion, wasn't very sorry either—not in her heart, you know. Me not loving her

made what she was doing for me all the finer, you see."

Perhaps these flashes of insight should not be turned on our benefactors, but the extract serves to show another side of Sophy—one which in fairness to her must not be ignored. Not only was restlessness unsatisfied, and young ambitions starved; the emotions were not fed either, or at least were presented with a diet too homely for Sophy's taste. For the greater part of this time she had no friends outside the Hall to turn to. Julia Robins was pursuing her training in London, and, later, her profession in the country. Basil Williamson, who "amused" her, was at Cambridge, and afterwards at his hospital; a glimpse of him she may have caught now and then, but they had no further talk. Very probably he sought no opportunity; Sophy had passed from the infants' school to the scullery; she had grown from a child into a big girl. If prudent Basil kept these transformations in view, none can blame him—he was the son of the Rector of the parish. So, when bidden to the Hall, he ate the potatoes Sophy had peeled, but recked no more of the hand that peeled them. In the main the child was, no doubt, a solitary creature.

So much is what scientific men and historians call "reconstruction"—a hazardous process—at least when you are dealing with human beings. It has been kept within the strict limits of legitimate inference, and accordingly yields meagre results. The return of Julia Robins enables us to put many more of the stones—or bones, or whatever they may be called—in their appropriate places.

It is the summer of 1865—and Julia is very gorgeous. Three years had passed over her head; her training had been completed a twelvemonth before, and she had been on her first tour. She had come home "to rest"—and to look out for a new engagement. She wore a blue hat with a white feather, a blue skirt, and a red "Garibaldi" shirt; her fair hair was dressed in the latest fashion. The sensation she made in Morpingham needs no record. But her head was not turned; nobody was ever less of a snob than Julia Robins, no friendship ever more independent of the ups

and downs of life, on one side or the other, than that which united her and Sophy Grouch. She opened communications with the Hall scullery immediately. And—"Sophy was as much of a darling as ever"—is her warm-hearted verdict.

The Hall was not accessible to Julia, nor Woodbine Lodge to Mrs. Brownlow's little cook-girl. But the Squire's coachman had been at the station when Julia's train came in: her arrival would be known in the Hall kitchen, if not up-stairs. On the morrow she went into the avenue of old elms about twelve o'clock, conjecturing that her friend might have a few free moments about that hour—an oasis between the labors of the morning and the claims of luncheon. Standing there under the trees in all her finery—not very expensive finery, no doubt, yet fresh and indisputably gay—she called her old mocking challenge—"Sophy Grouch! Sophy Grouch!"

Sophy was watching. Her head rose from the other side of the ditch. She was down in a moment, up again, and in her friend's arms. "It's like a puff of fresh air," she whispered, as she kissed her, and then, drawing away, looked her over. Sophy was tall beyond her years, and her head was nearly on a level with Julia's. She was in her short print gown, with her kitchen apron on; her sleeves rolled up, her face red from the fire, her hands too, no doubt, red from washing vegetables and dishes. "She looked like Cinderella in the first act of a pantomime," is Miss Robins's professional comment—colored, perhaps, also by subsequent events.

"You're beautiful!" cried Sophy. "Oh, that shirt—I love red!" And so on for some time, no doubt. "Tell me about it; tell me everything about it," she urged. "It's the next best thing, you know."

Miss Robins recounted her adventures: they would not seem very dazzling at this distance. Sophy heard them with ardent eyes; they availed to color the mark on her cheek to a rosy tint. "That's being alive," she said, with a deep-drawn sigh.

Julia patted her hand consolingly. "But I'm twenty!" she reminded her friend. "Think how young you are!"

"Young or old's much the same in the kitchen," Sophy grumbled.

Linking arms, they walked up the avenue. The Rector was approaching from the church. Sophy tried to draw her arm away. Julia held it tight. The Rector came up, lifted his hat—and, maybe, his brows. But he stopped and said a few pleasant words to Julia. He had never pretended to approve of this stage career, but Julia had now passed beyond his jurisdiction. He was courteous to her as to any lady. Official position betrayed itself only as he was taking leave—and only in regard to Sophy Grouch.

"Ah, you keep up old friendships," he said—with a rather forced approval. "Please don't unsettle the little one's mind, though. She has to work—haven't you, Sophy? Good-bye, Miss Robins."

Sophy's mark was ruddy indeed as the Rector went on his blameless way, and Julia was squeezing her friend's arm very hard. But Sophy said nothing, except to murmur—just once—"The little one!" Julia smiled at the tone.

They turned and walked back towards the road. Now silence reigned; Julia was understanding, pitying, wondering whether a little reasonable remonstrance would be accepted by her fiery and very unreasonable little friend; scullery-maids must not arraign social institutions nor quarrel with the way of the world. But she decided to say nothing—the mark still glowed. It was to glow more before that day was out.

They came near to the gates. Julia felt a sudden pressure on her arm.

"Look!" whispered Sophy, her eyes lighting up again in interest.

A young man rode up the approach to the Hall lodge. His mare was a beauty; he sat her well. He was perfectly dressed for the exercise. His features were clear-cut and handsome. There was as fine an air of breeding about him as about the splendid Newfoundland dog which ran behind him.

Julia looked as she was bidden. "He's handsome," she said. "Why—" she laughed low—"I believe I know who it is—I think I've seen him somewhere."

"Have you?" Sophy's question was breathless.

"Yes, I know! When we were at York! He was one of the officers there; he was in a box. Sophy, it's the Earl of Dunstanbury!"

Sophy did not speak. She looked. The young man—he could be hardly more than twenty—came on. Sophy suddenly hid behind her friend ("To save my pride, not her own," generous Julia explains—Sophy herself advances no such excuse), but she could see. She saw the rider's eye rest on Julia; did it rest in recognition? It almost seemed so; yet there was doubt. Julia blushed, but she forbore from smiling or from seeking to rouse his memory. Yet she was proud if he remembered her face from across the footlights. The young man, too—being but a young man—blushed a little as he gave the pretty girl by the gate such a glance as discreetly told her that he was of the same mind as herself about her looks. These silent interchanges of opinion on such matters are pleasant diversions as one plods the highway.

He was gone. Julia sighed in satisfied vanity. Sophy awoke to stern realities.

"Gracious!" she cried. "He must have come to lunch! They'll want a salad! You'll be here to-morrow—do!" And she was off, up the drive, and round to her own regions at the back of the house.

"I believe his Lordship did remember my face," thought Julia as she wandered back to Woodbine Cottage.

But Sophy washed lettuces in her scullery—which, save for its base purposes, was a pleasant, airy apartment, looking out on a path that ran between yew hedges and led round from the lawn to the offices of the house. Diligently she washed, as Mrs. Smilker had taught her (whether rightly or not is nothing to the purpose here), but how many miles away was her mind? So far away from lettuces that it seemed in no way strange to look up and see Lord Dunstanbury and his dog on the path outside the window at which she had been performing her task. He began hastily:

"Oh, I say, I've been seeing my mare get her feed, and—er—do you think you could

be so good as to find a bone and some water for Lorenzo?"

"Lorenzo?" she said.

"My dog, you know." He pointed to the handsome beast, which wagged an expectant tail.

"Why do you call him that?"

Dunstanbury smiled. "Because he's magnificent. I dare say you never heard of Lorenzo the Magnificent?"

"No. Who was he?"

"A Duke—Duke of Florence—in Italy." He had begun to watch her face, and seemed not impatient for the bone.

"Florence? Italy?" The lettuce dropped from her hands; she wiped her hands slowly on her apron.

"Do you think you could get me one?"

"Yes, I'll get it."

She went to the back of the room and chose a bone.

"Will this do?" she asked, holding it out through the window.

"Too much meat."

"Oh!" She went and got another. "This one all right?"

"Capital! Do you mind if I stay and see him eat it?"

"No."

"Here, Lorenzo! And thank the lady!"

Lorenzo directed three sharp barks at Sophy and fell to. Sophy filled and brought out a bowl of water. Lord Dunstanbury had lighted a cigar. But he was watching Sophy. A new light broke on him suddenly.

"I say, were you the other girl behind the gate?"

"I didn't mean you to see me."

"I only caught a glimpse of you. I remember your friend, though."

"She remembered you, too."

"I don't know her name, though."

"Julia Robins."

"Ah, yes—is it? He's about polished off that bone, hasn't he? Is she—er—a great friend of yours?"

His manner was perhaps a little at fault; the slightest note of chaff had crept into it; and the slightest was enough to put Sophy's quills up.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Why not? Every reason why she should be," he answered with his lips. His eyes answered more, but he refrained his tongue. He was scrupulously a gentleman—more so perhaps than, had sexes and places been reversed, Sophy herself would have been. But his eyes told her. "Only," he went on, "if so, why did you hide?"

That bit of chaff did not anger Sophy. But it went home to a different purpose—far deeper, far truer home than the young man had meant. Not the mark only reddened—even the cheeks flushed. She said no word. With a fling-out of her arms—a gesture strangely, prophetically foreign as it seemed to him in after-days—she exhibited herself—the print frock, the soiled apron, the bare arms, red hands, the ugly knot of her hair, the scrap of cap she wore. For a moment her lips quivered, while the mark—the Red Star of future days and future fame—grew redder still.

The only sound was of Lorenzo's worrying the last tough scrap of bone. The lad, gentleman as he was, was good flesh and blood, too—and the blood was moving. He felt a little tightness in his throat; he was new to it. New, too, was Sophy Grouch to

what his eyes said to her, but she took it with head erect and a glance steadily levelled at his.

"Yes," he said. "But I shouldn't have looked at any of that—and I shouldn't have looked at her either."

Brightly the mark glowed; subtly the eyes glowed. There was silence again.

Almost a start marked Dunstanbury's awakening. "Come, Lorenzo!" he cried; he raised his hat and turned away, followed by his dog, Lorenzo the Magnificent.

Sophy took up her lettuces and carried them into the kitchen.

"There you are, at last! And what's put you in a temper now?" asked Mrs. Smilker. She had learned the signs of the mark.

Sophy smiled. "It's not temper this time, Mrs. Smilker. I—I'm very happy to-day," she said. "Oh, I do hope the salad will be good!"

For he who was to eat of the salad—had he not forgotten print frock and soiled apron, bare arms, red hands, ugly knot, and execrable cap? He would not have looked at them—no, nor at beautiful many-tinted Julia Robins in her pride! He had forgotten all these to look at the stained cheek and the eyes of subtle glow. She had glanced in the mirror of love and sipped from the cup of power.

Such was her first meeting with Lord Dunstanbury. If it were ever forgotten, it was not Dunstanbury who forgot.

The day had wrought much in her eyes; it had wrought more than she dreamed of. Her foot was near the ladder now, though she could not yet see the lowest rung.

IV

FATE'S WAY—OR LADY MEG'S

The scene is at Hazleby, Lord Dunstanbury's Essex seat. His lordship is striking the

top off his breakfast egg.

"I say, Cousin Meg, old Brownlow's got a deuced pretty kitchen-maid."

"There you go! There you go! Just like your father, and your grandfather, and all of them! If the English people had any spirit, they'd have swept the Dunstanburys and all the wicked Whig gang into the sea long ago."

"Before you could turn round they'd have bought it up, enclosed it, and won an election by opening it to ships at a small fee on Sundays," said Mr. Pindar.

"Why are Whigs worse than Tories?" inquired Mr. Pikes, with an air of patient inquiry.

"The will of Heaven, I suppose," sniffed Lady Margaret Duddington.

"To display Divine Omnipotence in that line," suggested Mr. Pindar.

"A deuced pretty girl!" said Dunstanbury, in reflective tones. He was doing his best to reproduce the impression he had received at Morpingham Hall, but obviously with no great success.

"On some pretext, frivolous though it be, let us drive over and see this miracle," Pindar suggested.

"How could we better employ this last day of our visit? You'll drive us over, Percival?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Pindar," said the young man, resolute in wisdom. "I'll send you over, if you like."

"I'll come with you," said Pikes. "But how account for ourselves? Old Brownlow is unknown to us."

"If Percival had been going, I'd have had nothing to do with it, but I don't mind taking you two old sillies," said Lady Margaret. "I wanted to pay a call on Elizabeth Brownlow anyhow. We were at school together once. But I won't guarantee you a sight of the kitchen-maid."

"It's a pretty drive—for this part of the country," observed Dunstanbury.

"It may well become your favorite road," smiled Mr. Pindar, benevolently.

"And since Lady Meg goes with us, it's already ours," added Mr. Pikes, gallantly.

So they used to go on—for hours at a time, as Dunstanbury has declared—both at Hazleby when they were there, and at Lady Meg's house in Berkeley Square, where they almost always were. They were pleased to consider themselves politicians—Pikes a Whig, twenty years behind date, Pindar a Tory, two hundred. It was all an affectation—assumed for the purpose, but with the very doubtful result of amusing Lady Meg. To Dunstanbury the two old waifs—for waifs of the sea of society they were, for all that each had a sufficient income to his name and a reputable life behind him—were sheerly tiresome—and there seems little ground to differ from his opinion. But they were old family friends, and he endured with his usual graciousness.

Their patroness—they would hardly have gibed at the word—was a more notable person. Lady Meg—the world generally, and Sophy always, spoke of her by that style, and we may take the same liberty—was only child of the great Earl of Dunstanbury. The title and estates passed to his grandnephew, but half a million or so of money came to her. She took the money, but vowed, with an outspoken thankfulness, that from the Dunstanbury family she had taken nothing else. If the boast were true, there must have been a powerful strain of eccentricity and perversity derived from elsewhere. All the Dunstanbury blood was Whig; Lady Meg counted the country ruined in 1688. Even Dunstanbury had been a man of sensibility; Lady Meg declared war on emotion—especially on the greatest of all emotions. The Dunstanbury attitude in thought had always been free, even tending to the materialistic; Lady Meg would believe in anything—so long as she couldn't see it. A queer woman, choosing to go to war with the world and infinitely enjoying the gratuitous conflict which she had herself provoked! With half a million pounds

and the Duddington blood one can afford these recondite luxuries—and to have a Pindar and a Pikes before whom to exhibit their rare flavor. She was aggressive, capricious, hard to live with. Fancies instead of purposes, whims instead of interests, and not, as it seems, much affection for anybody—she makes rather a melancholy picture; but in her time she made a bit of a figure, too.

The air of the household was stormy that day at Morpingham—an incentive to the expedition, not a deterrent, for Lady Meg, had she known it. Sophy was in sore disgrace—accused, tried, and convicted of insubordination and unseemly demeanor towards Mrs. Smilker. The truth seems to be that this good woman (Rest her soul! She has a neat tombstone in Morpingham church-yard) loved—like many another good creature—good ale sometimes a trifle too well; and the orders she gave when ale had been plentiful did not always consort with her less-mellow injunctions. In no vulgar directness, but with a sarcasm which Mrs. Smilker felt without understanding, Sophy would point out these inconsistencies. Angered and humiliated, fearful too, perhaps, that her subordinate would let the secret out, Mrs. Smilker made haste to have the first word with the powers; and against the word of the cook the word of the cook-maid weighed as naught. After smaller troubles of this origin there had come a sort of crisis to-day. The longest of long lectures had been read to Sophy by mistress and repeated (slightly condensed) by master; then she was sent away to think it over; an abject apology to outraged Mrs. Smilker must be forthcoming, or banishment was the decree. Informed of this ultimatum, Sophy went out and hung about the avenue, hoping for Julia to appear. Soon Julia came and heard the story. She had indignation in readiness, and—what was more to the purpose—a plan. Soon Sophy's eyes grew bright.

Into this storm-tossed house came Lady Meg and her spaniels. This unkind name, derived at first from the size and shape of Mr. Pindar's ears (they were large, and hung over at the top), had been stretched to include Mr. Pikes also, with small loss of propriety. Both gentlemen were low of stature, plump of figure, hairy on the face;

both followed obediently at the heels of commanding Lady Meg. The amenities of the luncheon-table opened hearts. Very soon the tale of Sophy's iniquities was revealed; incidentally, and unavoidably if Sophy's heinous fault were to appear in its true measure, the tally of the Brownlows' benevolence was reckoned. But Mrs. Brownlow won small comfort from Lady Meg: she got a stiff touch of the truth.

"Ran in and out of the drawing-room!" she said. "Did she? The truth is, Lizzie, you've spoiled her, and now you're angry with her for being spoiled."

"What is she now, Mrs. Brownlow?" asked Pindar, with a sly intention. Was this Percival's deuced pretty girl?

"She works in the kitchen, Mr. Pindar."

"The girl!" his eyes signalled to Mr. Pikes. "Let Lady Meg see her," he urged, insinuatingly. "She has a wonderful way with girls."

"I don't want to see her; and I know your game, Pindar," said Lady Meg.

"I'm afraid she must go," sighed Mrs. Brownlow. Her husband said, more robustly, that such an event would be a good riddance—a saying repeated, with the rest of the conversation, by the butler (one William Byles, still living) to the gratified ears of Mrs. Smilker in the kitchen.

"But I'm not easy about her future. She's an odd child, and looks it."

"Pretty?" This from Mr. Pindar.

"Well, I don't know. Striking-looking, you'd rather say, perhaps, Mr. Pindar."

"Let her go her own way. We've talked quite enough about her." Lady Meg sounded decisive—and not a little bored.

"And then"—Mrs. Brownlow made bold to go on for a moment—"such a funny mark! Many people wouldn't like it, I'm sure."

Lady Meg turned sharply on her. "Mark? What do you mean? What mark?"

"A mark on her face, you know. A round, red mark—"

"Big as a threepenny bit, pretty nearly," said the Squire.

"Where?"

"On her cheek."

"Where is the girl?" asked Lady Meg. Her whole demeanor had changed, her bored air had vanished. "She seemed fair excited," Mr. Byles reports. Then she turned to the said Byles: "Find out where that girl is, and let me know. Don't tell her anything about it. I'll go to her."

"But let me send for her—" began the Squire, courteously.

"No, give me my own way. I don't want her frightened."

The Squire gave the orders she desired, and the last Mr. Byles heard as he left the room was from Lady Meg:

"Marks like that always mean something—eh, Pindar?"

No doubt Mr. Pindar agreed, but his reply is lost.

The girls in the avenue had made their plan. Sophy would not bow her head to Mrs. Smilker, nor longer eat the bread of benevolence embittered by servitude. She would go with Julia; she, too, would tread the boards—if only she could get her feet on them; and when did any girl seriously doubt her ability to do that? The pair were gay and laughing, when suddenly through the gate came Lady Meg and the spaniels—Lady Meg ahead as usual, and with a purposeful air.

"Who are they?" cried Sophy.

Hazleby is but twelve miles from Morpingham. Julia had been over to see the big house, and had sighted Lady Meg in the garden.

"It's Lady Margaret Duddington," she whispered, rather in a fright. There was time for no more. Lady Meg was upon them. Sophy was identified by her dress, and, to Lady Meg's devouring eyes, by the mark.

"You're the girl who's been behaving so badly?" she said.

Seeing no profit in arguing the merits, Sophy answered "Yes."

At this point Julia observed one old gentleman nudge the other and whisper something; it is morally certain that Pindar whispered to Pikes: "Percival's girl!"

"You seem to like your own way. What are you going to do? Say you're sorry?"

"No. I'm not sorry. I'm going away."

"Come here, girl, let me look at you."

Sophy obeyed, walking up to Lady Meg and fixing her eyes on her face. She was interested, not frightened, as it seemed. Lady Meg looked long at her.

"Going away? Where to?"

Julia spoke up. "She's coming with me, please, Lady Margaret." Julia, it would seem, was a little frightened.

"Who are you?"

"Julia Robins. My mother lives there." She pointed to Woodbine Cottage. "I—I'm on the stage—"

"Lord help you!" remarked Lady Meg, disconcertingly.

"Not at all!" protested Julia, her meaning plain, her expression of it faulty. "And I—I'm going to help her to—to get an engagement. We're friends."

"What's she going to do with that on the stage?" Lady Meg's forefinger almost touched the mark.

"Oh, that's all right, Lady Margaret. Just a little cold cream and powder—"

"Nasty stuff!" said Lady Meg.

A pause followed, Lady Meg still studying Sophy's face. Then, without turning round, she made a remark obviously addressed to the gentlemen behind her:

"I expect this is Percival's young person."

"Without a doubt," said Pikes.

"And Percival was right about her, too," said Pindar.

"Think so? I ain't sure yet," said Lady Meg. "And at any rate I don't care twopence about that. But—" A long pause marked a renewed scrutiny. "Your name's Sophy, isn't it?"

"Yes." Sophy hesitated, then forced out the words: "Sophy Grouch."

"Grouch?"

"I said Grouch."

"Humph! Well, Sophy, don't go on the stage. It's a poor affair, the stage, begging Miss Julia's pardon—I'm sure she'll do admirably at it. But a poor affair it is. There's not much to be said for the real thing—but it's a deal better than the stage, Sophy."

"The real thing?" Julia saw Sophy's eyes grow thoughtful.

"The world—places—London—Paris—men and women—Lord help them! Come with me, and I'll show you all that."

"What shall I do if I come with you?"

"Do? Eat and drink, and waste time and money, like the rest of us. Eh, Pindar?"

"Of course," said Mr. Pindar, with a placid smile.

"I sha'n't be a—a servant again?"

"Everybody in my house is a slave, I'm told, but you won't be more of a slave than the rest."

"Will you have me taught?"

Lady Meg looked hard at her. For the first time she smiled, rather grimly. "Yes, I'll have you taught, and I'll show you the Queen of England, and, if you behave yourself, the Emperor of the French—Lord help him!"

"Not unless she behaves herself!" murmured Mr. Pindar.

"Hold your tongue, Pindar! Now, then, what do you say? No, wait a minute; I want

you to understand it properly." She became silent for a moment. Julia was thinking her a very rude woman; but, since Mr. Pindar did not mind, who need?

Lady Meg resumed. "I won't make an obligation of you—I mean, I won't be bound to you; and you sha'n't be bound to me. You'll stay with me as long as you like, or as long as I like, as the case may be. If you want to go, put your visiting-card—yes, you'll have one—in an envelope and send it to me. And if I want you to go, I'll put a hundred-pound note in an envelope and send it to you—upon which you'll go, and no reasons given! Is it agreed?"

"It sounds all right," said Sophy.

"Did you always have that mark on your cheek?"

"Yes, always. Father told me so."

"Well, will you come?"

Sophy was torn. The stage was very attractive, and the love she had for Julia Robins held her as though by a cord. But was the stage a poor thing? Was that mysterious "real thing" better? Though even of that this strange woman spoke scornfully. Already there must have been some underground channel of understanding between them; for Sophy knew that Lady Meg was more than interested in her—that she was actually excited about her; and Lady Meg, in her turn, knew that she played a good card when she dangled before Sophy's eyes the Queen of England and the Emperor of the French—though even then came that saving "Lord help him!" to damp an over-ardent expectation.

"Let me speak to Julia," said Sophy. Lady Meg nodded; the girls linked arms and walked apart. Pindar came to Lady Meg's elbow.

"Another whim!" said he, in a low voice. Pikes was looking round the view with a kind of vacant contentment.

"Yes," she said. His lips moved. "I know what you said. You said: 'You old fool!'

Pindar."

"Never, on my life, my lady!" They seemed more friends now than patroness and client. Few saw them thus, but Pindar told Dunstanbury, and the old gentleman was no liar.

"Give me one more!" she whispered, plainly excited. "That mark must mean something. It may open a way."

"For her?" he asked, smiling.

"It must for her. It may for me."

"A way where?"

"To knowledge—knowledge of the unknown. They may speak through her!"

"Lady Meg! Lady Meg! And if they don't, the hundred-pound note! It's very cruel."

"Who knows?—who knows, Pindar? Fate has her ways."

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Not half as amusing as your ladyship's!"

Sophy, twenty yards off, flung her arms round Julia. The embrace was long; it spoke farewell. Lady Meg's eyes brightened. "She's coming with me," she said. Pindar shrugged his shoulders again and fell back to heel. Sophy walked briskly up.

"I'll come, my lady," she said.

"Good. To-morrow afternoon—to London. Mrs. Brownlow has the address. Good-bye." She turned abruptly on her heel and marched off, her retinue following.

Julia came to Sophy.

"We can write," she said. "And she's right. You must be for the real thing, Sophy!"

"My dear, my dear!" murmured Sophy, half in tears. "Yes, we must write." She drew back and stood erect. "It's all very dark," she said. "But I like it. London—and Paris! On the Seine!" Old lessons came back with new import now.

"The Emperor of the French!" Julia mocked—with tears in her eyes.

A sudden thought occurred to Sophy. "What did she mean by 'Percival's young person'? Is his name Percival?"

Julia gave a little cry. "Lord Dunstanbury's? Yes. You've seen him again?"

She drew out the story. It made the sorrow of parting half forgotten.

"You owe this to him, then! How romantic!" was actress Julia's conclusion—in part a true one, no doubt. But Sophy, looking deeper, fingered the Red Star. She had tracked the magnet of Lady Meg's regard, the point of her interest, the pivot of decision for that mind of whims.

V

THE VISION OF "SOMETHING BRIGHT"

With that scene in the avenue of elm-trees at Morpingham there comes a falling of the veil. Letters passed between Sophy and Julia Robins, but they have not been preserved. The diary was not yet begun. Basil Williamson did not move in the same world with Lady Meg and her entourage: Dunstanbury was in Ireland, where his regiment was then stationed. For the next twelve months there is only one glimpse of Sophy—that a passing and accidental one, although not without its significance as throwing a light on Lady Meg's adoption of Sophy (while it lasted it amounted to that), and on the strange use to which she hoped to be able to turn her protégée. The reference is, however, tantalizingly vague just where explicitness would have been of curious interest, though hardly of any real importance to a sensible mind.

The reference occurs in a privately printed volume of reminiscences by the late Captain Hans Fleming, R.N., a sailor of some distinction, but better known as a naturalist. Writing in the winter of 1865-66 (he gives no precise date), he describes in a letter a meeting with Lady Meg—whom, it will be noticed, he calls "old Lady Meg," although at that time she was but forty-nine. She had so early in life taken up

an attitude of resolute spinsterhood that there was a tendency to exaggerate her years.

"To-day in the park I met old Lady Meg Duddington. It was piercing cold, but the carriage was drawn up under the trees. The poor spaniels on the opposite seat were shivering! She stopped me and was, for her, very gracious; she only 'Lord-helped-me' twice in the whole conversation. She was full of her ghosts and spirits, her seers and witches. She has got hold of an entirely new prophetess, a certain woman who calls herself Madame Mantis and knows all the secrets of the future, both this side the grave and the other. Beside Lady Meg sat a remarkably striking girl, to whom she introduced me, but I didn't catch the name. I gathered that this girl (who had an odd mark on one cheek, almost like a pale pink wafer) was, in old Meg's mad mind, anyhow, mixed up with the prophetess—as medium, or subject, or inspiration, or something of that kind—I don't understand that nonsense, and don't want to. But when I looked sceptical (and old Pindar chuckled—or it may have been his teeth chattering with the cold), Meg nodded her head at the girl and said: 'She'll tell you a different tale some day: if you meet her in five years' time, perhaps.' I don't know what the old lady meant; I suppose the girl did, but she looked absolutely indifferent, and, indeed, bored. One can't help being amused, but, seriously, it's rather sad for a man who was brought up in the reverence of Lord Dunstanbury to see his only daughter—a clever woman, too, naturally—devoting herself to such childish stuff."

Such is the passage; it is fair to add that most of the Captain's book is of more general interest. As he implies, he had had a long acquaintance with the Dunstanbury family, and took a particular interest in anything that related to it. Nevertheless, what he says has its place here; it fits in with and explains Lady Meg's excited and mystical exclamation to Mr. Pindar at Morpingham, "They may speak through her!" Apparently "they" had spoken—to what effect we cannot even conjecture, unless an explanation be found in a letter of the Kravonian period in

which Sophy says to Julia: "You remember that saying of Mantis's when we were in London—the one about how she saw something hanging in the air over my head—something bright." That is all she says—and "something bright" leaves the matter very vague. A sword—a crown—the nimbus of a saint: imagination might play untrammelled. Still some prophecy was made; Lady Meg built on it, and Sophy (for all her apparent indifference) remembered it, and in after-days thought it worthy of recall. That is as far as we can go; and with that passing glimpse, Sophy Grouch (of course the mention of the wafer-like mark puts her identity beyond question) passes out of sight for the time; indeed, as Sophy Grouch, in the position in which we have seen her and in the name under which we have known her, she passes out of sight forever.

PART II

PARIS

I

PHAROS, MANTIS, AND CO.

Lady Meg left London for Paris towards the end of 1865 or the beginning of 1866, but we hear nothing of her doings until the early summer of 1868. The veil lifts then (so far as it ever lifts from before the face of the Paris period), and shows us the establishment in the Rue de Grenelle. A queer picture it is in many ways; it gives reason to think that the state of mind to which Lady Meg had now come is but mildly described as eccentricity.

The eminent Lord Dunstanbury, Lady Meg's father, had been one of that set of English Whigs and Liberals who were much at home in Paris in the days of the July

Monarchy. Among his friends was a certain Marquis de Savres, the head of an old French family of Royalist principles. This gentleman had, however, accepted the throne of Louis Philippe and the political principles and leadership of Guizot. Between him and Lord Dunstanbury there arose a close intimacy, and Lady Meg as a girl had often visited in the Rue de Grenelle. Changed as her views were, and separated as she was from most of her father's coterie in Paris, friendship and intercourse between her and the Savres family had never dropped. The present head of that family was Casimir de Savres, a young man of twenty-eight, an officer of cavalry. Being a bachelor, he preferred to dwell in a small apartment on the other side of the river, and the family house in the Rue de Grenelle stood empty. Under some arrangement (presumably a business one, for Marquis de Savres was by no means rich) Lady Meg occupied the first floor of the roomy old mansion. Here she is found established; with her, besides three French servants and an English coachman (she has for the time apparently shaken off the spaniels), is Mademoiselle Sophie de Gruche, in whose favor Sophy Grouch has effected an unobtrusive disappearance.

This harmless, if somewhat absurd, transformation was carried out with a futile elaboration, smacking of Lady Meg's sardonic perversity rather than of Sophy's directer methods. Sophy would probably have claimed the right to call herself what she pleased, and left the world to account for her name in any way it pleased. Lady Meg must needs fit her up with a story. She was the daughter of a Creole gentleman married to an English wife. Her mother being early left a widow, Sophy had been brought up entirely in England—hence her indifferent acquaintance with French. If this excuse served a purpose at first, at any rate it soon became unnecessary. Sophy's marked talent for languages (she subsequently mastered Kravonian, a very difficult dialect, in the space of a few months) made French a second native tongue to her within a year. But the story was kept up. Perhaps it imposed on nobody; but nobody was rude enough—or interested enough—to question it openly. Sophy herself never refers to it; but she used the name from this time forward on all occasions except

when writing to Julia Robins, when she continues to sign "Sophy" as before—a habit which lasts to the end, notwithstanding other changes in her public or official style.

The times were stirring, a prelude to the great storm which was so soon to follow. Paris was full of men who in the next few years were to make or lose fame, to rise with a bound or fall with a crash. Into such society Lady Meg's name, rank, and parentage would have carried her, had she cared to go; she could have shown Sophy the Emperor of the French at close quarters instead of contenting herself with a literal fulfilment of her promise by pointing him out as he drove in the streets. But Lady Meg was rabid against the Empire; her "Lord help him!"—the habitual expression of contempt on her lips—was never lacking for the Emperor. Her political associates were the ladies of the Faubourg St.-Germain, and there are vague indications that Lady Meg was very busy among them and conceived herself to be engaged in intrigues of vital importance. The cracks in the imposing Imperial structure were visible enough by now, and every hostile party was on the lookout for its chance.

As we all know, perhaps no chance, certainly no power to use a chance, was given to Lady Meg's friends; and we need not repine that ignorance spares us the trouble of dealing with their unfruitful hopes and disappointed schemes. Still the intrigues, the gossip, and the Royalist atmosphere were to Sophy in some sort an introduction to political interests, and no doubt had an influence on her mind. So far as she ever acquired political principles—the existence of such in her mind is, it must be confessed, doubtful—they were the tenets which reigned in the Rue de Grenelle and in the houses of Lady Meg's Royalist allies.

So on one side of Lady Meg are the nobles and their noble ladies sulking and scheming, and on the other—a bizarre contrast—her witch and her wizard, Madame Mantis and Pharos. Where the carcass is, there will the vultures be; should the

carcass get up and walk, presumably the vultures would wing an expectant way after it. Madame Mantis—the woman of the prophecy about "something bright"—had followed Lady Meg to Paris, scenting fresh prey. But a more ingenious and powerful scoundrel came on the scene; in association with Mantis—probably very close and not creditable association—is Pharos, alias Jean Coulin. In after-days, under the Republic, this personage got himself into trouble, and was tried at Lille for obtaining no less a sum than one hundred and fifty thousand francs from a rich old Royalist lady who lived in the neighborhood of the town. The rogue got his money under cover of a vaticination that MacMahon would restore the monarchy—a nearer approach to the real than he reached in his dealings with Lady Meg, but not, probably, on that account any the more favorably viewed by his judges.

The President's interrogation of the prisoner, ranging over his whole life, tells us the bulk of what we know of him; but the earliest sketch comes from Sophy herself, in one of the rare letters of this period which have survived. "A dirty, scrubby fellow, with greasy hair and a squint in his eye," she tells Julia Robins. "He wears a black cloak down to his heels, and a gimcrack thing round his neck that he calls his 'periapt'—charm, I suppose he means. Says he can work spells with it; and his precious partner Mantis kisses it (Italics are Sophy's) whenever she meets him. Phew! I'd like to give them both a dusting! What do you think? Pharos, as he calls himself, tells Lady Meg he can make the dead speak to her; and she says that isn't it possible that, since they've died themselves and know all about it, they may be able to tell her how not to! Seeing how this suits his book, it isn't Pharos who's going to say 'no,' though he tells her to make a will in case anything happens before he's ready to 'establish communication'—and perhaps they won't tell, after all, but he thinks they will! Now I come into the game! Me being very sympathetic, they're to talk through me (Italics again are Sophy's). Did you ever hear of such nonsense? I told Master Pharos that I didn't know whether his ghosts would talk through me, but I didn't need any of their help to pretty well see through him! But Lady Meg's hot on

it. I suppose it's what I'm here for, and I must let him try—or pretend to. It's all one to me, and it pleases Lady Meg. Only he and I have nothing else to do with each other! I'll see to that. To tell you the truth, I don't like the look in his eye sometimes—and I don't think Mrs. Mantis would either!"

As a medium Sophy was a failure. She was antagonistic—purposely antagonistic, said Jean Coulin, attempting to defend himself against the President's suggestion that he had received something like three thousand pounds from Lady Meg and given her not a jot of supernatural information in return. This failure of Sophy's was the first rift between Lady Meg and her. Pharos could have used it against her, and his power was great; but it was not at present his game to eject her from the household. He had other ends in view; and there was no question of the hundred-pound note yet.

It is pleasant to turn to another figure—one which stands out in the meagre records of this time and bears its prominence well. Casimir Marquis de Savres is neither futile nor sordid, neither schemer nor impostor. He was a brave and simple soldier and gentleman, holding his ancestral principles in his heart, but content to serve his country in evil times until good should come. He was courteous and attentive to Lady Meg, touching her follies with a light hand; and to Sophy he gave his love with an honest and impetuous sincerity, which he masked by a gay humor—lest his lady should be grieved at the havoc she herself had made. His feelings about Pharos, his partner, and his jugglings, need no description. "If you are neither restoring the King nor raising the devil to-morrow, I should like to come to breakfast," he writes in one of his early letters. "O Lady of the Red Star, if it were to restore you to your kingdom in the star whose sign you bear, I would raise the devil himself, all laws of Church and State notwithstanding! I came on Tuesday evening—you were surrounded by most unimpeachable dowagers. Excellent principles and irreproachable French! But, mon Dieu, for conversation! I came on Thursday afternoon. Pharos and Mantis held sway, and I dared not look round for fear of my ancestors being there to see me in the Emperor's uniform! Tell me when there will

be no ancestors living or dead, nor dowagers nor devils, that I may come and see you. If dear Lady Meg (Laidee Maig!)[1] should be pursuing one or the other in other places, yet forbid me not to come. She has whims, we know, but not, thank Heaven, many principles; or, if she has our principles, at least she scorns our etiquette. Moreover, queens make etiquette, and are not ruled by what they make. And Star-Queens are more free and more absolute still. What a long note—all to ask for a breakfast! No, it's to ask for a sight of your eyes—and a volume would not be too long for me to write—though it would be a bad way to make friends with the eyes that had to read it! I believe I go on writing because it seems in some way to keep you with me; and so, if I could write always of you, I would lay down my sword and take up the pen for life. Yet writing to you, though sweet as heaven, is as the lowest hell from which Pharos fetches devils as compared with seeing you. Be kind. Farewell.

"Casimir."

To this he adds a postscript, referring apparently to some unrecorded incident: "Yes, the Emperor did ask who it was the other day. I was sure his eye hit the mark. I have the information direct."

It is very possible that this direct information pleased Sophy.

Last among the prominent members of the group in which Sophy lived in Paris is Madame Zerkovitch. Her husband was of Russian extraction, his father having settled in Kravonia and become naturalized there. The son was now in Paris as correspondent to one of the principal papers of Slavna. Madame Zerkovitch was by birth a Pole; not a remarkable woman in herself, but important in this history as the effective link between these days and Sophy's life in Kravonia. She was small and thin, with auburn hair and very bright, hazel eyes, with light-colored lashes. An agreeable talker, an accomplished singer, and a kind-hearted woman, she was an acquaintance to be welcomed. Whatever strange notions she harbored about Sophy

in after-days, she conceived from the beginning, and never lost, a strong affection for her, and their friendship ripened quickly from their first meeting at Lady Meg's, where Marie Zerkovitch was a frequent visitor, and much interested in Pharos's hocus-pocus.

The occasion was one of the séances where Sophy was to be medium. It was a curious scene. Gaunt Lady Meg, with her eyes strained and eager, superintended the arrangements. "Lord help you!" was plentiful for everybody, even for the prophet Pharos himself when his miracle was behind time. Mantis was there, subterraneously scornful of her unwilling rival; and the rogue Pharos himself, with his oily glibness, his cheap mystery, and his professional jargon. Two or three dowagers and Casimir de Savres—who had to unbuckle his sword and put it outside the door for reasons insufficiently explained—completed the party. In the middle sat Sophy, smiling patiently, but with her white brow wrinkled just a little beneath the arching masses of her dark hair. On her lips the smile persisted all through; the mark was hardly visible. "No more than the slightest pinkness; I didn't notice it till I had looked at her for full five minutes," says Marie Zerkovitch. This was, no doubt, the normal experience of those who met Sophy first in moments of repose or of depression.

Sophy is to "go off." Pharos makes his passes and goes through the rest of his performance.

"I feel nothing at all—not even sleepy," said Sophy. "Only just tired of staring at monsieur!"

Casimir de Savres laughed; old Lady Meg looked furious; Mantis hid a sickly smile. Down go the lights to a dull gloom—at the prophet's request. More gestures, more whisperings, and then sighs of exhaustion from the energetic wizard.

"Get on, Lord help you!" came testily from Lady Meg. Had Pharos been veritably her idol, she would have kicked him into granting her prayer.

"She won't give me her will—she won't be passive," he protests, almost eliciting a perverse sympathy.

He produced a glittering disk, half as large again as a five-franc piece; it gave forth infinite sparkles through the dark of the room. "Look at that! Look hard—and think of nothing else!" he commanded.

Silence fell on the room. Quick breaths came from eager Lady Meg; otherwise all was still.

"It's working!" whispered the wizard. "The power is working."

Silence again. Then a sudden, overpowering peal of laughter from the medium—hearty, rippling, irrepressible and irresistible.

"Oh, Lady Meg, I feel such a fool—oh, such a fool!" she cried—and her laughter mastered her again.

Irresistible! Marie Zerkovitch joined in Casimir's hearty mirth, Mantis's shrill cackle and the sniggers of the dowagers swelled the chorus. Casimir sprang up and turned up the gas, laughing still. The wizard stood scowling savagely; Lady Meg glared malignantly at her ill-chosen medium and disappointing protégée.

"What's the reason for it, Lord help you?" she snarled, with a very nasty look at Pharos.

He saw the danger. His influence was threatened, his patroness's belief in him shaken.

"I don't know," he answered, in apparent humility. "I can't account for it. It happens, so far as I know, only in one case—and Heaven forbid that I should suggest that of mademoiselle."

"What is the case?" snapped Lady Meg, by no means pacified—in fact, still dangerously sceptical.

Pharos made an answer, grave and serious in tone in purpose and effect malignantly

nonsensical: "When the person whom it is sought to subject to this particular influence (he touched the pocket where his precious disk now lay) has the Evil Eye."

An appeal to a superstition old as the hills and widespread as the human race—would it ever fail to hit some mark in a company of a dozen? Casimir laughed in hearty contempt, Sophy laughed in mischievous mockery. But two of the dowagers crossed themselves, Lady Meg started and glowered—and little Madame Zerkovitch marked, recorded, and remembered. Her mind was apt soil for seed of that order.

That, in five years' time, five years in jail awaited the ingenious Monsieur Pharos occasions a consoling reflection.

II

THE LORD OF YOUTH

Sophy's enemies were at work—and Sophy was careless. Such is the history of the next twelve months. Mantis was installed medium now—and the revelations came. But they came slow, vague, fitful, tantalizing. Something was wrong, Pharos confessed ruefully—what could it be? For surely Lady Meg by her faith (and, it may be added, her liberality) deserved well of the Unseen Powers? He hinted at that Evil Eve again, but without express accusation. Under "the influence" Mantis would speak of "the malign one"; but Mantis, when awake, thought Mademoiselle de Gruche a charming young lady! It was odd and mysterious. Pharos could make nothing of it; he, too, thought Mademoiselle Sophie—he advanced to that pleasant informality of description—quite ravishing and entirely devoted to Lady Meg, only, unhappily, so irresponsive to the Unseen—a trifle unsympathetic, it might be. But what would you? The young had no need to think of death or the dead. Was it to be expected, then, that Mademoiselle Sophie would be a good subject, or take much

interest in the work, great and wonderful though it might be?

The pair of rogues did their work well and quietly—so quietly that nothing of it would be known were it not that they quarrelled later on over the spoils of this and other transactions, and Madame Mantis, in the witness-box at Lille, used her memory and her tongue freely. "The plan now was to get rid of the young lady," she said, plainly. "Pharos feared her power over my lady, and that my lady might leave her all the money. Pharos hated the young lady because she would have nothing to say to him, and told him plainly that she thought him a charlatan. She had courage, yes! But if she would have joined in with him—why, then into the streets with me! I knew that well enough, and Pharos knew I knew it. So I hated her, too, fearing that some day she and he would make up their differences, and I—that for me! Yes, that was how we were, Monsieur le Président." Her lucid exposition elicited a polite compliment from Monsieur le Président—and we also are obliged to her.

But Sophy was heedless. She showed afterwards that she could fight well for what she loved well, and that with her an eager heart made a strong hand. Her heart was not in this fight. The revelation of mad Lady Meg's true motive for taking her up may well have damped a gratitude otherwise becoming in Sophy Grouch transmuted to Sophie de Gruche. Yet the gratitude remained; she fought for Lady Meg—for her sanity and some return of sanity in her proceedings. In so fighting she fought against herself—for Lady Meg was very mad now. For herself she did not fight; her heart and her thoughts were elsewhere. The schemes in the Rue de Grenelle occupied her hardly more than the clash of principles, the efforts of a falling dynasty, the struggles of rising freedom, the stir and seething of the great city and the critical times in which she lived.

For she was young, and the Lord of Youth had come to visit her in his shower of golden promise. The days were marked for her no more by the fawning advances or the spiteful insinuations of Pharos than by the heroics of an uneasy emperor or the

ingenious experiments in reconciling contradictions wherein his ministers were engaged. For her the days lived or lived not as she met or failed to meet Casimir de Savres. It was the season of her first love. Yet, with all its joy, the shadow of doubt is over it. It seems not perfect; the delight is in receiving, not in giving; his letters to her, full of reminiscences of their meetings and talks, are shaded with doubt and eloquent of insecurity. She was no more than a girl in years; but in some ways her mind was precociously developed—her ambition was spreading its still growing wings. Casimir's constant tone of deference—almost of adulation—marks in part the man, in part the convention in which he had been bred; but it marks, too, the suppliant: to the last he is the wooer, not the lover, and at the end of his ecstasy lies the risk of despair. For her part she often speaks of him afterwards, and always with the tenderest affection; she never ceased to carry with her wherever she went the bundle of his letters, tied with a scrap of ribbon and inscribed with a date. But there is one reference, worthy of note, to her innermost sentiments towards him, to the true state of her heart as she came to realize it by-and-by. "I loved him, but I hadn't grown into my feelings," she says. Brief and almost accidental as the utterance is, it is full of significance; but its light is thrown back. It is the statement of how she came to know how she had been towards him, not of how in those happy days she seemed to herself to be.

He knew about Grouch; he had been told by a copious superfluity of female friendliness—by Lady Meg, cloaking suspicious malignity under specious penitence; by Madame Mantis with impertinent and intrusive archness; by Marie Zerkovitch in the sheer impossibility of containing within herself any secret which had the bad fortune to be intrusted to her. Sophy's own confession, made with incredible difficulty—she hated the name so—fell flat and was greeted with a laugh of mockery.

It happened at the Calvaire at Fontainebleau, whither they had made a day's and night's excursion, under the escort of Marie Zerkovitch and a student friend of hers

from the Quartier Latin. These two they had left behind sipping beer at a restaurant facing the château. On the eminence which commands the white little town dropped amid the old forest, over against the red roofs of the palace vying in richness with the turning leaves, in sight of a view in its own kind unsurpassed, in its own charm unequalled, Sophy broke the brutal truth which was to end the infatuation of the head of a house old as St. Louis.

"It's bad to pronounce, is it?" asked Casimir, smiling and touching her hand. "Ah, well, good or bad, I couldn't pronounce it, so to me it is nothing."

"They'd all say it was terrible—a mésalliance."

"I fear only one voice on earth saying that."

"And the fraud I am—de Gruche!" She caught his hand tightly. Never before had it occurred to her to defend or to excuse the transparent fiction.

"I know stars fall," he said, with his pretty gravity, not too grave. "I wish that they may rise to their own height again—and I rise with them."

The sun sank behind the horizon. A gentle afterglow of salmon-pink rested over the palace and city; the forest turned to a frame of smoky, brownish black. Casimir waved a hand towards it and laughed merrily.

"Before we were, it was—after we are, it shall be! I sound as old as Scripture! It has seen old masters—and great mistresses! Saving the proprieties, weren't you Montespan or Pompadour?"

"De la Vallière?" she laughed. "Or Maintenon?"

"For good or evil, neither! Do I hurt you?"

"No; you make me think, though," answered Sophy. "Why?"

"They niggled—at virtue or at vice. You don't niggle! Neither did Montespan nor Pompadour."

"And so I am to be—Marquise de—?"

"Higher, higher!" he laughed. "Madame la Maréchale—!"

"It is war, then—soon—you think?" She turned to him with a sudden tension.

He pointed a Frenchman's eloquent forefinger to the dark mass of the château, whose chimneys rose now like gloomy interrogation-marks to an unresponsive, darkened sky. "He is there now—the Emperor! Perhaps he walks in his garden by the round pond—thinking, dreaming, balancing."

"Throwing balls in the air, as conjurers do?"

"Yes, my star."

"And if he misses the first?"

"He'll seek applause by the second. And the second, I think, would be war."

"And you would—go?"

"To what other end do I love the Lady of the Red Star—alas! I can't see it—save to bring her glory?"

"That's French," said Sophy, with a laugh. "Wouldn't you rather stay with me and be happy?"

"Who speaks to me?" he cried, springing to his feet. "Not you!"

"No, no," she answered, "I have no fear. What is it, Casimir, that drives us on?"

"Drives us on! You! You, too?"

"It's not a woman's part, is it?"

He caught her round the waist, and she allowed his clasp. But she grew grave, yet smiled again softly.

"If all life were an evening at Fontainebleau—a fine evening at Fontainebleau!" she murmured, in the low clearness which marked her voice.

"Mightn't it be?"

"With war? And with what drives us on?"

He sighed, and his sigh puzzled her.

"Oh, well," she cried, "at least you know I'm Sophy Grouch, and my father was as mean as the man who opens your lodge-gate."

The sky had gone a blue-black. A single star sombrely announced the coming pageant.

"And his daughter high as the hopes that beckon me to my career!"

"You've a wonderful way of talking," smiled Sophy Grouch—simple Essex in contact with Paris at that instant.

"You'll be my wife, Sophie?"

"I don't think Lady Meg will keep me long. Pharos is working hard—so Marie Zerkovitch declares. I should bring you a dot of two thousand five hundred francs!"

"Do you love me?"

The old question rang clear in the still air. Who has not heard it of women—or uttered it of men? Often so easy, sometimes so hard. When all is right save one thing—or when all is wrong save one thing—then it is hard to answer, and may have been hard to ask. With Casimir there was no doubt, save the doubt of the answer. Sophy stood poised on a hesitation. The present seemed perfect. Only an unknown future cried to her through the falling night.

"I'll win glory for you," he cried. "The Emperor will fight!"

"You're no Emperor's man!" she mocked.

"Yes, while he means France. I'm for anybody who means France." For a moment serious, the next he kissed her hand merrily. "Or for anybody who'll give me a wreath, a medal, a toy to bring home to her I love."

"You're very fascinating," Sophy confessed.

It was not the word. Casimir fell from his exaltation. "It's not love, that of yours," said he.

"No—I don't know. You might make it love. Oh, how I talk beyond my rights!"

"Beyond your rights? Impossible! May I go on trying?"

He saw Sophy's smile dimly through the gloom. From it he glanced to the dying gleam of the white houses dropped among the trees, to the dull mass of the ancient home of history and kings. But back he came to the living, elusive, half-seen smile.

"Can you stop?" said Sophy.

He raised his hat from his head and stooped to kiss her hand.

"Nor would nor could," said he—"in the warmth of life or the cold hour of death!"

"No, no—if you die, it's gloriously!" The hour carried her away. "Casimir, I wish I were sure!"

The spirit of his race filled his reply: "You want to be dull?"

"No—I—I—I want you to kiss my cheek."

"May I salute the star?"

"But it's no promise!"

"It's better!"

"My dear, I—I'm very fond of you."

"That's all?"

"Enough for to-night! What's he thinking of down there?"

"The Emperor? I'm not so much as sure he's there, really. Somebody said he had started for St. Cloud this morning."

"Pretend he's there!"

"Then of anything except how many men die for what he wants."

"Or of how many women weep?"

Her reply set a new light to his passion. "You'd weep?" he cried.

"Oh, I suppose so!" The answer was half a laugh, half a sob.

"But not too much! No more than the slightest dimness to the glowing star!"

Sophy laughed in a tremulous key; her body shook. She laid her hands in his. "No more, no more. Surely Marie and the student are bored? Isn't it supper-time? Oh, Casimir, if I were worthy, if I were sure! What's ahead of us? Must we go back? To-night, up here, it all seems so simple! Does he mean war? He down there? And you'll fight!" She looked at him for an instant. He was close to her. She thrust him away from her. "Don't fight thinking of me," she said.

"How otherwise?" he asked.

She tossed her head impatiently. "I don't know—but—but Pharos makes me afraid. He—he says that things I love die."

The young soldier laughed. "That leaves him pretty safe," said he.

She put her arm through his, and they walked down. It had been a night to be forgotten only when all is. Yet she went from him unpledged, and tossed in her bed, asking: "Shall I?" and answered: "I'll decide to-morrow!"

But to-morrow was not at the Calvaire nor in the seducing sweetness of the silent trees. When she rose, he was gone—and the student, too. Marie Zerkovitch, inquisitively friendly, flung a fly for news.

"He's as fine a gentleman as Lord Dunstanbury!" cried Sophy Grouch.

"As who?" asked Marie.

Sophy smiled over her smoking coffee. "As the man who first saw me," she said. "But, oh, I'm puzzled!"

Marie Zerkovitch bit her roll.

"Armand was charming," she observed. The student was Armand. He, too, let it be recorded, had made a little love, yet in all seemly ardor.

So ends this glimpse of the happy days.

III

THE NOTE—AND NO REASONS

That feverish month of July—fitting climax to the scorching, arid summer of 1870—had run full half its course. Madness had stricken the rulers of France; to avoid danger they rushed on destruction. Gay madness spread through the veins of Paris. Perverse always, Lady Meg Duddington chose this moment for coming back to her senses—or at least for abandoning the particular form of insanity to which she had devoted the last five years.

One afternoon she called her witch and her wizard. "You're a pair of quacks, and I've been an old fool," she said, composedly, sitting straight up in her high-backed chair. She flung a couple of thousand-franc notes across the table. "You can go," she ended, with contemptuous brevity. Mantis's evil temper broke out: "She has done this, the malign one!" Pharos was wiser; he had not done badly out of Lady Meg, and madness such as hers is apt to be recurrent. His farewell was gentle, his exit not ungraceful; yet he, too, prayed her to beware of a certain influence. "Stuff! You don't know what you're talking about!" Lady Meg jerked out, and pointed with her finger to the door. "So we went out, and to avoid any trouble we left Paris the same day. But this man here would not give me any of the money, though I had done as much to earn it as he had, or more." So injured Madame Mantis told Monsieur le Président at Lille.

Early on the morning of Sunday, the 17th, having received word through Lady Meg's maid that her presence was not commanded in the Rue de Grenelle, Sophy slipped round to the Rue du Bac and broke in on Marie Zerkovitch, radiant with her great news and imploring her friend to celebrate it by a day in the country.

"It means that dear old Lady Meg will be what she used to be to me!" she cried. "We shall go back to England, I expect, and—I wonder what that will be like!"

Her face grew suddenly thoughtful. Back to England! How would that suit Sophie de Gruche? And what was to happen about Casimir de Savres? The period of her long, sweet indecision was threatened with a forced conclusion.

Marie Zerkovitch was preoccupied against both her friend's joy and her friend's perplexity. Great affairs touched her at home. There would be war, she said, certainly war; to-day the Senate went to St. Cloud to see the Emperor. Zerkovitch had started thither already, on the track of news. The news in the near future would certainly be war, and Zerkovitch would follow the armies, still on the track of news. "He went before, in the war of 'sixty-six," she said, her lips trembling. "And he all but died of fever; that kills the correspondents just as much as the soldiers. Ah, it's so dangerous, Sophie—and so terrible to be left behind alone. I don't know what I shall do! My husband wants me to go home. He doesn't believe the French will win, and he fears trouble for those who stay here." She looked at last at Sophy's clouded face. "Ah, and your Casimir—he will be at the front!"

"Yes, Casimir will be at the front," said Sophy, a ring of excitement hardly suppressed in her voice.

"If he should be killed!" murmured Marie, throwing her arms out in a gesture of lamentation.

"You bird of ill omen! He'll come back covered with glory."

The two spent a quiet day together, Sophy helping Marie in her homely tasks. Zerkovitch's campaigning kit was overhauled—none knew how soon orders for an advance might come—his buttons put on, his thick stockings darned. The hours slipped away in work and talk. At six o'clock they went out and dined at a small restaurant hard by. Things seemed very quiet there. The fat waiter told them with a shrug: "We sha'n't have much noise here to-night—the lads will be over there!" He pointed across the river. "They'll be over there most of the night—on the grands boulevards. Because it's war, madame. Oh, yes, it's war!" The two young women

sipped their coffee in silence. "As a lad I saw 1830. I was out in the streets in 1851. What shall I see next?" he asked them as he swept his napkin over the marble table-top. If he stayed at his post, he saw many strange things; unnatural fires lit his skies, and before his doors brother shed brother's blood.

The friends parted at half-past seven. Marie hoped her husband would be returning home soon, and with news; Sophy felt herself due in the Rue de Grenelle. She reached the house there a little before eight. The concierge was not in his room; she went up-stairs unseen, and passed into the drawing-room. The inner door leading to the room Lady Meg occupied stood open. Sophy called softly, but there was no answer. She walked towards the door and was about to look into the room, thinking that perhaps Lady Meg was asleep, when she heard herself addressed. The Frenchwoman who acted as their cook had come in and stood now on the threshold with a puzzled, distressed look on her face.

"I'm sorry, Mademoiselle Sophie, to tell you, but my lady has gone."

"Gone! Where to?"

"To England, I believe. This morning, after you had gone out, she ordered everything to be packed. It was done. She paid us here off, bidding me alone stay till orders reached me from Monsieur le Marquis. Then she went; only the coachman accompanied her. I think she started for Calais. At least, she is gone."

"She said—said nothing about me?"

"You'll see there's a letter for you on the small table in the window there."

"Oh yes! Thank you."

"Your room is ready for you to-night."

"I've dined. I shall want nothing. Good-night."

Sophy walked over to the little table in the window, and for a few moments stood looking at the envelope which lay there, addressed to her in Lady Meg's sprawling

hand. The stately room in the Rue de Grenelle seemed filled with a picture which its walls had never seen; old words re-echoed in Sophy's ears: "If I want you to go, I'll put a hundred-pound note in an envelope and send it to you; upon which you'll go, and no reasons given! Is it agreed?" As if from a long way off, she heard a servant-girl answer: "It sounds all right." She saw the old elm-trees at Morpingham, and heard the wind murmur in their boughs; Pindar chuckled, and Julia Robins's eyes were wet with tears.

"And no reasons given!" It had sounded all right—before five years of intimacy and a life transformed. It sounded different now. Yet the agreement had been made between the strange lady and the eager girl. Nor were reasons hard to find. They stood out brutally plain. Having sent her prophet to the right about, Lady Meg wanted no more of her medium—her most disappointing medium. "They" would not speak through Sophy; perhaps Lady Meg did not now want them to speak at all.

Sophy tore the envelope right across its breadth and shook out the flimsy paper within. It was folded in four. She did not trouble to open it. Lady Meg was a woman of her word, and here was the hundred-pound note of the Bank of England—"upon which you'll go, and no reasons given!" With a bitter smile she noticed that the note was soiled, the foldings old, the edges black where they were exposed. She had no doubt that all these years Lady Meg had carried it about, so as to be ready for the literal fulfilment of her bond.

"Upon which," said Sophy, "I go."

The bitter smile lasted perhaps a minute more; then the girl flung herself into a chair in a fit of tears as bitter. She had served—or failed to serve—Lady Meg's mad purpose, and she was flung aside. Very likely she had grown hateful—she, the witness of insane whims now past and out of favor. The dismissal might not be unnatural; but, for all their bargain, the manner was inhuman. They had lived and eaten and drunk together for so long. Had there been no touch of affection, no

softening of the heart? It seemed not—it seemed not. Sophy wept and wondered. "Oh, that I had never left you, Julia!" she cries in her letter, and no doubt cried now; for Julia had given her a friend's love. If Lady Meg had given her only what one spares for a dog—a kind word before he is banished, a friendly lament at parting!

Suddenly through the window came a boy's shrill voice: "Vive la guerre!"

Sophy sprang to her feet, caught up the dirty note, and thrust it inside her glove. Without delay, seemingly without hesitation, she left the house, passed swiftly along the street, and made for the Pont Royal. She was bound for the other bank and for the Boulevard des Italiens, where Casimir de Savres had his lodging. The stream of traffic set with her. She heeded it not. The streets were full of excited groups, but there was no great tumult yet. Men were eagerly reading the latest editions of the papers. Sophy pushed on till she reached Casimir's house. She was known there. Her coming caused surprise to the concierge—it was not the proper thing; but he made no difficulty. He showed her to Casimir's sitting-room, but of Casimir he could give no information, save that he presumed he would return to sleep.

"I must wait—I must see him," she said; and, as the man left her, she went to the window, flung it open wide, and stood there, looking down into the great street.

The lights blazed now. Every seat at every café was full. The newspapers did a great trade; a wave of infinite talk, infinite chaff, infinite laughter rose to her ears. A loud-voiced fellow was selling pictures of the King of Prussia—as he looks now, and as he will look! The second sheet never failed of a great success. Bands of lads came by with flags and warlike shouts. Some cheered them, more laughed and chaffed. One broad-faced old man she distinguished in the café opposite; he looked glum and sulky and kept arguing to his neighbor, wagging a fat forefinger at him repeatedly; the neighbor shrugged bored shoulders; after all, he had not made the war—it was the Emperor and those gentlemen at St. Cloud! As she watched, the stir grew greater, the bands of marching students more frequent and noisy, "A Berlin!"

they cried now, amid the same mixture of applause and tolerant amusement. A party of girls paraded down the middle of the street, singing "J'aime les militaires!" The applause grew to thunder as they went by, and the laughter broke into one great crackle when the heroines had passed.

She turned away with a start, conscious of a presence in the room. Casimir came quickly across to her, throwing his helmet on the table as he passed. He took her hands. "I know. Lady Meg wrote to me," he said. "And you are here!"

"I have no other home now," she said.

With a light of joy in his eyes he kissed her lips.

"I come to you only when I'm in trouble!" she said, softly.

"It is well," he answered, and drew her with him back to the window.

Together they stood looking down.

"It is war, then?" she asked.

"Without doubt it's war—without doubt," he answered, gravely. "And beyond that no man knows anything."

"And you?" she asked.

He took her hands again, both of hers in his. "My lady of the Red Star!" he murmured, softly.

"And you?"

"You wouldn't have it otherwise?"

"Heaven forbid! God go with you as my heart goes! When do you go?"

"I take the road in an hour for Strasburg. We are to be of MacMahon's corps."

"In an hour?"

"Yes."

"Your preparations—are they made?"

"Yes."

"And you are free?"

"Yes."

"Then you've an hour to make me sure I love you!"

He answered as to a woman of his own stock.

"I have an hour now—and all the campaign," said he.

IV

THE PICTURE AND THE STAR

The letter which gives Julia Robins the history of that Sunday—so eventful alike for France and for Sophy—is the last word of hers from Paris. Julia attached importance to it, perhaps for its romantic flavor, perhaps because she fancied that danger threatened her friend. At any rate, she bestowed it with the care she gave to the later letters, and did not expose it to the hazards which destroyed most of its predecessors. It is dated from Marie Zerkovitch's apartment in the Rue du Bac, and it ends: "I shall stay here, whatever happens—unless Casimir tells me to meet him in Berlin!"

The rash comprehensiveness of "whatever happens" was not for times like those, when neither man nor nation knew what fate an hour held; but for three weeks more she abode with Marie Zerkovitch. Marie was much disturbed in her mind. Zerkovitch had begun to send her ominous letters from the front—or as near thereto as he could get; the burden of them was that things looked bad for the French, and that her hold on Paris should be a loose one. He urged her to go home, where he would join her—for a visit at all events, very likely to stay. Marie began to talk of going home in a week or so; but she lingered on for the sake of being nearer the news of the war. So, amid the rumors of unreal victories and the tidings of reverses only too real, if not yet great, the two women waited.

Casimir had found time and opportunity to send Sophy some half-dozen notes (assuming she preserved all she received). On the 5th of August, the eve of Wõrth, he wrote at somewhat greater length: "It is night. I am off duty for an hour. I have been in the saddle full twelve hours, and I believe that, except the sentries and the outposts, I am the only man awake. We need to sleep. The Red Star, which shines everywhere for me, shines for all of us over our bivouac to-night. It must be that we fight to-morrow. Fritz is in front of us, and to-morrow he will come on. The Marshal must stop him and spoil his game; if we don't go forward now, we must go back. And we don't mean going back. It will be the first big clash—and a big one, I think, it will be. Our fellows are in fine heart (I wish their boots were as good!), but those devils over there—well, they can fight, too, and Fritz can get every ounce out of them. I am thinking of glory and of you. Is it not one and the same thing? For, in that hour, I didn't make you sure! I know it. Sophie, I'm hardly sorry for it. It seems sweet to have something left to do. Ah, but you're hard, aren't you? Shall I ever be sure of you? Even though I march into Berlin at the head of a regiment!

"I can say little more—the orderly waits for my letter. Yet I have so much, much more to say. All comes back to me in vivid snatches. I am with you in the old house—or by the Calvaire (you remember?); or again by the window; or while we walked back that Sunday night. I hear your voice—the low, full-charged voice. I see your eyes; the star glows anew for me. Adieu! I live for you always so long as I live. If I die, it will be in the thought of you, and they will kill no prouder man than Sophie's lover. To have won your love (ah, by to-morrow night, yes!) and to die for France—would it be ill done for a short life? By my faith, no! I'll make my bow to my ancestors without shame. 'I, too, have done my part, messieurs!' say I, as I sit down with my forefathers. Sophie, adieu! You won't forget? I don't think you can quite forget. Your picture rides with me, your star shines ahead.

"Casimir."

He was not wrong. They fought next day. The letter is endorsed "8th August," presumably the date of its receipt. That day came also the news of the disaster. On the 11th the casualty list revealed Casimir de Savres's name. A few lines from a brother officer a day later gave scanty details. In the great charge of French cavalry which marked the closing stages of the battle he had been the first man hit of all his regiment—shot through the heart—and through the picture of Sophy which lay over his heart.

No word comes from Sophy herself. And Madame Zerkovitch is brief: "She showed me the picture. The bullet passed exactly through where that mark on her cheek is. It was fearful; I shuddered; I hoped she didn't see. She seemed quite stunned. But she insisted on coming with me to Kravonia, where I had now determined to go at once. I did not want her to come. I thought no good would come of it. But what could I do? She would not return to England; she could not stay alone in Paris. I was the only friend she had in the world. She asked no more than to travel with me. 'When once I am there, I can look after myself,' she said."

The pair—a little fragment of a great throng, escaping or thrust forth—left Paris together on the 13th or 14th of August, en route for Kravonia. With Sophy went the bullet-pierced picture and the little bundle of letters. She did not forget. With a sore wound in her heart she turned to face a future dark, uncertain, empty of all she had loved. And—had she seen Marie Zerkovitch's shudder? Did she remember again, as she had remembered by the Calvaire at Fontainebleau, how Pharos had said that what she loved died? She had bidden Casimir not fight thinking of her. Thinking of her, he had fought and died. All she ever wrote about her departure is one sentence—"I went to Kravonia in sheer despair of the old life; I had to have something new."

Stricken she went forth from the stricken city, where hundreds of men were cutting down the trees beneath whose shade she had often walked and ridden with her lover.

PART III

KRAVONIA

I

THE NAME-DAY OF THE KING

The ancient city of Slavna, for a thousand years or more and under many dynasties the capital of Kravonia, is an island set in a plain. It lies in the broad valley of the Krath, which at this point flows due east. Immediately above the city the river divides into two branches, known as the North and the South rivers; Slavna is clasped in the embrace of these channels. Conditioned by their course, its form is not circular, but pear-shaped, for they bend out in gradual broad curves to their greatest distance from one another, reapproaching quickly after that point is passed till they meet again at the end—or, rather, what was originally the end—of the city to the east; the single reunited river may stand for the stalk of the pear.

In old days the position was a strong one; nowadays it is obviously much less defensible; and those in power had recognized this fact in two ways—first by allocating money for a new and scientific system of fortifications; secondly by destroying almost entirely the ancient and out-of-date walls which had once been the protection of the city. Part of the wall on the north side, indeed, still stood, but where it had escaped ruin it was encumbered and built over with warehouses and wharves; for the North River is the channel of commerce and the medium of trade with the country round about. To the south the wall has been entirely demolished, its site being occupied by a boulevard, onto which faces a line of handsome modern residences—for as the North River is for trade, so the South is for pleasure—and this boulevard has been carried across the stream and on beyond the old limits of the

city, and runs for a mile or farther on the right bank of the reunited Krath, forming a delightful and well-shaded promenade where the citizens are accustomed to take their various forms of exercise.

Opposite to it, on the left bank, lies the park attached to the Palace. That building itself, dating from 1820 and regrettably typical of the style of its period, faces the river on the left bank just where the stream takes a broad sweep to the south, giving a rounded margin to the King's pleasure-grounds. Below the Palace there soon comes open country on both banks. The boulevard merges in the main post-road to Volseni and to the mountains which form the eastern frontier of the kingdom. At this date, and for a considerable number of years afterwards, the only railway line in Kravonia did not follow the course of the Krath (which itself afforded facilities for traffic and intercourse), but ran down from the north, having its terminus on the left bank of the North River, whence a carriage-bridge gave access to the city.

To vote money is one thing, to raise it another, and to spend it on the designated objects a third. Not a stone nor a sod of the new forts was yet in place, and Slavna's solitary defence was the ancient castle which stood on the left bank of the river just at the point of bisection, facing the casino and botanical gardens on the opposite bank. Suleiman's Tower, a relic of Turkish rule, is built on a simple plan—a square curtain, with a bastion at each corner, encloses a massive circular tower. The gate faces the North River, and a bridge, which admits of being raised and lowered, connects this outwork with the north wall of the city, which at this point is in good preservation. The fort is roomy; two or three hundred men could find quarters there; and although it is, under modern conditions, of little use against an enemy from without, it occupies a position of considerable strength with regard to the city itself. It formed at this time the headquarters and residence of the Commandant of the garrison, a post held by the heir to the throne, the Prince of Slavna.

In spite of the flatness of the surrounding country, the appearance of Slavna is not

unpicturesque. Time and the hand of man (the people are a color-loving race) have given many tints, soft and bright, to the roofs, gables, and walls of the old quarter in the north town, over which Suleiman's Tower broods with an antique impressiveness. Behind the pleasant residences which border on the southern boulevard lie handsome streets of commercial buildings and shops, these last again glowing with diversified and gaudy colors. In the centre of the city, where, but for its bisection, we may imagine the Krath would have run, a pretty little canal has been made by abstracting water from the river and conducting it through the streets. On either side of this stream a broad road runs. Almost exactly midway through the city the roads broaden and open into the spacious Square of St. Michael, containing the cathedral, the fine old city hall, several good town-houses dating two or three hundred years back, barracks, and the modern but not unsightly Government offices. Through this square and the streets leading to it from west and east there now runs an excellent service of electric cars; but at the date with which we are concerned a crazy fiacre or a crazier omnibus was the only public means of conveyance. Not a few good private equipages were, however, to be seen, for the Kravonians have been from of old lovers of horses. The city has a population bordering on a hundred thousand, and, besides being the principal depot and centre of distribution for a rich pastoral and agricultural country, it transacts a respectable export trade in hides and timber. It was possible for a careful man to grow rich in Slavna, even though he were not a politician nor a Government official.

Two or three years earlier, an enterprising Frenchman of the name of Rousseau had determined to provide Slavna with a first-rate modern hotel and café. Nothing could have consorted better with the views of King Alexis Stefanovitch, and Monsieur Rousseau obtained, on very favorable terms, a large site at the southeast end of the city, just where the North and South rivers reunite. Here he built his hostelry and named it pietatis causâ, the Hôtel de Paris. A fine terrace ran along the front of the house, abutting on the boulevard and affording a pleasant view of the royal park and

the Palace in the distance on the opposite bank.

On this terrace, it being a fine October morning, sat Sophy, drinking a cup of chocolate.

The scene before her, if not quite living up to the name of the hotel, was yet animated enough. A score of handsome carriages drove by, some containing gayly dressed ladies, some officers in smart uniforms. Other officers rode or walked by; civil functionaries, journalists, and a straggling line of onlookers swelled the stream which set towards the Palace. Awaking from a reverie to mark the unwonted stir, Sophy saw the leaders of the informal procession crossing the ornamental iron bridge which spanned the Krath, a quarter of a mile from where she sat, and gave access to the King's demesne on the left bank.

"Right bank—left bank! It sounds like home!" she thought to herself, smiling perhaps rather bitterly. "Home!" Her home now was a single room over a goldsmith's shop, whither she had removed to relieve Marie Zerkovitch from a hospitality too burdensome, as Sophy feared, for her existing resources to sustain.

The reverie bore breaking; it had been none too pleasant; in it sad memories disputed place with present difficulties. Some third or so remained of Lady Meg's hundred-pound note. Necessity had forced a use of the money at any cost to pride. When all was gone, Sophy would have to depend on what is so often a last and so often a vain refuge—the teaching of French; it was the only subject which she could claim to teach. Verily, it was a poor prospect; it was better to look at the officers and the ladies than to think of it—ay, better than to think of Casimir and of what lay in the past. With her strong will she strove to steel herself alike against recollection and against apprehension.

The café was nearly deserted; the hour was too early for the citizens, and Sophy's own chocolate had been merely an excuse to sit down. Yet presently a young officer in a hussar uniform stopped his horse opposite the door, and, giving over the reins to

an orderly who attended him, nimbly dismounted. Tall and fair, with a pleasant, open face, he wore his finery with a dashing air, and caressed a delicate, upturned mustache as he glanced round, choosing his seat. The next moment he advanced towards Sophy; giving her a polite salute, he indicated the little table next to hers.

"Mademoiselle permits?" he asked. "She has, I fear, forgotten, but I have the honor to be an acquaintance of hers."

"I remember," smiled Sophy. "Captain Markart? We met at Madame Zerkovitch's."

"Oh, that's pleasant of you!" he cried. "I hate being clean forgotten. But I fear you remember me only because I sang so badly!"

"I remember best that you said you wanted to go and help France, but your General wouldn't let you."

"Ah, I know why you remember that—you especially! Forgive me—our friend Marie Zerkovitch told me." He turned away for a moment to give an order to the waiter.

"What's going on to-day?" asked Sophy. "Where's everybody going?"

"Why, you are a stranger, mademoiselle!" he laughed. "It's the King's name-day, and we all go and congratulate him."

"Is that it? Are you going?"

"Certainly; in attendance on my General—General Stenovics. My lodgings are near here, his house at the other end of the boulevard, so he gave me leave to meet him here. I thought I would come early and fortify myself a little for the ordeal. To mademoiselle's good health!" He looked at her with openly admiring eyes, to which tribute Sophy accorded a lazy, unembarrassed smile. She leaned her chin on her hand, turning her right cheek towards him. Sophy was never disdainful, never neglectful; her pose now was good.

"What sort of a man is the King?" she asked.

"The King is most emphatically a very good sort of fellow—a very good old fellow. I only wish his son was like him! The Prince is a Tartar. Has he gone by yet?"

"I don't think so. I suppose he'd have an escort, wouldn't he? I don't know him by sight yet. Does everybody call the King a good fellow?"

"Some people are so extremely righteous!" pleaded Markart, ruefully. "And, anyhow, he has reformed now."

"Because he's old?"

"Fifty-nine! Is that so very old? No; I rather attribute it—you're discreet, I hope? I'm putting my fortunes in your hands—to Madame la Comtesse."

"The Countess Ellenburg? Marie has told me something about her."

"Ah! Madame Zerkovitch is a friend of hers?"

"Not intimate, I think. And is the Countess oppressively respectable, Captain Markart?"

"Women in her position always are," said the Captain, with an affected sigh: his round, chubby face was wrinkled with merriment. "You see, a morganatic marriage isn't such a well-established institution here as in some other countries. Oh, it's legal enough, no doubt, if it's agreed to on that basis. But the Stefanovitches have in the past often made non-royal marriages—with their own subjects generally. Well, there was nobody else for them to marry! Alexis got promotion in his first marriage—an Italian Bourbon, which is always respectable, if not very brilliant. That gave us a position, and it couldn't be thrown away. So the second marriage had to be morganatic. Only—well, women are ambitious, and she has a young son who bears the King's name—a boy twelve years old."

He looked reflectively at his polished boots. Sophy sat in thoughtful silence. A jingle of swords and the clatter of hoofs roused them. A troop of soldiers rode by. Their uniform was the same smart tunic of light blue, with black facings, as adorned

Captain Markart's shapely person.

"Ah, here's the Prince!" said Markart, rising briskly to his feet. Sophy followed his example, though more in curiosity than respect.

The young man at the head of the troop returned Markart's salute, but was apparently unconscious of the individual from whom it proceeded. He rode by without turning his head or giving a glance in the direction of the café terrace. Sophy saw a refined profile, with a straight nose, rather short, and a pale cheek: there was little trace of the Bourbon side of the pedigree.

"He's on his promotion, too," continued the loquacious and irreverent Captain, as he resumed his seat. "They want a big fish for him—something German, with a resounding name. Poor fellow!"

"Well, it's his duty," said Sophy.

"Somebody who'll keep the Countess in order, eh?" smiled Markart, twirling his mustache. "That's about the size of it, I expect, though naturally the General doesn't show me his hand. I only tell you common gossip."

"I think you hardly do yourself justice. You've been very interesting, Captain Markart."

"I tell you what," he said, with an engaging candor, "I believe that somehow the General makes me chatter just to the extent he wants me to, and then stops me. I don't know how he does it; it's quite unconscious on my part. I seem to say just what I like!"

They laughed together over this puzzle. "You mean General Stenovics?" asked Sophy.

"Yes, General Stenovics. Ah, here he is!" He sprang up again and made a low bow to Sophy. "Au revoir, mademoiselle. A thousand thanks!"

He saluted her and hurried to the side of the pavement. General Stenovics rode up,

with two orderlies behind him. Saluting again, Markart mounted his horse. The General brought his to a stand and waited the necessary moment or two with a good-humored smile. His eye wandered from the young officer to the presumable cause of his lack of vigilance. Sophy felt the glance rest on her face. In her turn she saw a stout, stumpy figure, clad in a rather ugly dark-green uniform, and a heavy, olive-tinted face adorned with a black mustache and a stubbly gray beard. General Stenovics, President of the Council of Ministers, was not an imposing personage to the outward view. But Sophy returned the regard of his prominent pale-blue eyes (which sorted oddly with the complexion of his face) with vivid attention. The General rode on, Markart following, but turning in his saddle to salute once more and to wave his hand in friendly farewell.

For the first time since her arrival in Slavna, Sophy was conscious of a stir of excitement. Life had been dull and heavy; the mind had enjoyed little food save the diet of sad memories. To-day she seemed to be brought into sight of living interests again. They were far off, but they were there; Markart's talk had made a link between them and her. She sat on for a long while, watching the junction of the streams and the broad current which flowed onward past the Palace, on its long journey to the sea. Then she rose with a sigh; the time drew near for a French lesson. Marie Zerkovitch had already got her two pupils.

When General Stenovics had ridden three or four hundred yards, he beckoned his aide-de-camp and secretary—for Markart's functions were both military and civil—to his side.

"We're last of all, I suppose?" he asked.

"Pretty nearly, sir."

"That must be his Royal Highness just crossing the bridge?"

"Yes, sir, that's his escort."

"Ah, well, we shall just do it! And who, pray"—the General turned round to his

companion—"is that remarkable-looking young woman you've managed to pick up?"

Markart told what he knew of Mademoiselle de Gruche; it was not much.

"A friend of the Zerkovitches? That's good. A nice fellow, Zerkovitch—and his wife's quite charming. And your friend—?"

"I can hardly call her that, General."

"Tut, tut! You're irresistible, I know. Your friend—what did you tell her?"

"Nothing, on my honor." The young man colored and looked a trifle alarmed. But Stenovics's manner was one of friendly amusement.

"For an example of your 'nothing,'" he went on, "you told her that the King was an amiable man?"

"Oh, possibly, General."

"That the Countess was a little—just a little—too scrupulous?"

"It was nothing, surely, to say that?"

"That we all wanted the Prince to marry?"

"I made only the most general reference to that, sir."

"That—" he looked harder at his young friend—"the Prince is not popular with the army?"

"On my honor, no!"

"Think, think, Markart."

Markart searched his memory; under interrogation it accused him; his face grew rueful.

"I did wish he was more like his Majesty. I—I did say he was a Tartar."

Stenovics chuckled in apparent satisfaction at his own perspicacity. But his only comment was: "Then your remarkably handsome young friend knows something

about us already. You're an admirable cicerone to a stranger, Markart."

"I hope you're not annoyed, sir. I—I didn't tell any secrets?"

"Certainly not, Markart. Three bits of gossip and one lie don't make up a secret between them. Come, we must get along."

Markart's face cleared; but he observed that the General did not tell him which was the lie.

This day Sophy began the diary; the first entry is dated that afternoon. Her prescience—or presentiment—was not at fault. From to-day events moved fast, and she was strangely caught up in the revolutions of the wheel.

II

AT THE GOLDEN LION

It was the evening of the King's name-day. There was a banquet at the Palace, and the lights in its windows twinkled in sympathetic response to the illuminations which blazed on the public buildings and principal residences of Slavna. Everywhere feasting and revelry filled the night. The restaurant of the Hôtel de Paris was crowded, every seat on its terrace occupied; the old Inn of the Golden Lion, opposite the barracks in the Square of St. Michael, a favorite resort of the officers of the garrison, did a trade no less good; humbler hostelries were full of private soldiers, and the streets themselves of revellers male and female, military and civil, honest and dishonest, drunk and sober. Slavna had given itself up to a frolic; for, first, a fête is a fête, no matter what its origin; secondly, King Alexis was the most popular man in his dominions, though he never did a decent day's work for them; lastly, there is often no better way to show how much you hate one man than by making a disproportionate fuss about another. It was well understood that by thus honoring King Alexis, its Monarch, by thus vociferously and untiringly wishing him

the longest of reigns, Slavna was giving a stinging back-hander to Prince Sergius, its titular Prince and Commandant. You would see the difference when the Prince's day came round! When General Stenovics pointed to the lights gleaming across the Krath from the Palace windows and congratulated his Royal Highness on the splendid popularity of the reigning House, the Prince's smile may well have been ironical.

"I shall go and see all this merriment for myself at close quarters presently, General," said he. "I think the Commandant had best return to the city to-night as early as the King will allow."

"An admirable devotion to duty, sir," answered the General gravely, and without any effort to dissuade the zealous Prince.

But even in this gay city there was one spot of gloom, one place where sullen rancor had not been ousted by malicious merriment. The first company of his Majesty's Guards was confined to its barracks in the Square of St. Michael by order of the Commandant of Slavna; this by reason of high military misdemeanors—slackness when on duty, rioting and drunkenness when on leave; nor were the officers any better than the men. "You are men of war in the streets, men of peace in the ranks," said the Commandant to them that morning in issuing his decree. "You shall have a quiet evening to think over your short-comings." The order was reported to the King; he sighed, smiled, shook his head, said that, after all, discipline must be vindicated, and looked at his son with mingled admiration and pity. Such a faculty for making himself, other people, and things in general uncomfortable! But, of course, discipline! The Commandant looked stern, and his father ventured on no opposition or appeal. General Stenovics offered no remonstrance either, although he had good friends in the offending company. "He must do as he likes—so long as he's Commandant," he said to Markart.

"May I go and see them and cheer them up a bit, sir, instead of coming with you to

the Palace?" asked that good-natured young man.

"If his Royal Highness gives you leave, certainly," agreed the General.

The Commandant liked Markart. "Yes—and tell them what fools they are," he said, with a smile.

Markart found the imprisoned officers at wine after their dinner; the men had resigned themselves to fate and gone to bed. Markart delivered his message with his usual urbane simplicity. Lieutenant Rastatz giggled uneasily—he had a high falsetto laugh. Lieutenant Sterkoff frowned peevishly. Captain Mistitch rapped out a vicious oath and brought his great fist down on the table. "The evening isn't finished yet," he said. "But for this cursed fellow I should have been dining with Vera at the Hôtel de Paris to-night!"

Whereupon proper condolences were offered to their Captain by his subalterns, who, in fact, held him in no small degree of fear. He was a huge fellow, six feet three and broad as a door; a great bruiser and a duellist of fame; his nickname was Hercules. His florid face was flushed now with hot anger, and he drank his wine in big gulps.

"How long are we to stand it?" he growled. "Are we school-girls?"

"Come, come, it's only for one evening," pleaded Markart. "One quiet evening won't hurt even Captain Hercules!"

The subalterns backed him with a laugh, but Mistitch would have none of it. He sat glowering and drinking still, not to be soothed and decidedly dangerous. From across the square came the sound of music and singing from the Golden Lion. Again Mistitch banged the table.

"Listen there!" he said. "That's pleasant hearing while we're shut up like rats in a trap—and all Slavna laughing at us!"

Markart shrugged his shoulders and smoked in silence; to argue with the man was to court a quarrel; he began to repent of his well-meant visit. Mistitch drained his glass.

"But some of us have a bit of spirit left, and so Master Sergius shall see," he went on. He put out a great hand on either side and caught Sterkoff and Rastatz by their wrists. "We're the fellows to show him!" he cried.

Sterkoff seemed no bad choice for such an enterprise—a wiry, active fellow, with a determined, if disagreeable, face, and a nasty squint in his right eye. But Rastatz, with his slim figure, weak mouth, and high laugh, promised no great help; yet in him fear of Mistitch might overcome all other fear.

"Yes, we three'll show him! And now"—he rose to his feet, dragging the pair up with him—"for a song and a bottle at the Golden Lion!"

Rastatz gasped, even Sterkoff started. Markart laughed: it could be nothing more than a mad joke. Cashiering was the least punishment which would await the act.

"Yes, we three together!" He released them for a moment and caught up his sword and cap. Then he seized Rastatz's wrist again and squeezed it savagely. "Come out of your trap with me, you rat!" he growled, in savage amusement at the young man's frightened face.

Sterkoff gained courage. "I'm with you, Hercules!" he cried. "I'm for to-night—the devil take to-morrow morning!"

"You're all drunk," said Markart, in despairing resignation.

"We'll be drunker before the night's out," snarled Mistitch. "And if I meet that fellow when I'm drunk, God help him!" He laughed loudly. "Then there might be a chance for young Alexis, after all!"

The words alarmed Markart. Young Count Alexis was the King's son by Countess Ellenburg. A chance for young Alexis!

"For Heaven's sake, go to bed!" he implored.

Mistitch turned on him. "I don't want to quarrel with anybody in Slavna to-night, unless I meet one man. But you can't stop me, Markart, and you'll only do mischief

by trying. Now, my boys!"

They were with him—Sterkoff with a gleam in his squinting eye, Rastatz with a forced, uneasy giggle and shaking knees. Mistitch clapped them on the back.

"Another bottle apiece and we'll all be heroes!" he cried. "Markart, you go home to your mamma!"

Though given in no friendly way, this advice was wise beneath its metaphor. But Markart did not at once obey it. He had no more authority than power to interfere; Mistitch was his senior officer, and he had no special orders to act. But he followed the three in a fascinated interest, and with the hope that a very brief proof of his freedom would content the Captain. Out from the barracks the three marched. The sentry at the gate presented arms, but tried to bar their progress. With a guffaw and a mighty push Mistitch sent him sprawling. "The Commandant wants us, you fool!" he cried—and the three were in the square.

"What the devil will come of this business?" thought Markart, as he followed them over the little bridge which spanned the canal, and thence to the door of the Golden Lion. Behind them still he passed the seats on the pavement and entered the great saloon. As Mistitch and his companions came in, three-fourths of the company sprang to their feet and returned the salute of the new-comers; so strongly military in composition was the company—officers on one side of a six-feet-high glass screen which cut the room in two, sergeants and their inferiors on the other. A moment's silence succeeded the salute. Then a young officer cried: "The King has interfered?" It did not occur to anybody that the Commandant might have changed his mind and reversed his decree; for good or evil, they knew him too well to think of that.

"The King interfered?" Mistitch echoed, in his sonorous, rolling, thick voice. "No; we've interfered ourselves, and walked out! Does any one object?"

He glared a challenge round. There were officers present of superior rank—they drank their beer or wine discreetly. The juniors broke into a ringing cheer; it was

taken up and echoed back from behind the glass screen, to which a hundred faces were in an instant glued, over which, here and there, the head of some soldier more than common tall suddenly projected.

"A table here!" cried Mistitch. "And champagne! Quick! Sit down, my boys!"

A strange silence followed the impulsive cheers. Men were thinking. Cheers first, thoughts afterwards, was the order in Slavna as in many other cities. Now they recognized the nature of this thing, the fateful change from sullen obedience to open defiance. Was it only a drunken frolic—or, besides that, was it a summons to each man to choose his side? Choosing his side might well mean staking his life.

A girl in a low-necked dress and short petticoats began a song from a raised platform at the end of the room. She was popular, and the song a favorite. Nobody seemed to listen; when she ended, nobody applauded. Mistitch had been whispering with Sterkoff, Rastatz sitting silent, tugging his slender, fair mustache. But none of the three had omitted to pay their duty to the bottle; even Rastatz's chalky face bore a patch of red on either cheek. Mistitch rose from his chair, glass in hand.

"Long life to the King!" he shouted. "That's loyal, isn't it? Ay, immortal life!"

The cheers broke out again, mingled with laughter. A voice cried: "Hard on his heir, Captain Hercules!"

"Ay!" Mistitch roared back. "Hard as he is on us, my friend!"

Another burst of cheering—and again that conscience-smitten silence.

Markart had found a seat, near the door and a good way from the redoubtable Mistitch and his companions. He looked at his watch—it was nearly ten; in half an hour General Stenovics would be leaving the Palace, and it was meet that he should know of all this as soon as possible. Markart made up his mind that he would slip away soon; but still the interest of the scene, the fascination of this prelude—such it seemed to him—held his steps bound.

Suddenly a young man of aristocratic appearance rose from a table at the end of the room, where he had been seated in company with a pretty and smartly dressed girl. A graceful gesture excused him to his fair companion, and he threaded his way deftly between the jostling tables to where Mistitch sat. He wore Court dress and a decoration. Markart recognized in the young man Baron von Hollbrandt, junior Secretary of the German Legation in Slavna.

Hollbrandt bowed to Mistitch, with whom he was acquainted, then bent over the giant's burly back and whispered in his ear.

"Take a friend's advice, Captain," he said. "I've been at the Palace, and I know the Prince had permission to withdraw at half-past nine. He was to return to Slavna then—to duty. Come, go back. You've had your spree."

"By the Lord, I'm obliged to you!" cried Mistitch. "Lads, we're obliged to Baron von Hollbrandt! Could you tell me the street he means to come by? Because"—he rose to his feet again—"we'll go and meet him!"

Half the hall heard him, and the speech was soon passed on to any out of hearing. A sparse cheer sputtered here and there, but most were silent. Rastatz gasped again, while Sterkoff frowned and squinted villanously. Hollbrandt whispered once more, then stood erect, shrugged his shoulders, bowed, and walked back to his pretty friend. He sat down and squeezed her hand in apology; the pair broke into laughter a moment later. Baron von Hollbrandt felt that he at least had done his duty.

The three had drunk and drunk; Rastatz was silly, Sterkoff vicious, the giant Mistitch jovially and cruelly reckless, exalted not only by liquor but with the sense of the part he played. Suddenly from behind the glass screen rose a mighty roar:

"Long live Mistitch! Down with tyrants! Long live Captain Hercules!"

It was fuel to the flames. Mistitch drained his glass and hurled it on the floor.

"Well, who follows me?" he cried.

Half the men started to their feet; the other half pulled them down. Contending currents of feeling ran through the crowd; a man was reckless this moment, timid the next; to one his neighbor gave warning, to another instigation. They seemed poised on the point of a great decision. Yet what was it they were deciding? They could not tell.

Markart suddenly forgot his caution. He rushed to Mistitch, with his hands out and "For God's sake!" loud on his lips.

"You!" cried Mistitch. "By Heaven! what else does your General want? What else does Matthias Stenovics want? Tell me that!"

A silence followed—of dread suspense. Men looked at one another in fear and doubt. Was that true which Mistitch said? They felt as ordinary men feel when the edge of the curtain is lifted from before high schemes or on intrigues of the great.

"If I should meet the Prince to-night, wouldn't there be news for Stenovics?" cried Mistitch, with a roar of laughter.

If he should meet the Prince! The men at the tables could not make up their minds to that. Mistitch they admired and feared, but they feared the proud Prince, too; they had many of them felt the weight of his anger. Those who had stood up sank back in their places. One pot-bellied fellow raised a shout of hysterical laughter round him by rubbing his fat face with a napkin and calling out: "I should like just one minute to think about that meeting, Captain Hercules!"

Markart had shrunk back, but Mistitch hurled a taunt at him and at all the throng.

"You're curs, one and all! But I'll put a heart in you yet! And now"—he burst into a new guffaw—"my young friends and I are going for a walk. What, aren't the streets of Slavna free to gentlemen? My friends and I are going for a walk. If we meet anybody on the pavement—well, he must take to the road. We're going for a walk."

Amid a dead silence he went out, his two henchmen after him. He and Sterkoff walked firm and true—Rastatz lurched in his gait. A thousand eyes followed their

exit, and from five hundred throats went up a long sigh of relief that they were gone. But what had they gone to do? The company decided that it was just as well for them, whether collectively or as individuals, not to know too much about that. Let it be hoped that the cool air outside would have a sobering effect and send them home to bed! Yet from behind the glass screen there soon arose again a busy murmur of voices, like the hum of a beehive threatened with danger.

"A diplomatic career is really full of interest, ma chère," observed Baron von Hollbrandt to his fair companion. "It would be difficult to see anything so dramatic in Berlin!"

His friend's pretty blue eyes lit up with an eager intensity as she took the cigarette from between her lips. Her voice was full of joyful excitement:

"Yes, it's to death between that big Mistitch and the Prince—the blood of one or both of them, you'll see!"

"You are too deliciously Kravonian," said Hollbrandt, with a laugh.

Outside, big Mistitch had crossed the canal and come to the corner where the Street of the Fountain opens on to St. Michael's Square. "What say you to a call at the Hôtel de Paris, lads?" he said.

"Hist!" Sterkoff whispered. "Do you hear that step—coming up the street there?"

The illuminations burned still in the Square and sent a path of light down the narrow street. The three stopped and turned their heads. Sterkoff pointed. Mistitch looked—and smacked his ponderous thigh.

III

THE VIRGIN WITH THE LAMP

Whatever Marie Zerkovitch's feelings might be, Fate had its hand on her and turned her to its uses. It was she who had directed Sophy's steps to the old house ten doors

down the Street of the Fountain from St. Michael's Square. It was no more than half a mile from her own villa on the south boulevard (from which the Street ran to the Square), and she had long known the decent old couple—German Jews—who lived and carried on their trade in the house over whose front hung the sign of the Silver Cock. The face of the building was covered with carved timbers of great age; the door of the shop stood far back within a black and ancient porch. Behind the shop were a couple of rooms where Meyerstein and his wife lived; above it one large room, with a window which jutted far out over the narrow street. In this room, which was reached by a separate door in the left side of the porch and a crazy flight of a dozen winding stairs, lived Sophy, and thence she sallied out daily to give her lessons to her two pupils.

By the window she sat on the night of the King's name-day, on a low chair. The heavy figure of a girl carrying a lamp—a specimen of her landlord's superfluous stock—stood unemployed on the window-sill. The room was dark, for the path of light from the illuminations, which made the roadway below white, threw hardly a gleam on to its sombre walls; but Sophy had no need of a lamp and every need to save her money. She sat in the gloom, busy in thought, the fresh evening air breathing soft and cool on her brow from the open window.

Swift to build on slenderest foundations, avid to pile imagination on imagination till the unsubstantial structure reached the skies, her mind was at work to-night. The life and stir, the heat and tumult, of the city, were fuel to her dreams. Chances and happenings were all about her; they seemed to lie, like the water for Tantalus, just beyond the reach of her finger-tips; her eyes pierced to the vision of them through the dusky blackness of the ancient room. In response to the confused yet clamorous cry of the life around her, her spirit awoke. Dead were the dear dead; but Sophy was alive. But to be a starving French mistress at Slavna—was that a chance? Yes, a better than being cook-maid at Morpingham; and even in the kitchen at Morpingham Fortune had found her and played with her awhile. For such frolics and such favor,

however fickle, however hazardous, Sophy Grouch of Morpingham was ever ready. Dunstanbury had come to Morpingham—and Lady Meg. Paris had brought the sweet hours and the gracious memory of Casimir de Savres. Should Slavna lag behind? Who would come now? Ever the highest for Sophy Grouch! The vision of the royal escort and its pale young leader flashed in the darkness before her eagerly attendant eyes.

Suddenly she raised her head. There was a wild, quick volley of cheering; it came from the Golden Lion, whose lights across the Square a sideways craning of her neck enabled her to see. Then there was silence for minutes. Again the sound broke forth, and with it confused shoutings of a name she could not make out. Yes—what was it? Mistitch—Mistitch! That was her first hearing of the name.

Silence fell again, and she sank back into her chair. The lights, the stir, the revelry were not for her, nor the cheers nor the shouts. A moment of reaction and lassitude came on her, a moment when the present, the actual, lapped her round with its dim, muddy flood of vulgar necessity and sordid needs. With a sob she bowed her head to meet her hands—a sob that moaned a famine of life, of light, of love. "Go back to your scullery, Sophy Grouch!" What voice had said that? She sprang to her feet with fists clinched, and whispered to the darkness: "No!"

In the street below, Mistitch slapped his thigh.

Sophy pushed her hair back from her heated forehead and looked out of the window. To the right, some twenty yards away and just at the end of the street, she saw the figures of three men. In the middle was one who bulked like a young Falstaff—Falstaff with his paunch not grown; he was flanked by two lean fellows who looked small beside him. She could not see the faces plainly, since the light from the Square was behind them. They seemed to be standing there and looking past the sign of the Silver Cock along the street.

A measured, military footfall sounded on her left. Turning her head, she saw a

young man walking with head bent down and arms behind him. The line of light struck full on him, he was plain to see as by broadest day. He wore a costume strange to her eyes—a black sheepskin cap, a sheepskin tunic, leather breeches, and high, unpolished boots—a rough, plain dress; yet a broad, red ribbon crossed it, and a star glittered on the breast; the only weapon was a short, curved scimitar. It was the ancient costume of the Bailiff of Volseni, the head of that clan of shepherds who pastured their flocks on the uplands. The Prince of Slavna held the venerable office, and had been to Court in the dress appropriate to it. He had refused to use his carriage, sending his aides-de-camp home in it, and walked now through the streets of the city which he had in charge. It was constantly his habit thus to walk; his friends praised his vigilance; his foes reviled his prowling, spying tricks; of neither blame nor praise did he take heed.

Sophy did not know the dress, but the face she knew; it had been but lately before her dreaming eyes; she had seen it in the flesh that morning from the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris.

The three came on from her right, one of the lean men hanging back, lurking a little behind. They were under her window now. The Prince was but a few yards away. Suddenly he looked up with a start—he had become aware of their approach. But before he saw them the three had melted to one. With a shrill cry of consternation—of uneasy courage oozing out—Rastatz turned and fled back to the Square, heading at his top speed for the Golden Lion. In the end he was unequal to the encounter. Sterkoff, too, disappeared; but Sophy knew the meaning of that; he had slipped into the shelter of the porch. Her faculties were alert now; she would not forget where Sterkoff was! Mistitch stood alone in the centre of the narrow street, his huge frame barely leaving room for a man to pass on either side.

For a moment the Prince stood still, looking at the giant. Incredulity had seemed to show first in his eyes; it changed now to a cold anger as he recognized the Captain.

He stepped briskly forward, and Sophy heard his clear, incisive tones cut the air:

"What extraordinary emergency has compelled you to disobey my orders, Captain Mistitch?"

"I wanted a breath of fresh air," Mistitch answered, in an easy, insolent tone.

The Prince looked again; he seemed even more disgusted than angry now. He thought Mistitch drunk—more drunk than in truth he was.

"Return to barracks at once and report yourself under stringent arrest. I will deal with you to-morrow."

"And not to-night, Sergius Stefanovitch?" At least he was being as good as his word, he was acting up to the vaunts he had thrown out so boldly in the great hall of the Golden Lion.

"To-morrow we shall both be cooler." He was almost up to Mistitch now. "Stand out of my way, sir."

Mistitch did not budge. "There's room for you to pass by," he said. "I won't hurt you. But the middle of the road belongs to me to-night."

His voice seemed to grow clearer with every word; the critical encounter was sobering him. Yet with sobriety came no diminution of defiance. Doubtless he saw that he was in for the worst now, that forward was the word, and retreat impossible. Probably from this moment he did not intend the Prince to pass alive. Well, what he intended was the wish of many; he would not lack shelter, friends, or partisans if he dared the desperate venture. Be it said for him that there were few things he did not dare. He dared now, growing sober, to stand by what the fumes of wine had fired his tongue to.

For a moment after the big man's taunt the Prince stood motionless. Then he drew his scimitar. It looked a poor, weak weapon against the sword which sprang in answer from Mistitch's scabbard.

"A duel between gentlemen!" the Captain cried.

The Prince gave a short laugh. "You shall have no such plea at the court-martial," he said. "Gentlemen don't waylay one another in the streets. Stand aside!"

Mistitch laughed, and in an instant the Prince sprang at him. Sophy heard the blades meet. Strong as death was the fascination for her eyes—ay, for her ears, too, for she heard the quick-moving feet and the quicker breathing of a mortal combat. But she would not look—she tried not even to listen. Her eyes were for a man she could not see, her ears for a man she could not hear. She remembered the lean fellow hidden in the porch, straight under her window. She dared not call to warn the Prince of him; a turn of the head, a moment of inattention, would cost either combatant his life. She took the man in the porch for her own adversary, his undoing for her share in the fight.

Very cautiously, making no sound, she took the heavy lamp—the massive bronze figure of the girl—raised it painfully in both her hands, and poised it half-way over the window-sill. Then she turned her eyes down again to watch the mouth of the porch. Her rat was in that hole! Yet suddenly the Prince came into her view; he circled half-way round Mistitch, then sank on one knee; she heard him guard the Captain's lunges with lightning-quick movements of his nimble scimitar. He was trying the old trick they had practised for hundreds of years at Volseni—to follow his parry with an upward-ripping stroke under the adversary's sword, to strike the inner side of his forearm and cut the tendons of the wrist. This trick big Captain Mistitch, a man of the plains, did not know.

A jangle—a slither—a bellow of pain, of rage! The Prince had made his stroke, the hill-men of Volseni were justified of their pupil. Mistitch's big sword clattered on the flags. Facing his enemy, with his back to the porch, the Prince crouched motionless on his knee; but it was death to Mistitch to try to reach the sword with his unmaimed hand.

It was Sophy's minute; the message that it had come ran fierce through all her veins. Straining to the weight, she raised the figure in her hands and leaned out of the window. Yes, a lean hand with a long knife, a narrow head, a spare, long back, crept out of the darkness of the porch—crept silently. The body drew itself together for a fatal spring on the unconscious Prince, for a fatal thrust. It would be death—and to Mistitch salvation torn from the jaws of ruin.

"Surrender yourself, Captain Mistitch," said the Prince.

Mistitch's eyes went by his conqueror and saw a shadow on the path beside the porch.

"I surrender, sir," he said.

"Then walk before me to the barracks." Mistitch did not turn. "At once, sir!"

"Now!" Mistitch roared.

The crouching figure sprang—and with a hideous cry fell stricken on the flags. Just below the neck, full on the spine, had crashed the Virgin with the lamp. Sterkoff lay very still, save that his fingers scratched the flags. Turning, the Prince saw a bronze figure at his feet, a bronze figure holding a broken lamp. Looking up, he saw dimly a woman's white face at a window.

Then the street was on a sudden full of men. Rastatz had burst into the Golden Lion, all undone—nerves, courage, almost senses gone. He could stammer no more than: "They'll fight!" and could not say who. But he had gone out with Mistitch—and whom had they gone to meet?

A dozen officers were round him in an instant, crying: "Where? Where?" He broke into frightened sobs, hiding his face in his hands. It was Max von Hollbrandt who made him speak. Forgetting his pretty friend, he sprang in among the officers, caught Rastatz by the throat, and put a revolver to his head. "Where? In ten seconds—where?" Terror beat terror. "The Street of the Fountain—by the Silver Cock!" the cur stammered, and fell to his blubbering again.

The dozen officers, and more, were across the Square almost before he had finished; Max von Hollbrandt, with half the now lessened company in the inn, was hot on their heels.

For that night all was at an end. Sterkoff was picked up, unconscious now. Sullen, but never cringing, Mistitch was marched off to the guard-room and the surgeon's ministrations. Every soldier was ordered to his quarters, the townsfolk slunk off to their homes. The street grew empty, the glare of the illuminations was quenched. But of all this Sophy saw nothing. She had sunk down in her chair by the window, and lay there, save for her tumultuous breathing, still as death.

The Commandant had no fear, and would have his way. He stood alone now in the street, looking from the dark splash of Mistitch's blood to the Virgin with her broken lamp, and up to the window of the Silver Cock, whence had come salvation.

IV

THE MESSAGE OF THE NIGHT

The last of the transparencies died out; the dim and infrequent oil-lamps alone lit up the Street of the Fountain and St. Michael's Square. They revelled still down at the Hôtel de Paris, whither Max von Hollbrandt and a dozen others had hurried with the news of the evening's great event. But here, on the borders of the old north quarter, all grew still—the Golden Lion empty, the townsmen to their beds, the soldiers to barracks, full of talk and fears and threats. Yet a light burned still in the round room in the keep of Suleiman's Tower, and the Commandant's servant still expected his royal master. Peter Vassip, a sturdy son of Volseni, had no apprehensions—but he was very sleepy, and he and the sentries were the only men awake. "One might as well be a soldier at once!" he grumbled—for the men of the hills did not esteem the Regular Army so high as it rated itself.

The Commandant lingered in the Street of the Fountain. Sergius Stefanovitch was half a Bourbon, but it was the intellectual half. He had the strong, concentrated, rather narrow mind of a Bourbon of before the family decadence; on it his training at Vienna had grafted a military precision, perhaps a pedantry, and no little added scorn of what men called liberty and citizens called civil rights. What rights had a man against his country? His country was in his King—and to the King the Army was his supreme instrument. So ran his public creed, his statesman's instinct. But beside the Bourbon mother was the Kravonian father, and behind him the long line of mingled and vacillating fortunes which drew descent from Stefan, Lord of Praslok, and famous reiver of lowland herds. In that stock the temperament was different: indolent to excess sometimes, ardent to madness at others, moderate seldom. When the blood ran hot, it ran a veritable fire in the veins.

And for any young man the fight in the fantastically illuminated night, the Virgin with the broken lamp, a near touch of the scythe of death, and a girl's white face at the window? Behind the Commandant's stern wrath—nay, beside—and soon before it—for the moment dazzling his angry eyes—came the bright gleams of romance.

He knew who lodged at the sign of the Silver Cock. Marie Zerkovitch was his friend, Zerkovitch his zealous follower. The journalist was back now from the battle-fields of France and was writing articles for The Patriot, a leading paper of Slavna. He was deep in the Prince's confidence, and his little house on the south boulevard often received this distinguished guest. The Prince had been keen to hear from Zerkovitch of the battles, from Marie of the life in Paris; with Marie's tale came the name, and what she knew of the story, of Sophie de Gruche. Yet always, in spite of her praises of her friend, Marie had avoided any opportunity of presenting her to the Prince. Excuse on excuse she made, for his curiosity ranged round Casimir de Savres's bereaved lover. "Oh, I shall meet her some day all the same," he had said, laughing; and Marie doubted whether her reluctance—a reluctance to herself strange—had not missed its mark, inflaming an interest which it had meant to balk.

Why this strange reluctance? So far it was proved baseless. His first encounter with the Lady of the Red Star—Casimir's poetical sobriquet had passed Marie's lips—had been supremely fortunate.

From the splash of blood to the broken Virgin, from the broken Virgin to the open window and the dark room behind, his restless glances sped. Then came swift, impulsive decision. He caught up the bronze figure and entered the porch. He knew Meyerstein's shop, and that from it no staircase led to the upper floor. The other door was his mark, and he knocked on it, raising first with a cautious touch, then more resolutely, the old brass hand with hospitably beckoning finger which served for knocker. Then he listened for a footstep on the stairs. If she came not, the venturesome night went ungraced by its crowning adventure. He must kiss the hand that saved him before he slept.

The door opened softly. In the deep shadow of the porch, on the winding, windowless staircase of the old house, it was pitch dark. He felt a hand put in his and heard a low voice saying: "Come, Monseigneur." From first to last, both in speech and in writing, she called him by that title and by none other. Without a word he followed her, picking his steps, till they reached her room. She led him to the chair by the window; the darkness was somewhat less dense there. He stood by the chair.

"The lamp's broken—and there's only one match in the box!" said Sophy, with a low laugh. "Shall we use it now—or when you go, Monseigneur?"

"Light it now. My memory, rather than my imagination!"

She struck the match; her face came upon him white in the darkness, with the mark on her cheek a dull red; but her eyes glittered. The match flared and died down.

"It is enough. I shall remember."

"Did I kill him?"

"I don't know whether he's killed—he's badly hurt. This lady here is pretty heavy."

"Give her to me. I'll put her in her place." She took the figure and set it again on the window-sill. "And the big man who attacked you?"

"Mistitch? He'll be shot."

"Yes," she agreed with calm, unquestioning emphasis.

"You know what you did to-night?"

"I had the sense to think of the man in the porch."

"You saved my life."

Sophy gave a laugh of triumph. "What will Marie Zerkovitch say to that?"

"She's my friend, too, and she's told me all about you. But she didn't want us to meet."

"She thinks I bring bad luck."

"She'll have to renounce that heresy now." He felt for the chair and sat down, Sophy leaning against the window-sill.

"Why did they attack you?"

He told her of the special grudge which Mistitch and his company had against him, and added: "But they all hate me, except my own fellows from Volseni. I have a hundred of them in Suleiman's Tower, and they're stanch enough."

"Why do they hate you?"

"Oh, I'm their school-master—and a very strict one, I suppose. Or, if you like, the pruning-knife—and that's not popular with the rotten twigs."

"There are many rotten twigs?"

She heard his hands fall on the wooden arms of the chair and pictured his look of despair. "All—almost all. It's not their fault. What can you expect? They're encouraged to laziness and to riot. They have no good rifles. The city is left defenceless. I have no big guns." He broke suddenly into a low laugh. "There—that's

what Zerkovitch calls my fixed idea; he declares it's written on my heart—big guns!"

"If you had them, you'd be—master?"

"I could make some attempt at a defence anyhow; at least we could cover a retreat to the hills, if war came." He paused. "And in peace—yes, I should be master of Slavna. I'd bring men from Volseni to serve the guns." His voice had grown vindictive. "Stenovics knows that, I think." He roused himself again and spoke to her earnestly. "Listen. This fellow Mistitch is a great hero with the soldiers and the mob. When I have him shot, as I shall—not on my own account, I could have killed him to-night, but for the sake of discipline—there will very likely be a disturbance. What you did to-night will be all over the city by to-morrow morning. If you see any signs of disturbance, if any people gather round here, go to Zerkovitch's at once—or, if that's not possible or safe, come to me in Suleiman's Tower, and I'll send for Marie Zerkovitch too. Will you promise? You must run no risk."

"I'll come if I'm afraid."

"Or if you ought to be?" he insisted, laughing again.

"Well, then—or if I ought to be," she promised, joining in his laugh. "But the King—isn't he with you?"

"My father likes me; we're good friends. But 'like father, unlike son' they say of the Stefanovitches. I'm a martinet, they tell me; well, he—isn't. Nero fiddled—you remember? The King goes fishing. He's remarkably fond of fishing, and his advisers don't discourage him. I tell you all this because you're committed to our side now."

"Yes, I'm committed to your side. Who else is with you?"

"In Slavna? Nobody! Well, the Zerkovitches, and my hundred in Suleiman's Tower. And perhaps some old men who have seen war. But at Volseni and among the hills they're with me." Again he seemed to muse as he reviewed his scanty forces.

"I wish we had another match. I want to see your face close," said Sophy. He rose with a laugh and leaned his head forward to the window. "Oh no; you're nothing but a blur still!" she exclaimed impatiently.

Yet, though Sophy sighed for light, the darkness had its glamour. To each the other's presence, seeming in some sense impalpable, seemed also diffused through the room and all around; the world besides was non-existent since unseen; they two alone lived and moved and spoke in the dead silence and the blackness. An agitation stirred Sophy's heart—forerunner of the coming storm. That night she had given him life; he seemed to be giving back life to her life that night. How should the hour not seem pregnant with destiny, a herald of the march of Fate?

But suddenly the Prince awoke from his reverie—perhaps from a dream. To Sophy he gave the impression—as he was to give it more than once again—of a man pulling himself up, tightening the rein, drawing back into himself. He stood erect, his words became more formal, and his voice restrained.

"I linger too long," he said. "My duty lies at the Tower yonder. I've thanked you badly; but what thanks can a man give for his life? We shall meet again—I'll arrange that with Marie Zerkovitch. You'll remember what I've told you to do in case of danger? You'll act on it?"

"Yes, Monseigneur."

He sought her hand, kissed it, and then groped his way to the stairs. Sophy followed and went with him down to the porch.

"Be careful to lock your door," he enjoined her, "and don't go out to-morrow unless the streets are quite quiet."

"Oh, but I've a French lesson to give at ten o'clock," she remonstrated with a smile.

"You have to do that?"

"I have to make my living, Monseigneur."

"Ah, yes," he said, meditatively. "Well, slip out quietly—and wear a veil."

"Nobody knows my face."

"Wear a veil. People notice a face like yours. Again thanks, and good-night."

Sophy peeped out from the porch and watched his quick, soldierly march up the street to St. Michael's Square. The night had lightened a little, and she could make out his figure, although dimly, until he turned the corner and was lost to sight. She lingered for a moment before turning to go back to her room—lingered musing on the evening's history.

Down the street, from the Square, there came a woman—young or old, pretty or ugly, fine dame or drudge, it was too dark to tell. But it was a woman, and she wept as though her heart were broken. For whom and for what did she weep like that? Was she mother, or wife, or sweetheart? Perhaps she wept for Sterkoff, who lay in peril of death. Perhaps she loved big Mistitch, over whom hovered the shadow of swift and relentless doom. Or maybe her sorrow was remote from all that touched them or touched the girl who listened to her sobs—the bitter sobs which she did not seek to check, which filled the night with a dirge of immeasurable sadness. In the darkness, and to Sophy's ignorance of anything individual about her, the woman was like a picture or a sculpture—some type or monument of human woe—a figure of embodied sorrow, crying that all joy ends in tears—in tears—in tears.

She went by, not seeing her watcher. The sound of her sobbing softened with distance, till it died down to a faint, far-off moan. Sophy herself gave one choked sob. Then fell the silence of the night again. Was that its last message—the last comment on what had passed? Tears—and then silence? Was that the end?

Sophy never learned aught of the woman—who she was or why she wept. But her memory retained the vision. It had come as the last impression of a night no moment of which could ever be forgotten. What had it to say of all the rest of the night's happenings? Sophy's exaltation fell from her; but her courage stood—against

darkness, solitude, and the unutterable sadness of that forlorn wailing. Dauntlessly she looked forward and upward still, yet with a new insight for the cost.

So for Sophy passed the name-day of King Alexis.

V

A QUESTION OF MEMORY

King Alexis was minded that all proper recognition should be made of Sophy's service to his family. It had been her fortune to protect a life very precious in his eyes. Alien from his son in temperament and pursuits, he had, none the less, considerable affection for him. But there was more than this. With the Prince was bound up the one strong feeling of a nature otherwise easy and careless. The King might go fishing on most lawful days, but it was always a Stefanovitch who fished—a prince who had married a princess of a great house, and had felt able to offer Countess Ellenburg no more than a morganatic union. The work his marriage had begun his son's was to complete. The royal house of Kravonia was still on its promotion; it lay with the Prince to make its rank acknowledged and secure.

Thus Sophy's action loomed large in the King's eyes, and he was indolently indifferent to the view taken of it in the barrack-rooms and the drinking-shops of Slavna. Two days after Mistitch's attempt, he received Sophy at the Palace with every circumstance of compliment. The Prince was not present—he made military duty an excuse—but Countess Ellenburg and her little son were in the room, and General Stenovics, with Markart in attendance, stood beside the King's chair.

Sophy saw a tall, handsome, elderly man with thick, iron-gray hair, most artfully arranged. (The care of it was no small part of the duty of Lepage, the King's French body-servant.) His Majesty's manners were dignified, but not formal. The warmth of greeting which he had prepared for Sophy was evidently increased by the impression

her appearance made on him. He thanked her in terms of almost overwhelming gratitude.

"You have preserved the future of my family and of our dynasty," he said.

Countess Ellenburg closed her long, narrow eyes. Everything about her was long and narrow, from her eyes to her views, taking in, on the way, her nose and her chin. Stenovics glanced at her with a smile of uneasy propitiation. It was so particularly important to be gracious just now—gracious both over the preservation of the dynasty and over its preserver.

"No gratitude can be too great for such a service, and no mark of gratitude too high." He glanced round to Markart, and called good-humoredly, "You, Markart there, a chair for this lady!"

Markart got a chair. Stenovics took it from him and himself prepared to offer it to Sophy. But the King rose, took it, and with a low bow presented it to the favored object of his gratitude. Sophy courtesied low, the King waited till she sat. Countess Ellenburg bestowed on her a smile of wintry congratulation.

"But for you, these fellows might—or rather would, I think—have killed my son in their blind drunkenness; it detracts in no way from your service that they did not know whom they were attacking."

There was a moment's silence. Sophy was still nervous in such company; she was also uneasily conscious of a most intense gaze directed at her by General Stenovics. But she spoke out.

"They knew perfectly well, sir," she said.

"They knew the Prince?" he asked sharply. "Why do you say that? It was dark."

"Not in the street, sir. The illuminations lit it up."

"But they were very drunk."

"They may have been drunk, but they knew the Prince. Captain Mistitch called him

by his name."

"Stenovics!" The King's voice was full of surprise and question as he turned to his Minister. The General was surprised, too, but very suave.

"I can only say that I hear Mademoiselle de Gruche's words with astonishment. Our accounts are not consistent with what she says. We don't, of course, lay too much stress on the protestations of the two prisoners, but Lieutenant Rastatz is clear that the street was decidedly dark, and that they all three believed the man they encountered to be Colonel Stafnitz of the Hussars. That officer much resembles his Royal Highness in height and figure. In the dark the difference of uniform would not be noticed—especially by men in their condition." He addressed Sophy: "Mistitch had an old quarrel with Stafnitz; that's the true origin of the affair." He turned to the King again. "That is Rastatz's story, sir, as well as Mistitch's own—though Mistitch is, of course, quite aware that his most unseemly, and indeed criminal, talk at the Golden Lion seriously prejudices his case. But we have no reason to distrust Rastatz."

"Lieutenant Rastatz ran away only because he was afraid," Sophy remarked.

"He ran to bring help, mademoiselle," Stenovics corrected her, with a look of gentle reproach. "You were naturally excited," he went on. "Isn't it possible that your memory has played you a trick? Think carefully. Two men's lives may depend on it."

"I heard Captain Mistitch call the Prince 'Sergius Stefanovitch,'" said Sophy.

"This lady will be a most important witness," observed the King.

"Very, sir," Stenovics assented dryly.

Sophy had grown eager. "Doesn't the Prince say they knew him?"

"His Royal Highness hasn't been asked for any account at present," Stenovics answered.

"If they knew who it was, they must die," said the King in evident concern and excitement.

Stenovics contented himself with a bow of obedience. The King rose and gave Sophy his hand.

"We shall hope to see you again soon," he said, very graciously. "Meanwhile, General Stenovics has something to say to you in my name which will, I trust, prove agreeable to you." His eyes dwelt on her face for a moment as she took her leave.

Stenovics made his communication later in the day, paying Sophy the high compliment of a personal call at the sign of the Silver Cock for that purpose. His manner was most cordial. Sophy was to receive an honorary appointment in the Royal Household at an annual salary of ten thousand paras, or some four hundred pounds.

"It isn't riches—we aren't very rich in Kravonia—but it will, I hope, make you comfortable and relieve you from the tiresome lessons which Markart tells me you're now burdened with."

Sophy was duly grateful, and asked what her appointment was.

"It's purely honorary," he smiled. "You are to be Keeper of the Tapestries."

"I know nothing about tapestries," said Sophy, "but I dare say I can learn; it'll be very interesting."

Stenovics leaned back in his chair with an amused smile.

"There aren't any tapestries," he said. "They were sold a good many years ago."

"Then why do you keep a—"

"When you're older in the royal service, you'll see that it's convenient to have a few sinecures," he told her, with a good-humored laugh. "See how handy this one is now!"

"But I shall feel rather an impostor."

"Merely the novelty of it," he assured her consolingly.

Sophy began to laugh, and the General joined in heartily. "Well, that's settled," said he. "You make three or four appearances at Court, and nothing more will be necessary. I hope you like your appointment?"

Sophy laughed delightedly. "It's charming—and very amusing," she said. "I'm getting very much interested in your country, General."

"My country is returning your kind compliment, I can assure you," he replied. His tone had grown dry, and he seemed to be watching her now. She waved her hands towards the Virgin with the lamp: the massive figure stood in its old place by the window.

"What a lot I owe to her!" she cried.

"We all owe much," said Stenovics.

"The Prince thought some people might be angry with me—because Captain Mistitch is a favorite."

"Very possible, I'm afraid, very possible. But in this world we must do our duty, and—"

"Risk the consequences? Yes!"

"If we can't control them, Mademoiselle de Gruche." He paused a moment, and then went on: "The court-martial on Mistitch is convened for Saturday. Sterkoff won't be well enough to be tried for another two or three weeks."

"I'm glad he's not dead, though if he recovers only to be shot—! Still, I'm glad I didn't kill him."

"Not by your hand," said Stenovics.

"But you mean in effect? Well, I'm not ashamed. Surely they deserve death."

"Undoubtedly—if Rastatz is wrong—and your memory right."

"The Prince's own story?"

"He isn't committed to any story yet."

Sophy rested her chin on her hand, and regarded her companion closely. He did not avoid her glance.

"You're wondering what I mean?—what I'm after?" he asked her, smiling quietly. "Oh yes, I see you are. Go on wondering, thinking, watching things about you for a day or two—there are three days between now and Saturday. You'll see me again before Saturday—and I've no doubt you'll see the Prince."

"If Rastatz were right—and my memory wrong—?"

He smiled still. "The offence against discipline would be so much less serious. The Prince is a disciplinarian. To speak with all respect, he forgets sometimes that discipline is, in the last analysis, only a part of policy—a means, not an end. The end is always the safety and tranquillity of the State." He spoke with weighty emphasis.

"The offence against discipline! An attempt to assassinate—!"

"I see you cling to your own memory—you won't have anything to say to Rastatz!" He rose and bowed over her hand. "Much may happen between now and Saturday. Look about you, watch, and think!"

The General's final injunction, at least, Sophy lost no time in obeying; and on the slightest thought three things were obvious: the King was very grateful to her; Stenovics wished at any rate to appear very grateful to her; and, for some reason or another, Stenovics wished her memory to be wrong, to the end that the life of Mistitch and his companion (the greater included the less) might be spared. Why did he wish that?

Presumably—his words about the relation of discipline to policy supported the conclusion—to avoid that disturbance which the Prince had forecasted as the result of Mistitch's being put to death. But the Prince was not afraid of the disturbance—why should Stenovics be? The Commandant was all confidence—was the Minister afraid? In some sense he was afraid. That she accepted. But she

hesitated to believe that he was afraid in the common sense that he was either lacking in nerve or overburdened with humanity, that he either feared fighting or would shrink from a salutary severity in repressing tumult. If he feared, he feared neither for his own skin nor for the skin of others; he feared for his policy or his ambition.

These things were nothing to her; she was for the Prince, for his policy and his ambition. Were they the same as Stenovics's? Even a novice at the game could see that this by no means followed of necessity. The King was elderly, and went a-fishing. The Prince was young, and a martinet. In age, Stenovics was between the two—nearly twenty years younger than the King, a dozen or so older than the Prince. Under the present régime he had matters almost entirely his own way. At first sight there was, of a certainty, no reason why his ambitions should coincide precisely with those of the Prince. Fifty-nine, forty-one, twenty-eight—the ages of the three men in themselves illuminated the situation—that is, if forty-one could manage fifty-nine, but had no such power over twenty-eight.

New to such meditations, yet with a native pleasure in them, taking to the troubled waters as though born a swimmer, Sophy thought, and watched, and looked about. As to her own part she was clear. Whether Rastatz was right—whether that most vivid and indelible memory of hers was wrong—were questions which awaited the sole determination of the Prince of Slavna.

Her attitude would have been unchanged, but her knowledge much increased, could she have been present at a certain meeting on the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris that same evening. Markart was there—and little Rastatz, whose timely flight and accommodating memory rendered him to-day not only a free man but a personage of value. But neither did more than wait on the words of the third member of the party—that Colonel Stafnitz of the Hussars who had an old feud with Mistitch, for whom Mistitch had mistaken the Prince of Slavna. A most magnanimous, forgiving

gentleman, apparently, this spare, slim-built man with thoughtful eyes; his whole concern was to get Mistitch out of the mess! The feud he seemed to remember not at all; it was a feud of convenience, a feud to swear to at the court-martial. He was as ready to accommodate Stenovics with the use of his name as Rastatz was to offer the requisite modifications of his memory. But there—with that supply of a convenient fiction—his pliability stopped. He spoke to Markart, using him as a conduit-pipe—the words would flow through to General Stenovics.

"If the General doesn't want to see me now—and I can understand that he mustn't be caught confabbing with any supposed parties to the affair—you must make it plain to him how matters stand. Somehow and by some means our dear Hercules must be saved. Hercules is an ass; but so are most of the men—and all the rowdies of Slavna. They love their Hercules, and they won't let him die without a fight—and a very big fight. In that fight what might happen to his Royal Highness the Commandant? And if anything did happen to him, what might happen to General Stenovics? I don't know that either, but it seems to me that he'd be in an awkward place. The King wouldn't be pleased with him; and we here in Slavna—are we going to trouble ourselves about the man who couldn't save our Hercules?"

Round-faced Markart nodded in a perplexed fashion. Stafnitz clapped him on the shoulder with a laugh.

"For Heaven's sake don't think about it or you'll get it all mixed! Just try to remember it. Your only business is to report what I say to the General."

Rastatz sniggered shrilly. When the wine was not in him, he was a cunning little rogue—a useful tool in any matter which did not ask for courage.

"If I'd been here, Mistitch wouldn't have done the thing at all—or done it better. But what's done is done. And we expect the General to stand by us. If he won't, we must act for ourselves—for there'll be no bearing our dear Commandant if we sit down under the death of Mistitch. In short, the men won't stand it." He tapped Markart's

arm. "The General must release unto us Barabbas!"

The man's easy self-confidence, his air of authority, surprised neither of his companions. If there were a good soldier besides the Commandant in Slavna, Stafnitz was the man; if there were a head in Kravonia cooler than Stenovics's, it was on the shoulders of Stafnitz. He was the brain to Mistitch's body—the mind behind Captain Hercules's loud voice and brawny fist.

"Tell him not to play his big stake on a bad hand. Mind you tell him that."

"His big stake, Colonel?" asked Markart. "What do I understand by that?"

"Nothing; and you weren't meant to. But tell Stenovics—he'll understand."

Rastatz laughed his rickety giggle again.

"Rastatz does that to make you think he understands better than you do. Be comforted—he doesn't." Rastatz's laugh broke out again, but now forced and uneasy. "And the girl who knocked Sterkoff out of time—I wish she'd killed the stupid brute—what about her, Markart?"

"She's—er—a very remarkable person, Colonel."

"Er—is she? I must make her acquaintance. Good-bye, Markart."

Markart had meant to stay for half an hour, but he went.

"Good-bye, Rastatz."

Rastatz had just ordered another liqueur; but, without waiting to drink it, he too went. Stafnitz sat on alone, smoking his cigar. There were no signs of care on his face. Though not gay, it was calm and smooth; no wrinkles witnessed to worry, nor marred the comely remains of youth which had survived his five and thirty years.

He finished his cigar, drank his coffee, and rose to go. Then he looked carefully round the terrace, distinguished the prettiest woman with a momentarily lingering look, made his salute to a brother officer, and strolled away along the boulevard.

Before he reached the barracks in St. Michael's Square he met a woman whose

figure pleased him; she was tall and lithe, moving with a free grace. But over her face she wore a thick veil. The veil no doubt annoyed him; but he was to have other opportunities of seeing Sophy's face.

VI

"IMPOSSIBLE" OR "IMMEDIATE"?

Stenovics was indeed in a quandary. Mistitch had precipitated an unwelcome and premature crisis. The Minister's deliberate, slow-moving game was brought to a sudden issue which he was not ready to face. It had been an essential feature—a governing rule—of his campaign to avoid any open conflict with the Prince of Slavna until an occasion arose on which both the army and the King would be on his side. The King was a power not merely by reason of his cheaply won popularity, but also because he was, while he lived, the only man who could crown Stenovics's operations with the consummation to which the Minister and his ally, Countess Ellenburg, looked forward with distant yet sanguine hope. The army was with him now, but the other factor was lacking. The King's pride, as well as his affection, was enlisted in his son's interest. Moreover, this occasion was very bad.

Mistitch was no better than an assassin; to take up arms on his behalf was to fight in a cause plainly disgraceful—one which would make success very difficult and smirch it forever and beyond remedy, even if it came. It was no cause in which to fight both Prince and King. That would be playing the big stake on a bad hand—as Stafnitz put it.

Yet the alternative? Stafnitz, again, had put that clearly. The army would have no more to do with the man who could not help it at the pinch, who could not save its favorite, who could not release Barabbas.

The Prince seemed to be in his most unyielding mood—the Bourbon in him was

peeping out. For the honor of the Royal House, and for the sake of discipline, Mistitch must die. He had packed his court-martial with the few trustworthy friends he had among the officers, using the justification which jury-packers always use—and sometimes have. He had no fear of the verdict—and no heed for its unpopularity. He knew the danger—Stenovics made no secret about that—but said plainly that he would sooner be beaten by a mutiny than yield to the threat of one. The first meant for him defeat, perhaps death, but not dishonor, nor ignominy. The more Stenovics prophesied—or threatened—a revolt of the troops, the more the Commandant stiffened his neck.

Meanwhile, Slavna waited in ominous, sullen quiet, and the atmosphere was so stormy that King Alexis had no heart for fishing.

On Friday morning—the day before that appointed for Mistitch's trial—the names of the members of the Court were published; the list met with the reception which was, no doubt, anticipated even by the Prince himself. The streets began to fill with loiterers, talkers, and watchers; barrack-rooms were vociferous with grumbling and with speculation. Stafnitz, with Rastatz always at his heels, was busy with many interviews; Stenovics sat in his room, moodily staring before him, seeking a road out of his blind alley; and a carriage drew up before the sign of the Silver Cock as the Cathedral bells chimed noon. It was empty inside, but by the driver sat Peter Vassip, the Prince's personal attendant, wearing the sheepskin coat, leather breeches, and high boots that the men of the hills wore. His business was to summon Sophy to Suleiman's Tower.

The Square of St. Michael was full of life and bustle, the Golden Lion did a fine trade. But the centre of interest was on the north wall and the adjacent quays, under the shadow of Suleiman's Tower. Within those walls were the two protagonists. Thence the Prince issued his orders; thither Mistitch had been secretly conveyed the night before by a party of the Prince's own guard, trustworthy Volsenians.

A crowd of citizens and soldiers was chattering and staring at the Tower when Sophy's carriage drew up at the entrance of the bridge which, crossing the North River, gave access to the fort. The mouth of the bridge was guarded by fifty of those same Volsenians. They had but to retreat and raise the bridge behind them, and Mistitch was safe in the trap. Only—and the crowd was quick enough to understand the situation—the prisoner's trap could be made a snare for his jailer, too. Unless provisions could be obtained from the country round, it would be impossible to hold the Tower for long against an enemy controlling the butchers' and bakers' shops of Slavna. Yet it could be held long enough to settle the business of Captain Hercules.

The shadow of the weeping woman had passed from Sophy's spirit; the sad impression was never the lasting one with her. An hour of crisis always found her gay. She entered the time-worn walls of Suleiman's Tower with a thrill of pleasure, and followed Peter Vassip up the narrow stair with a delighted curiosity. The Prince received her in the large round room, which constituted the first floor of the central tower. Its furniture was simple, almost rude, its massive walls quite bare save for some pieces of ancient armor. Narrow slits, deep-set in the masonry, served for windows and gave a view of the city and of the country round on every side; they showed the seething throng on the north wall and on the quays; the distant sound of a thousand voices struck the ear.

Zerkovitch and his wife were with the Prince, seated over a simple meal, at which Sophy joined them. Marie had watched Sophy's entrance and the Prince's greeting closely; she marked Sophy's excitement betrayed in the familiar signal on her cheek. But the journalist was too excited on his own account to notice other people. He was talking feverishly, throwing his lean body about, and dashing his hands up and down; he hardly paused to welcome the newcomer. He had a thousand plans by which the Prince was to overcome and hold down Slavna. One and all, they had the same defect; they supposed the absence of the danger which they were contrived to meet. They assumed that the soldiers would obey the Commandant, even with the

sound of the rifles which had shot Mistitch fresh in their ears.

The Prince listened good-humoredly to his enthusiastic but highly unpractical adherent; but his mind did not follow the talk. Sophy hearkened with the eagerness of a novice—and he watched her face. Marie watched his, remembering how she had prayed Sophy not to come to Slavna. Sophy was here—and Fate had thrown her across the Prince's path. With a woman's preference for the personal, Marie was more occupied with this situation than with the temper of the capital or the measures of the Prince.

At last their host roused himself, and patted Zerkovitch's shoulder indulgently.

"Well, it's good not to fear," he said. "We didn't fear the other night, Mademoiselle de Gruche and I. And all ended well!"

"Ended?" Marie murmured, half under her breath.

The Prince laughed. "You sha'n't make me afraid," he told her, "any more than Zerkovitch shall make me trust Colonel Stafnitz. I can't say more than that." He turned to Sophy. "I think you'd better stay here till we see what's going to happen to-night—and our friends here will do the same. If all's quiet, you can go home to sleep. If not, we can give you quarters—rough ones, I'm afraid." He rose from the table and went to a window. "The crowd's thinner; they've gone off to eat and drink. We shall have one quiet hour, at all events."

An orderly entered and gave him a letter.

He read it, and said: "Tell General Stenovics I will receive him here at two o'clock." When the messenger had gone, he turned round towards the table. "A last appeal, I suppose! With all the old arguments! But the General has nothing to give in exchange for Mistitch. My price would be very high."

"No price! no price!" cried fiery Zerkovitch. "He raised his sword against you! He must die!"

"Yes, he must die." He turned to the window again. Sophy rose from the table and joined him there, looking over the city. Directly beneath was the great gate, flanked on either side by broad, massive walls, which seemed to grow out of the waters of the river. He was aware of her movement, though he had not looked round at her. "I've brought you, too, into this trouble—you, a stranger," he said.

"You don't think I'm sorry for that?"

"No. But it makes my impotence worse." He waved his arm towards the city. "There it is—here am I! And yet—I'm powerless!"

Sophy followed his gesture, and understood what was passing in his mind—the pang of the soldier without his armament, the workman without his tools. Their midnight talk flashed back into recollection. She remembered his bitter complaint. Under her breath, and with a sigh, she whispered: "If you had the big guns now!"

Low as the whisper was, he heard it—and it seemed to shoot through his brain. He turned sharply round on her and gazed full into her eyes. So he stood a moment, then quickly returned to the table and sat down. Sophy followed, her gaze fixed on his face. Zerkovitch ceased writing—he had been drawing up another plan; both he and Marie now watched the Prince. Moments went by in silence.

At last the Prince spoke—in a low voice, almost dreamy. "My guns for Mistitch! Mistitch against my guns! That would be a price—a fair price!"

The three sat silent. The Zerkovitches, too, had heard him talk of the guns: how on them hung the tranquillity of the city, and how on them might hang the country's honor and existence. Stenovics could give them, if he would, in return for Mistitch. But to give up Mistitch was a great surrender. Sophy's whisper, almost involuntary, the voicing of a regret, hardly even of a distant aspiration, had raised a problem of conduct, a question of high policy. The Prince's brain was busy with it, and his mind perplexed. Sophy sat watching him, not thinking now, but waiting, conscious only that by what seemed almost chance a new face had, through her, been put on the

situation.

Suddenly Zerkovitch brought his clinched fist down on the table. "No!" he almost shouted. "They'll think you're afraid!"

"Yes, they'll think that—but not all of them. Stenovics will know better—and Stafnitz, too. They'll know I do it, not because I'm afraid, but in order that I never need be."

"Then Stenovics won't give them!" cried Marie.

"I think he must give anything or everything for Mistitch." He rose and paced restlessly about the room. Sophy still followed him with her eyes, but she alone of the three offered no argument and made no suggestion. The Prince stood still for a moment in deep thought. Then his face cleared. He came quickly up to Sophy, took her hand, and kissed it.

"Thank you," he said. "I don't know how it will turn out for me; the case is too difficult for me to be able to foresee that. For me it may be mastery—I always thought it would mean that. Or perhaps, somehow, it may turn to ruin." He pressed Sophy's hand now and smiled at her. She understood and returned his smile. "But the question isn't one of my interest. My duty is plain."

He walked quickly to his writing-table and unlocked a drawer. He returned to the table with an envelope in his hand, and sat down between Marie and Zerkovitch.

The orderly entered again, announcing Stenovics. "Let him come in here," said the Prince. His manner grew lighter, and the smile which had comforted Sophy remained on his face.

Stenovics came in; his air was nervous, and he looked at the Prince's three companions with a visible access of embarrassment. At a nod from the Prince, the orderly placed a chair for the General, and withdrew.

"The same matter we discussed last night, General?"

"There can be but one matter in the thoughts of all of us now, sir. Pardon me—I understood your Royal Highness would receive me alone."

The Prince gave a low laugh. "When one bargains, shouldn't one have witnesses?"

In an instant Stenovics laid hold of the significant word; it made him forget his request for privacy. An eager light came into his eyes.

"Bargains? You're ready now to—?"

"La nuit porte conseil." He drew a paper from the envelope, unfolded it, and handed it across the table. "You remember that—a memorandum I sent to you three months ago—in my capacity as Commandant?"

Stenovics looked at the paper. "I remember, sir."

"It's indorsed in your hand?"

"Yes."

"The indorsement runs: 'Impossible.' Rather curt, General!"

"The note was for my private use, but your Royal Highness particularly pressed for the return of the document."

"I did. And, after all, why use more words than necessary? One will still be enough—but not that one."

"I'm not following you, sir," said Stenovics.

The Prince leaned across the table to him. "In our conversation, last night, you asked me to do a very remarkable thing, and to get this lady here" (he indicated Sophy) "to do it, too. You remember? We were to think that, at night, in the Street of the Fountain, in the light of the illuminations, Sergius Stefanovitch and Nikolas Stafnitz looked—and sounded—just the same. I didn't see my way to that, and I didn't think this lady would see hers. It seemed so difficult."

Stenovics was in a strain of close attention. The paper from the envelope crackled under the trembling of his hand.

"Now, if we had such a memory as Lieutenant Rastatz is happy enough to possess!" the Prince pursued. "Or if Colonel Stafnitz had taken us into his confidence about his quarrel with Captain Mistitch! All that was not so last night. Consequently, Captain Mistitch must be tried and shot, instead of suffering some not very severe disciplinary punishment, for brawling in the street and having a quarrel with his superior officer."

Stenovics marked every word, and understood the implied offer. The offer was good enough; Stafnitz himself would not and could not ask that no notice whatever should be taken. The trifling nature of the punishment would in itself be a great victory. But the price? He was to hear that in a moment.

"Sergius Stefanovitch—Nikolas Stafnitz! Which was it, General? It's only changing two words, yet what a difference it makes!"

"The difference of peace to-night or—" Stenovics waved his hand towards the city. But the Prince interrupted him.

"Never mind that," he said, rather sharply. "That's not first in my mind, or I should have left the matter where it rested last night. I was thinking of the difference to Captain Mistitch—and perhaps to you, General."

He looked full at Stenovics, and the General's eyes fell. The Prince pointed his finger across the table at the paper under Stenovics's hand.

"I'm a liberal bargainer," he said, "and I offer you a good margin of profit. I'll change two words if you'll change one—two for you against one for me! 'Sergius Stefanovitch' becomes 'Nikolas Stafnitz' if 'Impossible' becomes 'Immediate.'"

Stenovics gave one slight start, then leaned back in his chair and looked past the Prince out of the window opposite to him.

"Make that change, and we'll settle details afterwards. I must have full guarantees. I must see the order sent, and the money deposited in my name and at my disposal."

"This afternoon, sir?"

"Wouldn't it be well to release Captain Mistitch from Suleiman's Tower before to-night?"

"The money is difficult to-day."

"The release will be impossible to-morrow."

Again Stenovics's eyes wandered to the window, and a silence followed. Perhaps he saw the big guns already in position, dominating the city; perhaps he listened to the hum of voices which again began to swell in volume from the wall and from the quays. There are times when a man must buy the present with a mortgage on the future, however onerous the terms may be. It was danger against destruction. He put out his hand and took from Zerkovitch a quill which the journalist was twiddling in his fingers. He made a scratch and a scribble on the paper which the Prince had taken from the envelope.

"'Impossible' has become 'Immediate,' sir."

"And 'Sergius Stefanovitch' 'Nikolas Stafnitz,'" said the Prince. He looked at Sophy for confirmation, and she softly clapped her hands.

VII

THE BARONESS GOES TO COURT

The troops of the garrison and their allies, the scum of the streets, thought that they had scored a great victory and inflicted deep humiliation on the unpopular martinet who ruled and harried them. They celebrated the event with noisy but harmless revels, and when Captain Hercules was seen about again (he submitted to a fortnight's confinement to barracks with feelings in which thankfulness, though not gratitude, predominated), he found his popularity with them greater than ever. But in the higher circles—the inner ring—of the party he served, his reception was not so

cordial. Stenovics would not see him; Stafnitz saw him only to express a most uncompromising judgment on his conduct.

Yielding in appearance, in point of substance the Prince of Slavna had scored heavily. The big guns were ordered from Germany. The Prince had the money to pay for them, and they were to be consigned to him; these were the guarantees which he had asked from Stenovics. When the guns came—and he had agreed to make an extra payment for early delivery—his situation would be very different. With trusty men behind them, it would go hard with him if he were not master of Slavna, and he had already obtained the King's sanction to raise and train a force of artillery from among his own men in Volseni and its neighborhood. The men of Volseni were proof against Mistitch's bragging and the subtle indulgence by which Stafnitz held his power over the rank and file of the army. They were true to the Prince.

The idle King's family pride was touched; it was the one thing which could rouse him. At his son's express request—and at that only—he acquiesced in the release of Mistitch and his satellite Sterkoff; but he was determined to make his own attitude clear and to do what he could to restore the prestige of his family. The Prince said dryly that the prestige would profit best of all by the big guns; the King was minded to supplement their effect by something more ornate. He created a new Order, and made his son Grand Master of it. There was no harm in that, and Stenovics readily consented. He declared that something more must be done for the lady to whom his son owed his life; to be made Keeper of the Tapestries might be a convenient recompense, but was not honor enough. Stenovics declared that any mark of favor which His Majesty designed for Mademoiselle de Gruche might most properly be hers. Finally, the King instructed Stenovics to concentrate all his energies on the matrimonial negotiations. A splendid marriage would enhance and strengthen the prestige more than anything else. Stenovics promised zealous obedience, and withdrew full of thought. The Order was an easy matter, and honors for Sophy did

no harm. The marriage was ground much more delicate. It touched the "big stake" which Colonel Stafnitz had so emphatically warned the General not to play on the bad hand dealt to him by Mistitch's blundering. But with the big guns in position, and the sturdy men of Volseni behind them—would a good hand ever come?

There were but three in the inner secret of the scheme, but they were three of the longest heads in Kravonia. Countess Ellenburg was a pious woman and of exemplary demeanor; but (as Markart told Sophy) women are ambitious, and she had borne the King a son. Stenovics saw himself cast aside like an old glove if Prince Sergius came to the throne. Stafnitz was a born fisher in troubled waters, and threw a skilful net. Twice before in the country's history, intrigue had made revolution, and changed the order of succession in the House of Stefanovitch. The three waited on chance, but the chance was not yet. If the King were at enmity with his son, or if there were a demise of the Crown while the Prince was not on the spot to look after his interests, there might lie the opportunity. But now the King was all cordiality for his Heir Apparent, the Prince was on the spot; the guns and their Volsenian gunners threatened to be on the spot, too, ere long. It was not now the moment for the big stake.

King Alexis was delighted with his new Order, and the Grand Master's insignia were very handsome. In the centre of a five-pointed star St. Michael slew the Dragon—a symbol, perhaps, of Captain Mistitch! The broad ribbon was of virgin white; it would show up well against either the black sheepskin of the Volsenian tunic or the bright blue of the Prince's hussar uniform. There were, some day, to be five other Knights; with the Grand Master and the Sovereign himself the mystic number Seven would be reached—but it would never be exceeded; the Order would be most select. All this the King explained in a florid speech, gleeful with his new toy, while the serious folks listened with a respectful deference and a secret smile. "If he would make order, instead of Orders!" thought the Prince; and probably Colonel Stafnitz, in attendance as his Majesty's aide-de-camp, had thoughts not very different. Yet,

even toys take on a significance when grown-up people play with them. Countess Ellenburg was not pleased that only one appointment should be made to the Order of St. Michael. Was it not time that the pretty boy Alexis wore a Star?

The King had not done yet; there was honor for the Prince's friends, too; men should know that service to the Royal House was meritorious in proportion to the illustrious position of that House. Zerkovitch stood forward and was made Chevalier of the Cross of Kravonia. The occasion cost Zerkovitch the price of a Court suit, but for Marie's sake he bore the outlay patiently. Then the King, having refreshed himself with a draught which his valet Lepage brought him, turned to his most pleasing task. The Keeper of the Tapestries was called from her place in the circle beside Marie Zerkovitch. Colonel Stafnitz had not noticed her standing there, but now he gave a little start; the figure seemed familiar. He turned his head round to Markart, who was just behind him. "Yes, that's her," Markart whispered in answer to the question in the Colonel's eyes. The eyes flew back to Sophy instantly. There, too, was set the gaze of Countess Ellenburg. For Sophy was in full beauty that day. She, too, loved toys; and her ancient hatred of the name to which she had been born must be remembered. Her eyes glowed, and the Red Star glowed on her cheek. All her air was triumphant as she courtesied to the King, and then stood, erect and proud, to hear his gracious words.

Gracious his words were for her deed, and gracious his smile for her comely beauty. He could at least look a king—no man denied him that—and speak in kingly phrases. "A service unmatched in courage, and immeasurable in importance to us and our Royal House, the preservation of our dearly loved son and only Heir." (Countess Ellenburg looked down her nose at that!) For such an act did he confer a patent of nobility on Sophy, and for greater honor gave her, as title the name of one of his own estates, together with a charge on its revenues equal to her new dignity.

He ended and sank back in his chair. Her Prince came forward and kissed her hand

before them all. Countess Ellenburg bowed condescendingly. A decorous murmur of applause filled the hall as, with shining eyes, Sophia, Baroness Dobrava, courtesied again very low.

So, as Sophy Grouch had gone, went Sophie de Gruche!

"She's delighted—poor child!" whispered Marie Zerkovitch; but only Julia Robins, in England far away, heard the full torrent of Sophy's simple, child-like exultation. Such a letter went to her that night!—but there was stuff in it besides the Baroness's pæan.

Suddenly a childish voice rang out clear through the hall—a fearless, eager little voice.

"What's that you've got on your cheek?" asked young Alexis, with engaging candor; his finger pointed at Sophy's face.

So quaint an interruption to the stately formality of the scene struck people's sense of humor. Everybody laughed—even Countess Ellenburg. Sophy's own laugh rose rich and merry. Her ignorance or carelessness of etiquette betrayed itself; she darted at the pretty boy, caught him in her arms, and kissed him, answering: "That's my luck—my Red Star."

The boy touched the mark with his finger; a look of childish awe came into his blue eyes.

"Your luck!" he said, softly, and continued to look at the mysterious sign after Sophy had set him down again. The little scene was told all over Slavna before night—and men and women talked, according to their temper, of the nature and the meaning of the Red Star. If only the foolish think about such things, even the wise talk.

The King left his chair and mingled with his guests. His movement was the signal for a general relaxation of ceremony. The Prince came across the room and joined Sophy, who had returned to Marie Zerkovitch's side. He offered the Baroness his

congratulations, but in somewhat constrained tones. His mind seemed to be on something else; once or twice he looked inquiringly at Marie, who in her turn showed signs of restlessness or distress. A silence followed on Sophy's expression of her acknowledgments. The Prince glanced again at Marie and made up his mind to speak.

"You've done me the kindness I asked?" he inquired of Marie.

Marie picked at the feathers of her fan in unhappy embarrassment. "No, sir, I haven't. I—I couldn't."

"But why not?" he asked in surprise.

"I—I couldn't," repeated Marie, flushing.

He looked at her gravely for a moment, then smiled. "Then I must plead my own cause," he said, and turned to Sophy. "Next week I'm leaving Slavna and going to my Castle of Praslok. It's near Volseni, you know, and I want to raise and train my gunners at Volseni. We must be ready for our guns when they come, mustn't we?"

His eyes met hers—eager glance exchanged for glance as eager. "Our guns!" whispered Sophy under her breath.

"Marie here and Zerkovitch have promised to come with me. He'll write what ought to be written, and she'll cook the dinners." He laughed. "Oh, well, we do live very simply at Praslok. We shall be there three months at least. I asked Marie to persuade you to come with her and to stay as long as you could. But she's disappointed me. I must plead for myself."

The changing expressions of Sophy's eyes had marked every sentence of his speech, and Marie marked every expression of the eyes. They had grown forlorn and apprehensive when he spoke of leaving Slavna; a sudden joy leaped into them at his invitation to Praslok.

"You'll come for a little? The scenery is very fine, and the people interesting."

Sophy gave a low laugh. "Since the scenery is fine and the people interesting—yes, Monseigneur."

Their eyes met again, and he echoed back her laugh. Marie Zerkovitch drew in her breath sharply. With swift insight she saw—and foresaw. She remembered the presentiment, under whose influence she had begged Sophy not to come to Kravonia. But fate had weighted the scales heavily against her. The Baroness Dobrava was here.

The Prince turned to Marie with a puzzled look. Sophy was lost in glad anticipations. Marie met the Prince's look with a deprecating imploring glance. He frowned a little—not in anger, but in puzzle; what she foresaw he himself had not yet divined; he was feeling the joy without understanding it.

"At any rate you're not responsible now if we do freeze her to death with our mountain snows," he said in a jest which veiled friendly reproach.

"No, at least I'm not responsible," Marie answered.

There was a note in her voice now which commanded even Sophy's pre-engaged attention. She looked sharply at her friend—and perhaps she understood. But she did not yield to the suggestion. She drew herself up proudly. "I'm not afraid of what may happen to me at Praslok, Monseigneur," she said.

A simultaneous exclamation of many voices broke across their talk. At the other end of the room, men and women pressed into a circle round some point of interest which could not be seen by Sophy and her companions. A loud voice rang out in authoritative tones: "Stand back! Stand back—and open all the windows!"

"That's Natcheff's voice," said the Prince. Natcheff was the leading physician of Slavna. "Somebody's fainted, I suppose. Well, the place is stuffy enough!"

Markart emerged from the circle, which had widened out in obedience to the physician's orders. As he hurried past the Prince, he said: "The King has fainted, sir. I'm going to fetch Lepage." Two or three other men ran and opened the windows.

"The King fainted! I never knew him do that before."

He hastened to where his father lay, the subject of Natcheff's ministrations. Sophy and Marie followed in his wake through the opening which the onlookers made for him. The King showed signs of recovering, but Natcheff's face was grave beyond even the requirements of his profession or of his patient's rank. The next moment Lepage came up. This man, the King's body-servant, was a small, plump person, who had generally a weary, impassive, uninterested manner. He looked rather uninterested even now, but his walk was very quick, and he was soon aiding Natcheff with deft and nimble fingers.

"This is strange, Lepage," said Natcheff.

Lepage did not look up from his task.

"Has it ever happened before?"

Then Lepage did look up. He appeared to consider and to hesitate. He glanced once at the King before he answered.

"It's the third attack in two months," he said, at last.

"You never told me!" The words shot sharp from Natcheff's lips.

"That was by His Majesty's peremptory orders. He'll be angry that I've told you now."

"Clear the room!" ordered Natcheff, shortly.

Slavna had plenty to talk about that night. Besides the Baroness Dobrava's Red Star, there was the fainting fit of King Alexis! The evening bulletin was entirely favorable; the King had quite recovered. But many had heard Lepage's confession and seen the look that it brought to Natcheff's face.

Stenovics and Stafnitz rode back from the Palace to the city side by side. The General was silent, immersed in deep thought. Stafnitz smoked his cigarette with a light, rather mocking smile. At last, when they were almost opposite the terrace of

the Hôtel de Paris, Stenovics spoke.

"It looks like the handwriting on the wall," he said.

"Quite so, General," Stafnitz agreed, cheerfully. "But at present there's no evidence to show to whom, besides the King himself, the message is addressed."

"Or what it says?"

"I think that's plain enough, General. I think it says that the time is short."

He watched his companion's face closely now. But Stenovics's mask was stolid and unmoved; he said nothing; he contented himself with a sullen grunt.

"Short for the King!" pursued Stafnitz, with a shake of his head. "Short for the Prince, perhaps! And certainly, General, uncomfortably short for us!"

Stenovics grunted again, and then rode on some while in silence. At last, just as he was about to part from his companion, he made one observation:

"Fortunately Natcheff is a friend of mine; we shall get the best possible information."

"That might become of importance, no doubt, General," said Stafnitz, smiling still.

VIII

MONSEIGNEUR'S UNIFORM

Dr. Natcheff amply reassured public opinion. What information he gave to General Stenovics, his friend, is another matter, and remained locked in that statesman's heart. Publicly and to everybody else, from the Prince of Slavna downward, he declared that there was no ground for apprehension, and that the King merely needed rest and change; after a few days of the former it was proposed to seek the latter by moving the Court to His Majesty's country-seat at Dobrava—that estate from which Sophy had been graciously bidden to choose her title. Meanwhile, there

was no reason why the Prince should not carry out his intention, and proceed to the Castle of Praslok.

Below Slavna, the main post-road—as has already been stated, there was no railway at this time—follows the course of the River Krath for about five miles in a southeasterly direction. It is then carried across the stream (which continues to trend to the south) by an ancient wooden bridge, and runs northeast for another fifteen miles, through flat country, and past prosperous agricultural and pastoral villages, till it reaches the marshy land bordering Lake Talti. The lake, extending from this point to the spurs of the mountain-range which forms the frontier, bars its farther direct progress, and it divides into two branches. The right prong of the fork continues on the level till it reaches Dobrava, eight miles from the point of bisection; here it inclines to the northeast again, and, after some ten miles of steady ascent, crosses the mountains by St. Peter's Pass, the one carriage-road over the range and over the frontier. The left prong becomes a steep ascent directly the bisection has occurred, rising sharply for five miles to the hill on which the Castle of Praslok stands. Then it runs for another five miles on a high plateau till it ends at the hill city of Volseni, which stands on the edge of the plateau, looking down on Lake Talti and across to Dobrava in the plain opposite.

Beyond Volseni there is no road in the proper sense, but only cart or bridle-tracks. Of these the principal and most frequented runs diagonally across the valley in which Lake Talti lies, is interrupted by the lake (at that point about a mile and a half wide), and then meets the road from Dobrava half-way up St. Peter's Pass, and about twenty miles across-country from Volseni. It thus forms the base of a rough and irregular triangle of country, with the point where the Slavna road bisects, the Pass and Volseni marking its three angles. Lake Talti is set in the middle, backed by a chain of hills continuous everywhere except at the indentation of the Pass.

Though so near to Slavna in actual distance, the country is very different from the

fertile river-valley which surrounds the capital; it is bleak and rough, a land of hill pastures and mountain woods. Its natural features are reflected in the character of the inhabitants. The men who count Volseni a local capital are hardier than the men of Slavna, less given to luxury, less addicted to quarrels and riots, but considerably more formidable opponents if once they take up arms. For this reason, no less than on account of their devotion to him, the Prince did well to choose this country as the recruiting-ground for his new force of gunners.

The Prince had been at Praslok for a week when Sophy set out to join him there. At the last moment, Zerkovitch decided to remain in Slavna, at least until the Court made its promised move to Dobrava: reassuring as Dr. Natcheff was, it would do no harm to have a friendly pair of eyes and ears in the capital so long as the King remained in residence. Thus the two ladies were accompanied only by Peter Vassip, whom the Prince had sent to escort them. They set out in a heavy travelling-carriage at ten in the morning, reckoning to reach the Castle before evening fell; their progress would never be rapid, and for the last five miles exceedingly slow. They left the capital in complete tranquillity, and when Sophy settled her bill at the sign of the Silver Cock, and bade farewell to old Meyerstein, her landlord, he expressed the hope that she would soon be back, though, indeed, his poor house was, he feared, no fit quarters for the Baroness Dobrava.

"I don't know whether I shall come back here, but I can never forget your house. I shall always love it in my memory," said Sophy.

Max von Hollbrandt had obtained leave of absence from his Legation, and had accompanied the Prince to Praslok. The two were friends, having many tastes in common, and not least the taste for soldiering. Besides having the pleasure of his company, the Prince looked to obtain valuable aid from Max in the task on which he was engaged. The young German was amused and delighted with his expedition. Praslok is a primitive old place. It stands on an abrupt mound, or knob, of ground by

the road-side. So steep and sudden is the ascent, that it was necessary to build a massive causeway of wood—an inclined plane—to lead up from the road to the gate of the square tower which forms the front of the building; the causeway has cross-bars at short intervals, to give foothold to the horses which, in old days, were stabled within the walls. Recently, however, modern stables had been built on the other side of the road, and it had become the custom to mount the causeway and enter the Castle on foot.

Within, the arrangements were quaint and very simple. Besides the tower already mentioned, which contained the dining-room and two bedrooms above it, the whole building, strictly conditioned by the shape of the hill on which it stood, consisted of three rows of small rooms on the ground-floor. In one row lived the Prince and his male guests, in the second the servants, in the third the guard. The ladies were to be accommodated in the tower above the dining-room. The rows of rooms opened on a covered walk or cloister, which ran round the inner court of the Castle. The whole was solidly built of gray stone—a business-like old hill-fortress, strong by reason of its massive masonry and of the position in which it stood. Considered as a modern residence—it had to be treated humorously—so Max declared, and found much pleasure in it from that point of view. The Prince, always indifferent to physical comfort, and ever averse from luxury, probably did not realize how much his ancestral stronghold demanded of his guests' indulgence. Old Vassip, Peter's father, was major-domo—always in his sheepskin coat and high boots. His old wife was cook. Half a dozen servants completed the establishment, and of these three were grooms. The horses, in fact, seemed to Max the only creatures whose comforts were at all on a modern footing. But the Prince was entirely satisfied, and never so happy anywhere as at Praslok. He loved the simple, hardy life; he loved even more, though perhaps less consciously, the sense of being among friends. He would not yield an inch to court popularity in Slavna; but his heart went out to meet the unsought devotion of Volseni, the mountain town, and its surrounding villages. Distant and

self-restrained in Slavna, here he was open, gay, and full of an almost boyish ardor.

"It's worth coming here, just to see its effect on you," Max told him, as the two rode back together from Volseni on the day of Sophy's arrival. They had been at work, and the recruiting promised well.

The Prince laughed gayly. "Coming here from Slavna is like fresh air after an oven," he said. "No need to watch your tongue—or other people's! You can laugh when you like, and frown when you like, without a dozen people asking what's your motive for doing it."

"But, really, you shouldn't have chosen a diplomatist for your companion, sir, if you feel like that."

"I haven't," he smiled. "I've left the diplomatist down there and brought the soldier up. And now that the ladies are coming—"

"Ah, now we must watch our tongues a little bit! Madame Zerkovitch is very pretty—and the Baroness might make me absolutely poetical!"

Least prying of men, yet Max von Hollbrandt could not resist sending with this speech a glance at his companion—the visit of the Baroness compelled this much tribute to curiosity. But the Prince's face was a picture of unembarrassed pleasure.

"Then be poetical! We'll all be poetical!" he cried, merrily. "In the intervals of drilling, be it understood!" he added, with a laugh.

Into this atmosphere, physical and moral—the exhilaration of keen mountain breezes, the brightness of a winter sun, the play of high hopes and of high spirit—came Sophy, with all her power of enjoying and her ardor in imagining. Her mind leaped from the sad embraces of the past, to fly to the arms of the present, to beckon gladly to the future. No more than this had yet emerged into consciousness; she was not yet asking how, for good or evil, she stood or was to stand towards the Prince. Fortune had done wonderful things for her, and was doing more yet. That was enough, and beyond that, for the moment, she was not driven.

The mixture of poetry and drilling suited her to perfection. She got both when she rode over to Volseni with the Prince. Crisp snow covered the ground, and covered, too, the roofs of the old, gray, hill-side city—long, sloping roofs, with here and there a round-tower with a snow-clad extinguisher atop. The town was no more than one long street, which bayed out at the farther end into a market-place. It stood with its back against a mountain-side, defended on the other three sides by a sturdy wall, which only now, after five centuries, began to crumble away at the top.

At the city-gate bread and salt were brought to the Bailiff and his companion, and she and he rode side by side down the long street to the market-place. Here were two or three hundred, tall, fine fellows, waiting their leader. Drill had not yet brought formality; on the sight of him they gave a cheer and ran to form a ring about him. Many caught his hand and pressed or kissed it. But Sophy, too, claimed their eyes. It was very cold; she wore a short jacket of sable over her habit, and a round cap of the same fur—gifts of Lady Meg's in the days of her benevolence. She was at the pitch of pleasure and excitement.

In a moment, a quick-witted fellow divined who she was. "The lady who saved him! The lady who saved him!" he cried, at the full pitch of his voice. The Prince drew himself up in the saddle and saluted her. "Yes, the lady who saved me," he said. Sophy had the cheers now, and they mounted to her head with fumes of intoxication. It may be guessed how the Red Star glowed!

"And you'll save him, if need be?" she cried—quite indiscreetly. The Prince smiled and shook his head, but the answer was an enraptured cheer. The hatred of Slavna was a recommendation to Volseni's increased regard, the hint of danger a match to its fiery enthusiasm.

"A favor, Bailiff, a favor!" cried a young man of distinguished appearance. He seemed to be well known and to carry weight, for there were shouts of "Hear Lukovitch! Hear Lukovitch!"—and one called, with a laugh: "Ay, listen to the

Wolf!"

"What is it, Lukovitch?" asked the Prince.

"Make the lady of our company, Bailiff." New cheers were raised. "Make her a lieutenant of our artillery."

Sophy laughed gayly.

"I have His Majesty's authority to choose my officers," said the Prince, smiling. "Baroness, will you be a lieutenant, and wear our sheepskins in place of your sables there?"

"It is your uniform, Monseigneur," Sophy answered, bowing her head.

Lukovitch sprang forward and kissed her hand.

"For our Bailiff's preserver as for our Bailiff, men of Volseni!" he cried, loudly. The answering cheer brought tears to Sophy's sparkling eyes. For a moment she could not see her Prince nor the men who thus took her to their hearts.

Suddenly, in the midst of her exultation, she saw a face on the outskirts of the throng. A small, spare man stood there, dressed in unobtrusive tweeds, but making no effort to conceal himself; he was just looking on, a stranger to the town, interested in the picturesque little scene. The face was that of Lieutenant Rastatz.

She watched the drilling of the gunners, and then rode back with the Prince, escorted beyond the gates by a cheering throng, which had now been joined by many women. Dusk was falling, and the old, gray city took on a ghostly look; the glory of the sunshine had departed. Sophy shivered a little beneath her furs.

"Monseigneur, did you see Rastatz?" she asked.

"No, I didn't see him; but I knew he was here. Lukovitch told me yesterday."

"And not in uniform!"

"He has leave, no doubt, and his uniform wouldn't make his stay in Volseni any more pleasant."

"What's he there for?" she asked, fretfully.

"Ah, Baroness, you must inquire of those who sent him, I think." His tone was light and merry.

"To spy on you, I suppose! I hate his being there. He—he isn't worthy to be in dear Volseni."

"You and Volseni have fallen in love with each other, I see! As for spying, all I'm doing I do openly, and all I shall do. But I don't blame Stenovics for keeping an eye on me, or Stafnitz either. I do my best to keep an eye on them, you know. We needn't be afraid of Rastatz, we who have beaten Hercules Mistitch in open fight!"

"Oh, well, away with him!" cried Sophy. "The snow's not frozen—shall we canter home, Monseigneur?"

Merrily they cantered through the fast falling evening, side by side. Rastatz was out of mind now; all was out of mind save the fascination of the crisp air, the silent suggestion of gathering night, her Prince who rode beside her. The dark mass of the tower of Praslok rose too soon before her unwilling eyes. She drew rein, sighing.

"If life were just all that and nothing else!" she said, as he helped her to dismount and the grooms took the horses. She stopped half-way up the steep wooden causeway and turned to look back towards Volseni. The Prince stood close by her.

"That's good, but life has better things," he said, softly. "To ride together is good, and to play together. But to work together is better still, Baroness."

For a moment Sophy was silent. Then she laughed in joy.

"Well, I'm to wear your uniform henceforth, Monseigneur!"

He took her hand and kissed it. Very slowly and gradually she drew it away, her eyes meeting his as he raised his head. The heavy door at the top of the causeway opened; Marie Zerkovitch stood there, holding a lamp high in her hand; the sudden light flooded their faces. For a moment more he looked at her, then went down again

on his way to the stables. Sophy ran up to where Marie Zerkovitch stood.

"You heard our horses?" she asked, gayly.

But there was no responsive smile on Marie's lips. For her, too, the light had shone on those two faces, and she was sorely troubled.

The next day again they rode together, and the next. On the third day, Sophy rode into Volseni in the sheepskin cap and tunic, a short habit of blue hiding her leather breeches and coming half-way over her long boots. The Prince gave her his hand as they rode into the market-place.

Marie Zerkovitch trembled, Max von Hollbrandt shrugged his shoulders with a laugh—and little Rastatz drove back to Slavna through the night. He thought that he had seen enough for his purposes; his report might be useful in the city on the Krath.

IX

COUNTESS ELLENBURG PRAYS

In Slavna, Dr. Natcheff continued his reassuring reports until the public at large was so reassured as to ask for no more reports even of the most optimistic description. But the state of mind of the few people behind the scenes was very different. Stafnitz's conclusion held sway there. The time was short! That was the ruling thought and the governing fact. It might be very short; and the end might come without warning. The secret was well kept, but to those to whom he spoke at all Natcheff spoke openly. The King's life hung on a thread, which the least accident might break. With perfect quiet and tranquillity he might live a year, possibly two years; any shock or overstrain would precipitate the end. Countess Ellenburg and her confidential friends knew this, the King knew it himself, and Lepage his valet, knew it. There the possession of the secret stopped.

The King was gay and courageous; courage, at least, he had never lacked. He

seemed almost indifferent. The best years were over, he said, and why not an end? An end swift, without pain, without waiting! There was much to be said for it. Lepage agreed with his master and told him so in his usual blunt fashion; they agreed together not to cry about it, and the King went fishing still. But the time was short, and he pushed on his one great idea with a zeal and an earnestness foreign to his earlier habit. He would see his son married, or at least betrothed, before he died; he would see the great marriage in train—the marriage which was to establish forever the rank and prestige of the House of Stefanovitch. The Prince of Slavna must set forth on his travels, seeking a wife; the King even designated a Princess of most unquestionable exaltedness, as the first object of his son's attentions or pursuit. With an unusual peremptoriness, and an unusual independence, he sent Stenovics orders to communicate his wishes directly to the Prince. Stenovics received the royal memorandum on the day on which Lieutenant Rastatz returned to Slavna with the fruits of his observation at Volseni in his hand.

At first sight the King's commands were totally at variance with the interests of the Ellenburg coterie, and with the progress of their great plan. They did not want the House of Stefanovitch strengthened and glorified in the person of its present Heir Apparent. But the matter was more complicated than a first glance showed. There were the guns to be considered as well—and the gunners training at Volseni; these would be sources of strength and prestige to the Prince, not less valuable, more tangible, than even a great match. And now the Prince was on the spot. Send him on his travels! The time was short; when the short time ended, he might be far away. Finally, he might go and yet take nothing by his journey; the exalted Princess would be hard to win; the King's family pride might defeat itself by making him pitch his hopes and his claims too high.

On the whole the matter was difficult. The three chief conspirators showed their conviction of this in their characteristic ways. Countess Ellenburg became more pious than ever; General Stenovics more silent—at least more prone to restrict his

conversation to grunts; Colonel Stafnitz more gay and interested in life; he, too, was fishing, and in his favorite waters, and he had hopes of a big rise.

There was one contingency impossible to overlook. In spite of his father's orders, the Prince might refuse to go. A knowledge of the state of the King's health would afford him a very strong excuse, a suspicion of the plans of the coterie an overpowering motive. The King himself had foreseen the former danger and feared its effect on his dominant hopes; by his express command the Prince was kept in ignorance; he had been amply reassured by Dr. Natcheff. On the latter point the coterie had, they flattered themselves, nothing to fear. On what ground, then, could the Prince justify a refusal? His gunners? That would be unwarrantable; the King would not accept the plea. Did Rastatz's report suggest any other ground for refusal? If it did, it was one which, to the King's mind, would seem more unwarrantable still.

There is no big game without its risk; but after full consideration, Stenovics and Stafnitz decided that the King's wishes were in their interest, and should be communicated to the Prince without delay. They had more chances for them than against them. If their game had its dangers—well, the time might be very short.

In these days Countess Ellenburg made a practice of shutting herself up in her private rooms for as much as two additional hours every day. She told the King that she sought a quiet time for meditation and prayer. King Alexis shrugged his shoulders; meditation wouldn't help matters, and, in face of Dr. Natcheff's diagnosis of the condition of his heart, he must confess to a serious doubt even about prayer. He had outlived his love for the Countess, but to the end he found in her a source of whimsical amusement; divining, if not her ambitions, at least her regrets; understanding how these regrets, when they became very acute, had to be met by an access of piety. Naturally they would be acute now, in view of Natcheff's diagnosis. He thanked her for her concern, and bade her by all means go and pray.

What was the stuff of her prayers—the stuff behind the words? No doubt she prayed

for her husband's life. No doubt she prayed for her son's well-being. Very likely she even prayed that she might not be led into temptation, or to do anything wrong, by her love for her son; for it was her theory that the Prince himself would ruin his own chances, and throw the Crown away. It is not easy always to be sure of conscious insincerity.

Yet the devil's advocate would have had small difficulty in placing a fresh face on her prayers, in exhibiting what lay below the words, in suggesting how it was that she came forth from her secret devotions, not happy and tranquillized, but with weary eyes, and her narrow lips close-set in stern self-control. Her prayer that she might do nothing wrong was a prayer that the Prince might do nothing right. If that prayer were granted, sin on her part would become superfluous. She prayed not to be led into temptation—that sounded quite orthodox; was she to presume to suggest to Heaven the means by which temptation should be avoided?

Stenovics skilfully humored this shade of hypocrisy. When he spoke to her, there were in his mouth no such words as plans or schemes or hopes or ambitions—no, nor claims nor rights. It was always, "the possibilities we are compelled to contemplate"—"the steps we may be forced into taking"—"the necessities of mere self-defence"—"the interests of the kingdom"—"the supreme evil of civil strife"—which last most respectable phrase meant that it was much better to jockey the Prince out of his throne than to fight him for it. Colonel Stafnitz bit his lip and gnawed his mustache during these interviews. The Countess saw—and hated him. She turned back to Stenovics's church-going phrases and impassive face. Throughout the whole affair the General probably never once mentioned to her in plain language the one and only object of all their hopes and efforts. In the result business took rather longer to transact—the church-going phrases ran to many syllables; but concessions must be made to piety. Nor was the Countess so singular; we should often forego what we like best if we were obliged to define it accurately and aloud.

After one of these conferences the Countess always prayed; it may be presumed that she prayed against the misfortune of a cast-iron terminology. Probably she also urged her views—for prayer is in many books and mouths more of an argument than a petition—that all marriages were on one and the same footing, and that Heaven knew naught of a particular variety named in some countries morganatic. Of the keeping of contracts, made contrary to the presumed views of Heaven, we are all aware that Churches—and sometimes States, too—are apt to know or count nothing.

Such were the woman and her mind. Some pity may go out to her. In the end, behind all her prayers, and inspiring them—nay, driving her to her knees in fear—was the conviction that she risked her soul. When she felt that, she pleaded that it was for her son's sake. Yet there lay years between her son and man's estate; the power was for some one during those years.

"If I had the Countess's views and temperament, I should grow potatoes—and, if possible, grow them worse than my neighbors," said Colonel Stafnitz. "If I lived dully, I should at least die in peace!"

The King held a very confidential conference. It was to sign his will. The Countess was there; the little boy, who moved in happy unconsciousness of all the schemes which centred round him, was sent into the next room to play with Lepage. Stenovics and Stafnitz were present as witnesses, and Markart as secretary. The King touched lightly on his state of health, and went on to express his conviction of the Prince of Slavna's distinguished consideration for Countess Ellenburg and fraternal affection for little Alexis. "I go the happier for being sure of this, gentlemen," he said, to his two counsellors. "But in any case the Countess and my son are well secured. There will be enough for you, Charlotte, to live in suitable style, here or abroad, as you please. My son I wish to stay here and enter my army. I've settled on him the estate of Dobrava, and he will have means equal to his station. It's well to have this arranged; from day to day I am in the hands of God."

As with another King, nothing in life became him like the leaving of it. There was little more work to do—he had but to wait with courage and with dignity. The demand now was on what he had in abundance, not on a faculty which he had always lacked. He signed the document, and bade the General and Stafnitz witness it. In silence they obeyed him, meaning to make waste-paper of the thing to which they set their names.

That business done—and the King alone seemed happy in the doing of it (even Stafnitz had frowned)—the King turned suddenly to Stenovics.

"I should like to see Baroness Dobrava. Pray let her be sent for this afternoon."

The shock was sudden, but Stenovics's answer came steady, if slow.

"Your Majesty desires her presence?"

"I want to thank her once again, Stenovics. She's done much for us."

"The Baroness is not in Slavna, sir, but I can send for her."

"Not in Slavna? Where is she, then?"

He asked what the whole kingdom knew. Save himself, nobody was ignorant of Sophy's whereabouts.

"She is on a visit to his Royal Highness at Praslok, sir." Stenovics's voice was a triumph of neutrality.

"On a visit to the Prince?" Surprise sounded in his voice.

"Madame Zerkovitch is there too, sir," Stenovics added. "The ladies have been there during the whole of the Prince of Slavna's stay."

The King shot a glance at Countess Ellenburg; she was looking prim and grim. He looked, also, at Stafnitz, who bit his mustache, without quite hiding an intentional but apparently irrepressible smile. The King did not look too grave—and most of his gravity was for Countess Ellenburg.

"Is that—hum—at this moment, quite desirable?" he asked.

His question met with silence; the air of all three intimated that the matter was purely one for His Majesty. The King sat a moment with a frown on his brow—the frown which just supplants a smile when a thing, generally amusing and not unnatural, happens by chance to occur inconveniently.

Across this silence came a loud voice from the next room—Lepage's voice. "Take care, take care! You'll upset the flowers, Prince!"

The King started; he looked round at his companions. Then he struck a hand-bell on the table before him. Lepage appeared.

"Lepage, whom did you address as 'Prince' just now?"

"Count Alexis, sir."

"Why?"

"The Count insisted."

"Don't do it again. It's absurd! Go away!"

A dull red patched Countess Ellenburg's cheeks. Lids brooded low over the eyes of Stafnitz and of Stenovics. It was a very awkward little scene—the King's irritation had got the better of him for the moment. What would the kindred of the exalted Princess have said? The King turned to Countess Ellenburg and forced a smile.

"The question of reproof is one for you, Countess," he said, frigidly. "And now about the Baroness—No, I mean, I wanted to ask if my wishes have been communicated to the Prince of Slavna."

"The Prince has received them, sir. He read them in the presence of my messenger, and requested leave to send his answer in writing, unless he might wait on Your Majesty."

"There are reasons why I had better not see him just now. Ask him to write—but very soon. The matter isn't one for delay." The King rose from his seat.

"Your Majesty still wishes me to send for Baroness Dobrava?"

The King reflected for a moment, and answered simply: "No."

His brief word broke up the conference—it had already lasted longer than suave and reassuring Dr. Natcheff would have advised. The men went away with a smile, all of them—the King, Stenovics, Stafnitz, round-faced Markart—each smiling according to the quality of each, their smiles answering to Max von Hollbrandt's shrug of the shoulders. There are things which bring men to what painful youth was taught to call the least common denominator. A horse-race does it, a prize-fight, a cricket-match, a battle, too, in some sort. Equally efficacious, very often, though it is to be recorded with reluctance, is a strong flirtation with no proper issue obvious.

The matter was grave, yet all the men laughed. The matter was grave, and Countess Ellenburg did not laugh. Was that what Stafnitz called her views and her temperament? In part, no doubt. Besides, men will laugh at the side-issues of the gravest affairs; it is not generally the case with woman. Added again to this, perhaps Countess Ellenburg knew more, or divined more. Among glaring diversity there was, perhaps, something—an atom—of similarity between her and Sophy—not the something which refuses, but the something which couples high conditions with assent. The thousandth chance is to most men negligible; to most women it is no worse than the tenth; their sense of mathematical odds is sorely—and sometimes magnificently—imperfect.

It had flashed across Countess Ellenburg's mind that maybe Sophy, too, played for a big stake—or, rather, lived for it and so would die. The men had not thought of that; to them, the violent flirtation had its obvious end and its passing inconvenience. It might delay the Prince's departure for a while; it might make his marriage more entirely an affair of duty and of state. With this idea they smiled and shrugged; the whole business came under the head which, in their thoughts and their confidential conversations, they would style nonsense.

It was not so with the Countess. Disconcerted by that episode of Lepage and young

Alexis, more moved by the sudden appearance of Baroness Dobrava as a factor in the game, she returned to prayer.

What now was the form and matter of her prayer? The form must go unformulated—and the words unconjectured. Yet she prayed so long that she must have succeeded in putting a good face on her petitions. Without a plausible plea nobody could have rested on their knees so long.

It is probable that she prayed for others as she prayed for herself—she prayed that the Prince of Slavna and the Baroness Dobrava might escape temptation.

Or that, if they fell—? Again it was not for her to dictate to Heaven. Heaven had its ways of dealing with such sinners.

Yet through all her prayers must have echoed the words: "It's absurd!" She prayed again, most likely, against being suspected of wishing that the man who uttered them—her husband—might soon be dead.

The King dead—and the Prince a slave to love—to the idle hours of an unprofitable love! It was a fine vision, and needed a vast deal of covering with the veil of prayer.

X

THE SOUND OF A TRUMPET

The Prince of Slavna's answer to the intimation of his father's wishes was dutiful, courteous, and discreetly diplomatic. The Prince was much occupied with his drills and other occupations; he availed himself of Max von Hollbrandt's practised pen—the guest was glad to do his royal host this favor.

They talked over the sense of the reply; Max then draughted it. The Prince did no more than amend certain expressions which the young diplomatist had used. Max wrote that the Prince cordially sympathized with the King's wishes; the Prince amended to the effect that he thoroughly understood them. Max wrote that the

Prince was prepared cordially and energetically to co-operate in their realization; the Prince preferred to be prepared to consider them in a benevolent spirit. Max suggested that two or three months' postponement of the suggested journey would not in itself be fatal; the Prince insisted that such a delay was essential, in order that negotiations might be set on foot to ensure his being welcomed with due empressement. Max added that the later date would have an incidental advantage, since it would obviate the necessity of the Prince's interrupting the important labors on which he was engaged; the Prince said instead that, in his judgment, it was essential, in the interests of the kingdom, that the task of training the artillery should not be interfered with by any other object, however well worthy of consideration that object might be.

In the result, the draught as amended, though not less courteous or dutiful than Max's original, was noticeably more stiff. Translate them both into the terse and abrupt speech of every-day life, and one said: "I'd rather not, please," while the other came at least very near to a blank "I won't!" Max's was acquiescence, coupled with a prayer for postponement; the Prince's was postponement first, with an accompanying assurance of respectful consideration.

Max was not hurt, but he felt a professional disapproval; the Prince had said more, and shown more of his mind, than was needful; it was throwing more cards on the table than the rules of the game demanded.

"Mine would have done just as well," he complained to Marie Zerkovitch. "If mine had been rejected, his could have followed. As it is, he's wasted one or other of them. Very foolish, since just now time's his main object!" He did not mean saving time, but protracting it.

Marie did no more than toss her head peevishly. The author of the original draught persevered.

"Don't you think mine would have been much wiser—to begin with?"

"I don't see much difference. There's little enough truth in either of them!" she snapped.

Max looked at her with an amused and tolerant smile. He knew quite well what she meant. He shook his head at her with a humorous twinkle. "Oh, come, come, don't be exacting, madame! There's a very fair allowance of truth. Quite half the truth, I should think. He is really very anxious about the gunners!"

"And about what else?"

Max spread out his hands with a shrug, but passed the question by. "So much truth, in fact, that it would have served amply for at least two letters," he remarked, returning to his own special point of complaint.

Marie might well amuse the easy-going, yet observant and curious, young man; he loved to watch his fellow-creatures under the stress of feelings from which he himself was free, and found in the opportunities afforded him in this line the chief interest both of his life and of his profession.

But Marie had gradually risen to a high, nervous tension. She was no puritan—puritans were not common in Kravonia, nor had Paris grafted such a slip onto her nature. Had she thought as the men in the Palace thought when they smiled, had she thought that and no more, it is scarcely likely that she would have thus disturbed herself; after all, such cases are generally treated as in some sense outside the common rules; exceptional allowances are, in fact, whether properly or not, made for exceptional situations. Another feeling was in her mind—an obsession which had come almost wholly to possess her. The fateful foreboding which had attacked her from the first had now full dominion over her; its rule was riveted more closely on her spirit day by day, as day by day the Prince and Sophy drew closer together. Even that Sophy had once saved his life could now no longer shake Marie's doleful prepossession. Unusual and unlooked-for things take color from the mind of the spectator; the strange train of events which had brought Sophy to Praslok

borrowed ominous shadows from a nervous, apprehensive temperament.

No such gloom brooded over Sophy. She gave herself up to the hour: the past forgotten, the future never thought of. It was the great time of her life. Her feelings, while not less spontaneous and fresh, were more mature and more fully satisfied than when Casimir de Savres poured his love at her feet. A cry of happiness almost lyrical runs through her scanty record of these days—there was little leisure for diary or letters.

Winter was melting into spring, snow dwelled only on the hill-tops, Lake Talti was unbound and sparkled in the sun; the days grew longer, yet were far too short. To ride with him to Volseni, to hear the cheers, to see the love they bore him, to watch him at work, to seem to share the labor and the love—then to shake off the kindly clinging friends and take to a mountain-path, or wander, the reins on the horses' necks, by the margin of the lake, and come home through the late dusk, talking often, silent often, always together in thought as in bodily presence—was not this enough? "If I had to die in a month, I should owe life a tremendous debt already"—that is her own summing up; it is pleasant to remember.

It would be enough to say—love; enough with a nature ardent as hers. Yet, with love much else conspired. There was the thought of what she had done, of the things to which she was a party; there was the sense of power, the satisfaction of ambition, a promise of more things; there was the applause of Volseni as well as the devotion of the Prince; there was, too—it persisted all through her life—the funny, half-childish, and (to a severe eye) urchin-like pleasure in the feeling that these were fine doings for Sophy Grouch, of Morpingham in Essex! "Fancy me!" is the indefensibly primitive form in which this delight shows in one of the few letters bearing date from the Castle of Praslok.

Yet it is possible to find this simple, gracious surprise at Fortune's fancies worthy of love. Her own courage, her own catching at Fortune's forelock, seem to have been

always unconscious and instinctive. These she never hints at, nor even begins to analyze. Of her love for the Prince she speaks once or twice—and once in reference to what she had felt for Casimir. "I loved him most when he left me, and when he died," she writes. "I love him not less now because I love Monseigneur. But I can love Monseigneur more for having loved Casimir. God bade the dear dead die, but He bade me live, and death helped to teach me how to do it." Again she reflects: "How wonderfully everything is worth while—even sorrows!" Following which reflection, in the very next line (she is writing to Julia Robins), comes the naïve outburst: "I look just splendid in my sheepskin tunic—and he's given me the sweetest toy of a revolver; that's in case they ever charge, and try and cut us up behind our guns!" She is laughing at herself, but the laugh is charged with an infectious enjoyment. So she lived, loved, and laughed through those unequalled days, trying to soothe Marie Zerkovitch, bantering Max von Hollbrandt, giving her masculine mind and her feminine soul wholly to her Prince. "She was like a singularly able and energetic sunbeam," Max says quaintly, himself obviously not untouched by her attractions.

The Prince's mind was simple. He was quite sincere about his guns; he had no wish to go on his travels until they had arrived, and he could deliver them into the safe custody of his trained and trusty Volsenians, and of Lukovitch their captain. Less than that was not safety, with Stenovics in office and Colonel Stafnitz on duty at the capital. But Marie Zerkovitch was right, too, even though over-exacting, as Max had told her. The letter to the King held but half the truth, and that half not the more significant. He could not go from Sophy's side to seek a wife. The desire of his heart and the delight of his eyes—she was here in Praslok.

Her charm was not only for his heart and eyes, her fascination not solely for his passion; on his intellect also she laid her powerful hold, opening the narrow confines of his mind to broader views, and softening the rigor of his ideals. He had seen himself only as the stern master, the just chastiser of a turbulent capital and an

unruly soldiery. But was there not a higher aim? Might he not be loved in the plains as on the hills, at Slavna as at Volseni?

By himself he could not achieve that; his pride—nay, his obstinacy—forbade the first step. But what his sensitive dignity rejected for himself, he could see her sunny graciousness accomplish without loss of self-respect, naturally, all spontaneously. He was a soldier; hers were the powers of peace, of that instinctive statesmanship of the emotions by which hearts are won and kingdoms knit together by a tie stronger than the sword. Because in his mind's eye he saw her doing this, the idea at which the men in the Palace had smiled, and which even Marie Zerkovitch would have accepted as the lesser evil, never came into his head. In the future years she was to be openly at his side, doing these things for him and for the land of his love and labor. Would she not be a better partner than some stranger, to whom he must go cap in hand, to whom his country would be a place of exile and his countrymen seem half-barbarians, whose life with him would be one long tale of forced and unwilling condescension? A pride more subtle than his father's rose in revolt.

If he could make the King see that! There stood the difficulty. Right in the way of his darling hope was the one thing on which the King insisted. The pride of family—the great alliance—the single point whereon the easy King was an obstacle so formidable! Yet had he despaired, he would have been no such lover as he was.

His answer had gone to the King; there was no news of its reception yet. But on the next day, in the evening, great tidings came from Slavna, forwarded by Zerkovitch, who was in charge of the Prince's affairs there. The Prince burst eagerly into the dining-room in the tower of Praslok, where Sophy sat alone. He seemed full of triumphant excitement, almost boyish in his glee. It is at such moments that hesitations are forgotten and the last reserves broken down.

"My guns!" he cried. "My guns! They've started on their way. They're due in Slavna in a month!"

"In a month!" she murmured softly. "Ah, then—"

"Our company will be ready, too. We'll march down to Slavna and meet the guns!" He laughed. "Oh, I'll be very pleasant to Slavna now—just as you advise me. We'll meet them with smiles on our faces." He came up to her and laid his hand on hers. "You've done this for me," he said, smiling still, yet growing more grave.

"It'll be the end of this wonderful time, of this our time together!"

"Of our time at Praslok—not of our time together. What, won't Lieutenant Baroness Dobrava march with her battery?"

She smiled doubtfully, gently shaking her head. "Perhaps! But when we get to Slavna—? Oh, I'm sorry that this time's so nearly done!"

He looked at her gravely for a few moments, making, perhaps, a last quick calculation—undergoing, perhaps, a last short struggle. But the Red Star glowed against the pallor of her face; her eyes were gleaming beacons.

"Neither the guns, nor the men, nor Slavna—no, nor the Crown, when that time comes—without you!" he said.

She rose slowly, tremblingly, from her chair, and stretched out her hands in an instinctive protest: "Monseigneur!" Then she clasped her hands, setting her eyes on his, and whispering again, yet lower: "Monseigneur!"

"Marie Zerkovitch says Fate sent you to Kravonia. I think she's right. Fate did—my fate. I think it's fated that we are to be together to the end, Sophy."

A step creaked on the old stairs. Marie Zerkovitch was coming down from her room on the floor above. The door of the dining-room stood open, but neither of them heard the step; they were engrossed, and the sound passed unheeded.

Standing there with hands still clasped, and eyes still bound to his, she spoke again—and Marie Zerkovitch stood by the door and heard the quick yet clear words, herself fascinated, unable to move or speak.

"I've meant nothing of it. I've thought nothing of it. I seem to have done nothing towards it. It has just come to me." Her tone took on a touch of entreaty, whether it were to him, or to some unseen power which ruled her life, and to which she might have to render an account.

"Yet it is welcome?" he asked quietly. She was long in answering; he waited without impatience, in a confidence devoid of doubt. She seemed to seek for the whole truth and to give it to him in gravest, fullest words.

"It is life, Monseigneur," she said. "I can't see life without it now."

He held out his hands, and very slowly she laid hers in them.

"It is enough—and nothing less could have been enough from you to me and from me to you," he said gently. "Unless we live it together, I think it can be no life for us now."

The chain which had held Marie Zerkovitch motionless suddenly snapped. She rushed into the room, and, forgetful of everything in her agitation, seized the Prince by the arm.

"What do you mean?" she cried. "What do you mean? Are you mad?"

He was very fond of little Marie. He looked down at her now with an affectionate, indulgent smile.

"Come, you've heard what I said, I suppose—though it wasn't meant for your ears, you know! Well, then, I mean just what I said, Marie."

"But what do you mean by it?" she persisted in a feverish, almost childish, excitement. She turned on Sophy, too. "And what do you mean by it, Sophy?" she cried.

Sophy passed a hand across her brow. A slow smile relieved the enchanted tension of her face; she seemed to smile in a whimsical surprise at herself. Her answer to Marie came vague and almost dreamy. "I—I thought of nothing, dear Marie," she

said; then with a sudden low murmur of delighted laughter she laid her hands in the Prince's again. She had thought of nothing but of that life together and their love.

"She'll share my life, Marie, and, when the time comes, my throne," the Prince said softly: he tried to persuade and soothe her with his gentle tones.

Marie Zerkovitch would not have it. Possessed by her old fear, her old foreboding, she flung away the arm she held with an angry gesture. "It's ruin!" she cried. "Ruin, ruin!" Her voice rang out through the old room and seemed to fill all the Castle of Praslok with its dirgeful note.

"No," said he firmly. "Ruin will not come through me, nor through her. It may be that ruin—what you call ruin—will come. It may be that I shall lose my life or my throne." He smiled a little. "Such changes and chances come as nothing new to a Stefanovitch. I have clever and bold men against me. Let them try! We'll try, too. But ruin will not be by her fault, nor through this. And if it were, don't I owe her my life already? Should I refuse to risk for her the life she has given?" He dropped his voice to homelier, more familiar tones, and ended, with a half-laugh: "Come, little friend, you mustn't try to frighten Sergius Stefanovitch. It's better the House should end than live on in a coward, you know."

The plea was not perfect—there was wisdom as well as courage in question. Yet he would have maintained himself to be right in point of wisdom, too, had Marie pressed him on it. But her force was spent; her violence ended, and with it her expostulations. But not her terror and dismay. She threw herself into a chair and covered her face with her hands, sobbing bitterly.

The Prince gently caressed her shaking shoulder, but he raised his eyes to Sophy, who had stood quiet through the scene.

"Are you ready for what comes, Sophy?" he asked.

"Monseigneur, I am ready," she said, with head erect and her face set. But the next instant she broke into a low yet rich and ringing laugh; it mingled strangely with

Marie's sobs, which were gradually dying away, yet sounded still, an undertone of discord with Sophy's mirth. She stretched out her hands towards him again, whispering in an amused pity: "Poor child—she thought that we should be afraid!"

Out from the dusk of the quiet evening came suddenly the blare of a trumpet, blown from Volseni by a favoring breeze. It sounded every evening, at nightfall, to warn the herdsmen in the hills of the closing of the gates, and had so sounded from time beyond man's memory.

The Prince raised his hand to bid her listen.

"In good Volseni there is watch and ward for us!"

The echoes of the blast rang for an instant round the hills.

"And there is watch and ward, and the glad sound of a trumpet, in my heart, Monseigneur," she said.

The sobs were still, laughter was hushed, the echoes died away. In utter silence their hands and their eyes met. Only in their hearts love's clarion rang indomitable and marvellously glad.

XI

M. ZERKOVITCH'S BEDROOM FIRE

Often there are clever brains about us of whose workings we care nothing, save so far as they serve to the defter moving of our dishes or the more scientific brushing and folding of our clothes. Humorists and philosophers have described or conjectured or caricatured the world of those who wait on us, inviting us to consider how we may appear to the inward gaze of the eyes which are so obediently cast down before ours or so dutifully alert to anticipate our orders. As a rule, we decline the invitation; the task seems at once difficult and unnecessary. Enough to remember that the owners of the eyes have ears and mouths also! A small leak, left unstanched,

will empty the largest cask at last; it is well to keep that in mind both in private concerns and in affairs of public magnitude.

The King's body-servant, Emile Lepage, had been set a-thinking. This was the result of the various and profuse scoldings which he had undergone for calling young Count Alexis "Prince." The King's brief, sharp words at the conference had been elaborated into a reproof both longer and sterner than his Majesty was wont to trouble himself to administer; he had been very strong on the utter folly of putting such ideas into the boy's head. Lepage was pretty clear that the idea had come from the boy's head into his, but he said nothing more of that. The boy himself scolded Lepage—first for having been overheard, secondly (and, as Lepage guessed, after being scolded himself very roundly) for using the offending title at all. Meekly Lepage bore this cross also—indeed, with some amusement, and a certain touch of pity for young Alexis, who was not a prince and obviously could not make out why: in the books a king's sons were always princes, even though there were (as in those glorious days there often were) fifty or threescore of them.

Then Countess Ellenburg scolded him: the King's "It's absurd!" was rankling sorely in her mind. Her scolding was in her heaviest manner—very religious: she called Heaven to witness that never, by word or deed, had she done anything to give her boy such a notion. The days are gone by when Heaven makes overt present answer; nothing happened! She roundly charged Lepage with fostering the idea for his own purposes; he wanted to set the Prince of Slavna against his little brother, she supposed, and to curry favor with the rising sun at the poor child's cost.

She was very effective, but she angered Lepage almost beyond endurance. By disposition he was thoroughly good-natured, if sardonic and impassive; he could not suffer the accusation of injuring the pretty boy for his own ends; it was both odious and absurd. He snapped back smartly at her: "I hope nobody will do more to put wrong ideas in his head than I have done, Madame la Comtesse." In a fury she drove

him from the room. But she had started ever so slightly. Lepage's alert brain jumped at the signal.

Finally, Stenovics himself had a lecture for poor, much-lectured Lepage. It was one of the miscalculations to which an over-cautious cunning is prone. Stenovics was gentle and considerate, but he was very urgent—urgent, above all, that nothing should be said about the episode, neither about it, nor about the other reprimands. Silence, silence, silence was his burden. Lepage thought more and more. It is better to put up with gossip than to give the idea that the least gossip would be a serious offence. People gossip without thinking, it's easy come and gone, easy speaking and easy forgetting; but stringent injunctions not to talk are apt to make men think. References to the rising sun, also, may breed reflection in the satellites of a setting orb. Neither Countess Ellenburg nor General Stenovics had been as well advised as usual in this essentially trumpery matter.

In short, nervousness had been betrayed. Whence came it? What did it mean? If it meant anything, could Lepage turn that thing to account? The King's favorite attendant was no favorite with Countess Ellenburg. For Lepage, too, the time might be very short! He would not injure the boy, as the angry mother had believed, or at least suggested; but, without question of that, there was no harm in a man's looking out for himself; or if there were, Lepage was clear in thinking that the Countess and the General were not fit preachers of such a highly exacting gospel.

Lepage concluded that he had something to sell. His wares were a suspicion and a fact. Selling the suspicion wronged nobody—he would give no warranty with it—Caveat emptor. Selling the fact was disobedience to the King his master. "Disobedience, yes; injury, no," said Lepage with a bit of casuistry. Besides, the King, too, had scolded him.

Moreover, the Prince of Slavna had always treated Monsieur Emile Lepage with distinguished consideration. The Bourbon blood, no doubt, stretched out hands to la

belle France in Monsieur Lepage's person.

Something to sell! Who was his buyer? Whose interest could be won by his suspicion, whose friendship bought with his fact? The ultimate buyer was plain enough. But Lepage could not go to Praslok, and he did not approve of correspondence, especially with Colonel Stafnitz in practical control of the Household. He sought a go-between—and a personal interview. At least he could take a walk; the servants were not prisoners. Even conspirators must stop somewhere—on pain of doing their own cooking and the rest! At a quarter past eight in the evening, having given the King his dinner and made him comfortable for the next two hours, Lepage sallied forth and took the road to Slavna. He was very carefully dressed, wore a flower in his buttonhole, and had dropped a discreet hint about a lady, in conversation with his peers. If ladies often demand excuses, they may furnish them too; present seriousness invoked aid from bygone frivolity.

At ten o'clock he returned, still most spruce and orderly, and with a well satisfied air about him. He had found a purchaser for his suspicion and his fact. His pocket was the better lined, and he had received flattering expressions of gratitude and assurances of favor. He felt that he had raised a buttress against future assaults of Fortune. He entered the King's dressing-room in his usual noiseless and unobtrusive manner. He was not aware that General Stenovics had quitted it just a quarter of an hour before, bearing in his hand a document which he had submitted for his Majesty's signature. The King had signed it and endorsed the cover "Urgent."

"Ah, Lepage, where have you been?" asked the King.

"Just to get a little air and drink a glass at the Golden Lion."

"You look gayer than that!" smiled the King. Evidently his anger had passed; perhaps he wished to show as much to an old servant whom he liked and valued.

Conscience-stricken—or so appearing—Lepage tore the flower from his coat. "I beg Your Majesty's pardon. I ought to have removed it before entering your Majesty's

presence. But I was told you wished to retire at once, sir, so I hurried here immediately."

The King gave a weary yawn. "Yes, I'll go to bed at once, Lepage; and let me sleep as long as I can. This fag-end of life isn't very amusing." He passed his hand wearily across his brow. "My head aches. Isn't the room very close, Lepage? Open the window."

"It has begun to rain, sir."

"Never mind, let's have the rain, too. At least, it's fresh."

Lepage opened a window which looked over the Krath. The King rose: Lepage hastened to offer his arm, which his Majesty accepted. They went together to the window. A sudden storm had gathered; rain was pelting down in big drops.

"It looks like being a rough night," remarked the King.

"I'm afraid it does, sir," Lepage agreed.

"We're lucky to be going to our beds."

"Very, sir," answered Lepage, wondering whose opposite fate his Majesty was pitying.

"I shouldn't care, even if I were a young man and a sound one, to ride to Praslok to-night."

"To Praslok, sir?" There was surprise in Lepage's voice. He could not help it. Luckily it sounded quite natural to the King. It was certainly not a night to ride five and twenty miles, and into the hills, unless your business was very urgent.

"Yes, to Praslok. I've had my breath of air—you can shut the window, Lepage."

The King returned to the fireplace and stood warming himself. Lepage closed the window, drew the curtains, and came to the middle of the room, where he stood in respectful readiness—and, underneath that, a very lively curiosity.

"Yes," said the King slowly, "Captain Markart goes to Praslok to-night—with a

despatch for his Royal Highness, you know. Business, Lepage, urgent business! Everything must yield to that." The King enunciated this virtuous maxim as though it had been the rule of his life. "No time to lose, Lepage, so the Captain goes to-night. But I'm afraid he'll have a rough ride—very rough."

"I'm afraid so, sir," said Lepage, and added, strictly in his thoughts: "And so will Monsieur Zerkovitch!"

Captain Markart was entirely of his Majesty's opinion as he set out on his journey to Praslok. His ride would be rough, dark, and solitary—the last by Stenovics's order. Markart was not afraid, he was well armed; but he expected to be very bored, and knew that he would be very wet, by the time he reached the Castle. He breathed a fervent curse on the necessities of State, of which the Minister had informed him, as he buttoned up his heavy cavalry overcoat, and rode across the bridge on to the main road on the right bank, an hour before midnight.

Going was very heavy, so was the rain, so was the darkness; he and his horse made a blurred, laboring shape on the murky face of night. But his orders were to hasten, and he pushed on at a sharp trot and soon covered his first stage, the five miles to the old wooden bridge, where the road leaves the course of the Krath, is carried over the river, and strikes northeast, towards the hills.

At this point he received the first intimation that his journey was not to be so solitary as he had supposed. When he was half-way across the bridge, he heard what sounded like an echo of the beat of his horse's hoofs on the timbers behind him. The thing seemed odd. He halted a moment to listen. The sound of his horse's hoofs stopped—but the echo went on. It was no echo, then; he was not the only traveller that way! He pricked his horse with the spur; regaining the road, he heard the timbers of the bridge still sounding. He touched his horse again and went forward briskly. He had no reason to associate his fellow-traveller's errand with his own, but he was sure that when General Stenovics ordered despatch, he would not be pleased

to learn that his messenger had been passed by another wayfarer on the road.

But the stranger, too, was in a hurry, it seemed; Markart could not shake him off. On the contrary, he drew nearer. The road was still broad and good. Markart tried a canter. The stranger broke into a canter. "At any rate, it makes for good time," thought Markart, smiling uneasily. In fact, the two found themselves drawn into a sort of race. On they went, covering the miles at a quick, sustained trot, exhilarating to the men, but rather a strain on their horses. Both were well mounted. Markart wondered who the stranger with such a good horse was. He turned his head, but could see only the same sort of blur as he himself made; part of the blur, however, seemed of a lighter color than his dark overcoat and bay horse produced.

Markart's horse pecked; his rider awoke to the fact that he was pounding his mount without doing much good to himself. He would see whether the unknown meant to pass him or was content to keep on equal terms. His pace fell to a gentle trot—so did the stranger's. Markart walked his horse for half a mile—so did the stranger. Thenceforward they went easily, each keeping his position, till Markart came to where the road forked—on the right to Dobrava, on the left to Praslok and Volseni. Markart drew rein and waited; he might just as well see where the stranger was going.

The stranger came up—and Markart started violently. The lighter tinge of the blur was explained. The stranger rode a white horse. It flashed on Markart that the Prince rode a white charger, and that the animal had been in Slavna the day before—he had seen it being exercised. He peered into the darkness, trying to see the man's face; the effort was of no avail. The stranger came to a stand beside him, and for a few moments neither moved. Then the stranger turned his horse's head to the left: he was for Praslok or Volseni, then! Markart followed his example. He knew why he did not speak to the stranger, but he was wondering why on earth the stranger did not speak to him. He went on wondering till it occurred to him that, perhaps, the

stranger was in exactly the same state of mind.

There was no question of cantering, or even of trotting, now. The road rose steeply; it was loose and founderous from heavy rain; great stones lay about, dangerous traps for a careless rider. The horses labored. At the same moment, with the same instinct, Markart and the stranger dismounted. The next three miles were done on foot, and there before them, in deeper black, rose the gate-tower of the Castle of Praslok. The stranger had fallen a little behind again; now he drew level. They were almost opposite the Castle.

A dog barked from the stables. Another answered from the Castle. Two more took up the tune from the stables; the Castle guardian redoubled his responsive efforts. A man came running out from the stables with a lantern; a light flashed in the doorway of the Castle. Both Markart and the stranger came to a stand-still. The man with the lantern raised it high in the air, to see the faces of the travellers.

They saw each other's faces, too. The first result was to send them into a fit of laughter—a relief from tension, a recognition of the absurdity into which their diplomatic caution had led them.

"By the powers, Captain Markart!"

"Monsieur Zerkovitch, by Heaven!"

They laughed again.

"Ah, and we might have had a pleasant ride together!"

"I should have rejoiced in the solace of your conversation!"

But neither asked the other why he had behaved in such a ridiculous manner.

"And our destination is the same?" asked Zerkovitch. "You stop here at the Castle?"

"Yes, yes, Monsieur Zerkovitch. And you?"

"Yes, Captain, yes; my journey ends at the Castle."

The men led away their horses, which sorely needed tending, and they mounted the

wooden causeway side by side, both feeling foolish, yet sure they had done right. In the doorway stood Peter Vassip with his lantern.

"Your business, gentlemen?" he said. It was between two and three in the morning.

They looked at each other; Zerkovitch was quicker, and with a courteous gesture invited his companion to take precedence.

"Private and urgent—with his Royal Highness."

"So is mine, Peter," said Zerkovitch.

Markart's humor was touched again; he began to laugh. Zerkovitch laughed, too, but there was a touch of excitement and nervousness in his mirth.

"His Royal Highness went to bed an hour ago," said Peter Vassip.

"I'm afraid you must rouse him. My business is immediate," said Markart. "And I suppose yours is too, Monsieur Zerkovitch?" he added jokingly.

"That it is," said Zerkovitch.

"I'll rouse the Prince. Will you follow me, gentlemen?"

Peter closed and barred the gate, and they followed him through the court-yard. A couple of sentries were pacing it; for the rest, all was still. Peter led them into a small room, where a fire was burning, and left them together. Side by side they stood close to the fire; each flung away his coat and tried to dry his boots and breeches at the comforting blaze.

"We must keep this story a secret, or we shall be laughed at by all Slavna, Monsieur Zerkovitch."

Zerkovitch gave him a sharp glance. "I should think you would report your discreet conduct to your superiors, Captain. Orders are orders, secrecy is secrecy, even though it turns out that there was no need for it."

Markart was about to reply with a joke when the Prince entered. He greeted both cordially, showing, of course, in Markart's presence, no surprise at Zerkovitch's

arrival.

"There will be rooms and food and wine ready for you, gentlemen, in a few minutes. Captain Markart, you must rest here for to-night, for your horse's sake as well as your own. I suppose your business will wait till the morning?"

"My orders were to lose not a moment in communicating it to you, sir."

"Very well. You're from his Majesty?"

"Yes, sir."

"The King comes first—and I dare say your affair will wait, Zerkovitch?"

Zerkovitch protested with an eagerness by no means discreet in the presence of a third party—an aide-de-camp to Stenovics!—"No, sir, no—it can't wait an—"

The Prince interrupted. "Nonsense, man, nonsense! Now go to your room. I'll come in and bid you 'Good-night.'" He pushed his over-zealous friend from the room, calling to Peter Vassip to guide him to the apartment he was to occupy. Then he came back to Markart. "Now, Captain!"

Markart took out his letter and presented it with a salute. "Sit down while I read it," said the Prince, seating himself at the table.

The Prince read his letter, and sat playing with it in his fingers for half a minute or so. Then a thought seemed to strike him. "Heavens, I never told Peter to light fires! I hope he has. You're wet—and Zerkovitch is terribly liable to take cold." He jumped up. "Excuse me; we have no bells in this old place, you know." He ran out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Markart sprang to the door. He did not dare to open it, but he listened to the Prince's footsteps. They sounded to the left—one, two, three, four, five, six paces. They stopped—a door opened and shut. Markart made a mental note and went back to the fire, smiling. He thought that idea of his really would please General Stenovics.

In three minutes the Prince returned. "I did Peter injustice—Zerkovitch's fire is all

right," he said. "And there's a good one in your room, too, he tells me. And now, Captain Markart, to our business. You know the contents of the letter you carried?"

"Yes, sir. They were communicated to me, in view of their urgency, and in case of accident to the letter."

"As a matter of form, repeat the gist to me."

"General Stenovics has to inform your Royal Highness on the King's behalf that his Majesty sees no need of a personal interview, as his mind is irrevocably fixed, and he orders your Royal Highness to set out for Germany within three days from the receipt of this letter. No pretext is to delay your Royal Highness's departure."

"Perfectly correct, Captain. To-morrow I shall give you an answer addressed directly to the King. But I wish now to give you a message to General Stenovics. I shall ask the King for an audience. Unless he appoints a time within two days, I shall conclude that he has not had the letter, or—pray mark this—has not enjoyed an opportunity of considering it independently. General Stenovics must consider what a responsibility he undertakes if he advises the King to refuse to see his son. I shall await his Majesty's answer here. That is the message. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Just repeat it. The terms are important."

Markart obeyed. The Prince nodded his head. "You shall have the letter for the King early in the morning. Now for bed! I'll show you to your room."

They went out and turned to the left. Markart counted their paces. At six paces they came to a door—and passed it. Four farther on, the Prince ushered him into the room where he was to sleep. It was evident that the Prince had made personal inspection of the state of Monsieur Zerkovitch's fire!

"Good-night, Captain. By-the-way, the King continues well?"

"Dr. Natcheff says, sir, that he doesn't think his Majesty was ever better in his life."

The Prince looked at him for just a moment with a reflective smile. "Ah, and a trustworthy man, Natcheff! Good-night!"

Markart did not see much reason to think that the question, the look, the smile, and the comment had any significance. But there would be no harm in submitting the point to General Stenovics. Pondering over this, he forgot to count the Prince's paces this time. If he had counted, the sum would have been just four. Monsieur Zerkovitch's fire needed another royal inspection—it needed it almost till the break of day.

"The King's life hangs by a hair, and your Crown by a thread." That was the warning which Lepage had given and Zerkovitch had carried through the night.

XII

JOYFUL OF HEART

The storm had passed; day broke calm and radiant over the Castle of Praslok; sunshine played caressingly on the lake and on the hills.

Markart had breakfasted and paid a visit to his horse; he wanted to be off by nine o'clock, and waited only for the Prince's letter. He was returning from the stables, sniffing the morning air with a vivid enjoyment of the change of weather, when he saw Sophy coming along the road. She had been for a walk. Her eyes and cheeks glowed with exhilaration. She wore her sheepskin tunic, her sheepskin cap with its red cockade, and her short, blue skirt over high boots. She walked as though on the clouds of heaven, a wonderful lightness in her tread; the Red Star signalled the exaltation of her spirit; the glad sound of the trumpet rang in her heart.

Her cordial greeting to Markart was spiced with raillery, to which he responded as well as his ignorance allowed; he was uncertain how much she knew of the real situation. But if his tongue was embarrassed, his eyes spoke freely. He could not

keep them from her face; to him she seemed a queen of life and joy that glorious morning.

"You've recovered from your fright?" she asked. "Poor Monsieur Zerkovitch is still sleeping his off, I suppose! Oh, the story's all over the Castle!"

"It'll be all over the country soon," said Markart with a rueful smile.

"Well, after all, Monsieur Zerkovitch is a journalist, and journalists don't spare even themselves, you know. And you're not a reticent person, are you? Don't you remember all the information you gave me once?"

"Ah, on the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris! Much has happened since then, Baroness."

"Much always happens, if you keep your eyes open," said Sophy.

"If you keep yours open, nothing happens for me but looking at them."

She laughed merrily; a compliment never displeased Sophy, and she could bear it very downright.

"But if I were to shut my eyes, what would you do then?"

He looked doubtfully at her mocking face; she meant a little more than the idle words naturally carried.

"I don't think you'll give me the chance of considering, Baroness." He indicated her costume with a gesture of his hand. "You've entered the service, I see?"

"Yes, Captain Markart, the King's service. We are brethren—you serve him, too?"

"I have that honor." Markart flushed under her laughing scrutiny.

"We fight shoulder to shoulder then. Well, not quite. I'm a gunner, you see."

"Minus your guns, at present!"

"Not for long!" She turned round and swept her arms out towards the lake and the hills. "It's a day to think of nothing—just to go riding, riding, riding!" Her laugh rang out in merry longing.

"What prevents you?"

"My military duties, perhaps, Captain," she answered. "You're lucky—you have a long ride; don't spoil it by thinking!"

"I think? Oh no, Baroness! I only obey my orders."

"And they never make you think?" Her glance was quick at him for an instant.

"There's danger in thinking too much, even for ladies," he told her.

She looked at him more gravely, for his eyes were on her now with a kindly, perhaps a remorseful, look.

"You mean that for me?" she asked. "But if I, too, only obey my orders?"

"With all my heart I hope they may lead you into no danger," he said.

"There's only one danger in all the world—losing what you love."

"Not, sometimes, gaining it?" he asked quickly.

"Still, the only danger would be of losing it again."

"There's life, too," he remarked with a shrug.

"Sir, we're soldiers!" she cried in merry reproof.

"That doesn't prevent me from prizing your life, Baroness, in the interests of a world not too rich in what you contribute to it."

Sophy looked at him, a subtle merriment in her eyes. "I think, Captain Markart, that, if you were my doctor, you'd advise me to try—a change of air! Praslok is too exciting, is that it? But I found Slavna—well, far from relaxing, you know!"

"The Kravonian climate as a whole, Baroness—"

"Oh no, no, that's too much!" she interrupted. Then she said: "It's very kind of you—yes, I mean that—and it's probably—I don't know—but probably against your orders. So I thank you. But I can face even the rigors of Kravonia."

She held out her hand; he bent and kissed it. "In fact, I hadn't the least right to say

it," he confessed. "Not the least from any point of view. It's your fault, though, Baroness."

"Since I'm party to the crime, I'll keep the secret," she promised with a decidedly kindly glance. To Sophy, admiration of herself always argued something good in a man; she had none of that ungracious scorn which often disfigures the smile of beauty. She gave a little sigh, followed quickly by a smile.

"We've said all we possibly can to one another, you and I; more than we could, perhaps! And now—to duty!" She pointed to the door of the Castle.

The Prince was coming down the wooden causeway. He, too, wore the Volseni sheepskins. In his hand he carried a sealed letter. Almost at the same moment a groom led Markart's horse from the stables. The Prince joined them and, after a bow to Sophy, handed the letter to Markart.

"For his Majesty. And you remember my message to General Stenovics?"

"Accurately, sir."

"Good!" He gave Markart his hand. "Good-bye—a pleasant ride to you, Captain—pleasanter than last night's." His grave face broke into a smile.

"I'm not to have Monsieur Zerkovitch's company this time, sir?"

"Why, no, Captain. You see, Zerkovitch left the Castle soon after six o'clock. Rather a short night, yes, but he was in a hurry."

Sophy burst into a laugh at the dismay on Markart's face. "We neither of us knew that, Captain Markart, did we?" she cried. "We thought he was sleeping off the fright you'd given him!"

"Your Royal Highness gives me leave—?" stammered Markart, his eye on his horse.

"Certainly, Captain. But don't be vexed, there will be no invidious comparisons. Zerkovitch doesn't propose to report himself to General Stenovics immediately on his arrival."

Good-natured Markart joined in the laugh at his own expense. "I'm hardly awake yet; he must be made of iron, that Zerkovitch!"

"Quicksilver!" smiled the Prince. As Markart mounted, he added: "Au revoir!"

Markart left the two standing side by side—the Prince's serious face lit up with a rare smile, Sophy's beauty radiant in merriment. His own face fell as he rode away. "I half wish I was in the other camp," he grumbled. But Stenovics's power held him—and the fear of Stafnitz. He went back to a work in which his heart no longer was; for his heart had felt Sophy's spell.

"You can have had next to no sleep all night, Monseigneur," said Sophy in reproach mingled with commiseration.

"I don't need it; the sight of your face refreshes me. We must talk. Zerkovitch brought news."

In low, grave tones he told her the tidings, and the steps which he and Zerkovitch had taken.

"I understand my father's reasons for keeping me in the dark; he meant it well, but he was blinded by this idea about my marriage. But I see, too, how it fitted in with Stenovics's ideas. I think it's war between us now—and I'm ready."

Sophy was almost dazed. The King's life was not to be relied on for a week—for a day—no, not for an hour! But she listened attentively. Zerkovitch had gone back to Slavna on a fresh horse and at top speed; he would have more than two hours' lead of Markart. His first duty was to open communications with Lepage and arrange that the valet should send to him all the information which came to his ears, and any impressions which he was able to gather in the Palace. Zerkovitch would forward the reports to Praslok immediately, so long as the Prince remained at the Castle. But the Prince was persuaded that his father would not refuse to see him, now that he knew the true state of the case. "My father is really attached to me," he said, "and if I see him, I'm confident that I can persuade him of the inexpediency of my leaving the

kingdom just now. A hint of my suspicions with regard to the Countess and Stenovics would do it; but I'm reluctant to risk giving him such a shock. I think I can persuade him without."

"But is it safe for you to trust yourself at Slavna—in the Palace? And alone?"

"I must risk the Palace alone—and I'm not much afraid. Stenovics might go to war with me, but I don't think he'd favor assassination. And to Slavna I sha'n't go alone. Our gunners will go with us, Sophy. We have news of the guns being on the way; there will be nothing strange in my marching the gunners down to meet them. They're only half-trained, even in drill, but they're brave fellows. We'll take up our quarters with them in Suleiman's Tower. I don't fear all Slavna if I hold Suleiman's Tower with three hundred Volsenians. Stafnitz may do his worst!"

"Yes, I see," she answered, thoughtfully. "I can't come with you to Suleiman's Tower, though."

"Only if there are signs of danger. Then you and Marie must come; if all is quiet, you can stay in her house. We can meet often—as often as possible. For the rest, we must wait."

She saw that they must wait. It was impossible to approach the King on the matter of Sophy. It cut dead at the heart of his ambition; it would be a shock as great as the discovery of Countess Ellenburg's ambitions. It could not be risked.

"But if, under Stenovics's influence, the King does refuse to see you?" she asked—"Refuses to see you, and repeats his orders?"

The Prince's face grew very grave, but his voice was firm.

"Not even the King—not even my father—can bid me throw away the inheritance which is mine. The hand would be the King's, but the voice the voice of Stenovics. I shouldn't obey; they'd have to come to Volseni and take me."

Sophy's eyes kindled. "Yes, that's right!" she said. "And for to-day?"

"Nothing will happen to-day—unless, by chance, the thing which we now know may happen any day; and of that we shouldn't hear till evening. And there's no drill even. I sent the men to their homes on forty-eight hours' furlough yesterday morning." His face relaxed in a smile. "I think to-day we can have a holiday, Sophy."

She clapped her hands in glee. "Oh, Monseigneur, a holiday!"

"It may be the last for a long time," he said; "so we must enjoy it."

This day—this holiday which might be the last—passed in a fine carelessness and a rich joy in living. The cloudless sky and the glittering waters of Lake Talti were parties to their pleasure, whether as they rode far along the shore, or sat and ate a simple meal on the rock-strewn margin. Hopes and fears, dangers and stern resolves, were forgotten; even of the happier issues which the future promised, or dangled before their eyes, there was little thought or speech. The blood of youth flowed briskly, the heart of youth rose high. The grave Prince joked, jested, and paid his court; Sophy's eyes gleamed with the fun as not even the most exalted and perilous adventure could make them sparkle.

"Oh, it's good," she cried—"good to live and see the sun! Monseigneur, I believe I'm a pagan—a sun-worshipper! When he's good enough to warm me through, and to make the water glitter for me, and shadows dance in such a cunning pattern on the hills, then I think I've done something that he likes, and that he's pleased with me!" She sprang to her feet and stretched out her hands towards the sun. "In the grave, I believe, I shall remember the glorious light; my memory of that could surely never die!"

His was the holiday mood, too. He fell in with her extravagance, meeting it with banter.

"It's only a lamp," he said, "just a lamp; and it's hung there for the sole purpose of showing Sophy's eyes. When she's not there, they put it out—for what's the use of it?"

"They put it out when I'm not there?"

"I've noticed it happen a dozen times of late."

"It lights up again when I come, Monseigneur?"

"Ah, then I forget to look!"

"You get very little sun anyhow, then!"

"I've something so much better."

It is pathetic to read—pathetic that she should have set it down as though every word of it were precious—set it down as minutely as she chronicled the details of the critical hours to which fate was soon to call her.

Yet, was she wrong? Days of idleness are not always the emptiest; life may justify its halts; our spirits may mount to their sublimest pitch in hours of play. At least, the temper of that holiday, and her eager prizing and recording of it, show well the manner of woman that she was—her passionate love of beauty, her eager stretching out to all that makes life beautiful, her spirit, sensitive to all around, taking color from this and that, reflecting back every ray which the bounty of nature or of man poured upon it, her great faculty of living. She wasted no days or hours. Ever receiving, ever giving, she spent her sojourn in a world that for her did much, yet never could do enough, to which she gave a great love, yet never seemed to herself to be able to give enough. Perhaps she was not wrong when she called herself a pagan. She was of the religion of joy; her kindest thought of the grave was that haply through some chink in its dark walls there might creep one tiny sunbeam of memory.

They rode home together as the sun was setting—a sun of ruddy gold, behind it one bright, purple cloud, the sky beyond blue, deepening almost into black. When Praslok came in sight, she laid her hand on his with a long-drawn sigh.

"We have been together to-day," she said. "That will be there always. Yes, the sun

and the world were made for us this day—and we have been worthy."

He pressed her hand. "You were sent to teach me what joy is—the worth of the world to men who live in it. You're the angel of joy, Sophy. Before you came, I had missed that lesson."

"I'm very glad"—thus she ends her own record of this day of glory—"that I've brought joy to Monseigneur. He faces his fight joyful of heart." And then, with one of her absurd, deplorable, irresistible lapses into the merest ordinary feminine, she adds: "That red badge is just the touch my sheepskin cap wanted!"

Oh, Sophy, Sophy, what of that for a final reflection on the eve of Monseigneur's fight?

XIII

A DELICATE DUTY

There was a stir in Slavna; excitement was gradually growing, not unmixed with uneasiness; gossip was busy at the Hôtel de Paris and at the Golden Lion. Men clustered in groups and talked, while their wives said that they would be better at home, minding their business and letting politics alone. Knowledge was far to seek; rumors were plentiful. Dr. Natcheff might be as reassuring as he pleased—but he had spent the night at the Palace! All was quiet in the city, but news came of the force that was being raised in Volseni, and the size of the force lost nothing as the report passed from mouth to mouth. Little as Slavna loved the Prince, it was not eager to fight him. A certain reaction in his favor set in. If they did not love him, they held him in sincere respect; if he meant to fight, then they were not sure that they did!

Baroness Dobrava's name, too, was much on men's lips; stories about Sophy were bandied to and fro; people began to remember that they had from the beginning

thought her very remarkable—a force to be reckoned with. The superstitious ideas about her made their first definite appearance now. She had bewitched the Prince, they said, and the men of the hills, too; the whole mountain country would rise at her bidding and sweep down on Slavna in rude warfare and mad bravery. The Sheepskins would come, following the Red Star!

The citizens of Slavna did not relish the prospect; at the best it would be very bad for trade; at the worst it would mean blood and death let loose in the streets. A stern ruler was better than civil war. The troops of the garrison were no longer such favorites as they had been; even Captain Hercules subdued his demeanor (which, indeed, had never quite recovered from the chastisement of the Prince's sword) to a self-effacing discretion. He, too, in his heart, and in his heavy, primitive brain, had an uneasy feeling about the witch with the Red Star; had she not been the beginning of trouble? But for her, Sterkoff's long knife would have set an end to the whole chapter long ago!

The time was short and the omens doubtful. It was the moment for a bold stroke, for a forcing game. The waverers must be shown where power lay, whose was the winning side.

Captain Markart arrived at Slavna at one o'clock. Zerkovitch had used his start well and reached the city nearly three hours earlier. When Markart told Stenovics (he reported himself at once to the General) how he had been outwitted, Stenovics smiled, saying: "I know, and I know what he has done since he got here. They stole a march on you, but not on me, Captain. And now—your story!" He listened to Markart's tale with a frowning brow, and then dismissed him, saying: "You will meet me at the Palace. We meet the King in conference at four o'clock." But the General himself went to the Palace long before four, and he and Stafnitz were closeted with Countess Ellenburg. Lepage, returning from a walk to the city at two o'clock, saw the General arrive on horseback. Lieutenant Rastatz saw Lepage

arrive—ay, and had seen him set out, and marked all his goings; but of this Lepage was unconscious. The little lieutenant was not much of a soldier, but he was an excellent spy. Lepage had been with Zerkovitch.

The King was confined to his apartments, a suite of six rooms on the first floor, facing the river. Here he had his own sitting-room, dressing, and bedrooms. Besides these there were the little cupboard Lepage slept in, and a spare room, which at present accommodated Dr. Natcheff. The sixth room was occupied by odds and ends, including the tackle, rods, and other implements of his Majesty's favorite pastime. The council was held in the sitting-room. Natcheff and Lepage were not present, but each was in his own room, ready for any possible call on his services. Markart was there, first to tell his story and deliver his letter, secondly in his capacity as secretary to General Stenovics. The Countess and Stafnitz completed the party.

The King was anxious, worried, obviously unwell; his voice trembled as he read aloud his son's letter. It was brief but dutiful, and even affectionate. After a slight reproach that he should have been kept in ignorance of the apprehensions entertained about the King's health, the Prince requested an audience within the next two days; he had considerations which it was his duty to lay before his Majesty, and he firmly but respectfully claimed the right of confidential communication with his father; that was essential to his Majesty's obtaining a true appreciation of his views. The hit at Stenovics was plain enough, and the Prince did not labor it. The letter ended there, with an expression of earnest concern for the King's health. There was no word in it about starting on his journey.

Then Markart told his story—not that he had much to tell. In essence he added only that the Prince proposed to await the King's answer at Praslok. Neither to him had the Prince said a word about starting on his journey.

On this point Stenovics seized, pursuant, no doubt, to the plan devised in that

preliminary discussion with the other two members of the little coterie.

"It is remarkable, sir—even more than remarkable—that his Royal Highness makes no reference at all to the direct command which your Majesty was pleased to issue to him," he observed.

The King listened, puzzled and rather distressed. "Yes, it isn't proper, it isn't respectful. But now that my son knows of the state of my health, I think I must see him. It seems unnatural to refuse. After all, it may be the last time—since he's going on this journey."

"But is the Prince going on his journey, sir?" asked Stenovics. "Does the studied silence of his letter augur well for his obedience? Doesn't he seek an interview in order to persuade your Majesty against your better judgment? I must be pardoned freedom of speech. Great interests are at stake." The last words were true enough, though not in the sense in which the King was meant to understand them.

"My son knows how near this matter is to my heart. I shall be able to persuade him to do his duty," said the King.

The first round of the fight was going against the coterie. They did not want the King to see his son. Danger lay there. The Prince's was the stronger character; it might well prevail; and they were no longer certain that the Prince knew or guessed nothing of their hopes and intentions; how much news had Zerkovitch carried to Praslok the night before? Stenovics addressed the King again.

"Captain Markart gathered that the Prince was reluctant to interrupt the military training on which he is engaged at Volseni, sir."

"A very excellent thing, that; but the other matter is more urgent. I shouldn't change my mind on account of that."

"A personal interview might be trying to your Majesty."

The King looked annoyed, possibly a little suspicious. "You've no other objection

than that to urge, General Stenovics?"

Stenovics had none other which he could produce. "No, sir," he said.

"While I'm here I must do my duty—and I shall induce my son to do his. I'll receive the Prince of Slavna in private audience to-morrow or next day. I'll fix the precise time later, and I'll write the letter myself."

The decision was final—and it was defeat so far. There was a moment's silence. Markart saw Colonel Stafnitz nod his head, almost imperceptibly, towards Countess Ellenburg. The need and the moment for reinforcements had come; the Colonel was calling them up. The order of battle had been well considered in Countess Ellenburg's apartments! The second line came into action. The Countess began with a question, put with a sneer:

"Did no other reason for the Prince's unwillingness to set out on his journey suggest itself to Captain Markart from what he saw at Praslok?"

The King turned sharply round to her, then to Markart. "Well?" he asked the latter.

Markart was sadly embarrassed.

"Who was at Praslok?" asked the Countess.

"Madame Zerkovitch, and her husband for one night, and Baroness Dobrava."

"Yes, Baroness Dobrava!"

"She's still there?" asked the King. He looked perplexed, even vexed, but again he smiled. He looked at Stenovics and Stafnitz, but this time he found no responsive smiles. Their faces were deadly serious. "Oh, come, well—well, that's not serious. Natural, perhaps, but—the Prince has a sense of duty. He'll see that that won't do. And we'll send the Baroness a hint—we'll tell her how much we miss her at Slavna." He tried to make them answer his smile and accept his smoothing away of the difficulty. It was all a failure.

"I'm bound to say, sir, that I consider Baroness Dobrava a serious obstacle to his

Royal Highness's obeying your wishes—a serious obstacle," said Stenovics.

"Then we must get her away, General."

"Will he let her go?" snapped the Countess.

"I must order it, if it comes to that," said the King. "These little—er—affairs—these—what?—holiday flirtations—"

The Countess lost—or appeared to lose—control of herself suddenly. "Little affairs! Holiday flirtations! If it were only that, it would be beneath your notice, sir, and beneath mine. It's more than that!"

The King started and leaned forward, looking at her. She rose to her feet, crying: "More than that! While we sit talking here, he may be marrying that woman!"

"Marrying her?" cried the King; his face turned red, and then, as the blood ebbed again, became very pale.

"That's what she means—yes, and what he means, too!"

The King was aghast. The second assault struck home—struck at his dearest hopes and wounded his most intimate ambitions. But he was still incredulous. He spread out trembling hands, turning from the vehement woman to his two counsellors.

"Gentlemen!" he said, imploringly, with out-stretched hands.

They were silent—grave and silent.

"Captain Markart, you—you saw anything to suggest this—this terrible idea?"

The fire was hot on poor Markart again. He stammered and stuttered.

"The—the Baroness seemed to have much influence, sir; to—to hold a very high position in the Prince's regard; to—to be in his confidence—"

"Yes!" struck in the Countess. "She wears the uniform of his artillery! Isn't that a compliment usually reserved for ladies of royal rank? I appeal to you, Colonel Stafnitz!"

"In most services it is so, I believe, Countess," the Colonel answered gravely.

"But I should never allow it—and without my consent—"

"It might be invalid, sir, though there's some doubt about that. But it would be a fatal bar to our German project. Even an influence short of actual marriage—"

"She means marriage, I say, marriage!" The Countess was quite rudely impatient of her ally—which was very artistic. "An ambitious and dangerous woman! She has taken advantage of the favor the King showed her."

"And if I died?" asked the King.

Stenovics shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, there would be no control then," said he.

The King looked round. "We must get her away from Praslok."

"Will she come?" jeered the Countess. "Not she! Will he let her go? Not he!"

The King passed his hand weakly across his brow. Then he rang a bell on the table. Lepage entered, and the King bade him bring him the draught which Natcheff had prescribed for his nerves. Well might the unfortunate man feel the need of it, between the Countess's open eruption and the not less formidable calm of Stenovics and Stafnitz! And all his favorite dreams in danger!

"She won't leave him—or he'll follow her. The woman has infatuated him!" the Countess persisted.

"Pray, madame, let me think," said the harassed and sick King. "We must open communications with Baroness Dobrava."

"May I suggest that the matter might prove urgent, sir?" said Stenovics.

"Every hour is full of danger," declared the Countess.

The King held up his hand for silence. Then he took paper and pen, and wrote with his own hand some lines. He signed the document and folded it. His face was now firm and calmer. The peril to his greatest hopes—perhaps a sense of the precarious

tenure of his power—seemed to impart to him a new promptness, a decision alien to his normal character. "Colonel Stafnitz!" he said in a tone of command.

The Colonel rose to his feet and saluted. From an adviser in council he became in a moment a soldier on duty.

"I am about to entrust to you a duty of great delicacy. I choose you because, short of General Stenovics himself, there is no man in whom I have such confidence. To-morrow morning you will go to Praslok and inform his Royal Highness that you have a communication from me for Baroness Dobrava. If the Prince is absent, you will see the Baroness herself. If she is absent, you will follow her and find her. The matter is urgent. You will tell her that it is my request that she at once accompany you back here to the Palace, where I shall receive her and acquaint her with my further wishes. If she asks of these, say that you are not empowered to tell her anything; she must learn them from myself. If she makes any demur about accompanying you immediately, or if demur is made or delay suggested from any quarter, you will say that my request is a command. If that is not sufficient, you will produce this paper. It is an order under my hand, addressed to you and directing you to arrest Baroness Dobrava and escort her here to my presence, notwithstanding any objection or resistance, which any person whatever will offer at his peril. You will be back here by to-morrow evening, with the Baroness in your charge. Do it without employing the order for arrest if possible, but do it anyhow and at all costs. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir. Am I to take an escort?"

The answer to that question was anxiously considered—and awaited anxiously.

"Yes," said the King, "you will. The precise force I leave to your discretion. It should be large enough to make you secure from hinderance by any act short of open and armed resistance to my commands."

Stafnitz saluted again, and at a sign from the King resumed his seat. The King's

manner relaxed as he turned to Stenovics. "When we've got her here, we'll reason with her—she'll hear reason—and persuade her that her health will benefit by a foreign trip. If necessary, I shall cause her to be deported. She must be out of Kravonia in three days unless she can clear herself from all suspicion. I'll arrange that the Prince sha'n't come for his audience until she is well out of Slavna. It is, of course, absolutely essential that no word of this should pass the walls of this room. If once a hint of it reached Praslok, the task of laying our hands on the Baroness might become infinitely more difficult."

The three were well pleased. They had come to fear Sophy, and on that score alone would be right glad to see the last of her. And when she had gone, there was a fairer chance that the Prince, too, would go on his travels; whether he went after her or not they cared little, so that he went, and the recruiting and training at Volseni were interrupted.

Again, she was to go before the audience. That was another point. The peril of the audience remained, but they had improved their chances. Perhaps Stafnitz's brain was already busy with the possibilities of his mission and his escort. The latter was to be large enough to make him secure from hinderance by any act short of open and armed resistance to the King's commands. If it were impossible (as his Majesty obviously considered) to contemplate such resistance, it was evidently no less impossible to reckon what might happen as a consequence of it.

The King rang his bell impatiently. "I want my draught again. I'm very tired. Is there anything else which need detain us to-day?"

As he spoke, before Stenovics could answer, Lepage came in with the draught. The valet wore an even unusually demure and uninterested expression.

"There is one other matter, sir," said Stenovics.

The King paused in the act of drinking and listened with his glass in his hand, Lepage standing beside him.

"Your Majesty just now impressed on us the need of secrecy as to what passes between these walls. I think, sir, you would insist on the same thing with all who serve you confidentially. You haven't asked, sir, how the Prince became aware of the state of your Majesty's health."

The King started a little. "No, I forgot that. It was against my direct orders. How was it?"

Stenovics kept his eyes on the King; Markart and Stafnitz allowed themselves to study Lepage's features; he stood the scrutiny well.

"The news, sir, was betrayed by a man within these walls—a man in close touch with your Majesty."

"Natcheff!" exclaimed the King.

"Certainly not, sir. Another. This man, of whom I had suspicions, and whom I caused to be watched, went by night to the house of Monsieur Zerkovitch, who is, as you are aware, a close friend and (if I may use the word) an adherent of the Prince of Slavna. Their interview took place between nine and ten last night. At eleven Zerkovitch, having borrowed a horse from the Prince's stables, set out for Praslok. He rode hard through the night and reached the Castle, as Captain Markart has told us, in the small hours of the morning. There he had an interview with the Prince. He left Praslok between six and seven in the morning and arrived at his house on the south boulevard by eleven. At half-past eleven he walked up the Street of the Fountain, crossed St. Michael's Square, and entered a small inn in a little alley behind the Cathedral. Here the man I speak of was waiting for him. They were together half an hour. Zerkovitch then left. The man remained till one, then came out, and returned to the Palace by a circuitous route, arriving here about two o'clock. I venture to say that the meaning of all this is quite clear. This man is in communication with Praslok, using Zerkovitch as his intermediary. It's for your Majesty to say how far his disobedience in regard to acquainting the Prince with

your condition is a serious offence. As to that I say nothing. But it will be obvious that this man should know nothing of any private measures undertaken or contemplated."

The King had listened carefully. "The case seems clear," he said. "This fellow's a traitor. He's done harm already, and may do more. What do you ask, General?"

"We might be content to let him know nothing. But who can be quite certain of insuring that? Sir, you have just arrived at a very important decision—to take certain action. Absolute secrecy is essential to its success. I've no wish to press hardly on this man, but I feel bound to urge that he should be put under arrest and kept in the charge of a person who is beyond suspicion until the action to which I refer has been successfully carried out."

"The precaution is an obvious one, and the punishment hardly sufficient." The King rose. "Do as you say, General. I leave you full discretion. And now I'll go to my room and rest. I'm very tired. Give me your arm, Lepage, and come and make me comfortable."

Lepage did not offer his arm. He was not looking at the King, nor listening to him; his eyes and his ears were for General Stenovics. Stenovics rose now and pointed his finger at Lepage.

"That, sir, is the man," said he.

"Lepage!" cried the King, and sank heavily into his seat with a bewildered face. Lepage—his familiar—the man he trusted!

XIV

HIS MAJESTY DIES—TO-MORROW!

The King's ambition and pride had quivered under the threat of a cruel blow; the charge against Lepage wounded him hardly less deeply. He regarded his

body-servant with the trustful affection which grows on an indolent man in course of years—of countless days of consulting, trusting, relying on one ever present, ever ready, always trustworthy. Lepage had been with him nearly thirty years; there was hardly a secret of the King's manhood which he had not known and kept. At last had he turned traitor?

Stenovics had failed to allow for this human side of the matter; how much more alone the revelation would make the King feel, how much more exposed and helpless—just, moreover, when sickness made his invaluable servant more indispensable still. A forlorn dignity filled the King's simple question: "Is it true, Lepage?"

Lepage's impassivity vanished. He, too, was deeply moved. The sense of guilt was on him—of guilt against his master; it drove him on, beyond itself, to a fierce rage against those who had goaded him into his disobedience, whose action and plans had made his disobedience right. For right now he believed and felt it; his talks with Zerkovitch had crystallized his suspicions into confident certainty. He was carried beyond thinking of what effect his outburst might have on his own fortunes or how it might distress the already harassed King. He struck back fiercely at his accuser, all his national quickness of passion finding vent in the torrent of words he poured forth in excuse or justification. He spoke his native French, very quickly, one word jostling over another, his arms flying like windmills, and his hair bristling, as it seemed, with defiance.

"Yes, it's true, sir. I disobeyed your Majesty—for the first time in thirty years! For the first time in my life, sir, I did it! And why? Because it was right; because it was for honor. I was angry, yes! I had been scolded because Count Alexis bade me call him 'Prince,' and you heard me do it. Yes, I was angry. Was it my fault? Had I told him he was a prince? No! Who had told him he was a prince? Don't ask me, sir. Ask somebody else. For my part, I know well the difference between one who is a prince

and one who is not. Oh, I'm not ignorant of that! I know, too, the difference between one who is a queen and one who is not—oh, with the utmost respect to Madame la Comtesse! But I know it—and I remember it. Does everybody else remember it?"

He stopped for a moment and clutched at his stiff, tight collar, as though to wrench it away from his neck, and let the stream of his words flow even more freely. While he paused, nobody spoke. Stenovics's heavy gaze was on the King, Stafnitz's eyes discreetly on the ceiling; the Countess looked scared. Had they made a mistake? Would it have been better to run the risk of what Lepage could do? The King's hands were on the table in front of him; they trembled where they lay.

"Why wasn't the Prince to know? Because then he wouldn't go on his journey! His journey after the German princess!" He faced Stenovics now, boldly and defiantly, pointing a forefinger at him. "Yes, they wanted him to go. Yes, they did! Why, sir? To marry a princess—a great princess? Was that what they wanted? Eh, but it would have been little use for Count Alexis to ask me to call him a prince then! And Madame la Comtesse—with the utmost respect to Madame la Comtesse—she wanted a great princess here? Oh, she wanted that mightily, to be sure!"

The King stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Sir, will you listen to him?" the Countess broke in.

His answer was cold: "I listen to every man before I order him to be punished."

"Yes, they wanted him to go. Yes, certainly! For he trains his men at Volseni, trains them for his big guns. When the men are trained and the guns have come—well, who'll call Count Alexis a prince then? Will even they who taught him to think himself a prince? Oh yes; they wanted him to go. And he wouldn't go if he knew your Majesty was ill. He loves your Majesty. Yes! But if he hated you, still would he go?" With a sudden turn he was round on Stenovics again, and threw out his arms as though to embrace a picture. "Look! The Prince is away, the guns are come, the King dies! Who commands in the Palace? Who governs Slavna?" He was back to

the King with another swift turn. "May I answer, sir? May I tell you? The mother of Prince Alexis commands in the Palace; Slavna is ruled by the friends of Captain Mistitch!" His voice fell to an ironical murmur. "And the Prince is far off—seeking a great princess! Sir, do you see the picture?"

Stafnitz suddenly lowered his eyes from the ceiling and looked at the gesticulating little man with a smile.

"Such imagination in the servants' hall!" he murmured half under his breath.

The King neither rebuked his levity nor endorsed the insinuated satire. He took no notice at all. His eyes were fixed on his still trembling hands.

Stenovics spoke in a calm, smooth voice. "Absolutely, sir, I believe the man's honest!" he said, with an inflection of good-humored surprise. "One sees how he got the idea! I'm sure he's genuinely devoted to your Majesty, and to the Prince—as we all are. He sees something going on which he doesn't understand; he knows something more is going on that he's ignorant of. He knows the unfortunate condition of your Majesty's health. He's like a nurse—forgive me—in charge of a sick child; he thinks everybody but himself has designs on his charge. It's really natural, however absurd—but it surely makes the precaution I suggested even more necessary? If he went about spreading a tale like this!"

The line was clever—cleverer far than the Countess's rage, cleverer than Stafnitz's airily bitter sneer. But of it, too, the King took no notice. Lepage took no more than lay in a very scornful smile. He leaned down towards the motionless, dull-faced King, and said in his ear:

"They wanted him to go, yes! Did they want him to come back again, sir?" He bent a little lower, and almost whispered: "How long would his journey have taken, sir? How long would it have taken him to get back if—in case of need?" One more question he did not ask in words; but it was plain enough without them: "How long can your Majesty count on living?"

At last the King raised his head and looked round on them. His eyes were heavy and glassy.

"This man has been my trusted servant for many, many years. You, General Stenovics, have been my right hand, my other self. Colonel Stafnitz is high in my confidence. And Lepage is only my servant."

"I seek to stand no higher than any other of your Majesty's servants, except in so far as the nature of my services gives me a claim," said Stenovics.

"But there's one here who stands far nearer to me than any one, who stands nearer to me than any living being. She must know of this thing, if it's true; if it's being done, her hand must be foremost among the hands that are doing it." His eyes fixed themselves on the Countess's face. "Is it true?" he asked.

"Sir, how can you ask? How can you listen? True! It's a malignant invention. He's angry because I reproved him."

"Yes, I'm angry. I said so. But it's true for all that."

"Silence, Lepage! Am I to take your word against the Countess's?"

Markart, a silent listener to all this scene, thought that Lepage's game was up. Who could doubt what the Countess's word would be? Probably Lepage, too, thought that he was beaten, that he was a ruined man. For he played a desperate card—the last throw of a bankrupt player. Yet it was guided by shrewdness, and by the intimate knowledge which his years of residence in the Palace had given him. He knew the King well; and he knew Countess Ellenburg hardly less thoroughly.

"I speak truth, sir, as I believe it. But I can't expect you to take my word against the Countess's. I have too much respect for Madame la Comtesse to ask that."

Again he bent down towards the King; the King looked up at him; Stenovics's simile came back into the mind. In a low, soothing tone Lepage made his throw—his last suggestion. "Madame la Comtesse is of great piety. If Madame la Comtesse will

take a solemn oath—well, then I'm content! I'll say I was mistaken—honest, I declare, sir, but mistaken."

Stenovics raised his head with a sharp jerk. Stafnitz smiled scornfully; he was thinking that Lepage was not, after all, a very resourceful fellow. An oath! Great Heavens! Oaths were in the day's work when you put your hand to affairs like this. But here Stenovics was wiser—and Lepage was shrewder. Stafnitz generalized from an experience rather one-sided; the other two knew the special case. When oaths were mentioned—solemn oaths—Stenovics scented danger.

The King knew his wife, too; and he was profoundly affected, convulsed to the depths of his mind. The thing sounded true—it had a horrible sound of truth. He craved the Countess's denial, solemn as it could be framed. That would restore the confidence which was crumbling from beneath his tormented, bewildered mind.

"Can anybody object to that," he asked slowly, "if I say it will relieve my mind?" He smiled apologetically. "I'm a sick man, you know. If it will relieve a sick man's mind, banish a sick man's fancies? If I shall sleep a little better—and old Lepage here be ashamed of himself?"

None of them dared to object. None could plausibly, unless the Countess herself—and she dared not. In his present mood the King would not accept the plea of her dignity; against it he would set the indulgence due to a sick man's rebellious fancies; could she, for her dignity's sake, deny him what would make him sleep?

He looked at her; something in her face appeared to strike him as strange. A sort of quiver ran through his body; he seemed to pull himself together with an effort; as he spoke to her, his voice sounded faint and ever so slightly blurred.

"You've heard Lepage, and I know that you'll speak the truth to me on your oath—the truth about the thing nearest to the heart of a dying man—nearest to the heart of your dying husband. You wouldn't lie on oath to a dying man, your husband and your King. For I am dying. You have years still; but they'll end. You believe

that some day you and I will stand together before the Throne. As you shall answer to Heaven in that day, is this true? Was it in your heart, and in the heart of these men, to keep my son, the heir of my House, from his throne? Is it true? As you shall answer to God for your soul, is there any truth in it?"

The woman went gray in the face—a sheet of gray paper seemed drawn over her cheeks; her narrow lips showed a pale red streak across it. Her prayers—those laborious, ingenious, plausible prayers—helped her nothing here.

"I protest! At this time, sir! The Countess will be upset!"

Stenovics had been driven to this; he feared greatly. Not a soul heeded him; every eye now was on the woman. She struggled—she struggled to lie; she struggled to do what she believed would bring perdition to her soul. Her voice was forced and harsh when at last she broke silence.

"As I shall answer in that day—"

"As you shall answer to God for your soul in that day—" the King repeated.

She gave a wild glance at Stenovics, seeking succor, finding no refuge. Her eyes came back to the King's face. "As I shall answer—" Every word came forth by its own self, with its separate birth-pang—"As I shall answer to God for my soul—"

She stopped. There was silence while a man might count ten. She threw her hands above her head and broke into a violent torrent of sobs. "I can't! I can't!" they heard her say through her tumultuous weeping.

The King suddenly started back in his chair as though somebody had offered to strike him. "You—you—you, my wife! You, Stenovics! You, whom I trusted—trusted—trusted like—! Ah, is that you, Lepage? Did I hear rightly—wouldn't she swear?"

"With the utmost respect to Madame la Comtesse, she could not swear, sir."

The King sprang to his feet. "Go!" he cried.

They all rose—the Countess shaken with unconquerable sobs. But the next moment the King made a quick in-drawing of the breath, like a man suddenly pricked by some sharp thing. He dropped back in his chair; his head fell to meet his hands on the table in front. The hands were palms downward, and his forehead rested on his knuckles.

There was a moment's pause. Then Lepage darted from the room, crying: "Dr. Natcheff! Dr. Natcheff!" Stenovics wiped his brow. Stafnitz raised his head with a queer look at the King, and his mouth shaped for a whistle. The Countess's sobs seemed as though frozen, her whole frame was rigid. The King did not move.

Natcheff came rushing in; Lepage, who followed closely, shut the door after him. They both went to the King. There was silence while Natcheff made his examination. In a couple of minutes he turned round to them.

"Something has caused his Majesty strong agitation?"

"Yes," answered Stenovics.

"Yes!" said Natcheff. He cleared his throat and glanced doubtfully at the Countess.

"Well?" asked Stenovics.

Natcheff threw out his hands, shrugging his shoulders ever so slightly:

"I regret to say that the effect is the worst possible. His Majesty is dead."

Silence again—a silence strangely broken. Stafnitz sprang across the room with a bound like a cat's, and caught the physician by the shoulder.

"No!" he said. "Not for twenty-four hours yet! His Majesty dies—to-morrow!"

XV

A JOB FOR CAPTAIN HERCULES

"His Majesty dies—to-morrow!"

Stafnitz's words seemed to freeze them all stiff where they stood; even Countess Ellenburg's sobs, which had threatened to break forth again, were arrested in their flow.

"Markart, lock the door leading to the King's apartments. Natcheff and Lepage, carry the King into his bedroom; lay him on the bed; stay there till I call you. Countess, General, I invite your earnest attention."

Stenovics's mind excelled in the waiting game, the slow, tortuous approach, the inch-by-inch advance of leisurely diplomacy. For him this crisis was at first too sudden. The swift and daring intellect of Stafnitz naturally and inevitably took the lead; his strong will fascinated his confederates.

"Is this to be the beginning or the end?" he asked. "For us and our friends—which? If we send a courier to Praslok to call King Sergius to his capital—what then? For you, Countess, and your son, oblivion and obscurity at Dobrava—for all the rest of your life, just that! For you, General, and for me, and our friends—yes, you too, Markart!—our congé, more or less civilly given. There won't be more insignificant men in all Slavna on the day King Sergius enters. But there's no King Sergius yet!"

Stenovics was regaining the use of his brain; his eyes grew distant in deep meditation. Countess Ellenburg looked eager and grim; her lips could not swear a false oath—well, she was not asked to swear any oath now. Markart could not think; he stood staring at Stafnitz.

"In half an hour that courier must start for Praslok, if he starts at all. Of all things, we mustn't hesitate."

He had painted the result to them of the coming of King Sergius; it meant the defeat of years of effort; it entailed the end of hopes, of place, of power or influence. There was no future for those three in Kravonia if King Sergius came. And Markart, of course, seemed no more than one of Stenovics's train.

"And if the courier doesn't start?" asked Stenovics. He took out and lit a cigar,

asking no leave of the Countess; probably he hardly knew that he was smoking it.

Stafnitz looked at his watch. "Five o'clock! We have twenty-four hours—it would be risky to keep the secret longer. There's not much time; we must be prompt. But we mustn't sacrifice anything to hurry. For instance, it would look odd to present the King's orders to Baroness Dobrava in the middle of the night! She'd smell a rat, if she's as clever as they say. And so would the Prince, I think. I could have a hundred men at Praslok by midnight, but I shouldn't propose to have them there before eleven o'clock to-morrow. Well, they could be back here by five in the afternoon! In the course of the day we'll occupy all the important points of the city with troops we can trust. Then, in the evening—as soon as we see how matters have gone at Praslok—we proclaim King Alexis!"

The Countess gave a little shiver—whether of fear or of eagerness it was impossible to tell. Stenovics drummed his fingers on the table and turned his cigar quickly round and round in his mouth. Markart had recovered his clearness of mind and closely watched all the scene.

The Countess rose suddenly—in strong agitation. "I—I can't bear it," she said. "With him lying there! Let me go! Presently—presently you shall tell me—anything."

Stenovics laid down his cigar and went to her. "Wait in there"—he pointed to Natcheff's room—"till you're quite composed. Then go to your own room and wait till I come. Mind, Countess, no sign of agitation!" He led her out. Stafnitz shrugged his shoulders.

"She'll be all right," he said to Markart with a passing smile.

"I think she was fond of the King," said Markart.

Stenovics returned. "Now!" he said, seating himself again and resuming his cigar. "You suggest that we still use that order—for the arrest of Baroness Dobrava?"

"It's signed 'Alexis,' and King Alexis lives till five to-morrow. Moreover, if all goes well, King Alexis lives again for many years after that."

Stenovics nodded slightly. "The Baroness comes willingly—or you bring her? At any rate, one way or the other, she's in our hands by this time to-morrow?"

"Exactly, General. I fail to perceive that this lamentable event"—he waved his hand towards the King's empty chair—"alters the case as regards the Baroness one jot."

"Not the least—unless you consider that risking our heads on the throw has any such effect," replied Stenovics; and for the first time he smiled.

"Once you wanted to play the big stake on a bad hand, General. Won't you put it on the table now, when you've a good one?"

"I'm thinking of a certain strong card in the other hand which you haven't mentioned yet. Baroness Dobrava is to be in our power by this time to-morrow. But what will the Prince of Slavna be doing? Still drilling his men at Volseni, still waiting for his guns?"

Stafnitz looked him full in the face. "No," he said. "The Prince had better not still be drilling his men at Volseni, nor waiting for his guns."

"I think not, too," Stenovics agreed, twisting his cigar round again.

"General, do you think the Prince will let Baroness Dobrava come to Slavna without him?"

"I don't know. He might have confidence enough in you; he wouldn't wish to annoy or agitate the King. He might await his summons to an audience. On the whole, I think he would submit—and rely on being able to induce the King to alter his mind when they met. I'm not sure he wouldn't advise her to go with you."

"Well, yes, I confess that struck me, too, as rather likely—or at least possible."

"If it happened, it wouldn't be convenient," said Stenovics, with a patient sigh. "Because he would come after her in a day or two."

"But if I were detained by urgent business in Slavna—and we've agreed that there's work to be done to-morrow in Slavna—another officer would go to Praslok. The

order, which I have here, mentions no name, although the King designated me by word of mouth."

"The order mentions no name?"

"No; it directs the Baroness to accompany the bearer. True, at the foot my name is written—'Entrusted to Colonel Stafnitz.' But with care and a pair of scissors—!" He smiled at Markart again, as though taking him into the joke.

"Well, well, suppose another officer goes to Praslok—why shouldn't the Prince trust the Baroness to the care of that officer as readily as to you? You don't—how shall I put it?—monopolize his confidence, Colonel."

Stafnitz still wore his easy, confidential smile, as he answered with an air of innocent slyness: "Suppose the officer were—Captain Mistitch? I think it's just the job for Captain Hercules!"

Even Stenovics started a little at that. He laid down his cigar and looked at his friend the Colonel for some seconds. Then he looked at Markart, smiling, seeming to ponder, to watch how Markart was taking it, even to sympathize with Markart on having to consider a rather startling proposal, on having, possibly, to do some little violence to his feelings. Certainly Captain Markart gathered the impression that Stenovics was doubtful how he would stand this somewhat staggering suggestion. At last the General turned his eyes back to Stafnitz again.

"That's as ingenious a bit of deviltry as I ever heard, Colonel," he remarked quietly.

"Captain Mistitch is restored to duty. He's of proper rank to perform such a service, and to command an escort of a hundred men. After all, an officer of my rank made a certain concession in accepting so small a command."

"Of course, if the Prince knew you as I do, my dear Colonel, he'd trust her to a thousand Mistitches sooner than to you—"

"But then—he doesn't!" the Colonel smiled.

"He'd regard the sending of Mistitch as a deliberate insult."

"I'm afraid he would."

"He's hot-tempered. He'd probably say as much."

"Yes. And Mistitch is hot-tempered. He'd probably resent the observation. But you'll remember, General, that the escort is to be large enough to make the officer commanding it secure against hinderance by any act short of open and armed resistance to the King's command."

"He'll never believe the King would send Mistitch!"

"Will that make his peaceable obedience more likely?"

"In a moment they'd be at each other's—" He stopped. "Markart, go and see if they need anything in there." He pointed to the King's bedroom, where Natcheff and Lepage were.

Markart rose and obeyed. His head was swimming; he hardly yet understood how very ingenious the ingenious deviltry was, how the one man was to be sent whose directions the Prince could not submit to, whose presence was an insult, to whom it was impossible to entrust Baroness Dobrava. He was very glad to get out of the room. The last he saw was Stafnitz drawing his chair close up to Stenovics and engaging in low-voiced, earnest talk.

The King's body lay on the bed, decently disposed, and covered with a large fur rug. Lepage sat on a chair near by, Natcheff on another in the window. Both looked up for a moment as Markart entered, but neither spoke. Markart found a third chair and sat down. Nobody said anything; the three were as silent and almost as still as the fourth on the bed. A low murmur of voices came from the next room; the words were indistinguishable. So passed full half an hour—a strange and terrible half-hour it seemed to Markart.

The door opened, and Stafnitz called Natcheff. The physician rose and followed

him. Another twenty minutes went by, still in silence; but once Markart, looking for a moment at his mute companion, saw a tear rolling slowly down Lepage's wrinkled cheek. Lepage saw him looking and broke the silence:

"I suppose I helped to kill him!"

Markart shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Silence came again. Very long it seemed; but, on looking at his watch, Markart found that it was not yet half-past six.

Again the door opened, and Stafnitz called to them both. They followed him into the next room. Stenovics was sitting at the table with his hands clasped on it in front of him. Stafnitz took up a position by his side, standing as though on duty. Natcheff had disappeared. Stenovics spoke in calm, deliberate tones; he seemed to have assumed command of the operations again.

"Captain Markart, I'm about to entrust to you an important and responsible duty. For the next twenty-four hours, and afterwards until relieved by my orders, you will be in charge of this man Lepage, and will detain him in these apartments. His own room and this room will be at the disposal of yourself and your prisoner, but you must not let the prisoner out of your sight. Dr. Natcheff remains in his room. He will have access to the King's room when he desires, but he will not leave the suite of apartments. Beyond seeing to this, you will have no responsibility for him. The door leading to the suite will be locked by me, and will be opened only by me, or by my orders. I remain at the Palace to-night; under me Captain Sterkoff will be the officer on guard. He will himself supply you with any meals or other refreshments which you may require. Ring this hand-bell on the table—no other bell, mind—and he will be with you immediately. Do you understand your orders?"

Markart understood them very well; there was no need of Stafnitz's mocking little smile to point the meaning. Markart was to be Lepage's jailer, Sterkoff was to be his. Under the most civil and considerate form he was made as close a prisoner as the man he guarded. Evidently, Stenovics had come to the conclusion that he could not

ask Markart to put too great a strain on his conscience! The General, however, seemed very kindly disposed towards him, and was, indeed, almost apologetic:

"I've every hope that this responsible and, I fear, very irksome duty may last only the few hours I mentioned. You put me under a personal obligation by undertaking it, my dear Markart."

In the absence of any choice, Markart saluted and answered: "I understand my orders, General."

Stafnitz interposed: "Captain Sterkoff is also aware of their purport."

Stenovics looked vexed. "Yes, yes, but I'm sure Markart himself is quite enough." It seems odd that, in the midst of such a transaction as that in which he was now engaged, Stenovics should have found leisure—or heart—to care about Markart's feeling. Yet so it was—a curiously human touch creeping in! He shut Markart up only under the strongest sense of necessity and with great reluctance. Probably Stafnitz had insisted, in the private conversation which they had held together: Markart had shown such evident signs of jibbing over the job proposed for Captain Hercules!

Lepage's heart was wrung, but his spirit was not broken. Stafnitz's ironical smile called an answering one to his lips.

"It would console my feelings if I also were put in charge of somebody, General," he said. "Shall I, in my turn, keep an eye on Dr. Natcheff, or report if the Captain here is remiss in the duty of keeping himself a prisoner?"

"I don't think you need trouble yourself, Monsieur Lepage. Captain Sterkoff will relieve you of responsibility." To Lepage, too, Stenovics was gentle, urbane, almost apologetic.

"And how long am I to live, General?"

"You're in the enviable position, Monsieur Lepage, of being able, subject to our

common mortality, to settle that for yourself. Come, come, we'll discuss matters again to-morrow night or the following morning. There are many men who prefer not to do things, but will accept a thing when it's done. They're not necessarily unwise. I've done no worse to you than give you the opportunity of being one of them. I think you'll be prudent to take it. Anyhow, don't be angry; you must remember that you've given us a good deal of trouble."

"Between us we have killed the King."

Stenovics waved his hands in a commiserating way. "Practical men mustn't spend time in lamenting the past," he said.

"Nor in mere conversation, however pleasant," Stafnitz broke in with a laugh. "Captain Markart, march your prisoner to his quarters."

His smile made the order a mockery. Markart felt it, and a hatred of the man rose in him. But he could do nothing. He did not lead Lepage to his quarters, but followed sheepishly in his prisoner's wake. They went together into the little room where Lepage slept.

"Close quarters too, Captain!" said the valet. "There is but one chair—let me put it at your service." He himself sat down on the bed, took out his tobacco, and began to roll himself a cigarette.

Markart shut the door and then threw himself on the solitary chair, in a heavy despondency of spirit and a confused conflict of feelings. He was glad to be out of the work, yet he resented the manner in which he was put aside. There were things going on in which it was well to have no hand. Yet was there not a thing going on in which every man ought to have a hand, on one side or the other? Not to do it, but to be ready to accept it when done! He was enough of a soldier to feel that there lay the worst, the meanest thing of all. Not to dare to do it, but to profit by the doing! Stenovics had used the words to Lepage, his prisoner. By making him in effect a prisoner, too, the General showed that he applied them to the Captain also. Anything

seemed better than that—ay, it would be better to ride to Praslok behind Captain Hercules! In that adventure a man might, at least, risk his life!

"An odd world!" said the valet, puffing out his cigarette smoke. "Honest men for prisoners, and murderers for jailers! Are you a prisoner or a jailer, Captain Markart?"

XVI

A FRENCHMAN AND A MATTRESS

To say the truth, the word "murderers" seemed to Captain Markart more than a little harsh. To use it was to apply to Kravonian affairs the sterner standards of more steady-going, squeamish countries. A coup d'état may well involve fighting; fighting naturally includes killing. But are the promoters of the coup therefore murderers? Murderers with a difference, anyhow, according to Kravonian ideas, which Captain Markart was inclined to share. Moreover, a coup d'état is war; the suppression of information is legitimate in war. If the Prince of Slavna could not find out for himself what had happened in the Palace, were his opponents bound to tell him? In fact, given that an attempt to change the succession in your own interest was not a crime, but a legitimate political enterprise, the rest followed.

Except Mistitch! It was difficult to swallow Mistitch. There was a mixture of ingenuity and brutality about that move which not even Kravonian notions could easily accept. If Stafnitz had gone—nay, if he himself had been sent—probably Markart's conscience would not have rebelled. But to send Captain Hercules—that was cogging the dice! Yet he was very angry that Stenovics should have divined his feelings and shut him up. The General distrusted his courage as well as his conscience—there lay the deepest hurt to Markart's vanity; it was all the deeper because in his heart he had to own that Stenovics read him right. Not only the brazen

conscience was lacking, but also the iron nerve.

Getting no answer to his unpleasantly pointed question, Lepage relapsed into silence. He stood by the window, looking out on the lawn which sloped down to the Krath. Beyond the river the lights of Slavna glowed in the darkening sky. Things would be happening in Slavna soon; Lepage might well look at the city thoughtfully. As a fact, however, his mind was occupied with one problem only—where was Zerkovitch and how could he get at him? For Lepage did not waver—he had taken his line.

Presently, however, his professional instincts seemed to reassert themselves. He opened a cupboard in the room and brought out a clean pair of sheets, which he proceeded to arrange on the bed. Busy at this task, he paused to smile at Markart and say: "We must do the best we can, Captain. After all, we have both camped, I expect! Here's the bed for you—you'll do finely." He went back to the cupboard and lugged out a mattress. "And this is for me—the shake-down on the floor which I use when I sleep in the King's room—or did use, I should say. In my judgment, Captain, it's comfortable to go to bed on the floor—at least, one can't fall."

It was eight o'clock. They heard the outer door of the suite of rooms open and shut. A man was moving about in the next room; if they could judge by the sound of his steps, he also paid Dr. Natcheff a brief visit. They heard the clink of dishes and of glass.

"Dinner!" said Lepage. "Ah, that's not unwelcome! Have I permission?" Markart nodded, and he opened the door. On the table in the sitting-room was a savory dish, bread, and two bottles of wine. Captain Sterkoff was just surveying the board he had spread, with his head on one side. There was nothing peculiar in that; his head was permanently stuck on one side—a list to starboard—since the Virgin with the lamp had injured the vertebræ of his neck. But the attitude, together with his beaked nose, made him look like a particularly vicious parrot. Markart saw him through the open

door and could not get the resemblance out of his mind.

"Supper, gentlemen!" said Sterkoff with malevolent mirth. "The Doctor can't join you. He's a little upset and keeps his bed. A good appetite! I trust not to be obliged to disturb you again to-night."

Markart had come in by now, but he was too surly and sore to speak. Without a word he plumped down into a chair by the table and rested his chin on his hands, staring at the cloth. It was left to Lepage to bow to Sterkoff, and to express their joint thanks. This task he performed with sufficient urbanity. Then he broke into a laugh.

"They must think it odd to see you carrying dishes and bottles about the Palace, Captain?"

"Possibly," agreed Sterkoff. "But you see, my friend, what they think in the Palace doesn't matter very much, so long as none of them can get outside."

"Oh, they none of them spend the evening out?"

"Would they wish to, when the King has an attack of influenza, and Dr. Natcheff is in attendance? It would be unfeeling, Lepage!"

"Horribly, Captain! Probably even the sentries would object?"

"It's possible they would," Sterkoff agreed again. He drew himself up and saluted Markart, who did not move or pay any attention. "Good-night, Lepage." He turned to the door; his head seemed more cocked on one side than ever. Lepage bade him "Good-night" very respectfully; but as the key turned in the door, he murmured longingly: "Ah, if I could knock that ugly mug the rest of the way off his shoulders!"

He treated Markart with no less respect than he had accorded to Sterkoff; he would not hear of sitting down at table with an officer, but insisted on handing the dish and uncorking the wine. Markart accepted his attentions and began to eat languidly, with utter want of appetite.

"Some wine, Captain, some wine to cheer you up in this tiresome duty of guarding me!" cried Lepage, picking up a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. "Oh, but that wry-necked fellow has brought you a dirty glass! A moment, Captain! I'll wash it." And off he bounded—not even waiting to set down the bottle—into the little room beyond.

His brain was working hard now, marshalling his resources against his difficulties. The difficulties were thirty feet to fall, Sterkoff's sentries, the broad, swift current of the Krath—for even in normal times there was always a sentry on the bridge—then the search for Zerkovitch in Slavna. His resources were a mattress, a spare pair of sheets, and a phial half full of the draught which Dr. Natcheff had prescribed for the King.

"It's very unfortunate, but I've not the least notion how much would kill him," thought Lepage, as he poured the medicine—presumably a strong sedative—into the wine-glass and filled up with wine from the bottle Sterkoff had provided. He came back, holding the glass aloft with a satisfied air. "Now it's fit for a gentleman to drink out of," said he, as he set it down by Markart's hand. The Captain took it up and swallowed it at a draught.

"Ugh! Corked, I think! Beastly, anyhow!" said he.

"They poison us as well as shut us up!" cried Lepage in burlesque anger. "Try the other bottle, Captain!"

The other bottle was better, said Markart, and he drank pretty well the whole of it, Lepage standing by and watching him with keen interest. It was distressing not to know how much of the King's draught would kill; it had been necessary to err on the safe side—the side safe for Lepage, that is.

Captain Markart thought he would smoke his cigar in the little room, lying on the bed; he was tired and sleepy—very sleepy, there was no denying it. Lepage sat down and ate and drank; he found no fault with the wine in the first bottle. Then he went

and looked at Markart. The Captain lay in his shirt, breeches, and boots. He was sound asleep and breathing heavily; his cigar had fallen on the sheet, but apparently had been out before it fell. Lepage regarded him with pursed lips, shrugged his shoulders, and slipped the Captain's revolver into his pocket. The Captain's recovery must be left to Fate.

For the next hour he worked at his pair of sheets, slicing, twisting, and splicing. In the end he found himself possessed of a fairly stout rope twelve or thirteen feet long, but he could find nothing solid to tie it to near the window, except the bed, and that was a yard away. He would still have a fall of some twenty feet, and the ground was hard with a spring frost. There would be need of the mattress. He put out all the lights in the room and cautiously raised the window.

The night was dark, he could not see the ground. He stood there ten minutes. Then he heard a measured tramp; a dark figure, just distinguishable, came round the corner of the Palace, walked past the window to the end of the building, turned, walked back, and disappeared. Hurriedly Lepage struck a match and took the time. Again he waited, again the figure came. Again he struck a light and took the time. He went through this process five times before he felt reasonably sure that he could rely on having ten minutes to himself if he started the moment Sterkoff's sentry had gone round the corner of the building.

He pulled the mattress up onto the sill of the window and waited. There was no sound now but of Markart's stertorous breathing. But presently the measured tramp below came, passed, turned, and passed away. Lepage gave a last tug at the fastenings of his rope, threw the end out of window, took the mattress, and dropped it very carefully as straight down as he could.

The next moment, in spite of Sterkoff, somebody had left the Palace. Why not? The runaway was aware that the King was not really suffering from influenza—he could spend an evening in Slavna without reproach!

"I wish I knew the safest way to fall!" thought Lepage, dangling at the end of his rope. It swayed about terribly; he waited awhile for it to steady itself—he feared to miss the mattress; but he could not wait long, or that measured tramp and that dark figure would come. There would be a sudden spurt of light, and a report—and what of Lepage then? He gathered his legs up behind his knees, took a long breath—and fell. As luck would have it, though he landed on the very edge of the mattress, yet he did land on it, and tumbled forward on his face, shaken, but with bones intact. There was a numb feeling above his knees—nothing worse than that.

He drew another long breath. Heavy bodies—and even mattresses—fall quickly; he must have seven or eight minutes yet!

But no! Heavy bodies, even mattresses, falling quickly, make a noise. Lepage, too, had come down with a thud, squashing hidden air out of the interstices of the mattress. The silence of night will give resonance to gentler sounds than that, which was as though a giant had squeezed his mighty sponge. Lepage, on his numb knees, listened. The steps came, not measured now, but running. The dark figure came running round the corner. What next? Next the challenge—then the spurt of light and the report! What of Lepage then? Nothing—so far as Lepage and the rest of humanity for certainty knew.

Of that nothing—actual or possible—Lepage did not approve. He hitched the mattress onto his back, bent himself nearly double, and, thus both burdened and protected, made for the river. He must have looked like a turtle scurrying to the sea, lest he should be turned over—and so left for soup in due season.

"Who goes there? Halt! Halt!"

The turtle scurried on; it was no moment to stop and discuss matters.

The spurt of light, the report! There was a hole in the mattress, but well above Lepage's head. Indeed, if hit at all, he was not most likely to be hit in the head; that vital portion of him was tucked away too carefully. He presented a broader aim; but

the mattress masked him nobly.

There was another shot—the northwest corner of the mattress this time. But the mattress was on the river's edge. The next instant it was floating on the current of the Krath, and Sterkoff's sentry was indulging in some very pretty practice at it. He hit it every time, until the swift current carried it round the bend and out of sight.

The whole thing seemed strange and rather uncanny to the sentry. He grounded his rifle and wiped his brow. It had looked like a carpet taking a walk on its own account—and then a swim! Superior officers might be accustomed to such strange phenomena. The sentry was not. He set off at a round pace to the guard-room; he did not even stay to notice the white rope which dangled in the air from a first-floor window. Had he stopped, he would have heard Markart's invincible, drug-laden snoring.

Lepage had separated himself from his good friend and ally, the mattress, and dived under water while the sentry blazed away. He welcomed the current which bore him rapidly from the dangerous neighborhood of the Palace. He came to the surface fifty feet down stream and made for the other side. He could manage no more than a very slanting course, but he was a strong swimmer, lightly dressed, with an in-door man's light kid shoes. He felt no distress; rather a vivid, almost gleeful, excitement came upon him as he battled with the strong, cold stream. He began to plume himself on the mattress. Only a Frenchman would have thought of that! A Slavna man would have ran away with unguarded flanks. A Volsenian would have stayed to kill the sentry, and be shot down by Sterkoff's guard. Only a Frenchman would have thought of the mattress!

He made land a quarter of a mile below the Palace. Ah, it was colder on the road there than struggling with the cold water! But his spirit was not quenched. He laughed again—a trifle hysterically, perhaps. In spite of Sterkoff he was spending the evening out! He set his feet for Slavna—briskly, too! Nay, he ran, for warmth's

sake, and because of what the sentry might even now be reporting to Sterkoff, and, through him, to General Stenovics. The thought brought him to a stand-still again; there might be a cordon of sentries across the road! After a moment's hesitation he broke away from the main road, struck due south, and so ran when he could, walked when he must, two miles.

He was getting terribly tired now, but not cold—rather he was feverishly hot inside his clammy garments. He turned along a country cross-road which ran west, and passed through a village, leaving the Hôtel de Paris on the main road far to his right. At last he reached the main road south and turned up it, heading again for Slavna and for the bridge which crossed the South River. He passed the bridge without being challenged as the Cathedral clock struck midnight from St. Michael's Square. The worst of his task was accomplished. If now he could find Zerkovitch!

But he was sore spent; running was out of the question now; he slunk slowly and painfully along the south boulevard, clinging close to the fences of the gardens, seeking the shelter of the trees which overhung them.

Draggled, hatless, dirty, infinitely weary, at last he reached Zerkovitch's house at the corner where the boulevard and the Street of the Fountain meet. He opened the garden gate and walked in. Spent as he was, he breathed a "Bravo!" when he saw a light burning in the hall. He staggered on, rang the bell, and fairly fell in a lump outside the door.

He had done well; he, a man of peace, busy with clothes—he had done well that night! But he was finished. When Zerkovitch opened the door, he found little more than a heap of dank and dirty raiment; he hauled it in and shut the door. He supported Lepage into the study, sat him down by the fire, and got brandy for him to drink, pouring out full half a tumbler. Lepage took it and drank the better part of it at a gulp.

"The King died at five o'clock, Monsieur Zerkovitch," he said. He drank the rest, let

the tumbler fall with a crash in the fender, buried his head on his breast, and fell into blank unconsciousness.

He was out of the battle—as much as Markart, who slept the clock round in spite of Stenovics's shakings and Dr. Natcheff's rubbings and stimulants. But he had done his part. It was for Zerkovitch to do his now.

The King had died at five o'clock? It was certainly odd, that story, because Zerkovitch had just returned from the offices of The Patriot; and, immediately before he left, he had sent down to the foreman-printer an official communiqué, to be inserted in his paper. It was to the effect that Captain Mistitch and a guard of honor of fifty men would leave Slavna next morning at seven o'clock for Dobrava, to be in readiness to receive the King, who had made magnificent progress, and was about to proceed to his country seat to complete his convalescence.

Captain Mistitch and a guard of honor for Dobrava! Zerkovitch decided that he would, if possible, ride ahead of them to Dobrava—that is, part of the way. But first he called his old housekeeper and told her to put Lepage to bed.

"Don't worry about anything he says. He's raving," he added thoughtfully.

But poor Lepage raved no more that night. He did not speak again till all was over. He had done his part.

At five o'clock in the morning, Zerkovitch left Slavna, hidden under a sack in a carrier's cart. He obtained a horse at a high price from a farmer three miles along the road, and thence set out for the Castle at his best speed. At six, Captain Mistitch, charged with Stafnitz's careful instructions, set out with his guard of honor along the same road—going to Dobrava to await the arrival of the King, who lay dead in the Palace on the Krath!

But since they started at six, and not at seven, as the official communiqué led Zerkovitch to suppose, he had an hour less to spare than he thought. Moreover, they went not fifty strong, but one hundred.

These two changes—of the hour and the force—were made as soon as Stenovics and Stafnitz learned of Lepage's escape. A large force and a midnight march would have aroused suspicion in Slavna. The General did what he could safely do to meet the danger which the escape suggested—the danger that news of the King's death might be carried to Praslok before Mistitch and his escort got there.

XVII

INGENIOUS COLONEL STAFNITZ

After his happy holiday the Prince slept well, and rose in a cheerful mood—still joyful of heart. He anticipated that the day would bring him a summons from his father; he had little doubt that in the course of a personal interview he could persuade the King to agree to a postponement of his journey. Of Sophy he meant to say nothing—by a reservation necessary and not inexcusable. It was impossible not to take into account the knowledge he had acquired of the state of the King's health. The result of that condition was that his provision must, in all likelihood, be for months only, and not for years. The task for the months was to avoid disturbing the King's mind, so long as this course was consistent with the maintenance of his own favorable position. It must be remembered that no man in the kingdom built more on this latter object than the King himself; no man was less a partisan of Countess Ellenburg and of young Alexis than the husband of the one and the father of the other. The royal line—the line which boasted Bourbon blood—was for the King the only line of Stefanovitch.

Of the attack prepared against him the Prince knew nothing—nothing even of the King's mind having been turned against the Baroness Dobrava, whom so short a time ago he had delighted to honor; nothing, of course, of Stafnitz's audacious coup, nor of the secret plan which Stenovics and the Colonel had made, and of which Mistitch was to be the instrument. Of all the salient features of the situation, then, he

was ignorant, and his ignorance was shared by those about his person. On the other hand, Stenovics had his finger on every thread save one—the Lepage-Zerkovitch thread, if it may so be called. That was important, but its importance might be nullified if Mistitch made good speed.

On the whole, the odds were much in favor of the coterie. If by any means they could prevent the King from coming alive and free to Slavna, the game would be theirs. If he did come alive and free, their game would probably be up. His presence would mean a hard fight—or a surrender; and Slavna had no stomach for such a fight—though it would be piously thankful to be rid of Sergius, whether as Prince or King, without the necessity of an ordeal so severe.

As a preliminary to the summons he anticipated, and to a possible stay of some days with his father at Slavna, the Prince had details to discuss and routine business to transact with Lukovitch, the captain of his battery in Volseni. He was early on horseback; Sophy and Max von Hollbrandt (Max's stay at the Castle was to end the next day) rode with him as far as the gates of the city; there they left him and turned down into the plain, to enjoy a canter on the banks of Lake Talti. The three were to meet again for the mid-day meal at Praslok. Marie Zerkovitch had been ailing, and kept her bed in the morning. The Prince's mounted guard rode behind him and his friends to Volseni, for the sake of exercising their horses. In the Castle there were left only Marie Zerkovitch and the servants. The Prince did not anticipate that any message would come from the Palace before noon at the earliest.

Morning avocations pursued their usual peaceful and simple course at the Castle; old Vassip, his wife, and the maids did their cleaning; Peter Vassip saw to his master's clothes, and then, to save his father labor, began to sluice the wooden causeway; the stablemen groomed their horses—they had been warned that the Prince might want another mount later in the day. Marie Zerkovitch lay in her bed, sleeping soundly after a restless night. There seemed no hint of trouble in the air. It must be confessed

that up to now it looked as though Praslok would be caught napping.

It was Peter Vassip, busy on the causeway, who first saw Zerkovitch. He rested and leaned on his mop to watch the head which rose over the hill, the body that followed, the farm-horse lumbering along in a slow, clumsy, unwilling gallop. The man was using stick and spur—he was riding mercilessly. Peter ran down to the road and waited. A groom came across from the stables and joined him.

"He's got no call to treat the horse like that, whoever he is," the groom observed.

"Not unless he's on urgent business," said Peter, twirling the water from his mop.

Zerkovitch was up to them; he leaped from his horse. "I must see the Prince," he cried, "and immediately!"

"The Prince is at Volseni, sir; he rode over to see Captain Lukovitch."

"When will he be back?"

"We don't expect him till twelve o'clock."

Zerkovitch snatched out his watch.

"There's nobody here but Madame Zerkovitch, sir; she's still in bed, not very well, sir."

"Twelve o'clock!" muttered Zerkovitch, paying no heed to the news about his wife.

"The Baroness and Baron von Hollbrandt are out riding—"

"Can you give me a fresh horse? I must ride on and find the Prince at Volseni."

"Oh yes, sir." He signed to the groom. "And hurry up!" he added.

"The guard's here, of course?"

"No, sir. They've gone with the Prince."

Zerkovitch twitched his head irritably and again looked at his watch. "There must be time," he said. "They can't be here at soonest for an hour and a half."

Peter Vassip did not understand him, but neither did he venture to ask questions.

"Your horse 'll be here in a minute, sir. I think you'll find the Prince in his office over the city gate. He went to do business, not to drill, this morning."

Zerkovitch looked at him for a moment, wondering, perhaps, whether he would be wise to tell his news. But what was the use of telling Peter Vassip? Or his own wife? What could she do? It was for the Prince to say who should be told. The one thing was to find the Prince. There was time—at the very least an hour and a half.

The groom brought the fresh horse, and Zerkovitch began to mount.

"A glass of wine, sir?" Peter Vassip suggested. He had marked Zerkovitch's pale face and strained air; he had wondered to see his clothes sprinkled with whitey-brown fibres—traces of the sack under whose cover he had slid out of Slavna.

Zerkovitch was in the saddle. "No," he answered. "But a bumper, Peter, when I've found the Prince!" He set spurs to his horse and was off at a gallop for Volseni; the road, though high on the hills, was nearly level now.

Peter scratched his head as he looked after him for a moment; then he returned to his mop.

He was just finishing his task, some twenty minutes later, when he heard Sophy's laugh. She and Hollbrandt came from a lane which led up from the lake and joined the main road a hundred yards along towards Volseni. Peter ran and took their horses, and they mounted the causeway in leisurely, pleasant chat. Sophy was in her sheepskin uniform; her cheeks were pale, but the Star glowed. The world seemed good to her that morning.

"And that is, roughly, the story of my life," she said with a laugh, as she reached the top of the causeway and leaned against the rude balustrade which ran up the side of it.

"A very interesting one—even very remarkable," he said, returning her laugh. "But much more remains to be written, I don't doubt, Baroness."

"Something, perhaps," said Sophy.

"A good deal, I imagine!"

She shot a mischievous glance at him: she knew that he was trying to lure from her an avowal of her secret. "Who can tell? It all seems like a dream sometimes, and dreams end in sudden awakenings, you know."

"If it's a dream, you make an excellent dream-lady, Baroness."

Peter Vassip put his mop and pail down by the stables, and came up and stood beside them.

"Did the mare carry you well to-day, sir?" he asked Max.

"Admirably, Peter. We had a splendid ride—at least I thought so. I hope the Baroness—?"

Sophy threw out her arms as though to embrace the gracious world. "I thought it beautiful; I think everything beautiful to-day. I think you beautiful, Baron von Hollbrandt—and Peter is beautiful—and so is your mother, and so is your father, Peter. And I half believe that, just this morning—this one splendid morning—I'm beautiful myself. Yes, in spite of this horrible mark on my cheek!"

"I hear something," said Peter Vassip.

"Just this morning—this one splendid morning—I agree with you," laughed Max. "Not even the mark shall change my mind! Come, you love the mark—the Red Star—don't you?"

"Well, yes," said Sophy, with a little, confidential nod and smile.

"I hear something," said Peter Vassip, with his hand to his ear.

Sophy turned to him, smiling. "What do you hear, Peter?"

He gave a sudden start of recollection. "Ah, has that anything to do with Monsieur Zerkovitch?"

"Monsieur Zerkovitch?" broke from them both.

"He's been here; he's ridden at a gallop on to Volseni—to find the Prince." He added briefly all there was to add—his hand at his ear all the time.

"Hum! That looks like news," said Max. "What can it be?"

"He didn't stop even to tell Marie! It must be urgent."

They looked in one another's faces. "Can there be—be anything wrong in Slavna?"

"You mean—the troops?"

"I had thought of that."

"I can think of nothing but that. If it were anything from the Palace, it would come by a royal courier sooner than by any other hand."

"I can hear plainly now," said Peter Vassip. "Listen!"

They obeyed him, but their ears were not so well trained. A dull, indefinite sound was all they could distinguish.

"Horses—a number of them. Mounted men it must be—the hoofs are so regular. Cavalry!"

"It's the Prince coming back from Volseni!" cried Sophy.

"No, it's from the other direction; and, besides, there are too many for that."

Mounted men on the Slavna road—and too many to be the Prince's guard!

"What can it be?" asked Sophy in a low voice.

"I don't know. Zerkovitch's arrival must be connected with the same thing, I think."

"There! There are their shakoes coming over the rise of the hill!" cried Peter Vassip.

The next moment showed the company. They rode in fours, with sergeants on the flanks. The officer in command was behind—the three on the causeway could not see him yet. They were Hussars of the King's Guard, the best regiment in the army. The Prince of Slavna had made them good soldiers—they hated him for it. But Stafnitz was their colonel. On they came; in their blue tunics and silver braid they

made a brave show in the sunshine.

The three watched now without word or motion. The sudden sight held them spellbound. Not one of them thought of sending to warn the Prince. If they had, the thought would have been useless, unless it had chimed in with Mistitch's will. Twenty men could have been on them before there was time to saddle a horse. If the expedition were a hostile one, the Castle was caught napping in very truth!

Sophy stood forward a pace in front of her companions; her hand rested on the little revolver which Monseigneur had given her.

On came the company; the foremost file reached within twenty yards of the causeway. There they halted. Half of them dismounted, each man as he did so intrusting his horse to his next fellow. Half of the fifty thus left mounted repeated this operation, leaving the remaining twenty-five in charge of all the horses. The seventy-five took position, four deep, on the road. They separated, lining either side.

The figure of their commander now appeared. He rode to the foot of the causeway, then dismounted, and gave his horse to the sergeant who attended him. His men followed and drew up in the road, blocking the approach to the Castle. Big Mistitch began to ascend the causeway, a broad smile on his face. It was a great moment for Captain Hercules—the day of revenge for which he had waited in forced patience and discreet unobtrusiveness. It was a critical day, also, in view of the instructions he had. To do him justice, he was not afraid.

Sophy saw and knew. This must have been the news that Zerkovitch carried, that he had galloped on to tell to the Prince at Volseni. Some event—some unknown and untoward turn of fortune—had loosed Mistitch on them! That was all she had time to realize before Mistitch saluted her and spoke.

"I have the honor of addressing the Baroness Dobrava?"

"You know me well, I think, Captain Mistitch, and I know you."

"Our journey together will be all the pleasanter for that."

"Your business with me, please?"

"I have it in command from his Majesty to escort you to Slavna—to the Palace and into his presence. The King himself will then acquaint you with his wishes."

"You're a strange messenger to send."

"That's a point to put to my superior officer, Colonel Stafnitz, who sent me, Baroness."

Sophy pointed at his men. "You ride strongly supported!"

"Again the Colonel's orders, Baroness. I confess the precautions seemed to me excessive. I had no doubt you would willingly obey his Majesty's commands. Here, by-the-way, is the written order." He produced the order the King had signed before his death.

Sophy had been thinking. Neither her courage nor her cunning forsook her. She waved the document away. "I can take your word, Captain? You're making no mistake to-day?—I really am Baroness Dobrava—not somebody else with whom you have a feud?" She laughed at him gayly and went on: "Well, I'm ready. I'm dressed for a ride—and I'll ride with you immediately. In two minutes we'll be off." She saw a groom in the road staring at the troopers, and called to him to bring her a horse.

This prompt obedience by no means suited Mistitch's book. It forced him either to show his hand or to ride off with Sophy, leaving the Prince to his devices—and, in a little while, to his revenge.

"I mustn't hurry you. You have some preparations—?"

"None," said Sophy. Her horse was led out into the road.

"You'll at least desire to acquaint his Royal Highness—?"

"Not at all necessary. Baron von Hollbrandt can do that later on."

Mistitch looked puzzled. Sophy smiled; her intuition had been right. The attack on

her was a feint, her arrest a blind; the Prince was the real object of the move. She stepped down towards Mistitch.

"I see my horse is ready. We can start at once, Captain," she said.

"I'm instructed to express to the Prince regret that it should be necessary—"

"The regret will be conveyed to him. Come, Captain!"

But Mistitch barred her way.

"His Royal Highness is in the Castle?" he asked. His voice grew angry now; he feared the great stroke had failed; he saw that Sophy played with him. How would he and his escort look riding back to Slavna with nothing to show for their journey save the capture of one unresisting woman—a woman whom they dared not harm while the Prince remained free, and might become all-powerful?

"If he had been, you'd have known it by now, I think," smiled Sophy. "No, the Prince isn't at the Castle."

"I'll see that for myself!" Mistitch cried, taking a step forward.

With a low laugh Sophy drew aside, passed him, and ran down the causeway. In an instant she darted between the ranks of Mistitch's men and reached her horse. The groom mounted her. She looked up to Mistitch and called to him gayly:

"Now for Slavna, Captain! And hurry, or you'll be left behind!"

Her wit was too quick for him. Max von Hollbrandt burst out laughing; Peter Vassip grinned.

"What are you waiting for, Captain?" asked Max. "Your prisoner's only too anxious to go with you, you see!"

"I'll search the Castle first!" he cried in a rage which made him forget his part.

Peter Vassip sprang forward and barred the way. Mistitch raised his mighty arm. But Sophy's voice rang out gayly:

"Nonsense, Peter! There's nothing to conceal. Let the Captain pass!"

Her words stopped Mistitch—he feared a trap. Max saw it and mocked him. "Don't be afraid, Captain—take fifty men in with you. The garrison consists of a lady in bed, an old man, and five female servants."

Sophy heard and laughed. Even the troopers began to laugh now. Mistitch stood on the top of the causeway, irresolute, baffled, furious.

But behind his stupidity lay the cunning astuteness of Stafnitz, the ingenious bit of devilry. Mistitch's name availed where his brain could not. For the moment the Prince made little of the Crown which had become his; when he heard Zerkovitch's news, his overpowering thought was that the woman he loved might be exposed to the power and the insults of Mistitch. Sophy was playing a skilful game for him, but he did not know it.

"I hear something," said Peter Vassip again, whispering to Max von Hollbrandt.

Yes, there was the galloping of horses on the Volseni road!

Colonel Stafnitz had not miscalculated.

Now Mistitch heard the sound. His heavy face brightened. He ran down the causeway, loudly ordering his men to mount. He was no longer at a loss. He had his cue now—the cue Stafnitz had given him.

XVIII

TO THE FAITHFUL CITY

The King had died yesterday—yet none had told his heir! Mistitch had set out for Dobrava with fifty men to wait for the King—who was dead! The dead King would never go to Dobrava—and no messenger came to the new King at Praslok!

Zerkovitch's news was enough to raise the anger of a King—and Sergius blazed with it. But more potent still was his wrathful fear as he thought of Sophy at Praslok, in the power of Captain Hercules.

He had his guard of twenty mounted men with him. With these he at once set forth, bidding Lukovitch collect all the men he could and follow him as speedily as possible. If Mistitch had really gone to Dobrava, then he would find him there and have the truth out of him. But if, as the Prince hardly doubted, he was making for Praslok, there was time to intercept him, time to carry off Sophy and the other inmates of the Castle, send them back to safety within the walls of Volseni, and himself ride on to meet Mistitch with his mind at ease.

Relying on Zerkovitch's information, he assumed that the troopers had not started from Slavna till seven in the morning. They had started at six. He reckoned also on Zerkovitch's statement, that they were but fifty strong. They were a hundred. Yet, had he known the truth, he could not have used more haste—and he would not have waited for another man! He stayed to tell no man in Volseni the news about his father—except Lukovitch. But as his twenty rode out of the gate behind him, he turned his head to Zerkovitch, who trotted beside him—for Zerkovitch neither could nor would rest till the game was played—and said: "Tell them that the King is dead, and that I reign." Zerkovitch whispered the news to the man next him, and it ran along the line. A low, stern cheer, hardly more than a murmured assurance of loyalty and service, came from the lips of the men in sheepskins.

Mistitch saw them coming, and turned to his troop; he had time for a little speech—and Stafnitz had taught him what to say: "Men, you are servants of the King, and of the King only. Not even the Prince of Slavna can command you against the King's orders. The King's orders are that we take Baroness Dobrava to Slavna, no matter who resists. If need be, these orders stand even against the Prince."

Stafnitz's soldiers—the men he petted, the men who had felt the Prince's stern hand—were only too glad to hear it. To strike for the King and yet against the hated Prince—it was a luxury, a happy and unlooked-for harmonizing of their duty and their pleasure. Their answering cheer was loud and fierce.

It struck harsh on the ears of the advancing Prince. His face grew hard and strained as he heard the shouts and saw the solid body of men across his path, barring access to his own castle. And within a yard or two of their ranks, by the side of the road, sat the figure which he knew so well and so well loved.

Now Mistitch played his card—that move in the game which Sophy's cool submission to his demand had for the moment thwarted, but to which the Prince's headlong anger and fear now gave an opening—the opening which Stafnitz had from the first foreseen. It would need little to make the fiery Prince forget prudence when he was face to face with Mistitch. It was not a safe game for Mistitch personally—both Stafnitz and he knew that. But Captain Hercules was confident. He would not be caught twice by the Volseni trick of sword! The satisfaction of his revenge, and the unstinted rewards that his Colonel offered, made it worth his while to accept the risk, and rendered it grateful to his heart.

Sophy sat smiling. She would fain have averted the encounter, and had shaped her manœuvres to that end. It was not to be so, it seemed. Now, she did not doubt Monseigneur's success. But she wished that Zerkovitch had not reached Volseni so quickly, that the Prince had stayed behind his walls till his plans were ready; and that she was going a prisoner to Slavna to see the King, trusting to her face, her tongue, her courage, and the star of her own fortune. Never had her buoyant self-confidence run higher.

On the top of the causeway, Max von Hollbrandt looked to his revolver, Peter Vassip loosened his knife in its leather sheath. A window above the gate opened, and Marie Zerkovitch's frightened face looked out. The women-servants jostled old Vassip in the doorway. The grooms stood outside the stables. No one moved—only the Prince's little troop came on. When they were fifty yards away, Mistitch cried to his men: "Draw swords!" and himself pricked his horse with his spur and rode up to where Sophy was.

Mistitch drew his horse up parallel to Sophy's, head to tail, on her right side, between her and the approaching force. With the instinct of hatred she shrank away from him; it had all been foreseen and rehearsed in Stafnitz's mind! Mistitch cried loudly: "In the King's name, Baroness Dobrava!" He leaned from the saddle and caught her right wrist in his huge hand: he had the justification that, at his first attempt to touch her, Sophy's hand had flown to her little revolver and held it now. Mistitch crushed her wrist—the revolver fell to the ground. Sophy gave one cry of pain. Mistitch dropped her wrist and reached his arm about her waist. He was pulling her from her horse, while again he cried out: "In the King's name! On guard!"

It was a high jump from the top of the causeway, but two men took it side by side—Max von Hollbrandt, revolver in hand, Peter Vassip with knife unsheathed.

As they leaped, another shout rang out: "Long live King Sergius!"

The Prince rode his fastest, but faster still rode Zerkovitch. He outpaced the Prince and rode right in among Mistitch's men, crying loudly again and again, unceasingly: "The King is dead! The King is dead! The King is dead!"

Then came the Prince; he rode full at Mistitch. His men followed him, and dashed with a shock against the troopers of Mistitch's escort. As they rode, they cried: "Long live King Sergius!" They had unhorsed a dozen men and wounded four or five before they realized that they met with no resistance. Mistitch's men were paralyzed. The King was dead—they were to fight against the King! The magic of the name worked. They dropped the points of their swords. The Volsenians, hesitating to strike men who did not defend themselves, puzzled and in doubt, turned to their Bailiff—their King—for his orders.

As the Prince came up, Mistitch hurled Sophy from him; she fell from her horse, but fell on the soft, grassy road-side, and sprang up unhurt save for a cruel pain in her crushed wrist. She turned her eyes whither all eyes were turned now. The general

battle was stayed, but not the single combat. For a moment none moved save the two who were now to engage.

The fight of the Street of the Fountain fell to be fought again. For when Peter Vassip was darting forward, knife in hand, with a spring like a mountain goat's, his master's voice called: "Mine, Peter, mine!" It was the old cry when they shot wild-boar in the woods about Dobrava, and it brought Peter Vassip to a stand. Max von Hollbrandt, too, lowered his pointed revolver. Who should stand between his quarry and the King, between Sophy's lover and the man who had so outraged her? Big Mistitch was the King's game, and the King's only, that day.

Mistitch's chance was gone, and he must have known it. Where was the sergeant who had undertaken to cover him? He had turned tail. Where was the enveloping rush of his men, which should have engulfed and paralyzed the enemy? Paralysis was on his men themselves; they believed Zerkovitch, and lacked appetite for the killing of a King. Where was his triumphant return to Slavna, his laurels, his rewards, his wonderful swaggerings at the Golden Lion? They were all gone. Even though he killed the King, there were two dozen men vowed to have his life. They must have it—but at what price? His savage valor set the figure high.

It was the old fight again, but not in the old manner. There was no delicate sword-play, no fluctuating fortunes in the fray. It was all stem and short. The King had not drawn his sword, Mistitch did not seek to draw his. Two shots rang out sharply—that was all. The King reeled in his saddle, but maintained his seat. Big Mistitch threw his hands above his head with a loud cry and fell with a mighty crash on the road, shot through the head. Peter Vassip ran to the King and helped him to dismount, while Max von Hollbrandt held his horse. Sophy hurried to where they laid him by the road-side.

"Disarm these fellows!" cried Zerkovitch.

But Mistitch's escort were in no mood to wait for this operation; nor to stay and

suffer the anger of the King. With their leader's fall the last of heart was out of them. Wrenching themselves free from such of the Volsenians as sought to arrest their flight, they turned their horses' heads and fled, one and all, for Slavna. The King's men attempted no pursuit; they clustered round the spot where he lay.

"I'm hit," he said to Sophy, "but not badly, I think."

From the Castle door, down the causeway, came Marie Zerkovitch, weeping passionately, wringing her hands. The soldiers parted their close ranks to let her through. She came to the road-side where Sophy supported Monseigneur's head upon her knees. Sophy looked up and saw her. Marie did not speak. She stood there sobbing and wringing her hands over Sophy and the wounded King.

That afternoon—an hour after the first of the straggling rout of Mistitch's escort came in—King Alexis died suddenly! So ran the official notice, endorsed by Dr. Natcheff's high authority. The coterie were in up to their necks; they could not go back now; they must go through with it. Countess Ellenburg took to her knees; Stenovics and Stafnitz held long conversations. Every point of tactical importance in the city was occupied by troops. Slavna was silent, expectant, curious.

Markart awoke at five o'clock, heavy of head, dry in the mouth, sick and ill. He found himself no longer in the King's suite, but in one of the apartments which Stafnitz had occupied. He was all alone; the door stood open. He understood that he was no more a prisoner; he knew that the King was dead!

But who else was dead—and who alive—and who King in Slavna?

He forced himself to rise, and hurried through the corridors of the Palace. They were deserted; there was nobody to hinder him, nobody of whom to ask a question. He saw a decanter of brandy standing near the door of one room, and drank freely of it. Then he made his way into the garden. He saw men streaming over the bridge towards Slavna, and hastened after them as quickly as he could. His head was still in a maze; he remembered nothing after drinking the glass of wine which Lepage the

valet had given him. But he was possessed by a strong excitement, and he followed obstinately in the wake of the throng which set from the Palace and the suburbs into Slavna.

The streets were quiet; soldiers occupied the corners of the ways; they looked curiously at Markart's pale face and disordered uniform. A dull roar came from the direction of St. Michael's Square, and thither Markart aimed his course. He found all one side of the Square full of a dense crowd, swaying, jostling, talking. On the other side troops were massed; in an open space in front of the troops, facing the crowd, was Colonel Stafnitz, and by his side a little boy on a white pony.

Markart was too far off to hear what Stafnitz said when he began to speak—nay, the cheers of the troops behind the Colonel came so sharp on his words as almost to drown them; and after a moment's hesitation (as it seemed to Markart), the crowd of people on the other side of the Square echoed back the acclamations of the soldiers.

All Countess Ellenburg's ambitions were at stake; for Stenovics and Stafnitz it was a matter of life itself now, so daringly had they raised their hands against King Sergius. Countess Ellenburg had indeed prayed—and now prayed all alone in a deserted Palace—but not one of the three had hesitated. At the head of a united army, in the name of a united people, Stafnitz had demanded the proclamation of young Alexis as King. For an hour Stenovics had made a show of demurring; then he bowed to the national will. That night young Alexis enjoyed more honor than he had asked of Lepage the valet—he was called not Prince, but Majesty. He was King in Slavna, and the first work to which they set his childish hand was the proclamation of a state of siege.

Slavna chose him willingly—or because it must at the bidding of the soldiers. But Volseni was of another mind. They would not have the German woman's son to reign over them. Into that faithful city the wounded King threw himself with all his friends.

The body of Mistitch lay all day and all night by the wayside. Next morning at dawn the King's grooms came back from Volseni and buried it under a clump of trees by the side of the lane running down to Lake Talti. Their curses were the only words spoken over the grave; and they flattened the earth level with the ground again, that none might know where the man rested who had lifted his hand against their master.

The King was carried to Volseni sore stricken; they did not know whether he would live or die. He had a dangerous wound in the lungs, and, to make matters worse, the surgical skill available in Volseni was very primitive.

But in that regard fortune brought aid, and brought also to Sophy a strange conjuncture of the new life with the old. The landlord of the inn sent word to Lukovitch that two foreign gentlemen had arrived at his house that afternoon, and that the passport of one of them described him as a surgeon; the landlord had told him how things stood, and he was anxious to render help.

It was Basil Williamson. Dunstanbury and he, accompanied by Henry Brown, Dunstanbury's servant, had reached Volseni that day on their return from a tour in the Crimea and round the shores of the Sea of Azof.

XIX

THE SILVER RING

It was late at night, and quiet reigned in Volseni—the quiet not of security, but of ordered vigilance. A light burned in every house; men lined the time-worn walls and camped in the market-place; there were scouts out on the road as far as Praslok. No news came from outside, and no news yet from the room in the guard-house where the wounded King lay. The street on which the room looked was empty, save for one man, who walked patiently up and down, smoking a cigar. Dunstanbury waited for Basil Williamson, who was in attendance on the King and was to pronounce to

Volseni whether he could live or must die.

Dunstanbury had been glad that Basil could be of use, but for the rest he had listened to the story which Zerkovitch told him with an amused, rather contemptuous indifference—with an Englishman's wonder why other countries cannot manage their affairs better, and something of a traveller's pleasure at coming in for a bit of such vivid, almost blazing "local color" in the course of his journey. But whether Alexis reigned, or Sergius, mattered nothing to him, and, in his opinion, very little to anybody else.

Nor had he given much thought to the lady whose name figured so prominently in Zerkovitch's narrative, the Baroness Dobrava. Such a personage seemed no less appropriate to the surroundings than the rest of the story—no less appropriate and certainly not a whit more important. Of course he hoped Basil would make a good report, but his mind was not disturbed; his chief hope was that the claims of humanity would not prolong his stay in Volseni beyond a few days. It was a picturesque little place, but not one for a long visit; and in any case he was homeward bound now, rather eager for the pleasures of the London season after his winter journey—the third he had made in the interests of a book on Russia which he had in contemplation, a book designed to recommend him as an expert student of foreign affairs. He could hardly consider that these goings-on in Kravonia came within the purview of a serious study of his subject. But it was a pleasant, moonlit night, the old street was very quaint, the crisis he had happened on bizarre and amusing. He smoked his cigar and waited for Basil without impatience.

He had strolled a hundred yards away and just turned to loiter back, when he saw a figure come out of the guard-house, pause for a moment, and then advance slowly towards him. The sheepskin cap and tunic made him think at first that the stranger was one of the Volsenian levy; the next moment he saw the skirt. At once he guessed that he was in the presence of Baroness Dobrava, the heroine of the piece,

as he had called her in his own mind and with a smile.

Evidently she meant to speak to him; he threw away his cigar and walked to meet her. As they drew near to each other he raised his hat. Sophy bowed gravely. Thus they met for the first time since Sophy washed her lettuces in the scullery at Morpingham, and, at the young lord's bidding, fetched Lorenzo the Magnificent a bone. This meeting was, however remotely, the result of that. Dunstanbury had started her career on the road which had led her to where she was.

"I've seen Mr. Williamson," she said, "and he knows me now. But you don't yet, do you, Lord Dunstanbury? And anyhow, perhaps, you wouldn't remember."

She had been a slip of a girl when he saw her last, in a print frock, washing lettuces. With a smile and a deprecatory gesture he confessed his ignorance and his surprise. "Really, I'm afraid I—I don't. I've been such a traveller, and meet so many—" An acquaintance with Baroness Dobrava was among the last with which he would have credited himself—or perhaps (to speak his true thoughts), charged his reputation.

"Mr. Williamson knew me almost directly—the moment I reminded him of my mark." She touched her cheek. Dunstanbury looked more closely at her, a vague recollection stirring in him. Sophy's face was very sad, yet she smiled just a little as she added: "I remember you so well—and your dog Lorenzo. I'm Sophy Grouch of Morpingham, and I became Lady Meg's companion. Now do you remember?"

He stepped quickly up to her, peered into her eyes, and saw the Red Star.

"Good Heavens!" he said, smiling at her in an almost helpless way. "Well, that is curious!" he added. "Sophy Grouch! And you are—Baroness Dobrava?"

"There's nothing much in that," said Sophy. "I'll tell you all about that soon, if we have time. To-night I can think of nothing but Monseigneur. Mr. Williamson has extracted the bullet, but I'm afraid he's very bad. You won't take Mr. Williamson away until—until it's settled—one way or the other, will you?"

"Neither Basil nor I will leave so long as we can be of the least service to you," he

told her.

With a sudden impulse she put her hands in his. "It's strangely good to find you here to-night—so strange and so good! It gives me strength, and I want strength. Oh, my friends are brave men, but you—well, there's something in home and the same blood, I suppose."

Dunstanbury thought that there was certainly something in having two Englishmen about, instead of Kravonians only, but such a blunt sentiment might not be acceptable. He pressed her hands as he released them.

"I rejoice at the chance that brings us here. You can have every confidence in Basil. He's a first-rate man. But tell me about yourself. We have time now, haven't we?"

"Really, I suppose we have! Monseigneur has been put to sleep. But I couldn't sleep. Come, we'll go up on the wall."

They mounted on to the city wall, just by the gate, and leaned against the mouldering parapets. Below lay Lake Talti in the moonlight, and beyond it the masses of the mountains. Yet while Sophy talked, Dunstanbury's eyes seldom left her face; nay, once or twice he caught himself not listening, but only looking, tracing how she had grown from Sophy Grouch in her scullery to this. He had never forgotten the strange girl: once or twice he and Basil had talked of her; he had resented Lady Meg's brusque and unceremonious dismissal of her protégée; in his memory, half-overgrown, had lain the mark on Sophy's cheek. Now here she was, in Kravonia, of all places—Baroness Dobrava, of all people! And what else, who knew? The train of events which had brought this about was strange; yet his greater wonder was for the woman herself.

"And here we are!" she ended with a woful smile. "If Monseigneur lives, I think we shall win. For the moment we can do no more than hold Volseni; I think we can do that. But presently, when he's better and can lead us, we shall attack. Down in Slavna they won't like being ruled by the Countess and Stenovics as much as they

expect. Little by little we shall grow stronger." Her voice rose a little. "At last Monseigneur will sit firm on his throne," she said. "Then we'll see what we can do for Kravonia. It's a fine country, and rich, Lord Dunstanbury, and outside Slavna the people are good material. We shall be able to make it very different—if Monseigneur lives."

"And if not?" he asked, in a low voice.

"What is it to me except for Monseigneur? If he dies—!" Her hands thrown wide in a gesture of despair ended her sentence.

If she lived and worked for Kravonia, it was for Monseigneur's sake. Without him, what was Kravonia to her? Such was her mood; plainly she took no pains to conceal it from Dunstanbury. The next moment she turned to him with a smile. "You think I talk strangely, saying: 'We'll do this and that'? Yes, you must, and it's suddenly become strange to me to say it—to say it to you, because you've brought back the old things to my mind, and all this is so out of keeping with the old things—with Sophy Grouch, and Julia Robins, and Morpingham! But until you came it didn't seem strange. Everything that has happened since I came to this country seemed to lead up to it—to bring it about naturally and irresistibly. I forgot till just now how funny it must sound to you—and how—how bad, I suppose. Well, you must accustom yourself to Kravonia. It's not Essex, you know."

"If the King lives?" he asked.

"I shall be with Monseigneur if he lives," she answered.

Yes, it was very strange; yet already, even now—when he had known her again for half an hour, had seen her and talked to her—gradually and insidiously it began to seem less strange, less fantastic, more natural. Dunstanbury had to give himself a mental shake to get back to Essex and to Sophy Grouch. Volseni set old and gray amid the hills, the King whose breath struggled with his blood for life, the beautiful woman who would be with the King if and so long as he lived—these were the

present realities he saw in vivid immediate vision; they made the shadows of the past seem not indeed dim—they kept all their distinctness of outline in memory—but in their turn fantastic, and in no relation to the actual. Was that the air of Kravonia working on him? Or was it a woman's voice, the pallid pride of a woman's face?

"In Slavna they call me a witch," she said, "and tell terrible tales about this little mark—my Red Star. But here in Volseni they like me—yes, and I can win over Slavna, too, if I get the opportunity. No, I sha'n't be a weakness to Monseigneur if he lives."

"You'll be—?"

"His wife?" she interrupted. "Yes." She smiled again—nay, almost laughed. "That seems worst of all—worse than anything else?"

Dunstanbury allowed himself to smile too. "Well, yes, of course that's true," he said. "Out of Kravonia, anyhow. What's true in Kravonia I really don't know yet."

"I suppose it's true in Kravonia too. But what I tell you is Monseigneur's will about me."

He looked hard at her. "You love him?" he asked.

"As my life, and more," said Sophy, simply.

At last Dunstanbury ceased to look at her; he laid his elbows on the battlements and stood there, his eyes roaming over the lake in the valley to the mountains beyond. Sophy left his side, and began to walk slowly up and down the rugged, uneven, overgrown surface of the walls.

The moon was sinking in the sky; there would be three or four dark hours before the dawn. A man galloped up to the gate and gave a countersign in return to a challenge; the heavy gates rolled open; he rode in; another rode out and cantered off along the road towards Praslok. There was watch and ward—Volseni was not to be caught

napping as Praslok had been. Whether the King lived or died, his Volsenians were on guard. Dunstanbury turned his back on the hills and came up to Sophy.

"We Essex folk ought to stand by one another," he said. "It's the merest chance that has brought me here, but I'm glad of the chance now. And it's beginning to feel not the least strange. So long as you've need of help, count me among your soldiers."

"But you oughtn't to mix yourself up—"

"Did you act on that principle when you came to Kravonia?"

With a smile Sophy gave him her hand. "So be it. I accept your service—for Monseigneur."

"I give it to you," he persisted.

"Yes—and all that is mine I give to Monseigneur," said Sophy.

Any man who meets, or after an interval of time meets again, an attractive woman, only to find that her thoughts are pre-empted and totally preoccupied, suffers an annoyance not the less real because he sees the absurdity of it; it is to find shut a gate which with better luck might have been open. The unusual circumstances of his new encounter with Sophy did not save Dunstanbury from this common form of chagrin; the tragic element in her situation gave it a rather uncommon flavor. He would fain have appeared as the knight-errant to rescue such beauty in such distress; but the nature of the distress did not seem favorable to the proper romantic sequel.

He made his offer of service to her; she assigned him to the service of Monseigneur! He laughed at his own annoyance—and determined to serve Monseigneur as well as he could. At the same time, while conceding most amply—nay, even feeling—Monseigneur's excuse, he could not admire his policy in the choice of a bride. That was doubtless a sample of how things were done in Kravonia! He lived to feel the excuse more strongly—and to pronounce the judgment with greater hesitation.

Sophy had given him her hand again as she accepted his offer in Monseigneur's name.—He had not yet released it when she was called from the street below in a woman's voice—a voice full of haste and alarm.

"Marie Zerkovitch calls me! I must go at once," she said. "I expect Monseigneur is awake." She hurried off with a nod of farewell.

Dunstanbury stayed a little while on the wall, smoking a cigarette, and then went down into the street. The door of the guard-house was shut; all was very quiet as he passed along to the market-place where the inn was situated. He went up to his room overlooking the street, and, taking off his coat only, flung himself on the bed. He was minded thus to await Basil Williamson's return with news of the King. But the excitement of the day had wearied him; in ten minutes he was sound asleep.

He was aroused by Basil Williamson's hand on his shoulder. The young doctor, a slim-built, dark, wiry fellow, looked very weary and sad.

"How has it gone?" asked Dunstanbury, sitting up.

"It's been a terrible night. I'm glad you've had some sleep. He awoke after an hour; the hemorrhage had set in again. I had to tell him it was a thousand to one against him. He sent for her, and made me leave them alone together. There was only one other room, and I waited there with a little woman—a Madame Zerkovitch—who cried terribly. Then he sent for Lukovitch, who seems to be the chief man in the place. Presently Lukovitch went away, and I went back to the King. I found him terribly exhausted; she was there, sitting by him and whispering to him now and then; she seemed calm. Presently Lukovitch came back; the Zerkovitches and the German man came too. They all came in—the King would not hear my objections—and with them came a priest. And then and there the King married her! She spoke to nobody except to me before the service began, and then she only said: 'Monseigneur wishes it.' I waited till the service was done, but I could bear no more. I went outside while they shrived him. But I was called back hurriedly. Then the end

came very soon—in less than half an hour. He sent everybody away except her and me, and when I had done all that was possible, I went as far off as I could—into the corner of the room. I came back at a call from her just before he died. The man was looking extraordinarily happy, Dunstanbury."

"They were married?"

"Oh yes. It's all right, I suppose—not that it seems to matter much now, does it? Put on your coat and come to the window. You'll see a sight you'll remember, I think."

Together they went to the window. The sun had risen from behind the mountains and flooded the city with light; the morning air was crisp and fragrant. The market-place was thronged with people—men in line in front, women, girls, and boys in a mass behind. They were all absolutely quiet and silent. Opposite where they were was a raised platform of wood, reached by steps from the ground; it was a rostrum for the use of those who sold goods by auction in the market. A board on trestles had been laid on this, and on the board was stretched the body of the King. At his feet stood Lukovitch; behind were Max von Hollbrandt, Zerkovitch, and Marie. At the King's head stood Sophy, and Peter Vassip knelt on the ground beside her. She stood like a statue, white and still; but Dunstanbury could see the Red Star glowing.

Lukovitch seemed to have been speaking, although the sound of his voice had not reached them through the closed window of the topmost room in the inn. He spoke again now—not loudly, but in a very clear voice.

"The King lies dead through treachery," he said. "In Slavna the German woman rules, and her son, and the men who killed the King. Will you have them to rule over you, men of Volseni?"

A shout of "No!" rang out, followed again by absolute silence. Lukovitch drew the curved sword that he wore and raised it in the air. All the armed men followed his example; the rest, with the women and young people, raised their right hands. It was

their custom in calling Heaven to witness.

"God hears us!" said Lukovitch, and all the people repeated the words after him.

Dunstanbury whispered to Basil: "Do they mean to fight?" An eagerness stirred in his voice.

"Listen! He's speaking again."

"Whom then will you have for your King, men of Volseni?" asked Lukovitch. "There is one on whose finger the King has put the silver ring of the Bailiffs of Volseni. With his own hand he set it there before he died—he set it there when he made her his Queen, as you have heard. Will you have the Bailiff of Volseni for your King?"

A great shout of "Yes!" answered him.

"You will have Sophia for your King?"

"Sophia for our King!" they cried.

Lukovitch raised his sword again; all raised swords or hands. The solemn words "God hears us!" were spoken from every mouth. Lukovitch turned to Sophy and handed his drawn sword to her. She took it. Then she knelt down and kissed the King's lips. Rising to her feet again, she stood for a moment silent, looking over the thronged market-square; yet she seemed hardly to see; her eyes were vacant. At last she raised the sword to her lips, kissed it, and then held it high in the air.

"It was Monseigneur's wish. Let us avenge him! God hears me!"

"God hears you!" came all the voices.

The ceremony was finished. Six men took up the board on which the King lay, carried it down from the rostrum, and along the street to the guard-house. Sophy followed, and her friends walked after her. Still she seemed as though in a dream; her voice had sounded absent, almost unconscious. She was pale as death, save for the Red Star.

Following her dead, she passed out of sight. Immediately the crowd began to disperse, though most of the men with arms gathered round Lukovitch and seemed to await his orders.

Basil Williamson moved away from the window with a heavy sigh and a gesture of dejection.

"I wish we could get her safe out of it," he said. "Isn't it wonderful, her being here?"

"Yes—but I'd forgotten that." Dunstanbury was still by the window; he had been thinking that his service now would not be to Monseigneur. Yet no doubt Basil had mentioned the wisest form of service. Sophy's own few words—the words for which she cited Heaven's witness—hinted at another.

But Basil had recalled his mind to the marvel. Moved as he had been by his talk with Sophy, and even more by the scene which had just been enacted before his eyes, his face lit up with a smile as he looked across to Basil.

"Yes, old fellow, wonderful! Sophy Grouch! Queen of Kravonia! It beats Macbeth hollow!"

"It's pretty nearly as dreary!" said Basil, with a discontented grunt.

"I find it pretty nearly as exciting," Dunstanbury said. "And I hope for a happier ending. Meanwhile"—he buckled the leather belt which held his revolver round his waist—"I'm for some breakfast, and then I shall go and ask that tall fellow who did all the talking if there's anything I can do for King Sophia. By Jove! wouldn't Cousin Meg open her eyes?"

"You'll end by getting yourself stuck up against the wall and shot," Basil grumbled.

"If I do, I'm quite sure of one thing, old fellow—and that is that your wooden old mug will be next in the line, or thereabouts."

"I say, Dunstanbury, I wish I could have saved him!"

"So do I. Did you notice her face?"

Williamson gave a scornful toss of his head.

"Well, yes, I was an ass to ask that!" Dunstanbury admitted, candidly. It would certainly not have been easy to avoid noticing Sophy's face.

At six o'clock that morning Max von Hollbrandt took horse for Slavna. His diplomatic character at once made it proper for him to rejoin his Legation and enabled him to act as a messenger with safety to himself. He carried the tidings of the death of the King and of the proclamation—of Sophy. There was no concealment. Volseni's defiance to Slavna was open and avowed. Volseni held that there was no true Stefanovitch left, and cited the will of the last of the Royal House as warrant for its choice. The gauntlet was thrown down with a royal air.

It was well for Max to get back to his post. The diplomatists in Slavna, and their chiefs at home, were soon to be busy with the affairs of Kravonia. Mistitch had struck at the life of even more than his King—that was to become evident before many days had passed.

XX

THEY HAVE COLDS IN SLAVNA

It is permissible to turn with some relief—although of a kind more congenial to the cynic than to an admirer of humanity—from the tragedy of love in Volseni to the comedy of politics which began to develop itself in Slavna from the hour of the proclamation of young Alexis.

The first result of this auspicious event, following so closely on the issue of Captain Mistitch's expedition, was to give all the diplomatists bad colds. Some took to their beds, others went for a change of air; but one and all had such colds as would certainly prevent them from accepting royal invitations or being present at State functions. Young Alexis had a cold, too, and was consequently unable to issue royal

invitations or take his part in State functions. Countess Ellenburg was even more affected—she had lumbago; and even General Stenovics was advised to keep quite quiet for a few days.

Only Colonel Stafnitz's health seemed proof against the prevailing epidemic. He was constantly to be seen about, very busy at the barracks, very busy at Suleiman's Tower, very gay and cheerful on the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris. But then he, of course, had been in no way responsible for recent events. He was a soldier, and had only obeyed orders; naturally his health was less affected. He was, in fact, in very good spirits, and in very good temper except when he touched on poor Captain Hercules's blundering, violent ways. "Not the man for a delicate mission," he said, decisively, to Captain Markart. The Captain forbore to remind him how it was that Mistitch had been sent on one. The way in which the Colonel expressed his opinion made it clear that such a reminder would not be welcome.

The coterie which had engineered the revolution was set at sixes and sevens by its success. The destruction of their common enemy was also the removal of their common interest. Sophy at Volseni did not seem a peril real enough or near enough to bind them together. Countess Ellenburg wanted to be Regent; Stenovics was for a Council, with himself in the chair. Stafnitz thought himself the obvious man to be Commandant of Slavna; Stenovics would have agreed—only it was necessary to keep an eye on Volseni! Now if he were to be Commandant, while the Colonel took the field with a small but picked force! The Colonel screwed up his mouth at that. "Make Praslok your headquarters, and you'll soon bring the Sheepskins to their senses," Stenovics advised insidiously. Stafnitz preferred headquarters in Suleiman's Tower! He was not sure that coming back from Praslok with a small force, however picked, would be quite as easy as going there.

In the back of both men's minds there was a bit of news which had just come to hand. The big guns had been delivered, and were on their way to Slavna, coming

down the Krath in barges. They were consigned to the Commandant. Who was that important officer now to be?

When thieves fall out, honest men come by their own. The venerable saying involves one postulate—that there shall be honest men to do it. In high places in Slavna this seemed to be a difficulty, and it is not so certain that Kravonia's two great neighbors, to east and west, quite filled the gap. These Powers were exchanging views now. They were mightily shocked at the way Kravonia had been going on. Their Ministers had worse colds than any of the other Ministers, and their Press had a great deal to say about civilization and such like topics. Kravonia was a rich country, and its geographical position was important. The history of the world seems to show that the standard of civilization and morality demanded of a country depends largely on its richness and the importance of its geographical position.

The neighbor on the west had plenty of mountains, but wanted some fertile plains. The neighbor on the east had fertile plains adjacent to the Kravonian frontier, and would like to hold the mountain line as a protection to them. A far-seeing statesman would have discerned how important correct behavior was to the interests of Kravonia! The great neighbors began to move in the matter, but they moved slowly. They had to see that their own keen sense of morality was not opposed to the keen sense of morality of other great nations. The right to feel specially outraged is a matter for diplomatic negotiations, often, no doubt, of great delicacy.

So in the mean time Slavna was left to its own devices for a little longer—to amuse itself in its light-hearted, unremorseful, extremely unconscientious way, and to frown and shake a distant fist at grim, gray, sad little Volseni in the hills. With the stern and faithful band who mourned the dead Prince neither Stenovics nor Stafnitz seemed for the moment inclined to try conclusions, though each would have been very glad to see the other undertake the enterprise. In a military regard, moreover, they were right. The obvious thing, if Sophy still held out, was to wait for the big

guns. When once these were in position, the old battlements of Volseni could stand scarcely longer than the walls of Jericho. And the guns were at the head of navigation on the Krath now, waiting for an escort to convoy them to Slavna. Max von Hollbrandt—too insignificant a person to feel called upon to have a cold—moved about Slavna, much amused with the situation, and highly gratified that the fruit which the coterie had plucked looked like turning bitter in their mouths.

Within the Palace on the river-bank young Alexis was strutting his brief hour, vastly pleased; but Countess Ellenburg was at her prayers again, praying rather indiscriminately against everybody who might be dangerous—against Sophy at Volseni; against the big neighbors, whose designs began to be whispered; against Stenovics, who was fighting so hard for himself that he gave little heed to her or to her dignity; against Stafnitz, who might leave her the dignity, such as it was, but certainly, if he established his own supremacy, would not leave her a shred of power. Perhaps there were spectres also against whose accusing shades she raised her petition—the man she had deluded, the man she had helped to kill; but that theme seems too dark for the comedy of Slavna in these days. The most practical step she took, so far as this world goes, was to send a very solid sum of money to a bank in Dresden: it was not the first remittance she had made from Slavna.

Matters stood thus—young Alexis having been on the throne in Slavna, and Sophy in Volseni, for one week—when Lepage ventured out from Zerkovitch's sheltering roof. He had suffered from a chill by no means purely diplomatic; but, apart from that, he had been in no hurry to show himself; he feared to see Rastatz's rat-face peering for him. But all was quiet. Sterkoff and Rastatz were busy with their Colonel in Suleiman's Tower. In fact, nobody took any notice of Lepage; his secret, once so vital, was now gossip of the market-place. He was secure—but he was also out of a situation.

He walked somewhat forlornly into St. Michael's Square, and as luck would have

it—Lepage thought it very bad luck—the first man he ran against was Captain Markart. Uneasy in his conscience, Lepage tried to evade the encounter, but the Captain was of another mind. His head was sound again, and, on cool reflection, he was glad to have slept through the events of what Stenovics's proclamation had styled "the auspicious day." He seized little Lepage by the arm, greeted him with cordiality, and carried him off to drink at the Golden Lion. Without imputing any serious lack of sobriety to his companion, Lepage thought that this refreshment was not the first of which the good-humored Captain had partaken that forenoon; his manner was so very cordial, his talk so very free.

"Well, here we are!" he said. "We did our best, you and I, Lepage; our consciences are clear. As loyal subjects, we have now to accept the existing régime."

"What is it?" asked Lepage. "I've been in-doors a week."

"It's Alexis—still Alexis! Long live Alexis!" said Markart, with a laugh. "You surely don't take Baroness Dobrava into account?"

"I just wanted to know," said Lepage, drinking thoughtfully. "And—er—Captain—behind Alexis? Guiding the youthful King? Countess Ellenburg?"

"No doubt, no doubt. Behind him his very pious mother, Lepage."

"And behind her?" persisted Lepage.

Markart laughed, but cast a glance round and shook his head.

"Come, come, Captain, don't leave an old friend in the dark—just where information would be useful!"

"An old friend! Oh, when I remember my aching head! You think me very forgiving, Monsieur Lepage."

"If you knew the night I spent, you'd forgive me anything," said Lepage, with a shudder of reminiscence.

"Ah, well," said Markart, after another draught, "I'm a soldier—I shall obey my orders."

"Perfect, Captain! And who will give them to you, do you think?"

"That's exactly what I'm waiting to see. Oh, I've turned prudent! No more adventures for me!"

"I'm quite of your mind; but it's so difficult to be prudent when one doesn't know which is the strongest side."

"You wouldn't go to Volseni?" laughed Markart.

"Perhaps not; but there are difficulties nearer home. If you went out of this door and turned to the left, you would come to the offices of the Council of Ministers. If you turned to the right, and thence to the right again, and on to the north wall, you would come, Captain, to Suleiman's Tower. Now, as I understand, Colonel Stafnitz—"

"Is at the Tower, and the General at the offices, eh?"

"Precisely. Which turn do you mean to take?"

Markart looked round again. "I shall sit here for a bit longer," he said. He finished his liquor, thereby, perhaps, adding just the touch of openness lacking to his advice, and, leaning forward, touched Lepage on the arm.

"Do you remember the Prince's guns—the guns for which he bartered Captain Hercules?"

"Ay, well!" said Lepage.

"They're on the river, up at Kolskoï, now. I should keep my eye on them! They're to be brought to Slavna. Who do you think'll bring them? Keep your eye on that!"

"They're both scoundrels," said Lepage, rising to go.

Markart shrugged his shoulders. "The fruit lies on the ground for the man who can pick it up! Why not? There's nobody who's got any right to it now."

He expressed exactly the view of the two great neighbors, though by no means in the

language which their official communications adopted.

Stenovics knew their views very well. He had also received a pretty plain intimation from Stafnitz that the Colonel considered the escorting of the guns to Slavna as a purely military task, appertaining not to the Ministry of State, but to the officer commanding the garrison in the capital. Stafnitz was that officer, and he proposed himself to go to Kolskoï. Suleiman's Tower, he added, would be left in the trustworthy hands of Captain Sterkoff. Again Stenovics fully understood; indeed, the Colonel was almost brutally candid. His letter was nothing less than plain word that power lay with the sword, and that the sword was in his own hand. Stenovics had got rid of King Sergius only to fall under the rule of Dictator Stafnitz! Was that to be the end of it?

Stenovics preferred any other issue. The ideal thing was his own rule in the name of young Alexis, with such diplomatic honoring and humoring of Countess Ellenburg as might prove necessary. That was plainly impossible so long as Stafnitz was master of the army; it would become finally hopeless if Sterkoff held Suleiman's Tower till Stafnitz brought the guns to Slavna. What, then, was Stenovics's alternative? For he was not yet brought to giving up the game as totally lost. His name stood high, though his real power tottered on a most insecure foundation. He could get good terms for his assistance: there was time to make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness.

Privately, as became invalids, without the knowledge of any one outside their confidential entourage, the representatives of the two great neighbors received General Stenovics. They are believed to have convinced him that, in the event of any further disorders in Kravonia, intervention could not be avoided; troops were on either frontier, ready for such an emergency; a joint occupation would be forced on the Allies. With a great deal of sorrow, no doubt, the General felt himself driven to accept this conclusion.

He at once requested Stafnitz to fetch the guns to Slavna; he left the Colonel full discretion in the matter. His only desire was to insure the tranquillity of the capital, and to show Volseni how hopeless it was to maintain the fanciful and absurd claims of Baroness Dobrava. The representatives, it must be supposed, approved this attitude, and wished the General all success; at a later date his efforts to secure order, and to avoid the inevitable but regrettable result of any new disturbance, were handsomely acknowledged by both Powers. General Stenovics had not Stafnitz's nerve and dash, but he was a man of considerable resource.

A man of good feeling, too, to judge from another step he took—whether with the cognizance of the representatives or entirely of his own motion has never become known. He waited till Colonel Stafnitz, who returned a civil and almost effusive reply to his communication, had set off to fetch the guns—which, as has been seen, had been unloaded from the railway and lay at Kolskoï, three days' journey up the Krath; then he entered into communication with Volseni. He sent Volseni a private and friendly warning. What was the use of Volseni holding out when the big guns were coming? It could mean only hopeless resistance, more disorder, more blood-shed. Let Volseni and the lady whose claims it supported consider that, be warned in time, and acknowledge King Alexis!

This letter he addressed to Zerkovitch. There were insuperable diplomatic difficulties in the way of addressing it to Sophy directly. "Madam I may not call you, and Mistress I am loath to call you," said Queen Elizabeth to the Archbishop's wife: it was just a case of that sort of difficulty. He could not call her Queen of Kravonia, and she would be offended if he called her Baroness Dobrava. So the letter went to Zerkovitch, and it went by the hand of one of Zerkovitch's friends—so anxious was the General to be as friendly and conciliatory as circumstances permitted.

Much to his surprise, considerably to his alarm, Lepage was sent for to the General's

private residence on the evening of the day on which Colonel Stafnitz set out for Kolskoï to fetch the guns.

Stenovics greeted him cordially, smoothed away his apprehension, acquainted him with the nature of his mission and with the gist of the letter which he was to carry. Stenovics seemed more placid to-night than for some time back—possibly because he had got Stafnitz quietly out of Slavna.

"Beg Monsieur Zerkovitch to give the letter to Baroness Dobrava (he called her that to Lepage) as soon as possible, and to urge her to listen to it. Add that we shall be ready to treat her with every consideration—any title in reason, and any provision in reason, too. It's all in my letter, but repeat it on my behalf, Lepage."

"I shouldn't think she'd take either title or money, General," said Lepage, bluntly.

"You think she's disinterested? No doubt, no doubt! She'll be the more ready to see the uselessness of prolonging her present attitude." He grew almost vehement, as he laid his hand on a large map which was spread out on the table in front of him. "Look here, Lepage. This is Monday. By Wednesday evening Colonel Stafnitz will be at Kolskoï—here!" He put his finger by the spot. "On Thursday morning he'll start back. The barges travel well, and—yes—I think he'll have his guns here by Sunday; less than a week from now! Yes, on Thursday night he ought to reach Evena, on Friday Rapska, on Saturday the lock at Miklevni. Yes, on Saturday the lock at Miklevni! That would bring him here on Sunday. Yes, the lock at Miklevni on Saturday, I think." He looked up at Lepage almost imploringly. "If she hesitates, show her that. They're bound to be here in less than a week!"

Lepage cocked his head on one side and looked at the Minister thoughtfully. It all sounded very convincing. Colonel Stafnitz would be at the lock at Miklevni on Saturday, and on Sunday with the guns at Slavna. And, of course, arduous though the transport would be, they could be before Volseni in two or three days more. It was really no use resisting!

Stenovics passed a purse over to Lepage. "For your necessary expenses," he said. Lepage took up the purse, which felt well filled, and pocketed it. "The Baroness mayn't fully appreciate what I've been saying," added Stenovics. "But Lukovitch knows every inch of the river—he'll make it quite plain, if she asks him about it. And present her with my sincere respects and sympathy—my sympathy with her as a private person, of course. You mustn't commit me in any way, Lepage."

"I think," said Lepage, "that you're capable of looking after that department yourself, General. But aren't you making the Colonel go a little too fast?"

"No, no; the barges will do about that."

"But he has a large force to move, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear, no! A large force? No, no! Only a company—just about a hundred strong, Lepage." He rose. "Just about a hundred, I think."

"Ah, then he might keep time!" Lepage agreed, still very thoughtfully.

"You'll start at once?" the General asked.

"Within an hour."

"That's right. We must run no unnecessary risks; delay might mean new troubles."

He held out his hand and shook Lepage's warmly. "You must believe that I respect and share your grief at the King's death."

"Which King, General?"

"Oh! oh! King Alexis, of course! We must listen to the voice of the nation. Our new King lives and reigns. The voice of the nation, Lepage!"

"Ah!" said Lepage, dryly. "I'd been suspecting some ventriloquists!"

General Stenovics honored the sally with a broad smile. He thought the representatives with colds would be amused if he repeated it. The pat on the shoulder which he gave Lepage was a congratulation. "The animal is so very inarticulate of itself," he said.

XXI

ON SATURDAY AT MIKLEVNI!

Though not remote in distance, yet Volseni was apart and isolated from all that was happening. Not only was nothing known of the two great neighbors—nothing reached men in Volseni of the state of affairs in Slavna itself. They did not know that the thieves were quarrelling about the plunder, nor that the diplomatists had taken cold; they had not bethought them of how the art of the ventriloquists would be at work. They knew only that young Alexis reigned in Slavna by reason of their King's murder and against the will of him who was dead; only that they had chosen Sophia for their Queen because she had been the dead King's wife and his chosen successor.

All the men who could be spared from labor came into the city; they collected what few horses they could; they filled their little fortress with provisions. They could not go to Slavna, but they awaited with confidence the day when Slavna should dare to move against them into the hills. Slavna had never been able to beat them in their own hills yet; the bolder spirits even implored Lukovitch to lead them down in a raid on the plains.

Lukovitch would sanction no more than a scouting party, to see whether any movement were in progress from the other side. Peter Vassip rode down with his men to within a few miles of Slavna. For result of the expedition he brought back the news of the guns: the great guns, rumor said, had reached Kravonia and were to be in Slavna in a week.

The rank and file hardly understood what that meant; anger that their destined and darling guns should fall into hostile hands was the feeling uppermost. But the tidings struck their leaders home to the heart. Lukovitch knew what it meant. Dunstanbury, who had served three years in the army at home, knew very well. Covered by such a

force as Stafnitz could bring up, the guns could pound Volseni to pieces—and Volseni could strike back not a single blow.

"And it's all through her that the guns are here at all!" said Zerkovitch, with a sigh for the irony of it.

Dunstanbury laid his hand on Lukovitch's shoulder. "It's no use," he said. "We must tell her so, and we must make the men understand. She can't let them have their homes battered to pieces—the town with the women and children in it—and all for nothing!"

"We can't desert her," Lukovitch protested.

"No; we must get her safely away, and then submit."

Since Dunstanbury had offered his services to Sophy, he had assumed a leading part. His military training and his knowledge of the world gave him an influence over the rude, simple men. Lukovitch looked to him for guidance; he had much to say in the primitive preparations for defence. But now he declared defence to be impossible.

"Who'll tell her so?" asked Basil Williamson.

"We must get her across the frontier," said Dunstanbury. "There—by St. Peter's Pass—the way we came, Basil. It's an easy journey, and I don't suppose they'll try to intercept us. You can send twenty or thirty well-mounted men with us, can't you, Lukovitch? A small party well mounted is what we shall want."

Lukovitch waved his hands sadly. "With the guns against us it would be a mere massacre! If it must be, let it be as you say, my lord." His heart was very heavy; after generations of defiance, Volseni must bow to Slavna, and his dead Lord's will go for nothing! All this was the doing of the great guns.

Dunstanbury's argument was sound, but he argued from his heart as well as his head. He was convinced that the best service he could render to Sophy was to get her safely out of the country; his heart urged that her safety was the one and only thing

to consider. As she went to and fro among them now, pale and silent, yet always accessible, always ready to listen, to consider, and to answer, she moved him with an infinite pity and a growing attraction. Her life was as though dead or frozen; it seemed to him as though all Kravonia must be to her the tomb of him whose grave in the little hill-side church of Volseni she visited so often. An ardent and overpowering desire rose in him to rescue her, to drag her forth from these dim cold shades into the sunlight of life again. Then the spell of this frozen grief might be broken; then should her drooping glories revive and bloom again. Kravonia and who ruled there—ay, in his heart, even the fate of the gallant little city which harbored them, and whose interest he pleaded—were nothing to him beside Sophy. On her his thoughts were centred.

Sophy's own mind in these days can be gathered only from what others saw. She made no record of it. Fallen in an hour from heights of love and hope and exaltation, she lay stunned in the abyss. In intellect calm and collected, she seems to have been as one numbed in feeling, too maimed for pain, suffering as though from a mortification of the heart. The simple men and women of Volseni looked on her with awe, and chattered fearfully of the Red Star: how that its wearer had been predestined to high enterprise, but foredoomed to mighty reverses of fortune. Amidst all their pity for her, they spoke of the Evil Eye; some whispered that she had come to bring ruin on Volseni: had not the man who loved her lost both Crown and life?

And it was she through whom the guns had come! The meaning of the guns had spread now to every hearth; what had once been hailed as an achievement second only to her exploit in the Street of the Fountain served now to point more finely the sharpening fears of superstition. The men held by her still, but their wives were grumbling at them in their homes. Was she not, after all, a stranger? Must Volseni lie in the dust for her sake, for the sake of her who wore that ominous, inexplicable Star?

Dunstanbury knew all this; Lukovitch hardly sought to deny it, though he was full of scorn for it; and Marie Zerkovitch had by heart the tales of many wise old beldams who had prophesied this and that from the first moment that they saw the Red Star. Surely and not slowly the enthusiasm which had crowned Sophy was turning into a fear which made the people shrink from her even while they pitied, even while they did not cease to love. The hand of heaven was against her and against those who were near her, said the women. The men still feigned not to hear; had they not taken Heaven to witness that they would serve her and avenge the King? Alas, their simple vow was too primitive for days like these—too primitive for the days of the great guns which lay on the bosom of the Krath!

Dunstanbury had an interview with Sophy early on the Tuesday morning, the day after Stafnitz had started for Kolskoï. He put his case with the bluntness and honesty native to him. In his devotion to her safety he did not spare her the truth. She listened with the smile devoid of happiness which her face now wore so often.

"I know it all," she said. "They begin to look differently at me as I walk through the street—when I go to the church. If I stay here long enough, they'll all call me a witch! But didn't they swear? And I—haven't I sworn? Are we to do nothing for Monseigneur's memory?"

"What can we do against the guns? The men can die, and the walls be tumbled down! And there are the women and children!"

"Yes, I suppose we can do nothing. But it goes to my heart that they should have Monseigneur's guns."

"Your guns!" Dunstanbury reminded her with a smile of whimsical sympathy.

"That's what they say in the city, too?" she asked.

"The old hags, who are clever at the weather and other mysteries. And, of course, Madame Zerkovitch!"

Sophy's smile broadened a little. "Oh, of course, poor little Marie Zerkovitch!" she

exclaimed. "She's been sure I'm a witch ever since she's known me."

"I want you to come over the frontier with me—and Basil Williamson. I've some influence, and I can insure your getting through all right."

"And then?"

"Whatever you like. I shall be utterly at your orders."

She leaned her head against the high chair in which she sat, a chair of old oak, black as her hair; she fixed her profound eyes on his.

"I wish I could stay here—in the little church—with Monseigneur," she said.

"By Heavens, no!" he cried, startled into sudden and untimely vehemence.

"All my life is there," she went on, paying no heed to his outburst.

"Give life another chance. You're very young."

"You can't count life by years, any more than hours by minutes. You reckon the journey not by the clock, but by the stages you have passed. Once before I loved a man—and he was killed in battle. But that was different. I was very hurt, but I wasn't maimed. I'm maimed now by the death of Monseigneur."

"You can't bring ruin on these folk, and you can't give yourself up to Stenovics." He could not trust himself to speak more of her feelings nor of the future; he came back to the present needs of the case.

"It's true—and yet we swore!" She leaned forward to him. "And you—aren't you afraid of the Red Star?"

"We Essex men aren't afraid, we haven't enough imagination," he answered, smiling again.

She threw herself back, crying low: "Ah, if we could strike one blow—just one—for the oath we swore and for Monseigneur! Then perhaps I should be content."

"To go with me?"

"Perhaps—if, in striking it, what I should think best didn't come to me."

"You must run no danger, anyhow," he cried, hastily and eagerly.

"My friend," she said, gently, "for such as I am to-day there's no such thing as danger. Don't think I value my position here or the title they've given me, poor men! I have loved titles"—for a moment she smiled—"and I should have loved this one, if Monseigneur had lived. I should have been proud as a child of it. If I could have borne it by his side for even a few weeks, a few days! But now it's barren and bitter—bitter and barren to me."

He followed the thoughts at which her words hinted; they seemed to him infinitely piteous.

"Now, as things have fallen out, what am I in this country? A waif and stray! I belong to nobody, and nobody to me."

"Then come away!" he burst out again.

Her deep eyes were set on his face once more. "Yes, that's the conclusion," she said, very mournfully. "We Essex people are sensible, aren't we? And we have no imagination. Did you laugh when you saw me proclaimed and heard us swear?"

"Good Heavens, no!"

"Then think how my oath and my love call me to strike one blow for Monseigneur!" She hid her eyes behind her hand for a moment. "Aren't there fifty—thirty—twenty, who would count their lives well risked? For what are men's lives given them?"

"There's one at least, if you will have it so," Dunstanbury answered.

There was a knock on the door, and without waiting for a bidding Zerkovitch came quickly in; Lukovitch was behind, and with him Lepage. Ten minutes before, the valet had ridden up to the city gates, waving his handkerchief above his head.

Sophy gave a cry of pleasure at seeing him. "A brave man, who loved his King and served Monseigneur!" she said, as she darted forward and clasped his hand.

Zerkovitch was as excited and hurried as ever. He thrust a letter into her hand. "From Stenovics, madame, for you to read," he said.

She took it, saying to Lepage with a touch of reproach: "Are you General Stenovics's messenger now, Monsieur Lepage?"

"Read it, madame," said he.

She obeyed, and then signed to Lukovitch to take it, and to Dunstanbury to read it also. "It's just what you've been saying," she told him with a faint smile, as she sank back in the high oaken seat.

"I am to add, madame," said Lepage, "that you will be treated with every consideration—any title in reason, any provision in reason, too."

"So the General's letter says."

"But I was told to repeat it," persisted the little man. He looked round on them. Lukovitch and Dunstanbury had finished reading the letter and were listening, too. "If you still hesitated, I was to impress upon you that the guns would certainly be in Slavna in less than a week—almost certainly on Sunday. You know the course of the river well, madame?"

"Not very well above Slavna, no."

"In that case, which General Stenovics didn't omit to consider, I was to remind you that Captain Lukovitch probably knew every inch of it."

"I know it intimately," said Lukovitch. "I spent two years on the timber-barges of the Krath."

"Then you, sir, will understand that the guns will certainly reach Slavna not later than Sunday." He paused for a moment, seeming to collect his memory. "By Wednesday evening Colonel Stafnitz will be at Kolskoï. On Thursday morning he'll start back. On that evening he ought to reach Evena, on Friday Rapska." Lukovitch nodded at each name. Lepage went on methodically. "On Saturday the lock at

Miklevni. Yes, on Saturday the lock at Miklevni!" He paused again and looked straight at Lukovitch.

"Exactly—the lock at Miklevni," said that officer, with another nod.

"Yes, the lock at Miklevni on Saturday. You see, it's not as if the Colonel had a large force to move. That might take longer. He'll be able to move his company as quick as the barges travel."

"The stream's very strong, they travel pretty well," said Lukovitch.

"But a hundred men—it's nothing to move, Captain Lukovitch." He looked round on them again, and then turned back to Sophy. "That's all my message, madame," he said.

There was a silence.

"So it's evident the guns will be in Slavna by Sunday," Lepage concluded.

"If they reach Miklevni on Saturday—any time on Saturday—they will," said Lukovitch. "And up here very soon after!"

"The General intimated that also, Captain Lukovitch."

"The General gives us very careful information," observed Dunstanbury, looking rather puzzled. He was not so well versed in Stenovics's methods as the rest. Lukovitch smiled broadly, and even Zerkovitch gave a little laugh.

"How are things in Slavna, Monsieur Lepage?" the last named asked.

Lepage smiled a little, too. "General Stenovics is in full control of the city—during Colonel Stafnitz's absence, sir," he answered.

"They've quarrelled?" cried Lukovitch.

"Oh no, sir. Possibly General Stenovics is afraid they might." He spoke again to Sophy. "Madame, do you still blame me for being the General's messenger?"

"No, Monsieur Lepage; but there's much to consider in the message. Captain Lukovitch, if Monseigneur had read this message, what would he have thought the

General meant?"

Lukovitch's face was full of excitement as he answered her:

"The Prince wouldn't have cared what General Stenovics meant. He would have said that the guns would be three days on the river before they came to Slavna, that the barges would take the best part of an hour to get through Miklevni lock, that there was good cover within a quarter of a mile of the lock—"

Sophy leaned forward eagerly. "Yes, yes?" she whispered.

"And that an escort of a hundred men was—well, might be—not enough!"

"And that riding from Volseni—?"

"One might easily be at Miklevni before Colonel Stafnitz and the guns could arrive there!"

Dunstanbury gave a start, Zerkovitch a chuckle, Lepage a quiet smile. Sophy rose to her feet; the Star glowed, there was even color in her cheeks besides.

"If there are fifty, or thirty, or twenty," she said, her eyes set on Dunstanbury, "who would count their lives well risked, we may yet strike one blow for Monseigneur and for the guns he loved."

Dunstanbury looked round. "There are three here," he said.

"Four!" called Basil Williamson from the doorway, where he had stood unobserved.

"Five!" cried Sophy, and, for the first time since Monseigneur died, she laughed.

"Five times five, and more, if we can get good horses enough!" said Captain Lukovitch.

"I should like to join you, but I must go back and tell General Stenovics that you will consider his message, madame," smiled Lepage.

XXII

JEALOUS OF DEATH

In the end they started thirty strong, including Sophy herself. There were the three Englishmen, Dunstanbury, Basil Williamson, and Henry Brown, Dunstanbury's servant, an old soldier, a good rider and shot. The rest were sturdy young men of Volseni, once destined for the ranks of the Prince of Slavna's artillery; Lukovitch and Peter Vassip led them. Not a married man was among them, for, to his intense indignation, Zerkovitch was left behind in command of the city. Sophy would have this so, and nothing would move her; she would not risk causing Marie Zerkovitch to weep more and to harbor fresh fears of her. So they rode, "without encumbrances," as Dunstanbury said, laughing—his spirits rose inexpressibly as the moment of action came.

Their horses were all that could be mustered in Volseni of a mettle equal to the dash. The little band paraded in the market-place on Friday afternoon; there they were joined by Sophy, who had been to pay a last visit to Monseigneur's grave; she came among them sad, yet seeming more serene. Her spirit was the happier for striking a blow in Monseigneur's name. The rest of them were in high feather; the prospect of the expedition went far to blot out the tragedy of the past and to veil the threatening face of the future. As dusk fell, they rode out of the city gate.

Miklevni lies twenty miles up the course of the river from Slavna; but the river flows there nearly from north to south, turning to the east only four or five miles above the capital. You ride, then, from Volseni to Miklevni almost in a straight line, leaving Slavna away on the left. It is a distance of no more than thirty-five miles or thereabouts, but the first ten consist of a precipitous and rugged descent by a bridle-path from the hills to the valley of the Krath. No pace beyond a walk was possible at any point here, and for the greater part of the way it was necessary to lead the horses. When once the plain was reached, there was good going, sometimes over country roads, sometimes over grass, to Miklevni.

It was plain that the expedition could easily be intercepted by a force issuing from Slavna and placing itself astride the route; but then they did not expect a force to issue from Slavna. That would be done only by the orders of General Stenovics, and Lepage had gone back to Slavna to tell the General that his message was being considered—very carefully considered—in Volseni. General Stenovics, if they understood him rightly, would not move till he heard more. For the rest, risks must be run. If all went well, they hoped to reach Miklevni before dawn on Saturday. There they were to lie in wait for Stafnitz—and for the big guns which were coming down the Krath from Kolskoï to Slavna.

Lukovitch was the guide, and had no lack of counsel from lads who knew the hills as well as their sweethearts' faces. He rode first, and, while they were on the bridle-path, they followed in single file, walking their horses or leading them. Sophy and Dunstanbury rode behind, with Basil Williamson and Henry Brown just in front of them. In advance, some hundreds of yards, Peter Vassip acted as scout, coming back from time to time to advise Lukovitch that the way was clear. The night fell fine and fresh, but it was very dark. That did not matter; the men of Volseni were like cats for seeing in the dark.

The first ten miles passed slowly and tediously, but without mistake or mishap. They halted on the edge of the plain an hour before midnight and took rest and food—each man carried provisions for two days. Behind them now rose the steep hills whence they had come, before them stretched the wide plain; away on their left was Slavna, straight ahead Miklevni, the goal of their pilgrimage. Lukovitch moved about, seeing that every man gave heed to his horse and had his equipment and his weapons in good order. Then came the word to remount, and between twelve and one, with a cheer hastily suppressed, the troop set forth at a good trot over the level ground. Now Williamson and Henry Brown fell to the rear with three or four Volsenians, lest by any chance or accident Sophy should lose or be cut off from the main body. Lukovitch and Peter Vassip rode together at the head.

To Dunstanbury that ride by night, through the spreading plain, was wonderful—a thing sufficient in itself, without regard to its object or its issue. He had seen some service before—and there was the joy of that. He had known the comradeship of a bold enterprise—there was the exaltation of that. He had taken great risks before—there was the excitement of that. The night had ere now called him to the saddle—and it called now with all its fascination. His blood tingled and burned with all these things. But there was more. Beside him all the way was the figure of Sophy dim in the darkness, and the dim silhouette of her face—dim, yet, as it seemed, hardly blurred; its pallor stood out even in the night. She engrossed his thoughts and spurred his speculations.

What thoughts dwelt in her? Did she ride to death, and was it a death she herself courted? If so, he was sworn in his soul to thwart her, even to his own death. She was not food for death, his soul cried, passionately protesting against that loss, that impoverishment of the world. Why had they let her come? She was not a woman of whom that could be asked; therefore it was that his mind so hung on her, with an attraction, a fascination, an overbearing curiosity. The men of Volseni seemed to think it natural that she should come. They knew her, then, better than he did!

Save for the exchange of a few words now and then about the road, they had not talked; he had respected her silence. But she spoke now, and to his great pleasure less sadly than he had expected. Her tone was light, and witnessed to a whimsical enjoyment which not even memory could altogether quench.

"This is my first war, Lord Dunstanbury," she said. "The first time I've taken the field in person at the head of my men!"

"Yes, your Majesty's first campaign. May it be glorious!" he answered, suiting his tone to hers.

"My first and my last, I suppose. Well, I could hardly have looked to have even one—in those old days you know of—could I?"

"Frankly, I never expected to hold my commission as an officer from you," he laughed. "As it is, I'm breaking all the laws in the world, I suppose. Perhaps they'll never hear of it in England, though."

"Where there are no laws left, you can break none," she said. "There are none left in Kravonia now. There's but one crime—to be weak; and but one penalty—death."

"Neither the crime nor the penalty for us to-night!" he cried, gayly. "Queen Sophia's star shines to-night!"

"Can you see it?" she asked, touching her cheek a moment.

"No, I can't," he laughed. "I forgot—I spoke metaphorically."

"When people speak of my star, I always think of this. So my star shines to-night? Yes, I think so—shines brightly before it sets! I wonder if Kravonia's star, too, will have a setting soon—a stormy setting!"

"Well, we're not helping to make it more tranquil," said Dunstanbury.

He saw her turn her head suddenly and sharply towards him; she spoke quickly and low.

"I'm seeking a man's life in this expedition," she said. "It's his or mine before we part."

"I don't blame you for that."

"Oh no!" The reply sounded almost contemptuous; at least it showed plainly that her conscience was not troubled. "And he won't blame me either. When he sees me, he'll know what it means."

"And, in fact, I intend to help. So do we all, I think."

"It was our oath in Volseni," she answered. "They think Monseigneur will sleep the better for it. But I know well that nothing troubles Monseigneur's sleep. And I'm so selfish that I wish he could be troubled—yes, troubled about me; that he could be riding in the spirit with us to-night, hoping for our victory; yet very anxious, very

anxious about me; that I could still bring him joy and sorrow, grief and delight. I can't desire that Monseigneur should sleep so well. They're kinder to him—his own folk of Volseni. They aren't jealous of his sleep—not jealous of the peace of death. But I'm very jealous of it. I'm to him now just as all the rest are; I, too, am nothing to Monseigneur now."

"Who knows? Who can know?" said Dunstanbury, softly.

His attempted consolation, his invoking of the old persistent hope, the saving doubt, did not reach her heart. In her great love of life, the best she could ask of the tomb was a little memory there. So she had told Monseigneur; such was the thought in her heart to-night. She was jealous and forlorn because of the silent darkness which had wrapt her lover from her sight and so enveloped him. He could not even ride with her in the spirit on the night when she went forth to avenge the death she mourned!

The night broke towards dawn, the horizon grew gray. Lukovitch drew in his rein, and the party fell to a gentle trot. Their journey was almost done. Presently they halted for a few minutes, while Lukovitch and Peter Vassip held a consultation. Then they jogged on again in the same order, save that now Sophy and Dunstanbury rode with Lukovitch at the head of the party. In another half-hour, the heavens lightening yet more, they could discern the double row of low trees which marked, at irregular intervals, the course of the river across the plain. At the same moment a row of squat buildings rose in murky white between them and the river-bank. Lukovitch pointed to it with his hand.

"There we are, madame," he said. "That's the farm-house at the right end, and the barn at the left—within a hundred yards of the lock. There's our shelter till the Colonel comes."

"What of the farmer?" asked Dunstanbury.

"We shall catch him in his bed—him and his wife," said Lukovitch. "There's only the pair of them. They keep the lock, and have a few acres of pastureland to eke out

their living. They'll give us no trouble. If they do, we can lock them in and turn the key. Then we can lie quiet in the barn; with a bit of close packing, it'll take us all. Peter Vassip and I will be lock-keepers if anything comes by; we know the work—eh, Peter?"

"Ay, Captain; and the man—Peter's his name too, by-the-way—must give us something to hide our sheepskins."

Sophy turned to Dunstanbury. She was smiling now.

"It sounds very simple, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Then we watch our chance for a dash—when the Colonel's off his guard," Lukovitch went on.

"But if he won't oblige us in that way?" asked Dunstanbury, with a laugh.

"Then he shall have the reward of his virtue in a better fight for the guns," said Lukovitch. "Now, lads, ready! Listen! I'm going forward with Peter Vassip here and four more. We'll secure the man and his wife; there might be a servant-girl on the premises too, perhaps. When you hear my whistle, the rest of you will follow. You'll take command, my lord?" He turned to Sophy. "Madame, will you come with me or stay here?"

"I'll follow with Lord Dunstanbury," she said. "We ought all to be in the barn before it's light?"

"Surely! A barge might come up or down the river, you see, and it wouldn't do for the men on board to see anybody but Vassip and me, who are to be the lock-keepers."

He and Peter Vassip rode off with their party of four, and the rest waited in a field a couple of hundred yards from the barn—a dip in the ground afforded fair cover. Some of the men began to dismount, but Dunstanbury stopped them. "It's just that one never knows," he said; "and it's better to be on your horse than off it in case any

trouble does come, you know."

"There oughtn't to be much trouble with the lock-keeper and his wife—or even with the servant-girl," said Basil Williamson.

"Girls can make a difference sometimes," Sophy said, with a smile. "I did once, in the Street of the Fountain over in Slavna there!"

Dunstanbury's precaution was amply justified, for, to their astonishment, the next instant a shot rang through the air, and, the moment after, a loud cry. A riderless horse galloped wildly past them; the sheepskin rug across the saddle marked it as belonging to a Volsenian.

"By Heaven, have they got there before us?" whispered Dunstanbury.

"I hope so; we sha'n't have to wait," said Sophy.

But they did wait there a moment. Then came a confused noise from the long, low barn. Then a clatter of hoofs, and Lukovitch was with them again; but his comrades were four men now, not five.

"Hush! Silence! Keep cover!" he panted breathlessly. "Stafnitz is here already; at least, there are men in the barn, and horses tethered outside, and the barges are on the river, just above the lock. The sentry saw us. He challenged and fired, and one of us dropped. It must be Stafnitz!"

Stafnitz it was. General Stenovics had failed to allow for the respect which his colleague entertained for his abilities. If Stenovics expected him back at Slavna with his guns on the Sunday, Stafnitz was quite clear that he had better arrive on Saturday. To this end he had strained every nerve. The stream was with him, flowing strong, but the wind was contrary; his barges had not made very good progress. He had pressed the horses of his company into service on the towing-path. Stenovics had not thought of that. His rest at Rapska had been only long enough to give his men and beasts an hour's rest and food and drink. To his pride and exultation, he had reached the lock at Miklevni at nightfall on Friday, almost exactly

at the hour when Sophy's expedition set out on its ride to intercept him. Men and horses might be weary now; Stafnitz could afford to be indifferent to that. He could give them a good rest, and yet, starting at seven the next morning, be in Slavna with them and the guns in the course of the afternoon. There might be nothing wrong, of course—but it was no harm to forestall any close and clever calculation of the General's.

"The sentry?" whispered Dunstanbury.

"I had to cut him down. Shall we be at them, my lord?"

"No, not yet. They're in the barn, aren't they?"

"Yes. Don't you hear them? Listen! That's the door opened. Shall we charge?"

"No, no, not yet. They'd retreat inside, and it would be the devil then. They'd have the pull of us. Wait for them to come out. They must send to look for the sentry. Tell the men to lean right down in their saddles—close down—close! Then the ground covers us. And now—silence till I give the word!"

Silence fell again for a few moments. They were waiting for a movement from Stafnitz's men in the barn. Only Dunstanbury, bareheaded, risked a look over the hillock which protected them from view.

A single man had come out of the barn, and was looking about him for the sentry who had fired. He seemed to suspect no other presence. Stafnitz must have been caught in a sound nap this time.

The searcher found his man and dropped on his knees by him for a moment. Then he rose and ran hurriedly towards the barn, crying: "Colonel! Colonel!"

"Now!" whispered impetuous Lukovitch.

But Dunstanbury pressed him down again, saying: "Not yet. Not yet."

Sophy laid her hand on his arm. "Half of us to the barges," she said.

In their eagerness for the fight, Lukovitch and Dunstanbury had forgotten the main

object of it. But the guns were what Monseigneur would have thought of first—what Stafnitz must first think of too—the centre of contest and the guerdon of victory.

XXIII

A WOMAN AND A GHOST

For the history of this night from the enemy's side, thanks are due to the memory, and to the unabashed courtesy, of Lieutenant Rastatz, who came alive, if not with a whole skin, out of the encounter, and lived to reach middle age under a new régime so unappreciative of his services that it cashiered him for getting drunk within a year from this date. He ended his days as a billiard-marker at the Golden Lion—a fact agreeable to poetic justice, but not otherwise material. While occupying that capacity, he was always ready to open his mouth to talk, provided he were afforded also a better reason for opening it.

Stafnitz and his men felt that their hard work was done; they were within touch of Slavna, and they had no reason, as they supposed, to fear any attack. The Colonel had indulged them in something approaching to a carouse. Songs had been sung, and speeches made; congratulations were freely offered to the Colonel; allusions were thrown out, not too carefully veiled, to the predicament in which Stenovics found himself. Hard work, a good supper, and plentiful wine had their effect. Save the sentries, all were asleep at ten o'clock, and game to sleep till the reveille sounded at six.

Their presence was a surprise to their assailants, who had, perhaps, approached in too rash a confidence that they were first on the ground; but the greater surprise befell those who had now to defend the barges and the guns. When the man who had found the dead sentry ran back and told his tale, all of them, from Stafnitz downward, conceived that the attack must come from Stenovics; none thought of

Sophy and her Volsenians. There they were, packed in the barn, separated from their horses, and with their carbines laid aside. The carbines were easily caught up; the horses not so easily reached, supposing an active, skilful enemy at hand outside.

For themselves, their position was good to stand a siege. But Stafnitz could not afford that. His mind flew where Sophy's had. Throughout, and on both sides, the guns were the factor which dominated the tactics of the fight. It was no use for Stafnitz to stay snug in the barn while the enemy overpowered the bargees (supposing they tried to fight), disposed of the sentry stationed on each deck, and captured the guns. Let the assailant carry them off, and the Colonel's game was up! Whoever the foe was, the fight was for the guns—and for one other thing, no doubt—for the Colonel's life.

"We felt in the deuce of a mess," Rastatz related, "for we didn't know how many they were, and we couldn't see one of them. The Colonel walked out of the barn, cool as a cucumber, and looked and listened. He called to me to go with him, and so I did, keeping as much behind his back as possible. Nothing was to be seen, nothing to be heard. He pointed to the rising ground opposite. 'That must hide them,' he said. Back he went and called the first half-company. 'You'll follow me in single file out of the barn and round to the back of it; let there be a foot between each of you—room enough to miss. When once you get in rear of the barn, make for the barges. Never mind the horses. The second half-company will cover the horses with their fire. Rastatz, see my detachment round, and then follow. We'll leave the sergeant-major in command here. Now, quick, follow me!'

"Out he went, and the men began to follow in their order. I had to stand in the doorway and regulate the distance between man and man. I hadn't been there two seconds before a dozen heads came over the hill, and a dozen rifles cracked. Luckily the Colonel was just round the corner. Down went the heads again, but they'd bagged two of our fellows. I shouted to more to come out, and at the same time

ordered the sergeant-major to send a file forward to answer the fire. Up came the heads again, and they bagged three more. Our fellows blazed away in reply, but they'd dropped too quickly—I don't think we got one.

"Well, we didn't mind so much about keeping our exact distances after that—and I wouldn't swear that the whole fifty of us faced the fire; it was devilish disconcerting, you know; but in a few minutes thirty or five-and-thirty of us got round the side of the barn somehow, and for the moment out of harm's way. We heard the fire going on still in front, but only in a desultory way. They weren't trying to rush us—and I don't think we had any idea of rushing them. For all we knew, they might be two hundred—or they might be a dozen. At any rate, with the advantage of position, they were enough to bottle our men up in the barn, for the moment at all events."

This account makes what had happened pretty plain. Half of Sophy's force had been left to hold the enemy, or as many of them as possible, in the barn. They had dismounted, and, well covered by the hill, could make good practice without much danger to themselves. Lukovitch was in command of this section of the little troop. Sophy, Dunstanbury, and Peter Vassip, also on foot (the horses' hoofs would have betrayed them), were stealing round, intent on getting between the barges and any men whom Stafnitz tried to place in position for their defence. After leaving men for the containing party, and three to look after the horses, this detachment was no more than a dozen strong. But they had started before Stafnitz's men had got out of the barn, and, despite the smaller distance the latter had to traverse, could make a good race of it for the barges. They had all kept together, too, while the enemy straggled round to the rear of the barn in single file. And they had one great, perhaps decisive, advantage, of whose existence Peter Vassip, their guide, was well aware.

Forty yards beyond the farm a small ditch ran down to the Krath; on the side near the farm it had a high, overhanging bank, the other side being nearly level with the adjoining meadow. Thus it formed a natural trench and led straight down to where

the first of the barges lay. It would have been open to an enfilade from the river, but Stafnitz had only one sentry on each barge, and these men were occupied in staring at their advancing companions and calling out to know what was the matter. As for the bargees, they had wisely declared neutrality, deeming the matter no business of theirs; shots were not within the terms of a contract for transport. Stafnitz, not dreaming of an attack, had not reconnoitred his ground. But Lukovitch knew every inch of it (had not General Stenovics remembered that?), and so did Peter Vassip. The surprise of Praslok was to be avenged.

Rastatz takes up the tale again; his narrative has one or two touches vivid with a local color.

"When I got round to the rear of the barn, I found our fellows scattered about on their bellies. The Colonel was in front on his belly, with his head just raised from the ground, looking about him. I lay down, too, getting my head behind a stone which chanced to be near me. I looked about me too, when it seemed safe. And it did seem safe at first, for we could hear nothing, and deuce a man could we see! But it wasn't very pleasant, because we knew that, sure enough, they must be pretty near us somewhere. Presently the Colonel came crawling back to me. 'What do you make of it, Rastatz?' he whispered. Before I could answer, we heard a brisk exchange of fire in front of the barn. 'I don't like it,' I said. 'I can't see them, and I've a notion they can see me, Colonel, and that's not the pleasantest way to fight, is it?' 'Gad, you're right!' said he, 'but they won't see me any the better for a cigarette'—and then and there he lit one.

"Well, he'd just thrown away his match when a young fellow—quite a lad he was—a couple of yards from us, suddenly jumped from his belly on to his knees and called out quite loud—it seemed to me he'd got a sort of panic—quite loud, he called out: 'Sheepskins! Sheepskins!' I jumped myself, and I saw the Colonel start. But, by Jove, it was true! When you took a sniff, you could smell them. Of course I don't

mean what the better class wear—you couldn't have smelt the tunic our lamented Prince wore, nor the one the witch decked herself out in—but you could smell a common fellow's sheepskin twenty yards off—ay, against the wind, unless the wind was mighty strong.

"'Sheepskins it is!' said the Colonel with a sniff. 'Volsenians, by gad! It's Mistress Sophia, Rastatz, or some of her friends, anyhow.' Then he swore worthily: 'Stenovics must have put them up to this! And where the devil are they, Rastatz?' He raised his head as he spoke, and got his answer. A bullet came singing along and went right through his shako; it came from the line of the ditch. He lay down again, laughed a little, and took a puff at his cigarette before he threw it away. Just then one of our sentries bellowed from the first barge: 'In the ditch! In the ditch!' 'I wish you'd spoken a bit sooner,' says the Colonel, laughing again."

While this was passing on Stafnitz's side, Sophy and her party were working quietly and cautiously down the course of the ditch. Under the shelter of its bank they had been able to hold a brief and hurried consultation. What they feared was that Stafnitz would make a dash for the barges. Their fire might drop half his men, but the survivors, when once on board—and the barges were drawn up to the edge of the stream—would still be as numerous as themselves, and would command the course of the ditch, which was at present their great resource and protection. But if they could get on board before the enemy, they believed they could hold their own; the decks were covered with impedimenta of one sort or another which would afford them cover, while any party which tried to board must expose itself to fire to a serious and probably fatal extent.

So they worked down the ditch—except two of them. Little as they could spare even two, it was judged well to leave these; their instructions were to fire at short intervals, whether there was much chance of hitting anybody or not. Dunstanbury hoped by this trick to make Stafnitz believe that the whole detachment was

stationary in the ditch thirty yards or more from the point where it joined the river. Only ten strong now—and one of them a woman—they made their way towards the mouth of the ditch and towards the barges which held the prize they sought.

But a diversion, and a very effective one, was soon to come from the front of the barn. Fearing that the party under Sophy and Dunstanbury might be overpowered, Lukovitch determined on a bold step—that of enticing the holders of the barn from their shelter. He directed his men to keep up a brisk fire at the door; he himself and another man—one Ossip Yensko—disregarding the risk, made a rapid dash across the line of fire from the barn, for the spot where the horses were. The fire directed at the door successfully covered their daring movement; they were among the horses in a moment, and hard at work cutting the bands with which they were tethered; the animals were half mad with fright, and the task was one of great danger.

But the manœuvre was eminently successful. A cry of "The horses! The horses!" went up from the barn. Men appeared in the doorway; the sergeant-major in command himself ran out. Half the horses were loose, and stampeded along the towing-path down the river. "The horses! The horses!" The defenders surged out of the barn, in deadly fear of being caught there in a trap. They preferred the chances of the fire, and streamed out in a disorderly throng. Lukovitch and Yensko cut loose as many more horses as they dared wait to release; then, as the defenders rushed forward, retreated, flying for their lives. Lukovitch came off with a ball in his arm; Yensko dropped, shot through the heart. The men behind the hill riddled the defenders with their fire. But now they were by their horses—such as were left of them—nearer twenty than ten dotted the grass outside the barn-door. And the survivors were demoralized; their leader, the sergeant-major, lay dead. They released the remaining horses, mounted, and with one parting volley fled down the river. With a cry of triumph, Lukovitch collected the remainder of his men and dashed round the side of the barn. The next moment Colonel Stafnitz found himself attacked in his rear as well as held in check from the ditch in his front.

"For a moment we thought it was our own men," said Rastatz, continuing his account, "and the Colonel shouted: 'Don't fire, you fools!' But then they cheered, and we knew the Volsenian accent—curse them! 'Sheepskins again!' said the Colonel, with a wry kind of smile. He didn't hesitate then; he jumped up, crying: 'To the barges! To the barges! Follow me!'

"We all followed: it was just as safe to go with him as to stay where you were! We made a dash for it and got to the bank of the river. Then they rose out of the ditch in front of us—and they were at us behind, too—with steel now; they daren't shoot, for fear of hitting their own people in our front. But the idea of a knife in your back isn't pleasant, and in the end more of our men turned to meet them than went on with the Colonel. I went on with him, though. I'm always for the safest place, if there's one safer than another. But here there wasn't, so I thought I might as well do the proper thing. We met them right by the water's-edge, and the first I made out was the witch herself, in sheepskins like the rest of them, white as a sheet, but with that infernal mark absolutely blazing. She was between Peter Vassip and a tall man I didn't know—I found out afterwards that he was the Englishman Dunstanbury—and the three came straight at us. She cried: 'The King! the King!' and behind us we heard Lukovitch and his lot crying: 'The King! the King!'

"Our fellows didn't like it, that's the truth. They were uneasy in their minds about that job of poor old Mistitch's, and they feared the witch like the devil. The heart was out of them; one lad near me burst out crying. A witch and a ghost didn't seem pleasant things to fight. Oh, it was all nonsense, but you know what fellows like that are. Their cry of 'The King!' and the sight of the woman caused a moment's hesitation. It was enough to give them the drop on us. But the Colonel never hesitated; he flung himself straight at her, and fired as he sprang. I just saw what happened before I got a crack on the crown of the head from the butt-end of a rifle, which knocked me out of time. As the Colonel fired, Peter Vassip flung himself in front of her, and took the bullet in his own body. Dunstanbury jumped right on the

Colonel, cut him on the arm so that he dropped his revolver, and grappled with him. Dunstanbury dropped his sword, and the Colonel's wasn't drawn. It was just a tussle. They were tussling when the blood came flowing down into my eyes from the wound on my head; I couldn't see anything more; I fainted. Just as I went off I heard somebody cry: 'Hands up!' and I imagined the fighting was pretty well over."

The fighting was over. One scene remained which Rastatz did not see. When Colonel Stafnitz, too, heard the call "Hands up!" when the firing stopped and all became quiet, he ceased to struggle. Dunstanbury found him suddenly changed to a log beneath him; his hands were already on the Colonel's throat, and he could have strangled him now without difficulty. But when Stafnitz no longer tried to defend himself, he loosed his hold, got up, and stood over him with his hand on the revolver in his belt. The Colonel fingered his throat a minute, sat up, looked round, and rose to his feet. He saw Sophy standing before him; by her side Peter Vassip lay on the ground, tended by Basil Williamson and one of his comrades. Colonel Stafnitz bowed to Sophy with a smile.

"I forgot you, madame," said Stafnitz.

"I didn't forget Monseigneur," she answered.

He looked round him again, shrugged his shoulders, and seemed to think for a moment. There was an absolute stillness—a contrast to the preceding turmoil. But the silence made uncomfortable men whom the fight had not shaken. Their eyes were set on Stafnitz.

"The Prince died in fair fight," he said.

"No; you sent Mistitch to murder him," Sophy replied. Her eyes were relentless; and Stafnitz was ringed round with enemies.

"I apologize for this embarrassment. I really ought to have been killed—it's just a mistake," he said, with a smile. He turned quickly to Dunstanbury: "You seem to be a gentleman, sir. Pray come with me; I need a witness." He pointed with his

unwounded hand to the barn.

Dunstanbury bowed assent. The Colonel, in his turn, bowed to Sophy, and the two of them turned and walked off towards the barn. Sophy stood motionless, watching them until they turned the corner; then she fell on her knees and began to talk soothingly to Peter Vassip, who was hard hit, but, in Basil Williamson's opinion, promised to do well. Sophy was talking to the poor fellow when the sound of a revolver shot—a single shot—came from the barn. Colonel Stafnitz had corrected the mistake. Sophy did not raise her head. A moment later Dunstanbury came back and rejoined them. He exchanged a look with Sophy, inclining his head as a man does in answering "Yes." Then she rose.

"Now for the barges and the guns," she said.

They could not carry the guns back to Volseni; nor, indeed, was there any use for them there now. But neither were Monseigneur's guns for the enemies of Monseigneur. Under Lukovitch's skilled directions (his wound proved slight) the big guns were so disabled as to remain of little value, and the barges taken out into mid-stream and there scuttled with their cargoes. While one party pursued this work, Dunstanbury made the prisoners collect their wounded and dead, place them on a wagon, and set out on their march to Slavna. Then his men placed their dead on horses—they had lost three. Five were wounded besides Peter Vassip, but none of them severely—all could ride. For Peter they took a cart from the farm to convey him as far as the ascent to the hills; up that he would have to be carried by his comrades.

It was noon before all their work was done. The barges were settling in the water. As they started to ride back to Volseni, the first sank; the second was soon to follow it.

"We have done our work," said Lukovitch.

And Sophy answered, "Yes."

But Stafnitz's men had not carried the body of their commander back. They left it in

the barn, cursing him for the trap he had led them into. Later in the day, the panic-stricken lock-keeper stole out from the cellar where he had hidden himself, and found it in the barn. He and his wife lifted it with cursings, bore it to the river, and flung it in. It was carried over the weir, and floated down to Slavna. They fished it out with a boat-hook just opposite Suleiman's Tower. The hint to Captain Sterkoff was a broad one. He reported a vacancy in the command, and sent the keys of the fort to General Stenovics. It was Sunday morning.

"The Colonel has got back just when he said he would. But where are the guns?" asked General Stenovics of Captain Markart. The Captain had by now made up his mind which turn to take.

But no power ensued to Stenovics. At the best his fate was a soft fall—a fall on to a cushioned shelf. The cup of Kravonia's iniquity, full with the Prince's murder, brimmed over with the punishment of the man who had caused it. The fight by the lock of Miklevni sealed Kravonia's fate. Civilization must be vindicated! Long columns of flat-capped soldiers begin to wind, like a great snake, over the summit of St. Peter's Pass. Sophy watched them through a telescope from the old wall of Volseni.

"Our work is done. Monseigneur has mightier avengers," she said.

XXIV

TRUE TO HER LOVE

Volseni forgave Sophy its dead and wounded sons. Her popularity blazed up in a last fierce, flickering fire. The guns were taken; they would not go to Slavna; they would never batter the walls of Volseni into fragments. Slavna might be defied again. That was the great thing to Volseni, and it made little account of the snakelike line which crawled over St. Peter's Pass, and down to Dobrava, and on to Slavna.

Let Slavna—hated Slavna—reckon with that! And if the snake—or another like it—came to Volseni? Well, that was better than knuckling down to Slavna. To-night King Sergius was avenged, and Queen Sophia had returned in victory!

For the first time since the King's death the bell of the ancient church rang joyously, and men sang and feasted in the gray city of the hills. Thirty from Volseni had beaten a hundred from Slavna; the guns were at the bottom of the Krath; it was enough. If Sophy had bidden them, they would have streamed down on Slavna that night in one of those fierce raids in which their forefathers of the Middle Ages had loved to swoop upon the plain.

But Sophy had no delusions. She saw her Crown—that fleeting phantom ornament, fitly foreseen in the visions of a charlatan—passing from her brow without a sigh. She had not needed Dunstanbury's arguments to prove to her that there was no place for her left in Kravonia. She was content to have it so; she had done enough. Sorrow had not passed from her face, but serenity had come upon it in fuller measure. She had struck for Monseigneur, and the blow was witness to her love. It was enough in her, and enough in little Volseni. Let the mightier avengers do the rest!

She had allowed Dunstanbury to leave her after supper in order to make preparations for a start to the frontier at dawn. "You must certainly go," she had said, "and perhaps I'll come with you."

She went at night up on to the wall—always her favorite place; she loved the spaciousness of air and open country before her there. Basil Williamson found her deep in thought when he came to tell her of the progress of the wounded.

"They're all doing well, and Peter Vassip will live. Dunstanbury has made him promise to come to him when he's recovered, so you'll meet him again at all events. And Marie Zerkovitch and her husband talk of settling in Paris. You won't lose all your Kravonian friends."

"You assume that I'm coming with you to-morrow morning?"

"I'm quite safe in assuming that Dunstanbury won't go unless you do," he answered, smiling. "We can't leave you alone here, you know."

"I shouldn't stay here, anyhow," she said. "Or, at any rate, I should be where nobody could hurt me." She pointed at a dim lantern, fastened to the gate-tower by an iron clamp, then waved her hand towards the surrounding darkness. "That's life, isn't it?" she asked. "If I believed that I could go to Monseigneur, I would go to-night—nay, I would have gone at Miklevni; it was only putting my head out of that ditch a minute sooner! If I believed even that I could lie in the church there and know that he was near! If I believed even that I could lie there quietly and remember and think of him! You're a man of science—you're not a peasant's child, as I am. What do you think? You mustn't wonder that I've had my thoughts, too. At Lady Meg's we did little else than try to find out whether we were going on anywhere else. That's all she cared about. And if she does ever get to a next world, she won't care about that; she'll only go on trying to find out whether there's still another beyond. What do you think?"

"I hardly expected to find you so philosophically inclined," he said.

"It's a practical question with me now. On its answer depends whether I come with you or stay here—by Monseigneur in the church."

Basil said something professional—something about nerves and temporary strain. But he performed this homage to medical etiquette in a rather perfunctory fashion. He had never seen a woman more composed or more obviously and perfectly healthy. Sophy smiled and went on:

"But if I live, I'm sure at least of being able to think and able to remember. It comes to a gamble, doesn't it? It's just possible I might get more; it's quite likely—I think it's probable—I should lose even what I have now."

"I think you're probably right about the chances of the gamble," he told her, "though no doubt certainty is out of place—or at least one doesn't talk about it. Shall I tell you what science says?"

"No," said Sophy, smiling faintly. "Science thinks in multitudes—and I'm thinking of the individual to-night. Even Lady Meg never made much of science, you know."

"Do you remember the day when I heard you your Catechism in the avenue at Morpingham?"

"Yes, I remember. Does the Catechism hold good in Kravonia, though?"

"It continues, anyhow, a valuable document in its bearing on this life. You remember the mistake you made, I dare say?"

"I've never forgotten it. It's had something to do with it all," said Sophy. "That's how you, as well as Lord Dunstanbury, come in at the beginning as you do at the end."

"Has it nothing to do with the question now—putting it in any particular phraseology you like?" In his turn he pointed at the smoky lantern. "That's not life," he said, growing more earnest, yet smiling. "That's now—just here and now—and, yes, it's very smoky." He waved his hand over the darkness. "That's life. Dark? Yes, but the night will lift, the darkness pass away; valley and sparkling lake will be there, and the summit of the heaven-kissing hills. Life cries to you with a sweet voice."

"Yes," she murmured, "with a sweet voice. And perhaps some day there would be light on the hills. But, ah, I'm torn in sunder this night. I wish I had died there at Miklevni while my blood was hot." She paused a long while in thought. Then she went on: "If I go, I must go while it's still dark, and while these good people sleep. Go and tell Lord Dunstanbury to be ready to start an hour before dawn; and do you and he come then to the door of the church. If I'm not waiting for you there, come inside and find me."

He started towards her with an eager gesture of protest. She raised her hand and checked him.

"No, I've decided nothing. I can't tell yet," she said. She turned and left him; he heard her steps descending the old winding stair which led from the top of the wall

down into the street. He did not know whether he would see her alive again—and with her message of such ambiguous meaning he went to Dunstanbury. Yet curiously, though he had pleaded so urgently with her, though to him her death would mean the loss of one of the beautiful things from out the earth, he was in no distress for her and did not dream of attempting any constraint. She knew her strength—she would choose right. If life were tolerable, she would take up the burden. If not, she would let it lie unlifted at her quiet feet.

His mood could not be Dunstanbury's, who had come to count her presence as the light of the life that was his. Yet Dunstanbury heard the message quietly, and quietly made every preparation in obedience to her bidding. That done, he sat in the little room of the inn and smoked his pipe with Basil. Henry Brown waited his word to take the horses to the door of the church. Basil Williamson had divined his friend's feeling for Sophy, and wondered at his calmness.

"If I felt the doubt that you do, I shouldn't be calm," said Dunstanbury. "But I know her. She will be true to her love."

He could not be speaking of that love of hers which was finished, whose end she was now mourning in the little church. It must be of another love that he spoke—of one bred in her nature, the outcome of her temperament and of her being the woman that she was. The spirit which had brought her to Slavna had made her play her part there, had welcomed and caught at every change and chance of fortune, had never laid down the sword till the blow was struck—that spirit would preserve her and give her back to life now—and some day give life back to her.

He was right. When they came to the door of the church, she was there. For the first time since Monseigneur had died, her eyes were red with weeping; but her face was calm. She gave her hand to Dunstanbury.

"Come, let us mount," she said. "I have said 'Good-bye.'"

Lukovitch knew Dunstanbury's plans. He was waiting for them at the gate, his arm

in a sling, and with him were the Zerkovitches. These last they would see again; it was probably farewell forever to gallant Lukovitch. He kissed the silver ring on Sophy's finger.

"I brought nothing into Kravonia," she said, "and I carry nothing out, except this ring which Monseigneur put on my finger—the ring of the Bailiffs of Volseni."

"Keep it," said Lukovitch. "I think there will be no more Bailiffs of Volseni—or some Prince, not of our choosing, will take the title by his own will. He will not be our Bailiff, as Monseigneur was. You will be our Bailiff, though our eyes never see you, and you never see our old gray walls again. Madame, have a kindly place in your heart for Volseni. We sha'n't forget you nor the blow we struck under your leadership. The fight at Miklevni may well be the last that we shall fight as free men."

"Volseni is written on my heart," she answered. "I shall not forget."

She bade her friends farewell, and then ordered Lukovitch to throw open the gate. She and the three Englishmen rode through, Henry Brown leading the pack-horse by the bridle. The mountains were growing gray with the first approaches of dawn.

As she rode through, Sophy paused a moment, leaned sideways in her saddle, and kissed the ancient lintel of the door.

"Peace be on this place," she said, "and peace to the tomb where Monseigneur lies buried!"

"Peace be on thy head and fortune with thee!" answered Lukovitch in the traditional words of farewell. He kissed her hand again, and they departed.

It was high morning when they rode up the ascent to St. Peter's Pass and came to the spot where their cross-track joined the main road over the pass from Dobrava and the capital. In silence they mounted to the summit. The road under their horses' feet was trampled with the march of the thousands of men who had passed over it in an irresistible advance on Slavna.

At the summit of the pass they stopped, and Sophy turned to look back. She sat there for a long while in silence.

"I have loved this land," at last she said. "It has given me much, and very much it has taken away. Now the face of it is to be changed. But in my heart the memory of it will not change." She looked across the valley, across the sparkling face of Lake Talti, to the gray walls of Volseni, and kissed her hand. "Farewell, Monseigneur!" she whispered, very low.

The day of Kravonia was done. The head of the great snake had reached Slavna. Countess Ellenburg and young Alexis were in flight. Stenovics took orders where he had looked to rule. The death of Monseigneur was indeed avenged. But there was no place for Sophy, the Queen of a tempestuous hour.

They set their horses' heads towards the frontier. They began the descent on the other side. The lake was gone, the familiar hills vanished; only in the eye of memory stood old Volseni still set in its gray mountains. Sophy rode forth from Kravonia in her sheepskins and her silver ring—the last Queen of Kravonia, the last Bailiff of Volseni, the last chosen leader of the mountain men. But the memory of the Red Star lived after her—how she loved Monseigneur and avenged him, how her face was fairer than the face of other women, and more pale—and how the Red Star glowed in sorrow and in joy, in love and in clash of arms, promising to some glory and to others death. In the street of Volseni and in the cabins among the hills you may hear the tale of the Red Star yet.

As she passed the border of the land which was so great in her life, by a freak of memory Sophy recalled a picture till now forgotten—a woman, unknown, untraced, unreckoned, who had passed down the Street of the Fountain, weeping bitterly—an obscure symbol of great woes, of the tribute life pays to its unresting enemies.

Yet to the unconquerable heart life stands unconquered. What danger had not shaken not even sorrow could overthrow. She rode into the future with Dunstanbury on her

right hand—patience in his mind, and in his heart hope. Some day the sun would shine on the summit of heaven-kissing hills.

THE END

[1] He is apparently mimicking Sophy's mimicking of his pronunciation.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SOPHY OF KRAVONIA: A NOVEL ***

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