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A Novel.

BY  
A. DE GRASSE STEVENS,  
AUTHOR OF  
"OLD BOSTON," "THE LOST DAUPHIN," "WEIGHED IN THE BALANCE,"  
ETC.

In Three Volumes.  
VOL. II.

LONDON:  
WARD AND DOWNEY,  
12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.  
1888.  
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## MISS HILDRETH.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### A FACE FROM OUT A CRIME.

The same dazzling and brilliant sunshine, that for so many weeks had held sway in Petersburg, was still beautifying the Tsar's great capital, and gilding all things with an illusory sheen, which had all the appearance of true gold, but which fled away at the approach of darkness, leaving bare the cankerous fever spots, the dry bones and wasting disease of the most tyrannous, but most doomed phenomenon of autocratic power.

During all the early hours of morning the sleeping city lay bathed in this wonderful alchemy; the Neva resting tranquil beneath the spell, even its cold grey waters catching reflections from the sun-god's rays. From above its low bank rose a long grey stone wall, broken here and there into sharp angles and protected by recurrent cannon, set at regular intervals; beyond this a tall and slender spire shot up high into the air, graceful and quivering with a thousand golden lights, that seemed to break against it, and then fling the fragments broadcast with careless prodigality; these in falling touched again the fluttering flag on the white belfry, glanced athwart the Imperial mint, and awoke myriad reflections in the façade of the Winter Palace.

This tall spire, shooting upwards like a lance, is the crowning glory of Russia's great State prison, and Russia's Imperial tomb of kings, the grim fortress of Petropavlovsk. It is a familiar sight to Petersburg's populace, as they pass to and fro across the Troitski Bridge, or linger in the spacious Boulevard-park, which is never empty, and through which the dwellers on the Petersburg side go in and out to their homes.

Beneath its solid foundations lie the bones of Russia's greatest sovereigns; within its granite walls languish many of Russia's truest patriots; while without its precincts, separated only by a few rods, lying almost within its shadow, rises the stately palace, within which lives Russia's Tsar, conscious always of the everlasting surveillance of Peter's prison, yet unable to cast it from him, or flee before it.

It was very early in the day, about a month after Olga Naundorff's interview with Ivor Tolskoi, and as yet but few people were astir in the city's streets, save those whose avocations called them forth in the pursuance of itinerant trade. Now and then a mounted orderly would ride past, leading an uncaparisoned horse by a long rein, the iron hoofs clattering over the bridge, breaking clear and distinct across the sharp morning air; presently they would disappear under the arched entrance to the barracks, and then, perhaps, a dark, sombre figure would come next, passing swiftly along, with secrecy written on every line of the face and habiliments, to be swallowed up in the frowning doorway of the Imperial Chancellerie; while those he passed on his way drew

back instinctively, the women crossing themselves furtively, the men cursing below their breath. For was not this an emissary of that terrible secret police, from whom no one was safe, whose inexorable will was as iron and blood? And who could say who would be the next in turn to feel that cruel hand upon his throat, and know, with helpless certainty, that Petropavlovsk was his eternal destination?

Just as the clocks on tower and steeple struck seven, following the single notes by the ecclesiastical melody of triumph, "How glorious is our Lord in Sion," a young man appeared, walking quickly, and with long, swinging steps, across the Troitski Bridge. He was tall and straight, and though muffled in a long coat and profuse furs, the yellow tint of his close-cut curls beneath his sable cap, his fresh complexion and boyish gaiety of appearance, at once betrayed him to be Ivor Tolskoi.

He was humming lightly as he walked some half-remembered refrain from last night's ball or opera, but as he reached the middle of the bridge he halted, and folding his arms upon the parapet looked out across the marshy delta of the river, to where the Finnish Gulf made an indistinct grey line.

The gloomy fortress frowned heavily upon him, but the sun's shafts were making merry with the Palace windows, and Ivor's thoughts had more just then to do with hope and love, than with treachery and despair. The opera melody died on his lips unfinished and he heeded it not; his fancy had leapt the bounds of prosaic realism and was wandering as it listed in the realms of conjecture.

It was of Olga he thought as he wondered with idle curiosity which might be her casement among those that glittered and gleamed like jewels in a crystal setting, across the great marble front of the Winter Palace. If he waited long enough would he see the blind raised, the silken hangings withdrawn, and the face of his lady-love look forth to greet the day? Then would he, standing below her, bare his fair head and veil his bold blue eyes, and pray the passing wind to carry to her his message of fealty and true love.

But the windows remained hermetically sealed, the curtains undrawn, and presently Ivor with a shrug of his shoulders, a laugh at his sentimentality, and the fragment of song once more on his lips, passed on his way, looking neither to the right nor the left, and vanished within the heavy portals of the Imperial Chancellerie.

Mounting one flight of stairs with quick step, and passing along a short corridor, Ivor knocked at a closed door, and hearing the sharp French "*entrez*," opened it and stepped within that inner chamber where so few weeks ago Vladimir Mellikoff had weighed his chances, and made his choice.

Patouchki sat, as then, at the table writing; and without raising his eyes from his occupation, bade the young secretary good-morning, signing him to his place by a gesture of his left hand.

Ivor obeyed at once, and for some time only the rapid passing to and fro of the quill pens upon the paper were the only sounds.

Ivor Tolskoi had removed his heavy outside wraps and thus revealed the fact that he still wore evening-dress, and that a white rose-bud lingered in his button-hole, its freshness somewhat tarnished, but its perfume as sweet as ever.

After about half an hour's silence, Patouchki pushed back his chair and laid down his pen, passing his hand rapidly across his forehead once or twice, and looking keenly at his young companion as he did so. In the cruelly frank and searching morning light the face seemed to lose something of its pristine youth; the faint lines about the eyes and mouth became accentuated, the pallor of the temples more noticeable, the cruelty of lips and chin more pronounced. He did not look up however, though aware of the chief's scrutiny, until Patouchki's harsh voice and bullet-like sentences broke the silence.

"Burning the candle at both ends are you, Ivor? Pardon me if I remind you that wilful waste will scarcely benefit yourself, or us. Let me also remind you that that moderation in all things of which the apostle speaks, has always produced far more lasting results than reckless enthusiasm and imprudent zeal."

The young man flushed slightly as he replied: "If you would imply, chief, that my present dress is scarcely suited to my present occupation, I acknowledge the reproof with all promptitude. I was late at the Court Ball last night, and had not time to return to my apartments before making my journey across the bridge. I could not fail in that, since it was undertaken by your orders, consequently I must beg your pardon for appearing in such attire."

The words were apologetic enough, but the tone was slightly antagonistic. Patouchki looked more closely at him; it was not usual for his subordinates to use any but obsequious words and tones when addressing him, and his quick ear caught the foreign ring in Ivor's voice. He passed it by, however, without open comment, though inscribing it on the tablets of his memory, and replied, calmly:

"And have you brought me confirmation of the business on which I sent you?"

"Yes, chief," answered the young man, shortly. "I saw the man Mattalini, who is a veritable specimen of Southern Italy intrigue and falsehood. He would rather lie than tell the truth, I take

it; but he will be faithful enough to the Chancellerie if paid sufficiently. He had arrived only last night from Paris, and brought news of Count Vladimir Mellikoff's occupations and associates in gay Lutetia."

A slight sneer curled Ivor's lips as he spoke the Count's name, which was no more lost upon the chief than the unusual ring in his voice a moment before.

"Tolskoi grows restive," he mused, letting his keen black eyes rest piercingly on the young man's face for several moments; "nor is he quite frank with me. He keeps something back concerning Vladimir, whom I have noticed he never mentions without a covert sneer. There is without doubt a woman in the case. It is always so; Eve's daughters ruin our most promising patriots, sapping their energy, their spirit, their wit, and talent, by slow but sure degrees. And for what? A gleam of white teeth in a dangerous smile, the pressure of a traitorous hand, the hypocrite tears in melting eyes! Ah, bah! It's the old old story of the garden, for ever repeating itself—'the woman tempted me and I did eat;' and eating of the forbidden fruit, have become dead to all things save the unsatisfied desire it creates but never satisfies."

Aloud he said: "Did Mattalini give you no packet or papers for me?"

"Yes, chief," replied Tolskoi, "here they are," taking from his inner pocket a small sealed envelope, and holding it out to Patouchki. As the latter's long fingers closed over it, Ivor continued, in a half-nervous, half-jocular tone, and touching his fair moustache with his white fingers: "Might one interested in the cause inquire, chief, what news you have of Count Mellikoff and his mission? It is something of an open secret *why* he has gone in certain circles, and I, for one, should be glad to know how far he has succeeded."

"To pass on the information to those of your friends who are so keenly interested in and solicitous for the welfare of our father, the Tsar?" answered the chief, sharply. "Why, Ivor, I did not know you were so much of a gossip."

The young man bit his lip and frowned.

"You mistake me, chief," he said, and once again his voice had a ring of antagonism in its tone, "and you misjudge me. My question was in some sort a warning, and put forth that you might dictate such an answer as best suits the interests of the Tsar and Chancellerie. There are those, chief, who do not hesitate to assert that Stevan Lalloovich's murder was but an act of justice on the part of his repudiated wife; those, too, who have the ear of our Empress, and who are never weary of instilling dislike and distrust of the Chancellerie in her mind, and who insinuate that Count Mellikoff's mission has more to do with secret and treacherous intrigues against the Tsar, than with the finding of a fugitive woman. And when the Chancellerie is struck at, you best know for whom the blow is intended. This was my motive for my friendly inquiries regarding Count Mellikoff."

He finished with a slight bow, and stood looking full into Patouchki's face. For a moment the immobility of that sphinx-like countenance was broken up, a wave of dull-red blood rose slowly in the sallow cheeks, the black eyes flashed ominously, a sneer rested on the thin lips and repeated itself in the frown that gathered on his forehead. When he spoke his voice vibrated with greater distinctness and staccato emphasis than ever.

"There will always be fools, Ivor, as long as time endures; even in eternity we shall doubtless find similar spirits to vex our hard earned rest. If I have misjudged you, it is enough, I beg your pardon. That there are traitors on every side who can know so well as I, who hold my life not worth the price of a rush-light! To be accused wrongly forms the greater part of man's experience, but to know one's own rectitude is sufficient compensation. The Chancellerie is for the moment secure in the integrity of its members, I believe; though in this Petersburg of ours, who can say how long even our institution will stand, or who shall prove the first traitor to its system? Let it be known then, Ivor, that Count Mellikoff has at present reached America, and that he is working under our protection and our surveillance. Even he needs to tread warily, for not even he is free from our suspicion, or our watchful care. No one, Ivor, no one, in all our great machinery, but has his double, whose duty it is to report to us every action, word, or occupation. A traitor would find short mercy, he might think himself fortunate had he time for a *pater* or an *ave*, or a cry to our Lady of Kazan. I need say no more, your warning will be remembered and acted upon."

Ivor bowed again in silence and turned back to his desk, but before he reached it Patouchki stopped him.

"I shall not require you longer, Tolskoi," he said, in his usual quiet voice, "you had better get an hour or two of rest now; at twelve I shall desire your attendance with me upon the Emperor and Empress, who will make at that time a private visit of inspection to Petropavlovsk. Meet me at the private entrance of the Palace, and now S'Bo-gorn: not understood."

"I will be there, chief," replied Ivor, promptly, a little smile creeping into his eyes and about the corners of his mouth. He drew on his heavy furred coat and stood for a moment, holding his cap under his arm, as he pulled on his long gloves, glancing now and then at Patouchki, who had returned to his writing, and was apparently so engrossed with it as to be oblivious of Ivor's presence, and forgetful of Ivor's warning.

"Good morning, chief," said Tolskoi, again ignoring his elder's more solemn salutation, "and

thank you."

But Patouchki replied only by a gesture of his hand, and the next moment the heavy door closed noiselessly on Ivor's retreating figure. As he ran lightly down the short flight of stone stairs, and stepped out into the brilliant sunshine, the smile deepened in his eyes and about his mouth, and became a short gay laugh, that rang out clear and joyfully, cutting the cold keen air like a bell, and causing an old woman creeping slowly on her weary way, to turn and bless his youth and good looks in Our Lady's name.

"*Hé!* but 'tis good to be young, monsieur, and beautiful. Saint Peter send you a fair lady-love, and a short shrift!"

Ivor laughed again, and tossed the old dame a small coin; but the mirth died on his lips as he passed beneath the shadow of the great fortress, and recalled the gruesome context of the blessing bestowed upon him. "A fair lady-love, and a short shrift!" What a ghastly conclusion! What had he or Olga to do with death and death's ceremonies? He made very sure of winning his fair lady, but to take account with death, now in the full vigour and strength of his youth, had not entered into his calculations. A plague on all old women—evil prophets!—let them look after their own souls; as for him, a long life and a merry one stretched before him.

Then he began to hum again the broken strain from the opera; and as he did so, his thoughts travelled far ahead, and were on the whole satisfactory. Vladimir Mellikoff well out of the way, suspicion raised against him, no matter how faint, and the Italian, Mattalini, to dog his footsteps—for Ivor knew the Italian was the one picked out to serve as the Count's double—what might not he, Ivor Tolskoi, accomplish? Was not the way opening clear and straight before him, with Olga—beautiful, proud Olga—as his prize? What could be more opportune than the chief's selection of him to act as aide during the Royal inspection of the fortress; for well Ivor knew that Olga Naundorff would accompany the Tsarina, and that of necessity she would fall to his escort, as they passed from casemate to corridor of the giant prison.

Ivor was a firm believer in propinquity, and here would be a rare occasion for him in the relaxation of the strict Court etiquette, that usually hedged Mdlle. Naundorff about with a thousand barriers, for on such ex-officio occasions it was well known that the Tsar and Tsarina appeared with only a strong guard, and one lady and gentleman of their suite.

The great chimes of the fortress cathedral were ringing out the mournful cadences of the liturgy—"Have mercy, O Lord"—which in Petersburg mark each quarter of the hour, as Ivor passed out of the Chancellerie. It was close on eight o'clock, and already the streets and promenades were showing signs of renewed life. The great doors of St. Isaac's stood open, and into the vast misty building the devout of both sexes were passing rapidly.

Ivor paused, went up the steps, and looked within. The lights on the altar at the far end gleamed like so many tiny stars, through the diaphanous incense clouds, that clung always about the holy of holies. The dull gold on the massive ornaments and in the frescoes shone out here and there, thrown into relief by the more sombre purples and blues of their surroundings.

Before a statue of the Virgin and Child a woman had thrown herself in the abandonment of grief and petition; two or three scarlet kaftans of the Imperial Guard gave a touch of vivid colour, and contrasted chromatically with the white alb and golden vestments of the officiating priest. The low monotonous voices of the congregation rose and sank, like the murmur of the ocean breaking on the sands, as they, wrapt in private devotions, made known their petitions in low undertones, and quite irresponsive of the priest's function; while he, standing at the high altar, offered up the sacrifice of the mass.

As Ivor gazed half spell-bound, and half disbelieving, the woman who knelt before the Virgin's statue got up and moved slowly towards the door. She had thrown back her long veil, and her face against its blackness stood out in cameo relief. As Tolskoi's glance fell upon it, he started violently, and put out one hand involuntarily, as though to bar her way. But the woman dropped her veil instantly, and pushing rudely by him, walked rapidly down the steps and across the promenade; disappearing from view even as Ivor, recovering from his amazement, turned to follow her.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, standing for a moment uncertain what to do, the look of horror still stamped upon his features, "as I am a living man, that was the face of Adèle Lamien, the murderer of Stevan Lalloovich, and his repudiated wife!"

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## CHAPTER II.

### "IT WAS NO DELUSION."

At twelve o'clock that day, just as the great fortress cathedral chimes rang out the hour, repeating again the melody taken from the Eastern liturgy, "How glorious is our Lord in Sion," Ivor Tolskoi reached the side-entrance of the Palace court-yard, and, passing between the saluting sentinels, made his way towards a small door in one side of the building, before which marched constantly two of the Imperial Guard, whose business it was to watch jealously all in-

going or out-coming traffic, and who, fully armed as they were, presented a sufficiently terrifying appearance, even to the most peaceful-minded.

Before this door two open sleighs were standing, their magnificent black horses handsomely decked out in gold-plated harness, and each wearing a triangle of gold bells spanning its back, from which the slightest movement evoked a shower of tinkling notes that fell melodiously, one after the other, on the frost-bitten air, and were echoed back again by the high walls of the courtyard. Sumptuous rugs and wraps of the costliest furs were thrown across the velvet cushions, while the coachmen and footmen were wrapped in mink-skin capes and tall, conical-shaped hats.

A short distance ahead of the equipages a selected division of the Imperial body-guard sat immovable upon their splendid chargers, the scarlet of their kaftans contrasting finely with the glossy coats of their steeds and the dazzling snow that lay as a pall of innocence upon the great metropolis.

Ivor stopped only long enough to return the salute of the captain of the guard, and to exchange a good-morning with one or two of the others, who were all well known to him, and then, pressing quickly forward, entered the Palace by the small door, and made his way to an ante-chamber, where, as he expected, he found Patouchki already arrived.

The chief's face wore a somewhat troubled expression, which did not lessen as the young man, shutting the door securely behind him, came up hurriedly towards him, an answering look of anxiety upon his usually fresh, insouciant countenance. Patouchki also noticed that his face was very pale, and his eyes wore a restless, inquiring expression, which was enhanced by the stern set of his lips. He made no comment until standing close by Patouchki's side, when he said, abruptly, and almost commandingly:

"Did you not say that Vladimir Mellikoff had gone upon this mission to America to track and to arrest the cast-off wife of Stevan Lalloovich, for whose murder the Chancellerie holds her responsible?"

Patouchki, for once taken off his guard, started at this unexpected address, and turning sharply round so that he faced Tolskoi, looked at him keenly before he answered. But Ivor never flinched nor faltered; his cold, light-blue eyes met the chief's black ones full as boldly as they had ever rested on Olga Naundorff's fair proud face, and something in their hard cruel light warned Patouchki that the question was no idle one, but that behind it lay some disturbance unknown at their morning meeting. He replied in his most repellent manner:

"You have forgotten, Ivor, it seems, that the Chancellerie never makes decisive affirmations in words. Among us it is unnecessary to name names or publish identities. Your own rather too vivid imagination has outrun itself, Ivor, and accredited to Count Mellikoff's absence in the United States a more sinister motive than could be found in the records of the Chancellerie. Murder and arrest are two ugly words and have an ugly sound to ears unaccustomed to them, especially when applied to a woman."

"Nevertheless, chief," answered Ivor, impatiently, the frown deepening on his brow, "though you may choose to call Count Mellikoff's mission by every name under heaven save the right one, you cannot disguise its true motive. The Chancellerie may wrap itself about with all possible or impossible plausibilities of expression, there are those who can read between the lines, and who follow its machinations. Let me beg of you, chief, by all the months of faithful service I have given you—and they are many now—to be frank with me in this. Much—you cannot know how much—depends upon your answer to my question. Can you not yet believe in my fidelity and trust to my loyalty? Have I proved myself so poor a Russian? Answer me this, I beg; is it to track and to find Stevan Lalloovich's forsaken wife that Vladimir Mellikoff has gone to America? I will not press you further as to her share in the murder, or why you suppose her to have sought refuge there, if you will give me a frank yes or no to my question; only be quick, I entreat you, our very moments are numbered!"

Patouchki, who, during Tolskoi's impassioned address, had remained immovable, his eyes downcast, the lights and shadows on his strongly-marked face alone revealing his interest and irresolution, looked up as Ivor's voice dropped into silence, and again fixing his piercing black eyes on the young man's face, he replied slowly, and with a hesitancy that sat strangely on his usually assured manner:

"Your words are imperious, Ivor; but it is the imperiousness of youth, not arrogance, therefore I pass them by unrebuked. As to answering your question with a short yes or no, that is impossible. There are too many motives and too many interests mixed up in Count Vladimir's mission for me to give to you, or any one, so unequivocal a rejoinder. However, since I do believe in your honesty of purpose, Ivor, and trust your integrity of action, I will say this much, that one of Count Mellikoff's objects—the most important if you will have it so—was to seek and to find the woman who calls herself Count Stevan Lalloovich's wife. What then?"

"Then he will never find her, chief," broke in Tolskoi, "and you and the Chancellerie are being tricked by him for your pains. Vladimir Mellikoff may have his own game to play, and his own ends to serve, but finding and securing Stevan Lalloovich's pseudo wife will not be one of them."

He laughed slightly as he finished, and his voice grew scornful again at the mention of Mellikoff's name.

"What do you mean, Ivor?" exclaimed Patouchki, now thoroughly roused.

"What I say," returned Tolskoi, doggedly, "Vladimir Mellikoff is deceiving all of you when he pretends to be on the track of that wretched woman, and you, chief, are blinded by his specious words."

"Have a care, Ivor," cried Patouchki, sternly, "the Chancellerie can hold you accountable for those words. What proof have you of what you affirm?"

"The proof of my own eyes," replied Ivor, hotly, "I tell you, chief, Mellikoff is deceiving you for reasons of his own, for I, this very morning, since I parted with you, have stood face to face with Adèle Lamien, who calls herself Adèle Lalloovich!"

"You, Ivor, impossible!" cried Patouchki, "you have seen her, and here in Petersburg, in broad daylight! And where?"

"As I stood within the door of St. Isaac's this morning," answered Tolskoi, "the mass was just begun, and she had been kneeling—prostrated I should say—before the statue of our Lady of Kazan. Something familiar in the lines of her figure struck me even then, and presently as the *miserere* bells rang the quarter, she arose and came towards me, her veil thrown back, the whiteness of her face and the distinctness of her features thrown out vividly against her black apparel. She passed me rapidly, pulling down her veil impetuously, as she fled out and down the steps before I could put out my hand to stop her, and when I reached the pavement she had disappeared. But I tell you, chief, as I hope to be saved at the hour of my death, it was the face of Adèle Lalloovich into which I looked for that brief interval."

"Impossible!" again ejaculated Patouchki. "Impossible that she should be here, in Petersburg, and the Chancellerie remain ignorant of her arrival. She is a marked woman to all our emissaries, how could she come and go, without disguise even, and we remain in ignorance? No, no, my good Ivor, your eyes mislead you this time; with all her arrogant bravery Adèle Lamien knows better than to put her head in the lion's jaws, or herself in the power of the Chancellerie."

"I tell you I saw her," repeated Tolskoi, obstinately, "believe me or not, chief, I saw her, and no other."

"But my dear Ivor," began Patouchki, persuasively, when a groom of the chambers entered hurriedly, and bidding them make haste, as their Majesties were even then descending the staircase, cut short the chief's oratory, and caused both him and Tolskoi to hasten their footsteps towards the side door, which now stood open with footmen and lacqueys on either side, holding the fur robes, foot-muffs and wraps of the Imperial party.

As Ivor and Tolskoi emerged from the side corridor, the Tsarina reached the entrance and paused a moment for her attendants to clasp the magnificent cloak of sables about her slight figure. Very sweet and delicate, and somewhat sad was the face that looked out from the clinging furs, with a touch of the same melancholy that at times rests on her English sister's brow, and with more than a similitude of her gentleness and sympathy. As she crossed the threshold the slightest possible shrinking or timidity caused her to hesitate for one brief moment, then she took her place in the Royal equipage, and her face, as she turned it towards her husband, wore a brave courageous smile.

Poor Tsarina! though wrapped about on every side with all luxury, yet never to realise the happiness of confidence; never to feel secure, even in your strictest seclusion; never to know when the cruel bullet, sent with a fatally true aim, may end your tenure of greatness, and send you back to your magnificent palace, a heart-broken, lonely widow!

Behind the Empress came the Tsar, dressed, as was often his pleasure, in the scarlet kaftan of his own guard, and by which he signified his desire to remain incognito. Following him were Olga Naundorff and the Emperor's equerry, who, with Patouchki and Ivor, formed the Royal suite.

The Tsarina in passing had acknowledged Tolskoi's presence by a gracious recognition, which sent the young man's blood running hotly through his veins, flushing his face and brightening his eyes. Ivor was every inch an Imperialist, and he loved his gentle Tsarina Dagmar with a real and chivalrous devotion; the latent sadness in her eyes and the pathos of her smile touched the most responsive chords of his cold and selfish nature, and awoke in him the purest sentiment of his heart.

Olga had caught the Empress's friendly bow to Ivor, and she too relaxed somewhat the frigid demeanour she had evinced towards him, since their conversation regarding Count Mellikoff, and flashed upon him one of her most lovely smiles, as he put out his arm and almost lifted her to her place in the second sleigh. The Tsar and Tsarina drove alone in the foremost equipage, preceded and protected on either side by the guard, while in the second were seated Olga, the equerry, Patouchki, and Ivor.

The gates were flung wide apart, and thus, with the horses prancing, the bells ringing, to which the clanking swords made a monotonous echo, and the sun shining, the Royal party crossed the gay boulevard now thronged with people, and drew up at the grim and frowning archway of Peter's gloomy fortress.

## CHAPTER III.

### ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL.

Petropavlovsk is in itself a giant fastness, covering, as it does, three-quarters of a square mile, and divided into so many rambling corridors, barracks, ravelins, bastions, curtains, and store-houses, as to be for the most part unknown even to the officials who form its *ménage*, and who, having certain portions of the immense structure set apart for their duties, live out their lives without exploring, or being permitted to explore beyond their individual domains.

The boulevard and the canal intersect the building, and separate the citadel proper from what is known as the "crown work," which lies to the rear.

Dreary indeed is the outlook for the unfortunate political suspect who is hurried by night, blindfolded and closely guarded, into this living tomb. To him, hastened along through unfamiliar passages and by echoing walls, conveyed hither and thither through succeeding gates and vaulted corridors, no possible effort of memory, or mathematical calculation, can ever aid him to determine which one of the many courts, bastions, or redoubts is that selected for his incarceration.

Nor, indeed, will he ever know, for when at last the *gendarmes* halt, and he is allowed the use of his eyes, he finds himself in a small court-yard completely enclosed by high walls, above which only a limited sky line is visible. And where this court-yard is situated, to what bastion it appertains, whether it faces the river or lies back from it, what is its relation to the door of egress, or its connection with the other casemates of the prison, not the wildest conjecture can establish, or the keenest intuition demonstrate.

The part of the fortress, however, which the Tsar had selected for his inspection, was that known as the Trubetskoi bastion, one of the largest and most impregnable, projecting as it does well on to the river side, in the direction of the Bourse. The shape of this bastion resembles as much as possible a bishop's mitre, as worn by the Western Church; it is built, in two storeys of stone and brick, around a court-yard of its own, which extends beyond the building proper and terminates in high thick walls, that completely shut it out and in from all communication save that afforded by a narrow vaulted passage, always strongly guarded. The interior consists of two tiers of casemates, opening on to narrow corridors, two dark punishment cells, overseers' rooms, kitchen and soldiers' quarters. In the court-yard are a bath house and one or two stunted shrubs.

Nothing more gloomy and horrible can be imagined than imprisonment within one of these casemates, of which the Trubetskoi bastion boasts seventy-two, thirty-six on each tier. As they were originally designed for cannon they are considerably larger than an ordinary prison cell, but size is no mitigation of their horrors. Each casemate has a window, but it opens upon the baffling stone walls of the narrow outer court-yard, and is moreover set nine feet above the floor, in a deep arched recess, and guarded by heavy iron bars. The massive wooden door is equally disappointing, giving as it does on to the stone corridor that lies between the cells and inner court-yard; in the centre of each is a square aperture, which can be opened or closed at the will of the jailer, by a swinging panel, acting like a miniature portcullis, and which, when horizontal, serves as a shelf for the prisoner's food.

Directly above this panel is that horrible contrivance—more loathed and detested by the incarcerated wretch than any other of the diabolical arrangements—the "Judas" hagnoscope or Squint, and which resembles a slit for letters more than anything else, with a nicely adjusted strip of wood that can be noiselessly raised or lowered from the outside, and through which the eyes of the guard can spy at any moment upon the occupant of the cell.

Only those who have tasted of this unending inevitable surveillance can appreciate its horrors. To be never free, never for one moment, whether in grief, or pain, or despair, from the espionage of unsympathetic eyes. To throw oneself upon one's knees before the image of Our Lady, with which each cell is supplied, to pour out all the woe and misery of one's breaking heart in the abandonment of desolation, and then, to hear the faint click of the revolving slide, and starting back, find the argus eyes of one's jailer peering through the detestable "Judas;" and to know the very words of supplication and invocation will be used against one to condemnation.

What wonder then that many who have entered Petropavlovsk bravely and with a good courage, believing their imprisonment to be but an affair of days, are never seen again, never emerge alive from its terrible dungeons; or lose mind and reason waiting for the day of deliverance that never comes?

No words can paint the growing horror and despair of a prisoner thus incarcerated. Day by day his terror expands and magnifies as hope dies in his heart, and the inexorable hand of Russia crushes out his very life.

Within the casemates there are, for furniture, an iron bedstead and table bolted into the wall, an iron oven of the commonest description, a stationary iron wash-hand basin and a statue of the Virgin, beneath which hangs a tin cup for catching the dripping moisture that exudes constantly from the stone walls.

On entering his cell for the first time, the poor victim is stripped of his clothes and given in exchange a loose blue linen dressing-gown, grey linen trousers and shirt, and a pair of soft



noiseless list slippers. The guard, after making a minute personal examination, in search of some possible criminal matter, withdraws; the heavy door swings to with a dull echo, the bolts slip into the padlock, and the prisoner is left alone, in the midst of a stillness and silence like that of death.

Gloomy, forbidding, sombre, the walls and vaulted ceiling rise about and above him, the air is heavy and lifeless, the silence is profound; not even an echoing footstep in the corridor makes a welcome noise, for the guards creep about in felt slippers as noiseless and as muffled as his own. And thus the purgatory of his sentence begins; and who, save Almighty God, can say when it shall end! While hour by hour the chimes of the fortress-cathedral ring out their triumphant notes—a mockery of the poor soul in torment—or toll the *miserere*, that sounds a knell to all his hopes.

It was at the entrance to the Trubetskoi bastion that the Imperial party alighted. Extraordinary reports as to the violence and cruelty practised within the walls of Petropavlovsk had lately become so widely disseminated throughout Petersburg, mingled with such threats of summary justice to be shortly meted out to the officials by the hands of the enraged populace, and such sinister warnings of personal vengeance, that the press of all parties called upon the Tsar to prove himself Emperor in his own domains, by investigating and abolishing the scandals.

It was a time of grave anxiety; but he, listening to the counsels of those who had in past difficulties proved their loyalty and disinterestedness, yielded at last to their persuasions, and resolved to adopt the extreme measure of a personal inspection of the maligned fortress. The Empress, on hearing this decision, and who, despite her gentle looks and quiet manner, owned the courage and high spirit of her Danish ancestors, at once determined to accompany her husband.

The populace should see that their Tsar and Tsarina neither feared to trust themselves to the people, nor shrank from redressing wrong when brought before their notice, though indeed none knew better than she how purely perfunctory and ceremonious would be the inspection and its results.

The governor of Petropavlovsk and the lieutenant of the Trubetskoi bastion received the distinguished guests, and welcomed them with apparent relief and pleasure, throwing open the doors of the casemates one by one, and standing back deferentially, with more of sorrow than of anger on their official countenances; for was not theirs a sad example of unrequited and misjudged zeal, since even they could be regarded with suspicion and doubted in their humanity?

Most of the casemates were found to be unoccupied, and Patouchki, who walked beside the Emperor, never failed on each such occasion to draw his Imperial Highness's attention to the fact.

"I believe, sir," he said, as they entered the last of the lower range of cells, and found it like its predecessors, empty, swept, and garnished, "that one of the most formidable counts in the public indictment against Petropavlovsk, is the over-crowding of its cells, and their uncleanly condition. Your Majesty has now visited thirty-five of these casemates, the greater number of which have been found unoccupied, and all of them in perfect sanitary order. I think, sir, this answers that complaint."

The Tsar sighed, but made no reply. Perhaps he, like Patouchki, wished to make the best of everything and see only the brightest side; but even he could not still the premonitions of evil that arose thick and fast in his mind, as he comprehended the immensity and power of this Imperial prison house of Russia.

Of the few victims found in the cells none recognised the Royal party. They were for the most part political offenders from the interior provinces, who had never before been in Petersburg, and to whom the face of their new Tsar was not as yet sufficiently familiar to make recognition possible, especially as his dress differed in no respect from that of the officers accompanying him. Little did the poor victims imagine, as they were hurriedly changed, early that morning, from one part of the fortress to another, that it was to avoid any accidental recognition on the part of those, who, being the last to enter the prison, still retained memories of the outer world, and sentiments of Imperial justice—believing that their Tsar, once convinced of their innocent incarceration, would order their instant release—that this transfer was made. Any possible outbreak was to be avoided at all hazards, since any such *émeute* could not but end awkwardly for the Imperial inspectors, and disastrously for the officials.

Had these poor wretches but suspected that the tall, soldierly man, wearing a scarlet kaftan, without ribbon or order, and who looked gloomy and thoughtful beneath the military helmet, was their Tsar—their little father, the great Emperor of all the Russias—how they would have fallen at his feet, praying his interference; protesting their loyalty, and maintaining their innocence! Or had the faintest doubt crossed their minds, that the slight upright woman, clad in those closely-clinging, sombre robes, whose eyes looked so pitifully forth, and whose face was so wan and pale, might perchance be their Tsarina, what tears and sobs, what pleadings and supplications would have rent the air, as they kissed her hands, or grasped wildly at her garments!

But fate was against them; their opportunity came to them unsought, and they passed it by unknowing. How should they know, poor souls, to whom even a word of ordinary greeting from their jailers was denied, and to whom no echo of news ever penetrated, how should they know, that at the very moment, as they were praying passionately for some means of communication with their Emperor, he himself stood before them, and that had they but put out their hands they

could have touched him?

It was the cruel irony of fate; the bitter obligation of destiny.

As the guards threw open the massive casemate doors in silence, most of the inmates did not so much as raise their heads or change their attitudes. Why should they? It was only another of those many interruptions in their day's vacuity, in which the jailer played the part of inspector with maddening sameness. What call had they to look more often on his hated face than was needful?

Scarce a word passed between the Tsar and Tsarina, or their suite; the pall of absolute silence which enfolds great Petropavlovsk in the dark mantle of submission, had descended also upon them, and so held them captive as to kill any outward expression of inward emotion. Sometimes it was the "Judas" only that was lifted, and then the Tsarina would turn away her eyes and refuse to look, standing apart with anxiety and sadness written on her pale face; and when this happened, Olga would separate herself from Ivor, and waiting silently by her Royal mistress, watch her every motion with the sympathy of comprehension.

And so the weary task dragged on its heavy chain; there remained but one more cell, and then this horrible nightmare of duty, this travesty of inspection, would be over, and they might hurry away from out this gloom and depression, and seek once more the brilliant sunshine, the gaily-thronged streets, where at least the grim spectres of despair and desperation, if they stalked among the careless mummers, were out-balanced by the laughter and jesting of the merry-makers.

At length they reached the last casemate of all, and as the door was unbolted and thrown open, the Emperor and Patouchki stepped across the threshold. Seated on the iron pallet, his arms thrown out across the table, was an old man, whose head was white with the snows of many winters. He neither moved nor spoke as those without came towards him; his hands were waxen in colour, nerveless, and attenuated; the blue dressing-gown hung loosely upon his emaciated form; his face was hidden on his arm. Something in the intense stillness and rigidity of the attitude, in the absolute rest that had fallen upon him, startled the beholders with a vague sense of fear.

At a word from the Tsar, Patouchki crossed the cell and laid his hand upon the bowed shoulders. A shudder passed over the form, followed by a long and weary sigh, and then the head was lifted, and two feverish, bright eyes gazed out of the hollow sockets. For a moment he looked at them bewildered, and then, with a sudden, thrilling cry, he flung himself forward and fell at the feet of the Tsar, exclaiming in broken, feeble tones:

"Blessed be God in Sion; He has heard my prayer! Blessed be our Lady of Kazan! It is the face of my Tsarawich I see once more; it is the face of my little father—my Tsar! Oh, my Emperor, I am Alexis—Alexis of Battenkoff. I am an old man of over four-score, who, for fifty long years, served your father—my Tsar Alexander—and who, after all that time of faithful love and devotion, have been left to rot in this terrible pest-house for two long weary years. Pardon me, little father, pardon me! I have done no wrong, believe me. I have never plotted against my sovereigns; I have loved them always, and served them to the extent of my poor abilities. I had no hand in that bloody murder; I was innocent of all participation in it. I would have given my life's blood to save my Emperor. Why should I seek his death! Pardon me, my little father, as your sire, whose soul sees me now, would have pardoned me!"

As the last words passed from his lips the old man sank back, his hands twitched convulsively, and he fell on the floor in a swoon. So sudden had been his movement forward and so rapid his utterance, neither the officials nor Patouchki had time to interpose, but the latter now stepped quickly forward, as the Tsar, with a gesture, motioned to him to approach, and after giving him some directions, speaking earnestly and decisively, turned abruptly and left the cell. Neither the Tsarina nor Olga Naundorff had entered this casemate, the Empress's tender heart had therefore been spared the harrowing scene.

As the Imperial party drove away from the terrible fortress, and the brilliant sunshine caught at the glittering harness and bright trappings of the guard, a cry arose on the boulevard: "It is the Tsar, and our Tsarina! Long live the little father! Long live the Tsar!" But neither God's sunshine, nor the loyal shouts of his people could bring back the colour to the Emperor's face, or banish the look of care and anxiety that rested so heavily upon it.

The next morning an Imperial pardon was sent to Petropavlovsk for Alexis Battenkoff, but it came too late. The weary spirit and sorely wounded heart were at rest in eternity; the old man's soul had passed beyond all earthly pardon, into the Almighty hands of justice and recompense.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### SUSPICIONS.

For many days the Petersburg Imperial press rang the changes unceasingly on this last benignant and forgiving act of the Tsar's.

It called upon all malcontents and revolutionists to say, if in this pardon were not displayed the utmost leniency and mercy. For was it not well known that Alexis Battenkoff was taken almost red-handed at the assassination of the late Tsar? And, indeed, who but one familiar, through long habit and confidence, with the movements of the Emperor, could have supplied the knowledge which assured the grim success of the dastardly attack? Was not Alexis always to be found, under suspicious circumstances, consorting with the most pronounced of the Nihilist faction; and could he be there save for one purpose only? Could one touch pitch and not be defiled?

Where then, in modern history, could another such act of condonation be pointed out, as this by which the Tsar had pardoned a participator in his father's murder? Was not that answer sufficient to all the treacherous suggestions, the menacing innuendoes, that had been ripe and bursting for so long in Petersburg? Perhaps now the organs of the opposition would cease their importunate blating, since the Tsar's inspection of Petropavlovsk had resulted in such a redress of imaginary wrongs, as not even their wildest dreams could have supposed possible. And was not the hand of Almighty justice made plainly visible, in that Alexis of Battenkoff was not permitted to taste again of liberty, but was stricken by death before the news of the Tsar's generosity could reach him? Let those who would, read well the lesson thus openly delivered to them.

Paul Patouchki read the enthusiastic laudations and pious thanksgivings in the silence of his apartments in the Chancellerie, and, as he did so, a slow, inscrutable smile crept over his face and lingered there.

It was not often that the chief recognised any direct interposition of Divine Providence in the political turmoils of Russia; indeed, in his own heart, he scoffed at all such superstitions, and acknowledged frankly that the Imperial Government neither desired, nor would appreciate, any such interference with its autocratic despotism.

But certainly, for once, he saw in the Battenkoff incident and death a most opportune intervention, whether Divine or otherwise, since by it the hands of the Imperial party could be strengthened, and for a time, at least, their policy be freed from too suspicious and too true aspersions. To his mind, like the last of the Stuart Pretenders, nothing in life so well became poor Alexis of Battenkoff as his leaving it, how and when he did. It was the one touch needful to stamp the Imperial inspection of Petropavlovsk with triumphant success, and to prove a satisfying sop even to so hydra-mouthed a Cerberus as the disaffected party; and therefore he was thankful, though none knew better than he that no actual improvement had been effected, no evils redressed, no reforms instituted in the governmental department of Petropavlovsk. The giant fortress closed its jaws just as tyrannically upon its victims, and abated not one jot or tittle of its iron-handed authority.

Patouchki, however, had too many anxieties pressing upon him to spend over much time in complaisant reading of political trumpet notes; he laid aside the *Petersburg Messenger* and turned toward his desk, on which lay a heavy correspondence not yet disposed of. As he sat down in his familiar place, the grim smile faded from his lips, to be replaced by a dark frown that knit together the black eyebrows, and accentuated the strong lines about the eyes and mouth. In truth, the chief was more concerned than he liked to admit, even to himself, at Ivor Tolskoi's news; and though at the time he endeavoured to treat it with cavalier disbelief, he nevertheless had an inner consciousness, of its truth, and a presentiment of complications to follow in consequence.

That Adèle Lamien should be in Petersburg, and the Chancellerie have neither warning of her intentions, nor knowledge of her presence, seemed, as he had said to Tolskoi, impossible; and yet, even as the word fell from his lips, he knew himself to be wrong, and Ivor to be right. The great spy system had failed for once, imperceptibly almost, and so far without damaging results, but it had, nevertheless, proved itself vulnerable, and had found its match in the quick wits and ready ingenuity of a woman. Even all the elaborate machinery of the Chancellerie had not been sufficient, when pitted against the devices of one weak, fugitive woman.

Yes, that was where the shoe pinched; to be duped by the very criminal they were pursuing, and to hear her laugh in their ears, as she slipped out of their fingers! And then, what a bad precedent was even this slight dereliction on the part of the Chancellerie; and how could the discipline of fear be kept up in the minds of the younger members of the great body, if such a defection became known? And the woman, Adèle Lamien, was brazen enough and clever enough, smarting as she was under her own wrongs, to circulate their blindness and failure, just where it would most rebound to their discredit.

"It is impossible!" again muttered Patouchki, as his fingers rested idly on his desk, and his eyes wandered over the familiar trifles of his daily avocations. "It is impossible; and yet I know it is true. Some one of our emissaries has been asleep at his post, some one has connived at this woman's plotting, or been blind to her schemes, and deaf to her plans; some one, as at Balaklava, has blundered, and it remains for me to find the culprit, and to administer chastisement. A winter in Siberia, or in the Nartchinsk mines, will teach that some one the price of treachery, and the weight of the Chancellerie's wrath. Meantime the woman must be found and watched; the time is not ripe yet for her arrest, I must wait Vladimir Mellikoff's next report first; and by heaven, should he prove false, as Tolskoi would insinuate, he shall work out his retribution, side by side with the wretched victim of Count Stevan's licentiousness. But first of all, the woman must be found."

He drew a deep sigh, and with almost an expression of weariness took up one of the many despatches before him, and broke the seal.

Meantime, Ivor Tolskoi had prospered but slowly in his suit. Despite all his anticipations of numerous opportunities occurring during the inspection of the fortress, in which he should be able to command Olga's attention, and by deftly-turned compliment, or ingenious flattery, urge his pretensions, even as with subtle innuendo and covert sneer he touched upon Count Mellikoff's absence, and the character of his mission.

But Olga was more than indifferent, she was impatient with him; the influence of the time and place oppressed her peculiarly impressionable nature, as the sight of the pale sorrow on her Tsarina's face set vibrating the chords of her quick and passionate sympathy. She accorded Ivor but a half-hearted attention, scarcely hearing his soft pleadings, and while retaining unconsciously a memory of his insinuations against Vladimir, it was not until the Royal *cortège* turned down the gay boulevard that a full realisation of his meaning came to her. She turned then sharply to him, as he sat beside her, and, with her favourite imperious upward movement of her head, said abruptly, though in a low voice, inaudible to the other occupants of the sleigh:

"What is it, Ivor, you have been hinting to me all this morning, concerning my cousin Mellikoff? If you have news of him, why not give it me without so much useless circumambulation? I do not like mysteries."

"Mdlle. Naundorff has surely mistaken my meaning," answered Tolskoi, coolly, looking straight at her, and smiling a little. "I had no intention of insinuating anything detrimental of Count Vladimir; my remarks were but general, though to be sure any one is welcome to wear the cap, if it fits him."

"*Les absents ont toujours tort*," replied Olga, still impatient; "my cousin Mellikoff but shares the fate of all who have achieved even a limited greatness; jealousy and envy go hand in hand with those who, not so fortunate, only stand and look on."

Her words were sharp, and her manner pointed. Ivor knew both were intended to sting, and though he could not control the sudden wave of hot blood that dyed his face crimson, he could control his temper and his voice; he answered her, therefore, with another cold little laugh, as he said:

"Surely it is grace enough to be so defended by Mdlle. Naundorff? Even Count Vladimir could scarcely ask a greater favour, accustomed as he is to all devotion—where women are concerned."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Olga, imperiously. "I insist, Ivor, on your explaining your very equivocal suggestions."

Tolskoi shrugged his shoulders, and replied under apparent protest:

"It is, I think, well known how successful Count Mellikoff has always been in any *affaire du cœur*, though such details are better suited for men's ears than for yours, mademoiselle. It can, however, be no detriment to him, even in your estimation, to acknowledge that his past is not written upon an absolutely white page, since you are the only one who has definitely subdued him, and bid fair to turn the brave Lothario into a Benedict. I have yet to meet the woman to whom the reputation of a certain kind of success in a man proves anything but a recommendation."

As Ivor finished, a silence of several moments fell between them. Olga turned her fair face from him and looked out, with unseeing eyes, upon the gay, moving pageant about her. Tolskoi watched her intently but furtively, and saw with inward satisfaction that his barb had gone home and was rankling, and would rankle for days to come, in her heart.

Well he knew Olga Naundorff's character, with its complex mingling of cruelty and softness; its nicely balanced elements of revenge and generosity; its preponderance of pride, its insatiable demand of absolute submission to her will, and its imperious arrogation of supremacy, not only over the present and future of her suitors, but over their past as well. Like her great ancestress, the Empress Catherine, her favours were tyrannies; and woe unto the luckless recipient of them should she find him faithless in the smallest degree! Even his past must be forgotten and forsworn; his existence could only begin with the bestowal of her first smile.

Without knowing it, a true and absolute belief in her cousin Vladimir Mellikoff's integrity had gradually grown up within her; she had come to regard him as the one faithfully sincere lover out of all her admirers, whose very sternness and power of repression spoke more eloquently to her than all the more emotional pleadings of her other suitors. She had believed herself to be the first and only woman on whom he had expended even the smallest measure of love; and to be the object of so unique and chivalrous a devotion, had not been the least among her reasons for yielding to his solicitations.

Ivor's insinuations, therefore, coming as they did, disturbed her more than she cared to realise, and awoke at once that latent suspicion and distrust that forms so pronounced a factor in the Russian character, and caused her to accept his words as positive and final evidence of Vladimir's perfidy and deceit. She never stopped to weigh his actions against Ivor's words; hers was not a nature of sufficiently generous tendencies to turn instinctively from ignominious slander; rather it leapt to conclusions, and from its own attributes pronounced its condemnatory sentence.

In her eyes Vladimir Mellikoff had been tried and sentenced, with Ivor Tolskoi as judge and jury. She could never trust him again, and she would endeavour by every means in her power to unravel his past; holding the threads of it in her slender hand until the hour should come when she could wound deepest, and play with most sinister effect the part of Atropos. What though she stabbed her own heart as well with the sharp scissors of fate? She must bear that, and hers would be the satisfaction of beholding her victim's misery first.

Meantime the Imperial procession flew swiftly along the boulevard, saluted on every side by the shouts of the populace, and the cries of the people: "Long live the Tsar! Long live our little father! Long live the Tsarina!" And the bells rang, and the sun shone, and all was gaiety, and mirth, and mocking optimism.

The crimson blush that had dyed Olga's cheeks so deeply, as the meaning of Ivor's last words became clear to her, had faded and left them colourless when she again turned to him, and her voice had an additional ring of hardness when she next spoke.

"My dear Ivor, we have, I think, always been sufficiently good friends for us not to doubt each other's sincerity of motive, even when we feel forced to speak upon subjects whose very nature precludes any possibility of agreeableness. I do not forget my very singular position in the world; alone as I am, though apparently protected by Imperial power, I owe obedience to no one in matters that concern myself alone. And it is because of this peculiar position that I am about to appeal to your friendship, or whatever sentiment does duty for that obsolete emotion, and beg you to be quite frank with me, and tell me all you can of Count Vladimir Mellikoff's past. Since, as rumour asserts, I am to become his wife, it certainly befits me to inform myself of his antecedents, in order that I may be a true and sustaining helpmate to him. Tell me, then, my dear Ivor, all you know, or all you will reveal concerning my cousin."

There was something so finely bitter and yet so commanding in her voice, and she had subdued her countenance to such an expression of simple friendliness, Tolskoi looked at her with genuine admiration during the half-moment that elapsed before he answered her. When he did reply, it was scarcely in the way she anticipated.

"Mdle. Naundorff," he said, his cold, hard blue eyes studying her face intently, "you may remember that some weeks ago, when we spoke on this subject one evening at the Palace, you asked me a question, to which I gave you no answer. You asked me then what was my opinion as to the share of a certain woman—known as Count Stevan Lalloovich's cast-off wife—in the murder of that same Count Stevan? I told you then I had no opinion upon the matter, and from that the conversation wandered to more personal matters. Mademoiselle, what I said then was not true. I had, and have, a very strong opinion as to the culprit, or culprits; but we will let that rest for the time being. Shall I continue? Are you interested sufficiently in this wretched woman's story to wish to hear more?"

She replied by a quick and decisive gesture of her hand, and an almost inaudible, "Yes."

Ivor smiled again, and drew the fur robe more closely about her, glancing keenly across towards Patouchki, who, however, was absorbed in conversation with the equerry and paid no attention to his companions; seeing which, Tolskoi continued:

"Mademoiselle, that woman is now in Petersburg, and I have seen her. This is probably not such a matter of surprise to you as it is to—some other people; but when I tell you that Count Mellikoff's hurried journey to America was undertaken ostensibly to track, to find, and to arrest that woman, and that his continuing there is for the same reason, you will understand why my meeting with her here is pregnant with such grave complications."

Olga was gazing at him earnestly, following his every word and gesture with her eyes; the violet iris had grown black and enlarged from suppressed excitement.

"I will not go into the details, mademoiselle," Ivor went on, "of that unfortunate woman's wrongs, or the succession of cruel circumstances that led up to the murder of Count Stevan. Doubtless, she had a share and part in that murder; but hers was not the only brain that conceived the crime, or the only hand that struck the blow. There was a stronger and more important power behind; one who knew the terrible risk that was run in slaying a member of the Imperial blood, no matter how slight the consanguinity, and who had private ends to serve in seeing Count Stevan removed for ever from Imperial favour; one who, though hesitating to become a murderer in deed, did not hesitate to use this half frenzied woman as his accomplice and tool. Hers, indeed, should be the hand to hold the knife and strike the blow, but guided by a far more powerful coadjutor."

Ivor stopped again, and again Olga motioned to him to continue, by the same quick movement of her hand.

"There was but one man in Petersburg, mademoiselle, who could boast of any apparent intimacy with Count Stevan Lalloovich, and who, if any one at any time, might have been his confidant. That man was Vladimir Mellikoff."

Again he stopped, and Olga, without taking her eyes from his face, felt, as she gazed on its youthful freshness, a great and terrible wave of doubt and uncertainty rush up and over her, wrapping her round and round, and sweeping away all lesser sensations in this awful one of impending calamity; but such calamity as should break not only upon her, but on one whom she

dared not name, and out of which she could see no lift of light or hope. Tolskoi's words had been too well chosen not to carry with them the significance he intended, and she felt their full force even as she realised their full meaning. She drew her tongue across her lips, and tried to smile in answer to the cold light in Ivor's blue eyes, but the effort was feeble and abortive.

"Have you any more to tell me?" she asked at last, in a voice that was almost a whisper; "if so, continue, I beg. I find the story very interesting, and—instructive."

Ivor replied by one of his coldest little laughs, and then resumed his narrative.

"You, mademoiselle, were not in Petersburg when the murder was committed, the Court being then at Gatschina, consequently you could not know how great was the excitement here, or how freely Count Mellikoff mingled his regrets and desires for summary justice to be meted out to the criminal, with the public expressions heard on every side. No one had known Count Stevan better than he; and no one had a better right to mourn his untimely fate. Unfortunately, Count Vladimir had not been in Petersburg during the night of the murder, nor indeed for a day or two before; consequently, he could throw no light upon Stevan Lalloovich's movements at that time, and his regrets could only take the more passive form of words. You will see therefore, mademoiselle, why, when the Government discovered that Count Stevan's repudiated wife had fled the country—aided and abetted by some powerful political friends—and was heard of in America, it took prompt and decisive measures for her capture. And who could have been better chosen for this work than Count Mellikoff, since he had been Stevan Lalloovich's best friend? I must remind you here, mademoiselle, that my confidences must be held secret between you and me; I am, as it is, overstepping my boundaries in speaking thus frankly of the Government's share in this business; but I do so deliberately, and am willing to bear the consequences."

"I shall be silent," replied Olga, simply, and Tolskoi continued:

"You know, mademoiselle, how and when Count Mellikoff started on this mission, though at the time of his departure you little suspected it was in the interests of a woman that he undertook so long a journey. You knew only that there was work to be done on behalf of the Government, and that he had been selected for that work. It is now two months since he left Russia; granting him all necessary time for easy travelling and stoppages, he must have reached the United States close on to a month ago, which would leave him this last month to lay his train, if not to find the woman. I have said, mademoiselle, that this woman calling herself Adèle Lalloovich, was assisted through Russia, and over the frontier, by the influence of some strong political agent, one whose word and whose name carried the weight of coercion. Very well, this happened early in December; in January Count Vladimir leaves Petersburg, and reaches America early in February. A month goes by, and within the first week of March I meet Adèle Lalloovich face to face here. Ah, I see you have followed my reasoning. The same powerful influence that got her out of Russia, when danger menaced her here, has now sent her back to Petersburg, where she is for the time being more secure from arrest than in the States. And the brain and the hand that have twice protected and saved her—a fugitive from justice—are the same brain and hand that planned and executed Count Stevan's murder, and that used *her* as their instrument. I think, mademoiselle, that Count Mellikoff will somewhat disappoint the expectations and shake the confidence of his Government, when he returns without any definite intelligence or any important information regarding the movements and condition of Adèle Lalloovich."

Olga heard him throughout without word or sign, though not one detail of the terrible suspicion he so boldly advanced was lost upon her. Slowly but surely she followed his every gesture, his every sentence, never taking her eyes that had grown so strangely dark from his face. Every vestige of colour ebbed from her cheeks and lips, leaving her face white as alabaster beneath the dark furs of her close cap; a waving ripple of golden-lighted hair seemed the only sentient thing about her. She spoke at last, and her voice had a faint far-away echo in its whisper.

"What you would suggest, Ivor, is horrible, unnatural. What could be the motive for such a crime, and such a shielding of the criminal? If, as you say, it were possible for one brain to plot and plan it all, and another to fulfil it, still where would be the object, what would be the motive? I know whom it is you suspect, but his motive, Ivor, his motive?"

She bent forward eagerly, clasping her hands and looking into the very depths of his eyes. Ivor Tolskoi saw his advantage, and pressed it home. His opportunity had come, he was not one to lose it for lack of courage to deal one more swift sure blow. Meeting Olga's strained violet eyes with his, in which the steel-blue light flamed out, he said slowly and with distinct emphasis:

"Adèle Lamien, or Lalloovich, is a rarely beautiful woman, Olga, and beauty such as hers is a dangerous attribute. Count Mellikoff is a worshipper of woman's loveliness, and the story goes that when Adèle Lamien became the wife of Stevan Lalloovich, she cast off a former lover whose chains had begun to gall. Who that lover was, Olga, I leave to your imagination. But when Stevan Lalloovich repudiated and threw aside the woman, and an Imperial ukase released him from his obligations, is it unlikely that she sought her former friend and protector, or that he, maddened by her beauty and her wrongs, determined to avenge them?"

"That is the story, mademoiselle, and you now know why I swore to you that sooner than see you Vladimir Mellikoff's wife I would kill him with my own hand."

But Olga made no reply. Silent, impassive, stricken through and through, she sat with blanched face and tightly clasped hands; and the sun shone, and the bells rang, and the populace shouted: "Long live the Tsar! Long live our little father!" but she neither saw nor heard any of it. All her

heart and soul were in revolt and turmoil; all she had trusted to had gone down before her eyes, she was shipwrecked upon an ocean of deception and despair.

Presently the shouts and cries grew fainter, and the horses slackened speed as they turned into the Palace gates and were drawn up sharply at the side entrance, out of which she had passed so long ago—was it months or years, or alas! only hours? Should she ever again know what it was to feel light-hearted and joyous? Would this terrible burden of knowledge ever be lifted from her heart?

Ivor Tolskoi sprang down even as the threshold was reached and put out his arm to help her; she barely touched it with her gloved hand, and passed by him with but one burning look from her haunted eyes. For days after, the light pressure of her fingers rested there like iron, and the misery of her glance accompanied him as that of a lost spirit.

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## CHAPTER V.

### MIMI'S BIRTHDAY POSY.

George Newbold's birthday fell within the first week of May, and certainly no more ideal spring morning could have dawned than that which Esther had set apart to be especially celebrated in honour of her spouse.

Mr. Newbold should, indeed, for the fitness of things, have been a young and blooming maiden—rather than a man verging towards middle age, and more or less disillusionised—to correspond with the rare loveliness and freshness of creation, that sprang afresh to life as Aurora, with blushing finger-tips, drew back the curtains of the night, and ushered in the roseate dawn. Even as the surroundings belonged more to that "garden of fair delights," consecrated by the Egyptians to Daphne, into which naught but harmony and sensuous peace and pleasure was allowed to enter, rather than to

"This live, throbbing age,  
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,  
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,  
Between the mirrors of its drawing-rooms  
Than Roland with his knights at Roncevalles."

But Nature is ever prodigal and unreasoning; she stops not to consider on whom to spend her largesse, she has no calculation in her giving, and she seeks no return, since, with her keen perceptiveness, she knows we mortals possess nothing of our own, no gift of jewel or of price, of intellect or of beauty, that can compare with the least of those benefits she pours with such lavish hand upon us.

Does not all creation join with the angelic choirs to hymn her praises? What song of mortal measure, sung by mortal tongue, can equal in strength and melody that heavenly canticle? Nay, let us stand rather with bowed head and reverent mien, lifting our hearts in silent ecstasy, thankful if we may so much as catch a distant echo of those "divine praises," borne to us maybe on the wings of the far west wind; or a reflection of the golden glory of that paradise, ensnared in the luminous fragility of a sunset cloud.

It is all we can hope for on this lower earth, and who of us dare count on ever realising the terrible sublimity, the awful purity, of "the beatific vision"?

It was very early in the morning when little Marianne came running down the broad terrace steps, and stood alone amidst the varied riches of Esther's flower garden. Her sunny hair was all unbound, and lay upon her shoulders and about her forehead, still damp from the morning's bath, glistening like threads of gold washed in a wavelet of sunshine. Her white frock glanced in and out against the tender background of early green foliage, as she ran from flower to flower, plucking here a blossom, and there a bud, studying each attentively before adding them to the bouquet in her hand, with the gravity of childhood, which invests every action with a separate importance.

And as she flew about rejoicing, as only children and animals can rejoice, in the mere pleasure of being, she sang from time to time the rhyming measure of a nursery song, which fell unheeded from her lips, and that had no sense or meaning, but sprang as spontaneously from her heart as did the song of the little brown thrush, who was pouring out his weight of thanksgiving, with such overwhelming rapture as to shake his very soul, and cause the quivering cat-kin on which he perched to bend and sway beneath its vibrations.

The windows of the Folly were still closed and curtained. Its inmates were as yet scarce turning on their couches of down, or realising that another day had begun for them, another day opened out full of sublime opportunities for good or evil. With the passing of another hour they would perforce be roused from their dreams by the inevitable early cup of tea, without which species of dram-drinking no woman of fashion can support the fatigues of her toilette, or the embarrassments of the morning post. But that is sixty minutes off yet—sixty long minutes—three thousand, six hundred seconds—and in the meantime, before the inevitable overtakes us, let us

follow the preacher's advice and make the most of it. "Yet a little more sleep, and a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to sleep."

Time enough to take up the burden of living when that burden is ruthlessly thrust upon us, and we bow our shoulders with accustomed habit to receive its weight.

But little Marianne entertained no such pessimistic views; to her the joy of life was simply in the act of living, and its triumph in escaping from the tyranny of Sarah, and being absolutely free to tear her frock or rumple her golden hair without the visible personality of that Nemesis. Presently Trim, her beloved Skye terrier, came leaping out to her as fast as his very short legs and corpulent body would allow him to travel; and then began a series of romps in which it was difficult to say which took the most satisfaction—the dog or the child. Trim, however, was the first to give up and retire on his laurels, selecting a particularly green spot of turf beneath a lilac-tree in full bloom, and after solemnly turning round and round in an unsuccessful race with his own tail, settled himself comfortably thereon, and with the tip of his red tongue showing between his teeth, watched the child with a benign and patronising expression. Marianne, thus deserted, returned to her flower-gathering, apostrophising Trim as she did so.

"You are a lazy dog, Trim. I'm 'shamed of you! It's perfectly redic'lous your pretending to be tired; you can't be; it's only putting on shapes, just as Miss Dick says, and shapes isn't very nice manners in such a wee little doggie as you!"

Trim snapped at an intruding fly, and yawned for answer, then settled his nose on his paws and went to sleep, and Marianne, thus left companionless, grew a little weary of solitude.

"I guess I've got enough flowers now for Popsey's buffday," she said, regarding critically the glowing mass of blossoms held very tightly in her hot little hand. "I guess I'll go in and put 'em on his dressing-table, and cry 'boo' very loud in his ear. Then he'll have to get up!"

And fired with this most laudable device, Mimi trotted away very fast, without so much as a backward look at the recreant Trim. Little reeked George Newbold of the awful fate in store for him at the hands, or rather in the shrill voice of his small daughter! But surely, could he have foreseen her advent in the character of a red Indian, he would have devoutly thanked chance for his timely delivery.

As Marianne tripped along, a dark shadow fell suddenly across her path and stopped her further advance. Pushing back the fringe of golden hair, that fell almost into her sapphire blue eyes, the child halted and looked up a little bewildered.

It was Vladimir Mellikoff who stood before her, looking very tall and dark against the brilliant green of the sun-swept lawn behind him. The child gazed up at him gravely and without speaking. This was not a familiar figure in her little world; she would have greeted Jack Howard, or Freddy Wylde, or even old Sir Piers Tracey with her accustomed quaint mingling of condescension and intimacy; but this tall, dark stranger, with his sombre face and deep black eyes, was unknown to her, and because unknown was not to be put on the same footing with her old companions.

However, Esther Newbold's small daughter was sufficiently a little worldling in training to recognise in this stranger one of "papa's men," as she called them, classifying all unknown masculine visitors under one head; she did not, therefore, run away, but stood quietly silent, her eyes raised frankly to his, and the sunlight turning to living gold each tendril of her fair hair.

Vladimir Mellikoff could be very gentle and winning to children; they touched that inner chord of tenderness that vibrated so passionately to Olga Naundorff's lightest word, and something in the fair child's face, with its deep blue eyes, recalled to him that other proud Russian face, with the violet eyes and scornful, curved lips. He bent down and spoke to Mimi in his softest voice.

"You are little Marianne, are you not?" he said.

"I am Marianne Newbold," replied the child, with grave directness.

"I wonder if you could say my name," continued Mellikoff, persuasively. "It is not so pretty as yours, but then I am a man, you see."

"Men's is never so pitty," remarked the child, didactically. "What is your name?"

"Vladimir," replied Count Mellikoff, gravely, and repeating each syllable distinctly: "Vla—di—mir. Do you think you can say it? Try."

But Marianne shook her golden mane in positive negation.

"I couldn't," she said, "not possibly. But I'll call you Mr. Val, if you like; it's pittier than your real name."

"Very well, then, Mr. Val it shall be," answered the Count, smiling broadly at the very English sobriquet bestowed upon him. "Who have you been gathering all those flowers for?"

"They's for my Popsey; it's his buffday. Do you know how old he is, Mr. Val? I guess he must be most a hundred."

To which Mr. Val replied with a laugh; but Marianne was no whit abashed.

"I think so," she went on, seating herself on a low garden bench that stood under a spreading



ash-tree, and beginning to sort out the flowers as they lay upon her lap. "I think so, 'cause he's got so many grey hairs, more than I can count. When I was a *little* girl"—with great disdain—"I used to pull 'em out, till Sarah said ten new ones came to each old one's funeral. Then I asked Lammy the other day if she thought Popsey was nearly a hundred; but she only laughed. Does you know Lammy, Mr. Val?" she queried, abruptly.

"Oh, but that isn't a real name, you know," protested Vladimir, diplomatically; "that might be any creature's name—a dog's, or a cat's."

"Oh, no, it couldn't," cried the child, eagerly, "'cause it's a person's—a grown up's, you see. It isn't her very own, own name; but that's too long, so I just calls her Lammy."

"And what is her very own own name?" asked Mellikoff, idly, taking up a large white marguerite from Mimi's store, and carelessly stripping off its petals, his mind unconsciously repeating the old formula, "she loves me—she loves me not." The child's voice fell with startling distinctness across the morning stillness, and shattered Vladimir's sentiment with a straight, keen blow.

"Her very own name," said Marianne, slowly, and taking great pains with her syllables, "is Mademoiselle Lamien—Mademoiselle Adèle Lamien."

The stripped daisy-head fell from Count Mellikoff's fingers, and lay at his feet amidst its snow-flake petals unheeded. He started violently at this positive answer to his negligent question, and the blood rushed for one moment to his face. He, who was never known to show emotion even when confronting death, trembled now before the unconscious words of a little child. His dark eyes seemed to grow larger in their hollow settings, the fine veins about his temples throbbed visibly.

Mimi, however, was ignorant of the agitation she had awakened; her golden head was bent over her flowers, while with one little foot she kept off the repentant Trim, who, having awakened from his slumbers, was endeavouring with slavish abjection to reinstate himself in his little mistress's favour.

When Count Mellikoff next spoke, any one save a child would have noticed the forced lightness of his voice; as it was, even Mimi looked up surprised by the change in it.

"And is it, then, Mademoiselle Lamien—Adèle Lamien—that you call by the *petit-nom* of Lammy?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the child, a little startled and impressed by his manner. "Mumsey calls her Mam'zelle Lamien; but I don't—not always—I call her Lammy. Is you sorry? Why does your eyes look so black?"

"Do they look black, Marianne?" Mellikoff asked, stupidly; then recovering himself with a laugh, and returning to his old manner: "No, I am not sorry. Why should I be? I've never seen your Mademoiselle Lamien."

"She's gone away," answered the child, quickly. "She had to; she said she must, 'cause she and Miss Hildreth couldn't possibly be here together.' But when I asked Mumsey about it, she only said: 'Nonsense, and don't bother.'"

"And has she been a long time with you?" asked Vladimir, putting the question indifferently.

Mimi shook all her golden curls. "Not *very* long; she came on Sarah's buffday, and that isn't very long ago."

"But *how* long?" queried Mellikoff. "A month, a year, a week? Try and think, Mimi; was it one Sunday ago, or two, or three? You know when Sunday comes, don't you?"

"Yes," replied the child, "it's the day after Saturday, and I always have my best pudding for dinner. What's your best pudding, Mr. Val?"

But Mr. Val was spared answering this embarrassing question by the advent of Sarah, who bore down upon them, her cap-strings flying, and whisked Marianne off, in a whirlwind of yellow hair and white petticoats, before he could even protest. She waved one little hand to him as she tripped away, holding on to her flowers with the other, and Trim barking at her heels; then the terrace door closed upon them, and Vladimir was left alone.

Mechanically he stooped and picked up one of the stray blossoms that had fallen from Mimi's lap; he turned it idly in his fingers, looking at it with unseeing eyes, while his busy brain went on thinking, planning, scheming.

Was he wrong after all? Had she escaped him; nay, had she ever been here at all? Why had she gone away? When would she come back? How could he piece out his welcome a little longer at the Folly? Was he altogether wrong in his suspicions? Had the woman tricked him again; fighting him with his own weapons, had she out-matched him and escaped?

And thus, as he stood lost in his self-questionings—a sombre, dark figure in the glowing beauty and sunlight of the fair May morning, twisting the drooping flower round and round in his fingers, and the song of the birds echoing ceaselessly in his ears—a sudden light broke over the gloom of his countenance, a half-formed exclamation rose to his lips; he dropped the flower suddenly, and took a step forward.

"No, I am not wrong," he said, in answer to himself. "Let Adèle Lamien beware, or I may turn her own arms against her." Then he turned abruptly and walked towards the house; and only the sunshine, and the birds, and Mimi's faded blossoms remained.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### "'TIS A SIREN."

And so the long golden morning hours rolled on, and the garden remained untenanted. The sweet spring flowers—than which none are more beautiful and fragrant, because so redolent of promise—wasted their perfume on the gentle breezes that swayed their yielding blossoms; the birds' song grew hushed and lapsed into silence as the repose of noontide settled down upon them.

The sun fell in straight, level rays that were warm with a foretaste of tropical heat; far away in the distance a faint silver line marked the sea's limits, across which now and then a white sail flashed and was gone. All nature lay hushed and stilled in that strange peace that comes at the day's meridian, when the only sounds are those of the under-world, the drowsy humming of an early humble-bee, the impatient buzzing of a giant-fly, the bu-bu of multitudinous insects, the chip-chip of the grasshopper, broken sharply across by the monotonous hammer of the woodpecker.

Within the Folly all the lower rooms were alike deserted, not a ripple of laughter or an echo of voices was to be heard; even the billiard hall was void, the men, in the absence of the feminine element, having taken themselves off to the stables, or down to the club-house, where lay the yachts moored in harbour, curtsying gracefully to each succeeding wavelet as it broke against the sharp outline of stem or stern.

But up in Mrs. Newbold's boudoir however, there were life and action enough and to spare, for here were gathered Esther and her women guests, while each pair of feminine lips were eager to contribute their share to the general conversation.

Patricia Hildreth lay full length upon a couch pulled close to the hearth, on which a fire of fragrant hemlock burned, in mockery of the open window and in defiance of the dancing sunbeams. Miss Hildreth was in all things luxurious, and revelled with almost barbaric delight in warmth of atmosphere and colour.

Her slight but perfect figure was wrapped in a long loose cashmere robe of softest azure, about which the dark bands of Russian sables swept in classic lines, nestling closely about the firm white throat with caressing touch, and falling back from the white arms and rounded wrists. In her hand she held a dainty vellum-bound book, a collection of sonnets much in vogue, and from which she read aloud at intervals some special *jeu d'esprit*.

At her feet, on a low, luxurious pile of cushions, sat Dick Darling, doing nothing, her hands clasped around her knees, her eyes feasting, in true hero-worship, on the face of her divinity.

Before a large Psyche-glass stood Baby Leonard, absorbed in a row of suggestive little porcelain pots, and breathlessly engaged in the exciting process of "making up" in daylight, *à propos* of the evening's requirements.

Esther was resting in a lounging-chair with Mimi on her lap, the golden curls falling about the pretty face bent down over a new picture-book; and at the open window, on a low ottoman, sat Miss James, her hands clasped idly upon her lap, her thin face pale and tired, her dark, restless eyes fixed intently upon Miss Hildreth. Something in the attitude bespoke mental depression and dread, that even the alert watching of eyes and mouth could not disguise.

Dick's glib tongue had been running on aimlessly from topic to topic, taking in a wide range of subjects, from the races at Jerome Park, to the coming international yacht contest for the America Cup; and though the remarks of her auditors were few and far between, Dick was perfectly contented and asked nothing better than to listen to the sound of her own voice.

She was interrupted before long, however, by Miss James's sharp and rather high voice addressing no one in particular:

"Dick is certainly a living personation of Tennyson's 'Brook,' isn't she? 'for men may come, and men may go, but she goes on for ever!'"

To which Dick, arrested in mid-career, retorted sharply: "I can't say that I see any men about anywhere, either coming or going. The wish must be first cousin to Rosalie's thought. Good gracious, Baby! how much more rouge do you mean to annex? You're blushing like a peony now, and one eyebrow is half a mile longer than the other. You make me think of Jack Howard's story of Miss Grantham, the American beauty of London, you know."

"No, we *don't* know," broke in Esther, languidly; "perhaps you'll be so good as to enlighten us."

"*Town Optics* cribbed it from him," continued Dick, once more in her element, "and positively quoted it as true. It appears some magnificent masher asked Cecilia Grantham if she didn't find

her abnormally long eye-lashes rather inconvenient at times? To which Cis replied, smiling sweetly, "Why, certainly; I am always obliged to have them borne in front of me when I go upstairs, for fear I shall trip upon them!" And will you believe me," went on Miss Darling, when the laugh evoked had died out, "that brainless masher has gone about ever since getting it off as a double extra specimen of American repartee, and all the time it never took place at all except in Jack Howard's budding intellect. I think *Town Optics* owes him one for that."

"I can cap your story by a better, Dick," retorted Esther, rousing herself and sitting up very straight, "and mine is absolutely true, for it happened to George's sister, when she was in London, oh, ever so long ago, before the war."

"Ancient history!" groaned Miss Darling, resignedly. "Drive ahead, Esther, only you are awfully behind the age."

"A story's a story, no matter when it happened," replied Mrs. Newbold, a little confused in her grammar, "and you are not obliged to listen, Dick."

"Oh, yes, but I shall," remarked that young person—"listen and remember, and get it off with effect as first-hand, at my next big spread. Go on, Esther, do, like a daisy."

"Well, you must know, my dears, that George's sister was a very pretty girl——"

"Oh!" interpolated Miss Darling, making tragic efforts to control her astonishment.

"Yes, very pretty," went on Esther, severely, "and when she was in London she was presented at Court, and went out a great deal, and that's when old Sir Piers first saw her and wanted to make her Lady Tracey."

"For her sins! I am sure there could be no other reason for such a punishment," again interjected Miss Darling, piously.

"Ah, but Sir Piers was a gay young baronet in those days," said Esther, with decision. "*Any* girl might have hesitated before she gave him his *cong e*. However, that's neither here nor there. Margaret Newbold was a very great favourite; and one evening, at a big dinner party at a tremendously swell house, she was given a proportionately great grandee as a cavalier. This very high-bred personage began by staring at her, up and down and round and about, through his eye-glasses and over them; and when he found this was not in the least discomposing to the young woman, but that she talked on glibly to her left-hand neighbour, he gave a loud 'ahem!' and said, so that all the company might hear: 'Ah—miss—ah—I perceive, though you are an American, you speak English quite fluently—ah——' Margaret eyed him for a moment over the rim of her wine-glass, and then replied, with calm distinctness and an air of inward satisfaction: 'Well—yes—ah—Mr.—I do. You see, the missionary who converted our tribe was an Englishman, and he taught us the language.' Then she went on eating her fish, quite undisturbed by the shouts of laughter that went up at the expense of her unfortunate questioner."

"Served him right, too," cried Miss Darling, indignantly. "I never heard of anything so caddish. We might just as well ask, in an off-hand, jovial kind of a way, if it's because they have so many H's lying round loose, that they forget to pick 'em up and use 'em in the right places! And one might suppose so, you know, with reason, judging from some of the specimens we get over here."

"It's very trying," broke in Baby Leonard, plaintively; "I *can't* get both sides of my face to look alike, and this *cr me imp ratrice* is so sticky! What shall I do?"

"Leave it all alone," cried Miss Darling, brusquely. "You can't improve on nature, Baby—it's no use! 'Bad's the best,' as my old mammy-nurse used to say. You won't make your eyes any the larger or prettier by painting them a distinct violet, and your mouth's a far better shape left to its own lines; you can't make a Cupid's bow out of it, try as you may."

"Only listen to Dick the virtuous!" laughed Esther. "She positively waxes eloquent on the shams of the hour, and is developing a soul above frivolities! We shall have her quoting Carlyle next; or, stay, I know what it will be. What's that sentimental couplet, Dick, tucked carefully away beneath your pot of 'cherry-lip,' in your new silver-mounted *toilette des ongles*? Is this the way it runs:

'Why send me to this little girl?  
Sure such a gift were silly!  
Can I add lustre to the pearl,  
Or paint the gilded lily?'"

"Oh, Esther, you're a brute!" cried poor Dick, the tears actually in her eyes, her cheeks very red. "How could you? It's only—only some stupid little lines about a still more stupid joke. They don't mean *me* at all."

"And then, fancy Dick being compared to a pearl, and a lily—a painted lily!" exclaimed Miss James, in her most disagreeable voice, and with a slow smile creeping over her face.

"Oh, Esther, how could you!" cried poor Dick again; but Mrs. Newbold only laughed.

"Don't be cynical and fault-finding, then, my dear Dick," she said, quietly, drawing one of Mimi's golden curls through her fingers; "it doesn't suit you, my dear, nor your little round, brown, winsome face."

"Since poetry seems to be the order of the day, listen to this," broke in Miss Hildreth, in her clear musical voice, and lifting her eyes from the tiny vellum book she held:

"Near my bed, there, hangs the picture jewels would not buy from me.  
'Tis a siren, a brown siren,  
Playing on a lute of amber by the margin of a sea.

"In the hushes of the midnight, when the heliotropes grow strong  
With the dampness, I hear music—hear a quiet, plaintive song—  
A most sad, melodious utterance, as of some immortal wrong.

"Like the pleading, oft repeated, of a soul that pleads in vain,  
Of a damned soul repentant, that would fain be pure again!  
And I lie awake and listen to the music of her pain.

"And whence comes this mournful music? Whence, unless it chance to be  
From the siren, the brown siren,  
Playing on her lute of amber by the margin of a sea?"

Silence fell upon the little group as Patricia's voice died away. For a moment all were held by the spell of the poet's words, with their deep undertone of passionate protest. The present faded out of the line of mental vision, replaced by the past, within whose mystery of silence, somewhere a great wrong lay hidden, and unappeased.

Had the poet known of it, in all its details, and kept inviolate this secret of another's existence, or had he only guessed at its outlines, fearing to fill in the lights and shadows, lest imagination should fall short of reality?

So vivid, indeed, was the impression produced, it seemed only a continuation of the tragedy when Miss Hildreth spoke again, slowly and without any apparent reason, save inward impulse.

"I have known one such woman once, to whom all life and all time was but the cry of 'a damned soul,' crying out ceaselessly against 'an immortal wrong.' Did our poet know her story, I wonder, when he wrote of his 'brown siren'? But no; this poor soul has had no one to sing out her wrongs, or open up the story of the treachery that blasted her life. Alone she has had to bear her burden, and alone she must bear it to the very end."

As Miss Hildreth spoke, Dick Darling crept close to her side, and knelt there, listening eagerly, with quick-coming breath, to the disjointed sentences. In the deep interest of the moment no one looked towards the window where sat Rosalie James, or noticed the intense nervous restraint she was exercising. Her face was absolutely colourless; her hands pressed so hard one upon the other that they left blue marks upon the soft flesh; her eyes were strained and feverish; she bent forward in an alert, expectant attitude, as of one awaiting, yet not certain of, some preconceived revelation. At the Psyche-mirror sat Baby Leonard, still placidly trying one artistic preparation after another, and totally oblivious to the tense atmosphere of suppressed excitement about her.

"And who was she? Is she alive?" asked Dick, her whisper catching up Miss Hildreth's falling inflection, and sustaining the interest of the moment. "Who was she? Is she alive? Where did you know her?"

"Yes, she is alive; oh, yes, indeed, she is alive," answered Patricia, still in a retrospective tone; "and I knew her in Petersburg when I was last there—such a little time ago, as it seems now."

"Was she beautiful?" Again it was Dick's voice that asked, and Patricia's that replied.

"She was very beautiful—so beautiful that no one could withstand her loveliness. And her beauty became her curse; ah, what a curse, since it attracted the attention of one so high above her that his lightest regard was an insult! What but bitter wrong and crime could be the outcome of a love proffered by a scion of the Imperial house to a woman of the people? Beauty is a grand leveller, it is true, but it cannot level the iron hand and cruel laws of Russia. It was the old story—the old, old, pitiful story—that comes to every woman once in her lifetime, and that each woman translates as best suits her desires—the story that makes a heaven upon earth, a paradise within our hearts."

Again the musical tones died away in a sigh of regret, and again Dick cried out in her quick, absorbed whisper:

"Is there any more to tell? What happened? What was the end?"

"What any woman might have looked for, save a woman blinded by love, and a man absorbed by passion. They lived in a fool's paradise for an all too brief space, and then, before the golden sheen had fallen from their vision, while the woman still played with fate and the man toyed with destiny, the blow fell—sudden, sharp, omnipotent, as is the nature of Russia's potency. Taken away from his very arms, her marriage annulled by Imperial ukase, her life ruined, her soul lost in a whirlwind of injustice and despair, what wonder that her woman's nature revolted, and that throwing aside the narrower swathing bands of law and conventionality, she stood forth, bold and free and savage, and struck down her craven lover in the very zenith of his manhood, with a hand that never faltered, as it drove home the steel to his very heart?"

Miss Hildreth had grown strangely excited as she told the tragic story; she rose up now and stood

at her full height, the clinging cashmeres marking every line and curve of her beautiful form; her face was pale as death, and beneath her dark brows her eyes gleamed with their old dangerous fire; she lifted her hands and brought them together before her, throwing them out palm upwards in passionate protest; her voice was low and concentrated, vibrating with intolerance.

"And I who tell you this," she continued, "I speak as only one can who has looked upon such suffering as hers; who has beheld the soul drink to the very dregs of the cup of renunciation, despair, desertion; seen it touch the very heights and depths of mental anguish, and wandered with it so far in the paths of darkness that even crime seemed but justice, if it would in any way balance the debt of honour."

She faltered suddenly, and turning with quick impetuosity, sank back upon the couch, her light mocking laugh ringing out discordantly as she concluded.

"Was I not right, Dick? The poet must have known this story to write so tellingly of an 'immortal wrong, and of a soul repentant longing to be pure again.'"

Miss Darling had started back when Patricia had arisen, and though she remained kneeling, her eyes never left the other's face. Across the room, in the full warm glow of the noontide sun, Miss James sat shivering, but watching ever and always with the same look of expectancy, and yet of certainty, on her face.

As Miss Hildreth's little laugh struck so harshly across the compressed emotion of the moment, and made, as it were, a half-bar of discord in the tragic score, Dick Darling shuddered, and put out her hand, as though to ward off some impending danger.

"Don't," she cried, her brown face paling and flushing alternatively, "don't laugh in that dreadful way; oh, Miss Hildreth, it hurts me!" She crept a little nearer to her and laid one hand on the pale blue draperies. "That is not all, not all of the story, it cannot be all. Tell me the rest of it. Tell me her name!"

Dick's whisper was imperative, imperious, and Miss Hildreth, fingering nervously the vellum-covered volume, felt the force of the girl's candid eyes, and honest, earnest gaze.

"Her name"—she said, slowly and hesitatingly—"her name——"

But before she could complete her sentence Esther started up, putting Marianne hastily down, and came towards her.

"You have said quite enough," she exclaimed, excitedly. "Patty, Patty, let me beg you to be careful."

As she spoke, the door behind the swinging *portières* opened slightly, unperceived by any one except Miss James, over whose face the same sneering smile crept out again. Miss Hildreth looked up at Mrs. Newbold with defiance in her eyes and on her lips.

"My dear Esther, surely you are a little too dramatic. Why should not I gratify Miss Dick's romantic inquisitiveness? Her name—the name of this woman—was—is—well, let us call it Adèle Lalloovich."

As she uttered the words clearly and distinctly, the *portières* were pushed hastily aside, and George Newbold's voice preceded himself in person, exclaiming:

"May we come in, my dear? We are bored to the verge of insanity."

And crossing the threshold he held back the curtains, and Vladimir Mellikoff stepped into their midst. As he did so a sudden quick sigh broke from Miss James, she got up hastily and passing down the room met his cool impenetrable glance with the slightest possible recognition, and upward gesture of her hand. He stepped forward to open the door for her, and when it closed upon her and he returned to the little group, a keen observer might have noticed a slight increase in the brilliancy of his eyes, a touch of triumph in the smile with which he bent over Miss Hildreth's hand, held out in greeting to him.

Patricia's face, however, looked cold and hard; and the line of dark fur lay about her white throat like the shadow of a coming calamity.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CANKER WORM OF DOUBT.

Mr. Tremain did not again see Miss Hildreth after she left him standing by the fountain in the little wood, until they met in the green-room an hour before the play.

She had gone from him then with scorn and anger in her words, and with scorn and defiance in her heart; she met him now with cold and indifferent hauteur, amounting almost to insolence.

Philip had stood for a long time alone beside the marble boy Narcissus, revolving moodily the sharp home truths she had thrust upon him. He did not forget one curl of her lip, one flash of her

eyes, one inflection of her clear voice, as she flung back the love he offered; flung it back with bitter disdain and contempt. And yet, curiously enough, he was not angry with her; there was no such positive element in his feelings as that; he seemed to himself to hold, as it were, an outsider's position, and to look on and judge her from an outsider's point of view.

Was it her own complete indifferentism, her absolute disbelief in the ordinary delusions of life, her cynical acceptance of the contradictions of destiny, together with her sudden outburst of passionate derision, that had produced in him this state of cool analysis and judicial judgment?

He had pleaded his love fervently enough under the glamour of the moonlight and her loveliness, and he had meant what he said then; he would gladly have taken her in his arms, and given his answer to her letter in a fond and foolish lover's way; but—and here lay the difficulty—she must return to him as she had gone from him, the same yielding, loving, believing, if wilful Patty; he could accept no other; no new Patricia, no woman whose eyes spoke of the fires of conflict, whose face had that written upon it which tells of the lower depths of mental pain and struggle.

For Philip, as we know, was above all things, masterful, and his idea of dual happiness was autocratic rather than constitutional; he would share no divided throne and sceptre, even with the woman of his heart; he must reign, and he alone, and she must be the empire over which he ruled unquestioningly.

All this had been in his heart, though unspoken, when he pleaded with her to return to their old relations, and, unconsciously, perhaps, there was an echo of his despotism even in his tenderest words. However that may have been, Patricia would have none of it. She was not to be won by pity when passion had failed.

And so it was that as she stood tall and beautiful before him, with her rich white draperies clinging about her in sensuous lines and curves, her face pale with suppressed emotion, her eyes dark with endurance, she tossed back his proffered gift, his reawakened love—a love that would share no rights and no prerogatives—and, with the fine irony of a woman who sees her advantage and presses it, thrust back and away from her all appeal from out the past, touched though it was with the pure gold of that time when love and youth, belief and trust, went hand in hand together.

Even yet, then, after ten long years of experience and knowledge, Philip could not read her heart aright. And she, should she forgive him? Give up the unequal game, lay down her arms, acknowledge herself vanquished, and creep timidly back into his embrace, repentant and abject, meek and thankful?

Then she looked at Philip's face, calm and quiet and victorious, with just a touch of wearied assurance in its smile, and her heart leapt up again in sudden protest and passion. No, she would not yield, she would never yield until she saw him suffering, through a woman, some portion of the pain and humiliation he had inflicted upon her. Then, when expiation brought forth the fruit of atonement, why then—ah, then Miss Hildreth would reconsider.

It was Miss Rosalie James who first introduced the canker of doubt in Philip's mind concerning Patricia, of suspicion regarding her past.

It had never occurred to him to speculate upon the possible experiences and circumstances which must have made up the ten years of their separation.

Miss Hildreth had passed the greater part of that time abroad, and his news of her had not only been meagre but nil, for after the first few weeks of her absence, during which her name had been on every one's lips, coupled with her broken engagement, and her inherited fortune, it was rarely mentioned, and never in Philip's presence.

The most perfectly controlled human heart cannot so entirely root up envy and malice as not to cavil somewhat at the perversity of Providence, in showering benefits with both hands upon a fellow mortal, who certainly cannot so thoroughly deserve them as oneself. However, if destiny will be so blindly prejudiced, why let us become as indifferent to it as possible, and in perfecting ourselves in this fine-art forget both the name and existence of our once bosom friend.

This was society's philosophy regarding Patricia Hildreth, and thus for ten long years her place had been vacant in the circles of the great world, and she herself forgotten as completely as the snows of last year. "Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?" may be asked of more things than Musset dreamed of, when he wrote his sad and bitter reproach.

Miss James had met Philip late in the afternoon of George Newbold's *festa*, as he was strolling idly about the garden-paths, the inevitable cigarette between his lips, and his hands, as was his fashion, clasped loosely behind him. He caught sight of the small dark figure coming towards him down the terrace steps, and though at first impatient of the interruption, something in the thin outline of face and form, the lassitude of step and bearing, touched a chord of compassion in his kind heart.

He had not indeed been altogether insensible to the nature of Miss James's feeling towards him; no man is quite so dull and hard as not to be touched by the unasked devotion of a woman; it is wonderful when that devotion is directed to one's self how unselfish and pure, though hopeless, it appears! Philip's heart might be in the position of being captured in the rebound, but Miss James was not the one to do it; nevertheless her attraction to him, to call it by no warmer name, was harmless, if ineffectual, and not unpleasant.

Thus argued Mr. Tremain, though in justice to him let it be said the argument was not carried on in words, scarcely in sensations; it was negative rather than positive. He met her therefore with that deference and attention which made his slightest service a distinction, lifting his hat and throwing aside his half-smoked cigarette as he did so. Miss James looked at him steadily for a moment, watching him as he tossed away the end of burning paper.

"Oh, I am sorry you should do that," she said, in her rather hard voice. "I don't in the least object to cigarettes; in fact, I like them."

But Philip only smiled and shook his head.

"Oh, I've had quite enough of it, Miss James, I assure you. I was only smoking as a distraction and to make the time go."

"Has it been such a long day?" she asked, a trifle sharply. She knew Mr. Tremain and Patricia had not met that day, and shrewdly suspected the reason of his restlessness, and though she acknowledged to herself the hopelessness of her own hopes, she could not endure to have it brought home to her by him.

"Very long," replied Philip, candidly; "it's a way time has of never weighing his goods. The hours that *be* go by on lagging steps, the hours to come rush and tumble one on top of the other, and are never in the future but always in the past."

"I should think that rather depended upon one's occupation," responded Miss James, tritely. "If one's copybook was to be trusted, time never halted or stood still. 'Time Flies,' with a very large T and F is among my earliest recollections."

Mr. Tremain laughed a little as he replied:

"You shame me, Miss James, into an open confession of laziness. To be lazy is to find time out of joint, and in consequence out of touch with one. One can only be legitimately lazy on board a yacht, or fishing; under such circumstances action becomes criminal. By the way, let me congratulate you on your distinct success as Mrs. Bouncer, last evening. I asked for you after rehearsal, but did not see you."

"No," replied Miss James, slowly, "I did not come back to the theatre."

As she spoke a dull flush rose to her cheeks, for she remembered how and where she passed those two hours, when all the world were absorbed in the miniature playhouse. With one of those strange sudden waves of perception she saw again a broken feather-fan and golden-hued rose lying together on the velvet carpet, and Vladimir Mellikoff, tall and dark and smiling, holding back the heavy *portières*, through which she escaped trembling and doomed.

She caught her breath and went on a little nervously:

"I am very flattered to be praised by you, Mr. Tremain. I can't bear Mrs. Bouncer myself; she is quite antipathetic to me."

"Then surely you deserve all the more praise," said Mr. Tremain, courteously. "If to be out of accord with one's rôle results so favourably I shall devoutly pray that Henri de Flavigneul and I may be at daggers drawn this evening."

"But what would Miss Hildreth say to that?" asked the girl, sharply, and looking up so quickly as to catch the sudden frown of annoyance that spread over Mr. Tremain's face at the mention of Patricia's name.

"Ah, Miss Hildreth," he replied, with assumed carelessness. "I had not taken her into consideration."

"And yet Miss Hildreth is not one to be left unconsidered?" said Miss James, questioningly. "She is not one to be easily passed over." Then, with a sudden change of manner, she added: "You have known Miss Hildreth a long time, have you not, Mr. Tremain?"

Philip looked down at her a little startled and surprised. Was she laughing at him—this pale, quiet, almost insignificant girl—or mocking him? Surely the subject of his and Patricia's broken engagement had been public property too long to have escaped her knowledge. Was it impertinence or ignorance that dictated the question? But Miss James's face was placid and mildly interested as she looked up at him with a little smile, and waited for him to speak.

"Oh, yes, I have known Miss Hildreth for some years," he replied, shortly; and then with an abrupt laugh: "but I have not seen her for almost as long as I have known her."

"Ah," said Miss James, meditatively, "she has been abroad for ten years, and ten years makes such a difference in one's knowledge of another. Only think what might not happen in ten years!"

"Apparently Miss Hildreth's experiences have been more or less narrow," answered Philip, annoyed that the conversation should have turned upon Patricia, and yet unable to keep from discussing her.

"Oh, do you think so?" asked Miss James, with quite a look of surprised inquiry in her eyes. "To be sure you ought to know; but do you think she—any woman—could come back quite unchanged after ten years abroad?"

There was so much of veiled controversy in her tones that Philip at once found himself looking at the matter from her point of view, and debating his own question with a decided negative bias.

"What do you mean?" he said at last, after a moment's delay. "What do you think are some of the experiences that may have come in Miss Hildreth's way—or any woman's—during ten years' absence abroad?"

"That would depend so much as to where one went, what countries, or towns, or cities; whom one associated with; and how one lived. Each country has its own peculiar influences, dangers, casualties, but some countries have the two former more developed. Russia, for example; in Russia one instinctively looks for dangers, intrigues, conspiracies. Has Miss Hildreth ever been to Russia, Mr. Tremain?"

Miss James was treating the subject with so much gravity and impressiveness that Philip felt himself carried along with her, and inclined to look at Patricia's past career and its attendant trivialities in a serious and grave light.

"I really cannot answer you in detail, Miss James," he said, "but collectively I should say that nothing was more probable than Miss Hildreth's being perfectly familiar with Russia, and Russian society, in all its phases."

"Yes, I should say so too," answered Miss James, nodding her head in confirmation of her words. "In fact I am sure of it. Mr. Tremain, do you think Miss Hildreth has ever before met and known Count Mellikoff?"

They had been walking up and down a garden-path, but she stopped when she put this question and faced him. Philip of course, also stopped, and for a moment there was silence between them.

"That is an extraordinary question," he said at last; "have you any reason for asking it, Miss James?"

"But you have not answered me yet," she protested; "when you do so I will reply to you. Do you think Miss Hildreth has ever before seen and known Count Mellikoff; say in Paris, or St. Petersburg?"

"To the best of my belief Count Mellikoff is a stranger to America, Miss James."

"But is Count Mellikoff a stranger to Miss Hildreth, Mr. Tremain?"

"That is beyond me to answer," replied Philip, with an unconscious inflection of curiosity in his tone.

"Then I will answer for you," said Rosalie, her thin sharp voice growing rounder and fuller, "but you must bear in mind I have no reality to go upon, only surmise and observation. Very well, then, I say Miss Hildreth has not only met and known Count Mellikoff before, but she has known him well, and she is afraid of him. That surprises you, Mr. Tremain, and yet I don't know why it should. You must remember you have seen nothing of Miss Hildreth for ten years, and you know nothing—positively nothing—of her life during that time. Why shouldn't she have known Count Mellikoff, and why shouldn't she have reason to fear him? Ten years is a very long time; long enough to drink deep of experience; long enough to plant, and sow, and reap. Long enough to lose more than one friend, make more than one enemy; long enough to sink oneself to the neck in intrigue, and to bury oneself in crime. May not Miss Hildreth have eaten of the tree of knowledge, and found the evil outweigh the good? May not Count Mellikoff have been her friend, and become her enemy? Is it not possible that each is striving to outwit the other, and each is afraid of the other? I see you think me rather mad, Mr. Tremain, and credit me with a morbid love of melodrama, or a desire to make mountains out of mole-hills. Ah, very well, let us say no more about it: only when next you see Miss Hildreth and Count Mellikoff together, watch his manner towards her, and see for yourself if he carries himself as a stranger to her. Ten years is a long time for a woman to wander about the world alone."

She finished abruptly, and turned away from him, leaving him without another word.

Philip's meditations, if unpleasant before, were now distinctly disagreeable. He disliked mystery, and above all things and most of all he disliked it in connection with a woman. In his eyes all women should be, like Cæsar's wife, above suspicion, and it hurt and galled him that even a shadow of aspersion should rest on Patricia's fair fame.

And yet, as Miss James had said, ten years was a long time, and Miss Hildreth gave no explanation, beyond a vague and general one, as to how she had spent that time. Might there not be some secret bound up in those years; some secret between herself and Vladimir Mellikoff, which it was wisest to leave so buried? Was it possible of belief that in all that time Patricia had never consoled herself for the lost love of her youth?

Hers was an impetuous nature, open to sudden convictions, quick to act, ardent, impressionable; with such a temperament in the hands of Vladimir Mellikoff, what imprudence might not have taken place? Even a secret marriage, and a subsequent purgatory of disenchantment, were not impossible consequences. Indeed, the range of possibilities was so varied and so unsatisfactory, Mr. Tremain felt himself unable either to seize or exorcise them.

At the tea hour that same day, Miss James asked suddenly, in a lull of conversation, bending forward and addressing Patricia in her highest voice:



"Oh, Miss Hildreth, by the way, Mr. Tremain and I have been discussing your long absence from your native land, and your possible and probable experiences. Will you tell me, for it was rather a question of difference between us, have you ever been to Russia; do you know St. Petersburg?"

Something in Rosalie's sharp, hard tones commanded attention, and when she finished all eyes were turned upon Patricia, as she sat in a high-backed chair; her tea-gown of marvellous old lace and fluttering ribbons seeming but a fitting setting to her delicate beauty. Vladimir Mellikoff put down his cup of untasted tea, and drew near the central group.

Miss Hildreth looked up a little surprised at Rosalie's earnestness. She raised the tiny apostle spoon in her fingers, and studied it attentively as she answered:

"Oh, yes, indeed, Miss James, I have done the whole grand tour. I know my London, my Paris, and my Petersburg thoroughly, and like a loyal American place the Peerage and the Almanach de Gotha next to my Bible." Her voice was clear and mocking, and a trifle artificial.

"And may I also be permitted to ask a question, mademoiselle?" said Count Mellikoff, advancing towards her and bowing slightly.

Patricia raised her delicate eyebrows in cool superciliousness. "Oh, certainly, Count Mellikoff; in what way can I add to your knowledge?"

She put out her hand with the empty tea-cup, and Dick Darling flew to take it from her; the outstretched hand trembled ever so little, and the spoon fell to the floor.

"Since you know my home, mademoiselle, Petersburg, I do not make a blunder when I suppose you to have known it socially as well as——"

"According to Baedeker," broke in Miss Hildreth, with a little laugh. "Make your mind easy, Count Mellikoff; your Court and your *grand monde* showed me nothing but civilities."

"That goes without the saying, mademoiselle," replied Vladimir, still more gravely. "And, pardon me, it is pleasant to speak on home subjects to one who understands them so well; did you, then, when at Court, or in society, did you ever meet the most brilliant man of his time, the most fascinating, handsome, rich young noble of all Russia? You will recall him at once when I name him. Mademoiselle, did you ever know Count Stevan Lalloovich?"

There was silence for a moment as Vladimir Mellikoff asked his question, and for a moment after, during which all eyes were again turned towards Patricia. She had started forward a little, and half rose up from her chair; her face had grown suddenly pale, and her eyes, beneath their dark pencilled brows, flashed strangely.

It was but a moment, a second of time, a heart-throb, then she controlled herself, and, with one of her lightest, most mocking laughs, sank back upon her chair, sweeping her laces about her royally.

"Count Stevan Lalloovich," she said, very distinctly; "you ask me if I knew Stevan Lalloovich? My dear Count Mellikoff, your very question is superfluous. Could any woman who knew Petersburg, fail to know Stevan Lalloovich? The handsomest man of his day, as you have said, and the most unscrupulous." Then she turned to Miss Darling: "My dear Dick, will you beg Esther for another cup of tea, and boiling, my dear, positively boiling. You see, Count, among other Russian peculiarities, I cling to my Russian tea."

"I see, mademoiselle," replied Mellikoff, gravely. "May you always prove as loyal to all things Russian."

Mr. Tremain had not been present during this little passage at arms, but Miss James, as she sat before her mirror that evening "making-up" her small sallow face into a hard-visaged, calculating Mrs. Bouncer, congratulated herself upon her strategy.

"My shot told," she was thinking, as she painted in another wrinkle, "it almost took Miss Hildreth off her guard. She is not likely to forget herself again; but I have seen her once without her mask, and that is enough. Oh yes, 'it moves, it moves.'"

Then, with Galileo's immortal words on her lips, she added a final touch to her eyebrows, and glided quickly away, appearing a few moments later in the flies, and calling forth Mr. Robinson's encomiums upon her as a model of punctuality.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### A SOCIETY DRAMA.

In another half-hour the little playhouse was full to overflowing. Not a seat was vacant, and scarcely an inch of space was left for the men of the party to plant their feet upon. Gay and musical were the tones of women's voices and laughter that rose and fell upon the scented air, sustained and strengthened by the more manly basses.

The theatre itself glowed in the soft effulgence of electric light, each filament incased in a

hanging crystal vase, subdued to a warm palpitating softness by silk shades of roseate hue. Flowers bloomed everywhere, piled in glowing masses along the walls and across the miniature orchestra screen. The rose-houses had been stripped of their loveliest exotics, and these rifled blossoms hung their gorgeous heads amidst a quivering background of clinging green smilax.

On each rose-silk *fauteuil* lay a bouquet of the golden-hued Maréchal Niels, tied with long ribbons of palest amber, and a tiny satin programme on which, amidst quaint device of scroll work, were inscribed the characters and scenes of the coming drama.

The *lever de rideau* was a masterpiece from the hand of an English Academician, whose foreign name was better known in the two great English-speaking countries than others boasting a more national ring. The heavy folds of richest white silk bore testimony to the versatility of his brain and brush, since here swept garlands of trailing roses across a wonderful marble terrace, upon which were grouped in classic attitudes the sisters of histrionic art, Melpomene, Thalia, and Terpsichore.

The scene was one of luxury that had become a fine art, every detail being in itself so faultless, it required but the completing touch of contiguity to render it a rounded whole of perfection. The onlooker might well pause and ask himself if the developments of wealth, refinement, and culture, could reach a higher degree than was displayed that evening within the walls of this miniature La Scala.

The curtain rose on the perennially new and refreshing *Box and Cox*, in which Miss James again distinguished herself and scored her final points to rounds of ringing laughter and spontaneous applause, which savoured more of the "Surrey side," than of a languid *nil admirari* audience of this critical century. Between the farce and the serious work of the evening music held sway, and La Diva's glorious voice captivated all hearts and brains in Owen Meredith's "Aux Italiens," its final appealing line rounding each verse with the pathetic cry,

"Non ti scorda di me, non ti scorda di me!"

It was during this interval that Mr. Tremain, making his appearance in the Greenroom, found Miss Hildreth already there awaiting her first call. She was alone for the moment, and was standing with bent head and clasped hands, leaning against the tall carved chimney-screen that shielded the low burning logs on the hearth.

The long folds of her first costume, a *négligée* of Wörth's conception, fell about her in a clinging amber sheen, across which the flots and draperies of *duchesse* lace fell in filmy cascades. Philip stopped involuntarily for a moment, and looked at her. Her marvellous loveliness struck him afresh, as, indeed, it had a habit of doing whenever he came upon her unawares. This attribute was indeed one of Miss Hildreth's chief charms; you forgot her actual loveliness when away from her, and were apt to criticise not only it, but her. It was a criticism, however, that fell to pieces at the first contact with her, and which left you only conscious of her beauty and her fascination. You could not analyse her when she smiled, or when her deep, tender, dark blue eyes looked full into your own.

Miss Hildreth had not heard Philip's entrance; and he thus had an opportunity of watching her undisturbed and unconscious. Despite the make-up of rouge and bismuth, put on so delicately as to be almost imperceptible, the face was at that moment a sad one. All the fire, and life, and spirit, had gone out of it, and in their places an expression of weariness and despondency had crept about the mouth and eyes, which was strangely pathetic because so at variance with Miss Hildreth's usual bearing. Even the attitude, half-listless, half-weary, bespoke a state of mental depression and dejection.

Philip, as he watched her, recalled Miss James's unequivocal suggestions, and almost against his will found himself speculating as to which episode out of those ten unknown years of her life she was lamenting at that moment. He had not been present at the tea hour, and therefore had missed Rosalie's well-turned opportunity; but even without that, Miss James had contrived to sow the seeds of distrust and suspicion in his mind.

He could not look upon Patricia now without the record of those long ten years arising between him and her; across whose closed pages what experiences might not be written! Even her beauty became a source of like animadversion; could any woman possessing such a face and form count thirty years off life's score and not have drunk deep, even to satiety, of the wine of passion, that turns even as one's lips touch the cup's brim into the waters of Lethe? Miss James was right; those ten years wherein Patricia had grown from girlhood to womanhood must hold some hidden memories, into which for his peace of mind it were best he did not look, and from whose influence, as from her personality, it were wisest for him to detach himself at once.

He would end his visit at the Folly in a day or so, and when he left it so would he leave behind all recollection and all knowledge of Patricia. He desired to know nothing of her immediate past, he would refuse to be interested in her present or her future. Only, before he bid a long good-bye to the Folly and its inmates, he must once more see Adèle Lamien; there was something to be said to her, and he must say it.

He moved slightly forward, and as he did so Patricia turned and looked up. In an instant the softer and sadder shadows passed from her face, her eyes regained their fire and light, the smile came back to her lips and chased away the dimples in cheek and chin, the soft evanescent bloom stole upward and renewed her youth and freshness as colour and contrast can alone do.

Mr. Tremain came towards her grave and unsmiling, and with something of the old dark anger on his face, that ten years ago had frightened her and deterred her from uttering the few words of reconciliation hovering on her lips; this anger was all the more pronounced because of his character costume of light livery. One does not naturally associate buckskin tops and a striped waistcoat with a countenance of gloomy disapproval.

Miss Hildreth took in the situation at a glance, and laughed out at him, one of her cold light mocking laughs, that angered Philip with its ring of insincerity.

"Well, my Knight of the Rueful Countenance," she exclaimed, "you look not only bored, but in a rage! Ah, my dear Philip, when will you learn how foolish and *banale* a thing it is to expend your reserve emotions on trifles? We Americans are accused of being a race incapable of experiencing any grand passion, either in conception or realisation. Perhaps it is because after cultivating our sensibilities to the highest pitch we are content to expend them on trivialities. I remember a clever Englishman once telling me that we as a nation have no measurable idea of passion save in the abstract; we appreciate wit and humour, subtle argument, keen incisive reasoning, but as to the heights and depths of one terrible all-mastering, all-absorbing emotion, it is as a dead letter to us. Our highest expression of nervous force results in an exaggerated friendship, or a marriage of convenience; we are simply incapable of what the French call *une grande passion*."

She stopped with another little laugh, but Mr. Tremain made no reply, so with the slightest possible shrug of her shoulders she continued:

"For example—and pardon my using you as a peg upon which to hang my argument—to look at you at this moment one would declare that nothing less than a complete collapse of the entire social system could account for such an expression of abject wretchedness. How can one be supposed to know that it is the result of nothing more tragic than an ill-starved necktie, or a poor-fitting coat?"

Again she laughed, and Philip felt the blood surge up to his face at her taunting raillery.

"I should feel honoured at being considered worthy your mockery," he said, quickly, "only that this time I cannot plead guilty to the impeachment; my costume, even to its insignificant details, is, I beg to state, beyond reproach. I cannot complain even of a rumpled tie, or an uncomfortable coat."

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "You are fortunate and to be congratulated. Does not Madame de Rémusat tell us of the annoyance caused the great Napoleon by too tight arm-holes, and of Josephine's tears over the loss of one Cashmere, out of her two or three score? You see, my dear Philip, even the heroes of our immediate past were not above acknowledging their little weaknesses. Such items are the crumpled rose-leaves and parched peas of greatness. Dare we of a lesser mould scoff at them?"

She turned away from him as she spoke, leaving him with a decided feeling of having been taken at a disadvantage. His call followed almost immediately, so he had no time to reply; but the remembrance of her mockery remained with him, and added a touch of bitterness and reality to the situations of the play, in which he and she bore reversed relations to those of real life.

The drama selected by Esther Newbold, *The Ladies' Battle*, is too well-known and too great a favourite to require description. Perhaps of all drawing-room comedies it is the most pleasing and the most comprehensive. Those who have seen the foremost actresses of our day personate the young and beautiful Countess d'Autreval—who is not ashamed, though fully conscious, of her love for Henri de Flavigneul, and who bravely relinquishes it in favour of her girlish niece, Léonie de Villegontier—will remember what scope can be shown in the development of that character, whose fundamental attributes seem at first sight to be those of impulse and self-gratification.

The scenes moved on with magic smoothness and completeness, and gradually, as the interest grew and deepened, the audience began to realise that it was upon Miss Hildreth as the Countess, and Mr. Tremain as Henri, that the chief influence and importance of the play culminated. The undercurrent of suppressed antagonism that existed between them communicated itself to the onlookers with a subtle, yet potent power; while to those who could read the writing between the lines, the situations assumed a potential gravity and significance.

From the moment of the Countess's soliloquy, "Now to be more than woman," when, recognising her growing love for the young soldier, she consults her looking-glass as the oracle which is to encourage or dissuade her from entering the lists against Léonie, and then lays it down with the significant line, "Ah, it has deceived so many!" to her final act of renunciation, Patricia carried the house with her, and left no loophole for any anti-interest or climax.

Baby Leonard made a charming Léonie. Her innocent face and unsophisticated manner were a capital study and a clever following of nature; but it was on Patricia Hildreth that the sympathy and sentiment centred, and there arose almost a cry of disappointment when the curtain dropped finally upon Léonie's happiness, at the price of the nobler nature's self-sacrifice. Even her fellow actors felt her potency, and Philip most of all.

He caught her hand in his as she left the flies, and detained her one moment.

"Patty," he cried, "Patty, once more let me plead with you. Is it true, dear—are your words something more than allegory:

'Beneath the wreath and robe, the heart unseen  
Oft throbs with anguish.'

Are they true of *your* heart, Patty, Patty?"

But she checked him with her old impatient gesture, drawing away her hand from his close clasp, and laughing lightly, ironically.

"My dear Philip, too much simulatng of passion has overturned your habitual self-control. Fancy quoting a couplet out of a modern drama by way of asking a question! But let me follow your lead and answer you from the epilogue:

'Men conquer all, but women conquer men.'"

Then she passed by him still laughing, and the echo of her laughter came back to him long after the last gleam of her silks and laces had disappeared from sight.

A grand ball completed the celebration of George Newbold's birthday, and those who were perforce the wall-flowers of the occasion noticed, not without comment, that Mr. Tremain kept sedulously away from Miss Hildreth, and that Patricia danced more often with the dark Russian stranger than with any other of Mrs. Newbold's black-coated contingent. Or, as the men put it afterwards in the smoking-room, that conceited, distinguished, red-ribboned foreigner devoted himself exclusively to the most beautiful woman of the evening, with occasional relapses to the plainest girl.

It was thus that Miss Hildreth and Rosalie James divided the honours, if such they could be called, of Count Vladimir Mellikoff's attentions.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### "IT IS HOPELESS."

True to his resolution, made more absolute than ever by Miss Hildreth's last openly displayed indifference, Mr. Tremain determined to leave the Folly on the first possible excuse. His visit had already prolonged itself far beyond its original limits, and in the departure of his friend Mainwaring, he saw a happy opportunity of effacing himself naturally and without too violent a wrench.

John Mainwaring had come down only for the theatricals, and nothing could be more *à propos* than for Philip to make his *adieux* with him. As for Patricia, he entertained no softer sentiment towards her than that of distinct disapprobation. He felt it would be a relief to get himself away from her influence and from the spell of her beauty. Twice now she had repudiated him and the love he pleaded; what better proof of her thorough deterioration could any man ask for than this? Could any words have been more sharp than hers, or speak more openly of defiance and glad rejection? Apparently she retained not one tender recollection of the past, or the smallest desire to recur to it. She met him always with cool raillery, mocking aphorisms, or taunting satire; she was hard, brilliant, unresponsive as the diamonds she wore so regally, and to throw oneself upon her sympathies was to wilfully grasp at the glittering sheen of unreality, and be wounded because the substance slipped from one's hold.

Away from her and once more absorbed in the work of his profession, Mr. Tremain felt he could forget her and the past few days of unrest and disquietude. The calm monotony of his personal self-centred routine became a haven of rest in his eyes, to which he looked forward with impatience; forgetting that it is one's inner state of being that makes or mars the tranquillity of one's existence.

Accordingly Mr. Tremain ordered the packing of his portmanteaux, and made known his coming departure the next morning at the very late breakfast hour, at which feast Esther and a few of her guests appeared languid and fatigued, and instant in their demands for the strongest black coffee.

Philip observed with relief that Miss Hildreth was not among the number. Little Marianne was there, sitting by her mother's side, her fair child-face looking all the sweeter and fresher by contrast with the jaded *borné* appearance of her elders. Vladimir Mellikoff was also among the missing; but Miss James was at her place, seemingly none the worse for her exertions of the evening before, her sallow countenance and dark eyes being untouched either by fatigue or inertia.

Mrs. Newbold received Philip's announcement with voluble expressions of protest.

"Oh, but indeed you must not go," she said, "we really cannot spare you; do reconsider." And she looked at him with an almost exaggerated expression of entreaty in her blue eyes.

"You are very flattering and very kind," replied Philip, avoiding her glance, and answering in conventional tones and words, "but really I must go, it is impossible I should stay longer. Mainwaring has brought me news of an important case, which has been advanced on the

calendar, in which I am involved, and even if this were not the case, I could not, my dear Esther, desire to wear out so warm a welcome as yours."

But Mrs. Newbold did not rally to the implied compliment. She shook her head dubiously as she said:

"That is only a *façon de parler*. I did not suppose, Philip, that you would ever descend to subterfuge."

At which Mr. Tremain laughed, and Miss James lifted her eyebrows in scarcely concealed superciliousness.

"One could almost be discourteous to Mr. Mainwaring, in thought, at least," continued Esther, regarding that dark-visaged young man with an expression that belied her smile.

To which he replied, with a half-shrug of his shoulders, that he considered himself fortunate in attracting any portion of Mrs. Newbold's attention. It was a satisfaction to be regarded actively by her, even though that activity took the form of animosity.

Esther bit her lip and was silenced; but George Newbold laughed, and remarked aside to Dick Darling that *that* was a hit straight out from the shoulder.

Presently Marianne, who had been feeding the long-suffering Trim on deviled kidney scraps, and enjoying, with all the cruelty of childhood, his tears and squerms, lifted her golden head and innocent eyes, and startled the entire company by exclaiming, in her clear shrill treble:

"Mumsey, why does Mr. Val ask so many questions about my Lammy, and when is my Lammy coming back again?"

Esther, decidedly taken by surprise, turned quickly, and spoke with unaccustomed sharpness.

"Who are you talking about, Mimi? Who is Mr. Val? It really is extraordinary the amount of gossip you manage to imbibe from unknown sources."

"Mr. Val," replied little Mimi, with unabashed frankness, "Mr. Val is Mr. Val. I can't say all his name 'cause it's too long, so he said I was to call him Mr. Val. He came out in the garden when I was getting Popsey's buffday flowers, and he talked to me all about Lammy; and when I told him Lammy's very own name, his eyes got so black, and he said, 'When is she coming back?' and, of course, I didn't know. Miss James, she knows Mr. Val; she's always talkin' to him."

At which lucid and candid explanation Miss James felt the blood rush hotly to her cheeks, and Mr. Tremain, with kindly thought, turned attention from her by saying, quickly:

"It must be the Count, Mimi designates by that innocent abbreviation. With the frank socialism of childhood, she is no respecter of persons. 'Mr. Val' sounds just as important in her ears as Count Vladimir does in ours."

"She's a ridiculous little monkey," replied Esther, impatiently; and then the subject dropped, much to Philip's chagrin, as he desired to glean some further particulars concerning Mdlle. Lamien's probable return. Conversation languished after this, however, and one by one the women stole away to their bedrooms, there to sleep off the excitement and fatigue of the previous night.

It was arranged that Mr. Tremain and his friend should take the six o'clock evening boat, which would, as Freddy Slade remarked, land them in New York in ample time for a "refresher" prior to dinner at the club, at that magic hour when each small round table is daintily set out in fine linen and glittering silver, and surrounded by the best-known convives of clubdom.

"The pleasantest hour, by Jove, of the whole twenty-four," said Freddy, enthusiastically. "Upon my word, I quite envy you fellows the sensation you'll produce when you walk into the 'Union.' You will actually smell of the country, 'pastures green,' you know, and all that sort of thing."

For the better part of the day the house remained silent and deserted as far as the lower rooms were concerned, and luncheon, which was at all times a movable feast, became on this occasion a translated one, to be partaken of by the fairer sex within the privacy of their own apartments, and in the luxury of *déshabilles*.

Late in the afternoon Mr. Tremain made his way to Esther Newbold's boudoir, and knocking with assured familiarity, opened the door almost before the customary words of invitation. He found Mrs. Newbold alone, lounging far back in a "sleepy hollow" of a chair, with a tiny tea-service on a low, Japanese stool beside her. She welcomed him cordially and with a charming smile.

"Ah," she exclaimed, "is it you, Philip? I hope you have repented of your morning decision and have come to tell me so, and beg my forgiveness."

"For what?" asked he, wilfully dense.

"For saying you were going away, of course. Haven't you come to tell me you will not go after all?"

"No," said Philip, without any answering smile. "I have come, on the contrary, to bid you good-bye."

"You are unkind," exclaimed Mrs. Newbold, impetuously, "and—you are unwise. What, Philip, are you going to lay down your arms so tamely, and acknowledge yourself beaten by a woman?"

"It would seem so, my dear Esther, if flight means that I am vanquished. Will you give me some of your tea as a stirrup-cup?"

She answered him by pouring out the fragrant Pekoe and handing it to him in silence; the tears stood in her eyes and her mouth quivered a little. She sat still as Philip drank the tea, and then, when he had put down the empty cup and come back to his place beside her, she turned and spoke quickly, and with almost nervous impetuosity.

"Oh, Philip, I am sorry, grieved, inexpressibly grieved that you should go in this way. I had hoped so much for you—for her—yes, more for her—from the propinquity of these few days. And it has all come to nothing, and you are going away, and how can it be possible for you ever to come together, if you persistently let slip each opportunity of an understanding?"

She spoke with so much real earnestness, that Philip was greatly touched. It needed not the mention of Patricia's name to make plain to him who was the object of Esther's solicitude, and he could not but smile sadly as he thought how little worthy was she of Esther's tears and regrets. He bent towards her and took her hand in his.

"My dear little friend," he said, "the truest friend ever granted to an undeserving man, I beg you not to trouble yourself about me or my unfortunate affairs. Let me assure you that I am truly grateful to you for the opportunity you provided me with in which once more to seek and learn my fate. If the result, and my answer, has been but a double repetition of that of ten years ago, is that your fault? My dear Esther, I have looked upon my old love without prejudice or bias, and I have seen her stripped of all the thousand and one artifices that go to make up the woman of the world; we have stood face to face with nothing between us save the memory of the past, and I can say to you with all truth and earnestness, that I am not only glad, but thankful, that her answer to my appeal was what it was. Believe me, there could never be any solid happiness for us so long as the ten years of our separation lies between us like a gulf, dividing our past from our present. It is better as it is, dear Esther, it is better as it is."

He unloosed her hand, and, rising, walked hastily up and down the room. Mrs. Newbold was crying openly, scarcely wiping away the tears as they fell.

"Oh, Philip!" she pleaded, her voice pitiful and broken, "indeed, indeed, you judge her too harshly. Oh, can you not read her heart; are you so blind, so very blind, as not to see it is for you she cares, and you only? It is because she loves you that she strives to hide it all; that she laughs and jests, and is bitter, and mocking, and gay, and frivolous by turns, and never, never once reveals the real, passionate, throbbing woman's heart beneath these artifices. Oh, what can I say to open your eyes?"

"Say nothing," he replied, sternly, "it is best as it is. I am not one, Esther, as you know, to come lightly to a decision, especially one of such grave importance to me; but in this you cannot change me; nothing can alter my decision. You are blinded by your loyalty, you see her as you fain would see her, with the glamour of her beauty and her fascination surrounding her so closely you cannot perceive the real woman beneath. But I have beheld her as she is, cold, hard, brilliant, illusive, heartless; she is but the mocking personation of her old self; the outside tenement, beautiful, bewitching, but soulless and insincere. I told you when we spoke of this before that I would not willingly again become the plaything of a woman's vanity, and yet, so frail are man's resolves, I did again put my fate to the touch, and have again failed and lost. I am not likely to repeat my folly, Esther, when I can still hear the words of scorn with which she repudiated me, and flung back my love as not worthy her consideration."

"It is hopeless, then," cried Esther, imploringly.

"Yes," he replied, shortly, "it is hopeless, and I am glad that it is so."

When next he spoke, it was upon indifferent topics, and there was that in his face and voice which warned Esther against reopening the former subject. Before he left her he stood a moment, holding her hand, and looking down into her flushed and earnest face.

"Do not think me ungrateful," he said, with one of his rare, sweet smiles; "I have had my opportunity, it is my fault that I failed to utilise it to my advantage. After all, these things are arranged for us by a higher power than our own wills. To you, Esther, I can never feel aught but grateful, and you know whenever you need my poor services, they are yours without the asking."

"And hers, Philip, hers also," she pleaded, "you would not refuse your help to her, should she ever require it?"

"That is such an unlikely contingency, your question needs no reply," he answered, gravely; and bending his head until his lips touched the hand he held, he said, with simple gravity: "Good-bye, Esther, and God bless you."

And so he went away from her, and Mrs. Newbold, with the unreasoning instinct of her sex, felt she had never esteemed him so highly as now, when he refused the request she urged so ardently upon him.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE SONG OF THE CIGALE.

Mr. Tremain, on leaving Mrs. Newbold's boudoir, made his way, without encountering any one, to the lower hall, turning instinctively from the billiard-room, from whence the sound of the cues against the balls, and an occasional exclamation proclaimed the occupation of the men.

In his present state of mind he felt no inclination to join them, or take part in the employment of the hour. His conversation with Esther had reawakened all the unrest and bitterness of his heart against Patricia. Looked at in any light, her conduct could not but appear heartless and unwomanly, and the remembrance of it—of her scornful eyes and smiling, mocking lips—rankled in his mind and added the one touch of vindictiveness that is so closely allied to revenge, as to be a difference in name only.

Mr. Tremain would have scouted any such paltry feeling as a desire for retaliation, and yet deep down in his heart there lay the half-developed germ. Could any vendetta strike her heart more surely than such an action on his part, as should prove to her how brittle were the bands she had woven, how impotent her power to hold captive the man she had scorned?

There remained yet an hour before the time of his departure, and Philip, more by instinct than design, turned towards the library, and, pushing back the noiseless *portières*, entered. The room was empty, and lay in the half-shadow of the quick coming evening. A touch of gold from the setting sun still lingered on the painted windows, touching to a deeper tone the blues and purples in the classic folds of Clio's drapery. One casement stood open, and the evening air floated in, fragrant with a thousand odours from Nature's laboratory; strong and subtle and all-powerful arose the keen scent of the musk plant, overcoming all lesser perfumes, and asserting with overwhelming insistence its supremacy. One long low ray of sunlight fell across the picture on the easel, lighting up with magic radiance the passionate languor of Io's face, and marking with stronger emphasis Jupiter's stern acceptance of her allurements.

Still following his instincts Mr. Tremain crossed the long room, and drawing back the curtains that separated the music-parlour from the library, stood for a moment uncertain as to his further action. The room was unlighted save for the same level rays of dying sunlight, and the piano that stood at the far end was thus lost in the quivering darkness.

Philip, even as he stood upon the threshold, and before his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, was conscious of the presence of some one within the room beside himself, and gradually as the obscurity became penetrable he made out a dark figure sitting before the silent instrument, with bowed head, about whose throat and face hung heavy, clinging folds of black lace. Simultaneously with his discernment of this presence, he recognised its personality, and as he did so felt alarmed and electrified by the sudden rush and tumult which took possession of his being. The blood leapt to his face, he felt it throb in his temples and pulse in his veins, as he realised without further assurance, and before the bowed head was lifted and the pale, cold face gleamed out of the sombre surroundings, that it was Adèle Lamien who sat there, and that he was unreasonably glad and sorry, repentant and rejoicing, that he should thus have one more interview with her before he should vanish out of her life, as Patricia had already passed from out of his.

He advanced slowly and stood before her. As he approached, she dropped her protecting hands and sat silent, immovable, her pale face—pale with the pallor of mental conflict—looking strange and unearthly amidst its setting of falling black draperies, the dark bruise upon her cheek growing livid in the half lights. Suddenly, she threw back her head and smiled upon him.

It was but the second time he had ever seen her smile, and as the radiance and glory broke over her face and flooded it for one brief moment, with a brightness and transient loveliness, he started, for something in that smile and face, some strange, subtle, illusive likeness to some one whom he knew, and yet whom he could not name, grew into existence with the fleeting radiance, and faded with it before he could grasp at the reality. It was but a mere shadow of a resemblance, gone as soon as discovered, without substance, without reason, and yet perceptible, even when most baffling.

So sudden had been her transformation, and so rapid the return to the old habitual quietude and repression of her countenance, Philip found himself wondering if, after all, he was not under a delusion, or that his eyes, dulled by the dim obscurity of the room, had not mistaken the temporary flashing and paling of a sunbeam for that evanescent light on cheek and brow.

He had remained standing and silent, during the brief moment that elapsed between his entrance and her recognition; he bent over her now, and speaking quietly, said:

"I am fortunate, Mdlle. Lamien, in finding you—and alone."

"You are very kind," she answered, in a low, repressed voice, a voice that had through all its repression a throb of passion. "Surely Mr. Tremain can find pleasanter and more amusing companions than I."

"None who can interest me so deeply, believe me," replied Philip, gravely. "You have returned, mademoiselle, the better, I trust, for your absence?"

"My absence?" she queried, a little surprised; then more quickly, "Ah, yes, my absence; it was but an affair of hours, a necessity, not a pleasure. All the same, I thank you. I am better for the change."

Philip had waited for some sign of invitation to remain, but as none came, he grew bolder, interpreting her silence as best pleased him, and drawing up a low arm-chair, took his place beside her, at such an angle as enabled him to watch her face without effort.

"You have been missed, mademoiselle, by more than one," he said, slowly; "your name has been often mentioned, even by those unknown to you."

"Indeed," she replied, more quickly than usual; "who has done me that honour?"

"I shall answer your question by another," said Philip; "Mdlle. Lamien, where and when have you known Count Vladimir Mellikoff? Who and what is he, that he should express his surprise and displeasure at your movements?"

She drew a long sigh, and turned her head away from him, as she answered slowly and in a low voice:

"Where and when have I known Count Vladimir Mellikoff? Who and what is he? My reply can be brief enough, Mr. Tremain, to both questions: I have never known Count Vladimir at any time, I have no idea who or what he is."

Her words were concise and to the point, but they failed to convince Philip of their absolute sincerity. He said nothing for a few moments, but the silence that fell between them was alive with suggestion; and Philip, as he watched her, felt the old inconsequent irrational influence of her personality creep over him, wrapping him about in a half-magnetic, half-willing subjection; and which, while recognising its power, he was unable to throw off.

It was she who broke the silence with an upward gesture of disdain, as she said:

"Why should we speak upon so worn out a theme as my existence, Mr. Tremain? There are none concerned in my past who would care to recognise me now." Then suddenly, and with a quick movement towards the piano: "Shall I play for you, Mr. Tremain?"

She did not wait for his reply, but struck at once a few low notes, a minor chord or two that swept across the dim half-lights, and seemed but an outcome of the twilight, and of the last faint golden rays fading moment by moment in the far western sky. Then a headlong rush and tumult of melody caught up the passion, and despair, and longing of a soul in bondage struggling to be free, beating against the bars, crying out in anguish, then sinking back into despondency, and with a final moan striking downwards to despair.

Mr. Tremain, as he listened, felt himself caught up in the rush and movement, and borne along with it, following her will and pleasure even as her white fingers flew over the ivory keys, striking them now with fiery impetuosity, now with caressing softness, and again with lingering tenderness. Her slight figure in its black dress was alive and sinuous, responding to each emotion; her pale face grew illumined beneath its weight of white hair and drooping laces that fell about it. She was the living incarnation of the music; and Philip, half spell-bound, half realising the potency of the spell, found himself repeating mentally, "the charm of woven paces and of waving hands." Was she a Vivien as well?

She ceased playing as he came and stood beside her, and in the hush that fell between them, the echo of light laughter floated to them from the rooms above. It was a discord, a false note in the intensity of the theme.

Philip bent towards her, almost touching the white hair with his lips; it was a moment of exquisite uncertainty. Then she struck the notes again, and a plaintive prelude stole out, while in a low voice, monotonous yet musical, that seemed but the continuation of the melody, she said rather than sang:

"I am a woman,  
Therefore I may not  
Fly to him, cry to him,  
Bid him delay not.  
What though he part from me,  
Tearing my heart from me,  
Hurt without cure!"

Her voice faltered, sank into silence, her hands fell from the keys and lay motionless upon her lap. Philip, to whom the first line of her song had come not as a surprise, but as an expected climax, bent forward eagerly. Once again he heard the mocking voice of his vision, once again the faint sweet perfume of violets stole upward, robbing him of the reality of the present, restoring to him the past with all its unfulfilled promise and its hope.

It was the passion of surprise, not of arrangement or premeditation, that held him, and that swaying him against his better self, made him speak from the emotion of the moment.

"Adèle," he said, his voice low and restrained. "Adèle, you have doubtless heard my story; you know that I have been the sport, the plaything of one woman's vanity for all the better years of



my life; and yet I dare to offer you the heart she has scorned. Adèle, will you accept it? Will you restore my faith and belief in womanhood; that faith and trust which another woman has so nearly destroyed? Hush, wait one moment before you speak. Yes, I know I am almost a stranger to you, I have seen you but half-a-dozen times; you know but little of me, and that little is not of the best. And, I too, what do I know of you? Nothing, save what Esther was pleased to tell us all concerning you. I realise that your past is seared and crossed by sorrow and grief, but always, Adèle, always since first I saw you, you have haunted me, you have possessed me, you have laid me under a spell. Break that spell now by saying you will listen to me; by telling me that at last, however late in life, my faith, my belief, my trust shall not be given in vain."

He stopped, and she looking up quickly saw the flush of earnestness upon his face, the light of eagerness in his eyes. She let fall her glance, and a little smile—was it of triumph or of pity?—crept out about the mouth, that died ere he could catch its curves. She had listened to him apparently without surprise, and without betraying emotion of any kind; her voice fell dull and cold when she spoke.

"You proffer a strange request, Mr. Tremain, and one not easy of reply. Is it possible you can be in earnest? Have you not heard my story? Has not the whole of Madame Newbold's world become cognisant of its details? Do you not know that Adèle Lamien is a woman on whom rests the blight of suspicion, if not of guilt? A woman whose life has been one of no common misery. Do you realise what it means to be suspected of crime, branded as a fugitive, an outcast? Can you gauge the depths of misery contained in the words ruined and repudiated? Do you not know that one spot upon a woman's reputation, though incurred through no fault of her own, stamps her for ever in the eyes of your world. Can you, knowing all this, realising it, yet ask me to listen to your words of vehemence? You, Philip Tremain! Ah, do you not know I would give my very heart's happiness if I might so listen? No, no; that is not what I mean. You are mad, Mr. Tremain, mad with the desire born of a moment's passion."

"I am not mad, Adèle," he urged. "I ask you again to listen to me, and I tell you again that I neither care nor wish to know more of your past than you desire to tell me. Cannot we forget that, cannot I make for you a future that shall outlive your past? Nay, wait one moment, there is something more I must say. You know I have no fresh first devotion to offer you, I have not even a heart swept and garnished for your acceptancy. I did not wish to love you, I am not sure I love you even now; all I know is that you draw me to you with invisible chains; that you take from me all resistance, all desire to resist."

"Ah," she exclaimed, with infinite bitterness, "you speak as a man. We women do not so easily break the bonds that have held us for so long. Suppose I were to take you at your word, suppose I were to listen to you, to your own undoing? What would be the outcome of it? I, a woman, Adèle Lamien, who perchance has looked shame in the face, who may have swept the by-ways of wickedness with her skirts, I to demand of you this sacrifice, and for what? That you may hear my name spoken in whispers and with bated breath; that you may see me pointed at in scorn and derision; that never may you look at me, never see my face, without the bitter memory of my buried past rising up between us. No, this may not be; you have loved before, it is not love you feel now, it is resentment, disappointment, anger. Put by your fancy of the hour, Mr. Tremain, and let Adèle Lamien fade out of your life even as she has come into it, an accident only. Do you not remember the fable and fate of the poor Cigale?"

'The grasshopper so blithe and gay,  
Sang the summer time away;  
Pinched and poor the spendthrift grew,  
When the keen north-easter blew.'

I am that poor Cigale. I have had my summer time, and now it is winter; and you would fain make me believe that one can conjure up a second summer from out the ruins of autumn's blasts; nay, that is impossible alike for you as for me. Believe me, no good has ever come from a passion so suddenly developed, as this you plead now. You will live to thank me for my words, even if now, at this very moment, you are not confessing their justice."

She rose as she finished, and moved somewhat away from him. The darkness of the early May evening had crept up and about them unnoticed; she had become indistinct and unreal, a part of the shadows that surrounded her; and Mr. Tremain, as he listened to the low, even notes of her voice, felt the unreality of his position grow more and more defined.

He had been mad—mad with a moment's passion; and yet—and yet, what was this impalpable, intangible influence that drew him to her with invisible cords, even while he realised the wisdom of her words, and rejoiced in the freedom she forced back upon him?

The silence and the darkness increased; she became but a dim outline against the deeper tones of shadow, her pale face alone showing in the gloom.

"You scarcely give me a choice, Adèle," he said; "and yet how is it possible for me to accept your decision?"

His words were followed by a light laugh; a chord struck sharply, and then from out the obscurity came her voice again. But what was this change in it? What was this undertone of mocking raillery that sounded so familiar and yet so incongruous?

"Said I not truly, Mr. Tremain, you are mad to ask me to listen to you; and yet—ah, Philip—

perhaps it would be wiser for us both could I but yield."

"Then listen, I entreat, Adèle," he cried, impetuously, "do not make your decision a final one; leave it open as a possibility for future consideration. Do not let me ask in vain; only say that you will think twice before you refuse me definitely. Do I ask too much?"

"Too much!" she echoed, and her voice sank to a whisper. "Is it too much to put the cup of water to the parched lips of a dying man, and bid him drink? Will he refuse, think you? Do you know how greatly you tempt me? Shall not you and I come to repent with bitterness this parleying with the inevitable? Well, then, since you will have it so, and since my will is weak—ah, so very weak—and fate is strong, it shall be as you wish. I will make no final decision. I will wait. Surely this should be triumph enough, even for me, to know that I have won you from the remembrance—nay, from the very presence of—Patricia Hildreth!"

At Patty's name thrust thus sharply and unexpectedly upon him, Philip started forward, impelled by the same unknown, unreasoning force that had held and controlled him throughout their interview, but he was too late. He was conscious of a light silken rustle, a low laugh, a hand laid for a moment on his, and then he was alone.

As Mdlle. Lamien drew the *portières* behind her, two figures crept back into the obscurity of the room beyond, and as she passed swiftly on and out into the hall, a whisper in a woman's voice echoed across the shadows:

"Are you satisfied—convinced? There is no mistake?"

"I am absolutely convinced, mademoiselle, there can be no mistake," answered a second, carefully modulated voice.

A moment later Miss James stole quietly out of the now dark library, followed by the sombre, gliding figure of Vladimir Mellikoff.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### INTROSPECTION.

The party at the Folly had broken up at last, and, going the way of all things terrestrial, was already numbered among the pleasures of the have been.

Mrs. Newbold had flitted seaward with little Marianne, her husband, her maid, and a small army of dress-baskets and boxes. The golden glory of July held the gardens and woods, the terraces and parterres, in the spell of midsummer colouring; flinging abroad with generous hand its meed of sunshine, its wealth of fruit, its richness of blossom, its long hours of fullest beauty, when the intense blue heavens above, the smiling earth below, and the very atmosphere of soft delicious haze seemed to palpitate with their own tropical luxuriance.

Mrs. Newbold's island home never looked more enchanting or enchanted than in this "royal month," and yet it was just at this perfected time that stern fashion decreed she should leave it, and seek for pleasure and relaxation within the narrow limits and confined area of George Newbold's yacht. And Esther, with a courage worthy of a better cause, never dreamed of disputing fashion's mandate, but bore with heroic fortitude the thousand and one restrictions entailed upon her by existence in the *Deerhound*; for even in that most luxurious schooner her convenience had to suit itself to space.

And so, while the *Deerhound* lay moored at Newport, and Mrs. Esther entertained and was entertained with almost royal splendour, and the long summer days were given up to feasting and amusement, and the long summer nights to dancing and intrigue, the Folly was deserted, its blinds close drawn, its hospitable doors locked and barred; and the roses came to perfection, and ran riot in their wantonness, showering their petals in such lavish prodigality that the garden paths lay strewn and heaped with the crimson and white of their livery.

Even as in ancient Rome a certain youthful emperor, satiated with every guise of amusement, worn out with pleasure and fulfilled desire, buried the companions of his licentiousness beneath an avalanche of rose-leaves, which, as they fell, became their grave-clothes and their pall.

And have we of to-day no likeness to this pagan Heliogabalus? Do not we bury the best-beloved of our past beneath a cere-cloth, formed of the sweet sentiments of forgetfulness; and, turning from their appealing eyes and sadly accusing faces, enter with fresh zest and renewed enthusiasm upon the untried excitements of the hour? Are we, after two thousand years of Christ's humanity, and the awful lessons of Gethsemane and Golgotha, so much less pagan?

Mrs. Newbold had taken Dick Darling with her in her flitting; she had come to have a very true affection for that somewhat crude young lady, for Esther possessed so much of the alchemist's power as to recognise pure gold when she found it; and also Miss Darling's outspoken admiration for Patricia Hildreth acted as a salve to her disappointed and fruitless projects.

To Dick herself the prospect of three weeks or a month at Newport on board the most perfectly

appointed yacht of the squadron, with unlimited license to enjoy the passing hour to the full, was, in her own phraseology, "just too most awfully nailing!" She danced and she flirted, the latter in her own half-boyish fashion. She smoked everybody's cigarettes save her own. She won the ladies' single-handed lawn tennis tournament, and sported the prize—a jewelled racket and ball brooch—with frank delight in her own prowess. She drove Freddy Slade's tandem up and down Bellevue Avenue all one morning, and sailed Jack Howard's microscopic cutter out to the Narrows and back in the afternoon.

She was, indeed, as happy as the day was long; like Browning's 'Duchess,' "she loved whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere." And then, oh, happy thought, were there not more worlds to conquer in the immediate future? Did not visions of New London, Shelter Island, Mount Desert, and the Isle of Shoales stretch out in endless perspective before her? What girl could dare to be otherwise than sublimely happy so long as the sea laughed, and the sun shone, and there were such beneficent factors in the scheme of life and Providence as horses, and dogs, and boats, to say nothing of men and boys, who were but the playthings of existence?

And through all those long, luxurious summer days, Mr. Tremain remained in town, returning a curt negative to all alluring invitations.

He had not seen Mrs. Newbold again after his momentous interview with Mademoiselle Lamien; indeed, he had left the Folly immediately after it, walking into New Brighton, and proving but a sorry companion to John Mainwaring, during their journey to New York.

To tell the truth, he felt himself to be somewhat of a traitor to Esther, in that he had permitted himself to become a traitor to the memory of Patricia. He could not quite forget or put from him Esther's earnest words, Esther's eyes filled with tears, and Esther's undeviating fidelity to the love of his youth; that love from which he had now deliberately and by his own act cut himself off for ever. He knew that to Esther he could only appear as the most weak and vacillating of men; his own words rang too clearly in his ears to allow him for one moment to doubt what her judgment upon his action would be.

There are two things no woman can excuse or palliate in a man: disaffection from herself where she has once been the first object of his devotion, or disaffection to an ideal which she has set up as a fetich, and to which unswerving fidelity is expected as a matter of right. Esther had set up in this position the old love of ten years ago that had existed between himself and Patricia; she had, so to speak, dug its dead body from out its unquiet grave, and breathing into it her own vitality and desire, had set herself to work to re-create answering sentiments in his heart. With the impetuosity of woman's nature, which considers no office so legitimately its own as that of binding up broken hearts, and reuniting broken troths, she endeavoured now to re-construct and rehabilitate this passion of his youth, never pausing to reflect upon his attitude in the case, or the probabilities of failure which amounted to certainties.

She had failed, it was true; but that is only half a failure that leaves matters at the point from which they started. There is always room for hope so long as certain premises remain unchanged. Philip was still unbound and unfettered, and Patricia was still Patricia Hildreth. Were not these sufficient foundations on which to build as fancy dictated?

Reflecting on this, and on his own position from Esther's point of view, Mr. Tremain could not but acknowledge that his proposal to Mdlle. Lamien, and their partial engagement, could only be regarded by Esther in the light of direst treachery. Any reasons he might bring to bear in defence of his present situation and the circumstances that had led up to it, would, he knew, be scoffed at and scouted by his staunch little friend. Of what use would it be for him to enter into the physiological side of the question? He could not hope to explain to her the vague, impersonal power that drove him on to this finale. Should he plead that he was not altogether a free agent, and advance in confirmation of this the subtle illusive resemblance of Mdlle. Lamien to another some one, equally shadowy and unreal, he would be met with an incredulous smile, and a suggestion that since he could urge no stronger reason than that of a chance likeness, why need he hesitate to *exploiter* his delusion? Or why choose Adèle Lamien's negative unreality, in place of Patricia Hildreth's positive personality?

It would be vain also to remind Esther that not only had Patricia twice deliberately refused him in words, but by open raillery and covert mockery had emphasized those refusals, more times than his pride cared to count. No, Esther would be convinced by none of these things; it was worse than hopeless to expect it of her, and therefore worse than useless to appeal to her. In selecting Adèle Lamien for his future wife, he had cut himself adrift from his own life, and from the close sympathy and intimacy of those few friends whose affection had made existence worth living.

He realised perfectly that in thus choosing a woman upon whose past lay not only the blight of secrecy but the curse of suspicion, he made that past his own with all its weight of shame and sin, nay, perhaps, even of crime, at which she had so vaguely hinted. He knew now that in that moment of surprise and overmastering passion, when the spell of her music and her presence held him against his will, he had not reasoned, he had not considered. He had let the potency of the moment bear him away; he had, indeed, seen dimly what the outcome must inevitably be, and yet he had allowed himself to drift on with the current, and made no resistance.

His love, his pride, smarting and burning beneath the cool insolence of Patricia's scorn, hurried him on to such a declaration as should be final, and break for ever the bonds of those ten years that had held him so long, and galled him so intolerably. He would be free, and Patricia should

see and recognise his freedom and own its justice, even though she laughed gaily and jested mockingly upon it.

It was indeed in this half defined and scarcely acknowledged retaliation, that he now found his chief solace, for the matter of his new engagement cannot be said to have contributed to his happiness. Still, if fate was so untoward as to eliminate all the higher degrees of perfection from his destiny, it was at least something gained to know that he retained the power of wounding one woman through another. It was not the greatest or grandest revenge, nay, it had something pitifully mean and ignoble about it; but it was revenge, and Philip was still human enough not to have mastered that divine perfection, which kisses the hand bearing the rod, and blesses the scourge even while the blows fall.

In the meantime he hugged his secret, and kept his unhappiness to himself; refused to mingle with his own kind, and rarely stirred from out his chambers, except for the daily walk to and from his office, and grew silent, morose, unapproachable.

The July days came and went with lingering, regretful steps; but they brought him no comfort. He grew to hate the long, bright, cruel hours, during which the sun shone so fiercely in the intense blue sky whose wide expanse was unsoftened by cloud or mist; even as he came to loathe the short midsummer nights, with the flooding moonlight and the radiant stars set in the vaulted firmament of God's glory.

No news and no word came to him from Mdle. Lamien; he had neither seen nor heard from her since their unsatisfactory parting. He had waited expecting each day some expression from her, some recognition or repudiation of the promise that bound him; but each day brought him only disappointment, until at last, as the days grew into weeks, he ceased expecting and accepted his position almost with relief. He was ready and waiting whenever Mdle. Lamien should signify her need of him; he would not lift a finger to break the slight chain that bound him, but neither would he by act or word rivet that chain closer.

Of Patricia he knew absolutely nothing; not even the echo of her name reached him. That most energetic of society chronicles, *Town Optics*, was never counted in his literature, though, had he known it, even that authority was silent concerning her movements. She had apparently dropped out of his life as completely as even he could desire; and, as he acknowledged with a bitter smile, she was not likely to vex or trouble him more, in the changed conditions of his future.

Ah, well, let her rest in peace! Patty, his wilful, loving, perverse little Patty, had been dead to him for ten long years.

But with the last week of July, Mr. Tremain aroused himself, and, throwing off his lethargy, hastily packed a light portmanteau and betook himself to a certain landing-stage down in the city's depths; and as the sun set in a harmony of gorgeous splendour over Bowling Green and Castle Garden, making a golden symbol of Trinity's tall spire, and flooding the city with transient beauty, he stood upon the deck of a small steamer, bound for the rocky shores of Maine, and, two days later, had vanished amidst the deep far-stretching pine forests of that eastern state, pitching his tent beside an outlet of wild Hemlock Lake, and lost completely to civilisation in the form of post, or telegraph, or daily paper.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### PLOTTING.

Count Mellikoff had also on leaving the Folly betaken himself to New York, and re-established his locale in that quiet but eminently aristocratic hotel, which has for years been a sort of Mecca to European wanderers, who finding life on the plan of the ordinary huge American caravansary, too public and *en évidence*, have sought with thankfulness the more retired existence of this favoured resort.

Most people object to that process of public cleansing usually regarded as the attribute of vulgarity; but one need not be vulgar to object to consuming one's roast beef and port wine under the public eye. It is not a pleasant sensation to come to look upon one's self as only an atom in the great scheme of a *table d'hôte*; one loses one's identity at such times, and with the loss of identity goes also one's self-respect. If you wish to retain your dignity in your own eyes and in the eyes of your world, keep yourself to yourself; and, above all, do your eating and drinking in private. Nothing is so much desired as that which is difficult of attainment; and no man has so many dinner invitations as he who is known to be fastidious, as to whose table he will honour with his presence.

On the evening of the same day as that on which Mr. Tremain started off on his lonely wanderings, Count Mellikoff sat in a private apartment of his hotel busy over a variety of despatches and papers, heaped together on a writing-table.

The day had been very warm, and even with the approach of night the atmosphere became but little less intolerable. The windows were open, but the latticed blinds were let down, and through the crevices the moonlight fell in broken lines across the walls, the rays of the small lamp on the

writing-table being too faint to outshine the moonbeams; the room, in consequence, had a half unreal appearance, through the mingled reflections of oil and moonlight.

A few blocks up Fifth Avenue, a barrel-organ was groaning out a popular melody, interrupted at intervals by a Strauss valse from the German band performing in Washington Square.

On the centre table stood a tray with a bottle of claret and Apollinaris water, and a glass bowl filled with cracked ice.

Despite the intensity of the temperature, Count Mellikoff was scrupulously dressed in evening costume, the gardenia in his button-hole showing white against his coat; beneath the flower the tiny red button of honour, that had so fascinated Miss James, stood out like a drop of blood.

With rapid, accustomed fingers, Count Vladimir opened one by one the letters and papers, scanning their contents with quick comprehension, and laying each document aside with accurate decision. As he came to the last, he put it down before him, and bending forward, touched a little gong that stood near his despatch-box; then he leant back in his chair and waited. A door leading to an inner room was partially open.

In the few seconds that intervened before his summons was answered, his face, seen now in the full light of the lamp, seemed to grow more pallid and anxious, the mouth beneath the straight moustache and beard grew hard, the eyes from out their shadowy caverns burned with a restless light, the cheeks appeared thinner, the forehead more pronounced, the hand as it rested on the table more nervous and attenuated, while the ruby in his ring glowed with an evil fire.

The sharp metallic echo had scarcely died away before the door leading to the other room was pulled noiselessly open, and a short dark figure emerged from the interior shadows, and came forward with a cringing, uncertain gait.

"Did the Eccellenza ring?" the man asked in Italian, standing before the Count, and speaking in a voice that was both unctuous and false.

Mellikoff looked at him for an instant before replying, while a smile of infinite scorn and disgust curled his lips.

"Yes," he answered shortly, and in the same language, "I did ring; I require your most valuable services, Mattalini."

The Italian bowed, and rubbed his hands together.

"Si, si, Signor," he mumbled, "I am but your servant; you command, I obey."

Vladimir paid no attention to this protestation save for another of those slow, scornful smiles, neither of which escaped the Italian's notice.

"You will take this letter, Mattalini," Count Mellikoff continued, lifting a sealed packet and passing it across the table, "to M. Stubeloff, who is at present in this city. You will deliver it into his hands and bring me back a written reply—you understand, Mattalini—a written reply."

There was that in the Count's tone that caused the blood to leap hotly within the Italian's veins; but he only bowed the more obsequiously as he replied:

"Si, Signor, I comprehend. The M. Stubeloff is he who represents our father the Tsar in this *inferno* of a country; he makes a sojourn here. *Bene*, he shall receive your packet, Eccellenza, from my own hand, and you shall have his Excellency's written response."

The man's voice was quiet and respectful enough; but Vladimir caught the sudden look of hatred that flashed up for one moment in his eyes, and knew that Mattalini was his secret enemy. As he turned away, Count Mellikoff spoke again:

"You will give directions below at the office, that should a lady ask for me she is to be shown up at once—at once; do you understand?"

"Si, Signor," replied the man, quietly; and then, with creeping step and drooping shoulders, he crossed the room, appearing for one moment in the moonbeams like the shadow of an evil spectre, and then vanishing as noiselessly as he had entered.

Once outside the room he stopped and drew a deep breath, lifting his bowed form, and, raising his right hand, shook the open palm and long fingers at the closed door.

"Curse him," he muttered, "curse him root and branch. May the evil eye never leave him now or hereafter, in life or death!" Then he turned and walked swiftly down the passage towards the stairs.

Count Mellikoff, left alone, leant back in his chair with a heavy sigh, passing his hand wearily across his eyes. The rival musicians had settled their difficulties by the withdrawal of the barrel-organ, and only the strains from the German band floated in, mellowed by distance. It was the "Blue Danube" they were playing, and unconsciously, Vladimir Mellikoff kept time to the pathos of the under theme with his thoughts. The look of anxiety deepened on his face, emphasized by the additional expression of sadness that crept into his eyes.

And, indeed, he had reason to be both sad and anxious; of late he had detected in Patouchki's letters and despatches a latent tone of distrust and suspicion, which he was quick to feel and to

resent.

There were no more veiled allusions to his past ability and faithful services; no assurances of his proved fidelity to the Tsar; no commendation of the work already accomplished, such as had come rarely, to be sure, but yet with sufficient regularity in the earlier stages of his mission. Rather were there peremptory commands, undisguised admonitions, and barely concealed innuendoes of dissatisfaction and distrust on the part of the Chancellerie.

"Rest assured I shall be the last to misjudge or condemn you, Vladimir," had run the chief's last letter; "but it becomes me to warn you that there are others who take a less lenient view of your position than I do, and who will not scruple to use every indiscretion against you. He who serves Russia must be prepared to find her not only suspicious, but ungrateful; it is your high privilege, Vladimir, to be counted among the most loyal of her servitors; but even to you may come the bitter lesson, that trifling with her decrees is followed by swift and sure punishment. The sworn presence of the woman, Adèle Lamien, in Petersburg, to which Tolskoi has given his oath, but which, as yet, we have been unable to verify, greatly complicates your position, since the Chancellerie knows that it was to find her you undertook your present mission. If, in the month that elapsed between your arrival in the States and her alleged appearance here, you have allowed her to slip through your fingers, you know full well the judgment that will be passed upon you. Your telegrams of late have been vague and uncertain, your letters no more assuring. In the meantime, and up to this present moment, we have been unable to put our hands upon this woman; she has disappeared as mysteriously as she came. And since there is room for doubt in the matter, we prefer to give you the benefit of that doubt, at least for the present."

This had been the substance of Patouchki's communication, and Vladimir could not mistake its tone, even if its meaning had not been further enhanced by the arrival of the Italian, Mattalini, who came ostensibly as a bearer of despatches, and with a request, which was more of a command, that Count Mellikoff would kindly retain him in his service.

A bitter smile had come to Vladimir's lips as he read the letter of recommendation and looked at the candidate for his favour standing before him. Well might Ivor Tolskoi have said, that lying craft and duplicity were stamped on his every feature. Vladimir Mellikoff but confirmed these words when he said, half sadly to himself, as the man turned away:

"And has it come to this, my chief? Am I to be dogged and watched by such a paid miscreant as this Italian? Is he to be my 'double,' and am I to stand or fall according to his testimony? Oh, Russia, hard indeed are you as a task-mistress, heavy your yoke of iron, and bitter your recompense!"

It did not require any great perspicuity to read through the Chancellerie's design in sending Mattalini to be servant to Count Mellikoff; and, from the moment the sullen Italian entered his service, Vladimir felt his evil star had arisen, and his evil hour arrived.

That Tolskoi should have been the one to swear to the actual presence of Adèle Lamien, or Lalloovich, in Petersburg, when he—Mellikoff—was hunting her down in America, troubled him but little. Firm in his own belief, and secure of his ultimate success, he paid small heed to a chance likeness that might easily have deceived so gay and volatile a young man as Ivor. Was it likely that he, Vladimir Mellikoff, an old and tried servant of the Tsar—old at least in experience if not in years—should be distanced and out-done by a yellow-haired youth still almost in his adolescence? Count Mellikoff smiled, and put the thought aside as valueless.

Much more disturbing and distressing was the scant news he received of his betrothed. Olga had written once or twice during the first two months of his self-imposed exile, and then suddenly her letters had ceased, and he could obtain no further news of her than what he could glean between the lines of the official telegrams in the daily newspapers. These were meagre in the extreme, only a bare mention now and then of the more important items of Russian politics, or her attitude on the Bulgarian question; but they at least told him that the Court was still at Petersburg, and therefore he knew Olga to be there also. With the beginning of the Russian summer she would accompany her Imperial mistress to Gatschina, or the baths, and then he felt he should indeed be separated from her.

Oh, for this weary time of probation to pass! This winning of one more honour, one more decoration, to lay at her feet; and then to claim his recompense, his prize, and with his first rapturous kiss upon her proud lips seal his fealty, and bid a final good-bye to worldly ambition and reward!

Immersed in such meditations, Count Mellikoff started nervously as a sharp rap on the door awoke him from his reverie; with the immediate self-command of long habit, he instantly controlled both face and voice, and calling out a "Come in," rose from his chair and walked to the middle of the room.

The door was thrown open with the words, "A lady to see you, sir," and then quickly closed. A slight figure dressed in black, and with a heavy veil drawn over the face, advanced towards him, and, as Vladimir came forward, a voice, high pitched despite its whispered words, said quickly:

"I have come, but I must beg you will not keep me long."

For answer Count Mellikoff bowed respectfully and pulled forward an easy chair.

"Let me ask you to be seated," he said in his suavest tones, "and pray remove your veil. I entreat,

I insist; the evening is stifling."

Without a word his visitor sank down upon the chair, and mechanically unpinned and removed her thick veil; the face beneath the hard outline of the black hat looked hollow and aged, the dark eyes burned feverishly, the thin lips were colourless.

Even to the most superficial observer great and marked were the changes that a few weeks had wrought there; it bore but a faint and blurred resemblance to the face that Mr. Tremain had looked on, not unkindly, two short months ago at the Folly.

Count Mellikoff turned to the table, and pouring out a glass of claret, added the ice and Apollinaris with careful exactness, and brought it to his guest.

"You must drink this, mademoiselle," he said. "You are looking very exhausted. *Ma foi*, I cannot compliment you on the temperature of an American summer!"

She took the tumbler from him and drank the contents thirstily; as she put down the empty glass her ungloved hand came within the radius of the lamp-light. It looked shrunken and attenuated, the rings upon the thin fingers hung loosely and jangled one against the other. She sat back wearily, looking up at him with an eager, anxious expression.

"I must ask you not to keep me long," she said again, "I may be missed at any moment. It is important I should return as soon as possible."

Count Mellikoff drew a chair in front of her, and sitting down leant slightly forward, joining his hands together by the finger-tips. His position and gesture recalled another like occasion in which she and he were the chief actors; she shuddered violently and drew back from him involuntarily.

"Miss James," began Count Vladimir, in his cold, even tones, "I beg you will believe that I am fully alive to your disinterestedness in thus coming to me, and also to the risks you run in so doing. But, as I told you during our first conversation, in seeking your co-operation in my work I was well aware you would have to encounter much that must of necessity be disagreeable to you, since defying or breaking the canons of conventionality is always an unpleasant experience. You, however, elected to become my partner in this work—an honour of which I am deeply appreciative—and you were content to chance the consequences if you could but work out your own ends in furthering mine. Am I not correct in my statements?"

"Yes, yes, oh yes," she replied, hurriedly. "You are quite right, perfectly correct."

"I can assure you, mademoiselle," went on Count Vladimir, with a little smile, leaning somewhat more forward until the heavy, languorous scent of the gardenia seemed almost to stifle her, "that I have no desire to detain you longer than is absolutely necessary, though, were I to consult my pleasure, I would willingly lengthen the visit of one for whom I entertain such sentiments of respectful admiration. However, since we cannot consult inclination, let us proceed to duty. What news have you to give me of our *dramatis personæ*? Let us commence with Philip Tremain."

At the mention of this name the girl's white face paled perceptibly, and her lips quivered. She loved Philip as well and as generously as it lay in her nature to love any one; and though he had passed her by, even when conscious of her love for him, it was none the less bitter to find herself in the position of a spy and informer against him.

Vladimir Mellikoff saw her hesitancy and read its meaning.

"It's not pleasant, I admit, mademoiselle," he said, "to be obliged to speak uncompromisingly of any one; especially must this be the case now and with you, when you recall Mr. Tremain's pronounced—friendship."

His jibe told. It was this very friendliness of Philip's attitude towards her against which she most revolted and beat her passion to tatters; she could better have borne his anger or hate, than his calm indifference of friendly interest.

"Mr. Tremain is no friend of mine," she said, sharply, and with a short, hard laugh; "his goings and comings are nothing to me, except in so far as they influence *her*. I have fully admitted to you, Count Mellikoff, the reason why I shall be glad to see her humbled and exposed. I do not know why she should nourish, and flaunt her beauty in my face, when it lies in my power to tear the mask from her and reveal her real self to the world that flatters and adores her every whim and caprice."

"You have both reason and cause on your side, Miss James," replied Vladimir, quietly. "A woman scorned makes a dangerous enemy. But pardon me, if I remind you who it is that has placed the power of enmity within your reach."

"I have not forgotten," she answered, with almost sullen bitterness; "it is to you, Count Mellikoff, I owe my weapon of vengeance. I am not ungrateful."

Count Mellikoff made a slight bow, and said: "And now as to this Mr. Tremain, where is he at present; and have you any further news of her?"

"Up to this morning, Mr. Tremain was not two miles distant from here," replied Miss James. "He had not left town since his last interview with—her, until this evening."

"And has he gone now?" inquired Vladimir, quickly, sitting upright in his chair. "This is news, indeed. Where has he gone?"

"That I cannot tell you, but certainly not to her. I called at his chambers ostensibly on an errand of charity, and the janitor told me he had left town suddenly. A little judicious questioning elicited the further details that he had taken but one small portmanteau, given his man a holiday, and ordered himself to be driven to a landing stage, too far down town for any boat to start from but an ocean or Sound steamer. He left no directions for the forwarding of his letters, and made no plan for returning. He has vanished from out our circle for the present, and I can give you no clue to his possible destination."

"It matters but very little," replied Vladimir. "When his presence is required, the orbit of his destiny will swing round to us again. We can dismiss him for the present, and be thankful he has so opportunely vanished into space. And of her, mademoiselle, of Adèle Lamien, as it is wisest still to call her, since even walls have ears?"

"You are over-prudent, Count Mellikoff, surely. Still, perhaps it is as well to keep up the farce to the end. Of Adèle Lamien's escape there is no fear. She is absolutely in our power; I know her every movement, her daily avocations; I can put my hand upon her at any moment. She is as unsuspecting and ignorant of the net closing so securely about her, as she is that in me she sees her deadliest foe. No, there can be no failure there; whatever else fails, I am sure of that revenge; that is," she added, suddenly, "if *you* are certain—if you are not deceived."

"No, I am not deceived," replied Count Mellikoff, slowly. "We shall not have much longer to remain inactive, mademoiselle; I do but attend a final telegram, and then the blow will fall."

"I hope so," answered the girl, bitterly; "and may it crush both him and her when it comes."

There was a moment's silence before Count Mellikoff spoke again; when he did, his voice had regained its lighter tones.

"And Madame Newbold and the charming Miss Dick," he asked; "what of them?"

"Still at Newport, on board the *Deerhound*; but they are to weigh anchor to-night for a longer cruise than any they have yet taken. After this evening it will be impossible to say when or where telegrams or letters could reach them." She stopped for a moment, and then said, abruptly: "And the warrant—you will have no difficulty about that?"

"I anticipate none. The first steps can, of course, be but preliminaries. There is no doubt of our securing an arrest, and that is our first move. With Mr. Tremain lost, so to speak, the *Deerhound* and her passengers started on an uncertain cruise; and, New York an empty wilderness, there is nothing to interrupt the march of events, mademoiselle. We may look any day now, any hour, for the consummation of fate."

"I am glad," again replied the girl; "yes, I am glad. And now I must go; it grows late. Have you any further instructions to give me?"

She took out her veil as she spoke, and tied it closely over her face, listening earnestly meantime to Count Mellikoff's low and rapid utterances. He spoke quickly, but with decision, and she acquiesced by her absolute silence.

As he finished she rose, and drawing her thin black mantle closely about her, walked rapidly towards the door. Vladimir Mellikoff held it open for her, but she passed him without word or salutation.

Half-way down the narrow passage a man overtook her, and turned to glance at her as he passed. It was the Italian, Mattalini.

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Later on that same evening, while Philip Tremain paced the deck of the out-going steamer with restless footsteps, and did battle with the conflicting emotions that raged within him, Patricia Hildreth, leaning on the arm of the most distinguished partner of the hour, floated languidly around to the strains of "Dreamland" waltzes, the most admired woman of all the bevy of fair women who filled the spacious drawing-rooms of the "Eversleigh" at Long Branch. Her draperies of lustrous silk were not more white than her fair face, nor were the jewels on her bosom more bright and cold, than was the blue fire of her eyes. Only her smile retained its old charm and sweetness, and belied the weariness that rested upon her brow.

She conferred distinction by her presence, and dispensed her favours with so royal a grace, the recipients of her bounty never stopped to weigh their value, or count their cost.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE ANGLAIS.



Ivor Tolskoi did not see Mdlle. Naundorff again for several weeks.

On leaving her at the private entrance of the Palace, he had walked away with Patouchki, towards the Chancellerie, where he was kept busily at work until late in the afternoon. He purposely avoided the Court circle in the evening, his presence not being officially demanded, for he felt he could not so soon again meet Olga's reproachful eyes, and pale suffering face; a longer interval must elapse before he could greet her in his accustomed manner.

The next day he heard of her sudden indisposition through that same Countess Vera, whose trivial words had first set alight the fire of vindictiveness in his heart. Ivor was a great favourite in all the Petersburg *salons*, and his appearance in Countess Vera's drawing-rooms at the magic tea-hour was hailed with delight.

A considerable number of the best known *beau-mondaines* were already gathered there, to whom the Countess—who was a pronounced follower of all customs English—was dispensing tea from out a most un-English-looking samovar. She welcomed Ivor with effusion, and bade him take the vacant chair beside her low gipsy-table, which with its dainty tea-cloth and royal Worcester tea-service, looked distinctly out of place in the large, formal, mirror-hung apartment.

"It is delightful to see you, *mon cher*," lisped the Countess in her high voice, looking at him languishingly; "it is ages, eternities, centuries, since you last honoured one of my *thés anglais* with your presence. Positively I believe you have not before seen my newest importation from that land of fogs and delights. Behold, this is my very last!" and she pointed gaily to the little table. "I assure you it is quite correct, quite *comme il faut*, cloth and all. I have it direct from my dear friend, the Duchess of Hever; it is an exact copy of the one used by the Princess at Sandringham. The dear English! one quite grows to love them."

And the Countess clasped her hands together dramatically, letting them fall with effect upon her plush tea-gown; against the ruby folds the diamonds and rubies of her rings flashed triumphantly.

Tolskoi laughed, his full-hearted boyish laugh, as he took the English tea-cup she held out to him.

"You have the courage of your opinions, Countess," he said; "it is well you are protected by Imperial favour. I know some houses in Petersburg, where were such frank expressions of Anglo-mania indulged in, they would be followed by a swift and emphatic caution from the Chancellerie."

The Countess shrugged her shoulders.

"*Ma foi*, I am no politician, no intriguer. I am but a silly moth of fashion, I do not even pose as a butterfly; but it appeals to my sense of *bien-etre* to be on good terms with England; and certainly it is more politic, since through our Grand Duchess, and our Tsarina, our dynasty is doubly allied with that country. But there, I see your eyes are wandering after your thoughts; I regret your disappointment, *mon cher*, for you will not see her here to-day."

Tolskoi acknowledged the raillery with another laugh. "Ah, Countess, you are the fairy of the story books! And why does not Mdlle. Naundorff honour your *salon* to-day?"

"Because she is indisposed," answered Countess Vera, looking up at him sharply; "she is obliged to keep her own apartments. I fear you took but poor care of the future Countess Mellikoff, monsieur, for she returned from the Petropavlovsk inspection looking like a ghost, and scarcely able to render her light services to the Tsarina, during the evening. Were the horrors of the Fortress so very pronounced, *mon cher*? You will have to answer to Count Vladimir, you know, if on his return he finds his *fiancée* changed. Already Petersburg rings with your openly displayed admiration for her cold beauty."

She laughed as she concluded, and got up slowly from her low chair. Ivor rose also.

"I shall be only too happy to answer any charge of Count Mellikoff's," he said, deliberately, "when he returns."

Then the Countess Vera glided away from him, and with a word here, a whisper there, a smile, a nod, a gesture, set afloat the rumour that society might look for another highly-spiced scandal, as soon as Count Mellikoff returned, for Ivor Tolskoi, not content with stealing away his *fiancée's* allegiance, intended to challenge him as well.

Wasn't it quite dreadful? Ah, yes, but very romantic! added the little Countess, to whom intrigue and scandal were as the breath of her nostrils.

The conversation now became general, and of course the favourite topic under discussion was the Imperial visit of yesterday to Petropavlovsk. Ivor found himself in constant requisition, and his ingenuity not a little put to the test in replying vaguely yet satisfactorily to the eager questions poured upon him.

All interest in the reunion had, however, flown for him directly he heard the cause of Olga Naundorff's non-appearance, and he managed as soon as possible to make his *adieux* to the Countess.

"Ah," said that little lady, lifting her eyebrows in mock despair. "So we are to lose you already! We cannot offer you a sufficient attraction, *mon cher*, to keep you in the absence of the Court favourite. Let me warn you again, Count Mellikoff is not a man to be trifled with."

"Nor am I," answered Ivor, incautiously; whereat the Countess Vera laughed.

"*Ma foi*," she said, "if you carry matters with so high a hand we shall have even a more dramatic *esclandre* than the Stevan Lalloovich affair. By the way, Ivor, what news is afloat concerning Count Vladimir, and his search for the missing woman? Oh, yes, you see it is no secret to me, the reason of his departure *là-bas*."

With which vague and descriptive term and a gesture equally disdainful, the Countess indicated the broad continent of America. To her intelligence and imagination, it was but a land of semi-barbarians and savages, where existence was not worth the price of her smallest luxury.

Tolskoi replied with a little bow.

"Ah, Countess," he said, "who can hope to keep any secret from you, and indeed who would wish to do so? I believe Count Mellikoff is fully satisfied with his advance so far; it remains only for the Chancellerie to express an equal approbation."

Then he bent over the Countess's hand, and with a passing compliment, made his *devoirs* and left her. She stood for a moment looking after him thoughtfully.

"I would rather not be in Count Mellikoff's shoes," she said to herself, "should he not succeed. Ivor Tolskoi is not likely to prove a light enemy, and Ivor Tolskoi means to steal from him not only his sweetheart, but his reputation."

Then she laughed a little as she turned gaily back to her gipsy-table, and her *thé à l'anglaise*.

Meantime Tolskoi on leaving the Palace Vera, turned his steps towards the Boulevard de Cavalerio, in the direction of his own apartments. His brow was clouded and his lips stern as he walked along the gaily-lighted streets. Evening had already closed in, the long evening of a day late in March, and the boulevard was full of life and movement.

Ivor, however, took but little heed of his surroundings, the news he had just heard concerning Olga, disquieted him not a little, the more so as his love for her was very great, and he felt that he alone was answerable for her mental and physical illness. He would have spared her had it been possible for him to do so, and had he seen any other way out of his difficulties. His first great object was to win her away from Mellikoff, whom he knew to be his only serious rival, and to do this he was willing to descend to any subterfuge.

He knew her nature sufficiently well to be aware that nothing short of falsity to her, on Vladimir's part, would serve to break even the light bonds that held her to him. Mellikoff's greatest power lay in the protested claims of this his first and only love; and she, in listening to his protestations, had been more swayed by the sense of her undivided sovereignty over him, than by any feeling of affection.

His years and his honours gave him the right to pose as a man of fashion, whose experiences of a certain kind were but foregone conclusions; instead, however, of pleading this as a reason for his wish to *ranger* himself, he actually offered her a virgin heart, that had known no warmer mistress than ambition, until he met her, and fell captive beneath her smile and proud, cold loveliness.

The paradox of his life was unique, especially in Petersburg; and Olga had felt a thrill of pride when she looked upon Vladimir's stern face, and noted the many distinctions of honour that marked his Court dress, and realised that she, and she only, had won his love and his devotion. She was the first woman before whom he had bowed his head in haughty pleading. It was no mean triumph, even for Olga Naundorff, to win and rule him as an accepted suitor.

All this Tolskoi realised to the full, and as his passion grew and strengthened, he determined to hesitate at nothing—no duplicity, no falsehood—if by it he could awaken suspicion in her mind, and so gain time for the perfecting of his own ends. Mellikoff's prolonged absence, and the unexpected meeting with Adèle Lamien in St. Isaac's, gave him ample basis upon which to work, and furnished him with a plan of attack, with so much of possible truth in it as to carry instant conviction to Olga's mind.

Her heart had always remained untouched, even by Vladimir's devotion; she had not therefore, the divine instinct of love, by which to sift out the false from the true.

And of Ivor it may be said, he believed enough in his allegations to make their fulfilment an easy possibility; it was, however, quite outside his calculations that Olga, by a real or feigned illness, should effectually shut herself off from his personal influence; the more so, as in a few days he was obliged to leave Petersburg, for his own estates in the Ural provinces, and his absence would extend over several weeks. What security had he against adverse circumstances and influences, while separated from her? Was it not even possible that Mellikoff might return triumphant? In which case, of what avail would be his schemes and intrigues?

Fate, however, was against him, for he did not see Mdlle. Naundorff before his departure. He was often at the Palace, frequenting the Court *salon* with sedulous regularity; but Olga never appeared, and he learned from the Countess Vera that she was still indisposed, "though not in danger of death," that little lady added, sharply, and with a meaning look at Ivor's downcast face.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### "FIND ME THE WOMAN."

It was early April, when Tolskoi reluctantly quitted Petersburg, and it was June before he returned.

The Court was still at the Winter Palace, for the winter season had been a long and cruel one, and even with the first days of June, summer advanced with but lagging footsteps, seemingly unwilling to awake the gay capital from its long frost-bitten sleep.

Political affairs also held the Emperor, whose presence in the metropolis was considered by his ministers to be a necessity; therefore, when Ivor shook off the dust of many days, travel and alighted from his *coupé* at the railway terminus, it was to see the familiar standard floating from the Winter Palace, and the tall lance-like spire of Petropavlovsk rising above the creeping waters of the Neva, and piercing the vivid blue of the sky beyond. The Troitski bridge and Boulevard-park were gay with passing traffic, and noisy with the cries of the flower vendors, whose trays and baskets overflowed with the blue violets of the Novgorod.

Tolskoi made his way at once to the Imperial Chancellerie, where he found Patouchki, as he had left him, seated at his desk and busy over what seemed to Ivor the identical despatches that had surrounded him two months ago. The only observable change in the chief's *entourage* lay in the open windows, and the softness of the west wind, as it stirred the papers with a gentle touch, and yet that had a bitter chill even in its caresses.

Patouchki, he thought, looked worn and harassed; the sallowness of the flesh tints, the deeper lines about his forehead and mouth, spoke of days and nights of ceaseless occupation and anxiety; and to Ivor, fresh from the almost limitless freedom of his wide frontiers, spoke also of the despotic rule and iron obedience with which those who serve Russia, must accept Russia's dictates.

The chief looked up, and greeted him as though but a day's separation lay between them.

"Ah, Ivor," he said, "so you are come back. You are welcome."

Ivor thanked him and turned towards his own desk, where lay neatly piled together various documents and papers, anticipatory of his expected return. Several newly cut quills were in the pen-tray, and a fresh unstained pad was opened invitingly. An amused smile came to the young man's face; it was all so absurdly natural and familiar; his absence of weeks faded away and became visionary and unreal, in this crude matter-of-fact light of official routine.

What did it matter to Patouchki that he, Ivor, had but just come from those distant, far-reaching steppes, where the shy game and wild animals flew before his footsteps, and the miles of low stunted forest ended only with the horizon line, to meet which the cold grey sky appeared to curve in an almost perceptible arch.

Standing alone, amidst his vast possessions, surrounded by a limitless silence, Tolskoi had better understood than ever before the meaning of the word freedom, and the unfathomableness of that undefined yet distinct craving for something higher and greater, than this world gives, which is implanted in every human heart. That vain, vague stretching after the unattainable, the blue flower of the mountains, the edelweiss of the Alps, which grows only on the heights of sacrifice and abnegation, and which, like the precious stone set with the jewels of suffering, is only attainable "to him that overcometh." Great indeed is his reward, "and his joy no man taketh from him."

Ivor had carried with him during all his long return journey by road and rail, a recollection of this wider outlook, and it gave him therefore somewhat of a moral shock to find the world of Petersburg—his world—busily engaged just as he had left it, not only not recognising any spiritual change in him, but not even aware of any better or higher aims than those attainable by intrigue, and shameless pandering to the powers of the moment.

Although he had stood face to face with God and Nature, for one brief moment, what was that to them? Here, in Petersburg, neither the Almighty nor Nature, had part or lot in the fierce, unending struggle called life.

With a shrug of his shoulders Ivor took his accustomed place, and as he broke the first seal felt the better influences fall from him, and the old power reassert itself.

If, as we are told, each soul has its fatal moment of choice, on which depends its final development, this was that moment for Ivor Tolskoi, and in accepting the old life with that careless gesture and cynical smile, he put from him for ever the higher calling that might have been his, and set his feet in the downward path of deterioration.

After a short interval of silence, Patouchki turned towards him with his old imperiousness of manner, and said, abruptly:

"About this woman, Tolskoi, this Adèle Lamien, whom you avow you saw. So far we have been unable to obtain any trace of her here, or learn anything concerning her movements; while on the other hand Count Mellikoff sends repeated messages of confidence as to his assured success, and

the infallibility of his approaching *coup de main*. So after all, my dear Ivor, you must have been the victim of a delusion. It is impossible for Adèle Lamien to be in Petersburg without the Chancellerie's knowledge."

"I was not mistaken, chief," replied Ivor, quietly. "I saw Adèle Lalloovich with my own eyes. Hers is not a face to be easily mistaken, and I would rather trust to my own instincts, than to Count Mellikoff's written assertions. Answer me one question, chief: has Vladimir Mellikoff ever, to your knowledge, seen Adèle Lalloovich?"

"Really, Tolskoi, that is a strange question," answered Patouchki; "frankly, I have never had occasion to ask him. The woman's face was common property to all Petersburg, at one time, through the photographers, and considering how well Count Vladimir knew Stevan Lalloovich, it is but natural to suppose his opportunities for seeing his mistress were numerous."

"Pardon me, chief, if I differ from you on one or two points," replied Ivor, with unwonted gravity. "In the first place, you must admit that Stevan Lalloovich did not for some time regard Adèle Lamien in the light of a mistress. He married her, remember, according to the ceremonies of the Church of Rome, and it was not until his passion for her grew cold, that he sought Imperial interference. He kept her exclusively at his villa across the Neva, and so long as he upheld her position as his wife was over-scrupulous in his care of her. I have reason to believe that not one of Count Stevan's boon companions, even Vladimir Mellikoff, was ever admitted to her presence. The marriage was secret and kept so, and as long as the infatuation lasted Lalloovich showed nothing but respect to her. *We* know how sudden was the Imperial ukase, and how little prepared she must have been for it, was shown by the tragic vengeance that overtook him. You understand then, chief, why I prefer to trust to my own instincts rather than to Count Mellikoff's assertions. I did once see Adèle Lalloovich in her happier days, and I am not likely to mistake her face now, even though disfigured by shame and crime."

Patouchki had listened attentively to Tolskoi's remarks; he replied to them by a slight gesture and the words:

"Granted all that you say is true, Ivor, I fail to see how not knowing personally this unfortunate woman is any real disadvantage to Count Mellikoff. He has every facility for tracing her, and we know by experience that the last evidence to build upon in such a quest is personal appearance. It needs but the adjuncts of paint, powder, and a wig, to deceive even Lucifer himself. No, no, that troubles me but little; what is more of an anxiety is my inability to trace in any way the accomplice who first assisted Adèle Lamien out of Russia, and who now—placing credence upon your words—has accomplished her return. Could I but put my hand on that accomplice, I would soon unearth the criminal."

Ivor made no reply save by a significant smile, and the slightest possible shrug. Patouchki noticed both, and felt irritated at the implied dissension expressed by them.

"You have doubtless some theory to advance upon this also," he said, sharply; "perhaps you will have the goodness to impart it to me."

"I do not know if my deductions may be dignified by so specific a title as theory, chief," Ivor replied, imperturbably; "I was but working out a small sum of calculation, which is at your service. In December last, Stevan Lalloovich was murdered, and the woman calling herself his wife—though a suspect, and closely watched as such—disappeared, vanished absolutely. In the following January, Count Mellikoff, at the request of the Chancellerie, undertook a mission of discovery in the United States, whither the woman, according to trustworthy evidence, was supposed to have flown. Two months elapse, and nothing is discovered or revealed; meantime, you receive satisfactory, if vague, reports from Count Mellikoff, and the Chancellerie is lulled to inaction for the time being. At the end of March, I meet Adèle Lalloovich face to face in the heart of Petersburg, where she has arrived without the knowledge of the Chancellerie, or its agents. That is my problem, chief; now to its solution. The same powerful influence—whose word was law, whose will was coercion—that got this woman out of Russia at a critical moment, has again been successful in sending her back to Petersburg, at a time when suspicion was thrown off its guard, and when Petersburg was a safer hiding-place than New York. That is my theory, chief, so far as I have worked it out."

Patouchki did not speak for several moments. He sat looking straight before him, the furrows wrought by anxiety and care plainly visible on his fallow, stern, set face.

The shadow of Ivor's veiled meaning was not lost to his quick perceptions; but he put it from him as unworthy of debate, and turning again to the young man said, even more sternly than before:

"I would advise you to be careful, Ivor, in your own interests; it is best to say less than you know, still less than you suspect. To me you may speak freely, indeed, I desire you to do so; but beyond these walls, have a care. What further conclusions do you draw from your elaborate premises?"

Ivor, with a quick flush at the suggestion of sarcasm in Patouchki's voice, replied quietly:

"But one, and to you, chief, my deductions may seem both absurd and impossible. You will remember the circumstances of the murder, and you will, I am sure, concur with me, when I assert that to plan and accomplish such a crime could not have been the sole unaided work of a woman. There must have been a bolder and surer brain behind, one who had sufficient reason to make the perpetration of the murder serve as a double revenge. Very well then, granting such

was the case, who would be better fitted or more competent to assist the accomplice in crime in her flight, than he who had helped her to her revenge? Self-preservation would render this shielding power compulsory, where she was concerned; for, once she fell into the hands of the Chancellerie, not her life only, but his, would be the forfeit. I have no doubt, chief, that he who helped Adèle Lalloovich across our frontier, has conveyed her back again, and—for a reason."

Tolskoi, as he finished, walked slowly across the room and back again, halting beside Patouchki. The latter looked up at him with a strange drawn expression upon his face. There was complete silence for a few moments; when the chief spoke it was in a very different voice to his usual harsh tones.

"And you would suspect——"

"I suspect no one, chief," answered the young man, his blue eyes flashing coldly. "I would only suggest that it is a strange coincidence at least, that shortly after Count Mellikoff's arrival in America, Adèle Lalloovich should reappear in Petersburg."

He said no more, but turning abruptly, walked back to his desk.

Patouchki sat immovable for a long time. Ivor's suggestion had fallen upon him with almost crushing certainty, while mingled with the sense of humiliation and irritation at being outwitted, was also the feeling of pain and sorrow that he, who had thus outwitted him, should be the one in whom he had most implicitly trusted.

Like Olga Naundorff, there appeared to him no room for doubt. Ivor's very appearance, his boyish *insouciance* and frank bearing, were but additional witnesses to that other's treachery. And yet, and yet, could it be true? Should he not do well to wait just a little longer before condemning the absent? Could he but find the woman, could he but put his hand upon her! Were she really in Petersburg now, what greater evidence of perfidy could he desire, with those damning proofs in the shape of recent despatches and cables lying now on his desk? He turned at last, and spoke with apparent effort.

"Tolskoi, your warning is understood. Find me the woman, here in Petersburg, and I shall then know how to act."

"I will find her," replied Ivor, with stern brevity; and, accepting Patouchki's words as a dismissal, he bowed and left the room.

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## CHAPTER XV.

### "THIS LITTLE HAND."

Late that same evening Tolskoi made his appearance at the Palace, in the outer *salon*, where he found the usual gathering of officials and *dames d'honneur* with their invited guests. His reception was a flattering one, and his return to the *beau-mondaine* circles hailed with acclamation.

The heavy curtains to the inner *salon* were closely drawn, indicative of the Tsar and Tsarina's desire to remain unmolested for the present. The evening was very warm, and most of the long windows stood open, the wind gently swaying the light draperies.

Beneath the casements the Neva crept by in slow rippling motion; the moonlight falling athwart its grey opaqueness, woke here and there sudden gleams of radiance. It struck also across the blank stone wall of the Trubetskoi bastion, accentuating its grim outlines, and, shooting far upwards, tipped the lance-like spire of Peter's Fortress with golden fire.

The Countess Vera was the first to welcome Tolskoi, smiling up at him, as she did so, and waving her great fan of scented lace to and fro languidly.

"Oh, are you returned, *mon cher*? What a pleasure! And what a surprise to *some one*! Oh, yes, she is here, and quite ravishingly beautiful. For the moment she is with her Imperial Majesty. How hot it is, *mon cher*, and what a cruelty that the Court regards no one's convenience, save its own! One so longs to be flying westward."

"Is it so unsupportable?" replied Ivor in his clear youthful voice, looking very handsome and young as he bent down towards the miniature lady. "Upon my word, when I am near the Countess Vera, I lose all sensation but one of supreme well-being."

"Ah, flatterer!" cried the little Countess, tapping him lightly on the arm with her fan. "See, here she comes."

At that moment the velvet curtains at the far end of the grand *salon* parted for a moment, to allow the egress of a tall slight figure, that moved down the room with an almost regal grace, and whose white draperies of soft lustreless silk swept after her in rhythmic curves.

It was Olga, and Ivor, as he beheld her after two months of separation, felt his heart leap up in glad response to her beauty.

Indeed, never had she looked more beautiful. The grand curves of her perfect figure, well defined by the low-cut bodice and falling laces of her dress, her head, carried with all its imperial haughty grace, crowned by the masses of her golden hair, her eyes so deep and wonderful beneath the dark level brows, the "pomegranate flower" of her mouth showing vividly against the colourless fairness of her complexion. She wore a sapphire and diamond ornament upon her neck, and the rare stones flashed and scintillated beneath her quick-coming breath.

Ivor stepped forward eagerly, his face flushed with the renewed ecstasy of her presence, and bending low before her, murmured some inaudible greeting. The Countess Vera watched them, a smile on her brilliant little face.

Olga drew back, with an almost imperceptible movement, and with a sudden dramatic gesture repelled, rather than welcomed, the young man. She had not seen him since that day when at his thinly veiled allusions, and suggestive words, all trust and belief in the truth and honesty of human nature died within her. In that brief hour's drive it seemed to her she had grown years older, and beyond that day she never looked.

With the melting of the snows of winter she had put from her whatever of softness or leniency belonged to her girlhood; with her womanhood she adopted the creed of her world, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

"Ah, Ivor," she exclaimed, controlling instantly both voice and manner, and holding out her hand in greeting, "so you have come back. What an eternity you have been away! Petersburg has been only half itself without you."

She smiled as she spoke, and the charm of her smile counterbalanced the indifference of her tones.

"Petersburg cannot have been so desolate without me, as I have been without Petersburg," answered Tolskoi, gaily. "Is one permitted, mademoiselle, to express one's admiration and pleasure in beholding you so radiant and so—happy?"

"One is permitted always to speak one's mind in this age of enlightenment," she replied, carelessly, though the meaning of Ivor's question had not escaped her.

"And what news do you bring with you?" she continued, a little hurriedly. "One is bored to extinction here, kept so late in town, and with such a dearth of novelty that counting flies upon the wall becomes an exciting pastime."

She had walked on as she spoke, separating herself from the Countess Vera by a slight farewell gesture; Ivor kept pace at her side. When they drew near one of the deep embrasured windows she stopped, and motioned Ivor to the low cushioned seat beneath. But he refused to avail himself of her invitation, preferring to stand at her side and look down upon her. She sank languidly back upon the velvet cushions.

In the music gallery, at one end of the great *salon*, the Household band were playing an arrangement of some of the wild, sad, national airs. The strains floated to them across the rippling current of light laughter and gay voices, like the under-chord of melancholy that runs always side by side with the happier melodies of life's theme.

Ivor was the first to speak, and, as he did so, Olga turned her head somewhat away from him.

"You ask me for news, mademoiselle; that is, indeed, somewhat singular. How can I bring you news from my wild province which should prove of interest to you? Let me rather ask that question. What do you hear from Count Mellikoff, mademoiselle, and how prospers his mission?"

She did not reply at once, and Tolskoi, watching her averted face, saw the jewels on her bosom rise with a sudden, quick, indrawn breath.

When she spoke it was with an almost exaggerated assumption of carelessness.

"I hear nothing of, or from Count Mellikoff." Then, after a moment's pause, "Are you more fortunate?"

"If you like to call it so. My latest intelligence is to the effect, that having been successful beyond his expectations, he looks forward to an immediate return, and to the reward he feels he has fairly earned."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, quickly, "you surprise me. And the woman—is she found?"

"According to Count Mellikoff's despatches he does not doubt his soon having her in his power," answered Ivor, slowly. "But as we know, mademoiselle, there is considerable truth in the old saying about the cup and the lip. Even Count Mellikoff may find himself mistaken."

"And you?" she asked, still with averted head, and in her assumed careless voice. "May not you be mistaken? It would seem that this—this woman—whom you say you saw, must after all, have been but a delusion of your too ready imagination, since Count Mellikoff is so certain of his success."

"No, I am not mistaken, mademoiselle," answered Ivor, gravely. "When Count Mellikoff returns victorious, it will be my turn to win distinction; and he who wins last wins best, you know. When that time comes, Olga, I shall claim my reward, and you will give it to me."

"Your reward?" she questioned, turning her face towards him at last, and looking up straight into his eyes.

"Yes, my reward," he replied, "my reward, which will indeed have been hardly won."

He stooped and lifted her hand. "This hand, Olga, this little slender hand; that is what I shall claim, and that is what you will give to me."

She made him no answer, save to let her fingers lie passively in his. Presently he bent and kissed them, then quietly putting her hand down, he turned and walked from her.

When near the great doors he looked back. She was sitting as he had left her, passive and unmoved, with the shadows cast by the lightly swaying curtains half shielding her face, and the grey darkness of the starless sky for a background.

Her hand lay as he had put it down, motionless upon her lap.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### ARRESTED!

It was September before Philip Tremain turned his face homeward again, leaving behind him the deep, silent forests, already donning their wonderful autumn tints, and the silent waveless lake on whose bosom his boat had so often lain motionless for hours, drifting slowly with the almost imperceptible movement of the tide; while he, stretched full length along its narrow planking, his arms folded beneath his head, watched with speculative eyes the clear blue of the heavens, the passing of the fleecy clouds, the sweeping up of the rain mists, the birth of the stars, the rising loveliness of the crescent moon.

He had sought these solitudes to find some specific against the unrest and discontent of his heart. He had flown from the haunts of men, craving the healing power of nature, trusting to find forgetfulness in her potent charm. He had come to the very fountain head of nature, hoping to forget Patricia, and behold, nowhere was she more present to him. Nowhere did the spell of her beauty, her contradictions, work such havoc to his peace of mind.

The very motion of the boat, the blue waters of the lake, the "breath of the pine woods," the low rapid flight of a bird across the sky, all reminded him of her, and brought her so vividly before him as to cause him defined physical pain.

It was not, however, as the Miss Hildreth of the present, that she appeared to him—the successful beauty, the indifferent woman of the world, the jesting advocate of to-day's hateful creeds—but rather as the Patty of ten years ago; the Patty of his first passion, the love of his adolescence, the clear-eyed, honest-hearted, bewitching, wilful Patty of his first devotion.

He had sought for forgetfulness, but he had not found it; and so, after a month spent in unsatisfying and unsatisfactory inter-communion, he repacked his portmanteau one glorious autumn morning, bid good-bye to his little skiff, and to the silent sympathy of the pine woods, cast a long regretful look over the deep blue lake, and turning his steps towards the inartistic railway station, five miles distant, by afternoon of the same day was crossing the tortuous streets of Boston, preparatory to ensconcing himself comfortably in a "Pullman Express" for New York.

He reached that city in due time, and was at once immersed in the rush and go of its restless life. The streets were all alight, the open windows of hotels and restaurants displaying brightly dressed groups within, to whom the chief aim of existence for the hour was apparently, the excellence of a favourite ice, or the proper quality of the champagne *frappé*. Along the side-walks a varied crowd was constantly passing; shop-girls mostly, in large hats and pretty frocks, whose tired faces were flushed and eager, or pale and weary, according as they walked alone, or kept company with some smart young male assistant. Philip noticed with a half wonder, that each of these work-girls wore long gloves half-way up their arms, and that their low shoes were "dressy" to a degree, with patent tips and abnormally high heels, on which they limped along with heroic courage. The theatres were not out as yet; but Delmonico's and the Brunswick, were in the full swing of early evening traffic, and many were the envious glances cast by the weary pedestrians upon the more favoured few of fortune within those hospitable walls.

As Mr. Tremain let himself into his rooms with a pass key, he could not but feel how dreary and un-homelike was such a return. He had not telegraphed word of his arrival, and so found himself the sole occupant of the dark building; his servant and the care-taker were evidently enjoying life abroad this fine evening, and apparently the other *habitués* of the place were similarly employed.

He threw open the door of his sitting-room and entered; the room was in semi-darkness, the only light being a reflected one from the street lamps, and the moon which shone through the unsheltered windows. The furniture looked ghostly in the chintz over-coverings, and the faint gleam of gilded picture-frames and mirrors only added a further touch of unreality. On the writing-table he could just distinguish a pile of letters and newspapers—the accumulation of four weeks' absence; they seemed to him as the hand of civilisation, stretched out across the month of isolation and solitude, which separated him from the world of yesterday and to-day.

Striking a match he lit two of the wax candles in a small girandole; but they served only to make the darkness more apparent, and he was turning impatiently towards his bedroom, still holding the lighted taper, when the sound of quick hurrying feet, coming rapidly up the stone staircase, arrested his attention.

Why these particular sounds should at once arouse surprise and apprehension in his mind, he could not tell; many footsteps passed up and down the staircase in the course of the twenty-four hours, and as a rule he neither heard nor heeded them. But something in these quick agitated steps, with the tap of a light heel on each stair, disturbed him strangely.

The wax vesta burned down to his fingers and went out; and as the red spark vanished the footsteps halted, and Philip could distinctly hear the hurried respiration and quick-caught breath of some one just without his door. No sensation of fear or supernatural alarm overcame him, he stood quite still and waited; and as he thus stood counting these brief moments of suspense, he felt himself to be saying inwardly, that he was not at all surprised, it was only what he had expected—this night visitant—it was what he had come home for, the reason why he dared not linger longer beside the blue lake, in the depths of the keen-scented hemlock forest.

The hurried breathing grew more distinct; an uncertain hand was laid upon the handle of the scarcely closed outer door; there was the click of the catch being pushed hastily back; the rustle of a garment, the quick steps along the short passage, and then a figure detached itself from the enshrouding shadows and stood irresolute upon the threshold of the room.

A figure closely muffled in a long dark cloak, and a shadowy hat, beneath whose wide brim a white face flashed, and two eager eyes looked out, peering into the half lighted obscurity beyond.

It was but half a second the figure stood there, irresolute; then with a swift impulsive gesture it moved forward towards Philip, and as the light from the candles fell full upon the face, Mr. Tremain started, and then advanced quickly.

"Miss Dick!" he exclaimed. "You, and here!"

"Oh, yes," cried that young lady, still breathing very fast and speaking incoherently, her words rushing one on top of the other. "Oh, yes, it is I, and I am so glad to find you! I've been here twice already, each evening since we came back, and the door was always locked. To-night I saw the lights and thought at least I should hear something about you. Oh, Mr. Tremain, I am so glad you have come back at last!"

She stopped and looked at him appealingly, clasping and unclasping her fingers, with nervous impatience.

Philip was the least vain of men, but for one moment certainly a terrible thought did half form itself in his mind, as to the motive which had induced this most compromising visit. Was his little friend Miss Dick quite off her head, and was he in any way answerable for her aberration? The idea was not agreeable.

"My dear Miss Dick," he began, gravely, but she interrupted him.

"Oh, I thought you were never, never coming back again! That idiot of a care-taker and your fool of a servant, couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me anything about you. They only grinned discreetly behind their hands. Oh, what have you been doing to stay away like this, and never leave a scrap of an address behind you?"

"Good heavens!" thought Philip, "decidedly the poor girl is out of her mind, and if Tomkins, or Mrs. Barker have seen her like this, it will be all over town in a week, and her reputation nowhere."

"My dear Miss Dick," he said again, but Miss Darling evidently had no ears save for her own voice.

"It's perfectly dreadful—awful," she continued. "It has nearly broken my heart, and to think you should be away just when you were most needed, and I *couldn't* find you. And it is so hot, too, and such a season to be shut up in New York. Oh, why didn't you come before? What made you go away at all? I told Esther I would never rest until I found you, because I knew you could do something. You have always been a good friend to me, Mr. Tremain, you won't refuse me, will you?"

The tears were in her bright brown eyes as she spoke, and Philip, roused out of his self-consciousness by the sight of her earnestness, found himself saying, impetuously:

"What is it I can do for you, Miss Dick? You know I won't refuse, whatever you may ask."

"Oh, then go, go at once! Why do you stand looking at me so stupidly?" she cried, impatiently. "Every moment is precious, and here you are wasting them by the dozen!" She stamped her foot. "Why don't you go?" she repeated.

Philip, made more and more bewildered, could only look at her in vacant surprise, a fact that had the effect of reducing Miss Darling to silence, out of sheer rage.

"Go?" he said, slowly, repeating her words mechanically. "Go?—but where am I to go?"

"Ah," she gasped, beating her hands together, "how stupid you are, how cold, how cruel! Where



are you to go? Why—but no, stay, it will be better if you come with me. Will you come—at once, directly? Here is your hat," and she caught up that article of apparel from off the table, and held it out to him. "Oh, do make haste," she cried, "do come with me at once."

But Mr. Tremain was not to be carried off in so unceremonious a manner. He took the hat out of her hand and laid it back on the table, before he said very quietly:

"My dear Miss Dick, I will go with you to any place you may name; but first, I do beg of you, compose yourself a little, and tell me what it is you want me to do; who it is you want me to see?"

Miss Darling pulled herself together with an evident effort.

"I want you to go with me to Ludlow Street Jail," she said, speaking very slowly, "to see Patricia Hildreth."

Had a cannon ball dropped at his feet, or the foundations of the house given way beneath him, Mr. Tremain could not have experienced a more sudden or appalling shock. The words reached him, but it seemed as if they came from miles away. He saw the dark, alert figure standing before him, whose bright, dark eyes never left his face, whose nervously working hands were so suggestive; but it lost all identity to him. It was not Dick Darling who stood there, entreating him to make haste, not to delay; it was some phantom, some Nemesis from out the past, whose words and entreaties were as unreal as the shadows that came creeping out of the corners, revealing bit by bit the cunningly-concealed spectres.

"Come with you to Ludlow Street!" he gasped at last, "to see Patricia Hildreth. What do you mean?"

"Oh, I mean what I say," cried Dick, her voice high and strained; "it is quite true. She is there. She has been arrested."

"Arrested!" gasped Philip. "Arrested—Patricia!"

"Oh! yes, yes," sobbed Miss Darling, the tears running down her face. "She has been arrested, she is in prison—she will die. She is innocent. I know she is innocent, I know it."

"Arrested!" cried Philip again, unable to grasp more than this one direct fact, and quite unmindful of Dick's tears and protestations. "Arrested! And for what?"

"Oh, that is the most terrible thing of all," wept Dick. "It's so horrible I don't know how to tell you; she is arrested on a suspicion of murder."

"My God!" cried Philip. "What horrible mockery is this?"

"Oh, will you come, will you come?" implored Dick, wringing her hands. "Oh, only think, she is shut up there all alone. She has been in that hateful place for hours, for days, while we have all been away dancing, and flirting, and being happy and amused; and she has been alone—all alone—shut up in prison with no one to go to her, no one to help her. Oh, I could beat myself for never knowing, never dreaming of her trouble!"

"It is horrible," said Philip again, in the same low, inward voice in which he had spoken since Dick's first outburst. "It is infamous. Who has done this thing? Who has brought this charge?"

He spoke sternly, and looked at Dick with eyes that burned her very soul.

"The Russian Count," she answered slowly. "Vladimir Mellikoff."

Mr. Tremain made no reply. He turned abruptly away from her and walked over to the window, and stood there looking out into the night.

The street was a quiet one at all times, and now even a solitary passing footstep echoed far ahead in the absolute silence. But had it been mid-day, with its roar and rumble of traffic, Philip would have heeded it as little as he now heeded the stillness and desertion.

His mind was far away, busy with a thousand wild conjectures, a thousand improbable suggestions. The whole of the past ten years appeared to roll themselves out before him, full to overflowing with dark suspicions, unassailable doubts, maddening possibilities. The poison distilled by Miss James's smooth tongue had done its work; how could he tell what those past years might cover, what deed or crime be hidden in their protecting folds?

Ten years lay between him and the Patricia of his youth; was his faith in her so unshaken as to admit of no room for doubt? Ah, there lay the sting! He did doubt, and in that lay the keenest torture of this terrible moment. Indeed, as he thought of her mocking raillery, of her pronounced indifference, her assumed cynicism and misanthropy, he felt there was room for doubt, there was room for suspicion, there was room for condemnation. Would to God, that he could proclaim aloud a like faith in her innocence, a like belief in her unsullied past, a like valour in her defence, as did Miss Darling! Would to God he had but the memory of her—pure and untainted—as she was ten years ago in which to trust, and by which to fight for her!

For indeed, he knew it would come to that; he should fight for her, yes, inch by inch, even though the game was a losing one. He would give her of his best, he would bring to bear all his possessions of legal acumen, brilliant pleading, forensic argument; she should not fail or be beaten down, if his strength and his reputation counted for anything.

He had loved her—yes—and he loved her now; he knew it; better perhaps in her hour of humiliation than in that of her triumph; and for that love's sake he would spend and be spent in her behalf. And yet, ah yet, there must be ever and always resting between him and her that

"Little rift within the lute,  
That ever widening, makes the music mute."

Meantime Miss Darling, standing where he had left her, watched him keenly. The eyes beneath the broad brim of her hat were soft and gentle, the tears still lay upon her cheeks. Instinctively she recognised the anguish of the man before her, and she respected it, looking on with reverent but unspoken sympathy. Presently she moved quietly across the room and approached him; he paid no attention to her; apparently he had forgotten her very existence. She put one hand timidly on his arm.

"Will you come?" she said. "Oh, will you come with me—to Patricia? Only think how long she has waited! Only think of Patricia—our Patricia—in prison on so vile a suspicion!"

He looked down upon her, and at the hand resting on his arm; his face was drawn and aged, his eyes dark with suffering.

"Yes, I will come," he said; "I will go with you. My God, only to think of it! Patricia—Patty—in prison, and for murder!"

He took up his hat mechanically, and followed her as she led the way down the dimly lighted stairs, their footsteps echoing drearily behind them. And so together they passed on and out of the dark building, and were swallowed up in the greater darkness of the night.

The wax candles in the wall-sconces burnt on all through the long night hours, and died out only as the early sunlight struck athwart their feeble rays. On the table lay the accumulated letters and papers, one marked across the face "immediate," in a strong, bold hand. On the floor a glove had dropped, and close beside the door lay a withered rose-bud, as it had fallen from Dick's breast-knot.

And the morning hours grew into noontide, and gave place to afternoon, followed in turn by the shadows of evening; but neither the master of the deserted room, nor the girl with the bright eyes beneath the wide hat, came back to it. And so another day was born, and died, and slipped away into eternity within the narrow confines of that solitary chamber.

END OF VOL. II.

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