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Author: Frederick Whishaw

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MOSCOW

A STORY OF THE

FRENCH INVASION OF 1812

BY

FRED WHISHAW

AUTHOR OF "LOVERS AT FAULT," "THE TIGER OF MUSCOVY," "A GRAND DUKE OF RUSSIA," ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

With a great jangling of sleigh-bells and much shouting from his driver, who addressed the three horses by every epithet both endearing and abusive that his vocabulary could provide, Count Maximof drove into the yard of his nearest neighbour, the Boyar Demidof. The visit was expected, for Maximof had sent a messenger to give warning of his approach and to notify the boyar of the object of his coming. The Count was accompanied by his wife, Avdotia, and his son, a child of ten years, as well as by the priest of the district who had been picked up *en route* at his own village. The child Alexander, commonly called Sasha, sat by the driver, a young serf of surly appearance and manners, while the three elders occupied—as best they could—the cushioned seat behind. This was designed to hold two with moderate comfort, so that the two outside passengers now fared indifferently, but the middle one, who was the Count, was comfortable enough.

Demidof, with his wife, met the party at the threshold of his house, greeting them with voluble and exaggerated expressions of welcome, after the manner of Russian hosts of his day, which was about one hundred years ago.

"You see I have brought him," said Maximof; "make your bow, Sasha, and ask after the health of your *nevyesta* (bride)."

Sasha advanced shyly. "I hope Mademoiselle Vera Danilovna is well?" he said, glibly enough.

"She is well and waiting anxiously to embrace her fiancé," said Demidof, laughing. "Go into the salon on the right and you will find her—what? You have a present for her—a doll—that is delightful; she will love you from the very beginning. That is the door."

Sasha disappeared in the direction indicated.

"The notary is here," continued Demidof. "We can complete the legal part of the matter immediately; after which you, Father Nicholas, shall perform your share of the ceremony."

Parents, priest and notary now proceeded to the business of the occasion, which was the betrothal of Alexander Maximof, aged ten, to Vera Demidof, who numbered seven summers, and the signing of the contract of betrothal. When this latter document had been read over and approved and signed by all present, the two persons chiefly concerned in the matter were summoned for the religious ceremony; little Vera came hugging her doll, while Sasha was arrayed in a tiny Lancer uniform, the gift of his bride-to-be.

The priest recited certain prayers and injunctions to which the principals paid scant attention; and, the ceremony ended, all sat down to dinner. At this function there were many servants, serfs of the estate, to wait upon the feasters; the food was good and plentiful, but badly cooked, the wine plentiful also, but indifferent, and the plates and dishes were filthy. Civilisation had not as yet reached a high standard in the Russia of that day, when, even in the best houses, though the furniture might be gorgeously gilt, it stood in dust and dirt; where men- and women-servants slept in the passages which were not aired during the day; where there were no arrangements for personal ablutions, and ventilation and sanitation were arts as yet undiscovered and undreamed of.

The two mothers gushed over their children, who chattered and played together quite unconcerned to think of the serious nature of the function in which they had this day taken a chief part. It was a beautiful thing, Countess Maximof observed, to see innocent love actually in the birth, as at this moment. The fathers drank heavily and made boisterous jokes at which all present laughed aloud, including the servants and his reverence the priest, who drank as hard as any and gave no sign of displeasure when the humour of the two manor-lords surpassed in its vulgarity even the wide margin which, in those days of much breadth in such matters, was considered permissible.

More than once Demidof rose to chastise some unfortunate serf who had in some manner displeased him. Neither of the gentlemen hesitated to use language towards the servants, whether male or female, too outrageous to be imagined, far less quoted, applying names and epithets of the most unsavoury and insulting nature.

"You are too kind and gentle with your fellows," said Maximof, who was, even in those dark days of tyrannous and brutal manor-lords, a noted bully towards his serfs, and was hated by them in consequence even more bitterly than he himself was aware. "You should send that clumsy devil to me for a week, I'd train him for you."

The clumsy devil referred to had spilt wine over his master's arm and had received a clout over his head for his carelessness. He now stood lamenting audibly by the sideboard.

"You may have the fool," laughed Demidof, "for five roubles, and train him or bury him as you please."

"Oh no, no, Barin, God forbid," cried the wretched man sinking upon his knees, "it is unlawful to sell me away from the land."

"Good—I take him—send him over to-morrow!" Maximof hiccoughed, totally unconcerned by the fellow's blubbering and entreaties, to which his own master paid no more attention than the

Count did.

When dinner was over the afternoon was well spent and it was time to set out upon the twenty-mile drive which separated the houses of the two boyars. The children were made to kiss one another at parting, a demonstration to which the lady strongly objected though without assigning a reason until after her future lord's departure, when she explained to her mother's superstitious horror, but to her father's boisterous amusement, that she hated him.

"He kicked me and hit me," she said, showing certain marks upon her limbs, "because I was tired of playing at soldiers with him and wanted to hug my doll. Don't invite him here again, mother!"

"But he belongs to you, my dove, you must love him, he is yours and you are his," cried the horrified parent.

"Then I'll spill wine over him and he shall sell me for five roubles, as father sold Gregory just now!" said the child. Whereat the mother crossed herself and muttered a prayer and the boyar laughed boisterously.

Meanwhile the Maximof family sped homewards through the gloom of the early winter evening. The cold had a sobering influence both upon the boyar himself and upon the priest, who was with difficulty aroused from torpor, however, when his village was reached and the time came to drop him at his own house.

The driver, Kiril, had found friends at Demidof's house anxious to entertain him in return for his dismal accounts of the cruelties and abominations practised by his boyar upon the serfs of his estate.

"We are dogs, no better," he had told them; "you may thank God, brothers, that you are not in our place."

"Go on and tell us all about it," said one, plying Kiril with more drink. Kiril had many a tale to tell at the price of a drink for each recital, and when true stories failed him he employed his inventive powers.

"You, Gregory, had better hang yourself rather than come our way," said he, addressing the man sold in a fit of rage by Demidof at the dinner-table.

"There is no need," said Gregory. "My master is not a fool when he is sober; he knows two things, one that he cannot sell me away from the land and the other that I am worth more than five roubles to him. He will remember these two things when he has slept, and I shall not go."

"Good; so be it; remain and be happy! What in the devil's name does your master think of to mate his child with the whelp of a wolf? Like father like son; one day he will eat her."

"In twelve years much may happen. Drink, friend, and tell us more of the doings of your master, who must indeed be a very child of Satan, if all you say is true."

"It is true. Listen now how he knouted Masha, the herdsman's daughter; some lords have respect for the weakness of a woman, but he has none."

Kiril was still narrating and still drinking when summoned to put in the horses and start homewards. By this time he was far from sober.

On the way home he slept peacefully, the clever little horses knowing the road homewards and keeping faultlessly to the track.

The priest had been left at his house and there remained but four or five miles to drive when the astute little animals suddenly shied with one accord, sending the sledge skidding across the road and bringing it up violently enough against a pine-tree.

Maximof was rudely awakened from his sleep. His wife uttered a cry of alarm, the boyar swore loudly and thumped Kiril on the back. Young Sasha cried out incoherently and pointed among the trees on the right.

Kiril's head was sunk upon his breast; he snored in a drunken stupor and took no notice of the Barin's blows, which did not want for energy.

"See, father, wolves!" cried Sasha excitedly. "I have seen six, there is a seventh—oh—eight—nine!"

Maximof looked about. "It is true," he said, "they follow us."

"Husband, is there danger? Whip up the horses, Kiril!"

"Kiril is drunk and useless, he will not wake," replied the Count; "I will try other means." He took the whip and stood up to belabour the wretched sleeper about the neck, face and shoulders.

Kiril awoke with a roar of pain and drunken rage; he turned in his seat and struck savagely at his master, swearing horrible oaths.

"Sit down and hold the reins, you fool," shouted Maximof. "There is a pack of wolves at our heels."

There was something in the Barin's aspect at this moment that gave the drunken man pause. It was not the thought of the wolves, for he never glanced at them. He ceased to swear and rave and sat down obediently to drive. Five minutes later the fellow was asleep again, the reins dangling. By this time the wolves had grown more daring; several had left the cover of the forest and followed the sledge in the open moonlight, going at a hand-gallop, grey and lank and weird enough to see. There were still two miles to go. A gaunt beast suddenly sprang out at the off

horse, causing both animals to shy violently across the road.

Sasha uttered a cry of terror; the Countess caught her husband's arm; Kiril half awoke and joggled the reins.

"The wolves will attack us before we reach home. We are lost, husband," said the Countess.

"Take the reins from Kiril, Sasha," said Maximof, standing up. The boy obeyed, taking the reins from the sleeper's nerveless hands. Then Maximof suddenly caught Kiril by the waist and pulled him backwards. The Count was a large and powerful man, the other was a wisp in his arms. Kiril awoke and struggled. He caught the box-board with his heels, but Maximof kicked them free. Kiril struck at him and cursed, but feeling himself being forced over the side of the sledge he clutched with his hands and held on.

"Husband, what are you doing?—the wolves—the wolves!" shrieked the Countess. But her husband replied laughing that there were many trees, the fool could climb one if he was not too drunk. "Take the butt of the whip and strike his hands," he added, but his wife only shrieked and clung feebly to his arm.

Maximof forced one of the hands away and contrived by a united effort of arms, legs and body to expel the wretched Kiril from the sledge. But the other hand clung desperately for a moment as the man was dragged along. Maximof kicked it free.

There was a shriek, and in the moonlight each wolf seemed to make for one point in the road. Then came a scrimmage and a tumult of snarling and fighting, and now the sledge was out of sight and hearing. It went on its way without further pursuit, save for one or two stragglers who soon found that their comrades had chosen the wiser course, and went back in hopes of being in time for a share of such good things as the gods had provided.

That night an old hag from the village came to the mansion to inquire for her son Kiril. From the servants she learned no certain thing, but each had suggestions to make as to Kiril's non-arrival. The story of Sasha's nurse was grimly suggestive. When going to bed Sasha had shown off his new Lancer uniform, and, being in a boastful mood, had volunteered the information that he had held the reins while father and Kiril were fighting.

"Why did they fight?" asked the nurse, but Sasha had suddenly remembered that his mother had bidden him remain silent as to this episode, and he replied that he did not know. "Kiril was drunk," he said, "I know that."

Presently the hag found her way into the presence of her manor-lord and accused him, shrieking, of the murder of her son.

"To the wolves you threw him," she cried, "deny it if you can!"

Maximof laughed; he rang the bell and bade his servants take her to the flog room and see that she had her full twenty strokes.

"They that throw to the wolves shall to the wolves be thrown!" shrieked the woman as she was removed; but Maximof laughed and bade the servants add five strokes. Presently he rang again in order to ask whether his orders had been obeyed.

"To the letter, Barin," said the trembling serf; "twenty-five strokes; after her punishment, being unable to walk, she was carried away to the village."

"Good," said Maximof; "if any serf repeats the words she has spoken this night, he shall receive a double punishment."

As a matter of fact the hag had been allowed to go unknouted. "It is enough to have lost your son," her pitying fellow serfs had told her; "go quickly and remain lying and groaning to-morrow, in case the steward calls to make sure."

"Those that throw to the wolves shall themselves feel the teeth of the wolves," murmured the old hag as she took her departure, and the saying was repeated broadcast among the villagers next day, in spite of the manor-lord's threats, for this old hag had some reputation as a *znaharka*, or wise woman, and her curses and blessings were matters of considerable interest to the peasantry around.

CHAPTER II.

Maximof employed an agent to do the dirty work of the estate; he rarely came personally in contact with his people and scarcely knew the names of any of them. Kakin, the agent, was no better liked by the peasants; he was a bully, and rarely failed to improve when he could upon the severity of his master's measures towards them. A week after the events above recorded Barin and agent sat together in the estate office over the weekly consultation, when the question of the intended marriage of a serf came up for discussion, a man of the name of Ivan Patkin.

"He may marry whom he pleases in his own village," said the Count. "Who is the woman?"

"Timothy Drugof's daughter Olga, in this village," said Kakin; "Ivan of course lives at Drevno." This was a village within the boundaries of Maximof's estate, but seven miles at least from the manor-village of Toxova, in which Olga lived with her father.

"Tell the fool to marry a woman in Drevno or remain a bachelor," said the Count; "you know very well and so do the peasants that I will have no intermarrying amongst the villages."

"I will stop the proceedings then. I told the fellow of your objection, but he was impertinent—I will not tell you what he said."

"You should have given him the knout; do I pay you wages to sit and listen while my peasants use improper language towards their Barin?"

"I gave him the knout; but he is, as you may know, a sulky devil, and, instead of doing him good, the flogging caused him to abuse and threaten me to my face; I was somewhat afraid of the man; he is not one to meet alone in the forest on a dark night."

"Afraid of a serf? You forget, my friend, that by the admission you may endanger your position; for if you show yourself useless to me we must part. My authority must be absolute and you are my representative. As for this marriage," the Count ended, "I do not desire that Olga should leave this village—she is useful at the manor-house."

"I will do my best," said the agent. He did not mention that Ivan Patkin and his friends at Toxova had practically turned him out of the village with contemptuous words and threats directed not only against himself but also against the Count; nor that the peasants had interfered at the very beginning of Ivan's flogging and had rescued him by force.

"Tell the Barin to interfere with Ivan's marriage if he dares!" one of the peasants had said. "We would deprive him of no rights; we both are and remain his serfs and live upon his land; he loses nothing if one of us goes from one village to another!"

The agent's way of "doing his best" in this matter was discreet. Knowing that the day fixed for Ivan's wedding was the following Saturday at Drevno, this being Thursday, he contrived to be absent for two days in a distant part of the estate; so that when a deputation of peasants from Drevno came over to fetch the bride early on Saturday morning, he was not in the village to prevent them.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the Barin would have been unaware in such a case of the disobedience of his people; but it so happened that the girl Olga was required that day at the manor-house in order to act as substitute for one of the servants, who fell ill. Thus Olga's absence was remarked and commented upon and Maximof himself happened to be at hand and heard the fact mentioned.

"Where is the wench then?" he asked.

The woman who had been into the village to fetch Olga replied that the peasants had told her it was Olga's wedding-day and she had gone to Drevno to be married.

"What?" roared the outraged Barin; "married?—to whom?"

"To a peasant in that village," replied the trembling messenger, "one Ivan Patkin."

"Where is Kakin—why has he allowed the wench to go?" asked the Count, almost speechless with rage. Then he remembered that the agent was away collecting fines and duties in other villages.

"Let Kiril put the horses to," he roared; "I will go myself."

Some one tremblingly reminded the lord that Kiril was dead.

"Some other fellow then," he roared.

Maximof took his knout, an ugly leathern whip of many tails, and paid a visit—while waiting for his sledge—to the parents of Olga, who protested with tears that the agent had never told them of the Barin's desire that Olga should not be married out of her own village.

"As if we should dare to disobey the Barin's will," they cried. "It is not even as though we had wished the wench married there; naturally we would rather keep her in Toxova, near ourselves—but go she would!"

Maximof laid about him freely with his knout; he spared neither age nor sex, and the cries which arose from the household included those of Olga's grandparents as well as her parents, and of the children small and large. All wept and scolded in a body when the Barin had departed, blaming one another and the agent and the Barin himself, but principally Olga, for bringing this trouble upon them.

"There is Peter Kuzmin in this village," they cried, "who would have had her; but no, nothing would do but to marry Ivan Patkin, who is a devil, not a man! If the Barin fetches her back, she shall marry Peter without delay. Are we all to suffer again for her sins?"

Meanwhile the village of Drevno was *en fête*. The bride and bridegroom drove hither and thither, from house to house, receiving congratulations and presents, and drink flowed freely. The wedding ceremony would take place early in the afternoon, if the priest condescended to turn up in time. He was not one to put himself out, however, for a mere marriage of serfs. Maidens walked about the village singing the dirges and melancholy songs which are or used to be a recognised prelude to the marriage of one of their companions. In these songs all the possible sorrows and troubles of matrimony are reviewed, and the poor bride is reminded again and again that she is plunging into a bottomless sea of woe and would have done far better to keep out of the married state.

In some cases the bride accompanies this cheerful band, taking part with the maidens in foretelling her own troubles by singing the solo verses, which consist of a repetition of the dismal

prophecies with her own acquiescence thrown in. But Olga preferred to drive around with Ivan of whom she was extremely fond; for this—strange to say—was a love-match, a rare thing indeed in those days and among the serfs, whose marriages were usually arranged for them by their manor-lord with a view to the particular needs of any portion of his estate in the matter of population.

Olga was merry this day and happy. She knew very well that there might be trouble; that the Barin would be displeased and would cause old Kakin to threaten all manner of pains and penalties. But in Drevno the peasants were not afraid of Kakin; they knew well enough that he dared not fulfil his threats, and that he would prefer to report to his master that certain floggings had been inflicted than actually inflict them. As for the Barin himself, he rarely came to the village. The people of Toxova lived, as it were, under his eye; but at Drevno it was different, and the peasants consequently enjoyed a certain measure of independence, won for themselves and by themselves out of Kakin, the agent, whom they had successfully intimidated.

Even the Barin, Olga knew, could not unmarry her, once the church had performed the rite; neither could he separate husband and wife, though he might compel Ivan to transfer himself to Toxova.

It was a quarter to two when the Barin came swinging into the village at a hand-gallop, his three-horsed sledge—or *troika*—travelling at a splendid pace over the hard snow road. The wedding was to take place at two and Olga was now being dressed by her maidens at the house of Ivan's parents. The melancholy songs were in full chant; the bride and chorus were all, as the occasion demanded, in tears; every girl wailing and sobbing and singing as they decked their companion for the solemn rite.

Count Maximof drove straight to the Starost's house; this was the elected chief-peasant of the village, and the Barin put up his trap here, leaving with Gavril, the driver, a message for the Starost that if he were too late and the marriage should have taken place against his wishes and commands, the entire population should be not only fined but flogged also.

The Starost sent over for Ivan Patkin, the bridegroom, and communicated to him the disturbing news: the Barin had arrived to stop the wedding. The Starost was a sturdy independent man, like the rest of the Drevno villagers; he was entirely on Ivan's side in the matter.

"But the Barin is the Barin," he observed, "and the priest will obey him. He has gone straight to Father Michael's. What is to be done?"

Ivan Patkin stood and cursed and fingered the axe which hung at his belt. He was anxious to marry Olga, to whom he was sincerely attached. This fatal-looking hitch at the last moment was maddening. His eyes seemed to grow red in a sudden access of rage and of hatred for the Barin.

"I will kill the devil," he said. "The old men tell us that the peasants of the next estate rose against their Barin, who oppressed them, and slew him, and that the Tsaritsa Catherine closed her eyes. Let us do the same."

"No," said the Starost; "that is going too far, Ivan. The Tsar Paul is not like his mother and the laws are different also. Disappear in the forest with Olga, if you will, and be married to-morrow, or to-night after the Barin has gone. You will be knouted, no doubt, and fined, but you will have Olga."

Ivan was too wild with rage to argue quietly. "I see there is no help to be got from you," he said, and he withdrew hastily to take counsel with others. On his way through the village he met the Barin himself returning from his visit to the priest whom he had abused and threatened and browbeaten until the unfortunate cleric began to fear that the furious man would end by knouting him, but Maximof dared not raise his hand to beat the priest, though his fingers itched to flog some one. It was at this moment that he met Ivan.

Ivan, though furious, nevertheless removed his cap upon encountering his master. The peasant in him was too strong. Away from the Barin he would have told himself that he would not only not salute the Count if he should meet him, but that he would fall upon him and strangle the tyrant. In the Barin's presence he was cowed and his independence and courage vanished, though not his hatred.

"Who are you?" said the angry Count.

"Ivan Patkin," replied the man.

Then the Barin fell upon him, raining abuses and curses and knout-blows; and in a moment the wretched peasant was upon his knees blubbering and beseeching, rage in his heart, but in his veins the craven blood distilled by generations of oppression.

"Come to Toxova for a flogging once a month for a year," said the Barin, panting with his exertions; "and when you come Olga shall come also. I will show you both, and the rest of the village too, that I am to be obeyed. As for marrying, you shall marry the oldest hag in your own village, since you will have a wife."

Count Maximof felt somewhat relieved, but he continued his walk to the house wherein the bride had been dressed for her marriage. He found her alone, deserted by her maidens—who had fled from the wrath to come—and he flogged her without pity and without regard for her shrieks and her appeals for mercy.

Then, his anger somewhat appeased, he repaired to his estate office and bade them bring him tea, sending a message to Gavril, the driver, that he would return as soon as the horses should be

sufficiently rested. Olga might return in his sledge, he added, with fine generosity; she deserved to be made to walk through the forest night or no night, but he would let her drive in mercy.

CHAPTER III.

The horses had brought their master to Drevno at a hand-gallop, and required some little time for resting. It was half-past four before the *troika* drove up to the door, and quite dark. Olga sat huddled up on the box-seat beside the driver and she was still crying, her body heaving at regular intervals with deep-drawn sobs.

The Barin, having been obliged to wait for more than two hours in the close, hot room which served as his agent's office, was sleepy; he settled himself comfortably in the sledge, well wrapped in furs, and presently dozed off. Soon he was snoring loudly.

"Olga," the driver whispered, "don't be startled and make a noise—I am Ivan."

Olga did start, and that violently; she would have cried out, too, but Ivan placed a great gloved hand upon her mouth and prevented her.

"Ivan, he will awake and recognise thee, and we shall be knouted as we sit," she whispered presently, when he had removed his hand. "Why did you come, and where is Gavril?"

"Gavril lies drunk in the Starost's stable; he has had more than his share of the wedding *vodka*; I made him drunk in order to take his place. And I have come because—do not be a fool and cry out—because the devil behind us has lived long enough; as it has not been our wedding-day it shall be his death-day."

"Ivan, you dare not—you must not. He is a devil, as you say, but to murder him would do us no good. The Tsar's officers would come and take you from me and carry you away to Siberia, and what should I do then?"

"Bah! they must catch us first. We have these horses. We will drive all night by the roads, so as to leave no track, and we will come to the village of Ostrof, where I have relatives; they will take us in."

"And then?" said Olga, trembling so that she could scarcely speak.

"Their Barin will not ask questions; he will have us registered as his own and there is an end."

"But he must know why we have fled from our own Barin; he will ask and require to be satisfied."

"We will say that he was a devil and beat us, and that we would bear with him no longer."

"Do not shed blood, Ivan," said Olga. "I should fear you all my life long."

"Bah! to slay such vermin is to do God's service; do not be a timid fool, Olga; we cannot live without one another; is not that a certain thing?"

"That is certain; but I would rather love you without fearing you——" Olga's speech was interrupted at this moment by the sudden shying of the shaft horse, a movement which caused her to grab the narrow board on which she sat and Ivan to collide violently against her, so that both nearly toppled out of the sledge. It caused the Barin to awake suddenly, also, and to launch at Ivan's head a string of curses and abuse.

Ivan remained silent, rather than apologise in the cringing phraseology of Gavril, for he did not wish to be recognised at present.

But the Barin's drowsiness was not yet slept off, and in a minute or two he was fast asleep again, and snoring.

"Olga, do you know what the horse shied at?" whispered Ivan.

"No," said the girl; "unless it was a shadow in the moonlight."

"Keep a guard upon your lips and I will tell you; it was a wolf. At this moment I can count five, taking both sides of the road; watch between the trees a hundred paces from the road; you will see them creep from shadow to shadow, keeping pace with us."

"Holy Mother of God!" exclaimed Olga, piously crossing herself; "yes—I see them—Lord have mercy upon us. I cannot forget Kiril who died but a week ago!"

"Do not fear," said Ivan; "these wolves may yet prove to be our best friends."

Olga pondered in silence over this enigmatical utterance of Ivan's. She concluded at length that he must have meant it would be dangerous to stop in order to murder the Barin, as he had threatened to do, and that therefore the wolves must be regarded as good friends having thus prevented the intended crime. The discovery gave Olga much comfort.

"The wolves are more and more," said Ivan presently, "and they come in closer and closer to the road. There are at least a score, or it may be thirty; doubtless it is Kiril's pack."

"Lord save us!" ejaculated Olga.

"Bah! if there were three hundred there would be no danger behind these good horses—I would race the brutes from now until daylight!" said Ivan. "There is nothing to fear, Olga, only hold tightly to your seat."

Olga shuddered, but did as she was bidden. The wolves, as Ivan said, increased every moment in numbers and in audacity. They made no sound, but they cantered nearer on each side of the road, but twenty paces from the sledge, while others followed behind. The three horses, harnessed abreast, snorted with terror; they laid back their ears and dragged the light sledge at a hand-gallop. Ivan was a practised whip—every Russian peasant is—and controlled the pace at his desire. The Barin slept heavily on.

"How many there are, and how bold they grow!" whispered Olga. "Are you sure we are safe, Ivan?"

"Only hold on tightly," said Ivan hoarsely. A moment later he added:—

"Now, especially, hold on very tightly, Olga, with both hands; there is a bit of rough road here, and we may jolt."

Almost at the instant the off runner of the sledge struck the stem of a pine-tree which stood at the very edge of the road. The vehicle lurched heavily, glided perilously for a moment on one runner, then righted itself. The frightened horses started away at full gallop.

Olga, in spite of having clutched her seat with both hands, was thrown sidelong against Ivan, who grabbed her with his left arm, while with his right leg he touched and shoved off from the ground; this it was that righted the sledge. As the horses dashed forward both Ivan and Olga jolted back into their places, Olga shrieking with terror, but gripping the board upon which she sat so tightly as to be perfectly secure. Ivan sat still, looking neither to right nor left. He seemed to employ all his energies in getting the horses once more under control. They had travelled thus, at lightning speed, for two hundred yards, a distance which was covered in a quarter of a minute, before a shriek from behind caused Olga to cease, suddenly, her own screaming and look round.

"The Barin—the Barin!" she cried. "He has fallen out, Ivan!—stop the horses—we must save him!"

"Stop them who can—do not speak foolishness, Olga; you see that I am pulling with all my strength!"

Olga kept silence. There followed a second scream from behind; then a cry that seemed to be broken off in the middle.

Ivan took off his boots and threw them in the road. "Do the same, Olga," he said.

Olga obeyed, but half understanding. A few wolves were still following the sledge, but most had remained behind.

"Throw your coat also," said Ivan, "and your head kerchief!"

All these garments were afterwards found by the horrified persons who went out to look for the Barin, together with the heels of the Count's boots, and a few shreds of his clothes. Olga's boots and Ivan's were in pieces and partly eaten, and her coat and red cotton headkerchief were in shreds.

"This is where the Barin fell out," said the searchers; "the two others clung to the sledge a little longer, it appears, before being thrown out and pulled to pieces. It is horrible!"

But many of the peasants in Maximof's villages were of opinion that the Barin's fate was well deserved. He had been a tyrant and oppressor of the poor. "It is the finger of God!" they said. Why two innocent peasants should have been sacrificed at the same time was a puzzling factor in the matter. As for the sledge it was duly brought back by the three hungry horses next day.

"Dear Lord, look at them!" said the peasants at Toxova; "they have run half a hundred miles—chased by wolves throughout the night, only think of it! And the sledge empty behind them—bah! it is horrible!"

The new master at Ostrof asked no questions. He registered Ivan and Olga by the names they chose to give him. Two new serfs were a godsend not to be despised. It was as though some one had paid in an unexpected sum to his credit at the banker's!

And the reputation of the old hag at Maximof's manor-village increased wonderfully from this day. Her blessing upon crops, marriages and so forth doubled at once in value; while as for her curses, why, from this time onward until she died, if she but launched a malediction, the victim might as well go and hang himself for all the pleasure life would afford him until the wise woman was pleased to withdraw it.

CHAPTER IV.

For many a year after the tragic death of his father the new manor-lord, little Sasha Maximof, would not be induced to live at the estate. He was afraid of the woods, wherein for ever lurked, according to his morbid fancy, hoardes of ravening wolves intent upon his destruction; he was afraid of his serfs, a feeling originated and fostered by his mother, who was herself afraid of them, well knowing the hatred they had borne towards her husband and fearing lest their malice should be extended towards his child. She desired no more than Sasha to live in the country. The

property was placed in the hands of a steward—somewhat more merciful than deposed Kakin—who contrived to extract a fat living for the widow and her son by exploiting their unfortunate serfs to the utmost limit permitted by the law. The Countess lived with Sasha in St. Petersburg where he saw little or nothing of his "betrothed" for two or three years, after which little Vera Demidof was sent to Paris to be educated in a French school. Vera's aunt, Demidof's sister, had been married to the French Minister at the Court of the Emperor Paul, after whose tragic end he had left the country and returned to Paris, taking with him his Russian wife. Demidof was proud of his French relations and was glad enough to allow his child to receive her education under such promising auspices.

At the age of sixteen Vera returned to St. Petersburg quite prepared to find her countrymen and women little better than barbarians as she had been taught by the elegant Parisian folk to believe them.

"Bears, *chérie*, you will find them, every one," her French relations assured her; "they have no manners and no education, how should they? and your fiancé, he will be a bear like the rest, you will run from him, run back to France; we shall find you a fiancé who is not a bear!"

"Bear or no bear, we are pledged to one another and there will be no running away from him!" said Vera. Whereat her French relatives shrugged their shoulders and said, "This betrothal of babes, what does it signify? It was a very pretty game for children, but a thing to be forgotten when the doll is put away and the skirts are lengthened."

"In Russia they think differently," Vera replied. "My mother looks upon the betrothal as binding, I know. The law and the Church both would have something to say before the contract could be broken."

"Well, let us see first what he is like; if he should be an impossible, without doubt both the Church and the law will listen to reason. What, are two people to be bound to one another for life if they desire it not? God forbid!"

"Maybe we shall both desire it when we meet, who knows?" Vera laughed. "We are talking in the dark, since Sasha and I have not met for many years. But if each is repulsive to the other the contract may perhaps be set aside, by mutual agreement."

"That is sensible," said Vera's aunt; "the danger is lest he shall be attracted by you, while you feel no counter-attraction for him, or *vice versâ*."

"I will keep a guard upon my heart, aunt," laughed Vera.

The first meeting, after many years, between the young people took place soon after this conversation at the annual reception of the corps of cadets in St. Petersburg. This corps consisted of members of the *petite noblesse*—the boyarin families of Russia, destined for military service in the more aristocratic regiments. The Emperor Paul, shocked by the methods of his mother, Catherine the Great, in the matter of distribution of commissions to the sons of her boyars, had instituted this corps of cadets as a much-needed measure of reform, and indeed the step was taken not a moment too soon for the good of the country.

As the great Catherine's system of distributing commissions to the members of that class of her subjects which seems to have been her *enfant gâté*, the *petite noblesse*, is somewhat unique, I will ask permission to digress for a moment in order to give the reader some idea of her method and of the abuses to which it gradually led.

The thing developed gradually and attained the height of absurdity only when the Empress was an old woman.

Commissions in the Guards were at this time regarded as gifts from the sovereign to her faithful boyars and claimable by every boyar, if he so desired, for the benefit of his children. They were issued on demand, and were not, at first, applied for until the youth destined to enjoy the privilege had reached a time of life when a commission in the army might fairly be given to him; but since the officers of the Guards received liberal pay and were treated with marked kindness and indulgence by the sovereign, it occurred to certain boyars that it would be a pity to waste several years of the best part of the lives of their sons, years which might be spent so profitably in drawing pay and accumulating seniority in the Guards. Therefore certain aspiring parents applied for commissions for their sons at the age of fifteen; and—no objection being made—it soon became the custom to issue commissions to lads of this age.

Gradually the limit of age decreased. First commissions were demanded for boys of twelve, and obtained; then the age dropped to ten, then to eight, to six, to three. No duties were required of all these young officers, who were not even obliged to draw their own pay; their fathers were permitted to do this for them. But promotion proceeded in each case with regularity, and soon it was a common thing to see a promising young officer of seven years toddling at his mother's side in the epaulettes of a captain of the Guards.

But the matter did not end here. It now became the fashion to apply for commissions for male children as soon as born. Lieutenants were to be seen carried about in their nurses' arms and captains rode in perambulators, while majors and colonels of ten and twelve strutted about the streets, to the pride and no small profit of their happy parents. One would suppose that the comedy had at this point reached the very limit of absurdity; but this was not so.

It occurred to some ingenious boyar about to enter into the delights and responsibilities of wedlock to apply for commissions for a son or two in advance. If his marriage should be blessed with offspring—well; if not, well also; for no one would be likely to inquire into the matter as long

as the old Empress lived, and the pay of two or three officers of the Guards—non-existent, certainly, but steadily rising in rank for all that—would be a comfortable addition to the income of his parents that might have been.

This was the millennium of Catherine's *enfants gâtés*, the boyars, and it came to an end with her death and the accession of Paul, who had long watched the scandal from his retreat at Gatchina and watched it with helpless displeasure and anger. Paul was a strict disciplinarian and the sight of the degradation of the Guards maddened him. One of his first acts after his accession was to hold a review of the corps, a review at which every officer was compelled to be present or to hand in his resignation.

That must indeed have been the weirdest parade upon record. Officers in arms, officers in perambulators, officers clinging to their mothers' skirts; shy and self-conscious majors of ten wandering helplessly about the Champs de Mars, colonels of twelve and fourteen asking one another to which regiment they belonged, and the stern, angry Emperor surveying the motley scene as the executioner eyes his victim before dealing the fatal stroke which is to end him once and for all.

In spite of his anger, the Tsar Paul displayed some humour upon this occasion, perhaps with the intention of impressing upon all witnesses the absurdity of the prevailing state of affairs. Every officer was called upon to take his proper place with his own battalion, and to obey the words of command presently issued by the few remaining veterans of the various regiments.

Naturally the parade began and ended in confusion; a wild medley of nursemaids and perambulators, of crying children and bewildered boys; all officers who were unable to perform the duties expected of them were called upon to resign their commissions, and with this historic review the millennium of Catherine's baby-guards came to a timely end.

Young Sasha Maximof, Vera's betrothed, had been duly enrolled, like most of his fellows of boyar rank, among Catherine's officers of the sinecure regiments, but his mother, unlike many of the parents of those young warriors, had taken neither fright nor offence at the action of the Emperor Paul, but like a sensible woman had entered her son's name as a cadet in the newly organised institution for the education of youths desirous of entering the army as *bona-fide* officers. Sasha had been but six years old at the time of the catastrophe, and had then enjoyed the rank and pay of a captain. He had, of course, resigned his commission, but had rejoined as a cadet of the Imperial Corps upon reaching the age of fourteen. He was now nineteen and one of the seniors of the establishment—a nice-looking youth of medium height and good appearance. If one may use a modern expression to describe Sasha's attitude towards life at this time, he may be said to have "fancied himself" to a very considerable extent; he was, indeed, a fair example of the Russian youth of his day, when over the uncouth and bearlike manners of the old Muscovite type was gradually stealing the veneer of Western civilisation.

Sasha Maximof was a lady's man; he was generally liked and admired by the women, and knew it. He had already been through several *affaires du cœur*, and if he ever recollected the fact that he was a betrothed man, it is probable that he thought lightly of the matter, regarding the whole question as one of expediency. The dower to be had with his fiancée was a handsome one, he knew; but there were plenty of good dowers available for a man like himself; he might eventually decide to regard his engagement as binding—it depended upon the girl; mediocrity would not suit him.

"It will be a wonder, or rather *she* will have to be one," he remarked one day when his mother, observing his attitude towards some damsel whom he was accustomed to meet in society, casually reminded him of the existing contract to which he was a party. "She will have to be a wonder if that silly betrothal is to come to anything!"

CHAPTER V.

Little sixteen-year-old Vera Demidof looked very well in her stylish Parisian clothes. She was a pretty girl of true Russian type, and, Russian like, was an adept in the art of keeping up a constant flow of light talk, half in her native language and half in French, a fashion in polite society then as now. Vera was with her mother, and with them stood or moved about among the crowd of visitors at the annual function of the corps of cadets a young cousin, one Constantine Demidof, a youthful member of the corps.

"Tell me the notables," said Vera, "especially the military ones, but don't expect me to admire any of our poor Russians after the smart-looking French officers! As for your cadets—bah!—you are bigger than the French, perhaps, but clumsier; and your manners compared with theirs—the cadets here, I mean—oh! you are bears, my friend, and they are angels. Imagine, Constantine, *mon ami*, I have spoken to Ney—the bravest of the brave—only think of it; and one day the Emperor himself, beautiful man, smiled upon me."

"Oh, come," said Constantine, "if you speak of emperors and beautiful men, your Napoleon is a mere tub-man, and not to be named in comparison with our Emperor. You have not yet seen Alexander? A very different person from his unbeautiful father Paul, wait and see, he will be here in five minutes. Your Sasha Maximof is to receive a prize at his hands, lucky Sasha!"

"Sasha a prize—oh, I am glad!" exclaimed Vera—"and for what?"

"For fencing; he is the best fencer of all here; see, he is still busy with that girl, his latest craze; in charity we will hope that he has not yet seen you."

"If he did, I think he would not recognise me; he does not know I am here and it is five years since we met. Presently you shall go and bring him to me, but not yet. Tell me, Constantine, is Sasha liked here?"

Constantine glanced at his cousin; he caught her eye and smiled.

"Some people like him, I suppose," he said.

"Of whom Constantine Demidof is evidently not one," said Vera, laughing merrily. "Why not, my friend?"

"How should I? I scarcely know him, he is two years senior to me here, and that means much."

"I see. I should say, to look at him, that he has a good opinion of himself."

"Oh, he certainly has that," Constantine laughed. "He is thought good-looking, you know, and the girls flatter him, I suppose."

"Nevertheless his clothes fit very badly. In Parisian clothes he might look well, yes, he is not bad; you shall bring him to me, presently, but do not say who I am; you shall say that there is a lady who desires to have him presented to her."

At this moment the Emperor Alexander entered the room, preceded by an aide-de-camp, who first cleared the space about the doorway in order that his Majesty might enter with effect, which he certainly did.

The Emperor was a splendid-looking man, tall and straight as a pine stem, and handsome withal; there was perhaps but a single man in all Russia who was his superior in manly bearing and in stately presence, and that was his younger brother and successor, Nicholas, who had not his equal in Europe.

"Oh, he is splendid!" murmured Vera Demidof, gazing in wonder and admiration—"what a man! Oh, the sight of him makes me proud to be Russian after all!"

"Ha! it is good to hear you praise something which is not French. Your 'little Corporal' would look but a poor creature beside him, come, admit it!"

"Bah! one thinks of something else than inches when one sees Napoleon; nevertheless in the Tsar Alexander God has made a very fine man; they speak well of him in Paris as a wise ruler."

The Emperor now made a short speech to the cadets, after which he distributed the prizes, saying a word or two of praise or encouragement to each successful candidate. Sasha Maximof returned to his place, flushed and self-conscious, holding the sword of honour which the Tsar had presented to him with a word of approbation.

"How proud he looks!" said Vera; "I am glad he has won it and that he has been a success here."

Afterwards, when the Tsar and his suite had departed, she sent young Constantine to fetch Sasha to her side, in order that she might renew her acquaintance with him.

"Don't say who it is," she called after him as he moved away, somewhat unwillingly, to obey her behest. Constantine adored his cousin and would far rather have had her to himself.

"A lady wishes to have me presented?" said Sasha, frowning slightly. "Well, I'll come presently; I am busy entertaining another lady, as you perceive;—stop, which is she?"

Constantine pointed Vera out.

"What, that child?" exclaimed Maximof. "Tell her I have no time to talk to children."

"She isn't a child, and it's not likely I will give such a message," said Constantine angrily. "If you knew——" he paused.

"Well—what?"

"If you knew who she is," stammered Constantine, "you'd go to her."

"Why, is she anybody very particular?" asked the other, devoting a second and more interested glance in Vera's direction.

"You can only learn all about her by becoming personally acquainted with her," said the younger lad. "She *is* somebody rather particular."

"Well, I'll come, if I can, later; there are so many who want to speak to one on an occasion like this."

Sasha Maximof's companion had listened with amusement to this conversation; she, too, had glanced at Vera and had recognised her instantly, for the circumstances of the betrothal of these two were a matter of common knowledge.

"I see you are looking at the young lady who desires my acquaintance," said Sasha, when Constantine had departed; "do you happen to know who she is?"

"Do you seriously mean to say that you do not?" asked the girl, laughing.

"I'm afraid I cannot recall her name, though I believe I have seen the face somewhere; one does not take special notice of children; I cannot imagine why she should be any one in particular, as that little fool declared. Of course one knows every one who *is* any body! Well, who is she?"

"First tell me, do you consider her pretty?"

"Passable—but of course a mere child; she may improve and may go the other way. She's Russian, of course?"

"Certainly, but has been absent from Russia for five years. Her clothes are of the last French mode—she has French relations—have I shed light liberally enough to illuminate your intelligence?"

"She is Vera Demidof, you mean; I did not know she had returned. Well, she has come too soon, she is a child, I will say neither yes nor no to her until I can judge of her when full grown." Sasha flushed and looked aggrieved. His companion laughed.

"You are not a very ardent fiancé," she said. "Remember, it is your duty to love her; she will expect to be greeted radiantly, to hear words of endearment, delight at her unexpected return, and so forth; compose your features, my friend, you are frowning; look pleased, ardent, full of affection, and so go and do your duty."

"You speak foolishly; it is not for *you* to bid me perform this foolery, you who know that my heart contains but one image. You must be aware that my betrothal is a mere farce, a thing to be shaken off as easily as assumed. I shall speak to the girl—courtesy demands it, but I shall pretend no affection."

"Poor child, she will be heart-broken; see how lovingly she gazes at you even now!"

Sasha looked, but Vera's gaze did not strike him as being aptly described by the word "loving"; on the contrary, though she turned her head when she observed that she was watched, he was in time to surprise what appeared to him to be an indignant rather than a languishing expression.

As a matter of fact Vera was very angry indeed. Constantine had returned to her shy and shamefaced.

"Well—is he coming? What did he say?" she had asked.

"His vanity is terrible," said Constantine, "and his manners are even worse."

"How—what do you mean—does he recognise me and refuse to renew our acquaintance?"

"Oh no, he did not suspect who you were. He said you were a mere child and hinted that he had no time to waste upon children."

"Children!" repeated Vera indignantly; "and I in my seventeenth year! Bah—he has, as you say, no manners. So he has refused to be presented."

"Not quite that! 'I will come, if I can, later,' he said; I think he is much absorbed, at present, by the lady at his side; it is a different one, with him, every month."

"I will wait for half an hour, and then, if he comes not, you shall take me away, Constantine," said Vera; and though the lad at her side protested against her doing Maximof so much honour, she insisted upon staying.

Presently, however, seeing that Sasha showed signs of crossing the room in order to approach her, she said quickly:—

"See, Constantine, now he comes; when it is quite clear that his intention is to speak to me, I will rise and you shall give me your hand to escort me away!"

"Good," exclaimed her cousin delightedly. "Yes, that's the way he should be treated—see, he is approaching—come!"

The two young cousins rose and passed down the room, almost meeting Sasha Maximof, who stopped, obviously expecting them to do the same. "Demidof," he said, "be so kind as to present me to your friend."

Vera passed on, taking no notice whatever. Constantine looked round, over his shoulder.

"You will have to wait now, my friend, until she is a little older," he said, and Vera pinched his arm with delight.

"Bravo, cousin," she said, "that was splendid."

"It was rather daring," said Constantine, somewhat ruefully, "to a senior cadet; I don't know what will happen to me."

Sasha returned to his charmer, who, unfortunately, had witnessed his discomfiture.

"You've met your match, my friend!" she laughed; "she's decidedly pretty, too, when one sees her closely."

"She's an impudent little minx at any rate," said Sasha, laughing also, though somewhat artificially, and at the same time flushing hotly; he was not used to rebuffs from the fair sex. "By such conduct—revealing a tendency to bad manners—she commits *felo de se* as regards—well—a certain object she has in view."

On the way home Vera, following up some train of thought, remarked to her cousin that it was a pity Sasha Maximof was so good-looking; to which Constantine replied that he did not see much to admire in the fellow.

CHAPTER VI.

The Boyar Demidof, though not by profession a diplomat, had procured for himself an appointment as Attaché to the Embassy in Paris, in order to be near his daughter as well as his married sister. Vera's presence in St. Petersburg was in the nature of a flying visit. She would return with her mother to Paris in a month or two.

During that period she saw little of Sasha Maximof. He called upon the Demidofs once or twice, but was obviously but little attracted by Vera, whom he treated as a child, and from whom he did not attempt to conceal the fact that he had on hand more than one *affaire de cœur* and that he thought but little, if anything, of the contract entered into by their respective fathers when both of the principal parties were too young to understand the nature of the proceedings.

Vera began by treating Sasha with much hauteur, desiring to punish him for his indifference; but when it became clear to her that he cared nothing whether she bore herself haughtily or kindly, and was, indeed, very little interested in her, she began, with the inconsistency of human nature, to realise that whether she would have it so or no her interest in him grew, and with it the recognition that the young man was undoubtedly very good-looking and had a certain attractiveness about him. Before Vera returned to Paris Sasha Maximof had quite made up his mind that he was far too good to waste himself upon the commonplace little person his father had seen fit, without consulting his wishes, to select for his partner in life. He intended to do much better. The Countess, his mother, was inclined to agree with him. He consulted her upon the question as to whether a contract of marriage so made was binding or not.

"If both parties desire to annul it," the Countess thought, "surely no one would compel them to hold to it."

"The question is," said Sasha, "*will* the girl agree to annul it? The match is a good one, from her point of view; I don't suppose there's much harm done yet, in a personal way, I mean, for we have scarcely met and I certainly have not gone out of my way to be in any way attractive to her."

"Go and see the girl and talk it over with her," suggested the Countess, and this advice Sasha presently followed.

He called upon Vera and plunged quickly into the business on hand, though he began somewhat diffidently, for, though in speaking with his mother he had taken for granted that the girl could scarcely have fallen in love with him yet, Sasha, in the secret realms of his inner consciousness, was by no means so assured of the matter; indeed, he was strongly of opinion that no girl could see him and pass entirely unscathed through the ordeal.

Somewhat to his disgust he could detect no sign of regret or disappointment in Vera's attitude; on the contrary, he was not at all sure that she was not as anxious as himself to be relieved from the foolish obligation imposed upon both of them as children.

"I never could understand what was the object of our honoured fathers in making so foolish an arrangement," said Sasha; "my idea is that living down in the wilds as they did, they were so put to it for amusement that they invented this as a pastime; it would be interesting, they thought, to watch our affection bud and blossom and so on; but of course, as you know, my father died and neither my mother nor I ever lived in the country again, while you went to Paris. Of course if we had met constantly, living close to one another, and never seeing any one else, it might have been different."

Vera suddenly burst out laughing at this point.

"You mean that if neither of us had ever met any other young people besides our two selves we might one day have come to like one another? Believe me, Alexander Petrovitch, I am far from being so conceited as to suppose you could ever have learned to admire me. Is this, then, your theory: that if, for instance, a man and a woman were thrown together upon a desert island, they would be bound eventually to fall in love with one another? On the contrary, I should think they would soon be wearied to death by one another's society."

"I did not mean that at all," said Sasha, flushing rather angrily, for it occurred to him that his *amour propre* was in some way being attacked. "I meant that if we had seen more of one another than we have, it might have been quite a different matter. You might have liked me, which I see is not now the case, and of course I might have fallen in love with you."

"Which also is certainly not the case as any one might perceive," laughed Vera.

"I am not pretending that it is; I could not very well."

"For after all I am a mere child," she said.

"I see you cannot forgive me that expression. Why should it offend you? You are not fully grown up. However, I apologise for using it if you dislike it. Well now, I think I have made my meaning clear; I do not love you—indeed, I may tell you that I have fallen in love elsewhere, for which you can scarcely blame me, since you have never given me the opportunity to lose my heart where our revered parents desired that it should be lost; and of course the same may be said of you; you have had no opportunity of learning to like me."

"For which I certainly ought to be most grateful," said Vera, "under the circumstances. How terrible if one of us had fallen in love and the other not! If it had been I, I must have sacrificed my heart's happiness, for of course I could not well have admitted the pathetic truth. You would have gone away and never known!"

"Well, at any rate, we are fortunately quite agreed upon the subject," replied Sasha, who was not enjoying the conversation and wished it over. "And since we *are* agreed that the betrothal was a mistake and that we shall both be happier if we annul the agreement and go upon our respective ways in life in pursuit of our respective ideals of happiness, I now suggest to you that the foolish document be torn up."

"By all means," said Vera; "tear it up, if you have it."

"Yes, I have it. I am sorry, Vera, that things should have turned out as they have; neither of us is to blame. As I said before, if we had seen more of one another——"

"It would have been an exceedingly dangerous thing for *me*, is that what you would imply?" asked Vera, laughing.

The girl looked so handsome as she said the words, her eyes aflame and a heightened colour lending a wonderful charm to her somewhat pallid Russian complexion, that Sasha stared for a moment in surprise before he answered.

"It might have been dangerous for either of us," he said; "for though you *are* only a child, you are a very pretty one."

Vera curtsied pertly and laughed. "In every way the document is a horribly dangerous thing then," she said; "destroy it by all means, Alexander Petrovitch. You will now have a free hand with the lady whose name you have not mentioned. How relieved she will be to hear that I have given you a certificate of discharge."

"As to that," replied Sasha, flushing, "every one who knows of our betrothal laughs at it. Two persons thus bound, they say, would be sure to loathe one another long before the time came to marry, simply because they *are* bound."

"But we agreed just now that if we had seen more of one another, each would probably have found the other irresistible," Vera laughed; "let us hold to this pleasant conclusion, it is more flattering to both of us than the other. We will leave it at this, that I might have stood well in your regard, one day, but for the fact that another lady stands better, having supplanted me in time. As for yourself, except for my good fortune in being a mere child, I must, of course, have lost my heart at first sight, this, I understand, being the usual fate of my sex."

"You are pleased to jest, Mademoiselle Vera," said Sasha, uncertain whether to feel elated or angry. "It is time I departed; until the contract is destroyed we are still betrothed; may I kiss your hand?"

"The betrothal ended at the moment of mutual agreement. Farewell, Alexander Petrovitch, and a happy ending to your courtship."

"That girl will grow up into a lovely woman," thought Sasha as he strode away; "but what a little tigress she looked more than once. She is angry with me for wishing to annul the contract."

"I don't see why it should be actually destroyed," he reflected later, fingering the document. "Why not keep it in case of accidents? A year or two hence I may be heart free, and she may be uncommonly handsome—I think the paper may remain for the present."

He put it back in his desk and sat thinking.

"The little devil was laughing at me all along," he said presently; "it was pique, simply pique. She'll be a pretty woman, that's certain!"

As for Vera, she felt forlorn and unhappy. She was not in the least in love, but for better or worse she had been accustomed lifelong to look upon this man as her husband-to-be, and now the air-castle had fallen in ruins. There was a sudden gap, an empty space in her life, and she felt lonely and deserted.

She actually cried over the matter and this did her a world of good. "He's certainly good-looking," was the conclusion she now arrived at; "but, as Constantine said, his vanity is terrible. I don't think I could have borne it!"

CHAPTER VII.

A well-known establishment in a suburb of Paris, in the early part of last century, was the fencing-school of old Pierre Dupré, *maître d'armes* and retired Major in the French army. Old Pierre was growing somewhat old for the personal exercise of his art, but he could still superintend the practice of his pupils, who fenced with his assistants, and give such advice as they could receive from no other swordsman in all Paris.

Of assistants he had four, one a fine young fellow named Karl Havet, the second an equally excellent exponent of the beautiful art he taught, one Georges Maux. The other two helpers were, strange to say, females, strapping fine girls, both, and splendid swordswomen, old Pierre's daughters.

How it befel that his girls had become such adepts in their father's profession, and why, are matters easily explained.

It had been the greatest grief to the old man and a bitter grievance against destiny when, at the

birth of his first child, he learned that he was the father of a girl. When the second and last child made its appearance and proved, like its sister, to be of the wrong sex, he was in despair. He had longed for a son to train in the use of arms which he should wield in his country's honour.

"Bring them up as boys," some one suggested, "they are fine girls both of them, and would make splendid boys."

From the moment that this idea took root in his mind, old Pierre found consolation. He adopted the suggestion *in toto*. The girls, while still young children, were dressed as boys, taught as boys, treated as boys, and perhaps almost, though not quite, loved as boys. From the earliest day upon which their little hands could hold and manipulate a rapier, he taught them to fence, and now—at the age of nineteen and twenty—the girls—Louise and Marie—could hold their own with almost any swordsman in Paris.

Though no longer dressed in male attire, old Pierre's daughters still wore garments as nearly allied to the fashion of those worn by men as was consistent with propriety. The girls looked as like men as handsome girls could look; they associated entirely with men, talked and thought like men, were men to all practical purposes, excepting in one particular: their women's hearts remained to them. One, Marie, was engaged to marry young Karl Havet, to whom she was devotedly attached, much to the chagrin of her father, who regretted Marie's "weakness" as a sad falling away from the state of grace to which his daughter had attained. To have been brought up as a man and to have reached the point of perfection, or near it, in the most manly of all exercises, and then to exhibit the weakness of a silly woman by falling in love—"Bah!" said old Pierre, in speaking of it to his friends, "it is sad—it is cruel—it is incredible!"

Nevertheless, the evil existed and must be recognised and put up with. The pair were engaged and within a month they would marry.

As for the second daughter, Louise, her father's favourite, his pride and joy—for not only was she a little taller, a little stronger, a little more skilful with the rapier than her sister, but also possessed the crowning glory, in his eyes, of a deep contralto speaking-voice, which added a point to her score of manly virtues—Louise, too, though Pierre guessed it not, had fallen a victim to the universal weakness of womankind; she, too, had lost her heart to a man. Louise did not tell her father this; she did not even tell Marie, her sister; it is probable that she did not whisper it even to her own heart of hearts, and yet she knew well that it was so: she was in love.

After all, it was no wonder that she should have become attracted by one or other of the many handsome and manly youths who came either to learn to fence or to practise the art, already learned, by engaging in a set-to with one of Pierre's accomplished daughters. Louise was acquainted with half a hundred of the most attractive young officers in Paris. Nearly every one of Napoleon's marshals had visited Pierre's establishment, nay, even the Emperor himself had been there and had laughed and applauded the skill of the two *demoiselles d'armes*. He had spoken to Louise and praised her to her face which was nearer the sky than his own by four inches at least.

Yet never, until a certain afternoon in this very year of 1812, had Louise been conscious of the quickening of her pulses in response to the instincts of womanhood; for though assuredly there were many of the gilded youths of her acquaintance who had wasted upon her the eloquence of the eye, of the whispering lips, of the tightened hand—all these things had left Louise as they found her, calm and unmoved, and wondering, maybe, at the foolishness of men who could waste time upon such silly matters as love-making and love-talking.

The fatal afternoon was that upon which young Baron Henri d'Estreville first visited the fencing establishment in order to see for himself the skill of the two girls with whose fame as swordswomen all Paris was ringing.

The Baron was himself a first-class swordsman, but in fencing a bout with Louise he distinctly had the worst of it, a fact which he was himself the first to admit.

This was a good-looking youth, merry and debonair, an officer in a Lancer regiment and the first cousin of one with whom we are already acquainted, Vera Demidof. He spoke with Louise both before and after the fencing match, and for some reason or another he took her fancy as no other man had done. D'Estreville was no exception to the rule of young men of his age. Louise was a woman, young and handsome, and of course the Baron employed against her all the artillery he possessed. Louise had thought this sort of thing only silly in others; but the whispered words, the meaning looks, the pressure of the hand appeared very charming when these measures were employed by her new friend.

The Baron said he would come again.

"You beat me handsomely to-day," he laughed, "but next time I intend to turn the tables; ah, Mademoiselle, it was not the rapier that overthrew me to-day, but the light of your eye, the beauty of your face——"

To his bosom friend and constant companion, Paul de Tourelle, the Baron said, "You must come down to Pierre Dupré's fencing establishment and see those girls of his fence. Also you should see Louise's eyes and complexion—by all that's bewitching, they are splendid! You shall admit it! As for her fencing——"

Young Paul de Tourelle laughed. "Yes, you shall take me to see them," he said; "I am anxious to know whether their skill is really so great as it is said to be by their admirers. As for her eyes and the rest of it, that sort of thing is not likely to have much effect upon me just now, for reasons well known to you."

"Poor Paul! nevertheless come and see; when a man is so hard hit as you seem to be this time, to gaze upon something equally attractive may do him good, just as a change of air is beneficial to a sick man."

"Equally attractive! beware what you say, my friend; such words savour of disrespect towards—some one; there is no one equally attractive, and cannot be; you speak of impossibilities."

"I retract the words," said the Baron, laughing; "we will say that here is a personality displaying remarkable attractions, falling short, however, of the highest. Joking apart, she is a splendid woman, strong as a man, handsome as one of the Graces, and she fences—well—even the great exponent Paul de Tourelle must look to his laurels if he measures swords with her."

"*Âme de mon Épée!* is it so?" exclaimed Paul, flushing; Paul was acknowledged to be one of the finest, if not the very first swordsman in France. "That is a thing which I cannot afford to have said of any man, still less of any woman. I will come and see, my friend, and if she is willing we will try a bout."

"She will be willing; fencing is the breath of life to her; but seriously, if you fear that your reputation might suffer by defeat, you must do your best, Paul; she is a supreme mistress of the art."

"Fear not; I will remember to be careful!" laughed the other.

When the Baron visited the establishment of old Pierre on the following day he found the fair Louise somewhat inclined to avoid him, or at any rate less disposed to play the *bon camarade* than on the previous occasion. This attitude was the direct result of a conversation between old Pierre and his daughter Marie.

"I am no longer the black sheep, *mon père*," said Marie, laughing. "This day Louise has also shown that she is a woman."

"What mean you?" asked the old man, looking up startled from his occupation.

"Hitherto Louise has been with our visitors as a man among men; this day, in the presence of Monsieur le Baron, she has behaved as a woman in the presence of the man who is her soul's affinity."

"I'll not believe it of her," said old Pierre angrily; "because *you* have been a fool, Marie, and proved yourself no wiser than other silly women, you would have me believe that Louise can be equally foolish. I will speak to Louise; she shall belie your accusation."

Louise did belie it, but with blushing and much confusion. Possibly her father's words were the first intimation to her heart that it was no longer fancy-free.

The conversation left her very thoughtful, however, and very silent; and when the Baron arrived with De Tourelle and other friends on the following day, he found her—as has been said—somewhat inclined to give him the cold shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII.

At D'Estreville's second visit to old Pierre Dupré's he was accompanied by Paul de Tourelle and by Vera Demidof, now a beautiful girl of nineteen. The Baron was proud of his pretty cousin, between whom and his friend Paul a considerable friendship had lately sprung up.

In so far as De Tourelle was concerned, his sentiments towards Vera differed, as he had found to his surprise, from those he had ever experienced before this time towards any member of the fair sex. Up to the day upon which he had first made acquaintance with Vera Demidof, Paul had looked upon women as toys created for the delectation and amusement of mankind; he was always glad to play with them, to have his pleasure in their society, but not to take them seriously. He had always found young women in his own class charmed to meet him upon his own ground; to excurse with him as far as he was pleased to go into the pleasant glades of love-making, but to take him no more seriously than he chose to be taken.

With Vera it was otherwise. From the first he was aware that here was a creature of a different make, a more attractive toy than any he had yet set himself to play with, and, withal, one which, somehow, was extremely difficult to handle. Paul found that he was unable to have his way with this little Russian; she was unlike the French girls he was accustomed to; she took life more seriously, moved more cautiously, maintained an attitude of "stand-offishness" which at first puzzled him very much and perhaps exasperated him, but which he presently began to admire and respect.

"You'll have to be careful, my friend," Henri d'Estreville had told Paul, early in his acquaintance with Vera, before De Tourelle realised that his heart was in danger; "Vera is not like our French girls; not only is she far more serious-minded, but also she is a fiancée, after a fashion."

"A fiancée?" exclaimed Paul, laughing boisterously—"Mademoiselle Demidof fiancée? To whom? You rave, man!"

"No, it is true; she is betrothed; observe that I added 'after a fashion'. She was betrothed to some Russian bear as a child."

"Bah! as a child! and the bear a child also? She has never mentioned to me this young bear of

hers. You speak foolishly, Henri, *mon cher*; such things are not done."

"Ask her for yourself," Henri laughed. "For the matter of that, fall in love with my cousin, if you like. I would rather she mated with a good Frenchman than with a—what do you call them—a Moujik of Russia."

Paul did not, however, ask Vera as to her betrothal. He treated the matter with sufficient contempt to forget all about it. As to the second half of Henri's advice, however, he followed it to the letter, and fell so completely in love with Vera Demidof that he was himself astonished, for he had always boasted that to fall in love was not in his line, and was, indeed, a mistake he would never commit, since it was his pride to be a soldier of the French Army, and he possessed ambitions which he could not afford to thwart by indulgence in such foolishness as love.

Moreover, Paul not only fell in love but confessed the fact to Vera at the earliest opportunity.

Vera Demidof had listened during the last year or two to some half a dozen similar confessions from the gilded youth of Paris. She was, indeed, the object of much admiration in the gay city. But whereas Vera had listened and simply thanked each aspirant for his flattering declaration, regretting that she was unable to respond in the manner he would prefer, she gave Paul de Tourelle a piece of information which she had withheld from the rest.

"I must not listen to such things," she said, "for I am already a fiancée."

Paul suddenly remembered that he had been informed a month or two before that this was so.

"Betrothed as a child to a Russian child whom you may never see again," said Paul; "I have heard the story. For God's sake, Mademoiselle, do not allow so foolish a matter to stand between us."

"Monsieur takes too much for granted," said Vera coldly. "There is much that stands between Monsieur and myself besides my betrothal."

"You cannot pretend that you desire to regard that betrothal as binding, Mademoiselle; the idea is preposterous."

"I pretend nothing, Monsieur. I say that, being betrothed, I must not permit myself to listen to protestations such as you have just made."

Beyond this point Paul was unable, at his first attack, to push his advance. On subsequent occasions he showed more discretion, and took nothing for granted. He did not retire from his position as suitor, but betook himself to graduate for her love, a matter which he had at first supposed was to be had for the asking.

By this time the two were great friends. Vera made no secret of her partiality for De Tourelle, whom she liked very much better than any other youth of his standing; but on the rare occasions when Paul hinted that friendship was pleasant but lacked finality, Vera would shake her head and remind him that she was a fiancée.

"There are dark clouds on the horizon," said Paul on one occasion; "our little Corporal threatens to fasten his fingers about the throat of your big Emperor; we shall soon be *en route* for Moscow. Be sure that I shall seek out your fiancé; it shall be my first act upon reaching Moscow. Is your fiancé soldier or bourgeois?"

"A soldier and a splendid fencer!" said Vera, looking out of the window and far away.

"Good," said Paul; "I would rather fight a man than kill a sheep."

"I think you will never come to Moscow, and I pray God you may not," said Vera; "that would be a disaster indeed."

"I promise you it should be a disaster for your fiancé," said Paul; but it is probable that she heard nothing of what he said; her mind was entirely absorbed by this new and overwhelming idea: that Napoleon threatened Moscow—the holy city of her own race. "It is not a real danger?" she asked.

"What, this that your fiancé must run? Indeed, it is a very real danger."

"No, no—this war you speak of—this horrible quarrel of the two nations."

"They say that Napoleon has almost made up his mind; already the conscription is in full swing; Russia may yield, of course; if she does not, Moscow will be a French city by this time next year."

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Vera, hiding her eyes in her two hands. "The French must wade through a sea of Russian blood before Moscow is reached—it is horrible, Monsieur, this thought of yours."

"I did not invent it, Mademoiselle Vera; all the world will tell you that politics are to-day looking very darkly."

This was true enough. Vera questioned her father presently upon the subject, and learned many things which caused her the greatest anxiety, for Vera was a patriotic Russian, and was well aware that war with France must end disastrously for her beloved country. She was French enough to feel that to be arrayed against the terrible Napoleon was to court certain defeat, so tremendous was the Emperor's reputation among his own people.

With regard to private affairs, when Vera had explained to Paul that she was already a fiancée and must therefore refuse to listen to protestations of love, she had spoken the truth.

Only lately Alexander Maximof had written to her. Maximof had heard wonderful reports from Paris of Vera's beauty and charm, and had congratulated himself that he had had the good sense to keep the contract of betrothal intact. It had only now occurred to him, however, that he had either neglected or forgotten to inform Vera that he had not destroyed the document, as agreed

upon at their last interview, three years ago. Hence his letter to Paris at this time.

"I forgot to inform you," Maximof wrote, "that upon inquiry at the notary's office, I learned to my surprise that our contract of betrothal could not be destroyed excepting in presence of and by sworn consent of both parties. This may of course merely amount to a formality to be gone through at your next visit to Russia, which visit is likely to take place sooner than you had intended, if political prophets speak truly; for the horizon is dark indeed, and in case of a rupture between the Tsar and the Emperor, your father would doubtless leave Paris together with the Ambassador Kurakin. May I add, that I look forward with particular interest to our next meeting. We have never met as adults, and if all we hear with regard to the beautiful Vera Demidof be true, I may yet have cause to rejoice that our parents were longer-sighted than I at least had supposed. I may say, further, that my heart is disengaged. I have eschewed the follies of cadetdom...."

Vera laughed when she received this letter. The fact that her betrothal was still uncancelled did not at that time weigh upon her in the least. As, however, her friendship with Paul de Tourelle increased, it began to occur to her that circumstances might possibly arise which would cause her to regret that Alexander Maximof had not torn up their silly contract, as he had agreed to do. Paul de Tourelle had not greatly appealed to Vera's fancy at first acquaintance; she had disapproved of his self-assurance, his confident manner; but Paul had improved of late in these respects, and she had come to see beneath the veneer of mannerism a manliness and strength which she admired.

CHAPTER IX.

Vera went to old Pierre Dupré's fencing establishment with her cousin, Henri d'Estreville. She was anxious to see these two young women of whom Paris talked, though she felt that the exhibition of their skill would probably displease her. In this respect she soon found that she was mistaken. Old Dupré's pride in his daughters amused her, and the girls themselves, especially Louise, greatly attracted her.

Paul de Tourelle undertook to fence a bout with Marie, the eldest girl, an undertaking which he found considerably less of a walk over than he had expected. He held his own, certainly, but was obliged to put forth more effort into his work than he had expected to be called upon to display. At the call of time he was a point or two to the good, but he ended, surprised and a little mortified that he should have been compelled to extend himself in order to obtain this result.

During the bout with her sister Louise sat beside Vera and conversed with her, while the Baron, who glanced constantly in her direction, stood with Dupré and his assistants at the edge of the arena. Louise displayed no shyness; indeed she plied Vera with questions some of which Vera found rather embarrassing. Many of them referred to the Baron, whose name Louise mentioned with a certain hesitation. He was a soldier? and had fought in the wars with the Emperor? He must be a favourite with men—and, oh yes, this undoubtedly, with the ladies!

And Mademoiselle herself, she moved in the great world—ah, it must be pleasant to have the entrée there! Mademoiselle was doubtless fiancée? Vera admitted, laughing, that this was so and yet not so, a reply which puzzled her companion not a little.

Louise reflected. "Ah, Mademoiselle," she said, "perhaps I have solved the conundrum—Mademoiselle is betrothed to her cousin, Monsieur le Baron; but betrothals to cousins, as all the world knows, are not to be accounted as serious contracts; they are made for the convenience of both, but are not intended to be regarded seriously?" Louise gazed so intently in Vera's eyes as she put forward this suggestion that Vera was too surprised to laugh as she had at first felt inclined to do.

"My cousin?" she said; "*Mon Dieu*, no; the Baron is not of the kind to take the trouble to be fiancé for considerations of convenience."

"The Baron is not then betrothed to Mademoiselle?" murmured Louise, and presently she began to speak of the fencing, no longer interested—as it appeared to Vera—in the conundrum with regard to Mademoiselle's betrothal.

Which very naïve conversation went to convince Vera that howsoever gifted the fair Louise might be in the manly attribute of fencing, there was still much of the woman remaining in her composition. She watched Louise somewhat carefully after this, anxious to learn more as to her interest in Henri's affairs, when it was easy to perceive that though obviously avoiding the Baron, doubtless for reasons of her own, the girl's eyes constantly turned in the direction of her cousin.

"Poor little Louise!" thought Vera. "Henri of all people!"

Afterwards she sought an opportunity to add a word of warning.

"My cousin D'Estreville, to whom you suspected me of being engaged," she said, laughing, "is not one I would trust with my heart. He is the same to all women, implying much but meaning nothing. He is *par excellence* a soldier. Women are—for him—toys to be played with in time of peace. Henri is not one to bind himself; he takes his amusement where he finds it."

"All men that I have seen are like that," said Louise unexpectedly; "yet I believe that it comes to each man once in his life to take a woman seriously."

"Come, Louise," old Pierre called out at this point, "Monsieur has kindly consented to exhibit to us a second time his wonderful skill with the foils; you will find Louise a fair exponent, Monsieur, though she has never yet measured swords with one of your exceptional gifts."

"If she is as clever as her sister," said Paul gallantly, "she must be skilful indeed. I offer you my compliments upon your daughters, Monsieur Dupré, they are indeed a credit to their teacher."

"Ah, Monsieur, if they were but of the sex!" cried old Pierre; "but there—it is not their fault—I have bewailed it all their lives, but it is not their fault."

Paul, in his bout with Louise, was at first amused to find that he was getting the worst of it. Presently, as she added point to point, his amusement turned to disgust and presently he grew a little angry. When Paul reached this stage, in a fencing bout, he generally became invincible; and during the latter portion of the set-to his score rapidly improved. Nevertheless, when time was called it was found that Louise had won upon a point. Old Dupré clapped his hands in unfeigned delight, apologising immediately after for his rudeness.

"I also crave permission to applaud," said Paul; "Mademoiselle is magnificent. Several times she took me unawares in a manner that I thought impossible of any swordsman in Paris. If Mademoiselle is not tired, I should be grateful to try conclusions once more when she is rested; while she rests there are one or two points in our bout which I should like to think over."

"Oh—ah!" cried old Pierre delighted. "Monsieur refers I think to the *feint flanconnade*—the *feint flanconnade Dupré* we call it; it is a trick of my invention, Monsieur; twice I observed she scored by it! yes, it is subtle, Monsieur, and found by my daughters and by our pupils to be most exceptionally successful. It is a compliment that Monsieur takes notice of these little things."

"It is owing to these 'little things' that I find myself vanquished by Mademoiselle," Paul laughed good-naturedly. "I will consider these points for five minutes with Mademoiselle's permission."

During the interval old Dupré conversed with Vera Demidof, explaining to her how hard it had been for a parent longing for boys to find himself saddled with girls; how his daughters had, however, done their very best to atone for the "mischance" by growing up—as he had thought—superior to the weaknesses of their sex; and how he had been rudely brought up by the horrible discovery that Marie had fallen in love with his assistant and desired to marry him forthwith.

"Imagine my grief, Mademoiselle," old Pierre mourned; "so promising a swordswoman, so great a help and comfort to me, and pouff! she is married and her usefulness is gone! All that is man in her is gone also!"

Vera could not help laughing.

"You still have Louise!" she said, doing her best to say something comforting.

"Bah! she has seen her sister's deterioration and she will follow her example; it is infectious, like measles! already I perceive——"

What old Pierre was about to say remained uncertain, for at this moment Henri d'Estreville joined the group.

"There is war in the air, Dupré, have you heard?" he said. "The conscription papers are out. Young Havet had better be quick and get his wedding over or he may find himself in Moscow before he realises that he is a soldier."

"Ah—would to Heaven they had taken him before this foolery began!" said old Pierre. "Now I know not what is best; the evil is done; I do not approve of Marie's foolishness, yet I would not have her heart broken—for imagine, Monsieur le Baron, so false has become her estimate of the proportions that she would rather marry this young man than see him enrolled among the heroes of his country. Surely the object of love is the happiness and the well-being of the beloved? Compare then: to be a soldier of the Grande Armée, or to sit at home to lose manhood in the endearments of a foolish woman! Yet, knowing of the conscription, she would marry him to-morrow."

Old Pierre was almost in tears, so deeply did he feel the bitterness of the blow. That his daughters were women, was bad enough. That they should at length show a desire to behave as women was a grievance indeed!

"Be comforted, Monsieur," said Henri, smiling, "Havet is not yet chosen; if he should be so presently, allow me to suggest the very simplest solution of the difficulty. Let Mademoiselle Marie enlist also, thus no hearts shall be broken, and the Emperor gains a soldier better, I'll be bound, worth the having than half the six hundred thousand he intends to raise, if report speaks truly."

"Monsieur le Baron is pleased to jest," said Pierre; "yet it is true that Marie would make a good soldier; it is but three years, Monsieur, since my daughters exchanged the convenient garb of our sex for the foolish habiliments of that to which unfortunately they belong."

"So I have heard," said the Baron, "otherwise I should not have presumed, Monsieur, to make the suggestion which was not, be assured, altogether a jest."

"Was it not, Monsieur?" exclaimed Pierre, looking thoughtful. "Why then I will mention it to Marie; there is no knowing how the suggestion may strike her; assuredly she would pass as well for a man as the majority of the silly, half-grown youths that the conscription will catch. *Splendeur des Cieux*, Monsieur, it is a good idea. The glory of having, after all, a child of my own to serve with the colours! It is an ambition which I resigned with tears at the birth of my little

Louise!"

"See, your little Louise, who is quite as big as our friend Paul," the Baron laughed, "is about to play her second bout with my redoubtable De Tourelle. Try again your *feint flanconnade Dupré*, Mademoiselle Louise; only be prepared this time for a subtle riposte! When Monsieur de Tourelle has devoted five minutes to the consideration of his play, be sure the time has not been wasted!"

Louise blushed and lowered her eyes when spoken to by the Baron, a circumstance which more than one pair of eyes observed.

"Louise has several subtle tricks with which Monsieur may not yet be acquainted," said old Pierre, flushed now and excited with the prospect of a second exhibition of his daughter's splendid skill. "Though I am the first to admit that she has found more than her match, for once, in Monsieur de Tourelle."

Paul's five minutes had not been wasted, as he quickly showed. For though Louise made a great bid for victory and was, indeed, never more than a point or two behind, De Tourelle was a trifle the better, and ending with a beautifully executed "time in octave" finished the leader by two points.

"I shall consider seriously your suggestion, Monsieur," said old Pierre at parting with Henri d'Estreville; "the more I think of it the more I perceive that if only Marie would think well of the matter there is much to commend it."

"But you would lose two capable assistants, Monsieur le Major, as well as the comfort of a daughter's presence," said Henri, somewhat ashamed of having set the old man yelping upon so foolish a scent.

"Bah! all the world will be at the war, there will be few to take fencing lessons for the while. Louise and the other younker will suffice for all the pupils we shall get in war-time! Monsieur le Baron will himself be absent among the rest, I doubt not?"

"*Mon Dieu*, let us hope so!" Henri laughed. "Where else? *Eh bien, au revoir*, Monsieur, and *au revoir*, maybe, to Mademoiselle Marie in Moscow." Henri departed, laughing merrily. Louise had turned away with her flushed face a shade or two the paler for Henri's last speech, therefore she did not catch the amorous look which the Baron thought fit to send in her direction as he quitted the arena.

CHAPTER X.

During the next few weeks Paris and all France pursued but one topic of conversation. The Emperor's anger with Russia: would it end in war? Napoleon's threat—he had made it several times—that he would march into Moscow, was it spoken in seriousness or in bombast? For this was an undertaking before which even the heart of Napoleon might quail.

Apparently the Emperor Alexander of Russia felt little fear that the menacing attitude of his great rival must be regarded seriously, for he budged not an inch from the position he had taken up in the several matters at issue between them.

Alexander had several legitimate grievances against the French Dictator. In the matter of his sister, the Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna, he considered that he had been slighted; for Napoleon had displayed too obvious a readiness to end the negotiations for his marriage with the Russian Princess, and this savoured of a lack of respect towards her Imperial brother's Throne and person.

In the matter of Oldenburg, too, Napoleon had grievously offended. The Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, though not precisely a portion of the Russian Empire, dwelt under the protection of the Tsar; his own sister Catherine was married to the reigning Duke, yet France had lately annexed the little State, whose sovereign, with his Imperial wife, had been forced to take shelter in St. Petersburg. In addition to these semi-personal matters, there was an open sore in Poland; and again, the arbitrary demands of the Dictator that trade with England should be boycotted by the Continent generally, stuck obstinately in the gullet of the sturdy Russian Tsar, whose merchants knew where lay the best market for their hemp, their hides, their tallow and wheat.

There was stir and excitement at the Embassies. Kurakin, the Ambassador in Paris, and Demidof, Vera's father, his principal secretary, were busy from morning to night, interviewing, explaining, bargaining, smoothing and glossing the sturdy obstinacy of their own sovereign, which, while they pretended professionally to deplore it, they secretly admired and applauded.

Tchernishef, the Ambassador Extraordinary of the Tsar, arrived and was received in private audience by Napoleon. He brought with him the offer of certain concessions with regard to Oldenburg in exchange for counter-concessions in Poland. But the Dictator was obdurate; he would have surrender, not traffic.

"Not a mill, not a village of Poland will I give your master," said he; "tell him so; it is my last word."

It was Alexander's last word also, and seeing that his great opponent intended war, the Tsar began to make his preparations for defence.

The ambassadors in Paris and their secretaries and attachés packed up their traps and held

themselves ready for departure.

To Vera the whole matter was a source of unmitigated grief. In common with every patriotic Russian of the day, her soul revolted against the wanton injustice of Napoleon, and swelled in a suddenly awakened passion of patriotic love and enthusiasm for her own country. Napoleon and his Grand Army were of course invincible; Russia must suffer defeat, ruin maybe; the lives of her sons must go out in rivers of innocent blood.

"It is cruel and horrible," Vera cried, speaking of all this with her cousins the D'Estrevilles; "horrible because utterly useless and unjust. Does your Emperor think he will reach Moscow?"

"Our Emperor goes just as far as his word, Vera," said Henri. "Do not deceive yourself. If Napoleon has said that he will march to Moscow, to Moscow he will march, and neither man nor devil shall prevent him."

"You leave God out of the question," Vera raved; "but He, too, must be reckoned with, even by a Napoleon. Be sure, Henri, that this wicked campaign will not be permitted to prosper. You shall see."

"*Au revoir, ma belle*," laughed Henri. "We shall meet in Moscow."

"I would rather never see you again, cousin, than meet you there," cried Vera; "and that is truth!"

"What, and the same of Paul de Tourelle?" said Henri, still laughing; "fie, Vera, you show yourself in new colours to-day!"

Vera flushed crimson and turned away. She took no notice of the allusion to Paul, but a moment later she answered the latter part of Henri's banter.

"If I show myself in new colours it is the more shame for me. These are the colours I should always have worn; to-day, at least, if never before, I am all a Russian; I am none the less so because I happen to have French cousins. Henceforth, I shall be ashamed to own that there are folks of my flesh and blood who are content to serve this tyrant."

"I think none the worse of you for your patriotism," said Henri good-naturedly, seeing that the girl was much distressed. "But neither should you think ill of us who are also patriots from the other side of the hedge. Political aspects depend upon the point of view. You are excited. You will see all this differently when you think matters over in cold blood."

If Vera had been less miserable she would scarcely have spoken to Henri as she did, but Henri was a good-natured person and made allowances. He guessed the mingled emotions stirring in Vera's heart at this moment, for Vera had always been a good Russian, taking the part of her countrymen in the many bantering arguments in which the family frequently indulged at the expense of Russian bears, autocrats, barbarous moujiks, knouts, serfs and kindred matters. In such arguments Vera had often, to the delight of Henri and her other cousins, almost lost herself in indignant defence of her countrymen. Now, he knew, great fires of patriotic fervour must be ablaze within her, since the picture before her mind's eye was not that of an equal war in which either side might gain the advantage, but of a helpless, or semi-helpless, State, over which stood the gigantic figure of conquering Napoleon, a drawn sword in his hand, ready to shed the life-blood of her beloved nation. And in addition to this trouble, and aggravating it twofold, Henri fully believed, there was Paul.

Henri had quite made up his mind, much to his own gratification, for he was fond of his cousin and Paul was his chief friend, that these two were in love with one another. He had endeavoured, though vainly, to assure Paul that this was so.

"Any fool can see it," he had said; "cheer up, man; Vera is a ripe fruit, ready to fall into your mouth when you open it to ask her."

"I have asked her several times," said Paul; "you know that. She used to say she is engaged to some Russian."

"Oh, that old fable!" Henri laughed. "Well, has she dropped it lately?"

"She has not mentioned it, certainly, of late, but——"

"Very well then. It was a very good excuse while she wanted one. My argument is that she requires an excuse no longer. Ask her again before the Ambassadors leave Paris."

Paul accepted this advice. He generally resented advice, and hated to be preached at and interfered with, but he was always ready to take more from his friend than from any one else.

"I have come to say farewell, Mademoiselle," he said, calling at the half-dismantled embassy. "It is time you allowed me to know how I stand with you. That I love you with all my heart you are well aware."

"Monsieur—alas! It is not the moment to discuss such things. Let us try to part in friendship. If matters had been otherwise, I know not but that in time I might possibly have answered differently; as it is——" Vera paused.

"You are referring, doubtless, to your contract of affiance. Mademoiselle Vera, let me assure you that such a contract——"

"Bah! This is not a moment for deceptions, Monsieur; be sure that contract or no contract, I shall marry no one against my will."

"So far good, Mademoiselle Vera. To what, then, do you refer? With one hand you seem to give me hope; with the other you take it away again. What is between us, Mademoiselle? I am rich, I

love you as I have never loved woman. Is not this enough for you? What stands between us?"

"Perhaps everything and perhaps nothing," said Vera with a great sigh. "You say you love me; God forgive me, for I know well that I ought to reject your love, yet I hesitate to reject it."

"Why then," exclaimed Paul joyously—he was about to take her to his arms, but Vera waved him away. "Why, what do you mean, Vera?" he continued impatiently. "Why must God forgive you because I love you? I am not a leper; you will easily be forgiven! Explain—you madden me."

"Can you not understand, Monsieur? See, I allow you to say 'I love you'—yet you are the enemy of my country; what will be said of me if it is known that I have done this shameful thing? To have submitted to be loved by one who is about to invade the land of my fathers——"

"Well—but—Mademoiselle, for God's sake let us understand one another," cried Paul, "Here stand I, professing to love you. Am I not to be loved again because I am a soldier of Napoleon? As soon I might say that I must not love a subject of Alexander. Your patriotism is delightful; I love you the better for it, but your conclusion is ridiculous."

"What would you have, Paul? I do not know my own mind. I like you; it is possible that one day I may be able to say that I love you. I am young; I am not yet sure what is love and what is 'like'. Is it not enough?"

"No, a thousand times no! I must possess you—hold you—caress you—release you only when the last moment arrives, under promise that when we meet in Moscow——"

This was an unfortunate remark on Paul's part. Vera fired up instantly, receding a step or two from him, for Paul had approached and held her tenderly by the elbows, ready to take her to his arms if permitted to do so.

"When we meet in Moscow?" she cried. "God send that may never be, never, never! Sooner I would never see you again than meet you, as you suggest, in Moscow. Do you think I do not realise what you mean by meeting in Moscow? I tell you, Paul, God forbid that I meet you there!"

Paul recoiled a little, abashed. "I apologise, Mademoiselle," he said; "of course I should not have permitted myself to use so foolish an expression. When the war is over, I should have said."

"When the war is over, love may begin or may not," Vera replied. "This is not the time to speak of love. I will not shame myself a second time. Go, Paul—I am a traitor to have said what I said—forget it—farewell!"

"I swear I will never forget it," said Paul. "You are cruel, Vera; I do not understand your attitude; you are not like a woman!"

"I am a Russian; my heart bleeds for my country which lies under the shadow of Napoleon and his Grand Army, of which you are a member. It is hateful of me to have spoken of love with a French soldier. Go, Paul, I entreat you." She held out her hand, Paul bent over and kissed it. Then he left the room without a word.

CHAPTER XI.

At the Palais d'armes of old Pierre Dupré there was excitement. Both Karl Havet, Marie's fiancé, and young Maux, the second assistant, had received their conscription notices; both had been drawn; unless physically unfit or unsound, both men must serve in Napoleon's new and greatest army.

Maux was in excellent spirits. Being a splendidly built young fellow, lithe and strong as a leopard, there was no doubt whatever as to his fitness.

"I shall come back a sergeant, Monsieur," he said; "you shall see; it may even be that I shall gain a commission in the field—such things have happened before now!"

Old Pierre nodded approvingly. "You are going forth in the proper spirit, my son," he said; then he glanced sadly at Karl Havet, who sat with Marie conversing dejectedly over his conscription notice, and sighed. "Would it were the same there!" he added.

Louise fired up and spoke.

"You are not fair to them, father," she said. "You have no sympathy for the natural feelings. They were to be married in a month; they love one another; it is hard for them. If you were generous you would furnish a substitute for Karl."

"*Mon Dieu*, Louise, is it you that talk thus, *you*?" exclaimed the old man; "then indeed I do not recognise my own child. A substitute, when the Emperor has called him to arms? Shame!"

"It will break Marie's heart, be sure of that; she has been a good daughter to you, father; it is due to her that you should assist her in this emergency. Karl has no money to pay for a substitute—you have plenty. Let him stay a while at least with his wife. Be sure this will not be the last war; so long as the Emperor lives and Europe is not yet a province of France, there will be wars and wars. It is not right that they should be separated."

"Bah—you speak foolishly, like a woman; you disappoint me, Louise, you that have ever shown a spirit above that of a woman. As for separation, if Marie is so foolish as to depend upon the presence of a lover for her happiness, why should they be separated? Let her go also!"

"Father, what do you mean?" said Louise, gazing blankly at the old man; "do you rave?"

"On the contrary, never was I more serious. Marie is as good a man as the best; she lacks but the pantaloons—*eh bien*! There are many fools under conscription orders who will be glad of a substitute. Let her go to the war with her Karl, since they dread separation; she will be the happier and the richer too, for she will touch the money of some coward or fool who is ready to pay for his own dishonour—*voilà tout*!"

"And you, father, could your mind rest in peace if your child were exposed thus to the risks of war?"

Old Pierre started from his seat with an exclamation of impatience.

"*Sapristi*, Louise my child, you grow more foolish each minute! Do you not know that it is the one grievance of my life that I have no sons to fight for France? If I had a son and he went forth to battle, think you I should sit at home to weep in anguish of anxiety until he returned safely to the fireside? God forbid; I should thank Him daily, each minute, that I, too, had been found worthy to provide one soldier for France. Why then should I feel differently if I possessed a daughter who, thanks to her own fine spirit and to the training I have given her, had risen superior to the weakness of her sex and gone forth as a man to do a man's work in the world? I should thank God all the more—yes, and I should love my child the more, more by a hundred times."

Louise was silent. Now that her father explained his view of the matter she recognised that it was, after all, perfectly consistent with his character that he should think thus. That any one else should think the same way, however, was quite a different matter. Marie, for instance, would probably consider the idea a ridiculous one; her fiancé, Karl, was certain to laugh the suggestion to scorn, and yet Louise, to her surprise, found that she herself had listened to her father's words without the impatient amazement which so wild a proposal might have aroused in her. To her mind, trained as she had been, the idea of a woman assuming the dress of a man and enlisting as a man in the army of her country was neither absolutely new nor absolutely impossible. Louise knew, almost by heart, the story of Mademoiselle de Maupin, who had done this very thing a century ago; her career was a favourite theme of old Pierre's, who had drummed it into the ears of his daughters since they were children. Certainly if any woman could imitate Mademoiselle de Maupin with success, it was Marie. But Marie was in love and about to be married; she possessed no longer the manly spirit which would render such a thing possible, and Karl would certainly reject the idea.

"Suggest to them your scheme, father," she said; "but I warn you that they will not receive it seriously."

Marie flushed a little when the strange idea was mentioned to her; then she laughed and asked Karl what he thought of it.

"It is madness," said Karl, glancing indignantly at old Pierre. "That a man who loves a woman, whether as father or lover, should be willing to submit her to the shame and the thousand risks involved in such a scheme, is madness and worse. Thank God, I am not so selfish, Marie. Rather a million times, I will go alone."

Old Pierre shrugged his shoulders. "As you like," he said. "It is my misfortune. What other reply should I expect from a man who goes out unwillingly to serve his country?"

"As for that," said Karl boldly, "if I possessed money I should certainly procure a substitute; having none, I must go; it is hard, Marie, but—*que faire*? it is necessity that drives us apart."

Marie burst into tears and the unfortunate lovers left the room together.

"Bah!" said old Pierre, not untouched by his daughter's sorrow. "It is a misfortune—it is a disaster; see, Louise, how this foolish weakness called 'love' spoils not only a splendid woman, but a good man also. Karl is not a coward, and yet——"

"No—Karl is no coward, and Marie still less," said Louise, perfectly miserable. "Father, let a substitute be found—it is hard for them! You do not grudge the money, that I know!"

"My daughter, I would spend the money ten times to have Karl go willingly; to keep him at home, I will not spend it once; what, pay for the dishonour of one who would marry my child? God forbid!" Old Pierre left the room.

"It is an *impasse*" he exclaimed at the door. "I am sorry this has happened; but in honour there is only one course."

An hour later Louise still sat where the rest had left her. Soon after her father's departure an idea had occurred to her—an idea which evidently interested and absorbed her so fully that for a whole hour she sat motionless, thinking deeply, with set mouth and flushed face. The opening of the door startled her, and she looked up to see Henri d'Estreville entering the room, a sight which added a still deeper wave of colour to the flush of excitement which already darkened her cheek.

"Mademoiselle Louise," said Henri, "I have come to bid you farewell."

"Yes, farewell," murmured Louise, "I knew you would be going."

"I am happy to know that Mademoiselle has devoted a thought to me; it is right that it should be so, for indeed I have many for you, Mademoiselle."

"You go to the war," Louise murmured, speaking as though in a dream; "so should all brave men go; oh, Monsieur, it is grand to be a man, to take a great part in the affairs of life; to move and

live and fight, while others remain at home to weep and think with folded hands. To which army corps is Monsieur attached?"

"To that of Ney," said Henri, puzzled by the mood of Louise. Evidently he had surprised her in a moment of unusual softness. Henri had thought, more than once, that the attitude of Louise towards himself indicated a certain partiality. To-day he was almost certain of it.

"Ah, Ney! glorious, splendid Ney, Bravest of the brave! Then I may picture you, Monsieur, as for ever in the thick of the fighting; I shall think of you, Monsieur, be sure; will you also think of me?"

"Assuredly, Louise."

"And how?"

"As of one who, perhaps, sits and waits until a—a certain young soldier returns to repeat to her, as now from his very heart he tells her, that in absence it was her image——"

"Oh, Monsieur," Louise laughed, "not so! sits and waits! Yes, perhaps; but not in spirit! In spirit, Monsieur, I, too, shall be with Ney, fighting with him and with you the battles of my country; suffering hardships, wounds, death maybe, God knows; think of me thus!"

"Yes, I will think thus of you, Mademoiselle; and when I return——"

"Oh, Monsieur, 'sufficient for the day is the evil'. How know you that you will return, or if you return that you will find me?"

"I shall return, Louise; I have no presentiment that evil lies before me; certainly I shall return, and as for finding you, that is a matter of course."

"What if you do not seek me, Monsieur? or if, when you seek me, you do not find me?"

"To the first I reply that I shall desire you, Louise, as the miner longs for light and air; why should I not find you? I will ask you to wait for my return, Mademoiselle!"

"Yes, I will wait for you, Monsieur, if I am alive."

"Then farewell, Mademoiselle; in that hope I shall live." Henri drew her to him. "Upon your lips," he said, "I seal my promise to return." Louise did not resist.

"It is true that I love you, Monsieur," she said; "I that never thought to love a man!"

"By the Saints," Henri murmured, as he hastened away, "that is an easier conquest than I expected. Moreover, she is splendid. It is certain," he reflected five minutes later, "that I have never been nearer to falling in love than at this moment—be careful, Henri."

"When I return," his thoughts ran presently, "there will be some pleasant hours to spend in tilling this virgin soil—*tiens*! I wish I was not going so soon!"

Then Henri d'Estreville proceeded with his farewell visits, which included affecting leave-takings with several ladies of his acquaintance.

Louise sat dreaming for half an hour. Then she rose with flushed face.

"Of course," she muttered, "it is the only way, and what better could there be? I will do it at once."

When the household of Pierre Dupré sat down to dinner, Louise was absent. The rest, with the exception of young Maux, were silent and depressed. When Louise came in her eyes shone brightly, her cheeks were flushed, and she smiled with some embarrassment as she laid by her sister's plate a folded paper. Marie took it up and glanced at it. Suddenly she uttered an exclamation.

"What is it—what have you done, Louise?" she cried. "It is a demission, Karl, in your name, in respect of a substitute 'Michel Prevost'. Louise, did my father—oh, where did you raise the money, sister?—Oh, Karl, see, she has saved us—she has saved us!"

"What mean you?" exclaimed old Pierre. "What have you done, Louise? You have paid for a substitute for Karl? By all the gods, child, I will not have it; it is an outrage; I will——"

"Father, let me speak," said Louise; "it is very simple. I have no money; I have paid no one. The conscript room is crowded with busy people—one has but to go up in turn to the sergeant, answer a question or two and pass on. 'Who are you?' 'Michel Prevost.' 'Conscript or substitute?' 'Substitute for Karl Havet.' 'Height?' 'Five feet seven.' 'Health?' 'Perfect'—scribble, scribble; a paper is handed you—'Drill yard at seven to-morrow—pass on!' and it is done."

"What do you mean, Louise?" exclaimed Havet, starting from his seat. "You have not——"

"Do you not understand," cried Marie, laughing hysterically, "it is Louise herself who has——"

"Yes," said Louise, "that is it, Marie; I am Michel Prevost."

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed old Pierre; "is it so indeed, Louise?"

"It is so, father; I am Private Michel Prevost; you shall have your desire at last; by my own will I am going forth. I shall be in good company, my father, for my regiment is attached to the *corps d'armée* of Marshal Ney himself; hear you that? I shall fight under his colours, the Bravest of the brave. Are you satisfied, father, have I done well? And you, Marie, are you satisfied?"

"Sister, you cannot, you shall not; it is ridiculous—you jest!" cried Marie.

"God forbid. I do not jest! Let no one dare thwart me by revealing my secret"—Louise looked round with smiling face but blazing eye—"You, Karl, or you, Georges, for I swear I will split with

my rapier him who so does! I am a soldier of Ney's army, remember that, *mes amis*!" Louise ended with a loud laugh; she saluted the company military fashion and left the room.

For a moment a silence fell upon all present, then old Pierre's voice was heard repeating the "Nunc Dimittis" in Latin.

CHAPTER XII.

Neither argument nor entreaty availed to shake the determination of Louise. Her father was entirely on her side, enthusiastically backing and applauding her resolve. Marie and her fiancé, though at first shocked that Louise should thus sacrifice herself for their sake, soon realised that the sacrifice only played a part in the comedy.

"Do you not see a second reason?" Marie asked Karl one day. "It has occurred to me that she has another motive besides that of serving us. Louise, too, is in love. I suspected it, now I know it. I accidentally saw her parting with the Baron d'Estreville; they kissed, *mon ami*; imagine Louise kissed by a man; that reveals an extraordinary state of affairs. Well, the Baron has already gone to the war. Louise, poor soul, cannot bear to be parted; *eh bien*! she will go also; perhaps, she tells herself, she will see him from time to time, at any rate she will be near him."

"*Sapristi*, it may be as you say," said Karl; "If so I am glad of it. Then we can allow her to go with minds more at rest."

However this may have been, Louise attended the conscript drill for a month with the rest, and assuredly Michel Prevost there acquitted himself as well as any recruit upon the ground. Accustomed to male attire, which she had worn for some seventeen out of the full tally of the years of her life, she betrayed no awkwardness, whether in plain clothes or in uniform. Accustomed no less to every athletic exercise which went towards the training of the young men of her day, she satisfied the drill sergeant as easily as the most active of her companions, not one of whom ever showed the slightest suspicion as to her sex.

At the end of the month the somewhat raw company of young soldiers, of whom Louise was one, marched through Paris and away; a month later on and they had joined the ranks of Napoleon's ill-fated army. This army consisted of 356,000 Frenchmen, and a heterogeneous collection of 322,000 foreign troops, consisting of Belgians, Dutch, Hanoverians, Italians, Spaniards, Austrians, Prussians, Bavarians, Hessians, men of Frankfort, of Wurtemberg and of Mecklenburg, Poles and others. It was called by the Russians "The Army of Twenty Nations".

Napoleon himself was at Kovno, with about 200,000 troops commanded by Marshals Davoust, Oudinot, Ney, Bessières and Murat. But the detachment of which the conscript Michel Prevost was a member did not join the mighty host until the river Niemen had been crossed, and the dogs of war set at the heels of Alexander and his men.

To oppose his great rival the Tsar had, at this moment, but 150,000 troops, under Generals Bagration and Barclay de Tolly, though 200,000 men were elsewhere disposed, to be called up when required. Besides these troops, the Tsar could count upon some 80,000 Cossacks already enrolled and equipped. Beyond and above all these, too, he could rely upon the nation to provide, in the moment of need, an almost unlimited supply of raw material, ready to fight and die with the best in defence of their beloved country.

Meanwhile Vera had returned, with the rest of the Embassy, to St. Petersburg, and here, within a very few days, she received a visit from Countess Maximof, Sasha's mother, a middle-aged dame of typical Russian appearance and manners: kindly, gushing, voluble in a mixture of Russian and French, used indiscriminately as the words happened to occur to her.

"But, my dear, you are charming, exquisite!" she exclaimed, standing before the girl in an attitude of rapt admiration. "We had heard that you had grown up very beautiful, but this! who would have believed it? And my Sasha absent and unable to see you!"

"Is Alexander Petrovitch away then?" asked Vera, embarrassed by the good lady's compliments and wishing the visit over almost before it was begun.

"Alas—he is gone to this cruel war, *chérie*, where else? All that is best and most precious of our manhood has gone, and Sasha with the rest. Oh, this Napoleon of yours—though indeed he is no more yours than ours—there is no good thing to be said of him; he is Beelzebub, the prince of the devils!"

"I do not defend him," said Vera. "Why should I? I am as good a Russian as the best."

"See how ill-natured people are! It is said that you so love the French people that you no longer have a thought for your own folks; some even said that you would remain in Paris throughout the war!"

"It is false and very stupid also. Of course I love the French people. We have no quarrel with them, Madame, but with one man only; him whom we must all hold accursed for bringing this wicked war upon us!"

"It is true, it is true, *dooshá moyá*! It is the ogre of Europe who would eat up our children, not the people of France. Kiss me, *chérie*, you are beautiful like a morning in summer! Alas! how proud Sasha would have been of you, of his sweet fiancée, could he but have seen you!"

"Oh, Madame, Alexander Petrovitch is better employed!" said Vera weakly.

"You will scarcely believe how he looked forward to seeing you, *chérie*; assuredly he has not forgotten his precious claims to your heart's preference!"

Vera laughed quite unaffectedly.

"Oh, Madame, be sure that, no more than I, would he desire to remember those claims, if we had met! You speak of ancient history which is recalled only with a smile!"

"*Dooshá tui moyá*," exclaimed the Countess, throwing up her hands, "do you realise what you say? The dear Tsar himself would be disappointed to hear your words."

Vera laughed outright.

"The Tsar! What in the world has the Tsar to do with the matter, Madame?"

"*Chérie*, you do not understand. I am a *Dame de la Cour*; I am privileged to enjoy many opportunities of conversing with his Majesty. His Majesty is well acquainted with all the circumstances of this romantic betrothal of Sasha and yourself. My dear son is personally known to the Tsar, who has deigned to express himself as much interested in his career. His Majesty was, I may say, charmed to hear of the betrothal; for listen, *ma mie*; it has reached even those august ears that Mademoiselle Vera Demidof is well known to be one of the beauties of Paris. Ah, Mademoiselle, I can see by your blushes that you are surprised and charmed by this news! Shall I tell you more? The dear Tsar, it is but a month ago, was pleased to pat my Sasha upon the shoulder—'Hold your own, good boy!' said he, and the Tsar laughed most graciously; 'I hear we have a Russian outwork in Paris; see that the Frenchmen are kept out of it!'"

"Madame, I am stupid at guessing conundrums," said Vera, blushing.

"*Dooshá moyá*, the riddle is a very easy one. The Tsar is well pleased that so sweet a flower as our Russian Rose of Paris should be plucked by none but a Russian. 'Let no French lover come between you!' said his Majesty, in effect. Truly, as I have said, he would be disappointed indeed if you and Sasha should not come together as Destiny intended that you should."

"Oh, Madame, who can tell what are the intentions of Destiny? If the Tsar be pleased to jest in a matter which does not concern him, let him jest. It is quite likely that Alexander Petrovitch, when he sees me, will think the Tsar's jest but a poor one."

"A thousand times no, *chérie*! He will love you at sight. Already he is prepared to lose his heart; it is a heart worth winning! There are many who would give the world in exchange for it! Yet I whisper to you, *dooshinka*, this secret—he waits but to learn that you have escaped scatheless from Paris!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Vera, laughing. "Did he think the Frenchmen would begin the war by murdering poor little me?"

"Fie, fie, little hypocrite!" said the Countess, tapping Vera affectionately with her fan. "Well, well, Sasha shall tell you all these things for himself! I am only a poor old woman, but Sasha will return from the war, one day, and such matters will sound differently from his lips. We shall see what Destiny has to say then!"

"Yes, let us leave it so, Madame," said Vera; "for after all, we have not yet seen one another!"

CHAPTER XIII.

The beginning of the war dragged. There was little fighting, for the Russian generals adopted the policy of retiring constantly before the enemy's advance, apparently afraid to stand their ground, but actually luring him intentionally onward, deeper and deeper, into the immense spaces of the interior. By these tactics a constantly diminishing French force opposed a Russian army whose numbers augmented daily in spite of the leakage resulting from illness and small engagements.

In one of the earlier battles young Sasha Maximof received a bullet in the left arm, and being incapacitated for a while from active service was employed by the general to carry to Moscow the latest manifesto of the Tsar, and to superintend the raising of reinforcements demanded in that document by his Majesty.

The manifesto was as follows:—

"To our ancient City and Metropolis of Moscow:

> "The Enemy, with unparalleled perfidy and a force equal to his boundless ambition, has entered the frontiers of Russia. His design is the ruin of our country. The Russian armies burn to throw themselves upon his battalions....
>
> "Necessity commands that we should assemble a new force in the interior to support that which is now face to face with the enemy. To collect this new army we now address ourself to the Ancient Capital of our Ancestors: to Moscow, the sovereign city of all the Russians....
>
> "The security of our Holy Church, the safety of the Throne of the Tsars, the independence of the Ancient Muscovite Empire all demand that the object of this appeal be regarded by our subjects as a Sacred Decree....

"The ills which this treacherous invader has prepared for us shall fall upon his own head. Europe, delivered from vassalage, shall celebrate the name of Russia!

"ALEXANDER.

"GIVEN AT OUR CAMP AT POLOTSK,
6, 7, 1812."

The Countess Maximof presently received a letter from a relative in Moscow. "Come quickly," her cousin wrote; "you are the favoured of fortune; Sasha has arrived, slightly wounded—do not be afraid, it is a mere bagatelle, a bullet scratch in the left arm; he is busy recruiting—a very important billet, my dear, and the appointment is the highest compliment to so young a man! Sasha is too busy to write, but he begs me to say that he hopes to see you here, and also—if she is with you—Vera Demidof, who has of course returned from Paris." The Countess went straight to Vera with her letter.

"You will come, *chérie*—do not refuse—give him this pleasure; only think, he is wounded; one of the first to bleed for our dear Russia; he is wounded and will soon go back to the front—you will not refuse his request."

"Oh, I will come," Vera laughed, "if only to prove to you, Madame, that Alexander Petrovitch and myself shall need but one interview to assure ourselves that neither is anxious to be bound by the foolish betrothal of a dozen years ago!"

"Well, we shall see, we shall see; meanwhile you will come, and that is good. We shall travel in my own Dormese; in three days we shall be in Moscow. We shall not journey by night, for I would have you look your sweetest when Sasha sees you; poor lad, he will not be at his best—wounded and perhaps ill with fever; you will remember that when you see him!"

"I will remember that he has already bled for Russia, that will mean more for me than the colour of his cheeks," said Vera.

"That is a wise saying, *chérie*; good, I like it; yes, remember that he is a good Russian."

Vera was not long in Moscow before Sasha Maximof presented himself. He came with his arm in a sling, pale and looking many years older than when Vera last saw him. His face was certainly a handsome one, and much of its present pallor was lost in the blush which spread over his features as he took Vera's hand and bent over it.

"My mother did not exaggerate," he said, gazing at the girl with undisguised admiration. "I thought—three years ago, is it?—that you would grow into a handsome girl, but by the Saints, Vera, I did not anticipate—this!"

"So you have 'eschewed the follies of cadetdom,'" laughed Vera, quoting Sasha's late letter to her in Paris. "What does that mean, pray?"

"You quote imperfectly," Sasha blushed again. "I wrote, 'my heart is disengaged, and I have eschewed the follies of cadetdom'. You must know what I mean by the follies of my cadet-period, for assuredly there could scarcely have existed upon this earth a more objectionable person than I was in those days."

"You had, if I remember rightly," said Vera, "a very fair opinion of yourself; you refused to know me because I was too young."

"I am prepared to make amends," Sasha laughed. "Please do all your fault-finding at once, in order that my repentance may be complete. I know I was a conceited young cub and treated you abominably. What is your next grievance?"

"A very much more serious one. Your memory is so good that you will not have forgotten a certain conversation when we parted three years ago."

"I think I remember every word of it; I have often thought of it."

"Is that so?" asked Vera in surprise. "Why?"

"Honestly, because you looked so pretty that day and showed so much spirit that I was surprised into liking you better than I thought. I realised this afterwards. I suppose I am a person of strong imagination, because from time to time, recalling that interview, I have felt that sense of 'like' almost deepen into 'love'."

"Oh!" Vera laughed; "but that could only have been after your heart became disengaged; do not forget, *mon ami*, that when we parted your heart was far from being disengaged."

"I thought so; but one makes mistakes about such things. At any rate I got over that—that foolish business. Am I forgiven all these juvenile sins?"

"But there is nothing in the last confession which concerns me. What have I to forgive in the circumstance that you were once in love with some one unknown, and 'got over it'?"

Sasha winced.

"Of course that was nothing to you," he said.

"Absolutely. But with regard to that same conversation, I have a grievance and a serious one, as I hinted before. We came to an agreement, I remember, with regard to a certain foolish contract entered into by our parents on our behalf. You were to destroy it, by mutual consent. You did not do so, as I learned for the first time but a few months ago."

"Honestly, Vera, the notary said it could not be destroyed but in the presence of, and by sworn consent of, both. The priests, too, declare that the sanction of the metropolitan is necessary."

"You should not have asked them. You had undertaken to tear up the foolish thing. That would have sufficed for us. Why did you ask advice?"

"I see that you will have the whole truth. I stupidly thought that by retaining the contract I retained also a kind of hold upon you. Of course, on reconsideration——"

"Yes, of course that is nonsense. I will tell you, my friend, that contract or no contract, I should never dream of marrying any man against my own will and desire. Your action makes no difference, but it was foolish and not quite honest. It is better that we should understand one another from the beginning."

"Yes, that is true. Will you do me a kindness, Vera? You say that it is better that we should understand one another. It might save me much pain if you were to tell me now, before it is quite too late, whether you have left Paris as heart free as you entered it?"

Vera flushed crimson.

"By what right am I thus catechised?" she asked angrily. "Is it by virtue of the contract you so dishonestly retained? or do you consider that I am bound to give you my confidence because you have been so good as to lay bare your heart for my entertainment? Neither is a sufficient reason, sir."

"You are very hard on me, Vera," Maximof sighed. "What you have implied might have been conveyed to me less harshly. Well, thank you for letting me know what I wished to know." He paused. "With regard to our intercourse here in Moscow, I shall be very busy and—well, I may as well speak to you frankly while I am about it, I fancy it would be too dangerous for me to see much of you. Good-bye—oh, as to this thing——"

Sasha produced a pocket-book and took from it an oldish paper. "At any rate you shall be worried no longer by the whim of our parents!" He opened the door of the stove and threw the betrothal contract within; then he lit a match and applied it to an edge of the document which was soon in flames.

"So ends a foolish comedy that might have developed into a pretty romance!" said Maximof, laughing bitterly. "Farewell, Vera Danilovna. I wish to God you had not lived these three years in Paris!" At the door he turned and spoke again.

"Of course I don't blame you, but it's hard on me that you should have grown so—so maddeningly pretty." Maximof repeated his loud laugh and departed.

Vera sighed. "I ought to have known you before, my friend," she thought; "before—before Paul! But after all, the gulf between Paul and me is wide enough!"

CHAPTER XIV.

The war was in full swing, victory favouring the French troops, for the most part, though occasionally she would hearten the defending Russians with a smile or two of encouragement. Louise, with her fellow recruits, had joined Ney's army corps. Already she had been present in several minor engagements and had even received a slight flesh wound in the left hand. The army surgeon attending her had remarked upon the smallness of her hand. "It might be a woman's!" he said with a laugh. "There's nothing here to keep you out of the fun," he added; "get back to the colours as soon as you please."

The Russian General, Barclay de Tolly, was throughout unwilling to expose his troops to the risk of battle. He was no coward. In the face of much patriotic opposition from his fellow generals and the nation at large, he adhered to his own tactics, which were to lure the enemy constantly forward, striking only when a blow could be dealt with effect. The peasantry, patriots to a man, beseeched their general to bid them set fire to their standing crops, to their very homes and granaries, that the enemy might find but a desolate waste in his advance. Thousands of villages were so destroyed, their inhabitants preferring to wander homeless and hungry into the woods rather than allow the enemy to profit, even for a night, by the use of their property.

Michel Prevost, as Louise was called among her fellows, was soon a favourite in her regiment. No one had the slightest suspicion that she was anything but what she pretended to be, a young conscript like thousands of others who went to swell the Grande Armée. Occasionally remarks would be made—jokes as to her complexion, which was fair for a man's; her slight though well-knit figure, her modesty, her obvious dislike for coarse topics of conversation, but though occasionally a man might declare with a laugh that Michel was as much woman as man, barring his fencing, which was second to none, no one dreamed that in saying such a thing he was nearer the truth than he knew.

Never a day passed but Louise looked anxiously for the Baron d'Estreville. He belonged, she knew, to a fashionable light cavalry regiment, and this regiment she saw more than once, in the distance; but during the first month of her campaigning she never succeeded in catching a glimpse of her friend, an unkind arrangement of destiny which caused Louise to sigh daily.

Then came a day of stress and battle.

Barclay de Tolly had decided to vary, for once, his tactics by staying for a day his retrograde movement. If attacked and beaten, he could immediately recommence his slow retreat upon Moscow. Should he prove victorious—which he scarcely expected—it might be possible to inflict a blow upon Napoleon which, at this crisis, would be fatal to his further advance. Barclay decided upon this stand in deference to the complaints of his army. The result was disastrous, and involved, besides the loss of thousands of men, the burning and destruction of the splendid old city of Smolensk, on the Dnieper, into which stronghold he had thrown himself in his desperate attempt to stay the advance of the French.

Napoleon made the remark that the blazing town "reminded him of Naples during an eruption of Vesuvius".

During this day of fighting Louise suffered a shock, for she not only saw Henri close at hand for the first time during the campaign, but almost at the moment of recognising him, as he rode by at the head of his troop of Hussars, saw him also struck by a shot and knocked senseless from his saddle.

Her own regiment was at the moment rushing forward with cheers to assault a house held by marksmen of the enemy, whose shots from the windows had been a serious annoyance for an hour or more, and acting upon the inspiration of the moment Louise fell forward upon her face, as though struck by a bullet. She saw her comrades go forward shouting, laughing, cursing, leaving a man here and half a dozen there; she saw Henri's Hussars ride on also; then she rose and ran to the spot where she had seen the Baron fall.

Henri was unconscious but alive. She bathed his temples with tepid fluid from her own water-bottle. A bullet, she now saw, had passed through his left shoulder. She ripped the tunic and tore away the shirt and washed the wound. It bled fiercely, but she was able to stop the bleeding by means of a tight bandage.

Henri opened his eyes presently and half sat up, using his right arm and hand to prop himself. He looked around, listened to the cannonading, the shouting and turmoil a mile away, and glanced, eventually, at Louise, who was still busy over her bandage.

Henri stared at her face, saying nothing; Louise employed herself busily, collecting composure for the trying ordeal through which she now expected to have to pass.

"You are very kind to attend to my wound, *mon ami*," said Henri, at last. "Who are you?"

"Michel Prevost, Monsieur le Capitaine," Louise replied, saluting; "I saw you struck down, and fearing that you might bleed to death if left alone, I stopped to bind your shoulder. You will recover, please God; the bullet has missed the vital parts."

"It is curious. I seem to know your face, yet I think I have not seen you before. Are you a Parisian?"

"Certainly, Monsieur, but only a conscript; it is not likely that you should have seen me before."

"Perhaps not—yet your face seems familiar. Are you wounded?"

"No, mon Capitaine. I have no excuse to stay, now that your wants are for the moment attended to. With your permission, I will follow my companions, or I shall get myself shot for a skulker."

"I will speak for you. Stay a while here, my friend; or, still better, help me, if you will, to the small house yonder, which our cannonballs have half demolished. This wound of mine may be more serious than you suppose—I feel very faint. It is cold here and very damp. Is it dark or do my eyes ——"

The Baron suddenly fainted, falling back into his companion's arms with a groan. Within one hundred yards stood the half-demolished house to which Henri had made reference. Louise laid the wounded man carefully upon the grass and hastened to see whether any assistance was to be had. The house was of stone, the only habitation left standing within half a mile, for the wooden cottages which had surrounded it were burned to the ground, every one. This had been a village, she concluded, standing a mile or two from the town of Smolensk, now blazing in the distance. The house was empty. It had been, to judge from its appearance, the village shop or store. The upper portion had been destroyed by a cannon-ball, but the ground floor still stood. Searching hastily among the débris left by the owners on the approach of the French troops, Louise found a bottle of vodka, three parts empty. With this treasure-trove she flew back to her patient.

Henri opened his eyes when she had poured a quantity of the stuff down his throat.

"You again?" he said. "What is it—did I faint?"

"There is a wheel-barrow in the yard of the house yonder," said Louise; "can I leave you for a moment while I fetch it? If you are strong enough to bear moving, it would be better to take you under shelter. It is raining and miserable here. The night will be wet and cold."

"By the Saints, you are a good soul—what did you say your name was—Michel? Yes, fetch the wheel-barrow, my friend. Strong enough or not, I will make the journey, with your assistance."

Louise fetched the wheel-barrow. With many groans Henri contrived to seat himself in the conveyance, and Louise wheeled him very carefully into port. She improvised a bed out of a pile of hay which she found in the stable behind and soon Henri lay in comparative comfort.

His wound seemed to be serious, though not dangerous, unless complications should set in; but being young and very healthy there was little danger that anything in the nature of mortification would supervene. The wounded man and his companion were not long left in undisturbed

possession of their sanctuary, however, for before long a surgeon and his assistants, following in the steps of the fighting contingent, and finding a score of wounded men in the vicinity of Henri's house, brought in as many as could be accommodated in the place, which now became a pandemonium of groaning, swearing, raving and dying men. Two other sufferers were brought into Henri's room, a circumstance which did not please his nurse; but there was no help for it and the men remained.

Henri d'Estreville was seen and treated by the doctor.

"You'll be all right," he said; "though you'd have bled to death but for this young fellow—your servant, doubtless. I shall leave an assistant in charge of the household; I must be off; by the Saints, his Majesty gives us poor fellows work enough. Up at Smolensk, they say, it is like the shambles."

One poor fellow died during the night and was removed by Louise. The other lay groaning and raving in delirium, too far gone to take notice of any one or anything.

All night Henri, too, raved in delirium, suffering from high fever. Louise sat on the ground beside him, her back to the wall, weary to death but sleeping never a wink. Towards morning Henri was quieter, but could not sleep. He was inclined to talk, and treated Louise to a long account of his adventures in love, some of which caused the poor girl—who knew little of such things—to blush from neck to temples, though Henri was unaware of the fact, owing to the darkness.

"Every one of these affairs," said Henri, "has left me without a mark. I had begun to think that Nature, in her wisdom, had omitted to provide me with a heart, well knowing that such a possession is as much a trouble as a comfort to its owner; yet now, in my old age—imagine, Michel, I am twenty-five, no less!—I have begun to fear that after all she has treated me no better than my fellows. Not only have I found, of late, that I possess a heart, but no sooner was it found than I have lost it—so, at least, I fear!"

"It is possible, I suppose, that I shall die of this wound," Henri continued presently.

"God forbid!" muttered his companion.

"Oh, agreed! I am not anxious to die," Henri laughed; "still, it is possible, for, be assured, Michel, I have felt very ill this night; certainly I have been nearer death than has been my lot before to-day. Who can tell how the malady will go—which turn it will take. This girl, I spoke of; if I should die, Michel, you shall take a message to her. *Sapristi*—it is an odd thing, that I who have exchanged vows with a hundred women should now remember with affection but one, and she the most artless of them all and doubtless the most virtuous. You will carry a message for this one, Michel, promise me—it is only in case of my death—come!"

"I promise," murmured Louise.

"Good—perhaps I shall live, in which case keep my secret, lest by that time I should think differently. But supposing that I should die, go to the Palais d'armes of old Pierre Dupré, there ask for his daughter Louise—remember their names—you shall take a note of them presently, and tell her that in dying Baron Henri d'Estreville remembered her with tenderness; of all his vows of love he remembered those only that he made to her, which vows, say, he would certainly have kept if he should have remained in the same mind when he returned."

Louise suddenly broke in upon Henri's message with a merry laugh.

"I will leave out the last sentence, it will not sound so well as the rest," she said. "If you had lived, I will say, you might have been faithful to her. That you died loving her fairly well."

"Ah, you mock me!" said Henri. "No, I am serious. It is wonderful, but I remember that little simple one with true affection. To her lips I send a loving kiss, the pledge of my love."

"Shall I carry your very kiss to her?" said Louise; "if—if it would be a comfort to you, I will do so."

"Ah, rascal! I think I have roused your interest in my pretty one—well, if I die I care very little what happens; yes, take her my very kiss—bend over and receive it from me. It is a strange thing, Michel, but there is something in your face which reminds me of my Louise; in kissing you thus I can almost fancy it is she—I would to God it were!"

"Ah, you rave again!" murmured Louise.

CHAPTER XV.

On the following morning Louise, busy over some service on Henri's behalf, heard herself hailed by a wounded man, lying in the larger room of the house now in use as a temporary hospital. This was a sergeant in her own regiment, a rough-tongued veteran, keen in war, strict for discipline, a terror to the young conscripts of the regiment.

"Hi, you, Prevost, what the devil do you here?" he cried. "You don't seem to be wounded? May the devil claim all shirkers; why are you not with the colours?"

"I was engaged last night in tending an officer who was sorely wounded," said Louise; "I am no shirker."

"To Hell with your tending; I know what that means: the desire to be out of the line of fire

combined with the hope of a *pourboire*; away with you and report yourself to Sergeant Villeboeuf by midday."

"But the officer——" Louise hesitated.

"Bah—he is no excuse; Monsieur the under bone-sawer," continued the fellow, addressing the doctor's assistant busy operating at his elbow, "see to this officer this shirker speaks of."

"I have seen him," said the man; "he may come through or he may not, but in any case we desire no loafers in hospital, the space is too confined already."

"I am ordered to leave you, mon Capitaine," said Louise, entering Henri's room; "I pray God you may recover; farewell, Monsieur; I will remember your message."

"Yes—if I die, only!" said Henri; "not if I come through this and the rest of the war. I feel sick enough to-day—I wish they would leave you, *mon ami*, to look after me."

"They will not, they call me shirker for remaining only one night! Do not——" Louise was about to say "do not forget me," but she thought better of it and altered the sentence to "do not fail to get well".

"Not I—if it depends upon me—*au revoir, mon ami*, let us say, at Moscow!"

Louise left the little house with a heavy heart. "For God's sake keep an eye upon Monsieur le Capitaine," she said at parting to the little *feldscher*, or under-surgeon, who replied with a laugh:—

"*Tiens*, my friend, you are wonderfully anxious about the young man; one would think you were a woman!"

There was no *arrière pensée* about the remark, but poor Louise went away blushing terribly and very angry with herself for allowing herself to yield to so feminine a weakness.

Would the Baron survive? That was the question which throbbed for an answer with every beat of her heart. If he survived and remembered the love which he professed to have felt for the daughter of the old *maître d'armes*, oh! thought Louise, how heavenly a place the dull earth would become.

If he should not survive—well, let the first Russian bullet find its home in her heart, for all she would care to live on! And yet, Louise felt, even without Henri life was a thousand times more beautiful now that she had certain sweet memories to draw upon. "The most Holy Spirit," she reflected, "must have inspired him with that message—oh! to think that I, of all others, should have been chosen for its recipient: a message to myself, delivered into my keeping for my comfort—an inspiration in truth and indeed!"

Meanwhile the army of Napoleon, constantly dwindling, advanced daily farther and farther into the interior of Russia. Napoleon felt that he was being enticed forward, but there was no thought of retreating. On the contrary, successes were achieved daily, though great events were rare. The policy of the Russian commanders was still that of retreat, laying waste the country as they went. The faithful peasants aided and abetted them. Every man proved himself a patriot. "Only let us know the right moment," they declared, "and every hut in the village shall burn to the ground, every acre of corn shall be destroyed before the detested foreigner arrives to eat the fruit of our labours."

From the beginning of the campaign to the present time—two months and a half—Napoleon had lost by illness and battle 150,000 men; the Grand Army was melting away before his eyes. He now did all that was possible, by ordering up large reinforcements, to fill the voids.

But meanwhile the Russian troops, unaware that the continuous retreating movement was a part of the deliberate policy of their leaders, grew more and more discontented both with Bagration and Barclay de Tolly, generals who had, nevertheless, done passing well with the troops entrusted to them.

And seeing that the feeling of discontent was daily spreading, and the more quickly since the fall and destruction of Smolensk, the Tsar Alexander now united both his armies under the supreme command of Kootoozof.

This new appointment aroused enthusiasm. Kootoozof had no intention of altering the policy of his lieutenants. He knew, none better, that every step gained with much pain and difficulty, by the French armies, must presently be retraced with tenfold and hundredfold more difficulty, and pains unimaginable. The Don Cossacks were already being recruited in preparation for the French retreat; the militia, raised in response to the manifesto of the Tsar, would be ready for work in a month or two; great things were preparing for the discomfiture of the little Corporal and his men—the rod was in pickle—let them advance by all means toward Moscow!

But when old Kootoozof passed his troops in review, he repeated a hundred times for their edification words of encouragement and patriotic appreciation.

"Holy Mother!" he would ejaculate; "what soldiers! With troops such as these success is sure! We shall beat the French, my children—only wait and see!" And again, "With such soldiers we shall not retreat for long!"

Kootoozof halted his army at Borodino: 120,000 men, all told; and here, early in the morning of the 7th of September, the great Russian army confessed and communicated and were blessed by the priests with Holy Water. During the morning an eagle hovered for a few moments over the head of old Kootoozof, until frightened away by the shouts of enthusiasm by which the soldiers

saluted the happy omen. The battle raged all day with varying success, the French capturing the redoubts, losing them again, and again recapturing these and other outworks. The Russians slowly retreated and were not pursued. Both sides claimed the victory, and both lost enormously; but whereas the losses of the French were at this stage irreparable, those of the Russian army were comparatively of small consequence.

Then Kootoozof held a great council of his generals, whereat some voted for a final battle in defence of Moscow, some argued that there were greater issues at stake than the safety of the ancient capital which, after all, was "only a city like another". Kootoozof, however, reserved the final decision for himself, having, probably, long since made up his mind as to what should be done. He marched his army through the suburbs of Moscow, and presently spent the month during which Napoleon's soldiers occupied the Holy City in so disposing his forces that not only was the road to St. Petersburg blocked by a constantly growing army, but access to the richer provinces of the Empire was also barred; while hordes of Cossacks lay in wait along the line of retreat which, so soon as Moscow should be found no longer tenable, would, Kootoozof calculated, inevitably present itself as the last resource for the invading forces. In a word, Napoleon should be practically blockaded in Moscow.

But meanwhile, on the 14th September, the advance guard of the French army entered the city. Through the streets of the White Town and of China Town (known, respectively, as Biélui Gorod and Kitai Gorod) they marched, singing joyful songs. Then pillage began and continued until Napoleon himself arrived within the city walls.

But the personal entry of Napoleon into Moscow had been delayed. The Emperor had remained at the barrier leading to the Smolensky Road, awaiting the usual ceremonies which, he was determined, should precede his triumphal entry into the city. His Majesty expected humble deputations, servile invitations, sham rejoicings. He was accustomed to see the authorities of the place arrive to lay at his feet the keys of the conquered city, but here no one came, nothing of the sort happened. All seemed commotion in Moscow, but the afternoon arrived and still no deputation was to be seen leaving the city. Napoleon grew angry and sent a Polish General of his staff to hurry the movements of the authorities. This gentleman returned at night with the astonishing information that no authorities were to be found. Moscow was practically deserted; there were a few private residents scattered here and there, but palaces, public offices, the house of the Governor-General were all empty; not a functionary remained in Moscow.

The Emperor was furious and perhaps a little dismayed. He slept that night without the walls, and on the following day entered the city in sullen silence—no beating of drums, no music, no church bells greeted his arrival. As a writer of the times expresses it: "His feelings when viewing the accomplishment of this long anticipated enterprise must have resembled those of Satan at the destruction of Paradise. The fiend was received with hisses by his damned crew."

It is said that as he rode up to the Borovitsky Gate one Russian, an old soldier, decrepit and tottering, barred the Emperor's passage, and was struck down by the Guards surrounding his Majesty. Then Napoleon proceeded to the Kremlin and took up his abode in the ancient habitation of the Tsars, a home which he was not destined to occupy for many days.

CHAPTER XVI.

Meanwhile Count Rostopchin, ex-Governor of Moscow, had had a difficult task to perform. General Kootoozof, making no secret of his intention of abandoning Moscow, unless the stand at Borodino should meet with unexpected success, had promised the Count three days notice before the French should be free to enter the city; but Rostopchin received warning only twenty-four hours before the arrival of the first batch of foreign soldiers. During those four and twenty hours much was done. The archives, with many treasures from churches and palaces were removed to a neighbouring city. The arsenals were thrown open in order that whosoever desired might arm himself. The prisons were also opened, the fire-engines were removed or destroyed; the greater part of the population crowded out of the city, taking with them—as far as possible—their possessions. Only a few enthusiasts remained, patriotic souls or religious fanatics who would not leave the Holy City of Russia to the licence of the invaders.

Thus Napoleon found a deserted Moscow, deserted by all but a grim remnant of resolute, desperate, Russia-loving, foreigner-hating patriots.

Among them was Vera Demidof, whose motives for remaining were, however, decidedly mixed.

During the months of anxiety preceding the arrival, first of the Russian army and afterwards of the French, Vera had shown herself one of the most patriotic of Russian women. She had been surprised by her own fierce patriotic passion. She had gone daily among the people, inflaming their minds against the foreigners, helping—like many of the ladies in Moscow—to enrol every man of fighting age and capacity among the *drujina* or militia, which had started into being in response to the manifesto of the Tsar. She remained behind when the great majority of the population left in the hope that she might even yet find work to do for Russia's sake. She was a member of a patriotic guild, formed at this time to watch and to protect the beloved city, given over into the hands of her enemies.

If any one had told Vera that she had remained in Moscow partly at least in the hope of seeing a Frenchman, one Paul de Tourelle; of assuring herself that he was alive and well and that he still

loved her, perhaps she would have admitted the first portion of the indictment, but certainly not the last. Vera was, as a matter of fact, anxious to see Paul, if possible, but for a different reason. Whether he loved her or not was, at this moment of patriotic fervour, a matter of supreme indifference to her, for, indeed, she more than suspected that she had altogether lost that partiality for the young Frenchman which she had believed to be a preliminary to love; perhaps her patriotic hatred of the invaders of her country had scotched all private feelings for individual French persons; perhaps there were other reasons. At any rate Vera was anxious to see the man in order to make sure of herself; it was just as well, she thought, to know one's own heart. In any case she would be a patriot first. If she found that she still preserved some affection for this man, it might be a comfort to her wounded patriotic spirit to offer her private feelings a living sacrifice. At least she could do that much for Russia, if there was little else a woman could do.

On the day of the evacuation of Moscow Vera, sitting at her window and watching the turmoil and movement of the people in the streets below, heard the footsteps of someone running rapidly down the road. She recognised Sasha Maximof, who entered the house panting and excited.

"Vera, what is the meaning of this?" he said; Sasha was greatly agitated—"I hear you are determined to remain in Moscow—have you thought of the dangers from lawless French soldiers, the uselessness, the——"

Vera laughed. "Dear Sasha," she said, "give me time to say 'thank God you are alive and safe'; remember that I have not seen you since July and now it is September, and we have heard nothing of you!" Vera was, as a matter of fact, more relieved and grateful on this account than she quite realised; she had worried much on Sasha's behalf, chiefly—as she had assured herself—because of the anxiety of his mother, who had received no news of her son, but largely also on her own account, for at his last visit to Moscow she had learned, and made no secret of the fact, that young Maximof was an immensely improved person, and that she really quite liked and admired him.

"As for remaining in Moscow, I think I can take care of myself; I speak French so easily, you see, that I shall pass as a Frenchwoman in case of need; for the rest, I am not at all afraid, and I belong, moreover, to the patriotic guild and am bound to watch for opportunities to serve our beloved Russia."

"There can be none, Vera, believe me, that a woman can safely employ. For God's sake be persuaded to leave the city."

Vera shook her head.

"No, Sasha, I am not to be persuaded. I shall be safe. I am well armed, and these two faithful old servants who have chosen to stay with me are armed also; we shall have soft answers for any who may come to pillage, but—as you know—this street is too far from the centre of the city to be in much danger of pillaging parties. However this is foolish talk. Even if there were danger, ten times more than you suppose, I should still remain in Moscow."

"I do not like to think, and yet it has been suggested to me," said Sasha, flushing, "that though you are known to be both patriotic and fearless, there may be other reasons for your desire to remain in town. You have many friends among the French; possibly you are anxious to see or hear of them, to know that all is well with them."

"Yes, that may be true," said Vera, looking Sasha full in the eyes. "One may feel an interest in personal friends even though they fight in the ranks of the enemy."

"Of course," Sasha hesitated, "you will understand, Vera, that in saying this I had no *arrière pensée*; I mean, I was not hinting that you should tell me anything that is—is not my business."

"Yes, I understand," said Vera. "There is nothing to tell. I am interested to know whether—certain people—are alive; but that is not my only reason for remaining in Moscow. Where are you quartered?"

"With Barclay de Tolly's command. I shall not be far away—send for me, Vera, if you should need advice or assistance; I wish to God I could stay, but of course I cannot leave the colours."

"We have horses in the stables and arms in the house and—and God will protect His people, Sasha; the taking of Moscow is not the end of the campaign; we shall see what we shall see. Yes, I wish also that you were with us; but you are doing your duty as I believe I am doing mine. No one can do more than that!"

"No; well, I must go, Vera. I wonder whether we shall ever meet again; there are many dangers still in store for both of us; our fate lies in God's keeping. Before I go I will say that whether we live or whether we die, I know now that you are the only woman in the world for me. I shall pray daily for your welfare, and that your love, wherever it may be given, may in the end make for your lasting happiness. May I kiss your hand?"

Vera gave her hand and Sasha bowed over it; she kissed his forehead, Russian fashion, and he her hand.

"We will—we will think only of Russia now, Sasha," she said; "there will be time to talk of other things when her trouble is over."

Afterwards Vera went into the city to watch, from a safe corner, the entrance of the French soldiers. She saw Paul de Tourelle march in with his regiment, and she recognised also Henri d'Estreville, her own cousin, who rode in with his troop of lancers, looking very pale and ill. Paul seemed well and sound and rode with all that air of aristocratic *hauteur* which was natural to this

undoubtedly splendid-looking youth. Vera made a close examination of her feelings as she watched him and found that the dominating sentiment seemed to be one of anger that he, too, should be among these detested ranks of the successful enemies of her country and of indignation that he should assume so swaggering an air. Still, she was glad that he was alive and well, and admitted to herself that he looked handsome enough.

When she safely reached her house, late in the afternoon, a great surprise was in store for her.

Sasha Maximof met her in the entrance hall, having opened the door for her. He was in plain clothes; the first time since her childhood that she had ever seen him out of uniform. Sasha smiled radiantly.

"Thank God you are safe!" he exclaimed. "Vera, what a risk you have run in going out into the streets!"

Vera flushed with joy to see him and even laughed aloud in pure relief and contentment, though she made a show of attributing her mirth to his appearance.

"Sasha!" she cried—"you in plain clothes—oh, how funny!—explain, what is the meaning of this metamorphosis?"

"I have got leave of absence," he replied, "on the plea of protecting ladies of my family; I can stay a while; I shall be in the house if you will permit me, Vera, and I will join your patriotic league. Look—is that some of your work?" He led Vera to a window and pointed towards the commercial portion of the city; a thick smoke rose from the quarter indicated. "Our friends have begun early!" Sasha laughed exultingly. "Is it Rostopchin's agents, think you, or the patriots?"

"The patriots," Vera replied. "We shall burn all Moscow, Sasha, it is the principal part of our programme. I told you the campaign is not yet over. How long will the troops occupy a burning city? A week? Two weeks? And then comes Kootoozof's opportunity; Platof and his Cossacks; the Drujina of Moscow, and all you good regulars; you shall fall upon them like terriers upon the rats. Now do you understand why we of the league must remain in Moscow?"

"I see—I see!" said Sasha, trembling with excitement. "Yes! there is work to be done in the city, you are right, Vera; but it is not woman's work; it is work for desperate men, Vera, not for fair girls."

"My friend, the men are occupied in sharpening their swords, in drilling, in preparing for the running of the rats when the haystack is burned. We have no men in Moscow, excepting the old and the infirm."

"Oh, I am glad I came, I am glad I came!" said Sasha, his teeth chattering with the agitation of the moment.

CHAPTER XVII.

Late that same evening Vera had cause to reiterate Sasha's exclamation that it was well he had come to Moscow.

At ten o'clock there came a loud knocking at the door, and Sasha, peeping out of an upper window, descried a group of three or four persons, French officers as he judged from their talk.

Maximof armed himself with pistol and dagger and placed the two old servants in the entrance hall with orders to keep the visitors covered with their muskets, but not to fire unless specially told to do so. Vera awaited developments in a room adjoining the hall, armed and perfectly composed.

Then Maximof opened the barred door. Three young French officers entered and closed the door behind them. They laughed to see the two old men standing with musket to shoulder.

"Tell them to lower their weapons," said the spokesman in French, addressing Sasha; "I do not speak your infernal language; we mean no harm but only seek information."

"Let me first understand your errand," said Sasha in his best French. "The men will not hurt you except at a word from me."

"Well, then, is this the quarter of Moscow known as the Sloboda?" said the officer. "We are in search of the ladies of the French Theatrical Company, old friends of ours in Paris, who, we are told, dwell in this quarter of the city. Maybe you can direct us. You are, I conclude, a foreigner, or you would be with the army—what we have left of it."

"This is the Sloboda, but I know nothing about your actresses," began Sasha, but to his horror Vera suddenly made her appearance in the hall, coming to the door of the room in which she had stationed herself. The hall was lighted with but a single oil lamp hung over the front door, so that faces were seen but indistinctly.

"It may be that I can enlighten Monsieur," said Vera; "I overheard his request for information. The Governor-General caused the removal of the entire French company three days ago, considering this advisable with a view to their safety. They are not in Moscow."

"*Sapristi!*" exclaimed the young French officer, who had acted as spokesman; "that is a voice that I know, though it is too dark to distinguish faces. Is it possible that I address Mademoiselle Vera

Demidof?" He took a step forward. Sasha instantly barred the way.

"Back, Monsieur," he said. "There is no admittance excepting at Mademoiselle's orders."

Vera had started at the sound of the officer's voice. "Sasha, it is Paul de Tourelle," she said; "there is nothing to fear, let him enter."

"What, and these others also?" asked Sasha.

"I will answer for their good behaviour, Monsieur," said Paul. "Perhaps Mademoiselle will accord me the honour of a few moments conversation while these gentlemen rest themselves in the hall."

"Yes, I will speak with you—come in here!" Vera indicated the room which she had quitted a moment before. Maximof took his stand at the door. He waved his hand to the two old servants. "*Rebyáta*," he said, "you can lower your muskets but remain here." The two young Frenchmen stood at the stove to warm themselves. Sasha heard their conversation, which they took no pains to conceal from his ears.

"Our little Paul has found a friend it seems," said one, laughing; "he is indeed a wonderful man for the ladies. This will console him for Clotilde's absence."

"Curses upon the Governor-General, he might at least have left us the ladies of the Comédie Française!" said the other. "I had looked forward to seeing my little Jeanne. Maybe the Russian wench was lying, for reasons of her own."

"Beware what you say here, Monsieur," said Sasha angrily, "or your friend may find you no longer waiting when he comes forth."

"Pardon, a thousand pardons, Monsieur; I forgot that you spoke our language," said the officer politely; "do me the favour to regard my foolish words as unsaid."

The conversation was conducted in whispers from this point and Sasha heard no more of it.

Meanwhile Paul de Tourelle, so soon as the door was closed behind him, had made as though he would take Vera's hand and draw her to him, but she waved him away.

"Do not touch me, Monsieur," she said. "I have admitted you only for the purpose of making it clear to you that there can at present be no communication between us. I must regard you as an enemy."

"But, Mademoiselle!" exclaimed Paul, "what is this you say? In Paris we spoke of love; I hasten to Moscow, whither you have gone before me; I find you unexpectedly, and you tell me that I have come in vain. Did I not say that I would meet you in Moscow?"

"And did not I reply that I would rather never see you again than meet you in Moscow? No, Monsieur. I have no heart for love, no thought to spare for such matters, for my whole being is at present absorbed in the sorrows of my dear country. I am glad that I have seen you, since I am now assured of your safety but——

"Come, let me be thankful for the smallest of mercies!" Paul laughed bitterly. "At any rate Mademoiselle is relieved to hear that I am not yet buried beneath the soil of her dear country. We are very far from the point, however, which we discussed, Mademoiselle, in Paris. At that time we spoke of love; now it is sufficient for you that I am alive—*parbleu!* you are liberal with your favours."

"Monsieur, I will wish you good-night. This conversation can serve no good end. It is true that in Paris you spoke of love; as for me, I spoke of a liking which one day might ripen into love; that day has not yet arrived, Monsieur; at this moment I am inclined to think that it can never dawn; I unsay all that I said in Paris, which you will remember was not much."

Paul burst into loud laughter which had, however, no merriment in it. "I think I understand, Mademoiselle," he said; "the young gentleman who prefers to act as your doorkeeper rather than take his share in withstanding the enemies of your country: he is perhaps the fiancé of whom we once spoke, or maybe a nearer friend——"

"Monsieur, I have wished you good-night."

"Oh, but pardon, Mademoiselle, I have not yet finished that which I have to say; perhaps Mademoiselle would prefer if I continued and finished with Monsieur her friend. The matter may be settled without many words."

Vera's face paled a little, but she spoke resolutely. "If Monsieur is wise," she said, "he will not quarrel with Monsieur le Comte Maximof, who is at present acting as my protector in this city of many perils; the servants would not wait to fire their muskets if voices were raised or threats used. Be wise, Monsieur de Tourelle, and take your departure in peace. You have no quarrel with my friend, and none, I trust, with myself."

"Oh, as to yourself, Mademoiselle, I am not deceived; I shall hope to find compensation elsewhere for Mademoiselle's unkindness. But for the other matter, that, with your kind permission, shall be as I choose to decide." Paul bowed and made his exit.

Apparently the decision was for peace. He called to his companions to come away.

"*Au revoir*, Monsieur," he said to Maximof, at whom he now gazed very fixedly, as though he would make a note of his features; "I have no doubt we shall meet again shortly."

"With all my heart," said Sasha, bowing; "for I shall then request Monsieur to repeat certain words he thought proper to address to me, but now——"

"Monsieur shall have the words repeated," replied Paul, laughing; "come, my friends."

"You did not tell us, Paul, that Moscow contained other objects of familiar interest to you besides Clotilde," his companions observed as the door closed behind the trio and was fastened by Maximof. "She seemed *gentile*; may we be introduced perhaps?"

"Bah—you would not thank me. They are sour, these Russian women. This one has been in Paris, and is, at least, civilised; but she would visit upon each of you the sin of his Majesty who has declared war upon her country."

"Patriotism is a virtue, I do not dislike that in her; when the war is over you shall make us known to this lady of spirit, Paul," said the other.

"When the war is over," replied Paul, shrugging his shoulders and laughing, "I may want her myself. Remember, both of you, the face of that Russian in plain clothes, and if you should see him about the streets, inform me of it; I have a little bill to settle with my gentleman."

"What, a case of poaching upon preserved ground?" One of Paul's friends laughed, and the other remarked: "Poor little Russian if it comes to accounts with our little Paul de Tourelle! He had better have remained with the army!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

Early in the morning two days after Paul's visit to the Demidof mansion in the Sloboda quarter, a man came and knocked the house up. He asked to see Vera and explained his mission thus:—

"The French Emperor," he said, "is established in the Kremlin, in the dwelling of our Tsars; there is a meeting at ten in the house in the Tverskoy to decide what is best to be done".

Both Vera and Sasha Maximof attended that meeting, when it was decided that terrible as such a thing must appear to every good and patriotic Russian, the Kremlin Palace itself must be ignited or blown up. Better destroy than allow it to be defiled by the presence of these foreigners, with the antichrist himself at their head!

Volunteers were called for to attempt the dangerous enterprise. To Vera's joy and pride Sasha was one of the first to give in his name, and was chosen with a dozen others to evolve a scheme and put it into practice without delay.

"I am proud of you," she whispered; "it is a dangerous venture; if I were a man I should be with you."

"Yes, I am sure of that," Sasha laughed.

He was grave enough, however, when the time came to go forth upon his mission. The Kremlin was full of French guards and the attempt to be made by himself and his companions was perilous in the extreme.

"Promise me you will leave Moscow if anything should happen to me," he said at parting from Vera. "You must see that it is not safe for you here; the town already burns on all sides, I do not see that you can do any further good by remaining; the French rats will soon be obliged to bolt."

"Yes, I think that is so; I promise to be very discreet; the work has certainly gone well forward these two days. But do not speak as though you would not return, dear Sasha, for you, too, will be discreet and careful. Run no needless risks; your enterprise may be performed in safety, promise me you will be careful."

"If I thought," Sasha faltered, "that it was of consequence to you whether I lived or died, I would be careful indeed."

"But, *mon ami*, it is of the greatest consequence to me; are you not my protector here in Moscow? Are you not, too, one of our patriots and engaged even now upon a scheme which all Russia shall one day speak of and applaud?"

"Yes—but apart from that—*personally*, I mean, Vera; if only I might take with me the knowledge that you cared even a little for me, I would go to the gates of hell and return safely."

"Dear Sasha, I like you very much—far better than I used to like you. I suppose one would always be interested in a person who had once been her fiancé."

"Yes, yes, but——"

"But you have been so specially kind and attentive to me that—that you must really return, Sasha; I—I insist."

"Say that it matters to you personally, Vera, and by all the blessed Saints not all the soldiers of Napoleon shall prevent my returning."

"Oh, boaster," said Vera, attempting to withdraw her hand, which he had captured and was now covering with kisses; "I will say no more than this, 'please return safely'!"

Sasha Maximof went out, presently, upon his dangerous errand, and Vera was surprised to find how anxiously she awaited his return. She waited two hours, three, four, and then could bear the strain no longer. She had watched the sky in the direction of the Kremlin, but had not been able to discern that smoke rose from that particular quarter, though in almost every other direction

the heavens were obscured by lurid clouds of black vapour, increasing evidence of the activity of the patriotic league.

When four hours had passed and there was still no news of Sasha, Vera could bear her anxiety no longer, and sallied forth to see whether she could hear from others any news of the Kremlin enterprise. She visited one or two of her friends in the Sloboda, but no one had yet received any news.

Then she ventured into the portion of the city which was actually occupied by French troops, and even penetrated close to the outer wall of the Kremlin enclosure itself.

A dozen times she was accosted by soldiers, none too politely, but in each case Vera successfully eluded her impudent admirers and proceeded upon her way, pursued by remarks which, if she had attended to or even heard them, would have caused her cheeks to flush; but her mind was fully occupied and she heard nothing.

Close to the Great Arch of the Kremlin she was startled to hear the sound of shots many times repeated. She hesitated before entering the Kremlin enclosure; dared she penetrate thus into the very heart of the occupied quarters?

A group of Russians, old men mostly, hawkers of lemon drinks and of *prianniki*, or biscuits, presently came hurrying out into the street, chattering and crossing themselves, a few French soldiers chasing them through the archway out of the Kremlin.

"*Bóje moy*, it is horrible!" she heard an old man exclaim; "I shall dream of it!"

Vera accosted him. "What is it, father? What has happened?" she asked.

"What has happened?" said the old fellow crossing himself and looking round to see whether the French soldiers listened, "Why, murder has happened; the shedding of good Russian blood; butchery I call it! Did you not hear the shots? A dozen of them, all shot down one after another by these most damnable foreigners! As if they have not shed blood enough already, Russian blood too, which is the holiest of all and the best!"

"Yes, but whose blood is this you speak of? who has been shot?" asked Vera, her heart feeling like lead.

"Why, Russians; good patriotic fellows who had done nothing worse than attempt to burn down the great palace with the French Tsar inside it—would to God they had succeeded! Well, they were caught and shot, a dozen or more of them."

"All shot—every one of them?" Vera asked faintly. "Are you sure that all were shot?"

"Every single one—I saw it done; that's what I say, that I shall dream of it; I called the French soldiers shameful names, but they do not understand Russian, though they turned us all out for booing at them; it is a mercy we too were not shot; yet who could stand and see the murder done without protesting? Why, what ails you, *dooshá tui moyá*? One would think your sweetheart had been among these butchered men."

Vera said nothing but turned away with dry eyes and a steady lip. Within her breast, however, her heart lay dead-cold and heavy as lead.

"I wish I had been among them," the thought came a hundred times into her brain. "Why was I not among them, at his side?"

"Yes, that would have been far better—to have died at his side!"

Vera heard the sound of horses' hoofs behind her, but took no notice. Some one shouted, and she stepped automatically out of the roadway upon the raised wooden pavement at the side.

"That is a French dress," she heard a man say, and seemed to recognise the voice, but her thoughts were far away. "How came she here?—ask her, General." Vera half awoke from her dream of misery and looked up; Napoleon was at her elbow on horseback, with his suite in attendance. She was about to make the reverence which her familiarity with the Court in Paris prompted her to offer automatically at sight of the sovereign; but she bethought herself and left the curtsy half made.

"Who is it—I know the face," said Napoleon; "who are you, *mon enfant*, and what do you here? Have I not seen you in Paris?"

"Sire, it is the daughter of the Secretary of the Russian Embassy," explained an aide-de-camp; "Mademoiselle Demidof."

"Of course," said Napoleon, smiling benignly; "pardon me, Mademoiselle, I took you for a French lady and wondered at your presence here; may I add that so fair a face courts danger in Moscow at the present moment?"

Vera had stood still, gazing with set face from one man to the other as each spoke. Her heart swelled with indignation and hatred. This was the very arch-enemy himself; the fiend in man's likeness who had brought ruin upon her country and upon this holy city.

"Shall I then be shot down in cold blood as your Majesty has just slaughtered a body of my poor countrymen?" she said suddenly.

"*Morbleu!*" exclaimed Napoleon, glancing angrily at the girl. He paused a moment, then laughed, shrugged his shoulders and rode on.

"She is mad, Sire, patriot-mad!" Vera heard some one say, and the Emperor's reply reached her

ears: "She has nevertheless a fine spirit".

Vera hastened homewards. She forgot the incident of her encounter with Napoleon; she took no notice of the hundreds of compliments, impudent observations and rude jests thrown at her by scores of French soldiers as she passed; Sasha Maximof was dead: this was her only thought; it absorbed her entire being; was it—she asked herself—really so all-important to her that this man was dead? She had not yet learned to love him; it must surely be a mere sentimental regret, this black heavy weight upon her heart; a sentimental regret that one who had once been nominally her fiancé had suddenly met his death; her heart had not received its death-wound—oh no! this was but a passing feeling of sympathy and sorrow; it would disappear; the shock of the sudden catastrophe had unnerved her.

Nevertheless when Vera had lain for an hour upon her bed, assuring herself that after all this calamity was not really a disaster, for her, of the first magnitude, she suddenly realised that nothing in the world could have mattered more to her than the death of this man; and turning her face to the wall she wept as though her heart were indeed broken.

CHAPTER XIX.

Vera heard a banging at the front door—a sound which might have startled and even frightened her at another moment, but she was so full of her new grief that she scarcely noticed it; she felt as though nothing mattered; that she did not care what happened.

Then old Michael, one of the two servants who had remained in the house when the rest left Moscow, knocked at her door and put his head into the room.

"*Golôobushka moyá*," he said, "do not be frightened, a disaster has happened; the young Graf Maximof——" he paused; Vera laughed hysterically.

"Yes, yes, go on; he has been shot—he is dead—they have brought his body; you may tell me all, Michael."

"Oh, *liubeemaya*, not so bad as that; but he is hurt."

"What do you say—he is not dead?" cried Vera; she sprang from the bed upon which she lay. "Is he dying, is he mortally wounded, tell me quickly, has Stepan gone for a doctor?"

"But I did not say matters were so bad as that!" exclaimed old Michael, startled by her agitation. "The Count has, I think, been fighting—there is a rag bound round his wrist which is covered with blood and he is pale and faint, but——"

"But is he not shot—I thought—stop, Michael—go down and say that I will come immediately—I am not quite ready—I think I have been dreaming—do not tell the Count what I have said."

Old Michael went downstairs muttering and crossing himself. His beloved mistress could not be well if she dreamed in this fashion by daylight; what did it mean?

Vera dashed water upon her eyes and smoothed her ruffled hair; she stood a moment before her ikon and prayed; her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed; the expression of utter misery had left her face.

She found Sasha sitting dejected and pale, his arm bound up with a cloth which, as Michael said, was soaked in blood.

"What has happened—what is the matter? Are you hurt, Sasha?" she asked, assuming her usual air of composure, though her heart beat wildly with a variety of emotions.

"Vera, I am disgraced—doubly disgraced. We failed in our attempt—all my poor companions are dead—shot—I almost wish I had died with them—I feel dishonoured—shamed; see, I cannot look you in the face."

Vera leaned over and kissed his forehead; he looked up gratefully but said nothing.

"I am sure you are not dishonoured," she murmured softly; "let me first attend to your arm, and then you shall tell me all."

"I will tell you as you bind me," he said, and began at once.

"We carried out the first part of our scheme successfully; we got into the stables and set fire to straw and rubbish, but the smoke frightened the horses and there was a great commotion. We were found and dragged out by soldiers. Several young officers, quartered in the Kremlin, ran up and we were all pulled about and insulted. Among the officers were two of those who came to this house. 'Look here,' said one, on recognising me, 'look, Paul, here is your acquaintance of the other evening;' whereupon the impertinent one whom you interviewed alone that day saw me also. He called up half a dozen fellows and bade them take me to his quarters. Of course I struggled, but I soon saw it was useless and went with them. Afterwards I heard that the Emperor suddenly appeared upon the scene and asked what had happened and who were these men, meaning my late companions. When he was told he frowned and twisted his nose and called them canaille and bade the soldiers shoot them down, then and there, for which butchery I trust he may be tortured in eternal fires.

"As for me, I was taken to a house in the Kremlin in which your friend is quartered, and thither

he came, presently, and found me awaiting his pleasure, which, it seemed, was to answer to him at the sword's point for my presumption in posing as your protector in Moscow; at any rate, I could learn no other reason for his particular animosity against me. You may believe that I was charmed to meet his wishes even though he had not assured me, which he did many times, that I might thank my stars I had not been left by him with my fellow conspirators; for it seems Napoleon had himself condemned them to instant death, giving the order, so your French friend said, carelessly over his left shoulder as though the talk were of drowning so many rats. Well, we fought, and there is my disgrace, for though I thought I could fence, the fellow had me at his mercy with many French tricks which I had never seen. Doubtless he could have ended me several times over, but he forbore. I am ashamed and disgraced, Vera, I have come home beaten like a dog that slinks into his kennel after a thrashing. There is excuse for me, but I do not claim it—strange, foreign swords to fight with, the shock of my companions' deaths, the uncertainty whether, if I fell savagely upon the man and bore him down by sheer stress, I should not injure a dear heart at home which perhaps held his life as a precious thing."

Vera laughed hysterically.

"Who knows," she cried, "perhaps the same generous consideration held his hand also!"

"Ah, you mock me; well, beaten and disgraced I am, and it is useless to conceal the truth. Yes, he withheld his hand, he could have given me the point a dozen times while I never touched him, not once. There is worse behind. He made me promise, under threat to send me back to his master to share the fate of my fellows, that I would give you a detestable message. Please do not blame me, Vera, I cannot help it, for the promise was given. Before giving it I fell upon him furiously, and it was thus I received this wound in my sword-arm, which incapacitated me. I was to say that he returned to you a spoilt lover, but perhaps good enough for one who could not tell a man from a moujik."

Vera's eyes flashed and her bosom heaved. "Is that all?" she asked.

"Not quite. I must say all he bade me tell you. Tell her, he said, that next time man meets moujik matters will end less happily for the moujik; she had better send him out of Moscow, there is less danger for him without than within the walls."

"If you had killed him for that speech, I could not have blamed you, my friend," answered Vera. "When I see him I will tell him something."

"I could then no longer even attempt to kill him," said Sasha, blushing hotly, "for I was helpless; we had finished fighting, and I was worsted. I thought it better to bear the disgrace of telling you this than to go back to the Red Plain in order to be shot in cold blood by Napoleon's men. I have not done with him. With God's help I will one day give him *quid* for his *quo*. Until I shall have done this I can enjoy no self-respect. With my own sword I may do better, though he has the devil's own skill." Vera considered a while, then she spoke.

"I think we will go out of Moscow; there is no longer any reason to stay here. The smoke hangs over the city in every direction; already there is more fire than all Napoleon's men can extinguish; within a fortnight the rats must make their bolt."

"We have done something, certainly, but it is not yet time to go—not for me; for you it is different; go, in God's name, Vera; I will do your work and mine. In the face of this man's insult I cannot leave Moscow."

"Yes—that is true; you cannot; we will stay, then, Sasha; I do not doubt that we shall find work to our hands. Do not search out this man, however; leave your quarrel in God's hands. Promise me you will not be rash, Sasha."

"Ah, I see you think that I have no chance against him; yet I am not a fool with the rapier, Vera, my own weapon, mind you, not his. I shall have a chance, though I admit he is very clever. If he were as clever as the prince of all the devils I must meet him."

"He is the best fencer in Paris, *mon ami*. What matters is your safety; oh, do not mistake me—do you think I shall esteem you less and him more because he is a little cleverer than you with tricks of the sword?" Vera laughed quite merrily. "Oh, what children men are to think so much of so small a matter," she continued; "you are not disgraced in my eyes, Sasha; I thank God for two things, the first that it occurred to Paul to vent his spite upon both of us by pricking you with his sword instead of allowing you to be shot down by the guard, and the second that his conceit was so great that he preferred sending you back with a bombastic message to giving you a fatal wound."

"Tell me truly, Vera, is this Paul he to whom you gave your heart in Paris; for God's sake, tell me truly?"

"I do not think I gave my heart in Paris. Perhaps I fancied that my heart was in danger where no danger existed. He is the man who caused me thus to search my feelings—well, I have searched them."

"And the result?" Sasha murmured.

"The result is that I can thank God I do not love a Frenchman, one of Russia's enemies."

"Then I thank God also humbly and sincerely. You know well what I would have of you, if I could. You treat me now as a brother, you are kindness itself, but I hunger for more; I will wait more patiently now that I am assured that at any rate your heart is free."

"When I love I promise that I will love a Russian," Vera smiled. "Promise me in return that you

will not run foolish risks in order to prove to me how cleverly your hand and eye work together in sword play. There are greater issues at stake for us Russians than the nursing of private petty vanities. The noblest of men may yet be the clumsiest. Russia requires all the manhood of all her sons, my friend. Come, promise me!"

"Well, I promise then," muttered Sasha, "though your words are not flattering to my vanity. I wish you could have added," he sighed, "that you wanted me alive for your own sake, as well as for Russia's."

"Oh, I will say that," she laughed. "I certainly want you alive. Sasha," she added suddenly, her eyes softening wonderfully, though her voice was full of laughter, "I see that you are still far from having eschewed the follies of cadetdom; you are as vain as ever, *mon ami*, and as blind to—to the true proportion of things."

Sasha Maximof looked puzzled and shook his head, failing to understand the meaning of Vera's last utterance.

CHAPTER XX.

During these first few days of the French occupation Moscow became a very pandemonium of pillage and violence, of smoke and fire, of orgies and of cruelties too horrible to relate. The churches and cathedrals were robbed and desecrated without distinction. Marshal Davoust could find no more appropriate place for his bedroom than the sanctuary, the very "Holy of Holies" of a cathedral, wherein he slept, guarded by a sentinel at each of the two royal doors which gave entrance to this hallowed spot. Horses were stabled in the churches. Furnaces and melting-pots were to be seen outside each of Moscow's most venerable cathedrals, where gold and silver vessels, the frames of costly ikons, ornaments, even the golden decorations of the vestments of the priests were melted down and fought over.

Soldiers on "leave of absence," which meant that they had received, each in turn, licence for a season of plundering, spent every hour of their leisure in pillage and violence, declaring—if interfered with—that the Emperor had promised them the treasures of Moscow.

The fires, meanwhile, raged on almost unnoticed. They broke out first close to the Foundling Hospital, then the Gostinnoy Dvor, the great market of the city, blazed up, and smoke rose almost simultaneously from a dozen different quarters. After two or three days a marshal was told off by Napoleon to quell the conflagration, but it was a week before Mortier's efforts produced any effect upon the flames. The Kitai Gorod was a sea of flames and the Kremlin itself was in danger; the Church of the Trinity caught fire and had to be destroyed by Napoleon's guard. The Emperor fled to the Palace of Petrofsky, accompanied by his staff, by the King of Naples and several marshals.

Napoleon at this time grew nervous and irritable. He sent repeated messages to the Tsar Alexander professing the warmest personal regard and his willingness to conclude terms of peace, but the Tsar treated his overtures with silent contempt.

Many of the inhabitants of Moscow, those who had remained behind at the general exodus, preferring to live in the suburban quarters or to hide in cellars rather than abandon altogether their beloved city, by this time scarcely dared venture into the streets; for Napoleon's soldiers, having finished looting the houses and churches, had now turned their particular attention to robbery of the person. Men and women were held up and robbed in the open streets.

Vera, engaged from time to time upon the work of the patriotic league to which she belonged, was obliged to walk hither and thither, even in the streets most infested by French soldiers. For the first few days she had not been actually interfered with, a circumstance for which she was indebted partly to her aristocratic appearance and partly to her knowledge of the French language.

But there arrived a day when her immunity came to an end. During the morning her cousin D'Estreville called. He had overtaken his regiment at the gates of Moscow, following the main army as soon as he was able to ride. He was looking pale and worn, a shadow of his former self, and having discovered Vera's address he lost no time in paying her a visit, though he scarcely expected to find her in Moscow.

Vera was overjoyed to see him alive.

"I thought I saw your regiment march in, and even fancied that I made you out among the rest," she said, "though you were scarcely recognisable. You have been wounded or ill—which?"

Henri gave an account of his mishap. Then he asked why Vera had remained in the deserted city—a question to which she gave an evasive answer. Lastly he inquired whether she had seen Paul. Vera blushed.

"Oblige me, dear Henri, by mentioning his name no more," she said; "I have seen him, yes. He came to our portion of the town in search of some lady friends attached to the French theatrical company which existed here before the occupation. I—I think I was mistaken in Monsieur de Tourelle, Henri. At any rate I do not wish to see him or to speak to him again."

Henri whistled. "If your dislike to him is patriotic," he laughed, "I suppose I too am not a welcome

visitor."

"Well, to be truthful, now I am assured of your safety, I would rather forget we are cousins until after the war," said Vera. Henri laughed.

"You don't know what the occupation of Moscow means for us Russians," she added. "Your people have defiled and robbed our holy places, destroyed our homes, ruined and wasted our country at the whim of a vile man who will reap no benefit from his wickedness. What does he propose to do, think you, *mon ami*? Because Moscow is occupied, do you suppose we Russians are done with?"

"It is only the beginning of our advance, *ma cousine*; do not flatter yourself with false hopes. If Moscow grows too hot for us, we shall march to St. Petersburg and Napoleon shall be crowned Tsar at St. Isaac's."

"We shall not agree, my friend. For the rest, do not visit me here—it is better not. If we were to argue constantly, I should soon forget that the same blood flows in our veins and I should learn to hate you as at this moment I hate every Frenchman."

Nevertheless the cousins parted friends, though Henri quite agreed that at present it would be better if they did not meet.

Vera walked in the outskirts of the city one afternoon, glad of the calls of some duty which justified the risk of venturing into the fresh air, when she observed a notable episode. An old Russian priest, one of the staff of the Cathedral of the Assumption, driven out of his senses by the persecutions and desecrations which he had witnessed in his beloved city and church, marched alone through the streets carrying a large ikon in his arms and shouting aloud denunciations and menaces against the disturbers of the peace of Holy Russia.

"Thy Holy Temple," he raved, "have they defiled and made Jerusalem a heap of stones—slay them, oh Lord, and scatter them! Shall Thy enemies triumph for ever?" And again:—

"The time shall come when every man who slayeth one of them shall believe that he doeth God service!"

Up the road came half a dozen rowdy French soldiers "on leave of absence". They stood and listened to the priest's raving for a moment, understanding nothing; then one knocked the old man down with a buffet, rolling him in the mud, while the ikon fell to the ground. Instantly there was a rowdy battle for possession of the image, which was quickly pulled in pieces, each piece being carefully scrutinised for precious stones or metal.

"Bah! we might have spared ourselves the trouble—it is brass—the whole thing is not worth fifty centimes!" exclaimed one man, looking angrily at the old priest, sitting dazed and bruised in the mud, mumbling and holding his head.

"How dare you carry a brass ikon, deluding honest persons into the belief that it is a thing of value?" asked another soldier; he kicked the old man viciously; the priest gave a howl of pain. This was more than Vera could stand.

"*Miserables!*" she exclaimed, "are you not ashamed of attacking an old man, and a priest? A curse will fall upon such as you."

"Let it fall, *ma mie*; see, *mes enfants*," the fellow continued, "what I have found—a French woman and a pretty one—are you one of the French actresses, *chérie*?" The soldier leered and tried to put his arm about her waist. Vera angrily pushed him away.

"Come, come, come!" said the fellow, who was half drunk, "you must not look crossly upon your compatriots—you and I are both good French people, let us be happy together."

"Thank God I am a Russian," said Vera. "If you touch me again you shall find that I can sting!"

"A Russian? Oho! Listen, *mes enfants*, she is a Russian! Then, *chérie*, you shall give us each six roubles and six kisses—see, I have spoken, it is an edict! Is it not so, my friends?"

The men crowded round Vera, whose heart sank a little. She placed her back against the wall of the house, however, close to which she stood, and felt within the folds of her mantle for the pistol, without which and a sharp dagger she never left the house at this time.

"See," she cried, "I said that I could sting—who will offer to touch me now. I swear that I will shoot if——"

One of the men by a sudden movement knocked the pistol from her hand; a second later he had his arms about her neck and was in the act of drawing the girl close to him. Suddenly he recoiled with an oath, pale, scowling, grabbing at the upper part of his left arm. Vera laughed.

"I told you I should sting!" she said.

"The little devil has stabbed me!" exclaimed the man, whose sleeve was covered with blood where it had touched his shoulder. "You little serpent, for this——" The laughter of his comrades drowned the rest of his threat.

Two French sub-officers now suddenly appeared upon the scene, one of them knocked the threatener aside.

"Stop it, canaille!" he cried. "Have you not read the placards of the Emperor? The inhabitants are no longer to be robbed and ravaged; they have suffered enough."

"Placards or no placards, Emperor or no Emperor, and corporals or no corporals," shouted the

principal offender, "I shall not bear this affront, my friend! Brothers, we will have our roubles and our kisses. Hold this little fool while I exact my own share; then each shall have his turn!"

But the two sergeants placed themselves between Vera and her persecutors. One picked up her pistol and handed it to her. The young Frenchman who had first spoken drew his sword.

"*Mes enfants*," he said, "I recommend you to disappear. Three of you I know by name—let them go first—Rénet, Judic and Meyer; go, my friends, if you are wise. These others I shall deal with."

The three men named quickly disappeared. It was true that the Emperor had—none too soon—placarded the city with stringent orders that the reign of bloodshed and violence should cease, under severe penalties. The other three men, after preserving their threatening attitude for a few moments, began to look over their shoulders in the direction taken by their retreating comrades; presently with a muttered curse or two and many scowls they turned and followed them.

CHAPTER XXI.

Vera now had leisure to examine her protectors more closely; one was a dapper little corporal who made eyes at her as she looked at him. She quickly withdrew her gaze and fixed it upon the other, a handsome, dark-eyed and eyelashed sergeant of a line regiment. This man had been the spokesman. Vera started slightly as she looked at him.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed, "what an extraordinary likeness! I beg a thousand pardons, Monsieur; it is very rude of me; my first expression should have been one of grateful thanks. You have preserved me, Monsieur, from persecution, I am indeed grateful."

The young sergeant bowed.

"Mademoiselle does us too much honour," he replied. "Rochefort, *mon cher*, if you will excuse me, I will see this lady to her home, it is not right that you should walk alone in the city, Mademoiselle, at present." The little corporal made a grimace.

"Rascal!" he whispered, "you always come in for the good things!" He took his departure, however, after bestowing upon Vera his most fascinating smile together with a low bow and a ferocious wink of the left eye.

Vera gazed at her companion, examining him from head to foot as he watched his comrade depart. The sergeant turned when he had seen the other safely to the end of the street.

"I see," said Vera, "that it is to an old acquaintance that I am indebted for this great service. I thank you heartily. But is the French Emperor so badly off for men to march against our poor Russia that he must needs enrol women as soldiers, Mademoiselle Louise?"

The sergeant blushed scarlet. "For God's sake be careful of your words, Mademoiselle," he said. "Of course it is unknown that I am I. You are the first who has guessed it. I entreat you to keep my secret."

"That of course. In Heaven's name, why have you done it? May I know this?"

"It is easily told, Mademoiselle, to you, who I do not doubt will appreciate my motives and forgive me." Louise narrated to her companion the story of the conscription, of young Havet's trouble and her sister Marie's; "therefore I became his substitute," she ended, "*et voilà tout*!"

"Is it really all, Mademoiselle Louise?" said Vera. "I confess that I fancied there might be another motive for your conduct." Louise walked silently for a little while.

"It is true that I love him," she murmured at length; "yes, Mademoiselle, with all my heart of hearts. I could not bear to be so far from him."

Vera laughed. "*Mon Dieu*, Louise, you are a wonderful person! It is sad, however, that you should have staked your happiness upon my cousin, who is——"

"Not dead, Mademoiselle—for God's sake dare not to tell me he is dead?"

"Dead? Oh no, not that, I saw him but yesterday and spoke to him."

"You did, Mademoiselle—here, in Moscow? Oh, thank God—thank God! Mademoiselle, I have been in terror and tribulation about him; I left him near Smolensk, badly wounded in the shoulder, I was driven from him to join the colours and knew not whether he lived or died."

"Yes, he lives and is well, though he looks like a dead man or near it. So he knows you are with the army. Beware, Louise, you are playing a dangerous game. My cousin will not respect one who thus follows him and avows her love. Moreover, your conduct——"

"Mademoiselle—pardon—he does not know it. Thank God, I am more modest than you suppose! Also he has avowed his love for me—he did so before leaving Paris; still, I have not revealed myself, lest he should disapprove of my action. I am not—not the kind that Mademoiselle supposes."

"Forgive me, Louise; I meant my warning to be very friendly. I am rejoiced to hear what you have said. As to his vows of love, however, do not trust him too much. I know my cousin so well. He has loved many times."

"Mademoiselle, I also know this, and more besides. At Smolensk, as he lay tossing in fever, a

wonderful thing happened; not knowing that I was I, the Baron narrated to me many of his past love affairs, declaring at the last that he remembered only one of those for whom he had felt affection, and that one was, said he, the daughter of Pierre Dupré, *maître d'armes*; imagine, Mademoiselle, my happiness to hear this from him, and to receive a message from his lips to be carried to this Louise Dupré in case of his death."

Louise was flushed and her eyes were bright with love-light. Vera looked at her companion and laughed merrily.

"I certainly think it the most promising of Henri's love affairs that I have yet heard of," she said; "if I see Henri again——"

"Oh, Mademoiselle, for Heaven's sake keep my secret; what would he think—he might say angry words—he might——"

"No, no, your secret is safe; I was going to say—I will ask him to tell me of his sickness at Smolensk; perhaps he will confide to me the tale you have just told me; that would prove that he did not suspect you to be yourself."

"Oh, Mademoiselle, I am sure he did not, or he would not have told me all that he did of—of other matters," Louise blushed; and Vera laughed and said that perhaps that was so.

"At any rate I should keep your secret," she added, "even if I saw my cousin again, which is unlikely. I cannot associate, you see, with Russia's enemies, even though they be personal friends or near relations. There are those who would blame me much for walking with yourself in this way, if they were to see us together. We must not meet again in Moscow. I see you have had promotion; you wear a sergeant's stripes; doubtless for some service done to your Emperor at the expense of my poor country."

"At Borodino; the service was small enough and not worth narrating. I have learnt, Mademoiselle, that war is detestable, and the taking of life a most terrible thing; I shall shed no more blood, if I can help it."

"This is the most unjust and infernal of wars," said Vera; "all wars are abominable, but this is the worst and wickedest. Farewell, Louise, and thank you for your timely service; this is my street and that is my house. I hope that some day, if happier times should come, we may perhaps be cousins."

"Oh, Mademoiselle, may that day dawn indeed—and soon!" Louise raised Vera's hand to her lips and departed with a salute.

Unfortunately Sasha Maximof, looking out from a window for Vera's return, saw this little demonstration, and the sight depressed and angered him.

"I see," he said, as Vera entered, "that you have discovered another acquaintance among the French, and, as it seems, another admirer."

"Ah, in this case the admiration is truly mutual," Vera replied gravely, though with a twinkle in her eye. "Do you know, Sasha, *mon ami*, that though, speaking generally, I hate all French soldiers, at this time, I am so greatly indebted to this one and love him so well——"

"*Love* him?" Sasha echoed miserably. "Oh! then this *is* the one."

"Yes, this is the one; our friendship is great, but perhaps one day it will be greater; he has this day avowed to me——" Vera paused. Sasha continued her sentence—"His passion, I suppose. You have not accepted him, Vera—a Frenchman? Did you not tell me you would only marry a Russian?"

"Did I? I had forgotten. Well, we shall see. What was I saying?—Oh, this dear, adorable soldier. He has avowed to me, *mon ami*, that he hopes one day to become a near relation."

"Vera!" gasped Sasha, "are you mocking me?"

"On the contrary, I am confiding to you a great secret which I forbid you to disclose to any living soul. This dear Frenchman, who has this day done me a great service of which I will tell you presently and for which I should like to show my gratitude in a fervent kiss——"

"Vera!" Sasha gasped.

"Do not interrupt me, *mon ami*; this dear Frenchman is, in fact, *not* a Frenchman nor a Russian; he is not, indeed, a man of any nationality whatever—but a woman masquerading as a man, and all for love of my cousin Henri d'Estreville. Think of it!"

Vera exploded in a fit of merry laughter, to which the expression in Sasha's face soon added an extra note of mirth. The laughing did her good, for indeed there had been little of late to promote mirth in this unhappy city of Moscow.

Afterwards there were explanations and apologies, and if Sasha Maximof contrived to gather another grain of encouragement for his hopes, this was not more, perhaps, than was intended.

CHAPTER XXII.

Destiny soon made it impossible that Vera Demidof should meet again either her cousin

D'Estreville or Louise Dupré, for both presently left Moscow with their regiments in order to engage the armies of Kootoozof without the city walls, for the doings of the Russian Commander-in-Chief rendered Napoleon anxious and disquieted.

Moscow was becoming uninhabitable, for food was scarce and the Russian forces were so strategically disposed as to cut off the city from communication with the grain- and meat-producing provinces. Moreover, though the weather was still moderately warm, the frost would begin in a month or so, and under wintry conditions life in this latitude would become unpleasant if not impossible.

Napoleon's state of mind at this time, as evidenced by his appearance and conduct, has been described by a Russian eye-witness as unnerved and anxious. He walked with a quick, uneven tread, having abandoned his usual calm and regular movements. He looked constantly about him, fidgetted continually, frowned, tweaked his nose and stood to think, dragged his gloves on and off again, or took one out of his pocket and rolled it into a ball and, still in deep thought, put it into the other pocket, repeating the process many times. Meanwhile the generals standing behind him stood like statues, not daring to move. He grew irritable and performed many acts of needless and wanton cruelty. He issued numerous "bulletins" to his army, full of elusive promises and rose-coloured announcements of his "intentions". He made foolish speeches upon the subject of Peter the Great, courted the Tartars, but failed to convince them, issued proclamations to the Russian people, pointing out the advantages of rebellion, to all of which the sturdy Russians remained blind, and up to the last moment concealed his intention of abandoning Moscow.

This abandonment of the old city took place, as all the world knows, in October, and was preceded by an abortive attempt to blow up the Kremlin. The attempt was entrusted to Marshal Mortier, who—whether designedly or by miscalculation—entirely failed in his object, though he used nearly one hundred tons of explosives in mining the palaces and cathedrals and outer walls of the historic fortress.

The French soldiers indulged in a final and universal campaign of outrage and robbery just before quitting the city, and this time Vera was obliged to abandon her house, which was pillaged like the rest, and to fly for her life. Sasha Maximof had before this been recalled to his duties with his regiment, and had left Vera with a sore heart, having failed to persuade her to leave Moscow and go to St. Petersburg where she would find most of her friends and relatives.

"I shall wait to see the end of the drama," Vera said, "unless I am menaced with serious danger. So far, I have run but little risk."

The behaviour of the French troops at the end of their month in Moscow seems to have been almost more ruffianly than at the beginning. Houses and property of all sorts were ruthlessly destroyed, both within the city and in the suburbs. Occasionally they would come upon notices nailed to the outer gates of some boyar's residence, setting forth that rather than abandon his property to be desecrated by French hands the owner had himself destroyed every atom that he had been unable to remove. Here is an example: a letter affixed to the gate of his palace by no less a person than Rostopchin, Governor of Moscow, who thus addressed those who approached his home, intent upon looting and destruction:—

> "For eight years I found my pleasure in embellishing this country retreat. I lived here in perfect happiness, within the bosom of my family; and those around me largely partook of my felicity. But you approach and lo! the peasantry of this domain, to the number of 1,720 human beings, have fled far away. As for my house, it is burnt to the ground! We abandon all, we consume all, that neither ourselves nor our habitations may be polluted by your presence.
>
> "Frenchmen, I left at the mercy of your avarice two of my houses in Moscow full of furniture and valuables to the amount of half a million of roubles. Here, you will find nothing but ashes.
>
> "(Signed) Fedor, Count Rostopchin."

No sooner did the news reach the Russian Commander-in-Chief, old Kootoozof, that Moscow had been abandoned by the invaders, than he issued the following address to his army and the Empire generally:—

"Order Issued to the Armies, 31st October.

> "The following Declaration is given for the Instruction of all the Troops under my Command:—
>
> "At the moment in which the enemy entered Moscow he beheld the destruction of those preposterous hopes by which he had been flattered; he expected to find there Plenty and Peace, and on the contrary he saw himself devoid of every necessary of life. Harassed by the fatigue of continued marches; exhausted for want of provisions; wearied and tormented by ever active soldiers who intercept his slender reinforcements; losing, without the honour of battle, thousands of his troops, cut off by our provincial detachments, he found no prospect before him but the vengeance of an armed nation, threatening annihilation to the whole of his army. In every Russian he beheld a hero, equally disdainful and abhorrent of his deceitful promises; in every state of the empire he met an additional and insurmountable rampart opposed to his strongest efforts. After sustaining incalculable losses by the attacks of our brave troops, he recognised at last the madness of his expectations, that the foundations of the

empire would be shaken by his occupation of Moscow. Nothing remained for him but a precipitate flight; the resolution was no sooner taken than it was executed; he has departed, abandoning nearly the whole of his sick to the mercy of an outraged people, and leaving Moscow on the 11th of this month completely evacuated.

"The horrible excesses which he committed while in that city are already well known, and have left an inexhaustible sentiment of vengeance in the depths of every Russian heart; but I have to add, that his impotent rage exercised itself in the savage attempt to destroy a part of the Kremlin, where, however, by a signal interposition of Divine Providence, the sacred temples and cathedrals have been saved.

"Let us then hasten to pursue this impious enemy, while other Russian armies, once more occupying Lithuania, act in concert with us for his destruction! Already do we behold him in full flight, abandoning his baggage, burning his war carriages, and reluctantly separating himself from those treasures, which his profane hands had torn from the very altars of God. Already starvation and famine threaten Napoleon with disaster; behind him arise the murmurs of his troops like the roar of threatening waters. While these appalling sounds attend the retreat of the French, in the ears of the Russians resounds the voice of their magnanimous monarch. Listen, soldiers! while he thus addresses you! 'Extinguish the flames of Moscow in the blood of our invaders!' Russians, let us obey this solemn command! Our outraged country, appeased by this just vengeance, will then retire satisfied from the field of war, and behind the line of her extensive frontiers, will take her august station between Peace and Glory!

"Russian warriors! God is our Leader!

(Signed) MARSHAL PRINCE GOLENISHCHEFF KOOTOOZOF,

"*General-in-Chief of all the Armies*."

CHAPTER XXIII.

To give any kind of description of the horrors of the retreat of the Grande Armée is very far from the intention of the writer of this history; the theme is both unpleasant and threadbare. An incident or two will suffice.

Louise, marching with her regiment, which formed a portion of Marshal Ney's command, walked with her companions into an ambush of desperate Cossacks, who rode tumultuously into the midst of the French ranks from the shelter of a belt of pine forest, freely dealing death and wounds before they were driven back by their spirited opponents. Louise was knocked down by a small Cossack pony and trodden upon by more than one of its companions, the great majority of which, however, adroitly avoided stepping upon her; for the little Cossack horse hates to plant his foot upon a recumbent human form and displays marvellous ingenuity in avoiding so sacrilegious an act.

Louise lay a while unconscious. When she recovered her senses and sat up her companions had already moved forward and were out of sight, all but the grim lines of dead men and a few wounded fellows who sat or lay and conversed.

"*Sapristi!*" said Louise, "I don't think I am very badly hurt. Can you stand and walk, any of you? I have a mind to move on."

Most of those about her replied that they preferred to remain and chance being picked up by the ambulances. "The Marshal himself is still behind," one said; "he will make dispositions for us."

One or two attempted to stand and move forward with Louise, but soon found that the exertion was too much for them. Louise hastened forward alone. Her head ached terribly and she felt pain in her breast, doubtless the result of being trodden upon or kicked by a passing horse. For the rest she was unwounded.

For a mile she trudged forward, hoping to catch sight of the regiment. This she presently did, but hurrying onward, in order to gain ground upon them, she suddenly became aware that her head swam; she reeled, went on a few paces and sat down.

"I cannot," she muttered; "I am fainting."

There was a deserted village close at hand, and Louise presently contrived to struggle onward as far as the nearest hut, which she entered. The single room was dirty and smoky, the air fœtid and horrible, but Louise felt that she had reached paradise; she was cold and ill and miserable; she sank upon the floor with her back to the stove, which was still warm, and prepared to sleep.

"It is a risk, I know," she told herself, "for the peasants may return at any moment, but I must sleep or die. Mercy of Heaven, what a pain is in my breast!" She tore open her military tunic and bared her bosom; it was badly bruised but not actually wounded. "It is nothing. *Mon Dieu*, I must sleep this moment," Louise murmured.

Automatically pulling together the clothes which she had torn apart the weary girl fell fast asleep with the task half accomplished.

Half an hour later a dozen peasants and some women crept back to the village, having hidden themselves at the approach of the French soldiers in the early afternoon. It was now dusk. A man and a woman entered the hut in which Louise lay, the man entering first.

He started back upon seeing the French soldier asleep, turning towards his wife with finger to lip.

"See," he whispered, "what lies at the stove! God is good to us—here is an accursed Frenchman delivered into our hands! He has a rifle, a sword, a uniform and possibly money in his pocket!" The fellow fumbled with the axe which hung at his girdle.

"He has touched none of our things—the village has not been destroyed or pillaged; spare the poor wretch, God will requite us," said the woman, who gazed not without admiration at the handsome sleeping face.

"*Vzdor!* nonsense! God will, on the contrary, punish us if we allow to escape one of the invaders of Holy Russia. How do we know this fellow has not helped to rob a church or to assault a woman, or to desecrate the Holy Place in one of God's own houses? He comes from Moscow, where, it is said, many such detestable acts were done!"

"Well, have your will, but let me first go out of sight," said the woman, "for I am afraid of bloodshed."

A moment later the moujik rushed out of the hut to his wife, who stood and shivered without in the cold rain which was half snow.

"Masha!" he cried, "come and see; it is a woman!"

"*Vzdor*—it cannot be; it is a soldier; you have not struck?"

"Not yet—I was startled and held my hand; there is some mystery here, it is certainly a woman."

Masha entered the hut and stole softly towards the stove. Louise lay breathing peacefully, her bosom, half bared, rising and falling in the measured cadence of quiet slumber.

"Yes, it is a woman. You shall not strike, Mishka; there is certainly mystery here; probably it is some poor soul who strives to escape more safely by donning the uniform of a French soldier of which she has robbed a dead man by the way. She may be a Russian maiden who has sought her wounded lover upon the battlefield."

"My God, it may be as you say. We will let her lie. Who knows she may be rich and will reward us. Here is her wallet, I will see if it contains money."

The wallet contained a few silver pieces, which Mishka quickly transferred to his own pocket. Then he added wood to the stove and the pair ate their supper. Louise slept peacefully through it. Presently both man and woman lay down to sleep.

"The warning bell will soon wake us if we must clear out again," Mishka had said; "or shall one of us watch a while and afterwards the other?"

"God forbid!" exclaimed Masha, yawning; "last night there was no sleep and the night before but an hour or two; I am tired to death."

Soon after midnight Louise awoke at the sound of running feet without. She started up and looked about, but could see nothing in the darkness. Some one came to the door and called out "Dmitry Vannkof—Mishka—awake and come to the door, I have news for you".

"*Mon Dieu!*" thought Louise. "Perhaps I had better be substitute for Dmitry Vannkof, whoever he may be, and attend to this visitor; it is dark and I should not be seen." She was about to rise and go to the door, when the unseen visitor continued to shout and to knock impatiently with some hard object, probably an axe; Louise remembered that though she had picked up much Russian during the campaign, she was not a sufficiently good scholar to carry on a conversation without suspicion and discovery. She therefore lay still.

"Mishka, curse you, are you drunk or dead?" roared the unseen one.

To the horror and surprise of Louise some one shuffled close beside her on the floor, and a woman's voice said aloud: "Mishka, we are called—awake—*séchasse idyóm, soodar*! (we're just coming, sir!)".

Mishka grunted and awoke with imprecations. "What is it?" he shouted; "are we never to be allowed to sleep again? Who's there?"

"It is I, the Starost; the Hetman of the Mojaisk Cossacks is in the village; we are to assemble at four in Toozof's field, bringing pitchforks and pickaxes. There is to be an *oblava* (battue). It is said that the best general of all these accursed cut-throats is to pass at daybreak; he is sleeping at Biéloy; he is to be ambushed with all his guard; we shall not have lived in vain if we succeed in this; we shall be three thousand Cossacks and the moujiks of twelve villages; be ready at four and thank God meanwhile for all His mercies."

The man departed.

"By the Saints!" exclaimed Mishka, yawning; "if one were not so deadly sleepy that would be good news. See, Masha, what we will do. I will sleep until four, while you wake; when I have departed you shall sleep, if you will, for a score of hours!" Masha agreed to this arrangement, and within a minute his snoring was sonorous proof that her goodman had wasted none of his time.

Louise lay and listened to Masha's yawning and half-uttered exclamations of weariness. Why had these people not despatched her at sight? Had they entered in the dark and failed to detect her? The thing was a mystery. She felt refreshed and her head scarcely ached; Biéloy was, she remembered, but a league away, towards Moscow. So far as she had understood the Starost's words, it was Marshal Ney and his guards who were to be ambushed. "I shall warn them, of course," she reflected; "but there is no need to disturb them too soon, for Heaven knows every man of us requires all the sleep he can get."

Poor Masha gaped and muttered for an hour; then she snored at intervals in concert with her husband; then she fell asleep in earnest and this time very soundly.

"Poor soul!" thought Louise; "let her sleep! We shall have one pitchfork the less to contend with!"

Long before four o'clock she was afoot and on the way to Biéloy, having left the worthy moujik and his wife snoring in peaceful harmony.

She reached Biéloy, a large village or *selo*, which means the principal of a group of villages, containing the church and perhaps a shop or two. The place was occupied by French soldiers. A picket was placed upon the road half a mile from Biéloy and the soldiers sat and talked and laughed over their fire. They challenged Louise, who showed herself in the firelight and explained her errand.

"That is well," laughed a man. "I thought you must have fallen in love with some Russian wench in Moscow and were returning to her embraces. This we should have been obliged to prevent. Love is good when time and opportunity serve. Think of the women of Paris, *mon brave*, they wait for you and for me!" Louise laughed also.

"You will allow me to carry my news to the Marshal?" she said.

"*Sapristi!* While the Marshal sleeps? My friend, cannot this danger wait until we are all refreshed and fit to contend with it?"

"It will wait until marching time," said Louise; "especially if you will give me food meanwhile."

"There is food to-day, and you shall share it; also there is a drink called *kvass*, which I think the devil invented for the confusion of human stomachs; you shall taste it and suffer pain, as I have done; what matter! we are brought into the world to suffer and to enjoy. To-morrow we may starve; but one day we shall reach Paris!"

At daybreak the village was astir. Marshal Ney himself rode out in the midst of his guards and Louise was brought before him, for she had refused to tell her tale except to his ears.

"I may as well have the advantage of my luck, if any advantage there be!" she had told herself.

Ney listened, frowning.

"You are in luck, *mon brave*," he said. "What is your name?"

"Michel Prevost, Excellence."

"Good; you are a sergeant, I see; call yourself a lieutenant; do you know this place the fellow referred to—the place of ambush?"

"I was myself ambushed there yesterday with my regiment, Excellence; it is well adapted for a surprise."

"Good; you shall be guide; the surprise this time shall be to the Cossacks and your friends with the pitchforks. If you guide us cleverly you shall call yourself captain, though, *entre nous*, I think most of us are more likely to need our titles for paradise than for Paris!"

On this occasion the Cossacks were caught napping and Louise came out of her adventure with the epaulettes of a captain, which Ney bestowed upon her with his own hands.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The rear-guard of the Grand Army fared worse and worse as the days and weeks passed, its numbers diminished until there remained but a straggling remnant which crept into Vilna, only to be chased out again within a few hours of their arrival there. Louise, in her captain's epaulettes, was still alive and well, though thin and haggard almost beyond recognition for want of good food and rest.

At Vilna she came across several officers of Henri d'Estreville's Lancer regiment, and these she questioned—in terror for their reply—in hopes of news of her friend, who was not with them.

"D'Estreville?" cried one of them, laughing grimly. "Where is he, you ask? I should say that depends, for those who believe in a future existence, upon his past life. Henri was the best of *bons camarades*, but it may be that good comradeship is a quality which is not highly valued by those who will make up our accounts!"

"Do you mean," poor Louise murmured, "that he has actually died; did you see him die, or was he merely wounded? If so, where has he remained?"

"My friend," said the other, "I did not see him struck down; I know nothing of him. In these days, one thanks God if one is alive at sundown and not buried by these accursed Russian snows, with

a thrice-damned Cossack bullet to keep one company. There is no time for friendship and philanthropy and so on."

"He is my dearest friend," Louise murmured; "if only I knew where he had fallen, I would return."

"*Mon ami*, hell is behind us, in the shape of Platof and Chechakof and their most damnable Cossacks. You would find it even more impossible to go backward than forward. Your friend may be alive and well for aught I know. Can either of you give this gentleman any information?"

"Who is it he wants—one of ours?" asked a second officer who sat by the stove almost too exhausted to eat the mess of stewed horseflesh which had been set before him.

Louise mentioned Henri's name.

"I saw him alive in the forest of Gusinof," said the man; "that is where Platof ambushed us and we got finally separated. He may be a prisoner, or of course Platof's devils may have cut him to pieces; he would not be the only one that died in that accursed wood, not by two thousand! That was the most detestable night I ever spent. Go and look for him in the forest, my friend, if your affection will carry you to so great a length. Good Lord! It is a thing David would have refused to do for Jonathan!" The weary man laughed and filled his mouth with the savoury horseflesh.

"If you are wise," he added, with his mouth still half full, "you will get to Paris the best and quickest way you can, and hope that your friend will find his way there also! *Sapristi*, it is not likely that either he or you or any of us will get much farther than this. Listen—is that the Cossacks already? Curse them, I must sleep or go mad!"

Fagged, dazed, starved, desperate, the unfortunate rear-guard, led by their indomitable chief, straggled forward. Dogged by hordes of pitiless Cossacks they contrived eventually to reach the river Niemen, and to cross into safety, the last survivors of Napoleon's army; their miserable story is well known and need not be recapitulated.

Louise seemed to bear a charmed life. Though, believing that Henri d'Estreville was among the large majority of the Grande Armée lying beneath the snows of Russia, she would gladly have remained, like her lover, among the ten who stayed behind rather than be the one who escaped—for of Napoleon's half million of men scarcely a tithe returned to their homes—yet Louise saw her companions fall around her and never a bullet touched her or a sword or a spear grazed her.

"You and I are wonders, Prevost," said her colonel. "Are we preserved for great military careers, think you? *Nom d'un Maréchal*, I think I could be another Ney if I had the opportunity! *Sapristi*, he is splendid!"

"As for me, I have done with war," Louise sighed. "My days of fighting are over."

"Why, you are but a lad—a conscript of 1812; the year is only now ending and you wear a captain's epaulettes! Nonsense, my son, go home and rest and dream of glory; you will tell a different tale when you have recovered."

Then Louise walked one day into her father's salon while the old man, with Marie, sat and listened as young Havet read out Napoleon's latest bulletin. The Emperor had been in Paris for some little while, having deserted his army, and was already busy with his new project of raising 300,000 men, in order to regain the prestige he had undoubtedly lost in the disastrous Moscow campaign.

"Stop, Havet, who is this that enters without knocking?" exclaimed old Dupré angrily; his temper had not improved of late, owing to the reverses of the French arms and the absence of news of Louise, as to whose safety neither his heart nor his conscience was at rest. Marie uttered a cry of delight. "Father, it is Louise!" she screamed. "Louise—sister. Oh, how thin, how worn, how——"

The sisters embraced one another warmly; old Dupré held his daughter to his heart, endeavouring, after his manner, to suppress every sign of emotion. His arms came in contact with her epaulettes. "Why," he cried, "Marie, Havet, see what is here, the epaulettes of an officer; Louise, you have won promotion—glory—is it not so?"

"I received a commission; what glory can any one claim—on our side—and such a war! There must be officers, nine in ten were killed; do not talk of the war, my father; are you well?"

The old man gazed at his daughter in pride and exultation.

"Listen to her modesty—no glory, says she; a little conscript returns a captain, and no glory! Hola, there, Havet, order food and wine. *Mon Dieu*, Louise, you have seen adversity, you are thin and in rags, to-morrow you shall have new uniform!—the Emperor already assembles a new army to chastise these Cossacks. *Mort de ma vie*, my daughter, you shall die a marshal, I swear it!"

Louise did not think it necessary to chill the old man's happiness by telling him that to-morrow she would return to the ordinary costume of her sex; that she was sick of man's attire and of war and all that appertained to the profession of arms; that she was, indeed, weary of life itself and longed to be where Henri d'Estreville was, at rest among the frozen pine-trees in some snow-covered Russian forest.

The evening proved a painful one for Louise, who did her best, however, to maintain a cheerful demeanour, while her father—to whom this was, perhaps, the happiest hour of his life—held forth upon his favourite theme of glory and honour and a marshal's baton in store for Louise, and so forth. Young Havet was to take part in the coming war; if possible he should enlist in Michel Prevost's regiment (the old man laughed heartily as he pronounced the name!), and perhaps Louise would do her best to assist him in his military career.

When the trying evening was over and Louise parted with her sister for the night, Marie took her aside.

"You are depressed, sister, what ails you?" she said. "Oh, I can see plainly that all is not well. Are you ill in body?"

"I am worn and weary, sister; yes, I am depressed; who would not be, that has seen the sights that I have seen since Moscow?"

"Ah—ah! You are not so much in love with war as father would have you?"

"In love with war—bah! It is devil's work, Marie, unsuccessful war, at any rate."

"Tell me, sister, have you seen Henri d'Estreville, is he well?"

Louise flushed and caught at the chair back. "Yes, I have seen him many times. I know not whether I shall see him again. Who can tell who has returned and who not? Nine in each ten have remained."

"Oh, sister, and you love him—is it not so?"

"Love—bah! One has other things to think of than love when one is running in front of the Cossack sabres. Let us talk no more of the war, sister, nor yet of love; let me thank *le bon Dieu* that I have done both with one and the other; I would rest and rest and again rest."

"Poor Louise," said Marie, kissing her; "poor Louise!"

Afterwards she added, speaking of this to her husband, that Louise must indeed have supped her fill of horrors since even love had been forgotten in the tumults and terrors of war.

Louise submitted to be presented with a new uniform, which her father bought for her the very next day. She would rather have donned her woman's skirt, but for several reasons she consented to figure a while at least as Michel Prevost. One of these was the distaste she felt in her present condition of weakness and utter fatigue of mind and body for any sort of argument or discussion with her father. Another was an irresistible desire to move among those who had returned from the war, in order that she might gather any information there might be with regard to the fate of Henri.

Louise had not altogether despaired of him. Soldiers and officers still dribbled daily into Paris, emaciated, tattered, half-alive; men who had somehow lagged, through wounds or illness, and had contrived to escape the countless dangers which assailed them in their solitary retreat through a hostile country. Why should not Henri have escaped, like others? She would allow herself to hope a little; just a very little.

And about a month after her own arrival a wonderful day dawned for her. Seated at a restaurant close to a table at which sat four officers of Henri's regiment, Louise suddenly caught the sound of his name.

"That makes seven alive," some one was saying; "one better than we thought. Certainly no one could have supposed that D'Estreville would reappear. His has been, I think, the narrowest escape of all. His trials have depressed even his spirit. Have any of you ever seen Henri depressed? He will be here, presently, you shall judge for yourselves. *Sapristi!* he has left his gaiety with all Ney's guns in the Niemen. Seven officers out of forty——"

Flushed, giddy, almost swooning for joy, Louise stumbled out of the restaurant. "I will return immediately," she told the astonished waiter.

CHAPTER XXV.

If any one had informed Henri d'Estreville on the morning when, departing for the war, he took a somewhat affectionate farewell of Louise Dupré, that his strange sensation of particular tenderness for the girl would not only prove an abiding sensation, but would actually develop into something remarkably like the tender passion itself, and that without any further communication, meanwhile, with the object of his affection, he would have laughed the idea to scorn.

It was not in accordance with Henri's temperament that his heart should linger over soft recollections of charms which his eyes no longer beheld. If Chloe were absent, Phyllis, who was present, would fill her place excellently well. No woman had as yet proved herself essential to him. He took his pleasure from the society of the other sex where and when he found it, and this sufficed.

But somehow the memory of Louise had lingered. Perhaps the combination of certain womanly qualities with her splendid skill and courage in manly exercises had impressed him. Certainly he had not forgotten her magnificent eyes, he often recalled these when his recollection of her other features had faded. Louise had made no secret of her preference for Henri over every other man of her acquaintance. That alone, however, would not have greatly attracted the Baron, for he was a favourite with the sex, and Louise was not the first who had been simple enough to lay bare to him her heart of hearts.

"I am a fool," thought Henri; "but there is no doubt that I wish to see her. Perhaps the best medicine for my sickness will be to do so as soon as possible. Probably the first glance will disenchant me. I have somehow, and most foolishly, so embellished my recollections of her that I

am remembering an ideality! The reality will soon set me right again!"

Thus it was that one morning as old Pierre sat with his daughter Marie, Louise being absent with Karl Havet, a servant announced the Baron Henri d'Estreville.

"Who is he?" said old Pierre, frowning; "I do not remember to have had a pupil of that name!"

"Ask the Baron to wait a moment in the salon," said Marie. "Do you not remember, father?" she continued, laughing, when the servant had disappeared. "This is a very beautiful young man, and in one respect at least, unique as well."

"Unique?" repeated Dupré; "and how so?"

"In that he is the only male being who ever succeeded in causing our Louise an extra pulse-beat or two. Have you forgotten how she nearly lost her heart, and how distressed you were, just before her departure for the war?"

"*Sapristi*—I remember the fool. What has he come for, think you?"

"To seek Louise, doubtless. He will find that she is none the softer for her warfaring. I am not sorry she is from home, however, the sight of him might not be good for her, *mon père*. It would be a pity if her career were spoiled for the sake of a Henri d'Estreville, who, they say, is not too trustworthy."

"Oho!" said old Pierre; "is it so? He shall know that there is no longer a Louise Dupré to listen to his philandering."

This attitude did not bode well for Monsieur le Baron, who awaited Louise in the salon, more agitated than he would have believed possible.

"Monsieur will doubtless remember me," he explained; "it was I who brought Monsieur Paul de Tourelle, the only fencer—it is said—at whose hands Mademoiselle Louise was ever worsted."

"Ah, his was a fine hand with the foils!" said Pierre. "Yes, I remember well. Ha ha! in the first bout she scored twice with the *feint flanconnade Dupré*—a trick new to him and most successful; but after consideration he thought out a counter which was clever; I remember well. Does Monsieur le Baron come now as a pupil? Let me see, have we already enjoyed the honour of instructing Monsieur le Baron?"

"Monsieur, I have lately returned from the war; I have heard enough of the clash of swords to last me handsomely until the Emperor enters upon a new enterprise and one, let us hope, of better omen. I have come to pay my respects to a friend for whom I entertain feelings of the highest respect—it is Mademoiselle your daughter."

"Ah—Marie; she is within; I will tell her." Old Dupré shuffled off as though to fetch Marie.

"Pardon, Monsieur," said Henri, blushing; the old man was very dense. "You have another daughter; it is Mademoiselle Louise I mean!"

"Louise!" exclaimed Dupré, throwing up his hands; "Monsieur le Baron has not then heard that Louise is dead?"

"*Grand Dieu*, Monsieur, what are you saying?" exclaimed Henri; his cheek grew suddenly pale; his knees seemed to tremble beneath him; he had risen to his feet, but he sat down again hurriedly.

"She is dead, Monsieur; Louise is dead; she has ceased to exist; do I not express myself with sufficient clearness?"

"Monsieur will pardon my emotion—I had not heard," murmured Henri scarcely audibly. "My God, it is incredible; it is horrible; and I have so looked forward—Monsieur, how long since did this most lamentable event happen?"

"Nearly a year, Monsieur. I fail to remember that Monsieur's acquaintance with my daughter was particularly intimate."

"Monsieur Dupré," said Henri, finding his voice, "I did not mention the circumstance when I was here in May last for the reason that I had not then myself realised it; but it is nevertheless the truth that, short as was my acquaintance with Mademoiselle Louise, it was long enough to convince me that my heart had in Mademoiselle found its intimate, its complement, that in a word I loved Mademoiselle and must lay at her feet my life, my happiness. Monsieur, I was presumptuous enough to think that your daughter was not indifferent to me; her young heart had never, I believe, been assailed; I had the greatest hopes that she would listen favourably to my suit—we should, perhaps, have enjoyed wedded bliss; and I return to be informed by you that she is dead."

"Monsieur le Baron will forgive me," said old Dupré, "but those who know me are well aware that such matters as Monsieur speaks of meet with no sympathetic response from my side. It is my grievance against Destiny, Monsieur, that my children should have been females; Monsieur had not heard this? It is the truth. Consequently, having brought up my daughters as men and taught them the highest skill in manly exercises and to value such attainments more highly than the usual avocations of women, I have ever observed with repugnance any indications of a falling away of either of the girls towards the ordinary womanly foolishness of a desire for love and courtship and such things. Which being the case, Monsieur, I can only reply to your rhapsodical utterances by saying that I thank Heaven Louise ceased to exist in time. I would not have had her exposed to such a declaration as you intended, I suppose, to make to her this day, for ten times the inducements Monsieur could offer."

Henri was silent. The old man's lack of sympathy mattered very little beside the greater fact: the fact of the death of Louise, which Henri felt to be a disaster of the first magnitude; too great, indeed, to be altogether realised so suddenly. Here was a grievance against Destiny, indeed! For once in his life the Baron had come very near to falling honestly in love, and this was the result; it was too appalling, too unfortunate for belief.

"Mademoiselle must have died soon after I left for the war," he murmured. "Was she long ill, Monsieur?"

"Louise died at the beginning of the war, Monsieur; she ceased to exist, I remember, on the day of the conscription in this *quartier*; her end was sudden; there was no illness."

"She did not, I suppose, leave messages for friends; words of remembrance and so forth—there was not time, perhaps?"

"Doubtless there was neither time nor inclination, Monsieur. Louise was happily but little disposed towards those follies of womankind to which I have made allusion."

"Pardon, Monsieur, I had reason to hope that in my own case Mademoiselle Louise had made an exception."

"Not so, Monsieur; believe me, you are mistaken."

"I think not, Monsieur. I may tell you, since Mademoiselle is dead and I break no confidence, that she had even confessed her love for me."

"Then, *Sapristi*, Monsieur le Baron, I repeat ten thousand times," cried old Pierre, banging the table with his fist, "that I thank Heaven my daughter ceased to exist before your return from the war. Monsieur le Baron will now understand my sentiments in this matter and will, I trust, for the future retain inviolate the secret he has been good enough to share with me."

Henri bowed and prepared to depart. The man was obviously crazy. Probably the death of Louise had overbalanced his reason. Henri remembered that he had heard long ago of his eccentricity with regard to his daughters and their sex.

"Monsieur will pardon my intrusion," he said politely; "he may rest assured that the secret made over to him shall henceforward remain inviolate in my breast."

When old Pierre returned to his daughter his face betrayed that he was in the best of spirits. He entered the room laughing and swearing round oaths.

"*Âme de mon Épée!*" he exclaimed; "I think we shall have no more visits from this suitor. The devil! He would have carried Louise from under our noses if we and she had been fools enough to let him. Thanks be to Heaven that Louise—if ever for a moment she wavered, as you seem to suppose—quickly recovered her balance. It was your example, Marie, fool that you made of yourself!" Marie laughed.

"You will sing a different song, my father," she said, "when you have a houseful of little grandsons to educate in the art of the sword. What did you tell the Baron?"

"The old tale—the same which we have told others, that Louise died long since. She 'ceased to exist,' that was my expression. *Sapristi*, it is the truth! Louise ceased to exist when Michel Prevost came into existence—is it not so? Ha! so it is!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

Henri d'Estreville sat at his midday meal at the restaurant specially frequented by the officers of his regiment. He wore the aspect of one who is more than ordinarily depressed. He was pale and distrait and neglected the food which had been placed before him.

Several acquaintances entered the room and saluted him as they passed, but he took no notice of them.

"What ails D'Estreville?" men asked one another. "Is it cards or a woman?"

Among others there entered presently Michel Prevost, who was known to very few, having but lately qualified for the right to sit at meals with the class of men mostly frequenting this eating-house and others of its kind.

Michel looked round and saw Henri d'Estreville. His face flushed and then paled. He sat down on the nearest seat to gather breath and strength. Michel had almost despaired of his friend since the terrible day at Vilna, when the remnant of Ney's division, tattered and war-worn, had marched into the town like men returning from the grave; when he had looked and inquired for Henri among the rest and found him not. Even when he had heard it said, this very morning, that the Baron had reappeared, he had scarcely dared to believe it. For five minutes he sat still, not daring to move or speak. At last he rose from his seat, and advancing from behind came up and touched the Baron's shoulder.

"So you, too, have reached home in safety, *mon ami*!" he said. "You have returned from the grave indeed! Do you not know that we mourned you for dead? Allow me to share your table? I am a little shy of these super-aristocratic persons in times of peace; in the field the devil may care how many airs they put on; but here it is different. My commission feels new and strange to me; I am

afraid at every moment that some one will say 'What right have you here? go out!'" Michel talked quickly, to conceal his agitation. Henri looked up and gave Michel his hand, smiling.

"Yes, I found my way home somehow," he said; "yet for all the joy I feel in living I wish to God I had stayed beneath the Russian snows."

Michel gazed at his friend in amazement.

"Why—what mean you—what has happened?" he asked.

"Michel, *mon ami*, you have been a good friend to me; you will sympathise; it will do me good to tell you; listen. Have I your permission to bore you with my tale of woe?"

"Yes—speak—who knows, I may be able to counsel you, give you relief——"

"No, it is impossible. Listen, my friend. You may remember our first meeting, when I lay wounded at Smolensk, I spoke confidentially—you will call it raving, I daresay—the subject, women; I confessed many things foolish and wicked; I spoke of one pure sentiment; of the love, strange and unfamiliar, because pure and disinterested, that I cherished for a very simple, very charming maiden whose name——"

"Was Mathilde—was it not?—or Louise; one of the daughters of a *maître d'armes*."

"Yes; Louise; you professed to know her—to have heard of her, at any rate. Well, let that pass then. It is strange, my friend, but my affection in that quarter has not vanished after the fashion of the wretched sentiment I have hitherto felt for other women, which has evaporated when the object is absent. On the contrary, it has increased in absence. I returned home to Paris inclined, certainly, to love the girl even more than I loved her at parting; a wonderful thing for me, Michel, *mon brave*, and very remarkable." Henri smiled ruefully at his friend.

"Continue," said Michel, whose face looked pale, perhaps in sympathy with that of his companion.

"Well, I return. I go, almost the first available moment, to see my charming one. I enter the house, my heart glowing with love and sweet anticipation. I am received by her father, who is cold, polite, long-winded, unsympathetic. I ask for Louise——" Henri paused; his fingers tapped upon the table; his voice had grown suddenly hoarse; there was actually moisture in his eyes.

"Continue," murmured Michel, who wondered what was coming, for all this was a surprise to him, neither Dupré nor Marie having breathed a word of the visit of Baron Henri.

"I ask for Louise," D'Estreville continued. "She is dead."

"Dead?" exclaimed Michel, suddenly rising to his feet and pushing back his chair with a clatter. "Who said so? Why dead? What mean you?"

Michel was never so grateful to destiny as at this moment, for he was able to ease his feelings by an exhibition of genuine surprise. But for that he must soon have burst into tears.

"Simply that she is dead. It is true, my friend. 'She is dead,' said her parent, and 'since it appears you come as a lover and would have stolen from me my daughter who should be above such feminine foolishness as love and marriage, I add my thanks to the Highest that she has ceased to exist in time'—these are the very words of her father, whose throat I could have pinched with satisfaction. What say you, *mon ami*, have I the right to be distressed? By all the Saints, Michel, it is too cruel a trick of Destiny. I could have loved this girl. God knows, I might even have married her. Never before have I felt so fondly disposed towards a woman, never so virtuous. I believe this was true love, my friend, or the beginning of it."

"*Nom de la Guerre!*" exclaimed Michel. "And she is dead, say you—the father himself declared it?"

"I have said so. 'She ceased to exist'—that was his odd manner of expressing it; 'she ceased to exist on the day of conscription'; it is odd how the crazy old man dates naturally from that day; he is mad upon men; he loves only men, honours men, thinks men; women are nothing to him. You would suppose he would be affected in speaking of the death of his daughter; but no! It seemed that her loss is nothing to him. Why? because she was not a man."

To Henri's surprise and displeasure Michel at this point suddenly burst into a roar of laughter. He looked up frowning.

"I beg ten thousand pardons," cried Michel, half choking; "I am not wanting in sympathy, *mon ami*; but in truth the attitude and words of this old man are very comical. Forgive me, Baron, I was very rude."

"Enough. I would laugh also if I had the heart. Certainly the old man is a lunatic. Tell me, Michel; what shall I do? What is going on? I shall die of ennui if I sit and nurse my grief, as now. Thanks to Heaven that you have arrived; it may be that the Saints sent you for my salvation, as before at Smolensk. Come, suggest. I must be made amused; must laugh. I must see movement of men and women."

"Ha! you are not so overwhelmed by your grief, I see, that you cannot feel the desire for amusement. That is a good sign, Baron; you will soon recover, I prophesy."

"A good sign, say you? There is no question of recovery. You are far from the truth, my friend. It is distraction that I need. I do not yet ask to be cured, that would be impossible."

"That depends! The rapidity of the healing depends upon the severity or otherwise of the wound. Yours is, I take it, but a shallow slash."

"Michel, you wound me again by these words. I need distraction; but that does not imply that I am not almost heart-broken, which I verily believe that I am. You, who have never been in love, are unable to appreciate the anguish of having loved and lost."

"Thanks be to Heaven I have never yet loved woman in that foolish manner," said Michel. "You are right, my friend. Tell me, is it worth while to love when an accident, such as this from which you now suffer, may in an instant turn love to misery? Is there any woman in this world for whose sake it is worth while to break one's heart?"

"I thought the same but a short while since. You are young, Michel; do not boast. One day you too will love."

"*Absit omen!*" laughed the other. "I say that there is no woman worth loving; worth, that is, breaking one's heart over, in case she should prove unfaithful, or die or what not."

"And I say that one such, at least, there has been. Do not speak so positively, Michel, my friend, of matters in which you are altogether ignorant."

"Well, have it your own way; but I swear that I, for one, shall never love a woman."

"I am sorry that my grief has had so deterrent an effect upon you," Henri sighed, "though I will not say that I am surprised; for indeed, now that I have lost her before she was won, I wish with all my heart I had never seen her. Like you, I am tempted to swear that I shall never give my heart of hearts to another woman."

"Oh, oh!" laughed Michel. "That is not easily believed; for they say that once a heart has become susceptible to womankind there is no more controlling its vagaries. Be sure, my friend, that we shall find you falling in love, and maybe far more seriously than before, with the first fair lady you see."

Henri looked reproachfully at his friend.

"Let us talk of other things," he said; "it is too early as yet to make of love a jesting matter; my heart is sorer than you think, Michel, or perhaps you would speak more sympathetically. Remember that my grief is as yet very green."

"Forgive me," said Michel, a softer look stealing into his eyes. "I will jest no more. Come, we will walk in the streets of Paris; *Sapristi!* it is better than Moscow, ha?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

Napoleon and his Grand Army had been starved out of Moscow; they had made their futile attempt to destroy the Kremlin, they had delivered their last savage onslaught upon the inhabitants, lighted the last fire, desecrated the last church, exploded the last mine, insulted the last woman; they had manœuvred in the direction of St. Petersburg and of the rich Volga provinces in order to cover the movements of the main force, and finally they had thrown to the winds all subterfuge and frankly made off with all speed towards the frontier and France, leaving behind them a city of smoke and of fire, of starvation, of desertion and of the dead. Within the cathedrals was the stench of stabled horses, with all the filth attendant thereon. Dead bodies of men and women, of horses and dogs, lay about the streets unremoved. Scarcely a house within a twelve-mile radius of the centre of the city but was wholly or partially burned, pillaged, and its contents pulled hither and thither and destroyed.

Scarcely had the last Frenchman left the place to its silence and emptiness when back into this city of death and destruction began to creep, cautiously, at first, but presently to crowd into each gate that gave access within the walls, a dense mob of her banished inhabitants, each anxious to make his way to the quarter of the city in which his home had existed a month ago. Would it be found standing now? Of the Lares and Penates left behind in the terror and stress of sudden departure, would anything be left to him?

The great majority found their houses burned. Those whose four walls were still standing found their homes sacked and looted, their possessions ruthlessly destroyed and themselves ruined.

From end to end of Moscow a wail of despair arose and continued day long, for in the city proper, out of 6,000 wooden houses 4,500 were burned down, while of the 2,500 brick dwellings which had existed before the fires, only 500 now remained standing.

But meanwhile the last of the retiring French were leaving the city by the Borovitsky Gate, and here, at the very first opportunity, began the stupendous anguish of their terrible retreat. For from the first they marched from ambush to ambush, from disaster to disaster, through miseries of frost and hunger and sleeplessness and unceasing attack in flank and rear. Truly the avenging of Moscow began from her very gates.

Vera Demidof came with the rest of the returning fugitives into Moscow, came—like thousands of others—to find that the house in the Sloboda had been looted and wrecked, though the fire had not reached it. Vera had hurried back to Moscow, however, not from any anxiety as to the family mansion or its contents, she came because she had ascertained from Sasha Maximof that his regiment was to be one of those which should first engage the retreating French beyond the walls of Moscow.

"Just to hurry them up and see them safely off the premises," Sasha had laughingly expressed it

but yesterday, paying her a hurried visit at the village to which she had retired on leaving Moscow.

Indeed, as the crowds of Muscovites entered the city at one side, the roar of cannon from the opposite end of the town, beyond the Borovitsky Gate, gave grim evidence that the Frenchmen were not being permitted to march away in peace and impunity.

"If you should be wounded outside Moscow, send me word," Vera had said at parting. She felt depressed and inclined to expect disaster, though she was not one to indulge weakly and without resistance in presentiments; Vera's healthy intelligence was accustomed to look upon such things as foolishness.

"Why do you expect me to get hurt?" Sasha had laughed. "When my time comes I shall die, but I do not think that is yet, Vera. There is something I am determined to achieve before I finish with life—can you guess what it is?"

Vera did not attempt to guess. "You are always getting hurt," she laughed. "Send me word by a soldier if you are clumsy enough to stand in the way of a French bullet." Vera laughed though she spoke with a full heart.

In consequence of this conversation, Sasha actually wrote Vera's address upon a slip of paper which he gave to a trooper in his regiment, bidding him keep an eye upon him and ride back to Moscow quickly, if he should fall, in order to tell the lady named in the written address of what had occurred. When, later in the day, Sasha's regiment received orders to charge from their cover a body of French foot-guards, the trooper to whose care Sasha had entrusted his slip of paper and who rode close at Sasha's stirrup saw a notable sight.

In the mélée he heard a French officer call gaily to the Count Maximof:—

"Hi," he cried, "*mon ami*, Maximof, here am I, let us finish that old matter".

Sasha had turned his horse, and with an exclamation made straight for the Frenchman, at whom he lunged and struck with his sabre. But the Frenchman skilfully dodged his blows, and watching his opportunity planted a thrust of his bayonet which entered the Count's body and tumbled him off his horse senseless.

"Aha!" the Frenchman cried, "that was more than I meant; what will the fair Vera say!" Almost at the same moment a Russian trooper rode this French officer down, and the messenger himself dealt him a whack with his sword that half severed his left arm at the shoulder.

After this the stress of battle separated the trooper from these two fallen men, but when the fight was done and the Frenchmen had gone forward, pursued by the Russian mounted men, the trooper, whose name was Markof, returned to the spot to see how the Count fared. Here he found the Frenchman actually giving Maximof a drink from his flask, talking to him the while in French and laughing; Maximof's eyes were open, but he breathed with difficulty.

Markof spoke to him, saying he would now ride back to the address given upon his paper, which name and address he read aloud in order to make sure he had it right.

"Ah, ah!" said the Frenchman, "Vera Demidof—good—go back and tell her, my friend, that there are two who wish to see her before they die. *Sapristi*, we are in luck, Maximof, both of us!"

At this the Count smiled, but said nothing, being apparently very weak. Presently he shut his eyes and swooned.

"Go, my friend, I will keep him alive till she comes," said the Frenchman, and away went Markof upon his mission.

Vera received the messenger, pale but dry-eyed and resolute.

"He is alive?" she asked. Markof nodded.

"When I left," he said; "but he is bad, lady; do not expect too much. A Frenchman sits by his side, wounded also, who has undertaken to keep him alive with brandy until you come. They seem to know one another."

Vera looked puzzled for a minute, then her face brightened.

"I am ready," she said, "and my droshka is ready, we will go at once."

Markof led the way to the spot in which Sasha had fallen. Amid the dead and dying around they found Paul de Tourelle dozing, but Sasha had disappeared. Paul opened his eyes at the sound of their voices.

"Ah! the fair Vera," he said; "I am glad I have lived long enough to see you; I am desolate, Mademoiselle, by reason of your treatment of me, yet I forgive you. Your friend Maximof has been taken by Russian peasants to the village yonder; me they left, after bestowing a great whack upon my head with a bludgeon—Maximof is alive; he——" Paul's head drooped and he closed his eyes. He had spoken gaily, but his voice came faintly and in gasps.

"Markof, my friend, go to the village and find the Count Maximof," said Vera. "I will come very soon. See that I am shown the right house without delay when I arrive."

Vera took the flask which lay at Paul's feet; she administered a drop or two of its contents to the swooning man. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"This is the irony of fate, Mademoiselle Vera—two splendid lovers, and both to lie dying. I am glad to see you again. *Mon Dieu*, how I loved you in Paris! I have never yet loved faithfully, but in

you I thought I had at length found my destiny."

"Monsieur, can I ease your pain, is there anything I can do for you?" said Vera.

"*Ma mie*, I am past praying for; tell me, were you near loving me in Paris? *Sapristi*, but for this war I believe we should have come together. You are lucky, Mademoiselle, to have escaped me. I am not one of the constant ones. Perhaps Maximof is different, he is slow and stolid and perhaps faithful, not like us Frenchmen—we are like the bubbles in champagne—we come and go—I pray that Maximof may live." Paul's head drooped again and his eyes closed. Vera thought he was dead. She bent and kissed his forehead, preparing to depart. De Tourelle opened his eyes again.

"Was that a kiss?" he murmured. "Ah, I was right—you might have loved me, but for my ill-fortune when you overheard me ask for Clotilde—ha ha! do you remember? That was accursed bad luck, indeed! To go to the house of the beautiful, the chaste Vera Demidof, not knowing it was hers, and to ask for Clotilde!"

Paul spoke very faintly; his words came slowly and more slowly.

"Was it a kiss, or did I dream?" he murmured. "Mademoiselle, I—I did my best to protect Maximof as he lay here—it was for your sake—will you reward me with a kiss? I shall not live to tell of you."

Vera bent and put her lips to his forehead. Paul smiled.

"It is paradise," he murmured. "I die content."

They were his last words. Vera waited a moment or two, then she knelt and prayed, made over the dead man the sign of the cross and departed.

In the village she found a peasant awaiting her. "This is the way, lady," he said, in the obsequious manner of the moujik who expects largess. "It was I that found and brought in the gentleman. Lord, he is handsome—and heavy also!"

Vera gave the man money. "Is he alive—is he alive?" she said—"speak quickly!"

"Alive? Lord, yes!" said the moujik, "doing well. We have found a doctor for him and we have not ceased to pray—assuredly he will live, Barishnya!"

The moujik returned to the battlefield, where he spent the night reaping a glorious harvest, with other vultures of his kidney, from the unfortunate dead and dying.

Vera entered the hut.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Marie Havet, *née* Dupré, was much surprised and somewhat concerned on the evening of the day upon which Louise had found, to her almost uncontrollable joy and relief, that Henri was still alive and in Paris when her sister, looking very grave and with signs of tears and past agitation upon her face, drew her aside for a conversation, which, said Louise, must be held absolutely in private. Marie's conscience instantly smote her. She was going to be scolded for saying nothing about the Baron's visit.

"Marie," Louise began, "you may have observed that I returned from the war depressed, not joyous and elated as one returning home after many perils and who has received certain honours and rewards might be expected to be. Did it never occur to you and to my father that this was so?"

"It occurred to both of us, sister, that you were naturally depressed, that your career of success and glory should be already over and that you must return to the ordinary dull routine of home and of the sex to which you belong."

"You were mistaken in the reason, sister. I am tired to death of my uniform, and of masquerading as a man. I shall thank God to be a woman once more as the Seigneur created me. But that is another matter. My depression was due to reasons very different. You may remember to have seen here a certain Baron Henri d'Estreville."

Marie flushed and sat down. Her scolding was coming, then; Louise had somehow heard of the Baron's visit. This was a matter Louise would not easily forgive.

"Yes, I remember him. He came with Monsieur de Tourelle, the finest fencer in Paris, who nevertheless was unable to have the better of our little Louise."

"Bah!—let that pass. With this D'Estreville I fell in love, Marie—why, there is no reason to look surprised. We are women both, you and I; you were not ashamed to love and to marry, why should not I have loved?"

"It is true—it is true," Marie murmured.

"More strange is the fact that the Baron should have returned my love; the darling of Paris, he had been called, Marie; every woman adored him; yet he condescended to feel for me a different sentiment, a pure and deep affection such as no other woman had hitherto inspired in him; imagine it, Marie!"

"Dear Louise, it does not surprise me," said Marie, touched.

"Me, it surprises—delights—transforms. By this circumstance I have been made to see clearly how poor a thing it is that a woman should desire to masquerade as a man; so clearly that now—even though my love-dream is over—I must return to my own sex. I shall never see Henri again, Marie; he lies buried beneath the snows of Russia; I am widowed before I am a wife."

"Louise, what are you saying? Do you imply that D'Estreville is dead, that he died in the war? that ——"

"Alas, there is little doubt. Why look you so, Marie? You have not heard otherwise—alas! that is impossible—can you wonder that I returned dejected from the war?"

"Poor Louise!" said Marie, and stopped to think very earnestly. Here was a very difficult question set for her decision. Louise knew nothing, after all, of Henri's visit; was not even aware that he was alive. Would it be better to leave her in ignorance, for her career's sake, or for her heart's sake tell her the good news? There was no doubt as to which alternative old Dupré would choose were he to be asked for his opinion. Marie was proud of her sister's career as a soldier and honestly sorry that it should end, thus, at its beginning. The Emperor would see to it that a new war should follow quickly upon the disastrous campaign just ended; Louise would have plenty of opportunity to rise.

But Louise seemed to have wearied of "masquerading"; she desired to be a woman once more; she had become transformed by love. Would this phase pass and ambition for a soldier's glory dawn again at the first bugle call?

"You will forget your sorrow, maybe," she ventured, "when the trumpet sounds for a new war, which will be soon enough; you will desire to return where glory awaits you."

"Not so, sister; I have done with glory; it is love that I want. I will tell you a secret; when I became substitute for Karl it was indeed in part for your sake, that you might be spared the pain of separation; but there was another motive besides, for I desired to go where Henri went—ah! I deceived you, Marie; forgive me; it is a devilish thing when sisters deceive one another!"

Marie felt very uncomfortable.

"Sometimes it is not possible—for the sake of others to tell the whole truth," she stammered. "We both have my father to consider, Louise. You could not well have confessed to him this other motive."

"No, you are wrong; it is cowardly to deceive thus; it would have been better if I had braved my father from the first, as you did, sister; you were braver than I and more honest; you made no pretence in the matter of your love for Karl; I think it is not in your nature to deceive. If Henri had lived I should have married him, Marie, and you should have assisted me to persuade my father to forgive me." Louise looked keenly at her sister; Marie felt her eyes penetrate to her very soul.

"Louise, you kill me with these words, say not another one, it is needless. I am on your side, sister. It is true that we withheld the truth from you—oh yes, I perceive that you know all; like my father, I was proud of your success and thought only of your career, also—before Heaven I thought and hoped you had forgotten Henri; if it is not so and you still love him——"

"Yes, I still love him, Marie—what would you have, does one forget love so quickly? I would exchange all the military glory in the world for one kiss from his lips. My father is mad and you were mad, sister; do you think Henri could be alive and in Paris and I not know? You shall help me to prepare my father's mind, Marie, for whether he approves or disapproves, I must go my own way in this matter!"

"But I deceived you, Louise—am I forgiven?" cried Marie, ashamed and distressed to realise how poor a part she had played in this comedy.

Louise took her sister in her arms and kissed her—the first embrace these two had exchanged for many a year. "There," she laughed; "you see how true it is that I am a woman again; as for forgiving—bah!—there is a great deal of my father's madness in you, sister; in your heart of hearts you are as anxious as he for my career and as disappointed as he will be that I have so fallen away from your high ideals as to have fallen in love. Be comforted, Marie—you deceived me with the best motives, no harm has come of it, and you have confessed in time to save your soul and preserve my respect—*eh bien!* all is well!"

Nevertheless Marie approached her father with considerable trepidation when the moment came to speak of this matter of Louise; for Marie had stipulated that, as punishment for her offence, the task should be left to her.

"Father," she said, "we have been mistaken, you and I. We had hoped and we believed that my sister Louise ceased to exist from the day of conscription, but alas! I have discovered that Louise lives, it is Michel Prevost who has ceased to exist."

"What mean you?" said the old man, frowning.

"It is this Baron d'Estreville, she has seen him, my father; it has been as you feared. She has spoken to me of him. She loves him."

"*Sapristi!* it is impossible! That any one should love a man more than honour and glory and a career—*cent mille diables!*—it is impossible!"

"It is true—she is a woman, what would you have? it is better to recognise the fact, father; it is not her fault. I too found that I was a woman, and you forgave me."

"That was different. You were always a fool, Marie; but here was one after my own heart, a woman, by misfortune of birth, but able to put the best of men to shame. And a fine career well begun! We will argue with her, Marie, she shall be wise. Stay—yes, that is better—I will pick a quarrel with this fool, and call him out. *Sapristi!* my old arm is still strong enough to slice the rogue; let him but show his face here once again—he shall be taught that——"

"It is useless, my father; Louise will have her own way; she is man enough for that! What matters is that we have deceived the Baron and that she will know it."

"*Mon Dieu*, let her know it—what then? Am I ashamed that I would defend her from that which strikes at her true advantage? God forbid. Let him know also or not know, what care I?"

"They have met and it is certain that she knows we have hidden the truth from him."

"Good! let him know it also. If he is an honourable man he will not sit still under so vile a deception. *Sapristi*, I have lied to him; let him call me out!" Old Dupré laughed aloud, delighted with his own astuteness. His eyes were aflame with the light of battle. "Thanks be to Heaven!" he said, "I shall fight one more duel before I die!"

From this bellicose attitude Marie found herself quite unable to move her father. On the contrary, he seemed so delighted with the situation in which he now found himself that he would speak to her of little else than this, and Marie found that she had, after all, rendered her sister no more signal a service than to place within the category of possible things that which assuredly neither of them would until this day have contemplated as in any degree likely, a duel between old Dupré and the lover of his daughter. Moreover, to the astonishment of his assistants, old Pierre forthwith arrayed himself for the arena and practised his fencing with each in turn until his limbs were so stiff with the unwonted exercise that he could hold his foil no longer.

"*Mais*, Monsieur!" exclaimed Havet, perspiring with the exertion to which the old man's unexpected activity had condemned him, "you are as skilful and as nimble as a youth of thirty."

"Aha! you find me so? *Sapristi*, that is well, *mon ami*. After a few days you will find me invincible, and that is well also, for, *entre nous*, there is hope that I shall be called out. *Imaginez, mon enfant!* another fight before I die! Truly, Heaven is kind to me!"

Old Pierre did not think Heaven quite so kind on the morrow, however, when he discovered that his limbs were so stiff that he was unable to get out of his bed. But this circumstance did not in the least affect his spirit or quench the enthusiasm with which he looked forward to the fight which he had now persuaded himself to regard as inevitable.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Michel Prevost met D'Estreville by appointment at a café. "There is no one I can talk to about certain matters so readily as yourself," the Baron had said, and Michel replied, laughing, "Oh, if you are going to sigh and mourn over this little Dupré I think I will leave you to lament alone!"

Nevertheless D'Estreville begged him to come, and he went.

The attitude of old Dupré had put Louise into a doubly awkward position. "What shall I do, Marie—help me!" Louise had entreated her sister. "Henri must be told that I am alive, that is certain; yet when he learns that my father deceived him he will be so angry with my father that I do not know what may happen."

"Bah!" said Marie, "he will be so happy to learn that you are alive, that he will forget everything else. Moreover, he is not so foolish that he would take my father seriously."

"But father takes *himself* so seriously; he is determined to quarrel. Moreover, when Henri learns that I am alive he must also learn that I have masqueraded as a man, among men, and that is what I dare not tell him. It is an *impasse*."

"As you have put it, it is an *impasse*. But why dare you not tell him?"

"I am ashamed. There was a tale told in Moscow of a young Russian woman who had taken part in every battle in the campaign, her name was Nadejda Doorova. The soldiers in my regiment said horrible things about her. It is not likely that Henri would think well of my performance. It is not every one who is like my father and yourself, who have his blood in your veins."

"Bah! he will, as I say, be so thankful to find you alive that he will forget all this. Shall I go to him, sister, and tell him your story?"

"Heaven forbid, do nothing; no one shall tell him my tale but I myself."

"Tell him of this Russian girl and see what he says to the story," Marie suggested.

"But what if he disapproved of it and said something so cruel about her that I dare not tell him afterwards of my own escapade? I wish now I had not done it, Marie, indeed I do, except that your Karl was left to you instead of being carried off to the war."

"If he loves you he will forgive ten times more," said Marie. "Go to him boldly, sister, go as Michel Prevost; say, 'Here, mourn no more for me, my friend, I am Louise and my old father is not to blame for the deception, for obviously no person can be two persons at the same time, and while I was Michel there could be no Louise. Now Michel has finished and Louise steps once more into

being.'"

Louise laughed. "It sounds very foolish," she said, "but something of the kind must be done."

But when Michel Prevost found Henri d'Estreville at the rendezvous appointed she had evolved no clear plan for his enlightenment.

Henri began to speak of his trouble almost immediately. The more he thought about the matter, he said, the more amazed he was that a little love affair should have so transformed him that he could think of nothing else. "It is unlike me, therefore the experience is obviously a peculiar one: ergo, I conclude that I was for once seriously in love; which being so, what an atrocious trick fortune has played me. It is the last time, my friend, that I shall look at a woman!"

Michel contrived to direct the subject of conversation to the career of Nadejda Doorova, the Russian girl who had fought throughout the war as a Cossack soldier. Henri had not heard of her and displayed but little interest in her adventures.

"Bah!" he said, "she is an eccentric. It is the kind of thing old Pierre Dupré would have liked his daughters to do; old Pierre is mad. A woman must be wanting in modesty to unsex herself thus."

"Oh!" exclaimed Michel involuntarily; his heart sank. "Let us be just to her," he murmured; "who knows, she may have had some good reason of which we know nothing, this Nadejda; her lover, maybe, went to the war and she could not bear to be parted."

"That would perhaps excuse her to a certain extent," said Henri wearily. He was not in the least interested in the conversation.

In despair, Louise tried another tack. She had determined to come to an understanding this day, nothing could be done without risk.

"D'Estreville—will you promise not to be angry if I make a communication to you—it is about Louise Dupré?"

Henri was all attention in a moment.

"About Louise?" he repeated. "What can you have to say about her—and why should I be angry? I wish you to talk of her."

"It may be different this time. I shall hope that you will not be angry. You may have observed, my friend, that when you told me your story a few days since I was greatly astounded to hear of her death, Louise Dupré's death."

"Naturally, I hope you were shocked, if only for the sake of your friend, who loved her."

"Monsieur, prepare yourself for a surprise greater than my own. You have been deceived."

"Deceived?" Henri started from his chair. "How deceived, by whom?"

"Be calm, dear friend, and sit down. It is about Louise. I have come this day to tell you the truth; Louise did not die as you were told." Henri sat down suddenly; his face paled, then flushed.

"Stop—she did not die—is she then still alive? for God's sake speak plainly, Michel."

"She is not dead."

"Then to what end was I deceived? For whose sake was I to be kept in ignorance? Is it for yours, Michel? I remember that you said there was no woman worth breaking one's heart over, if she should prove false or die. What have you done, Michel—what have you done?"

"You rave, D'Estreville," said Louise, growing a little frightened.

"No, I am sane; I know what I say; did you not tell me you believed that I was dead? Believing this you delivered my message to Louise and that was the beginning. Since then the false wench has learned to prefer Michel living to Henri dead—is it not so? Come, confess, Michel."

"You are very swift to find fault with the woman you profess to love, Monsieur le Baron," said Louise, somewhat alarmed at the turn the conversation had taken, yet indignant withal.

"Ah, you prevaricate! I have guessed rightly. So this is your friendship for me, Monsieur Michel Prevost—a worthy friend in truth and indeed!"

"Monsieur le Baron jumps to conclusions," said Louise. "Moreover, seeing that the message was to be delivered to the lady in case of your death, and seeing that you were believed to be dead, should I be to blame even though it were so as you have said?"

"Ha! you assured yourself very quickly of my decease; and she, too, by all the Saints she has wasted no time!"

"Monsieur le Baron is so angry that he will not listen to reason. It is easy for him to see this lady."

"Not I!" cried Henri; "I will see her no more."

"But what if you suspect her unjustly?"

"Then why was I deceived and told that she was dead? She was 'dead to me,' that is the explanation. She is not dead to others—to you, for instance, her new lover—oh Lord, Michel, a pretty messenger thou hast been!"

"A worse than the Baron supposes," Michel laughed nervously, "for his message was never delivered."

"What! though you believed me dead? Then indeed, my friend, you have been little better than a

traitor."

"It seems you are determined to quarrel with me, say what I will; if I delivered the message it was in order to found a courtship of my own upon it; if I did not I am a traitor. Nevertheless I will not quarrel, my friend. It was not I that deceived you, remember, but I that undeceived you. Was it not Monsieur Dupré who declared that his daughter was dead? Then why am I to be quarrelled with?"

"Because, my friend, I believe you to have been a party to the deception, for a certain end of your own which I have indicated."

"Then your wrath is expended upon wind, for I swear to you that though, I confess, this lady is more to me than any woman in the world——"

"Aha! listen to him!" Henri raved.

"And though I am well aware that she is not wholly indifferent to my virtues——"

"By Heaven, Michel, you are a bold man!" cried Henri, fingering his sword hilt; "finish your sentence; I will judge whether our rapiers shall settle this matter."

"Yet I would not marry the girl for all the wealth of India, nor she me. Moreover, I promise that Louise shall confirm my words. Henri, my friend, it is as her messenger I come this day. 'Bid him come to me'—that is her message."

"If it be so, Michel," began the Baron, his face instantly relaxing, "you shall bid me do penance for my suspicions; but if——"

"Nay, I weary of arguing, my friend; come to her quickly."

CHAPTER XXX.

Henri d'Estreville lost no time in complying with the request conveyed in the message which Michel Prevost had brought him. He hastened to present himself at old Dupré's establishment, where he knocked—in his eagerness—with unnecessary vigour, rousing old Dupré from a nap as he lay in bed, still a victim to the stiffness of his joints, brought about by his practice with the foils in preparation for an imaginary duel.

Marie opened the door.

"*Mon Dieu!* it is Monsieur le Baron!" she exclaimed, flushing.

"Yes, it is I," replied Henri; "I have found that on my last visit, Madame, I was disgracefully deceived as to the pretended death of your sister; I have come to see Mademoiselle Louise, and also to receive an explanation of the deception to which I was made a victim."

"Monsieur, I will fetch Louise, let her explain," Marie murmured; "there are circumstances which Louise will explain better than I; Monsieur will understand and forgive."

"Good; I will see Louise—fetch her quickly."

Henri waited in the salon. He was strangely agitated. He did not half comprehend all that Michel had said; for Michel's connection with Louise seemed mysterious and incomprehensible; he professed to love Louise, yet, he had declared, he did not desire to marry her. "Either the fellow is mad," Henri reflected, "or he has discovered that Louise already loves me, in which case she might have chosen another messenger! Soon I shall know whether Louise indeed loves me. *Mon Dieu*, if she does not, after all this, I know not what shall happen." Henri strode up and down the room, scarcely able to contain his excitement, it was most inconsiderate of Louise to keep him waiting so long—what did it mean?

"She adorns herself; that is what it means!" Henri reflected; "it is only natural that she should desire to look her best; it is only what every woman would do."

In this conjecture Henri was not far wrong.

Upstairs in old Dupré's bedroom there had been scarcely less excitement than below in the salon.

"Well, who was it that knocked so loudly?" cried old Dupré, as Marie presently appeared after opening the front door to admit the visitor.

"*Mon père*, do not be agitated, it is the Baron d'Estreville," said Marie, hesitating.

"Ah—ah! I thought it! I knew it! and he has demanded satisfaction of me, and awaits me below, is it not so?" The old man struggled to get out of bed, but his daughters restrained him.

"Calm yourself, my father," said Marie; "he has not demanded satisfaction. He has, however, discovered that Louise is still alive and desires explanations of the deceit of which he was a victim."

"There! What said I? Was I not right? Let me rise—I *will* rise, I say, Marie; I am ready; the necessary explanations I shall give; he shall have them at the rapier's point. Out of my way—thanks be to the Seigneur that I shall yet fight another fight before I die!"

"My father, you cannot—you are stiff—it is impossible," Marie protested; but the irate old man shook her off and sprang out of bed. But the exertion gave him so agonising a twinge in all his

muscles that he uttered a cry of pain and collapsed in a sitting position upon his bed.

"*Morbleu!*" he groaned, "it is anguish to move my limbs. What is to be done? He shall postpone the meeting until I can walk. One week will suffice. Go down—tell him so, Marie."

The old man almost wept for chagrin and disappointment.

"Nay, I dare not go," said Marie. "It is Louise that he would see, not me; I fear his anger if I should appear and not Louise."

"Alas, Marie, that I should be the parent of a coward," Dupré groaned. "Do you not see that it is inadvisable that Louise and this man should meet? Have you forgotten the foolishness that he uttered concerning your sister? Louise shall live to be a Marshal of France, yet this fool would persuade her, if he could, to waste the glory of a career in silly dreams of love—drag her down to the level of the sex from which, by her splendid achievement, she has emancipated herself! Speak, Louise—repudiate this folly—assert yourself!"

"*Mon père*, it may be that Louise, like myself, possesses the instincts of a woman," said Marie, fighting on her sister's behalf; "be not hard upon her; maybe——"

"Let me speak, Marie," said Louise. "*Mon père*, it is certain that this Baron d'Estreville must be very angry with us all, and wishes to fight. I have an idea. The Baron knows nothing of Michel Prevost, that he and I are one. He is determined, it seems, to see me. Send me with a message, that you will have no man but Prevost for a son-in-law, and that if the Baron would aspire to claim your daughter, he must fight this Michel Prevost for her. Now the Baron is but a poor fencer, and it is certain that I, as Michel, would soon better him in a set-to with our rapiers."

"*Parbleu!*" exclaimed old Dupré, "it is good—it is excellent! *Sapristi*, my daughter, you are a genius in diplomacy as well as in arms! Listen to her, Marie, and learn! And you would have set her down to become this wretched fellow's drudge. *Mort de ma vie*, Louise, I thank the Almighty that you are not as your sister would believe you to be! Yes, yes, go down, *chérie*, and arrange this matter—it is good! But stay, declare first that Marie has spoken nonsense—that you have forgotten your woman's instincts—that glory and the career come first in your estimation, that ——"

"Father, at any rate I am not yet ready to be a woman; the time may come, soon or late, I will make no promises. At present let it be as I have said. The Baron is offended and would fight —*volontiers*! I am ready; he shall fight Michel for Louise!"

Louise laughed gaily and ran from the room. She hastened to her own chamber, where she quickly donned her own dress, the fencing costume of old days when she still acted as her father's assistant. All this occupied some time, and Henri's patience was almost exhausted when at last she opened the door and presented herself before him.

D'Estreville caught the girl in his arms and covered her face with kisses. Louise abandoned herself to his embraces, making no effort to resist, and conscious of no desire to do so. On the contrary, she felt in that precious moment that she wished for nothing better in this world, no greater happiness, no more perfect peace than to belong body and soul to this man. D'Estreville let her go presently.

"Thanks be to God, you love me then, after all," he murmured.

"Did you then doubt it?" she whispered.

"Louise, there have been doubts and mysteries; tell me, you are acquainted with one Michel Prevost?"

Louise flushed. "I know Michel very, very, very well," she replied, smiling.

"Come, explain—there is a mystery, but I think I have a clue! Confess, you have a brother or a near relation—now that I see you, I am impressed the more with the likeness between you and this good fellow! If I am wrong, then who—in Heaven's name—is this Prevost whom you know so well and who reminds me so strongly of you?"

"Not a brother—a relative, yes; he loves me, Henri—nay, do not speak—he loves you also, *mon ami*; he would not have us parted," Louise laughed hysterically. "Do not fear, he shall never be dearer to me than now, and that is not so dear as you, not by—oh, oh! so many miles!"

"I see—I see! Good; I am content. They told me you were dead, my beloved—imagine my despair. Why was I deceived?"

"My father will have no son-in-law but this Michel."

"*Peste!* So I must be deceived and sent into the fires of the nether regions!"

"My Henri, be calm and listen. My father sent me to you with a suggestion; you are to fight for me with this Michel——" Henri interrupted with a roar of laughter.

"Oh, oh! poor Michel! he is doomed! I shall fight like a fiend from hell, if it is for you, *ma mie*; moreover, he is—you say—on our side! What a foolish fight will this be!"

"Michel is a good fencer, he has few equals. What if he should slay you, my beloved, for—if I remember rightly—you have not more than a passable hand with the rapier."

"Bah! in such a cause I would overthrow even Louise herself," Henri laughed; "but will Michel fight?"

"It—it shall be arranged; he shall slip and you shall disarm him—neither shall be hurt." Louise

blushed and became agitated. "Go down, *chérie*, to the *salon d'armes*, you know it of old, and there Michel shall meet you. Adieu, until—until Michel is overthrown."

Henri laughed and embraced the girl. "Adieu, then," he said, "until then—bid Michel be quick!"

The *salon d'armes* was empty when Henri entered it. He busied himself in examining and testing the rapiers upon the walls. A sound presently attracted his attention and he looked round.

Louise stood in the arena, rapier in hand; she wore her fencing dress; her face was crimson with blushes; she seemed too agitated to speak.

"What is this, *chérie*, where is Michel Prevost?" asked Henri.

Louise replied, murmuring so softly that he could scarcely catch her words.

"Michel is here," she whispered. "Oh, my beloved, are you so blind? Michel is here, but his uniform he will never wear again; oh, Henri be kind to me for the love of Heaven, for I am ashamed."

CHAPTER XXXI.

The terrible war of 1812 was over, and Russia had shaken herself free of the last Frenchman. Already the Tsar Alexander had taken in hand preparations for the terrible vengeance which was to be exacted from his arch-enemy. Moscow was being rapidly rebuilt; the Russian workman, equipped with axe alone, is able to do wonders in the matter of building up a structure of wooden beams. In front of the Senate house was already beginning to accumulate that immense collection of cannon captured from or abandoned by the Grand Army, which may still be seen by visitors to the Kremlin. Of these nearly 370 are French, 190 Austrian, 120 Prussian, 50 from the German States, over 100 Italian and some 35 to 40 Spanish, Dutch and Polish; over 800 items of evidence to the anguish of the great retreat.

The prevailing sense throughout Russia was that of profound devotional gratitude to the God of Battles, not unmingled with a feeling of jubilant pride in the nation's prowess, and of passionate affection for the Tsar Alexander himself, whose courage and wisdom had shown themselves pre-eminent qualities from first to last, and of respect and admiration for those of his Generals, and for Count Rostopchin, Governor of Moscow, who had distinguished themselves in the defence of their beloved country.

Alexander himself was undoubtedly the hero of the hour. At the annual reception of the cadet corps in St. Petersburg, a function to which the reader of this history has been introduced on a former occasion, his advent was awaited with the greatest excitement. A laurel crown was to be laid at his feet by a deputation of beautiful women, of whom Vera was one. "Bozhé Tsaryá Chranee," the National Anthem, was to be sung by cadets and guests, as it had never been sung before; all the world was on the tiptoe of expectation.

Vera moved across the room, supporting upon her arm a limping, decrepit-looking figure, one of many who limped among the august company present that day. Old Countess Maximof sat and watched them. She nudged her nearest neighbour, a motherly old person dressed in gorgeous attire.

"See them—are they not a lovely pair?" she said. "It has taken me some time to forgive Vera the impropriety of remaining in Moscow throughout the trouble, but she has been so good to my Sasha that who could have held out for ever?" The other gazed at Vera through her double eyeglasses.

"Hah! remaining in Moscow! Many unkind things were said of her upon that account, I remember. She had friends among the French officers—old acquaintances in Paris—that was the chief indictment. That will all be forgiven and forgotten. Yes, she is beautiful. Your son might have done worse!"

Vera and Sasha talked and laughed together, they appeared to be radiantly happy.

"It is only four years ago that we met here," Vera whispered, "and at that time you were still a victim to the follies of cadetdom—do you remember how——"

"Shall I never be forgiven that expression?" Sasha laughed.

"Oh, *droog moy*, let us remember it to our everlasting gaiety; let us remember also how you had no leisure to be presented to your little fiancée; she was too young and too ugly, and Mademoiselle Kornilof was at the same time so fascinating; and oh, *mon Dieu*, the conceit of the good-looking cadet whom poor I was obliged to adore from afar!"

"Ah, you did not adore me, that is not true, *dooshá moyá*; come, confess that at that moment you detested me!"

"Perhaps I tried to think so; but there was a something deep down in my heart that was certainly not hatred. It has lurked there ever since. If you had shown a liking for me that day, it might never have existed, but when you gave me the cold shoulder it came and with it a kind of determination that you should repent in sackcloth and ashes; that you should sue——"

"Little tyrant! you exacted a terrible revenge! Oh, the hours of misery you have caused me, you and your French admirers."

"Ah! poor Paul!"

"Frankly, Vera, were you ever near to loving him?"

"Never so near as when he befriended you on the battlefield." Sasha's fingers closed tightly over his companion's arm. He had never thought it necessary to inform Vera that Paul had very nearly killed him before befriending him, nor did Vera ever learn that it was he who had dealt the blow which went so near to widowing her heart for ever.

Vera was much observed at this time. She was more beautiful than ever. Sorrow and suffering had added something to her loveliness. Her story was known to most of those present and rendered her an interesting personality, for the Russian dearly loves a romantic tale. This afternoon there were many lips that told of the baby-betrothal of these two, of Vera's Parisian experiences, of her patriotism, of her finding and nursing the Russian lover, her childhood's fiancé, and of his triumph over all rivals, French and otherwise.

Even the Tsar, when at last he made his triumphal entry into the hall and had received the laurel tribute prepared for him and listened to the splendid soulful rendering of the National Anthem, presently noticed the beautiful girl in constant attendance upon young Count Maximof, whom he knew.

"Who is she?" he asked—"she is beautifully dressed—one would say she was French—but her face is Russian, of our loveliest type."

"It is the daughter of Demidof, your Majesty's envoy at present at the Court of Sweden," the Tsar was informed.

"What, the beautiful Russian maiden who was said to have inflamed the hearts of half the youth of Paris?" the Tsar laughed. "Has she then decided, at last, in favour of a Russian admirer?"

"Not only so, Sire, but of one who was betrothed to her in childhood—perhaps your Majesty remembers the story. It was said that they had agreed to annihilate the contract entered into, perhaps, in a moment of conviviality by their respective fathers; but the end of the story is most romantic; the lady sought and found her lover upon the battlefield outside Moscow at the village of Pavlova; there she nursed him back to life, and—at his request, for he believed himself to be dying—actually married him as he lay gasping in a peasants hut."

"*Chort Vosmee!*" laughed the Tsar, "that is a good story; what, and they have not disagreed, since he recovered? That kind of marriage might prove a more serious matter than the foolish betrothal contract!"

"They seem good friends, Sire, if one may judge from appearances!" said the other.

Afterwards Vera, to her astonishment and delight, though perhaps also somewhat to her consternation, was informed by his aide-de-camp that the Tsar would dance with her.

She went through the ordeal of that stately quadrille excellently well, however, entertaining and delighting the Tsar with an account of how Sasha had stolen a march upon her by persuading her to marry him as he lay dying—which she did, she explained, to oblige a friend—afterwards recovering when he certainly had no right to do so.

"You are caught now, Madame," said the Tsar; "will the caged bird beat herself against the bars of her prison?"

"Your Majesty must ask me a year hence," Vera laughed; "at present I am a new toy, and my jailer is content to play with me!" The Tsar laughed again.

"By the Saints, Madame, if he should show signs of falling short in his appreciation of his good fortune, you shall tell me and he shall be sent to Siberia. Such a man would deserve his fate."

"It may be, your Majesty, that he married me out of patriotic motives in order to prevent my falling into French hands."

"Good—good! it was a worthy act and shall be rewarded," said the Tsar, smiling kindly. "Adieu, Madame; we shall meet again I trust."

On the following morning Vera received a beautiful present from his Majesty: an order, the collar of St. Anne, commonly known in Russia as "Annooshka na shay". The gold cross attached to the collar was inscribed "For Patriotism".

Sasha at the same time obtained, what was at the moment the object of every young Russian officer's ambition, a captain's commission in the new regiment of Imperial Guards lately organised by his Majesty. Not long after this Vera received a letter from Paris. It was brought by hand by a Russian prisoner returning to his native country. The packet contained a gilt-edged card, upon which was printed:—

Mons. le Baron Henri d'Estreville.
Madame la Baronne Henri d'Estreville
(*née* Louise Dupré).

To which was added, written in a woman's hand:—

> "En suite le Capitaine d'infanterie Michel Prevost, qui vous fait part, belle cousine, de sa mort."

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