

Princess Nadine

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Princess Nadine

CHAPTER I

The Shell Of Aphrodite, And The Victor's Car

IT was the height of the Carnival of Nice, and on the Promenade des Anglais the Battle of Flowers was raging. From the double line of equipages passing along that famous highway of pleasure, men and women of the fashionable cosmopolitan world were pelting each other with blossoms like gleeful children. The air was filled with flying missiles, with laughter and with fragrance, while all the flowers of spring seemed defiling by in the gay parade, where fancy ran riot in the forms of the vehicles— it was before the universal reign of the hideous motor-car — and in the manner of their decoration. Now it was a cornucopia overflowing with blooms and driven tandem by a girl who seemed an incarnation of Spring herself; then a landau covered with violets from which the face of a famous Parisian *mondaine* looked out of violet draperies and green leaves; then a reigning English beauty in a swan of white carnations; followed by a yachtsman afloat in a boat of white lilac on a sea of blue corn-flowers; a perfectly appointed drag, blazing with scarlet hibiscus; and a rustic charette, twined with the wild almond blossoms of the hills, in which two well-known members of the smart winter colony appeared in gypsy costume. Of these, and many more, the spectators who filled the balconies and tribunes which lined the way expressed their approval by vigorously pelting their occupants with flowers, as well as by murmurs and cries of commendation; while floods of sunshine streamed on the brilliant masses of colour, on the satin coats of horses and the glittering points of harness, on the graceful figures and charming toilettes of women, on the long pennants floating from tall Venetian masts, on the whole fanciful, delightful spectacle, framed by the beauty which nature has lavished on these enchanted southern shores.

The picturesque gaiety was at its highest point when a classic chariot, covered with the yellow blooms of the daffodil, and driven by a charioteer who might have driven Caesar — one of those Italians of the lower orders whose face and form are cast in almost perfect classic mould, and whose statuesque proportions were admirably set off by his antique Roman dress — swung into the Promenade and joined the long line of decorated carriages. It attracted instant attention and applause, for nothing more effective had appeared. Cries of "Brava la Biga!" were heard on all sides, while from the tribunes and carriages a hot fire was promptly opened upon its occupants.

These were two men, who differed as widely in appearance as in their manner of receiving the attack. One, slender, good-looking, perfect type, from the top of his head to the points of his boots, of the man of the fashionable world, stood up, the better to return the fire of which he was the target. The other, who remained quietly seated and took no part in the gay warfare, had about him little or no suggestion of the fashionable world, but instead a note of personal distinction which seemed to mark him as one possessing powers, either actual or potential, that might set him above his fellows in the great world of active life. The bronzed face, with its clear-cut contours, its square jaw, and keen, steady dark eyes, crossed by the level line of the eyelids, expressed so distinctly the force of a strong personality, the power to dominate men and events, to take all chances and accept all hazards, that, with the supreme, almost arrogant composure of its owner's bearing, it made more than one of the onlookers recognise the appropriateness of his appearance in the triumphal car of antiquity.

"See, the conquering hero comes!" laughed one man to another in the press tribune. "There's a significant conceit for you — triumphal chariot decorated with gold! Nobody can accuse Leighton of modesty. He makes even the Carnival serve the purpose of advertising his success."

"Who is Leighton?" asked the other. "That's Alan Despard in the chariot, you know. Capital fellow, but not particularly triumphant or golden that I've ever heard."

"I'm not talking of Despard," the first speaker answered, "but of the other, the quiet dark man. That's Leighton. Can't be possible you don't know him? Comes from Central America — tremendously rich, and so powerful politically that they call him the uncrowned king of the country down there."

"Oh! — is that the man?" A stare of interest followed the car. "The Figaro had an article about him only the other day. It appears he's floating some immense concessions in London and Paris just now."

"And in the intervals cruising in the Mediterranean — he's bought Lord Maltby's yacht, the *Nereid*, — which accounts for his presence at Nice, triumphal chariot and all."

"Lucky dog! Central American politics and concessions must pay well. But *voilà!* — the carriage of Princess Nadine Zorokoff! — An inspiration— a dream!"

This exclamation, and many like it, was called forth by the appearance of a sea-shell of white roses, lined with the same flowers in deepening shades of pink, and holding a vision which might have been Aphrodite herself, just floated ashore from the marvellous, colour-flecked distance of the sapphire sea beyond. For the lady whom the shell enshrined was of the rare loveliness that we associate with goddesses, a blonde of the purest and most dazzling type, whose exquisite face, looking out from the midst of the blossoms that surrounded her, moved the populace, quick as an Italian crowd always is to recognise and salute beauty, to cries of frankest admiration.

And among those whom the charming apparition roused to enthusiasm was the quiet man in the classic chariot. As the two equipages, approaching oppositely, came abreast, he raised himself quickly. At the same moment the lady flung a rose into the car. It was intended for Despard, who had just paid his compliments to her in a shower of Parma violets, but as Leighton bent forward he received the soft, fragrant blow directly in his face. He caught the flower, while his eyes met and held those of the laughing beauty for an instant before she passed on in her fairy shell.

"You took what was intended for me then," observed Despard, glancing around at him.

"Yes," Leighton assented coolly, as he fastened the rose on his coat. "I generally take what comes in my way — if I care to do so. I'll keep this in memory of the loveliest woman I have ever seen. Who is she?"

"Princess Nadine Zorokoff, the most beautiful woman in Nice — perhaps the most beautiful woman in Europe."

"A Russian?"

"In nationality, yes. In blood she is half American."

"How does that come about?"

"In the usual way. Her mother was one of the first of the American heiresses who during the last twenty-five years have made brilliant marriages over here. She — Oh, by Jove, this is too much!" From the top of the scarlet-decked drag a sharp fire was suddenly opened upon him. "Help me to fight them, Leighton."

But Leighton would lend no help, although himself plainly singled out for attack by one particularly animated combatant on the box-seat, whose piquant prettiness did not escape his attention.

"The American girl appears to be in great force here," he remarked as the drag passed on.

"Where is she not?" Despard queried. "But there's only one in that party."

"She has the place of honour, however."

"To be sure. And anything else that Lord Uxmoor — he's the whip — can offer her. His intentions are plainly serious."

"They couldn't well be anything else. Seriousness is written large all over him."

"He *has* rather more than his share of British stolidity. But the uncommon feature of the affair is that he is a tremendous match, and Miss Hazleton is no heiress, though she comes from the golden State of California and is cousin to Princess Nadine Zorokoff."

"To the beautiful princess of the sea-shell? *Caramba!* Is it possible that any man, even a stolid Englishman, could look at that little soubrette by the side of— "

"A goddess?" Despard laughed. "But you know there are men and plenty of them, who prefer soubrettes to goddesses. A spice of the devil — that's what fascinates men like Uxmoor,

as witness the ease with which the music-hall favourite marries into the peerage. Now, there's an abundance of *diablerie* in Miss Hazleton, and if she doesn't overreach herself she'll go far. Oh, the American girl is a wonderful creature! And here comes another — ” It was the gypsy cart which now demanded attention. "Mrs. Jack Percival, *née* Griggs, of Chicago, whose husband is heir to an English baronetcy."

"Is that her husband with her?"

"Good Lord, no! That's Greville, fashionable novelist, you know. Gets material for his books by fetching and carrying for the women of the smart world."

"He must have a high sense of the dignity of letters."

"He has a keen appreciation of the market value of social gossip, thinly veiled as fiction. I'll wager he puts you into his next book."

"If so, it will not be the first fiction in which I have figured. Most of what has been published about me would come under that head. But tell me something more of this Russo-American princess. She interests me."

"She interests many men, my dear fellow," Despard returned, "but one might as well be interested in a bright particular star, and all the rest of it, as in Princess Nadine Zorokoff."

Leighton's square jaw set itself a little more squarely. "Why?" he asked.

But the question received no reply, for Despard's attention was again distracted by the demands of the conflict, and although he continued to fling to his companion names and fragments of information about the people who passed, almost all of them celebrities of one kind or another, there was no further word of Princess Nadine Zorokoff. It was not until the Battle of Flowers was over, and they had the pleasure of seeing that beautiful and distinguished personage receive the much-coveted first prize — handed to her with words of smiling congratulation by Grand Duke Michael himself — that Leighton was able to learn more about her.

"She's an enchanting creature, the princess," Despard remarked enthusiastically, as they drove away from the reviewing stand, "and her decoration deserved the first prize. There was nothing to compare with that sea-shell of roses, and herself in it, looking as if she had just sprung from the foam of the waves."

"What does she spring from?" Leighton asked practically. "When I observed a little while ago that she interested me, I was thinking of her chiefly as a study in heredity."

"Oh!" — Despard's smile was broad — "a study in heredity."

"Exactly. Hasn't it ever occurred to you to wonder what will be the result in another generation of the international marriage of which one hears so much nowadays?"

"The

‘exchange of fatted steers,
Chicago pig, and eligible peers?’"

Despard quoted. "I can't say that I have ever speculated much on that particular result, though it certainly opens a wide field for conjecture when one thinks of all we are told about inherited instincts and tendencies."

"So wide a field," Leighton said, "that it has often struck me that such a combination as the blood of an ancient aristocracy and that of a new, crude, vigorous plutocracy ought to produce something rather uncommon — and perhaps interesting."

"Well, now you see that it has. No one can deny that Princess Nadine is both uncommon and interesting. And her antecedents are as picturesque as herself. On one side a long line of Russian boyars — for the Zorokoffs are of the ancient princely families of Russia — and on the other a miner's pick rampart—"

"Be less picturesque yourself, and more explicit."

But Despard went on in his own way. "International marriages weren't as common twenty years ago as they are now," he said, "and it was the sensation of the day when Prince Zorokoff, famous for his great estates and greater debts — he was the most notorious gambler in Europe —

married Miss Wentworth, only child and heiress of the bonanza king—"

"What!" The energy of Leighton's exclamation was almost dynamic. "Do you mean that this girl is the granddaughter of old Dick Wentworth, the California miner — the most daring, resourceful, and unscrupulous of the whole bonanza set?"

Despard nodded. "That's what she is," he said. "Odd, isn't it?"

"Odd!" Leighton paused, as if words were difficult to find. "It 's astounding! No speculation on possible combinations and results of the international marriage could imagine anything more extraordinary than a descendant of Russian boyars on one side and 'Lucky Dick' on the other."

"There's no trace of 'Lucky Dick' about the princess," Despard assured him. "Only the boyars are in evidence."

Leighton shook his head. "Don't you believe it!" he said. "Lucky Dick was far too vigorous a personality to be effaced by any number of boyars."

"By Jove!" Despard's burst of laughter made Luigi, the handsome charioteer, turn his head to see what amused the signores so much. "California miner and Russian princes fighting it out in Princess Nadine! What would Mrs. Wentworth say to such blasphemy!"

"Who is Mrs. Wentworth?"

"Widow of the late bonanza king. And by the by, here comes in some more good blood to offset — er — 'Lucky Dick'. It seems that fortunate person wisely waited to marry until he had money enough to induce a gentlewoman to accept him. Mrs. Wentworth belonged to an aristocratic old Southern family. She has the appearance and manners of a grand duchess, is haughty, exclusive, *plus royaliste que le roi*, as most Americans become over here, you know — effect of American institutions, we may presume — and altogether an ideal chaperon for her beautiful granddaughter."

"The princess's parents are not living?"

"No. Both are dead; and as their only child she has inherited Russian estates and American millions. She is one of the greatest heiresses in Europe, and her grandmother's ambition for her doesn't stop short of a throne."

"A throne! You are jesting."

"Not at all. If you were up in social and diplomatic gossip, you would have heard that a marriage is about to be arranged between his Serene Highness Prince Maximilian of Altenberg and Princess Nadine Zorokoff."

Leighton regarded his companion with an incredulous frown. "Serene Highness!" he repeated. "That's an inferior brand of royalty, isn't it? How does Prince Maximilian of Altenberg come to have a throne to offer?"

"Because," Despard explained, "although he only belongs to one of the mediatised royal houses, he is the most promising candidate for the throne of Serabia, that troublesome Balkan State which is just now in need of a ruler. He dare not take, because he could not hold, the crown without the consent and support of Russia; but that support may be gained by the proposed alliance with Princess Nadine."

"Princess Nadine is only a Russian subject, — how can an alliance with her secure what he wants?"

"Have you forgotten that Natalie of Servia was only the daughter of a Russian colonel? Yet we know the part she played in maintaining the influence of Russia in the Balkans. Princess Nadine, with her high rank, her immense wealth, and her exalted connexions can serve Russian interests even more greatly. Oh, you may be sure Prince Maximilian knows what he is about, and since he has arrived in Nice the matter may be regarded as settled, and we shall soon have the pleasure of seeing the first woman of American blood mount a throne."

"In Serabia!"

"No matter, A throne is a throne, wherever it may be set up. And if I know Princess Nadine nothing could prevent her from mounting it."

"She is so ambitious?"

"Remember the influences of heredity you have just been considering. Could she be otherwise?"

"Not easily," Leighton agreed. "Ambitious she must be; but her ambition might take another direction than an unsteady throne in a semi-barbarous country."

"You forget her education and environment. That throne is the greatest thing within her reach, and she will take it. Make no mistake about that."

"It might, however, be possible to make a mistake," Leighton intimated. "Considering what racial extremes have met in this girl, if it is possible to judge her character or foretell her conduct by ordinary rules, I shall be surprised." He paused, and then added abruptly, "I should like to know her. Is it possible?"

"Quite possible," Despard answered. "She is always very gracious to me, and Mrs. Wentworth quite condescending. Indeed it is probable that you can meet her at once, if you like. When the Marquise de Beaumanoir called me to her carriage at the reviewing stand, it was to ask us to take tea on her terrace after the parade. She is one of the leaders of the gay world here, as well as in Paris, and, like all French women just now, is immensely enamoured of Russians. Princess Nadine is almost certain to be one of the people whom we shall meet there."

"You forget that I have not the honour of knowing the Marquise de Beaumanoir. She couldn't have meant to invite me."

"My dear fellow, it is you who persist in forgetting that you are a celebrity, and celebrities are always welcome. I don't wish to underrate my own attractions, but I was perfectly aware that Madame de Beaumanoir called me for the single purpose of saying, 'Bring your friend to take tea with me.' At least that is what she did say."

"Then we'll go," said Leighton as decidedly as under other circumstances he would have declined the flattering invitation.

CHAPTER II

Dreams Of Empire

AND pray," said Princess Nadine, "who is Mr. Leighton?"

It was on the terrace of the Marquise de Beaumanoir's villa in the midst of colour, light, fragrance, and a number of fashionable people drinking tea and gossiping together, that Despard had found an opportunity to make his petition to present his friend. The throng which from the time of her entrance had surrounded the beautiful Russian princess had for the moment dispersed, and as she sat down, teacup in hand, under a clambering wistaria, Despard felt the instant to be propitious. In reply to her question, he lifted his brows.

"It's clear that you don't read the newspapers as much as you should," he chided gently, "or you would remember the Leighton whose name has been frequently mentioned of late in connection with Central American affairs."

"No," the princess admitted. "I confess that I read the journals very little, and then only what interests me. I take no interest in Central American affairs; and so I have never noticed your friend's name. But I noticed himself, if he was the man with you in that striking chariot. He suited it extremely well."

"Yes," Despard chuckled. "He looks the dictator, doesn't he? I flatter myself that triumphal car was a good idea. It was altogether mine, you know, but he'll have the credit of it. If I could have induced him to wear a classic costume and a laurel wreath, the thing would have been perfect."

The princess laughed. "It would have been appropriate certainly," she agreed. "But he looked the part as it was. And is he really a dictator? What has he done?"

"Everything," Despard answered with large comprehensiveness. "He has fought and intrigued and — er — done all the other things they do in Central America, until he has all the political and financial strings that govern the several quarrelsome republics in his hand. He has been in revolutions without number, and he has always come out of them not only alive but successful. And he is credited with all sorts of ambitious projects which no one but himself knows whether he entertains or not. What everybody does know, however, is that he is very powerful, a force to be reckoned with in all complications arising down there, and that he is certain to be, even if he is not already, fabulously wealthy."

"He must be rather a picturesque person," the princess conceded with an air of interest. "How do you chance to know him?"

"Oh, he's an American — of the States I mean — after a fashion at least. His father's people and mine are neighbours at home in Maryland. I've often heard of handsome, gallant Jack Leighton, who fought in the Confederate army and then went to Central America, where he married a beautiful Spanish American and prospered greatly. He was a good deal of a power himself before he died, but of course his son is much more of one, belonging to the country by birth and with many influential connexions through his mother. Altogether, there's nothing of the social, though there may be much of the political, adventurer about him."

"And one has no objection to the last, so long as there is nothing of the first," the princess replied. "You may present him."

If Despard smiled a little at the suggestion of royal graciousness in this permission, it was not because he did not know that the tone was unconscious. Those who live in a sublimated atmosphere and inhale incense habitually are inevitably affected by it a little, and her unconsciousness robbed Princess Nadine's manner of any offensiveness. It was with an amused sense of mischief, however, as of one who brings inflammable material together, and then stands off to wait possible consequences, that he went in search of Leighton, whom he found just leaving the side of their hostess. The great lady had devoted several minutes of her time to him, and said afterwards that she found the Central American dictator both *comme il faut* and interesting.

Of the latter quality Princess Nadine had been assured by Despard's description of his friend—though she was not unaware of the fact that people who do interesting things in public life sometimes prove very uninteresting in private — but of the former she had time to feel a little doubtful in the brief interval before Despard's return. Her doubts if they existed, however, were at once dispelled by the appearance of the man, who bowed before her with an air which told her that they met on equal ground, and that, whatever deference he might pay to her beauty and charm, he was not in the least overawed by her social rank.

In truth there was no thought of her rank, either positive or possible, in Leighton's mind at the moment, but only a delighted consideration of the picture she presented, with the green leaves and pendant masses of purple flowers around and above her, making a perfect background for her ethereal beauty. It was a beauty full of distinction, as that of high-born Russian women often is. The tall, slender figure, in its costume of white lace, had the svelte charm, the subtle, fascinating grace of those women of the North, in whom there is so strong a strain of the Oriental. But there was nothing Slav in the face, where another race had set its mark in the fine chiselling of the delicate features and in the perfect oval of cheek and chin. The large and brilliant eyes of sapphire blue were set under brows and lashes delicately dark, although the shining masses of her abundant hair were softly golden as those of a child. She looked altogether a creature so exquisite, formed for exquisite uses only, that it was difficult for Leighton to recall the "Lucky Dick" of California tradition, or to believe his connexion with her to be other than a myth of the imagination. And it was while he was thinking this that she spoke, in a voice full of such musical intonations that, despite its purity, her English sounded foreign.

"Mr. Despard has been telling me quite wonderful things of you, Mr. Leighton," she said. "It seems that while we have fancied that only England was able to produce such men as the Rajah Brooke and Mr. Cecil Rhodes, you have proved that America can produce them also."

"I'm afraid Despard has given you an idea that I am a much more interesting and important person than I really am," Leighton answered. "Candour compels me to protest that I have no claim whatever to be classed with either of the remarkable men you have mentioned."

"Then Mr. Despard has greatly exaggerated your claims, and that I can hardly believe," the princess returned. "Perhaps I am less inclined to believe it," she added with a smile, "because the careers of those men of whom I have spoken have always appealed very strongly to my imagination."

"And therefore you have been kind enough to feel slightly interested in meeting one who has in a degree at least led the same kind of life," Leighton said, with an answering smile of comprehension. "As much as that, rather than disappoint you, I will admit. But perhaps I can better judge of any real claims I may possess on your interest if you will tell me what it was in their careers which particularly appealed to your imagination."

"That is easily told," she replied. "It seems to me that it must be delightful to do great things in the world by the force of one's individuality alone, to govern men and direct events in wild, fresh, new countries."

"And exist always in an atmosphere of combat and danger?" Leighton queried. "But you are right," he added quickly. "There's nothing in the world quite so much worth while. When one has known the excitement of such a struggle, and the triumph of gaining power, not by modern methods of pandering to an ignorant democracy, but by the older and more direct means still in force among a primitive people, everything else in life becomes by comparison tame."

"I can believe it," said the princess; and, as he met the light which came into her eyes, Leighton felt that he had been right in thinking that this girl, in whom such strangely alien influences met, was not likely to be altogether like others. "To fight for power under any circumstances must be the most exciting thing in life," she went on, "but the direct methods — the primitive people — all that sounds so interesting that I think I should like some details."

"As for example —?"

"Well, for example, what happens in — Central America, isn't it? — if you fail to gain the success for which you have struggled?"

He laughed lightly, yet with a certain grim note in the lightness.

"On some morning quite early," he replied, "one finds oneself facing a file of soldiers with one's back to a wall. That is what generally happens."

"Has it ever happened to you?"

"Not yet, or I should not have the pleasure of being here and talking to you now."

"Did my question sound absurd?" she asked. "But you give me the impression of being one who might find a way to dominate those soldiers, and leave that wall a conqueror instead of a prisoner."

There was a flash in the dark eyes now, and a flush of pleasure showed through the man's bronzed skin.

"It is strange," he said, "but you have divined a real situation. I was very near that wall once, and — well, it was by dominating the soldiers, in the persons of some of their leaders, that I succeeded in reversing the situation, and that I find myself ready to enter upon and win other battles."

"To win!" she echoed. "Do you never consider defeat possible?"

"The man who considers defeat possible is to a certain degree already defeated," he told her.

"Then," she pursued, with frank curiosity, "perhaps you only enter into contests where success is probable."

"On the contrary," he said, "I care little for easy victories. It is when success is difficult, when it must be struggled for against heavy odds, that I find pleasure in fighting. Any one can do easy things."

The careless and evidently sincere disdain with which he uttered the last words made the princess draw in her breath a little. There was something in this man's attitude toward life, in his self-confidence, his unmistakably daring and dominant strength, which, as she had said of the men to whom she likened him, appealed to her imagination, like a breath from those outlying regions of the world where his life had been spent, from the wild, fresh, new countries of which she had spoken.

"Yes," she assented, "any one can do easy things; but the difficult ones are difficult, you see, and therefore—"

"Are the only ones worth doing," he ended as she paused. Then he suddenly held her eyes with his keen, steady gaze. "How is it with yourself?" he asked directly. "Do you care for what is to be won without effort?"

"I!" She hesitated for an instant. "How can I tell? Everything so far has come to me, without effort; but I have thought — I have dreamed—"

He nodded. "Of course," he said, "else how could the careers of the adventurers of the world — of those who fought for all they gained, and took by the strong hand all they possessed — have appealed to you? There must be something in yourself which responds to their lawlessness and audacity."

"Not to the lawlessness, I hope," she said with a laugh, "but perhaps to the audacity, if you consider that the key-note of their success."

"Can there be a doubt of it?" he returned. "‘*L’audace, l’audace, toujours l’audace!*’ — there’s no better motto for those who take desperate risks to accomplish great ends. For a man's deeds are judged by their results, and if the results are sufficiently large — Rhodesia, or India, let us say — a robber is euphemistically called an empire-builder."

"You would not then care to be called an empire-builder?"

"I should not care to be called so," he replied, "but to be an empire-builder, in a greater and wider sense than any in which the term is used in these days, is — what shall I say? — not a hope, and hardly an aspiration, but certainly a dream of mine."

"Ah!" There was a note of deepening interest in her voice. "And, if I may ask, what empire would you like to build?"

He did not answer for a moment, and while he hesitated she saw a change, as of some more serious thought or feeling, come over his face.

"I have never spoken of it to any one before," he said then, "and it is rather odd that on such brief acquaintance I should speak of it to you. But even in these few minutes it has been made plain that we have at least one passion in common—the passion for great adventure—and so I will tell you that the empire I should like to spend my life, and every energy of my mind and body, in building is one formed of the states of Spanish America. Of course you know very little — for the matter of that the world knows very little — of the vast region and the blended races of people which go under that name. But there are possibilities in both to make an empire which in wealth and power might be greater than any the world has yet known, if a man should arise capable of uniting in one league the states which now spend their resources and retard their development by constant revolutions and wars."

"It is a wonderful dream," Princess Nadine said in a tone which showed that she had expected nothing half so great. "I can imagine that it fascinates you. But where would you find the bond of union?"

"That may be easily found. Just now all Spanish America is filled with apprehension and resentment of the growing power and threatening domination of the so-called Anglo-Saxon States of the North. And being already united in race, in type of civilisation, in religion, in all the essential things which tend to unite men, all that is required is the touch of a common danger to

make the people of the southern continent sink their surface differences in the great purpose of forming a league strong enough to defy aggression, of creating a new and splendid Latin civilisation in the New World — were the man only found able to inspire and to lead them."

If his object in speaking in this manner — a manner, as he had truly said, in which it was not the least his habit to speak — had been to impress the imagination of his listener, he certainly could not doubt his success. Such dreams appealed to all the idealism of the Slav in the girl before him, and her beautiful eyes were shining as she answered in some well-known words.

"Thou art the man!" she said.

"In my dream, — yes," he agreed. "All seems clear there — the opportunity, the boundless possibilities, and the manner in which these possibilities might be used. But outside of the dream I know that it is a task which would call for qualities such as few among the leaders of men and makers of history have possessed."

"Do you not think that you possess them?"

He laughed. "My worst enemies have never accused me of modesty," he replied, "but to think that I possess those qualities would be rather a large demand upon my self-esteem."

"Oh — self-esteem!" She dismissed its consideration with an impatient gesture. "What has that to do with the matter? The point is, not what you may think yourself, but what you really are. Now it appears to me that you are peculiarly fitted to do this work. Indeed it is as if you were specially born for it. Although you are a Spanish American by birth, you are in blood partly of the other continent, the other race, and that blood not only helps you to understand its people, but it gives you some of the qualities which have made the Anglo-Saxon the master of the modern world." Seized, as it were, by the attraction of her own idea, the clearness of her own insight, she looked at him with a gaze which seemed to measure and probe him. "It is a wonderful dream," she repeated, "and you ought to fulfil it; for you have imagination from one race and force from another, and to that combination everything should be possible."

"You are delightfully inspiring," Leighton said with a smile, "and I see that like myself you have given some consideration to the mysterious influences of what is called heredity. It is a subject which has deep interest for those of us who have come of the union of widely different national strains."

"No doubt that is why it has always interested me," she said. "I, too, come from strains as far removed from each other as the East is from the West."

"And," he hazarded, "you have possibly felt within yourself the conflict of their opposing tendencies?"

She shook her head. "No. If there are any opposing tendencies in my nature, I have never felt them. I only know myself as Russian." She paused an instant and then went on a little impulsively: "As we are talking of dreams, I may acknowledge that I, too, have a dream. It will possibly seem to you absurd, but it is to help, as far as a woman may, in extending the influence of Russia, and — perhaps — to live to see the Tsar in the city of the Caesars by the Golden Horn."

It was now Leighton who said "Ah!" in a tone of surprise and comprehension. For these few words enabled him to understand, as by a revealing flash of light, the attraction which was leading the speaker to Prince Maximilian of Altenberg and the unsteady throne of Serabia. No mere desire for social pre-eminence, no vulgar ambition to be, as Despard had said, the first woman of American blood to wear a crown; but the passion of race and country which has always dominated lofty natures with intensely compelling power, the high ambition to lend her aid toward attaining an end so splendid that self might willingly be spent, or if necessary wholly sacrificed, in the effort to attain it.

"Did I not say well that we have in common the passion for great adventure?" he asked. "And it does not seem to me in the least absurd that you should dream in that manner. You are made for such dreams, and made also to fulfil them."

She lifted her delicate brows slightly.

"You are very kind," she told him, "but I am afraid that your knowledge of what I am made for is hardly great enough to justify you in deciding how far I may be able to fulfil my dream."

"We only know those perfectly whom we divine at first sight," he quoted. "Will you permit me to say that I have divined you? Why, even this" — he indicated the silken prize-banner, lying on the seat beside her — "is a symbol proving that I am right. And it reminds me that I have not yet congratulated you on your triumph of to-day."

"Oh," she said carelessly, "the prize is so much coveted that — for the moment — it seemed worth winning. No doubt such a triumph appears very trivial to you, but we are only idlers and triflers here, you know."

"So far from appearing trivial to me," he replied, "it strikes me as a foreshadowing of other triumphs which life holds for you, since it is impossible to doubt that any prize for which you enter must fall to you, however much others may covet it."

"Are your conclusions always so rash?" she asked. "For surely it is very rash to assume that I must win all prizes because I have gained one for carriage decoration in a carnival parade."

"I should put the matter the other way," he returned. "It is because you are fitted to win all prizes that you have gained even the insignificant one of which we speak."

"You have evidently spared some time from more important matters to perfect yourself in the art of flattery," she said. "And since compliments are in order, let me congratulate you on the success of your decoration. That triumphal chariot was most effective — and appropriate."

"Sarcasm, princess, is an unkind return for sincere homage," he answered. "I am honoured that you observed my decoration, but the credit of it belongs to Despard, as I left the matter entirely in his hands. Only one thing" — he glanced down at his coat — "I claimed and retained for myself out of the day's merrymaking."

The glance of the princess, following his own, rested on the rose which he still wore, and recognised it, or at least divined whence it came. There was no reasonable ground for finding anything presumptuous in the fact that he was wearing one of the flowers she had tossed away in the Carnival warfare, yet there was that in his tone and manner and in the glowing dark eyes which conveyed more than a hint of presumption. Instinctively she felt, as she had felt when her eyes first met his during the Battle of Flowers, the challenge of a boldness which might be insolent as well as audacious. It was this which roused her to a sudden perception that she had not only allowed him to monopolise her attention for an unusual length of time, and had been led into showing a very unusual degree of interest, but that the conversation had taken a personal tone which the length of their acquaintance by no means warranted. A faint flush rose into her cheek, as she lifted her slender neck and flowerlike head with an air which made Leighton feel that it was perhaps fortunate that their conversation was at this moment interrupted.

For a lady approached, the finest of fine ladies, in softly rustling silken draperies, with a waft of faint fragrance and a stateliness of bearing which suited her upright figure and delicately chiselled features — features sufficiently like those of Princess Nadine to make Leighton, as he rose to his feet, quite prepared to be presented to her grandmother, Mrs. Wentworth.

The first thought that occurred to him as Mrs. Wentworth sat down, and lifting her lorgnette calmly scrutinised him, was that Despard had been right in saying that this widow of a California miner had the appearance of a grand-duchess. The "air noble," like most other things, can be cultivated, and Mrs. Wentworth had been very successful in her cultivation of it, aided by the kind work of nature, which had bestowed upon her the great gift of personal beauty, and by the habit of command produced by practically unlimited control of the wealth to which the world is always ready to bow down. Indeed her success in this regard was but typical of her success in other respects. From the day that she sacrificed herself to the dead bonanza king, she had determined to have full payment for her sacrifice by buying with his gold all that is in the market of the world to be bought; and, without being cynical, one must admit that this is very nearly

everything. She had arranged for her daughter the greatest match which up to that time an American woman had ever made, she had herself achieved a social position which left nothing to be desired, and she was now at the age of sixty in full possession of wealth, health, good-looks, and — to crown all — of a granddaughter who was not only a princess, a great beauty, and a great heiress, but for whom her ambition foresaw the most brilliant elevation. Considering all these things, it was perhaps no wonder that her voice had a touch of condescension as she remarked in words which sounded like an echo of Princess Nadine's:

"I hear that you are a very remarkable person, Mr. Leighton, but no one has given me any particulars of your achievements. Would you mind telling me something about them?"

"I am sorry to say that I should very much mind," Leighton replied. "It is a difficult task for any biographer to hold the exact mean of justice with regard to his subject, and I could hardly hope to succeed in my own case, you know."

"Yet I fancy that you are accustomed to succeed in most things which you undertake," she said, still scanning him with deliberate scrutiny.

He bowed, amused by her manner, which would not have proved amusing to one less certain of himself. "I am flattered by your penetration," he said. "I have no cause to complain of failure in life."

"I am sure you have not," she returned, "and I am also sure that you find the exercise of whatever power you have gained very agreeable."

Leighton laughed. "Doesn't every one who possesses power find the exercise of it agreeable?" he asked. "Even women are accused of finding it sweet. If a personal remark may be permitted me," he added with outward deference, but an inward determination to return her impertinence in kind, "I should judge that Mrs. Wentworth herself does not object to it."

"Oh, I don't hesitate to admit that I am a very domineering person," said that lady calmly. "I should make a despot of the first water, but a benevolent despot, I think. Now, your despotic qualities are evident; but I am not so sure of your benevolence."

"After one has gained power, one can afford to be benevolent," he replied, "but not while one is fighting for it. *Then* one must be inflexible as steel. Up to this time I have been fighting: that is why you do not perceive any signs of benevolence in my countenance."

She continued to regard him silently for a moment. To the woman who was herself so ambitious, and who had indeed found the gratification of her ambition so sweet, there was an attraction born of sympathy in the dominant quality with which Leighton impressed every one who came in contact with him. But mingled with the attraction there was also a subtle sense of antagonism, of natures too much alike to agree, and certain to conflict if ever brought into association.

"Yes," she said presently, "one can see that you like fighting, and that you are as inflexible as steel. As for your possible benevolence, I should not care to trust to it. *Eh, bien!* these are personal and I fear rather rude remarks. Tell me how it is that a man of your type is found in this haunt of idlers and pleasure-seekers."

"May not a man of my type be permitted to enjoy idleness, and seek pleasure sometimes? But in fact I am chiefly in search of warmth. To an inhabitant of the tropics, a month or two of London and Paris in winter is as much as it is possible to endure."

Mrs. Wentworth shivered slightly. "Paris was certainly detestable when I left it," she said. "But Nice is warm enough and bright enough to satisfy even tropical cravings for sunshine, and we furnished you a very pretty spectacle in our Carnival to-day."

"Most charming. I have had the pleasure of congratulating the princess upon obtaining the first prize."

"It was a gratification, because the decoration was her own conception altogether, and— What is it, my dear?"

The question was addressed to a very pretty girl who at this moment came up with a little rush, and murmured a few words in a low voice. Mrs. Wentworth answered briefly, with an

evident shade of rebuke in her tone, and then turning introduced Leighton — who never forgot or mistook a face, and who recognised the new-comer at once as the girl who had attracted his attention on the scarlet-decked drag in the Battle of Flowers — to her niece, Miss Hazleton.

The young lady held out her hand in the frankest manner. "I am so glad to meet you," she said. "Of course I saw you in the parade—and what a stunning thing that chariot was! We are compatriots, aren't we?"

"In the sense that we are both Americans, yes," Leighton replied. "But American is a wide word, you know, and stands for many things."

"It stands for the State of California with me," she said, "and I fancied it might stand for the same thing with you."

"My nationality is more comprehensive," he said. "I represent both continents, and Central America besides."

Her laugh rang out, clear as a bell, and so distinct amid the low murmur of well-bred voices around that many people turned their heads, and Mrs. Wentworth frowned.

"Clare!" she said a little sharply. "Do be kind enough to remember—"

"That loud laughter is dreadfully vulgar," Clare interposed quickly. "I know, auntie, and I'm sorry to have forgotten, but the comprehensiveness of Mr. Leighton's nationality amused me. You see," she went on, addressing the latter, "you don't look quite so large as that, although I knew at once that you came from some place where men have room to grow."

"As you," Leighton returned, "plainly come from some place, where flowers find warmth in which to bloom."

"That is very discerning of you. I was born in Los Angeles."

"I perceive now that you could not possibly have been born anywhere else."

"One would recognise you for a Spanish-American by that. We have almost forgotten that Los Angeles means the City of the Angels. But your compliment is more pretty than sincere, I'm afraid. No one could mistake me for an angel."

There was no denying this. The charming face with its colour flushed skin, its piquant features, its hazel eyes, and wealth of red-brown hair, was as little as possible of the angelic type. In fact, despite its extreme prettiness, it suggested a trinity which is by no means in good standing. It was easy to see that the world, the flesh, and the devil were influences more likely to direct its owner's conduct than any which breathed of high standards or austere ideals.

"No one could possibly mistake you for anything else than what you are," Leighton answered. "You make one understand how it is that the American girl carries everything before her."

"What a perfectly delightful person you are! Auntie, do you hear what charming compliments Mr. Leighton is paying me?"

"I have no doubt whatever of Mr. Leighton's ability to pay compliments, my dear, nor of yours to inspire them," Mrs. Wentworth replied a little dryly. Then she rose, for Princess Nadine, who had meanwhile been talking to some one else, now turned and said a few words to her.

"Yes," she assented, "I am a little fatigued, also. We will make our adieu to Madame de Beaumanoir." She glanced at Leighton, hesitated a moment, and then said with more graciousness of manner than she had yet displayed: "Since you are here for warmth and sunshine, Mr. Leighton, perhaps you would care to come to a garden party at our villa — the Villa Zorokoff — to-morrow afternoon, where you will find both, and some agreeable people besides."

"You are most kind," Leighton replied. "It will give me much pleasure to present myself."

"We shall expect you then," said Mrs. Wentworth with a nod. Princess Nadine gave him a smiling inclination of her beautiful head, but Miss Hazleton again held out her hand.

"I'm glad I shall see you again so soon," she said. "Yes, I know that I ought to have waited for you to say that, and then demurely answered 'So am I'; but I haven't the least doubt that you are glad, and what is the good of being an American girl if one cannot say what one thinks! *Au revoir!*"

CHAPTER III

A Girl Op The Golden West

THE Villa Zorokoff was one of the most charming villas in the immediate neighbourhood of Nice. Its gates opened upon the famous highway which follows all the curves of the delightful coast, but its gardens extended back over a promontory which jutted into the sea. They were of famous beauty, as well as of wide extent, these gardens, for unlimited wealth had brought out all the possibilities of soil and climate, and the result was a veritable paradise of verdure and bloom. Everywhere, in the sculptured forms gleaming through leafy gloom, in the settings of the fountains, and in the form of the weather-stained marble benches, the classic note reigned supreme; so that a wanderer in the enchanting shades could easily have fancied himself in some garden of old Rome, while down the foliaged vistas nymphs and fauns might have danced, and at their end — seen through arched openings of green — blue waves sparkled in the sunshine.

Overlooking the lovely pleasance, as well as the marvellous distance of the sapphire sea beyond, the villa stretched its palace-like length above a spacious terrace, adorned in such stately fashion with statues and balustrade that it might have served as a setting for the festivities of a court. Under a pergola at one end of this terrace a table was laid for breakfast on the morning after the Battle of Flowers, and here in the sparkling air, with the entrancing view spread before them, Mrs. Wentworth and Miss Hazleton were taking their *d  jeuner*. If the brilliant sunshine proved a little trying to the complexion of the elder woman, it showed to the utmost advantage the freshness and bloom of the younger. She looked full of exuberant life, and of the joy thereof, and, in the intervals of doing fullest justice to the dishes placed before her, her gay hazel eyes wandered now and again over the beautiful gardens, to the distant line where the two azures of sea and sky met and blended. At length she spoke, with a deep-drawn sigh of intense satisfaction:

"It 's all just too heavenly for anything!"

"Eh!" Mrs. Wentworth, who seemed unusually abstracted, looked up with a start. "What did you say, Clare?"

"Only that all this — the life we're living, and the place we're in, and the delightful state and luxury — are just too heavenly for anything!" Miss Hazleton repeated. "I don't know how I should endure going back to America, if I ever meant to go."

Mrs. Wentworth came altogether out of her abstraction now, and regarded the speaker with a glance of smiling approval.

"It would no doubt be dreadful," she agreed; "but when I sent for you I never intended that you should go back — that is, of course, unless you wished to do so."

"I 'm hardly likely to be such an idiot," the girl declared. "I know when I 'm well off, and it certainly was awfully good of you to send for me."

"I thought you would be likely to do me credit," Mrs. Wentworth explained, "and if I could only induce you to be a little less American in your manners—"

"You think that result might be attained? But, my dearest aunt, don't you know that in that case I wouldn't be half as charming as I am? To be American is to be something fresh and piquant, and just now very much in the fashion. Ask Laura Percival if I 'm not right — or, better still, ask Lord Uxmoor!"

"To a certain extent, perhaps you are right," Mrs. Wentworth conceded. "But I was going on to say that, in sending for you, I also had in view the time when Nadine would no longer be with me, when I should have you for a companion, and be able to devote my attention to settling you well in life."

Miss Hazleton cocked her head on one side, like an attentive spaniel, and considered her aunt with bright, inquisitive eyes.

"And that time is in sight, isn't it?" she asked. "I suppose we shall soon be addressing Nadine as her Serene Highness, Princess Maximilian of Altenberg."

Mrs. Wentworth smiled with an indescribable air of pride.

"And Queen of Serabia!" she added.

"Auntie!" The word was a subdued shriek. "You don't really mean it?"

Mrs. Wentworth nodded with the solemnity of a diplomatist.

"There doesn't seem to be any doubt of it," she said impressively. "We have had an intimation from the very highest quarter that Russia will endorse Prince Maximilian as a candidate for the throne of Serabia, if a marriage is arranged between Nadine and the prince."

Clare sank back in her chair with the air of being overwhelmed. "Her Majesty, the Queen of Serabia!" she murmured. "How ecstatic! By the by, where is Serabia?"

"Oh," Mrs. Wentworth replied a little vaguely, "it is one of the — er — Balkan States. Rather small and obscure, I believe. But that doesn't matter."

"Not the least," Clare agreed. "All that matters is that Nadine will be a queen." "I know that Prince Maximilian has arrived in Nice," she added, leaning forward eagerly. "Has he come to propose?"

Mrs. Wentworth met her dancing eyes with a look of rebuke. "In the order of life in which the alliances of princes are made," she said with dignity, "such matters are arranged, you know. But of course now that everything is understood his Serene Highness will offer his hand."

Clare made a grimace, which elevated her already *retroussé* nose several degrees higher.

"How extremely kind of him — when everything is arranged!" she cried sarcastically. "But I suppose Nadine could say 'No,' if she wanted to, couldn't she?"

"It is very plain, my dear," Mrs. Wentworth replied, with increased dignity, "that you don't in the least understand these things."

"I understand," Clare returned, "that there's one right a woman should never give up, and that's the right of saying 'No' if she likes — or rather if she doesn't like — even to a Serene Highness."

"As I remarked a few minutes ago," Mrs. Wentworth observed in a distinctly glacial tone, "you are still rather crudely American."

"It would be a little odd if I wasn't, considering that I haven't been anything else very long," Clare replied. "And Laura Percival says—"

"Excuse me," Mrs. Wentworth interrupted, sharply, "but I have no desire to hear Laura Percival's opinions. She has been very successful, but I consider her in atrociously bad style."

"The grand style has gone out, you know," Clare said with an air of simplicity. "It suits you, because you are a little old-fa — I mean you look like a dowager-empress, or something of that kind. And a touch of it suits Nadine, because she is not only a princess and a beauty, but she is going to be a queen, or play at being one—"

"Clare!"

Her aunt's tone was so severe that Clare dropped her weapons at once, and the air of simplicity was quickly replaced by one of penitence.

"Oh, *do* excuse me!" she cried. "You know how my tongue runs on, saying anything that comes into my head! Of course I'm just as much elated over Nadine's magnificent prospects as you are — and a little bit envious, too, perhaps. Ah!" — the sigh which came now was very sincere — "why wasn't *I* born a Russian princess, instead of an ordinary American girl, who isn't even an heiress!"

Mrs. Wentworth gave a mollified glance at the pretty, downcast countenance.

"Never mind," she said encouragingly. "I will see that you make as brilliant a marriage as any heiress of them all. You have capabilities, you are very attractive."

"Lord Uxmoor is good enough to find me 'doocedly amusin'," Clare remarked demurely, "and to be found deucedly amusing by Lord Uxmoor would be delightful if only he were not so deucedly stupid."

"My dear!" Mrs. Wentworth was deeply shocked. "Lord Uxmoor is the best match in England. I hope you don't let him suspect that you find him stupid."

"I'm certain that he could never conceive the possibility of such a thing — not if I laughed in his face twice as often as I do," Clare replied. "But what do you suppose has become of Nadine?" she suddenly asked, glancing toward the silent façade of the villa. "Isn't she taking *d'êjeuner* with us to-day?"

"I haven't heard to the contrary," Mrs. Wentworth answered. "Go and inquire if the princess is not intending to breakfast here," she said, addressing (in French) the servant in attendance.

"She is probably too absorbed in thinking of her brilliant future to remember anything so commonplace as breakfast," Clare observed rather flippantly; and then, perhaps to avert a probable reproof, she added hastily, "I wonder what Count Alexis will think of the arrangement?"

"Why should his opinion be of the least importance?" Mrs. Wentworth inquired a little coldly.

"Well, he's her cousin," Clare answered, "and what is called over here the head of the house, isn't he?"

"Certainly not," Mrs. Wentworth replied in her most stately manner. "Prince Michael Zorokoff, Nadine's father, was the head of the house. Count Alexis is only the son of his cousin. He is not at all important, has a very small fortune, and since he is not in favour at Petersburg cannot hope for any official advancement."

"Why isn't he in favour at Petersburg?"

"Because he is so extremely foolish as to have, or allow it to be supposed that he has, revolutionary sympathies. Talks nonsense about the rights and the wrongs of the moujiks — I have no patience with such absurdity!"

"All the same, he's rather a charming person," Clare observed lightly. "When I first met him I thought he would probably marry Nadine."

"A most ridiculous idea!" Mrs. Wentworth commented. "Nadine has always been fond of him, but, even if he were not her cousin, he has no pretensions whatever to aspire to marry *her*."

"No," — and the little sigh of envy came again — "I suppose nothing short of a Serene Highness, with a crown in his pocket, would do for that."

At this moment the servant who had been sent to inquire if the princess were coming returned with the information that she had gone into the gardens an hour or two earlier and was not yet returned.

"What a passion she has for fresh air at untimely hours!" Clare observed. "But yonder she comes now!"

And indeed just then the tall, slender figure of Princess Nadine mounted the terrace steps, and, attended by a magnificent Borzoi dog, came toward them. As she advanced in the broad sunshine, along the stately terrace, her beauty struck even the familiar eyes regarding her, for the dazzling light brought out all the loveliness of the flawless skin, fine as satin and white as snow; made a glittering mass of the golden hair, caught the clear light shining in her sapphire eyes, and showed all the exquisite curves of her graceful form in its simple shirt of soft blue silk and skirt of some clinging white stuff, while her step, light, proud, and elastic, was instinct with the vitality of youth and perfect health.

"Good-morning, *matushka*," she said as she drew near, and bending kissed her grandmother's cheek. "Good-morning, Clare. I am later than I thought."

"I sent to inquire for you," Mrs. Wentworth said, "but heard that you had gone out into the gardens some time ago."

"Oh, yes, several hours ago," the princess answered, as she sat down. "It was so divinely beautiful in the early morning that I could not resist the temptation to take a dip in the sea—"

"Alone! My dear Nadine, that was very unsafe."

"Being alone was the charm of it," Nadine replied, "and yet I wasn't entirely alone, for I had Boris here, and it was as if we possessed the entire Mediterranean for our own. There was not even a sail in sight, only the sea and the sky, rivalling each other in beauty; and when I left the water the sunshine to bask in, and all the bloom and fragrance of the garden steeped in dew. It was like paradise when just created."

"A paradise containing an Eve without an Adam, would be something new," Clare said. "I'll commend the idea to the next strong-minded woman I meet. But fortunately Adams are not entirely excluded here, else I, for one, should find it a very dull paradise."

The princess looked at her with a smile. They had not known each other very long, these two, and the Russian girl found the American a study of inexhaustible interest.

"Yes, it would be a dull paradise for you, little coquette," she said. "The masculine half of the world is very necessary to you, if only as food for powder."

"I intend one at least of them to serve a more useful purpose than that," Clare answered with a confident nod. Then she looked at her aunt with a mischievous light in her eyes. "The choice of late has seemed limited to a very dull British peer," she said, "but I'm not sure that a picturesque Central American dictator might not be preferable."

"Was that why you invited the picturesque Central American to our garden party, *m átushka*?" the princess asked. "I rather wondered at your doing so."

"He is a very remarkable person, Alan Despard says," Mrs. Wentworth replied, "and it is generally worth while to be civil to remarkable people. He seems, as far as I can judge, to be something of a cross between a filibuster and a promoter; but since he is evidently a gentleman, as well as a celebrity, there was no risk in asking him to a garden party."

"Especially as it is sometimes necessary to excuse celebrities from being gentlemen," the princess remarked. "But it wasn't necessary for Mr. Despard, or any one else, to tell us that Mr. Leighton is a remarkable person. His face tells one that."

Clare glanced at her a little curiously. "Did you like him?" she asked. "You talked to him some time."

"Like him?" Princess Nadine hesitated. "I didn't consider whether I liked him or not; but there is a quality about him which impresses one strongly. It is impossible to doubt that he is capable of daring things." She paused a moment. "And also that he might become a trifle presumptuous," she added.

"Most successful men are inclined to be that," Mrs. Wentworth remarked. "They always suffer from the defects of their qualities. This man is masterful and self-confident to a degree which could hardly fail to render him presumptuous. But that is something easily dealt with, and a lesson would be of service to him."

Clare threw back her head with a laugh. "Was it your charitable object, in opening your gates to him, to give him the lesson?" she inquired. "He looks as if he might prove a difficult subject for that kind of tuition."

"So much the worse for him, then," Mrs. Wentworth replied. "When people fail to profit by such lessons, they must be dropped, and fortunately it is an easy matter to drop a man from Central America, who has only a certain novelty to recommend him to one's notice."

"Mr. Leighton doesn't exactly strike me as a person to be easily dropped," Clare observed. "But I'm glad you invited him to come this afternoon. I like clever, successful men, and although he didn't take the trouble to ask an introduction to me, I was determined to know him, and I gave you credit, auntie, for being kind enough to provide by your invitation an opportunity for his knowing me."

"Perhaps I did think that you might — er — find him interesting," Mrs. Wentworth admitted.

Clare nodded. "Oh, I understood," she said. "Of course he was dazzled by Nadine; but he'll soon find out that she is far above the most aspiring dictator, and then he will turn for consolation to my modest charms."

"Modest is hardly the word to describe them, I think," said the princess. "*Et apr ès?*"

"That," Clare answered calmly, "must be left to circumstances. There is no telling to what height I may attain when I become the cousin of a Serene Highness and probable—"

The princess rose from table. "There are other things besides your affairs which are yet undetermined in the future, my dear Clare," she said, "and there, if you please, we will leave them. *Mátushka*, the sun and the air have made me sleepy, so I will go and take a siesta before it is time to receive our friends."

CHAPTER IV

Enter His Serene Highness

THE gardens, which Princess Nadine had declared to be like paradise newly created in the early morning, were hardly less beautiful in the golden radiance of the perfect afternoon when Leighton and Despard entered them. But their charm of stillness was gone. All that was most fashionable of the cosmopolitan society of Nice, and indeed of all the near-by Riviera, had been emptied into the lovely shades, smart men and women banished even the suggestion of fauns and dryads, and the sound of light musical chatter in many languages filled the air. On the spacious terrace of the villa the two men, who were a little late, found Mrs. Wentworth, surrounded by a group of people whose appearance testified to the extremely rarefied social atmosphere in which that lady found her friends. These elegant figures, seated in chairs of gilded wicker, and served with refreshments by servants in the superb Zorokoff liveries, made a brilliant picture, but after paying their respects to Mrs. Wentworth neither Leighton nor Despard were inclined to linger here, although the latter had been greeted in a cordial manner by more than one of the great ladies.

"*A la bonne heure!*" cried Madame de Beaumanoir at sight of him. "Here is Mr. Despard. Now we shall be amused."

"Congratulations, *mon ami!*" said a man with a diplomatic air, rising from a chair beside the speaker. "The marquise is as flattering to you as she is severe upon the poor efforts to be amusing of the rest of us."

"But no!" protested the lady, opening her dark eyes very wide. "You know, M. de Champnoix — everybody knows — that Mr. Despard always has some piquant bit of gossip to tell, which no one else has yet heard."

Despard spread out his hands in a deprecating manner. "You are too kind, madame," he said. "It is difficult sometimes to live up to the reputation one's friends have been good enough to give one."

"Ah, bah!" returned the marquise. "Do you mean us to believe that the Carnival has not furnished you with something entertaining — some morsel of amusing scandal?"

"Oh, the Carnival!" Despard suddenly assumed a mysterious air. "Then you haven't heard — but no, it is too soon for anything to be known yet, and as for me I am unfortunately bound to secrecy, at least for the present."

"Bound to secrecy — what nonsense!" another lady cried. "That only means that you want to whet our curiosity. What is it? You *must* tell us now!"

"My dear Lady Wargrave, nothing could be further from my desire than to rouse curiosity which I am in honour bound not to gratify," Despard assured her. "But yonder" — he cast a glance toward the villa — "comes Greville, who may not be as strictly tied to secrecy as I am."

Perhaps he may be able to tell you what occurred at the *bal masqué* last night. As for me, lest I should be tempted to be more indiscreet, I must run away."

Suiting the action to the word, he promptly and literally ran away, following Leighton down the terrace steps to the gardens below.

"And pray," the latter inquired a little dryly, "what *did* occur at the *bal masqué*— which I happen to know you didn't attend — last night?"

"A thousand things, no doubt," laughed Despard, "some one of which will after a while transpire, and save my credit with my friends. You see it doesn't do to offend those who have social power in their hands; but it's a good deal of a nuisance sometimes to have a character as a purveyor of social gossip to sustain."

"It lays a heavy burden on your inventive faculties no doubt, but since you've cultivated the character, you have no right to grumble over the penalties of success."

"I don't grumble. It isn't every man who could either cultivate or sustain such a character, and it gives me a lot of privileges. To be *persona grata* with those women up there is distinctly one of them. But it chanced that just now I have a fancy to amuse myself rather than them."

"This is a tempting place for amusement," Leighton remarked, glancing around. "One has a feeling that — well, that anything might happen here."

"Something *is* happening — something so important and interesting that all assembled society is on tiptoe of expectation with regard to it," Despard answered. "And it was chiefly because, like the rest, I want to have a glimpse of the personages concerned at this moment of fate, that I declined to be detained even by the Marquise de Beaumanoir and the Countess of Wargrave."

Leighton turned a keen glance on him. "Of whom are you speaking?" he asked.

"Of whom could I be speaking," Despard queried in turn, "but of our beautiful hostess, Princess Nadine, and his Serene Highness, Prince Maximilian of Altenberg?"

"He is here then, the Serene Highness?"

"My dear Leighton, can you doubt it?"

"One neither doubts nor believes something to which one has not given a thought. I haven't come to meet Prince Maximilian of Altenberg. He doesn't interest me in the least."

"He chances, however, to interest others extremely, especially the princess whom you admire so much."

"It remains to be discovered whether or not he will continue to interest her."

"After Mr. Leighton, of Central America, enters on the scene?" Despard asked, lifting his brows. "My friend, I no longer wonder at your success in life. Your audacity is colossal enough to account for it."

"If it were not colossal I should not be where and what I am," Leighton replied coolly. "Ah, but this is delightful!" he exclaimed suddenly, as a turn in the path they were following brought them in view of a charming spot — an open glade among the flowery shades, where a fountain poured its waters through the inverted vase of a nymph, into a brimming fern-edged basin, and a group of fashionable figures were gathered in the midst of the lovely greenery.

"A perfect setting for romance!" Despard agreed. "And, most appropriately, there is the heroine of our immediate romance, with the hero in attendance— Princess Nadine and Prince Maximilian."

"Which of those men is the prince?"

"The tall, fair man standing by Princess Nadine. He has the reputation of being the handsomest prince in Europe."

It was not an undeserved reputation, Leighton acknowledged, as he looked at the man thus indicated, whose magnificent figure and erect bearing were suggestive of the military uniforms in which exalted personages are wont to array themselves as a substitute for royal robes, while his striking head, with its well-cut features and thoughtful eyes of rather cold grey-blue, was carried with the air of one who expects as his right the deference he has never needed to

demand. This, then, was Maximilian of Altenberg, the pretender alike to the throne of Serabia and to the hand of Princess Nadine Zorokoff — a prince who, besides being connected with every royal house in Europe, was credited with ability enough to hold his own in the difficult game of diplomacy always being played in the shadow of the Balkans, and who could, therefore, probably satisfy to the full the ambition which burned like a flame in the beautiful daughter of Russian boyars and California miner. It was characteristic of Leighton that as he looked at the prince, with a glance accustomed to read and appraise men, he fully recognised not only his advantages of birth and position, but also the qualities of mind and person which had brought him into prominence among a number of undistinguished Serene Highnesses, as well as the force with which these advantages and these qualities would appeal to Princess Nadine, even while the most daring of the many daring resolves of his life took definite form in his mind. Probably the age-old dislike of man to seeing the woman who has pleased his fancy appropriated by another, as well as the stimulus of apparently insurmountable obstacles, made him at this moment determine to enter the lists against a rival so formidable that the mere fact of his pretensions would have appeared sufficient to put rivalry on the part of any other man out of the question. "Any one can do easy things," he had said to the princess, in a spirit far removed from boastfulness, and it was with this spirit, which found incentive in difficulty and disdained what could easily be accomplished, that he entered upon the most audacious undertaking of his audacious and adventurous career.

"Nature has equipped the prince very well to play the part assigned him," he said in answer to Despard's last remark. "But I 'm a little curious to know what is behind that handsome, impassive face."

"If you discover any more than its owner intends of what is behind it, you will accomplish more than has been accomplished in some of the foremost chancelleries in Europe," Despard replied.

Leighton smiled. "The effort to betray nothing, often betrays most of all," he observed a trifle sententiously, as they approached the group around the fountain.

A moment later they were bowing before Princess Nadine, and as he looked at her Leighton was not only struck afresh by her beauty, but he perceived a radiance which seemed the outward reflection of some inner excitement or triumph. There was a deepened rose-tint on her fair cheeks, and he was almost dazzled by the full-orbed glow of the sapphire eyes, as he took the hand she gave him in greeting.

"So you have been tempted to come and see how we amuse ourselves when we are not pelting each other with flowers, Mr. Leighton," she said gaily. "I'm afraid you will find our normal amusements as stupid as normal amusements mostly are. By the by, how do you amuse yourself in the country — you must excuse me if I don't exactly know what it is — from which you come?"

"With bull-fights and revolutions chiefly," Leighton told her. "Both are exciting. But there is nothing quite equal to the last, especially when one has helped to make the revolution, and all one's interests, and perhaps one's life, hang on the issue."

"I can fancy that compared with such amusements ours must seem very tame," she replied with a laugh. "After all one pays a price for living in a condition of settled law and order, and the price is that life is robbed of much excitement and picturesqueness. Doesn't your Highness agree with me?" she asked turning to the tall, handsome man beside her who, having greeted Despard, was now listening to her words with an air of amusement.

"On the contrary," he replied, "I find myself very well able to dispense with the excitement furnished by revolutions."

"Ah," said the princess, "I should have known you wouldn't agree. Those who have nothing to gain by revolution can't be expected to enjoy it. Will you allow me to present Mr. Leighton, who comes from a country where revolutions are both frequent and enjoyable?" Then to Leighton she added, "His Serene Highness, Prince Maximilian of Altenberg."

Leighton bowed, but the prince extended his hand with an air of graciousness.

"I have heard of Mr. Leighton," he said, "and I am not surprised that he should find revolutions enjoyable. They afford an ambitious man very desirable opportunities."

"Your Highness has divined the case exactly," Leighton replied. "When one has not had the good fortune to be born a prince, one must, if one has a fancy to exercise power, become an adventurer. And revolutions give an adventurer his opportunity."

"If, as I presume, you use the word adventurer in its true sense," said the prince, "that of one who ventures much and boldly, it is not unheard of that princes should become adventurers also."

"Nor that they should through such venturing gain what they desire," Leighton returned. "There are other kingdoms besides that of heaven to be taken by violence, by a daring which refuses to recognise obstacles."

"That has been your policy, I believe," the prince said, looking at him curiously, "and by all accounts you have been very successful. But possibly diplomacy as well as daring had something to do with your success."

"A great deal," Leighton acknowledged. "But without daring the diplomacy would have availed little. One must know when the moment for action comes, and then have the courage to strike — hard! There is no other way."

"I suppose not." The prince still had an air of studying this man whose personality inspired belief in his ability to do the things of which he spoke. "*Eh bien!*" he added more lightly, "we are content that you should enjoy your revolutions in — South America, isn't it?"

"The particular revolutions in which I have played a part have been in Central America," Leighton told him.

"Ah, Central America — then, so long as we are not asked to join in the amusement."

"And yet," Leighton said, "I fancy that our American revolutions will prove but child's play to the storm that some day may burst in Europe. I don't know how it strikes others, but to me the earth has a very hollow sound in these old lands, honeycombed with secret societies, and filled with the spirit of revolt."

"It is true that there are forces working here more dangerous than your turbulent, volcanic eruptions," the prince admitted. "But there is the difference that we have them well in hand, and when it becomes necessary, do not hesitate to use stern means of repression."

Leighton smiled slightly. "To permit ideas to work live leaven, and then attempt to control the outbreaks which result from them, is a policy doomed to failure," he said. "Russia," he went on, turning to the princess, "is the only country which acts consistently in this matter. She does not allow theories which are subversive of society to be taught, and then punish those who practise the teaching, as more 'liberal' countries do. She holds the man who preaches anarchy as guilty as the man who practises it by throwing a bomb."

"I am glad," the princess said, "that our policy meets with the approval of a dictator—"

"Only a potential one, I assure you."

"Of a potential dictator, then, from Central America. Conditions in Russia are so little understood outside of the country that one finds the methods of our government more often condemned than its difficulties appreciated."

"That is because men, generally speaking, think in shibboleths," Leighton replied: "and the great modern shibboleth, as we know, is freedom of thought and speech. That the natural corollary of this is freedom of action, and that freedom of action leads to anarchy, it may require a few more revolutions to teach the world. And not such revolutions as we have in Spanish America either. There we merely change governments — there's a pronunciamento, a little firing, a little shifting of cards, and *pouf!* the thing is done. Everything goes on as before. But here — well, here it will be different."

The princess looked at him with a sudden gravity in her brilliant eyes.

"You speak as if it were going to be different soon," she said.

"Subterranean forces are hard to reckon with," he answered. "Even in Russia revolution may burst forth when no one looks for it."

"In Russia!" The scornful incredulity of her tone was natural, since these were the days before the Japanese war. "Haven't you just said that Russia alone knows how to deal consistently with such forces?"

"But Russia cannot control the policy of other governments, and if they give asylum to her anarchists, what can she do? The thing which alone counts — the propaganda of ideas — goes on. But this is not a scene in which to think of anything so grim as the Red Spectre," he suddenly broke off. "There was a Mirabeau at Versailles; but one cannot fancy even the mildest of revolutionists in the gardens of Villa Zorokoff. They are truly Arcadian, these gardens of yours, Princess. May I beg you to show me some of their beauties?"

This request was so surprising that for an instant the princess hesitated in her reply. That this stranger, this adventurer from Central America, should expect her to leave a prince and possible king to accompany him on a stroll through the gardens, was presumptuous to the point of absurdity, but, remembering his probable ignorance of conventionalities, she merely said:

"I am sorry that my duties as hostess will not permit me to have that pleasure. But perhaps my cousin, Miss Hazleton,—"

She glanced around in search of Clare, who had been one of the group a little earlier. But even before it became apparent that this young lady had disappeared, Leighton spoke decidedly.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I don't really care to see the gardens with any one but yourself. I was under the impression that it was the chief merit of this form of entertainment that the hostess was as free as her guests to amuse herself, and that even the most exalted personage might be left to the society of others for a few minutes."

Her eyes expanded now with something more than surprise. For clearly this was not ignorance, but simply presumption — that presumption of the possibility of which in him she had from the first been instinctively conscious.

"You are probably not aware — " she began, when Leighton again interrupted, with low-toned quietness:

"I can't allow you to imagine that I am not aware of many things," he said, "among the rest that I am running the risk of offending you. But even at this risk, I must suggest that it hardly accords with the dignity of Princess Nadine Zorokoff to refuse a trifling act of courtesy to one guest because another is a pretender to — shall we say, a throne?"

There was a brief, speechless pause, and then Princess Nadine rose from her seat. It was evidently necessary to crush this offender in a manner he would not forget; but in order to do so with the desired effect she must for a few minutes at least grant his request. She turned to a very gay and smart young woman, who was just now chattering to the prince.

"Laura," she said, "I think it will amuse Prince Maximilian to hear a description of your visit to the Grand Duchess at Cimiez."

"It will amuse me immensely to give it to him," the gay lady replied, with a strong American accent. "But you — where are you going?"

"Only to the end of the avenue to show Mr. Leighton our famous sea-view. I shall return in a moment."

Then, attended by Leighton, she walked away.

CHAPTER V

The Way Of A Maid With Men

IT was before the arrival of Leighton and Despard that Miss Hazleton had allowed herself to be drawn away from the group about the fountain by no less a person than Lord Uxmoor.

"This," he had confided to her, "is what I call beastly dull — a lot of people together, doing nothing but talking."

"You don't regard conversation, then, as one of the fine arts," she laughed.

"Oh, it's all very well for those who enjoy it," he largely conceded. "Men like Greville and Despard, who make a business of gathering epigrams, don't ask anything better than an opportunity to set them off like fireworks. But for a man like myself, who can't talk, you know—"

"It seems to me that you talk well enough," she said. "One grows tired of epigrams, and of people who are continually straining to be brilliant. You are — restful."

"Glad to hear it," he remarked, with an air of tempered gratification. As a matter of fact, he had a deep, underlying consciousness that to be brilliant and amusing might serve for men who otherwise would be undistinguished, but that for the Earl of Uxmoor it was altogether unnecessary. The knowledge of his own dulness did not, therefore, trouble him, nor lessen the immense sense of his importance which was the very foundation of his existence.

"If I'm restful," he went on, "perhaps you wouldn't mind leaving all this for a bit, and strolling about with me. These gardens are — er — rather pretty, you know, and if I can't talk, you can; so there's really no need to bore ourselves by staying here longer."

"Not the least," she agreed, "especially since nobody here amuses me particularly, nor shows any marked consciousness of my existence. If there is one thing more than another to which I object," she added, as they moved away, "it is playing the part of supernumerary on any stage."

"As if you could ever play such a part!" he observed with unmistakable sincerity.

"As if I haven't just been playing it!" she returned. "What possible chance for notice has a plain American girl, when a Russian princess holds the centre of the stage, with a royal prince — he *is* royal, isn't he? "

"Not exactly — only a Serene Highness, you know."

"Well, a Serene Highness in attendance as her suitor. Of course it isn't possible to speak of him as her lover, but all the same everybody is immensely interested in the affair."

"It seems to me that it would be very possible for any man to be the lover of Princess Nadine," Uxmoor remarked, "and why not Prince Maximilian as well as another?"

"Because he's thinking of Serabia, not of *her*," Clare replied, "and she's thinking of the throne he may be able to offer, not of *him*; so there 's no room for the absurdity called falling in love with either of them."

"You consider falling in love an absurdity?" he inquired with the air of one seeking information.

"Why, of course it is," she answered in her light tones. "Isn't that an absurdity which causes people to do the most absurd things — and surely falling in love does that!"

"I don't think falling in love always causes people to do absurd things, " he objected. "Sometimes it makes them do very — er — sensible things."

"Oh, indeed!" she mocked gaily. "That's a new view of the passion which we've always been told makes fools alike of gods and mortals. But to return to Nadine and her prince — do you think he will really be made king of Serabia?"

"It seems to be regarded as pretty certain," Uxmoor replied. "But I don't in the least believe that love makes fools of all men, you know," he added.

"Only of some men," Clare amended. "But why should we discuss such a trite subject? Let us talk about — Serabia!"

"I don't know anything about Serabia, and don't feel the least interest in it. Why shouldn't we talk about ourselves?"

"Because we aren't interesting. At least I'm sure I am not. "

"That's where you are very much mistaken" (emphatically). "You are the most interesting subject I know."

"How extremely good of you to think so!" Then, with a flash of mischief, "I'm sorry I can't return the compliment."

"That's not to be expected," he said with serious simplicity. "I know that I'm awfully dull in many respects, and not at all likely to prove interesting"

"Lord Uxmoor," she cried quickly, "you make me ashamed of myself! You receive flippant impertinence with such positively angelic amiability that it's impossible not to find you interesting — if only as a study in virtue."

Lord Uxmoor joined in her laughter. "I shouldn't know myself as a study in virtue," he said. "But I should be glad if — er — you could find me interesting in any way enough to — er — tolerate, you know."

"Oh, I find you much more than that," she replied hastily, while she told herself that it was absolutely necessary to fence off his growing seriousness as long as possible. "For he is as heavy as he is eligible," she sighed, "and how I am ever to endure him!" A sudden recollection of Leighton came to her. He could offer no such brilliant position as that of an English countess, but besides his reputedly great wealth, how infinitely preferable the man himself, with his ready wit, his keen mind, his power of command, his faculty for domination and success! She glanced around, in the hope of seeing him possibly advancing down one of the green vistas which radiated in many directions; but instead of his figure she suddenly caught sight of another which almost drew an exclamation from her. "Why surely that is Count Alexis Zorokoff!" she was about to say, when the man in question paused abruptly, and the next instant disappeared in the shrubbery beside the path on which he had been walking.

Clare caught her lip between her teeth, not only from surprise but also from relief that she had not uttered aloud the words trembling on it. For an instinct told her that Count Alexis Zorokoff (she felt certain that it was he) had not disappeared so mysteriously at sight of her without good reason. That he was not expected she was sure, that no one was aware of his presence she believed, and if he were in the grounds of the villa unknown to his cousin, it could only be for some cause which she felt herself immediately consumed with curiosity to learn. But how to learn it! — how to get rid of the man beside her, the dense mass of hopeless stupidity, as in her thoughts she characterised him! A moment's delay and the opportunity would escape! With ready resource she acted on the first idea which occurred to her.

"Oh!" she cried, suddenly sinking down on a seat, with her hand to her eyes. "I hardly know what I am saying or doing. I am almost wild with pain. The most fearful headache — neuralgic, I think. Do you ever have neuralgia, Lord Uxmoor?"

Lord Uxmoor, filled with sympathy, replied that he had never suffered from neuralgia himself, but that he had seen his mother endure agonies from tic-doloureux, and did Miss Hazleton think that she had that dreadful form of the malady?

"Oh, I hope not," the young lady fervently replied, "but sometimes the pain strikes me all in a moment like this — sharp as a sword, you know. A—h!" It was a long-drawn sigh expressive of intense suffering. "If I only had my salts! But of course I forgot my vinaigrette when I came out."

Where, Lord Uxmoor anxiously inquired, could this vinaigrette be found? He would fly for it at once.

"If you will really be so good, then," she murmured, "you can get it by going to the villa and sending for my maid. She will know where to find it."

Lord Uxmoor immediately prepared to fly, but paused — how could he leave her suffering so much entirely alone?

"That is really the best thing you can do, leave me to be quiet," she assured him. "The pain sometimes goes away as quickly as it comes — if I can be perfectly quiet. So it's just as well for you to go. I'm quite comfortable here, and all you can do for me is to bring the vinaigrette."

Let Marie understand that she must find it. So good of you! — *how* sympathetic you are! Yes, I hope I shall be feeling better soon. "

If Lord Uxmoor had taken time in his rapid progress toward the villa to glance back, he would have seen that the promised improvement was strikingly coincident with his departure. For hardly had he turned away, when Clare rose and walked quickly into the avenue where the figure which she felt sure of having identified had disappeared. As she approached the place of this disappearance, a tall, blonde young man, with bright blue eyes full of laughter, stepped from behind a large oleander and bowed gracefully to her.

"I have the honour to salute an accomplished actress," he said. "You managed that admirably."

"So it is you!" she returned, with a fine air of surprise. "I thought I recognised you, but you vanished so suddenly and so— er — oddly, that I fancied I must be mistaken, and that perhaps I had better investigate a little."

"And you sent your heavy British admirer away before investigating," he said, speaking English with perfect purity and ease. "That was very considerate. It gives me the pleasure of kissing your hand," — he promptly did so — "and telling you that you are, if possible, lovelier than ever, and that I am delighted to see you again."

"You seemed to be delighted a few minutes ago," she replied ironically. "Your arrival is a little unexpected, isn't it? Does Nadine know that you are here?"

"No one knows that I am here — at least," he amended, "I hope that no one knows — except yourself. I have, as you say, arrived rather unexpectedly."

"But in order to be in the gardens you must have seen some one at the villa," she said.

"I didn't arrive by way of the villa," he answered. "I came from Nice by water, and landed there" — he nodded toward the end of the avenue, where the sea glittered like a sheet of sapphire — "a few minutes ago. I was told by the boatman who brought me that there is a *fête* in progress at Villa Zorokoff."

"A garden party, yes. Prince Maximilian of Altenberg is here."

She uttered the prince's name in a significant tone, for the first explanation of this unannounced visit which occurred to her was that it probably had reference to him. Notwithstanding Mrs. Wentworth's denial, it still seemed to her probable that Count Alexis was a suitor for the hand of his beautiful and richly endowed cousin, and that he had come to prevent if possible her betrothal to another. This plausible theory, was, however, dispelled by the smile with which he greeted her last words.

"Oh, Prince Maximilian is here!" he said, with an air of interest. "I wasn't aware that matters had gone quite so far. Has the engagement been announced?"

"Not yet, but everything seems understood — 'arranged,' Aunt Caroline says, is the correct term." She paused a moment. "Aren't you concerned about it?" she asked with irrepressible curiosity.

"Immensely," he answered, — still smiling, — "though perhaps interested would be a better term than concerned. He's a very good fellow. Prince Max; and the more important my cousin becomes, the better for me."

"Why the better for you?"

"She can serve me more effectively with her influence, which is what I am here to ask. The fact is," — to give an idea of the airy and careless tone of the speaker would be quite impossible — "I have been unfortunate enough to fall into a little trouble with my government."

Clare's eyes grew large. She suddenly remembered some other words of her aunt. "He is so extremely foolish as to have, or allow it to be supposed that he has, revolutionary sympathies," Mrs. Wentworth had said. Revolutionary sympathies! — was that what it meant, this sudden arrival and mysterious conduct? Clare was not a very widely informed person; but through the medium of current fiction she had acquired a slight knowledge of socialists, anarchists, and other

persons who have kindly undertaken the reformation of the world. "Do you mean," she asked, "that you are a — conspirator?"

He laughed. "I might possibly be described by that term," he said. "At least some plans in which I have taken part, for obtaining better government in Russia, have been discovered and not altogether appreciated by the existing government — which accounts for my rather dramatic mode of appearing and disappearing. And, by the by, isn't it time for me to disappear again? I don't care to renew my acquaintance with Lord Uxmoor at present, and he may be returning any moment with your vinaigrette."

"I don't think it likely that he will return very soon," she said. "If anybody has the faintest idea where that vinaigrette is, it's more than I have. But why should you object to meeting him?"

"Well, for one reason because it might place him in an awkward position if the police began making inquiries about me."

"The police!"

"Yes, — you see I left Paris suddenly yesterday to avoid arrest."

"Arrest!" For once Clare's ready tongue seemed only to serve her as an echo. She stared incredulously at the young man standing before her, with his air of nonchalance, his blue eyes full of laughter. "I don't believe a word of it!" she cried suddenly. "You are amusing yourself by trying to impose on me."

"Ah, but no!" he protested eagerly. "I should not think of such a thing. The situation is really as I tell you. It is absurd but true that I received a warning yesterday which only just enabled me to get away from Paris before I was arrested."

"But can't you be arrested here as well as in Paris?"

"Quite as well, if my presence were known. This is why I am avoiding rather than courting notice. I had hoped to see my cousin for a few minutes quietly, and then leave France as soon as possible. I hadn't counted on Prince Maximilian, or the garden party, you see."

"Nor on *me*," she said. "Yet, do you know, I think luck served you rather a good turn when it brought you to my notice. Perhaps I may be able to help you a little."

"I am sure that luck, as you call it, served me the most delightful turn possible when it gave me even a glimpse of you," he told her, "but as for helping me — well, my own folly has made it difficult for any one to do that."

"I can at least let Nadine know that you want to see her, though I doubt if she will sympathise much with what you call your folly."

"She will not sympathise with it in the least," Count Alexis agreed; "but after she has blamed, she may help me. She is an immense favourite at Petersburg — godchild of the empress dowager and all that kind of thing — and she'll be higher in favour than ever if this alliance with Prince Maximilian is arranged; so I want her to get things smoothed over for me. It's an awful nuisance, having to run away and go into hiding like this!"

"I wonder," Clare observed a little severely, "that you didn't think of that beforehand."

"Unfortunately I never think of things beforehand," he acknowledged ruefully. "It is only when their rear view strikes me that I begin to be wise. But I don't think that I have ever seen even a rear view before with so little that was encouraging about it." He paused a moment. "I didn't fully appreciate what a blow fate had dealt me until I saw you with that Englishman," he went on abruptly. "Are you going to marry him?"

"Count Alexis — really—"

"Oh, I know that I haven't the faintest right to ask the question," he interrupted. "And I also know that it's absolutely inexcusable and reckless: but if I have to go away indefinitely — and I don't see anything else to do — I can't go without at least telling you that I adore you."

Clare's heart leaped with excitement and pleasure. This was something worth while — something with the flavor of ardour and romance about it, vastly different from the dull wooing of the Englishman of whom he spoke! And it was not only an agreeable contrast to and diversion from the last, but as it chanced, she had entertained a fancy for the handsome, gay young Russian

ever since she had known him — a fancy held in check by her belief that he probably desired to marry his cousin, as well as by the practical turn of the mind which dominated her heart, but strong enough to make her ready to respond at once to his declaration. For, like a flash, she recognised that such a response would bind her to nothing. It was a game — and the most fascinating of all games — which she might play to win or lose, and of which, if she lost, no one but herself would be the wiser. Oddly enough, too, the situation — his position of difficulty and peril — appealed to her. A born *intriguante*, a creature of infinite shrewdness, quickness, and resource, with a boundless ambition for selfish ends and an absolute confidence in her own ability, she sprang, as it were, at the opportunity to seize this situation, deal with it, and bring it to a successful issue. Count Alexis was fairly dazzled by the light in her eyes when she turned them on him.

"Do you mean it?" she demanded. "Do you really — adore me?"

"Do I really adore you?" he cried. "Why, I have never done anything else from the first moment I saw your charming face, so pretty, so mischievous, so altogether adorable! And I should have told you so long before this but that I waited to have something more to offer you. I enlisted influence — there was hope of official advancement. But now" — he threw out his hand with a passionate gesture — "I have nothing!"

"Oh, yes, you have," she assured him. "You have yourself — and that's everything!"

"My angel!" It was not her hand which he kissed now. "I could never have dreamed that a woman lived so noble, so brave, so unselfish!"

"Perhaps you don't know as much about women as you have fancied," she smiled. "But if you really care for me, I don't see how you could possibly have let yourself be drawn into such dreadful imprudence and danger — for there is danger in it, isn't there?"

"So much danger," he answered — and the gaiety was all gone for the moment from his tone — "that I have no right to speak to you in this manner, to ask you — anything."

"But you haven't asked me anything," she returned. "So far you have only given me a little interesting information. While I—"

It was not surprising that at this point he kissed her again, for her smiling eyes, her *provoquante* lips clearly invited a demonstration of the kind.

"You have given me hope, life, an incentive to make every possible effort to escape from the dreadful position into which I have blundered," he told her with something like seriousness. "Of course I must go away for the present; but as soon as I can arrange matters so that I may return—"

"Oh, going away is stupid!" she cried. "Is there no way to avoid that?"

He shook his head. "None at all. Every moment that I am here is at the risk of arrest."

Something in his tone — the indefinable tone in which a Russian utters that fateful word, arrest — brought for the first time to her light soul some realisation of the peril in which he stood, notwithstanding his gay courage. Panic suddenly seized her. She caught his arm and fairly dragged him back toward the shadows from which he had emerged.

"Come!" she said breathlessly. "I don't know what we are dreaming of, to stand where any one might come in sight at any moment. If you must hide, you shall hide thoroughly. Come!"

CHAPTER VI

"L'audace, L'audace, Toujours L'audace!"

IF Leighton had entertained any doubt of the reason which induced Princess Nadine to grant his request, he would have been speedily assured with regard to it as soon as they were at a sufficient distance from the group they had left to make speech safe. But, as a matter of fact, he had not the

least doubt on the point, although he was hardly prepared for so much hauteur as that with which she turned to him.

"Is it a Central American fashion, monsieur, to endeavour to force an undue degree of attention from one's hostess by insinuations which are distinctly impertinent?" she asked, with an up-lifting of her graceful head, and a perceptible heightening of her already heightened colour, which rendered her in the eyes of the man she addressed most perilously beautiful.

"On the contrary, Princess," he answered quietly, and without the least attempt to deprecate her anger, "it is a fashion peculiar to myself, and born of the necessity of the moment. By what other means could I have hoped to obtain your attention under the circumstances?"

"I had given you all the attention which you had a right to expect," she replied, "and for the rest, you do not seem to be aware that a guest of exalted rank is entitled to special deference, according to the rules of an etiquette of which no one is ignorant except—"

"A barbarian from beyond the seas," he said, with unmoved composure as she hesitated. "I'm afraid that I can't even plead ignorance of those rules. And neither can I deny that you had given me all the attention to which I was entitled. But if you don't know that the heart of man is desperately grasping, let me tell you that it is so; and no more grasping heart than mine can possibly exist. I felt that I must risk everything — even the possibility that you might never speak to me again — to withdraw you, were it only for five minutes, from that prince, and force you to concentrate your attention on myself. I have succeeded, and I am glad — although I regret deeply to have offended you."

"You regret nothing of the kind," said she, regarding him with a surprise which seemed for the moment at least to overpower her anger. "You are only triumphant at having carried your point. What a passion for asserting yourself you must possess!"

"Very great," he agreed coolly. "But I cannot allow you to credit this act to that passion alone. Do you think I would have cared enough for the society of any other woman in that group — let me be frank and say any other woman in the world — to make me wish to draw her away in this manner? Believe me, no. Whatever impression I may give, I have really no desire to assert myself for the mere gratification of doing so. But to gain some end on which I have set my heart, I hesitate at nothing. It is only fair to tell you this, because I must also tell you that I have set my heart on winning your favour."

"On winning my — favour!" the princess repeated, with something like a gasp. Surely this man's audacity was incredible, and the process of crushing it was not proceeding with the success which was to be desired.

"Your frankness is equal to your presumption," she said after a moment, "and both are—"

"Intolerable, perhaps," he suggested, still coolly, as she paused again.

"Thanks for the word," she answered, and now there was a flash of blue fire in her glance. "It is at least quite clear that you practise an unconventionality too great to be tolerated in our social conditions. Of course," she added, "you understand that I only came away with you in order to say this."

"Oh, yes," he replied, "I understand very well that you were kind enough to spare my presumption the public rebuke which I confess it deserved. I am grateful for your consideration, and also for the opportunity to tell you—"

"I must decline to listen to anything more," the princess interrupted, for in truth she was anxious to end as speedily as possible a conversation which she now perceived should not have been begun. A sudden recollection occurred to her of the rash and too confident people in the Arabian Nights who occasionally liberated genii whom they were afterwards unable to control. Had she, by indiscreet interest in this man's adventurous career, done something of the same kind, brought herself for the first time in her life in contact with a presumption which it was beyond her power to restrain, or even to rebuke effectively? The dominant quality of his personality impressed her now no less than it had done at first, but it also provoked antagonism and anger,

curiously mixed with a vague sense of something too strong to be resisted, yet which every instinct of her nature was in arms to resist.

As she uttered the last words, she turned with the evident intention of rejoining the guests whom she had left; but Leighton's voice, with a compelling note which thrilled through its quietness, almost despite herself arrested her steps.

"I am sure," he said, "that you will not refuse to listen to me for a moment longer. There is certainly no doubt of my unconventionality, but have you no possible sympathy with that, Princess? Do you never remember that on one side your blood is derived from an ancestor as little versed in conventionalities, and as little likely to have been ruled by them, as myself? Does that blood never stir in your veins? I think it does. I think I perceived in talking to you yesterday that you sometimes feel the narrow bounds of this gilded existence, with its vapid amusements, its small ambitions, and long for a life where great things are struggled for, great interests felt, great ends achieved. Your Carnival Battle of Flowers was but a type of the world in which you live —"

"No!" the princess exclaimed, carried out of herself by the protest which his words roused. "You talk of what you don't understand. In this world, beneath its trifles, its amusements, its battles of flowers if you will, there are great ambitions stirring, great ends to be gained." She threw her head back, her brilliant eyes dilated and deepened in tint as she looked at him. "What end has human ambition ever proposed to itself greater than a throne?" she demanded.

He understood the proud vibration in her voice as well as the question itself, and understood also how well he had judged in reckoning on the possibilities of her nature.

"You are right," he returned. "Human nature has never proposed to itself an end greater than a throne, provided that it was a real throne, on which men sat as rulers, not as mere figureheads or playthings. But don't permit yourself to fancy that Maximilian of Altenberg will ever gain or hold such a throne. He is no leader of men, but only the tool of intriguers and diplomatists, at whose dictation he moves, instead of daring boldly for himself. The crown which he offers you, Princess Nadine, would prove, should he ever be able to give it, so poor, so frail, so insecure a thing, that it is no more worthy of your acceptance than the heart which is — or possibly is not — supposed to accompany it."

"Your audacity — your insolence," said the princess, now pale with anger, "are beyond belief! We will not continue this conversation an instant longer, and after to-day—"

Leighton had not the least doubt what sentence was coming — what exclusion from the number of those privileged to approach her — when an interruption occurred which cut short her speech. A young man suddenly emerged from the green shadows of the shrubbery surrounding them, and stepped quietly into the avenue where they stood.

"Alexis!" Princess Nadine cried in a tone of amazement. "Where do you come from? — and what are you doing here?"

"Where do I come from?" Count Alexis repeated, as he took her hand. "What does that matter? — Paris, Russia, where you will! But as for what I am doing here — the answer to that is easy. I am here to see you, Nadine *dushka*."

"But is it necessary to make your appearance in quite such startling fashion?" she asked reprovingly, although there was a great kindness and much pleasure in her eyes as they rested on him. Then, remembering the stranger standing by, she turned and said, "My cousin, Count Alexis Zorokoff, Mr. Leighton."

The young count bestowed a careless glance upon Leighton, as he acknowledged the introduction, before answering her words.

"I am sorry to have startled you," he said, "but I have just arrived, and I must speak to you without delay on a matter of importance. This gentleman" — he glanced again at Leighton — "will no doubt excuse you for a few minutes."

"I have the honour to bid you good-day, Princess," Leighton said, bowing.

But, somewhat to his surprise, Count Alexis interposed quickly.

"Your pardon, monsieur. I do not ask you to withdraw entirely — only to be kind enough to wait for the princess for a few minutes."

"If you must speak to me, it is not at all necessary to detain Mr. Leighton," Nadine said in a tone which Leighton at least thoroughly understood.

"Ah, your pardon, also, — but it *is* necessary," Count Alexis cried a little impatiently. "I will explain if you will come with me—"

"But this is absurd!" she objected. "Why should I come with you? — what can you possibly have to say of sufficient importance to justify such extraordinary conduct?"

"I will explain it all, if you will only come!" Count Alexis repeated, taking her hand again with a grasp to the insistence of which she yielded. The next moment Leighton stood looking after the two tall, graceful figures, as they moved away together along the narrow path, under the overarching boughs of acacia and myrtle, from which the young man had emerged.

Having been asked to wait, he waited; with a distinct consciousness that fortune had once more, as often before in his life, befriended him in a very striking manner. Indeed it was only now that he had time to realise how extremely opportune the interruption had been for him. Another moment and he must have accepted his dismissal with what grace he could, his audacity having for once failed, himself banished definitely from Princess Nadine's presence and acquaintance. Only the most unexpected chance had saved him from this; but so firm was his faith in his lucky star that he felt confident that the sentence which had trembled on her lips would now never be spoken.

Why he was so certain of this he did not know. It was a matter of the instinct to which also he had learned to trust. Who exactly the young Russian was, and what the possible nature of the business on which he had in such impetuous fashion drawn the princess apart, he had naturally not the least idea, but a feeling approaching to a conviction assured him that the incident was to serve his interest and ends in a manner even more marked than that in which it had already served them. He had an odd sense of waiting to hear, to know, perhaps to do something—

When suddenly his attention was quickened by an expressive pantomime. The figures which his gaze had continued to follow suddenly paused and faced each other, as people do in moments of strong tension. From her attitude it was plain that Princess Nadine was startled, possibly angered, while it was equally clear that Count Alexis was eager and deprecating. Rapid sentences were exchanged, and then, with a gesture of indignant repudiation, the princess turned from her companion and came swiftly back along the shade-arched path, toward the spot where Leighton was waiting.

But when she reached him he perceived how far he had been from her thoughts. As her glance fell on him, she started with unmistakable surprise.

"Mr. Leighton!" she exclaimed. "You are — still here!"

"As you see, Princess," he replied, with an air of extreme deference. "I have ventured to remain, not only because your cousin requested me to do so, but because I could not go until I had learned whether there was any manner in which I might perhaps be able to serve you."

"To serve me!" she repeated, and as she stood looking at him, he saw how great was the shock she had evidently received. All trace of colour had left her face, and her eyes were large and shining under their dark, knitted brows. "There is no possible manner in which you can serve me," she said coldly, "even if I were willing to accept any service from you."

"Are you quite sure of that?" he asked. "I mean," he went on quickly, "are you quite sure that there is no possible manner in which I can serve you? If there is any such manner, will you not forget my presumption of a few minutes ago, and only see in me a man whose experiences have given him the right to say that he is a little more daring and resourceful than his fellows, and who places himself unreservedly at your command?"

"Why should you say this to me?" she demanded, with a startled expression. "Why do you think that I stand in need of service, or that it should be daring and resourceful?"

"It is difficult to tell you why I think so," he answered. "But one who has lived amid many dangers acquires at last a sense, an instinct, which warns him when danger is near. I am conscious of that warning now, and since it can hardly relate to myself, it must relate to you."

"Not to me," she replied involuntarily, "but perhaps to—"

She broke off abruptly, and looked back toward the figure she had left, which still remained standing in somewhat dejected attitude in the leafy gloom. The next instant her glance returned to Leighton, with the gleam of a sudden recollection in it.

"Was it the instinct of which you speak," she said, "that made you talk a little while ago of Mirabeau at Versailles, and say that it was impossible to imagine even the mildest of revolutionists in the gardens of Villa Zorokoff? Did you guess — did you possibly suspect—"

"Nothing," Leighton interposed hastily — for, wildly improbable as it seemed, a flash of enlightenment came to him now. "I was merely talking idly, as one will talk now and then. But," he added with strong emphasis, "I am not speaking idly when I repeat my offer to serve you, or any one in whom you are interested, to the extent of my ability. And I am not boasting when I add that my ability is perhaps greater than you think."

There was a moment's silence, in which their eyes met, and he read in hers a struggle of pride and doubt with the constraining force of a great anxiety, and a great need. It was pride, however, which spoke.

"I have no doubt of your ability," she said, "but I fail to see any reason why I should allow you to exert it in my behalf."

"The sufficient reason why you should allow it," he said, "is that you need the service which I ask no greater privilege than to render. Ah, Princess, whether you approve of me or not, let us acknowledge that we recognised each other as soon as we met, and that neither can ever again be a stranger to the other. I am, moreover, much of what is called a fatalist. I don't believe that things happen by chance. It is not by chance that I am here, with the will and the power to help you in a need which you cannot deny."

"No," she admitted, "I cannot deny the need, but neither can I forget—"

"My audacity?" he said, as she paused. "You may safely forget it. I pledge my honour to base no claim of any kind — not even a claim to your acquaintance — on any service which you may do me the honour to accept from me. I am sure you believe this — as I have already said, have we not recognised each other? — so let us waste no more time, but go at once to do whatever can or must be done."

If Count Alexis Zorokoff was surprised when he saw his cousin returning toward him, accompanied by the stranger whom he had so airily bidden to wait for her, he was still more surprised by her words when she reached him.

"Alexis," she said, "Mr. Leighton kindly offers his assistance in the danger your folly has brought upon you. He is an American, a man accustomed to deal with emergencies—"

"Whatever Mr. Leighton may be, why should you trouble him with my affairs?" the young Russian interposed. "And how could he possibly help me, even if I had any claim on his help? All that I ask of him is a certain convenience of memory in forgetting that he has seen me."

"Of that you may be assured," Leighton told him quietly. "But is it not possible that I may do more? As Princess Nadine has said, I am a man accustomed to meet emergencies, and to deal with dangerous situations. If you are in danger it might be well to let me help you. "

"There is no doubt that I am in danger," answered the other, "but unless you could manage to spirit me away immediately, I don't see how it would be possible for you to help me."

"That," Leighton returned, "is precisely what I can do. My yacht lies in the harbour of Nice, and it will give me pleasure to take you on board, and convey you wherever you may wish to go."

The young count started and looked at his cousin. "*Ma foi!*" he said. "It seems the very thing. What shall I do?"

"Tell him," she replied, "the nature of the danger in which you stand."

"Pardon me," Leighton said, "but that is not necessary. In fact, I should prefer not to know. I have simply the honour to invite Count Zorokoff to be my guest on a cruise, and if he is kind enough to accept my invitation, there only remains to get ourselves on board the yacht as quickly as possible. Is there" — he addressed the young man — "any reason why you shouldn't return with me to Nice?"

"Every reason," Count Alexis candidly replied. "When I arrived at the railway station an hour or two ago, I thought it probable that I might be arrested before I could reach this villa. You see" — he glanced at the princess — "I knew before I left Paris that an order for my arrest had been issued at the request of the Russian ambassador."

"And all because of madness — of folly inconceivable — because you have chosen to play with conspiracy as a child plays with fire!" Princess Nadine cried in a tone of exasperation. "Oh, I have no patience with you — none! You deserve to be punished—"

"But it is not you who will punish me, *dushenka*," he interrupted caressingly. Then turning to Leighton, "So you perceive, monsieur," he said, "that under these circumstances I cannot accompany you to Nice. The question, therefore, appears to be, how shall I reach your yacht?"

"It is a question easily answered," Leighton replied. "If you can remain here with safety, wait for a few hours, and after dark I will bring the yacht off this point and send a boat ashore for you. Meanwhile I will return immediately to Nice and have everything made ready for departure. Princess, I have again the honour to bid you adieu."

He was about to bow himself away with these words, when the princess stopped him by a gesture, stepping forward as she spoke.

"You forget," she said, "that you have first to take me back to my neglected guests."

CHAPTER VII

"Some Papers Of Importance"

"WELL," Clare remarked approvingly, "I find that admirably arranged."

Count Alexis looked at her with a smile in his gay, blue eyes. They were sitting on a time-stained marble bench under a clump of ilex trees in a remote corner of the grounds— a spot than which no better could have been desired by a person who was not seeking public notice.

"Yes," he said, "I think it is rather well arranged, though who the gentleman may be with whom I am to take a cruise, and in whose hands incidentally I have placed my liberty, I really have not the least idea."

"I know who he is," Miss Hazleton answered, "and I'm sure that whatever you've placed in his hands is quite safe. He's an American, to begin with, and, unless his looks are very deceptive, 'a first-class fighting man.' It was extremely fortunate that he should have been with Nadine when we were lucky enough to catch sight of her, detached from the prince — but rather odd, too," the speaker ended in a different and somewhat meditative tone.

"It was fortunate," Count Alexis agreed; "and also, as you say, a trifle odd," he added after another moment, "that my cousin should have taken him into her confidence. Has she known him very well or very long?"

"She has known him since yesterday," Clare answered, with a subtle smile. "At the Battle of Flowers he appeared in a classic chariot, decorated with daffodils, which was quite the most striking equipage on the Promenade, and afterwards we met him at Madame de Beaumanoir's. It was there that he was introduced to Nadine and must have interested her, for she talked to him for an unprecedented length of time. Then Aunt Caroline invited him to the garden party here this afternoon, and — *voilà tout!*"

"So that's all she knows of him!" Count Alexis said in a tone of surprise. A shadow of gravity came into the blue eyes now. "It 's a very slight acquaintance on which to risk so much. If I had known—"

"If you had known, you would have gained nothing by refusing his help," Clare said, as he paused, "since Nadine had already told him that you needed it. But I'm certain you run no risk in trusting him. All Americans, on general principles, sympathise with conspirators and revolutionists, especially if they are Russian — for, although they know very little about Russia, their minds are quite made up about it — and so Mr. Leighton would no doubt be glad to help you on that ground. Besides which, there might be — other reasons."

The significance of her tone as she uttered the last words appeared to escape the young man's attention. He was evidently thinking hard and fast, while the gravity lingered in his eyes.

"At least," he said, as if speaking his thoughts aloud, "I must not risk anything except my personal safety. Mr. Leighton may be trustworthy as you think, but it seems that you really know nothing about him, and therefore it is possible that he may be something altogether different. It's the part of wisdom to guard against betrayal with regard to myself, but it's a matter of absolute necessity that I should guard against it, by every means in my power, where others are concerned. And therefore, although I shall take whatever chances there may be in going away with this man as I have agreed to do, I must ask your permission to leave with you some important papers which I have about me."

Clare's expression grew vividly interested. "Do you mean that they are — revolutionary papers?" she asked.

"They relate to revolutionary affairs," he answered, "and so they are both important and dangerous."

"Oh, dangerous! — and yet you wish to give them to me?"

"I mean," he explained, "that it would be very dangerous to the persons engaged in those affairs if these papers should fall into certain hands. But to you they could not possibly be a source of danger, and I am sure they would be safe with you."

"Of course they would be safe with me, and yet" — she stopped and considered — "I don't know, either. I haven't really any place of security in which to put them, and I confess they would be a great weight on my mind. On the whole, I think it will be best for you to give them to Nadine. She doesn't object to responsibility — at least I imagine she doesn't — and, being a Russian, of course she will be interested in their safety—"

Count Alexis threw his head back with an irrepressible burst of laughter.

"Interested — my cousin Nadine — in the documents and plots of revolutionists!" he cried. "Surely you know her better than that?"

"I know that she professes to have no sympathy with your ideas—"

"Neither has she any. We have quarrelled on the subject a hundred times. She's an absolutist of absolutists, and, if she were a man in power, would crush us all with an iron hand, and think that she was serving Holy Russia best by doing so."

"I'm not sure that she isn't right," said Clare. "See what a position you have put yourself in by your plotting! But all the same she doesn't try to crush you with an iron hand — on the contrary she has engaged a Central American dictator to carry you off on his yacht — and no doubt she would take equally good care of your documents."

"She would die before she would give up anything entrusted to her, however much she disapproved of it," Count Alexis said gravely. "There's not the least doubt of that. And since she has probably better means of taking care of them than you have—"

"Very much better. Not only a safe where her jewels are kept — oh, such jewels! — but a secret drawer, which she showed me one day, in her escritoire, besides many other places."

"It may perhaps be best to entrust the papers to her," Count Alexis ended. "It is certain that I cannot take them with me on a yacht of whose owner I know absolutely nothing. That is a risk I have no right to run. *Eh bien!*" — the gay light came back into his eyes again — "this being

settled, we will now put all disagreeable thoughts aside, and enjoy these delightful golden moments which fate has given us, while we may."

"It would be charming to do so," said Clare, "but I'm afraid I shall have to leave you and show myself for a little while at least, or there may be a hue and cry after me. Lord Uxmoor is quite stupid enough for it, and you know" — she laughed—"my disappearance was rather mysterious."

"Not so mysterious that a man wouldn't understand—"

"He understands nothing which isn't clearly told him. I can fancy him searching for me at this moment with that vinaigrette, and he has so much of the British bull-dog tenacity that he will never give up the search until he has found me." She rose with an air of apprehension. "I should have thought of it before. He might appear at any moment. No, don't detain me! This is really dangerous. We don't want to be forced to take any one else into our confidence."

"There's every chance that he may not find us in this remote spot, and if he did he could surely be trusted—"

Clare made a movement of quick impatience.

"But I don't want to trust him!" she said. "Don't you understand? It's a question of me, as well as of you. Only one conclusion could be drawn from my being here with you, and that conclusion mustn't be drawn at present. I can't have it known that I am engaged to a man who has to fly from the police."

"I understand." Count Alexis's detaining hand fell away from her. "You are quite right. It was unpardonable of me to speak to you — to tell you that I love you — under such circumstances. I can hardly forgive myself for it, and of course it is necessary that no one should have cause to link your name with mine. Until I can offer myself openly, I have no claim upon you — none."

Clare, who knew this as well as he, and whose mind was quite firmly made up on the point, nevertheless smiled on him with reassuring sweetness.

"You have the claim of what I choose to give you," she said softly, "but we must be very prudent until you can come and offer yourself openly. For one thing, Aunt Caroline would be furious if she had any idea of my caring for you. Only to-day she told me that she has set her heart on my making a great match — and, even at the best, you aren't exactly that, you know."

"I am as far as possible from it," Count Alexis agreed a little grimly.

"Oh, no, not as far as possible," Clare corrected him. "Everything ought to be within your reach, if you can only get over the consequences of your present folly. For the matter of that, you ought to be Prince Zorokoff, the head of your house, and have the great Zorokoff estates, instead of a girl like Nadine."

He stared at her a little. "That is dreaming," he said. "I am not the head of the house, and the Zorokoff estates don't belong to me. Nothing can give me those things, but if, as you say, I can get over the consequences of my present folly, I may win a rank of my own—"

She nodded. "And meanwhile I shall set my wits to work to help you, and they aren't wits to be despised, believe me."

"Your wits are as adorable as all the rest of you," he told her, "but there's no way in which they can help me just now."

"Ingrate! Haven't they helped you already?" she demanded. "Don't you owe the meeting with Nadine and Mr. Leighton to me? And I shall help you further. I've always thought that I should like to have a chance to find out if I don't possess a talent for — intrigue, shall I say? Or perhaps diplomacy is the better word, for what is diplomacy but making men — and women, too, if necessary — serve your ends, instead of their own?"

"Not a bad definition of diplomacy," he laughed, "And what men and women do you propose to try your powers on?"

"You are incredulous of my powers, so I will tell you nothing," she returned. "But I think it must be a delightful game, and one I shall enjoy testing my ability in. Now I must positively go."

At what time is Mr. Leighton to come for you?"

"He is to send a boat from his yacht some time after nightfall."

"Ah, we have abundance of time to see each other again then, after I have shown myself to the world in general and Lord Uxmoor in particular. Nadine, of course, will not be able to see you until all her guests are gone; but I will come back as soon as possible. Do keep yourself well concealed, and — yes — that will do! *Au revoir!*"

She waved her hand gaily, as, with his kisses still burning on her lips, she ran away— a charming figure, flitting nymph-like down the shade-arched vista. As she went her pulses were beating with a delightful exhilaration which was not wholly, nor perhaps even chiefly, due to the genuineness of her fancy for the man she had left, but arose largely from her sense of triumph in what she had already achieved, as well as for what she had no doubt of her ability to achieve, in the game of intrigue or diplomacy of which she had spoken and which she was eagerly bent upon playing. Every faculty of mind and body was thrilling with excitement and pleasure, lending to her beauty an almost dazzling brilliancy, when she suddenly came face to face with Leighton in one of the avenues leading directly to the villa.

Both paused instinctively, and looked at each other with a quick perception of something electrical in the air.

"Ah, my compatriot of all the Americas!" Clare cried gaily, as the man uncovered. "I am delighted to meet you again."

"And I am nothing less than charmed that I have not been obliged to go away without a glimpse of the fair lady from the City of the Angels," Leighton returned with a smile. "I began to be afraid that that misfortune was before me."

"You have been here long, then?"

"Long enough to have paid my respects to the princess, to have admired this enchanting place, and to have been disappointed in obtaining a glimpse of you."

Clare put her head on one side, as she looked at him with her bright, alluring gaze.

"I should like to believe that you have been disappointed," she said, "but I'm really afraid that you have hardly remembered my existence until this moment."

"And why, if I may ask, should you possibly do me such injustice?"

"Oh!" She lifted her shoulders lightly. "Surely that jumps at the eyes, as our French friends say. A princess who is as beautiful as she is fabulously rich, and a prince who is going to be a king — in Serabia — those attractions would naturally quite overpower any thought of a plain American girl even though she does come from the City of the Angels."

Leighton, as was natural, proved quicker than Lord Uxmoor in seeing the opening for a compliment.

"It would be quite impossible under any circumstances to think of you as a plain American girl," he assured her.

"I'll acknowledge that I consider myself something quite different," she answered laughingly, "but that is how I am classed over here, you know, even when there is no question of a future Serene Highness and Queen of Serabia."

The mocking tone in her voice was not lost on Leighton, who found himself regarding her a little curiously. He wondered what it meant, this note of the bitterness which springs from envy, in one with whom Princess Nadine could not possibly have come into any conflict of rivalry. And yet, even while asking the question, he remembered that there is no envy so bitter as that which is forced to perceive and acknowledge that the person envied is altogether beyond the possibility of rivalry.

"It did not occur to me," he said, "to think of Princess Nadine as a future Serene Highness or Queen of Serabia. I have found that in life it is best to deal only with accomplished facts."

"Ah!" Clare's glance dwelt on him meditatively. "I can guess why you prefer to deal only with accomplished facts in this case; yet it might on the whole perhaps be wiser to consider them already accomplished."

"That is a form of wisdom which I never practise," he answered coolly, "probably because I have often seen what pleasure Fate seems to take in upsetting the best laid plans."

"And you like to play the part of Fate occasionally, is it not so? It's a part for which Nature has plainly cast you, and which no doubt you have often played with success. But in the present instance—"

"In the present instance," he said, "I am making no effort to play the part of Fate, or upset any plans, and I am at a loss to imagine why you should think so."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose you are at a loss to imagine why I should think so, and I am wondering whether or not to tell you."

He looked at her keenly now, for something in her tone assured him that she was not merely endeavouring to rouse his interest and pique his curiosity, but that there was a deeper meaning to her speeches. Then, by one of the flashes of something like divination which had often astonished his opponents, and inspired them with an almost superstitious fear, he understood and connected her meaning with Count Alexis. This would account for her mysterious absence, — he had chanced to overhear some of Lord Uxmoor's inquiries about her — for her appearance alone in this part of the grounds, for the air of excitement which clothed her like a garment, and for the enigmatical tone of her utterances. His smile of comprehension gave her suddenly an uncomfortable sense of being seen through by a penetration which had been sharpened by long practice in the game she was just essaying to play.

"I have been a little dull," he said, "but I begin to understand what you mean. You are, however, giving me at once more and less credit than I deserve. One may be grateful for an opportunity to render service to a person in need of it without hoping, far less planning, to benefit personally thereby."

"Oh!" Her smile was clearly incredulous. You are magnificently disinterested, which is surely much wiser, as well as better, than what I was — romantic enough, shall I say? — to imagine. I was dreaming of a man who, having conceived a daring ambition, was also daring enough to seize and use the opportunity which might further his end; and I was so foolish as to think of offering my poor little aid, in gratitude for his having come to the help of one whom I — er — like."

"I see." Leighton saw indeed very clearly. "You have been kind enough to think of a league of forces to accomplish certain results which we each desire. I am grateful; but two things have always been my habit — one to give without demanding a price in return, and the other to rely upon myself solely for what I wish to accomplish."

"In other words, you scorn my help."

"Believe me, no. I only find it unnecessary."

"It is the same thing," she replied; "but it doesn't matter. All that matters at present is that I mustn't detain you longer."

She held out her hand, her bright, mocking gaze challenging him in a manner which, despite his haste to be gone, he might have lingered to make an effort at least to understand a little better, if at that moment Lord Uxmoor had not appeared.

"Oh, Miss Hazleton," he cried, "how happy — how relieved I am to find you!"

"Did you think I had drowned myself?" she asked laughing. "The pain wasn't as bad as that. I've been keeping quiet, so that now it has vanished, and I am ready to enjoy myself again. You are really going, Mr. Leighton? Well good-bye, and good luck attend you."

CHAPTER VIII

"As A Child Plays With Fire"

THERE was no moon to betray the *Nereid* when, after having sailed away at sunset, like a great white bird, into the luminous world of sea and sky beyond the harbour of Nice, she later drew in again toward the land, and, hovering off the rocky point where lay the gardens of the Villa Zorokoff, sent her boat ashore.

In the stem of this boat Leighton was seated, and when he approached the landing-place at the foot of the gardens, he perceived in the soft star-light two figures standing at the head of the steps which led down to the water. As he stepped ashore, one of these figures spoke.

"This is yourself, Mr. Leighton, is it not?" Princess Nadine asked, in a tone as quiet as if she had been receiving him at the door of her drawing-room.

"Myself, Princess," he answered. "I could not think of trusting any one else to come. Your cousin is ready?"

"More than ready," answered that gentleman, "exceedingly anxious to take advantage of your kind hospitality, monsieur. The minutes have seemed hours to me while I have been waiting."

"It is unnecessary to wait even one minute longer," Leighton replied. "Have you any luggage?"

"None, I regret to say. I left Paris at a moment's warning, and dared not even return to my lodgings for fear of arrest."

"You will allow me, then, to provide for your wants for the present, and in that case there is nothing to detain us."

"Nothing. So adieu, Nadine dushka, and remember what I have told you."

"I will remember," replied Princess Nadine, as she gave her cheek to his kiss. "Adieu, Alexis, and for Heaven's sake run no risks which might involve this gentleman who has so kindly aided you."

"Fear nothing for me, Princess," said Leighton quietly. "I never allow myself to be involved in an unnecessary risk, and I never avoid one which is necessary. Trust me, and believe that your cousin is safe with me."

"I am quite sure that he is safe with you," said the princess. She advanced a step and held out her hand. It was borne upon him that she was too proud to fail in acknowledging a debt, which was, nevertheless, distasteful to her.

"You must let me thank you," she said with the air of a queen. "You have placed me under great obligations, which I can never forget."

"So far from that," he answered, taking her hand, and speaking in a low tone, "you are under no obligation to me whatever. If I thought so, I should be tempted not to do this thing, for what I hope — what I desire above all things — to win from you must be given freely, not bought. I am glad that fate allows me to serve you, in this or any other way, but I repeat again that I base no claim upon the service. I only ask that you will accept my thanks for the trust with which you have honoured me, and that you will rest tranquil, fearing no harm to your cousin while he is in my hands."

Then, giving her no time for reply, he ran down the marble steps and sprang into the boat, where Count Alexis was already seated. Quickly pushing off, they rowed away, leaving Princess Nadine still standing, a slender, motionless figure, at the head of the landing steps, until point and figure alike vanished in the obscurity of the night.

Very few words passed between Leighton and the unknown quantity whom he called his guest, until they were on board the yacht; then, in the luxuriously fitted and brilliantly lighted cabin, they looked at each other with a mutual impulse of curiosity.

Now, as in the afternoon, Leighton was struck with the boyish aspect of the young Russian, although subtly mingled with boyishness was the air and manner of a man of the world. Typically Russian of the aristocratic class, with appearance and manners of the highest distinction, although now and then youthful as his looks, he was altogether a very attractive creature to the man of stress and action.

He was the first to speak, after each had silently measured the other with those involuntary glances.

"I am wondering, Mr. Leighton," he said in his singularly pure English, "how I can possibly express to you my sense of the great service you are rendering me."

Leighton made the gesture of one who brushes a subject aside. "Let me beg," he said, "that you will make no effort to express it. I assure you that I am speaking no more than the simple truth when I say that to render this service is a great pleasure to me. I am a man accustomed to action, but condemned just now to idleness, and anything which gives me an excuse for action is welcome. I was beginning to find Nice a little tiresome, even with the excitement of visits to Monte Carlo to enliven it, and was thinking of taking a cruise, when you were kind enough to give me a motive for doing so, and a companion. Consider me, therefore, the obliged party, and let us say no more of it. Now allow me to inquire if you have dined?"

"*Ma foi*, no," answered the other smiling. "I did not wish to enter the villa, so although my cousin spirited out to me a few sandwiches and a bottle of wine, I can by no means say that I have dined."

Leighton touched a bell, and to the servant who presented himself said, "Show Count Zorokoff to his room, and let dinner be served immediately."

A little later they were sitting together at a perfectly appointed dinner, to which Count Alexis did as much justice as if no escape lay behind him and no danger before. In fact, his appetite and his spirits were alike so excellent that Leighton was unable to conceal a little surprise, especially at the last.

"I am glad to perceive that you are able to take your situation so cheerfully," he said when the final course had been removed from the table and they were alone with their wine and cigars. "I hope I may judge from this that it is not so serious as I feared."

The young count shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot flatter myself that it is not very serious," he replied, "but there is nothing that I am aware of to be gained by sighing, even over the worst situation. Mine may or may not be quite hopeless. Even if it is, there nevertheless remains the obligation not to repay your hospitality by proving a duller companion than need be."

"When we met this afternoon," said Leighton, "you offered to tell me the circumstances which have placed you in this position. I declined to hear them then, because it did not in the least matter to me what they were, when it was merely a question of offering you my hospitality. But now, if you are still inclined to give me some further details of the matter, I shall be glad to hear them. It may be that I can assist you more substantially than by merely removing you from Nice."

"I fear that is hardly possible," the other replied, "but I shall be happy to tell you my story. I suppose you have guessed that my difficulties arise from my having taken part in some of the various plots for improving the government of Russia?"

"I drew that conclusion from what your cousin said," Leighton replied.

"Ah, she has not much sympathy with liberal aspirations, my cousin Nadine," said the young man with a laugh. "She is more autocratic in her ideas than the emperor himself."

"But she is surely right in your case," said Leighton. "What have you to gain by revolutionary plots?"

"The good of the greater number," replied the other; "the relief of the oppressed, the prosperity of Russia, and, incidentally, the excitement of conspiracy, which is perhaps the only real excitement to be found, and therefore not to be despised in a world where dulness abounds."

"In short," said Leighton, "Princess Nadine was right— you 'have played with conspiracy as a child plays with fire,' and the consequences are very much the same."

"Very much indeed," the other calmly agreed. "They promise certainly to be quite unpleasant. It is more than probable that I shall have to ask you to land me at some English port, and shall then have no alternative but to proceed to London and cast my lot with the conspirators who live there and provide a *raison d' être* for the Continental police."

It was impossible for Leighton to refrain from smiling as he looked at the speaker. This silken young aristocrat, with his boyish grace and air of finding all life a holiday, was so little the material of which conspirators are made, that the whole situation would have seemed a comedy but for the grim consequences likely to result from it.

"Before deciding to cast your lot irrevocably with the forces of conspiracy in London, or elsewhere, suppose you tell me what you have done," he suggested.

"With much pleasure," the other replied. "You must understand, then, that I have always been liberal in my political theories, and when I came in contact not long ago with some men who are devoting their lives to a propaganda which has for its end the putting of these theories into practice, I found a new and fascinating interest in their association. You are perhaps aware that there is nothing to which the Russian is more subject than a boundless *ennui*, the more when fortune has put within reach all the pleasures and amusements of life. This is why so many of us are passionately devoted to play, the higher the better, because that alone offers an excitement which does not readily pall."

"And you mean that the same reason explains why so many Russians, even of the higher class, become conspirators, since conspiracy is a game where, life and liberty being the stakes, the interest roused is proportionately great?"

Count Alexis smiled. "It is," he said, "a partial explanation at least. You must remember that we are also a people prone to ideals and capable of making great sacrifices for their realisation. This is why so many who, like myself, have little or nothing personally to gain by revolution, desire ardently to change the existing state of things, and become what you call conspirators in consequence. But you must recollect that what is sufficient to constitute a conspirator in Russia would only render one a very moderate member of — say, the Left Centre in any other European country. For we are not all anarchists by any means. Many of us — myself for example — only want such degree of reform as would give us a parliament, a ministry responsible to the parliament, and a better administration of justice in the courts."

"Might you not as well plot for anarchy — in Russia?" Leighton asked. "Unless I am mistaken, the government classes you all together, moderates and extremists alike."

"You are right," the other admitted. "The government makes no distinction in its unrelenting persecution of all who advocate liberal ideas in any form. Many men are in Siberia now for views more moderate than those I have held and advocated."

"And yet you have incurred such a danger, — you who have so little to gain by it!"

"Every man," said the young Russian gravely, "has much to gain by living under a free government. But, even granting that I have nothing personally to gain, do you think I can be indifferent to the sufferings of these men of whom I have spoken, and of many others in different degrees?"

"But, instead of helping them, you have only placed yourself in great danger, and probably exiled yourself hopelessly from the country where your interests all lie. I admire your idealism, but I cannot respect your judgment. Tell me, had I not taken you away from Nice, what lay before you?"

"One of two things: an escape by some other means before my whereabouts were discovered by the police; or arrest, return to Russia, and incarceration in some fortress there, with other unpleasant consequences in the future."

"And now one other question, if you will pardon my inquisitiveness. Why did you stop at Nice, instead of leaving French territory at once, since you knew the danger in which you stood?"

Count Alexis hesitated before replying. It was quite plain that there was something in the question which caused him embarrassment, and Leighton had time to recall the picture of Clare Hazleton emerging from the green depths of shrubbery with flushed cheeks and shining eyes and enigmatical offers of aid to himself, before the other, lifting his eyes from a cigarette which he had been rolling, said quietly:

"My reason for stopping in Nice was to see my cousin, and ask her to use her influence with the emperor in my behalf. As you may possibly imagine, it is extremely inconvenient to be forced to go into exile in this manner, and I was sure that she would help me if she could, lthough she has no sympathy and scant patience with my political ideas."

"And did she agree to help you?"

"Yes. At first she refused to do so, but later her heart softened, as I knew that it would, and she has promised to do what she can for me."

There was a brief pause, in which Leighton smoked meditatively and looked at his wine-glass. Presently he turned his keen glance again on his companion.

"That will mean betraying the fact that she has seen or at least been in communication with you, and is there nothing in that which may compromise her?" he asked.

Count Alexis opened his blue eyes widely.

"Compromise! — Princess Nadine Zorokoff! You might almost as well talk of compromising one of the grand-duchesses," he declared.

"Unless I am mistaken, there are instances in which even grand-duchesses have not been above suspicion," Leighton returned a little dryly. "At least" — was it again that quality of divination which spoke? — "I hope you have done nothing, beside paying an imprudent visit, to incur possibilities of annoyance or danger for the princess."

There was another pause, in which Count Alexis, remembering uncomfortably a certain package of papers, told himself that he owed no account of his actions to this dictatorial stranger; yet finally acknowledging a power, hypnotic or otherwise, in the dark, steady eyes which were bent on him, said in a tone of rather forced carelessness:

"I left some papers with her, but it is not in the least likely that they could be the cause of any annoyance or danger to her."

"Some papers! — with Princess Nadine!" Amazement and consternation were blended in Leighton's voice. "It isn't possible — you can't mean that they relate to your revolutionary affairs?"

Count Alexis nodded. "Just that," he said. "It chanced that they were in my possession when I received warning of arrest, and I was not able to dispose of them before leaving Paris; so it was essential to put them in a place of safety."

"Why did you not bring them with you? Isn't this a place of safety?"

Gaze challenged gaze for an instant, and then the young Russian smiled again, with disarming frankness.

"I am now quite sure that it is," he replied, "but will you forgive me if I say that I could not be sure when I accepted your offer of hospitality this afternoon? That sounds abominably no doubt, but ask yourself, monsieur, what did I know of you? And, while I could risk anything for myself, I dared not — you will surely understand this — take a single unnecessary risk with what had been committed to my care."

"And so" — Leighton's voice was now vibrant with anger — "because you distrusted me, even while accepting my aid, you were guilty of the inexcusable rashness and folly of leaving such papers with Princess Nadine! Ah, if I had known—"

He broke off abruptly, as if unable to trust himself for further speech, and, rising, walked to one of the windows of the cabin, where a soft southern breeze was fluttering the green silk hangings. There followed a minute or two of rather tense silence, during which Count Alexis wondered what mysterious influence had induced him to be so frank, while he stared a little blankly at the straight, stem back turned uncompromisingly toward him. But it was not until Leighton presently swung around, and with a determined air returned toward the table, that he spoke.

"I am really more than sorry," he said with winning grace, "that you should regard what I have done as implying distrust of yourself personally. Surely you comprehend that I could not be said to distrust one whom I did not know—"

"Nor to trust, either, apparently," Leighton interrupted coldly. "Your attitude was natural enough, perhaps, although the fact that your cousin trusted me might have influenced you a little. But what you thought or did not think of me is a matter of no importance. What matters is that you have placed Princess Nadine in grave danger by her possession of those papers."

"Pardon me, but I am perfectly sure that I have done nothing of the kind," Count Alexis replied. "In the first place, no one could possibly suspect her possession of the papers; and in the second place, as I have already told you, it would be simply ridiculous to think of her as being engaged in any plot against the government."

"Many Russian women have been engaged in such plots."

"Not women like Princess Nadine Zorokoff. Not only is her rank so high, and her sympathies — probably because of her American blood — so intensely aristocratic, but she is about to make a marriage which puts her altogether beyond the possibility of suspicion. Nevertheless, since I have now the pleasure of knowing you, I hope you will believe that I sincerely regret my action in leaving the papers behind."

"In that case you will be willing to undo your action as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible, yes. If you will kindly give orders to touch at the first convenient port, I will telegraph to a man in Paris to go at once and obtain them."

Leighton shook his head.

"That will not do," he said decidedly "You must see that none of your political associates can be allowed to come into contact with Princess Nadine."

"No danger could arise from the visit of the man to whom I allude. His connection with the revolutionary party is absolutely unsuspected."

"So you would probably have said of yourself a few days ago. No, you can run no further risks where the princess is concerned."

"What, then, do you propose that I shall do?" Count Alexis asked a little impatiently.

"I propose," Leighton answered quietly, "that you shall give me a letter to your cousin, authorising me to take charge of those papers."

Count Alexis did not answer at once. "You are asking a great deal," he said at length very gravely. "I should be unworthy of the safety which, thanks to you, I enjoy at present, if I could be careless of the safety of men who would be hopelessly lost were those papers to fall into the hands of the Russian police. They are of much more importance than my life; and if necessary I will myself return to Nice for them."

"That would be madness," Leighton returned, "since you are subject to arrest as soon as you set foot on French soil. It is plain that you are not willing to trust me, and I am reasonable enough to admit that under the circumstances this is excusable, as you know little or nothing about me. So let us agree to a compromise. Give me a letter directing the princess to destroy the papers immediately. This will satisfy me, and should also satisfy you."

"I have no right to do that. They can only be destroyed as a last resort."

A look came over Leighton's face which could have been interpreted readily by certain people down in Central America. He leaned forward, with his arms on the table and his dark eyes fixed on the face of the young man before him.

"We will," he said, "speak plainly. The lives and liberty of all the conspirators in Russia are not worth the risk you have induced your cousin to take. I therefore insist that you write a letter telling her to dispose of those papers in one of the two ways I have mentioned, or else—"

"What?" asked the other calmly, as he paused.

But it was difficult for Leighton to conclude his sentence. What he longed to say was, "Or else I will take you back to Nice and hand you over to the police." To make a threat impossible of execution was not, however, to be thought of by a man who never failed to fulfil exactly every word that he uttered, especially if those words happened to be of the nature of threats. And that such a threat as this would be impossible of execution he knew well, since it was as much out of the question for him to violate the hospitality he had offered, and the good faith he

had pledged, as to lose all that he had gained with Princess Nadine by the rescue of her cousin. So he was forced to end his speech in a manner by no means to his taste.

"I shall leave you," he said sternly, "with the contempt which a man deserves who throws upon another — and that other a woman — the possible consequences of his own rash folly. If you still refuse to authorise me to obtain those papers from the princess, I shall go and see if I cannot obtain them without such authorisation, and, in any steps toward that end which I may be forced to take, I shall certainly have no consideration for yourself or your associates."

"In other words, you would hand us over without hesitation to the tender mercies of the police," said Count Alexis, smiling. "And you would be quite right, if such a step were necessary for the safety of my cousin. But since it is not necessary, and moreover would not serve the faintest purpose, I have no fear of your doing so. You wrong me if you think I would be careless of any risk involved for her in the custody of those papers. I am quite sure there is no risk; but since you think differently, I will agree to your wishes. I will write a letter requesting her to deliver the papers to you, and I will also write a despatch to the man in Paris of whom I spoke, which you will send as soon as you go ashore. This despatch will direct him to go immediately to Nice, and receive the papers from you. And all that I ask of you is to wait for him there. Does this satisfy you?"

"Perfectly," Leighton replied. "Be good enough to write the letter and despatch while I go and give orders for putting the yacht into the nearest Italian port."

CHAPTER IX

"I Refuse To Trust You"

OWING to various unavoidable delay, it was not until the afternoon of the next day that Leighton was again driving out from Nice toward the Villa Zorokoff. As he passed rapidly in his motor-car over the beautiful road, he had a sense of almost incredulous wonder at the thought that it was only twenty-four hours since he had passed along this way before, a stranger to the life and affairs of the woman who had indeed already attracted his fancy, but toward whom he had not apparently the faintest chance of ever drawing nearer. Yet now Fortune had so far favoured him, and he, according to his wont, had so used Fortune's opportunity, that he was on his way to her with a certainty of attention and interest which could not have been greater had the intimacy of a lifetime, instead of the acquaintance of forty-eight hours, been behind it.

Yet he did not in the least deceive himself concerning the nature of this interest. Because he had been able at a moment of emergency to offer a refuge of safety to her cousin, he had acquired importance in the eyes of Princess Nadine, but it was an importance so accidental, so brief, that he would have considered it valueless save for the fact that it afforded him a vantage-ground from which he might hope to direct her attention to himself, the man Leighton, and not merely to the rescuer of Count Alexis Zorokoff. He was not blind to the apparent hopelessness of doing this; but the confidence born of his life of success stood him in good stead. He could not believe in the possibility of failure, because he had never failed, and, now as ever, doubt and difficulty, instead of discouraging, only stimulated him to effort.

The servant who received his card at the door of the villa regarded it with an air of aloofness, and ventured to express a discouraging doubt whether Princess Nadine was at home.

"Take that card to the princess," said Leighton quietly. "If she is in the house she will see me."

His tone compelled obedience, and as he was shown across the magnificently spacious hall, toward one of the reception-rooms, a light figure came flitting suddenly to meet him — a figure which he had last seen against the green setting of the gardens.

"Oh, Mr. Leighton," cried Clare Hazleton breathlessly, "I am so glad that I chanced to be here! You have come—?"

"To beg the favour of a few minutes' interview with Princess Nadine," Leighton replied, as she broke off, regarding him with wide-eyed interrogation.

"With Princess Nadine," she repeated, accompanying him into the apartment where he followed the servant. "It is likely that she is — er — engaged just now, but it will be quite the same thing if you tell me what you have come to say to her."

"Pardon me," Leighton answered with a smile which she found irritating, "but it is never quite the same thing to speak to one person for another."

"How absurd to be so mysterious!" she cried impatiently. "Surely you understand that I know everything! Why, it was I who brought about the meeting which resulted in your carrying Count Alexis off in your yacht!"

"Which is a proof I hardly needed that Count Alexis is very fortunate in his friends," Leighton observed.

"I am at least sufficiently his friend to have a right to know if he is safe," she returned haughtily.

"It gives me pleasure to assure you that he is perfectly safe," Leighton answered.

"Then what brings you here?" she demanded with renewed impatience.

"I have already had the honour of telling you that I have come to see the princess."

Her eyes, as she looked at him now, suddenly blazed with anger under their frowning brows.

"You are insultingly rude," she said, "for these evasions only mean that you refuse to recognise my interest and to trust me. Some urgent reason has brought you — for presumptuous as you are I am sure you would not present yourself quite so soon merely to see the princess — and I repeat that I have a right to know what it is."

"You must forgive me," he returned quietly, "if I fail to see what right you can possibly have to demand the reason of my actions."

"I care nothing for your actions," she retorted, "except in as far as they relate to — Ah, here comes my cousin! Believe me, I shall not forget this, and you may find that I am not a person to be ignored or insulted with impunity." Then, with a swift change of tone, as the princess advanced toward them, "I have just been telling Mr. Leighton that I feared he could hardly hope to see you, Nadine, but it seems that you are kinder to him than I expected. He appears to have some mysterious business, with which he has declined to trust me, so I will leave him to explain himself to you."

She turned and left the room, as Princess Nadine, apparently too much preoccupied to observe her, said with a startled expression, —

"What does this mean, Mr. Leighton? My cousin—?"

"Is safe, Princess," he replied quickly. "You need not entertain the least fear for him. He is at this moment on the *Nereid*, and can direct her course to whatever port he chooses. I left the yacht this morning at Bordighera."

She drew a deep breath. "Ah, what a relief!" she murmured. "I feared— I hardly know what I did not fear when I saw your name!"

"And yet I told you that I made myself responsible for his safety," Leighton reminded her. "If you knew me better, you would have had no fear."

"But you have left the yacht," she said, as if in excuse.

"Because my presence on it was no longer necessary, whereas my presence here seemed very necessary. I bring a letter from your cousin, which will tell you why I have returned to Nice."

He gave her the letter as he spoke, and she tore it open, sinking into a chair as she did so. He also sat down, and watched her face as she read; but there was no change of expression

perceptible until she lifted her eyes. Then he saw a look with which he was familiar in other eyes — the look of one who stands on guard.

"Of course you know what this letter contains," she said. "You know that my cousin directs me to give you a package of papers which he left with me."

Leighton bowed. "It is for that I am here," he answered. "After his departure your cousin wakened to a sense of what he had done in leaving those papers with you, and as the quickest way of repairing the mistake and of relieving you of a dangerous trust, it was agreed that I should come for them."

There followed a moment's silence, and then:

"I know my cousin so well," Princess Nadine said, "that I find it a little surprising that he should have awakened to the knowledge of which you speak. I therefore think that some influence — presumably your own — must have quickened his perceptions."

"Count Alexis is young and reckless," Leighton observed calmly. "It is therefore possible that he might not have thought of the grave danger to which he has exposed you if I had not directed his attention to it. But his perception once roused, he was, I assure you, prompt to act."

"Or you were prompt to act," said Princess Nadine. "But I cannot think that there is any necessity for transferring these papers to you. No one is less likely to be suspected of any connection with conspirators or revolutionists than myself."

"That was your cousin's excuse for leaving the papers with you," said Leighton. "But I pointed out some facts to him which should be equally plain to you. In the first place there seems to be no doubt that his connection with revolutionary affairs is known, and that only his abrupt departure from Paris saved him from arrest. His escape must, however, by this time be discovered, and it will be exceedingly easy to trace him not only to Nice but to this house. Here he disappears. What follows then, in the second place? Why, probably suspicion of yourself, Princess Nadine."

Princess Nadine looked at him haughtily. "That is impossible," she said. "My sentiments, my loyalty, are too well known."

"Allow me to remind you that you have, in the eyes of the police, not only received and sheltered your cousin, but arranged his escape. There is, then, sufficient reason to suspect you of having his papers, and if they are found in your possession do I need to tell you that no expression of loyalty would save you from very serious results?"

"They will not be found," said she confidently. "Even if stupid suspicion could go so far as to search for them—"

"Pardon me, Princess, but would the suspicion be very stupid which, supposing you to have those papers, searched for them here?"

She could not refrain from a smile. "Perhaps not," she admitted. "But stupid or otherwise, if such a search should be made — which I believe incredible — the papers would not be found. Of that you may be sure."

"Have you destroyed them?"

"No, I should not feel at liberty to do that."

"Then you cannot possibly be sure that they would not be found. I must beg you, therefore, to bring them to me at once. Do not delay, there is no time to be lost."

His voice was urgent, even peremptory, but Princess Nadine made no movement to comply with his request. On the contrary, she remained perfectly still, while her eyes dwelt on him with an expression of surprise, as if she were confronted by something altogether new and strange to her experience.

This absolute disregard would have been extremely disconcerting to another man, but it only served to rouse Leighton into stronger self-assertion. What he felt at the moment was not so much that he must have the papers, as that he must impose his will upon this woman. He leaned forward and unconsciously frowned a little. His voice sank to a lower key — a key of great apparent gentleness, but which few people had ever failed to obey.

"There is no time to be lost," he repeated. "Bring me the papers immediately."

But still Princess Nadine did not stir, nor did her gaze turn from his.

"I appreciate your solicitude on my behalf," she said quietly; "but please understand, once for all, that I do not recognise any necessity for it, and that I have no intention of giving you those papers."

Leighton stared at her for a moment, incredulous, almost uncomprehending. "You have no intention of giving them to me?" he repeated. "But have I not explained to you why you must do so? Have you not understood?"

"Perfectly, I think," she replied with the same composure. "I understand all that you have explained — and more." Her eyes and her voice seemed suddenly to gather deeper meaning. "I understand everything, Mr. Leighton," she said imperatively, "and I shall not give those papers up, except to my cousin or to some one with an undoubted right to them."

He pointed to the letter in her hand. "Does not that give me a right to them?"

She hesitated a moment, then answered: "No, for I am forced to remember the circumstances under which my cousin wrote this letter. He was not only on your yacht, indebted to you for rescue and hospitality, but you had also excited his fears for my safety. This being the case, what could he do but yield to your suggestion, for I am sure that the arrangement made in this letter was at your suggestion—"

Her pause was sufficiently interrogative for him to feel bound to say, "It was at my suggestion, because I saw the danger in which his rashness had placed you."

"And I repeat again that I appreciate your solicitude," she replied with an indefinable accent which conveyed to him that she rather resented it; "but since I do not recognise any need for it, I cannot comply with my cousin's request, which is in point of fact your request, to give up the papers he entrusted to me."

"In other words," said Leighton, gripping hard the arm of the chair in which he sat — an outward sign of the inward force he was compelled to exert in order to retain his composure — "you intend me to understand that you do not trust me."

"So far from intending you to understand anything of the kind," she replied, "I should be glad if you would regard my decision differently."

He made a quick, almost fierce gesture. "Let us have done with phrases and come to realities," he said. "It is possible you would prefer that I should be obtuse enough not to understand. But I read your thoughts as clearly as if you spoke them, and they are these: 'Here is a man who has had the presumption to conceive a passion for me'—"

She made an indignant motion, but he went on without heeding her:

"'He has already placed me under an obligation which is distasteful to me, and he now wishes to obtain possession of papers so compromising, so dangerous, that he can hold them over me as a threat, if I refuse what he desires. I will not put this power in his hands.' *That*, Princess Nadine, is what you are saying to yourself. You cannot deny it."

The princess rose to her feet. "I have no intention of denying it," she said. "And the fact that you have clearly divined what I feel proves that there is reason for my feeling it. Since you insist upon knowing the truth in all its apparent brutality, take it: your presumption is so great that I do not trust you."

There was a pause. When she rose, Leighton had risen also, and they now faced each other like two duellists. But the man, whose life had been one long battle, still preserved his self-control in this strange conflict.

"I owe you thanks for the truth," he said at length, with a dignity which compelled her recognition. "When it is necessary for two human souls to know each other, whatever tends to strip away pretence and disguise is welcome. So much is gained, then, when you acknowledge that you fear to trust me because you know that I love you."

"I acknowledge nothing of the kind," she cried. "I spoke of presumption: I said nothing of — love."

"And what is the presumption but the love? You are so convinced of the existence of this that you are afraid I will use the power given me by possession of these papers to urge my suit upon you. And I — how can I convince you of the great injustice you do me? If I recognise no great presumption in my love for you—"

"But it *is* presumption!" she interposed.

"I would none the less scorn to owe anything to any service which I had been so happy as to be able to render you. I have welcomed the opportunity to serve you, because it opened a way by which I could approach you, and through which I hoped you might learn to know me—"

"I have no desire to know you," said the princess, her voice trembling with indignant anger. "You have forced yourself upon me with an incredible audacity, and I detest the obligation under which you have laid me. I could not refuse your help for my cousin — I was forced to accept that, bitter as it was to me. But I utterly refuse your aid for myself. You are not a man to whom I choose to owe anything. If the police were at the door, I would say the same thing. I will not trust you with those papers."

"This is your last word?" Leighton asked, still with great effort preserving his calmness.

"This is my last word."

"Then I must go and find a means to aid you in spite of yourself. I have the honour to bid you good-day, Princess."

CHAPTER X

The Uses Of A Butterfly

LEIGHTON left the Villa Zorokoff with the same composure of appearance and manner which he had preserved throughout the interview just ended. But it was a composure altogether external. A mist was before his eyes and a noise as of many waters in his ears, as he strode across the marble-paved hall and went out to his car. He gave, no doubt, some order to his chauffeur, for when he presently observed his surroundings he found himself on the road to Nice and being driven at a tremendous pace; but from the time that he left the presence of Princess Nadine he had been conscious of only two things, one an intense sense of misjudgment and insult, the other an equally intense desire to bend and overmaster the woman who had so scornfully refused him trust.

When he regained his ordinary self-control, however, it was to become aware of the fact that her refusal placed him in a position of great difficulty, if not of complete powerlessness. To compel her to give up the papers was clearly impossible, and to one less fertile in expedients it would have appeared also impossible to provide by any other means against the danger which lay for her in their possession. But Leighton was so well aware of his own power of resource, tried and tested as it had been at many a critical moment, that he felt little doubt of his ability to conceive some other plan.

The first which naturally suggested itself was to permit the man, whom Count Alexis's telegram summoned from Paris, to meet the princess, since she could hardly refuse to surrender the papers to him. But Leighton felt a deep reluctance to this course. He was not only sure that there was grave danger of her being compromised by such a visit, but he was honest enough with himself to admit that he did not wish to step aside and resign his leading part to another. More than ever now did he desire to force upon her the perception of his power to help and save her; more than ever did he long to see her turn to him for aid, however unwillingly she should do so. This was the revenge for her scorn for which he yearned, and which in his heart he swore to accomplish.

It seemed an answer to his thoughts that he found awaiting him, when he entered his hotel at Nice, a telegraphic message signed with the name of the man to whom he had that

morning sent Count Alexis's despatch. The message was in cypher, but when he applied the key which had been given him, he found that it said with startling clearness:

"Impossible to comply with request. Am leaving for England. We have been betrayed. Destroy papers immediately."

Having written out these sentences, he sat for some time staring at the sheet of paper on which they stood distinct and black. As he gazed, something else faced him beside the words: it was the unwritten but now imperative question, what was to be done? There was no longer a possibility of turning the matter over to another person. Danger was very close to Princess Nadine, and he alone could save her from it. But what if she still refused to allow him to do so? What if she refused to heed even this warning? She might regard it as merely another attempt on his part to force himself on her notice and make a fresh claim on her gratitude. He could not but own that nothing was more possible, for her voice still rang in his ears as she declared: "I utterly refuse your aid for myself. You are not a man to whom I choose to owe anything. If the police were at the door, I would say the same thing." And if the police were at the door and she did say the same thing, what then? Leighton confessed to himself that he had never before felt so blank a sense of being opposed by a resistance which he was unable to control.

And yet, even as he felt this, he felt also the stern bracing of the muscles, the keen concentration of his faculties, and the stimulation of spirit which had become familiar to him in many a past conflict, and of which he had never been more conscious than when a situation grew desperate and others said, "There is no hope." Now, as on many another occasion, he found it impossible to foretell what he should or could do; but he had still implicit confidence that when the moment for action came, the inspiration which had never failed him would be at his command.

Meanwhile he put aside the message and proceeded to make his toilet for dinner. But by the time this was completed he decided to order dinner served in private, since he wished to avoid notice as much as possible. The order had hardly been given, however, when a card was brought to him. He frowned as he read the name of Alan Despard, then with a clearing brow said,

"Show monsieur up."

A moment later the American entered — easy, debonair, a perfect type of the social butterflies who seem to a grave mind to have no more reason for being than the gay-winged insects they suggest, but whose unconscious usefulness is probably much the same, to carry from one to another something which it is important for the recipient to possess or to know. This at least was the thought in Leighton's mind, as he welcomed his visitor.

"You are just in time to give me the pleasure of your company at dinner," he said. "I'm certain you have not already dined, because the hour is early. But I have an engagement for the evening, so I have ordered dinner served immediately."

"With all my heart," Despard answered, as he sank into a chair. "It is a pleasant surprise to find you," he went on. "I was told to-day that you left Nice yesterday on the *Nereid*."

"It was true," Leighton replied. "A sudden impulse seized me, so I put to sea and spent a pleasant night afloat. But, remembering this morning some necessary affairs, I went ashore, telegraphed, and learned that I must return here to meet a man on important business. So it happens that you find me."

"*A la bonne heure!* It's an ill wind which blows good to no one. By the by, I missed you yesterday at the Villa Zorokoff. How is it that you left so early?"

Leighton shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't find it amusing," he said carelessly. "I was not born for a courtier. The part of gentleman-in-waiting is not suited to my taste."

"But it hardly seems the part you played," Despard returned. "Every one was talking about the manner in which you carried the princess away from her royal suitor. It was said that, judging from the length of her absence, you were either able to interest her, or else that it required some time to give you the rebuke which your presumption was supposed to deserve."

"Ah!" The bronzed face did not change in expression. "My presumption was supposed to deserve rebuke? Well, no doubt it did, and you will probably be interested to hear that the princess had no hesitation in administering it."

"And you?"

"I gained my point — which was to withdraw her attention from the Serene princeling for a time, and concentrate it on myself — and, that done, I found nothing of sufficient interest to detain me."

Despard regarded him admiringly. "It would be worth while to serve an apprenticeship in revolutions in Central America if the result were to endow one with such superb cheek," he remarked. "There is no telling what the result might have been if you had come upon the scene a little earlier."

"As it is, you think I am too late."

"Think! My dear man, you are as much too late as if Princess Nadine were already Queen of Serabia."

"Has her engagement to Prince Maximilian been announced?"

"Not yet, but the prince is dining at Villa Zorokoff to-night, and the announcement of the engagement will no doubt be made immediately. After the dinner there is to be a carnival dance, to which I have the honour of being invited. It is rather an impromptu affair, but, apart from the fact that invitations to Villa Zorokoff are never declined, all those who belong to the great world are immensely interested in the impending alliance and are going in the expectation of offering their congratulations."

"Expectation certainly seems very confident," Leighton remarked.

"Naturally," Despard told him. "The thing is as clearly understood as if it had been announced. There simply isn't a shadow of doubt about it. But if there were," he added with the air which made those who knew him prick up their ears for some bit of interesting news or gossip, "the appearance of a man of whom I caught a glimpse as I entered this hotel would assure me that all we have heard is true."

"Ah!" Leighton glanced at him keenly. "And, if I may ask, who is the man whose appearance carries so much meaning?"

"One of whom probably you have never heard, but who is well known nevertheless. Stanovitch, of the Russian embassy in Paris."

"An attaché?"

"He would no doubt tell you that he is; and, using the term in a wide sense, he might be accurately called so. He is certainly attached to the embassy, though not in an openly official capacity. There are hints of his being an agent of the police, but the general impression is that he is more of a diplomatic agent — one of those who are sent wherever there is something to be arranged in diplomatic affairs in which high personages cannot appear."

"I see." Leighton spoke meditatively. "And you draw the conclusion that his presence at Nice means—?"

"That he has been sent to meet Prince Maximilian, and make the final arrangements about Serabia. It can't mean anything else."

"Isn't there a possibility that some other affair might bring him?"

"My dear fellow" — Despard's tone was full of the superiority of one who enlightens natural and rather amusing ignorance — "what other affair would be likely to bring Stanovitch here just now? He is clearly sent to give Prince Maximilian the assurance of Russia's support, to obtain whatever guarantee of supporting Russian interests in the Balkans the prince on his part is to furnish, and to bestow the imperial sanction on the alliance with Princess Nadine Zorokoff."

"Your knowledge of these matters is so much greater than that of a barbarian like myself that of course it cannot be questioned," Leighton remarked in a tone of irony too subtle to be detected. "If the appearance of this man means what you think—"

"It can't possibly mean anything else."

"Then no doubt the engagement of the princess is, or will soon be, an accomplished fact, and I have indeed arrived too late."

"You might," Despard suggested with a laugh, "console yourself with the charming cousin."

Leighton shook his head. "We've taken each other's measure, the charming cousin and I," he said, "and whatever passages there may be between us, will assuredly not be in the line of love-making. But here is dinner at last; and while we dine you can tell me what are the particular carnival features of the dance at Villa Zorokoff, which I am not to have the pleasure of attending."

"The chief carnival feature is that one has the liberty of appearing in costume and mask," Despard replied, "and since there are always amusing possibilities of one kind or another in masquerading, it is pretty certain that gay society will take full advantage of the opportunity offered to amuse itself. A pity you are not going!"

"Quite so," Leighton agreed. "Especially since masquerading has always had a particular attraction for me."

CHAPTER XI

Masquerading

If the fêe at Villa Zorokoff was in a measure impromptu, as Despard had said, there was certainly no sign of this fact in the brilliant aspect which the house and its spacious grounds presented. Especially when viewed from the sea, the villa had the look of a fairy palace of light, crowning its stately terrace, which was also illuminated with arches and clusters of lights, while the gardens below glowed with lines of fire, bringing out the dim, mysterious masses of their palms and cypresses, their thickets of oleander, orange, and magnolia, through which the statue-set avenues opened like ways of enchantment. The landing-stage, at the end of one of these avenues, was lighted by two tall electric lamps, which sent their radiance streaming far out over the dusky purple water, although it seemed hardly probable that any of the guests would prefer arriving by sea to the convenience of carriages and motor-cars on a perfect road.

One (self-invited) guest who did arrive in this manner, however, thought how preferable it was to the other when, on rounding a rocky point, the fairy-like spectacle of the brilliant palace, hanging above its magical gardens, burst on the vision. Even the boatmen rested on their oars to utter exclamations of admiration, while the domino-shrouded man seated in the stem of the boat scanned eagerly the sea-wall and landing-stage, and noted with satisfaction the absence of any figures on either. Evidently it was possible to make an entirely unperceived entrance into the grounds, and, with the familiar thrill of pleasure which with him always accompanied any adventurous risk, Leighton said impatiently, "*Avanti! Avanti!*" and a few minutes later the boat drew up beside the marble steps. Stepping ashore, he turned and spoke in Spanish to a man who remained in the boat.

"I have decided that, instead of waiting here, you had better go back to Nice, Antonio," he said.

"Very well, señor," the man, who was a Central American, and his own servant, replied. "And when shall I return?"

"In about two hours," Leighton answered. "If I am not on the steps here, do not come up to the landing-place. Lie off in the shadow of the point yonder, until I call you to approach by the usual signal."

"Si, se ñor," the man returned, in the tone of a soldier, which in fact he had been until, struck by his intelligence and adaptability, Leighton had taken him into his service, and employed him for many purposes not usually counted among the duties of a servant.

In obedience to his orders the boat pushed off, and was soon lost to sight as it passed out of the radiance of the lamps, although the rhythmical dip of the oars came back for some time to the ear of the man left standing alone on the landing-stage. As the sound finally died away, he seemed to rouse to action, and, fastening on a mask, which, together with the domino, effectually concealed his identity, turned and took his way toward the villa.

When he drew near the brilliantly lighted façade, the strains of dance music told him that the ball was in progress. Mounting the steps of the terrace, he drew near one of the windows of a great white-and-gold *sala*, now transformed into a ballroom, where, himself unperceived, he could observe the gay scene within.

The gayest of gay scenes it was, with the carnival note in its gaiety, for most of the dancers were in costume, and almost all were masked. It was like a picture of the Renaissance — the brilliant, fantastic figures framed by the splendid room — and from his position in the shadow outside the window Leighton perceived much which would have amused and interested him at another time, but just now he was too preoccupied in mind, too possessed by one dominant desire, to be conscious of either amusement or interest. Over the shifting throng his keen glance passed again and again, in search of a presence which it failed to discover. He felt certain that if Princess Nadine were present, even masked, he would recognise her, and it was some time before the thought occurred to him that she was probably still engaged elsewhere in receiving her guests.

It was as he reached this conclusion that his attention was suddenly struck by the tones of a familiar voice. Two figures had paused near the window where he was standing, one of whom he had no difficulty in identifying as Lord Uxmoor, while the other — a slender, graceful woman, wearing a Cinquecento costume and a small black mask — he might have guessed to be Clare Hazleton even before her voice, with its American accent, fell on his ear.

"Oh, this is impossible!" she exclaimed petulantly. "You can't — really. Lord Uxmoor, you can't dance at all! We had better give up the attempt, and sit down somewhere."

"I'm awfully sorry," Lord Uxmoor replied apologetically. "I know I'm a poor dancer, but there's — er — some compensation for my awkwardness."

"I don't know what it can be," Clare returned, unless you consider it a compensation to tread on my feet, tear my frock, and try my temper."

"No, no," he assured her. "I'm really most awfully sorry for all that. The compensation is — er — the pleasure of sitting out the dance with you."

"You should have told me that you preferred sitting-out to dancing," Clare answered in an unmollified tone. "I'd have taken your word that you couldn't dance without being torn to pieces."

"I'm really most awfully sorry," Uxmoor repeated contritely. "Where shall we go?"

"Oh, anywhere." She glanced around vaguely. The terrace?" — in answer to a suggestion — "No, my partner for the next dance mightn't be able to find me—"

"So much the better!" Uxmoor remarked, making a step toward the window.

"For you perhaps," she returned, detaining him, "but not for me, since I adore dancing — with a good partner. We won't go outside, therefore, but we may find a quiet spot where you can recover your breath and I my temper, yonder."

She nodded in the direction of a smaller room, one of a suite opening from the grand *sala*, and, with her companion, moved away toward it. As Leighton watched them, it occurred to him that possibly the princess might be in this apartment, and he passed along the terrace to one of the windows which commanded it. He found, however, that the room into which he looked was empty, save for the presence of Miss Hazleton and Lord Uxmoor, who meanwhile entered and sat down in a plant-screened comer.

"After all," the former observed a little more graciously, as she leaned back with an air of relief, "it *is* pleasant to be quiet for awhile."

"It's — er — delightful," Lord Uxmoor solemnly remarked.

"And so lively!" Clare added, with hardly subdued sarcasm, after waiting for a minute.

"It's always lively for me where you are," he answered, "though of course I know that you can't feel in the same way, because I 'm an awfully dull fellow—"

"You've said that of yourself before," she interrupted, "and I told you then that it isn't true. You are quite entertaining sometimes, and always good-natured— which is much more than I am."

"I shouldn't like to see you different in the least from what you are," Uxmoor answered with unmistakable sincerity.

"Then we don't agree at all," she returned, "for I should like to see myself very different in many respects."

"For example?" he asked, leaning toward her, elbow on knees, with an air of deep interest.

"Oh, for example," she answered lightly, "I should like to be a Russian princess."

Disgust appeared on Uxmoor's countenance.

"Can't see why you should wish that," he growled. "Russia's a beastly country."

"Well, wishing can't make me one," Clare replied indifferently, "so it doesn't matter."

There was another brief pause, and then —

"Why not wish that you were — er — an English countess?" Uxmoor inquired.

The listener outside the window realised that the conversation had reached a point at which it was incumbent upon him to efface himself; but curiosity made him delay a little longer, to hear Clare's answer to this significant question. It came quickly, in a tone of asperity:

"Because all such wishes are idle and foolish."

Uxmoor shook his head.

"Not all," he said. "That wish can be — er — fulfilled if you like."

"Oh, but suppose I don't know what I like," she cried hastily. "Please don't talk such utter nonsense. Lord Uxmoor!"

"There is no nonsense about it," Lord Uxmoor replied stoutly. "I'm quite in earnest. I — Oh, confound it! here's somebody coming in!"

It was a man wearing the dress of Mephistopheles who entered the room at the moment. He was masked, but Leighton knew that was to be Despard's costume, and he waited to see how this always ready person would deal with the situation. His impulse plainly was to pass on to the ballroom, for, recognising Uxmoor, he knew who his companion must be, but Clare stopped him by a beckoning gesture.

"What are you bidding for souls to-night, Signor Mephistopheles?" she inquired, as he approached in obedience to her summons.

"Always that which the soul desires most," Mephistopheles replied. "Wealth, rank, love—whatever is most tempting to it."

"It seems that love stands last on your list of temptations," she mocked gaily.

"My list is like an ecclesiastical procession — the greatest comes last," he said.

"The greatest!" she echoed. "Does that mean the most effective?"

He shrugged his shoulders in Mephistophelian fashion.

"It is not possible to say that it is always the most effective," he answered. "Everything depends on the predominant inclination of the person to be tempted."

She put her head on one side, her eyes shining with mirth through her mask.

"Now I wonder how you would proceed to tempt me?" she observed. "Can you possibly guess my predominant inclination? You may sit down and make the attempt, while Lord Uxmoor is kind enough to get me something to drink."

Lord Uxmoor rose a little stiffly. It was evident that he did not like being sent off in this manner; but to refuse was impossible, so he moved away in the direction of the refreshment room, while Mephistopheles looked after him with another significant shrug of the shoulders.

"Most charming of maids," he said, as he took the vacated seat, "are you quite sure that you are acting with the wisdom which should govern even charming maids in their relation to an eligible *parti*?"

Clare laughed.

"That is a very characteristic speech," she said, "whether one regards it as coming from Mephistopheles or from Mr. Despard."

"In other words it is equally suitable to either," said Despard. "You are as flattering as you are discerning. By the way, how did you detect me?"

"By your voice first," she replied, "and secondly by your admonition. That is so like you! Of course I know that Lord Uxmoor is an immensely eligible *parti*—"

"Oh, no!" Despard shook his head. "You can't really know how eligible, or you wouldn't hesitate to accept him."

"Why do you think that I am hesitating?"

"Because the engagement isn't announced. Any one can see Uxmoor's condition with half an eye."

Clare laughed again, and then, looking at her fan, remarked meditatively,

"I suppose he is really a very great match."

"If you had spent a season in London you'd know how great!" Despard told her. "And if you knew how rare it is for a man of his fortune to marry an American, you'd be more flattered than you are!" he added impressively.

"As far as that goes, I am flattered — tremendously," she declared. "But even you must admit that he is — is—"

"Awfully stupid," Despard admitted, "but you can't have everything, you know. Think of the Uxmoor castles and jewels, and the splendid house in London with yourself reigning in it."

"Dear Mephistopheles, I do think of those things," she assured him, "but I also think that there is something else I would like even better."

Mephistopheles regarded her severely.

"It can't be," he said, "that you mean my last temptation?"

"I mean just that," she avowed. "You have said that one can't have everything, but I want everything — not only castles and jewels and rank, but love also."

"It's impossible," he informed her sternly. "You simply can't have it, and the other things too."

"Why not?" she demanded, with a note of defiance.

"Because it is opposed to the unalterable nature of human arrangements," he answered. "You can take the love, or the castles and jewels and rank, but you can't have both. You've got to choose."

"But I won't choose," she declared. "That is, I won't give up either. I want all."

"So" (sarcastically) "do a good many other people, but they recognise the inevitable, and in the end they — choose."

"From the time I was so high," Clare remarked, holding her hand about two feet from the floor, "I have always had what I wanted, and I mean to have it now."

"All for love, and the world well lost' — eh?" he queried, still sarcastically.

"Not a bit of it," she replied coolly. "I am quite as ambitious as the other American women who come over here and marry for rank. I intend to have all that they have — and the other thing besides."

"It's impossible!" he repeated. "You may take my word that you'll never manage it."

"I shall manage it, if things only happen as I want them to happen," she returned.

"But they never do, you know," he admonished her. "We've all got to take 'em as they are and make a wise choice. Look at Princess Nadine — she's making one!"

"She's doing nothing of the kind," Clare retorted sharply. "There's no choice — that is, no sacrifice of anything she wants — demanded of her. Everything has come, or is coming, to her feet. I often think she has more than is fair!"

"There seems no doubt that she has Prince Maximilian at any rate," Despard observed. "By the by, I was doubtful whether or not to offer congratulations. Has the engagement been announced?"

"Not yet, but of course it will be soon," Clare replied. "Whatever word has yet to be said, either by the prince or by Nadine, will probably be said to-night. It is only a form, you know."

"An important form, however, with which perhaps Stanovitch's arrival may have something to do."

Clare turned on him a quick glance of surprise.

"Whose arrival?" she asked.

"Stanovitch — man from the Russian embassy in Paris," Despard answered. "Do you know — or have you ever chanced to hear of him?"

"Stanovitch!" she repeated. "I think I met some one of the name at a ball at the Russian Embassy before we left Paris — but he isn't here."

"There you are mistaken. He is very much here. As I arrived, I saw him ushered by the groom of the chambers into the boudoir of the princess. His appearance at this juncture is significant."

"Of what?"

"Why, of the final arrangements for the alliance of course, although it seems a little odd that he should come to see the princess — and at such a time."

"It *is* odd," Clare assented. She sat for a moment staring at the man who had, quite unconsciously to himself, for the second time that evening carried the news of this arrival to a person whom it deeply concerned. "And you say that he is in the boudoir of the princess — now?"

"I saw him conducted there a few minutes ago."

"And Nadine?"

"Is or was with Mrs. Wentworth still receiving tardy guests like myself in the Louis Quinze *sala*."

Clare rose to her feet.

"I must go and tell her about this man," she said. "I am sure there has been some stupid mistake. Ah, here comes Lord Uxmoor at last, so I needn't detain you longer from the ball-room, where Mephistopheles can't fail to be *persona grata*."

CHAPTER XII

A Diplomatic Agent

IT was because he found himself distinctly amused by the conversation between Despard and Miss Hazleton — to which there seemed no reason why he should not listen — that Leighton had continued to linger at the window near which they sat, and so learned of the arrival at the villa of the agent from the Russian Embassy in Paris.

The news immediately roused in him a renewed sense of the apprehension which he had felt when Despard first mentioned the man in his apartment at Nice. Then he had thought it merely possible that his business might relate to the affairs of Count Alexis Zorokoff, rather than to those of Prince Maximilian and Serabia; but now he was quite certain that such was the case,

since on no other conceivable theory could this visit to Princess Nadine be explained. An anathema at his own delay rose to Leighton's lips. If he could have seen and spoken to the princess before the coming of the man, she would not only have been warned of his presence in Nice, but might perhaps have been induced to reconsider her resolution about the papers, in the light of the despatch which he had brought to show to her. He blamed himself for having lingered outside the villa, in the hope of finding an opportunity to speak to her unobserved, instead of boldly entering and making the opportunity in his accustomed fashion. He smiled a little cynically as he thought of the motto he had quoted to her as his own on their first meeting. "Not much of '*toujours l'audace*' in skulking outside windows," he told himself. "Why didn't I go in, make my way to her, and force her to listen to me!"

It was now, however, too late to adopt this course, and skulking seemed for a little longer not only advisable but necessary. He must proceed cautiously if he hoped to serve the princess in what he feared was a dangerous situation; and the first essential was to learn if possible what had brought M. Stanovitch to Villa Zorokoff. In what part of the house the boudoir to which the latter had been conducted was situated, he had naturally not the least idea. But in the hope that it might be, not only on the ground-floor of the villa — so much indeed seemed certain — but also with windows overlooking the gardens and sea, he passed rapidly along the terrace, glancing into many apartments, and presently, with a leaping heart, found what he was in search of.

For there could be no doubt that the charming room into which he finally looked, with its satin-wood furniture, its white rugs, its great jars of roses, its softly shaded lamps and exquisite appointments of every kind, was the boudoir of the princess. It was not only beautiful and luxurious, with an altogether feminine touch in all its details, but it seemed to Leighton's fancy that Princess Nadine had set the stamp of her own individuality upon it, and created a fitting shrine for the rare and delicate loveliness which it suggested. And if its appearance had not convinced him that this was the room of which Despard had spoken, all possibility of doubt would have been ended by the sight of the man who was the only occupant of the apartment.

This man was standing before a picture which hung on the wall — a lovely water-colour of the Riviera coast — in the attitude of a connoisseur, his hands clasped behind his back, and his whole air expressive of critical appreciation and enjoyment. He was of rather distinguished appearance, with a subtle mingling of the military and the diplomatic in his aspect. His erect bearing, carefully trimmed and upward curling moustache, and perfection of dress suggested the first, but the inscrutable, expressionless countenance, and the keen yet veiled glance of the eyes, under their half-closed lids, indicated one trained in diplomacy, with perhaps a vague suggestion of the detective.

He was still regarding the picture as intently as the unseen observer was regarding himself, when the door opened and Princess Nadine entered the room.

She was a dazzling vision, in her splendid dress and shining jewels, and it seemed to Leighton that her beautiful head was carried on the slender neck a little more proudly than usual. If she felt any apprehension in meeting this strange visitor, her manner showed no trace of it. She entered with the perfect ease and grace of a woman to whom, in the security of her lofty station, fear in any form is unknown; and as he looked at her Leighton was conscious of an instant conviction that she would be able to hold her own in whatever contest lay before her. The man, who turned at the sound of the opening door, bowed deeply.

"Princess," he said in a tone of the utmost deference, "it is kind of you to permit me to recall myself to your recollection, and to see me in this manner."

"I remember you very well, M. Stanovitch," the princess replied, with an air at once courteous and reserved, "and because you have sent me" — she glanced at a card which she held in her hand — "this urgent request for an interview, I am here, although I cannot but think the request is made at a very strange time."

"I am well aware of that," M. Stanovitch replied, "and deeply regret the necessity for my intrusion. If I could have deferred my visit, believe me I should have done so, but the urgency of

the matter left me no alternative. For I have come from Paris to see you, and I am acting under the direct instructions of the Russian ambassador."

The watcher outside, who had guardedly drawn near the open window, so that he heard every word of the conversation, looked at the princess and saw that the expression of her face did not change, save that a faint shade of surprise came into it.

"You come from — the ambassador?" she repeated with an accent of interrogation.

"Precisely, Princess," M. Stanovitch replied. "Since you are good enough to remember me, you remember also, no doubt, that I am an attaché of the embassy, and I may inform you that my duties are of a very private and confidential nature."

The princess bent her head.

"I am waiting," she said, "to hear how these duties of yours, monsieur, have brought you to see me."

"I come, as I have stated, by the orders of his Excellency," was the answer, "to bring you a message from himself. Before delivering it, however, permit me to say that we are aware of the departure from Paris of your cousin. Count Alexis Zorokoff, and we know that he reached Nice yesterday."

The princess looked at him calmly. "Surely," she said, "my cousin is at liberty to leave Paris whenever he chooses to do so."

M. Stanovitch smiled. "That is a question which we will not discuss," he replied. "It is possible that his liberty at this particular time might have been curtailed a little had he not acted so quickly. But the point which concerns us is that he came to this house when he reached Nice yesterday."

"Yes," the princess answered quietly. "He came here, but remained only a short time. He is not here now."

M. Stanovitch bowed. "I am aware of that also," he said. "But we are interested in Count Alexis's movements and should like to know where he went when he left here."

"That," replied the princess, "I am unable to tell you. My cousin did not mention his destination when leaving."

"Ah!" commented M. Stanovitch. "It was evident that he had not expected any other reply. He paused, but only for an instant, before going on. "Count Alexis has been very imprudent," he then said slowly. "He has contracted some friendships, been amusing himself with some associations, which are — let us say, ill-advised. But he is young; and those interested in him are anxious that he shall not suffer from what is merely a passing folly. Therefore every opportunity will be given him to retrace his steps. This is the first thing which I have to tell you."

The princess looked at him now with something like gratitude in her brilliant eyes. "To retrace one's steps is often so difficult that I am glad to know that it will be made easy for my cousin," she said. "It is true, as you say, monsieur, that he is very young and foolish."

"Also incredibly imprudent," repeated M. Stanovitch. "That he should have come here, and in a manner compromised you, was inexcusable. But for us it is a convenience. We are well aware that he would not have come without some very important motive. Into that motive we shall not inquire — at present. It is enough that we have no doubt that you have means of communication with him, and are able, therefore, to transmit a message to him."

Again he paused, as if for her assent; but she made no reply in words; only her silence seemed to admit the correctness of his supposition.

"We have reason to believe," continued the suave voice, "that Count Alexis had with him, when he left Paris, certain papers. Those papers have a value to the Russian government, and also to himself. What their exact value is to the government I need not say: but their value to Count Alexis is easily stated. We may call it — forgetfulness. If he surrenders them, he may rest assured that his late follies will be forgotten."

"Otherwise?" asked the princess, calmly.

M. Stanovitch shrugged his shoulders. "Otherwise," he replied, "he cannot hope to return to Russia, and if he remains in any country where our police can reach him, it is likely that he will make acquaintance with the interior of the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul."

The princess looked down, closing and unclosing with deliberation a fan which she held in her hand.

"And is this the message which you wish transmitted to my cousin, monsieur?" she asked.

"That is the message for him," M. Stanovitch replied. "For yourself" — she looked up quickly — "I have another. His Excellency, from his deep, I might almost say fatherly, interest, sends you a warning. You will pardon me if I put it briefly, in order that it may be clearly comprehended."

"The more brief and the more clear you are, monsieur, the better pleased I shall be," said the princess with proud quietness.

"Briefly, then, it will be well for you to clear yourself as soon as possible of any suspicion which from your cousin's visit might unfortunately attach to you; and the obvious way to do this is to use your influence to induce him to comply with the wishes of the government. Those papers must be given up. If perhaps" — and how searching was the glance of the keen eyes half veiled by their lids — "he was so imprudent as to leave them with you, before continuing his flight, the only course open to you, for his interest as well as your own, is to surrender them at once. His Excellency entertains no doubt that your loyalty to the emperor would in such a case immediately lead you to do so."

"His Excellency is very kind," the princess murmured, her eyes again dropped to the toy of lace and carved ivory which she held. "But if I am unable to comply with his suggestion —?"

"Then," said M. Stanovitch, "if there is reason to suppose that you might have complied and failed to do so, a word from Petersburg might reach Prince Maximilian of Altenberg, withholding approval of certain hopes and wishes of his. I hardly think that I need be more explicit."

"No," returned the princess, and now her eyes were lifted, full, dazzling, defiant, "it is unnecessary. I comprehend your meaning perfectly."

"Yet one point further should perhaps be made clear," the suave tones went on. "The prince would probably also hear that if he persisted in his — er — intentions, Russia would decline to support him as a candidate for the throne of Serabia."

"Is that all, monsieur?" the princess asked, sweeping him with a scornful glance.

"That is all," M. Stanovitch said, again bowing deeply, "and I need detain you no longer from your guests. With your permission I shall have the honour of seeing you to-morrow, when I hope you will have decided to give us the benefit of your assistance in this important affair."

CHAPTER XIII

"I Will Give Them To You"

PRINCESS NADINE remained quite motionless after M. Stanovitch left the room, and as she stood gazing at the spot he had occupied it is possible that her thoughts returned to another man who a few hours earlier had offered help which she refused. Perhaps she had a vision of the face on which fear had never traced a single line, the face of one whom no emergency would find unprepared. But if so, such mental vision hardly prepared her for the reality of the presence which met her gaze when a slight noise caused her to turn, and she saw Leighton entering by the window from the terrace outside.

"You have good nerves. Princess," he said. "If I had not felt sure of that I should not have risked an entrance in this manner. But the opportunity of speaking with you was not to be lost, now that you know in what danger you stand."

"You have heard?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I have heard every word of your conversation with the man who has just gone out. I do not apologise for what was an unpleasant necessity. It was essential that I should hear it, in order to learn how best to serve you."

"Did you know that he would be here — this police-agent, who calls himself an attaché?"

"No," Leighton answered. "I was only so fortunate as to arrive simultaneously with him, and I could not afford to lose, for a punctilio, knowledge which might be useful. We will not waste time in discussing what he said. The only question of immediate importance is, do you now recognise the necessity of trusting me?"

It was an abrupt question, and Princess Nadine hesitated before answering it. As she hesitated there flashed into her mind the memory of those words of hers which Leighton so well remembered: "I utterly refuse your aid. You are not a man to whom I choose to owe anything. If the police were at the door, I should say the same thing." Arrogant, scornful words — words which, spoken in return for service offered, it was permissible to regret. But was it possible to ignore them, and accept in the moment of danger what had been contemptuously rejected in the moment of security? It was characteristic of the woman that she said to herself that it was not possible, and it was equally characteristic of Leighton that he caught the reply from her eyes before her lips uttered it.

"Don't answer me now," he said. "I see that you are not ready to do so. Take a little time to consider; and only believe that I have forgotten, utterly wiped out of my mind, all that was said when we last met. I am simply a man who is ready to serve you, and who has perhaps a little more power than most men to do so. It will be well if you decide to trust me — well for others besides yourself; but I will not urge you further, lest my motives should be again misunderstood."

The dignity and sincerity of these words could not be mistaken, and as the princess looked at him, the impression which he made upon her when she saw him first — the impression of strength, keenness, fearlessness — was revived and deepened. She was conscious of an influence which seemed to emanate from him and make the trust he asked not only possible but imperative. Something within her seemed to leap up in sympathetic response to his bold self-reliance, yet the same instinct which assured her of his power to accomplish whatever he undertook, warned her that to accept his help was to give him a claim upon her which even she might later hardly be able to disallow.

"I am sorry," she said at length, with her most princess-like air, "if I misunderstood the motives of which you speak. I wonder if you will believe that it is not because I have learned the reality of the danger of which you warned me, that I regret the form of my refusal to do what you asked of me when I saw you last."

"You mean that your regret is only for the form of the refusal?" he asked.

"For the form — yes," she answered.

He smiled slightly. "My regret was for the matter," he said. "But let us put all question of regret aside, and come to that which is of vital importance now. You do recognise the reality of the danger of which I warned you, and therefore you know how unsafe it is for you to keep those papers longer in your possession. Well, here is your warrant to destroy them."

He gave her the telegram he had received from Paris, together with its deciphered translation.

"This message," he said, "explains why I have been lurking outside your windows, like a burglar or a conspirator. When, on my return to Nice, I received the despatch, I saw that the situation had become very grave, and that it was imperative I should lose no time in communicating with you. But it was a question how to do so. I could not again, within so short a time, present myself openly at your door; and I should probably have waited until to-morrow to

make an attempt to see you, but for the arrival of the man who has just gone out. But when I heard of that arrival, I suspected, or at least feared, the purpose for which he had come. So there seemed nothing to do but to enter your grounds from the sea, present myself, an uninvited guest, at your ball, and trust to chance to secure an opportunity for a word with you. In this Fortune has helped me beyond my hopes."

"But not perhaps beyond your experience," she hazarded.

"No," he replied with a look of surprise for her flash of intuition. "I have come to rely on Fortune because I have never neglected to seize the chances she offers. And so it has been to-night, although the chance has come later than I wished. What I desired was an opportunity to warn you before M. Stanovitch arrived."

"Although I had scorned your other warning!" she said — and then impulsively: "I wonder that you are here! I wonder that you have cared to take so much trouble to warn one who had already refused your aid."

"I am very obstinate," he answered. "Every one who knows me knows that. What I have undertaken I never give up until I have carried it to an end — of one kind or another. But the point to be decided is, will you destroy those papers?"

"No," she answered, "I will give them to you."

A light sprang into the dark eyes which transformed his whole face.

"Thank you for the proof of confidence," he said. "It may perhaps be better to give them to me than to make any other disposition of them — since I take it for granted that you have no intention of surrendering them to the Russian government in order to obtain a pardon for your cousin and a crown for yourself."

"You can," she told him quietly, "take that for granted."

"And yet," Leighton said, regarding her steadily, "you understood, no doubt, the threat couched in the man's last words. Unless you surrender those papers, the brilliant alliance which is now within your grasp — the most brilliant ever made by a woman of American blood — will never be accomplished. The word of Russia being against you, Prince Maximilian will obediently look elsewhere for a bride, and the world will say — need I tell you what the world will say, Princess Nadine?"

He saw from a slight quiver of her lips, a fuller beating of the veins in her slender throat, how great was the tension in which she was holding herself; and, since she did not answer, he continued in a gentler tone:

"It seems brutal to say such things, but I wish you to comprehend exactly the situation in which you are placed. It is not well that you should act hastily, or without fully appreciating the consequences of your action. Do what you will, they are far-reaching consequences. In one case you hand over to a merciless government the secrets of a band of conspirators with whom you have no sympathy—"

She interrupted him passionately. "None — absolutely none! I feel at this moment as if I would like to put my foot upon their necks and crush them! Nevertheless—"

He understood perfectly what she strove to say as her voice choked over the words.

"Nevertheless," he echoed gravely, "you cannot betray them."

"That is it," she said. "I cannot betray them though I despise and hate them. And I must bear the consequences. Is it not hard to be placed in such a position by madness, folly, selfishness incredible?"

"It is hard," Leighton agreed. "But will you allow me to say that, bitter as the sacrifice demanded of you is to your pride and ambition, it may involve less suffering than that which might await you in a marriage where you would only play the part of a pawn in a game of state?"

She turned upon him angrily. "Do you think I would condescend to be no more than that?" she cried. "Do you think I have not the ability to play my own part in the game of which you talk?"

"You have the ability to play any part, to be the most incomparable assistant that man ever had, in the highest game of ambition he ever played," Leighton answered. "But, as I have told you before, you will find no such game to play with Prince Maximilian of Altenberg. There is nothing lofty in his ambition, just as there is nothing disinterested in the motives which make him your suitor."

"How dare you pronounce upon his motives?" she demanded. "What do you know of his character or his heart?"

"Very little," was the cool reply. "But my life has accustomed me to judge men from slight outward indications; and in such judgments I seldom make mistakes. Do you wish to test my judgment of Prince Maximilian, to prove the depth and sincerity of the feeling he offers you?"

"I should not fear to do so," she answered.

"Then here is your chance — fate and M. Stanovitch have given it you — to test him. If he loves you, he has now such an opportunity to prove it as is seldom offered a man in this unromantic age. Tell him that unless you commit a dishonourable act Russia will withhold approval of his alliance with you, and that if he persists in forming that alliance she will withhold her approval of his pretensions to the crown he covets. Tell him that, and see what he will reply."

Involuntarily she shrank a little. "It will be a hard test," she said. "Even you" — she looked at him resentfully — "might feel that, since you too are an ambitious man, and the higher an ambition the harder must be the struggle to resign it."

"Yes," he replied, "I am an ambitious man, but — believe me or not, as you like — I would not hesitate a moment between a kingdom and you. Forgive this personal word. I only want you to realise one man's feeling, in order to help you test another. Believe also that you should scorn to give yourself for less than a man's whole heart, prince and possible king though he be. And if this man assures you that you have his heart, his first and highest devotion, put him now to the proof. Fate, I repeat, has given you the opportunity."

"And I will take it," she said, as if his word were a challenge. "I will test him; for I believe in the sincerity of the devotion he professes. If I did not believe it, his possible crown would not tempt me."

"I am sure of that," Leighton answered. "And if he bears the test worthily, I will acknowledge that for once my ability to judge men has failed. You will then, tell him?"

"Everything, as soon as possible. He is in the house at this moment, you know."

"I know," Leighton said quietly. "I must not therefore detain you longer. Will you give me the papers now?"

"I cannot give them now," she replied. "To get them would require some time, and I have been absent too long already. To-morrow—"

He interrupted her a little sharply. "Is it possible," he said, "that you don't understand yet? To-morrow will not do. Those papers must be out of your hands to-night. If you cannot get them now, will you bring them to me in the garden, when your guests are gone?"

"Yes," she answered. "I will bring them to you. You can wait for me at the fountain where you found me yesterday. Don't grow impatient if the waiting lasts some time."

"I never grow impatient," he told her. "You will find me at the place you have mentioned whenever you come."

A moment afterwards the room was empty.

CHAPTER XIV

Clare Plays Her Game

“BUT it is not possible that M. Stanovitch is going away without even a glance at our carnival masquerade?”

It was a very seductive voice which spoke (in French) through the mask that concealed all save a softly rounded and distinctly youthful chin. As Stanovitch turned quickly — he had been in the act of crossing the hall toward the entrance, where his waiting carriage stood — he saw a richly costumed figure, which had stepped from behind a group of palms and laid on his arm a hand beautifully moulded in its long, perfectly fitting glove.

The invitation of touch and tone was one to which the Russian was peculiarly susceptible. Under his trained impassiveness he possessed not only the Slav love of pleasure and excitement, but that passion for the society of the rich and great which is so frequently characteristic of those who have not been born to it. To turn his back as a social outsider — one who like a servant had accomplished his errand and been dismissed — on the brilliant festivity of Villa Zorokoff, was hard to him; and a word of invitation from the princess, had she been diplomatic enough to offer it, would have been eagerly welcomed. Since this word had not been spoken, however, there seemed no alternative but to take his departure, as he was on the point of doing, when fate intervened in the person of the beguiling fair one who now addressed him.

"Pray believe," he answered, with the utmost sincerity, "that nothing could give me more pleasure than to have a glimpse of your masquerade, but I am here only by accident, and am not fortunate enough to be an invited guest."

"Ah, what difference — since you are here!" the gay, seductive voice replied. "It is the carnival — when everything is permitted, except running away. And *that* is never permitted to a man of gallantry."

"It would hardly be a man at all who could desire to run away from one so charming as yourself," he responded to the challenge of her words and tones.

"Then that settles the point of your going, *n'est-ce pas?*" she laughed. "If you had but a mask now—"

"Oh, for that!" His hand went to his pocket and drew forth a mask. "At the carnival one goes prepared, not knowing what some happy chance may have in store for one."

She nodded approvingly.

"It is what I should have expected of you," she commented. "I cannot imagine any chance, happy or otherwise, finding you unprepared to take advantage of it."

"You are too flattering," he returned, while secretly a good deal puzzled. Who could this woman, with her subtle but unmistakable air of smartest fashion, be, he wondered, who not only knew him so well, but who took the trouble to flatter him? He did not expect such attention in the rarefied atmosphere of Villa Zorokoff, although sufficiently prepared for it in certain other strata of society, where he had not been without his *bonnes fortunes*, "I should prove myself to be wholly lacking in gallantry if I failed to take advantage of the chance which you are good enough to offer me," he told her. "That music sounds irresistible. May I beg for the pleasure of a dance?"

For an instant she hesitated. Her object in detaining him had certainly not been to dance with him; but like many women she had an instinctive knowledge that a man's most vulnerable point is his vanity, and it was essential for her purpose that she should deal adroitly with this man. To please, to flatter, to beguile — all that might help her in the serious business with him which she had in view, and so she again laid her hand with a coquettish air upon his arm.

"The music is quite irresistible, and you are a perfect partner, as I have reason to know," she said. "Therefore, — *allons!*"

A little later a stream of masked, costumed figures poured from the ballroom out upon the wide terrace, filling the soft night air with gay chatter and laughter, and presenting a picturesque, fantastic spectacle — a very carnival masque indeed — as they flitted to and fro in the light of the multitude of coloured lanterns.

Two figures, however, quickly withdrew themselves from the somewhat rampant gaiety and sought one of the many seats, invitingly arranged in various secluded nooks and comers.

"I hardly thought," Stanovitch assured his companion as they sat down, "that my debt to your kindness could be increased, but if to dance with you was delightful, to find myself here with you is more delightful still."

She laughed a little, as she shot a quick glance at him through her mask.

"I wonder," she hazarded lightly, "if all Russians are proficient in the art of saying agreeable things."

"I am afraid I can hardly claim so much for all my countrymen," he answered; "but one may safely conclude that you have known some other Russians who have — said agreeable things."

"Oh, yes," she returned, "you may quite safely conclude as much as that. And I give you leave," she added in the same light tone, "to guess who those Russians were."

In the brief pause which followed this speech something electrical was to be felt in the atmosphere, something like that instant when the foils of two fencers touch for the first time. With a certain familiar quickening of the faculties, though a slight sense of disappointment also, Stanovitch said to himself that he understood now what her advances meant. Whoever she was, she knew or guessed what had brought him to the villa, and her object in detaining him — well, that was the question! What was her object in detaining him? Did she hope to learn something from him — from *him*, Stanovitch! — or had she possibly information herself to give? A subtle but perceptible change had come into his voice when he answered her last words.

"There are many Russians," he observed, "whom one might credit with sufficient good taste to say agreeable things to a lady so fascinating, but our environment seems to suggest one in particular, who is somewhat noted for his susceptibility to feminine charms — Count Alexis Zorokoff."

"My compliments!" she laughed again. "How delightfully acute you are! I confess that I was thinking of Count Alexis — who, by the by, should be here to-night, but unfortunately is absent."

"You are quite sure that he is absent?" Stanovitch queried significantly. "I need hardly remind you that masks and dominos sometimes prove very useful disguises in real life, as well as in fiction."

"Oh, no," — and something in her tone told him that she was speaking the truth — "he is certainly not here. If he were" — again a slight pause — "I should know it."

"Ah!" Stanovitch regarded her keenly. "In that case, since you are quite sure that he is not here, it is possible that you may know where he is."

"And if I do," — the foils were crossed in earnest now — "is there any reason why I should inform you, monsieur?"

"There might be several very good reasons," Stanovitch answered, "but unless I know to whom I am speaking, I can hardly tell which of those reasons would be likely to prove most effective."

"I can easily tell you that," she said quickly. "The reason which would prove most effective would be that which promised most benefit—"

"To Count Alexis?"

"But naturally to him — although I will not deny that what benefited him might conceivably benefit me also."

Stanovitch apparently reflected upon this for a moment before he remarked quietly, "I may understand, then, that I am talking to one who is — something more than a friend, shall I say? — of Count Alexis?"

"I will not only answer that question, but also perhaps others more important," she replied, "if you will tell me frankly whether the business which has brought you here to-night relates to Count Alexis."

"Before I tell you that," Stanovitch said, in what might be called his official rather than his social manner, "It will be absolutely necessary for you to let me know who you are."

"You have no idea who I am?" she asked.

"I confess that I have not the least idea," he answered.

"Then — *me voici!*" she laughed once more as she removed her mask. "And I shall never forgive you if you don't remember me!"

She had been quick enough to guess that there had been one fleeting moment in which Stanovitch was at a loss to recognise the extremely pretty face so abruptly revealed to him. Then the note of nationality enabled him to place her, without, as he flattered himself, perceptible hesitation.

"Could any one who ever had the pleasure of meeting the charming American cousin of the princess possibly forget her?" he asked.

"So you really do remember me," she replied. "Yes, I am Miss Hazleton, the American cousin of the princess, as you have said. Of course this doesn't make me the cousin of Count Alexis, but it gives me a right to be interested in him, does it not?"

"To that question there can be but one answer," Stanovitch replied. "You have every right to be interested in Count Alexis, and I may add that he is a very fortunate man to have inspired such interest."

"Just now one wouldn't call him very fortunate, would one?" Clare queried. "And unless my interest can do him some good — real, practical good, you know — it is not of much account. But when I was told of your arrival, M. Stanovitch —"

"So you were told of it!" Stanovitch interposed. "Might I ask by whom?"

"Oh, by a person of no importance" — if Despard had but heard her! — "I suspected that possibly you had come to make some inquiries about Count Alexis, and it occurred to me that it might be worth while, as well as agreeable, to renew my acquaintance with you."

"Worth while!" Stanovitch repeated. "Your English idioms are a little puzzling to one who speaks the language imperfectly—"

"On the contrary, you speak it quite perfectly," she told him very sincerely.

"But unless I am mistaken," he went on, "the meaning of your phrase is that you thought there was possibly something to be gained by renewing your acquaintance with me."

"You have grasped my meaning exactly," she returned. "I certainly thought — I still think — that there is possibly something to be gained by both of us."

The eyes of the Russian, narrowed under their half-closed lids, were now fastened on her face. "And that something is —?" he inquired.

She made an impatient gesture.

"I am not afraid to speak openly," she said. "You know best what we have to gain — we can, if you like, talk of that later — but what I want is to learn on what terms it is possible for Count Alexis to obtain a pardon for the folly which I can assure you he now deeply regrets. And if you ask me why I am interested in his obtaining this pardon, I reply frankly that I have promised to marry him, if matters can be arranged so that he is able to offer me the position which — er—"

"You would fill so admirably," Stanovitch said, with a bow that was necessary to conceal the flash of satisfaction which he felt in his face. For this was better than he could have ventured to hope! If the girl was engaged to Count Alexis, and anxious to negotiate on his behalf, matters might easily be arranged. Indeed, it occurred to him, in the light of this new knowledge, that it had possibly been a mistake to approach the princess at all. Clearly the attraction which had drawn Count Alexis to Nice was to be found in the seductive person before him; and if the young Russian had left the papers which he carried with anybody, it would be more likely to have been with one who was a foreigner, as well as his betrothed, rather than with the princess.

"I am deeply honoured by your confidence," he then went on, "and I shall offer my sincere congratulations to Count Alexis when I next have the pleasure of meeting him."

Meanwhile, it affords me gratification to assure you that he can very readily obtain the pardon of which you speak. He has only to display a little —common sense shall we say? — and since it is evident that you, mademoiselle, are liberally endowed with that valuable quality, I am sure you will use your influence to induce him to comply with the very easy conditions on which pardon may be secured. "

"You are quite right about my common sense," she remarked, "but I cannot use my influence until I know what the conditions of which you speak are."

"They may be briefly told," Stanovitch said. "When Count Alexis left Paris, he carried with him certain papers of — importance."

"Yes," she assented, with an eagerness which gave whatever assurance of her knowledge he needed.

"Our chief concern," he continued, "is about those papers. We are extremely anxious to secure them, because to do so would enable us to lay our hands on persons far more important than Count Alexis. If, therefore, we can obtain them from him, or from any friend acting on his behalf, I am able to give the assurance that his folly will be forgotten — with the further condition, of course, that it is not repeated."

Clare nodded expressively.

"If matters ever arrange themselves so that I can marry Count Alexis," she said, "you may be quite sure that the folly will not be repeated. But now about those papers — may I ask if you mentioned them to Princess Nadine?"

"The object of my visit was to mention them," Stanovitch answered. "You will perhaps understand that since we were in ignorance of the attraction which, as I now perceive, evidently drew Count Alexis to Nice and to the Villa Zorokoff, the most natural explanation of that rather imprudent step on his part suggested itself as a wish to dispose of the papers which he carried, before leaving the country. And, being only fallible mortals who were not aware of Miss Hazleton's charms, and hardly — you will pardon me! — of her existence, we drew the inference that he might have left them with his cousin, the princess."

"Oh!" Clare suddenly saw so many things that among them she hardly knew how to make her next move. "What did the princess tell you?" she asked breathlessly,

"The princess," Stanovitch replied, "was, as it now appears, rather too diplomatic. She told me nothing at all; but in view of her extreme reticence, and of the fact that she did not deny either knowledge or possession of the papers, I drew the conclusion that she had them."

"And then— ?"

"Well, then," Stanovitch regretfully acknowledged, "I made what I now fear was a mistake. I used a weapon — a threat — which was only to have been employed as a last resort."

"And used it without effect?"

"Without apparent effect, at least."

Clare shook her head disapprovingly.

"You made a great mistake" she assured him, "I don't know the princess very well — having only been with her a short time — but I know her well enough to be certain that you would never accomplish anything by threatening her. What was the threat, by the way? If we are going to work together, you had really better tell me things frankly than give me the trouble of dragging them from you piecemeal. Did you threaten her with Siberia?"

Stanovitch smiled slightly.

"No," he replied. "Princess Nadine Zorokoff is rather too great a personage to be threatened with Siberia. She was only threatened with the possible loss of a higher rank."

"Of — Prince Maximilian and Serabia!"

Clare caught her breath, as she stared at him during a moment in which possibilities like revolving wheels seemed whirling before her mental vision. She had a sense of holding the situation in her hand — and of not knowing exactly what to do with it. Matters were becoming too complicated, even for one who imagined herself possessed of a talent for intrigue. It would be

delicious — oh, but delicious! — to see her cousin disappointed and humiliated by the loss of the brilliant marriage, the exalted rank, which had appeared not only within her reach, but already within her grasp. Clare, who was like a great number of the human race in the fact that she found it difficult to forgive another for possessing so much which was denied to herself, felt as if she could hardly resist playing a game which might bring this desirable result to pass. But if she did, how about Count Alexis and herself? There were many reasons why it would not do to compromise Princess Nadine. She recognised these with a quickness which did credit to her sagacity as far as her own interest was concerned, and with a regretful sense of foregoing a great gratification decided to follow what might in a certain sense be called the straight path — at least the path which led most directly to what she chiefly wanted.

"So you threatened the princess with the loss of her Serene Highness and future king!" she said, with an air of mocking amusement. "How quite too awfully absurd, as my English friends would say! For you really should have known that the princess, who is hoping to be a crowned head herself, would not be likely to aid and abet her cousin in his plots to unsettle the crown of the Tsar — at least I suppose that is the object of them. But of course it would have been too much to expect you also to know that you might — possibly — obtain the papers you want through me."

"I think I could hardly have been expected to know that," Stanovitch remarked, "but I am glad to be assured of it now."

"I shall have some conditions to make on my side, however," she warned him.

"I am ready to hear them," he answered. If you can secure those papers for me, you can make what terms for Count Alexis you please."

"My terms, then," she said, "are, first a pardon, which will enable him to return from the inconvenient and ridiculous exile into which he has gone."

"That," Stanovitch answered, "will be easily granted. Count Alexis is of very little importance as a conspirator; and in case we obtain the papers, I am able, as I have already mentioned, to promise entire forgetfulness of his folly."

"Then," Clare proceeded, "I should like the title of prince for him."

Stanovitch's stare was so astonished that she found herself forced to explain.

"I have always," she remarked, "thought that I should like to be a princess. It sounds better — to American ears — to be called princess than countess."

"Ah, I comprehend!" Stanovitch's smile expressed an amusement which had several causes. The frank expression of that ineradicable love of rank which republicanism has proved so unable to suppress in human nature, whenever human nature has a chance to grasp it, was one; while another was the thought of how Count Alexis's revolutionary associates would be likely to regard the favour asked for him. Of the danger that it would involve, he knew that Clare was ignorant, and it was no part of his duty to enlighten her on that point. His business was to obtain the papers, as speedily as possible, and a few promises — which it might be convenient to disregard later — were easily given.

"But certainly," he assured her. "That can be arranged — after a time."

"And then" — Clare was enumerating her conditions rapidly, with an eye open to possible interruptions — "I am quite certain that there should be a — er — financial consideration. Titles amount to very little without money to support them. I've been in Europe long enough to learn *that*."

Stanovitch regarded her thoughtfully for a moment before he said: —

"I begin to understand, mademoiselle, the extraordinary success of your countrymen. I regret to be forced to bargain with a lady, but your terms strike me as really somewhat exorbitant. Count Alexis will be very fortunate if he escapes without paying a penalty for his folly, but when it comes to a question of reward—"

"That may be true, as far as Count Alexis is concerned," Clare replied, as the speaker paused significantly, "but do I need to remind you that you are not — bargaining, shall we say?"

— with Count Alexis, but with me? It is I who offer the papers you want, and I who have a right therefore to name my terms, which you can accept or reject as you please."

In these slightly insolent words Stanovitch clearly recognised the fact that if he wanted the papers in question — and he certainly wanted them very badly — he had no alternative but to accept the terms, exorbitant as they truly were, of this astonishing young person, who had taken capable charge of Count Alexis's affairs. It hardly required an instant's reflection to show him that he had no weapon of coercion, nor even of intimidation, to use against her. She was outside the limit of his power, great as that power was; his only hold upon her was through her self-interest, taking the form of her fancy — apparently serious — for Count Alexis, and her desire of rank and wealth.

"Before I can either accept or reject your terms, mademoiselle, they must be explicit," he said. "'A financial consideration' is very vague. What price exactly do you want for the papers?"

For the first time Clare hesitated in her reply, and, as she looked at him, Stanovitch saw something — an expression at once doubtful and defiant — in her eyes which made him quite sure that she was about to name a price altogether unreasonable. With a sense of irritation he said to himself that he had been premature in thinking that it would be easy to deal with her, for it was now quite clear that with the impracticability of her sex she united the shrewdness and the grasping proclivities of her nation. But, while he waited a little grimly to hear what she would venture to say, her glance suddenly went beyond him, and her expression changed to one of mingled annoyance and relief.

"Oh," she exclaimed impatiently, "there is some one looking for me whom I can't escape, for he'll never rest until he finds me! So it isn't possible to tell you just now about the price — there's a great deal to be gone into — but I'll see you again later, when we may be able to complete our arrangements. I suppose you don't mind waiting for me?"

Stanovitch signified that he did not mind in the least; but inquired where he might hope to have the pleasure of meeting her.

"In the gardens will be best," Clare replied hurriedly — her eyes still following the unmistakable figure of Lord Uxmoor, who was examining all the shaded nooks and corners with praise-worthy thoroughness. "But of course we must have a point of rendezvous — there's a fountain in a large, central space which you can't miss, with a statue of a nymph pouring water. I'll meet you there when the ball is over, if not before."

"You will bring the papers with you," Stanovitch suggested.

But Clare shook her head.

"Hardly, I think," she said. "That wouldn't be business, as we say in America. Everything must be clearly settled and — er — signed and sealed before the papers are produced. — Ah, milord, with whom are you playing hide and seek?"

"With you!" Lord Uxmoor replied. He stood before her in his uncompromising heaviness and solidity, glowering equally at her and at the masked man beside her. "I've been looking for you everywhere," he went on in an injured tone. "This is our dance, and it's half over."

"It might be better if it were wholly over," Clare said with a sigh, as she rose. "But of course, if you care to try dancing again, we can take a few turns."

CHAPTER XV

Prince Maximilian Gives Advice

IT was not many minutes after Clare, with Lord Uxmoor, had left Stanovitch alone in his shaded seat on the terrace, that two figures emerged from the ballroom where most of the guests were now again dancing, and walked across its wide space to the marble balustrade.

They were very magnificent figures indeed, for one was Princess Nadine in her rich dress as Margaret of Navarre, and the other Prince Maximilian, equally splendid in the costume of his great ancestor the Emperor Maximilian, while both possessed a physical beauty, a grace and distinction of bearing, which made their assumption of the attire of a period when splendor of living touched perhaps its highest, as well as most artistic point, altogether appropriate.

Neither wore a mask, and there was consequently no danger of any one being so indiscreet as to interrupt their *tête-à-tête* when, leaning against the terrace balustrade, they watched the moon rising in belated beauty into the violet sky. Below lay the illuminated gardens breathing out perfume from their dew-drenched thickets, while not even the pealing music of the Hungarian band in the ballroom could overcome the piercing sweetness of the notes of a nightingale, singing out its heart down among the oleanders and roses.

"This," the prince observed, "is most charming, and decidedly preferable to dancing. For it has the great advantage that one can talk to you."

Princess Nadine looked at him with a smile. "It was for that reason I suggested our coming out," she said. "I wish to talk."

"That is more charming still!" the prince declared. "To hear you talk is not only better than dancing, but much better than talking myself!"

"How much better will depend, will it not, on what I have to say?" she asked, still smiling. "If your Highness—"

"Pardon!" he interrupted quickly. "Let me beg that you will forget the 'Highness' and speak only to the lover who has given you his heart."

Her beautiful face grew grave, and she bent her head with a gesture as proud as it was graceful.

"I must first," she said, "assure the prince how deeply I am conscious of the honour he does me, before I speak to the man who calls himself my lover."

"They are one and the same," he told her. "For you there can be no distinction. The prince who asks you to share his career, to aid and inspire him in all that he hopes to attain, is also the man who brings you his devotion."

"His devotion!" she repeated. There was a moment's pause in which her luminous eyes seemed searching his face. "It is a great word, expressing a great thing," she went on then. "But it has different meanings for different people. Will you pardon me if I ask you to define the meaning which you attach to it? For I am an exacting woman, *mon prince*, — I must warn you of that — and I am not satisfied as another woman might be, with the honour you do me, without knowing something of the quality of this devotion of which you speak."

It was now the turn of the prince to smile, as he bent toward her. What a mere woman, after all — longing for, demanding the tender flatteries, vows, and protestations which women love! Well, he was ready enough to give them — why not? Was he a stock or a stone that so fair a creature should leave him unmoved, simply because she was the woman whom it was expedient for him to marry? On the contrary he was wise enough to recognise the great advantage which lay in the fact that he was sufficiently touched by her charm for his protestations to have the ring of sincerity which cannot easily be counterfeited. "My devotion," he said, "includes everything that man can offer to woman; for you are not only a woman to be supremely adored for your beauty, your grace, and your charm, for all that appeals most to the heart of man, but you are fitted to be an inspiration as well in those lofty paths of ambition which I must tread. Is not the very highest homage contained in this assurance? I, who know every court in Europe, know that I would search in vain among the daughters of royal houses for one endowed as you are with the gifts necessary in a great career; and when I have placed you on a throne, you will adorn it as few queens have ever done."

In the flood of silver light in which they stood, he saw the heave of her bosom under its filmy laces, and caught the flash of her eyes before the lids fell over them. Truly he had read her well. This was the form of flattery, of homage, which she would find irresistible. Ambition, love

of power, the desire to rule, to reign, to achieve — these had in her the force of passions at once inherited and quickened by the high-wrought fever of civilisation in which she lived.

"It is true," she answered. "I know that I have capabilities which are not altogether usual. I believe that I could aid a great ambition to attain its end, and, when that end was attained, that I could play my part worthily, even on a throne. If I did not believe this I should not think of taking such a place."

"It is as I have said," the prince replied. "You will bring to the part qualities which will enable you to play it as it has not been played in this generation. You know this, you feel it, you recognise the compelling force of destiny, and you will accept all that I offer — my devotion and the brilliant possibilities of my future."

Every fibre of her being thrilled in response to his words; every instinct of her differing, yet strangely agreeing, ancestry seemed to declare that here was the supreme opportunity of her life, which madness alone would refuse. The ruthless cupidity of the old bonanza-king, the imperious temper and love of domination of a race of boyars, whose feet for ages had been upon the necks of their serfs, the insatiable vanity and boundless ambition of the type of American womanhood from which she sprang, all these mysterious forces of heredity, for the existence of which she, Nadine Zorokoff, was in no wise responsible, made themselves felt, and clamoured to control her fate. Where did it come from, the spark of resistance, the strength which, from a mere scruple of honour, held these forces in leash? Was it perhaps born of the strange idealism which is a part of the Russian nature, the capability of sacrificing the tangible real for the visionary ideal? Or was it only the old truth, almost forgotten in an age of materialism, that to each soul God gives the power to rise, if it will, even above the tyranny of inherited tendencies, and make its own destiny for good or evil, for noble or ignoble ends?

"Whether or not I can accept the great honour which your Highness offers me," she said at last, with a sudden change of tone and manner, "is yet uncertain. But meanwhile I have something to say. Will you listen to a story which I brought you here to tell?"

If Prince Maximilian was surprised, he did not betray the fact. "To listen to you is always a pleasure," he said.

"I am afraid you will hardly find it a pleasure in the present instance," the princess returned, "but I will make my story short, since long stories are generally tiresome. Briefly, then, — I believe you know my cousin, Count Alexis Zorokoff?"

"I have the pleasure of knowing Count Alexis slightly," the prince answered, while, consciously or unconsciously, a shade of reserve crept into his tone.

Recognising this, Princess Nadine smiled.

"Have no fear of a love story," she said. "Alexis has always been like a younger brother to me — lovable, charming, but constantly in need of scolding for his many follies and imprudences."

"I am well acquainted with the type," the prince observed indulgently.

"Ever since we were children," she continued, "he has always come to me in his difficulties, and I have always helped, even while I scolded him. So the other day, when he was in a more serious difficulty than ever before, he came to me as usual."

"And you helped him as usual," the prince commented lightly. "It is easy to guess the rest. The troubles of young men of the type of Count Alexis have always just two causes — money and women."

"Sometimes," the princess said gravely, "there is a third — political conspiracy."

Prince Maximilian looked at her with surprise.

"Conspiracy, and Count Alexis Zorokoff!" he said. "That seems an impossible conjunction."

"It should have been impossible," the princess replied, "but it is what has occurred. I have long been aware of his liberal theories, over which we have quarrelled many times, but I never dreamed that he could so far forget himself as to join the revolutionists—"

"Good Heavens!" the prince ejaculated, for he knew that this was serious indeed.

"Two days ago," Nadine went on, "he was forced to leave Paris, barely in time to escape arrest. He came here — perhaps you may remember that yesterday afternoon, I strolled away with Mr. Leighton and remained some time?"

His Serene Highness signified that he remembered. As a matter of fact, the occurrence in question had not pleased him, and what does not please us we seldom forget.

"I met my cousin then," the princess continued. "He had entered the gardens without being perceived, and seized this opportunity to speak to me and ask me to intercede for him with the emperor. He also wished to leave France as soon as possible, and it was fortunate that Mr. Leighton was with me, for he offered to take him away immediately in his yacht."

"Ah!" The prince drew a breath of relief. "I was afraid you were going to tell me that he was still here."

"No, he is safely gone," she said. "Mr. Leighton took him away last night. But the point of my story is yet to come. It seems that he had some important papers on his person when he was warned in Paris of the danger of arrest, so he brought them with him and entrusted them to me — thinking that I could never be suspected of having anything to do with revolutionists or their documents."

"But this is most imprudent — most dangerous even!" the prince exclaimed quickly. "Don't you see—"

"I see," she interrupted, "that he was mistaken. An hour ago I had an unexpected visitor — a person called Stanovitch, who is attached to the embassy in Paris."

"Stanovitch came to you — for what purpose?"

"To tell me that it was known that Alexis had been here, that it was suspected he might have left some papers with me, and that if so I must give them up, or accept the consequences."

"And those consequences?"

Princess Nadine looked steadily at the handsome and now very grave face before her.

"The first," she said quietly, "is that Petersburg will refuse approval to your wishes regarding myself."

The prince started. "And the second?" he demanded quickly.

"The second," she went on, "is that, if you persisted in those wishes, Russia would decline to support your claims for the throne of Serabia."

He stared at her as if he could hardly believe that he heard aright, and his voice was sharp with anxiety when he said, "What did you answer?"

"I bade M. Stanovitch good-night," she replied.

"It can't be possible," he cried, "that you mean you refused to give up the papers?"

"What else could I mean?" she asked. "I did not refuse to give them up, because I did not acknowledge having them; but no doubt he understood that I have them, and that I will not give them up."

"But you must see that this is madness!" the prince said sternly. "How can you think of shielding your cousin at such a price? His conduct in placing you in this position is absolutely without excuse; and yet you will permit his selfish folly to ruin your life — and mine."

"What, then, would you advise me to do?" she inquired.

"There cannot be the least doubt what you should do," he answered. "You have no sympathy with this crime of conspiracy. Do your government, then, the service of delivering up these papers, that the men who are guilty of it may be put out of the way of accomplishing further mischief."

There was dead silence for a minute or two. The music in the *sala* had ceased, but the voice of the nightingale still filled the night with its passionate melody.

"And this," the princess presently said, "is your advice."

"How is it possible for me to give you any other?" he returned. "There is simply nothing else to be said, nothing else to be done. What greater folly could there be than to incur the disapproval of your government for the sake of a few conspirators whom you despise?"

"Yes," she said, "I despise them and the objects for which they work. You are right about that. But there is something involved which you do not seem to take into account. It is the question of honour. How can I betray a trust which was placed in me?"

"That," he told her, "is easily answered. You will fulfil a duty rather than betray a trust. But even if it were otherwise, self-preservation is the first law. You have no right to sacrifice yourself."

"But if I feel that I could sooner die than surrender the papers to those who demand them — what then?"

The prince threw out his hands with a gesture which expressed finality.

"Then," he said, "you will ruin the brilliant promise of your life, and place a serious obstacle in the path of my ambition — the ambition with which you have assured me you sympathise so deeply."

Her eyes still held him with their steady gaze, shining like jewels in the radiance of the moon-light. "But," she said again, "if it must be so — if I have no alternative — would it not be possible to disregard the disapproval of Russia?"

Prince Maximilian looked at her silently for a moment, while a change came over him.

"Princess," he said in his most courtly manner, "allow me to express admiration for your power of self-sacrifice, in casting away for a mere chimera of honour the most substantial and highest of worldly honours. I regret that I cannot follow you to such a height. I cannot sacrifice the efforts of years and all the hopes of my friends for the sake of a group of conspirators whose aims I detest. Since some sacrifice must be, I on my part shall be driven to sacrifice the wishes of my heart, if you persist in your refusal to do what is demanded of you."

Again a brief silence, and then the princess turned with a slight shiver toward the ball-room.

"Shall we go in?" she asked. "The nightingale has stopped singing, and the air grows a little chill. Perhaps after all it is better to dance."

"Don't go yet!" cried the prince passionately. "Let me urge, let me implore you to consider —"

She paused in her movement.

"You mean that you urge me to consider and — give up the papers?" she asked.

"There is nothing else to be done," he answered.

"*You*" — and her voice had a piercing note — "in my place would give them up without hesitation?"

"Considering all that is at stake for you — and others — I would certainly give them up without hesitation," he declared.

She did not reply immediately, and when she spoke it was in a tone of extreme calmness.

"Let me thank you for your advice," she said. "It makes the situation quite clear. And now we will go in."

CHAPTER XVI

Stanovitch Offers Counsel

IT was not very long after the two picturesque figures had passed back to the ballroom, that M. Stanovitch, emerging from his place of seclusion, which had also proved a place of deeply interested observation, although no word of the conversation reached his ears, had the altogether

unlooked-for gratification of meeting Prince Maximilian, as the latter came out again upon the terrace — this time alone. For, having resigned Princess Nadine to a waiting partner, his Serene Highness — just now anything rather than serene — felt the need of a few minutes of solitude in which to collect his thoughts and face the situation that had so unexpectedly developed and threatened to disarrange his carefully laid plans.

Under these circumstances it was not surprising that he wore a distinctly unapproachable air, and that his gaze passed carelessly and a little haughtily over the masked man approaching him. He stopped abruptly, however, when the latter pausing with a bow, spoke, in a tone of easy, though respectful, assurance:

"It is good fortune to meet your Serene Highness in this manner! I was on my way to find, if possible, an opportunity for a word with you."

The prince, frowning slightly, looked at the speaker.

"You are — ?" he queried.

"Stanovitch, at your Highness's service," the Russian replied. "If I do not unmask, it is only because I prefer to avoid unnecessary recognition."

"You are quite right, M. Stanovitch," the prince said coldly. "I too, prefer that your presence here should not be known, though I am glad to have an opportunity to speak to you. Where can we talk — with least danger of observation or interruption?"

Stanovitch looked for a moment toward the seat he had just left, but, notwithstanding its seclusion, he knew that one so conspicuous as Prince Maximilian could hardly escape observation there, even if he escaped interruption. His glance passed then to the gardens, lying in their illuminated beauty below, and he waved his hand in that direction.

"I think," he said, "that our best chance for quiet is probably there."

The prince assenting by a nod, they passed across the terrace, descended the steps, and entered one of the avenues which led between depths of enchanting boscaje toward the sea. Here they walked silently for a few minutes, before the prince turned to his companion with an air of intense irritation.

"Well, M. Stanovitch," he said, "whatever your instruction or intentions may have been, you have certainly succeeded in creating a situation full of difficulty and awkwardness for *me*."

"I regret extremely to hear it," Stanovitch replied, in a tone of unmistakable concern. "I beg your Highness to believe that nothing was further from my intention. But I hope, indeed I am sure, that the difficulty is more in appearance than in reality."

"I hardly see how that can be," the prince returned; "but if so, you must have blundered intolerably."

"That is, of course, possible," Stanovitch admitted, as one might admit lunacy possible, though not probable. "But if I may inquire to what your Highness particularly alludes—"

His Highness, however, shot a haughty glance at him.

"We will defer discussion of the subject until you are able to unmask," he said. "Although I have not the least doubt of your identity, I have nevertheless no intention of talking of important matters to a masked man."

"And I have not thought of expecting you to do so," Stanovitch answered, with a deference which was for the future king of Serabia, rather than for a mere Serene Highness of Altenberg.

"I have only waited to unmask until we find the quiet spot of which we are in search, and there is less possibility of meeting some one who may recognise me."

"Here is a spot where we may sit down and avoid that possibility," the prince remarked.

The place of which he spoke, and into which they now entered, was the lovely glade where the white figure of a nymph, pouring a stream of water from her inverted vase into the brimming basin of the fountain at her feet, was relieved against deep masses of foliage, and where marble benches of classic shape, delightfully toned by time and weather, stood under the drooping boughs of oleander and mimosa.

Stanovitch, who immediately recognised the spot as that of Clare's designated rendezvous, smiled a little, as he removed his mask, and bowed again to the prince before taking a seat beside him on one of the benches.

"Your Highness perceives that it is no other than myself," he observed.

"I have already informed you that I had no doubt of your identity, M. Stanovitch," the prince replied coldly. "But, now that we are face to face, I must demand an explanation of the manner in which you ventured to introduce my name into your late conversation with Princess Nadine."

"The princess has then told you" — Stanovitch began.

"The princess has told me ever3rthing," Prince Maximilian interrupted sharply, "and I consider that you have been guilty of an inexcusable liberty towards myself and my affairs."

"Your Highness will pardon me," — the manner of the other was absolutely perfect in its respectful suavity — "but in what I ventured to say to the princess I was, in the first place, simply speaking as the mouthpiece of his Excellency, the Russian ambassador; and in the second place, it could hardly be said that a liberty was taken towards yourself when it was only the attitude of Russia under certain contingencies which was spoken of."

"You told the princess that unless she surrendered some papers left with her by her cousin, Count Alexis, Russia would withhold approval of our marriage, or else—"

"Approval of your candidacy for the throne of Serabia — exactly!" Stanovitch spoke with unchanged suavity, but there had been a quick flash in his narrow eyes at the allusion to the papers. "You will surely perceive that it would be impossible for Russia to permit a Russian subject, tainted with even the suspicion of revolutionary sympathies, to share the throne of a state which may prove of great importance to us."

"You certainly know that Princess Nadine Zorokoff has no revolutionary sympathies," the prince declared angrily. "Nothing could be more absurd than such a suspicion."

Stanovitch lifted his shoulders and opened his hands with a significant gesture.

"In that case, is it not easy for the princess to clear herself of the suspicion?" he asked. "Do I not understand you to say that she acknowledges her possession of the papers?"

The prince gave him a keen glance out of his cold, blue eyes.

"You must undoubtedly have been sure of her possessing them," he said, "when you ventured to address such a threat to her."

"No," Stanovitch replied, "I was by no means sure. But her manner led me to think so, and the chance seemed worth taking. It appears that after all I was right." He mused for a moment. "Oh, that little *intriguante*!" he said to himself — and then aloud: "The princess was clearly very unreserved with you. May I ask what followed her confidence?"

"What could follow except that I urged her to give up the papers?"

"And she—?"

"Talked of scruples of honour, and absolutely expected me to brave the displeasure of Russia for her sake."

Stanovitch smiled.

"She is very *exalt ée*, the princess," he remarked. "It is a defect of the Russian temperament. But scruples of honour are misplaced when one is dealing with those who have no scruples of any kind."

"So I told her," the prince said, "but she remained immovable. "It is" — he drew his brows together again in a frown — "a very unpleasant situation for me! What were you about in Paris to let that ineffable idiot, the cousin, come here, and upset our plans?"

"It was certainly a pity that he was allowed to get away," Stanovitch agreed. "But he slipped through the fingers of the police — who are rather puzzled, by the by, to account for his movements after he reached Nice. He was traced to this villa, but there is no trace of his manner of departure, although we are assured that he is not here now. If he were" — a significant pause — "matters would be much simplified."

"He is not here," the prince said. "Having accomplished all the mischief he could, he got away quite easily and comfortably in an American yacht."

"Oh! — in an American yacht!"

"Belonging to a man named Leighton — dictator or promoter, or both, from Central America."

"So *that* was how it was managed!" Again M. Stanovitch mused for a minute. "Now why did he not take the papers with him? Ah, I see! — they were left to be turned over to some one whom he had not time to find before his hurried departure from Paris. Really Princess Nadine should have more sense than to allow herself to be compromised by connection with such dangerous matters! It will be necessary for your Highness to take great care that nothing of the kind occurs after she goes to Serabia."

His Highness stared at the speaker.

"To Serabia!" he repeated. "But only a moment ago you said—"

"That Russia could not allow any one tainted with revolutionary sympathies to go to Serabia as its queen," Stanovitch repeated. "That remains true; but I am sure that you are right in believing that the princess has no sympathy with revolutionists, and that a misplaced sense of honour has alone prevented her from surrendering the papers left with her. This being the case, I am glad to assure you that the threat was merely a threat, and that it was never seriously intended that the alliance should not take place."

"The threat of Russia's withheld consent to the alliance was never seriously meant?" the prince inquired in a tone ominous of rising anger.

"Surely your Highness understands," Stanovitch said. "Those papers are very important to us, and in the hope that Count Alexis had dropped them here in his flight — we could then see no other reason for his coming here, though another has since developed — it occurred to his Excellency that a threat of losing an alliance on which her heart must naturally be set would probably induce the princess to tell us all that she knew, and to give up the papers if they were in her possession. We relied on our knowledge of woman in forecasting the result, but" — he shook his head regretfully — "the princess is not a calculable quantity."

"No!" the prince returned. "She is not a calculable quantity, and you have not only blundered in your conduct of this affair, but you have made *me* blunder also, — hopelessly, I fear! Why did you not see me — warn me — before your interview with her, so that I might have understood that your threat was merely a threat?"

"I had no reason to imagine that the matter would reach you, except through myself," Stanovitch replied. "It never occurred to me that the princess would take you into her confidence."

"If you had only told me," the prince repeated in angry excitement, "I should have known what part to play — and I could have played it well. No man ever had a better opportunity. What magnificent disinterestedness I could have displayed! What a chance I should have had to win the woman — the woman so proud, so elusive, so difficult to win!" Then suddenly remembering himself, his manner changed, and he added in a tone of biting sarcasm: "You are to be congratulated on your diplomacy, M. Stanovitch! If Russia really desires this alliance, you have succeeded in rendering it exceedingly doubtful whether that desire will ever be fulfilled."

"Your Highness must pardon me if I say that you reach conclusions a little precipitately," Stanovitch told him. "There is not the least doubt that the wishes of Russia will be fulfilled."

"You are," said the prince haughtily, "talking of a matter of which you know nothing. The princess is, as you have said, *exalt é* to a degree — romantic, filled with impossible heroic ideals —"

"It is a national trait," Stanovitch remarked complacently. "We Russians are all inclined to cherish ideals, and to sacrifice realities for them. Or else," — his tone appeared to hint of personal experience here — "are forced to sacrifice our ideals to realities."

The prince eyed him scornfully.

"The ideals must have indeed been exalted which M. Stanovitch found it necessary to sacrifice to realities!" he said. "But the point which immediately concerns us is that, as a result of your admirable diplomacy, I have been placed in an intolerable position with the princess, have been forced to do injustice to my sentiments towards her, to incur her scorn because I was unable to accept her exalted standards, and practically to choose between herself and the objects of my ambition."

Stanovitch now understood some of the pantomime which he had witnessed on the terrace. "Surely the good God created an impossible creature when He made woman!" he ejaculated piously. "At least some women. Others are practical enough. But I am glad to say that there is a very simple means by which your Highness can not only make your peace with the princess, but regain all that you have lost in her estimation."

The prince looked at him with an eagerness which struggled with his anger.

"And that is —?" he asked.

"By going to her to-morrow, and telling her that a night's reflection has convinced you that even a throne has no value in your eyes as compared with herself, and that you are prepared, if necessary, to brave the displeasure of Russia for her sake."

"And then?" The prince spoke coldly and a little suspiciously.

"Then," Stanovitch proceeded, "I shall have the pleasure of seeing her later and assuring her that the threat, which enabled her to test your devotion, was only a threat, and that the crown of Serabia is destined to adorn a brow which seems made to wear it."

"All of which sounds romantic enough for the operatic stage," the prince remarked, still regarding him suspiciously. "It appears to me that your talents lie in the dramatic rather than in the diplomatic line. But what about the cause of all this trouble — the papers of Count Alexis?"

"Those," Stanovitch said, "will be in my possession — probably to-night. I have arranged for that, without troubling the princess further. She has acted in a very ill-advised, in fact a dangerously imprudent, manner, but the arrangement about Serabia is very important just now, and if she is to be permitted to go there, no scandal can be allowed to touch her. But for this, I should have taken a very short means of obtaining the papers. The villa would have been searched; and I need hardly tell you that the consequences of their being found in her possession would have been very bad, even for one of such high rank as Princess Nadine Zorokoff."

"If Count Alexis Zorokoff had his deserts, he would go to Siberia," the prince observed vindictively.

"There is no doubt of that," Stanovitch agreed. "But, instead of going to Siberia, the prospects are that Count Alexis will be pardoned and rewarded."

"Rewarded!— for what?"

"For being wise enough to entrust his affairs to very capable hands. I can hardly say more to your Highness at present."

"I have no desire to hear anything more," said his Highness impatiently. "How you are to obtain the papers, or what is to become of Count Alexis, is of absolutely no importance to me, if you assure me that I shall be perfectly safe in going to the princess to-morrow and carrying out your recommendation."

"I assure you of it. I pledge my faith that you will be perfectly safe in doing so," Stanovitch replied earnestly.

If some sarcastic comment on the possible value of M. Stanovitch's faith trembled on the prince's tongue, he restrained it; but as he rose from the bench he drew up his splendid figure with an air which said clearly enough how disagreeable he found the position in which he was placed.

"We may regard the matter, then, as settled," he told the other. "It would be folly to approach the princess on the subject again to-night, but I will see her to-morrow, and do what I can to — er —"

"Restore the lost status," Stanovitch ventured to suggest, as the speaker hesitated.

But he brought upon himself a last flash of princely hauteur.

"Your diplomatic experiences have plainly not taught you that nothing is more difficult than to restore a lost status — either with a country or with a woman," Prince Maximilian observed. "What I was about to say was that I will do what I can to retrieve the effects of your unfortunate blundering."

CHAPTER XVII

Clare States Her Terms

After the prince had left him with that parting shaft, M. Stanovitch settled himself in the most shaded corner of the bench near the fountain, and, lighting a cigar, prepared to wait the appearance of the lady who had given him rendezvous in this spot.

And as he waited he smiled, in the fashion of one who is well satisfied with the course of events. Indeed, he more than once murmured "*Bien!*" to himself softly. The parting injunction of the ambassador to him in Paris had been that no hint of any scandal must be allowed to touch Princess Nadine. If she had received her cousin, if she had even been foolish enough to allow him to leave his papers with her — and the official mind could perceive no other reason than the leaving of the papers for the reckless imprudence of the visit to Nice — she must be dealt with gently, and with the consideration due her possibly exalted rank. As a last resort — in case there were grounds to believe that she really had the papers in her possession — it would be allowable to threaten her with the loss of the brilliant alliance which was on the point of announcement. But beyond this threat it was not possible to go. For there were reasons, very important reasons, why Russian influence must be paramount in the Balkan state which, at the suggestion of Russia, had offered its crown to Prince Maximilian of Altenberg, and therefore a Russian wife was most desirable for him. No daughter of the imperial house was available — indeed, his Serene Highness being only a mediatised prince, and the crown offered him notoriously most unstable, he could hardly be considered eligible for a daughter of the imperial house — but Princess Nadine Zorokoff, with her great wealth, her high position, and her devotion to the persons of the emperor and empress, was regarded as an altogether satisfactory substitute. It was true that in his present position Prince Maximilian could not contract marriage with one below his own rank; but as king of Serabia he would be able to marry whom he chose, and the beautiful Russian princess, who could bring him a dower much greater than that of royal princesses, would certainly be acceptable to his new people. Everything had been arranged in a manner most satisfactory to all concerned, and, with the official blessing of Russia upon his wooing, Prince Maximilian had betaken himself to the Riviera, when a bomb exploded in Paris, some one betrayed the secrets of a band of revolutionists there, and Count Alexis Zorokoff took the *Grande Vitesse* for Nice.

It was very provoking, as Stanovitch had remarked, that he had been allowed to slip through the fingers of the police, but it was impressed upon this astute member of the *corps diplomatique* that Count Alexis himself was of small importance. A sojourn, more or less prolonged, in the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul would certainly be good for him, but he might be allowed to go and live in obscurity in London or Switzerland if he liked. The papers which he carried were, however, of great importance, and if there was the least reason to believe that he had left them with his cousin, no effort must be spared to obtain them.

"Judicious effort, of course," he was told. "You are sent because the matter must be conducted in diplomatic, not in police fashion. If the princess is not amenable to reason, or to threats — and such is the folly of women that it is barely possible she may not be — you can proceed no further with her; but in her household there must be those whom you can influence.

You may employ what methods, pay what money, you please, provided you obtain the papers without scandal. At any cost that must be avoided."

"At the cost of failure?" Stanovitch had felt himself obliged to inquire.

The distinguished personage talking to him gave him a cold glance.

"I am sending you," he said, "because I believe that with you there will be no question of failure. But in case the matter is more difficult than we imagine, I can only remind you that Petersburg would never forgive a blunder which imperiled the Serabian arrangement. Bear this in mind."

Stanovitch had not failed to bear these sayings in mind as he watched the interview between Princess Nadine and Prince Maximilian, and asked himself a little uneasily what certain expressive gestures and movements meant. They had been very subdued, those gestures and movements — so subdued, indeed, like the high-bred voices — that one less sharply observant than himself might not have perceived, or attached any significance to them. But few things escaped the narrow, half-closed eyes, and, remembering the hint about how Petersburg would regard anything which imperiled the Serabian arrangement, he had felt it necessary to lose no time in seeking Prince Maximilian, in discovering what he had learned, and explaining whatever might call for explanation.

It was, he felt, a part of the good luck which had attended him to-night, that he encountered the prince immediately, disengaged, and as anxious to meet him as he was to be met. And the conversation with his Serene Highness had, on the whole, been satisfactory. It was of course annoying that Princess Nadine had, with the inconsequent folly of her sex, created trouble out of the threat, which was intended to be merely a threat; but he had no doubt that this could be remedied in the manner he had indicated. The prince might be irritated, undoubtedly was irritated, by the slightly undignified position in which he was placed, but he could do what was demanded of him, the fair princess would be soothed, the alliance which Russian policy demanded would be no further endangered, and the papers which were the cause of all the difficulty would be in his (Stanovitch's) possession, at the cost of a few promises to a woman's vanity.

This brought his thoughts to the woman — the little *intriguante*, as he called her in his mind — whom he was awaiting. Wonderfully fortunate (for him) it certainly had been that, hearing of his presence in the villa, she had so shrewdly leaped to a suspicion of his business, so audaciously waylaid him, and so cleverly made her bargain to deliver the papers, without betraying that they were not in her possession. Stanovitch smiled to think how little need there was of mystery on the latter point. Whether Count Alexis had left his dangerous documents with her or with his cousin did not matter in the least, provided she could put her hands upon them, and bring them to him. And this he had not the least doubt that she could do. She had impressed him with her capability, even while he had a sense of amusement in recalling her conditions. "It sounds better — to American ears — to be called princess than countess!" Surely they were astonishing creatures, these women whom the great overgrown, absurdly rich republic across the water was sending to amaze the Old World! — childlike in their grasping at the baubles of rank, without knowledge of or regard for its great essentials, but wonderfully mature in their shrewdness, their worldliness, their cynical determination to use all things to further their own interests. "*C'est une créature de t'ête,*" the keenest of modern observers, M. Paul Bourget, has called the type — one, that is, whose springs of action lie in her head rather than in her heart; and, although Stanovitch had never heard this characterisation, he formulated something of the same kind in the thoughts of Miss Hazleton which served to amuse him as he sat in the soft, odorous shadow, near the statue of the nymph, and listened to the distant strains of dance-music, mingling with the liquid notes of the nightingale in the bosage behind him.

Now and again picturesque figures in rich, fantastic dress passed along the avenue, filling the quiet space with their voices and laughter, or pausing by the fountain to cast curious glances at the quiet masked figure in the shade. Several times he was gaily addressed, and had to

exchange a little of the badinage appropriate to the occasion. Once a lady, motioning her companions to go on, sat down beside him for a moment.

"It is sad that she for whom you are waiting leaves you so long alone!" she remarked sympathetically in French, with a strong American accent. "But you must allow me to express admiration for your patience — which is positively monumental. I have seen you sitting here for two or three hours at least."

"Hardly so long, I think," Stanovitch said.

"Oh, but yes!" the lady cried. "Only when I saw you first you were wearing a domino which you have discarded now. Of course it's possible that there are two of you, but both so mysteriously masked, and both waiting in the same place for some one who is inexcusably long in coming— you must confess that this would be a little odd!"

"No doubt it would," Stanovitch confessed, who found it decidedly so. "But if I have a double, I have not had the pleasure of seeing him."

"It would be rather amusing if you were both waiting for the same person," the lady hazarded.

"Very amusing," he agreed again, "but, I think I may say, hardly probable."

"You are so sure of her as that!" the lady mocked. "*Eh bien*, I must be going, then, or she might come, find me here, and be jealous, not knowing how little encouragement you have given me to remain."

"No encouragement would be too great to give you," Stanovitch assured her, "if it were not —"

"That she is coming!" the lady laughed. She rose and made him a deep courtesy. "My compliments for a faithful lover!" she said. "I hope that your patience may be rewarded, and that the other — the double in the domino— has nothing to do with her delay."

She waved her hand and flitted away after her companions, leaving Stanovitch to wonder slightly concerning the other — the double in the domino — who had evidently earlier in the evening occupied his present place, but had so conveniently vacated it before he and Prince Maximilian came down into the garden in search of quiet. That this person was in any way connected with his affairs did not occur to him; but what did occur, with somewhat disquieting effect, was that his conversation with the prince might possibly have been overheard — the deeply massed shrubbery around giving admirable opportunity for eavesdropping. The suspicion made him rise and examine closely all the ground surrounding the fountain. There was not the least sign of human presence anywhere, and, satisfied on this point, he had just returned to his seat when Clare came hurrying into sight.

"Oh, M. Stanovitch, you are here, are you?" she said a little breathlessly, as he rose to meet her. "I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long, but I couldn't come until the ball was over. The people are going away now, and I have taken the opportunity to run down here for a few minutes."

"Have you brought the papers?" Stanovitch inquired. The knowledge that she had attempted to deceive him with regard to her possession of these important documents had its effect not only upon his opinion of her, but also upon his tone, in which there was less of diplomatic suavity than there had been before.

She looked at him with apparent surprise. "I thought I told you that I would not bring them to-night," she said. "It isn't convenient for me to do so, and moreover, we haven't quite settled our — er — terms."

"Ah, yes, our terms." Stanovitch bowed ironically. "Let us then settle them without delay. If you will sit down, we can talk more at ease."

"I really can't stay more than a minute," she said. But she sat down and looked at him with bright, eager eyes, yet with the same hesitation in her manner which he had noted when they spoke on this subject before.

"Even a minute should be sufficient to state a price," he suggested. "I may remind you that it was at that interesting point we were interrupted. You were then not able to decide exactly how high a figure you could venture to name, but consideration has probably brought your courage to the point, whatever it may be. *Allons!* — let me hear what you want, mademoiselle."

The note in his voice was distinctly imperative now, and roused an answering spirit in Clare. She threw back her head defiantly.

"What I want," she said, "are the Zorokoff estates in Russia."

"What!" Even Stanovitch was for a moment stupefied by the colossal audacity of this demand. "You want—"

"The Zorokoff estates," she repeated. "As I mentioned when we talked of this matter a little while ago, titles amount to nothing without money to support them; so with the title of prince Count Alexis should have the family estates. They ought to be his by right anyway; he ought to be the head of the house; and as for Princess Nadine, she has millions of American money, and doesn't need them in the least."

"*Mon Dieu!*" For once in his experience, words positively failed M. Stanovitch. He could only stare at the extraordinary young person before him, while she on her part now found it easy to proceed.

"I have arranged it all in my mind," she said, "and it really seems quite — er — providential that these papers should have come into my hands —"

But the last words roused a sudden chord of recollection in her hearer's mind, and he interrupted sharply.

"Isn't there rather a weak point, mademoiselle? Before making demands which are quite absurdly exorbitant, would it not have been wise at least to get the papers into your hands?"

She opened her eyes at him with an effrontery which concealed her surprise.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean," he answered, "that since I had the pleasure of talking with you on the terrace I have learned positively that the papers about which you are bargaining are not in your possession, but in that of Princess Nadine."

If he expected her to betray any sign of being disconcerted by this statement, he had to acknowledge himself mistaken.

"Did I tell you that the papers were in my possession?" she queried a little scornfully. "I have no recollection of doing so. I think I merely told you that I could deliver them to you — and that was surely all that concerned you. I did not wish to bring the princess into the matter—"

"Only to rob her, it appears!" Stanovitch could not forbear interjecting.

"You forget yourself, monsieur!" Clare spoke with quite haughty anger. "I am not proposing to rob the princess. But supposing that your government will of course exact some penalty for her refusal to give those papers to you, it occurred to me that, if that penalty should take the form of confiscation of her estates, it would be natural to transfer them to Count Alexis."

"Very natural to rob — you must forgive me if I repeat the word — the princess who is innocent to enrich Count Alexis, who is guilty!" Stanovitch commented sarcastically. "Really, mademoiselle, you — surprise me!"

And this, which was strictly true, was saying much from one whom few things were able to surprise.

"I'm sure I can't conceive why," Clare returned coldly. "I don't make the policy of your government, which does worse things than that every day. You have told me that you didn't hesitate to threaten the princess with the loss of Prince Maximilian and his crown!"

"To threaten, yes," Stanovitch admitted, "but, as I think I also told you, merely to threaten. It was never intended to execute the threat."

"O—h!" She stared at him for a moment in somewhat crestfallen fashion. "No, you didn't tell me that. It seems a trifle — odd. Why should you have uttered a threat which it was never intended to execute?"

"The exigencies of diplomatic life often force one to say things that are not to be taken literally, mademoiselle."

"Well, it's a pity," she replied sharply, "that the exigencies of diplomatic life should force you to say things that mislead one dreadfully. In plain words, then, although you are now perfectly aware — though I can't help wondering how you learned it! — that Princess Nadine received the papers from her cousin, that she had them in her possession when you demanded them, and refused to give them up, you declare that she is to escape any punishment for conduct which would send other people to Siberia, she is to have her prince, she is to have her ridiculous crown, and her estates must not be touched! Why — why is she to be treated with such leniency?"

"For several reasons," Stanovitch thought it well to explain. "For one, because we are quite sure that the princess has no sympathy with her cousin's ideas—"

"How can you be sure of it?" Clare interrupted — anger and disappointment leading her farther than she intended to go. "Would she be likely to risk so much for the sake of a set of conspirators with whom she was not in sympathy? Really, M. Stanovitch, I cannot think you believe that!"

"Whether I do or not matters little," Stanovitch said, who was in truth inclined to a cynical view of human nature, and therefore to doubt whether the princess was indeed only withheld from surrendering the papers by a scruple of honour. "I give you the view of those who are much higher in power and rank than I am. This view is that the princess has been guilty of nothing worse than imprudent folly, and that her conduct must be condoned because the Serabian arrangement is just now very important to Russian policy."

"I understand." Clare rose with an icy air. "Every consideration is to be given Princess Nadine Zorokoff, she is even to be allowed to play with conspiracy if she likes, and to refuse important papers to an agent of the government; but there is no consideration for one who is really anxious to help and serve the government —"

"Mademoiselle!" Stanovitch spoke earnestly, for clearly it would never do to lose an instrument as useful as this. "You forget that I have agreed to all your terms except—"

"The most important of all," she interrupted again. "I want the Zorokoff estates for Count Alexis, and if I cannot get them, why" — she made a gesture expressive of indifference— "he may stay in exile for me, and you, M. Stanovitch, may obtain your papers from the princess, or do without them, as you please."

Then Stanovitch for the first time permitted himself the indulgence of losing his temper.

"You forget," he said sternly, "that if I am forced to proceed to extremities I have only to search the villa, and take the papers, since I now know where they are."

There was all the impertinence of transatlantic womanhood in the manner in which she laughed in his face.

"And do you really think that those papers are where you could find them if you searched the villa ever so often?" she asked. "Why I thought that detectives, like Sherlock Holmes and yourself, knew everything — but it seems you are possessed of a most delightful simplicity!"

"I have the honour to inform you, mademoiselle," — Stanovitch showed his deepening anger only by his official stiffness of manner — "that I am not in any sense a detective, but an attaché of the Russian Embassy, whose business here is purely diplomatic."

"Ah!" Clare looked at him with the same air of impertinent mockery. "That accounts, of course, for your supposing that any one could be so foolish as to keep those papers in the villa, which I presume is Russian territory, isn't it? No? Well, in any case it wouldn't be a very safe place for revolutionary documents. No, no, monsieur" (patronisingly), they are elsewhere, I assure you, and quite, quite safe. Your only possible chance to obtain them is — I mean was — through me."

"I am not certain of that," Stanovitch told her with a touch of sardonic composure. "If you fail to make your bargain to deliver them to-night, it is probable that to-morrow may be too late — for you."

She regarded him doubtfully, impressed despite herself by the assurance of his manner.

"You cannot get them either to-night or to-morrow, except through me," she repeated. "Perhaps you think that the princess may reconsider—"

"The princess did not refuse to give up the papers," Stanovitch reminded her. "She simply evaded the point, and it is therefore entirely possible that she may reconsider."

Clare shook her head. "Never!" she said confidently. "I know her too well. She will never give them up."

Stanovitch spread out his hands with the gesture which is so expressive among the Latin and Slavic races.

"That is as it may be," he said. "But you have found that I have other sources of information than yourself, and you may perhaps believe that, as I learned that the papers are not in your possession but in that of the princess, so I may be able to obtain them through other hands than yours. In which case, I need hardly point out to you that no pardon will be forthcoming for Count Alexis, nor any title for your charming self."

"It is unnecessary to be sarcastic," Clare answered him coolly, "because I know that I am charming, and also because there are other titles within my reach than that of a Russian princess. No doubt my friend Mephistopheles is right, and there would be something more solid and safe in becoming an English countess; but having a princess for a cousin first made me think what a shame it was that I wasn't a princess, and then it dawned upon me that there might be a way, through Count Alexis, who is himself quite adorable, and as unlike a heavy Englishman as possible, of becoming one."

"It is quite true," Stanovitch agreed, "that to become Princess Zorokoff, with a high position at the Imperial Court, would be more brilliant, more picturesque, altogether better suited to the peculiar abilities of mademoiselle, than the commonplace position of an English countess. Let us, then, proceed to business. The Zorokoff estates being out of the question, what price will you take for the papers, besides the pardon and the title?"

"I — don't know," Clare confessed, as she stood looking at him with the air of a disappointed child. "I had set my heart on those estates — no others *could* be like the estates of the family, you know, — and there's a superb castle, where I went when I first came over here. Oh!" — a deep breath — "it would be *heavenly* to be châteline of that castle! And if Nadine is going to be queen of Serabia, what does she want with it?"

"One so keenly alive to certain considerations as yourself should be able to perceive that to deprive the princess of her castle, and all that goes with it, might render her becoming queen of Serabia very doubtful," Stanovitch suggested.

"Prince Maximilian must be awfully grasping if he would not be satisfied with her American millions!" Clare observed. "But really, if the estates are out of the question, I don't know what would be an equivalent."

"An equivalent?"

"Certainly" (very sharply). "You can't imagine that I would take less than an exact equivalent for them?"

Somewhat exasperated, Stanovitch was on the point of saying that it was impossible to deal with one whose idea of the value of the papers which were the object of discussion and bargaining was so extravagant, and in fact absurd, when he suddenly perceived in the illuminated vista of the avenue leading toward the fountain a figure — a tall, slender, splendid figure which, as he recognised it, made him start.

"Mademoiselle," he said quickly to his companion. "Yonder comes the princess herself!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"It Is Not Yet Too Late"

THEY looked at each other for an instant in consternation, and then Clare said sharply, suspiciously:

"What is she coming for? Is it possibly to meet you?"

"Certainly not," Stanovitch replied. "The princess can have no idea that I did not go away when I took leave of her."

And yet, even as he said this, he remembered Prince Maximilian, who knew that he was here, and who might have found or made an opportunity to speak of his presence to the princess, but — so quick are mental processes — the thought was hardly conceived before it was rejected. For if the prince was to make his peace with her in the manner arranged, it was before all things necessary that she should have no cause to doubt his sincerity, no suspicion that he had seen the agent of the Russian embassy, and learned that the threat addressed to her was only a threat. No, nothing was less likely than that she knew of his (Stanovitch's) presence, or that she was seeking him in thus coming down into the garden at so late an hour.

"It's very strange," Clare said, "and very provoking, too! But you had better get out of sight. I'll meet her and learn what she's here for."

So a moment later, when Princess Nadine entered the place where she expected to meet Leighton, she was confronted by a presence as different as possible from his — a feminine presence which, standing beside the fountain, greeted her with a light laugh.

"Clare!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Just what you are, I fancy," Clare replied lightly, "that is, getting a draught of fresh air before trying to sleep. Your *bal masqué* was as exciting as it was beautiful, and the music is still ringing in my brain. Like this, you know" — she hummed a few bars of the strains to which they had been dancing. "Are you haunted that way?"

"No," answered the princess, "but this air is delightfully refreshing, and may help me to sleep, as you say." She sat down on one of the marble benches and looked up at the other. "Don't let me detain you," she said in a tone of unmistakable dismissal. "The people are all gone, the lights are out, and you had better return quickly to the house before it is closed up."

"Oh! — and you?" Clare queried.

"I shall remain here a little longer," Nadine replied — and her manner plainly indicated, "What concern is that of yours?"

There was a pause, and then —

"We had better speak plainly," Clare said. "You haven't come here for fresh air any more than I have. You have come to meet some one."

"Are you mad?" the princess demanded, amazed lightning gathering in her eyes.

"Not in the least," Clare returned coolly. "I don't mean that you've come to meet a lover, or anything of that kind, but I know all about Alexis and the papers and M. Stanovitch. Have you come to meet M. Stanovitch?"

"How do you know anything about M. Stanovitch?" the princess asked.

"Never mind how I know — that's a long story," Clare answered impatiently. "It's enough that I do know — everything! I know that it is suspected that you have the papers, and that M. Stanovitch came to you to-night from the embassy to demand them."

"Since you know so much, you ought also to know that I sent him away without them," was the cold reply, "though how you have learned all this I cannot imagine."

"There are possibly a great many things which you cannot imagine," Clare remarked impertinently. "And one of them may be how I am interested in the matter at all. I might as well

tell you, therefore, that Count Alexis and I are engaged, and if he should ever get over the unpleasant results of this political folly, I shall marry him."

Princess Nadine looked at her incredulously.

"Why," she asked, "have you never told me this before?"

"There really was not anything to tell," Clare replied. "We liked each other from the first, but when I sounded auntie, she said he was quite ineligible and impossible, so I tried to think no more about him — until he came yesterday and said that what brought him was the desire to see me again before going away into exile. Then I told him that I had no use at all for an exile, but if he would make his peace with his government, and promise to behave sensibly ever after, I might consider marrying him. It was then that he appealed to you for help, and entrusted his papers to you. So you see I have a right to ask if you are going to give those papers to M. Stanovitch?"

The princess rose and laid her hand upon the other's shoulder. The taller of the two, as she stood looking down at the girl before her, there was something protecting, as well as kind and altogether charming, in her attitude and expression.

"That was very fine of you!" she said in her exquisite tones. "To tell Alexis at such a time that you loved and would marry him — it is what very few women, at least of our world, would have been capable of doing! It must have made him feel that his folly had brought him a reward greater than he deserved, and made him proud of you. You must forgive me that I have never appreciated you before."

She bent her beautiful head; a kiss, light, soft, fragrant, touched Clare's cheek, and it is to be recorded to that young woman's credit that for an instant her self-possession failed and she gasped, speechless.

"Now that I understand you," Nadine went on, "that I see what a faithful defender Alexis has, I am glad to assure you that you need have no fear of my betraying his trust. It is true that it is known or suspected that he left the papers with me, and it is also true that the man of whom you have spoken brought me to-night a message from the ambassador demanding them."

"But you refused to give them up?" Clare spoke a little breathlessly.

Princess Nadine lifted her head slightly. "One does not even discuss the question of giving up what was entrusted to one's honour," she said.

Clare sank suddenly upon the bench by which they stood, and covered her face with her hands.

"You are so — *exalt é!*" she complained, in Stanovitch's phrase. "You make one feel so — so low in one's standards—"

"Not you surely!" the other said kindly. "No one could be more *exalt é* than you have proved yourself in action, though you are often so cynical in speech. That is a modern fashion, however, and I shall never do you the injustice of believing that you really mean what you say again. But we will talk of all this to-morrow. Now you must let me repeat that you had better go to the house before it is closed."

"And leave you here — alone?"

There was an accent, if not of suspicion, at least of intense curiosity in Clare's voice, and in the glance she lifted to the face above her.

"Yes," Nadine answered quietly, "I wish to be left alone."

Her tone made refusal to go, or even longer delay, impossible, although Clare still hesitated for an instant, and glanced involuntarily toward the shrubbery where Stanovitch had disappeared, wondering if he were still there. It was of course possible that he was not there, that having, as she was now convinced, no reason to meet the princess, but on the contrary probably desiring that she should not become aware of his presence, he had gone back to the villa, where no doubt his carriage awaited him, and where awkward inquiries might be made if he did not appear. With this thought she suddenly realised that by lingering here she was possibly losing an opportunity to communicate with him again, and make an appointment to meet him the next day, and she rose quickly to her feet.

"Of course in that case I must go," she said in reply to her cousin's last words. "I hope that your draught of fresh air will help you to sleep well when you come in. It was a delightful ball, and no prince in a fairy-tale was ever more splendidly handsome than his Serene Highness! I don't wonder that you want to come and think about him — and his crown! — in this romantic spot. Good-night — your Majesty!"

She dropped a deep courtesy, laughed, and went hastily toward the villa.

Left alone, Princess Nadine glanced around with an air which was at once expectant and slightly wondering. Her first surprise at Leighton's absence had immediately changed to a belief that he had probably stepped aside and concealed himself when Clare appeared in their appointed place of meeting. But in that case, he would now surely lose no time in presenting himself and enabling her to end the unpleasant business which had brought her there; yet the minutes passed, and continued to pass, without any sign of him.

How long minutes can appear under such circumstances, we have all had occasion now and then in life to learn, as the princess learned now. Presently impatience overmastered her, and she walked to the opening of the avenue, where in the full radiance of the moonlight she made a wonderful picture. Over her rich Renaissance costume she had thrown a white lace mantilla, such as the women of Genoa wear, which gave a dream-like touch to her ethereal beauty, as it covered her golden hair and fell about her shoulders, partly concealing the splendor of her dress but failing to hide the lustre of the pearls, of immense size and perfect beauty, which hung in a great rope below her waist, or the wide collar of brilliants which clasped her slender throat. So standing, she seemed a marvellous figure indeed — as if she had stepped bodily out of a mediaeval romance — to the eyes of the man who presently came hastening toward her from the direction of the sea.

"Princess," he said breathlessly, as he reached her, "I am indeed sorry that you have had to wait for me! But you will forgive my absence when I tell you that I have been with your cousin."

"With Alexis?" She was greatly startled. "Where is he then?"

"He is now on the *Nereid*," Leighton answered, "but he was here in your garden."

"Here!— to-night?"

Leighton nodded. "By the best of good luck I met him just after leaving you," he explained. "It seems that during the course of the day it occurred to him that, if the man from Paris failed to come, I might be in doubt what to do with his precious papers, and it appears that he would be in a very unpleasant position with his revolutionary associates if he were not able to account for them satisfactorily. So he ordered the yacht to Nice, reached there a few hours ago, sent a boat ashore for me, learned of my absence, learned also of your carnival ball, and decided to attend it."

"Attend the ball?"

"Exactly. I met him on his way to the ball-room — masked of course. He was in the highest spirits, and I had trouble, I assure you, to turn him from his purpose."

"I can easily believe it," she said. "Knowing him as I do, knowing how the very danger of the adventure would commend it to him, I only wonder that you succeeded."

"I should have tried the application of force if necessary," Leighton replied a little grimly, "and so I told him. 'Very well,' I said, when I found that remonstrance had no effect, 'if you go to the villa it is only a question of your being arrested a little sooner or a little later, and therefore I shall see that it is as soon as possible. You may take your choice — to return to the yacht or be handed over to the police immediately.' "

Princess Nadine looked at the speaker with a glance in which surprise and something like amusement were mingled.

"That was good!" she commented. "It was what he deserved, and even if you had fulfilled your threat, it would have been no more than he deserved."

"I should certainly have fulfilled it," Leighton assured her. "I have never in my life made a threat which I was not ready to fulfil. I think Count Alexis appreciated that. He was extremely angry, but he yielded. To be quite certain, however, of his return to the yacht, I felt it necessary to accompany him, and I left orders that he should not, under any circumstances, be allowed to land on French soil again."

"That also was good," she said. "But how like him, the whole adventure — the imprudence, the folly, the daring!"

"And the selfishness," Leighton added dryly. "I put *that* to him! I asked him how he dared come here, and risk compromising you further. Of course he protested that he had no intention of the kind. He thought it merely an admirable opportunity to obtain his papers, as well as to amuse himself."

"The last especially," the princess said in a tone of exasperation. "He would certainly have been recognised — he is so unmistakable in many ways — and, since no doubt the house is full of spies of the police, could not possibly have escaped arrest. It was wonderfully fortunate that you met him but, if he were masked, how did you know him?"

"I did not know him. It was he who recognised and stopped me, for, luckily again, I had not resumed my mask after leaving you. He wanted to know whether the papers were in my possession."

"Ah!" she murmured regretfully. "What a pity that I had not given them to you! Well," — she drew a small package from the folds of lace which enwrapped her, and extended it to him as she spoke — "here they are now."

Leighton received the package and held it in his hand a moment, as if weighing it, while his gaze rested meditatively on her face.

"It is very small, very light, to represent so much!" he said at length. "Have you thought well, Princess Nadine, what it represents for you?"

"Have I thought?" she echoed a little bitterly. "What should I be made of if I had not thought? Is it likely that I am either so shallow or so heroic that I can do what will change my whole life and think nothing of it?"

"I, too, have been thinking since we parted," he said gravely, "and the sum of my thoughts is this, — it is not yet too late for you to reconsider the great sacrifice you are making."

"To reconsider!" In her astonishment she seemed only able to echo his words. "You advise me to reconsider — *now*?"

"It must be now or never," he answered. "It is indeed your whole life which you are deciding when you put these papers out of your hands, and accept the consequences of refusing to comply with the demand of your government for them."

"I have accepted those consequences," she said with proud quietude.

"No," he returned, "you have not yet accepted them, and what I wish you to consider is whether there is any reason why you should do so. Will you sit down for a few minutes while I tell you what I have been thinking?"

"What is to be gained by either telling or listening?" she asked.

Nevertheless she sat down, with a slight air of weariness, on the bench from which she had risen before his approach, and, clasping her hands together in her lap, looked away from him, down the shadowy vista of the avenue, to where the distant line of sea and sky blended together.

Leighton, on his part, remained standing, perhaps because he was thus more at liberty to let his gaze dwell on her, and drink in her poetic beauty, as if it were the fragrance of a flower. He was quite sure that he had never seen anything so fair as the picture she presented, as she sat in the lustrous moonlight, wrapped in her mantle of white lace, but the touch of weariness — or was it sadness? — on her lovely face made him, by force of contrast, recall her appearance as he had seen her in this very spot only a few days before, brilliant, triumphant, elated, and a sudden realisation of all that was involved in the necessity of relinquishing the glittering prize which had then seemed within her grasp stirred the man's heart with a sense of pity as painful as it was

unselfish. Involuntarily his square jaw set itself sternly, for to feel without desiring to act was impossible to him.

"What is to be gained," he said in answer to her last words, "is perhaps a little clearer light on a difficult situation. I confess that this light has only come to me since I have had time to reflect on several things, of which your cousin's unpardonable selfishness is but one, and to ask myself why you should suffer so much for the faults and crimes of others?"

"You forget," she reminded him, "that it is not only for the faults of others that I am suffering. If I had given you those papers when you first came for them, everything would be different."

"Why think of that now?"

"Because, having refused to trust you, I suffer for my own fault as well as for that of others."

"If there were fault in that, it was more mine than yours," he said. "Why should I have expected you to trust me? You had only heard of me as a man who has gained some power in the world by craft and audacity, and you only knew me as one who had presumed on the briefest acquaintance to express a violent and, in your eyes, an insolent passion—"

"I knew," she interrupted hastily, "that you had saved my cousin from the worst consequences of his folly."

Leighton's gesture expressed contemptuous indifference.

"To take him away cost me nothing," he said, "but gave me much."

"Gave you—?"

"The right to approach you, the power to serve you — oh, you were right enough in thinking that I counted on those things! I never fail to recognise when fortune befriends me."

"If fortune has befriended you in this matter," Nadine said, again a little bitterly, "she has certainly forgotten to befriend me."

"Wait for the end, Princess!" Leighton told her. "I have often said that to myself in times of anxiety and peril, and I have never failed to find the end better than I expected."

She looked at him silently for a moment, before she said,

"I think such men as you make your own ends."

"Sometimes we do," he replied. "And now I should like, if I may, to aid in making yours." He walked away a few steps, turned, came back, and again standing before her went on quickly, "It comes to this, — my advice to you is to keep these papers and to-morrow give them to M. Stanovitch."

"Are you in earnest?" she asked.

"Entirely in earnest," he answered. "It is the only wise thing to do."

"The only wise thing, from the point of view of diplomats, princes, and — it seems dictators," she said disdainfully. "But it would also be a base thing."

"For you, — no," he returned. "What obligation rests upon you to guard the secrets of conspirators, whose objects you abhor, and to shield them, at such tremendous cost to yourself, from dangers which they have wilfully incurred?"

"Obligation to them you know well that I have none," she replied. "It is the obligation of my own honour which constrains me."

"Might it not constrain you differently? Doesn't it occur to you that, as a loyal subject of your emperor, you are bound to assist in suppressing revolutionary schemes, which you know to be dangerous?"

"I do not consider myself an unattached member of the secret police," she answered; "but if I were, I should draw the line at betraying my friends."

"Then," Leighton said, with the air of one who urges his last appeal, "have you no thought for the man whose hopes you disappoint? You may be willing to sacrifice your own ambition for a scruple of honour, but have you a right to force Prince Maximilian to choose between sacrificing his or sacrificing *you*?"

The princess rose to her feet — a beautiful, stately figure in her indignation.

"I am at a loss to understand you, Mr. Leighton," she said. "A few hours ago you were kind enough to tell me that I might find consolation for the sacrifice of my ambition in the fact that I should be able to prove that Prince Maximilian regarded me as merely a pawn in his game of state. It may interest you to know that he has fully proved this."

"I never," Leighton said, "doubted that he would prove it."

"And yet," she went on, "you ask me to consider *him*, if I do not consider myself, and to refrain from the possible sacrifice of *his* ambition, if I am willing to sacrifice my own? What am I to think of such counsel? Are you simply mocking me?"

"You know that I am not," he answered. "Though I hardly wonder you should be astonished at the change. I am astonished myself. It comes from the fact that since we parted I have achieved a victory — the hardest of my life. I have ceased to think of myself, and I have succeeded in thinking only of you. How the power to do this came to me, I do not know. It was like a miracle. 'Whereas I was blind, now I see.' And what I see is that the life to be desired for you by one who would regard your happiness, rather than his own presumptuous wishes, is the life for which your birth, your education, your whole environment have prepared you; and that who desires to serve you best must help you toward this life, and not away from it. Therefore Prince Maximilian—"

She stopped him. "I decline to discuss Prince Maximilian further," she said.

"Pardon me," Leighton replied, "but I think we must discuss him a little further. He stands for so much in your life."

"He stands for nothing now," she returned. "If he were ten times a royal prince I would not marry him since he failed under the test I was so confident in applying. For, surely you understand — he failed! Nothing weighed with him, neither thought of me nor consideration of my honour, against the crown of Serabia."

"Ah, the crown of Serabia!" Again Leighton took a few steps away from her, and again returned. "See, Princess," he said, "it is like this: we must consider Prince Maximilian, also, in the light of his education and environment. I recognise now that in my view of the situation, as it concerned him and his ambition, I was altogether selfish. I wanted to prove him self-seeking and interested, without considering that if he gave what you desired it was enough; and that only a barbarian like myself would have dreamed of expecting absolute disinterestedness in the matrimonial choice of a royal prince."

"This sarcasm —" she began.

"It is not sarcasm, believe me," Leighton interrupted earnestly. "I am simply trying to tell you the thoughts which have come to me, as by a stroke of illumination. And since I advised you badly a little while ago, let me now advise you well. Apply no more tests, cease to look for the fulfilment of impossible ideals, but accept realities, and draw from them the most lasting satisfaction of life, that of gratified ambition. It is not likely that even to you the chance of wearing a crown will ever be offered again. If you desire it — and what woman in your position would not desire it? — do not sacrifice the brilliant future before you. Give up these papers, and take the crown!"

He held out the package to her, but she did not glance at it. Instead, her eyes were fastened on his face.

"In my place you would act as you advise me to do?" she asked.

"An adventurer from Central America could hardly be supposed to look at life from the standpoint of Princess Nadine Zorokoff," he answered evasively.

"He might at least suppose that Princess Nadine Zorokoff's sense of honour was as keen as his own," she told him. "But I understand — in all that you have said you have been thinking only of me."

"Of whom else should I think?" he demanded. "Of Prince Maximilian, your cousin, these insane revolutionists — what do any of them matter compared to your life? Do you think I have

forgotten how you talked to me of your ambition — your dream of empire for your people and your Tsar — the first time we met? At this moment I would not hesitate to sweep out of your path by any means — you understand me, any means! — those who interfere with the fulfilment of your desires. And this being so, the first person whom I sweep out of that path is myself."

"How have you interfered with the fulfilment of my desires?" she inquired.

"I have interfered so vitally," he answered, "that but for me you would not be obliged to make the odious choice which is now forced upon you."

"It will be difficult for you to convince me of that."

"Not difficult at all," he returned, "but very easy. You know when I saw you in that parade — was it the day before yesterday, or years ago? — I fell in love with you. That's a crude, bald way of putting it; but you will comprehend. I simply saw what I recognised to be the most wholly desirable thing I had ever seen, and, with the arrogant presumption of a man who has never failed, I swore that I would win it —"

"I cannot listen to this," she interrupted coldly but gently.

"Wait!" he said urgently. "This is only a preface. You remember how I angered you by my audacity and my criticism of Prince Maximilian when we met next, here in your garden. It was the policy of desperation. I saw that you were absorbed in things so far away from me that I had to be rude, violent, altogether objectionable, to make you realise that I even existed. Of course I took the risk of offending you past forgiveness and this, you will perhaps remember also, was what very nearly occurred, when — your cousin came! I caught gladly at the chance to serve you by carrying him away. But it was of myself I was thinking, of how to make the event serve my end. And when I found it necessary to return for these papers, I came filled with an exultant consciousness of power, of holding everything in my hand — not indeed in the sense you suspected, but enough to justify you in refusing to trust me. And you did refuse."

"Yes," she assented, "I refused. And so—"

"And so" — he took the words from her lips — "the responsibility for the present situation, for the choice which is forced upon you, lies with me. If when Stanovitch came to you the papers had been out of your hands, you could have met his eyes boldly and let him read in yours that you spoke the truth when you said, 'You are mistaken. I have no papers.' But you could not say that because I had made it impossible for you to trust me, and so they were still in your possession. Now, having done you this great injury, you must suffer me to repair it."

"How can you repair it?"

Again he held the package out to her. "By making you see that it is right for you to take these, right for you to give them up, and right to walk over whoever opposes you, straight to the object of your ambition, the throne of Serabia!"

There was a brief silence, while they stood facing each other with something of the aspect of duellists, as they had stood when she refused to give the papers to him in the afternoon. It was a strange reversal of conditions, but now as then every instinct of the man's dominant nature was roused to overcome the resistance which opposed him.

"Take them!" he commanded imperatively. "You must take them!"

"Put them up!" the princess replied quietly. "Nothing that you, or any one else, could say would induce me to take them. And as for the rest, I don't think you have as much responsibility for my choice as you believe; but if so, don't regret it. Even thrones may be bought too dearly."

"My God!" he exclaimed passionately. "What can I say to convince you that this is quixotic folly — madness?"

"Nothing," she answered again. "Quixotic folly or madness it may be, but I cannot act otherwise. Now you must go." She held out her hand as she spoke. "If you were not carrying away all possibility of my ever wearing a crown," she added, faintly smiling, "we might fancy ourselves playing some great game of statecraft and plotting — I a queen in distress, and you my trusted counsellor and faithful knight. As it is, I am no queen, nor ever shall be now, but I can at

least recognise, even though a little late, that I have gained a friend, if unselfishness is the test of friendship."

Perhaps Leighton never in all his life astonished himself so much as when he found himself kissing that fair hand, with one knee touching the earth.

"You are to me," he said, "far more a queen than if you wore the crown which you sacrifice rather than betray a trust, and I am ever your faithful servant."

CHAPTER XIX

"A Wise Man Throws Down His Cards"

A MOMENT later Leighton was standing alone, looking after the princess, as she moved lightly and swiftly along the avenue toward the villa. And while he looked, he was conscious of such a thrill of triumphant elation as he had never, even in his strenuous existence known before. For after all he had not blundered, or, if he had, he was now able to turn his very blunders to account. His presumption was forgiven in the smile with which she called him her friend, and this being so, all things became possible to his upleaping hope. The flower-soft touch of her hand seemed a promise, an assurance that the future might be moulded to his heart's desire, and it was with a sense of positive exultation that he thrust the package of papers into his pocket and turned in the direction where his boat was awaiting him. But as he turned, a voice spoke — a voice quiet, courteous, yet, he felt instinctively, as peremptory, as little to be disregarded, as the whistle of a bullet.

"Permit me, monsieur, a word with you." It said much for Leighton's iron nerves that he did not start, but only stopped short and looked sharply in the direction whence the voice proceeded. From the deep shadow of a tangle of oleanders beside the fountain a man emerged, and as he stepped into the path the moonlight falling broadly over him revealed M. Stanovitch.

"I am sorry to detain you, monsieur," said the Russian calmly. "But the delay need not be great. It is only necessary for you to give me the papers you have just received from Princess Nadine Zorokoff."

Before the last words were uttered the strongest feeling of which Leighton was conscious was one of intense regret. Why had he come on such an errand unarmed? Why had he trusted to the fact that he was in the midst of civilisation, where men fought with craft, and not with primitive weapons of force? What would he not have given at this moment for the pistol always so near to his hand in Central America! But, lacking it, he knew that he stood with only his empty hands and quick wit to defend the trust received from Princess Nadine.

"This is an astonishing demand," he replied coolly, "and an equally astonishing intrusion. May I inquire who you are?"

"I think," the other answered with a smile, "that you probably know very well who I am, since my name has been mentioned several times during the extremely interesting conversation which has just ended. But if it is necessary for me to introduce myself, — I am Stanovitch of the Russian Embassy, at your service."

"Ah, M. Stanovitch!" Leighton lifted his brows. "This accounts for your rather absurd as well as astonishing demand. But we are not in Russia, monsieur, and Russian methods are a trifle out of place here, especially in view of the fact that, since you have avowedly been playing the spy, you must know who *I* am."

"Certainly," Stanovitch told him, "I am aware that I have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Leighton, whose adventurous and picturesque career has been — ah — very well advertised."

"Then," Leighton returned contemptuously, "there is no further answer required for you. Be good enough to stand aside and let me pass!"

Aware of the risk he was taking, but faithful to his policy of "*toujours l'audace*," he made a step forward — to find himself, not altogether unexpectedly, looking into the gleaming barrel of a small revolver.

"Neither are we in Central America, Mr. Leighton," the Russian said contemptuously in turn, "and this tone of a dictator is a little more absurd than my demand. Really I should have fancied that your stirring experiences would have taught you when a game is lost. At such times a wise man throws down his cards."

"A wise man never throws down his cards until it is proved to him that his game is lost," said Leighton, whose outward coolness was unchanged, although his pulses were beating furiously enough.

M. Stanovitch shrugged his shoulders.

"It strikes me that the proof is sufficiently clear," he said, "but if you would like further demonstration — a single shot from this pistol would bring the police on the scene. But I hardly believe you will force that necessity upon me. I think you must recognise that you have come to the end of the romantic part you have been playing. It has been very chivalrous and no doubt amusing, but there are several reasons why it must end. For one thing, we must have those papers; and for another Princess Nadine cannot be allowed to entangle herself further, either with the foolish conspiracy of her cousin, or the homage of the most devoted of knights." He paused an instant, and then went on in the same suave tone, flavoured with mockery: "It is of course quite easy to understand your wishes and intentions, but I may tell you frankly that the princess will not be permitted to refuse the alliance with Prince Maximilian. A matter so important to the interests of Russia cannot be endangered by a girl's caprice. I give this explanation, not only to convince you of the hopelessness of your — pardon me — rather presumptuous aspirations, but also because it gives me pleasure to express my appreciation of the disinterested and excellent advice which you offered her. I could have offered no better myself."

Leighton bowed. "I am highly flattered," he said ironically.

"And since you saw so clearly what it was best for her to do," Stanovitch added, "you will certainly see with equal clearness what is best, indeed necessary, for you to do now on her behalf."

"You forget," Leighton reminded him, "that what the princess declined to do for herself I can hardly do on her behalf."

"I am afraid that you are a little dense, Mr. Leighton," Stanovitch observed regretfully. "It seems that you have not yet grasped the situation. I must have those papers at any cost — at any cost, do you understand? But we are both anxious to avoid anything which would tend to compromise the princess, are we not? So far you have served her well, but the only way in which you can continue to serve her is to deliver those papers to me quietly and at once."

"And if I decline to do so?" Leighton asked, keeping his eyes steadily fixed on the erect figure before him.

Again Stanovitch shrugged his shoulders. "In that case," he replied, "the consequences will be unpleasant — for you. But I am sure you will not be so foolish."

There was another pause, and then Leighton made a gesture which seemed to indicate that giving up a game of which the other had spoken.

"It is possible," he said, "that you are right, and that what you advise is best for the princess. But if I give the papers to you, may I feel assured that you will make her understand why I have yielded to your — arguments?"

"I shall take pleasure in assuring her that you only yielded to necessity," Stanovitch replied. "And now" — his voice took an imperative key — "let us have no more delay. The papers, if you please!"

"Since you promise to do me justice with the princess —" Leighton repeated. As he spoke his hand went to his pocket, and drawing out the package, he advanced over the space which divided the two men.

Stanovitch, still keeping the levelled pistol in his right hand, extended the other to receive the papers, on which involuntarily his glance fell. At that instant, with lightning-like rapidity, Leighton dropped the package and literally hurled himself forward. Entirely unprepared for such an attack, the Russian staggered back under the sudden impact, the pistol was wrested from his grasp, and the next moment he found himself gasping, half-stunned, on the bench where he had sat with Clare a little earlier, while Leighton stood over him, grim and triumphant, with the weapon in his hand.

"I suppose," the American remarked quietly, "that I need hardly call your attention, monsieur, to the fact that a game is not always lost when it appears to be so. At present I hold the winning card, and, although I am inclined to believe that your statement about the police was — a diplomatic subterfuge, shall we say? — I will take no risks, but must trouble you to accompany me to the landing-stage, where my boat is waiting and where I shall have the pleasure of bidding you good-night."

CHAPTER XX

Mrs. Wentworth's Appeal

Isn't the princess up yet, Marie?" It was Miss Hazleton who asked the question, impatiently, as she entered the boudoir of Princess Nadine the morning after the ball, and was met by her maid.

"Yes, mademoiselle," the French girl answered, "the princess has just breakfasted, and she desired me to say, if you or madame inquired for her, that she would be out in a few minutes."

"Then I'll wait for her here," Clare said. She flung herself into an easy chair and, sitting in a careless heap, with her elbows on its arms, and her chin supported in the palms of her hands, stared moodily before her, not at the beautiful view of gardens and distant sparkling sea, lying in the brilliant sunshine beyond the open windows, but at an escritoire of inlaid satinwood which stood directly in her line of vision. The look with which she regarded this apparently inoffensive article of furniture might quite accurately be described as a scowl, while one small, slippered foot beat restlessly on the floor. Indeed it would have been patent to the most superficial observation that care sat on Miss Hazleton's pretty shoulders this morning. She was not only strikingly pale — this might have been a natural result of physical fatigue — but an extremely irritated expression replaced her usual air of buoyant satisfaction with life and with herself. Several minutes passed, and she was still scowling at the escritoire and still tapping her foot nervously on the floor, when the sound of an opening door made her start and turn quickly to see, not the princess, but Mrs. Wentworth entering.

"Oh!" The interjection, expressive of intense vexation, escaped her involuntarily, and to cover it she hurried on: "Good morning, auntie. How are you feeling to-day? I'm afraid" — her glance expressed recognition of something unusual in the appearance of the other — "that last night's dissipation was a little too much for you."

Mrs. Wentworth sat down before she answered. Over her, too, care had apparently flapped its black wings. She also looked both pale and worried, and, as might naturally be expected, these signs of mental disquiet had wrought greater havoc in her case than in that of the girl who was staring at her more curiously than sympathetically.

"Such dissipation is a great mistake!" she declared in the tone of one who seizes the first available vent for irritation. "Balls are all very well, but this carnival frivolity is absurd. One should approach Lent in a spirit more suitable to — er — fasting and ashes."

Clare made an expressive grimace. "I feel as if my mouth were full of ashes this morning, and they are uncommonly bitter, even for ashes," she observed. "I've just come in to find out how Nadine is looking at things to-day."

"I have also come to see how she is, and to discuss an important matter with her." Mrs. Wentworth remarked stiffly. "I shall be glad if you will leave me to see her alone."

"Oh, certainly," Clare rose, and then paused from irrepressible curiosity: "I hope," she hazarded, that it isn't anything very — disagreeable?"

"Why," Mrs. Wentworth inquired frigidly, "should you imagine that it is disagreeable?"

"I don't know," the girl answered, "unless it is because there's such a pervading flavour of ashes about everything to-day."

She left the room as she spoke, in an abrupt transatlantic fashion which Mrs. Wentworth had often rebuked. Notwithstanding her preoccupation it annoyed her now, and she was still frowning at the door which had closed on the brusque young figure, when another door opened and Princess Nadine entered.

All things gracious and fair seemed to enter with her, for, although she, too, was somewhat paler than usual, there was no sign of worry, or irritation in the beautiful eyes, or about the delicate lips. These last were a trifle firmly closed when she appeared, but they softened into a charming smile, as she moved across the floor — looking more than ever like a tall lily, in her draperies of soft white silk — and approached her grandmother.

"Dear *matushka*," she said, kissing her cheek, "I hope you are feeling well?"

"Such a hope is a mockery," Mrs. Wentworth replied in a bitter tone. "How could I possibly be feeling well after the dreadful revelations of last night!"

The princess sighed, as she sat down, and gazed with genuine sympathy at the face which, in the strong light beating on it, looked drawn and aged.

"Ah, I was sorry," she said in a tone of deep regret, "that you should have discovered what I didn't intend you to know until to-day."

"As if not knowing it until to-day would make any difference!" Mrs. Wentworth returned resentfully. "It is knowing it at all — it is the awful thing itself! Nadine! it seems to me that I must have dreamed it, that you didn't really tell me that — that—"

"I shall not marry Prince Maximilian," Nadine said quietly. "You didn't dream it. I really told you so, though I should have preferred not to have been forced to tell you last night. But when I came in, and found you here waiting for me, frankness seemed the only thing possible."

Mrs. Wentworth shuddered visibly.

"Never in my life," she said solemnly, "have I had such a terrible shock! To come to congratulate you — talk of the success of the ball—tell you how proud I was of you — how satisfied—how glad —"

Her voice broke, and the princess leaning forward took her hand. "Ah, *matushka*!" she murmured sorrowfully.

"Then to find you absent — so strangely absent!" Mrs. Wentworth went on. "And when you came, to hear such an incredible story of folly — of madness—"

"Poor *matushka*!" the girl repeated, as if the soft Russian name of love was the only form in which she could express her affection and her regret. She stroked caressingly the hand she held. "I would so gladly have spared you," she said.

"Then spare me now!" Mrs. Wentworth cried, in a tone of passionate appeal. "Nadine, my child, my darling, it is for that I have come — to beg you to spare me a disappointment which will kill me! I have done nothing since we parted but think of what you told me, and I cannot believe that you will be so mad as to ruin your own life and break my heart."

"What," Nadine asked a little sadly, "would you have me do?"

"I would have you," Mrs. Wentworth answered, "give up those papers to the man who came for them, and cease your foolish attempts to shield your imbecile of a cousin and the plotting wretches who should be in Siberia."

"I have not attempted to shield any of them, not even Alexis," the princess replied. "I have only found it impossible to betray a trust which, however foolishly, I deliberately assumed. But even if I desired to give up the papers I could not do so now, for they are out of my hands."

"Out of your hands!"

"Surely you understood? I gave them last night to Mr. Leighton."

Mrs. Wentworth stared, for, as a matter of fact, in the overwhelming intelligence that the alliance with Prince Maximilian was threatened, other details of the story had been, as it were, submerged.

"The man from Central America!" she gasped. "What has he to do with it?"

"Don't you remember," the princess reminded her, "that I told you of his carrying Alexis away in his yacht, and then coming back for the papers, of my refusal to give them to him, of his returning after M. Stanovitch had been here, and of my promising to take them to him in the garden? It was to fulfil that promise I had gone out when you came — you must remember all this?"

Mrs. Wentworth shook her head.

"I suppose I am growing old," she said tragically. "It is altogether too much for me! I cannot take it in — the thought of you mixed up with the plots of dreadful anarchists, and meeting secretly at night an American adventurer—"

"I am not in the least mixed up in the plots of anarchists," Nadine told her a little proudly, "and I only met Mr. Leighton in order to give him the papers, which he has no doubt taken to Alexis."

"I wish that he and Alexis were both at the bottom of the sea!" Mrs. Wentworth declared viciously. "And you gave him those papers in defiance of the wishes, the advice, of the prince —"

"I am afraid," the girl interposed gently, "that you don't realise the situation. All is at an end between Prince Maximilian and myself, if indeed that can properly be said to be at an end which has hardly had a beginning. When I told him that I could not act as he advised, he — withdrew his suit."

Mrs. Wentworth snatched her hand from the touch which was still softly caressing it, and as she threw her head against the back of her chair and closed her eyes it seemed for a moment as if she were about to faint. But fainting was very far from her exasperated mind.

"Great Heaven!" she said at length. "What unutterable madness! And from you — you, of whom and from whom I hoped so much!"

"I know it is a terrible disappointment," the princess said, "but it may console you a little to hear that I am quite sure that I could never have been happy with Prince Maximilian."

Mrs. Wentworth opened her eyes sharply.

"Why should it console me?" she demanded. "And why should you not have been happy?"

"For the simple reason," the girl answered. "that he has proved that he does not love me, and you cannot imagine that I would willingly marry, or having married that I could be happy with, a man of whom I knew that to be true."

"What *bourgeois* absurdity!" her grandmother retorted angrily. "Who would think that you had been trained as carefully as any royal princess for an exalted destiny, when you can talk such sentimental nonsense! One might take you for a romantic schoolgirl, or some provincial American."

The princess smiled. "If I were a provincial American," she said, "I should probably be too much dazzled by the rank of the prince to consider the man beneath it. But because I have never known any other atmosphere than that of the 'great world,' I can rate things more nearly at their true value. I confess that I have been very much attracted by Prince Maximilian, and that my own ambition aided his attractions. There are many reasons why I should have liked to be queen of Serabia—"

"Oh, Nadine!" It was a cry of positive anguish. "You were born to be — you must be!"

"But last night," the clear voice went on, "I tested the prince, and the test proved that if I can serve his purpose he will make use of me, of my wealth, my rank, my beauty, perhaps even my brains, so long as they are pledged to think only of his ends. But if I put my honour, my word,

the lives and fortunes of misguided men, as an obstacle in the way of his ambition, then he withdraws without even a pretence of personal regret. And do you think I would give myself to such a man for the sake of the crown he may possibly be permitted to wear? No, not if he really reigned a king, and not a puppet!"

"Nadine! I am — astonished at you!"

The protest sounded weak, but it was an expression of the only sentiment of which Mrs. Wentworth was conscious at this moment. Astonishment the most profound filled her mind; astonishment such as now and again seizes us all at certain crises of life, when a character with which we fancied ourselves thoroughly familiar displays an absolutely unfamiliar aspect.

The princess looked at her wistfully. "Perhaps I am astonished at myself," she said. "Perhaps I have learned some things about myself which I never knew before. I suppose there must be many such revelations for us in life — revelations of the unknown possibilities of our own natures."

"There is nothing of the kind," Mrs. Wentworth retorted almost fiercely, "for those who know their own minds, who have adopted a plan of life and follow it with consistency and resolution. What should I be if I had not followed such a plan of life, and never faltered in it?" She held out her hands imploringly toward the girl. "Do you think it was all a path of roses for me?" she asked. "Do you suppose that the relations into which I entered were ideal? But I never allowed myself to pause! I kept on; I climbed as high as the circumstances surrounding me would permit; and I never dreamed — never for a moment — that the great disappointment of my life would come through you, in whom all my heart, my hope, my ambition, have been from your birth bound up!"

The princess took the outstretched hands and lifted them to her lips with a gesture full of grace.

"*Matushka*," she said sweetly, "I know it. And I would not disappoint your hopes and your ambition if I could help it. But even if I were ready to forgive Prince Maximilian for proving that I am nothing to him but a tool with which to carve his fortune, do you not see that it is too late to change anything? He would not now even wish—"

She stopped abruptly, for at this moment the groom of the chambers appeared at the door, and, bowing profoundly, said:

"His Serene Highness Prince Maximilian of Altenberg begs to know if Princess Nadine will receive him."

CHAPTER XXI

"I Would Lose A Hundred Thrones"

THERE was an instant's breathless pause in the boudoir, as the eyes of its two occupants met in a flash of astonishment on one side, and almost rapturous relief and hope on the other.

"Prince Maximilian!" Mrs. Wentworth exclaimed, clasping her hands.

Princess Nadine looked quietly at the servant.

"I will receive his Serene Highness," she told him. Then, as the man withdrew, her gaze returned to meet that of her grandmother. "This is strange," she said. "I know of no reason why he should come."

"No doubt he has come to explain," Mrs. Wentworth suggested eagerly. "You must have misunderstood him last night — I was quite sure you had misunderstood him!"

"There was no room for misunderstanding," the princess answered. "But it is possible that he may still be hoping to induce me to act as he advised—"

"And you will — you must!" Mrs. Wentworth cried vehemently. "Nadine, you can't be so utterly mad as to throw away this chance which has come to you so — miraculously."

Nadine looked at her compassionately.

"You don't in the least comprehend my position, *matushka*," she replied. "But you can hear for yourself what Prince Maximilian has to say."

"No, no!" Mrs. Wentworth rose precipitately and turned in rapid flight toward a door which opened into the adjoining apartment. "You must see him alone — oh, there can't be a doubt of that! But for Heaven's sake don't lose—"

The door opened and closed upon her while she was still speaking. "Wonderful chance" floated back, however, and seemed still vibrating on the air when a moment later Prince Maximilian was introduced into the charming room, which formed such a harmonious background for the graceful presence of the princess, who stood there alone. As he advanced, it struck her that she had never seen him looking so well — so handsome, so animated, so much like one who feels in himself the power to bend circumstances to his will, rather than tamely to submit to them.

"You must forgive me for intruding before you have perhaps recovered from the fatigue of your delightful ball. Princess," he said, as he bent over her hand, "but the truth is that I have been unable to stay away."

"Your Highness is very flattering," she answered, as by a gesture she invited him to a seat and sank into one herself. "I was certainly not expecting you," she added frankly.

The prince smiled. "Not so soon, perhaps," he admitted.

"Not at all," she assured him.

"Ah!" He made no pretence of failing to catch her meaning. "I had no right to hope that you would expect me, and yet that you did not, seems to argue a singular want of knowledge of your own power."

"I must own not only to want of knowledge, but to absolute incredulity with regard to that," she replied quietly.

"Then let my presence convince you of it," he returned, "for you see that, setting conventionalities at defiance, I have come at the earliest possible moment to tell you some things which have become very clear to me since we parted."

Her sapphire eyes met his, cool, steady, unwavering, as no woman's eyes had ever returned his gaze before.

"And those things —?" she queried.

He bent toward her, a sudden glow leaping into his own eyes.

"The first," he said, "is that I love you — love you so deeply that my only hope for happiness is in winning your love!"

Involuntarily she caught her breath, for the words rang with a sincerity which it was difficult to doubt. But there was no perceptible hesitation before she answered a little coldly:

"Your Highness has surely forgotten — my love would be for you just now a very undesirable possession."

"I have forgotten nothing," he returned quickly, "and I assure you that your love is the one possession in the world which I most desire."

"And the crown of Serabia?" she suggested.

"I have put the crown of Serabia in the scale against you," he answered, "and found that it weighed nothing. Let us not talk of Serabia! I have ceased to think of it. All that I have been able to think of since we parted is the fear that I may have disappointed — perhaps lost — you, and all that I care to know is that I have not done so."

He extended his hand with an impetuous motion, but the princess drew back, her delicate brows knitted above the lucent eyes.

"I — hardly understand," she said. "Or is it that perhaps *you* do not understand? Since

I saw you last I have put the papers which you advised me to give up out of my hands, and so have incurred whatever penalty there may be for refusing to deliver them to M. Stanovitch."

"I am sorry," the prince said, "that you could not have followed my advice, for I believe it would have been the wisest course; but I recognise the scruple of honour which forbade you to do so, and since the papers are out of your hands we are at least relieved from the necessity of considering them further."

"But the approval of Russia — you are not relieved from the necessity of considering that," she reminded him.

"Even the approval of Russia has ceased to mean anything to me, in comparison with your approval," he answered. "Only tell me that by my worldly-wise advice I have not forfeited your trust, your regard—"

She interrupted him quickly, the doubt and bewilderment in her eyes deepening.

"How can I tell you anything," she said, "when I find myself unable to comprehend this extraordinary change?"

"There is nothing extraordinary about it," he told her. "It is simply that I love you."

Again words, voice, glance carried a conviction of sincerity, and again she caught her breath in her surprise.

"You say it," she exclaimed involuntarily, "as if — you meant it!"

"As *if!*" he echoed. "Do you doubt that I mean it?" Again he leaned forward and now he took her hands. "Nadine," he said passionately, "I love you with all my heart and soul! I don't pretend that I shall not regret to lose Serabia, but if the choice lies between losing it or losing you, I find that I cannot hesitate a moment."

"But," she cried, "this is madness! It is worse — it is romance! And who ever heard of romance in connexion with a throne?"

"Who cares can hear of it now," the prince laughed. "What would the throne be to me without romance and without you?"

Still for a moment she looked at him, but now the perplexity in her gaze had given place to a clear shining of admiration and something like gratitude. Yet, although her eyes thanked him in this fashion, she drew her hands decidedly from his grasp.

"Nevertheless romance and I must not lose a crown for you," she said. "When I was helping to bring it within your reach— ah, that was another matter. But now, to be an obstacle in the path of your ambition, to be the cause of your losing the throne on which you have almost taken your seat — that is impossible."

"I would," he declared, "lose a hundred thrones rather than give you up!"

"But you must give me up," she answered, "if that is indeed how it stands. For I will never be a hindrance in any man's career. I have dreamed of something very different. I have always felt that I would give my blood, my life itself, to aid in a great cause, to help a great ambition, to climb to a great end with a man who was able to climb, and whom I might —love."

The man listening to her felt himself stirred more deeply than he had imagined possible by her fire and by her beauty. "My Princess," he said, "it is what you were made for!"

"Yes," she assented, "it is, I think, what I was made for. That — not to drag the man down to obscurity, instead of helping him upward to a great place in the world, to the doing of great deeds. Oh!" — it was a passionate cry — "do you think that I who know, girl though I am, what the burning of the fire of ambition is, would condemn you, would permit you, to give up yours? It is no exaggeration to say that I would die sooner! If I cannot help you to Serabia, I will not hinder you. I will not sacrifice your ambition, if I must sacrifice my own, to what you have called a scruple of honour."

"But my love!" he said. "You cannot sacrifice that. I will not allow you to do so."

"Your love!" She repeated the words very sweetly. "Love is a great thing, and I am proud that you have given yours to me, but it may be necessary that you should sacrifice it for the sake

of those whose hopes are bound up in you, for the sake of the great ends you can serve by going to Serabia—"

"I shall never go to Serabia," he interrupted, "unless you go with me. Look upon that as settled, and only tell me if you will accept my love."

"I cannot accept it, if by accepting I will do you an injury," she answered. "But if" — she paused, suddenly conscious of a strange impulse of hesitation, a strange disinclination to pledge herself — "if there should prove to be any way out of the position in which my cousin's folly, and, yes, my own also, have involved me, I will not forget the great proof of disinterestedness which you have given."

"And is this," he asked reproachfully, "all you can tell me?"

"It is," she answered, "all I can tell you now, and all I may ever be able to tell you, unless the threat conveyed to me last night should prove to be empty, and that is not probable. For I have done what it will be hard for Petersburg to pardon."

"We need ask Petersburg nothing, if you will only come to me!" he urged.

She shook her head. "I will never come to you if my coming could possibly harm you," she said with a firmness which was not to be mistaken. "Be sure of that. I must not even listen to anything more now. The man who came to me last night is to come again to-day. After I have seen him I shall know how far his threat holds good, and whether or not it must be farewell between us."

"It will certainly not be farewell," he assured her boldly. "But if you wish me to go—"

"I do wish it," she said, "for M. Stanovitch may arrive at any time, and I should prefer that he did not find you here."

Conscious of preferring the same thing, the prince accepted his dismissal, with a last protestation.

"Whatever M. Stanovitch may have to say, he told her, "is of no importance if you will only believe and rely upon my devotion."

Then he kissed her hand and went out, very well satisfied with the result of the interview and with himself.

CHAPTER XXII

Le Mot De L'énigme

BUT the woman whom he left behind by no means shared in this satisfaction. After he was gone, Nadine stood for several minutes with her gaze fastened on the door through which he had passed. Then, turning, she began to pace slowly to and fro, her silken draperies rustling softly about her as she walked, her hands clasped before her, and her eyes still dilated and shining with strong emotion.

"What does it mean?" she was asking herself. "He was sincere — there cannot be a doubt of that. I have known too many men — heard too many men make love — not to know when a man feels what he utters. This man felt it. He loves me — after his fashion. He wishes me to accept him, and he is willing to give up Serabia for my sake. It seems incredible, but it is true!" She paused suddenly before the window where last night the man had entered who challenged her to this trial, this test of a sincerity for which it had seemed almost too much to hope. "But he has rung true!" she said, as if she were addressing that man. "You did not believe it possible, and I was not sure, but he offers a proof which is not only convincing, but greater far greater, than I can accept."

Again she fell to pacing, and again, as when she faced the prince, the delicate dark brows were knitted above the luminous eyes. "Why can I not *feel* convinced?" she demanded of herself.

"Am I so accustomed to worldliness, so saturated with it, that I cannot believe in the reality of an unselfish passion when I find it? If the situation had been foretold to me I should have fancied that I would be delighted, exultant — haven't I always dreamed of a great passion, a passion for which one might cast away the world and count it well lost? And did I not always feel about Prince Maximilian that he was too cold, too ambitious, too selfish to be capable of such a passion? Yet now, when the test has so unexpectedly come, when he has proved himself ardent and disinterested beyond anything that I ever hoped for, it is I who am cold, incredulous, doubtful of myself and of him. What does it mean?" Her glance turned again toward the window, passed beyond to the garden, and sought amid the bosquets of foliage and bloom for the spot where the nymph of the fountain poured a crystal stream from her urn, and in a flood of silver moonlight a man had knelt and said, "You are to me far more a queen than if you wore the crown which you sacrifice rather than betray a trust, and I am ever your faithful servant." Was it the passionate sincerity of that voice which made the other, the later voice, ring less true? "I think that I really am mad!" Princess Nadine said aloud, with an air of conviction.

At this moment the door burst open, and Miss Hazleton entered in a manner quite as abrupt as that with which she had a little earlier gone out.

"I hear," she said, addressing her cousin with a challenging air, "that Prince Maximilian has been here."

The princess looked at her with surprise. "Yes," she answered, "he has just left."

"Oh!" Clare's tone was indescribably insolent. "Then I suppose everything is settled. I suppose you have secured the prince, and Serabia, and — and everything else you wanted by breaking your promise to me."

Nadine still regarded her with amazement. "What promise to you have I broken?" she asked.

"As if you didn't know!" Clare cried. "As if I could be talking of anything else than Alexis' papers! You told me you wouldn't give them up, but you have given them — to Stanovitch, I suppose."

"I think," said the princess, "that you have lost your senses! Why should you possibly imagine that I have given the papers to M. Stanovitch?"

"Because they are gone!" Clare answered. "You can't deny that they are no longer in the secret drawer of your escritoire there."

She pointed as she spoke to the piece of furniture at which she had so persistently scowled when in the room before.

"You have, then, been examining my escritoire and its secret drawer?" her cousin said coldly.

"Yes," Clare returned defiantly, "I examined it. I wanted to see if you had told me the truth."

"Indeed!" the princess rejoined. "And when, if I may ask, did this examination take place?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Very little, certainly," was the contemptuous reply. "It is enough to know that at some time you have stolen to my escritoire, violated my confidence, and discovered what does not concern you."

"Not concern me!" Clare's voice took a higher, more indignant key. "It concerns me more than anyone — than anyone, do you hear! I told you last night what my interest in Alexis is."

"I — remember." Nadine suddenly seemed to soften as she had softened the night before. "You told me that you love Alexis, and that he loves you. And yet you thought I could betray him!"

"You *have* betrayed him," Clare charged angrily. "Else where are the papers?"

"The papers are quite safe."

"Safe enough no doubt — with Stanovitch!"

"You are mistaken." The crystalline tones were very cold again. "I have not given them to M. Stanovitch."

"Then," the girl cried, "you have given them to Prince Maximilian, and that is exactly the same thing."

"How do you dare to speak so of the prince?" Nadine asked indignantly.

"I dare because I know what I am talking about," Clare replied. "When you found me in the garden last night I had just parted with Stanovitch — he went away when he saw you coming — and I am now sure that while waiting for me he had met and talked with Prince Maximilian and that that was how he learned some things which puzzled me. And now this visit — oh, you *are* a fool if you believe that the prince would have been here this morning if everything had not been arranged between him and that diplomatic spy! You might have played fair with poor Alexis, if you had only known, for whether you gave up the papers, or whether you didn't, you were safe — you and your precious crown! The threat of Russia's refusal to permit your marriage with the prince was only a threat to frighten you. And you were cowardly enough to be frightened!"

The princess stood now as if frozen, staring at the speaker.

"You are talking," she said at length, "of things which you cannot possibly know."

"Don't I?" Clare retorted. "I'll soon convince you that I do. I told you last night that I knew all about Stanovitch, but I didn't tell you how I knew. I didn't tell you that, learning that he was here, and having an idea of what he wanted, I waylaid him after he left you, kept him, danced with him, talked with him, found out all I wanted to know, and finally made terms for Alexis, promising to deliver the papers in consideration of a free pardon for him, and — er— some other things."

"You— did that!"

The words seemed to express all that was possible of amazement and scorn, but Clare went on recklessly:

"Yes, I did that. And pray why shouldn't I make terms for myself and Alexis, as you have done for yourself and Prince Maximilian? Of course I made them — and they were good terms — but before we had quite settled details you came. Then I was foolish enough to believe that you told me the truth, that you really were not going to give up the papers, so I came here to get them, and they were gone! And you gave them up for nothing, for you would have been queen of Serabia anyway —"

"You do not deserve a word of explanation from me," the princess interposed haughtily, "but understand, once for all, that I have not imitated you in treachery. I have not sold the papers for the crown of Serabia, or anything else."

"You cannot deny that you have given or sent them to Stanovitch."

"I do deny it — absolutely."

"Then what have you done with them?"

"I do not acknowledge that you have any right to ask, but I will tell you. I have sent them to Alexis."

"To Alexis!" This was so unexpected that Clare could only stare for a moment. "By whom?"

"By Mr. Leighton."

"Oh! — Mr. Leighton!" Clare threw her head back with a burst of angry laughter. "I had forgotten Mr. Leighton — the rescuer, the meddler, the marplot! I see it all now. It was he whom you were in the garden to meet, and you had the papers with you, of course. Ah!" (with sudden fury) "if I had only had sense enough to guess it, I could have called Stanovitch and taken them from you!"

"Clare!"

"I would! — I would!" the girl asserted, quite beside herself with disappointment and rage. "For now you have ruined everything, thrown away everything! And I had made such good terms —"

"And do you imagine that Alexis would ever have forgiven your treachery, or consented to share its fruits?" the princess asked sternly.

"He would have known nothing about it," Clare answered, "but he would have had a pardon, a fortune, the title of prince—"

"Great Heaven!" The passionate ejaculation seemed wrung from the listener. "You cannot have been so base!"

"And why not?" Clare turned upon her fiercely. "Do you suppose I am not like all the other American women over here, like auntie, like your mother, like Laura Perceval, like Lady This and Countess That — yes, like yourself? Do you suppose I don't want my share of the wealth and rank for which you are all ready to sell yourselves, body and soul?"

"What has this," the princess asked, "to do with treachery? We may be worldly, we of whom you speak, but we are not traitors."

"No," Clare retorted bitterly, "you are not traitors, because you have no need to be. Everything has been made easy for you. The money with which you can buy titles and estates, and even crowns, has been provided for you. But if one is not an heiress, or a princess, one must do what one can with one's wits, and I've long been determined to carve out my fortune with mine."

"If I had known, if I had ever imagined that you felt like this," Nadine said with wonder, and a certain cold gentleness, "I would have done anything, given anything—"

"I did not want your gifts!" Clare interrupted scornfully. "I wanted your position, your rank, your opportunities. And I should have had them — my bargain was made — but for you!"

She flung the last words, as if they were the weapons she would have liked them to be, at the pale, proud girl who stood looking at her with eyes which seemed asking if this were not all an evil dream, and who had not yet spoken in reply when the groom of the chambers again appeared in the door and said:

"M. Stanovitch begs to know if Princess Nadine will receive him."

CHAPTER XXIII

The Word Of Russia

THIS time Princess Nadine replied without an instant's hesitation.

"I will receive M. Stanovitch," she said.

As the servant retired, Clare looked at her with eyes flashing vindictively.

"I wish you joy of your interview!" she said. "Stanovitch will make things rather unpleasant for you, I'm sure, though you are going to be the puppet queen of Serabia! As for me, I've no further business with him, so I'll go!"

She dashed, as she spoke, through the window, and Nadine was still gazing after her flying figure as it crossed the terrace, descended the steps, and disappeared in the gardens below, when M. Stanovitch was announced.

She turned, still pale, but quite perfect in composure and dignity, to meet the man who, with his air half-military, half-diplomatic, entered the room.

"Again, Princess," he said, bowing low, "I have to thank you for your kindness in receiving me so promptly. I hope that I find you fully recovered from the fatigue of last night."

"I am quite well, monsieur," the princess replied coldly. "Will you sit down? Or perhaps a few words will suffice for your— business?"

The impassive face at which she was looking did not change, but a gleam came into the eyes under their drooping lids, which showed that Stanovitch resented both words and manner, although his own manner remained unaltered.

"With your permission," he said, "I will sit down, since my business may require a little time for its explanation."

Recognising the inevitableness of the *mauvais quart d'heure* which Clare had prophesied for her, the princess sank into a chair, while Stanovitch, seating himself very deliberately, turned his cold, keen gaze on her as he spoke, with equal deliberation.

"I came to you last night, Princess," he said, "with a request, to which perhaps a harsher name might be given, and told you that I would return to-day for your final answer. Have you that answer ready?"

"Is this pretence worth while, M. Stanovitch?" she inquired contemptuously. "You are perfectly aware that the papers for which you asked last night are not in my possession."

It was as if she flung down a challenge before him — a challenge so unexpected that it was a moment before he realised all that the words implied. Then, anxious to learn how much she knew of the events of the night before, and also how this knowledge had been acquired, he made a bold move:

"You are right," he said quietly. "I am very well aware that the papers are not in your possession, since they are in mine."

Her eyes opened upon him.

"That," she declared, "is impossible — if the man to whom I gave them is alive."

Stanovitch bowed, smiling ironically.

"Thanks for the admission, Princess," he said. "It simplifies things very much. Yet you must allow me to express astonishment that you should not hesitate to acknowledge that you were in possession of the papers of conspirators, that you refused to give those papers to me when I demanded them in the name of the government, and that you afterwards gave them to one whom you knew to be acting as the agent of the revolutionists."

"Why should I not admit what you already know?" she asked. "You cannot deny that you were in my garden last night as a spy, and no doubt saw me give the papers to—"

"Mr. Leighton," Stanovitch coolly ended as she paused. "I certainly cannot deny that I had the pleasure of assisting at your interview with that adventurous gentleman. It was very romantic, and — er — interesting."

"You are insolent!" she told him, with sudden indignation. "How did you dare to intrude yourself unbidden among my guests, into my grounds? I have broken no law that you should venture—"

Stanovitch lifted his hand with a gesture which, despite her anger, stopped the words on her lips.

"Princess," he said gravely, "it cannot be that you, a Russian subject, are so ignorant of Russian law as not to know how daringly and how dangerously you have broken it. What you have done would subject you to penalties of which I hesitate even to speak, were I not in a position to testify that you have been guilty of folly, rather than crime, and were not those in authority determined to deal very leniently with you."

She lifted her head haughtily. Russian subject she might be, and half Russian in blood, but there was another strain in her, the blood of another race, which with all its faults — and they are many — has not for centuries known what it is to tremble before despotism.

"If I have been guilty of folly, rather than crime," she said, "why should it be necessary for anyone to deal 'leniently' with me?"

Stanovitch smiled a little pityingly.

"Does the law take cognisance of intentions, or of facts?" he asked. "I am sure you can answer that question, and I am equally sure that you are aware of the facts in your case. Last night you had an opportunity to prove your loyalty, and to do the government a great service, by delivering those papers to me. Do I need to remind you what you did instead? — or to tell you that, as a result of that action, you stand to-day as deeply compromised as your cousin in the eyes of the law?"

He did not need to tell her. She saw it plainly, and, looking beyond the man who personified all the ruthless power of the most arbitrary government in the world, she seemed to behold some of the consequences which had fallen upon others for acts less serious than her own, and which might also fall upon her, despite her rank, her wealth, her youth, and her beauty.

To say that the vista of these grim possibilities had no terror for her would be to say that she was childishly ignorant, or else a fool. She was neither, and there is no doubt that her heart quailed within her. But her courage remained undaunted, and M. Stanovitch was conscious of a thrill of admiration when her eyes again met his, clear, brilliant, unwavering.

"So much being granted," she said calmly, "what then?"

"That I shall now have the pleasure of telling you," he replied. "You asked me a moment ago why you should be dealt with leniently. The answer is easily given: — because, in the first place, it is well understood that this affair is only an act of imprudent folly, into which you have been betrayed by your attachment to your cousin; and, in the second place, because it is settled at Petersburg that you shall marry Prince Maximilian of Altenberg."

"Yet last night —" she began impetuously.

Again Stanovitch stayed her words.

"Pardon me," he said. "It is true that last night I led you to believe that unless you gave up those papers the emperor would refuse his sanction to your marriage with the prince. It was hoped by that means to attain the desired end with the least difficulty. But in reality the threat was only a threat. Interests of great importance are too closely connected with the alliance for it to be allowed to fail."

"In that case," said the princess, with restrained scorn, "it is unfortunate that in order to attain your end 'with the least difficulty' you employed a means which not only failed to gain that end, but defeated another."

Stanovitch felt himself distinctly startled. "You mean —?" he queried.

"I mean," she answered, "that in consequence of your threat, and of the choice offered me between betraying a trust or having the sanction of Russia withdrawn from Prince Maximilian's suit, I laid the matter before the prince, and asked his advice. His reply decided one thing at least, that I shall never marry him."

"Have you not, then," Stanovitch asked a little uneasily, "seen his Serene Highness to-day?"

She smiled, and now the scorn in her eyes and on her lips was less restrained.

"I have had that pleasure," she replied, "and I am able to assure you that he played his part extremely well. He is a good actor, the prince, and followed so ably the line which no doubt you indicated to him when you met him last night that, until I was informed of that meeting, I was almost convinced of his sincerity."

Stanovitch set his teeth together sharply. "That little *intriguante*!" he exclaimed.

"It cannot surely be a new experience to you that traitors do not make good confidantes," the princess observed, with subdued sarcasm.

He swallowed an inarticulate reply, and then, grasping as it were his most official manner, spoke very stiffly:

"All this," he said, "is quite beside the question. It is to be regretted that you choose to doubt the prince's very sincere devotion, but we may hope that his Highness will hereafter be

more successful in convincing you of it, since your engagement to him must be immediately announced."

"And if I refuse to permit such an announcement?" she asked haughtily.

"Then," he replied, "I regret to say that you must face the consequences of your incredible imprudence, and I cannot believe that you are prepared to ruin your life in such a manner."

"I would rather," she told him, "ruin my life in that manner than in the other. I would Prefer—"

"A prison? — confiscation of your estates? — Siberia, even?" he interrupted incisively. "You have laid yourself open to all these penalties."

If she shrank at the ominous words, there was no outward sign of it.

"Yes," she answered, "I would prefer even these to marrying a man for whom I have no longer a shadow of respect, who has not even the grace of sincerity in his worldliness and selfishness, but is guilty of the contemptible hypocrisy of affecting high sentiments, when assured that he may do so without the risk of losing anything."

Stanovitch shrugged his shoulders with a cynical air.

"You are *exalt é*, Princess, — very *exalt é*!" he said. "It is a fine trait, but likely to lead, if carried too far, to great mistakes. Believe me, it will be better to yield to the suit of a lover than to the peremptory commands of a power which is never disobeyed with impunity."

The glance which met his now was like a flash of blue fire.

"I will yield to neither," she said.

Again Stanovitch paused for an instant before replying. He was in truth unprepared for a defiance such as in all his experience he had never encountered before, and which he felt himself very much at a loss how to deal with. For it had been impressed upon him that Princess Nadine Zorokoff was to be handled with gloves, yet he knew that even she could not be permitted to defy the exalted powers which had arranged her destiny.

"You are not a child, Nadine Michaelovna," he said at length in Russian. "You must be aware of the gravity of your position. Do not trifle with a peril which if you were a grand-duchess you could not safely dare. The word of Russia is spoken — you will marry Prince Maximilian. There is not the least doubt of that. If you are wise you will submit to the inevitable gracefully, and not force the government to use for your coercion the terrible weapons you have placed in its hands."

He waited a minute longer; then, as she did not reply, rose, bowed again deeply, and went away, leaving her still silent and motionless.

CHAPTER XXIV

"What Are You Here For?"

THE tempest of disappointment and rage with which Clare fled out of the villa and into the garden, at the announcement of Stanovitch's arrival, was by no means subsided when she sat a little later in the place where she had met the diplomatic agent the night before and made the bargain which would now never be fulfilled. As she reflected upon this, and especially as she remembered how she had talked with the princess here and then walked away and left her with the papers in her possession, to be given to Leighton, a wave of fury overwhelmed her again. She lifted her clenched hands above her head in a passion as violent as it was impotent.

"Fool! — fool! — fool!" she said aloud, according to that primitive impulse of human nature on which the stage soliloquy is truly founded. She sprang to her feet, and began to walk swiftly up and down the open space. "Oh, if I had only known!" she cried. "If I had only guessed!

I'm not as clever as I thought I was — not by half — or I would have known! How could I have been so blind as to go away and leave her here! It was a chance in a thousand, and by sheer stupidity I lost it — lost it!" She wrung her hands together now, and then flung them out in an unconsciously dramatic gesture, while something like a sob of rage escaped her lips. "It means that I shall have to give up all thought of Alexis," she went on. "And I've never seen anybody in all my life that I liked as well. But what a fool — oh, what a fool he is in his way! To think of bringing all this trouble on himself and me for nothing — or worse than nothing, for a lot of wretched *moujiks* who, as auntie says, would cut our throats to-morrow if they had the chance! And now I suppose I shall have to marry Uxmoor, who is such an awful fool in still another way, for I can't possibly stay with Nadine after this. Oh, I never want to see a Russian — any Russian — again as long as I live!"

More furious pacing for several minutes. Then she halted abruptly, with head thrown back, in a listening attitude. Her quick ear had caught the sound of voices, growing momentarily more distinct, and of footsteps drawing nearer. Suddenly a laugh broke on the air, and she caught her breath, starting violently. It was impossible, and yet —

"Alexis!" she cried, in a tone of amazement.

Count Alexis Zorokoff, who, together with Leighton, was walking rapidly up the avenue from the landing-stage, stopped short, his handsome face and gay blue eyes irradiated with delight.

"Ah, what an unexpected pleasure!" he cried. "What a happy chance to meet you here!" He strode forward and seizing her hands raised them to his lips. "It must have been a telepathic message, sent by my heart to yours, which brought you," he declared.

"It was nothing of the kind!" Clare returned, as she drew her hands with a decided movement out of his clasp. "The last thing I could possibly have expected would have been to meet you. What are you doing here? Isn't it very unsafe?"

"Very," he agreed lightly. "But my host and — er — custodian, Mr. Leighton, has been persuaded to bring me ashore, in order that I may try to straighten out the tangle I have so unfortunately made in my cousin's affairs."

"Oh! — you have come for that!" Clare's eyes flashed anything but a friendly glance over to Leighton, as he stood in the path where Count Alexis had so abruptly left him. His quiet "Good morning, Miss Hazleton," she did not deign to notice. "I might have known," she said sarcastically, "that Mr. Leighton was considering the safety of the princess, rather than yours."

"Of course he is," the young count said, before Leighton could reply. "The safety of the princess is of vastly more importance than mine, and must be secured at any cost."

"Your anxiety is quite unnecessary," Clare told him with the same sarcastic note in her voice. "Her safety is entirely assured — it hasn't really ever been threatened. But what is more important is that your safety, which is so seriously threatened, can be assured also by very easy means. I had it all arranged with M. Stanovitch last night when Mr. Leighton" — again the unfriendly glance flashed at him — "interfered."

Count Alexis stared at her incredulously.

"You had it all arranged with Stanovitch!" he repeated. "What did you arrange? — and how did you possibly come into contact with him?"

Something, a quite indefinable tone, in his voice brought to Clare's memory certain words which Nadine had very lately uttered. "Do you imagine that Alexis would ever forgive your treachery, or consent to share its fruits?" she had asked and, recalling the question, Clare said to herself that these Russians were impracticable and impossible beyond belief. There was really no telling how he would take the account of what she had done, or what she now eagerly hoped to induce him to do; but it was an imperative necessity, things being as they were, that she should explain the matter to him herself, and bring all her personal influence to bear to induce him to regard it as she did, and act as she wished, if success — the success for which she had ceased to

hope, but which this unlooked for chance seemed to put again within her reach — was to crown her efforts.

"It's a long story," she said in reply to his last words, "and I should like to tell it to you before — well, before you have seen any one else. It is of great importance — to your interests."

Count Alexis turned to Leighton.

"Will you," he said to him, "go to the villa, see my cousin, and explain to her what I have come to do, while I speak with Miss Hazleton for a few minutes? I will then join you."

Leighton seemed to hesitate slightly.

"Let me remind you," he said, "that if your presence here is suspected, you are in immediate danger of arrest."

The young man made an impatient gesture.

"*Cela ne fait rien!*" he exclaimed, in the language most familiar to his lips. "Kindly do as I have asked. Don't you see that I must understand this?"

"Yes," Leighton assented, "it probably is necessary that you should understand — everything. But don't be too long!"

With this warning, he walked away, and Count Alexis, turning again toward Clare, looked at her with eyes out of which all of the gaiety had vanished.

"I must surely have misunderstood you," he said. "You can't have meant to tell me that you have had dealings of any kind with Stanovitch?"

"You didn't misunderstand me at all, and I meant to tell you just that," she answered. She laid her hand with a caressing gesture on his. "Come and sit down," she said coaxingly, "and let us talk comfortably, now that odious man has gone."

Count Alexis lifted his brows, while he yielded to her touch of invitation.

"When did Leighton become odious?" he asked, as they sat down beside the fountain. "When we spoke of him last you were rather eulogistic. Don't you remember telling me that he was a 'first-class fighting man' and thoroughly to be trusted? I have certainly found him so. He seems as keen about my safety as — may I say, as you could be?"

She thrust out her pretty lip disdainfully.

"He proves it by bringing you here, at such tremendous risk to yourself, in order to straighten out Nadine's affairs!" she said. "And that, too, when they don't need straightening out. The threat about preventing her marriage to Prince Maximilian was only a threat — Stanovitch told me so himself — and she has her prince and her precious crown quite safe. You needn't trouble in the least about her. But there's pressing need to trouble about your own affairs."

"Mine," he said gloomily, "are past troubling about, or at least past any hope of mending."

"That's where you are very much mistaken," she assured him breathlessly. "They are not past mending. As I've told you, I had matters all arranged — beautifully arranged with M. Stanovitch, when Nadine and Mr. Leighton together ruined everything. But I'm sure it isn't yet too late."

"For what?"

She did not altogether understand the tone of the laconic inquiry, but she knew instinctively that it was a time for all her fascinations. She dropped her eyelids for an instant, and then lifted them to meet his eyes with her own — bright, alluring, pleading.

"I'm sure you haven't forgotten," she said, "that when we were talking about your unfortunate situation before you went away, and you were deploring your great folly — you called it so yourself—"

"I'm quite ready to call it so again," he remarked a little grimly. "Damnably folly, if you like!"

She nodded full agreement with this. "I told you," she went on, "that I was going to set my wits to work to help you. I didn't quite see how I would do this, but I felt certain that I had some talent for diplomacy, and I determined to be on the alert to seize any chance that offered. So

when M. Stanovitch came last night to see Nadine I immediately suspected that his business was about you, and I determined to meet him myself. I intercepted him, therefore, as he was leaving the house — it was while the carnival ball was going on, so I was masked, and the whole thing was really great fun — and after I had jollied him—"

"You had what?"

"Oh, I forgot — that's American slang, you know, or it seems you don't know! Well, after I had flattered him a little, I made him put on a mask, which he had conveniently brought, and come and dance with me—"

"Dance with you — Stanovitch?"

She opened her eyes wider. "But why not? I've met him at your Embassy in Paris, and one can't go higher socially than that."

"True," he admitted. "The Embassy puts a social stamp on him, but it is well known — however, go on! You danced with him, and then —"

She hesitated an instant longer. Really the thing was harder to tell than she had expected! It was perhaps, she thought, because of Nadine's high-flown ideas, but Alexis was a man of the world, and would surely be reasonable, grateful — nevertheless she put out her hand and laid it again with a caressing touch on his.

"Then," she said, "I took him to a quiet place, and we — talked. I soon found out all I wanted to know."

Count Alexis groaned. "Or Stanovitch found out all *he* wanted to know," he interjected.

Clare bridled slightly. "You are very much mistaken," she said. "I managed the matter *most* diplomatically. He didn't find out anything — not even who I was — until I allowed him to do so. But I learned that, just as I suspected, he had been to Nadine to make inquiries about you, and even more — for he was unkind enough to say that you were of small importance — about those papers you left with her. When I heard that, I was very sorry that I had not let you leave them with me, but since you only gave them to Nadine because I suggested it, I felt as if they were really in my possession, and — and that I had a right to do the best I could for you with them."

Count Alexis had suddenly grown very pale, and in his eyes, as he gazed at her, there was an apprehension amounting to fear. "What did you do?" he asked.

"Why, I made a splendid bargain with Stanovitch!" she declared exultantly. "I was to give him the papers, and obtain a free pardon for you. And not only a pardon! I made him agree that you should have the title of prince, and — er — an equivalent for the Zorokoff estates, which I wanted for you, but he said—"

She paused abruptly, for there could be no doubt what was looking at her now out of the bright blue eyes. It was simply horror. He drew his hand, he drew himself, away from her before he spoke.

"My God!" he said. "You were ready to sell my honour — to make a traitor of me — for a pardon, a title, estates! It is — incredible!"

"To sell — you are as bad as Nadine!" she cried angrily. "Are you all so absurdly *exalt é* you Russians?"

"You forget M. Stanovitch," he replied bitterly. "There are unfortunately many Russians like him."

"At least he has common sense!" she returned. "He would not throw away everything of value in life for a shadow, a sentiment, a folly! And why shouldn't I have made a bargain with him?" she demanded indignantly. "Your plots, whatever they were, had been already discovered, so why should you not profit—"

"By the misfortune of my comrades? Why should I not betray men, who are now not even suspected, to torture, exile, death perhaps?" he interrupted sternly. "That hardly seems to me to require an answer. But I assure you that if you had succeeded in making your 'bargain,' if you

had got those papers into your possession and given them up to this agent of the police, there would be just one thing left for me to do, and that is to kill myself. Only by that means could I prove that I was not a traitor."

As their eyes met, even her shallow soul recognised that he was in deadly earnest. She stared at him for an instant before she said coldly:

"Then what are you here for? If you don't mean to offer the only thing you have of any value — if you haven't brought the papers — what do you expect to gain by coming?"

"What I expect to gain," he answered, "is to make it quite clear to M. Stanovitch, and those whom he represents, that my cousin is not accountable for the position in which my folly has placed her. And what I expect to do is to suffer all the penalties of that folly, rather than allow the brilliant prospects of her life to be clouded."

Clare rose with a movement of angry impatience.

"I've told you that her brilliant prospects are not clouded in the least," she said, "but this fact needn't interfere with your intentions. You'll find M. Stanovitch with the princess now — at least he was with her when I left the house — and no doubt he will be ready to oblige you by ordering your arrest. Since we are not likely under these circumstances to meet again soon, I'll bid you good-bye."

He had risen also, and now stood looking at her with a strange wonder in his eyes.

"And you have nothing else to say to me?" he asked.

"I know of nothing else," she answered, "unless —which seems quite useless— I wish you more sense. For myself I wish I had never seen you, and you may be quite sure that, if I can possibly help it, I never will see you again!"

A moment later she had vanished from his sight among the surrounding greenery.

CHAPTER XXV

"I Cannot Offer You A Crown."

"Princess!"

It was hardly more than a whisper, softly breathed, but the girl who sat like a statue where Stanovitch had left her, and in whose ears his last words were still echoing, turned with a sudden cry of amazement and gladness toward the window, where the same figure which had entered there the night before was now standing. She rose and ran swiftly across the floor, with hands outstretched in a gesture of welcome.

"Mr. Leighton!" she cried. "Oh, thank God!"

The next instant Leighton was within the room and holding the hands, which in their clinging grasp, as well as her voice in its tone, and her eyes in their wide appeal, told him that she was suffering the reaction from some great strain or shock.

"I 'm afraid," he said, with deep concern, "that I have startled you."

"No, no, " she answered, "it is not that. It is" — she released one of her hands to put to her throat — "that I never before knew what it was to feel — fear. When you spoke to me I was in the grip of fear, and it is awful!" She shuddered from head to foot, while she looked at him with an expression which said more than words. "No doubt I should have pulled myself together in a few minutes," she went on, "but when I heard your voice it — unnerved me. It seemed to bring such unlooked-for relief. You know you inspire a wonderful sense of — how shall I put it? — courage, capacity, power."

The deep flush which showed through the man's sunburnt skin was the sign of a greater pride and pleasure than in all his life he had ever known before. For this tribute to the qualities

which had made him what he was, to which he owed his success, was as spontaneous, almost involuntary, as it was sweet.

"All my courage, capacity, power, and everything else I possess, are pledged to your service, you know," he said quietly. "I am here to learn how they can serve you, but before we discuss anything let me advise you to sit down and relax, mind and body. It is quite clear that both have been on too long a strain."

He drew forward a deep, easy chair, and as she sank into it, she smiled at him gratefully.

"I suppose I am a little tired," she said. "I have had several — surprises. A strong emotion is always exhausting, isn't it? Perhaps that explains my want of courage, for I never before suspected that I was a coward."

"You a coward!" The scorn of his tone, scorn for the mere idea, was superb. "I am sure that M. Stanovitch — it was he who left you as I came up, was it not? — ^s under no such illusion."

"Perhaps not," she agreed. "I don't think my courage failed in meeting the demands he made on it. That was instinctive. It was like fire — as quick and as uncontrollable — the impulse of defiance, of pride, which leaped up, when he spoke of coercion, talked of what I — I, Nadine Zorokoff! — must do. But when he went away, and I thought —I thought—"

"Yes, I know," Leighton said, as her voice faltered, for if he did not really know he was at least able to imagine in some degree what such threats of coercion might mean to a Russian. "You thought of things which, by the help of God, you will never suffer. Put the recollection of them away from you!"

But still she gazed at him with eyes in the depths of which terror lurked.

"Every one in Russia," she whispered, "has heard — has known of dreadful things. One tries to forget them — one thrusts the thought of them away — one is told, and one believes, that they are necessary, that the government is fighting a life-and-death fight against anarchy, murder, revolution in its worst form, and that terrible weapons must be used. But nevertheless one's heart grows cold in hearing of the things which are done, and it was for that reason more than any other that I could not give up those papers as you advised."

"Forgive me for advising it," he said. "I see now that it would have been unworthy of you. But I was thinking of you, of your ambition, your dream of empire—"

She smiled faintly. "Yes, I understood that — I understood that you were thinking of me, and my foolish dreams. For I recognise now that they were foolish. This seems to have been sent to tell me so. It is not only that Prince Maximilian has proved himself even less sincere, even more of a mere puppet in the hands of others, than I had imagined. But I have learned that I could not play the part in what is called statecraft — that is, in intrigue and deception — which the rôle I dreamed of demands. I am sure I have some qualities which fit me for such a rôle, but those I now see to be the most essential — the cold heart, the ruthless will, the taking expediency, instead of honour, for one's guide — those I have not, and I could never acquire them."

"Never," he agreed, looking at the noble lines of her face, the lucent beauty of her eyes, with an admiration he did not try to conceal.

"And so," she went on, with the sigh that speaks of renunciation, "I must lay my dream aside for ever. It is not for me to aid in extending Russian interests in the Balkans, in opening the way for the Tsar to the city of the Caesars."

"Perhaps," he hazarded, "Russia may have a word to say about that."

She smiled again — this time proudly.

"Russia has already had a word to say, through the mouth of M. Stanovitch;" she told him. "The government will be kind enough to ignore the episode of the papers, as far as I am concerned, if I am ready to play my part in the diplomatic intrigue which places the Altenberg prince on the throne of Serabia, as the tool of Russia. If I refuse to play this part, to accept the destiny marked out for me, then I must prepare myself to face whatever consequences a Russian subject may fear who has been compromised by touching the forbidden thing called conspiracy."

"But they know," Leighton cried; "that man whom I met after you were gone last night, acknowledged your absolute innocence of any intention to conspire."

"What does that matter?" she returned scornfully. "The law, as he reminded me this morning, takes cognisance only of deeds, not of intentions, and in deed it appears that I am guilty. I have placed in their hands a whip with which to coerce me.

A sudden fire sprang into the dark depths of Leighton's eyes.

"And will you be coerced?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "I may have been born in Russia, but I have not the spirit of a serf, and it is only one with such a spirit who crouches at the sound of the whip."

"Ah!" He drew in his breath sharply. Then he rose to his feet, walked across the floor, and returned, to stand looking down at her, as he had stood in the garden the night before.

"Princess," he said, "I am tempted beyond my strength — tempted to ask you to accept, instead of your own, my dream of empire! All your qualities — the heroic qualities which I discerned in you as soon as I saw you — which would be thrown away in Serabia, can find a wide, a free, a practically boundless field in those wonderful lands beyond the western ocean of which I have talked to you. I told you once how vast a field it is, how full of superb possibilities — such possibilities as the modern world has never known. Rhodesia, of which you spoke, is like the plaything of a child compared to it. All Latin America lies ready to our hands — aroused to aspiration, stirring with unrest, waiting only a capable leader to form the greatest and richest empire the earth has yet seen. Will you come and help me be that leader, form that empire? I cannot, like Maximilian of Altenberg, offer you a crown, but I can promise you power such as few crowns in these days possess, besides the excitement of adventure, the stern joy of warfare, and the triumph of victory!"

How well he read her was proved when, like one who answers a call which she is unable to resist, she rose to her feet, and faced him.

"And are these things," she asked, "all that you offer me? — all to which you pledge yourself?"

"The rest," he answered, "I have already pledged you — my heart, my devotion, my service, all that I have gained in life and all that I may yet gain. Did I not lay them at your feet last night?"

"I believe you did," she said softly. And now her eyes seemed to melt and flash at once, as she looked at him. "You spoke a moment ago of being tempted beyond your strength," she added. "I, too, find what you offer a great — temptation."

"Do you?" he cried in a tone thrilling with passion.

He made a step forward, and the next moment might have seen him again literally at her feet, if at this instant a door behind them had not opened, and a sharp voice asked —

"Nadine, who was that person?"

CHAPTER XXVI

When Steel Meets Steel

PRINCESS Nadine turned quickly around, to meet the anxious eyes of her grandmother. But as she met those eyes they expanded with fresh amazement, for Mrs. Wentworth suddenly caught sight of the masculine figure in the room and lifted her lorgnette.

"Mr. Leighton!" she gasped. "This is very unexpected."

Leighton bowed. "I am sure," he said, "that Mrs. Wentworth must find it so. And very surprising, besides. But I have had the honour to serve the princess in a small matter—"

"A small matter!" Mrs. Wentworth swept forward majestically, with the air of one who, intending to crush an offender, has not the least doubt of her ability to grind him to powder, should such grinding prove necessary. "I have heard of your interference in a very important matter," she said. "But it has not been made clear to me what your interest in interfering is."

"My interest," Leighton told her quietly, "has simply been to serve Princess Nadine."

"Princess Nadine," Mrs. Wentworth returned haughtily, "stands in no need of service from a —stranger. She has any number of friends and servants—"

"And among them all, not one who could have rendered me the service which Mr. Leighton has rendered," the princess interposed. "It is my fault if this has not been made clear to you, *matushka*. But tell me what person you were speaking of when you came in?"

Mrs. Wentworth turned toward her.

"The person of whom I was speaking," she said, "was the man who left you a few minutes ago. Thinking that Prince Maximilian was still with you and fancying from the length of his stay that — that everything had been arranged, I was coming down the staircase, with the intention of joining you, when, to my great astonishment, I saw this absolute stranger shown out. I called Dimitri and questioned him. He told me that the prince had been gone some time, and that the man whom I had seen was—"

"M. Stanovitch, diplomatic agent, and police spy, from the Russian Embassy in Paris," the princess said calmly. "He is the man who came for the papers."

"And" (eagerly) "you gave them to him?"

"*Matushka!* — how often must I tell you that they are no longer in my possession."

Mrs. Wentworth shook her head and sat down heavily.

"You have told me so many incredible things," she said, "that I am entirely confused. It seems impossible for me to learn what you have done, or what you mean to do. I leave you with the prince, hoping, trusting—"

"I warned you," Nadine said gently, "not to hope."

"And I find," Mrs. Wentworth went on, with a gesture which swept the interruption aside, "instead of the prince, a person whom you describe as a police spy, in the act of leaving you, and with you a man who certainly must have entered very mysteriously, since Dimitri knew nothing of his presence. He assured me that you were alone."

"Dimitri was not to blame for knowing nothing of my presence," Leighton remarked. "I entered in a rather irregular manner by the window."

"Oh!" Mrs. Wentworth's expression, as she glanced at the window, and from the window back to him indicated that such a mode of entrance was only what she would have expected of him. She folded her hands together and regarded him with a gaze which, if it had been cold before, was now bitterly hostile. He, on his part, met the gaze calmly, recognising that the antagonism which at their first meeting he had instinctively felt as a possibility between himself and this arbitrary lady, if their wishes and their interests should ever conflict, was now a certainty.

"As Princess Nadine's guardian, and nearest relative," Mrs. Wentworth proceeded, "I must request an explanation of your extraordinary conduct. Who has given you the right of such familiarity in this house?"

"*Matushka,*" the princess interposed again before Leighton could reply, "you must let me remind you of the story I told you last night. You cannot have forgotten that Mr. Leighton has rendered me services which give him a right to familiarity. He not only carried Alexis to a place of safety," — here Mrs. Wentworth snorted disdainfully — "but he came back to me for the papers, which if I had given to him would have made everything different."

"And why didn't you give them to him?" Mrs. Wentworth demanded. "That point has never been explained. Why did you persist in keeping things so dangerous in your possession?"

"Simply because I was a fool," the princess answered, "so great a fool that I have no pity for myself in any consequences that may fall on me!"

"That doesn't answer my question," Mrs. Wentworth persisted. "Even if you were so foolish as not to have believed in the possibility of danger, why should you have refused to give the papers to Mr. Leighton, to whom you profess yourself under such obligations, when he had taken the trouble to come for them?"

A flush like that which the sunset throws on snow dyed Princess Nadine's pale, proud face.

"I was ungrateful, as well as foolish," she said. "I have acknowledged that to Mr. Leighton."

"I cannot allow you to accuse yourself unjustly, Princess," Leighton said. "I repeat what I have already told you, that you were not to blame for refusing to trust me."

Like a flash Mrs. Wentworth turned on him.

"Why was she not to blame?" she asked. "What had you done to prove yourself unworthy of trust?"

"What I had done," Leighton replied, "was a very simple thing to me, though no doubt to you, as to the princess, it will seem a great presumption. I had told her that I loved her."

"You!"

It was a gasp, rather than a word, and for a moment Mrs. Wentworth could say no more. Then her anger broke forth:

"How did you dare?" she cried. "Are you so ignorant, so much indeed of a barbarian, that you don't comprehend the extent of the presumption of which you were guilty? To approach Princess Nadine Zorokoff, almost betrothed to a royal prince, with insolent love-making — you, a mere adventurer!"

"*Matushka*, — "the princess began, but Leighton stopped her by a glance. Then he looked again at Mrs. Wentworth.

"Madame," he said with dignity, "you do me injustice in imagining that I was unaware of the halo of rank, both present and prospective, which surrounded Princess Nadine when I met her. It was because I recognised that these artificial barriers — which, however, I do not hold in quite so much reverence as you do — made approach to her difficult, that I broke through them somewhat rudely, in order to tell her what I felt for her; and it was with the memory of this presumption in her mind that she refused to give me the papers — a reason for which you, I am sure, will not be inclined to blame her."

Mrs. Wentworth stared at him a few seconds longer in speechless indignation. Then:

"I think you are mad!" she said at length. "It is the only thing possible to believe."

"And why more mad than yourself," he inquired coolly, "when you brought your young daughter to this market of Vanity Fair and exchanged — shall we say? — her wealth for the title of Princess Zorokoff? If that was a laudable ambition, why should mine appear to you presumptuous? Permit me to lay my claims for consideration as a suitor for the hand of Princess Nadine before you. My birth is many degrees better than was that of your husband, my wealth is equal to the fortune he left, and I have to offer, besides an ambition which stretches out to great things — greater, though you may not be able to believe it, than the throne of Serabia — a high position already achieved in my own country, and a heart capable of deep attachment. Why, then, may I not lift my eyes to Princess Nadine, and ask her if she prefers an insecure crown, and the knowledge of being merely a pawn in the game of a prince, who is himself only the puppet of higher powers, or if she will accept the untrammelled life, the bold chances, and the passionate devotion of a man whose suit is at least wholly disinterested?"

"Your assumptions are insolent and insulting!" Mrs. Wentworth exclaimed, pale with intense anger. "How do you venture to assume that because Prince Maximilian is a prince, and because he offers my granddaughter a brilliant destiny, he is therefore interested in seeking her hand? He is a man as well as a prince. Why should he not give her 'passionate devotion,' as well as any adventurer from the other side of the world?"

Leighton turned toward Princess Nadine, who stood by, her beautiful face set, as one who holds emotion and possible passion in strong leash.

"The princess," he said, "can herself tell you how far she has been able to test Prince Maximilian's devotion and disinterestedness."

"Prince Maximilian at least is not mad," Mrs. Wentworth cried, angrily. "And it would be madness if he resigned the ambition, the opportunity of his life for the inconceivable folly of a girl who has lost her senses."

"I have told you what I found the prince when I talked to him last night, *matushka*," Nadine said quietly. "What I have to tell you now is that when he came this morning it was to retract all that he had expressed then, and to assure me that he is ready to forfeit the support of Russia, and the hope of the throne of Serabia, rather than lose me."

Mrs. Wentworth shot a glance of triumph at Leighton.

"I knew it!" she declared somewhat inconsistently. "I knew it! Oh, my dearest child—"

"Wait!" The incisive word stayed further speech on her lips. "He had hardly gone, this marvellously disinterested prince, when I learned that he was merely playing a part, that after our conversation last night he met Stanovitch, and Stanovitch told him that it was only a pretense, the threat of refusing consent to my marriage unless I gave up the papers. You see" — a keen edge of scorn came into her tone — "they were quite sure I would give up anything sooner than lose the chance of wearing a crown."

"The threat was only a pretense!" Mrs. Wentworth stared at her helplessly. "Then it has all been about nothing — this trouble!"

"As far as the threat is concerned, yes. It has been about nothing."

"Then since there is nothing for the prince to give up—"

"Ah, there you are mistaken!" the girl cried quickly. "There is something for the prince to give up, and that is *me*! Nothing would now induce me to marry him — nothing!"

"Nadine!" It was a positive wail. "You can't mean it! — you can't be so insane as to refuse the brilliant position which only yesterday you were ready to take of your own will, to run the risk of angering the emperor—"

"The risk!" Princess Nadine interposed again. "The certainty, *matushka*! That man who was here a little while ago, the man whom you saw going out, has told me that if I refuse the prince I will not only incur the anger of the emperor, but all the consequences of having had in my possession the papers of conspirators."

Mrs. Wentworth leaned forward, her face grown suddenly pallid, her eyes startled. Even to her, who had fancied herself so far removed from it, came a touch of the Russian terror, which chills the blood of the bravest.

"And those consequences," she gasped, "what are they?"

"Whatever the government pleases — imprisonment, confiscation of estates, Siberia, any or all."

"And yet you refuse!"

The princess looked at her with shining eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I refuse — absolutely."

Mrs. Wentworth sank back, shivering a little.

"Then what," she asked weakly, "are you going to do for — for your own safety?"

Princess Nadine looked at Leighton, but he, who for a moment past had been gazing out of the window, now turned again to Mrs. Wentworth.

"The princess will be better able to answer that question in a few minutes," he said.

"Yonder comes Count Alexis Zorokoff."

CHAPTER XXVII

"You Have Given Me A Touchstone."

At the last words the princess started, and her gaze went swiftly to the open window, through which the tall, graceful figure of Count Alexis could be seen, advancing across the terrace toward the villa. Then her glance returned as swiftly to Leighton.

"Call him!" she said. "Call him quickly to come to us here! The servants must not see him, if it can be avoided."

Leighton strode hastily to the window, and lifted his hand. Count Alexis, whose eyes were sweeping the many-windowed façade, as if in expectation of some such signal, at once perceived and came rapidly toward him. A moment later he was in the room and going straight to his cousin seized her hands and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Nadine, Nadine *dushka!*" he cried. "How can you ever forgive me! — how can I ever forgive myself for the trouble I have caused, the injury I have done you!"

"You have certainly caused me trouble enough Alexis' " she replied, with a somewhat subtle smile, "but I am not sure that you have done me any injury. Perhaps, indeed, you have given me more than you have cost me."

He stared at her.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he ejaculated. "What have I given you besides annoyance, danger, and loss?"

"You have given me," she answered, with the same enigmatic smile, "a touchstone with which to test others and — myself."

"Oh!" He stared an instant longer, uncomprehending, and then went on vehemently. "You will believe that I never dreamed of the possibility of your suffering in this manner for my fault! But as soon as I heard of the position in which I had placed you, I knew that there was but one thing for me to do — to come and take the responsibility for everything."

She glanced reproachfully at Leighton.

"Why did you allow this?" she asked.

"He could do no less. Princess," Leighton answered. "What would you have thought of him if he had been willing to leave you to bear the consequences of his—"

"Folly and crime!" It was the deep, indignant tones of Mrs. Wentworth which broke in. As she spoke, she rose from her seat, and pointing an accusing finger at Count Alexis — "Of course he could do no less," she said, "than come to bear the consequences of his own inexcusable conduct. If he has a spark of manhood he will go at once and tell the truth about those wretched papers, if he has a spark of sense he will give them up, and if necessary he will go to prison or to Siberia, instead of Nadine."

Count Alexis' eyes were horror-struck, as he gazed at his cousin. "Have they dared to threaten you with that?" he asked.

She nodded slightly.

"Yes," she said. "The first threat, of which you no doubt have heard, was only a pretense; but I hardly think there is any pretense in that which M. Stanovitch uttered when he was here a little while ago — a threat that if I refuse to accept the destiny arranged for me, to marry Prince Maximilian, in order that Russian influence may predominate in Serabia, I must be prepared to suffer all the consequences of having been, according to the letter of the law, an accomplice of conspirators."

"And you have refused?" he asked, as Mrs. Wentworth had asked before him.

"Yes, I have refused," the princess answered. "I told you a moment ago that you have done me the service of giving me a touchstone by which to test both others and myself. Tried by this touchstone, Prince Maximilian has proved altogether unworthy. I might possibly have forgiven the cold worldliness, the blindness to everything but self-interest, which he displayed

last night, when he advised me to surrender the papers, and on my refusal to do so, and hearing the consequences involved for himself, unequivocally withdrew his suit. Then, at least, he was sincere, but when, at the dictation of Stanovitch, he comes to-day to deceive me with false professions of disinterestedness and devotion — ah, that is too much! Refuse him? Yes, I would refuse him if the door of the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul stood open for me!"

The young man dropped into a chair, buried his head in his hands, and groaned aloud.

"If I were shot," he said, "it would only be what I deserve!"

"It would!" Mrs. Wentworth agreed vindictively. "But I don't see that shooting you would mend matters much — now. They seem past mending, unless you are ready to give up those papers which are the cause of all the trouble."

He lifted his head to look at her with an expression of wonder.

"That is not possible," he said. "I thought you would know. My liberty, my fortune, my life if necessary, I am ready to give for my cousin, but not the lives and fortunes of men who have trusted me. She" — his anxious blue eyes turned toward the princess — "understands this."

It was a wonderful assurance of comprehension and sympathy which he met in the sapphire eyes so like his own.

"I understand perfectly, Alexis," the clear, proud voice told him. "We would both suffer anything rather than that you should be a traitor. That is not even to be thought of."

"No," — he groaned again — "that is not even to be thought of. And so it does not seem as if I can help you in any way!"

"As far as this matter is concerned, you cannot help me in any way at all," she said. "It has gone far beyond your affairs, and what is at stake now is the happiness of my life."

"The happiness of your life!" he echoed. He rose and took her hands again. "That is what makes it so terrible," he said, "that I should have ruined the happiness of your life!"

"Perhaps you have not ruined it," she answered gently. "There are other countries beside Serabia, other things better worth gaining than its crown."

"Not for you," he urged. "Nature made you to wear a crown, Nadine, and I — miserable wretch that I am! — have lost it for you!"

"Don't regret it," she comforted him. "I have no longer any regret."

"But Serabia and its crown are not all that you are losing," he reminded her. "Remember, *dushenka*, if you persist in this defiance, you may escape arrest by flying to Switzerland or to England, but you will forfeit everything of value in your life. You can never return to Russia; favor at court, with all that it means, you will lose irrevocably," — it was Mrs. Wentworth's turn to groan audibly — "your estates will probably be confiscated—"

"Let them go!" She did not speak defiantly now, but with an air of quiet decision. "They have long been a weight upon my heart and my conscience. The condition of the people is so dreadful, and one is allowed to do so little to help them. 'You must wait,' I was warned — warned kindly but decidedly — in Petersburg, 'to carry out philanthropic plans on your estates until the revolutionary unrest in the country is over. The dangerous doctrines abroad make any tampering with the conditions of the peasants at this time very unwise.' What can one do when such things are said — in Russia?"

"Obey," the young Russian answered grimly, "or join those who work in secret, with the risk of unutterable dangers always before them."

She shook her head.

"I could never join them," she said, "for what they offer is more terrible than any despotism of the government which exists. So one can only be quiet, and — wait. But meanwhile men and women suffer and die on the estates which are called mine, but on which I may not do as I please, and therefore I shall be glad to be relieved of them."

"But what, then," he asked, "are you going to do? If you are determined on this course, you must immediately go where the power of Russia cannot reach you. There is no time to lose."

Stanovitch will communicate your refusal to Paris — has perhaps already done so — and the order for your arrest may come at any moment. You must decide, and decide quickly, what you will do."

Before she could reply, Leighton stepped forward.

"I have only waited to hear the princess's final decision before making a proposal which I think will cover the situation," he said. "I suggest that Mrs. Wentworth" — he glanced at that now speechless lady — "shall, together with you, at once accompany the princess on board the *Nereid*. In this way she can leave France immediately, and all that her friends need know, when it is necessary for them to know anything, is that she has gone on a yachting cruise. The yacht is absolutely at her disposal, to take her wherever she desires, but I think England is possibly the best place in which to remain until she learns how her conduct is regarded at Petersburg."

The princess turned to her grandmother.

"*Matushka*," she said, "will you come with me?"

"You are really going — with this man, on his yacht?" Mrs. Wentworth demanded tragically.

"Pardon me!" Leighton interposed quickly. "The princess is not going with me, because I shall remain behind, and I may add that I will show myself very conspicuously in Nice, so that there may be no mistake on that point. I have only the honor to place the yacht at her and at your disposal."

"It is the only thing to do, *matushka*," the princess said, "and I don't think you will let me go alone."

"You forget that you will have the protection of your cousin, who has brought all this trouble upon you," Mrs. Wentworth said bitterly.

"No," Count Alexis answered gloomily, "I shall also remain behind, and surrender myself to arrest. It will be an expiation, at least."

"It would be a foolish and useless sacrifice," Princess Nadine said, laying her hand on his arm. "A sacrifice which would benefit me no more than yourself. No, you must at once return to the yacht, and we will go to London, as Mr. Leighton advises, and wait there to hear from Petersburg. *Matushka*, you will not let me go alone!"

Mrs. Wentworth threw up her hands appealingly to heaven.

"It will kill me!" she declared. "I am sure that I shall die of it — but of course I cannot let you go alone!"

"That being settled, you must not delay a moment," Leighton said to the princess. "There is no telling who of your household has seen Count Alexis, or what message may have been telephoned to M. Stanovitch in Nice. We don't wish to be forced to fight the police."

"No, no," she agreed eagerly. "I am ready to go immediately. May I not even take time to change my dress?"

"It will be best to make no delay," he replied. "Your maid can put up and carry to you all that you need. She can follow with Mrs. Wentworth, who will probably like a little time to arrange her affairs and prepare for a voyage. After conveying you to the yacht the launch will return for her, and I will remain here until I see her safely off. Come, my Princess!"

He held out his hand, and without an instant's hesitation, Princess Nadine placed her own in it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

(Letter from Alan Despard At Nice To A Friend In Paris)

"I SUPPOSE, my dear fellow, that you have heard the extraordinary events which have culminated here in the disappearance of the great Russian heiress. Princess Nadine Zorokoff. These events have been enveloped in so much mystery, and are known really to so few, that not even the correspondents who furnish social gossip to the journals have been able to get hold of them. There are not indeed, half a dozen persons in Nice who know the facts, and those persons maintain a strictly guarded silence. For it is understood that very important matters — matters concerning states and crowns— have been seriously disarranged and that there is stern anger in very high quarters at this wholly unexpected escapade of one who stood so near to the greatest elevation ever attained by an American woman.

"You will no doubt desire to correct me here and say that the princess is not an American woman. This is true; but as the daughter of a typical American woman, and the product of the much-discussed international marriage, every American heiress looking forward to the purchase of European rank, by way of the holy state of matrimony, would have regarded her elevation to the throne which is awaiting Prince Maximilian of Altenberg with feelings of mingled pride and envy. With what kind of feelings will they hear that she has flung this exalted destiny aside, that she has cast away, as of no account, the rank for which they are eager to sell themselves, and with a strange indifference to things which dazzle us all — but especially us good republicans — has gone to share an adventurer's career beyond the seas?

"For this is what has occurred. The beautiful heiress of American millions and Russian estates, with the world in a literal sense at her feet, has turned her back upon that world, and, as we are told that those who have gypsy blood will sooner or later fly even from a palace to the tents and the open sky, so we may suppose that in her some lawless, primitive strain has asserted itself, and that, like a wild bird only partially tamed, she has flown back to the conditions of life from which her ancestry sprang.

"I say that we may suppose this; but in truth all is conjecture except a few undisputed facts. And these are, briefly, that she was married the other day in London to Leighton of Central America, of whom you know, that Prince Maximilian is furious, that Russia (represented by an imperial personage) is not less so, and that our friend Mrs. Wentworth is in despair. Her only comfort — and necessarily a very inadequate one — is that just at this time the engagement of her niece, Miss Hazleton, to Lord Uxmoor is announced.

"But, while the conduct of the princess seems incomprehensible, more than all else am I absorbed in wonder and admiration of Leighton. What a marvellous creature! As his friend, and especially as the medium of his introduction to Princess Nadine, I am just now *persona grata* in the highest degree in the society of Nice. Every one seeks me, every one asks the same question, 'How on earth did he accomplish it?' And I smile and look mysterious, and murmur that I cannot betray confidence; while in fact I know no more than any one else how he accomplished it. When he first saw Princess Nadine — and that was only at the Carnival — he manifested in his masterful way a strong interest in her. But how I should have laughed, and all Nice would have laughed with me, had any one prophesied that he could within so short a time cast such a spell over her as to cause her to forget everything and renounce everything for his sake! It is inexplicable.

"Why she should in a manner have eloped with him — gone away suddenly and mysteriously on his yacht — when she was perfectly free to choose and marry whom she would, is another mystery. There are whispers of political and revolutionary complications, of some entanglement in conspiracy, which forced her to fly beyond the power of Russia. But every one who knows Princess Nadine laughs these sensational reports to scorn. There is not a crowned head in Europe with less sympathy for what is called liberal ideas than this granddaughter of a California miner. To imagine her connected in any manner with conspiracy is to imagine something absolutely absurd, and to suppose an explanation for her conduct more inconceivable than the conduct itself.

"And so we are left without explanation, staring blankly at each other. Of course, some other sensation will presently arise, and the story of Princess Nadine will be forgotten. But just now nothing else is talked of in Nice, and even when it is supplanted by some fresh happening, I think it will be long before the great world will entirely forget the beautiful princess who has gone out from it to seek another world in which also she has an inheritance.

"Having found this other world, will she be happy in it? Who knows? Who can venture to prophesy? Certainly not

"Yours,
"A. D."

The End.

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