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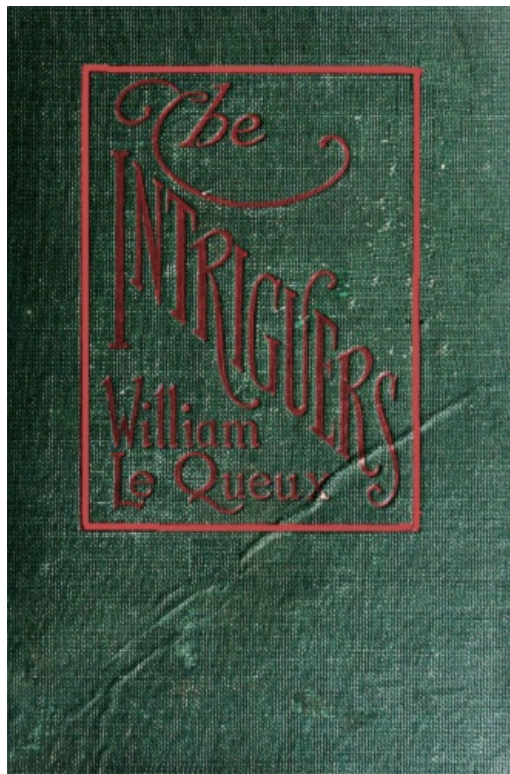
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THE INTRIGUERS

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

Author of "The Doctor of Pimlico," etc.

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Madame Quéro was startled.

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THE INTRIGUERS

CHAPTER I

The scene was Dean Street, Soho, and this story opens on a snowy winter night in the January of 1888. The modern improvements of Shaftesbury Avenue were as yet unmade, and the foreign district of London had still to be opened up.

A cold north wind was blowing on the few pedestrians whom necessity, or some urgent obligation, had compelled to tramp the pavements laden with snow. A few cabs and carriages crawled along the difficult roadway to the Royalty Theatre, deposited their occupants and crawled back again.

Nello Corsini, a slim, handsome young Italian, poorly clad, carrying a violin-case in one hand, wandered down the narrow street, leading with his other a slender girl of about eighteen, his sister, Anita. She was dressed as shabbily as he was.

The snow was lying thickly on the streets and roads, but it had ceased to fall a couple of hours ago. The two itinerant musicians had crept out at once, as soon as the weather showed signs of mending, from their poor lodging.

They had only a few pence left. The bitter weather of the last few days had affected their miserable trade very adversely. It was necessary they should take advantage of to-night, for the purpose of scratching together something for the evening meal.

There were lights in several windows. It was, of course, far from being a wealthy quarter; but there could be none behind those warm-looking lights, safely sheltered from the cold and wind, so wretched as these two poor children of fortune who would have to go supperless to bed if they could not charm a few pence out of the passers-by. [Pg 8]

Nello withdrew his violin from its case with his cold fingers. Just as he was about to draw the bow across the strings, a carriage passed down the street on its way to the Royalty Theatre. Inside was a handsome man verging upon thirty-five. Beside him sat a very beautiful girl. Nello glanced at them swiftly as they came by. They were evidently not English, but he could not for the moment guess at their nationality.

They certainly did not belong to any one of the Latin races, that was evident. It was not till later that he discovered their identity. The tall, imperious-looking man was Prince Zouroff, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. The girl, about twenty, was his young sister, the Princess Nada.

The young Princess was as kind and sweet-natured as she was beautiful. She caught sight of the two mendicants, for as such she regarded them, standing there in the snow, and a gleam of compassion came into her lovely eyes. Impetuously, she pulled at the check-string, with the intention of stopping the carriage and giving them money.

Her brother laid his hand on hers roughly.

"What foolish thing were you going to do now, Nada? Your sentimentality is an absolute curse to you. If you had your own way, you would give to every whining beggar in the street." [Pg 9]

She shrank back as if he had struck her a blow. There was no love lost between the two. He despised her for her kind, charitable instincts; she disliked him for his hard, domineering nature, unsoftened by any lovable or generous qualities. She put back the purse which she had drawn hastily from her pocket. Her mouth curled in a mutinous and contemptuous smile, but she returned no answer to the brutal words.

Nello played on in the cold and biting wind. When he had finished, his sister had been the recipient of two small donations from the few passers-by. The girl's heart already felt lighter. They could not expect very much on such an unpropitious night as this.

And then, as the young violinist paused, from the first floor of one of the houses close to them, there floated faintly into the air the strains of a sweet and melancholy air, played with exquisite taste and feeling.

Nello listened eagerly, while his heart contracted with a spasm of pain. The man who had played that beautiful little melancholy romance was as capable a violinist as himself. Alas, how different their lots!

When the sounds had died away, the young man resumed his instrument. He played over twice that beautiful theme which had impressed him so strongly, and then, as if inspired, wove into it a series of brilliant variations.

He felt he was playing as he had only played once or twice before in his life. Soon, a small crowd was gathered on the pavement, in spite of the icy temperature. And when Anita went round shamefacedly with her little bag, she met with a liberal response. Nello need play no more that night, they had enough for their humble needs; they would get home as quickly as possible. He had contracted a heavy cold from which he was still suffering. To-morrow he could stop indoors and she would nurse him, as she had so often done before. [Pg 10]

She whispered the good news into her brother's ear, and joyfully he placed the violin back into its case. The small crowd, noting the action, melted away. The friendless young souls linked their arms together, stepped on to the pavement and turned in the direction of their humble lodging.

But they had not taken half a dozen steps when the door of a house was opened very quietly, and

an extraordinary figure stepped out and beckoned to them.

"My poor children, it is a wretched night for you to be out." This peculiar-looking old man was speaking in a very kind and gentle voice. They noticed his face was withered and furrowed with the deep lines of age. He wore a bristling white moustache, which gave him rather a military air in spite of his stooping figure. He had on a tiny skull cap to defend himself against the keen night air, but underneath it his snow-white locks were abundant.

He turned to young Corsini, peering at him through his tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses. "You have the gift, my young friend; you played those variations divinely. Our neighbour over the way is a decent performer, he plays in a very good orchestra, but he has not your fire, your brilliancy."

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He fumbled in his pocket and produced a shilling, which he pressed upon Anita, who shrank back a little. She had not always been accustomed to this sort of half-charity.

The old man saw her embarrassment and smiled. "Ah, it is as I thought, my child. But there is no cause to blush. If your brother were a famous violinist and I paid half-a-guinea for a stall to hear him, you would not think he had lowered himself by taking my money for the pleasure he gave me. Well, I had my stall up here on the third floor! there is a convenient little hole in the blind through which I could peep and see the whole proceedings."

They both thanked him warmly, and were about to move on, when the strange old man arrested them.

"Stop a second, my poor children. You must be numbed with standing so long in that frosty air. I have a good fire upstairs. Come and warm yourselves for a few moments."

His voice and manner were compelling. Wonderingly they obeyed, although at the moment, they were thinking very intently of their supper. Still, the night was young yet. They could wait a little longer to make their purchases. Plenty of shops would be open. And a few minutes spent at a bright fire would be comfortable.

He opened the door wide as they entered it and closed it behind him. Then he skipped, wonderfully nimbly for a man of his age, in front of them.

"Follow Papa Péron, that is what they call me in these parts, where I have lived for Heaven knows how many years. It is a big climb and I don't do it as easily as I used. But to children like you, it is a hop and a skip. Follow me."

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They followed him up the old-fashioned staircase into a small room, where a roaring fire was blazing. He drew forth two easy-chairs and motioned to them to seat themselves. He lighted another gas-jet in their honour. He looked intently at their white faces, and what he read there impelled him to a swift course of action.

He dived into a small sideboard. In a moment, as it seemed to the fascinated watchers, he had laid a cloth upon the small and rather rickety table, arranged knives and forks. Then he produced half a fowl, two sorts of sausages, half a ripe Camembert cheese, and a dish of tinned fruit. When all his preparations were complete, he beckoned them imperiously to the table. He spoke in short, sharp accents, with the air of a man who is accustomed to be obeyed.

"At once, please! You are famished with that dreary standing in this arctic street, and it will be some time before you can get food. Please fall in at once."

The sharp pangs of hunger were already gnawing the vitals of both brother and sister, the tasty viands were inviting enough; but they had observed the poorly furnished room. Monsieur Péron, in his small fastidious way, seemed to have an air of distinction, but his clothes were well-worn. Nobody could be as poor as themselves, but they felt sure this kind-hearted old Frenchman was far from being well-off.

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Corsini raised a protesting hand. "Sir, you have been kindness itself already. You have warmed us, and we are very grateful, but we cannot eat you out of house and home."

They guessed pretty accurately that these viands which he had produced with such abandon, were meant to last some little time. The average Frenchman is a small eater, and a very thrifty person.

Papa Péron beat the table impetuously. "*Mon Dieu*, do you refuse my little whim? I am not rich, I admit. One does not lodge on the third floor if one is a millionaire. That is understood. But I can show hospitality when I choose. To table at once, my children, or I shall be seriously displeased."

The old gentleman, in spite of his frail appearance, was very masterful; it was impossible to resist him. Obediently they sat down, but their native politeness forbade them to eat very much. They just stayed their appetites, and left enough to satisfy their host for a couple of days at least. In vain he exhorted them to persevere. Brother and sister exchanged a meaning glance, and assured their host that they had already done too well.

When they had finished and were back in the two easy-chairs, basking in the warmth of the glowing fire, the old Frenchman went to a little cupboard affixed to the wall. On his face was a sly smile.

From this receptacle he produced a bottle, dusty with age. He performed some strenuous work with a somewhat refractory corkscrew whose point had become blunt with the years. In a trice,

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he produced three glasses and placed them on a small table which he drew close to the fire.

"This is fine Chambertin," he explained to his astonished guests. "A dozen bottles were sent to me by an old friend, since dead, three years ago. In those three years I have drunk six—I am very abstemious, my children. To-night, in your honour, I open the first of the six that remain. We will carouse and make merry. It is a long time since I have felt so inclined to merriment."

To this sally they could make no retort; they were still in state of bewilderment. To a certain extent they felt themselves in a kind of shabby fairyland. Was this strange old Frenchman as poor as appearances suggested—or a miser with occasional freakish impulses of generosity?

Papa Péron shot at them a shrewd glance. Perhaps he divined their thoughts. Long experience had made him very wise, possibly a little bit cunning.

"You think I am just a trifle mad, eh?" he queried.

With one voice, or rather two voices raised in a swift unison, they disclaimed the insinuation. They only recognised several facts: that he was very kind, very generous, very hospitable.

Papa Péron sipped the excellent Chambertin and fell into a meditative mood.

"I lead a very lonely life, and youth, especially struggling youth, has a great attraction for me. I watched you two poor children to-night through the little peep-hole in my blind. *Mon Dieu!* I guessed the position at once. You had come out in the snow and bitter wind, to try and make a living. You are two honest people, I am sure. *N'est-ce pas?*" They had been speaking in English up to the present moment, but momentary excitement, the stimulus of the Burgundy, had made him indulge in his native tongue.

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They assured him that they were.

Papa Péron smiled a little sardonically. "Of course you are. If you were inclined in other directions, you with your talents, your sister with her good looks, would have taken up more paying trades than this. What have you earned to-night?" he concluded sharply.

Anita answered in a faltering voice. "Over three shillings, Monsieur."

The sardonic smile vanished. A look of infinite compassion spread over the lined face.

"My poor children. Virtue is indeed its own reward." He turned to Nello, and his eyes flashed fire. "And that charlatan, Bauquel, gets a hundred guineas for a single performance. And he is not in the same street with you."

"But Bauquel is a genius, surely, Monsieur?" ventured Corsini deferentially. "I have never heard him play, certainly, but his reputation! Surely he did not get that for nothing?"

He spoke very cautiously, for although he had not known Papa Péron for very long, he had recognised that under that kindly and polite demeanour was a very peppery temperament. If he were crossed in argument, the old Frenchman might prove a very cantankerous person.

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Péron snapped his fingers. "Bauquel, bah! A man of the Schools, a machine-made executant. He never half understands what he attempts to render." Again he snapped his contemptuous fingers. "Bauquel, bah! A charlatan? It amazes me that the public runs after him. He has a powerful press, and he employs a big *claque*. *Voilà!* On the business side, I admit he is great; on the artistic side, not worth a moment's consideration."

"You understand music, Monsieur, you are a critic?" suggested the young man timidly. Papa Péron was evidently a very explosive person; it would not be polite or grateful to risk his anger.

For a little time the old man did not answer. When he spoke, it was in a dreamy tone.

"Once I was famous as Bauquel is to-day—with this difference: that I was an artist and he is a pretender, with not an ounce of artistry in him."

"Was your instrument the violin, Monsieur?"

"Alas, no," was the old man's answer. "Chance led me to the piano. I think I did well. But I have always regretted that I did not take up the violin. It is the one instrument that can sing. The human voice alone rivals it."

After a moment's pause, he added abruptly, "Are you very tired?"

No, Corsini was not in the least tired. The warmth, the meal of which he had eaten sparingly from motives of delicacy, the Burgundy, had warmed his blood. He was no longer the weak, pallid creature who had set out from his lodging to earn a night's sustenance.

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"Why do you ask, Monsieur?"

"If you are not really tired, I would love to hear that exquisite romance again, with one or two brilliant variations. See, in that corner, stands a piano of fairly good tone. I will accompany you, or rather follow you."

Corsini, his blood aglow with the generous stimulant, the strange circumstances, rose up, took his violin from its case, and drew the bow lovingly across the strings. The Frenchman went across to the piano, opened the lid, and struck a few chords with a touch that revealed the hand of the

master.

For the next ten minutes the room resounded with the divinest melody. The deep notes of the piano mingled with the soaring strains of the violin.

Corsini, strangely inspired, played as one possessed. And Papa Péron caught every inflection, every subtle change of key. Never, during the brief performance, was there a single discord. All the time the Frenchman, old in years, had followed every mood of the younger musician.

Papa Péron dropped his slender, artistic hands on the last chord. "My young friend, you are great," he said quietly. "Success to you is only a matter of time. Another glass of Chambertin?"

Nello drained it; he felt strangely elated. "Ah, Monsieur, but your accompaniment was half the battle. When I faltered, you stimulated me. You must have been a magnificent pianist."

Anita broke in in her gentle voice. The daughter of an English mother, she spoke the tongue of her adopted country very fluently. [Pg 18]

"You put great heart into us, Monsieur. But when you speak of success, I remember that we have earned just about three shillings to-night."

Péron, the optimist, waved his hand airily. "Look up to the stars, my child, and hope. I have a little influence left yet. Perhaps I can put you on the right track; take you at least out of these miserable streets. Sit down for another ten minutes; make a second supper if you like." He guessed that they had not fully satisfied their hunger.

But this they resolutely declined. He waved them to their chairs.

"Five minutes, then. Tell me a little something of your history. I am sure it has been a tragic one."

And Corsini, departing from his usual mood of reticence, imparted to the old Frenchman the details of his career.

His father, the elder Corsini, had been first violin at the Politeama Theatre in Florence, while comparatively a young man. He had quarrelled violently with the manager and been dismissed. Confident in his ability, he had come over to England to seek his fortune afresh. Here he had met and fallen violently in love with a young English girl, some few years his junior. She was a pianist by profession, in a small way. She attended at dances, played accompaniments at City dinners. Her income was a very meagre one. She was the product of one of the numerous schools that turn out such performers by the dozen.

They married, and Corsini soon discovered that he was not the great man he imagined himself to be. Also, he was of a frail and weakly constitution. Ten years after his marriage he died of rapid consumption. Madame Corsini was left with two children on her hands. [Pg 19]

She was a devoted mother. Nello dwelt on this episode of their sad life with tears in his eyes. She worked hard for a miserable pittance; and then she was worn out with the strain. Nello and his sister, Anita, were left orphans. Nello had been taught the rudiments of the violin by his father; all the rest he had picked up himself.

After his mother's death the rest was a nightmare. He had done his best for himself and his sister. That best had landed them in this snow-laden street to-night.

Papa Péron listened quietly to this young violinist's recital, but he made little comment. Here was one of the numerous tragedies that were occurring every day in every populous city.

He rose and shook hands with the two. "You have a lodging to go to, my poor children?" he asked anxiously.

With a deep blush, Corsini assured him that they had a lodging to go to; he did not dare to give him the address. Dean Street was a comparatively aristocratic abode. Papa Péron's humbly furnished room seemed a Paradise. And the piano was good—that must have been saved from the prosperous day—and was his own. No Soho landlady would provide such a piano as that.

Péron shook them warmly by the hand. "You must come and see me to-morrow. I shall be in all the morning. I shall think things over between now and then. I am a poor man myself, but I may be able to help you with introductions. I must get you out of these miserable streets." [Pg 20]

They walked home, wondering about Papa Péron. Who could he be? Anita inclined to the belief that he was a miser. Nello had his doubts.

Still very hungry, they bought some sausages on their way home and devoured them before they went to bed. They still had a substantial balance on hand, according to the thrifty Anita.

And the next morning, Nello was round at Dean Street to learn what Papa Péron had thought of in the meanwhile.

The old Frenchman had heard Corsini's knock at the door. He stood at the entrance to his shabby sitting-room, the only article of furniture being the piano, his kind old lined face illumined with smiles.

"Courage, my young friend. I did not sleep very well after the excitement of your visit. Inspiration came to me in the middle of the night. You see that letter?" He pointed to a small desk standing against the wall. "Go and see to whom it is addressed."

Nello obeyed him. His eyes sparkled as he read the name on the envelope. "Mr. Gay, the leader of the orchestra at the Parthenon."

Papa Péron nodded his leonine head, bristling with its snow-white locks. "A friend of mine. He is a composer as well as *chef d'orchestre*. I have corrected many of his proof sheets for a firm I work for."

Corsini pricked up his ears at this statement. He and his sister had been curious as to the old man's profession. The mystery was solved. He was no miser, no millionaire, just a music publisher's hack. And once, according to his own statement, he had been a famous pianist, with a renown equal to that of Bauquel.

"I have asked him to give you the first vacancy in his orchestra. He will do it to oblige me, for I have helped him a little—given him some ideas. It is one of the best theatre orchestras in London. The pay, alas! will not be good, but it will take you out of those miserable streets. Go to his private address this morning; I am sure he will see you at once." [Pg 22]

"How can I thank you?" began the young man; but Péron stopped him with an imperious wave of his long, thin hand.

"Tut, tut, my child! I want no thanks. I have taken a fancy to you and that dear little sister of yours. Now, listen; I have another scheme on hand."

Rapidly the genial old man unfolded his plans.

"In my room there are two beds. The landlady has a little attic to let, by no means a grand apartment, but it will serve for your sister. You can share my room. Three people can live almost as cheaply as two." There was a knowing smile on the wrinkled face, as the genial Papa enunciated this profound economic truth. "Come and live here. You can practise on the violin while I play your accompaniments."

"But Monsieur, at the moment, we have no money," stammered the embarrassed violinist. "Mr. Gay may not have a vacancy for some little time."

Papa Péron frowned ever so little. He did not easily brook contradiction. "You are making difficulties where none exist. You must lodge somewhere. My landlady only asks five shillings a week for the attic. You share my bedroom and sitting-room. As for the food, you will be my guests till you earn something. Do not say me nay," he ended fiercely. "I am resolved that you shall play no more in those miserable gutters. It is finished. You come here to-night." [Pg 23]

There was no resisting this imperious old man with the frail figure and the snow-white abundant hair. Nello promised that he and his sister would move into Dean Street that afternoon. In the meantime, he would take the letter of introduction to Mr. Gay, who had lodgings in Gower Street, no great distance.

Mr. Gay was a fat, rubicund man with a somewhat faded and slatternly wife. He read Péron's note and a genial smile lit up his massive face.

"Good!" he cried heartily. "My old friend vouches for you, and you have come in the very nick of time. One of my men is leaving in a couple of days—got a better berth. You can take his place. But before we settle, you may as well give me a taste of your quality. We go in for rather high-class music at the Parthenon. Play me Gounod's 'Ave Maria,' I always test a man with that."

He called to the slatternly woman who was crouching over the fire. "Ada, please go to the piano and play the accompaniment for this young man."

Mrs. Gay complied with the request. Nello played the beautiful piece with all his soul. Gay listened, attentively. When it was finished, he applauded loudly.

"By Jove, you are great! Péron was right. He has not exaggerated. You have had no chance, eh?"

Nello stammered that he had had no chances. He did not dare confess to this prosperous person, composer as well as conductor of an orchestra, that, lately, he had been playing in the streets for a living to pay for his miserable lodging and scanty food. [Pg 24]

They arranged terms with many apologies on the part of Mr. Gay.

"It is an insult to a man of your talent to offer such a miserable pittance. But my hands are tied, and tied very strictly, I can tell you. Turn up at the Parthenon on Friday night; you will soon get something better. You can read music quickly?"

Nello assured him on that point. He could read music as easily as his newspaper. The terms which Mr. Gay offered him were riches compared to the few coppers he had earned in the streets.

That same afternoon he and the joyful Anita presented themselves in Dean Street, with their few belongings. Papa Péron furnished a royal supper and broached another bottle of the very excellent Chambertin.

There was, however, still the question of clothes. Nello had nothing but what he stood up in, and the Parthenon was a very swagger theatre. Péron was equal to the emergency. He took the young man round to a neighbouring costumier's, and secured a dress-suit on the hire-purchase system, at a very small outlay of ready money which he advanced. For, although the good Papa was not rich, he was very thrifty, and usually had a shot in the locker.

It was a very happy *ménage*; the old Frenchman was kindness and geniality itself. He seemed to grow younger in the society of his youthful friends.

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And in time the mystery that had seemed to surround him vanished, his means of livelihood became revealed. He was on the staff of a couple of big music publishers. He corrected their proof sheets, he occasionally advised on compositions of budding composers; but needless to say, at this hack work his remuneration was very modest.

But he always appeared cheerful and resigned. He would drop fragmentary hints of a brilliant past, when money flowed like water, when he had mixed with illustrious personages. But he could never be induced to dwell very long on this period, would enter into no convincing details.

"It is gone, it is a feverish dream," he would say with a somewhat theatrical wave of the hand. It was evidently a weakness of his to enshroud himself in an air of romance and mystery. "What does it matter who and what I was? To-day I am Papa Péron, music publisher's hack, earning a few shillings a week at a most uncongenial occupation. But, at my age, I want little."

Nello and his sister were happy too. The salary at the Parthenon was not magnificent, but it was a certainty, and they were frugal young people. No more playing in the sleet-driven streets, no more terrible uncertainty as to the night's lodging and the next day's meal.

For a month they pursued this humble, but not uncomfortable life. And Nello, who had no opportunity of displaying his talent in this big orchestra, where he was one of many, played two or three hours a day to the brilliant accompaniment of the old Frenchman.

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And then the clouds began to gather. Papa Péron was taken with a severe attack of bronchitis. Racked in spasms of severe coughing, he was unable to pursue his humble and not too remunerative occupation. He could no longer correct the proof sheets. The doctor's visits, the necessity of extra and expensive nourishment, began to eat up his slender store. The few sovereigns he had hoarded for a rainy day began to melt rapidly.

This did not matter much for a while. The regular salary at the Parthenon sufficed, with Anita's skilful management, for the three; but there was no longer any question of putting by. Anita knew now that she had been very mistaken in thinking the poor old Papa was a miser. With tears in his poor old eyes, he had been forced to confess that he had come to his last sovereign.

And Anita had cried too. "What does it matter, dear Papa?" she said. She had grown very fond of the kind old man. "You took us in when we were poor and friendless. Nello will work for you now, and I shall be very careful. You will see how well I can manage on a little."

And so good old Papa Péron had his beef-tea, his little drops of brandy, his expensive chicken. Whoever went without, he must not experience want. And the doctor was paid punctually.

But misfortunes never come single. One very frosty night, on coming out of the Parthenon, Nello fell on the slippery pavement and seriously hurt his left hand. He went to the doctor on his way home, and his worst fears were confirmed.

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"A longish job, I fear, Signor Corsini. The fingers are very much injured, and so is the arm. You are a musician, are you not?"

"A violinist, sir. If it had been the right arm instead of the left, I might have managed with the bow. But I cannot play a note."

Mr. Gay was informed of the accident, in a letter from Anita. He was genuinely sorry, but the theatre had to be served. He had to procure another violinist at once. For four miserable weeks Nello ate his heart out, and Papa Péron seemed to grow weaker every day.

When life and motion returned to the poor damaged fingers, there were only a few shillings left in the house. Péron had announced that if help did not come soon they must sell the piano, the one bit of property he owned in the world. So, at least, he averred.

Nello could play now. He went round at once to Gay's lodging in Gower Street. Could he be taken on again? The kindly conductor hemmed and hawed; he was obviously very much embarrassed.

"We had to fill up your place, my dear chap, and the new man has proved quite satisfactory. It is, of course, awfully hard on you. But, you see, I can't sack him to put you in his place."

"Of course not," answered Nello quietly. Misery was gnawing at his heart, but he was just. The man who was taken on had possibly been in the same state of wretchedness as himself. He would hardly have cared to turn him out, if Gay had been willing.

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"And how is the dear old Papa?" asked Gay, trying to relieve an awkward situation with the

inquiry.

"He is very ill; not far from death, I fear," was Nello's answer. And then the truth, which he could no longer conceal, flashed out. "And very soon he will be close to starvation."

Gay looked shocked. He had experienced his ups and downs, but he had never been in such a tight corner as this. He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and produced a sovereign, which he thrust into the other man's hand.

"Terrible, terrible! I am sorry I cannot do more; but I am a poor man, too."

Nello took it, but his face burned, it was such obvious charity.

"I accept it, Monsieur, with gratitude, and I thank you for the kind thought. But can you help me to find work? I want to earn money, not to beg it."

"Sit down a moment while I think." The kind-hearted conductor was very distressed himself at the piteous state of affairs.

"I have it," he exclaimed after a few moments of reflection. "You have heard of Paul Degraux?"

"One of the directors of the Covent Garden Opera?"

"Right," said Gay. "Well, Degraux is a big man now, but twenty-five years ago we were playing in the same orchestra for a few shillings a week. He is there, I am here. We have never quite lost sight of each other, and I think he would always do me a good turn if it was in his power. I will give you a note to him. Take it round to him this morning. You will find him at the theatre."

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Ten minutes later, Corsini was on his way to the great man. Gay had written a most glowing and eulogistic introduction.

"The bearer of this note, Signor Nello Corsini, is a most accomplished violinist. I have had him in my orchestra, but he is too good for that. Give him a chance at one of your concerts and he will make good. You know my judgment is generally pretty accurate. Give him a helping hand and you will not regret it."

CHAPTER III

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The name of Gay seemed one to conjure with. Five minutes after the letter had been taken in, Nello was shown in to Monsieur Degraux's private room.

He was a tall, handsome man, this musical director of the opera who, twenty-five years ago, had played in a small orchestra for a few shillings a week. His countenance was florid, he had a very striking personality. Emphatically he was the type of man who gets on, who shoulders his way in the world, pushing aside with his strong, resolute elbows his weaker and more timorous fellow creatures.

He was always urbane, even when he had to say No. At the present moment he had not decided as to whether he would say Yes or No to his old friend's request. He was very much taken with the appearance of the slim, handsome young Italian. His clothes were certainly shabby: Degraux's experienced eyes took in that fact at once; but there was a certain resolution in Nello's bearing, a brightness and animation in his face, that showed he was no ordinary seeker for favours.

"Sit down, sit down," he said genially, "although I cannot give you very long. I am a very busy man; all the day and half the night I have to cut myself into pieces, as it were. And always, I am frightfully worried. To-day I have been more worried than usual."

"I am sorry to hear it, Monsieur," said the Italian, sympathetically. If he wanted to get anything out of Monsieur Degraux, he must fall in with his moods. Privately he thought the director's worries, whatever their magnitude, were as nothing compared to his own.

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This plump, prosperous-looking person was not very close to starvation.

"You know, of course, the name of Bauquel?" inquired Degraux abruptly.

"A great genius, Monsieur." In spite of Papa Péron's hostile verdict, the younger musician had a great reverence for the celebrated violinist, who was a popular favourite in every European capital.

The director snapped his fingers, and indulged in an angry exclamation. "Not the genius that he thinks himself, not the genius his friends pretend he is. He is very astute on the business side, has worked his Press well, and always maintains a vigilant *claque*. I and people like myself have helped him very considerably also by taking him at his face valuation. Genius, certainly not; at any rate, not a great genius."

Monsieur Degraux snapped his fingers more contemptuously, and reeled off the names of a few rivals. "Those are geniuses if you like, artists who disclaim his clap-trap methods."

Nello felt uncomfortable and apprehensive. The irate director was evidently so occupied with the subject of the offending Bauquel that Mr. Gay's letter stood in danger of being forgotten. And the great man had especially said that his time was short.

"Monsieur Bauquel has had the misfortune to incur your displeasure, sir?" he hazarded.

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"I should think he had," cried Degraux furiously. "He was to appear at my great concert next week; Royalty and the élite of London will be there. Two days ago we had a little tiff, in which I admit I told him some home truths. What happens? This morning I receive a letter, dated from Brighton, in which he throws me over. Pretends he is ill and that his doctor has ordered a complete rest."

"And you do not believe this to be true, Monsieur?"

"True!" thundered Degraux. "An absolute lie. A friend of mine writes me at the same time from the Grand Hotel. He tells me that the so-called invalid is staying there with a rowdy party and looking the picture of health. The scoundrel has done it to put me in a corner. And what is to become of my concert? I cannot put my hand on a violinist of the first rank in the few days left me."

Nello stood up, his face glowing, his limbs trembling with excitement. He pointed to Gay's letter, which lay on the director's desk.

"Monsieur, I beseech you, if it is not too great presumption, to let me take his place. I may not make a sensation, but certainly I shall not be a failure. And you will have so many stars of the first magnitude, that a smaller one may dare to give a little light. You have read what Mr. Gay says of me. I fancy he is no mean judge of music and musicians."

Degraux was suddenly brought down from his heights of indignation by this direct appeal. He looked keenly at the young man, but in his eyes there appeared a humorous twinkle, as if he admired his audacity.

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"You don't miss a chance, I see, my young friend. But it is a big risk to run you in the place of Bauquel, and as soon as he gets wind of it, he will send his *claque* to hiss you."

Monsieur Degraux thought for several seconds, and the young man went hot and cold. His hopes, his fate, hung upon the conductor's caprice.

Degraux touched a bell on the desk with the air of a man who had made up his mind. An attendant answered the summons.

"Please send in Mr. Lemoin." He turned to Nello. "This gentleman will accompany you, and you shall show what you can do. Remember, you will appear before one of the most appreciative, but also one of the most critical, audiences in the world."

Monsieur Lemoin appeared, a fat chubby person. He accompanied very well; not perhaps with the assured artistic instinct of old Papa Péron, who was a part of the piano he played so skilfully.

Degraux listened intently. He had told Nello to play the pieces which, in his own opinion, he could render best. The young man finished with that sad little romance which he had heard in Dean Street on that well-remembered night, and into which he wove some brilliant variations.

The director rose and spoke, for him, rather enthusiastically. "Yes, my young friend, Gay is right. You are a true artist. Play that little romance at the end; you are at your best in that. Play it as you have done here and we need not fear Bauquel's *claque*. I engage you for that concert. I will also boom you, but not extravagantly—just judiciously—in the short time that is left me. Now about terms?"

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He named a fee that seemed to Corsini to represent absolute wealth. If he could only obtain a couple of sovereigns on account, to ease the hard conditions in Dean Street. Degraux did not seem a hard man; it was possible the request would be granted as soon as asked.

But prudence forbade. It would be the reverse of politic to plead absolute poverty on so brief an acquaintance. Till next week, they must draw their belts a little tighter. Well, experience had taught them to do that.

He hurried back to Dean Street with the joyful news. He was to appear before a most fashionable audience in place of the great Bauquel, squandering his money down at Brighton in order to revenge himself upon the too plain-speaking Degraux.

Papa Péron was sitting up in bed, Anita by his side. The poor old man had had one of his good days, the cough was less troublesome. The doctor had whispered as he went out that if the severe weather mended a little, they might pull him through. He smiled happily as his young protégé recounted what had happened.

"I have met Degraux once or twice in the years gone by, and I have been told that prosperity has not spoiled him. But, my dear boy, there is one little difficulty about that concert next week."

"And that?" asked young Corsini. He was so overjoyed in his new-found fortune, that he could think of nothing else.

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The old Frenchman chuckled quietly. "You will want an evening suit, my young friend. One does

not appear before Royalty in ordinary clothes, and those not of the newest, does one?"

Nello groaned. The dress-clothes which Papa Péron had purchased for the engagement at the Parthenon had found their way to the pawn-brokers a few days ago, to provide food. What a fool he had been not to make a clean breast of it to Degraux and ask for a few pounds in advance!

"It crossed my mind to ask for a loan, and I was afraid I might offend him," explained the young man.

"Quite right, my dear son, quite right. Those wealthy men are peculiar. We will not trouble this rich gentleman. There are other ways."

He pointed his thin hand to a little cupboard standing against the wall. "Go and open the door. Within I have a small private box where I keep my papers. Bring it to me, please."

Nello obeyed, and carried to him a beautiful little antique casket of ebony, inlaid with tortoise-shell and silver, with some cipher letters on the lid. The old man opened it with a key which he wore attached to a ribbon round his neck.

From the small box he carefully produced an antique ring with a tiny miniature portrait, exquisitely painted and set with diamonds. This he pressed reverently to his lips, and then handed it to the young man, saying:

"This is the likeness of my honoured Master, my Emperor Napoleon the Third—given to me with his own hand." [Pg 36]

He took out a jewelled star, all tarnished. "This is the Order of the Chevalier of St. Louis, bestowed upon me for my services to——" He could not finish his sentence; the tears were rolling down his thin, wasted cheeks.

Brother and sister exchanged a swift glance across the bed. Evidently, Monsieur Péron had, at one time, been a personage of some importance. Sovereigns did not bestow such gifts upon undistinguished people.

"Take that ring and the Order," commanded the old man in his feeble, husky voice. "Go and pawn them. If you cannot get enough by pawning, sell them outright. And buy a dress-suit with the money to-day."

Both Nello and his sister protested. These two objects and the piano were all that the old man had preserved out of his brilliant past.

Corsini spoke. "Listen, dear Papa! You would not part with these when we had not enough to eat. I can understand what they represent to you. Do not worry about me. I will go to Degraux in a couple of days and explain the situation. Even if he is annoyed, he will have gone too far to recede."

But Péron was persistent. A flash of his old imperiousness came back to him.

"Go and do as I tell you. My days are numbered. My one hope is that I may live to see you successful. Go and dress yourself properly. Let me hear of your success before I die; that is all I wish." [Pg 37]

The strain of the interview had been too much for him. Taken with a violent fit of coughing, he sank back exhausted on his pillow. Anita pointed to the door.

"You cannot disobey his wishes. Come back and tell him you have done what he asked you. It may give him a few days more of life."

The young man, fearing the old man's death, rushed round to the nearest pawnbroker in Wardour Street. Upon the ring alone he raised sufficient to hire a dress-suit at a neighbouring costumier's. On his return he was overjoyed to find that the poor Papa had rallied from his exhaustion.

On the night of the concert Nello came into the old man's room to bid him good-night. Péron drew him towards him and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Courage, my son, courage!" Alas! every day the voice was getting feebler. "You play at the end that little romance with your own variations. *Au revoir*. I shall be awake when you return to hear the news. Anita and I will not have a wink of sleep till you come back."

"*Au revoir, bon Papa!*" was Nello's parting greeting.

Papa Péron raised himself in his bed, shook his hand at the air and almost shouted after him: "And if you do not outplay that charlatan, Bauquel, I will never forgive you."

CHAPTER IV

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Nello stood facing the big and fashionable audience. A celebrated accompanist was already seated at the piano. There was perfect silence in the vast assembly. In a few seconds the pianist would strike the opening chords, and Nello Corsini, the unknown violinist, must justify the faith

that had been placed in him by Paul Degraux.

He felt sick and a little faint. As he looked dimly into that vast sea of expectant faces, he realised the ordeal to which he was exposed. In the little room in Dean Street, with Papa Péron and his worshipping sister for an audience, it was not difficult to feel at ease, to pour out his artistic soul. Even to Gay and Degraux, in the privacy of their apartments, he had given of his best.

But to-night he was before a vast audience, critical and fastidious. Had they not already sampled many executants, many equal to himself, not a few superior?

The salient episodes of his later life floated before him. His meeting with Papa Péron, his introduction to Gay, the placid evenings when he had played at the Parthenon for a small wage, his accident and the miserable days that had supervened, his desperate visit to the powerful Degraux, the marvellous success of that interview. And behind the recollection of all this, the memory of that dreadful time when he had played in the streets for a few wretched coppers to keep himself and his sister from want.

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But to-night he was playing for fame and fortune, through the lucky chance of the great Bauquel's absence. If he made good to-night, if he could secure the plaudits of this fashionable crowd, coppers would no longer be his portion, but sovereigns and Bank of England notes.

It was a brilliant assembly. In the Royal box sat the Queen of England, with the Prince and Princess of Wales. Peers and Peeresses were there by the dozen. Every other person was more or less distinguished. This was no audience gathered from the corners of mean streets.

As the pianist struck the opening chords, the mist cleared from the young man's brain. Those upturned faces which met his fascinated gaze were no longer charged with cold hostility, but full of friendliness, of welcome to a new and untried artist. He drew his bow caressingly across the strings, and began.

The last plaintive notes died away—he had chosen to open with an exquisite romance of Greig's. The applause was sincere, but it was not fervent. Degraux, standing anxiously in the wings, had to admit that it was not fervent. And then, suddenly, Bauquel's noisy *claque* burst forth in a storm of hisses. They were paid by the popular favourite to howl down any likely rival.

The young man's face went white as death. Was the chance going to be snatched from him? Would he leave the theatre a failure, to the disgust of the man who had befriended him and put faith in him?

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The storm of hisses, hired disapprobation, died slowly down, countered, as it was, with a little decorous and well-mannered applause. The charming romance of Greig, though exquisitely played, had failed to really touch the audience. If the great Bauquel, with his well-established reputation, had rendered it, the house would have been in a furore.

Corsini's next item was a piece by Chopin. Amid the din of the contending hisses and applause, the pianist beckoned to the young man and they exchanged whispers.

"Take my advice; leave the Chopin piece. They are not in the melancholy mood to-night: they want something brilliant, an undertone of pathos with a cascade of fireworks to relieve the sadness. Play that romance of yours, *with* the variations. Cut the theme as short as possible; use it as just an introduction. Get to work on the variations, those will fetch them."

Nello set his teeth firmly; opposition, the suspicion of failure, had goaded him to fresh effort, to a fuller belief in his own powers. He remembered the good old Papa's injunction: "If you do not outplay that charlatan, Bauquel, I will never forgive you."

And he played as one inspired. The violin, a legacy from his father, sang and sobbed and thrilled as it had never done before. When he had finished the applause was hearty and vehement. The hisses of the Bauquel *claque* could no longer be heard. The unknown young violinist had made good and won the plaudits of one of the most critical audiences in Europe.

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Degraux met him in the wings and shook him warmly by the hand. "A thousand thanks. I see now I was right in engaging you, in speculating on a chance. Now, come to my room. You told me something yesterday about certain things in Dean Street. Cheques are no good to you. You want ready money."

Nello admitted that it was so. Together they hastened into the director's private room. Degraux went to a small safe, unlocked it and drew forth a roll of notes.

"See here, my young friend, you have saved the position. For the moment, that rascal Bauquel is temporarily eclipsed. Here is your fee, double what I promised."

Nello protested faintly. "But, Monsieur, this is too much. And remember, please, I was very nearly a failure. Bauquel's *claque* was almost too much for me."

Degraux laughed light-heartedly. "Very nearly, but not quite. You say your good old Papa Péron calls him a charlatan. The expression is perhaps a little strong. He is not that, but he is perhaps not the genius he thinks himself, or his friends think him."

"I should be more than delighted to possess his reputation, Monsieur," interrupted the young Italian.

Degraux laid his hand lightly on Nello's shoulder.

"I see, Corsini, you have a head upon your shoulders. Will you permit me to give you a few words of sound advice?" [Pg 42]

"A thousand if you are so disposed, Monsieur."

"You have scored a triumph of sorts to-night, but don't let it give you a swollen head."

"It will not, Monsieur, I can assure you," was the answer.

"That is well; preserve the business head as well as the artistic instinct. This profession is full of ups and downs. Look at Bauquel! In spite of his considerable earnings, he is always in debt, always in the hands of money-lenders. He earns easily, he spends more easily. In five years he will be ousted from his position by younger and more talented rivals, and he will be penniless. He will probably come to me to borrow a sovereign."

"And you will let him have it, I am sure, Monsieur," said Nello warmly. "You have a very kind heart."

"Of course I shall let him have it. But, at the same time, I shall take advantage of the opportunity to say, 'here it is, friend Bauquel. But why did you not save in the fat years, instead of spending your money on a miserable *claque*, in order to spoil my show? And you know, moreover, you were absolutely in the wrong.'"

Nello could not refrain from smiling. Paul Degraux was very human. He could not forgive Bauquel for his cavalier treatment.

"I am a frugal Italian, Monsieur. I shall never waste my money."

Paul Degraux swelled out his broad chest. "You will get on, my young friend. Look at me! Twenty or twenty-five years ago I was playing in a small orchestra with Gay at a few shillings a week—I have no doubt Gay has told you of that little episode. I know he is a very garrulous person—a dear good chap, but garrulous. Well, Gay is there and I am here. Why?" [Pg 43]

He thundered out the question, expanding still further his broad chest.

Nello temporised. The great director was evidently in a confidential mood. It was as well to fall in with his humour.

"Ah, why, Monsieur? I should like to know. I am sure I should learn a good deal."

Degraux, in his present mood, was pleased to have a listener. The concert was going on splendidly with experienced stars. It no longer required his attention.

"Listen, my young friend! I devoted myself to the business side of art. I saw more money was to be made out of exploiting other people than being exploited by others. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," said the young Italian, who was fairly shrewd for his years. "In fact, I am sure I do."

"Good! Gay followed the artistic side." Degraux snapped his fingers contemptuously. "The result: poor Gay, at his age, conducting a small orchestra at the Parthenon—a good one, I admit; but what is the remuneration? I, Paul Degraux," again he tapped his broad chest significantly, "am here in a great position. I have followed the business side of art; poor old Gay has followed the artistic side. Bah!" [Pg 44]

"You advise me, Monsieur, to cultivate the business side?" queried the young man.

"Of course. I am giving you good advice; sound advice. You have made a little stir here, certain things may follow from it. But still, you have not the reputation of Bauquel, second-rater that he is. Bauquel will be on his knees to me next week, and of course I shall take him back. It may be, when you come to me again, I can only give you a second place in the programme. The way will be hard from the artistic point of view."

Nello listened with deep attention. Degraux was a man of business to his finger-tips. Certainly he was giving him good advice.

"And what are they, these artists, except the very few who are in the front rank—creatures of an hour, of the public's caprice? Joachim, Sarasate, those are names to conjure with; they are permanent. But the others come and go. I, one of the directors of the Italian Opera, remain while they disappear. The exploiters are permanent, the exploited are transitory."

"What do you advise, Monsieur?" asked Nello timidly. This whirlwind of a man half fascinated, half repelled him.

Monsieur Degraux held out his hand with his frank, engaging smile.

"Be exploited as long as it suits your book. Then save money and exploit other people. I cannot stay any longer. I have given you a few hints. You must work them out for yourself." [Pg 45]

A new world was opening to Nello Corsini, the talented young violinist who, only a few weeks ago, had played in the street on the chance of the coppers flung by passers-by. But it was absurd! How could he ever be a Paul Degraux? And yet, Degraux had played twenty-five years ago in a

small orchestra for a pittance. What was his income now? Something princely.

He longed to hasten back to Dean Street with that precious sheaf of notes. How the dear old Papa's eyes would lighten up at the news of his success, when he told him the tale of how Bauquel's *claque* had been silenced. And the dear little Anita too! Tears of joy would run down her cheeks.

Degraux, or Bauquel, after such a night of triumph, would have taken a cab. But such an idea was alien to Nello's frugal temperament. It was only a few moments' walk. He took his violin case in his hand and stepped along bravely.

As he emerged from the theatre a footman in handsome livery laid his hand upon his arm.

"Pardon me, Signor Corsini. The Princess Zoureff wishes to speak to you. Will you follow me, please? I will lead you to her carriage."

He followed the tall footman. The Princess, a grey-haired woman of tall and commanding presence, leaned through the carriage window.

"Ah, Signor Corsini, I have been enchanted with your playing to-night. I am giving a reception at the Russian Embassy, in Chesham Place, to-morrow evening. I shall be so pleased if you will come and play for us—at your own fee, of course."

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Nello shot a swift glance into the carriage. On the back seat, facing the horses, were the grey-haired woman and a beautiful young girl. On the front seat was a dark, handsome man of about thirty-five.

He recognised them at once, the man and the young girl. They were the two who had driven down the street to the Royalty Theatre on that dark winter night when he had been playing in the streets.

"Enchanted, Madame. I will present myself to you to-morrow evening. Will you forgive me if I render you only very brief thanks at the moment? I have a very dear friend, I fear at the point of death, to whom I must hasten."

The grey-haired Princess inclined her head graciously. "Pray do not wait a moment. I am sorry such trouble is awaiting you on the night of so great a success."

Nello raised his hat and was moving away, when the charming girl leaned forward and spoke impetuously.

"One second, Signor; we might be of assistance to you. Will you please give me the name of your friend, and his address?" She had recognised him the moment he appeared on the platform as the wandering musician she had passed on her way to the Royalty Theatre.

She turned eagerly to the Princess, her mother. "We might send our own doctor, Sir Charles Fowler, he is so very clever. Perhaps this gentleman's friend has not had the best medical advice."

The Princess assented graciously. She was a very kind-hearted woman, if not quite so enthusiastic in works of charity as her more impulsive daughter.

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Nello, with burning cheeks, gave the name of poor old Papa Péron and the number of the small house in Dean Street. His cheeks flamed, because he was wondering if she had recognised him as he had remembered her. It was evident she thought he was poor by that remark about the best medical advice.

He thanked both the ladies in a low tone, and for the second time turned away. The man, Prince Zoureff, who had been fidgeting impatiently during the short interview, leaned out of the window of the carriage, and in a sharp, angry voice commanded the coachman to drive on.

Ho sank back in his seat and darted a glance of contempt, first at his sister, then at his mother.

"Your foolish sentimentality makes me sick, Nada. And I am surprised at you for abetting her in it," he added for the benefit of the Princess.

The Princess answered him in calm, sarcastic tones. "Would it not be better, Boris, if you left off interfering with every word and act of poor little Nada? If she has too much compassion, you redress the balance by having none."

Nello hastened with quick strides in the direction of Dean Street. His one fear was that Péron might have already passed away. It would be heart-rending if he were not alive to hear the splendid news.

But the vital flame, although very low, was still burning. The old man had had a long sleep, the sleep of exhaustion. By some strange effort of will, he had allayed the impending dissolution, had awoken about the expected time of Nello's return, and was sitting up in bed, propped up against the pillows, awaiting the arrival of the young man whom he had grown to regard as a son.

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"It is well, I can see," he said in the low, husky voice that was so soon to be hushed for ever. "It is well. Triumph is written all over your face. You have scored an even greater success than you anticipated, eh?"

Nello sank on his knees beside the bed, at which his sister had devotedly seated herself, to watch the least movement of the dying man. He possessed himself of one of the long, wasted hands—those hands which had once made such eloquent music—and kissed it reverently.

“All thanks to you, my more than father. There was a trying moment. My first piece did not touch them much, and the Bauquel *claque*, as Degraux warned me would be the case, did their best to hiss me down. Then I set my teeth and vowed that I would not be a failure and return home disgraced. I played that little romance, with my variations. I finished in a storm of applause.”

“Ah!” sighed Péron amongst his pillows, a wan smile lighting his livid face. “That is your masterpiece. That would always stir the dullest audience.”

“And listen, dear good Papa. Degraux was so pleased with my success that he has paid me double the fee he promised. No more short commons for any of us. Little Anita here shall keep the purse and maintain us in royal state.” He threw his head back and laughed almost hysterically. “Oh, it must be a dream, a wild, mad dream. I cannot be the same Nello Corsini who, a few weeks ago, used to play in the streets for coppers.”

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Then he recovered from his overwrought mood. There was more yet to be told to this kind old man.

“Then, dear Papa, I had an adventure—it was the first-fruits of success. As I came out, a tall footman in livery accosted me; he was to lead me to the carriage of the Princess Zouroff.”

Péron’s voice grew a little stronger. “The mother of the Russian Ambassador, Boris Zouroff. In the long ago I used to know her. Her husband was a brute. She has two children, Boris and a girl much younger than he. I have heard that Boris is a brute like his father. Go on, Nello. Finish your adventure; but I can guess what is coming.”

“The Princess is giving a reception to-morrow evening at the Embassy in Chesham Place. She has asked me to play, at my own price.”

Tears welled up into the old man’s eyes. “You are made, my son, but we must not be too jubilant. Artists are creatures of the hour. To-day Bauquel, to-morrow Nello Corsini. Take advantage of the present, but it will be wise to look out for something more permanent than the caprice of public favour, which dethrones its idols almost as quickly as it has crowned them.”

Nello started. There was in Péron’s mind the same thought that Degraux had expressed a short time ago.

The poor old man rallied himself for a last effort. “In that little cupboard yonder there is a packet containing a few private papers. You will destroy all except a letter addressed to yourself; in it you will find my last instructions. But you will not open that cupboard till I am dead. You both know as well as I do that it is only a question of a few hours. Well, my son, I do not regret; I have lived long enough to know of your success. And you have both been a great comfort to me. My heart was starved till I met you. You have taken the place of the children I never had.”

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As he finished, there was a thundering knock at the door. Nello jumped up, remembering. Had not the Princess Nada promised to send their own physician?

“I forgot to tell you, *bon* Papa. I told them I was in a hurry to get back to you because you were so ill. The young Princess, a most beautiful girl, inquired your name and address. I gave them. She wished you to have the best medical advice. She is sending you their doctor, Sir Charles Fowler. I am sure that is he. I will go down and see.”

In good health, Papa Péron, in spite of his kind heart and still kinder actions, had a little spice of malice in him. He was not quite exhausted, as his next words showed.

“I know him well by reputation.” This remarkable old man knew of everybody, so it seemed. “Rather pompous and very suave, a good bedside manner, rather despised by his fellow practitioners. But he has a large and very aristocratic connection: he panders to their whims. But it was very sweet of the young Princess. Evidently she does not take after her father, she inherits the sweetness of her mother. Twenty Sir Charles Fowlers cannot keep me alive. But show him up, out of deference to the Princess. He is as much a charlatan in his profession as Bauquel is in his.”

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Nello went downstairs into the shabby sitting-room, where the slatternly maid had just shown in the popular physician.

Sir Charles addressed the young musician in his most bland and courteous accents. He must privately have been very annoyed to be sent at this time of night to such an obscure patient, but he did not betray his annoyance. The Princess Zouroff and her daughter were demi-goddesses to him. Their whims were equivalent to a Royal command.

“Signor Corsini, I presume? The Princess has told me over the ‘phone of your great success to-night; I congratulate you. She has sent me to see a friend of yours, who I understand is seriously ill. Of course it is not very strict professional etiquette that I should intrude myself without a request from his local doctor. But the Princess is a little autocratic, and will be obeyed.” He waved his plump hands deprecatingly, in well-bred apology for the unaccountable vagaries of the aristocracy. “Will you take me to him, please?”

Corsini led him up the shabby, narrow staircase into the small apartment containing the two

beds, in one of which the now successful violinist was used to sleep.

Anita was hanging over the bed, with a white face, the tears raining down her cheeks. In those few seconds of the conversation between her brother and the doctor, the poor old man's soul had taken flight to happier realms.

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Sir Charles stepped to the other side, and his trained eye took in the situation at once.

"Alas, my dear sir, too late! He has passed away, absolutely without pain, I assure you. But I could have done nothing for him. He is very old: a clear case of senile decay, aggravated by the malady from which he has been suffering. Your local doctor will give you a certificate."

He looked intently at the white countenance. Sir Charles might not be a very clever physician, as his less opulent colleagues were always very fond of affirming, but he had special gifts of his own.

"A fine, intellectual head, a distinguished face. I should not be surprised if he had once been a man of some distinction. Do you know anything of his antecedents?"

Nello shook his head. "Next to nothing. Our acquaintance has been too recent for much confidence, but he has been very kind to myself and sister. I gather that he was at one time a very celebrated pianist."

"His name, the Princess told me over the 'phone, was Péron. With the recollection of all the great artists for, say, fifty years, I cannot recall that name. We have here, my dear sir, a mystery, and probably a tragedy also. I will keep you no longer. A thousand regrets that my visit has been so useless."

Nello saw the plump, urbane man to the door, and then returned to the little bedroom where poor old Papa Péron, of the kind heart and the caustic tongue, lay in the last sleep of all.

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CHAPTER V

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His heart heavy with grief at the loss of his kind old friend, who had been to him and his sister a second father, Nello Corsini faced again a fastidious and critical audience in the saloons of the Russian Embassy.

Last night he had played to the élite of the fashionable world, made up of its many elements. Royalty, as represented by the sovereign and her children, the flower of the aristocracy, subordinate members of the financial and commercial world, distinguished persons of every profession.

To-night he was to appear before the smaller world of diplomacy and politics. But he was very confident of himself. If he had not failed on that vast stage, he would not disgrace himself on a smaller one.

The Princess Zouroff was devoted to music, as was her daughter. The somewhat brutal Prince, her son, could not distinguish one note from another—like his father, whose death had been regretted by nobody, excepting his son.

The difference between father and son was very easy to define. The late Prince Zouroff was both brutal and brainless. The present holder of the title was of quite as brutal nature as his father, but he possessed mentality. In short, he inherited the brains of his mother, the gentle, grey-haired lady, whom he despised for her womanly qualities.

Two *prime donne* and a celebrated contralto had already sung. The two *prime donne* had united in a duet which resembled the warbles of two nightingales; the contralto had enchanted the audience with her deep and resonant notes; an accomplished quartette had disbursed exquisite music.

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It was time for the turn of the violinist. Nello Corsini, his slim figure habited in the garments which he had hired from a costumier in the neighbourhood of Wardour Street, followed these famous personages.

He was so adaptive that, in this short space, he had learned to accustom himself to his environment. A few weeks ago he had been playing in the streets for coppers. To-night he was playing for higher stakes.

He darted his bright, keen eyes over the illustrious assembly, and his spirits rose, as they always did when something was to be striven for.

In a far corner he saw three men standing together and whispering confidentially. One was the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, wearing the ribbon of the Garter; another was that brilliant genius, too early eclipsed, Lord Randolph Churchill; the third was a slim, tall young man, who had taken on the dangerous post of Secretary for Ireland, still now with us, beloved and revered by all parties, Arthur James Balfour, who later succeeded his great uncle as Prime Minister.

In these far-off days the old melodies were the sweetest. Nello played first the "Ave Maria" of

Gounod. He followed on with Chopin. And then, as a finale, he played that exquisite little romance which had floated on a wintry night out of the window of a house in Dean Street, with his own variations.

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There was a subdued thrill amongst the audience. There was not the full-throated applause that had greeted him at Covent Garden; but he made allowance for that. The pit and the gallery had had something to say last evening: they were always ready to recognise a new genius. This assembly was too *blasé*, it was no longer capable of great emotion, even in the case of an artist of the first rank. But, in a way, they were subtly appreciative. At least, he had pleased them.

Nello Corsini, with his keen Latin mind, grasped the situation. Princess Zouroff had set the fashion. There were many more fashionable concerts at which he would be invited to play, at remunerative fees. But he also remembered that both Papa Péron and Degraux had pointed out to him the uncertain tenure of public favour.

Unobtrusively, he made his way out, but not before Princess Zouroff had thanked him warmly for the pleasure he had given them, and introduced him to a few notable persons, some of them hostesses as popular as herself, who had spoken gracious words.

And while he was talking to one of these exalted ladies, there had floated to him a vision of youthful beauty, the lovely young Princess Nada, attired in an exquisite dress of white satin, a single diamond star in her dark-brown hair, round her slim neck a row of pearls. These were her only ornaments. She reached out her slender hand.

"Thank you so much, Signor. That exquisite little romance brought the tears to my eyes. We shall meet many times again, I trust, and I shall often ask you, as a special request, to play that to me."

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"Enchanted, Mademoiselle," answered Corsini, bowing low, and blushing a little. He was rather overwhelmed with these compliments from great ladies. The person to whom he was talking when Nada intervened was a popular Countess, the *châtelaine* of an historic house in Piccadilly. She had spoken of a concert in a few days' time which she had invited the young violinist to attend.

"A great artist and a very handsome young man also," murmured the great lady to Nada, as soon as Nello was out of earshot. "He will very soon be the rage. Bauquel will want to commit suicide."

The Prince, who was talking to the Prime Minister, and always saw everything that was going on, had observed the brief conversation between his sister and the violinist. A scowl settled on his handsome face.

As soon as he was disengaged, he overtook the young Princess as she was on her way to speak to some guests.

"Indulging in a little bout of sentiment again with this young fiddler, Nada?" he inquired in sneering tones. "Telling him how delighted you were with his playing, eh? What need is there to thank these hired artists? They are well paid, generally overpaid, for what they do."

Usually the Princess endured the insults and coarse remarks of her truculent brother with disdainful indifference. To-night she was a little unstrung. Like her mother, she was a passionate lover of music—what the French describe as *un amateur*. The lovely voices of the two *prime donne*, the exquisite strains of the violin, had raised her to an exalted mood, in which she only wanted to think of things pure and beautiful.

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The Prince's coarse words and sneering accents jarred upon her sensibilities, and aroused in her a spirit of antagonism. She darted at him an angry and contemptuous glance.

"You are more than usually offensive to-night, Boris. I suppose you have been indulging in your favourite habit of drinking too much champagne."

The shaft went home. It was well known in his family and amongst his friends that the Prince, in spite of the obligations of his high position, was far from abstemious, and had caused some scandal as a consequence of his unfortunate proclivities.

A dull flush spread over his hard, handsome face. "You little spitfire!" he growled savagely. "I wonder when you will be tamed. Never, so long as our mother refrains from keeping a tighter rein over you."

For answer, the young Princess swept scornfully away from him, in her pearls and shimmering white satin, a dream of loveliness to everybody except her churlish brother.

Nello hastened home to his frugal supper in Dean Street, prepared for him by the capable hands of his little sister. A roll of notes had been handed to him on his departure by a slim young man, the secretary of the Princess. In spite of his natural grief at the death of the poor old Papa, he was jubilant, over his good luck. In two evenings he had made a small fortune. He handed over the precious roll of notes to Anita.

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"They are safe in your keeping, my dear one. But you must buy yourself some good clothes. Heaven knows we have starved and gone shabby long enough. But I cannot believe in it yet. It is still a dream."

Poor Papa Péron was lying upstairs. Nello to-night would sleep in an improvised bed made up on the shabby sofa in the sitting-room. Anita, with her usual spirit of self-sacrifice, had offered him

her own attic, while she made shift, but, of course, he would not hear of that.

He had spent the morning in making arrangements for the funeral; they would bury the kind old Papa in two days from now. Happily, there was no lack of money at the moment. A week sooner, and a pauper's grave might have awaited him.

Nello was very excited with his evening, and in consequence, wakeful. He smoked a cigarette, and Anita thought he would suggest retiring to his improvised bed after he had finished. But, to her surprise, he did not seem at all desirous of repose.

"Are you very sleepy, little one?" he asked.

As a matter of fact the girl could hardly keep her eyes open. The long watch by old Péron's bedside had tried her slender vitality sorely. But she was always ready to sacrifice herself to the slightest whim of those she loved.

"Not in the least. What is in your mind, Nello?"

"I thought we might look through the dear old Papa's papers. He said we were to open that cupboard after his death. I wonder if we shall learn who and what he was?"

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Nello went to the little cupboard and drew from it the ebony casket. The first thing that met his eye was the glittering order of Saint Louis, attached to a faded ribbon, which had been returned on the night when he had raised sufficient money on the miniature.

There was a very small bundle of papers, carefully tied up, for good old Papa Péron was nothing if not methodical and neat. There was nothing in the papers to reveal his identity. With two exceptions they were absolutely unimportant documents. These, according to Péron's dying injunctions, Nello committed to the fire. It was the dead man's wish.

The first exception was a letter addressed to Anita, dated a few weeks back, no doubt when he had prescience that the end was near. In it he told her that he had left everything in the world he possessed to her: the ring set with diamonds, which had not then been pawned, the order of St. Louis, and the piano. These would give her and her brother a little capital with which to carry on.

It was a very informal sort of will, although he had taken the precaution to have his signature witnessed by his landlady. But there was no next of kin to dispute the document, and Anita was the sole heiress of his poor possessions—poor from the point of view of money value.

Two other letters were tied up together, the one addressed to Nello himself, the other marked "Private" and directed to the Baron Andreas Salmoros, 510 Old Broad Street, E.C.

The note to Nello, dated a few days after the more or less informal will, was short but to the point.

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Péron informed his protégé, at the time of writing, that his artistic career still hung in the balance. That even if he achieved a certain success, his career was an uncertain one. It behoved him therefore to set his ambitions in other directions which might yield more permanent results. The letter concluded as follows:

"There yet remains one person in the world who will still take an interest in me. For the remembrance of those days long ago, he may prove of service to you when I am gone. After all is over with me, carry this letter to him yourself. Trust it to no other hands. Of course you have guessed that Péron is an assumed name. If the Baron likes to reveal to you my identity, he will do so. It will matter no longer to me."

Nello gasped, as he laid down the letter. "But dear old Papa Péron must have been a distinguished man at one time. He speaks of Salmoros as an old, I should say a great, friend of the long ago. Of course you do not know who he is."

Anita shook her head. She had never heard of the Baron Andreas Salmoros. How should she? Absorbed in her domestic cares, she never read the newspapers.

"But he is one of the greatest financiers in the world," cried Nello eagerly. "He is only second to the Rothschilds themselves."

And then it suddenly struck him that Salmoros was a very busy man, that approach to him was difficult. Péron had expressly said that he was to take the letter to him himself. If Péron had only written a private note introducing him, a note that could be posted! But the poor Papa had not thought of that, of course.

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Then there recurred to him the altered circumstances which had taken place since that letter was written.

Then he was just Signor Nello Corsini, unknown and poor. To-day all the newspapers, London and provincial, had blazoned forth his name as a brilliant and successful artist. Even the great financier would welcome a great musician.

And even if he did not, the Princess Zouroff, at whose house he had played to-night, the Countess, at whose house he was playing shortly, would secure him a personal introduction. It was a certainty that the Baron's vast wealth enabled him to mix in their world.

A month had elapsed since the funeral of the good old Papa, and the note addressed to the Baron Salmoros was still in Corsini's keeping. He knew from a postscript in Péron's letter that no date except that of the year had been affixed to it, for obvious reasons.

The young man was considering his position. There was no doubt that the Baron had been asked to find him a post that would give a more assured future, remove him from the difficulties, the uncertainties of an artistic career. He was not yet quite sure in his own mind that he wanted to avail himself of this opportunity, if Salmoros offered it to him.

His month's experience had been very satisfactory. An enterprising gentleman, keenly on the alert for new clients, had introduced himself to him and established himself as his agent, unfolding a rosy future if he trusted himself to his skilled guidance. Nello had agreed. This plausible person, obviously of the Hebraic persuasion, knew the ropes, Nello did not. Besides, he had come with a recommendation from Degraux, who had spoken highly of his abilities in exploiting young artists, who had set their first step on the ladder of fame.

Yes, the month had been very satisfactory, if it had not reaped quite such a golden harvest as Nello and his sister had anticipated. The agent booked him for private concerts as hard as he could, but there was a great variance in the fees. Some were considerable, some very moderate. Mr. Mosenstein—such was the agent's name—made light of the discrepancy. These were the anomalies incidental to the profession.

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"The great thing is to get known, my dear boy, to be seen everywhere, in South Kensington as well as Belgravia," the plausible agent had explained. "If South Kensington pays you less than Belgravia and Mayfair, never mind. Better take a small fee than stop at home, earning nothing."

All of which went to prove to the shrewd young man that, if he had set his feet upon the first steps of the ladder, he had not, so far, mounted very high up. If the great Bauquel, who had now made it up with Degraux, condescended to play in South Kensington at all, he would demand a higher fee than he obtained in Mayfair, penalising the less fashionable quarter for the honour of his services.

Brother and sister, for Anita was no less shrewd than her brother, and had a fund of common sense, argued the matter out many times, now inclining one way, now another.

The present was distinctly satisfactory: it meant absolute wealth compared with the penury of the old days. The question was, would it last? Was he just, in a secondary sort of way, the fashion of the moment in certain circumscribed circles, to be shortly superseded by somebody who had scored in a night, by some fortunate accident, the same kind of sudden success? In short, should he take that letter to the Baron Salmoros or not? That was the vital question. In his undecided mood, he sought Degraux, who received him with great cordiality, but who had now made it up so effectually with the still powerful Bauquel that he had no opening for another violinist.

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"Privately, my friend, I agree with your old Papa Péron that as an artist pure and simple you are the superior of Bauquel. But what can one do? Bauquel has got the name, he has ten years' reputation behind him. At any moment he may be relegated to a back seat, but at present he fills, he draws. He is an asset to an impresario. In a word, he represents gate money. His name on an announcement fills the house. Five years hence, I predict it will be very different."

Nello pondered these wise and sensible sayings. "Do you think it possible, Monsieur, that I could gain the standing of Bauquel? You have seen and known so much, I can believe in your opinion."

The great director shrugged his shoulders. "You ask me a little too much, my friend. I cannot see into the future. You have made a very considerable success, you created quite a respectable furore on that night—but—" he paused significantly.

"But!" repeated Nello quietly. "Please be quite frank with me. I want to hear the truth."

"I cannot say that you have progressed much since that night. You ask me to speak frankly, and I should say, on the contrary, that you have gone back a bit. No doubt you are doing quite well at these private concerts—that is Mosenstein's specialty. But, supposing I could ask you to play for me at my next big concert, which I can't because Bauquel will be there, I doubt if you would repeat the success."

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"In a word, I am far from being in the first, even in the second rank?" queried Nello. His life had been so full of disappointments, that he had become hardened in the process. He did not seem as disturbed as Degraux had expected he would be by this uncomfortable cold *douche* of plain speaking.

"Fairly well on in the second rank. Mark you, I am not speaking of your standing as an artist, but just from the box-office point of view. You see, one can never tell what goes to the making of a first-class success. An inferior person often achieves it, a genius as often as not misses it."

He did not mention names, but Nello guessed, while he was speaking, Degraux had the great Bauquel in mind, who, he admitted, was the inferior artist.

The young man looked a little downcast, in spite of his stoicism. Degraux clapped him on the shoulder.

"Now, my young friend, cheer up. After all, you are not doing so badly. Live as frugally as you can, put by every penny you can save. If things go well, still save. If they go badly, you will have something put by. You remember our last conversation here, eh? I told you to join, as quickly as possible, the ranks of the exploiters instead of remaining in the vast army of the exploited."

Nello remembered that conversation well. Degraux's advice had made a great impression on him at the time.

"That is precisely what I am here for, Monsieur—to ask you to give me a little more of your valuable advice on a very important matter. I am not at all sure about the rewards of the simply artistic career."

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"Tell me what is in your mind," answered Degraux kindly. It was not the first time in his long and brilliant career that he had been called upon to act as the arbiter of a young man's destiny.

Nello told him of the note addressed to himself, of the letter directed to the Baron Salmoros, whom Péron apparently claimed as an old and attached friend.

Degraux elevated his eyebrows at the mention of that world-known name.

"Salmoros! One of the greatest of European financiers. He knows the secrets of pretty well every Cabinet," he remarked, when the young man had finished his narrative. "Your old Papa Péron must, at some time, have been a person of more than ordinary distinction. You have no knowledge of the contents of that sealed letter?"

"None, Monsieur. I can only guess that I have been recommended to the Baron's protection."

"Of course," said Degraux. "It is a pity this very kind old man was not a little bit more communicative before his death, or in his last letter to you."

"I think he was a little fond of mystery, Monsieur."

"Evidently," said Degraux drily. "Possibly, when you knew him—you told me the acquaintance was very brief—he had begun to go a little off his head. Well, let us see how the matter stands. On the one side, satisfaction with your present lot, with all the possibilities opening out to you. On the other hand, the presentation of this letter, with the chance of the Baron's patronage. If we could only have a peep into that letter we should know better where we were."

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"But that is impossible, Monsieur. We can only guess that the kind old Papa has recommended me in the warmest terms."

"Yes, we may assume that. Then, I think, my young friend, there is only one obvious course. You take that letter to the Baron. When he has read it, he will either put you off with smooth promises, or propose a certain line of action out of deference to his old friend's request. If he should put before you any proposition that does not recommend itself to you, you can easily decline and stick to your present career."

The advice was sound and sensible. By presenting the letter to the eminent financier there was nothing to lose. On the other hand, there might be something to gain.

"Unfortunately, Monsieur, I do not know the Baron personally. I understand he is a very busy man, and access to him a very difficult matter."

"That is so," admitted Degraux. "I know him just a little. I dare say you have heard that he is a great lover of music, and we have exchanged a few words now and then. But I fear my acquaintance with him would hardly excuse a formal note of introduction. But stay, you know the Princess Zouroff and Lady Glendover, at whose house you played lately. He is a friend of both. Either of these will give you what you want. If not, come and see me again and I will think of somebody I know fairly well, who will do it as a favour to me."

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"Both these ladies occurred to me," said Nello. "The Princess is kindness itself; I am sure she would do it at once. But, in case of failure, I will fall back upon you."

With many thanks for his good advice, Nello took leave of the warm-hearted director. Yes, Degraux was quite right. He would present that letter as soon as possible. He would write to the Princess Zouroff to-morrow.

But fate willed it that the Princess's good offices were not required. He was playing that night at the house of a certain Mrs. Raby, who lived in Kensington Gore.

Mrs. Raby was a widow of about fifty years of age, of good family and considerable fortune of her own. When a romantic girl of twenty-two she had eloped with a man some twenty years her senior, who happened to be one of the greatest, if not absolutely the greatest, pianists of his day. For a long time her parents and friends held aloof from her. Artists were all very well in their way, but Constance Raby, with her money and good looks—she was an heiress through her godmother—ought to have made a brilliant match.

But Mrs. Raby loved her long-haired musician, the more perhaps for the fact that he was an Englishman, and never repented her choice. And in time, parents and friends condescended to

bury the hatchet and came to her house, exchanging frigid courtesies with the artistic husband.

To their drawing-rooms flocked the élite of the musical world—great sopranos, great contraltos, nearly every artist of eminence. And in that charming house in Kensington Gore they gave for nothing what they demanded high fees for elsewhere, for was not the host one of their own world, and had they not adopted his charming wife as one of themselves?

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Mr. Raby had died some ten years ago, but his widow still maintained the fame of those musical evenings. And to those who had still their way to make, an appearance in Mrs. Raby's drawing-rooms conferred a *cachet*.

Mosenstein had secured an invitation for his young client. There was no fee. When Nello had demurred to this, not quite understanding the situation, the astute agent had silenced his objections at once.

"You do not understand, my young friend. England is a very funny place. A lot is done here for love. Mrs. Raby occupies a unique position. Supposing you were unknown, to play at one of her evenings would secure you a twenty-guinea engagement in South Kensington. Patti, Lucca, Nielson have sung there for friendship. Sarasate has played there for friendship. My friend, if you are wise, you will be glad that I have procured you an invitation."

Nello made no further objection. Mosenstein knew the ropes as well as anybody. If he urged him to go to the house in Kensington Gore and play for nothing he had a wise motive. Mrs. Raby was evidently a power in the musical world.

The drawing-rooms were crowded, mostly with musical people. But there were a few others from another world; and amongst these, Nello presently discovered his patroness, Lady Glendover, who came here out of sheer love of music. The Countess had to pay five hundred or more for what Mrs. Raby got for nothing.

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She greeted Nello kindly and invited him to sit beside her.

"Do you know many people here?" she asked, as she made way for him on the sofa.

"So far as I can see, nobody but yourself, Madame."

"Oh, then, we will take compassion on each other and keep each other company—at least till you have to play. I suppose you are on the programme."

"I believe so. My agent, Mosenstein, is arranging matters, and he will tell me when I am wanted."

"Very well; until that moment arrives we can sit still and chat. I don't know very many people either: just a few artists who have appeared at my house. The Princess Zouroff sometimes comes, but she is not here to-night. Some evenings, of course very late, it is as good as one of Paul Degraux's concerts, when all the great stars have come on. About one o'clock in the morning they begin to warble and outplay each other. Of course you know Mrs. Raby married the greatest pianist of his day. They perform for her out of camaraderie."

They talked for a little time, when the Countess suddenly exclaimed: "Ah, there is somebody from my own world, the Baron Salmoros. There is such a crush, he does not see me. Do you know him?"

Nello's breath came quickly. "No, Madame, but at the moment he is the one man in the world that I particularly want to know."

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Lady Glendover looked at him sharply, but she was too polite to inquire the cause of his sudden agitation.

"I will introduce you to him with pleasure; but it is no use running after him in this crowd, we shall never catch him. I know his methods, he comes here very often, he is a great *amateur*. He will exchange greetings with the many artists he knows, making a tour of the rooms, and then he will see me and come to a halt in front of us."

Lady Glendover's prognostication of the Baron's movements was a correct one. After what seemed to Nello, watching his slow progress round the room, an interminable period, Salmoros stopped before them and bowed over the Countess's outstretched hand.

"Delighted to see you, dear lady. I have just met Mosenstein, who always arranges the programme. There are not so many stars as usual to-night, but he promises us some very good music."

While he was speaking the young Italian took stock of the great financier. A massive head, surmounted with a mass of snow-white hair, a patriarchal beard of the same hue, a tall, sturdy figure. Nello guessed his age at seventy, but the brightness of his glance, the upright form, gave little sign of age. He went by the evidence of the snow-white hair and beard.

After a brief conversation the Countess turned to young Corsini.

"This gentleman wishes to make your acquaintance, Baron. Signor Nello Corsini. You will no doubt remember him at the last Covent Garden Concert."

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The Baron held out his hand and his smile was very kindly. "I recollect you well, Signor. You played very beautifully; you took the place of Bauquel, who played our good friend Degraux a

rather scurvy trick.”

Nello bowed. He felt very embarrassed. The Countess had discreetly turned her head, so as not to appear to listen to their conversation. The young violinist had, no doubt, something of a private nature to impart.

“I have taken advantage of the Countess’s kindness to make your acquaintance, Baron. The fact is, I have in my possession a letter addressed to you, a few days before his death, by a friend of mine, a Monsieur Péron. Did you know anybody of that name?”

“Péron, Péron!” repeated the Baron, then he shook his snow-white head. “No; that name recalls nobody to me.”

“I have reason to believe it was an assumed one and that he was a great friend of yours some years ago. I am charged to deliver it personally into your hands.”

The bright eyes took on an alert expression. “You have not got it with you, I suppose?”

“No, sir, I would not risk carrying it about with me. Would it be possible for me to see you at your office, or anywhere else, for a few moments?”

The Baron thought a second. “Certainly. Come to Old Broad Street to-morrow morning, say at eleven o’clock. Please be punctual, as my day is pretty well cut up with appointments.”

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“At eleven to the minute, sir,” was Corsini’s answer. After a few minutes’ chat with the Countess, in which he tactfully included the young violinist, the Baron pursued his tour of the drawing-rooms, exchanging numerous greetings, for he knew every artist in London.

CHAPTER VII

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The next morning Corsini presented himself at the palatial premises in Old Broad Street where the Baron evolved his vast financial schemes. After he had waited in an anteroom for a couple of minutes, a slim young man, who looked like a confidential secretary, appeared from an inner apartment, and led him down a long corridor to Salmoros’s private sanctum.

It was a handsome apartment, beautifully furnished. Your feet sank in the thick Turkey carpet; the easy-chairs were models of artistic design and comfort. There were only a few pictures on the walls, but each one was a gem. The Baron was a lover of art in every shape and form, and one of the best-known collectors in Europe. In his business, as well as his leisure hours, he loved to surround himself with beautiful things.

Few, save a few old friends, knew anything of his family or antecedents. The name suggested a Greek origin, although of course most of his enemies would have it that he was a pure Jew. His fine, clear-cut features, however, had no affinity to those of that celebrated race.

He smiled kindly at the young man, and shook hands cordially with him: he had the greatest respect for all persons connected directly with the arts. After a few commonplace remarks, he asked for the letter.

Nello handed it to him, and at the same time showed him the glittering Order of St. Louis.

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“This is one of the few things my poor old friend had in his possession when he died in that poor house in Dean Street, Baron. I have no doubt, in my own mind, that he was once a man of position and distinction.”

The Baron glanced at the Order, and nodded his head. It was evident common persons did not come into possession of such valuable things. Then he opened the letter, and read.

When he had perused it and laid it down on the desk in front of him, a strangely soft expression had come over his fine, intellectual face.

“My poor old friend Jean!” he murmured in a low voice. “How very strange! I believed him dead long ago. There was a rumour that he had been shot in those terrible days of the Commune. Poor Jean! My once dear friend Jean!”

“I am right in saying that the name of Péron was assumed?” asked Nello timidly.

The Baron bent his keen glance on him. “You know absolutely nothing of his real history?”

“For the purposes of identification, nothing, sir. The only thing that he ever let drop was that long ago he had been a pianist of eminence. That I could well believe, for even at the age at which I knew him, his touch was that of a master.”

“Ah, that is all you could gather. Well, my poor old friend was always a little fond of mystery. His real name was Jean Villefort, and he was one of the finest and most successful artists of his generation. You are a musician yourself; you must have heard of him, although, of course, he was long before your time.”

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Yes, Nello had heard of him as one of the great masters of the past. “Then he must have amassed

a great fortune, Baron. How came it that he died so poor and friendless?"

The Baron spoke slowly, in a musing tone, as if following the thread of his recollections. "Yes, he made plenty of money in his time; he had a tremendous vogue on the Continent and was a special favourite of Napoleon the Third; I do not think he ever achieved much success in England or America. I know he was greatly dissatisfied with both his tours in those countries."

The Baron paused, much to Nello's disappointment. He was eager to know all the details of the past life of this strange old man who had passed away under such tragic circumstances. Especially curious was he to learn what had become of all his wealth.

Salmoros looked up and caught the gleam of interrogation in the young man's eyes.

"Naturally you are curious. Well, no doubt my poor old friend made plenty in his time; but he was very lavish, charitable, and open-handed. Still, his fortune could have endured the strain placed upon it by the possession of such amiable qualities. Alas! he was a confirmed gambler; the racecourse and the card-table swallowed up any surplus he ever possessed."

"I understand," said Nello. "And when was it, may I ask, Baron, that you lost sight of him?"

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"He disappeared from Paris—you may say, from the world—about twenty-five years ago, or thereabouts. I was one of his most intimate friends, although he was about seven years my senior. From that day to this, to the moment that you have brought me this letter, I have never heard a word from him. His sudden disappearance was a nine days' wonder, but the world rolled on and the great artist, Jean Villefort, was forgotten.

"That sudden disappearance, the abandonment of such a brilliant career in a moment of despair, was, I need hardly say, the outcome of a tragedy. Also needless to add that, as usual in such cases, a woman was at the bottom of it. The few details that filtered out enabled us to piece together certain things."

"And the certain things?" queried Nello eagerly.

Salmoros spoke in his low, deliberate voice—the voice of the man who, with his vast experience of the world, had known and seen everything, and was surprised at nothing.

"Let me put it to you as shortly as possible. An elderly husband, married to a charming and beautiful young woman some fifteen, perhaps twenty, years his junior. The husband, a member of the old French nobility, a little dull, not gifted with any mentality. The wife, ardent, romantic, a lover of music and all the arts, not a single bond of union between her and her unappreciative husband. You follow me? You are an artist yourself. You will soon see the beginning of the romance that ended in tragedy. In a very inspired mood, you could express it on your violin."

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Nello nodded. His life had been so hard up to the present moment, that he had enjoyed scant leisure to indulge in the softer emotions of life. But, in a vague sort of way, he could appreciate something of the tragedy of Papa Péron's past.

"Tell me something more, if you please. I am very interested."

Salmoros continued in his slow, deliberate tones. "The *femme incomprise*, a more or less bovine husband, a man almost as old as her husband, but ardent and impetuous, ten years younger in spirit than his real age. What happens? The woman falls in love with him for his genius. He bewitches her with his beautiful art. With his deft and skilled fingers, and by Heaven he was almost the finest pianist I have ever heard, he drew out from her her very soul."

"Ah! I can understand he must have been very wonderful," interjected Nello. "Even at his age, there were times when he thrilled me."

Salmoros nodded. "You can understand the spell he would cast over a comparatively young woman. Well, let us get to the end of this. My poor old friend Jean sleeps in peace, why wake up those old faint memories?"

"But they are very interesting, Baron," urged Corsini.

"I know, my young friend. Even I have a melancholy interest in them, because they take me back to the days of comparative youth. Well, to be brief—a romance in a nutshell. A violent altercation between husband and lover, a duel, the husband is wounded, not mortally, carried to his house. The charming young wife, innocent, or perhaps guilty, cause of all this dire misfortune, commits suicide. Jean Villefort, apprised of her tragic end, disappears. He might have thrown himself into the Seine. For days his friends searched for him in the *morgue* to no purpose. And, through you, I have at last unearthed the mystery. Jean Villefort did not avail himself of the coward's resource."

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"Ah, Baron, dear Monsieur Péron—I prefer to call him by that name—was no coward," interjected Nello eagerly.

"I quite agree. He left a world which held no further joys or triumphs for him. *Mon Dieu*, what a strange temperament! Why don't these fellows make art and sentiment a part of their life only, and put in some common sense on the other side?"

"You speak from the great financier's point of view, Baron?" suggested Nello shrewdly.

Salmoros smiled his slow, appreciative smile. "I see, young man, you have got a head on your

shoulders. Well now, let us come to this letter."

Nello was only too anxious that he should.

"I am waiting for that, Baron. Of course I can only guess at the contents that he has recommended me to you."

"That he does in the warmest terms, and for the sake of our old friendship I am prepared to comply with his request. In this letter, which is not dated—he explains that by the fact that he does not know how soon his death will take place—he states that you are hoping to establish yourself as an artist, that he has already secured you a small, but fairly remunerative, engagement at the Parthenon."

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"That is quite true, sir."

"Then, I take it, this letter was antecedent to your considerable success at the Covent Garden Concert. In that comparatively short space of time, your remuneration has gone up by leaps and bounds?"

Nello assented for the second time. "Perfectly correct, sir."

"Then how do we stand? Of course, if you were quite a poor man, I would find you a post at once for the sake of my old friendship with Jean Villefort. But, candidly, do you want my assistance? I am not dissatisfied with my lot, Signor Corsini, I can assure you——"

And Nello murmured, half under his breath: "I should think you were not, Baron, you a financier of European renown."

A whimsical smile overspread the other man's features. "And yet I will tell you a little secret. Music is a passion with me. I am a financier by profession, but art, art alone absorbs my soul. I have tried, oh how hard! to be an executant on more than one instrument. Signor Corsini, I would pay you a hundred thousand pounds to-morrow, if you could teach me to play that exquisite little romance as you played it last night. I feel every note in my soul, but when my feeble fingers touch the strings, they are powerless."

Nello looked at him compassionately. There was in his composition the hard Latin fibre; but here was a new experience for him. Here was a man who had achieved eminence in one of the most difficult professions, a man who could write a cheque for one or two millions. And here he was, lamenting his incapacity to succeed in an art for which nature had given him no equipment.

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"It is very sad, Baron," breathed the young Italian softly. "But in your case, the gods have given so generously. Why should you complain that they have withheld this one small gift, the gift of the executant?"

"You call it a small gift, do you?" replied Salmoros in his deep, sonorous tones. "I call it the greatest gift of all." He paused, reflected a second, and then became again the man of affairs.

"Now, Signor Corsini, to your immediate business. How can I help you for my good old Jean's sake and your own? What are your own views as to the present situation? Are you satisfied, or not?"

Corsini was quite frank. "In a way, yes; in a way, no. Degraux and dear Papa Péron both gave me very good advice——"

"The sum of which was——?" interjected the white-haired Salmoros.

"That unless you make a very great success, the artistic career is of all the most uncertain."

Salmoros nodded his massive head. "I quite agree. Poor dear old Jean was shrewder than I thought. And yet, how simple in some things. Why did he not apply to me instead of drawing his last breath in that miserable house? I would have given him an annuity for life."

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"I am sure you would, sir, but the dear old Papa was too proud to accept charity. Surely it was to his credit that he did not sponge on his old friends?"

"Just like him, just like him, a dear, kindly, impracticable creature. Well, now to your affairs. Do you want to stick to the artistic line, or not?"

"Not if there is anything better in prospect, Baron," answered the shrewd Nello.

The Baron swept him with his keen glance.

"I am rather a judge of men. You seem just the sort of man who would make good. Let me think a little. There is something running in my mind. You might serve my immediate purposes, and at the same time, I might help you in your artistic career. You might have two strings to your bow. What do you think?"

"I am quite in your hands, Baron," was Nello's answer.

The mind of the great financier worked swiftly. He took up two letters, one in French, the other in Italian.

"Take these over to the table by the window, and translate the French into Italian and the Italian into French. Take your time, but do them well."

Nello complied with his patron's request. Salmoros was evidently a man who thought swiftly.

While Nello was engaged on his task, the Baron's private secretary entered.

"The Prince Zouroff wishes to see you, sir."

The Baron frowned. There were certain persons in the great world who were in his good books. The Russian Ambassador was certainly not. He knew a little too much about him. [Pg 84]

He held up a warning finger to his secretary and crossed over to Nello.

"The Prince Zouroff is asking for an interview. You have played at the Russian Embassy; do you want to meet him?"

"No," said Nello shortly; "I don't think I do. I have heard that he is a bit of a brute."

"Quite right, but, on account of his position, we have to cotton to him in a way. With your head over your desk you won't see each other."

The private secretary ushered in Prince Zouroff, the Russian Ambassador.

The Prince was a very overbearing and truculent personage; but he knew full well that even ambassadors have to preserve a modest demeanour, even as their sovereigns, in the presence of all-powerful financiers.

"Greetings to you, my dear Salmoros!" The Prince was always flamboyant. "The Czar has recalled me to St. Petersburg."

Salmoros affected surprise. But he was not surprised in the least. He had received intimation of the news two days ago from the Russian Foreign Office itself.

"Ah, I have heard the rumour," he said in his slow, suave accents. "You are to be Governor of Kieff, a post you have long been coveting, eh? I congratulate you, my dear Prince, although your friends in London will be very sorry to lose you."

"You are mistaken," replied the Ambassador shortly. "Though I have tried several times to obtain the governorship of Kieff my Imperial Master will not give it to me. It is my right by inheritance, because my estates are in that province. I hear that I may be appointed Governor of Archangel; in the meantime, I am to present myself at the Court of St. Petersburg." [Pg 85]

Salmoros did not betray by a flicker of the eyelid that the information was priceless to him.

Zouroff, after a brief sojourn at the Court of St. Petersburg, was to be advanced to the governorship of Archangel.

Salmoros knew what this meant. The Czar was as well aware of the fact as he was. Zouroff was a great nobleman, but also a traitor. The Government was going to proceed by easy steps. From Archangel to Siberia and life-long imprisonment would be a facile progression and create no great scandal, excite very little comment. Prince Zouroff would simply disappear, under this most autocratic of all autocratic governments.

After a short conversation the Baron held out his hand. In his heart he had a little sympathy for this truculent Ambassador, brute as he was, who was going to his doom, the victim of an iron and despotic Government. But perhaps his sympathy was wasted. Zouroff was a traitor, a man who would bite the hand that fed him.

When he had dismissed the Ambassador, he crossed over to the desk where Nello had just finished his translations.

"They are here, Baron. Will you read them?" [Pg 86]

The Baron read them. "Very good, very good, indeed," he said. "Now, Signor Corsini, I think you and I will have a little serious talk."

CHAPTER VIII

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The Baron led Nello from the desk where he had been writing and planted him in one of the numerous comfortable chairs scattered about the handsomely furnished room.

"Sit you down there, my young friend, while I talk to you. Now, these translations are very good, and they have started an idea in my mind which might result in something useful. But, in the first place, I should like to know something of your own views. Would you have any objection to leave England for a space, assuming that I could push your musical interests in another country?"

It did not take the young man long to consider. A musician is, or should be, cosmopolitan; to-day in London, next week in Paris, the week after in Vienna or Berlin.

"One country is as good to me as another, Baron, so long as my chance of a career is equal."

"Good!" The financier looked at his watch. "It is now half-past eleven, and I have a deal to do

between now and one o'clock. Can you see me again at one?"

"My time is at your disposal, sir. I will return at one."

"By that time my ideas will have developed, and I may be able to put before you a definite proposition," said Salmoros. "I have an unpretentious little lunch served here every day when I have no outside engagements. You will honour me by partaking of it. I cannot speak very highly of the *cuisine*; it is quite simple, but I shall be able to give you a very decent bottle of wine."

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"A thousand thanks, Baron." Nello smiled inwardly at his host's apologies for the simplicity of the meal. This rich man did not know, and perhaps it was better he should not know, the depths of the poverty to which his guest had descended, how often he had gone to bed half famished.

At the appointed hour he returned. The same young man who had previously received him showed him into a small room, no less well furnished than the other.

A round dining-table was laid for two. As he had expected, it was to be a *tête-à-tête* meal. He had just time to notice the beautiful appointments of the table, the snowy napery, the rare old silver, the exquisite glass, when Salmoros entered. A moment later the meal was served, simple in its elements, but perfectly cooked.

The wine served during the few courses was champagne. The Baron had a couple of glasses at both lunch and dinner; he believed in its stimulating properties.

Then a bottle of claret of the finest vintage was put on the table, and the financier produced some perfect cigars. There was no doubt that Baron Andreas Salmoros had a great respect for his creature comforts. A man of the profoundest intellect, he was also an artist and an epicure.

"Now, my young friend," he said as he puffed at his excellent cigar with every appearance of enjoying to the full its flavour and perfume. "We will talk. Help yourself to that claret; I can recommend it."

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Nello did as he was requested. His head was swimming a little from the unaccustomed champagne, but he had no desire to forfeit the Baron's good graces by proclaiming himself a weakling. If this was how people in the great world lived, he must pretend to be used to it.

He waited respectfully for the great man to unfold the plan that would perhaps change his whole life and open out to him a new world. Of course he was shrewd enough to guess that whatever was proposed would be as much in the Baron's interests as his own.

But he did not feel resentful over this. Philanthropists pure and simple are not generally found amid such palatial surroundings. Poor old Papa Péron had been one without doubt, and he had flung his money about right and left; wrecked his life for a sentimental attachment and drawn his last breath in a mean lodging. Emphatically Baron Salmoros was not of the same breed. He seemed kindly, and there was often a benevolent gleam in those clear, shrewd eyes. But for every ounce of help he gave, he would stipulate for a handsome return.

"I think, Corsini, we can help each other very considerably. I believe it is in my power to advance you in two ways; in the more permanent direction that my dear old friend, Jean Villefort, suggests, and also in the artistic way. I take it, the latter is really nearer to your heart. Even if your success has not been stupendous, you have set your first footstep on the ladder of fame."

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"I should be very sorry if I found it an absolute necessity to give up my musical career altogether, Baron."

Salmoros nodded his massive snow-white head. "In that you have my fullest sympathy. I told you a short time ago what I would give to possess your executive talent. Well, I have been thinking considerably since you left, and I believe I can solve the difficulty."

Nello followed him with the closest attention. To a certain extent he had found a fairy godfather in Papa Péron, for from the chance meeting on that snowy winter's night had flowed his present success, his introduction to Gay, through Gay his meeting with Paul Degraux. Was he about to find a more powerful and influential one in this world-renowned financier?

"Suppose I sent you on a partly diplomatic mission to Russia, and at the same time insured you certain introductions which would help you greatly in your musical career—What would you say to that? Does the suggestion impress you?"

The young man could hardly believe his ears. Again his thoughts went back to the days when he had played in the streets for a few miserable coppers. And to-day he was sitting, an honoured guest, at the table of one of the greatest financiers in the world. He had to assure himself that he was not dreaming.

"I cannot think of anything more delightful," was the fervent answer.

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The Baron proceeded. "I want a very private and confidential letter—it will, of course, be written in cipher—carried to Lord Ickfold, the British Ambassador at Saint Petersburg."

Nello bowed. This would surely not be a very difficult task.

"You may wonder why I should employ you on this mission. I could get it through a Foreign Office Messenger, as a matter of course, but he would be suspected, and my letter might be abstracted.

They have some very clever people on the other side. You follow me?"

Nello assured him that he did. He was not at all sure that he did follow the windings of this subtle intelligence. But it would never do to let the Baron suspect that.

"Now, nobody will suspect you. It is well known that I am a rather generous patron of the arts, that I have befriended many a struggling genius; helped him upwards in his career. Poor old Jean Villefort has sent you to me, soliciting my influence. I have numerous friends in Russia. You consult me. I come to the conclusion that a short absence from England will whet the appreciation of those who have already recognised you as an artist of considerable ability."

Nello nodded his handsome head. Salmoros was now getting on ground where he could easily follow him.

"I suggest that, with my introduction, you can make a greater and quicker success than here—you can afterwards come back with a foreign *cachet*. At the same time you carry my letter, and put yourself at the disposition of Lord Ickfold and any friends he may introduce you to, on the diplomatic side."

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Yes, Corsini understood perfectly now. He said as much.

"I take it that, up to the present, you have not made a vast number of acquaintances. Anyway, the diplomatic part must be kept a strict secret between us, until I give you leave to speak of it. Perhaps I may never give you leave; anyway, to those few friends you have, give it out that you have seen me, that I have interested myself in your career and have advised you to go to Russia, where I believe my introductions will insure you an immediate success."

"I understand perfectly, Baron. When do you wish me to start?"

"As soon as possible; the matter is urgent. But before we settle that, let me recommend you to pay a casual visit to Paul Degraux and tell him what I have told you to say. You need mention nothing about poor old Jean; he would not be interested in it, if you told him the story. Just mention that you were presented, which is the truth, by Lady Glendover; that you achieved the rest yourself."

"I will pay a casual visit to Degraux to-morrow."

"Right," said the Baron, pleased to find his latest pupil was so quick. "Degraux is in with all the musical people, and what you tell him to-day will be whispered to a hundred persons in the course of the next few days. And having assisted at your *début*, he will be prepared to claim a considerable amount of interest in your success. Now, when can you go? I have told you the matter is urgent. What engagements have you got on?"

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"Only two, Baron. One to-night, at Leicester House, the other three nights hence."

"We can say, then, that you will be ready to leave England on the Monday of next week?" queried Salmoros.

"I shall be ready," answered Nello quickly. Then he waited. The financier would surely say something about ways and means. He had saved a certain sum of money in the short time that he had been successful, but that modest store would not support the expenses of a Russian campaign.

But of course Salmoros was not a man likely to overlook such an important point as this.

"One does not travel for nothing. And I may tell you that in this enterprise, on which you are embarking at my instigation, there will be no lack of the sinews of war. I shall give you a considerable amount of money to start with. When you arrive in Russia, you will be well provided with funds. I can assure you that you will not regret having temporarily relinquished your artistic career here. Lunch with me again here on Friday of this week. I will have everything ready cut-and-dried for you."

The great man looked at his watch. "Fortunately, not a very busy day. I am glad we have had plenty of time to talk. But I will give you more time on Friday."

Nello perceived that he was dismissed. This man had many irons in the fire; he could not stay too long in warming one. Still, there was something he must say before he left; something very important.

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"Pardon me, Baron, if I intrude upon a few more seconds of your valuable time. You know nothing of my domestic circumstances. I have neither wife nor sweetheart, but I have a young sister, to whom I am very tenderly attached. I may take her with me on this journey?"

Over Salmoros's usually kind face there crept a slight frown. He had not thought of this, and yet a young man was bound to have an entanglement of some sort. Fortunate that it was not a wife, still more fortunate that it was not a sweetheart. He knew the artistic temperaments well. One smile of a woman would outweigh much gold.

Then the frown died away and the benevolent smile came back. He must reason with this young man calmly.

"I take it you are very devoted to each other?"

Nello answered fervently. "We think with one brain, we feel with one heart, sir. It will cut her to the quick for me to leave her behind."

The Baron spoke musingly. Years ago he had had his love affairs like other men; but women had never entered into his scheme of things as they had in the case of his old friend Jean. They were meant for man's leisure, for his playtime; they could not be woven into the serious business of life.

"That is all very well, Corsini, but hearts are not so easily broken by a little absence. One day you will leave her for a wife, one day she will leave you for a husband. I trust she will be sensible. You cannot go on this expedition hampered by a woman, whatever her relationship. You will come back to her soon."

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"How soon do you think, sir?" questioned Nello eagerly.

"Say, in two or three months." The Baron's tone was a little hesitating. He knew in his own mind that there was a darker side to the picture, that there might be an altogether different ending to the journey. But he was not going to frighten the young man with that, or he might cry off at the last minute.

Nello persisted; his love for his self-sacrificing little sister was very real, very deep.

"She is young, in many things younger than her years, and utterly ignorant of the world. I cannot leave her alone, Baron, in the charge of a careless landlady. I would rather give up the whole thing and risk my chances here in London."

The Baron thought to himself that here was a more difficult person to deal with than he expected. But it was not very long before his fertile brain solved the difficulty.

"I understand. I am the last man in the world to suggest such an inhuman thing. I can make the way easy for you. Two dear friends of mine, old maids I suppose we must call them, have a big house in Kensington. They are very lonely, without any young relatives. At a word from me they would be delighted to take charge of her during your brief absence. Keep what money you have saved for yourself. I will charge myself with her maintenance, and she shall have plenty of pocket-money, I can assure you."

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Nello grasped the old man's hand warmly. "You have relieved me of the last ounce of hesitation. A thousand, nay, ten thousand thanks."

The Baron returned the pressure; he was delighted he had got his own way. "That is understood. On Friday I will have that cut-and-dried also. Now keep up your little sister's spirits—what is her name? Eh, Anita. Tell her that you are going to make fame and fortune, that you will soon be back, and that she will be very happy with these two dear old ladies, who will cosset her like a baby."

When he left the Baron he could not quite decide what his feelings were. In a sense he was jubilant at the brilliant prospects before him, but his heart was heavy for Anita. They had lived together all their lives; they had been through terrible and heart-breaking times.

To-night he was playing at Leicester House, the abode of a musical duchess. He wanted to play his best; he would not dare to tell the unsuspecting Anita of his speedy departure. Her tears, her grief, would unman him.

The first persons he met in the specious saloons overlooking the Green Park were the Princess Zouroff and her daughter.

The girl held out her hand. "Ah, Signor, I am so pleased to see you. You must play that lovely little romance to-night. Shall I tell you the reason?"

"I require no reason, Princess. It is enough for me that you request me to play it. It shall be played." He blushed a little as he spoke. He was not accustomed to indulge in *persiflage* with great ladies.

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A little colour came into her face also. Perhaps the young musician's tone had been more fervent than he intended.

"But I will tell you the reason, nevertheless. We have been recalled to St. Petersburg; we leave London next week. That is the reason my brother Boris is not here; he is winding up affairs for his successor."

A deeper flush spread over Nello's face. "But that is very strange. I am going there myself. I start next Monday."

The young Princess looked pleased. She turned to her mother. "Signor Corsini must call upon us, mother." She looked at him with a little smile. "To-night will not then be the last time I shall hear that lovely romance."

The elder woman seconded the invitation warmly. "You shall come and play for us, Signor. I think you will find the Slav temperament a little more fervent than the Anglo-Saxon one."

Nello thought this a good time for explanations. Degraux would spread the news about in his world, the Zouroffs would spread it about in theirs.

"You know, of course, the Baron Salmoros?"

The Princess replied that they had a slight acquaintance with that distinguished financier.

"Lady Glendover introduced me to him. He is a very considerable *amateur*, he has been kind enough to take a very warm interest in me. He is going to push my fortunes in Russia."

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"His name is one to conjure with in Russia," said the grey-haired Princess. "He stands very high in the favour of his Imperial Majesty."

Princess Nada nodded him farewell. "It is not good-bye, then, only *au revoir*. I suppose artists and ambassadors are the greatest cosmopolitans on earth. We shall meet next in St. Petersburg."

And, on the Monday of the following week, Corsini set out on his expedition.

He had seen Degraux, who had congratulated him heartily. "Salmoros pulls so many strings; he can do more for you in a week than I could do for you in twelve months," he had told him. "He has run several theatres for people he believed in. He will do anything in the world for you when he once takes a fancy."

And little Anita had been very brave; she wept a good deal when she was alone, but in her brother's presence she kept her tears back. Was she to oppose the feelings of her loving and undisciplined heart to the fiat of this new benefactor who had come so unexpectedly into their lives?

So she went meekly to the big house in Kensington, tenanted by the two dear old maids who were prepared to mother her, as much for her own sweet ways as from their ardent admiration for the compelling Salmoros, who had been a bosom friend of their father.

"Two or three months and I shall be back again!" sighed Corsini as he settled himself in the train. Little could he guess what the future would unfold as he made this confident prediction.

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CHAPTER IX

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Weary and worn with his long journey, Nello dismounted at the little wayside station about thirty miles from St. Petersburg. All passengers were peremptorily ordered to alight. Presently he learned that there had been a slight railway accident in front, and that he might have to wait two or three hours before he could get on to the capital.

He walked in the direction of the little village. There was evidently a great stir taking place in this ordinarily quiet neighbourhood. Mounted soldiers were drawn up before the old posting-inn.

Nello happened to get hold of a man who could speak a little French, in a halting, but intelligent way.

"Quite a commotion for such a tranquil spot. What is it that is on the *tapis*?" inquired Corsini.

The man explained in his slow French. "Something out of the usual, Monsieur. Have you ever heard of a terrible fellow, one Ivan, nicknamed 'The Cuckoo'?"

No, Nello had never heard of him. "Is he a very formidable personage this 'Ivan the Cuckoo,' then?"

The man explained elaborately that Ivan was a much-feared outlaw, that he was in the vicinity with a gang of desperadoes and assassins. He was a convict who had escaped from the mines of Siberia, and had gathered round him a band of miscreants as desperate as himself, and as careless of consequences. They had lived by preying on the peasants and stray travellers.

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"The police are endeavouring to block the roads, so that, in desperation, he and his associates may be driven into the village and captured," concluded the man who had volunteered the explanation in his halting French.

Corsini thanked him, and strolled along down the straggling village street. What was he to do till the railway service was restored? The village inn was open, where, if he pleased, he could go and saturate himself with vodka or some other potent spirit; but the young man had the abstemiousness of the Latin races. He did not want to amuse himself in this fashion.

He would take a little stroll. Occupied with his own thoughts of the life and reception awaiting him in St. Petersburg, with those powerful introductions from the influential Salmoros, he did not think of the risk he was running in wandering away from the protected precincts of the quiet village, guarded as it was by those stout mounted soldiers. Ivan and his band were lurking about somewhere, ready to pounce on the unwary traveller.

After a few minutes' slow walk, he came to a roadside ikon. Mechanically he stopped and crossed himself. He was a man of deeply religious feeling, and he fancied he had been blessed with a good omen on his entrance into this strange country. A few prayers to the Blessed Virgin and he would be sheltered from all harm.

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Hardly had his lips ceased moving in reverent supplication, when he was aware of a strange

presence. A tall, bearded man emerged from the semi-gloom and held out his hands with an imploring gesture.

"Save me for the sake of her whom we both reverence," he cried. He spoke, like the last man who had addressed Nello, in lame and halting French. He had evidently appreciated the fact that Corsini was not a fellow-countryman.

Corsini started back and his hand stole to his hip pocket, from which he produced a very serviceable revolver, which he levelled straight at the intruder.

"Who and what are you?" he cried loudly, with a resolution he was far from feeling. This rough, unkempt man looked as if he was possessed of giant strength. If it had come to a hand-to-hand tussle, he could have broken the slim young Italian in two. But Nello would not let it come to that. He kept his pistol well levelled at the stranger's head. The least movement and he would fire.

"Save me for her sake, for the sake of the Virgin," pleaded the man in despairing accents. "You are not an outlaw like me; you have not been through what I have. I trust you, for a man who says his prayers with the devotion you do—I watched you behind the trees—would never betray his hunted fellow-creatures."

And then a light came suddenly to Corsini, standing there, armed with that eloquent pistol.

"You speak of yourself as an outlaw. I have just come from the little village yonder, which is in a state of commotion with mounted soldiers. They are looking for an outlaw, a convict escaped from the mines of Siberia. I am right in saying that you are 'Ivan the Cuckoo.' Where is your band of assassins and robbers who prey upon the travellers and peasants?"

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The miserable man fell at his feet. Nello, in the dim light, saw that his face had gone livid.

"You have guessed, Monsieur. It is true. I am Ivan the outlaw. You cannot appreciate the misery that drove me to this."

In a dim sort of way Nello understood. This man was an outlaw. Was it not just a chance that he was not one himself? Many a night, as he had played in the cold streets for a few miserable pence, he had passed the flaring restaurants, the well-lighted shops, their windows full of precious things to be coveted by the poor and hungry. He could not deny that many a time he had railed at the world's injustice, that criminal thoughts had surged through his half-maddened brain.

He thought of the saying of the old Quaker, whenever he heard of a criminal on the road to death. "There, but for the grace of God, goes myself."

Yes, but for the sudden intervention in the shape of good old Papa Péron, he might have drifted into evil courses like the wretched creature grovelling at his feet. It was not for him to judge.

He looked at him steadily, still keeping the pistol levelled at the vital part, and repeated his question.

"What has become of your band of robbers and assassins?" he asked sternly.

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"Dispersed, Monsieur—dispersed, I give you my word. Yesterday we learned that the soldiers and police were on our track, were preparing to draw a cordon round us. It was a case of *saue qui peut*, devil take the hindmost. We agreed to separate. There were not more than half a dozen of us, but our numbers have been exaggerated. We all scattered in different directions. Somehow, I stumbled up here, and you tell me the little village is astir."

"What is it you want of me?"

"Just a little money, Monsieur; just a little money to help me on my way to St. Petersburg, where I shall find friends."

Nello looked at him suspiciously. "But why do you want money? It was only yesterday that you heard the police were closing round you. You have been robbing as you go. When you agreed to separate, no doubt you divided the ready money."

"That is true, Monsieur; you are very clever," replied the grovelling man in a fawning voice. "You will hardly believe me when I tell you, but I swear it is true. Last night I slept in a little inn a few miles from here. I had drunk heavily, I admit; I slept very soundly. When I awoke in the morning every coin I possessed had been stolen from my pockets. I, an old hand, blush to tell you, Monsieur; but I, who have robbed so many, was robbed myself."

"Do you suspect anybody?" was Nello's next question.

The man uttered a fierce imprecation. "Yes, I do; I suspect one of my so-called pals. As captain I took the biggest share when we agreed to separate. I caught his eye fixed upon me with a very sinister look. My theory is that he followed me at a safe distance and saw where I was lodged. He was well aware of my habits; he knew I should be pretty fast asleep. He climbed up through the window, Monsieur, and took every copper. I was too drunk to hear him. If I had been in my sober senses, I would have strangled him, and added one more crime to the many committed by Ivan the outlaw." He ended with a defiant grin, that showed a row of strong white wolfish teeth.

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Nello mused for a little space. The man might be speaking truth; he was half disposed to think so.

On the other hand, he might be telling him a tissue of lies.

"Why are you not armed?" he asked suddenly.

"I have a pistol, Monsieur, but it is empty. I could find no place in which to buy cartridges. See for yourself."

He fumbled in his pocket and threw down the weapon on the ground. Nello picked it up cautiously; it was, as its owner had truly declared, harmless.

A grim smile crossed the young man's countenance, but he did not for a second relax his vigilance. This ruffian of the highway was, no doubt, as cunning as he was plausible.

"If your pistol had been loaded, I expect you would have extorted money from me instead of begging it."

Ivan the outlaw shook his big head. "Under ordinary circumstances, yes, Monsieur. Adversity has taught me not to stand upon ceremony. But when I saw your lips moving in prayer before the ikon, I would not have harmed a hair of your head. You would have been sacred." [Pg 106]

Truly a strange being, imbued with the ever-present superstition of the Russian peasant, thought Nello to himself.

"And you want money from me. Of course you know what my duty is, as a peaceable man who has no sympathy with robbers and assassins?"

"Certainly, Monsieur. If you don't choose to shoot me in a vital spot and so insure my death, you ought to maim me to prevent me from moving, leave me here and go and fetch the police from the village to take me into custody." The man had spoken so far in a low, imperturbable voice; then at the end he lashed himself into sudden fury and shrieked out.

"It's a toss of a copper to me what you do. But if you won't give me any money, kill me outright. I have not made such a success of life that I am anxious to enjoy much more of it. Kill me, Monsieur, and finish it once for all. The police will thank you for having got rid of 'Ivan the Cuckoo.' They won't ask too many questions."

Nello thought for some little time. His thoughts went back to a very miserable night, some six months ago. He had been playing in the streets and had returned home with nothing. He owed the rent for the miserable hovel in which they sheltered; they had no food.

He had looked his sister squarely in the face and had whispered the question—"Is life worth living, Anita, under such conditions?" She had returned his gaze with a face as white as his own, but she had not faltered, as she replied, "Nello, I leave it in your hands." And, thank Heaven, he had conquered that terrible fit of despair, to find, later on, a new world opening to him. [Pg 107]

He handed the wretched man a sum of money and spoke in very gentle tones.

"God be good to you, my poor friend, and soften your heart. I know not if the world has been too harsh to you, or you have too grievously offended the world. Go in peace. I am not your judge, and I will not be your executioner."

With a brief blessing, the outlaw took the money and slunk away in the gathering darkness.

"I shall remember your face for ever," he whispered in farewell. "It is not likely we shall ever meet again. But if we do and I can repay my debt, I will, and with interest."

A few hours later Nello was in St. Petersburg. He put up at one of the best hotels in the city, acting upon the instructions of Salmoros. That gentleman had urged upon him the necessity of keeping up a good appearance, and spending money lavishly, at any rate for the present.

That night he had confused dreams of his gentle little sister Anita, the beautiful Princess Nada, and the rough outlaw whom he had saved from justice.

Next morning he made his way to the British Embassy and inquired for Lord Ickfold, mentioning that he had come on a special mission from the Baron Salmoros. In a few moments he was shown into His Excellency's presence. [Pg 108]

Lord Ickfold was a handsome, presentable man of about sixty years of age. Contrary to the fashion of the day, he was clean-shaven. Being a widower, an unmarried daughter presided over the establishment. This morning he was at a somewhat late *déjeuner*, alone.

He rose and shook the young man cordially by the hand. "Anybody who comes from my good old friend Salmoros is especially welcome," he said with true diplomatic urbanity. "By the way, have you breakfasted? I am very late; I had to send important despatches last night. I did not get to bed till four this morning."

Nello answered with equal courtesy that he had already made his meal, and handed him the bulgy packet with which the Baron had entrusted him.

The Ambassador perused the contents of the packet slowly as he consumed his breakfast. But the last letter he read seemed to agitate him to an unwonted degree. He jumped up hastily, rang the bell, and commanded the footman to order his carriage immediately. For a moment he almost seemed oblivious of the young man's presence.

"Pardon me, Signor Corsini. I must drive to the Winter Palace at once; the news in the last letter is of extreme urgency. We will go down together when the carriage comes. Can I drop you anywhere?"

But Nello preferred to walk and take his bearings of the wonderful city. Lord Ickfold shook him warmly by the hand at parting. [Pg 109]

"I have your address. It will not be long before I shall want to see you again. If you are writing to the Baron to-day, please give him my warmest regards and a thousand thanks. It may be a little time, for certain reasons, before I communicate with him directly. In fact, I would rather send a letter to you to be forwarded."

Nello walked the gay streets for some time. Being a very shrewd young man, in spite of his comparative youth, it seemed to him that Lord Ickfold and the Baron were playing some subtle game, in which he was to be used as a pawn.

But what did that matter, so long as his career was advanced between the pair?

And then his thoughts reverted to the charming young Princess Nada. When would he meet her again? She would be in St. Petersburg this week, so she had told him.

CHAPTER X

[Pg 110]

In the private room of Count Golitzine, the Czar's private secretary, sat two men—the Count himself and Lord Ickfold, the British Ambassador. The apartment was in a secluded wing of the Winter Palace.

The Ambassador was reading aloud from the Baron's covering letter, which he held in his hands.

"Remember, the young man, Corsini, whom I am sending you is everything for your purpose. Only you must keep him in entire ignorance of the part he is to play—at any rate for the present—as he is still very young and might be open to the influence of women. This is a most vital point. He is very intelligent without being suspicious; honourable, trustworthy, and innocent, without being a fool. I think I have taken his measure pretty accurately. He is devoted to his art—he is really a most accomplished musician, as the notices I enclose will prove—and you must get him pushed forward to the premier place, through the good offices of your friends. The Zouroffs are returning for a short space to the Court and he will have the *entrée* to their house. I fancy, from what I have heard, that the Princess Nada is just a little attracted by him. The important thing, however, is to get him an introduction to La Belle Quéro. She is hand in glove with Prince Zouroff, and from that fact alone to be suspected. They have been in correspondence with each other all the short time he has been in England; but although I have tried my best, I have never been able to get hold of any of their letters."

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Lord Ickfold paused a moment and looked at the Count, who nodded his head.

"Yes, I agree. Corsini may be very useful, especially if he manages to captivate La Belle Quéro. That is, no doubt, what Salmoros has in his mind, amongst several other things."

The Ambassador resumed his reading. "I regret that I have but a slight clue to what I conceive to be a very bold and desperate conspiracy, in which Zouroff is one of the leading figures. The man has a certain amount of brains and a considerable amount of daring, which makes him the more to be feared. But the information which I send your Excellency in other letters is absolutely reliable. For the present, until we can learn more, use all your influence through Golitzine and others to make sure that the Emperor does not appear in public more often than is absolutely necessary. Otherwise, I fear disaster."

The two men discussed the situation for some time. There were other documents besides the covering letter which they read very carefully.

Golitzine summed up, as it were. "Our hopes lie in the direction of La Belle Quéro through this young Italian, who, you tell me, is handsome and also a talented artist."

"You have read in one of those other letters what Salmoros has said of him—that he has created a considerable success in London, and only just wants a little influence to push him into the front rank."

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The Count smiled. "That is easy, my dear friend. The Director of the Imperial Opera is getting a trifle old. We will pension him, and put Corsini in his place."

"A bold stroke," said Lord Ickfold admiringly. "There is something to be said for an autocratic government after all. We dare not do anything of the kind in our country; all the Press would be up in arms. With you, a stroke of the pen settles everything."

The Count's smile deepened. "And after all, my lord, in the long run, it works as well as in your democratic country. In the end, substantial justice is done, rather more swiftly, by our methods."

"It seems to me that La Belle Quéro is the crux," commented the Ambassador. "Suppose she refuses to fall in love with this Corsini, what then?"

"She will not refuse," replied the Count, speaking with his assured man-of-the-world air. "The relations between her and the Prince have been of long standing, I admit, and she is also a woman who might be attracted by a certain amount of brutality which our excellent friend Boris has in perfect abundance. But this young man is a Latin like herself, an artist like herself. Bah! In twenty-four hours Zouroff will be forgotten. Besides, he is verging on middle age, and this Corsini is a youth. Besides, further, he will be the Director of the Imperial Opera. She will be dependent upon him for small kindnesses, little favours, which I shall instruct him to be lavish of. You understand?"

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The morning after the interview between these two exalted personages, the Ambassador's smart carriage stopped at Nello's hotel. The slim secretary alighted and sought the young musician, with a message from his chief that he desired to see him immediately at the Embassy.

"You see I have not forgotten you, Signor Corsini," was Lord Ickfold's cordial greeting as Nello entered the room. "Salmoros has asked me to use all my influence to advance you in your profession, and I intend to do so. It will give me the greatest pleasure."

He wrote a brief note and handed it to the young man. "This is a letter to Count Golitzine, the Emperor's secretary, who wields more influence than anybody in St. Petersburg. You will find him at the Winter Palace. My carriage is waiting to drive you there."

Events were happening very rapidly, Nello thought. When Salmoros took a thing up, the wheels of action appeared to move very easily. Also, he was beginning to get a firm foothold in the great world of diplomacy and politics. Yesterday he had made the acquaintance of the British Ambassador; this morning he was to interview the Emperor's private secretary, the most powerful man in St. Petersburg, and consequently in Russia.

The Count received him with more than ordinary graciousness, and questioned him kindly about his London experiences. Lounging by the mantelpiece of the room in which the two men were seated, was a tall, quietly-dressed middle-aged man in civilian clothes. Nello took him to be either an official of the Court or a private friend of the secretary.

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At a pause in the conversation, this person, whoever he was, suddenly turned to the young man and carelessly asked in French, "Do you know any one of position in St. Petersburg, Signor Corsini?"

Nello frankly answered that with the exception of Lord Ickfold and the Count, he knew nobody except the Princess Zouroff and her daughter. He explained how he had met them, how he had played at their house in London, and been invited to visit them here.

Nello fancied that a slight frown come over the unknown's face at mention of the name Zouroff. But his comment was quite simple. "Ah, the Ambassador and the Count between them will soon extend your circle of acquaintance. I understand you come with strong letters of introduction from that splendid old fellow, Salmoros."

Nello bowed. Evidently this personage, to whom he had not been introduced, knew what was going on. He must certainly be an official of some importance, and appeared to be quite at his ease in Golitzine's presence.

The Count resumed his conversation with Nello, and the other man quitted his lounging position by the fire-place, and walked down the long room to the deep bay window, from which he pretended to look out. But all the while he was listening intently to the other two.

"And now, Signor Corsini, I have a little surprise for you, and one which I hope will be welcome," were the Count's parting words. "The present Director of the Imperial Opera has for some time contemplated retirement. He is growing a little deaf, and finds that the infirmity militates against the proper performance of his duties. He will relinquish his post next week, and I have much pleasure in conferring the appointment upon you. I do so with the sanction of my Imperial Master, to whom I have shown the Baron's strong letters of recommendation."

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Nello felt the room going round. Could he believe his ears? Only a few hours in St. Petersburg, and promoted to one of the most coveted posts in the musical world! Why, he was as great as Degraux. Truly, the white-haired Salmoros was a wizard, masquerading under the guise of a benevolent financier.

With a great effort he pulled himself together and stammered his thanks. "I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude, your Excellency. I shall do my best to justify your kindness. But I feel it will be no easy task to follow in the footsteps of such an illustrious predecessor."

As soon as Nello had retired, the man who was lounging in the bay window turned round to Golitzine and shot at him the abrupt question, "Well, what do you think of him, eh? Is that shrewd old fellow Salmoros right? Will he be useful to us?"

The Count replied in respectful tones. "It is rather early to form a judgment, your Majesty; but I must own I am very favourably impressed with the young man. I think he would be as true as steel to those who had befriended him."

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Nello had little suspected that the tall middle-aged person, dressed in civilian attire, whom he had taken for an official of the Court or a personal friend of the Count's, was the Emperor Alexander himself, the autocrat of all the Russias, supposed to be the strongest man in Europe,

who could bend a horse-shoe between his fingers.

"The one thing to do now is to bring this young Italian and La Belle Quéro together." The Emperor spoke in a musing tone. "That is what the Baron intends. And we know besides that she is suspected by our secret police. Half the men who go to her little parties are in their black books; about Zouroff, we have already pretty convincing evidence. My own belief is that she is one of the prime movers in the affair."

"So far, of course, nothing has been brought home to her. She entertains these men, I know, but she is a foreigner, a Spaniard, and cannot be well acquainted with our domestic politics," interjected the Count, who was rather favourably impressed with the beautiful contralto. "Still, in this direction, Corsini may be very useful. He may be able to worm something out of her."

"Well, Golitzine, we will bring matters to a head as soon as possible, so far as these two people are concerned," commanded his Majesty. "Let your wife give a concert before the week is out and engage La Belle Quéro and this young Corsini for it."

The Count bowed. "I will execute your orders, Sire. I agree it would be politic to introduce them under social auspices, rather than strictly business ones. Next week he will be installed at the Opera, and must at once come into touch with her in pursuance of his professional duties."

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"Precisely. That is just what I wish to anticipate. You have, as always, most accurately taken my meaning."

A gleam of anxiety came into Golitzine's eyes as he ventured to give a word of warning.

"I trust that your Majesty does not propose to do me the honor of attending this function?"

"Why not? I had rather thought of coming, in order to learn from you how the first act of the comedy was going. What are your objections?"

"You will remember, Sire, the solemn warning Salmoros has given me: that you should show yourself in public as little as possible. I would beseech your Majesty to pay heed to that warning. I cannot bar the suspects from my house. Zouroff, for example, who arrives to-morrow, must receive an invitation."

The Emperor indulged in an angry gesture. "It has come to something when I have to slink away and hide myself from a traitor like that! But you are right, Count; Salmoros is right. We must bide our time until we can catch them red-handed. Then, Heaven help them! No, I will not attend your wife's concert, from motives of prudence. But you will let me know early next morning if the scheme is progressing?"

Count Golitzine accompanied his Royal Master to the door; then he returned to his seat to meditate profoundly over what was happening.

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CHAPTER XI

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It wanted two days to Nello Corsini's assumption of his post as director of the Imperial Opera, and to-night was the night of Countess Golitzine's concert.

Nello was to play to-night in his private capacity of violinist, his fame having already spread abroad through the good offices of the Count. As soon as he took up his office as director he would not be able to take on many private engagements. To use the language of Degraux, he would be one of the exploiters rather than one of the exploited.

The saloons of the Countess were very crowded. A rumour had gone around that the Emperor himself would grace the function with his august presence. This rumour, as the previous chapter has revealed, was a false one; but its circulation had provided the hostess with many guests who otherwise would not have put in an appearance.

Nello Corsini, at present unrecognised by the fashionable crowd which had only heard of him by name, made his way amongst the beautifully attired men and women. There was no familiar face amongst this vast throng. For a moment he felt just a little home-sick; he thought of his little sister Anita. Oh, why could he not have brought her?

And then, suddenly, his glance brightened. Standing a foot in front of him were the grey-haired Princess Zouroff and her radiant, charming daughter.

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Nada stretched out a welcoming hand. "We must have raced each other across Europe. I see you have your violin-case with you. You are going to play."

"Yes, and I shall certainly play your favourite. I arrived just a day or two in front of you, and of course, you have not heard of my good fortune. Through the offices of Count Golitzine, I have been appointed to the post of Director of the Imperial Opera."

The young girl opened her eyes wide; and turned to her mother. "What do you think of that, dearest? Signor Corsini is appointed to the directorship of the Imperial Opera."

The elder woman smiled, and replied in her calm, quiet accents, directing her gaze at the young

Italian.

"I told you, Signor, that the name of Salmoros was one to conjure with in Russia."

Nello was about to reply, when the young Princess put her finger to her lips. A sudden hush had spread over the assembly. A beautiful young Spanish woman had just ascended the small platform—a young woman known by the affectionate nickname of La Belle Quéro.

She sang the well-known song from *Lucrezia Borgia*, "Il Segreto per esse felice," in her deep, resonant, contralto tones. She sang it with a vigour and abandon which placed beyond question the fact that she was a superb artist, as well as a beautiful woman.

When she had finished, there was tremendous applause. An encore was insisted on and granted by the obliging *prima donna*. The Count Golitzine himself led the great singer from the platform to a seat. His keen eye had already observed Corsini in attendance on the Zouroffs. He beckoned to the young man, who made a hasty apology to the Princess and her daughter.

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"I have the pleasure of presenting one great artist to another," said the Count in his suavest tones. "Signor Corsini, who will presently enchant us on the violin, to Madame Quéro, who has already captivated us with her liquid notes. You have no doubt already heard, Madame, that next week Signor Corsini takes over the post of Director of the Imperial Opera."

Madame Quéro—she had a husband knocking about somewhere in Spain, who never came into her calculations or scheme of existence—flashed at the handsome young Italian a very charming and provocative smile.

"We shall have to work together very soon, shall we not, Signor? I am afraid you will find me a somewhat difficult person. It is just as well we should meet first on neutral ground. Perhaps when we do quarrel, we may be disposed to forgive each other the more readily for that fact."

Nello was becoming quite a man of the world in this rarefied atmosphere into which he had been so suddenly projected. He replied to the raillery of the beautiful singer in becoming language. She swept an approving glance over him.

"I think we shall soon be very good friends," she said in a gracious voice. "Our present Director is a bit of a bully, and I believe hates women." She shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Well, he is ancient and cantankerous. You are young; I am sure you do not hate women, just because they are the inferior sex."

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The smile that accompanied the words became more seductive. Corsini was a little put to it to preserve his equilibrium. He had been welcomed cordially by a Princess and her charming daughter. Here was a celebrated *prima donna* of great beauty, openly declaring that she was ready to flirt with him—ready to be made love to, if he were disposed that way.

He paid her some gallant compliments, of the kind that come readily to the lips of members of the Latin races; but, as he did so, his glance stole unconsciously to the lovely young Princess, and involuntarily there came into his eyes a light that was noted by the observant Spanish woman.

"You admire the Princess Nada Zouroff immensely. Is it not so? You have a good excuse; she is certainly very beautiful. An exquisite bud rather than a full-grown rose, eh, my friend?"

"Perhaps, Madame," replied the diplomatic Italian. "But all flowers are beautiful, whether in bud or full blossom."

"For myself, were I a man, I should not be very greatly attracted by immaturity. We are using flowers in the form of an allegory. Of course we are really speaking of women." She threw at him one of her most dazzling smiles. There was nothing immature, nothing of the ripening bud about the opulent beauty of La Belle Quéro.

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Corsini, seeing what was expected of him, returned that alluring smile with a glance of respectful admiration. He had already gathered that she was a popular idol, and wielded great influence in the musical world.

Personally, he preferred the simpler and more modest loveliness of the charming young Princess. But it was politic to win the good opinion of such an influential personage, and she was evidently not the sort of woman to tolerate rivalry.

For the next five minutes he made himself as agreeable as possible, and the handsome singer was obviously impressed. Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the conductor of the concert, who intimated to Corsini that his would be the next turn.

Madame Quéro rose. "I must not keep you. Well, I hope we shall be very great friends. I shall stay to hear your solo and then I shall leave. I feel just a little fatigued to-night; not quite in the mood for this sort of scene, gay and brilliant as it is."

With a gracious inclination of her handsome head, she walked with her graceful, swimming gait to the entrance of the big saloon. Arrived at the doors she waited till Corsini was on the platform and listened attentively to his performance. There was great applause when he had finished, and she clapped her hands enthusiastically. The artist in her responded to the artist in him. It would not be true to say that she had not heard greater masters, but there was a subtle quality in his playing that revealed true genius. He always excelled in the appealing and sentimental passages.

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But while she was listening, to all appearances with the closest attention, her glance was ever roaming through the open doors, down the grand staircase. It was evident that she was looking for somebody, and restless and disappointed because of his non-arrival.

And then, just as she was preparing to leave, a sudden light came into her beautiful eyes. The tall soldierly figure of Zouroff was ascending the stairs.

Her smile was just a little cold, her tones reproachful.

"I was just going; you promised to be here in time to hear me sing. Why are you so late?"

The Prince drew her a little out of earshot. He spoke with his usual ease and assurance. He admired the beautiful singer more than any woman of his acquaintance, but he never spoiled any member of the gentler sex with too great a display of politeness or solicitude.

"Is it so very difficult to guess? There are certain things that must always come first in a man's life."

"Spare me that ancient platitude. You have indulged in it so often." Her voice was restrained and low, but there was a dangerous gleam in her eyes. Zouroff appealed in many ways to her passionate but rather hard nature, but there were times when his indifference, his brutal frankness, cut her to the quick.

But the Prince was not a man to pay more than passing heed to the symptoms of a woman's gathering displeasure. By nature he was a savage. To a certain extent he was susceptible to female beauty and fascination, but deep down in his heart he had a profound contempt for women, for their uncontrolled feelings, their little tricks of sentiment, their abject subservience to their emotions.

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"Things go well," he said, in his hard, level tones. "I trust we shall not have to wait very long now. We held a very important meeting to-night; it was prolonged beyond the hour I expected. That is why I am late and could not get here in time to hear you sing."

The beautiful singer seemed but half appeased by this rather curt apology. It confirmed what he had told her so often before, that overwhelming ambition, the advancement of his political schemes, were all powerful influences in his life; that a woman's devoted affection weighed but as a feather in the scale against these.

"Let us talk of other things," she said, speaking in a tone of assumed lightness.

"But I thought you took a great interest in these matters. At any rate you have pretended to." His voice was hard and rasping, and there was a sneer in it, an angry gleam in his eyes. He could not bear to be crossed.

"At the proper time and place. But I don't choose to talk of just one subject every moment we spend together. I am pleased, my friend, that the prospects are so good. And now, for a few seconds, shall we talk of those other things which are not quite so unimportant to the world in general as they appear to you."

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"And those other things?" inquired Zouroff in his surliest and most repellant manner.

"Well, for example, we have just been listening to our new Director of the Opera, Signor Corsini. He has played some very beautiful things; he is a fine artist. Have you met him yet?"

Zouroff frowned heavily. "Yes, I have. The fellow played once at the Embassy in London, and my mother and sister raved about him. You know I am no judge of instrumental music—rather dislike it than otherwise. And this young man seemed to me particularly objectionable."

"I wonder why?" inquired the *prima donna* with a most innocent expression. "Just because your mother and sister admired his genius? What a very insufficient reason."

Zouroff vouchsafed no reply to this delicate raillery, and Madame Quéro continued in the same detached, indifferent tones. "The Count introduced him to me; we had a long chat together. I think he is a most charming young man, quite unaffected, with delightful manners and very handsome. I predict he will be excessively popular."

"I wonder if you realise how much you are annoying me when you talk in this manner?" asked the Prince roughly.

La Belle Quéro held out her hand. "My friend, it seems to me you are in rather a savage mood to-night, and I am not in the best of tempers myself. If we talk much longer we may have a serious quarrel. I will say good-night."

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"Good-night," said the Prince in a low and harsh voice. "Perhaps it is as well we should separate. There are a lot of people here I must speak to."

Madame Quéro turned towards the staircase. He strode after her and laid his big, strong hand none too gently on her arm.

"And please listen once and for all to me. If it pleases you to amuse yourself with this young Corsini, or for the matter of that with any other effeminate foreigner, you need fear no interference from me. Understand that."

Tears of rage came into the beautiful eyes. "Take your hand away, you savage, you are hurting me. As for what you have just said in your usual brutal manner, I perfectly grasp your meaning. And please also to understand this from me. If I choose to turn my fancy in that or any other direction, I shall not trouble to consult you, much less beg for your permission."

With a muttered curse Zouroff released her arm, whose delicate flesh he had bruised, turned on his heel and re-entered the concert saloon.

And next morning, Golitzine, whose sharp eyes had noted the pleasant talk between Corsini and the beautiful singer, also the way in which Zouroff had flung away from her as she descended the grand staircase, was able to report to his Imperial Master that the first act in the little comedy had opened well.

CHAPTER XII

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The relations between the handsome singer and the new Director, so pleasantly established on the night of the Countess Golitzine's concert, progressed very smoothly. La Belle Quéro was unwontedly gentle and submissive in her acceptance of any professional suggestions from the handsome young Italian.

It was the general gossip that she was a good deal in love with Corsini, and wavering in her allegiance to the masterful and tyrannical Prince. Nello himself took the situation very calmly. In the first place, Madame Quéro was a married woman; to fall in love with her, were he so disposed, would be hopeless, unless he resolved to risk a scandal that might adversely affect their respective careers.

And more important still, although he felt for her a quite warm friendship, he was not the least in love. Her full and opulent beauty possessed little attraction for him.

Although at present he did not fully realise the fact, the serene loveliness of the young Princess Nada, combined with her girlish *esprit*, her air of rank and position, had cast a spell over him that he could not shake off. She would always be the lady of his dreams, although by the exigencies of their different stations, he would be compelled to worship her in secret and from afar.

She was surrounded with the halo of birth and great position. Madame Quéro, although a woman of genius and considerable brain power, had sprung from the peasant class. Her husband, whom she had married when little more than a child, had been a poor fisherman. She made him a handsome allowance, on the condition that he never intruded his rights nor exposed her to the annoyance of his presence.

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Her glorious voice had lifted her from grinding poverty and obscurity, her quick mentality had enabled her to acquire much, to adapt herself, with more than fair success, to her new environment. But certain traces of her humble origin showed themselves very plainly at times, especially in moments of excitement—vulgarity of gesture, some common terms of speech, picked up from the gutter where she had played with other bare-footed children like herself.

To a man of Corsini's naturally refined and elevated temperament, these unconscious revelations came as a disturbing shock. And the more intimate he became with her, the more frequently she revealed herself, having no longer occasion to wear a protecting mask.

In a palace or a fashionable drawing-room, with that careful mask on, La Belle Quéro was one personage, most careful as to speech and manner. In her dressing-room, or in familiar intercourse with a fellow artist, not of the great world, only belonging to the aristocracy of talent, she was quite another being, with the solecisms, the occasional coarse flashes of humor, of the Biscayan peasant.

No; although La Belle Quéro was so much nearer to him from the social point of view, for his origin had not been so much more distinguished than her own, he could not feel fascinated, in spite of her obvious liking for him.

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Golitzine, who had spies everywhere, in the dressing-rooms of actresses, in the boudoirs of great ladies, knew all there was to know about the friendship of the conductor and the *prima donna*. Was Corsini taking advantage of his opportunities to acquire the woman's confidence, so that it might serve his employer's interest?

But Corsini was only being used as a pawn in the game. He did not even know that he was being used even in this humble capacity. He must have guessed that there were some subtle motives behind this sudden and unexpected preferment; but how could he possibly guess what these motives were?

If the young Italian was going to be made really useful, he would have to be enlightened. Salmoros, in his letter, had made a point of his being kept in the dark, fearful probably of some scruples on his part on being told that he was to play the *rôle* of a spy.

He, Golitzine, was loath to go against the advice of Salmoros, but astute and shrewd as the financier was, he could not have thought out the situation with his usual judgment. The time had

certainly arrived when Corsini must be told frankly the part he was expected to play.

After all, there was nothing in the least dishonourable in what he would be asked to do. Salmoros and the Count between them, with the sanction of the Emperor, had set him on the high road to fame and fortune. Their enemies were a band of traitors, headed by Zouroff, assisted by Madame Quéro. He must and would, in honour bound, prove his allegiance to his benefactors.

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Having made up his mind, it was not long before the energetic Count summoned the young Italian to a private interview in the Winter Palace. As on the previous occasion, the same tall stranger was present, lounging about the room—the stranger in whom Nello was later on to discover the Czar of all the Russias.

Golitzine did not introduce them, but he made a brief allusion. "We are going to have a rather confidential conversation, Signor, but you can speak freely before this gentleman. He is perfectly in my confidence."

Nello bowed, feeling a little embarrassed. He would have been more at his ease if the tall stranger had not been present.

The Count proceeded in his smooth, conciliatory accents. "I hear very flattering accounts, so far, of your directorship. You have excited less envy than I expected, under the rather unusual circumstances. And you have also won some golden opinions. I am told that Madame Quéro, in particular, has distinguished you with a somewhat marked friendship. And she is reported to be a rather difficult woman to get on with. I know our late Director found her so, to his frequent annoyance."

Nello blushed deeply. He was very sensitive, and it vexed him to find that his friendship with the handsome Spanish woman had been already commented on. If these comments had reached Golitzine, they had probably also reached the Princess Zouroff and her daughter.

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"The relations between Madame Quéro and myself are, I am pleased to say, most cordial. Being the most distinguished member of the company, as she certainly is, it insures smooth working all round," answered the young Italian.

"Quite, quite," assented the suave Count. "Of course you have many opportunities of meeting and chatting. I hear that our friend, Prince Zouroff, is much chagrined that the charming lady in question is friendly with you. You have met the Prince, I presume. I should like to know your real opinion—of course in the strictest confidence."

The flush on Corsini's face deepened. He had met the Prince now on several occasions at different houses in the city, and that arrogant nobleman had always treated him with marked *hauteur*, hardly taking the trouble to acknowledge his polite salutation.

"I should say, your Excellency, that he is sadly deficient in the common courtesies of life."

There was a subdued laugh from the man in civilian clothes, standing in the bay window. He turned round for a second and exchanged a meaning glance with the Count. Golitzine knew what that glance was intended to convey. "There was no love lost between these two."

"I think, Signor Corsini, you have very pithily defined our friend's deficiencies. If he could have controlled his somewhat brutal impulses and acquired a little more polish, he might have advanced farther in his career than now seems possible."

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There was a brief pause, which was broken by the Count.

"In the course of these chats with Madame Quéro, I dare say you learn a good deal of her general habits. Women are apt to get confidential with an agreeable male friend. I expect she has told you of those secret little parties to which only men are admitted, which she has at her villa?"

"I swear to your Excellency that to me she has never breathed a word of them."

"I quite believe you, Signor. There is good reason why she should keep silence. Her last party was on Saturday night. The next time you are chatting with her, just mention it in a casual way, and ask her why she does not include you, the Director of the Opera, in her intimate circle?"

"I will certainly do so, Count," replied Nello just a little piqued at the information he had received. It was strange that Madame Quéro had never invited him to one of these, presumably, select parties.

"By the way," added the Count. "If she should ask you where you got your information from I must request you not to mention my name. Refuse to satisfy her curiosity. I have special reasons for this."

Nello promised that he would obey the Count's injunction, and rose to leave, under the impression that the interview was ended. But Golitzine waved him to his seat.

"Just a few moments more, Signor Corsini. I want to take you a little farther into my confidence. We all agree that you are a very capable artist, but I suppose you may sometimes have wondered why your way in this country has been made so very easy; why, in short, your success has been so rapid."

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"It has occurred to me many times, your Excellency, but I did not like to ask directly for an

explanation," replied the young violinist quietly. "I thought that would come at the proper time and place. Am I correct in assuming that I am to be given it now?"

"It shall be given you now," answered the Count in an equally equable voice. "And I am going to speak very plainly, Signor Corsini. Salmoros admired your talent greatly; he told me that in a private letter, and he wished to push you for reason of that; but he also perceived in you different qualities that would serve his own purposes—purposes which are closely associated with the welfare of the Russian Empire."

The Count suddenly rose and waved his hand in the direction of the silent man, lounging in the bay window.

"I am going to make a somewhat dramatic introduction. I present Signor Corsini, the protégé of Baron Salmoros, to the Emperor Alexander himself, who has been a silent witness of our interview."

Corsini rose and bowed profoundly. Unused to the atmosphere of courts, he was bewildered as to the exact etiquette on such occasions. Ought he to kneel and kiss the Emperor's hand? He had a hazy notion he had read somewhere that this was the prescribed ritual.

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The Emperor put an end to his embarrassment by advancing and holding out to him that strong hand which could bend a horse-shoe between its fingers.

"I am delighted to welcome you, Signor. Salmoros has vouched for you. Our good friend, Golitzine, who is a keen judge of men, assures me that you are loyal and true to those who befriend you, as we have done."

"My services, for what they are worth, are entirely at your Majesty's disposal," answered Corsini fervently. It was but natural he should be a little overcome by the gracious condescension of such a high personage. He was not even petty enough to be chagrined by the discovery that his sudden advancement was not due solely to his artistic genius.

The Emperor, having said just what was needful, retired to the seclusion of his bay window. The astute Count resumed the conversation.

"I trust, Signor Corsini, there are no reservations in your expressions of loyalty to those who have advanced and befriended you?"

"I am afraid I do not quite follow your Excellency."

"Tut, tut, my good young friend. I am quite sure we shall understand each other very quickly. La Belle Quéro, according to report, is very enamoured of you—an artist like herself, a handsome and presentable young man; vastly, in my opinion, superior to the brutal Zouroff. Now, this important thing is—what are your sentiments towards her?"

Nello's answer was very frank. "I have grown to look upon her simply as a kind and good friend."

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Golitzine drew a breath of relief. It was as he had hoped. The young musician had placed his fancy on one far removed from him, by rank and position. The comparatively coarse charm of the handsome singer could not compete with the youthful beauty of the Princess Nada. A benign expression stole over his lined face.

"And if you knew that Madame Quéro was taking advantage of the hospitality of this country, of her apparently neutral position, to conspire and plot with his Majesty's sworn enemies, you would be hand and glove with us to find out what you could in order to frustrate her designs?"

"Assuredly, your Excellency." Nello had started from his seat and spoken with fervour. "My duty and my allegiance is to the Emperor, yourself, and the Baron Salmoros. Madame Quéro, good friend as I believed her to be, counts as nothing."

"That is precisely what I want to be assured of," said the Count. "Now, Signor, put that question I suggested to Madame Quéro. It may be she will tell you a deliberate lie. It may be she will seek to entangle you in this plot, and make you one of the conspirators as the price of her favour. I should prefer that, but I think she is too clever to do it. Anyway, report to me how things go, which way they go. And I rely upon it, that you are a faithful servant of the House of Romanoff."

Nello assured him that he was, and returned to his hotel full of thought.

So this was what the apparently benevolent Salmoros had secured him for, to be a spy of the Russian Government. At first he felt a little indignant. La Belle Quéro might be a traitress, a conspirator, but was it his mission to unmask her?

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Then his shrewd Latin sense came to his aid. Whatever their ulterior motives, his powerful friends had incidentally helped him, and his bounden duty was to them. If the handsome Spanish woman, who should have no part or lot in the political concerns of Russia, had chosen to mix herself up with a lot of base intriguers, that was her business. It was, after all, diamond cut diamond.

Perhaps he was the more impelled to the cause which the wily Golitzine had urged him to take, by the rumour in the circles where he chiefly mixed that the names of Prince Zouroff and La Belle Quéro were generally coupled together. It was currently reported that as soon as the beautiful singer could get a divorce from her complacent fisherman, she would marry the Prince. But in

Roman Catholic countries divorce is not easily to be obtained, and the fascinating Madame Quéro was still united to the lover of her youth. And according to further rumour, Zouroff was not inclined to hurry matters on. As a matter of fact, he was much more interested in other things. Perhaps, also, the lady was not quite so keen as formerly.

So Nello resolved to play his part, the part that it was his bounden duty to play. If the Spanish woman and her confederates were playing a low-down game, he was playing a straight one by outwitting them, in the interests of the Imperial House which had shown him such remarkable favour.

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That night the two met, as Madame Quéro was going to her dressing-room. She had sung better than ever that evening, never had she aroused greater enthusiasm. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks were glowing with triumph. She met Corsini's cold glance, and her smile faded away.

"You do not seem very amiable to-night, Signor. Have I had the misfortune to offend you in any way?"

The appealing look she darted at him was certainly that of a woman more or less in love. For a moment, Nello felt a little ashamed of the part he had to play; it seemed cowardly to hurt a woman. But after all, his duty was to his benefactors, and if she was the traitress they alleged she deserved no mercy.

Nello bowed, but made no immediate response. He was on the point of moving away, when she laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Stay, I beseech you! Why are you so cold? I have sung better than ever to-night, and yet you offer me no word of congratulation. Many a time, when I have sung badly, you have been profuse of your praises, and I thought we were such good friends!"

Nello saw his opportunity at once. "I used to think, Madame, that we were very good friends."

"And has anything happened to alter your previous opinion?" inquired Madame Quéro in a faltering voice.

Again the young Italian made a movement to pass on, and again the impetuous woman detained him.

"If you please, we will not leave it where it is, with studied coldness on your part. Please tell me how I have offended you."

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Nello spoke with exaggerated courtesy. "Madame, I am too humble to have the right to be offended. I, the mere Director of an Opera, you, one of the idols of Europe."

The *prima donna* stamped an impatient foot. "Signor Corsini, you are trying my patience unduly. It is easy to see that you have some fancied grievance. Will you be good enough to explain what it is, or at any rate the nature of it?"

Corsini looked at her steadily. "Madame, you have been good enough to call me your friend. If that is the case, why have I not been invited to those little private suppers at your villa? So many go, that one more would not have made a serious addition."

Her face went as white as death. "Who has told you such a falsehood?" she stammered.

Nello never took his eyes off her. The white face, the stammering tongue, proved that Golitzine was right. She had secret parties at her villa, and she was dismayed to find that anybody had heard of them.

"A friend of mine, whose name I must not reveal, Madame."

Without another word Madame Quéro went to her dressing-room. From there she despatched a hasty note to Prince Zouroff.

CHAPTER XIII

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La Belle Quéro and the Prince Zouroff were sitting together in the boudoir of the small villa on the outskirts of St. Petersburg.

They were both smoking cigarettes. Madame Quéro looked anxious and perturbed, Zouroff surly and annoyed.

"Inez, you are very unreasonable. Why have you dragged me here at this time of night? If your note had not said 'very urgent,' I should not have taken myself away from more important matters."

La Belle Quéro flicked the ash of her cigarette on the carpet. "Once, my friend, you would have come on the slightest request from me. I should not have been compelled to mark my note urgent, eh?"

The Prince answered a little awkwardly. "Don't let us be too sentimental, dear child. We have

been good friends, we have got to a closer degree of comradeship. Is it not an ideal relationship? Well, what have you to tell me? You have not summoned me here for nothing, I am sure?"

"Not even for the pleasure of your society, my most charming and exquisite Boris?" inquired the *prima donna*, in a tone of raillery.

The Prince frowned. At the moment, the light caprices of women did not appeal to him.

"You are talking nonsense, my dear Inez. Let us come to the point."

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The Spanish woman came to the point at once, with an angry glitter in her eyes. What a pity that Zouroff was not a little more gentle in his dealings with women!

"Our little secret evening parties have been discovered, that is all. It may give you and me food for reflection."

The Prince drew a deep breath. "Discovered! It is impossible. Who dares to suspect us?"

"It does not matter who suspects us. It is enough that we are suspected. I suppose the Secret Police have been at work."

Zouroff thought a few moments, and then a sudden light came to him. He crossed over and grasped the beautiful young woman by the arm.

"Tell me the truth and don't palter with me," he thundered in his harsh, raucous tones. "Where have you this information? But I can answer the question myself. It is from that white-livered Italian, Corsini. He is a spy in the pay of Golitzine."

Madame Quéro endeavoured to utter a faltering negative, but Zouroff, always fond of brutal methods, tightened his grasp on the delicate flesh.

Under the hypnotic influence of this brutal and commanding man, she stammered forth the truth.

"You have guessed right. It was Corsini who told me, in a very brief interview. He had heard the rumour from a friend."

Zouroff smiled. It was a very sinister smile at the best. The lips curled up, the strong, white, even teeth showed themselves, suggesting the fangs of a wolf.

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"So this degenerate Italian is daring to thrust himself across our path, is he? Well, then! *the Italian mountebank must disappear.*"

Madame Quéro rose to her full height and braved the brutal and truculent Prince.

"I think I have got a word to say in this: If he does disappear, I shall go to the Emperor and tell him the whole truth."

"You have fallen in love with this young man, eh?" inquired the Prince in a jeering voice.

"No, I will not say that. And besides, he is in love with somebody else. But understand me, if you please"—she spoke with her old imperiousness—"I will not have a hair of this young man's head harmed. He is young, he is innocent; he shall not fall a victim to your dastardly schemes."

Boris regarded her with his cold, hard glance. "Suppose I said that, in that case, even La Belle Quéro herself must disappear. What then?"

Tears came into the beautiful woman's eyes. She looked at him, more compassionate than angry.

"Oh, Boris, have you sunk so low, have you let your ambitions overcome all the softer impulses of your nature? Would you really murder me for fear I should tell, and frustrate your schemes?"

She looked very beautiful as she appealed to him. For a moment the old love for her, the old infatuation surged up in his heart. He clasped her to his breast, and murmured softly the words: "Why are you not heart and soul with me, as you used to be?"

She disengaged herself gently from his embrace; it no longer thrilled her. "You are no longer the same to me, Boris," she whispered, with the usual subterfuge of the woman. "You have had other loves besides La Belle Quéro."

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"I do not admit that, Inez," he answered, in his rough, hard tones, a little shaken by his emotion. "But remember, we are bound together by solemn ties, by solemn oaths, to the same cause. Mark my words," he added, with a sudden access of savagery. "If you play me false in that respect, expect no mercy."

"If I play you false, Boris, I expect no mercy; I shall get none. I know the manner of man you are."

"Yes, you know the sort of man I am, Inez. Pursue your little flirtations, if you will. I shall not complain. But once play me false in other matters, and your doom is sealed."

He strode out of the room, and the face of Madame Quéro went white as she remembered the threat. The Prince loved her in his rough, brutal way, but if she interfered with his plans, he would brush her out of his path with as little compunction as he would kill a fly that annoyed him with its impertinent buzzing.

And then, in a few moments, her thoughts went back to the handsome young Italian, Corsini. She

had, in an unguarded moment, given him away. Zouroff's slow, but unrelenting, vengeance would pursue him. The Prince had said that Corsini must disappear. In this autocratic country people disappeared every day, and nobody seemed to wonder. It was such a common occurrence.

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Next day Madame Quéro, very disturbed, sought Corsini at his private office at the Imperial Opera. Her object was to gain a little time before Zouroff could put his evil designs into execution.

She approached him with her most winning smile.

"Signor, you reproached me for not having asked you to my villa. Will you allow me to repair the omission? Will you sup with me, *tête-à-tête*, on Thursday night?"

She had meant, in this intimate meeting, to give him a few hints as to his personal safety without too closely inculcating Zouroff and his associates, whom she still greatly feared.

Nello expressed a thousand regrets. After his duties at the Opera were over, Prince Zouroff had requested his attendance at his Palace, as Princess Nada had wished to again hear his rendering of the romance which had now become celebrated.

The voice of the *prima donna* grew agitated. She was very distrustful of Boris and his ways.

"But, Signor Corsini, why go there when you know so well that the Prince is quite indifferent to music? He does not care for any sort, yours or mine."

Nello darted at her a shrewd glance. "I do not think myself, Madame, that the Prince is a great connoisseur; but he is generally in his box when you sing."

The beautiful Spanish woman blushed ever so slightly. "Ah, Signor, he comes because I am the fashion. But all the same, I wish you would not go."

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Her manner was very insistent. Nello could see that she was greatly agitated.

"Tell me, Madame. You have some reason for not wishing me to go?"

Madame Quéro hesitated. She dared not tell the truth, that she feared there was some sinister design on the part of the Prince. Had he not said that Corsini must disappear? Her blood ran cold at the thought.

She relied on her woman's wiles. "Suppose," she whispered softly, "that I told you I was very jealous of the Princess Nada. Would that keep you away?"

Nello looked at her steadily. A few days ago her request might have had some influence on him, but now he knew her for a traitress. She was only seeking to trap him for her own ends. He was proof against her. Golitzine had warned him.

"The Princess Nada is an old friend of mine, Madame. I have promised to play that little romance for her whenever she wishes to hear it. I cannot break my promise."

The blood of the Biscayan peasant surged wildly in her veins. "You are a fool, Signor Corsini; you do not know your real friends, I assure you."

Corsini assumed his most diplomatic manner. He bowed profoundly. "I have made many friends in St. Petersburg, Madame, but I shall always remember that you were one of the first and best."

"Always excepting Princess Nada," remarked the *prima donna* spitefully.

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"Ah, Madame, I met her first in London; I cannot tell you under what tragic circumstances. Yes, to be quite frank, the Princess has a little niche in my memory that nobody else can occupy. You will forgive me?"

Madame Quéro turned away from him scornfully, her warm Spanish blood all aflame at the mention of her rival.

"Go then to your beautiful Princess, with her bloom of the lilies and roses on her cheeks, and your fate be on your own head."

Corsini, in spite of his equable temperament, was a little disturbed by the interview. Madame Quéro had been very insistent that he should not go to the Zouroff Palace. What was there behind this insistence?

He had pressed her closely as to her reasons, and she had led him to understand she entertained an undefined jealousy of the Princess Nada. In all probability that was the true explanation. Anyway, she would give him none other.

He was very busy during the next day or two with the cares of management—the directorship of the Imperial Opera was no light task. He met the singer several times, but she still appeared to nourish resentment.

Well, he could not help it. Wild horses would not have kept him away from the Zouroff Palace, from the few minutes' glimpse of the beautiful young Princess. The Thursday drew near, and his pulses beat with pleasurable anticipation. If Madame Quéro withdrew her friendship from him, it would not break his heart; and if she was the traitress that Golitzine assumed, her friendship was not worth having.

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As for the woman herself, she was torn with conflicting emotions. At one moment she hated him, at another she wept to think that he should fall a victim to the machinations of the unscrupulous and unrelenting Prince. And on the Wednesday, the day before the reception at the Zouroff Palace, her softer feelings conquered.

She had seen the Prince the night before, and he had told her that he was going into the country and would not return to St. Petersburg till the midday of the Thursday.

She drove to the Zouroff Palace in the afternoon and sent up her card to the Princess Nada. On it she had pencilled—"To see you on an urgent matter."

The young Princess's maid, Katerina, who was devoted to her mistress, brought in the card.

Nada read it, and she frowned. She was not at all conventional for a girl of her rank and station, and she numbered many artists amongst her friends. But she had heard of the reputation of La Belle Quéro. Rumours had reached her of the peculiar relations between the singer and her brother, the Prince. Obviously, she was not the sort of woman she could receive in a private capacity.

"Go down yourself, Katerina, to this person, and be perfectly civil," she enjoined her maid. "Explain to her as politely as possible that I am not able to see any visitors to-day."

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The young woman conveyed the cold, decisive message to the waiting Madame Quéro. A dull, red flush spread over the singer's face as she recognised the reasons for the refusal to accord her an interview.

But she had not come unprepared for such a rebuff. "One moment, if you please," she said, drawing forth a letter and handing it to the maid. "Take this to your young mistress. I will wait till you return. I fancy next time you will bring me a different answer."

The maid bowed and went back to the Princess. Nada tore the letter open angrily. The woman was a trifle too insolent and persistent. Then her angry mood passed as she mastered the brief contents.

"I regret very much to intrude upon you; I can quite guess that my presence is not welcome. A great danger is threatening a certain gentleman, Signor Corsini, for whom I believe you have some friendship. You are the only person I can think of at the moment who can avert that danger, especially as it is threatened by a member of your own family. If you still persist in refusing to see me, please seal up this letter and return it by your maid."

There was no longer any fear of refusal. Corsini threatened with danger, and by a member of her own family, who could be none other than Boris!

"Bring the lady to me at once, Katerina," she commanded the wondering maid.

A moment later the two faced each other, the Princess standing in the middle of the room, courteous but distantly polite, to receive her unwelcome guest.

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They looked at each other steadily, with dislike in their hearts, the aristocrat of pure and ancient lineage, the woman who had played barefoot in the gutter as a child, and won her way with her exquisite talent to fame and fortune.

There was between them, at the start, the antagonism of class. But there was also between them a still more subtle antagonism, recognised by each: they had a mutual tenderness for the same man.

CHAPTER XIV

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It was exceedingly difficult for a person of Nada's frank and open temperament to resort to the arts of the dissembler, to feign a cordiality she did not feel. Still, she managed to pull herself together and, to a creditable extent, conceal her dislike of her unwelcome visitor. With a grave courtesy she invited the Spanish woman to seat herself.

"Your note has distressed me, Madame, for more than one reason. In the first place I am very sorry to hear that Signor Corsini is menaced by a great danger. I met him in London; ours was the first private house he played at after his great success at the Covent Garden concert. I have a great esteem for him as an artist, and I am shocked to think that, after so short a stay in my own country, he should be the victim of some sinister designs. Secondly, I am the more disturbed because your letter tells me very plainly in what quarter these designs are being entertained."

Madame Quéro spoke very quietly. The Princess disliked her, of that she was assured, and she returned the dislike with compound interest. Still Nada was doing her best to be civil and polite. It should not be her fault if the interview was not conducted with perfect discretion on both sides.

"If the danger had not been very great and also very imminent, Princess, I should not have taken the liberty of intruding myself upon you. We move in different worlds, it is true, but I am some sort of a personage in my own sphere and not fond of exposing myself to rebuffs at the hand of a waiting-maid."

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Nada blushed at the shrewd, quick thrust, although the words were spoken without the least heat.

"I am very sorry you should have felt offended," she faltered. "But of course, I could not deliver the message myself."

Madame Quéro dismissed the subject with a graceful wave of the hand. If Nada had the composure of the aristocrat, she had the self-possession of the woman of the world. She could skate over thin ice as delicately as anybody.

"I have every reason to know that your brother, Prince Boris, has taken a violent enmity to this young musician."

"My brother, I regret to say, takes violent dislikes to many people, for reasons that I have never been able to fathom. But I cannot guess any motive for enmity against Signor Corsini. In what possible way can their paths cross?"

"You will, of course, understand, Princess, that I cannot, in every instance, speak as plainly as I could wish. You may have heard, it is hardly possible you should not, that for some few years past Prince Zouroff has been one of my most intimate friends."

Nada bowed her graceful head, while a faint flush rose to the fair cheek. Of course it was common rumour in St. Petersburg that he was greatly attracted by the handsome singer and was prepared to marry her, if her husband could be got out of the way. Such an alliance would not, naturally, recommend itself to the other members of the proud and ancient house of Zouroff.

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"It would certainly seem a strange thing that their paths should cross in any way," was Madame Quéro's answer. "And here, I am afraid, I dare not be as explicit as I wish. You must forgive me, Princess, if I content myself with hints instead of full explanations. I can only just tell you this: Signor Corsini has discovered a jealously guarded secret of your brother's. Your brother, therefore, regards him as a dangerous man, to be got out of his way."

Nada's face went pale as she listened to these rather vague utterances. Although so young, with a disposition naturally frank and trusting, she had a very quick intelligence. She thought she could read between the lines. It was some time before she spoke.

"My brother has a jealously guarded secret which Signor Corsini has discovered," she repeated slowly. "If he revealed that secret, it would mean danger to Boris?"

Madame Quéro bowed. "At present his knowledge is not very great, but if he learnt more, it would mean the greatest possible danger to your brother."

There was no mistaking the sinister meaning behind these words. The young girl reflected a few moments. Not once, but many times, some unguarded phrase of the Prince, dropped in one of his frequent rages, had set her thinking.

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"Boris is not, then, exactly what he seems, Madame?"

"Far from it, Princess," replied the singer, speaking with a frankness that a second later she regretted.

"And perhaps, too, Signor Corsini is not exactly what he seems?" queried Nada. Intuition was leading her very near the truth.

"Of that I cannot speak with any certainty. Your brother has certain suspicions of him, but I have no means of knowing whether they are well- or ill-founded. One thing is certain, Prince Boris goes in fear of him and meditates harm to him."

"You are sure of his intentions?" asked Nada.

Madame Quéro shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Should I be here, if I were not?"

The Princess questioned her a little more closely. "You will not tell me more than you wish, I know, but I think I am entitled to put this question. How did you learn his intentions, from himself or a third party?"

And the singer answered truthfully. "From his own lips."

Nada was silent for some seconds. She was working it out in her own mind, on the somewhat scanty data that had been furnished her.

"You mean that the Prince intends to get Signor Corsini out of the way by some treacherous means?"

"That is the idea that is forming in his mind, Princess."

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"When will he put that idea into action, do you think?" was Nada's next question.

"Corsini plays here at the Prince's request to-morrow evening—is that not so?"

Yes, it was true. She had written the invitation herself at Zouroff's request.

"Well, the Prince is a man who acts very rapidly when he has once made up his mind. It is my belief that whatever project he has formed will be put into execution to-morrow night."

Nada put her hand to her brow. "It is horrible, Madame, unthinkable, that a brother of mine should stoop so low. Why should he have a secret so guilty, that he cannot afford to have it dragged forth into the light?"

Madame Quéro did not answer the question directly. "I fear, Princess, your brother is not a man easily to be read even by those who have lived in the same house with him."

"What is it you suggest that I should do?" asked the Princess after a long pause. "Shall I meet him at the entrance and entreat him to go away at once, on some pretext or another? And what might follow if I took such a strange step? I cannot bring myself to confess to him that I suspect my own brother of base designs against him."

It was a puzzling question, which Madame Quéro could not answer at once. For some moments the two women, their mutual hostility suspended for the time being, put their wits together. Suddenly an idea occurred to the singer.

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"That maid of yours, who interviewed me on your behalf. Can you trust her?"

"She is devoted to me," was the Princess's answer.

"Your brother, I happen to know, has one or two confidential servants in his employ."

"Yes," said Nada, looking at her visitor steadily. It was evident that if the Prince concealed some things from Madame Quéro, there were many things that he told her. The girl had a very shrewd suspicion that the guilty secret which Corsini had discovered was also known to the beautiful singer herself.

"It is just possible that if your maid instituted a few discreet inquiries in certain quarters, she might learn something."

"Can you suggest any particular quarter in which she could put them?" asked the Princess. It was evident that the Spanish woman knew a great deal about the Zouroff household—a great deal more than she did herself.

"Peter, his valet, is, I know, absolutely in his master's confidence."

"That is fortunate," remarked Nada; "because I happen to know that Katerina and he are very great friends; in fact, I believe lovers."

She rose, touched the bell and commanded the attendance of her maid. For a long time the two women, mistress and servant, talked together in Russian. Madame Quéro, who only knew two languages, her own and French, could not, of course, follow them.

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The Princess explained the result of the interview. "I have enlisted Katerina's sympathies, she is going to find out if Peter knows anything."

Madame Quéro rose. "Whatever it is, I am sure he will have a hand in it, although I don't expect he will take an active part. Well, Princess, I must leave it to you to take what steps may occur to you."

Nada put to her the shrewd question. "Is it impossible for you to take any steps yourself, Madame?"

A shamed expression came into the singer's beautiful eyes. "Alas, Princess, I fear I must admit it is. If the Prince could trace anything to me directly, his vengeance would follow me very swiftly."

Nada shuddered. She had long ago ceased to entertain any illusions as to her brother. She knew he was hard, tyrannical, brutal, and pitiless. But this conversation with the foreign woman had thrown a new and sinister light upon his character. There was in him, in addition to these disagreeable qualities, a strong criminal taint.

He did not intend to spare Corsini, and from what she had just heard, he would not, if necessity arose, spare the woman to whom he professed attachment, but would punish her ruthlessly for daring to thwart his plans. And the poor young Princess shuddered again as the thought crossed her that he would not be likely to spare his own sister, if she offended him in the same way.

It was not till the middle of the next day that Katerina had charmed out of Peter certain information which confirmed her worst fears.

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Briefly, the information amounted to this. The Prince had sent one of his trusted servants into the country to order relays of horses. A travelling carriage was to be waiting at midnight close to the Zouroff Palace. But Peter either did not know, or would not tell, who was to be the occupant or the persons in attendance on the carriage.

One little important detail he had dropped. The carriage was to make its first halt at Pavlovsk, the first stage of the journey, on the Moscow road.

There was no longer any doubt in Nada's mind as to the Prince's intentions. Corsini was to be entrapped on leaving the Palace and thrust into the carriage; in all probability, drugged and bound. Of his ultimate fate she shuddered to think.

She knew the Chief of Police, General Beilski, well. He was an old friend of the family, also one of the Emperor's most trusted adherents. While devoted to her mother and herself, he had never

shown himself much attached to the Prince.

Nothing easier than for her to pay a private visit to the General at his office, or invite him to the Palace, and request his assistance in thwarting her brother's foul designs. It was the course which Madame Quéro could have taken had she so wished, in the first instance.

The same reason held back both women. Such a step must have brought about the immediate ruin of Zouroff, with its consequent degradation for his relatives. The General was a man who would put duty and patriotism before every other consideration. He would not consent to any paltering with justice, he would drive no bargain. He would not save Corsini at the cost of letting the Prince go free and unpunished.

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It was a terrible situation for so young a girl, thrown upon her own resources. True, she could have taken counsel with her mother, but she shrank from exposing her brother's villainy to such a close relation. She would keep the shameful secret locked in her own breast so long as it was possible.

And then came a ray of light. She wrote a letter in a feigned hand to the General, which ran thus:

"A travelling carriage will set out to-night from St. Petersburg at any time after midnight, and will halt at Pavlovsk, on the road to Moscow. Let the carriage be examined, as the writer of this letter has reason to believe there is a plot afoot to deport a certain person well-known in artistic circles."

This she handed to Katerina, whom the General had never seen, with instructions to take it to his office and hand it for delivery to some responsible person. She was to disguise herself as well as she could, and not linger a moment after she had delivered the letter. It was next to impossible that Beilski should ever discover where that letter came from, but she was certain he would act upon it at once.

What would follow from her action she could not foresee; but she had done the best, according to her lights, to save the young man who had had the misfortune to cross her brother's path.

Zouroff, just returned from his journey into the country, entered her charming little boudoir half an hour after she had despatched Katerina with the warning note.

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He seemed in a good mood to-day. With bitterness at her heart, she guessed the reason. He had laid his plans so well for this evening that he did not anticipate any likelihood of their being disturbed.

He greeted her with a sort of rough geniality. "Well, little Nada, you seem very thoughtful. Wondering what particularly charming costume you will wear to-night?"

With difficulty she forced herself to meet his gaze, to banish from her own the loathing that was in her heart. She tried to speak lightly, so that he should suspect nothing from her voice or manner.

"Not quite accurate, Boris. No, I have decided on the costume. I was really wondering what jewels I should select."

The Prince seemed to accept her explanation readily. "Well, I am certain you will enjoy yourself. Your great favourite, Corsini, is sure to play that little romance which has so captivated you. I really asked him here to give you pleasure."

Was it fancy, or did she really catch the ghost of a sneering smile on the hard, handsome face, as he turned to leave the room?

"Base, treacherous hypocrite!" she murmured when she was alone. "Why have I been cursed with such a brother, my poor mother with such a son?"

CHAPTER XV

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More than one of her admirers noted that La Belle Quéro was not in her best form to-night. Her acting lacked its usual spontaneity, and several times she sang flat.

Those who thought themselves in the know, put down the inequality of her performance to some recent tiff with Prince Zouroff. But this was only a surmise, not a fact. Zouroff, of course, was in her thoughts, but only in connection with Corsini.

It was the danger threatening the handsome young Italian that caused her to sing flat and provoke those unflattering comments amongst her usually loyal audience.

Again in the early part of the evening she had sought him in his private room, and for the second time endeavoured to dissuade him from going to the Zouroff Palace. He was convinced in his own mind that it was unworthy jealousy of the Princess Nada which had prompted her action.

Perhaps, a short time ago, he would have felt a certain amount of pity for an affection that was so thoroughly misplaced. But Golitzine's plain hints had destroyed his former feelings of friendship. He could only regard her interference now with resentment.

He looked at her very steadily. "Give me some intelligent reason for breaking my promise, Madame, and I will go so far as to say I will consider it." [Pg 161]

She turned pale and bit her lip in manifest agitation. What he asked her was precisely what she could not do. After that none too veiled threat of Zouroff's, that if she failed him he would show her no mercy, she dare not betray him by telling the truth.

But she was a woman of considerable resource and she thought she might get round him by appealing to his pride.

"I do not know that I can advance any very sufficient reason, except that we have been good friends, and it annoys me to find you refusing to place a proper value on yourself."

"How am I making myself cheap by playing at the Zouroff Palace, Madame? Like yourself, I am an artist and follow my art; certainly because I love it, but also because it procures me a substantial reward. If I play for the Countess Golitzine and others, I can play without loss of dignity for the Princess Zouroff."

She saw her opportunity, and took advantage of it swiftly. "I am not speaking of women, my good friend. It is the Prince himself who is in my mind. You have told me half a dozen times that this man treats you with the greatest *hauteur*; hardly deigns to return your salutation. He is, after all, the master of the house. It seems to me that if you respected yourself, as I should wish you to do, you would refuse to give him the chance of insulting you."

Corsini could easily have retorted that La Belle Quéro, in her professional capacity, attended many houses where the women showed her as scant courtesy as the autocratic Prince displayed towards him; but he was of too chivalrous a nature to hurt the pride of a woman. [Pg 162]

Anyway, she did not give him the real reason, which he still believed to be that unworthy jealousy of the charming young Princess.

He shrugged his shoulders in real, or assumed, indifference. "I must not say too much about this Zouroff, because we all know he is a great friend of yours. He certainly might take a lesson in manners, but I don't know that his want of them affects me very greatly."

"Still, his discourtesy hurts you, or you would not have dwelt upon it so often as you have done," retorted Madame, woman-like following out her point.

Corsini rose; he was rather tired of the argument.

"If it is so, Madame, I shall not pay him the compliment of staying away. I would not give him the triumph of thinking that he was capable of hurting me."

She saw it was useless. "It must be as you wish, Signor;" there was a note of sadness in her voice as she turned away. She left the room, murmuring to herself, "I have tried my best. It is the sister who draws him, and she must wish as fervently as I do that he would stay away."

It was early in the evening when she had sought this interview, and as the hours sped on, bringing Corsini nearer to the time of his appointment, her agitation increased. If she could only know if the Princess had thought of anything, if she had taken any steps to prevent the tragedy which she felt sure was impending. [Pg 163]

With a woman of her nervous and excitable temperament, to express a wish was to carry it swiftly into execution. The Opera finished early that night. She drove home at once to her villa, summoned her maid, and bade her change her costume.

A few moments later she came back to the waiting carriage, attired in clothes befitting a woman of the poorer classes, and drove to within a short distance of the Zouroff Palace. She walked on foot to the servants' entrance and demanded to see the Princess's maid, Katerina, on very urgent business.

The girl came to the door, wondering who her visitor could be, what was the cause of this imperative summons.

The *prima donna* laid her finger on her lips to impress caution and secrecy.

"We must speak very low, if you please. I am Madame Quéro, the person you showed yesterday into your young mistress's room. Can you convey a message from me to her now?"

Katerina looked at the strange visitor who had disguised herself so successfully. Had she met her in the street, she would have passed her by without knowing her. But now that Madame Quéro had recalled herself to her recollection, she at once recognised the popular singer, in spite of her humble attire.

"If you don't mind waiting a few moments, Madame, I think I can manage it. But I am afraid I shall have to ask you to wait outside. Am I to take a letter?" [Pg 164]

"I will wait outside, certainly. No, no letter, it might excite suspicion. Just take this message to your mistress: Has she been able to take any steps with regard to the matter we spoke of yesterday? A few words, yes or no, will do for an answer."

The door was closed, and La Belle Quéro, one of the idols of St. Petersburg, waited in the darkness for a message to be delivered by a lady's maid. For a moment, as she stood there, she

laughed a little hysterically at the situation.

The Zouroff Palace had never opened its doors to her, even in a professional capacity, for the Princess was a *grande dame*, and very rigid in her social views. But there were other great houses, presided over by hostesses with a more elastic code for people of genius who had entertained her as a guest.

It was, to say the least of it, a little *bizarre* that she should be waiting outside the servants' quarters, dressed in working-woman's attire, because she did not want one lover to injure another man who might have been a lover had he chosen.

The minutes sped by; it seemed an eternity to the anxious woman waiting there. Then at last the door was opened cautiously, and Katerina spoke in a low voice.

"A thousand pardons for keeping you waiting so long, Madame, but it was very difficult to get hold of the young Princess. There is a big reception on to-night."

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"I know, I know," interrupted the singer eagerly. This obliging girl, like most of her class, was apt to be garrulous. "Has she sent an answer?"

Katerina looked a little offended. Her good-humoured young mistress never interrupted her, even in her most prolix moments. She spoke stiffly.

"Yes, Madame, I was coming to that in a second. She has taken certain steps which she devoutly hopes will insure the result you both desire, but of course she cannot be certain." Suddenly the maid's tone changed, and she dropped a very profound curtsey. "It is very kind of you, Madame, but it was really not necessary. I am only too pleased to have been of use."

The change in tone was due to the fact that Madame Quéro had slipped into her hand a substantial sum of money, immediately afterwards disappearing into the darkness.

Although not happy nor assured, she felt relieved to know that something had been done to thwart the Prince's sinister designs.

She walked swiftly to her carriage, and on her way passed Corsini, who was going in the direction of the Palace with his beloved violin-case in his hand. It was a peculiarity of the Italian that he never drove where he could walk. She shuddered as she wondered if he was going to his doom, or if the Princess's fervent hopes would be realised.

For a moment a wild impulse urged her to turn back and run after him, to blurt out the truth and implore his silence. But the instinct of self-preservation prevailed and the impulse was combated.

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Zouroff's dark threat rang in her ears. And if the Prince's suspicions were correct, Corsini was in the pay of Golitzine. If that were true, she would entreat his silence in vain. Even gratitude for his escape would not blind him to his obvious duty.

Corsini ascended the staircase, and the first person he met on entering the handsome gilded music-salon was the master of the house. To the Italian's intense surprise the Prince held out his hand and greeted him with an apparent show of cordiality.

"Ah, good evening, Signor. You are a little late—is it not so? Many of your admirers have been asking after you and fearing that you were not able to come."

Nello, a man of a most frank and trusting disposition, was almost overcome by this condescension. Had he misjudged the man after all? A great Russian nobleman of ancient lineage might be disposed to look down upon meaner persons who could boast of neither wealth nor origin. At any rate, he was behaving well in his own house, was not reminding him of the difference between their stations.

"I am afraid I am a little late, Prince. But I will make amends. If they desire an extra encore they shall have it." Thus Nello, a little elated by Zouroff's subtle suggestion that he was a person of great importance in the world of art, and his audience was waiting impatiently for his arrival.

He played very beautifully that night. The enthusiasm of his listeners was so great that he had to grant not one, but three encores. At last he left the platform.

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The Princess Nada met him as he descended the few marble steps.

"You have surpassed yourself to-night, Signor. There are many waiting to pay you compliments. But will you first come and have a brief chat with me?"

Was there anything he could more ardently desire? To gaze for a few moments into those beautiful eyes, to listen to those soft, kind tones—were not a few moments spent like this worth much more than all the applause he had received?

She led him to a small divan in the spacious salon, that was fortunately not occupied. She sat at one end, he at the other; but they were not very distant.

He was very agitated. His close proximity to this beautiful young woman, the product of centuries of high breeding, the delight of her presence, the perfume that stole to him from her abundant hair, the hundred and one subtle allurements that a daughter of the classes possessed for a son of the people, intoxicated him. She was indeed the woman of his dreams, a star set so high in the firmament that he could only gaze respectfully at its light.

She brought him to earth with the simple question: "You must be very tired after your fatigues of the day and night; it is some time past twelve now. How do you propose to return to your hotel? I suppose you have your carriage waiting to take you back?"

She had put the question in her subtle, woman's way. She knew it was a fad of Corsini's that he would never ride or drive where he could walk. When he was rallied upon it by his few intimate friends, he always gave the same explanation that he proffered now.

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"It is an eccentricity of mine, Princess, that I always walk wherever I can. Shall I tell you why?"

Nada looked at him kindly. "Yes, tell me why. I cannot tell you whether it is an eccentricity until I know the reason. Personally, I am a very lazy person, and never walk when I can ride."

Corsini leaned towards her. He could inhale the fragrance of her hair, the stronger perfume that came from the roses she wore in her corsage.

"Princess, may I reveal to you some of my inmost cherished aspirations?" His eyes were glowing, he spoke with unusual vehemence.

"I should be honoured to receive your confidences," replied the Princess softly.

"Ah, then, since you are so indulgent, I will tell you. My career up to a few months ago was an obscure one. Music is in my blood, as it is in yours. Am I not right?"

"Yes," replied the Princess, in an even softer voice than before. "Music is in my blood, too. Everything fades into insignificance beside those lovely rapturous sounds, such as you and a few other great artists can evoke and render in your various media: through the voice, the violin, the piano—perhaps the weakest, the least convincing of all."

She was very lovely, very alluring, thought Corsini. She had considerable mentality, even great spirituality. Alone with his violin and her, he could so charm her that perchance she might cast off her high estate, the estate of the Princess, and venture forth with him into the world of exquisite music and unknown dreams. But the time had not come for that. She had only extended a kind and gentle friendship. He could not, at the moment, ask for more. It would be presumption on his part.

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"I trust I shall not weary you," he said, with a smile of apology. "As a violinist, I have met with some success; as the Director of the Imperial Opera, I am not quite a failure. But these successes, for what they are worth, do not put limits on my ambition. I want to be something greater than either—the successful composer."

The Princess sighed. "Ah, that is my ambition, too. I have tried every instrument, and failed. I have composed heaps of things, but there is no originality in them. I play Chopin and try to imitate him, Wagner with the same result. I have an artistic instinct, Signor Corsini, but no creative ability. I must be a listener all my life, envying the people who render what I would give all my fortune to express."

Corsini thought of his interview with Salmoros, when that sedate and experienced financier had expressed the inmost desires of his soul, that he would give a hundred thousand pounds out of his princely fortune to acquire half of the Italian's executive art.

Corsini looked at her, his artist soul beaming in his expressive eyes.

"It is one of the tragedies of life, Princess. You, like my good friend Salmoros, desire to be an executant, and your fingers refuse to obey the impulses of your soul. You want to be a composer, and you cannot express your ideas. You do not create, you only imitate."

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"Alas, yes," answered the Princess mournfully.

Corsini half rose from his seat in his agitation. "With me, Princess, it is different. The executive part comes easily to me; I do not worry about that; it is, of course, a gift. But, as I told you, I long to be a composer. That is the reason why I always walk whenever the distance is not too long."

"Ah, yes, we have wandered far from the original subject," answered the Princess, realising that Corsini had got upon the great theme of self, and was no longer keen to listen to the recital of her small aspirations.

"Playing in these gilded saloons, shut up in my office at the Opera, my imaginative past is dull and dead. When I walk through the silent streets watching the tide of life as it flows by, the nobleman rolling by in his carriage, the beggar cringing for alms, great thoughts come to me. Overhead at night, the stars, full of mystery and wonder, this petty world beneath! Then, Princess, my imagination awakes. I feel in me some of that divine fire which must have informed the great Beethoven when he composed 'The Moonlight Sonata,' some of that inspiration which moved Chopin, Wagner, and the other great masters."

He waved his arms with a dramatic gesture. "That is why I walk rather than ride. Speaking as a composer, when I am confined in a close space, I am dead artistically. When I walk and look round on life, I find inspiration."

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He was very glowing, very impassioned. Nada felt her pulses thrill as she listened to him. But perhaps, because she was not the full and complete artist that Corsini was, she always leaned to the practical side.

"Oh, please do not think I am not capable of understanding you," she said. "If I were the artist you are, I should break away from the narrow confines of this Palace and seek inspiration, like you, from the moon and stars, even in the silent streets."

She paused a moment, and then added, with her full knowledge of what was lying in wait for him, "But all the same, Signor, in spite of the inspiration you may derive, I wish you would not walk home to-night. Give the moon, the stars, the silent streets the go-by for once. Wait for your inspiration till to-morrow."

He was flattered by that direct appeal to him from such a beautiful girl, but of course, he had no idea of the reason that had prompted it.

"But, Princess, why put an embargo on this exquisite night? As I walk along, great ideas will come to me. I may be able to think of something worthy of Chopin, Schumann, even of the great Wagner himself."

She leaned forward to him a little from her side of the divan, and her flower-like face was very close to his. He could catch the subtle perfume of her hair, the scent of the roses at her breast.

"It is just a little whim of mine, Signor Corsini. You work very hard, you are devoured by your artistic ambitions which nourish the soul, but consume the body to ashes. Do not incur unnecessary fatigue. You have your carriage waiting?" [Pg 172]

"No, Princess, I have never any carriage waiting. I nearly always walk to my hotel—the longer the distance, the better, because I have a longer time for inspiration."

"I know, I know," answered Nada quietly. "I fully appreciate all this, but one may sometimes overdo it. I do not think you are looking very well to-night, Signor. You have put too great a strain upon yourself lately. You say you have no carriage waiting. Permit me to supply you with one. The courtyard is choked up with vehicles. You have only to say the word and my maid will bring you one to the side door of the Palace. You can get in there and be driven home at once, without any tedious delay."

A delightful thought crossed his brain. Was it possible that the Princess had appreciated his respectful homage, his silent devotion? Or was this solicitude for his welfare merely the expression of a womanly compassion for the man outside her world, but claiming the common kinship of art?

His voice broke as he declined her offer. "Ten thousand thanks, but I would not put you to such trouble. You have so many guests to see to. I have already taken up too much of your time. I will walk home as usual and seek my inspiration under the stars."

Her troubled gaze sought his. If he would only prove amenable, she could still save him—at any rate for a time—from her ruthless brother, with the aid of her faithful maid, Katerina, out of the reach of those scoundrels who were waiting to convey him—she hoped into the arms of General Beilski's police. [Pg 173]

But Corsini was not to be saved to-night, although two women had done their best for him. He took the hand that the Princess offered him.

"You have been so very kind. I shall always cherish you in a warm corner of my heart, for were you not one of my earliest friends? At that time, I had not many friends, Heaven knows."

"I shall always be your friend, Signor Corsini. I only wish you would allow me to order the carriage to take you home." The concluding words almost sounded like an entreaty.

But Corsini would pay no attention. He was resolved on walking home to seek inspiration from the clear skies and the silent streets.

At the top of the great staircase the Prince was standing, to all appearances cordiality itself. But, from a far corner of the music-salon, he had been watching with angry eyes the conversation between his sister and Corsini.

But he could afford to be indifferent; he could afford to greet the young Italian with a smile. He had laid his plans cunningly.

Zouroff accompanied him to the door, guarded by a big hall-porter. In a corner of the hall lounged a small dapper man, Peter, his valet, the lover of Katerina.

"Good-night, Signor. Have you no carriage waiting? Ah, no, I understand it is a habit of yours to walk. Good! Exercise is a fine tonic. My secretary will send you a cheque to-morrow for your services. Again, good-night!" [Pg 174]

The door closed on the retreating Corsini. Zouroff turned swiftly to the small, dapper man, and whispered in his ear.

"After him, Peter. Come back and tell me that they have done their work."

The hall-porter opened the door at a sign from his imperious master, and the valet went out with a slow, stealthy tread.

He followed in the wake of Corsini, who marched along gaily, his violin-case swinging from his hand, his thoughts full of the Princess Nada, who had been so sweet to him, so gracious.

He hummed one of the gayest of the many gay airs from "Il Barbiere" as he walked along. It was one of his favourite operas, one in which La Belle Quéro was inimitable.

He was in a very happy frame of mind to-night as he walked through the silent streets. He even thought tenderly of La Belle Quéro, and went to the length of forgiving her for what he had once considered her groundless jealousy of the Princess.

In the midst of these happy thoughts, four black shadows loomed up against him, four men surrounded him.

What a fool he had been not to take the Princess's advice and drive home! St. Petersburg, like every other populous city, was full of thieves.

Blindly he struck out with his disengaged hand. Shrilly he called out for help.

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One of the burly men who had surrounded him threw a handkerchief over his face. In a few seconds his struggles had ceased.

His almost inanimate form was conveyed to the waiting carriage, standing in a side street not far from the Zouroff Palace. It was bundled inside, two of the men mounted the box, the others sat inside, and the horses set off at a fast trot in the direction of the Moscow road.

The valet, Peter, strolled back home. His master was lounging about in the vestibule to await the news. Peter whispered them in his ear.

Zouroff smiled a slow smile of gratified malice.

"The bird is trapped," he exulted as he ascended the staircase, to mingle once more with his guests.

CHAPTER XVI

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After having delivered her letter in the way recorded in a previous chapter, Katerina had sped away with the swiftness of the proverbial arrow. She was well on her way home before it reached the hands of General Beilski, who was closeted with an official of high importance and could not be disturbed till the interview was finished.

The Chief of Police was, above all things, a man of action. There was nothing in the letter itself to give the least clue as to the writer, but it was evidently genuine. He came to the conclusion that the woman who had sent it was unwillingly mixed up in some plot against which her conscience revolted.

He immediately called in one of his subordinates to make arrangements for the immediate despatch of a body of mounted police to Pavlovsk, where they would lie in wait for the arriving carriage.

The man who had taken the letter from the somewhat frightened maid was called in and questioned, but his evidence was of no value. His recollections of the appearance of the young woman were very hazy. She was young, slim, and rather good-looking, but he had taken so little notice of her that he admitted that he would not be sure of recognising her if he met her again. There were other callers at the time and his attention had been distracted.

The man was dismissed, and the General and his lieutenant closely scrutinised the letter for the second time. All that they could do was to agree upon two points. The handwriting was evidently a feigned one, and also that of a person of education.

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"There is one peculiar thing about it; our informant wishes to save the person threatened," remarked the Chief; "but she evidently wishes to involve as little as possible the perpetrators. Otherwise she would have told us where the carriage was going to start from for Pavlovsk, so as to save us the trouble of going all that way. Still, when we stop the carriage, we shall be able to get something out of the scoundrels who are in charge of it."

"Unless they are too staunch or too well paid to give away their employer," observed the subordinate, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Many of these criminals, and none but criminals would engage in such a job, are very loyal."

"In the good old days we would soon have made them find their tongues," said the General with a grim smile.

That night Beilski dined alone with Golitzine and his wife. After dinner was over, the two men adjourned to the Count's study and sat late into the night, discussing various important matters.

When they were about to separate, the General drew from his pocket the anonymous letter, and handed it to his host.

"Read that, Count, although I don't suppose you will be able to make more out of it than I. It was left to-day by a mysterious young woman who bolted as soon as she had given it into the hands of the porter. He took very little notice of her and doubts if he would recognise her again."

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The Count read the letter slowly, and meditated for a few seconds. "Strange, very strange," he said at length. "A person of some importance in the artistic world!"

"Does that give you any clue?" inquired Beilski. "Of course you know a good many things that I don't, and you also mix in more worlds than I do. Is there anybody you can think of, or are acquainted with, whose removal might be useful to some person or persons?"

It was some time before a sudden flash of inspiration came to Golitzine. When it did, he spoke slowly.

"At present, mind, it is only a conjecture. But I can think of a man who would answer to the description—Corsini, the Director of the Imperial Opera."

The General elevated his eyebrows. "From all I have heard of him—I have never met him—a most quiet, unassuming fellow. How could he give offence to anybody?"

"I must let you into one of my secrets, Beilski. This young man is acting for me in a certain matter. I have given him some information which, according to my instructions, he has divulged to somebody else, a woman."

"Is there any objection to telling me the name of the woman?"

"As I have gone so far, I may as well go a little bit farther," was the Count's answer. "But, at the moment, you must remember it is only a conjecture. The woman whom I suspect of having sent that note is La Belle Quéro."

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"The woman who gives supper parties to men whom we strongly suspect, but regarding whom we have, up to the present, no actual proof," commented Beilski.

"Precisely." The Count looked at his watch. "That carriage has started with its freight some time ago. I think we can soon solve the problem of whether Corsini is the occupant or not."

"Your theory is, then, either that this Madame Quéro has more conscience than her associates, or is in love with the young man and has made up her mind to save him?"

Golitzine nodded his head. "If my suspicions are wrong, Corsini is at one of two places, either at his hotel or at the Zouroff concert. He told me yesterday he was going there to-night to play. We will send round a guarded note to each, only to be delivered into his own hands."

This was done, and the two men waited for the result. The man despatched to the Palace returned first. He had inquired for Signor Corsini and was told that he had left a long time ago.

The other messenger arrived a few seconds later. He had seen the manager of the hotel. Corsini had not come back, a most unusual thing, since for a man in his profession he kept early hours.

"The inference seems pretty clear," observed the General. "If he had intended to stay at the house of some friends he would have told the manager. Still, he may have gone on to some other party, although I doubt it. Well, if Corsini is in that carriage, and it seems most probable, we shall soon have him back in St. Petersburg."

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"And when we get him back we must have him closely guarded," said Golitzine; "at any rate until we have discovered the perpetrators of this outrage."

"That may prove an easy matter, or one of great difficulty," was Beilski's comment. "Madame Quéro herself is, of course, no use to us. She would never admit that she wrote that letter. Do you happen to know her handwriting?"

"Yes; I have had half a dozen letters from her on professional matters. The handwriting bears not the slightest resemblance to this. But, of course, she would be too shrewd to write it herself, even in a feigned hand. She dictated it to some female accomplice."

"By the way," added the Count as they separated for the night, "they will bring back the occupant of the carriage, who I think we may safely presume to be Corsini, to your own quarters, of course?"

"Of course," assented the General.

"Well, bring him on to me while his impressions are red-hot, you understand? We want to bring it home to the real instigators."

While these two high functionaries were discussing matters, the travelling carriage, with the senseless young man inside, was proceeding on the Moscow road at a fast pace.

One of the two ruffians produced a stout piece of cord and proceeded to twist it round the arms and legs of the helpless man.

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"He doesn't seem capable of showing much fight," he said to his companion with an evil grin, "but one never knows. A liver-hearted chicken would fight for life and liberty. Best to make sure."

He bound him securely. The other man handled the violin-case which had dropped from Corsini's hand when so suddenly assailed. His eyes betrayed a covetous gleam.

"This is worth something, I expect, but we dare not handle it."

"More than our lives are worth," replied the other ruffian, in an equally regretful tone. "There will be a hue and cry in St. Petersburg to-morrow when it is known that the Director of the Imperial Opera has disappeared. We must all lie low. Any attempt to realise on that violin would give us away at once. Besides, we are being very handsomely paid."

"That is true," grunted his companion in villainy, as he sank back on his seat beside the unconscious man. "We don't ask too many questions, but we can pretty shrewdly guess who is working this job. Peter is a wary bird and doesn't let out much, but we know who is his master."

The carriage sped on through the gathering night till it reached Pavlovsk. Here there had been ordered a relay of horses, which was awaiting them at a small posting-house.

Corsini was still wrapt in a profound slumber. Once he had shown signs of consciousness, and one of the two miscreants had given him another dose of the powerful narcotic. It saved trouble, to keep him in that condition till they reached their destination. [Pg 182]

It had been a cold drive. The two men who had guarded the prisoner stepped outside and stamped their feet. The other two, who were more chilled, dismounted from the box.

The leader of the party peered at the unconscious figure. "He is still in the land of dreams, my dear friends," he said. "Well, while he is sleeping and we are changing horses, we will get a warm drink."

The four men tramped into the bar of the small inn, where they comforted themselves with the refreshment they desired. They had no wish to delay their departure, but it would take a few minutes to change the tired horses, they might as well enjoy themselves in the interval. They were members of the criminal class whom Peter, the valet, had employed in his master's interests, but they were very game fellows. They would never round on their old friend Peter.

Suddenly in the midst of their revels, for the one original drink had extended itself to three or four, a decrepit old ostler shambled in with a white and scared face. He was an aged man, toothless, and with a voice that scarcely rose above a hoarse whisper.

"Every man who wants to save himself had better run as fast as he can," he croaked, with a meaning glance at the four men assembled in the small parlour. "The place is full of police. They have surrounded the carriage. They will be inside in a moment."

The two younger men of the party took the hint at once, escaped through a side door and bolted somewhere away in the darkness of the night. The other two, staggered by the unexpected course of events, had not wit or agility enough to save themselves. In a second they were seized and handcuffed by the agents of the law. [Pg 183]

Corsini's inanimate form was carried in. General Beilski had taken the precaution to send a doctor along with the police. He had accurately guessed that those who wanted to "deport a certain person," would take the precaution of drugging him first and keeping him under narcotics during the journey.

So heavily had the unfortunate young man been drugged, that it was some time before the doctor could bring him to a waking state. At last he opened his dazed eyes and gazed wonderingly round at the narrow little room in which he had been laid.

"Where am I?" he ejaculated slowly. His senses were not yet well ordered. He had hazy recollections of the Zouroff Palace, of a conversation with the Princess Nada, a confession to her of his ambition to be a great composer as well as a great executant, of a walk through the silent streets, the sudden appearance of some men. Then a blank.

The doctor bent over him and spoke in a soothing voice. In spite of the ashen and livid face, he recognised him at once. The doctor came from St. Petersburg in the company of the police, and he had seen the portrait of the new Director of the Imperial Opera in several newspapers. Here was some subtle mystery to which he had not the key.

"You are amongst friends, Signor Corsini. I am going to give you another injection, and after that you will have a little light food before we take you back to St. Petersburg." [Pg 184]

Corsini's tired eyes wandered round the room. He saw the kind, compassionate face of the doctor bending over the sofa on which he had been laid. He saw also three men in police uniform and a tall, bearded man who was evidently the leader of the party. Then his eyes closed again and he relapsed into insensibility.

The doctor swore under his breath and turned to the tall, bearded man.

"They have nearly done for him with their infernal doping, but in an hour from now I shall have him in trim to take back to the General. Have you got all those scoundrels?"

The tall, bearded man shook his head with a melancholy air. "Alas! only two of them, doctor. The other two escaped, warned, no doubt, by some ruffian in this inn. Still, I have got two and I will do my best to make them speak before I have done with them."

Corsini, pale and exhausted from his terrible experiences, sat in Golitzine's study. General Beilski was there also.

"Now, Signor, we want to get at the bottom of this." It was the Count who was speaking. Beilski was a devoted adherent of the Czar, and had been promoted to his high post through the Imperial favour, but he was not a man of very considerable mentality, and the astute secretary had, privately, a very poor opinion of him.

Corsini struggled to collect his wandering thoughts.

"It seems all like a very bad and confused dream, your Excellency. I remember playing at the Zouroff Palace. I had a short conversation with the Princess Nada. I left early; the Prince accompanied me to the door. I remember distinctly the hall-porter and an obscure sort of person lounging in the doorway. I left and walked along in the direction of my hotel. Suddenly I was surrounded by four men—footpads, as I surmised. They seized me and drugged me. The rest is a blank. I woke up in a little bedroom in an obscure inn, with a kind doctor bending over me. Then, there are sleeping and waking intervals, and I find myself here in your Excellency's house."

"Can you carry your mind a little farther back, Signor Corsini? You recognise that you were kidnapped by some persons who desired your disappearance." [Pg 186]

"I understand that perfectly, Count. Let me go back a little. There are certain suspicious circumstances that recur to me."

Beilski and the Count exchanged significant glances. Golitzine motioned the young man to proceed.

"I was engaged to play at the Zouroff Palace last night. I had already acquainted your Excellency with that fact."

The Count nodded a little impatiently. He was anxious to get at the facts.

"A very singular thought has occurred to me, gentlemen. Madame Quéro was very insistent that I should not play at the Zouroff Palace. On two occasions she endeavoured strongly to dissuade me, to make me break my appointment."

The other two men exchanged an even more significant glance. They were getting close to the truth.

Nello had paused. He seemed desirous to say more, but something kept him back. Golitzine noticed his hesitation.

"Come, Signor Corsini, out with it. You have not yet told us all you surmise or suspect. We know about La Belle Quéro. There is something else you can tell us if you choose."

Corsini was never a very good dissembler. He was as wax in the hands of these experienced men of the world.

"A singular thing, gentlemen, after thinking over all those things, is this. Perhaps you know that it is a peculiarity of mine to always walk to and from my engagements." [Pg 187]

"It is a peculiarity of yours that has been already commented on," said Golitzine, who knew everything about everybody. "Proceed, Signor."

"It is just a thing that has struck me as a little peculiar, taken in conjunction with the whole circumstances. Madame Quéro, whom I know you suspect, was very insistent that I should not go to the Zouroff Palace, without assigning any definite or plausible reason."

"We have already understood that," interrupted Beilski, rubbing his hands. "Perhaps we may now come to something that throws more light on the affair."

Corsini proceeded. "I had a brief conversation with the Princess Nada." He blushed slightly as he continued. "She was pleased to express some solicitude for my welfare, my health. She thought I was not looking well, that I had been working too hard. She asked if I had a carriage waiting for me. I answered in the negative, telling her that I always preferred to walk home. She offered to procure a conveyance for me, and added that it could be drawn up at a private entrance to the Palace, as there was a great crush in the main entrance. Gentlemen, I have told you all the facts, it is for you to draw your inferences. It is pretty evident that both Madame Quéro and the Princess had an inkling, perhaps actual knowledge, of the danger that was threatening me, and dared not say more than they did."

Golitzine rose and drew the General into a corner.

"The thing is clear enough. The two women have been in league to save this young man. La Quéro has split upon Zouroff, because she is in love with Corsini, and has enlisted the sympathies of the Princess, probably in love with Corsini herself. You see it, General?" [Pg 188]

Beilski had not the agile intelligence of the Count, but when it was so clearly put before him, he saw it.

"The young woman who brought the note is the maid of one of them," he said tersely. "Well, my men shall bring both the maids before me to-morrow and I will wring the truth out of one of them. In the meantime, how shall we proceed with Corsini?"

"Take him back to his hotel. Fudge any story you like to the manager—been taken ill in my house, or yours, it does not matter which. Let him go about his usual duties and let him be safely guarded till we bring this home to the proper quarters. How about those men accompanying the carriage?"

"Alas! I have only bagged a couple," answered the General regretfully. "The others escaped through the want of vigilance on the part of my men."

"And what have the two you captured got to say for themselves?"

"Just nothing. Their lips are sealed. They will take their own punishment, but they will not give away their employer. If we had lived in the old days we could have made them speak."

Golitzine crossed over to the young Italian.

"Signor Corsini, I cannot say how deeply I am grieved that you should have been subjected to this outrage. Rest assured it shall be tracked home to the proper quarters, and you shall be amply avenged. I have asked General Beilski to put a secure guard around you whenever you venture abroad. You need fear no repetition. Salmoros would never forgive me if you came to harm."

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Corsini was taken back to his hotel, wondering over all the things that had happened to him. A tale was fudged up to the manager that he had been attacked with sudden indisposition at the house of Count Golitzine, and compelled to remain there. Beilski took good care that he was unobtrusively guarded by members of the secret police.

The next thing was to get hold of the two maids. The General's satellites secured the one in the service of Madame Quéro, and brought her along.

Beilski interrogated her himself, but the cross-examination of five minutes convinced him that she was not the woman who had brought the note. And the porter was equally certain on this point. She was a person of different build.

He dismissed her with a caution, as he handed her some coins.

"I would prefer that you kept your mouth shut about this visit. Still, it is very probable you will blab about it to your mistress."

"Not after your generosity, your Excellency," answered the maid gratefully, with a smirk.

The General grunted. "That is as it may be. I don't know that I trust you farther than that door. But if you should feel disposed to take your mistress into your confidence, you can tell her this—that we have our eye upon her and know more than she thinks."

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Half an hour later the terrified Katerina was brought into his presence. She had been taken in charge a few yards outside the Zouroff Palace, whence she was proceeding on a shopping errand for her young mistress.

The General, with his experienced eye, read at once in her demeanour the signs of great perturbation. She was no hardened criminal, only a weak, trembling girl. He had rough and ready methods for such as these.

"Speak the truth, girl, and fear not; the strong arm of the law shall protect you," he thundered in his loud, vigorous accents. "You are the young woman who brought me a note the other day from the Princess Nada. My hall-porter has recognised you."

This, of course, was a flight of the gallant General's imagination. The hall-porter had distinctly said that he would not be certain of recognising her; but it was enough to scare the shrinking Katerina.

She sank upon her knees, trembling in every limb. "It is true, your Excellency. Are you going to kill me, or send me to Siberia?"

The General smiled grimly. "Neither, my excellent young woman, as you have confessed without any unnecessary trouble. Give my compliments to your young mistress, and tell her I will give myself the pleasure of waiting upon her this afternoon on a little private matter. You can tell her that I have interrogated you, and you have confessed. You can also mention that the police, presided over by General Beilski, has a long arm, and a very wide espionage; also that we find out things pretty quickly, however carefully they are concealed."

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Poor Katerina hurried away, her brain in a whirl. As she scurried home, she reproached herself that, under the awe-inspiring presence of the formidable General, she had given her young mistress away. But, after all, she was not to blame. The Princess ought not to have sent her on such an errand.

Nada had been wondering at her absence. The shopping errand on which she had been despatched should not have occupied her very long.

Poor Katerina had to confess to her interview with the General. Nada spoke no word of blame; it was her own fault that she had chosen so weak an instrument. And she further admitted to

herself that if Beilski's emissaries had seized her instead of her maid and conveyed her to his headquarters, she would have lost her head as her maid had done.

And the General was coming to-day to worm out of her all he could. Of course, she knew she would be as wax in his hands. But even above her own immediate troubles rose the one anxious thought—was Corsini safe? had he escaped the vengeance of her ruthless brother?

She could not make use of the already too terrified Katerina any more. She sent around a brief note to Corsini at his hotel, in which she asked him to procure for her a certain piece of music of which he had spoken to her in a brief conversation a little time ago.

The messenger came back with the information that Signor Corsini was engaged in his duties at the Opera, and that the note would be given him on his return.

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This relieved her very much. Corsini, at any rate, was safe. Her strategies had succeeded. She braced her nerves for the forthcoming interview with the General. She knew it would be a strenuous one. How, in the name of all that was marvellous, had he discovered that she was the sender of that letter?

Beilski had chosen a most fortunate day from her point of view. Her mother was in bed with a feverish cold. She would have to receive the General alone. He would go to the point at once. If she had her mother's protecting presence, decency, respect for his old friend of many years, would have tied his tongue to some extent. He might hint his suspicions of Zouroff to a sister; he would conceal them from a mother, ruffian as he knew the son to be.

But though her heart was fluttering, she received him very prettily and graciously. Had she not known him from a child?

"An unexpected pleasure, my dear General. It is not often that you come to the Zouroff Palace."

"Not so often as I would wish, my dear child, but my time is very fully occupied. As you can guess, these are troublous times. How is your dear mother?"

Nada explained that the Princess was in bed with the first symptoms of a feverish cold.

The General took a few sips of the cup of tea that the charming young Princess offered him. His bushy eyebrows worked from time to time. He was a perfect gentleman at heart; he was also very chivalrous to women. He did not at all relish the mission he was engaged on. It was the breaking of a butterfly upon a wheel, and the butterfly was the little girl to whom he used to bring chocolates and bon-bons a few years ago.

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"Sorry to hear it, my dear child. Keep her warm and she will soon be all right." Of course he was not really sorry at all that the Princess Zouroff was well out of the way; it was now all plain sailing.

After a long pause, he spoke in gruff accents. "There is no need to fence, Nada. You got the message from your maid. You know why I have come and what I have come for."

"Yes, I know," answered the young Princess in a faltering voice.

The General drew his chair closer. "Now, out with it all. From whom did you get the information that prompted you to write that letter?"

CHAPTER XVIII

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Zouroff had exulted very greatly on that night when he had said good-bye to Corsini at the doors of the Palace. The carriage was waiting a short distance away. In a few hours the young musician would cease to be a menace to him.

He was doomed to grievous disappointment. One of the escaping band had managed to despatch a telegram in cipher acquainting him with the fact that his plans had miscarried, that Corsini had been rescued by the police at Pavlovsk.

Upon receipt of that telegram, he went into one of his violent rages, but of course nobody witnessed his distress. After he had recovered himself, he sought out his valet and imparted to him the news.

Later, in obedience to his master's instructions, the valet learned that Corsini was back at the Opera; further, that General Beilski had surrounded him with a strong bodyguard, which was to protect him, in an unobtrusive fashion, day and night.

His suspicions fell at once on La Belle Quéro. If he had obeyed the promptings of his wild and savage nature, he would at once have gone to her dressing-room at the Opera, taxed her with her treachery, and strangled her with his own hands. Needless to say, he had no idea of the part played by his sister in the rescue of the hated musician.

But he was wily as well as savage. He would take his own measures with this treacherous Spanish woman in due course. She certainly would not escape his vengeance; but he would do nothing rash, nothing calculated to bring his own neck into jeopardy. He would meet her as if

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nothing had happened. He would be more lover-like than ever.

And things, as he thought, were now hastening so rapidly towards the goal that his revenge need not be long delayed.

Corsini had resumed his duties at the Opera, and his brief disappearance had been plausibly explained. The story of a short indisposition had satisfied all curiosity.

His feelings at this particular period were, perhaps, a little uncertain. He was not quite sure that the excellent Salmoros, whom he had once looked upon as a pure and benevolent philanthropist, ever ready to extend a helping hand to a struggling genius, had done him such a good turn, after all.

True, he had made certain strides in his calling: he might be said now to have gained a European reputation in place of a purely local one. On the other hand, he was mixed up in the political schemes of Golitzine. He had been kidnapped, and but for the tenderness of a woman, perhaps two women, might have been done to death by now.

On the whole, England seemed a safer place than Russia. In Russia there was only one bright spot. And that was the presence of the Princess Nada.

And this constant, ubiquitous bodyguard annoyed him. Of course he was quite sensible enough to know that it was necessary. Whoever his enemy might be, Zouroff or another, he would try and kidnap him again, undeterred by the failure of the first attempt. Golitzine and the Chief of Police were quite right to put a cordon round him.

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It irked him very much, this body of four patient men who guarded him day and night, not in any way obtrusively, but always within reach—lurking in the corridor of his hotel, in the passages and lobbies of the Opera House, always ready to rush to his assistance if he were suddenly surprised.

In London he could walk east, west, south, or north without fear—to the breezy heights of Hampstead, the sylvan glades of Richmond. For, if he were to seek inspiration, he must fly from closed rooms, from shut doors, and hold communion with the stars.

On the second night of his return, the four patient men accompanied him on one of his walks, scattering discreetly, but ever on the alert.

Inspiration had come to him. The fugitive notes, with difficulty recaptured, were shaping themselves into music in his brain. Suddenly a tall figure loomed out of the darkness and stood in front of him. The four silent watching men formed up and drew closer.

“Do not fear,” whispered the man; “I am a friend. I see there are men looking after you. They are members of the police, I am sure. Tell them not to be afraid for your safety; but I would like them to withdraw out of earshot.”

“I seem to remember your voice, I have a faint recollection of your face,” answered Corsini, “but at the moment I cannot recall when and where we met.”

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The big man laughed softly. “Throw back your memory a little while. A lonely road leading out of a still more lonely village filled with troops and mounted police. Your train had broken down, you had taken a quiet walk. You were saying your prayers before a village ikon. There suddenly appeared a tall, bearded man who implored your charity.”

Then Corsini recognised him. “Ivan the Cuckoo, Ivan the outlaw! What are you doing here?”

“Get your friends a little out of earshot and then we can talk quietly,” was the outlaw’s answer.

Corsini went up to the leader of the four men, who had drawn very close.

“This is a man whom I met on my first entrance into this country under very strange circumstances. I have good reason to believe he is well disposed towards me; but he wishes to speak to me in private. Will you withdraw a little so that you cannot hear what he says?”

The chief of the party looked somewhat doubtfully on the big figure of the outlaw. “He seems a bit of a ruffian, Signor, but it is as you wish. We will go out of earshot, as you request, but we will keep our pistols well levelled at him, in case of accident. You are sure you can trust him?”

“I think so,” replied Corsini. “I am afraid he is not a very estimable character and his appearance is not in his favour, but I helped him once when he was in great straits, and he swore to return the obligation. I am inclined to trust him myself.”

The four men withdrew. The big man chuckled quietly. “So you have persuaded them to get out of the way. They were urging you not to trust me, eh?”

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“Something of the sort. Well, Ivan, what have you got to say?”

“Simply this. On that day you saved me, when the police were waiting within a few yards to trap me like a rabbit, I swore I would pay back the debt, did I not?”

“You did, Ivan. I remember that promise well. But you don’t mean to say you are going to pay it back to-night.”

“If not to-night, very shortly, Signor Corsini. You see, I know something about you. Well, I will tell

you something you may, or may not, know; you have a very bitter enemy, who is resolved to hunt you to death."

"That is true, Ivan. I can guess his name, but you know it. Is that not so?"

"It is quite true," replied the outlaw in low tones. "Your enemy is mine, too, the dastard and scoundrel who enjoys the style and title of Prince Zouroff."

"Your enemy also?" queried Corsini in wondering tones. "But how can you have crossed his path?"

"I have a heavy account against the man and his family," answered the outlaw in his low, fierce voice. "In the old bad days of serfdom, his father, who was even a bigger ruffian, if it is possible, than his son, had my father flogged to death for a trivial offence. That was burnt into my brain."

He tore open his clothes and showed his naked chest, on which was a long scar.

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"You see that. Boris insulted my sister, a pure and innocent girl, born on his estate as I was. She told me the story. I borrowed a sword. I lay in wait for him in the woods one night. I challenged him to fight. I wounded him, thank Heaven, but he got his sword in too and left me with that scar. You can guess that I have got a big account against this Prince who swaggers about St. Petersburg and boasts amongst his intimates that he will dethrone the Czar."

For a few seconds the outlaw paused, struggling to regain his composure, which the recital of his wrongs had so disturbed.

"After that incident, you will guess there was no safety for me, Signor. It was no longer possible for me to remain on this villain's estate," he resumed. "I wandered forth to embrace a life of crime—to become a thief, a bandit, a marauder. But, as Heaven is my judge, my guilt lies at his door."

"You spoke of repaying a debt, Ivan," interjected Corsini, with a view of recalling the unhappy man from these troublous and disturbing memories. "And if not to-night, very shortly. I don't know that I very much desire repayment. What I did was out of feelings of humanity. Some people might say misplaced humanity. But what I did that night I should do again to-morrow if we were both in the same position."

The big, bearded man regained his calmness, and spoke in slow, measured tones. "I have seen your portrait in the newspapers, Signor, and so was able to give a name to my preserver. It is in my power to put you in possession of an important secret that will bring great distinction to you, when you impart it to the proper quarters. In return you will secure for me a full pardon. I am not asking too exorbitant a price; I am sure you will admit that."

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"It is a secret, I can guess, concerning the man whom you describe as our common enemy, Prince Boris Zouroff."

Ivan nodded his big head. "Listen! I have many friends in St. Petersburg, most of them certainly not of a reputable class. But I have one friend, quite a decent and honest fellow, born like myself on the Prince's estates. His name is Stepan, and he is in the service of the well-known opera-singer, popularly known as La Belle Quéro."

Corsini started. At first he had felt inclined to pay little heed to the outlaw's rather wild talk. How could a man in his position be of any serious use, a man who had to skulk in obscure corners, lest he drew upon himself the too vigilant attention of the police?

"Stepan and I were boys together and great comrades. The poor fellow is heavily handicapped in the fact that he is very deaf. At times he can hear a little, but his hearing is never to be depended on. He was rather a favourite of Zouroff's, who, I suppose, found him useful in certain ways, perhaps because of his infirmity: what he could not hear he could not communicate to others."

"I quite understand," interposed the young Italian.

"Some considerable time ago, Zouroff brought him up from the country and installed him in the service of Madame Quéro. Of course he had a motive in this, which you will presently comprehend. I must explain to you that owing to his deafness being so acute, all those who want to speak to him have to use signs. All the same, he is a very intelligent fellow, and can see through a brick wall as clearly as anybody. His speech is affected, too."

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"For what purpose did his master hand him over to Madame Quéro?" queried Corsini.

"I will explain, Signor. The singer has constantly at her house parties of men; no other woman but herself appears at them; and these parties consist of Zouroff and his friends. I have made it my business to find out all their names. You can have that list when you want it; it will be useful to certain persons in high quarters."

Decidedly, Ivan was growing very interesting. The young Italian listened with the closest attention.

"In the side wall of Madame Quéro's villa there is a secret door, my friend Stepan is janitor. On the night when these parties assemble he is on duty. A small bell is pulled, which he cannot hear, but he sees the wire of it vibrating. Stepan ushers them into an inner chamber across which, screening it from the small vestibule, hang heavy black velvet curtains. These men, Signor, are

conspirators, one and all. Stepan is too deaf to overhear what they are conspiring about, but he has his suspicions."

"One moment, Ivan," interrupted Corsini. "You said that Prince Zouroff has showed this man favours. Is he not loyal to his master?" [Pg 202]

"No more loyal than I am, Signor, although, like him, I was born on the villain's estates. Shall I tell you why? When Stepan was a youngster, before this terrible deafness came upon him, he was in love with my sister. You can now understand that he hates Zouroff with only a few degrees less hatred than myself."

"It is quite intelligible, Ivan. Please go on."

"Now I am getting to the point where you come in," explained the outlaw. The four patient men were still watching the prolonged interview, with their pistols ready to be discharged at a moment's notice, should this burly stranger show any suspicious movement.

"These men conduct their conversation in French; that much Stepan knows. On the nights of these assemblies, both the vestibule and inner chamber are very dimly illuminated. Stepan could manage to hide me there to overhear. But, as you know, Signor, I speak French very imperfectly myself and it would be impossible for me to follow them. I often have to ask you to repeat your words slowly, to catch the sense."

Corsini admitted that it was so.

"Now, Signor, here comes the strange thing, a coincidence that must have been fashioned by Providence to direct our ends. In a dim light, you and Stepan are as alike as two peas; it was this resemblance that put the idea into my head. I will not say that in the broad daylight the difference between you might not be discernible." [Pg 203]

Corsini drew a deep breath. He was beginning to have an idea of the scheme which had worked in Ivan's cunning brain. "You want to dress me up as Stepan, put me in his place, and overhear what they are plotting, so that I can communicate it to the police?"

"Precisely, Signor. Is it not a great idea?"

"It sounds pretty well, my friend, but there are one or two little things that might confound your scheme. Has it occurred to you that, since the Prince might communicate with me by signs, I might not be able to understand the alphabet."

"I have arranged for all that, Signor," replied the big man, who was pretty full of resource. "There is a fair-sized cupboard in the vestibule in which Stepan can hide himself while you are listening. You pull open the cupboard and he can change places with you when you please. You can do this as often as you like in the twinkling of an eye."

Corsini smiled. "Admirably thought out, Ivan, but there will be no need. I know the alphabet perfectly; I learned it when a boy, and since my short sojourn here I have picked up a fair amount of Russian. Of course Zouroff speaks Russian to Stepan."

The outlaw smiled gleefully. "No, Signor; everything, I see, is working most smoothly for our plans. Zouroff had the boy very well educated; he can speak French as well as you can, and the Prince always expresses himself to him in that language."

"Then all should go very smoothly, Ivan. When do you want me to take up my *rôle*; in other words, when does the next meeting at the villa take place?" [Pg 204]

"To-morrow night or the night after, I cannot be sure. But I shall hear from Stepan to-morrow, who will be informed by Madame Quéro. I will send you round a note to your hotel," answered the outlaw.

"And at what hour do they assemble?"

"Shortly after midnight, Signor. Here, by the way, is a list of the names which you might like to show. I take it, after our conversation, you will go at once to General Beilski and tell him what you have learned."

Corsini nodded. It was not, however, his idea to repair to that somewhat pompous functionary. He proposed to seek the astute secretary, Golitzine, at his own house; failing that, at the Winter Palace.

"And you will not forget the free pardon, Signor, for the poor outlaw who was driven to a life of crime through the wrongs perpetrated upon him and his by the Zouroffs, father and son."

"No, Ivan, I will not forget that. I shall also press for a substantial reward, if things come off as we hope. Now, supposing I want to communicate with you? Will you let me have your address, or not?"

Ivan pointed his hand in the direction of the four waiting men.

"I am rather fearful of this sort of gentry, Signor, as you can well imagine. But I trust you; I proved your metal that night when I found you in front of the ikon. I know you will not betray me. Still, do not write to me unless absolutely necessary, and be very careful of your messenger. Anyway, address me under an assumed name." [Pg 205]

He drew a dirty piece of paper out of his pocket and scribbled upon it the address of his mean lodging, in one of the commonest quarters of the town; also the assumed name by which he was to be addressed.

Corsini held out his hand. "Well, Ivan, if this all turns out well, you will have more than repaid your obligation. Good-night; I will get that free pardon for you, rely upon it. I shall hear from you to-morrow or next day at the latest."

He watched the big figure of the outlaw well out of sight. Then he beckoned to the leader of the four men.

"A most fortunate meeting," he said, in a cheerful voice. "I am now going straight on to Count Golitzine. I will try his house first."

CHAPTER XIX

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But Golitzine was not at his house. Corsini exchanged a few words with the Countess, who informed him that her husband was at the Winter Palace, closeted with the Emperor on important matters. She did not expect him to return till very late.

Under ordinary circumstances, Nello would have refrained from intruding himself on the Secretary when engaged with his Imperial Master, but the information which Ivan had given him was genuine: of that he felt assured.

Delay might be dangerous. The failure of Zouroff's scheme to entrap the young director, the knowledge that there must have been treachery amongst his associates, would render the Prince a very desperate man. Whatever *coup* he meditated would be brought off swiftly, before the other side had time to strike.

He sent up a short note to Golitzine, stating that he had come into the receipt of most important information, obtained from a most unexpected quarter.

The Count showed the note to the Emperor, who read it, and said immediately:

"Have him up at once and let us know what it is. I have always had a notion that this young fellow would be useful to us. I believe he is born to be lucky himself and to bring luck to those with whom he is associated."

So Corsini was shown at once into the august presence.

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The autocrat welcomed him most graciously. Any protégé of his staunch old friend and supporter, Salmoros, would have been sure of his good graces in any case; but he liked the young man personally, for his modest, but assured bearing. And, moreover, Corsini was free from the cringing arts of the professional courtier. In his demeanour there was proper respect, but no servility.

"Welcome back to St. Petersburg, Signor. I hear you have had a trying time. I have had a full report of the occurrence from the Count and General Beilski. I hope it will not be long before we give you your revenge."

"I am in hopes that very shortly I may take a hand in that revenge myself, your Majesty," answered the young Italian with a low bow. "Something very extraordinary has happened to-night. I was taking one of my evening strolls, shadowed by men whom the General has kindly instructed to look after my safety, when I was accosted by a man whom I met under strange circumstances, on my first entrance into this country."

"His name? but perhaps we don't know him," interrupted the Count.

Corsini looked a little troubled. He remembered his promise to the outlaw. He must secure that free pardon in advance.

"May I first be permitted to retail to your Majesty and your Excellency the information he gave me?"

"We are in your hands, Signor Corsini," answered the Emperor graciously, and the Count nodded his head in assent.

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Briefly the young man told them what Ivan had communicated to him—the secret meetings of certain well-known nobles, whose names he imparted, at the villa of Madame Quéro; the attendance in the vestibule of the deaf servant, Stepan, whom he almost exactly resembled; the suggestion that he should take Stepan's place and listen to the conversation of the conspirators, whose chief was Prince Zouroff. He added that the next meeting would be to-morrow night, or, at latest, the night after.

"It will be to-morrow night, of that we may be certain," said the Emperor in a decided tone, when the young man had finished. "Zouroff cannot be very happy at the present moment, after the failure of his attempt to put the Signor out of the way. He is also pretty certain to know that General Beilski has visited his sister; that fact will give him some food for thought. Besides,

although these two scoundrels, whom we have secured, have not confessed yet, at any moment they may open their mouths to denounce him. If Zouroff has got his plans pretty well matured, he will strike with as little delay as possible. Do you agree, Count?"

The Count agreed, and then addressed Corsini.

"And now, Signor, I think it is time you gave us the name of this mysterious informant. I do not know whether his action is dictated by loyalty, or the hope of reward. But anyway, he must be rewarded, and handsomely too."

The Emperor concurred warmly. "Whoever serves us will not find us niggardly or ungrateful," he said. [Pg 209]

"Alas! I have great hesitation in mentioning it to your Excellency, for my strange friend is by no means an estimable person. Speaking plainly, he is a malefactor, and has escaped from the mines of Siberia."

"In other words, the price of this very important information is a handsome reward and a free pardon. Well," the Count looked towards the Emperor, "I suppose I have your Majesty's permission to promise both."

"We do not go back on our word," was the autocrat's grave answer. "A deed like this, performed from whatever motive, purges his offences, whatever they may be."

And then, reassured, Corsini gave the name. "A big, bearded man, born on the Prince's estates, known as Ivan the outlaw, nicknamed Ivan the Cuckoo."

"I know of him by reputation—a desperate fellow, according to his record," remarked the Count. "And how did you first become acquainted with him, Signor Corsini? But if you prefer to keep it a secret, I will not press the question."

Corsini took advantage of Golitzine's generosity. He did not want to confess that he had helped a notorious criminal to escape from justice. "I think I would prefer to guard it as a secret, your Excellency, since you give me permission to do so."

"Yet, if I may venture to relate a little history to you," he added a moment later, "I think I might be able to convince you that this wretched man, brutal and degraded as he became, was more sinned against than sinning." In a few words he told him of the offences of the Zouroffs, father and son, against the outlaw's family. [Pg 210]

The Count made no comment. After a few moments he rose, to intimate that the interview was at an end.

"With your assistance, Signor—I am, of course, assuming that the scheme will go through as this unfortunate man has planned—I think and hope we shall soon get the evidence we want. I fear I cannot give you any more time now, as his Majesty has still some very important matters to discuss with me. By the way, I know that General Beilski is sending for you early to-morrow morning, as he has something of importance to communicate to you. I shall have an interview with him also, but in case you see him first, tell him everything you have told us. He may be able to assist your plans. You will, of course, report to us as soon as you have discovered anything."

Corsini promised that he would. He had a strong presentiment that his changing places with the deaf Stepan would be productive of stupendous events.

On arriving back at his hotel, he found a sealed note from the General, summoning him to his office at an early hour the following morning.

"I have not been idle since we last met, Signor," was Beilski's greeting. "I have no doubt I have got to the bottom of your affair. I will give you just an outline of how I propose to act."

But here Nello broke in. "Excuse me a moment, your Excellency, but before you enter into this matter, may I put a question to you? Have you seen or heard from Count Golitzine between now and last night?" [Pg 211]

The General answered in the negative. "It is now only nine o'clock; there has not been much time. Why do you ask?"

The young man explained. "Late last night I went to see the Count, whom I found closeted with his Majesty. My reasons for disturbing him at such a moment were of the greatest urgency. As I left he told me you would be sending for me, and that if I saw you first I was to tell you everything that I had told to him and the Emperor."

For the second time he related in full the details of that momentous interview with Ivan the outlaw.

The General smiled triumphantly when the narrative was concluded. "So this fellow has been lying hid in St. Petersburg all this time, has he? Well, I think my spies ought to have hunted him out. Still, as it turns out, it is better they didn't. Desperado and robber as he has been, I frankly admit he has fully earned the free pardon which you were shrewd enough to get for him."

He mused a few moments before he proceeded. "The information you have given me may materially alter our plans. I cannot decide positively till I have talked with his Excellency. But I

doubt if we shall move till we get some positive information from you. In the meantime, I will tell you to what extent I have unravelled the plot against yourself."

Needless to say that Nello was all attention. He had his own suspicions, which were very close to the truth, but Beilski was probably on the track of the truth itself. [Pg 212]

"On the afternoon of the day that you were kidnapped, I received a letter couched in cautious and guarded language to the effect that a carriage, starting from St. Petersburg somewhere about midnight or later, would halt at Pavlovsk. There was a plot on hand to deport a certain person well known in artistic circles. That person would be found in the carriage when it stopped at the first stage on the road to Moscow."

Nello shuddered. How well he recalled the incidents of that memorable evening—the Prince's apparent cordiality, the Princess's almost officious offer of a carriage to convey him home, the short walk through the silent streets, the sudden appearance out of the dark of the four sinister figures, the waking in a room of the little country inn.

"There was a certain significance in the fact that the writer of that anonymous letter, evidently a woman, had not told us where the carriage was to start from. It was evident that while she wished to protect the victim, she also wanted to shield, so far as she could, the perpetrators of the outrage."

"It was Madame Quéro who wrote that letter?" suggested Nello quickly.

"No, my friend, it was not, although it would be quite correct to say that she was the cause of that letter being written. Of course, I had no clue; the note was left by a young woman whom the porter took very little notice of: he was not at all sure that he would remember her. That night I was dining with the Count—of course, treating the note as a genuine one, I had already acted upon it and despatched the police to Pavlovsk. Just as I was about to leave, a sudden idea occurred to me to show it to Golitzine and ask him if he could help me. His Excellency is a very wonderful man. Above all men that I have met, he possesses, in the highest degree, the qualities of genius and intuition." [Pg 213]

Beilski was not a man who underrated himself, but he was not mean or petty. In this particular matter he was disposed to give to the Count all the credit that was his due, even although it compelled him to play second fiddle.

"With the rapidity of lightning, he jumped at the conclusion that you were the person threatened. We made sure that you were neither at the Zouroff Palace, where you had told him you were going to play, nor at your hotel. Surmise, under such circumstances, became certainty. The rest you can guess almost yourself."

"All the same, I would like you to tell me, General," said Corsini.

"The letter served its purpose admirably," pursued General Beilski. "You were rescued and brought back to St. Petersburg. One significant fact you revealed to us was that La Belle Quéro had strongly dissuaded you from playing at the Palace. Another one, equally significant in our eyes, was that the Princess Nada had urged you not to walk home that night. We put two and two together."

"The letter, then, might have been sent by either of the two women? That, I take it, is your Excellency's meaning?" commented Nello. [Pg 214]

"Precisely. I had the two maids brought before me. The singer's I soon dismissed. She did not correspond in the slightest degree to my porter's rather hazy recollections of the young woman who had brought the note. The second shot was more successful."

"The maid of the Princess Nada, of course?"

"Yes, a slim young thing—I forgot to say the other was short and plump—frightened out of her wits by the sudden turn of events. Terrified by myself, the forbidding aspect of her surroundings, the unknown terrors of the law, she made no pretence of a fight. She fell upon her knees, imploring my clemency."

"So it was the Princess Nada who sent that note with the object of saving me?" asked Nello. There was a very tender look in his eyes as he spoke her name.

"I have known the Princess Nada from her childhood," said Beilski, speaking with some emotion. "Her mother, father, and I were of the same generation. The Princess Zouroff is a sweet woman—generous, kind-hearted, charitable; the daughter is the same. The old Prince was a ruffian in every sense of the word—drunken, dissolute, vicious. The son is a ruffian also, but he has missed a few of the paternal vices. He is not a confirmed drunkard, although he takes more than is good for him, as is well known to his family and his intimates. And he is only moderately dissolute. He has one superiority over his father: he has got brains and ambition." [Pg 215]

"How did such a fair flower spring from such a contaminated soil?" asked Corsini wonderingly.

Beilski shrugged his shoulders. "Who can tell? A freak of nature, I suppose. But remember the mother is pure, and comes from a family without a taint. Well, to resume. When the maid had stammered forth her confession, for an instant a horrible suspicion assailed my mind. We know Zouroff to be a traitor whom we have not yet succeeded in unmasking. Was his innocent-looking

sister involved in his schemes?"

Nello leaned forward in a state of agitation. For an instant, on hearing that it was the Princess and not La Belle Quéro who had sent that letter, a similar doubt had occurred to him.

"I took the bull by the horns. I sent a message by the maid that I would call upon her mistress that same day, that she was to inform her of what she had confessed."

"And you went and interviewed the Princess?" asked Corsini.

"Yes; fortunately I found her alone; her mother was in bed with a feverish cold. She was nervous and agitated, as was to be expected, but one moment's glance at her face convinced me that she was no guilty woman, enmeshed with her own consent in her brother's vile schemes."

The young man drew a deep breath of relief. He had always held the highest opinion of her character. There would be some satisfactory explanation forthcoming of her actions.

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A little note of pomposity and self-congratulation crept into Beilski's voice. "I need hardly tell you that an innocent and inexperienced girl like this was as wax in my hands. With a woman of Madame Quéro's experience, my task might have been more difficult."

"I can quite believe it," murmured Corsini.

"In five minutes I had the whole truth out of her. Well, perhaps, not quite the whole truth," admitted the General reluctantly, "for, woman-like, although she has no love for her brother, she did not want to give him away, to render certain the punishment which he richly deserves."

"And her story, your Excellency?" asked the young man eagerly.

"Briefly it was this. Madame Quéro called upon her to report that there was a plot to decoy you and convey you to an unknown destination—she did not know, or pretended she did not know, your ultimate fate, neither did she know where the carriage was to start from; she was only sure that the first stoppage was to be at Pavlovsk. This of course was Nada's version. It at once occurred to me that these ladies, if they knew so much, would know a little more. They were not both of them ignorant, but, of course, one might be. Which was the ignorant one?"

"The Princess, of course," said Corsini at once. "La Belle Quéro knew where the carriage started from, but did not want to implicate Zouroff, as it was drawn up so close to his residence. She pretended ignorance."

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The General leaned back in his chair and laughed genially. He was very pleased with himself, for what he was about to relate was really his own master-stroke. It owed nothing to the more inventive genius of Golitzine.

"That is, of course, what would occur to you, what would occur to, I dare say, ninety-nine persons out of a hundred. I am the hundredth, and I have had great experience." The General spoke with an air of profound wisdom. "La Belle Quéro had only certain suspicions, fostered by some random remark dropped by Zouroff in a moment of intense rage and irritation. As a matter of fact, she knew no details. She did not know of a carriage at all, and consequently she was ignorant of where it started from or where it was going to."

"The Princess, then——!" interrupted Nello, in a voice of the most intense surprise.

"The Princess, then——!" repeated Beilski. "I saw that poor little Nada's story was lame and halting; of course I guessed the reason why. I pressed her with the question why, if La Belle Quéro, from whom she got her information, knew where the carriage was going to, she did not know where it started from. Both her answer and demeanour were too evasive to deceive me. I could not break her any more on the wheel; I saw she had had about as much as she could stand. I selected another victim."

"Madame Quéro, of course," cried Corsini.

"Wrong again, my friend; you have not yet quite got the analytical faculty that makes a great detective. I had the maid before me again, this time more terrified than before. If I had stretched her on the rack, she could not have poured it forth more fully."

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"And the outcome?" was Corsini's eager question.

"What I had made up my mind was the fact. Zouroff is not the man to impart the details of his plans to any but his immediate instruments. He imparted them neither to Quéro nor his sister."

He related to Corsini what the reader already knows. The visit of the singer to the Princess, of her suspicion that a plot was on foot against the Italian, of her suggestion that Nada should institute some inquiries in the Zouroff household, of the valet, Peter's, confidence to Katerina, the Princess's swift deductions from these revelations.

"I have gone farther," concluded the General. "I have interrogated that scoundrel, Peter, as to what he knows about his master's general projects, and more especially your abduction. But I have not given poor little Katerina away, or the young Princess. I have led him to infer that I was acting on the confession of the two scoundrels we have got in custody."

"And what attitude did he take?"

"At first, one of stupidity, complicated with sullen defiance. But towards the end of the interview, I could see that his heart was being softened. I told him to consider it carefully; full confession and a full pardon, or—the utmost rigour of the law."

"And he will at once tell Zouroff," suggested Corsini. "That is, if he is really loyal to the Prince." [Pg 219]

Beilski shrugged his shoulders. "He may and he may not. I expect he will be thinking chiefly of his own skin. On the other hand, ruffians like the Prince have a remarkable knack of attracting loyalty. At any rate, it does not matter. In a couple of days I should have laid my hands on him for this matter alone—I have no doubt they would have taken you to some lonely place and finished you off—but I shall wait, if necessary, a little longer for the report of your visit to the villa. If that is what we expect it to be, we will have done with this gentleman, once and for all."

"Amen!" cried Corsini, fervently. In spite of his English upbringing, he had in him the true spirit of Italian revenge. He loved the Princess Nada, but for her brother, who would have taken his life, he had no mercy.

He walked home to his hotel, followed at an unobtrusive distance by his guards. His heart was singing happily within him, as a result of his interview with the bluff, but genial General.

He was grateful to La Belle Quéro for her unselfish interference on his behalf: she had braved detection, Zouroff's vengeance, on his account. When his lips were unsealed he would express to the singer his thanks.

But it was the Princess who had more fully schemed and plotted, set to work her woman's wit, and ultimately triumphed on his behalf. Was it due to a kind pure woman's compassion only, or—delicious thought—was she attracted to him as he was to her? Was it love that had stimulated her brain, urged her to that desperate measure of the anonymous note to the Chief of Police? [Pg 220]

A letter was handed to him by the hall-porter as he entered the hotel. He was told that it had been delivered by a shabbily-dressed man, who would not wait for his return.

It was from Ivan, no longer an outlaw, and ran as follows:

"Come to my lodging with your guards at twelve-thirty to-night. The meeting is an hour later. I will give you full instructions. Your Friend."

CHAPTER XX

[Pg 221]

Peter the valet was a man of criminal instincts, cunning, avaricious, and unscrupulous. Perhaps his sole remaining qualities were his devotion to his master, Zouroff, and his ardent love for the Princess's maid, Katerina.

His interview with the formidable and awe-inspiring Beilski had shaken him considerably. His faith in Zouroff was great, but in that brief conversation he had begun to realise the sinister power of the police, at which body, the Prince, in his arrogance, was wont to snap his fingers.

He returned home full of thought and much perturbed. He had already determined in his own mind the cause of the failure to remove Corsini. In an unguarded moment, he had revealed to Katerina certain facts about a travelling carriage whose first stoppage was to be at Pavlovsk. Katerina had blabbed all this to somebody.

But, until his interview with Beilski, he had been content to let matters stand where they were. It did not greatly concern him that Corsini had been rescued and was back again in St. Petersburg. His master would never suspect him: he would rather suspect one of the four other men of having given it away, for the sake of the reward that he would claim. So reasoned Peter in his narrow, but cunning brain. Therefore, for many reasons, he did not tax Katerina at once with the betrayal of his misplaced confidence. [Pg 222]

Beilski's threat set his thoughts working vigorously in the direction of self-preservation. He was devoted to the Prince, but he was still more devoted to himself. If he could have saved Zouroff, he would, but that seemed impossible, the Police knew too much. But he could save himself by telling what he knew. It was necessary therefore to earn that free pardon. It was only a matter of hours before he would go to the General and make a full confession.

It hurt him very much that he should crown so many years of fidelity with such a black act, but it seemed a question of *saue qui peut*. Loyal as he had been to his master, he knew enough of his character to be sure that the Prince, in a similar emergency, would have thrown him, and a dozen like him, to the wolves in order to purchase a moment's respite. Why should he pursue a different policy?

Beilski had promised a free pardon, and also not to implicate him in the transaction. Still Zouroff was a man of extraordinary shrewdness, and when he began to work it out in his mind, might quickly focus his suspicions in the right direction.

How to avert Zouroff's suspicions from himself! That was the question. His narrow, but cunning brain bent itself upon this for some time. At the end of his cogitations, he sought Katerina, and

bluntly taxed her with the betrayal of his confidence.

At first, Katerina, with the natural adroitness of her class and sex, protested indignant denial; she vowed that she had forgotten the incident altogether.

"You are lying," said her lover sternly. "If you do not confess this instant, I will take you to the Prince himself, and he will wring the truth out of you." [Pg 223]

Katerina's face went white. She had been very frightened at Beilski, but her terror of Zouroff was greater even than her fear of the Head of the Police. If she saw him in one of the corridors, she would scuttle away like an alarmed rabbit. If he came into her young mistress's room, she was agitated till he was gone.

In a few moments, what with her fear of Zouroff and her genuine love for Peter, the artful valet had her reduced to a state of tears. It was not long before he forced out of her everything he wanted to know. How she had conveyed the information to the Princess, how she had taken her mistress's note to Beilski, how, later on, she had been summoned to the presence of that formidable person and confessed much as she was doing now.

Peter uttered no word of reproach; the time of reproaches was past; but he saw clearly that the game was up, so far as the abduction of Corsini was concerned. The sooner he made a clean breast of it to Beilski, the better. At the same time, he wanted to throw suspicion upon somebody else.

He loved Katerina genuinely, too well to harm a hair of her head, even to save himself. In this respect he was several degrees better than his master, who would have sacrificed the whole world for such a laudable purpose.

And to the charming young Princess, with her gracious ways, her sweet friendliness to all, he was also strongly attached. He would not harm a hair of her head, if he could help it. But still, his first instinct was for self. [Pg 224]

Besides, if he gave them away, he would be giving himself away, also. What these two women knew, mistress and maid, they must have learned from some member of the Zouroff household.

Was there any member of that household, except himself, who had foreknowledge of the Prince's plans? He was inclined to doubt it. Confidants he must have, when engaged in so many dark schemes, but Zouroff chose as few as possible. Yet, and yet—if only he could throw suspicion in a likely quarter, on somebody else!

Katerina, embarked on the full tide of confession and genuinely alarmed for her lover's safety, babbled on artlessly. Peter had drawn a gloomy picture of the vengeance he might expect at the hands of his master for that innocent gossip of a few moments, when discovery came home to him, as it was sure to do. In her revelations she let fall the fact that the celebrated Madame Quéro had paid a visit to the Princess, during her brother's temporary absence.

Peter pricked up his ears at the information. He knew full well the relations between the Prince and the handsome singer. Here was a fact that might be turned to his advantage. Madame Quéro, he felt assured, participated in all her lover's secrets.

"Have you any proof of that?" he asked eagerly.

Katerina opened wide her tear-dimmed eyes. "Proof? Do you doubt my word? Why, she gave me her card, and the Princess handed it me back and told me to return it to her, with her excuses for not receiving her. I did not like to be so rude, and I put it in my pocket." [Pg 225]

"Have you still got that card, Katerina?" questioned the valet anxiously.

"Of course I have. I kept it as a souvenir. I regard her as a very distinguished person, and I hear she came from our own class. The Princess, of course, looks upon her as the dirt under her feet, but in her position there is no blame, perhaps, for her doing that." Thus poor Katerina, divided between loyalty to her young mistress and admiration for the beautiful woman who had overcome such formidable obstacles.

The artful valet put his arm round her waist and imprinted a fond kiss on her pretty cheek.

"Katerina, my little sweetheart, I think you will admit you owe me some amends for your foolish indiscretion. Give me that card, and we will cry quits. But not a word to the Princess. But I forgot. You cannot tell her; you ought to have returned it to Madame Quéro."

Katerina was glad to be reconciled to her lover on such cheap terms. Five minutes later, the card of La Belle Quéro was in Peter's hands.

And then Peter thought long and cunningly. He had made up his mind to betray his master—it was a matter of necessity—but he was very particular that his master should not know by whom he was betrayed. There was Fritz, the German, one of the four men implicated in the abduction of Corsini. Fritz was always a shifty person, ready to sell himself to the highest bidder. Peter felt assured that Zouroff's suspicions were already centred on Fritz. He was one of the two men who had escaped, no doubt with the connivance of the police; anyway, that would be Zouroff's view. [Pg 226]

The possession of Madame Quéro's card had suggested new lines of thought. Of course, Peter did not know to what extent the beautiful singer was in the Prince's confidence. Here, naturally, he

was groping wildly in the dark. But the more he diverted Zouroff's attention from himself on to other people, the better.

In divulging what he proposed to do to the Prince, it was more than probable that he would implicate the young Princess Nada. And Peter had a very soft spot in his heart for her. Still, it was simply a question of saving himself. If Zouroff saw red and laid all about him, as it were, Nada must protect herself. Even a ruffian like Zouroff would exercise some compunction when his sister was in question. With regard to La Belle Quéro, who had, at times, treated him a little disdainfully, with the slight arrogance of a person who had emerged from his own class into a superior one, Peter felt no qualms. The Prince and she could adjust their own differences at the proper time and hour.

Later on, he approached Zouroff with his fawning and cringing aspect, and handed him Madame Quéro's card.

"You know that my eyes and ears are always open in your Excellency's service," he whined. "That is what I have found." [Pg 227]

Zouroff's face grew as black as thunder as he read it. "She has been here, then. To see whom?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. He wanted to be as non-committal as possible. "That I cannot tell. Your Excellency may guess better than I."

The Prince looked at him long and intently. Peter was a very cunning rogue; that he knew full well; but he was the last man he was inclined to suspect.

"How did you come into possession of this?" he thundered.

But Peter was determined not to implicate his sweetheart, Katerina. In this respect he was a slightly better man than his master.

"Your Excellency will excuse me; my lips are sealed. One must be faithful to one's comrades. There are wheels within wheels, as you well know."

The Prince nodded. He knew Peter well. In many ways he was docile and obedient, but it was always politic not to push him too far; on such occasions the valet was apt to take on a spirit of sturdy independence which his master was compelled to respect. Wild horses would not draw from him how, or through whom, he had discovered that card.

"Leave me, Peter, if you please," commanded Zouroff. "I must be alone to think this thing over, since you say your lips are sealed."

He shook his fist angrily in the direction of the retreating valet. "Ah, for my good old father's days," he murmured regretfully. "I would have had it out of you with the knout then, my excellent friend." [Pg 228]

Left alone, Zouroff pondered out all these things in his subtle brain. The treacherous Madame Quéro had come to the Palace, to seek whom, and to what purpose?

Rumour, gathered at the stage door, and in the more intimate circles of the profession, averred that the handsome singer was in love with Corsini. He had also his impressions of his sister in connection with the handsome young Italian. He had watched them together in that prolonged conversation on the night of the concert at the Zouroff Palace, on quitting which, Corsini had been abducted.

Rapidly in his own mind, he reconstructed the sequence of events. Madame Quéro was in love with Corsini. He gnashed his teeth as he remembered he had been fool enough to suggest to the Spanish woman that Corsini must disappear. She had acted on that hint and come straight to the Palace to invoke his sister's assistance in rescuing Corsini.

His sister was in love with Corsini herself. The two rivals had united to save their common lover, and their measures had been well taken. The police had met the carriage at Pavlovsk, rescued the drugged and inanimate Director of the Imperial Opera, and brought him safely back to St. Petersburg. And, in the capital, so Zouroff was assured by his spies, he was being safely guarded by Beilski's men. The Government and the police were proving themselves very cunning, almost as cunning as Zouroff himself. [Pg 229]

So far he had reasoned things out very logically. Now came the one thing for which he could not account. To La Quéro he had given no details, and as he had not given them to her, she could not communicate them to his sister. Here was a final stop.

And yet, the carriage containing Corsini, drugged and bound, had been surrounded at Pavlovsk by the police. Somebody, then, had given information. Who was that somebody?

His suspicion fell at once on Fritz, the German, chiefly, perhaps, because Fritz had been found guilty of minor acts of disloyalty in previous transactions. For a man of his acute intelligence, it was, perhaps, a little surprising that he did not, at first hand, suspect Peter.

But Peter had just disarmed his suspicions by handing to him Madame Quéro's card. Yes, Peter was loyal, if every other person was tainted with treachery.

There emerged from his strenuous efforts to get at the truth some clear and certain facts,

according to his own deductions, which were, of course, erroneous.

Madame Quéro had been informed by Fritz of the actual facts: that Corsini was to be kidnapped just outside the precincts of the Palace, that the carriage was to stop on its first stage on the Moscow road at Pavlovsk.

He had to admit that there were flaws in his reasoning. If Madame Quéro had got this information from Fritz, and she was resolved to save Corsini, she could have informed the police herself. Why had she come to the Palace, to invoke the assistance of Nada? [Pg 230]

Pending his cogitations, he had recourse to stimulants, as was his wont on such occasions. Amid the fumes of alcohol he solved the problem, as he thought. Quéro, not wishing to appear herself, had made his sister her instrument. He ground his teeth, and vowed implacable revenge upon his once sweetheart, La Belle Quéro.

But his anger against his sister was hardly less burning. To think that this innocent young girl, only just out of the schoolroom, should dare to thwart his plans.

He burst into her sitting-room, his face red and inflamed from his secret drinking. She recognised the symptoms at once. He had one of his wild fits of brutal and unreasoning rage.

He attacked her at once, in unmeasured language.

"You are a disgrace to your sex," he shouted wildly, "a disgrace to the noble house of Zouroff, to the name you bear."

The young Princess looked at him calmly and steadfastly, with her clear gaze. He was a wild beast at the moment—she saw that; also gathered that he had been drinking heavily. Wild beasts are sometimes tamed by the eye. She never took her glance off him.

"Of what do you accuse me?" she asked in cold and cutting accents. "In what way have I, of all the members of our family, disgraced the house of Zouroff?"

The Prince spluttered forth his accusations. "You have disgraced yourself by falling in love with a strolling player, that mountebank, Corsini." [Pg 231]

Of course he was still master enough of himself not to reveal all he knew, or thought he knew.

The Princess drew herself up haughtily. It was not the first time she had encountered her brother in this mood.

"I don't think you know what you are talking about, Boris; I can see your condition very plainly. Signor Corsini is not a strolling player—that description applies to the destitute members of the theatrical profession. Corsini is a musician, an artist, and the Director of the Imperial Opera. Think of some other expression that will vent your rage and spite, but don't call him 'a strolling player.'"

"But whatever he is, you love him," thundered the Prince, now fairly consumed with rage.

The young Princess kept her temper, her tone was as cutting as before.

"You insult me with these questions," she said calmly. "Return to me when you are sober and I may perhaps be able to talk with you, reason with you." She was thinking of a few hints dropped by General Beilski on his brief visit to her.

"And if I do not choose to leave at your bidding," retorted the Prince, in a jeering tone. "Suppose I insist upon remaining and finishing our conversation!"

"In that case I shall leave the Palace for good." And suddenly her woman's strength gave way, opposed to that of this resolute ruffian and bully. "If our dear mother were here, you would not dare to stay in this room a moment longer. You take advantage of my weakness," she cried tearfully. [Pg 232]

"Our dear mother," mimicked Zouroff, in mocking accents. "You and your mother have always held together against me; you always held against my dear father in the old days."

"Of whom you are a worthy son," flashed the Princess, with an angry gesture. She had poignant memories of those old days, when her mother had suffered untold indignities at the hands of Prince Zouroff the elder, indignities which had bitten into the souls of both wife and daughter. Boris was the only member of the family who revered the name of his father, for the very simple reason that he partook of his worst qualities.

And then a softer mood came to her. After all, he was her brother, son of the same kind, gentle mother. She went across to him and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Be reasonable, Boris, and prudent. I can guess more than you think. I am sure you are playing a very dangerous game. Be certain on your side that your opponents are not stronger than you."

But Zouroff was in no mood to listen to the tender expostulations of a woman, especially a woman whom he despised as much as his sister, this frail girl who took after her gentle mother, who had in her none of the iron qualities of his brutal father.

He flung her aside, and spoke in a grating voice.

"You will leave the Palace, will you? Yes, you shall, but when and how I choose. There is your own little comfortable Castle of Tchernoff. Perhaps if I sent you there, it might cool your hot blood."

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The Princess flamed up. "You dare not think of such a thing. Brute as you are, you would not dare to do it."

"We shall see. Remember I am still your legal guardian," cried the Prince, with a mocking laugh, as he left the room.

The interview had sobered him. All that was now working in his mind was, first, a scheme of revenge upon La Belle Quéro; second, a milder scheme of revenge against his sister.

An hour later Peter, the valet, reported himself to General Beilski and obtained his free pardon by a full confession. And the General, waiting for further developments, stayed his hand for the moment.

CHAPTER XXI

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Needless to say that Nada was very much alarmed by the threat which her brother had flung at her when she spoke of leaving the Palace. She tried to reason herself into the belief that her fears were groundless. In their not infrequent quarrels he had more than once threatened to lock her up in that gloomy castle in order to bring her to her senses.

But nothing had ever come of it. He was hotheaded and overbearing, but she did not believe him to be vindictive. Of course, in forming this lenient estimate of a character not to be very easily fathomed, she was grievously mistaken.

To-day he was in one of his blind rages, and he had, moreover, been drinking. At such times he was not always responsible for either his words or actions. In a few hours he would be his normal self, and his senseless anger would have died down.

Still, she wished that she could take counsel with somebody. She could not go to her mother. The Princess's cold had been the precursor of an acute attack of diphtheria of such an infectious nature that her chamber was barred to everybody except the nurse and doctor.

Relatives, of course, Nada had in abundance, but she shrank from exposing her brother to these. He was unpopular enough with his family as it was.

She could, of course, send round a note to Beilski, informing him of her brother's threat and claiming his protection; but, from the few hints the General had dropped, she could see that he was already sufficiently inflamed against Zouroff. She did not wish to increase that resentment, unless it were absolutely necessary.

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But still she felt imperatively the desire to confide, in somebody to have disinterested counsel as to the course she should pursue.

And suddenly the idea of Corsini occurred to her mind. She knew, with the intuitive instinct of a woman, that the young musician had fallen deeply in love with her, that if for certain reasons he would never go so far as to confess his love, she would ever find in him a true and devoted friend.

When she had sent that letter to his hotel to make sure that he had been safely brought back from Pavlovsk, he had forwarded her the piece of music she had asked for, as an excuse for writing to him.

After the first few formal lines of his answering note, he had written some strange words—words which evidently conveyed a deeper meaning than appeared on the surface. She remembered them perfectly.

"I cannot express to you in grateful enough language my thanks for all you have done for me. Later on, perhaps, I may have the opportunity of rendering them personally."

Grateful thanks for all she had done for him! There was only one service she had rendered him which could call for such warm expressions. But had he been able to connect her with that? Had he been able to reason it out in his own mind that Zouroff was the man who desired his removal? Or had he learned it all from Beilski?

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She could not be sure. She had fenced as well as she could with Beilski, but the fact that that carriage had been drawn up within a few yards of the Palace certainly supported the idea that the Prince was the perpetrator of the outrage. Of course, she knew nothing of the General's second interview with Katerina; the maid had thought it wiser to keep that to herself. Neither did she know of the other interview with Peter the valet.

Zouroff had gone out, leaving word that he would not be home till late at night, very shortly after that stormy scene between the pair. The coast was clear. She would send round a note to Corsini asking him to come and see her for a few moments. Her maid would be waiting for him and would at once conduct him to her boudoir.

She would then endeavour to find out how much he knew; and if he had discovered the absolute

truth, then she would seek his counsel and advice.

Corsini went to the Palace at once, much as he disliked entering the house of which the hateful and treacherous Prince was master.

He could see that the young Princess was very agitated as she greeted him.

"It is very kind of you to come so quickly, Signor. What I really wanted to see you about was this. In that letter you wrote me when you sent me that piece of music I asked for, you made use of certain expressions which I could not quite understand. You spoke of my having done you some service for which you wished to express your thanks."

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The Italian looked at her steadily and intently, but in that deep gaze there was a very tender expression.

"Can you yourself recall no service that you have rendered me, Princess?"

So he knew. Of course, if he had not guessed of his own volition, Beilski would have told him that she had sent that letter of warning.

"Ah, I see you have found out," she faltered. "Well, on the spur of the moment I did my best, and I am glad that the result was so successful."

"I shall ever remember it with the deepest feelings of gratitude," said the young musician fervently. "It could have been no light matter for you to act as you did, to run the risk of being detected."

There was now no further need of fencing on either side. "Signor, since there is now such a frank understanding between us, I want to ask your advice on a matter that is troubling me very much."

In tones of unmistakable sincerity he assured her that his services were whole-heartedly at her disposal.

"My mother, alas! cannot help me. She is so seriously ill with diphtheria that we are forbidden to go to her room; only the doctor and the nurse are allowed there."

Corsini expressed his deep regret at the Princess's severe indisposition. Nada resumed, in her soft, musical voice:

"This morning my brother and I had a serious quarrel." A vivid blush spread over her charming face as she recalled how the quarrel had begun with his taunting her with her preference for the man whom he called "a strolling player."

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"We have had many quarrels in our time," she explained. "He is violent and overbearing, and breaks in the most ungovernable rages. At such times, I think, he goes actually mad for the moment. This particular quarrel, however, has left a deeper impression than most. He has threatened to lock me up in a gloomy old Castle in the Caucasus, as a punishment for my venturing to incur his displeasure."

"And is there any valid, or sufficiently apparent, reason for his displeasure?" asked Corsini. "Or perhaps I am indiscreet in putting that question."

"Oh, none at all," replied the Princess, with a return of that vivid blush; "mere trifles that a less violent man would smile at. He has used this threat once or twice before, but to-day he spoke as if he meant it."

Corsini thought deeply before he answered. Had Zouroff actually discovered the part she had played in his rescue, and was this his revenge?

"My advice, Princess, is to leave the Palace, and either seek shelter with some relatives or claim the protection of Golitzine and Beilski; if necessary of the Emperor himself. The Prince, you know doubtless, is not a favourite at Court."

"I know," said Nada quickly. "But think of the awful scandal when all this is blazoned forth. For my poor mother's sake I want to avoid that."

The Italian spoke very gravely. "The scandal will, of course, be regrettable. But compared with your own safety, I should not give it a moment's consideration."

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He stood up, and his calm left him as he thought of the danger she ran with this brutal brother, who seemed capable of any villainy.

"You asked for my advice, Princess. I have given it and repeat it. Leave this house at once and acquaint Beilski with all you have told me."

"You mean leave it now—to-day?" she faltered. "And my poor mother lying so ill upstairs."

"That, of course, from what I know and can guess of the Prince would provide him with an excellent reason for carrying out his plans as quickly as possible," observed Corsini bitterly.

The poor young Princess seemed overwhelmed by the position. She felt Corsini's advice was sound, and yet she shrank from taking such a decided step. The Prince had used a similar threat before, and nothing had come of it.

"I think I will wait till I see him again to-morrow," she said presently. "I shall know by his mood if he has forgotten the incident. Nothing will occur to-day. He has gone out, and left word that he will not be home till late to-night."

Yes, he would be late home to-night; Corsini knew that for certain. He still persisted, however, in his point.

"Delays are dangerous, Princess. I will help you any way you like. And it will be wise to take advantage of his long absence to make your escape. Tell me your destination, and I will myself bring round a carriage to some quiet entrance where you can slip out unobserved. I have not told you that I go about with a bodyguard with which the General furnished me. The carriage shall be told to go at a walking pace. I and my attendants will keep it in sight till you are safely at your destination."

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She thanked him warmly, but still persisted that she would prefer to wait till to-morrow. If she changed her mind before the day was out, she would slip out with her maid and take a passing conveyance.

Corsini took her hand and held it for a little time in his, while he gazed earnestly into her troubled eyes, from which she could with difficulty keep back the tears.

"My heart bleeds for you, dear lady. I wish I could convince you, and I hate to leave you here. Will you let me know to-morrow to what course of action you have made up your mind?"

She promised that she would, and the young man left her with feelings of dire foreboding. Please Heaven, this night's work would turn out so well that very shortly Zouroff would be rendered harmless and impotent. To let him loose on the world was like letting a wild and savage beast out of its cage.

The Prince did return to the Palace about the middle of the afternoon. Was his message, that he would not be home till late at night, simply a blind to lull his sister into a false sense of security? He did not go near her; he went up to his own apartments by a private staircase, only used by himself.

He summoned his valet, Peter, and gave him some very minute instructions. Peter, knowing what was in store for his truculent master, would have liked to offer a little sensible advice, to dissuade him from the course he was bent on pursuing.

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But the habits of long obedience, the fear that if he opposed him in the smallest detail he might draw suspicion upon himself, weighed heavily on him. Reluctantly he agreed to obey Zouroff's orders. Later on, when Zouroff was caged himself, he might be able to undo the mischief he had promised to abet.

The Prince stole out of the Palace as silently as he had entered it. Nobody but Peter and another servant, as much in his confidence as the valet himself, knew that he had been there.

It was a very busy day with him. A few more hours should see the end of all this plotting and scheming, should see his well-laid plans mature. The thought of vengeance, and a sense of coming triumph, induced in him a certain exultation which expressed itself in his resolute glance, his assured bearing. He made his way on foot to the villa of Madame Quéro. He had made up his mind to have a little reckoning with her, in order to wind up his final accounts.

The beautiful singer received him graciously. A woman of capricious moods, she had, for a brief space, admitted to herself that she had not treated him quite fairly, had been found lacking in the spirit of true comradeship. After all, Zouroff had loved her in his rough, masterful way, and he had always been generous.

She had played him false in this respect, that she had allowed herself to be attracted by the handsome young Italian, to the extent of thwarting the Prince's plans in regard to him. And it was to no purpose. Corsini was in love with the Princess Nada, no doubt a hopeless passion on his part. But he would never give a thought to her save in the way of friendship. And that was the last thing that the passionate heart of the Spanish woman desired.

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When, therefore, Zouroff entered her boudoir, in apparently one of his best moods, she felt some of his old attraction for her returning. She little knew what deep anger against her was burning in his heart.

But he was a skilful diplomatist; he showed nothing of this. He kissed her fondly, with the warm kiss of a man who hoped some day to make her his wife.

"Ah, my dear sweetheart, how pleasant to see you again!" said the base hypocrite. "I have had a busy day. Things are going well. It will not be long before my utmost ambitions are realised." He spoke confidently; he was ever an optimist, and he believed in his own particular star.

La Belle Quéro felt an inward qualm. Corsini was nothing to her now. And, in that brief interview with Nada, she had surmised, through all her girlish dignity and reticence, that the Princess was more than half in love with him. Otherwise, would she have been so eager to save him?

But if Zouroff triumphed, as he seemed to have every hope of doing, the Italian's fate would be sealed. And La Belle Quéro was sure she could not save him a second time. The fates would not be propitious to her again.

"Old friends are best, my dear," said the Prince in his most agreeable tones, as he seated himself in one of the luxurious easy-chairs and lighted a cigarette. "Somehow a little cloud seems to have come between us lately, I should like to remove it." [Pg 243]

Madame Quéro looked a little uneasy. She knew full well to what he was alluding. Her obvious *tendresse* for the young director had occasioned a good deal of talk; no doubt some of it had floated to Zouroff's ears.

"Do not let us speak of clouds, Boris. We have been long and good friends. Let us be good friends again."

"With all my heart," responded the Prince, with his most charming smile. "Well, I have come to tell you I shall not be at the Opera to-night. I have to see a great many people, make a great many arrangements. I cannot tell you how sorry I am; I know it is one of your great nights. But you understand—business must always come before pleasure."

Madame assented good humouredly. "It has always been so with you, Boris, at any rate. You are a great man in many ways, perhaps a little too optimistic, a little too sure of yourself."

The Prince smiled his confident smile. "A pessimist is not much good in this world, my dear. Believe in yourself and your star, and you will become a leader of men."

"Perhaps," sighed Madame Quéro. She was beginning to be very attracted to him again. He was certainly in a most charming mood to-night; she felt herself carried back to the old days when she had been infatuated with him, with his virility, his assurance, even the hint of that brutal strength which lay at the back of his plausible exterior. [Pg 244]

At length the Prince rose. "I wonder whether you would do me a little kindness. It is a long time since we had a meal together and I told them at home I should not be back till late to-night, after the meeting here. You have given instructions to Stepan to be in readiness?"

Yes, she had given instructions to Stepan.

"Then you will give me a little snack before you start for the Opera? No prolonged, heavy meal, we have neither of us time for that, just something light."

"But, of course, Boris. You are always welcome to my hospitality, such as it is. You will be here an hour before I have to start for the Opera?"

The hypocrite bent low and kissed the hand she extended to him. "I will be here on the tick of the clock. *Au revoir*, my old sweetheart, who has come back to me again."

He went out, intent on his dark schemes. He plumed himself on the fact that he had played his *rôle* quite well. And she, this treacherous woman who had sold him on account of her sudden fancy for Corsini, had also played her part perfectly. It was diamond cut diamond, but he was sure he would cut deeper of the two.

He was back to the minute. It was a light meal, but Madame Quéro, persuading herself that she was happy in this sudden reconciliation, had provided him some dainties that he was very fond of. Zouroff was in the highest spirits; he praised everything, drank her health several times in the excellent champagne she had provided. The singer ate sparingly and drank very little. It was a gala night at the Opera, she had to be careful of her voice, of those liquid notes which were presently to charm the house. [Pg 245]

The moments fled swiftly, it was time for her to start. Zouroff was going on foot to the house of a fellow conspirator.

He bade her good-night, and carelessly drew a small box from his pocket. "See, I did not forget you, I have brought a box of your favourite chocolates." He pointed with his finger to one. "See, here is a fine fat fellow, I will take a smaller one."

La Quéro could never resist chocolates. She took the big one Zouroff pointed out to her and crunched it in her even white teeth. The Prince laid the box on the table.

"Good-night," he said. "There is no time to lose. We are both a little late." He went out, with a strange smile on his face.

Looking back to it in the happy after years, Corsini always declared that of all days this had been the most eventful day in his life.

At the hotel, on the previous evening, he had found waiting for him the note from Ivan the Cuckoo, who did not know at the time he despatched that missive that he was a free man. Corsini, accompanied by his faithful bodyguard, was to repair to Ivan's mean lodging that night.

Nello was not without a spirit of adventure. He was rather looking forward to what would happen at midnight. He was to change places with Stepan, heavily handicapped as to hearing and speech, and listen to the conversation of the conspirators. [Pg 246]

It was a gala night at the Opera. The Emperor and his consort were to be there. On such ceremonious occasions, Corsini was wont to conduct the orchestra himself, as a mark of respect to the autocrat. The Opera given on this particular night was a famous masterpiece in those days, Rossini's "Semiramide."

It was a great house. The flower of Russia's nobility was gathered in the boxes and stalls of the vast building, the men attired in immaculate costume, the women radiant in their flashing jewels. In a far box, Nello saw the charming young Princess with an elderly friend, acting as her chaperon in place of her mother. Evidently she had not taken his advice. He cast a lightning glance around as he bowed to the plaudits of the audience. He was looking for Zouroff, but he could not see him. If the Prince was in the crowded house, he had missed him. Certainly he was not in the box where his sister sat.

He conducted the overture. In a few moments the curtain would rise. Before he had got to the end of the last few bars, there was heard a piercing scream, the cry of a woman. It penetrated to every corner of the building and created an uneasy feeling in the audience.

Nello recognised the situation at once. He beat with his bâton on the desk and started the overture again. Something had happened. He would know in a few minutes.

At last the curtain rose. The stage-manager, looking very agitated, appeared. In a few brief sentences he explained that Madame Quéro had been attacked with sudden indisposition; that he must crave the indulgence of the audience for her understudy, who would take her place. [Pg 247]

Corsini dared not leave his desk. On such a night as this he could not affront his Emperor and this brilliant assemblage by deputing his task to a subordinate. He went through the Opera with the conscientious spirit of the artist. But all the time his thoughts were dwelling on La Belle Quéro, the woman who had braved Zouroff's vengeance in order to save him.

It was evidently a serious indisposition. If it had been only a slight attack, the handsome singer would have pulled herself together and appeared some time in the course of the evening. With her jealous temperament, she was not the woman to give an understudy too big a chance.

At last the Opera was over, the brilliant crowd filed out. Corsini went round to the wings to inquire after La Belle Quéro. One of his subordinates gave him the information he sought.

"Madame Quéro is very ill, Signor. The doctor was called in. He did not seem quite able to diagnose her symptoms. He had her conveyed home and consigned to the care of her own maid and her own physician."

Corsini at once despatched a messenger to the villa, with instructions to report to him at his hotel. The man came back with disquieting news. The singer was still in a comatose state, and her life was despaired of. [Pg 248]

A swift thought swept through the Italian's mind. Had Zouroff anything to do with this, apparently, fatal illness? Had he discovered the part she had played in his rescue?

And a still more disturbing thought assailed him. If the Prince had taken this swift vengeance on La Belle Quéro, it would not be long before he revenged himself on Nada. If only he could have conveyed a message to that box, to entreat her to fly before it was too late! Zouroff was evidently a scoundrel of the deepest dye who would stick at nothing.

But he could not act himself. Very shortly he must go to the mean lodging of Ivan, and receive his instructions as to taking the place of the deaf and dumb Stepan. In a brief space he would be inside that villa where the beautiful singer lay dying.

He did the best that presented itself to him. He despatched a brief note to Beilski.

"Madame Quéro attacked with sudden illness. It is reported that she is dying. I have certain suspicions of a person well known to us both. Please probe the matter. I cannot go myself. You know where I am due to-night."

A little later, Corsini, escorted by his vigilant bodyguard, took his way to the mean quarter of the town where Ivan was lodged.

CHAPTER XXII

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Ivan met him in the doorway. "You are punctual, Signor," he said, as he ushered him into the shabby apartment.

"My friend, first of all, you are no longer an outlaw," cried Corsini cheerfully as he cast his glance round the dingy room. "The Emperor himself has graciously accorded a full and free pardon, and if this night's work turns out well, there will be a very handsome reward in addition. So, you see, things are marching."

The outlaw stretched his hands out, and for a moment it seemed as if he would dissolve in tears. Then he recovered himself, and his voice rang out, clear and firm.

"And, at last, Signor, I shall have revenge on those who wronged me and my family."

"Say rather, Ivan, justice, not revenge," interrupted the young Italian mildly.

"It is the same, Signor, is it not?" cried Ivan. He pointed with his finger to an inert figure in the corner of the room, apparently inanimate.

"That is Stepan. I have given him a narcotic in order to prevent accidents. He does not look at his best at the moment. But just go and have a peep at him and see the likeness to yourself."

Corsini crossed over the small room and looked at the prostrate form, of the man, wrapped in a deep slumber, and breathing heavily. Yes, Stepan might have been his twin brother under normal conditions.

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"The time is short," said the outlaw. "We must make you look as like Stepan as possible, with regard to the externals."

He went to the door and whistled softly. A small, slouching man answered to the summons.

"Paul, my friend," said Ivan in an imperious tone, "I have told you something of this affair. You have got to convert this gentleman into the speaking likeness of our sleeping friend. Do your little tricks at once."

The small, slouching man went to work immediately. He stripped off the rough clothes from the slumbering man in the corner, and signalled to Corsini to divest himself of his own garments. In a trice, Corsini was dressed in Stepan's habiliments. He then proceeded to stain his face and hands.

When all this was finished, he drew back with a sense of pardonable pride in his own deft handiwork.

"*Mon Dieu!* it is Stepan himself," he cried enthusiastically.

Corsini took a survey of himself in a small, cracked mirror that hung in the shabby sitting-room. He cast a further glance at the inert form lying in the corner. Yes, in these rough clothes, with his face and hands stained, he could well pass for Stepan himself in a dim and doubtful light.

"It is just about time," said Ivan, when these preparations had been completed. "My friend Paul will conduct you to the villa. There are seven windows on the ground floor, built very high. Underneath the fourth window the blank wall is of wood. You can feel it. There is a small door with a keyhole in the centre. Here is the key. Paul knows it well; he will lead you to it."

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The small slouching man led Corsini to the villa of Madame Quéro. The four silent men followed in their wake. Arrived at the villa, Corsini slipped easily into the small vestibule to await the arrival of the conspirators.

"You are well in time, Monsieur," whispered the man, Paul, as he took his departure. "Do not answer the bell too quickly; watch its vibration before you respond. You must remember that Stepan is deaf. You will excuse me for giving you the hint."

Paul departed. The four guards scattered themselves in various directions, but always ready to assemble together if danger threatened the man they were deputed to watch.

Corsini was alone in the little vestibule. He drew aside the heavy velvet curtains and peered into the inner room, a rather spacious chamber. This was very dimly lighted, too. But evidently Madame Quéro had given her instructions. A cold supper was laid out on the long table, with several bottles of champagne. Upstairs, no doubt, she was lying between life and death, no longer able to take part in these festivities.

The bell vibrated. Nello opened the door and made a low obeisance. Two men came through the narrow doorway. He recognised them at once: they were two highly distinguished noblemen of the Russian Empire. He had seen them several times at the Opera.

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The bell vibrated again and again. Five more men passed through, and last came the tall, commanding figure of Zouroff.

In the dim light the Prince made his signs, "They are all here, Stepan?"

And the supposed Stepan replied in answering signs, "I think they are all here, Excellency."

Zouroff passed through the heavy curtains. Corsini crouched behind and bent his ears to listen.

At first there was a confused babble of sounds. Everybody seemed to be talking at once. But fortunately they were speaking in French and not in Russian. It was easier for Corsini to catch what they said.

A tall, bearded man was speaking. "This infernal Corsini, for instance. No doubt he is in the pay of Golitzine. We cannot remove him, it seems."

Zouroff took up the running. "I did my best, you know, gentlemen; but he escaped me, and since then Beilski has put a cordon round him that we cannot break through."

"And yet Beilski is a fool," growled the bearded man.

"I know," answered Zouroff. "Beilski is what you say, but he has got Golitzine at his back, and Golitzine has the intelligence of several monkeys. When Beilski is in doubt, he goes to the secretary."

Another man spoke. "You know we have every confidence in you, Prince; but we all know of your attachment to La Belle Quéro—by the way, why is she not here to-night, to preside over our

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festivities?"

Zouroff spoke in a harsh, strained voice. "La Belle Quéro is ill, confined to her room. You have probably not heard that she was attacked with sudden indisposition at the Opera to-night, and that her understudy had to take her place."

None of the men had been at the Opera, they had not heard. One or two indulged in expressions of sympathy.

The bearded man, a powerful nobleman, only just second to Zouroff himself in importance and length of lineage, continued his remarks.

"I spoke just now of your well-known attachment to La Belle Quéro. Is it possible, Prince, that in an unguarded moment, you may have dropped some hints of your purpose to her? I did not wish, for a moment, to offend your *amour propre*, but rumour has it that she is very much attracted by this handsome young Italian. It is strange that he should have escaped you, who usually lay your plans so well."

Zouroff paused for a moment before he replied. These men were as keen-witted as himself; it was impossible to deceive them for long.

"Gentlemen, I will be quite frank with you. One is always a fool where women are concerned. In a moment of ungoverned temper, I did hint to Madame Quéro something that might have set her wits to work, and she may have acted upon that."

"From her *penchant* for the Italian?" suggested the bearded man, who, privately, was not too fond of the Prince, and always indulged in a pin-prick when possible.

Zouroff flushed a deep red. It angered him deeply that other persons should know Corsini had been preferred to him. [Pg 254]

He looked round the assembly. He knew that the bearded man was bidding for the leadership that had been willingly accorded to himself. If his position were menaced, he must recover it immediately, and by a bold stroke.

He surveyed the small knot of men, his bold bearing and resolute demeanour at once challenging their allegiance, and compelling it.

"Gentlemen, I blench at nothing for the Cause to which we are all devoted, to which we have dedicated our lives and fortunes. On that occasion, I am convinced that La Belle Quéro betrayed me. Well, she will never betray us again. Madame La Quéro's hours are numbered. That is why she has not appeared to-night."

The men whom he addressed were as hardened and brutal as himself, with no respect for the sanctity of human life; but, as he spoke, a slight shudder went through the assembly. La Belle Quéro was so handsome, so popular; it seemed a thousand pities that she should be done to death, even in the interests of the Cause.

Zouroff spoke eagerly. At the moment he felt no remorse for having compassed the death of his former sweetheart with that poisoned chocolate. Had she not insulted him by daring to look with favourable eyes on another man?

"Gentlemen, it has ever been one of our fixed rules that anybody who betrayed us, man or woman, it matters not which, should pay the penalty of death. If I betrayed you, I should not complain if that law were put into execution against myself. La Belle Quéro betrayed us; she has paid the penalty." [Pg 255]

Zouroff was logical. The sense of the assembly was with him. The bearded man made a last effort to wrest from him his supremacy, not on the score of disloyalty, but for maladroitness in handling their common affairs.

"I very much regret that Madame Quéro should have allowed her heart to govern her head. She was a very charming woman," he said smoothly. "Do you happen, by any chance, Prince, to have enemies in your own household?"

"Why do you ask me that question?" queried Zouroff boldly.

"One of my spies told me that Beilski has paid a recent visit to your sister, the Princess Nada. Beilski is not in the habit of paying afternoon calls. Does the young Princess know anything?"

Zouroff knew nothing of the visit of the General; it was news to him; but he grasped the situation promptly.

"I have already provided against that, Count. Her mother is in bed; a feverish cold, as we thought at first, has developed into diphtheria. I believe my sister is quite innocent of any serious designs against us, but it is always as well to be on the safe side."

The other men listened with the closest attention. After all, Zouroff was the subtlest of them all. The bearded man maintained a sullen silence; he had given up all hope of rescuing the leadership of the party from the resourceful Prince. [Pg 256]

"My sister I shall send to the old Castle of Tchernoff and keep her there as long as it suits my purpose. It is a veritable tomb, far away in the Caucasus. I have arranged that she starts to-night."

Our good Stepan will later have his instructions. As he is practically deaf and almost incapable of speech, he can tell no tales. Besides, he is devoted to me."

Corsini, close up against the curtains, had listened to all this with every nerve strained and his brain working at high pressure.

He had learned two things of great importance. Zouroff, in a roundabout way, had confessed to the murder of La Belle Quéro. Secondly, the Princess was to be taken *that night* to this gloomy castle in the Caucasus. And he, in his character of Stepan, the man who could not hear and only speak with the greatest difficulty, was to be an instrument in her abduction. Here was food for thought. Oh, for five minutes with that man of subtle brain and resource, Golitzine! At such a moment, even the inferior Beilski would have been welcome, even one of the four men waiting outside! How could he save the innocent young Princess from the vile schemes of her remorseless brother? A few minutes could alone decide this momentous issue. Why had she not taken his advice, proffered a few hours earlier?

The conspirators talked presently in lower tones of a great *coup* to be brought off to-morrow night at a big reception at the Winter Palace. But although they spoke almost in whispers, as if fearful of the magnitude of the stupendous event, Corsini had sharp ears and heard quite enough. This would be great news for Golitzine, as soon as he could see him. [Pg 257]

The conference was ended, the supper partaken of. No servants ever assisted at these simple feasts. An hour after the meal was finished, La Belle Quéro, the handsome singer, the idol of more than one capital, had passed away in the arms of her faithful maid, done to death by the implacable vengeance of Zouroff.

One by one the traitors filed out. The Prince came last and made signs to the waiting janitor, supposed to be Stepan.

"You will come with me to the Palace. You will convey two women, my sister and her maid, to the Castle of Tchernoff, in the Caucasus. When you have deposited them safely there, return to the Palace, where I will find you further employment. It is very likely that Madame Quéro will have no further need of your services."

Corsini replied in appropriate signs that he comprehended his Excellency's wishes.

Together they drove to the side door of the Palace, in front of which a carriage was standing. Two burly men, the Prince's chosen confederates, were beside it. Zouroff motioned to Corsini to stay where he was.

A few moments later the forms of two helpless women, the Princess Nada and her maid, were carried out and placed in the carriage. The Prince was well served in his household. Evidently both had been drugged. [Pg 258]

The two men stood waiting for the sign of departure from the Prince.

And, in that moment, a flash of inspiration came to Corsini.

He spread out his arms and burst into a chuckling sort of laugh, like one demented. He sprang on the box, seized the reins, and whipped up the horses. He was well out of sight before the Prince and his two ruffians could recover from their consternation at the unexpected turn of affairs.

Had Stepan suddenly gone out of his sense? was the Prince's first thought.

CHAPTER XXIII

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Zouroff shook his fist at the retreating carriage. He looked, and felt, like a demon. Why had this fool taken this particular moment to go off his head? He knew that Stepan had suffered from a weak intellect for many years, but he was not prepared for this sudden ebullition of insanity.

"We cannot catch him up, your Excellency, he has driven like the wind," remarked one of the two burly men who were in attendance on the Prince.

"Let him drive to the devil," snarled Zouroff, in his most vicious tone. He was really trying to mask his alarm under an assumption of indifference. "What harm can the idiot do? He cannot hear, he can only make guttural, and unintelligible sounds when he attempts to speak."

"He can write, your Excellency. Do not forget that. Say that at the moment he has gone crazy. That carriage will halt somewhere in St. Petersburg, or the environs, the police will be on the spot, inquiries will be made. If he cannot speak, they will make him write."

But Zouroff by now had recovered his incurable optimism. "He will recover his senses shortly and drive back to the Palace for instructions. We will wait up for him."

The two men were not quite so convinced, although they did not dare openly to dispute their employer's opinion. They were not quite sure of Stepan's sudden attack of insanity. There was more in this than met the eye. [Pg 260]

Corsini, intensely agitated by the novelty of the unexpected situation, drove recklessly for the

first few moments, anxious to put as much space as possible between Zouroff and himself, striving to collect his thoughts.

As he had sat silent by the side of the Prince on their progress from the villa to the Palace, he had thought well over the only plan of campaign that seemed open to him. At the first stopping-place on that long journey to the gloomy Castle of Tchernoff, he would alight, go to the nearest police station and divulge the facts of the Princess's abduction.

Well, fate had ruled it otherwise. The unconscious girl and her maid were still in St. Petersburg and under his charge. Whither should he convey them? But he must be quick. Zouroff was a man of resource. He might have hired a passing conveyance and, accompanied by his two burly satellites, be rapidly on his track.

And then the thought came swiftly to him. He would turn the carriage round and drive by devious ways to the house of Golitzine. Once in the Count's care, his precious charge would be safe. And, if he took that devious route, there would be no chance of encountering the formidable Zouroff on the way.

He halted at the door of the Count's house; but here an unexpected difficulty awaited him. He dare not leave his horses, high-mettled and but slightly blown by their short gallop. Ah, there was a convenient lamp-post, a couple of feet in front of him. He would dismount and tie his reins round it while he knocked at the door.

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While he was engaged in this task, a carriage drove up out of the dark, as it were, and halted beside the other one. A cold sweat broke out over the young man as he observed its arrival. This devil of a Zouroff had been too quick for him.

Then his countenance cleared as he recognised the first man who stepped out. It was the leader of his faithful bodyguard. He had, in the excitement of passing events, forgotten them.

"You have lost sight of us, Signor, but, you see, we have not lost sight of you," said the chief of the party. "We followed you to that mean street where your friend lodged, we saw you come out transformed in appearance, we followed you to the villa of Madame Quéro, we drove behind you and Prince Zouroff to the Palace, we saw what happened there, and we came after you at lightning speed. Now, how can we help you? There is some strange work going on, that is easy to see. This is the house of Count Golitzine, you want to see him. But I expect they are all gone to bed."

"Yes, my friend, so much has happened in the last hour or two that I had forgotten you," was Corsini's answer. "Tell one of the men to knock at the door till it is opened. If the Count has gone to bed, he must get up. And you and the others guard that carriage and look out for Prince Zouroff."

The house seemed wrapped in darkness, and in fact everybody had retired to rest except the energetic Count himself. Five nights out of six he worked into the morning hours. To-night he had a special reason for sitting up late. At any moment he might expect a visit from the young Italian, to report the results of the meeting at the Villa Quéro.

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He peered into the darkness and his astonished gaze rested on more than he expected to see. He was prepared to see Corsini, to observe the bodyguard lurking in the background; but the carriage and two impatient horses champing at their bits was more than he had bargained for.

"In Heaven's name, what is this, Corsini?"

Nello advanced and whispered in his ear. "I dare say these men suspect as much as I know, but for the present we need not assume it. Inside that carriage are two helpless women, drugged by that ruffian Zouroff, the Princess Nada and her maid. I will tell you all the details of the adventure later. Enough to say that I have been able to rescue them from his clutches and drive them to your house. You will not refuse them shelter?"

"Of course not," replied the Count at once. "Bring them in and I will at once arouse the Countess. Drugged, you say! Send round one of the fellows for the nearest doctor: he is the same man who succoured you at Pavlovsk. Stay, I will give the address myself."

The two helpless forms were carried in. The Countess Golitzine was aroused. The doctor arrived. It was some time before he could bring them round. Zouroff and his satellites were evidently acquainted with the secret of a very powerful narcotic. He came down at length to the Count in his study, where he found Corsini.

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"Good-evening, Signor. Well, Count, I have brought them back to consciousness, have prescribed a little light food. They were very heavily drugged."

He turned to the young Italian. "It carries me back to that night at the little inn at Pavlovsk, but you were a more difficult case. Then you had had more than one dose. These young women have had only one. I should say, by the symptoms, a similar drug, administered by the same hand."

"Right, doctor; I will tell you all in good time," said Golitzine; "but perhaps in a few days all St. Petersburg may hear of it. You will see them in the morning?"

The doctor promised to call early the next day, but he assured them that they need fear no anxiety; both young women had vigorous constitutions. He was too discreet to mention that he

had recognised one of them as the Princess Nada. He had often seen her at the Opera and driving in the Nevski Prospekt.

And Golitzine was a man to appreciate discretion; he could do much for this young doctor if he chose; therefore he would keep his mouth shut till it was time for him to open it. Golitzine saw him to the door and laid his finger impressively upon his lip.

"Silence for the present, doctor, as to all these strange events you have witnessed. I charge myself with your future advancement." The doctor bowed and went his way. [Pg 264]

Upstairs, Nada was slowly regaining her senses. She looked round the big, handsomely-furnished chamber. On a sofa, a little away, was stretched the form of Katerina, recovering more slowly than her mistress.

"How did I come here? Where am I?" she murmured.

The Countess Golitzine, a handsome woman, some twenty years younger than her husband, was sitting by the bedside, holding the Princess's hand.

She whispered in a kind voice: "Do not speak much, my dear Nada, you are too tired; but be quite sure you are amongst friends. Do you recognise me?"

Memory came back in the wake of that long stupor. "The Countess Golitzine, of course; we met a few days ago. But why am I in your house and not at the Palace?"

She put her disengaged hand to her head and tried to collect her scattered thoughts. "Ah, I remember, my brother said he would send me to Tchernoff, and I did not believe he would dare to carry out his threat."

She burst into bitter weeping as the subsequent events forced themselves on her half-numbered brain, her seizure by two burly men, a handkerchief pressed tightly over her face. Then a blank till she woke up here.

She was clearer now. "Yes, I can recall certain things. But how did I come here? How was I rescued on the road to Tchernoff?" [Pg 265]

"My dear, I do not know myself. I had gone to bed early; my husband said he would be working into the morning, as is often his custom. I was in a deep sleep when he woke me suddenly. He told me that you and your maid were being brought in, that you were drugged, that he had sent for a doctor to bring you round. I have been here with the doctor till you came back to consciousness. Would you like to see the Count?"

"Indeed I would," cried Nada, whose faculties were quickly coming back to her. "I cannot calm myself until I know what happened between my leaving the Palace and arriving here. And, as well as thanking you, dear Countess, for all your kindness to me, I would like to thank your husband also. It is not a time of night to receive uninvited, or unexpected guests."

Madame Golitzine went down to her husband's room and found him closeted with Corsini, who had given him a full account of the proceedings at the Villa Quéro, of his driving back with Zouroff to the Palace, of his stratagem in jumping on the box and driving off, to the surprise of the Prince and his two burly ruffians.

The Count had chuckled at the end of the narrative. Things were shaping well for him, to-morrow he would hear his Emperor's hearty cry of—"Well done, Golitzine. I knew you would beat them in the end."

"Corsini, my dear fellow, you are wasted on music. Give it up, and I will get you a big post in the Secret Police." [Pg 266]

But the Italian shook his head. "Many thanks, Excellency, but I do not really love this excitement. Music was my first love, it will be my last."

The Countess came in. She knew Corsini well, but did not recognise him in the rough clothes of Stepan, with his face and hands stained.

"Nada is quite conscious and her faculties are coming back rapidly," she told her husband; "but she is terribly anxious to know all that has happened since she was drugged. She wishes to see you. Of course, I can tell her nothing, as I have not had time to hear anything from you."

"She is not too excited?" questioned the Count.

"Only from anxiety to know. She will grow very excited if she is kept much longer in suspense."

The Count beckoned to Corsini. "Let us go to her. You can explain better than I."

But Corsini shrank back and a hot blush showed through the dark stain that had been rubbed on his face in the mean lodging of Ivan the outlaw.

"I cannot present myself in these miserable clothes, disguised as I am, to the Princess," he stammered.

The Count smiled his quiet rather cynical smile. "I will wager she will penetrate with the first glance through the disguise and the shabby clothes."

He turned to his wife. "My dear, permit me to re-introduce to you Signor Corsini, the Director of the Italian Opera. He doesn't cut quite such a brilliant figure as usual, but his excuse is that he has been doing some very good work for the Emperor."

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The Countess, a woman of charming manners, advanced to him with outstretched hands. "A thousand pardons. Please forgive my obtuseness, but my thoughts were so occupied with our poor dear Nada." So adroitly did she redeem a somewhat awkward situation.

The three went up to the chamber whither the young Princess had been conveyed. The Count went to the bed and shook her warmly by the hand.

"My wife tells me you are recovering from the shock. The doctor assures me you will be yourself again to-morrow. I am only too pleased that my house should be your refuge. And you want to know all that has happened since your rascally brother had you drugged and thrust into that carriage."

He drew forward the shrinking man, hovering shamefacedly in the background.

"Here is your preserver, Nada." He always called her by her Christian name; he had known her from a child. "You see, he is a common man, dressed in rough clothes, his face and hands proclaiming his calling. But he is your preserver, and you will thank him."

He spoke with that half-humorous, half-cynical smile which was almost characteristic.

Corsini nervously advanced to the bed on which the Princess was lying and recovering her scattered senses.

"You are safe, dear lady," he said, softly. "Thank Heaven you are safe."

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She recognised the voice. She penetrated through the veil of the rough clothes, the stained face and hands. She uttered a little joyful cry.

"Ah, Signor Corsini, it is you who are my preserver?"

Corsini bent over her. "It has been my turn, Princess. You saved me at Pavlovsk, I have paid back my debt in St. Petersburg."

The Princess's wondering eyes grew bigger. "But tell me all that has happened. I am dying with curiosity."

Golitzine touched his wife on the shoulder. "We are *de trop*, my dear, let us leave the young people together."

The Countess was a very obedient wife. She accompanied her husband out of the room; but when they were outside she whispered to him: "Alexis, is it wise? Nada is a girl of high birth but of romantic notions. Corsini is, no doubt, very talented, but is it prudent to leave them together?"

"Listen to me; I am going to impart to you a little secret," said the Count in a low voice. "To-morrow the house of Zouroff will be humbled in the dust. Our pretty little Nada can then well choose where her heart leads her to make her choice, even if it is in the direction of our young friend, Nello Corsini."

"I think I understand," said the Countess.

In the big chamber, Katerina, recovering more slowly than her mistress, was reclining on the sofa. A tall, white-capped nurse stood in the corner.

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Nada, of course, paid no heed to servants. They were a part of her being, to be ignored at will. For all practical purposes she and Corsini were alone.

"And so it is you who were my preserver," she said softly; "you in this rough garb, with your face and hands stained to a peasant's hue. There must have been some motive behind such a dangerous adventure."

Corsini bent over her, over the lily-white face, still looking wan after her terrible experience.

"It was Providence that led me to your aid to-night, Princess. You remember my urgent advice to leave the Palace at once."

"I know I was blind and foolish," murmured the Princess. "I could not believe my brother capable of such cruelty."

"Your brother is capable of anything, of everything," said Corsini. "Listen! I will tell you all that has happened to-night. Please understand that Count Golitzine has got him in the hollow of his hand."

In a few brief words, he recounted all that he had overheard at the villa of Madame Quéro, Zouroff's confession that for his own purposes he had removed the beautiful singer.

"To-morrow, or the day after, he will be on his way to Siberia," concluded Corsini, with a pardonable exultation. "He doomed me to death because he found me in his way; he has murdered his old sweetheart from the sheer lust of revenge. You, out of that same spirit of vengeance, he would have condemned to a long exile. I trust, Princess, you will not mourn over the well-deserved fate of such a worthless brother."

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"No," she said in a resolute voice, "I will not mourn over him. His outrage on me quenches the last spark of affection I ever entertained for him."

The conversation was concluded. Corsini rose, and yet he still lingered. Something alluring in the sweet face of the Princess still drew him. But could he dare? There was a softness in her gaze, something inviting in her demeanour.

Youth was calling to youth. Suddenly he leaned over and pressed his lips on hers. They were met by an answering pressure.

"I love you, I love you, oh, I cannot tell you how much," he murmured brokenly. "I have loved you ever since the night when you passed me in Dean Street and wanted to throw me coppers when I was playing in the gutter, and your imperious brother forbade you. I have loved you ever since that moment."

And Nada murmured softly, "I love you, too. I cannot date it back to that night. I think it was when you came to play for us at the Embassy, in London. But it does not matter, dear Nello. We have both saved each other."

"Yes, we have saved each other," was Corsini's answer. He left the white-capped nurse in the corner, the still tearful Katerina. What did he reck of these? Had not his beautiful Princess avowed her love with that warm kiss on his lips? What did anything else in the world matter?

Golitzine met him with his humorous smile. "Well, I have no doubt you have made good use of your time with the Princess. Now or never was your opportunity. To-morrow morning, in the Emperor's cabinet, at the Winter Palace!" [Pg 271]

Corsini left the Count's house. He certainly would not forget that appointment to-morrow morning at the Winter Palace.

But although he had many things to remember, his most vital recollection was the answering kiss of Nada.

CHAPTER XXIV

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Zouroff, at this particular moment, was not in a very enviable frame of mind. Optimist as he was, and a believer in his own star, he could not disguise from himself the fact that his two efforts at kidnapping had not been attended with any remarkable success.

Corsini, through treachery on the part of his associates, had been rescued at Pavlovsk. And last night, the deaf and inarticulate Stepan, suffering, no doubt, from momentary aberration, had driven off in the darkness with the young Princess and her maid—whither, he knew not.

He sat up till the small hours of the morning, awaiting the return of that carriage. Stepan would come back to his senses and drive back for further instructions. But the carriage did not return. At length Zouroff dismissed his two confederates.

"Let Stepan return when he will, or never return, it does not matter," he said impatiently. What did small things like this matter? A carriage stranded, two helpless and drugged women inside, recognised later on. By the time this could be brought home to him, he would be in such a position that he could hush-up all inquiries.

He strolled round to the Villa Quéro. The servant who opened the door knew him well, of course.

"I am grieved to tell you, Excellency, that our dear mistress died in the early hours of the morning." [Pg 273]

"I am very grieved to hear it," said the hypocritical Zouroff. "I heard that she was taken ill at the Opera yesterday evening. It was sudden, was it not?"

"Very sudden, your Excellency. The doctor seems to think that she was poisoned."

"Poisoned! Good Heavens!" cried Zouroff. "But who could want to poison such a charming woman, so generally beloved?"

The servant shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, who can tell? Perhaps some envious rival. The post-mortem may possibly tell us something."

The Prince walked away quite easy in his mind. Yes, no doubt, the post-mortem would tell them something—that la Quéro had been done to death by a very subtle poison. But he had reasoned it all well out.

It would be proved that he had shared a light repast with La Belle Quéro that same evening. It might be proved that he had brought her a box of chocolates, out of which two were missing.

They could analyse that box of chocolates. They would find no poison in them. There was only poison in one, the one that he had picked out as a fine fat fellow and which she had crunched greedily between her strong white teeth.

That same morning Stepan woke up from his deep stupor in the mean lodging of Ivan the Cuckoo.

"Where am I?" was his first question, as he opened his heavy eyelids.

Ivan bent over him, till his bearded face was close to that of the dazed man.

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"You are with your old friend and comrade. Last night I took the liberty of playing a little trick upon you. You will forgive me when I tell you the object of that trick was to ensnare our old enemy, Zouroff."

Stepan's rather expressionless countenance showed considerable animation. He tried to speak, but the sounds would not issue from the paralysed organs. He had recourse to his usual signs, which read as follows:

"What has happened at the Villa Quéro? I was not there at the meeting last night. You drugged me to keep me away. Who took my place?"

"A friend of mine who resembles you very closely," replied the late outlaw, who was not greatly given to imparting confidences. "I expect he got some important information, my good Stepan. He can hear perfectly, and he understands both French and Russian."

Stepan rubbed his hands gleefully before he replied. "Ah, I would be glad to hear that Zouroff was trapped; but I should be very grieved if they caught poor Madame Quéro, she was always so kind and considerate. Many a night at those meetings I was kept up very late. She would always come to me the next morning with her bright smile, and give me a handsome *pour-boire*."

Ivan, who had spies all over the city, imparted the latest news. "Madame Quéro died last night, or rather in the early hours of this morning. Zouroff was at the villa during the evening, a short time before she left for the Opera. There are rumours that she died of poison. You can put two and two together, Stepan."

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Yes, knowing Zouroff as well as he did, the deaf, and almost dumb, man could guess what was suggested by Ivan. He raised his hands to Heaven in horror, and then made rapid signs. "This infamous scoundrel will stop at nothing."

Presently he grew drowsy again, and in a few moments relapsed into a second deep sleep which lasted over a couple of hours. When he woke, the outlaw, who was growing rather alarmed about the prolonged effects of the narcotic, was bending over him.

Stepan repeated the question he had asked on his first waking, "Where am I?"

Ivan explained to him again that in consequence of the infirmities which so handicapped him, he was of little use against Zouroff and his friends, that a man who closely resembled him had taken his place at the villa.

Stepan, who now seemed thoroughly awake, intimated that he remembered.

Ivan proceeded, in his strong, resolute tones, "I am not a man who takes any chances, as you well know. However well you lay your plans, your ultimate success depends, more or less, on the support of your confederates. That is why I took the liberty of giving you a little harmless sleeping draught that effectually kept you from interfering with my designs. You are none the worse for it, and very shortly you shall have some vodka to pull yourself together."

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Stepan, half-foolish as he was, understood this sort of language well. The mention of the word had an almost instantaneous effect in completing his recovery.

He rubbed his hands together and smiled his silly and vacant smile. "And how goes it with the ruffian, Zouroff, who so wronged you, my poor friend?"

"Make your mind easy, my dear Stepan," was Ivan's answer. "In a very few hours we shall both be avenged. I had a note a short time ago from the man who took your place at the Villa Quéro." Ivan was the soul of discretion and reticence. Even to so intimate a comrade as Stepan he was not going to reveal the name of Corsini. "He suggested that this very night, Zouroff and his rascally band will be taken into the toils. I, your old friend, am no longer an outlaw, my pardon is secured. Further, I shall have a handsome reward, and my old playmate, Stepan, will receive his share. For us, comfort in our old age; for that double-dyed villain, Siberia and the mines. It is good to think of, Stepan, is it not?"

The half-witted creature emitted low, gurgling sounds of satisfaction. Then he spoke rapidly on his fingers.

"It is worth living for, this day, Ivan. Will he ever know it was through us his doom was brought about? That would be the greatest satisfaction of all."

The pardoned outlaw smiled grimly. "Trust to me for that. I have friends everywhere. I will get that information conveyed to him somehow by somebody. Yes, that will make him writhe."

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After his visit to the Villa Quéro, Zouroff went back to the Palace. He was met by his valet, Peter, whose looks expressed consternation. The news he had to impart to his master was very grave. Also he was uneasy with regard to his own skin. He had obtained a free pardon for his share in the abduction of Corsini; could he rely upon a further dispensation in the case of the young Princess?

"Excellency, I have to report disaster. One of our spies has ferreted out the following facts. Stepan drove the carriage by a roundabout route to the house of Golitzine. The Princess and her maid, my sweetheart, Katerina, are now under the protection of the Count. I fear this will very much interfere with your Excellency's plans."

Zouroff swore roundly. "Then this Stepan is another traitor."

"It would appear so," replied Peter, with a look of disgust well simulated. Fresh from his confession to Beilski, it was necessary that he should reprobate all fellow traitors. "You can never trust these half-witted chaps," he added.

Zouroff thought rapidly. "Run round to the villa, Peter, and demand to see Stepan. You can talk to him by signs. Learn what has become of the carriage. Get what you can out of him. By Heaven, when I have done with him he will wish he had never been born." His expression was ferocious as he uttered those last words.

Peter hastened to obey his commands. To-morrow, the Prince might not be his master, but he would obey him as long as he was in his service. He returned with the news that Stepan was not at the villa. They could draw their own conclusions from his absence.

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Zouroff ground his teeth savagely. "Golitzine and Beilski have got him safe between them. Well, never mind, the tables will be turned to-morrow."

He was thinking of the great *coup* which was to take place at the Winter Palace that night, the great *coup* which had been so carefully rehearsed by himself and his fellow conspirators, the details of which had been overheard by Corsini, in the character of Stepan.

Safe in the custody of the kind and amiable Countess, Nada felt strangely happy. True, she was very anxious about her mother, and some natural compunction assailed her as to the fate of her brother, in spite of his infamous conduct towards herself. As to that fate, Corsini's words had left her in no doubt. In a few hours the arch-plotter and assassin would be on his way to Siberia. The House of Zouroff, so far as its titular head was concerned, would have ceased to exist.

But she was very happy in her knowledge of her love for Corsini, of Corsini's love for her. The name of Zouroff might be a tainted one, but the Italian stood high in the estimation of the Emperor and his powerful Secretary. Princess as she was, she would not stoop so greatly in becoming the wife of this favourite of fortune.

Zouroff spent the greater part of his day in calling at the houses of his various adherents. The knowledge that Golitzine was now acquainted with the dastardly part he had played against his innocent sister, spurred him to extra effort. Optimist as he was, he had an uneasy conviction that he was playing a desperate game. Could he strike before Golitzine would strike? That was the question, and it was one which would be determined in the course of a few hours.

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He brought all the resources of his mind to bear upon this important problem. He employed all his eloquence, he exercised all the influence of his strong personality. He heartened the wavering amongst his fellow-conspirators, he urged to more determined resolution those who were staunch and confident.

But he felt it was touch and go. He kept away from the Palace all that day, sending round a note to Peter to bring his evening clothes to a secret meeting-place. At any moment, Golitzine might determine to strike, and he might find Beilski's emissaries waiting for him at his ancestral home.

He was so terribly in the dark as to what Stepan had revealed or been forced to reveal. Of course, he did not learn till much later that it was not Stepan who had driven away on the box, but his hated rival, Corsini.

And why had Stepan feigned this sudden fit of insanity, a man who had always appeared so devoted to his person and his fortunes? Stepan, with his incurable deafness, could have learned nothing at these secret conclaves, he would have no information to sell that was worth any price. And yet he had driven straight to Golitzine's house. What could have been his motive? There was something here he could not fathom.

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Wandering in this maze of tangled speculation, Zouroff believed he had hit upon the right solution of these, apparently, inexplicable proceedings.

Stepan was devotedly attached to all the members of his house—himself, his sister, and his mother. When he had seen the two drugged and helpless women carried out of the Palace, he had recognised the young Princess and her maid as they were put into the waiting carriage.

In his slow, feeble brain he had realised that some danger was menacing them. His loyalty to his master had experienced a sudden revulsion. Some chivalrous instinct in him had urged him to espouse the cause of the weak and defenceless. A sudden inspiration had come to him by which he could secure his object. Before they could stop him, he had sprung on the box and whipped up his horses, with a view of placing the two women under safe protection. This seemed a reasonable explanation of that sudden and unexpected action. But there was always the disturbing thought—how would Golitzine, having once got Stepan into his clutches, deal with him? He would force him to write some account of the events of that night, even if he could not make him speak.

And then a comforting thought came to the Prince. It was possible that Stepan had been loyal to

both, to his master and the young Princess. He had halted the carriage at the Secretary's door, rung the bell, and run away before the door was opened, leaving the astute Count to unravel for himself the mystery of the two drugged women, one of whom he would recognise at once.

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Still there was not much comfort in that thought, after all. Even if Stepan had not betrayed him, was there any reasonable hope that Nada and Katerina would keep silence for a moment, after they had been brought back to consciousness?

No, it was touch and go. He must strike swiftly, before Golitzine could get in his blow. And the puzzling thing was, why had Golitzine not already struck?

CHAPTER XXV

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Five men were seated in the private cabinet of the Czar—the Emperor himself, his diligent and faithful Secretary, Golitzine, General Beilski, the Head of the Police, General Burovkin, a man with a heavy mustache and cast-iron countenance, one of the great military chiefs of Russia, devoted like the others to the services of the autocrat, and Nello Corsini.

Golitzine explained in his smooth, passionless accents. He was a man who was never excited, never perturbed. Except that he was of lean build, he might have suggested the idea of a relentless spider, moving amongst a web of his own weaving to catch the unsuspecting flies.

He had been the first to speak. "Our very capable young friend, Corsini, has done great work. He was hidden at the Villa Quéro last night and gathered information of the greatest importance."

The Emperor, who always liked to tell his subordinates that he knew all that was going on, interrupted his faithful and more astute Secretary.

"Ah, poor Madame Quéro! I hear that she died in the early hours of the morning and that there are certain suspicious circumstances connected with her death—an idea that she has been poisoned, eh?"

Golitzine nodded. "Your Majesty has been correctly informed." He might have added that he had given this information himself, but he was too experienced a courtier to venture on such an experiment. Autocratic monarchs like to think they discover things for themselves. And perhaps the autocrat had not been quite awake when he received Golitzine's letter long before breakfast.

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Golitzine waved his hand towards Corsini. He possessed a very generous nature, and he was quite ready to give honour where it was due.

"This is the man to whom we are indebted for the information which shall be fully detailed to your Majesty. Salmoros never did us a better service than when he sent Signor Corsini to us."

The Emperor inclined his head in his most gracious manner. "Salmoros never makes a mistake, and Corsini has more than justified his selection."

Golitzine leaned towards the young Italian. "Tell his Imperial Majesty all that you told me last night, the full details of what happened at the Villa Quéro. I have given him a brief *résumé*, but you can make it more convincing than I can. Speak out, Corsini; omit nothing; you need not fear to trespass on his Majesty's attention."

The Emperor inclined his head. He always blindly followed the lead of his Secretary. He knew that he could trust him, above all; also some half a dozen others, the two Generals amongst them.

Corsini, feeling very nervous, although by now he was becoming accustomed to his new environment, began his recital, giving full details of the strange things that had happened in the course of a few hours. Of course, he was intending to keep strict silence as to that little love scene between himself and the beautiful Nada. One must keep back certain things even from an autocrat of Alexander's type.

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Being very nervous in the presence of the Emperor and these high officials of the Russian Empire, he told his story very haltingly. Several times Golitzine helped him through when he faltered.

And then, when he was not a quarter through his narrative, there came a hesitating knock at the door. It was that of a timid *aide-de-camp*, who had taken upon himself to disturb his Emperor's privacy.

At the first sound of that timid knock, the Emperor frowned. His orders had been precise: he was not to be disturbed, except on a matter of greatest urgency. Perhaps this was one.

"Come in," cried the autocrat, in a far from conciliatory voice.

The young man, dressed in immaculate uniform, advanced, bowing very low. He tendered a letter.

"A thousand pardons for disturbing your Majesty after your particular instructions. The Baron Salmoros, whom I know well, has just arrived. I told him you were engaged in important discussions with the biggest personages in the Empire. He persisted that I should bring his note

to you. I disobeyed your instructions, but, under the circumstances, I trust you will think that I have not done wrong, that I have exercised my discretion wisely. The Baron said it was urgent, that, whoever you were engaged with, you must be disturbed. I know how highly the Baron stands in your Majesty's favour."

Alexander opened the letter with a frowning brow. True autocrat, he was incensed that his slightest instructions should have been disobeyed. But, as he read the letter of the Baron, his brow cleared.

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He turned a mild look upon the disturbed young officer. "You have acted very wisely indeed. I shall hold you in my remembrance. Bring the Baron to us at once."

He turned to the four other men. "Gentlemen, our good friend, Salmoros, has taken a journey to us because he has certain information to impart. I recognise very gratefully that I am well served, but I think we may well admit the Baron's brains to our important conclave." He looked towards Golitzine as he spoke.

The adroit Secretary inclined his head. "I think your Majesty can well admit the Baron to our counsels. We can always learn something from him."

A few moments later the venerable figure of Salmoros appeared in the doorway of the private cabinet of the Emperor, ushered in by the no longer fearful young officer.

He advanced and kissed the Emperor's hand. Alexander, as a mark of his esteem for the great financier, had risen to greet him. The Baron shook hands with Golitzine and the two Generals. Then he laid his hand lightly on Corsini's shoulder.

"Ah, my young friend and protégé, I see you have done well. If you had failed, you would not be in the private cabinet of the Emperor to-day."

The autocrat interposed. "My dear Baron, your young friend has been of the most inestimable service to us. You were always a great judge of men."

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The next to speak was Golitzine. "My dear Salmoros, I know full well that it is your zeal for the Emperor and the great Empire over which he rules that has led you to take this long and tedious journey. You have something of importance to communicate."

Salmoros spoke in his slow, grave accents. He looked at the Emperor as he spoke, but he was really addressing Golitzine. He knew that in that remarkable man, apart from mere figureheads, lay the destinies of the great Russian Empire.

He was not oblivious to the fact that the two Generals were persons to be reckoned with; as a matter of fact, he was counting on their practical assistance; but Golitzine, the man of brains, the man of initiative, the true statesman, was his sheet-anchor.

Alexander was, of course, the mere titular head of the state, served by his subordinates, more or less well.

If Golitzine went, and some inferior person took on his office, then Alexander would be very badly served. He was not a monarch who could reign by himself.

The Baron bent his deep, penetrating gaze upon the assembly of notable persons—the Emperor, the two Generals, the Secretary, the modest and rather shrinking young Italian, somewhat embarrassed by his recent projection into matters of high statecraft.

Certain things at once struck his observant eyes. All except the Emperor were dressed in immaculate costume. The autocrat himself was attired in a loose dressing-gown. He had had no time to array himself in conventional garments.

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As a matter of fact, Golitzine's letter had reached him shortly before dawn, requesting his presence at the private counsel which was now taking place. Alexander, no doubt relying on the efforts of his faithful servants, had indulged in a little extra slumber, confident that he would be well looked after.

Salmoros reflected, with a certain contempt, upon the obvious inferences which were to be drawn from these very apparent facts.

He looked at Golitzine, that astute Secretary, who kept his master in order, spurred him when he was too sluggish, restrained him when he was too impetuous.

Cynical thoughts shaped themselves in his active brain, and if translated into speech, they might have expressed themselves thus: "Why do we men of intelligence and initiative give our best, the keenest of our brains, to these mere figureheads whom we flatter, but at heart despise for their feebleness? It is because we find the figurehead binds us more closely together, makes our own position more secure, while we are propping up his."

He answered Golitzine's question, with his slow, grave smile.

"A man of my age, Count, would not travel so many miles, at great personal inconvenience, without some very strong motive. I warned you some time ago of a slowly maturing conspiracy against the person of his Majesty." He inclined his leonine head in the direction of the autocrat, the figurehead, who smiled back graciously in intimation that he fully appreciated the Baron's

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services.

"I have, as you know, considerable resources at my command, but these people are very cunning. It is only quite lately that I have secured definite information as to day and date. As soon as I received that information, I cast all other considerations to the winds. I came to St. Petersburg as fast as special trains would bring me. Of course, I had no knowledge of what you were doing here, and one cannot express oneself very fully in telegrams."

Golitzine gave him a glance which said as plainly as the language of the eyes could speak, "We are both men of the highest intelligence. Let us disregard the figureheads and the instruments and address ourselves to each other. The others can follow us at their leisure."

Aloud he said, "Well, Baron, you have been well served, but we, in St. Petersburg, have not been idle. When do you say that Zouroff and his fellow conspirators will strike?"

"Within the next three days. That is my information, derived, of course, from a traitor, who has received a substantial reward," was the answer of Salmoros. He thought, rather regretfully, that there were few secrets of this unhappy country, which could not be purchased for a liberal payment of gold. He was not even sure to what extent the most trusted adherents of the Emperor might not be bribed, always excepting Golitzine.

The Emperor broke in, in his rather awkward way, to prove that he was always master in his own house.

"You have done more than well, Baron, and you have now, as before and ever, our undying gratitude. But"—he pointed a finger towards the young Director of the Imperial Opera—"this gentleman is just a little bit in front of you. You say within three days. Signor Corsini will tell you that the great *coup* of Zouroff and his friends is planned for to-night at the Winter Palace. Speak, Signor, and tell the Baron something of what you have already told us." [Pg 289]

Golitzine's heavy brows expressed displeasure. After his long journey, doubly trying to a man of his age, Salmoros need not have his own protégé flung in his face as it were. The situation could have been dealt with in a more diplomatic manner.

But Salmoros, man of the world and philosopher as he was, did not indicate by a flickering of the eyelid that he took the slightest notice of these small pinpricks, delivered by a maladroit, but not hostile hand.

He looked kindly at the young man. "Please repeat what you have already told to this illustrious assembly. If the pupil has beaten his master, it will be proof to me that my judgment of men seldom fails."

He paused and bowed profoundly to the Emperor, who was just beginning to entertain an uneasy idea that he might have employed more diplomatic language.

"I am an old man, Sire, and perhaps my brain does not work quite so rapidly as it used. But you will kindly remember that I have several important interests at stake, besides watching over the destinies of Empires in a state of disturbance, such as seems afflicting your kingdom at the present moment. For many years, as you know, I have lived in free and prosperous England. We don't have any of those troubles in that well-governed and tranquil country." [Pg 290]

The Emperor reddened under the mild rebuke, delivered in the most passionless tones. Golitzine hastened to pour oil on the troubled waters. The two Generals, men of action, of no subtlety of thought, had not noticed that the waters were troubled at all.

The Count addressed himself directly to Corsini.

"You were only embarking upon your narrative which the fortunate advent of the Baron cut short for a few moments. Will you kindly proceed? Our good friend will then realise how you have been aided by a most fortunate conjunction of circumstances."

Nello proceeded with his narrative, but of course, he had to repeat portions of it, to bring Salmoros into line with the others.

He finished up with the pregnant words: "The attempt is to be made to-night at the Winter Palace at the big reception, the *bal-masqué*." He turned to the Emperor. "Your Majesty is to be assassinated by one of the eight chief conspirators."

Corsini had now come to a part of his narrative which he had not yet disclosed before the arrival of Salmoros.

"His name?" demanded the Emperor, with flashing eyes.

"I grieve very much that I cannot give that information. It was not settled last night at the meeting. I understood they would draw lots for it to-day."

The Emperor subsided. For the moment he could not vent his vengeance on any particular person. [Pg 291]

Corsini proceeded. "At the *bal-masqué*, your Majesty is to wear a pale-blue domino."

"Quite true," answered the autocrat. "That is the costume I have chosen."

"These men are acquainted with every detail of the reception, and they have a hundred spies and adherents."

"I see," said the Emperor. "It is well known we are giving a big reception to-night, to which even this traitor Zouroff himself is invited. Truly, the conspirators have chosen a very convenient occasion."

After these words the Czar of all the Russias leant his head upon his hand, apparently engrossed in deep thought.

Golitzine looked at Salmoros, the Baron flashed back an answering glance. The same thought had occurred to both. Had the Emperor's brain, never of a very dominating quality, suddenly given way under the tragic possibilities of to-night?

The two Generals, admirable machines, but who were pretty well incapable of moving on their own volition, kept imperturbable faces.

Golitzine at last ventured to touch the shoulder of his Imperial Master. Even a favourite Secretary paused before taking liberties with an autocrat, so long as he was in his right mind. But Golitzine was beginning to doubt if he was, and Salmoros entertained the same suspicion.

"There is no time to be lost, Sire. They are going to strike to-night. We must be prepared to counter their blow. What does your Majesty suggest?"

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The Emperor smiled calmly. It was evident that he had not gone out of his mind, as they had at first feared.

He spoke in measured accents. "I have been thinking very deeply, my good old friend Golitzine. One of the band is going to assassinate me to-night. Well, you leave that part of the problem to me."

Golitzine recoiled in consternation. "It is my duty and that of my colleagues"—he pointed to the two inarticulate Generals—"to guard the sacred person of your Majesty. With all respect, Sire, I cannot leave that task to yourself."

He turned to the Baron. "I think, Salmoros, you will agree with me?" he asked.

Salmoros spoke in very decided tones. "In a question of this importance, your Majesty must consent to take the advice of your faithful friends and legal supporters." He had no very great opinion of the Emperor's ability or capacity to deal with difficult circumstances.

The Emperor's smile was more pronounced than before, as he tapped Golitzine on the shoulder and extended a hand to the venerable Salmoros.

He drew them aside, and spoke in a confidential whisper.

"My dear friends, I appreciate to the full your anxiety about me, and I shall want your wholehearted assistance, which, I know, will be given ungrudgingly to me. With regard to this little matter of assassination, some ideas have come to me. Let me work them out my own way, if you please."

Both men bowed in assent. There was no more to be said. When an autocrat has delivered his fiat, argument on the part of even his most trusted servants is useless.

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"May your Majesty never live to regret your decision," murmured the faithful Golitzine, in a low whisper.

The Emperor again gave him a reassuring pressure on the shoulder.

"My excellent Golitzine, and you, my good Salmoros, you can safely leave this part of it to me. I have in my mind a little tragedy that shall later turn into comedy. To-night, at the Winter Palace, you will appreciate an Emperor's stratagem. You shall also witness, later on, an Emperor's vengeance."

He paused, then extended a hand to each and spoke in the same whispering tones. "You, Golitzine and Salmoros, will confer with the two Generals. They have not the brains of either of you, but they are good machines. You will take measures to have the soldiery and police well posted in order to combat the revolution engineered by that villain, Zouroff, and his friends. Corsini, I daresay, has still a few more details to impart which will be useful. For the present, *au revoir*."

Golitzine, after his Imperial Master's departure, spoke to Salmoros.

"What do you think of it all, Baron? Is he sure of himself? Has he got an idea, of which he is so proud that he will not communicate it even to us?"

Salmoros shook his white wise head slowly to and fro while he spoke with his gentle, slightly ironical smile.

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"My dear Golitzine, who can prophesy? Wisdom, we know, sometimes proceeds out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. Perhaps it may, in occasional moments, emanate from the brains of Kings and Emperors. In the meantime, you will take all necessary precautions. It would not be wise to trust too much to the Emperor's inspiration, whatever it may be."

Corsini quitted the cabinet shortly after the departure of the Emperor. Alexander, full of his great idea, and it was proved later on that it was a very excellent and ingenious one, felt that he could leave all further details to the astute Golitzine, Salmoros, and the two Generals.

After the Czar had left, Golitzine had questioned the Italian closely as to certain items of the information which he had gathered at the villa the night before. Being satisfied as to these, he had intimated, of course in the most polite and diplomatic manner, that Corsini's presence was no longer required. He was now going into certain practical matters with the two Generals, with regard to the disposition of the soldiery and police, of a strictly technical nature which would have no interest to a civilian.

Corsini took the hint at once. He had already learned that high politics meant strict business. These two great men would put up with your company, just so long as you were useful to them. As soon as you had fulfilled your part, you were dismissed, in order that they might turn to somebody else of equal importance.

But Golitzine, in spite of his lean and rather saturnine aspect, was a kind-hearted old fellow. He shook the young man warmly by the hand and whispered in his ear:

"Please do not accuse me of scant courtesy, if I seem to hurry you away, but the time is all too short for what I have to plan and arrange. Be assured that, so far as the Emperor is concerned, your fortune is made. I cannot take upon myself to predict the precise nature of your reward, but it will be a very substantial one. And of course your friend Ivan and his associate will be remembered, too."

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Corsini bowed gratefully. He already knew enough of Courts to assume that Golitzine himself would determine the nature and extent of those rewards. The Emperor would only speak with the voice of his Secretary, although as a matter of etiquette, he must always be regarded as the fountain of honour.

Golitzine went on in a still lower tone. "You have more time on your hands than we hard-working servants of the State have. We shall not meet again till to-night at the *bal-masqué*. You might use a few of your leisure moments in strolling round to my house and cheering up the Princess Nada. I prepared my wife for a possible visit. I am certain you will not be denied admittance."

Corsini was very young, too young to have got over the youthful habit of blushing. A deep red settled on his countenance as he realised the nature and intention of the kindly Count's suggestion.

Golitzine peered at him amiably through his spectacles. He liked that ingenuous blush: it betokened sincerity. Here was no callous young adventurer, simply a youth of integrity and good principles, quick-witted enough to take advantage of his opportunities.

"You are a favourite of fortune, my dear fellow, but you have had the good sense to see when she smiled on you. Strike while the iron is hot. Every right-thinking young woman is grateful to her preserver, especially when he is so good to look at as you are. You don't want me to give you any further hint."

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Corsini, more embarrassed than ever, murmured a reply that was almost inarticulate, but one expressing gratitude for his Excellency's suggestions. He made his *adieux* hastily, anxious to be out of the chamber where these experienced men seemed to read his very soul.

Salmoros detained him a second. "Not quite so quick, my young friend. You will dine with me to-morrow night at my hotel; here is the address." He added with a humorous smile, "That is to say, if this devil of a Zoureff leaves any of us alive."

Corsini left the Winter Palace. He saw the figures of his faithful bodyguard hovering in the distance, pledged to watch after his safety, to protect him from the evil designs of his relentless enemy, that traitor Prince whom he had outwitted.

He bent his steps in the direction of Golitzine's house. He was anxious to see the Princess again, but perhaps, had he not been spurred by the Count's hints, he might not have dared to intrude upon her so soon.

The kiss of last night, when their lips had met for the first time! She had kissed him warmly then, in the exaltation of grateful feelings for her rescue from her ruffianly brother.

That was last night. Would the morning bring reflection, prudence? Would she remember the difference between their stations—recollect that she was a Princess of the highest lineage, he an artist, a genius, but a man of no birth or connections?

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As he walked slowly along, his thoughts travelled back to the time when he had been in such despair that he had come one night to the conclusion life was no longer worth living. He remembered he had put that question to his devoted little sister, Anita, and she had answered bravely that she would leave the decision to him.

And by one turn, as it seemed, of fortune's wheel, all this was changed. He had in his pocket a letter received from Anita that morning, written from the house of the kind ladies in whose charge the Baron Salmoros had placed her when he despatched her brother on his mission to Russia.

A young Englishman had fallen in love with Anita; she had fallen in love with him. He had excellent prospects. One of the two benevolent ladies had enclosed a brief note, speaking in the highest terms of the young lover, who was also a protégé of the benevolent Salmoros. Anita had promised to become his wife, subject to her brother's consent.

How far away it all seemed, that snowy night in Dean Street, when he had played in the gutter to earn a few coppers for food and lodging. Dear old Papa Péron, with his big heart, the genial Degraux, the powerful and astute Salmoros, who picked out intelligent instruments for his deeply laid schemes! All these figures were present to him as he strolled along.

So Anita was in love and would shortly be a happy wife. Well, if she made half as good a wife as a sister, her husband would be a fortunate man. He would ask a few details of Salmoros when he dined with him to-morrow night about this young suitor, but he had no doubt he would write Anita a warm letter of congratulation. [Pg 299]

And for himself! Last night, the beautiful Nada, whom he had regarded as a star set high up in the firmament above him, had returned his kiss. Already he occupied an important post in the musical world. This morning, Golitzine had hinted at substantial rewards for his secret and important services. The Count had spoken of him as one of fortune's favourites. The description did not seem to be misplaced.

His heart beat more confidently as he approached the Count's house. After all, he was not so unworthy as he had once imagined himself to be. Nada was one of a long line. He was going to be the first of his—virile, ambitious, with the restless impulses of new blood. Was the difference between them so great after all?

He met the Countess in the hall. Full of the prejudices of her caste, she did not perhaps wholly approve of the visit; but she was a very obedient wife, and Golitzine, as it has been explained, had given her a hint that if Corsini called he was to be admitted at once to the presence of the young Princess.

Nada was reclining in an easy-chair, looking a little wan. To her enraptured lover, her slight pallor only added spirituality to her beauty.

He felt he must proceed very cautiously. She might wish to ignore that episode of the previous night, for which the strange circumstances could furnish a reasonable excuse. [Pg 300]

He bowed low over her hand and raised it respectfully to his lips. "I am so pleased, Princess," he began in rather hesitating tones, "to see that you are very little the worse for last night's adventure."

A faint colour suffused her cheeks; she withdrew her hand with a little pettish gesture. It was evident that she did not wish to ignore the incident of last night.

"Why are you so formal? I am not a Princess to you, but simply Nada, an unhappy girl whom you rescued and brought here at night, and whom you said you loved. Have you forgotten all this?"

"No, I have not forgotten," was the fervent answer, "but I was not sure you might wish to remember. Last night, the circumstances were very unusual. Feelings of gratitude might have led you farther—"

He paused, for the very good reason that Nada had placed her hand upon his lips.

"Do you know, you are talking very foolishly, Nello. But no, it is not altogether foolish. I can guess all that there is in your mind. You are such a perfect gentleman, so chivalrous where a woman is concerned. But you need doubt no longer. When I allowed you to kiss me last night and kissed you back, I gave you my heart once and for all time."

He bent over her and kissed this time, not her hand, but her lips.

"And you will marry me, you will be my wife?" he asked in a voice that still expressed hesitation. [Pg 301]

"Of course," answered the Princess, with a pretty assumption of indignation. "Do you think I would suffer any man to kiss me unless I were sure he were going to be my husband?"

As he walked back to his hotel Corsini felt as if he were treading on air. How thankful he was to the kindly old Count for that hint, to strike while the iron was hot. Left to himself, he might have lost her for want of boldness. And now, Nada had promised to be his wife. Very shortly he and his dear little sister would both be happily married.

Later in the day, when the Emperor's private cabinet had been cleared of his official counsellors, Alexander held an important conversation with a man as strong and stalwart as himself, closely resembling him in height and build. This man was an illegitimate son of one of the Romanoffs, and had ever devoted himself to his Majesty's person and given a hundred proofs of his loyalty.

"Listen, my faithful Sergius," said the autocrat, as he motioned him to a seat. "I have something to tell you that will startle you. You know that to-night we hold a *bal-masqué* at the Winter Palace. You will be there."

The man Sergius nodded. On these more or less ceremonious occasions he was never far from his master's side. He had no subtlety of intellect, he had little sense of diplomacy. It was impossible to advance him very far, to make him into even the semblance of a statesman, but he worshipped his Emperor and relative with a canine fidelity. He was a magnificent watch-dog and would lay down his life for his master.

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"There is a plot on foot, engineered by Prince Zouroff and others, to assassinate me to-night in the ball-room of the Winter Palace."

Sergius recoiled in horror. "But where are your guards, your police? What are Golitzine, Beilski, and Burovkin doing?" he cried in amazement. He started from his chair, ever a man of action. "Let me go round to the Zouroff Palace at once, get hold of this ruffian and choke the life out of him. You can then punish me for a brief space and then give me a free pardon—extenuating circumstances, or something of that sort."

Alexander smiled kindly. Sergius, the man of proved loyalty, spoke, as usual, from his full heart. But, as ever, he lacked discretion.

"A most excellent idea, my good old friend and cousin, but in this century we cannot proceed on strictly mediæval lines. Besides, we want to take them, so to speak, red-handed. Golitzine is working admirably. So are Burovkin and Beilski; they will see to the soldiers and the police. They wanted to arrange my part in the affair—I know what they would have proposed, that I should absent myself—I determined to take the matter in hand personally. If I am not there, and they already know how I purpose to be dressed, they will not carry out their plot; they will postpone it, and we shall still be hanging on the tenterhooks of suspense, wondering when the blow will fall. Let it fall to-night, as they have planned, and let them be taken red-handed. That is my policy."

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Sergius stared at his master with a puzzled expression. His slow brain could not follow the Emperor's explanation. Certainly, it would be very easy for him to go round to the Zouroff Palace and strangle its master; half a dozen others, if necessary. This was surely the most certain way to his soldier-like and practical mind.

"Sergius, my good friend, this affair wants a little diplomacy, which you and I will carry out between us. I shall acquaint Golitzine and the others with it, say, an hour before the reception begins. They think they have the monopoly of brains, that their Emperor must always think the thoughts they put into his head, always speak the words they prepare for him. Well, I am going to show them that sometimes I can act upon my own initiative. I have prepared a little stratagem, in which I invite your co-operation. I will explain it to you."

He unfolded his scheme to the puzzled and interested Sergius. The blunt soldier rose up when the Emperor had finished, and smiled delightedly.

"Excellent, most excellent, Sire. You can rely upon me; you may be sure I shall not fail to play my part."

At midnight the vast saloons of the Winter Palace were thronged with a happy, joyous crowd. Zouroff was there, in a disguise that he thought nobody could penetrate. The other seven leaders were there also, safe as they thought from recognition.

Corsini was there, having come on from the Opera. And the young Princess had come also, with the Countess Golitzine. At first she had protested. She wished to see the Emperor triumph, as she was assured he would; but the Emperor's triumph would mean the ruin of her brother. Basely as he had treated her, she was reluctant to assist at the spectacle of his degradation.

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But curiosity prevailed, the natural curiosity of being in at the finish of things. And besides, the Countess had told her that she would give to Corsini a description of her costume, and obtain from him one of his, so that they could easily recognise each other. In the end, she went.

The commanding figure of the Emperor, clothed in his mask and blue domino, moved about amongst his guests. There was no mistaking that Imperial presence. One man, in particular, was watching intently, following every motion.

Corsini had at last found out his sweetheart. They were conversing together in low whispers, when suddenly there rose from a hundred throats the shout of—"Treason! Treason!"

They turned their startled gaze towards the end of the room, in time to see the Emperor's huge form sink slowly to the floor. A small man darted from his side, buried himself amid the crowd and made hastily towards the nearest door, concealing in his garments the dagger with which he had inflicted the blow.

He found the door guarded by three stalwart men, who seized him at once and forbade egress. They were members of Beilski's police.

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At the same instant the General himself tore off his mask, and cried out in stentorian tones, "Unmask, everybody. The doors are guarded. None can pass through till we are satisfied of their innocence. We know the names of all the traitors. At yonder door my men have got the assassin."

Slowly they all unmasked, Zouroff amongst the rest. He knew now that he had been foiled by somebody, that his ambitions were quenched for ever. Siberia and the mines for him, as the lightest penalty.

To do him justice, he took his fate stoically. He folded his arms across his breast and cast a disdainful glance in the direction of the panic-stricken crowd.

Beilski, who had been standing close to that tall, commanding figure, went and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

“Get up, Sergius,” he whispered. “The first act of the tragedy is over.”

The apparently inanimate man rose slowly to his feet, threw off his mask and domino, disclosing a suit of chain mail beneath, which the dagger of the assassin had been unable to penetrate.

And then a great shout of loyalty burst forth from the assembly, as they recognised the situation. The Emperor had never been at the reception at all. This faithful left-handed relative of his, who so closely resembled his Imperial Master, had taken his place.

And then a side door opened and the Czar, in ordinary attire, came through and made his way to the top of the room. He was escorted by a strong bodyguard. It was just on the cards that one of these desperate men might make a second attempt, out of pure revenge. [Pg 306]

But there was no fear of this. Beilski’s men had got all of the eight leading conspirators and several accomplices safely in their clutches.

It must be said for the Emperor that, on occasions like these, he could always assume the grand manner.

In a few well-chosen sentences he dismissed the assembly, with many regrets that their pleasure had been so abruptly terminated. There were matters of great import to be attended to, matters which would not brook delay.

Nada broke away from the Countess and rushed over to her brother. In spite of his cruel treatment of her, her heart at that moment bled for him.

“Oh, Boris, I know it is good-bye for ever. Why did you not listen to me when I pleaded with you to give up your dangerous schemes?”

But Zouroff hardly listened to her. He was thinking of that snowy, never-ending road to Siberia, along which he would trudge in chains, guarded by the merciless Cossacks.

“Don’t worry me,” he said in a dull voice. “All is finished. What is the use of looking back?”

After the assembly had dispersed the Emperor retired to his private cabinet. He intimated that, for the moment, he only wished to see Golitzine and Corsini. The others he would interview later.

Immediately the door was closed he turned to the young Italian.

“Signor Corsini, I have said before in your presence that the house of Romanoff is not ungrateful. I have great pleasure in bestowing upon you the title of Count; there will also be paid to you a considerable sum which you can invest at your discretion. The directorship of the Imperial Opera, if you wish to retain it, can be yours for life. With regard to your friend, Ivan, our promises have been already given. Golitzine will see to this.” [Pg 307]

Corsini expressed his thanks in becoming language, and was about to withdraw, when the Count detained him.

“One moment, Corsini; I shall take upon myself to disclose to his Majesty a little idyll that has lately been going on in St. Petersburg—one which the Countess has confided to me. The Princess Nada has promised to be our young friend’s wife.”

The Emperor smiled graciously and extended his hand cordially.

“Congratulations, Signor. Nada will make a good and faithful wife. She takes after her mother; the father and son were both ruffians.”

CHAPTER XXVII

The night after these thrilling events, Corsini went to dine with Salmoros at his hotel.

The great financier always travelled in royal state on important occasions. He lodged himself in the same fashion. At the present moment he was occupying one of the most expensive suites in the hotel. Two secretaries and a valet formed his retinue. He had journeyed all the way by special trains.

Well, in a way he was a monarch himself—one of the half-dozen undisputed kings of finance, who are the power behind titular potentates and taken into their counsels before they resolve upon decided action. [Pg 308]

There was no other guest. Salmoros wished to talk to this young man alone. Nothing appealed to the Baron like success. He was prepared to admit that luck was a frequent element in success, and Corsini had undoubtedly been lucky. A chance meeting with a discredited outlaw—so much he had gathered from Golitzine in a brief conversation to-day—had put the young Italian on the right track. All the same, luck had a knack of presenting itself to people born to achieve greatness. It presented itself to everybody, but the stupid people were too blind to see and take advantage of it.

He remembered a word of warning that his old friend and patron, that far-seeing statesman Lord Beaconsfield, had once addressed to him. "Never associate yourself with unlucky people, my dear Salmoros." He had faithfully regarded that warning during his strenuous years of commercial and business intrigue.

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The Baron had jestingly said yesterday that they would meet to-night if that devil of a Zouroff left anybody alive. Well, they were all alive, and the traitor Prince would soon be eating his heart out in Siberia. And yet it had been touch and go. It had been a thrilling day, and an ordinary man might have felt his nerves a little shaken when the strain was over.

But Salmoros was as calm as if the destinies of the Russian Empire, in which he took so keen an interest, had never hung for a moment in the balance. Perhaps he had experienced and survived too many catastrophes to feel very great emotion at another triumph, the last of a hundred or more.

Corsini, on his side, with the jangling nerves of youth, was very palpably agitated. His smile was forced, his face was twitching. He could not dismiss from his mind these great events that had so suddenly crowded into his life.

Nada, that peerless divinity whom he had adored from afar when there seemed no hope, who had suddenly descended, as it were, to earth and had promised to be his wife! Here was one intoxicating thought.

And then, last night the Emperor had called him into his private cabinet, invested him with the title of Count of the Russian Empire and promised him an even more substantial reward.

And yet he was the same man who, a short time ago, had been playing in the streets for coppers which his half-starved sister collected. But for the providential interference of dear old Papa Péron he might have been playing there still, or sought refuge in an untimely grave. Simply a turn of fortune's wheel.

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Salmoros noted his agitation, and for a long time, did not press him with any very direct conversation. He talked of music, of which he was a great connoisseur, and presently he found that this subject drew the young man out of his perturbed thoughts.

By the time the meal was finished, Corsini was almost his normal self. The animated discussions over different composers, in which each disputant defended his opinions warmly, had driven for a time into the background the personal events of the last few days.

"We shall never agree about Russia," remarked the Baron at the end of this artistic conference. "Now, we have had quite a long argument and the subject is very absorbing to both of us. Let us talk of something a little nearer home. The Signor Corsini I sent out to Russia in the nature of a speculation is now Count Corsini, a member of the nobility of the Russian Empire. Have you reflected over these facts and to what extent they are going to influence your future?"

Nello answered candidly. "For the last few days, Baron, I seem to have been living in a world of dreams. I never sought adventure, but through you—no, I must not forget dear old Papa Péron, he was the origin of all this—adventure has come to me."

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At the mention of Péron's name, Salmoros lifted his glass and spoke in a voice of emotion.

"To the memory of my dear old friend and comrade, who had a heart of gold. Ah, why did he choose to die in that miserable garret, when he knew I was so near? What misplaced pride!"

"He had the artistic temperament, Baron, but he was never a man of the world. He would give, but he blushed to take," was Nello's answer. "Well, you have asked me for my ideas as to the future. Candidly, I have not yet formulated any, except as regards in one direction. For one thing I would prefer not to remain in Russia."

The Baron smiled his quiet and comprehending smile. "There I think I am with you. A charming place for a brief visit, but for a prolonged residence, certainly not."

Corsini went on. "I love England and its free ways. Here there is too much intrigue. I propose, when certain things are settled, to return to England. The Emperor has kindly said that if I wish it the directorship of the Imperial Opera is mine for life. It is a fine post and I fully appreciate the compliment. But—"

Salmoros interrupted him. "I quite understand. You would sooner play your violin at the Floral Hall in London than conduct the Imperial Opera in this city of St. Petersburg, honeycombed with spies, traitors, and actual or potential assassins?"

Nello nodded. It was very easy to explain to this wonderful old man, who seemed to know what you were going to say before the words were formed.

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"Now confide in me," said the Baron in his most confidential tones. "You dropped a rather significant phrase just now. You said you had not yet formulated your ideas, except in one particular direction. Will you tell me, or can I guess it?"

The young man blushed vividly. "I have been fortunate far beyond my deserts, sir. The Princess Nada Zouroff, whom I first met in London at the Russian Embassy, has been kind enough——"

"Don't be so formal, Nello," said the Baron kindly, using his Christian name to put him at his ease. "You need not tell me any more. I had a long talk with Golitzine this afternoon. Of course he told me many things and amongst them was this item of news, that Nada is going to marry you."

This wonderful old Salmoros knew everything, but how could he help it, when so many channels of information were open to him? Corsini's answer was a still deeper blush.

"She will make you a good wife. Golitzine knows them well; he speaks in the highest terms of her and her mother. The father was a bully and a ruffian, the brother we know was a traitor, and will get his deserts."

He raised his glass, bowing to the young man with an old-world courtesy.

"To the health of your *fiancée*, the future Countess Corsini. When do you propose to marry?"

"I cannot fix the exact date, Baron. Her mother, you may have heard, is very ill. Nada has only returned to the Palace to-day. It would not have been safe for her to do so while that scoundrel Boris was at large."

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Salmoros mused for a few moments before he spoke again. "So you will marry as soon as all the circumstances will permit. And I take it you will reside in England. What does the young Princess say to that?"

"Nada loves England," was Corsini's answer, "and after the events of last night Russia will not have very pleasant recollections for her or her mother."

"True," agreed the Baron. "I shall very much like you to spend part of your honeymoon with me at my place in Sussex, if it falls in with your arrangements."

"I am sure we shall be delighted, sir," cried Nello. He paused and added a little nervously: "But I hope you won't want to send me on any more missions of this sort. If so, you must let me know the nature of the danger beforehand."

Salmoros laughed good-humouredly. "No, my young friend, I will not play that sort of trick upon you a second time. Besides, being a Count and the husband of a very charming Princess, I doubt if I should find you so useful for my purposes. I will do my utmost to advance your artistic interests in England, instead. But remember, it is a promise; you will bring your wife to my house in Sussex, if not upon your honeymoon, at some time convenient to yourselves."

Nello assured the benevolent old Baron that they would certainly accept his hospitality, and bade him good-night.

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Outside he saw the four stalwart figures of his bodyguard waiting for him. Beilski had not relaxed his precautions. It was still possible that some fanatical and devoted adherent of Zouroff might resolve to avenge his defeated chief.

A burly, bearded man was walking up and down outside the door of the hotel. Corsini recognised him immediately—"Ivan the Cuckoo."

The four men drew nearer, as they perceived the late outlaw was accosting him, but Corsini raised his hand and waved them back.

"I waited for you, Signor, to express my thanks to you who have so nobly fulfilled your part of the bargain," said Ivan, speaking in low tones. "I was at the Count's house an hour ago; he has promised me a most substantial sum, part of which will go to my good old comrade, Stepan. After all, Signor, if we must be truthful, it was he who really saved the Emperor."

"I quite agree," answered Corsini. Yes, Stepan had expressed his suspicions to Ivan, and Ivan's quick wit had developed the plan of campaign, which the Italian had skilfully conducted. The honours seemed a little unequally distributed. Corsini was a Count, with a handsome sum of money. Ivan was to have also a substantial pecuniary reward, and Stepan was to have some share of what Ivan received. Still, it was no use pondering over these caprices of fortune.

"Signor," went on the late outlaw, "I am sick of Russia. As soon as I get my money, and the Count promises it immediately, I shall leave this country. I am tired of it. I shall go to England—I hear it is a land of the free—set up a business there, and turn myself into an honest man."

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Corsini shook him by the hand. "Bravo, Ivan. Yes, by all means go to England. It is, as you say, a land of the free. I shall go back there as soon as I can. I am not over-fond of Russia."

Ivan's eyes sparkled. "Perhaps, Signor, we might meet there some day, if it would not be presumption on my part to intrude on you."

"Nonsense, my good Ivan. I shall always be pleased to see you in memory of those few moments we spent before the village ikon. Here is an address to which you can always write me."

He felt very grateful to Ivan. If it had not been for the good services of the "Cuckoo," he would never have been a Count of the Russian Empire. He handed him an envelope on which he scribbled his full title and description, addressed to the care of the Baron Salmoros. Any letter directed to that quarter would be sure to reach him, and he knew the Baron would be certain to pardon him for taking the liberty.

A little later, in the leafy month of June, Corsini and his charming young wife spent a week-end with Salmoros at his beautiful place, Marwood Park, in Sussex.

Salmoros, with that spirit of unconscious ostentation which often marks the *nouveau riche*, had built himself a very lordly pleasure house, designed by an eminent architect. Although a childless man, and a bachelor to boot, he had insisted upon a very spacious dwelling. [Pg 316]

The eminent architect, a man of some humour, had remarked to him when he laid before him the plans, "Most men, Baron, when they build houses, build them too small; afterwards they have to enlarge. I have made ample provision here for another wing, if it should be required. It will not destroy the general scheme of the structure."

Of course, when the eminent architect made this suggestion, Salmoros was comparatively a young man. He might marry and want to put aside suites of rooms for his sons and daughters. The eminent architect had this in his eye when he suggested the possibility of another wing.

Salmoros had agreed, but the other wing had never been built. He had not married, and the house as it stood was spacious enough for his wants.

Here he stored his valuable pictures, his rare china, his costly antiques. His gardens were the best laid-out in England, his rock walk was not to be equalled in the kingdom, his hot-houses were the pride of the county.

Everything that money could purchase was his, not from a mere common love of display, but that he would have everything of the best—cellars stocked with the finest wines, cabinets filled with the most choice cigars. A week-end with Salmoros was to the *bon viveur* a period of ecstasy. Everything in that well-appointed *ménage* was perfect. [Pg 317]

Even Nada, accustomed to the splendours of the Zoureff Palace, was a little overwhelmed by the stately magnificence of the great financier. Corsini, of humble extraction, was fairly dazzled by it.

"We seem to walk on velvet, darling, don't we?" he whispered to his wife as they went down the great staircase. "If we could only have a little music, we might think we were in Paradise."

But the Baron had provided for that. There were no other guests during the week-end. With the whim of an old man he had wanted to have them to himself.

During the perfect dinner, prepared by a *chef* to whom he paid an enormous salary, a small orchestra played some exquisite music, so softly rendered that it did not interfere with conversation. Salmoros thought out all these things with the true spirit of the artist—the artist with perhaps, in his complex spirit, a little of the Oriental.

Nada was enchanted. What seemed barbarous in Russia was here touched with refinement, a different thing altogether. What a wonderful old man he was!

And Corsini was equally delighted, with his artistic appreciation of all that was beautiful and refined. The gaudy splendours of the Winter Palace were vulgar compared to this perfect setting—and only for a party of three—the exquisite glass and silver, the snowy napery, the well-trained service, the full but subdued light, and that orchestra in the gallery of the vast dining-room rendering that beautiful, but not obtrusive, music, every member of the small band an artist. [Pg 318]

The long meal was ended. Salmoros rose.

"Come into my favourite sitting-room," he said. "We can smoke there in comfort, and Madame can have a cigarette."

He led the way into a cosy chamber, furnished in the most exquisite taste. Easy, comfortable chairs abounded. Salmoros presented a cigarette to the Princess and offered Corsini one of his choicest cigars. There was a little period of silence, and then the Baron turned to Corsini.

"Have you brought your violin with you, Nello?"

"I never travel without it, sir," replied the young man.

"Ah, then, when we have had our smoke, perhaps you will humour an old man's whim. Will you play for me that lovely little romance which was always your encore? There is a piano in yonder corner. Perhaps your wife, who is a musician, will accompany you. If not, I will do my best."

Later on Nello played, his charming wife accompanying him. The Baron listened, enraptured.

"Ah, my dear Nello, that is exquisite music, exquisitely rendered," he said when Corsini had finished. "That fellow who leads my orchestra is good—good enough for dinner anyway—but he has not your perfect touch. Ah, you remember me telling you once what I would give if you could

teach me to play like you. Well, that offer is still open.”

Corsini smiled. “What would I not give to be the Baron Salmoros?”

The Baron raised himself from his artistic dreams. “Ah, my young friend, everybody wants something the other has got, and so it will be to the end of time.” [Pg 319]

He looked long and earnestly at the young couple before he spoke again.

“Ah, how very strange is the world! Why should we grope our way in dark, tortuous, and devious paths to destruction when sincerity, truth, courage, and honesty of purpose will do it with less trouble and more certainty. I sent you to St. Petersburg because I knew the peril in which the Emperor, our good and faithful friend, existed—a peril which, if the plot succeeded, would be a grave disaster to our own diplomacy of Great Britain, and to all other countries, save Germany. The plot was formed here, in London, by that traitor, Prince Boris Zouroff, who possessed his Majesty’s confidence. But all has ended, my dear Count Corsini, as I had planned.”

Then rising, the great financier, who was also a statesman, added to Nada: “And I wish to heartily congratulate your Highness upon your husband—a man in whom your Emperor, the Queen of this country, and myself have the most perfect confidence.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER’S NOTES:

1. Minor changes have been made to correct typesetters’ errors; otherwise, every effort has been made to remain true to the author’s words and intent.
2. The original of this book did not have a Table of Contents; one has been added for the reader’s convenience.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INTRIGUERS ***

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