Mor Jokai

The Green Book - Freedom Under the Snow

Publio

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Publio Kiadó

2013

CHAPTER I
SNOW ROSES

A blizzard is covering the roads with a thick coating of snow. The horses are up to their fetlocks in it. The dark-green firs bend beneath its weight, and what has melted in the midday sun already hangs from the slender branches of the undergrowth in thick masses of icicles; and as the wind sweeps through the forest the ice-covered leaves and branches ring and jingle like fairy bells.

Ever and anon the moon shines out from amid the fast-flying clouds; then, as though it has seen enough, hides itself again under the ghostly mist. The sighing of the wind through the forest is like the trembling of fever-stricken nature. In the stillness of night, through the pathless forest, rides a troop of horsemen. Their little long-maned horses sniff their way with low, sunk necks; by the shaggy fur caps of their riders, and their long lances hanging far back at their sides, they are to be recognized as a party of Don Cossacks.

They ride in battle array. In the van a picket with drawn carbines; next to them a detachment; then a cannon drawn by six horses. After that follow a large body of men; then, again, a mounted gun and artillerymen. Behind these another troop of mounted horsemen, and another gun-carriage drawn by six horses. But to this the cannon is wanting. In its stead a human form lies bound. The head hangs down over the back of the rattling carriage, and as the moon ever and anon peeps out from between the clouds, it discloses a face distorted with agony, from which all trace of hair on head or beard has been cut away—perhaps dragged out. The eyes and mouth are wide open. A coarse horsecloth covering is fastened underneath the man. A corner of it drags along the snow-covered ground. From it every now and then a drop of blood falls—a sign that, in bleeding, the man still lives. The drops of blood in the snow fantastically change, as they fall, into roses. Red flowers on the white snow-field! The ghost-like procession disappears in the mist.

Keeping carefully to one side, but ever following closely on the track of the soldiers, is a horseman, also mounted on a long-maned, broad-headed pony. He wears a thick fur coat; a fur-bordered czamarka is on his head; icicles hang from his long beard. He rides slowly and cautiously, his horse taking long strides, as though its master were seeking something on the ground. Then, as often as he sees a red rose upon the snow, he dismounts, kneels, and with a golden spoon he takes up the crystallized token and places it in an enamelled reliquary, then rides on to the next.

The way leads without interruption through a primeval forest. It is the forest of Bjelostok. Only there, in all Europe, are bisons to be met with. There no sound of axe is ever heard; storms alone bring down the giant trees. One forest arises out of the decay of the former. Beeches, oaks, limes, vie in height with tall pines. In the dead of night resound the shriek of the lynx, and the roar of the female bison anxiously calling for its sucking calf. But no human sound is to be heard. No human dwelling is near. Had not the path through the forest been a highway, undergrowth had long since made it impenetrable.

The fallen drops of blood lead the rider on farther and farther. Now they appear at longer intervals. At length the last rose is reached; the track left by the wheels of the gun carriage is now his only guide. The horseman continues to follow it. The man bound to the gun-carriage is assuredly dead by this time. If dead, they will as surely bury him somewhere.

Upon the endless solitary forest follow towns equally void of human beings. On the banks of a great river stand two towns facing one another, marked upon maps of a former century as still fortified places, but now only to be classed among ruins. At that time they were specified by name, Kazimir and Ivanowicze, I believe. Now their very names are lost to history. Fallen walls, heaps of bricks and stones everywhere. Nettles grow rank in the snow-covered squares and streets; castles, churches, and temples are overgrown with briers to the very roofs. The broad river is frozen over; from out the ice rise the piles of a half-burned drawbridge, near to which stretches a track across the snow. The solitary horseman follows the traces. In the middle of the river his scrutinizing search is suddenly brought to a halt by a newly made gap in the ice.

That it is newly made is shown by the broken ice lying about, upon which no fresh layer of snow has had time to form. The shape of the gap is oblong—like an open grave. Close round it are traces of many feet upon the snow; not far away the smooth surface shows the pressure of a human form, which must have lain there face downwards. Here, without a doubt, has been the place of burial. They had lowered the body under the ice (a secure burial-place, indeed); the current would then convey it gently to the sea.

The horseman dismounts, kneeling down beside the open space and baring his head. He murmurs something—perhaps a prayer. Into the water beneath there drops something—perhaps a tear.

At that instant the moon shines out resplendent. The man's head is distinctly visible—a head once seen not easily forgotten. A high forehead; the hair of reddish hue, but already tinged with gray, growing low upon it; the face thin, nervous; cheek-bones and chin prominent; nose aquiline; deep-set eyes; the towsled beard brushed forward; the character of the whole face was one of suppressed suffering, of silent woe. The moon has again disappeared under the clouds. A thick, heavy mist falls around. Primeval forest and ruins alike fade; the figure of the horseman grows more and more shadowy.

Through the thick mist, in the dead stillness of black night, is a weird sound of sighing and moaning. Perhaps it is the she-bison calling her young—perhaps it is the voice of one singing "Boze cos Polske."

CHAPTER II
MIST SHADOWS

At the same time that the wanderer on the rough path of Bjelostok forest was gathering up its snow roses, another man on the far-off shores of the Black Sea was preparing for a long, distant, and hurried journey. The two men hasten to the same goal. They had never seen one another, had never heard the other's name, had never corresponded. Yet each is aware of the other's existence; aware that they are to meet, and that this meeting must take place on a given day. The first has, perhaps, the shorter road to take, but he can only ride slowly; he has to avoid inhabited towns, to utilize night for his progress, to pass the days in isolated csards.

The second has the longer and more difficult way; but the only battle he has to fight is with the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, and these he can conquer. The fifth obstacle—man—places himself obsequiously at his service. This traveller wears the uniform of a colonel. Short of stature, he gains in height by the singular erectness of his head and the elasticity of his walk. By that walk he can be detected under any disguise. His closely cropped hair displays a broad, high brow; his eager eyes dance in his head as he speaks. He has an expressive face—one from which it is easy to read his thoughts, even when his lips are silent—a face in which every muscle moves with his words; one in strongest contrast to that of the other man. He can hide his every feeling under an immovable countenance; this one betrays beforehand his every thought. During his five minutes' colloquy with the jemsik, he has exhausted a whole gamut of expressions, from flattery to rage, as if playing upon the strings of a violin. He gesticulates violently with his hands; now his five fingers are under the peasant's nose; then they strike him on the shoulder, punch him in the ribs, seize him by the lappet of his coat; now shake, then embrace him. He kisses him, strokes his beard with coaxing action, then tugs at it, pushes him roughly away, finally reaching him his flask for a drink; and perhaps his only object has been to find out whether the road to Jekaseviroslaw is passable or not.

For while the snow still lies deep in the forest of Bjelostok, and gun-carriages may yet drive across the ice-covered Niemen, thaw has already set in along the valleys of the Dnieper and the Don, and the whole plain is a sea, from out which the rush huts, with their surrounding plantations of reeds, stand out like solitary islands. To every hut a boat made of willow is secured; this boat is the one and only mode of locomotion, albeit a dangerous one, whereby in the spring season the inhabitants can convey themselves to the pasture-land to look after their cattle and horses.

As far as eye can reach stretches out the endless reddish-brown plain. Rushes, reeds, and other water-plants not yet freed from their dried-up winter clothing, lend a deep-red shimmer to the landscape, to which the sprouting willows, now illumined by the light of the setting sun, add their tinge of color. The storm-portending evening glow tinges the fleecy clouds flame color, causing the rest of the sky to appear topaz green. Myriads of water-birds whirl restlessly through the air, filling the plain with their cries. In the far distance swim a flock of swans, tinged golden in the setting sun, which, half-sunken beneath the horizon, sends out its last rays across the changing clouds, like a departing sovereign clothed in gold and purple.

Across the great, never-ending plain there is but one path, laid bridge-like with willow stems. Over this the traveller must needs make his way—there is no alternative. The river banks passed, further sign of human habitation ceases. The smithy of a gypsy colony, which has established itself on the side of a hill, alone sends its light far out into the evening mist. Soon that, too, will be lost in the gathering gloom; then the traveller's three-horsed car must jolt along by the fitful light of the moon. An occasional kurgan rising up here and there in the Steppe is the sole sign that it was once inhabited by a people. Those tschudas upon the brow of the hill were their gods. Blocks of stone, with roughly carved human heads, proclaim afar, even to the banks of the Amur, the former abiding-place of a race which has not left even a name behind, only its gods, which later races have called tschudas (from the Hungarian word *csuda*, signifying "miracle").

The traveller will find shelter for the night with a Czaban, who has chanced to dig himself a cave near the wayside, and lives there, surrounded by his numerous herds of sheep. The Colonel remarks in his note-book that the shepherds living in the neighborhood of the kurgans are a stupid, squalid set, who smell of cheese.

Next morning the chariot with its ringing bells proceeds ever farther and farther, until the inundated banks of the Dnieper oblige it to halt. Here, the traveller has no resource but to take to a boat. Luckily the stream is sufficiently swollen to enable his boat successfully to navigate the famous Falls of Herodotus without striking on the rocks. Only of the last does the ferryman warn him. It is the Nyenaschiketz (the Insatiable). There it is not advisable to tempt one's fate by evening light.

"But I must go on," says the traveller, imperiously. He is in haste. That alters the case. His imperious "must" knows no hindrances.

Upon it follows the only answer, "Seisas" (Immediately). This one word characterizes the whole people. It even bridges over the "Insatiable." The boat goes to pieces, but boatman and traveller swim safely to shore. The remainder of the night is passed in a fisherman's hut. The traveller here remarks in his note-book that the boatmen and fisher-folk who live on the banks of the Dnieper are a stupid, squalid set, who smell of fish.

The opposite bank is inhabited by the Zaporogenes, who take their name from the falls "zaporagi"—people who live beside waterfalls. Here it is only possible to proceed on horseback. By nightfall the traveller has reached Szetsa, a so-called village. The houses are earthen caves, thatched with grass, called "kurenyi." The traveller, after having sung and drunk with the Zaporogenes, observes in his note-book that the dwellers in "kurenyi" are a stupid, squalid set, smelling of coach-grease.

The first work of a Zaporagen is to soak his new garments in tar, to make them durable. Among that people are to be found the first indistinct traces of a longing after freedom, primitive, but still existent. This instinct reaches its culminating-point in the propensity to rob their neighbors; turn their wives out of doors when tired of them, and take to themselves a fresh one, who may please them better.

On, on, in the saddle, until the ancient city of the Steppe looms in the horizon, "the Mother of Cities." It is Kiev, the so often razed and rebuilt Jerusalem of the Scythians, with its catacombs and remains of Sarmatic saints. In the distance a deceptive Fata Morgana, looking with its gilded cupolas like a city of churches, from out which the mighty tower of Lavra rises like a giant.

The traveller avoids alike the Beresztovo, the most inhabited quarter, and the barracks; nor does he avail himself of the hospitable shelter of the Lavra monastery, but seeks the Jewish quarter, and there in a poor-looking Jewish hovel passes the night, taking counsel with soldiers who, as though informed beforehand of his coming, have entered one by one through the low entrance-door, to disappear in like manner by the opposite one.

The traveller remarks in his note-book that the Jews are a stupid, squalid set, who smell of anise-seed.

The way lies ever northwards. Spring-time vanishes from the earth; the glow of evening from the sky; a canopy of gloomy gray mist overspreads the firmament: the pale disk of the sun is like a medal upon a ragged soldier's cloak. Even the waning moon only rises late of nights. The nights grow longer, and the flames of the rush-heaps burning in the fields impede the way. The traveller is often obliged to turn back to the houses which border the pine forests. They are well-ordered, pretty domiciles, inhabited by apostates who have taken refuge from their pursuers in the woods.

There, too, sounds an occasional chord of yearning after freedom. They are prepared to endure, to make a firm stand, one and the other, in order to be allowed to write the name of Jesus ("Jhsus"). This is something for a beginning!

The traveller records in his note-book that the Raskolniks are stupid and unhappy, and smell of leather.

Still farther northwards. Upon the plains green with young wheat follow again expanses of snow; instead of flocks of swans and cranes, swarms of ravens and Arctic birds are to be seen thickening the air. This time the traveller passes the night in the Sloboden, where all sorts and conditions of men congregate—men from the most remote parts in search of work, offering their pair of hands for any description of labor. Hither each brings his misery, his ignorance, and—foul odors. The misery and ignorance are one and the same, but the foul odors are diverse: by these they distinguish one from another, through these they fall into broils. No sooner do they perceive the alien smell than they come to blows.

Time presses with the traveller. Now he has reached the land of sledges.

Thick mists and snow-storms are his companions. There come days in which there is no morning or noon-day; the snow-drifts change the world around him into a prison-house. Such terrific snow-storms are only known in those parts; they are "pad," the terror of travellers. The night frosts have become insupportable in their severity; the mile-stones lie hidden under the snow; the north wind has swept it into hillocks in many places; then, again, into deep holes, in which the sledge sinks axle-deep: a chorus of wolves howl in the woods. By morning the door of the csárda is snowed up; the only mode of egress is to crawl through the hole in the roof, where the jemsik, his sledge already horsed, is in waiting, leaning against the chimney. He calls laughingly to his fare:

"It is cold enough for a couple of fur coats, sir!"

The north wind has chased away the clouds over night; the sky is the color of steel. In the gray lilac-tinted horizon a red glowing fire-ball is rising—it is the sun, which, running its orbit, scarce rises over the earth; even at mid-day it gives out no warmth. The kingdom of winter reigns. And now the way becomes more peopled. Life seems bright and stirring in this kingdom of winter. Whole strings of sledges, laden high with wares, move onwards in the one direction; well-appointed equipages, steering clear of the heavily laden freight, pass them by. It is the last day of the journey. Along the horizon a shining streak grows visible—the frozen ocean. The streak grows broader and broader, and as the sun goes down the rays of the aurora borealis stretch up over the starry sky to its very zenith; and, illuminated by this magic sea of rosy light, there arises from out the expanse of snow a giant city, with the white roofs of its palaces, the cupolas of its churches, the bastions of its fortresses, cupolas and bastions alike of dazzling whiteness, as though it were the ghost of a city, painted white upon white; above it the rosy northern light, behind it the bluish-leaden veil of mist.

The traveller has reached his goal. But the other—is he here too?

CHAPTER III
COMME LE MONDE S'AMUSE

It is the last day of "Butter-week." Despite the excessive cold, the streets of St. Petersburg are thronged with a tumultuous crowd. To-day meat may still be eaten, to-morrow the great fast begins; every butcher's shop will be shut; for seven whole weeks oil is in the ascendant. Every one is in haste to make a good meal to-day.

The great Haymarket, the "Szenaja Plostadt," is the attraction to the hungry throng. There, in long rows before the butchers' booths, stand on their four feet frozen oxen, bucks, and wild boars, with heads outstretched, the butcher either sawing or chopping off the desired joint for his customers; his knife would make no impression upon the hard-frozen meat. Quantities of small game—hares, partridges, pheasants, and black-cock—from other countries, preserved by the icy atmosphere, hang in festoons from the booths. The venders of bear's flesh have their separate quarter; the centre of the square is taken up by the fish shops, where great heaps of bemaned sea-lions are offered as delicacies. Purchasers in tens of thousands pass before the booths, some on foot, others in sleighs with bells jingling, the greater part of them women, while the sellers are all men. No women hawkers are to be found here. Even the special delicacy of Butter-week, the "blinnis," are made by men bakers; these are omelets soaked in butter and spread with caviare. Then there are the Raznocsiks, tall young fellows, their fur coats fastened with a girdle round their waists, who, with baskets on their heads piled high with every kind of eatable, go in and out of the crowd with untiring cry, "Come, buy pirogo! saikis! kwast!" The venders of tea are keeping it boiling hot in their great samovars; the doors of the spirit-booths are forever on the swing. Pirog especially disposes to a good drink. It is a flat cake, composed of chopped fish, meat, and coarse vegetables—a choice morsel—and this is the last day on which it may be enjoyed; to-morrow it may not even be thought of. All St. Petersburg is in the streets. It is a lovely day in March; not a day of spring and violets, but of frost and icicles. The north wind of yesterday has sent down the thermometer fourteen degrees. Splendid weather!

At midday, just as the great clock of Isaac Church begins to strike, a fresh hubbub arises among the noisy throng. Down the long, straight street, called Czarskoje Zelo Prospect, a party of huntsmen were seen coming along in full pursuit of a magnificent twelve-antlered stag. A stag-hunt at that season of the year is forbidden by the common laws of hunting. The new antlers are not yet grown; they are but knots grown over with tender hide. No less is it permitted to follow a hunt through the streets of a city, more especially of St. Petersburg during Maflicza week. But this distinguished party does not seem bound by ordinary laws.

The hunting-party consists of some twelve men and three of the opposite sex, not counting about fifty huntsmen and packs of hounds. They send the people flying the whole length of the street before them.

It may have been that the start had been in Czarskoje Zelo Deer Park, that the stag had broken away and had taken his course towards the town, the huntsmen after him. A huntsman's zeal does not stop to inquire which way is permitted or which prohibited.

The stag dashes across Fontankabridge. In vain the toll-keepers put up the barrier, it clears it at a bound. Then, seeing the hunting-party in pursuit, the terrified toll-keepers prepare to reopen the passage. "Leave it alone!" shouts the foremost, and the company, following the example of the stag, clears it. Mr. Stag has meanwhile reached one of the principal streets, the hounds on his track; the gaping country bumpkins at the street corners rush back in panic as the huntsmen dash past them.

At the entrance to the barracks of the Imperial Cadet Corps stands a grenadier on guard. If he has any sense he will shoot down the approaching stag, that it may not injure the crowd in its mad career. But military etiquette goes before common-sense. The soldier on guard, recognizing his superior in command, lowers his gun and presents arms. The rebellious stag meanwhile, knowing no such etiquette, springs upon the guard, and, catching him on its antlers, tosses him into the air. The guard on reaching the ground again will probably present arms once more from that lowly position. The stag, by this time, has reached a cross street. This is one of the most frequented promenades in the imperial city. The loungers rush away in all directions, women screaming, men swearing, dogs barking—one runs against and upsets the other—sledges overturn upon fallen foot-passengers. The stag and hunting-party spring over outstretched bodies and overturned sledges alike. It is capital sport—no one can take any hurt, the snow lies too thick. Now the stag, reaching the Haymarket, seems somewhat bewildered. For one second it stands affrighted, the dense throng blocking up the great square. The next something attracts its attention. It is the row of stags, which it takes for a herd, standing up before the game-dealers' booths. Now the instinct of all hunted animals is to seek refuge in a herd if they come upon one. So away into the thick of the throng! Now the roar, the screams, and curses become a very pandemonium. Booths and butchers' stalls overturned bear witness to the creature's wild career; but no sooner has it reached its lifeless fellows and, with quick instinct, scented blood, than, maddened with fury and with antlers lowered, it forces itself a passage back into the Garten Strasse, and tears off panting and snorting towards the Costinoi Dwor. This is one of the curiosities of St. Petersburg—the great bazaar.

The Costinoi Dwor is a distinct quarter in itself, where everything of most costly nature, from Persian carpets to diamond necklaces, is to be bought. Here the stag evidently thinks to find shelter. All the doors stand open. From among the thousand shops he must needs select that of a Venetian glass-dealer, huntsmen and hounds in hot pursuit. In the vast apartment, supported by pillars, are massed crystal ornaments, amounting in value to hundreds of thousands of rubles, artistically piled into pyramids of fairy-like elegance, the walls hung with Venetian mirrors reaching from floor to ceiling. The unhappy Italian proclaims himself bankrupt as he sees the stag make for his shop, containing such costly and perishable wares, and it is a comical sight to see the poor signor and his *fauteuil* fall back head over heels when the crash comes. But no sooner does the stag see an innumerable number of its fellows reflected in the mirrors all around him, hounds upon them, closely followed by galloping huntsmen, than it completely loses the little remnant of wits it had retained, and, turning its back on the raving Italian, it dashes through the ranks of its pursuers towards the Appraxin Dwor, where Turks, Jews, Armenians, Persians, brokers, second-hand dealers, Little and Great Russians, Copts, and

Raskolniks, Gruses, and Finlanders abound, their stalls crammed with old rubbish from every quarter of the globe, and they themselves standing out in the middle of the street to better attract the passers-by, two or three seizing the unwary customer by the arm at the same time, crying up their own wares, depreciating those of their neighbors, squabbling among themselves, vociferating oaths, lying, cheating, bargaining—playing the rogue in every barbaric language under the sun. And to them, in their very midst, the excited, maddened stag! Now the real fun begins. It was a sight to see the terrified peddlers scattered right and left among their heaps of rubbish, to hear their agonized adjurations to all the powers of heaven and earth; to see them crawl on all fours, frog-like, into their holes, as the huntsmen and hounds went galloping in full course over their fallen bodies; and to watch the angry company, after the wild hunt had passed, streaming back again to their desecrated wares with loud laments, proclaiming that the world was coming to an end. The stag simply flew over the heads of the densely packed throng; the hunt could not follow up so rapidly; it required the huntsmen's whips to keep the dogs together in such a bewildering crowd. Thus it gained a certain advantage, and, reaching the Boulevard of the Fontana Canal, dashed across the frozen stream to the opposite bank, and sped down the Goronschaja Street before its pursuers came up with it. [At the time of our story (1825) a palace, surrounded by a large park, the Bulasky Gardens, stood there. The great fire of 1862 has since laid it, as well as the whole Appraxin Dwor, in ruins; the railway-station of Czarskoje Zelo now occupies the site.]

The park is surrounded by a high gilded railing, through which sprigs of vine-covered firs push their way. Perhaps the stag takes it for its native home. Close by palace and park lies the great Obuchow Hospital; some five hundred patients, men and women (most of them epileptics) are just coming down the opposite street, returning from Trinity Church, where they have been attending mass. Should the affrighted creature rush in among the panic-stricken crowd, there would be no escape for them—their crippled, infirm forms, their enfeebled brains, would render it impossible. The very fright alone might kill them, deadened as are their senses. Now a chorus of horror arises from the procession of imbeciles, who, as if under a spell, come to a halt, helplessly awaiting the attack of the incomprehensible foe. Infirmity has not crippled their feet alone, but their thinking powers also. Nothing intervenes to stop the approaching stag. As it flies in full career past the principal gate of the Bulasky Gardens a shot resounds in the air. The stag makes a side spring, throws back its head, sinks down, struggles up again, plunges its bleeding nose into the snow, then stretches itself out, resting its stately antlered head on the threshold of the gate, as though in gratitude to him whose well-directed aim has released it from its pursuers.

Sport was spoiled.

CHAPTER IV
NO RIVAL

What unheard-of audacity, to spoil the sport of such an aristocratic hunting-party!

"Who fired that shot?" cried the foremost of the huntsmen, with a threatening crack of his whip.

The hounds dashed furiously on towards the open gate, their sense of the dignity of the hunt equally insulted.

The question had been put in Russian; and the action was in accord with the speech, although the speaker's face was close shaven in the French style, while the other members of the hunt all wore short whiskers.

"I took that liberty!" returned a woman's voice; and from under the fir-trees, whose branches overhung the gate, appeared a woman's form, slender as one of the Amazons of the "Kalevala" Saga, her pale oval face surrounded by loose-falling hair of reddish gold, like a lion's mane; the nose, straight and delicate, and full lips recalling the Niobe group; while at sight of the great flashing eyes, instinct with magic beauty, one was irresistibly reminded of a peri from the "Sakuntala." A very fairy, who united in herself the threefold myths.

"I dared do it!" she said, coming forward alone, unattended. And carelessly dispersing the excited dogs with one hand, she raised the pistol she held in the other, and, pointing it at her interlocutor, continued: "And there is another shot in it for you if you do not instantly lower your whip."

The hounds were cringingly snuffing about her whom the moment before they had been ready to tear in pieces; the huntsman, too, was not less susceptible to the charm than was the pack. Raising his whip, he touched his cap courteously with it, and addressed her in French, the language of Russian society:

"It were unnecessary, madame, that you should use firearms, possessing as you do in your eyes such powerful weapons."

By this speech the huntsman betrayed the school of Versailles, where men were accustomed to carry on war with compliments, and to mask retreat with gallant words.

Meanwhile the rest of the hunting-party had come up to the gates. The gentlemen, seeing with whom their comrade was in conversation, held in their horses, as though not wishing to take part in it; only an older man, wearing an order set in diamonds on his fur-lined coat, approached nearer; and one of the ladies, galloping straight up to the gate, pulled up her horse at its threshold, the body of the dead stag alone separating her from the other woman.

The huntswoman wore a blue, fur-bordered jacket, with hunting-cap to match, under which her fair hair hung in ringlets to the shoulders. Her face was crimsoned with eagerness and the extreme cold, giving to her somewhat prominent eyes a still more dazzling brilliancy than they were wont to have; her thin, delicately shaped lips were half open; the blue veil falling over her forehead, and the blue band she wore under her chin as a protection from the cold, did not allow more of her face to be seen. But as she drew up close beside the other lady she pushed back the chin band, perhaps in order to speak more freely, thereby displaying a pretty, rosy chin, divided by charming dimples.

"How dared you shoot that stag?" she cried to the other lady. "Did you not know it was an imperial one?"

"How dared you chase that stag to the very gates of the hospital? Did you not know that it is a hospital for cripples?"

"I hope you recognize that the Czar is the first gentleman in Russia."

"Throughout the whole world the first gentlefolks are the sick."

"You are foolhardy, madame."

"That I admit."

Now the huntswoman lifted her veil. She was heated. She toyed impatiently with the riding-whip in her hand.

"Why am I not a man?" she muttered, between her pearly teeth.

The huntsman with the clean-shaven face, reading from his companion's working features and piercing eyes that there was something more in dispute than the shot stag, now bending towards her, addressed her audibly enough in German. For though the French language—that of the best-beloved enemy—is the language of society in the Russian capital, German—that of the most hated friend—is only spoken by the exclusive. German is therefore spoken when the servants are not desired to understand.

"A rival, eh?" asked the clean-shaven one.

The huntswoman projected her lips scornfully, and, knitting her brows, answered aloud in German:

"Neither rival nor——"

The lady standing by had distinctly heard the short colloquy, and was perfectly aware that she had another charge in her pistol.

The speaker had turned pale as she spoke, like a duellist who, having fired his shot and wounded his adversary, now awaits the other's fire.

The owner of the park did not do this, however. There are words, looks, and gestures which can strike deeper than the most deadly weapon. Placing one foot on the crowned antlers of the stag lying prone before her, she smiled full in the face of her adversary; and, as though to emphasize the insulting challenge, raising her pistol, she fired the remaining shot into the air. For an insult loses its sting if directed by an armed person against one unarmed. Now once more she stood conqueror.

The huntswoman's face flamed with fury. She twisted her riding-whip in her hands like a serpent, as though inwardly debating whether to strike it across the other's face, and thus wipe away the irritating smile.

One of the other two ladies was young, little more than a child. Her face a perfect oval, with exquisitely formed chin, a little rosebud mouth, large, deep-blue eyes, looking black in the distance, dark, finely pencilled eyebrows, and hair hanging in soft, shining plaits down her back.

Her whole face wore the astounded expression of a school-girl. The strangest thing about her was that she rode a gentleman's saddle, with which her costume was in keeping—the Circassian beshmet, the broad, white salavár, high boots, and flowing cashmere, with hanging kindzsál. Every one but she knew what the two women were saying to each other. He who happened to be ignorant of the language could understand the gestures, the contemptuous expression of the features, the crossfire of eyes. The young girl did not understand even that. She merely looked on in amazement. That the two ladies were angry with each other she saw—and about a stag's antlers! The riding-whip was twisted about in the huntswoman's nervous fingers until it snapped. She made use of another weapon.

"Bethsaba!" she exclaimed, turning to the girl, and speaking to her in a language unknown to any of their auditors—possibly Circassian; but the expression on the speaker's face, and the terror-stricken, pallid look on that of the young girl, said as plainly as words:

"You have asked me what the devil looks like? Look at that woman; there you have the fiend in human form."

The girl, bending her head, crossed herself as she cast a frightened side glance at the dreadful woman, who was the embodiment of his Satanic Majesty. Then the Amazon, turning her own horse, and at the same time seizing the reins of that upon which the young girl was mounted, galloped back the way she had come, huntsmen and hounds following. The stag remained where it had fallen.

CHAPTER V
PLAN OF WAR AGAINST A WOMAN

On the way back to Ghedimin Palace naturally nothing was spoken of by the members of the hunt but the exciting scene to which they had just been witness.

"*Parole d'honneur*," said the clean-shaven horseman, as he struck his riding-boot with his whip, "the whole world is turned upside down! In the time of the Empress Elizabeth, if any woman had allowed herself to insult a Princess Ghedimin in that manner, she would have had her tongue cut out and have been punished with the knout."

"This is what we have to thank exaggerated philanthropy for! It was never created for us. Voltairianism will be the ruin of the nation. How can Araktseieff suffer it?"

"The woman is no Russian?"

"Perhaps some English or German here to spite us, and who has placed herself under the protection of the Embassy? By Jove! in 1816, when I was last at home, such a thing would not have been permitted!"

"These cursed foreigners! Anyway, if the president of the police does not take the matter in hand, we will administer the knout ourselves. I swear your presence alone withheld me just now, Princess Maria Alexievna!"

"Indeed! You do not know who the woman is."

"What does it matter who she is? She may even be a princess."

"She is more than that."

"Then some expatriated queen, perhaps from Georgia."

"Silence!" said the lady, as she gave a warning look in the direction of the girl riding at her other side.

"She does not understand German. So the woman is really a queen?"

At this question the lady laughed heartily.

"Really a queen! A true queen! A reigning queen—an absolute monarch! We all are her slaves; you, I, even Alexis Maximovitch. A queen who is not to be driven out of her kingdom by means of cannon, but with this!" and she held out to her companion the whistle of her shattered riding-whip.

"What! an actress?"

"Of course. What else should she be?"

"Ha, ha, ha! To whom the whistle means a revolution; whose throne is upset by hisses! Ah, Maria Alexievna, present me with this whistle. With it I will fight for you, as a knight *sans peur et sans reproche*."

The lady resigned the fatal weapon, so efficacious in the downfall of stage potentates, to her cavalier, as the latter lifted her out of her saddle in the portico of the Ghedimin Palace.

He then kissed her hand. She kissed him on the cheek, and, taking the young girl by the hand, she passed through a treble glass door and ascended the broad frescoed staircase within.

Here the hunting-party broke up, making rendezvous at the opera that evening.

Now the silent, bestarred gentleman, who had hitherto not mixed in the conversation, slapping the clean-shorn one on the back with the flat of his hand, said:

"Nicholas Sergievitch, a word with you. Come along with me."

"At your service, Alexis Maximovitch."

And together they rode off to the Araktseieff Palace.

There are no old palaces in St. Petersburg. The whole city only dates back a century and a half. The palace of the favorite official of the Czar is situated on the Nevski Prospect, and is built more for comfort than for elegance. During the winter the whole building is heated throughout with hot-air pipes; every window has treble cases; the floors of the rooms are of parquetry.

The two huntsmen said nothing until they had refreshed themselves with hot tea seasoned with arak and a curious compound of cayenne and cantharides. A tiny portion on the point of a knife of this latter warms one's frozen limbs. In any other climate it were poison.

The great man whom we now recognize from the name of his palace, Araktseieff, first locking the door of the room they were in, pushed up a rocking-chair to the fireplace for his guest, gave him a chibouque, and himself took up his station before the fire.

"Hark ye, Nicholas Sergievitch, put the whistle you received from the Princess just now among your treasures, and when you want to blow it go out into the woods. That is my advice to you. For if you carry out what you have sworn to the Princess you will find yourself next day on the road to Irkutsk, and, by Heaven! I can't say when you will be coming back."

"The devil!"

"You see, the Czar is of opinion that he can create a hundred noblemen such as you in an hour; but singers such as Zeneida Ilmarine are to be met with but once in the century."

"Ah! So this mysterious stranger is Zeneida Ilmarine, the far-famed Simarosa heroine? All honor to her! I take my pipe out of my mouth as I speak her revered name! When I made my promise to Princess Ghedimin, I had no idea whom it concerned. This absolves me from my oath. Against the 'divine' Zeneida one may not revolt, even to please the 'angelic' Maria Alexievna. Rather raise the standard against the whole army of legitimate rulers! What a fool I was! The excessive cold must have frozen my wits like quicksilver in a thermometer. Of course, I had heard abroad that the *diva* was a *protégée* of the Czar and Czarina, and, moreover, the beloved of the brave Ivan Maximovitch. From the dialogue in which the two ladies indulged, I might have gathered that it was a meeting between wife and lady-love."

"Now you must devise a way to find favor with both. Favor with the wife, as with the sweetheart."

"Easy as kiss your hand. I have only to tell one about the other."

"That may succeed with the wife, for she is outspoken, straightforward, and passionate. With the favorite, however, it may be more difficult; for she understands how to play as many parts in real life as on the stage. And your office it will be to find out which is the real one."

"That I will do—as sure as my name is Galban."

"Well, Chevalier Galban, you may imagine that it is a matter of some importance which has induced us to call you back from Versailles, where you were to us as eyes and ears are to man. You have there learned, in masterly fashion, how to unravel the most secret diplomatic webs by means of a woman's heart, yourself the while remaining unscathed. Now you must carry out your masterwork at home."

"What, Holy Russia has secrets which her police and the priests are unable to fathom?"

"My dear Chevalier Galban, our good Chulkin has enough to do to catch thieves, and is not too successful in that department. I counsel you, if your sledge be stopped on the way home from the club at night, give the thief your purse quietly, for if you call the watch the soldiers will ease you of your fur coat into the bargain. If, on the other hand, you fall into the hands of a policeman, he will not only clear you out, but the thief too. As for the priests, they count for nothing to our people, who are atheists."

"Have we come to that?"

"Yes; to that. General Kutusoff did well to say, when our forces came back from the French War, 'The best thing the Czar could do would be to drown the whole expedition in the Baltic.' They were all indoctrinated to a man with liberalism, and have infected the entire army. I assure you that many a young officer carries 'The Catechism of a Free Man' and 'A Scheme of Constitutional Monarchy' about with him in his coat-pocket."

"How do they get hold of them?"

"They must have a secret press."

"They have been allowed to play with freedom too long."

"That were the least danger. As long as we allowed them the game of freemasonry, all was open and above board. At the court balls they would talk in the presence of the Czar himself of freedom, and debate over the rights of the people and the emancipation of serfs. That was all academical discussion. But when the masonic lodges were closed, and the insignia sold by auction in the Jews' market on the Appraxin Dwor, the secret evil grew worse and worse. The freemasonry of Mamonoff, of a sudden, took five or six different forms. One called itself a 'General Betterment Society,' Orloff at its head. Another was 'Szojusz Spacinia,' a third 'The Confederation of Patriots,' a fourth 'Szojusz Blagadenztoiga.' There is another constituted under the title of 'Republic of the Eight Slav Races'; its members wear an eight-pointed star as a token, the inscription on one of the points being Hungary. They grow like mushrooms."

"Ridiculous! Even in my time there were clubs where secret meetings were held. But there was no talk then of danger to the State. If certain much-wronged husbands had no complaint to make, the police might let us go scot-free."

"That is not the case now," answered Araktseieff, impatiently. (It was his habit, when receiving secret visits in his own house, to keep a sword-stick in his hand, with which he would incessantly prod screens, walls, and hangings, as though ever suspecting listeners; and did he perceive that his visitor had a bulging pocket-handkerchief or note-book, he would prod that, too, to discover what was there.) "They are about everywhere, and yet nowhere to be traced. They give each other rendezvous at balls, concerts, wine-parties, etc., and so contrive to give our spies the slip. Why, they actually keep a register, a sort of parliamentary hand-book, in which the conferences of every distant province are entered concerning the organizing of a systematic revolution throughout Russia; the best form of constitution; what is to become of the dynasty; how the empire is to be partitioned, and whether to be represented by landed proprietors or the people. And this protocol it is which contains a fully named register of the conspirators, those who hold the threads of the net in their hands throughout the whole land, from the shores of the Black Sea to the Arctic Pole. Among themselves they call it 'the green book.' Now, where is this book? That is the question."

"To which I reply by a counter-question. But do not keep on so incessantly prodding my coat-pockets with that sharp stiletto of yours. Has any one seen this book—and, if seen, why has he not said where he has seen it?"

"That I will tell you, too. The conspirators are divided into three classes. The first are 'Brethren.' To this community any one may belong, on his introducer making himself responsible for him; they know nothing beyond the fact that they are members of a conspiracy, and have the right to attend meetings. The second class are called 'Men.' They are trusty people, who, on a certain watchword being given them, are authorized to act. You may reckon one-third of the officers in the army as belonging to this class. They cannot betray anything beyond their own individual names and the work given them to do. Then we come to the third class, the 'Bojars,' and leaders of the whole affair. It is extremely difficult to get in among them; and those who do belong to them do not betray one iota."

"Are they married men? Have they no wives—no mistresses?"

"That question occurred to me long ago. It is no new discovery that women are the best mediums for discovering secrets. Bright eyes and diamonds can cast light into many a dark corner—that is an old story! That 'the green book' is in the custody of some woman is unquestionable; but, so far, with all our espionage, we have reached no further. We were informed that Orloff's mistress was the possessor of 'the green book,' and paid down enormous sums for the information. And what did we find? A pack of scandalous anecdotes of St. Petersburg society, all of which, moreover, were known to us before. Then we got on another scent. 'The green book' was in the keeping of the 'Martinists,' whose president had a lady-love—faithfulness itself. In her case all our bribes were useless. So one night we had her surprised in her room, bound, the boards of the floor raised, and actually there was found a 'green book.' But it contained nothing but atheistic theses. What was the use of them? People may rebel against the Deity, but not against the Czar! At length we received secret information that the heart of the conspiracy is that league which calls itself 'The Northern Union'—its head Prince Ghedimin."

"The devil!"

"Yes, my friend; the next in succession to the throne! He it is who must hold possession of 'the green book,' or who has had it in his keeping. To whom should a man confide so dangerous a treasure but to his own wife? But the husband, we are told, always wore the key of the iron chest in which the book was guarded round his neck. Father Hilary attacked the Princess on the religious side, and persuaded her to remove the key from her husband's neck when he lay unconscious in typhus fever. She must have had many sins to atone for. Anyway, she did commit the small piece of treachery, and I passed a whole night studying 'the green book' obtained from Ghedimin."

"Well?"

"Well, having carefully gone through it, I flung it to the other end of the room. The book was filled with dangerous doctrines—nothing more. Pure abstract reasoning, philosophical treatises, and the like, but no single name of any member. What care I for the utterances of Seneca, Rousseau, Saint-Just? What I want to know is what the Muravieffs and Turgenieffs are talking about. That, too, was a mere piece of trickery. That cunning Ghedimin did not trust his wife. He gave her a book to keep which the Censor—had she betrayed him—would readily have condemned to be burned, but for which the President of Secret Police would have grudged the oil consumed in the reading."

"Then, if the real 'green book' is not to be found in his wife's keeping, it must be in that of his lady-love—and that lady-love is

Zeneida?"

"Right."

"Is she a foreigner?"

"No; a subject. A Finnish girl from Helsingfors; and especially favored by the Czar, because she has triumphed over the pride of the Empire—Catalani. The Czarina, too, is very gracious to her. You know that the Czar is a great music-lover, and will not suffer the school of Cimarosa and Paisiello to be set aside by the modern school of Rossini. Zeneida Ilmarine does not sing a note of Rossini. At all hours she is admitted to the imperial family. How often have I—ay, and even the Grand Duke Nicholas—had to kick our heels in the antechamber while she was having audience? At the court soirées she is treated like any reigning princess; she alone is privileged to wear in her hair a white rose, the Czarina's favorite flower. It is entirely due to the magic of her voice that the Finnish students of Helsingfors escaped being sent off in a body to Kiew after the rebellion; for she can intercede as effectually as she can sing. The Czar would have raised her to the rank of a duchess, but what do you think the spoiled *diva* said? 'Would your Majesty wish to degrade me?'"

"And is this the woman who could take part in a conspiracy against the Czar?"

"Why not? if the leader of that conspiracy be sweet upon her, a Prince Ghedimin, the most powerful among Russia's twelve ruling families, the number of whose serfs and estates more than equals the whole kingdom of Würtemberg. Do not forget, moreover, that she is a 'Kalevaine.'"

"What are the proofs of this suspicion?"

"I have already told you that the conspirators are marvellously clever in eluding detection. It is not their way to creep into obscure corners or subterranean caves; they rather hold their meetings in the midst of crowds and in public places. This is a wrinkle they have learned from the Poles, among whom the 'Philaretes' and 'Vendita' usually meet at their yearly fairs. Now the fast is at hand. For seven weeks every public amusement is forbidden, that the people may see that great folks do penance as well as themselves. High and low must attend the services of the Church. But no one asks what takes place o' nights behind closed doors. This is the harvest-time for secret meetings. The invited guests have no political proclivities; they have no wish to found constitutions; their sole idea is to enjoy a good dinner—'Anti-fasters' they call themselves. Surprised by the police, all that would be discovered would probably be a table spread with appetizing game or steaming roast-beef, and, maybe, a few guests the worse for liquor. The 'sinners' would, of course, be fined, but no one would be the wiser of what was taking place in the more private apartments. And here our prima donna has peculiar advantages. The stage, as you know, makes its own laws. Who in the world expects to find strict morality among actresses and ballet-dancers? The police wisely shut their eyes to much that goes on among them. He who is lucky enough to be an invited guest to one of Zeneida Ilmarine's exclusive Carême soirées will find all the frivolous beauties of the opera and ballet, all the *jeunesse dorée* of St. Petersburg, assembled, and will have no need to complain of either the lack of fiery eyes or fiery wines. Many a man has been singed by them. But if he be wise enough to keep his head in the midst of the tumult, he will observe a certain portion of the company disappear gradually and noiselessly from the reception-rooms."

"There may be other reasons for such disappearance."

"Certainly. For instance, roulette may be carried on in those private apartments. Now, the Czar has issued a severe prohibition against roulette-playing—any one caught in the act is sent straight off to Siberia, without possibility of remission of sentence. It is a fact that Zeneida's calumniators, especially among the women who are envious of her, have circulated the report that she keeps a roulette bank, which enables her to indulge in all her lavish luxury. I hold a different opinion."

"Upon what grounds?"

"That Michael Turgenieff is a constant guest at these theatrical soirées, and is one of those who at midnight disappear into the inner apartments. Now, Michael Turgenieff is a philosopher and a puritan."

"Even philosophers have their lucid intervals, induced by combined charms of pretty women and good wine."

"We know Michael better. I have had my eye upon him ever since his Demi-Decemvir. He was the only one among his young companions who did not give way to any of the modern forms of debauchery. In his travels through England, France, and Germany, he only sought out great writers and men of mind and genius; he was never to be found in fashionable or vicious haunts. Not even in Paris, where vice and pleasure reign supreme. What, then, should possess him to secretly worship here at the altar of false gods? No; the presence of this one man alone is sufficient to betray that those closed doors conceal other than Eleusinian mysteries."

"And it has, so far, been impossible to discover them?"

"No sooner does Zeneida, taking the Duke's arm, leave the company than it assumes the aspect of a revel. Beauty and folly take possession of men's senses, and next day not one of them can recall anything but that they have had a jolly evening. If a 'Brother' try to follow a 'Bojar' in his retreat, he is surrounded by sirens, who lure him back by a conspiracy of charms. In order to let diamond cut diamond, and so conquer the high-priestess of the mysteries herself, it needs just such a conquering hero as you are."

"Very flattering for me! When shall I make a beginning?"

"This very night. It is the last day of Maslica week, the last night of the opera. Zeneida is to sing in Cimarosa's *Secret Marriage*. The streets will be thronged. At the stroke of midnight the bells of all the churches will proclaim the beginning of Lent. Every one goes to confession. In the opera queen's kingdom, however, the revel begins. Prince Carnival, with his merry company, will make his joyous procession through the brilliantly lighted saloons, through whose fast-closed windows no ray of light, no sound of music, may penetrate. You must manage to procure an invitation to the entertainment."

"After the insult of to-day?"

"You are master in the art of intrigue."

"I have given my promise to Princess Ghedimin to hiss her rival off the stage to-night."

"You have given me your promise to win her to-night."

"The time is too short."

"But the opportunity favorable. I am informed that yesterday two men arrived in the capital who are rarely seen here. The one is Krizsanowski, from Poland; the other, Colonel Pestel, of the Southern Army. Both have already received invitations to Zeneida's so-called dance. Only there can you come across them; and you must find out from them what has brought them here."

"I will be there."

"How will you manage it?"

"As we men begin all love affairs—by means of presents."

"Ah! this nymph is richer than you, my dear fellow. She makes her forty thousand rubles in a single concert. If her mood is for diamonds, she chooses out the most costly; if for something better than diamonds, she divides her night's earnings among the poor. It may happen that you receive back your presents twofold."

"I will make her a present which will command her favor—an eight-in-hand."

"Ah! such as the Czar alone possesses?"

"Such as not even the Czar possesses! You shall see, with this eight-in-hand, I will force open the gates of the fairy castle. Leave the rest to me. If a 'green book' be in existence, I will know its contents."

CHAPTER VI
OLD AGE

Prince Ghedimin was dining that day with his wife. Both he and the Princess studiously avoided mention of the affair which so abruptly ended the hunt. Yet it was unlikely that the news of it should not have spread throughout the city. The police alone appeared ignorant of it, the shot stag remaining on the spot where it fell. Was it the intention to remove it at nightfall, when no one could see who took it away?

"Shall I meet you at the opera to-night?" asked the Princess.

"I am not sure if I can be there."

"It would be a pity to remain away. Fräulein Ilmarine sings in the *Secret Marriage* for the last time this season. She will have a great ovation."

The Princess firmly believed that Zeneida would be hissed off the stage; and what could be better than that the Prince should have the pleasure of witnessing her humiliation from his wife's box?

"I am awfully sorry that I cannot engage to be there, my dear. As you are aware, it is my night to visit my grandmother, and when once I am there the dear old lady is sure not to let me come away. She has so much to ask about every one, and at the stroke of midnight she will expect me to take the organ in the chapel adjoining the apartment and sing through the penitential mass; and I cannot refuse her. But if you wish that we should spend the evening together, why not come with me?"

"Oh, many thanks. I do not sing in masses."

"But you have not once been to see the grandmother since our marriage."

"I think you know that I shrink from dead people."

"But the poor old soul is still living."

"So much the worse—a living death! It makes me shudder to look at a mummy, and to think that some day I too shall appear like one!"

"Ah, well! A pleasant evening to you, my love."

"Edifying devotions, your Excellency."

The Prince withdrew. The Princess sent her dwarf after him, that—hidden among the orange-trees in the conservatory—he might find out whether the Prince had actually gone to his grandmother's apartments, and how long he stayed there.

Ivan Maximovitch Ghedimin really did pass through the corridor into his grandmother's apartments. The old lady inhabited the central block of the palace, its windows, on both sides, looking on to the court-yard.

It is twenty years since Anna Feodorovna has left her apartments. Even in the sultry summer heat, a time when all the aristocrats of the capital take refuge in the islands of the Neva, she passes it among her fur-hung walls.

Since the spring of 1804, when she had a critical nervous illness, she has spent her days in a wheel-chair, the being wheeled from the dinner to the card-table and back again her only exercise. She dreads fresh air.

At first she had some society. Three old ladies of her own age used to come to play whist and gossip with her. Gradually they left off coming; first one, then two, at length all three. No one dared to tell her that they were dead; she was told that they found it difficult to mount the stairs. Since then she had played her game of whist alone.

The old lady still wears the old-fashioned cotton costume which was so fashionable in 1803, when the Czar Alexander had forbidden the importation of foreign woollen stuffs. She thinks that every lady in society still wears it, and with it a cap and feather, closely resembling a turban.

It is now twelve years since the last of her contemporaries visited her. All have now been gathered to their fathers. But Anna Feodorovna must not know this. All are living, and on every great occasion send her their messages and congratulations, exchange consecrated cakes with her, and colored Easter eggs; and on Easter morning she always finds on her table their illuminated visiting-cards, with the inscription in letters of gold, "Christos wosskresz."

History for her has stopped with the signing of peace between the Emperors Napoleon I. and Alexander I.; and the appointment, at that date, by the Czar, of her only son, Maxim Wassilovitch, to the command of the new Georgian regiment of Lancers. Georgia had just been incorporated into Russia, and Anna Feodorovna tells proudly to this day how, on one occasion, she had the honor of a conversation with Heraclius, the deposed Emperor of Georgia; how her beloved son, Maxim, brought his Majesty up to her, and although she did not understand what he said to her—for his ex-Majesty only spoke Persian, which was not at all like either Russian or French—they had had a most interesting conversation.

From that period in history it had been the endeavor of the family that no rumors of the world and its events should disturb the quiet of that revered member. A daily paper was published separately for her, from which every war detail was scrupulously expunged. The reigning sovereigns did nothing in the world but give or take a princess in marriage, magnanimously yield each other territory, distinguish their generals for no reason whatever; and, that the century might not pass over without some blood-shedding, the unbelievers on the far-off island of Tenedos were occasionally slaughtered; a revolt of the Kurds on the boundaries of Persia would be suppressed from time to time; or Belgrade be conquered by Csernyi-Gyurka. Anna Feodorovna knew nothing of the terrible French invasion, nor of the burning of Moscow; nor that her only son, Maxim, had fallen in the battle of Borodino. Her paper, on the contrary, stated that Maxim Wassilovitch had been appointed Governor of Georgia, and had at once proceeded there without furlough. From that time news had regularly come to her from him, and he had sent letters, which her man-servant was obliged to read to her, for her eyes were not capable now of deciphering handwriting. The good son who never forgot his old mother! Her man-servant, faithful Ihnasko, is everything to her—cook, house-maid, reader. He, too, must be some seventy-five years old; thus fifteen years younger than his mistress. No other serving-man would have held on as he had done, no other have submitted to put a seal to his lips, and have observed silence as to all that was passing without. Even among us men there are few Ihnaskos. And on a fête day, such as this, it is especially difficult, when Anna Feodorovna does not play cards—for card-playing is sinful—and there being no whist, she questions the more.

Fortunately for her she has a good appetite, and can enjoy all the varieties of cakes sent her by "her friends" on this last Maslica day.

"Ihnasko, I cannot believe that Sofia Ivanovna prepared these cakes herself. She always stones the raisins so carefully. Try this one."

"You are right, your Highness. But then the poor lady's eyesight is not so good as it was."

"Oh yes; she grows old, like me. Reason enough to see nothing."

(The main reason, however, is that six feet of earth lie between her and the world.)

"And the little princess, and the brunette countess, have they sent their usual congratulations to-day? And the Lieutenant-General's wife, who is so hard of hearing?"

"The cards are all laid on the silver table, your Highness."

"And you have acknowledged them in the customary manner?"

"At once, your Highness."

"You should have written in very large characters to the Lieutenant-General's lady, for she is so hard of hearing. Has the old beggar-woman come for the warm clothing? Was she glad to have it? Did she not prophesy good luck for this year? Is it not to be a comet year? Ah, there is no chance of that! Have you taken the grand duchesses their bouquets?"

"I took them. They return their thanks."

"Are neither of them married yet? Dear me! They must be of marriageable age now."

(Both are long married—in their girlhood—to the white bridegroom, Death; but no one has ever told Anna Feodorovna this.)

"How is the old man?"

"As usual."

"Does he make use of the Elizabeth pills I sent him against gout?"

"Constantly."

"Can he sleep at night?"

"Sometimes, yes; sometimes, no."

"Does he not grumble when it is new moon, or the wind blows?"

"At times. But he soon calms down."

"Of course, he always has that horrid pipe in his mouth, and sits in clouds of smoke like a charcoal-burner."

"What else should he do?"

"Wait a minute. Just take him these warm night-caps. I knitted them with red wool for the old man myself. He has always liked red caps. Tell him that I think of him, though he does not think of me. But what could he send me—tobacco ashes?"

(Alas! the *old man* has long become dust and ashes himself. He was Anna Feodorovna's husband, a martyr to gout, who did not see his wife once in a year, although they lived in the same house. Neither would visit the other. She could not endure a pipe; he could not live without it. One day he, too, found that his mausoleum in the Alexander Nevski Cathedral was a more peaceful resting-place than his bed; but he was interred so silently that his old wife did not know of his death, and continued to knit him his red night-caps.)

"Where can Boysie be so long? My boy is surely not ill? It would be a fine thing if Boysie forgot me! I will give him a downright scolding for this."

Hereupon Ihnasko had to calm his old mistress by telling her that "Boysie" had been called upon to attend an important council held by his Imperial Majesty the Czar. Most probably concerning some new grant of territory.

That was quite another thing!

Of course, Boysie was a grown-up man now—a man of thirty, and the owner of many an order set in brilliants. It is her grandson, the haughty, powerful Prince Ivan Maximovitch Ghedimin, whom his old grandmother still calls the "Boy."

The lamp has long been lighted; indeed, for days together it is not extinguished. At the least current of air the windows are closely curtained, and three or four days may pass before daylight is again admitted. It matters little to the owner of the apartment whether it be day or night; she neither rises nor goes to bed. She lives in her arm-chair. If she is sleepy, she goes to sleep; when she awakes she is ready for her food, and with good appetite. Every Sunday her maid washes and dresses her, and that function lasts for the week. When the bells of the Isaac Cathedral begin their midnight peal she knows that Sunday has come round again; when her newspaper is brought to her she knows that it must be Friday. Sometimes the two, Ihnasko and she, quarrel about politics.

Just now there are strained relations between mistress and man. A paragraph in the newspaper has stated that "the heroic George Csernyi has taken the fortress of Belgrade from the Turks."

The mistress chooses to understand by this that Csernyi had stormed the fortress and massacred the unbelievers; the man, on the contrary, takes it literally, that he had bought the fortress from the Turks for sterling cash.

Over this they quarrel hotly.

"When Ivan comes, he shall decide it; and if you are right, you shall have a brand-new coat trimmed with fox; if I am right, you shall get five-and-twenty lashes with this rod from my own hands!"

From her hands, who had not the strength to kill a fly! But the old woman is vindictive, and has already, for the third time, ordered him to lay out the new coat and the courbash on two chairs, so that the instant Ivan comes he shall get either the one or the other. And yet she forgets all about her anger, Belgrade, and George Csernyi the moment "Boysie" appears on the scene.

He comes in so gently at the tapestried door that she only perceives him when he stands before her.

Her Boysie is the handsomest man in the whole capital; he is as tall as the Czar.

His languishing gray eyes wear an earnest, thoughtful expression.

"Now, you bad boy—to come so late! Is school but just over? Are you not afraid that I shall make you kneel to ask my pardon?"

He is already kneeling before her; and the old grandmother passes her thin, wrinkled hand over his face as he bows his head on her lap. Laughing, she playfully ruffles his hair.

"This naughty Boysie! He knows how to coax his old grandmother, like any kitten. All right; you shall have no blows this time. I forgive you; so no need to cry. He has just the same shaped head as my Maximilian; only Maximilian loves me best, for he writes to me every month; and yet he is a great man. At your age two orders of merit already decorated his breast. But what have you done? Have you fought yet for the honor of your country? Are you following in your father's footsteps?"

The old woman's hands feel over the young man's breast until they rest upon the diamond star of the Alexander Nevski order, upon which she cries, joyfully:

"This is no cross; it is a star! And set in brilliants! You have robbed your father, for this order would have sat well upon him. He is a hero, a great man; the diamond star would well have become him. But he, too, has already obtained the first grade of the order, has he not? And set with diamonds as fine as these?" (Ah yes—ah yes! he has received it set with glistening pebbles in the cool sands of the Muscovite soil.) "But now stand up. You are a grown-up man, and what would the Czar say if he were to know that his privy-councillor still knelt, like a boy, at his grandmother's knee? Stand up, my dear boy, and tell me about matters of State. I know how to talk about them. Oh, in Czar Paul's time I was up in everything. It was I who kept the old man back from joining in Count Paklem's conspiracy, or he would be even now in Siberia. Eh, my boy, you love the Czar? That's right. How many a time has Czar Paul bastinadoed your grandfather! And he never complained. But now there are no conspiracies throughout the whole land against the Czar."

"None, dear granny."

"If at any time you should hear of plots, mind you tell it at once to headquarters. If you knew there was a thief lurking under your grandmother's bed, would you not straightway drag him out by the legs? Much more is it your sacred duty to destroy all conspiracies against the Czar's Majesty. He who works against the Czar will be punished, but he who serves him will be richly rewarded. How was it with Kutusoff? Did not the Czar take the finest jewel from his crown to present to him, and had a golden leaf set in the empty space with 'Kutusoff' inscribed upon it? The family of the Ghedimins is not inferior to that of the Kutusoffs."

Ivan turned pale. The family name, "Ghedimin," and the Czar's crown? One was a part of the other. The topic was a dangerous one. High-treason might be named in the next breath.

"My whole life I have consecrated to the Czar, granny." And then he blushed at his own words, for he had spoken falsely. He neither can nor dare tell the truth to living soul. His old grandmother is the only being on earth he really loves; and her, too, he must deceive. From morning to night his life is a lie; he must look men in the face and lie; must lie to baffle the spies ever on his track, so that at night he dare not offer up the prayer, "Incline thine ear to me, O God," for dread lest he must lie even to his God.

"I have been waiting for you ever so long. I have had a sharp dispute with Ihnasko, and you must be the arbiter;" and she related the subject of their dispute. "So now, who is in the right?"

Ivan laughed.

"As far as experience goes, you were right, grandmother; for fortresses, as a rule, are taken by force. But in this case Ihnasko was right, for George Csernyi really did buy Belgrade for good coin of the realm. So give the good fellow the coat, and not the whip."

The old lady nodded to her man-servant.

"Do you hear, Ihnasko? Thus should a just judge decide. Like Prince Ivan, he should give the servant right over the master, if need be, even if it be over his own grandmother. Rejoice, ye people, that your fate will rest in the hands of a man whose lips only know the truth!"

Ivan turned away.

"But now come nearer, sit down by me, and make your confession. When are you going to marry? It is high time. Have you not made your choice yet?"

And Ivan had to answer, "No."

He could not tell her that he had been already married three years to a woman who was so utterly heartless that she would not be presented to his old grandmother because she was afraid of her age and wrinkles—so he had answered, "No."

"Now you are telling me a fib. Let me feel your pulse. Of course, it was a fib! And why should you not have fallen in love? Look! in this drawer I am keeping a diadem for your bride; it is the same diadem I wore when your grandfather led me to the altar. Then Moscow was the capital of the empire. Where this fine palace stands were nothing but clumps of willows. Now, your bride shall adorn herself with this diadem. Take it; I give it you. You best know who is to wear it. The girl you love shall be my very dear granddaughter."

But Ivan, in truth, did not know to whom to give the diadem. He had a wife who had no love for him, and he loved a woman who could never be his wife. Thus to neither could he give it.

"I will take care of it, dear granny, until the right one comes."

"But now you will stay to supper with me, will you not, that we may eat the last Butter-night meal together? You are not going to be off to any bachelor drinking-party—to get into all sorts of wild company? You will stay, like a good son, with the old grandmother."

And so Ivan stayed to supper, and had to declare how much he was enjoying it, when he had dined but so short a time before, and knew all the while that in Zeneida's palace a Lucullus-like feast awaited him. If his digestion rebelled against the sacrifice, his heart made it a thousand times heavier.

Oh, the unspeakable agony that overpowered him as he thought how at that very time his affronted wife would be venting her whole vengeance upon that other woman who the world knew had thrown her soft shackles over him, and whom he dared not openly protect, least of all against this aggressor, his own wife! Had the Czar been in St. Petersburg, she would not have dared to molest her; but, in his absence, his powerful favorite, Araktseieff, was supreme.

To tell the truth, Ivan was glad that his absence was compulsory. A warm, tender-hearted man, of weak will, he was unequal to the situation. Taller by a head than most other men, he had been chosen as a leader among them; but the position oppressed him, for, capable as he was in all else, he lacked the necessary courage and decision for the post.

What he would most gladly have done would have been to say adieu one fine day to all his palaces, possessions, confederates, and to Russia, and to go out with Zeneida into the wide world to sing tenor to her soprano. Perhaps, too, it might have come about, had Zeneida been an ordinary artist and nothing more. But the disquieting thought is there—what may happen to-night on that other stage? Perhaps she is destined to mortification on the one; but on the other? On those boards the blood of the actors is wont to flow.

And all this time his fond grandmother could not press him enough to eat, as she asked news of Maria Louisa and the great Napoleon, of the little King of Rome, and many another who had long passed away; to many of which questions Ivan returned such mixed answers that the good Ihnasko was constantly exercised to set him right, being far better informed through his newspapers of all these things than was the absent-minded Prince.

At the first sound of the bells the old lady conscientiously lays down her knife and fork; and Ihnasko, without awaiting orders, proceeds to clear the table, and spreads another silken cover over it.

It was Lent.

"Let us draw near to our heavenly Father!" whispers the pious old lady.

Ivan kisses her cheeks, and she his.

There was a small door opening out from her bedchamber into the chapel. Opening this, Prince Ghedimin went in; and while his old grandmother, rosary in hand, began telling her beads, the tones of the organ were heard, and a man's clear voice began chanting the penitential psalm.

"What a good son and a good Christian is my Ivan Maximovitch!" murmured Anna Feodorovna, amid her prayers. "And what a lovely voice he has! He might be one of the Czar's choristers."

And amid the sounds of pealing organ and penitential psalm she reverently thanked the Lord, and, praying for the living and the faithful dead, fell into peaceful slumber in her arm-chair.

The organ still continues to peal, and penitential psalms ascend, for Ivan Maximovitch—Prince Ghedimin—is a good man, and a tender, loving son.

And yet this again is a fresh lie; for, as Ivan entered the chapel from his grandmother's room, one of the Czar's choirmen, who had been admitted by a secret door, was already in waiting there, and his task it was to sing on and play the organ until the old woman had fallen asleep.

Prince Ghedimin, meanwhile, hastily descended the secret staircase and passed into a masked corridor leading from his palace into the next house. There, quickly assuming a disguise, he jumped into a sledge awaiting him in the courtyard, and gave the coachman directions where to drive.

Upon the Princess's return from the opera she was informed, both by his Highness's coachman and her dwarf, that the Prince was still at home, and had not yet left his grandmother's apartments.

CHAPTER VII
THE EIGHT-IN-HAND

Prince Ghedimin left his secret domicile in a simply appointed sledge, without crest, his coachman wearing no livery. He ordered his man to drive to the opera.

At that time the capital possessed but one large, newly built theatre—the opera-house. Here representations of the drama, comedy, and opera were given, and often on one and the same evening, the performances lasting, as a rule, from early evening to midnight.