

FICTION

Louis Tracy

A Son of the Immortals



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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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A Son of the Immortals

By

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The sight of Alec and his fair burden brought a cheer from the crowd
Frontispiece

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A SON OF THE IMMORTALS

CHAPTER I

THE FORTUNE TELLER

On a day in May, not so long ago, Joan Vernon, coming out into the sunshine from her lodging in the Place de la Sorbonne, smiled a morning greeting to the statue of Auguste Comte, founder of Positivism. It would have puzzled her to explain what Positivism meant, or why it should be merely positive and not stoutly comparative or grandly superlative. As a teacher, therefore, Comte made no appeal. She just liked the bland look of the man, was pleased by the sleekness of his white marble. He seemed to be a friend, a counselor, strutting worthily on a pedestal labeled "*Ordre et Progres*"; for Joan was an artist, not a philosopher.

Perhaps there was an underthought that she and Comte were odd fish to be at home together in that placid backwater of the Latin Quarter. Next door to the old-fashioned house in which she rented three rooms was a cabaret, a mere wreck of a wineshop, apparently cast there by the torrent of the Boule Mich, which roared a few yards away. Its luminous sign, a foaming tankard, showed gallantly by night, but was garish by day, since gas is akin to froth, to which the sun is pitiless. But the cabaret had its customers, quiet folk who gathered in the evening to gossip and drink strange beverages, whereas its nearest neighbor on the boulevard side was an empty tenement, a despondent ghost to-day, though once it had rivaled the flaunting tankard. Its frayed finery told of gay sparks extinguished. A flamboyant legend declared, "Ici on chante, on boit, on s'amuse(?)" Joan always smirked a little at that suggestive note of interrogation, which lent a world of meaning to the half-obliterated statement that Madame Lucette would appear "tous les soirs dans ses chansons d'actualites."

Nodding to Leontine, the cabaret's amazingly small maid of all work, who was always washing and never washed, Joan saw the query for the hundredth time, and, as ever, found its answer in the blistered paint and dust covered windows: Madame Lucette's last song of real life pointed a moral.

Joan's bright face did not cloud on that account. Paul Verlaine, taking the air in the Boulevard Saint Michel, had he chanced to notice the dry husk of that Cabaret Latin, might have composed a chanson on the vanity of dead cafes; but this sprightly girl had chosen her residence there chiefly because it marched with her purse. Moreover, it was admirably suited to the needs of one who for the most part gave her days to the Louvre and her evenings to the Sorbonne.

She was rather late that morning. Lest that precious hour of white light should be lost, she sped rapidly across the place, down the boulevard, and along the busy Quai des Grands Augustins. On the Pont Neuf she glanced up at another statuesque acquaintance, this time a kingly personage on horseback. She could never quite dispel the notion that Henri Quatre was ready to flirt with her. The roguish twinkle in his bronze eye was very taking, and there were not many men in Paris who could look at her in that way and win a smile in return. To be sure, it was no new thing for a Vernon to be well disposed toward Henry of Navarre; but that is ancient history, and our pretty Joan, blithely unconscious, was hurrying that morning to take an active part in redrafting the Berlin treaty.

At the corner of the bridge, where it joins the Quai du Louvre, she met a young man. Each pretended that the meeting was accidental, though, after the first glance, the best-natured recording angel ever commissioned from Paradise would have refused to believe either of them.

"What a piece of luck!" cried the young man. "Are you going to the Louvre?"

"Yes. And you?" demanded Joan, flushing prettily.

"I am killing time till the afternoon, when I play Number One for the Wanderers. To-day's match is at Bagatelle."

She laughed. "Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech betrayeth thee," she quoted.

"I don't quite follow that, Miss Vernon."

"No? Well, I'll explain another time. I must away to my copying."

"Let me come and fix your easel. Really, I have nothing else to do."

"Worse and worse! En route, *alors*! You can watch me at work. That must be a real pleasure to an idler."

"I am no idler," he protested.

"What? Who spoke but now of 'killing time,' 'play,' 'Number One,' and 'Bagatelle'? Really, Mr. Delgrado!"

"Oh, is that what you are driving at? But you misunderstood. Bagatelle is near the polo ground in the Bois, and, as

Number One in my team, I shall have to hustle. Four stiff chukkers at polo are downright hard work, Miss Vernon. By teatime I shall be a limp rag. I promised to play nearly a month ago, and I cannot draw back now."

"Polo is a man's game, at any rate," she admitted.

"Would you care to see to-day's tie?" he asked eagerly. "We meet Chantilly, and, if we put them out in the first round of the tournament, with any ordinary luck we ought to run right into the semi-final."

She shook her head. "You unhappy people who have to plan and scheme how best to waste your hours have no notion of their value. I must work steadily from two till five. That means a sixteenth of my picture. Divide two hundred and fifty by sixteen, and you have--dear me! I am no good at figures."

"Fifteen francs, sixty-two and a half centimes," said he promptly.

She flashed a surprised look at him. "That is rather clever of you," she said. "Well, fancy a poor artist sacrificing all that money in order to watch eight men galloping after a white ball and whacking it and each other's ponies unmercifully."

"To hit an adversary's pony is the unforgivable sin," he cried, smiling at her, and she hastily averted her eyes, having discovered an unnerving similarity between his smile and--Henri Quatre's!

They walked on in eloquent silence. The man was cudgeling his brains for an excuse whereby he might carry her off in triumph to the Bois. The girl was fighting down a new sensation that threatened her independence. Never before had she felt tongue-tied in the presence of an admirer. She had dismissed dozens of them. She refrained now from sending this good-looking boy packing only because it would be cruel, and Joan Vernon could not be cruel to anyone. Nevertheless, she had to justify herself as a free lance, and it is the role of a lance to attack rather than defend.

"What do you occupy yourself with when you are not playing polo or lounging about artists' studios?" she asked suddenly.

"Not much, I am afraid. I like shooting and hunting; but these Frenchmen have no backbone for sport. Will you believe it, one has the greatest difficulty in getting a good knock at polo unless there is a crowd of ladies on the lawn?"

"Ah! I begin to see light."

"That is not the reason I asked you to come. If you honored me so greatly you would be the first woman, my mother excepted, I have ever driven to the club. To-day's players are mostly Americans or English. Of course there are some first-rate French teams; but you can take it from me that they show their real form only before the ladies."

"As in the tourneys of old?"

"Perhaps. It is the same at the chateaux. Everyone wants his best girl to watch his prowess with the gun."

He stopped, wishing he had left the best girl out of it; but Joan was kind hearted and did not hesitate an instant.

"So you are what is known as a gentleman of leisure and independent means?" she said suavely.

"Something of the sort."

"I am sorry for you, Mr. Delgrado."

"I am rather sorry for myself at times," he admitted, and if Joan had chanced to glance at him she would have seen a somewhat peculiar expression on his face. "But why do you call me Mr. Delgrado?"

She gazed at him now in blank bewilderment--just a second too late to see that expression. "Isn't Delgrado your name?" she asked.

"Yes, in a sense. People mostly call me Alec. Correctly speaking, Alec isn't mother's darling for Alexis; but it goes, anyhow."

"Sometimes I think you are an American," she vowed.

"Half," he said. "My mother is an American, my father a Kosnovian--well, just a Kosnovian."

"And pray what is that?" she cried.

"Haven't you heard of Kosnovia? It is a little Balkan State."

"Is there some mystery, then, about your name?"

"Oh, no; plain Alec."

"Am I to call you plain Alec?"

"Yes."

"But it follows that you would call me plain Joan."

"Let it go at Joan."

"Very well. Good morning, Alec."

"No, no, Miss Vernon. Don't be vexed. I really did not mean to be rude. And you promised, you know."

"Promised what?"

"That I might help carry your traps. Please don't send me away!"

He was so contrite that Joan weakened again. "It is rather friendly to hear one's Christian name occasionally," she declared. "I will compound on the Alec if you will tell me why the Delgrado applies only in a sense."

"Done--Joan," said he, greatly daring. He waited the merest fraction of time; but she gave no sign. "My stipulation is of the slightest," he added, "that I discourse in the Louvre. Where are you working?"

"In the Grande Galerie; on a subject that I enjoy, too. People have such odd notions as to nice pictures. They choose them to match the furniture. Now, this one is quite delightful to copy, and not very difficult. But you shall see."

They entered the Louvre from the Quai.

Joan was undoubtedly flurried. Here, in very truth, was that irrepressible Henri descended from his bronze horse and walking by her side. That his later name happened to be Alec did not matter at all. She knew that a spiteful Bourbon had melted down no less than two statues of Napoleon in order to produce the fine cavalier who approved of her every time she crossed the Pont Neuf, and it seemed as if some of the little Corsican's dominance was allied with a touch of Bernais swagger in the stalwart youth whom she had met for the first time in Rudin's studio about three weeks earlier.

They were steel and magnet at once. Delgrado had none of the boulevardier's abounding self-conceit, or Joan would never have given him a second look, while Joan's frank comradeship was vastly more alluring than the skilled coquetry that left him cold. Physically, too, they were well mated, each obviously made for the other by a discriminating Providence. They were just beginning to discover the fact, and this alarmed Joan.

She could not shake off the notion that he had waylaid her this morning for a purpose wholly unconnected with the suggested visit to the polo ground. So, tall and athletic though he was, she set such a pace up the steps and through the lower galleries that further intimate talk became impossible. Atalanta well knew what she was about when she ran her suitors to death, and Meilanion showed a deep insight into human nature when he arranged that she should loiter occasionally.

Delgrado, however, had no golden apples to drop in Joan's path, could not even produce a conversational plum; but he was young enough to believe in luck, and he hoped that fortune might favor him, once the painting was in hand.

Each was so absorbed in the other that the Louvre might have been empty. Certainly, neither of them noticed that a man crossing the Pont du Carrousel in an open cab seemed to be vastly surprised when he saw them hastening through the side entrance. He carried his interest to the point of stopping the cab and following them. Young, clear skinned, black-haired, exceedingly well dressed, with the eyes and eyelashes of an Italian tenor, he moved with an air of distinction, and showed that he was no stranger to the Louvre by his rapid decision that the Salle des Moulages, with its forbidding plaster casts, was no likely resting place for Delgrado and his pretty companion.

Making straight for the nearest stairs, he almost blundered upon Alec, laden with Joan's easel and canvas; but this exquisite, having something of the spy's skill, whisked into an alcove, scrutinized an old print, and did not emerge until the chance of being recognized had passed. After that, he was safe. He appeared to be amused, even somewhat amazed, when he learned why Delgrado was patronizing the arts. Yet the discovery was evidently pleasing. He caressed a neat, black mustache with a well-manicured hand, while taking note of Joan's lithe figure and well poised head. The long, straight vista of the gallery did not permit of a near view, and he could not linger in the narrow doorway, used chiefly by artists and officials, whence he watched them for a minute or more.

So he turned on his heel and descended to the street and his waiting victoria, waving that delicate hand and smiling with the manner of one who said, "Fancy that of Alec! The young scamp!"

Joan was copying Caravaggio's "The Fortune Teller," a masterpiece that speaks in every tongue, to every age. Its keynote is simplicity. A gallant of Milan, clothed in buff-colored doublet slashed with brown velvet, a plumed cavalier hat set rakishly on his head, and a lace ruffle caught up with a string of seed pearls round his neck, is holding out his right palm to a Gypsy woman, while the fingers of his left hand rest on a swordhilt. The woman is young and pretty, her subject a mere boy, and her smug aspect of divination is happily contrasted with the youth's excitement at hearing what fate has in store.

"There!" cried Joan. "What do you think of it?"

She had almost completed the Gypsy, and there was already a suggestion of the high lights in the youngster's face and his brightly colored garb.

"I like your copy more than the original," said Delgrado.

"Your visits to Rudin have not taught you much about art, then," said she tartly.

"Not even that great master would wish me to be insincere."

"No, indeed; but he demands knowledge at the back of truth. Now, mark me! You see that speck of white fire in the corner of the woman's eye? It gives life, intelligence, subtle character. Just a little blob of paint, put there two hundred years ago, yet it conveys the whole stock in trade of the fortune teller. Countless numbers of men and women have gazed at that picture, a multitude that must have covered the whole range of human virtues and vices; but it has never failed to carry the same message to every beholder. Do you think that my poor reproduction will achieve that?"

"You have chosen the only good bit in the painting," he declared stoutly. "Look at the boy's lips. Caravaggio must have modeled them from a girl's. What business has a fellow with pouting red lips like them to wear a sword on his thigh?"

Joan laughed with joyousness that was good to hear.

"Pooh! Run away and smite that ball with a long stick!" she said.

"Hum! More than the Italian could have done."

He was ridiculously in earnest. Joan colored suddenly and busied herself with tubes of paint. She believed he was jealous of the handsome Lombard. She began to mix some pigments on the palette. Delgrado, already regretting an inexplicable outburst, turned from the picture and looked at Murillo's "woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a diadem of twelve stars."

"Now, please help me to appreciate that and you will find me a willing student," he murmured.

But Joan had recovered her self-possession. "Suppose we come off the high art ladder and talk of our uninteresting selves," she said. "What of the mystery you hinted at on the Quai? Why shouldn't I call you Mr. Delgrado? One cannot always say 'Alec,' it's too short."

Then he reddened with confusion. "Delgrado is my name, right enough," he said. "It is the prefix I object to. It implies that I am sailing under false colors, and I don't like that."

"I am not good at riddles, and I suspect prefix," she cried.

"Ah, well, I suppose I must get through with it. Have you forgotten how Rudin introduced me?"

She knitted her brows for a moment. Pretty women should cultivate the trick, unless they fear wrinkles. It gives them the semblance of looking in on themselves, and the habit is commendable. "Rudin is fond of his little joke," she announced at last.

"But--what did he say?"

"Oh, there was some absurdity. He addressed me as if I were a royal personage, and asked to be allowed to present his Serene Highness Prince Alexis Delgrado."

The man smiled constrainedly. "It sounds rather nonsensical, doesn't it?" he said.

"Rudin often invents titles. I have heard efforts much more amusing."

"That is when he is original. Unfortunately, in my case, he was merely accurate."

Joan whirled round on him. "Are you a Prince?" she gasped, each word marking a crescendo of wonder.

"Yes--Joan."

"But what am I to do? What am I to say? Must I drop on one knee and kiss your hand?"

"I cannot help it," he growled. "And I was obliged to tell you. You would have been angry with me if I had kept it hidden from you. Oh, dash it all, Joan, don't laugh! That is irritating."

"My poor Alec! Why did they make you a Prince?"

"I was born that way. My father is one. Do you mean to say you have lived in Paris a year and have never seen our names in the newspapers? My people gad about everywhere. The Prince and Princess Michael Delgrado, you know."

"I do not know," said Joan deliberately.

Her alert brain was slowly assimilating this truly astonishing discovery. She did not attempt to shirk its significance, and her first thought was to frame some excuse to abandon work for the day; since, no matter what the cost to herself, this friendship must go no farther. The decision caused a twinge; but she did not flinch, for Joan would always visit the dentist rather than endure toothache. She could not dismiss a Serene Highness merely because he declared his identity, nor was she minded to forget his rank because she had begun to call him Alec. But it hurt. She was conscious of a longing to be alone. If not in love, she was near it, and hard-working artists must not love Serene Highnesses.

Delgrado was watching her with a glowering anxiety that itself carried a warning. "You see, Joan, I had to tell you," he repeated. "People make such a fuss about these empty honors----"

Joan caught at a straw. She hoped that a display of sarcastic humor might rescue her. "Honors!" she broke in, and she laughed almost shrilly, for her voice was naturally sweet and harmonious. "Is it an honor, then, to be born a Prince?"

"If a man is worth his salt, the fact that he is regarded as a Prince should make him princely."

"That is well said. Try and live up to it. You will find it a task, though, to regulate your life by copybook maxims."

"The principedom is worth nothing otherwise. In its way, it is a handicap. Most young fellows of my age have some sort of career before them, while I--I really am what you said I was, an idler. I didn't like the taunt from your lips; but it was true. Well, I am going to change all that. I am tired of posturing as one of Daudet's 'Kings in Exile.' We expelled potentates all live in Paris; that is the irony of it. I want to be candid with you, Joan. I have seen you every day since we met at Rudin's; but I did not dare to meet you too often lest you should send me away. You have given me a purpose in life. You have created a sort of hunger in me, and I refuse to be satisfied any longer with the easygoing existence of the last few years. No, you must hear me out. No matter what you say now, the new order of things is irrevocable. I almost quarreled with my father last night; but I told him plainly that I meant to make a place for myself in the world. At any rate, I refuse to live the life he lives, and I am here to-day because the awakening is due to you, Joan."

A tremor ran through the girl's limbs; but she faced him bravely. Though her lips quivered, she forced herself to utter words that sounded like a jibe. "I am to play Pallas Athene to your Perseus," she said, and it seemed to him for a moment that she was in a mood to jest at heroics.

"If you mean that I regard you as my goddess, I am well content," he answered quickly.

"Ah, but wait. Pallas Athene came to Perseus in a dream, and let us make believe that we are dreaming now. She had great gray eyes, clear and piercing, and she knew all thoughts of men's hearts and the secrets of their souls. My eyes are not gray, Alec, nor can they pierce as hers; but I can borrow her beautiful words, and tell you that she turns her face from the creatures of clay. They may 'fatten at ease like sheep in the pasture, and eat what they did not sow, like oxen in the stall. They grow and spread, like the gourd along the ground; but, like the gourd, they give no shade to the traveler, and when they are ripe death gathers them, and they go down unloved into hell, and their name vanishes out of the land.' But to the souls of fire she gives more fire, and to those who are manful she gives a power more than man's. These are her heroes, the sons of the Immortals. They are blest, but not as the men who live at ease. She drives them forth 'by strange paths ... through doubt and need and danger and battle.... Some of them are slain in the flower of their youth, no man knows when or where, and some of them win noble names and a fair and green old age.' Not even the goddess herself can tell the hap that shall befall them; for each man's lot is known only to Zeus. Have you reflected well on these things, Alec? Be sure of yourself! There may be Gorgons to encounter, and monsters of the deep."

He came very near to her. Her eyes were glistening. For one glowing second they looked into each other's hearts.

"And perhaps a maiden chained to a rock to be rescued," he whispered.

Then she drew herself up proudly. "Do not forget that I am Pallas Athene," she said. "My shield of brass is an easel and my mighty spear a mahl-stick; but--I keep to my role, Alec."

He longed to clasp her in his arms; but it flashed upon him with an inspiration from topmost Olympus that, all unwittingly, she had bound herself to his fortunes.

"Then I leave it at that," he said quietly.

This sudden air of confidence was bewildering. She had been swept off her feet by emotion, and the very considerations she thought she had conquered were now tugging at her heart-strings. He must not go away as her knight errant, eager and ready to slay dragons for her sake.

"Do not misunderstand me," she faltered. "I was only quoting a passage from one of Kingsley's Greek fairy tales that has always had a peculiar fascination for me."

"I'll get that story and read it. But I am interfering with your work, and here comes your friend, the Humming Bee. If he said anything funny to me just now, I should want to strangle him. So good-by, dear Joan. I will turn up again to-morrow and tell you how I fared in each round."

And he was gone, leaving her breathless and shaken; for well she knew that he held her pledged to unspoken vows, that his eager confidences would apply alike to the day's sport and his future life. With hands that trembled she essayed a further mixing of colors; but she scarcely realized what she was doing, until a queer, cracked voice that yet was musical sang softly in German at her elbow:

If the Song should chance to wander
Forth the Minstrel too must go.

It was passing strange that crooked little Felix Poluski, ex-Nihilist, the wildest firebrand ever driven out of Warsaw, and the only living artist who could put on canvas the gleam of heaven that lights the Virgin's face in the "Immaculate Conception," should justify his nickname of Le Bourdon by humming those two lines.

"I hope you are not a prophet, Felix," said Joan with a catch in her throat.

"No, *ma belle*, no prophet, merely an avenger, a slayer of Kings. I see you have just routed one."

She turned and looked into the deepset eyes of the old hunchback, and for the first time noted that they were gray and very bright and piercing. At the same time the fancy crossed her mind that perhaps Henri Quatre had had blue eyes, bold yet tender, like unto Alec's.

"So you too are aware that Monsieur Delgrado is a Prince?" she said, letting her thought bubble forth at random.

"Some folk call him that, and it is the worst thing I know of him so far. It may spoil him in time; but at present I find him a nice young man."

Joan swung round to her picture. "If Alec had the chance of becoming a King, he would be a very good one," she said loyally.

Poluski's wizened cheeks puckered into a grin. He glanced at the easel and thence to the picture on the wall.

"Perfectly, my dear Joan," he said. "And, by the bones of Kosciusko, you have chosen a proper subject, The Fortune Teller! Were you filling our warrior with dreams of empire? Well, well, I don't know which is more potent with monarchs, woman or dynamite. In Alec's case I fancy I should bet on the woman. Here, for example, is one that shook Heaven, and I have always thought that Eve was not given fair treatment, or she would surely have twisted the serpent's tail," and, humming the refrain of "Les Demi-Vierges," he climbed the small platform he had erected in front of the world famous Murillo.

Back to back, separated by little more than half the width of the gallery, Joan and Poluski worked steadily for twenty minutes. The Pole sang to himself incessantly, now bassooning between his thin lips the motif of some rhapsody of Lizst's, now murmuring the words of some catchy refrain from the latest review. Anybody else who so transgressed the rules would have been summarily turned out by the guards; but the men knew him, and the Grande Galerie, despite its treasures, or perhaps because of them, is the least popular part of the Louvre. Artists haunt it; but the Parisian, the provincial, the globe trotter, gape once in their lives at Andrea del Sarto, Titian, Salvator Rosa, Murillo of course, and the rest of the mighty dead, and then ask with a yawn, "Where are the Crown Jewels?"

So the Humming Bee annoyed none by his humming; but he stopped short in an improvised variation on the theme of

Vulcan's song in "Philemon and Baucis" when he heard a subdued but none the less poignant cry of distress from Joan. In order to turn his head he was compelled to twist his ungainly body, and Joan, who was standing well away from her canvas, was aware of the movement. She too turned.

"I am going," she announced. "I cannot do anything right to-day. Just look at that white feather!"

"Where?"

"In the boy's hat, you tease! Where else would you look?"

"In your face, *belle mignonne*," said the Pole.

It was true. Joan was not ill; but she was undeniably low spirited, and the artist's mood has a way of expressing itself on the palette. She laughed, with a certain sense of effort.

"I like you best when you sing, Felix. Sometimes, when you speak, you are Infelix."

"By all means go home," he grinned. "One cannot both joke and copy a Caravaggio."

He began to paint with feverish industry, did not look at her again, but tossed an adieu over his humped shoulder when she hurried away. Then he gazed reproachfully, almost vindictively, at the uplifted eyes of the transfigured Virgin.

"Now, you!" he growled. "*Vous etes benie entre toutes les femmes!* This affair is in your line. Why don't you help? *Saperlotte!* The girl is worth it."

CHAPTER II

MONSEIGNEUR

The Wanderers beat Chantilly. One minute before the close of the fourth chukkur the score stood at four all. Both teams were playing with desperation to avoid a decider on tired ponies, when the Wanderers' third man extricated the ball from a tangle of prancing hoofs and clattering sticks, and Alec Delgrado got away with it. He thought his pony was good for one last run at top speed, that and no more. Risking it, he sprinted across two hundred yards of green turf with the Chantilly Number One in hot chase. His opponent was a stone lighter and better mounted; so Alec's clear start would not save him from being overhauled and ridden off ere he came within a reasonable striking distance of the opposing goalposts. That was the Chantilly man's supreme occupation,—some experts will have it that the ideal Number One should not carry a polo stick,—and the pursuer knew his work.

A hundred, eighty, sixty, yards in front Alec saw a goal keeping centaur waiting to intercept him. In another couple of strides a lean, eager head would be straining alongside his own pony's girths. So he struck hard and clean and raced on, and the goalkeeper judged the flight of the white wooden ball correctly, and smote it back again fair and straight.

It traveled so truly that it would have passed Alec three feet from the ground to drop almost exactly on the spot whence he had driven it. But there was more in that last gallop along the smooth lawn than might be realized by any one present save Alec himself. It was his farewell to the game. From that day he would cease to be dependent on a begrudged pittance for the upkeep of his stable, and that meant the end of his polo playing. But he was not made of the stuff that yields before the twelfth hour. His mallet whirled in the air, there was a crack like a pistol shot, and the ball flew over the amazed goalkeeper's head and between the posts.

The yelling and handclapping of the few spectators almost drowned the umpire's whistle.

"By gad, that was a corker!" said he of Chantilly, as the ponies' wild gallop eased to a canter.

"I hope that flourish of mine did not come too close, Beaumanoir," said Alec.

"Don't give a tuppenny now," laughed Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir. "The match is over, and you've won it, and if you play till Doomsday you'll never score a better notch."

"It was lucky, a sheer fluke."

"Oh, that be jiggered for a yarn! A fellow flukes with his eyes shut. You meant it!"

"Yes, that is right. So would you, Bert, if it was your last knock."

"Well, time's up, anyhow," said Beaumanoir, not comprehending.

They trotted off to the group of waiting grooms. Delgrado ran the gauntlet of congratulations, for Paris likes to see Chantilly's flag lowered, and escaped to the dressing room. He gave a letter, already written and sealed, to an attendant, and drove away in his dogcart. Bowling quickly along the broad Allee de Longchamps, he turned into the Route de l'Etoile, and so to the fine avenue where all Paris takes the summer air.

He found himself eying the parade of fashion in a curiously detached mood. Yesterday he thought himself part and parcel of that gay throng. To-day he was a different being. All that had gone before was merged in "yesterday's seven thousand years."

His cob's pace did not slacken until he drew rein at the giant doorway of a block of flats in the Rue Boissiere. It was then about five o'clock, and he meant to appear at his mother's tea table. He was far from looking the "limp rag" of his phrase to Joan. Indeed, it might have taxed the resources of any crack regiment in Paris that day to produce his equal in condition. Twenty-four years old, nearly six feet in height, lean and wiry, square wristed, broad shouldered, and straight as a spear, he met the physical requirements, at least, of those classic youths beloved of Joan's favorite goddess.

Usually his clean cut face, typically American in its high cheekbones, firm chin, mobile mouth, and thoughtful eyes, wore a happy-go-lucky expression that was the despair of matchmaking mamas; but to-day Alec was serious. He was thinking of the promise that to the souls of fire would be given more fire, to the manful a might more than man's.

If he had not been so preoccupied, he would certainly have heard the raucous shouts of newsboys running frantically along the boulevards. That is to say, he heard, but did not heed, else some shadow of a strange destiny must have dimmed his bright dreams.

Their nature might be guessed from his words to Joan. The question he addressed to the concierge proved that his intent was fixed.

"Is Monseigneur at home?" he asked.

"*Oui, m'sieur*: His Excellency has mounted a little half-hour ago," said the man.

Alec nodded. "Now for it!" he said to himself.

His father, a born fop, a boulevardier by adoption, cultivated habits that seemed to follow the mechanical laws of those clockwork manikins that ingenious horologists contrive for the amusement of children, big and little. Whether eating, sleeping, driving, strolling, chatting or card playing, the whereabouts and occupation of Prince Michael Delgrado could be correctly diagnosed at any given hour of the day and night. Fortune delights at times in tormenting such men with great opportunities. Prince Michael, standing now with his back to the fireplace in his wife's boudoir, was fated to be an early recipient of that boon for which so many sigh in vain.

Of course he knew nothing of that. His round, plump, rosy face, at first sight absurdly disproportionate to his dapper and effeminate body, wore a frown of annoyance. In fact, he had been obliged to think, and the effort invariably distressed him. Apparently he had a big head, and big headed men of diminutive frame usually possess brains and enjoy using them. But closer inspection revealed that his Highness' skull resembled an egg, with the narrow end uppermost.

Thus, according to Lavater, he was richly endowed with all the baser qualities that pander to self, and markedly deficient in the higher attributes of humanity. The traits of the gourmand, the cynic, the egoist, were there; but the physiognomist would look in vain for any sign of genius or true nobility. Recognition of his undoubted rank had, of course, given him the grand manner. That was unavoidable, and it was his chief asset. He liked to be addressed as "Monseigneur"; he had a certain reputation for wit; he carried himself with the ease that marks his caste; and he had shown excellent taste in choosing a wife.

The Princess did indeed look the great lady. Her undoubted beauty, aided by a touch of Western piquancy, had captivated the Paris salons of an earlier generation, and those same salons repaid their debt by conferring the repose, the dignity, the subtle aura of distinction, that constitute the aristocrat in outward bearing. For this reason, Princess Delgrado was received in poverty stricken apartments where her husband would be looked at askance, since the frayed Boulevard Saint Germain still shelters the most exclusive circle in France.

Here, then, was an amazing instance of a one-sided heredity. Alexis Delgrado evidently owed both mind and body to his mother. Looking at the Princess, one saw that such a son of such a father did not become sheerly impossible.

To-day, unhappily, neither Prince Michael nor his wife was in tune for a family conclave. Monseigneur was ruffled, distinctly so, and Madame was on the verge of tears.

When Alec entered the room he was aware of a sudden silence, accentuated by a half-repressed sob from his mother. Instantly he took the blame on his own shoulders. He expected difficulties; but he was not prepared for a scene.

"Why, mother dear," he said, bending over her with a tenderness that contrasted strongly with Prince Michael's affected indifference, "what is the matter? Surely you and dad have not been worrying about me! You can't keep me in the nest always, you know. And I only want to earn the wherewithal to live. That is not so very terrible, is it?"

The distressed woman looked up at him with a wan smile. She seemed to have aged since the morning. There was a pathetic weakness in her mouth and chin that was noticeably absent from her son's strong lineaments, and it occurred to Alec with a pang that he had never before seen his mother so deeply moved.

"I suppose one must endure the world's changes," she murmured. "It was foolish on my part to imagine that things could continue forever on the same lines; but I shall not grieve, Alec, if no cloud comes between you and me. It would break my heart----"

"Oh, come now!" he cried, simulating a lively good humor he was far from feeling. "What has dad been saying? Clouds! Where are they? Not around my head, at any rate. I have dispelled the only one that existed, the silly halo of class that stops a fellow from working because he happens to be born a Prince. It was different for dad, of course. My respected grandfather, Ferdinand VII., was really a King, and dad was a grown man when the pair of them were slung out of Kosnovia. Sorry, sir; but that is the way they talk history nowadays. It has ceased to be decorous. I am afraid Paris is largely responsible. You see, we have an Emperor in the next block, two Kings in the Avenue Victor Hugo, and a fugitive ex-President in the Hotel Metropole. I have seen the whole lot, even our noble selves, burlesqued in a Montmartre review. And I laughed! That is the worst part of it. I roared! We looked such a funny crew. And we were all

jolly hard up, borrowing five-franc pieces from one another, and offering to sell scepters at a ridiculous sacrifice. That came rather near home. We haven't got what the storybooks calls an embarrassment of riches, have we? So, a cup of tea, please, mother, and I'll hear the Czar's edict. It is pending. I can see it in his eye."

Usually Prince Michael responded to that sort of airy nonsense. When sure of his audience, he had spoken much more disrespectfully of the Parisian band of Kings in exile. But to-day his chubby cheeks refused to crease in a grin. He remained morose, oracular, heavy jowled. In fact, he had set himself a very difficult task. Now that the moment had arrived for its fulfilment, he shirked it.

"May I ask, Alec, if you have any scheme in view?" he said, strutting on the hearthrug in front of a grate filled with ferns. He always stood there,--in winter because it was warm, and he was a martyr to chilblains; in summer because of the habit contracted in winter.

"Well, sir, candidly speaking, I have not. But I saw in a newspaper the other day a paragraph of advice to a young man. 'No matter how small your income may be, live within it: that is the beginning of wealth,' it said. How profound! I applied it to myself. My income is nil. There I encountered a serious obstacle at the very start of the Great Money Stakes. But----"

"This is a grave discussion, Alec. I have that to say which may pain you. Pray be serious."

"Oh, I am--quite serious. My ponies and the dogcart are in Dumont's catalogue for the next sale. I resigned my membership of the polo club to-day. To-morrow, or eke to-night, I look for a job. As you, mother o' mine, have heard men say in your beloved west, I'm going to butt in."

"I--er--suppose you--er--look to me for some assistance?" coughed Prince Michael.

His wife rose. Her face was gray-white, her eyes blazed. "Alec knows we are poor. Why torture him--and me? I refuse to allow it. I refuse!" Her voice took a tragic note, thin and shrill; there was a pitiful quivering of her lips that wrung her son's heart, and he was utterly at a loss to understand why a discussion as to his future should lead to this display of passion.

"But, mother darling," he cried, "why are you grieving so? You and dad must maintain a certain state,--one begins by assuming that,--and it is no secret that the Delgrado side of the family was not blessed with wealth. Very well. Let me try to adjust the balance--the bank balance, eh? Really, why weep?"

Alec's gallant attempt to avert the storm failed again. His Serene Highness muttered words in a foreign tongue that sounded anything but serene. The Princess did not understand; but her son did. His brows wrinkled, and the good humored gleam died out of his eyes.

"Perhaps, sir," he said stiffly, "this subject had better be discussed when my mother is not present."

Prince Michael looked at him fixedly. For some reason the little man was very angry, and he seemed to resent the implied slur on his good taste.

"I am determined to end this farce once and for all," he vowed. "Before you joined us, I told the Princess----"

The door was flung open. The young man who had followed Joan and Alec into the Louvre that morning rushed in. His pink and white face was crimson now, and his manner that of unmeasured, almost uncontrollable excitement. He gazed at them with a wildness that bordered on frenzy, yet it was clear that their own marked agitation was only what he expected to find.

"Ah, you have heard?" he snapped, biting at each syllable.

"Heard what, Julius?" demanded Monseigneur, with an instant lowering of the princely mask, since Julius dabbled in stocks and was reputed well to do.

"The news! The news from Kosnovia!"

Prince Michael affected to yawn. "Oh, is that all?" he asked.

"All! *Grand Dieu*, what more would you have? It means--everything."

"My good Julius, it is long since I was so disturbed. What, then, has happened? The Danube in flood is no new thing."

"The Danube!" and the newcomer's voice cracked. "So you do not know--sire?"

The little word seemed to have the explosive force of nitroglycerine. Its detonation rang through the room and left them

all silent, as though their ears were stunned and their tongues paralyzed. Alec was the first to see that some event far out of the common had reduced his cousin, Count Julius Marulitch, almost to a state of hysteria.

"We are at cross purposes," he said quietly. "My father, like the rest of us, read this morning's telegram about the overflowing of the river----"

Count Marulitch waved his hands frantically. He was literally beside himself. His full red lips, not at all unlike those of the youth in Joan's picture, moved several times before sounds came.

"It is at least my good fortune to be the first to congratulate my King!" he cried at last. "Be calm, I pray you; but a tremendous change has been affected at Delgratz. Last night, while Theodore and the Queen were at dinner, the Seventh Regiment mutinied. It was on guard at the Schwarzburg. Officers and men acted together. There was no resistance. It was impossible. Theodore and Helena were killed!" This man, who appealed for calmness, was himself in a white heat of emotion.

A stifled scream, a sob, almost a groan, broke from the Princess, and she clung to her son as though she sought protection from that bloodthirsty Seventh Regiment. Prince Michael, fumbling with an eyeglass, dropped it in sheer nervousness. Alec, throwing an arm round his mother, recalled the hoarse yelling of the newsboys on the boulevards. Was it this latest doom of a monarchy that they were bawling so lustily? He glanced at his father, and the dapper little man found it incumbent on him to say something.

"But, Julius--is this true? There are so many canards. You know our proverb: 'A stone that falls in the Balkans causes an earthquake in St. Petersburg.'"

"Oh, it is true, sire. And the telegrams declare that already you have been proclaimed King."

"I!"

Prince Michael's exclamation was most unkingly. Rather was it the wail of a criminal on being told that the executioner waited without. His ruddy cheeks blanched, and his hands were outstretched as if in a piteous plea for mercy. There was a tumult of objurgations in the outer passage; but this King in spite of himself paid no heed.

"I?" he gasped again, with relaxed jaws.

"You, sire," cried Marulitch. "Our line is restored. There will be fighting, of course; but what of that? One audacious week will see you enthroned once more in the Schwarzburg. Ah! Here come Stampoff and Beliani. You are quick on my heels, messieurs; but I promised my cabman a double fare."

A scared manservant, vainly endeavoring to protect his master's private apartments, was rudely thrust aside, and a fierce looking old warrior entered, followed by a man who was obviously more of a Levantine than a Serb. The older man, small, slight, gray haired, and swarthy, but surprisingly active in his movements for one of his apparent age, raced up to Prince Michael. He fell on his knees, caught that nerveless right hand, and pressed it to his lips.

"Thank Heaven, sire, that I have been spared to see this day!" he exclaimed.

The Greek, less demonstrative, nevertheless knelt by Stampoff's side. "I too am your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subject," said he.

The Prince did then make a supreme effort to regain his self possession. "Thank you, General," he murmured, "and you also, Monsieur Beliani. I have only just been told. Theodore and Helena both dead! What a thing! They were my enemies; but I am shocked, I may almost say grieved. And what am I to do? I am practically powerless,--few friends, no money. One does not merely pack a valise and go off by train to win a throne. You say I am proclaimed King, Julius. By whom? Have the representatives met? Is there an invitation from the people?"

Stampoff was on his feet instantly. A man of steel springs and volcanic energy, his alertness waged constant war against his years. "The people!" he shouted. "What of them? What do they know? There is talk of a Republic. Think of that! Could folly go farther? A Republic in the Balkans, with Russia growling at one door, Austria picking the lock of another, and the Turk squatting before a third! No, Monseigneur. Start from Paris to-night, cross the Danube, reveal yourself to your supporters, and you will soon show these windbags that a man who means to rule is worth a hundred demagogues who exist only to spout."

His Serene Highness was slowly but surely recovering lost ground. He grasped the eyeglass again, and this time gouged it into its accustomed crease.

"You, Beliani, you are not one to be carried away by emotion," he said. "Count Marulitch spoke of a proclamation.

Who issued it? Was there any authority behind it?"

"God's bones! what better authority is there than your Majesty's?" roared Stampoff.

But the Prince extended a protesting palm. "An excellent sentiment, my friend; but let us hear Beliani," he said.

The Greek, thus appealed to, seemed to find some slight difficulty in choosing the right words. "At present, everything is vague, Monseigneur," he said. "It is certain that a battalion of the Seventh Regiment revolted and declared for the Delgrado dynasty. Two other battalions of the same regiment in the capital followed their lead. But the Chamber met this morning, and there was an expression of opinion in favor of a democratic Government. No vote was taken; but the latest reports speak of some disorder. The approaches to the Schwarzburg are held by troops. There are barricades in the main streets."

Prince Michael's hands went under his coattails. His face had not regained its claret red color, and its present tint suggested that it had been carved out of a Camembert cheese; but he was gradually taking the measure of current events in Kosnovia.

"Barricades seem to argue decided opinions," he said, and there was a perceptible tinge of cynicism in the phrase that jarred on his hearers.

"One must be bold at times," muttered Count Julius.

General Stampoff was chewing an end of his long mustaches in impotent wrath, and Beliani merely shrugged.

"Of course, my father means that prudence must be allied with boldness," broke in Alec, who had placed his mother in a chair and was now gazing sternly at Marulitch as if he would challenge the unspoken thought.

"Exactly, my boy. Well said! One looks before one leaps, that is it! Now I am not so young, not so young, and I have not forgotten the pleasant ways of Kosnovia. Theodore thought all was well; but you see what has happened after thirty years. Just think of it. A lifetime! Why, I came to Paris twenty-four years ago, just after you were born, Alexis, and even then the Obrenovitch line seemed to be well established. And here you are, a grown man, and Theodore and his Queen are lying dead in the Black Palace. It gives one to think. Now, our good Stampoff here would have me rush off and buy a ticket for Delgratz to-night. As if Austria had not closed every frontier station and was not waiting to pounce on any Delgrado who turned up at this awkward moment on the left bank of the Danube!"

Beliani was stroking his nose; Stampoff evidently meant to shorten his mustache by inches; and Julius Marulitch was waxen, and thereby rendered more than ever like a clothier's model.

Alec was a dutiful son. There were elements in the composition of the senior Delgrado that he did not admire; but he had never before suspected his father of cowardice. His cousin Julius, whom he thoroughly disliked, was betraying a whole world of meaning in the scorn that leaped from his eyes, and there was no mistaking the thoughts that inspired the furious General and the impassive Greek. For the first time in his life, Alec despised Prince Michael. There was a quickening in his veins, a tingling at the roots of his hair, a tension of his muscles, at the repulsive notion that a Serene Highness might, after all, be molded of common clay. And in that spasm of sheer agony he remembered how Joan's sweet voice had thrilled him with the message of Pallas Athene. Was he, indeed, one of those sons of the immortals whom the goddess "drives forth by strange paths ... through doubt and need and danger and battle?" Surely some such hazardous track was opening up now before his feet! His whole nature was stirred in unknown depths. It seemed to him that there was only one man in the room whose words had the ring of truth and honest purpose. He strode forward and caught old Paul Stampoff by the shoulder.

"I'll tell you what," he said, unconsciously adopting the free and easy style of speech that came naturally to him, "you and I must carry this thing through, General! My father is glued to Paris, you know. He has lost some of his enthusiasm, and one must be enthusiastic to the point of death itself if he would snatch a Kingdom out of such a fire as is raging now in Kosnovia. Austria has never seen me, probably has never even heard of me. I can slip through her cordon, swim ten Danubes if need be. What say you, General? Will I fill the bill? If I fail, what does it matter? If I win--well, we must reverse the usual order of things, and my respected parent can step into my shoes."

"Alexis, I am proud of you----" began Prince Michael pompously; but a sigh that was blended with a groan came again from his wife, and Princess Delgrado drooped in a faint.

Alec lifted her in his arms and carried her to a bedroom. A queer silence fell on the four men in the boudoir. Even his Serene Highness was discomfited, and abandoned his position on the hearthrug to gaze out of the window. To his displeased surprise, a small crowd had gathered. A man was pointing to the Delgrado apartments. Another man, carrying a bundle of newspapers, bore one of the curious small Parisian contents bills, but its heavy black type was

legible enough: "Assassination of the King and Queen of Kosnovia! King Michael in Paris!"

Alec, having given the Princess to the care of her maid, came back. He found his father looking into the street, General Stampoff standing on the hearthrug, and Count Julius whispering something in Beliani's ear.

"My mother will soon be all right," he announced cheerily. "She was a bit upset, I suppose, by our warlike talk; but we were so excited that we forgot she was present. Well, father, what say you to my proposal?"

Prince Michael turned. His face was no longer in the light. Perhaps that was his notion when he first approached the window. "I think it is an excellent one," he said. "Of course, there is a regrettable element of risk----"

"But what are we to understand?" broke in Stampoff's gruff accents. "These things are not to be settled as a shopkeeper appoints an agent. Does your Highness renounce all claim to the throne of Kosnovia in favor of your son?"

Words have a peculiar value on such occasions. The substitution of "Highness" for "Majesty" was not devoid of significance; for Stampoff, though loyal to the backbone, was no courtier.

"No!" cried Alec sharply.

"Yes," said Prince Michael, after a pause.

Count Julius Marulitch breathed heavily, and Constantine Beliani threw a wary eye over Alec.

"Good!" said Stampoff. "That clears the air. I shall be ready to accompany your Majesty by the train that leaves the Gare de l'Est at seven-thirty P.M."

Prince Michael laughed dryly. "You see," he said. "I was sure Stampoff would interfere with my dinner hour."

There was almost a touch of genius in the remark. Its very vacuity told of the man's exceeding unfitness for the role thrust upon him by certain desperadoes in the far off Balkans.

"We must have money," growled Stampoff with a most unflattering lack of recognition of the elder Delgrado's humor.

"Ah!" said Prince Michael, plunging both hands into his trousers' pockets and keeping them there.

"How much?" inquired Beliani.

"To begin with, fifty thousand francs. After that, all that can be raised."

"It is most unfortunate, but my--er--investments have been singularly unremunerative of late," said his Serene Highness.

"Why fifty thousand francs?" inquired Alec, half choked with wrath at sight of his father's obvious relief when the terrifying phantom of the Black Castle was replaced by this delectable Paris. Yet, with it all, he was aware of a consuming desire to laugh. There was a sense of utter farce in thus disposing of the affairs of nations in a flat in the Rue Boissiere. He recalled the exiled potentates of the music hall review, and the bitter wit of the dramatist was now justified. It was ludicrous, too, of Stampoff to address him as "your Majesty."

"Even Kings must give bribes occasionally," explained the impetuous General.

"Or promise them," said Count Julius.

"Or take them," said Beliani.

"If I am to be a King, I mean to dispense with these bad habits," said Alec. "We need our railway fares only, General. Once at Delgratz, our fickle Kosnovia must either maintain us or shoot us. In either event, we are provided for."

"Still, we must have sufficient funds to secure a foothold," urged Stampoff.

"I charge myself with providing ten thousand francs," said the Greek.

Alec glanced at his watch. "Give the money to Stampoff. He may want it. I do not," he said. "Dumont, though a horse dealer, is fairly honest. My four ponies are worth another ten, and he will surely pay me five, cash down. We meet at the Gare de l'Est. Who goes? You, Julius?"

"No," said the Count, "I shall follow when you have made a beginning. My presence would hamper you now. I am too well known, and secrecy is all-important until you are at the head of the army."

Alec turned on him with an air that would have delighted Joan, could she have been present.

"The army!" he cried. "I know nothing of leading armies. I mean to place myself at the head of the people."

"Nonsense, Alexis! Make for the troops. They alone can make or mar you," said Prince Michael.

"We shall settle those points at Delgratz," declared the brusque Stampoff. "You will bring the money, half in gold, to the station?" he added to Beliani.

"Yes. Gold is best. For the remainder, you will want Russian notes."

Something seemed to be troubling the august mind of Prince Michael. "By the way, my dear Beliani," he began; but the Greek awoke into a very panic of action.

"Pray forgive me, your Highness," he said. "If I have to raise such a large sum before seven o'clock I cannot lose an instant."

"I shall see you off from the Gare de l'Est," cried Marulitch hurriedly, and the two quitted the room in company. Alec went to pay a brief visit to his mother, and Prince Michael was left alone with the rugged old General. Then, for a few seconds, he became a man.

"You must forgive me, Paul," he said huskily. "I am not fitted for the work. I am broken down, a trifle, a worn out old dandy. You have got the right metal in Alexis. See to it that he does not follow my example, but keeps unstained the family name."

"God's bones! he will do that at least," muttered Stampoff. "If you or your father had possessed half his spirit, there would never have been an Obrenovitch on the throne of Kosnovia! Ferdinand VII., Michael V., Alexis III.! By the patriarch! somehow you Delgrados have managed at last to breed a King!"



CHAPTER III

IN THE ORIENT EXPRESS

After some haggling, Alec wrung four thousand five hundred francs out of Dumont. Then, at five minutes past six, he jumped into a cab and was driven to the Place de la Sorbonne.

Of course he had ascertained Joan's address easily. He made no secret of the fact that he had seen her on her way to the Louvre nearly every day of the twenty that had elapsed since their first meeting. His knowledge of the route she followed advanced quickly until he found out where she lived. He would not have dared to call on her now, if it had not been for the tremendous thing that had happened in his life; for he was sure he would become King of Kosnovia. The art that conceals art is good; but the art that is unconscious of artifice is better, and never had soothsayer arranged more effective preliminaries for astounding prediction than sibyl Joan herself.

Paris, too, might well witness the rising of his star. What other city stages such memorials to inspire ambition? Behind him, as his cab sped down the Champs Elysees, rose the splendid pile of the Arch of Triumph; in front, beyond the Place de la Concorde, the setting sun gilded a smoke blackened fragment that marked the site of the Tuileries; while near at hand the statue of France, grief stricken yet defiant, gazed ever and longingly in the direction of her lost Provinces. Here, within a short mile, stood the silent records of three Empires, founded, as time counts, within a few years. Two were already crumbled to the dust. The survivor, consolidated on the ruins of France, flourished beyond the Rhine.

Perhaps, if read aright, these portents were not wholly favorable to one about to try his luck in that imperial game. But Alec, though a good deal of a democrat at heart, was cheered by the knowledge that so long as the world recognizes the divine right of Kings, no monarch by descent could lay better claim to a throne than he. And he was young, and in love, and ready to believe that youth and love can level mountains, make firm the morass, bridge the ocean.

He wondered how Joan would take his great news. He thought he could guess her attitude. At first she would urge him to forget that such a person as Joan Vernon existed. Then he would plead that she was asking that which was not only impossible but utterly unheroic. And the minutes were flying. He would remind her that time does not wait even for Kings, nor would the Orient Express delay its departure by a single second to oblige such a fledgling potentate as he.

"We must part now, my sweet," he would say. "I am going to demand my birthright. When I am admittedly a King, I shall send for you. If you do not answer, I shall become my own envoy. You will make a beautiful Queen, Joan. You and I together will raise Kosnovia from the mire of centuries."

Somewhat stilted lovemaking this; but what was a poor fellow to do who had been taken from the Rue Boissiere and plunged into empire making, all in the course of a summer's evening?

He crossed the Pont Neuf without ever a look at Henri Quatre. That was a pity. The sarcastic Bearnais grin might have revealed some of the pitfalls that lay ahead. At any rate, the King of Navarre could have given him many instances of a woman's fickleness--and fickleness was the ugly word that leaped into Alec's puzzled brain when an ancient dame at Joan's lodgings told him that Mademoiselle and her maid had gone away that afternoon.

"Gone! Gone where?" he asked blankly.

"It is necessary to write," said Madame, and shut the door in his face, since it is forbidden in the Quartier for good looking and unknown young men to make such urgent inquiries concerning the whereabouts of discreet young women like Mademoiselle Joan.

Leontine, still scrubbing, came to the rescue. Never had she seen any one so distinguished as this Monsieur. *Mon Dieu!* but it was a pity that the belle Americaine should have packed her boxes that very day! And diminutive Leontine was romantic to the tips of her stubby fingers.

"M'sieu? wishes to know where he will find the young lady who lives there?" said she archly, jerking her head and a broom handle toward the neighboring house.

"But yes, my pretty one," cried Alec.

"Well, Pauline said--Pauline is her domestic, see you--said they were going to the forest to paint."

"To Fontainebleau?"

"Perhaps, m'sieu'--to the forest, that was it."

"No name? Barbizon?"

"It might be. I have no head for those big words, m'sieu'."

Alec gave her a five-franc piece. It was the first coin he found in his pocket, and the sight of it caused a frown. Confound those Montmartre playwrights! Why was their stupid travesty constantly recurring to his mind? He frowned again, this time at Auguste Comte's smugness, and looked at his watch. Twenty-five minutes to seven! It was too late now to do other than write--if he succeeded. If not--ah, well! "Some of them are slain in the flower of their youth." At least, she would remember, and those glorious eyes of hers would glisten with tears, and the belief helped to console him. Still, he was saddened, disappointed, almost dulled. Doubt came darkly with the dispelling of the dream that he might commence his Odyssey with Joan's first and farewell kiss on his lips. Love and ambition seemed to be at variance; but love had flown, whereas ambition remained.

Back, then, to the Rue Boissiere, to an uproar of visitors, sightseers, journalists. Prince Michael had become Monseigneur again. He was holding a reception. Alec, pressing through the throng, was waylaid by a servant.

"This way, monsieur," whispered the man, drawing him into a passage and thence to the room of Princess Delgrado. Alec was soothing his mother's grief when his father entered secretly on tiptoe with the hushed voice and stealthy air of a conspirator. He carried a parcel, long and narrow, wrapped in brown paper.

"I have been consumed with anxiety," said he. "Julius came and warned me that your departure from Paris ought to be incognito. This is wise; so I remain King-elect till you reach Delgratz. The newspapers are pestering me to declare a program. They all expect that I shall leave Paris to-night or early to-morrow. Indeed, an impudent fellow representing '*Le Soir*' says that if I don't bestir myself I shall be christened the Sluggard King. But I shall humbug them finely. Leave that to me. Your portmanteaus have been smuggled out by way of the servants' quarters, and you must vanish unseen. Buy a ticket for Vienna, ignore Stampoff during the journey, accept my blessing, and take this." He held out the parcel.

"What is it?" inquired Alec.

"My father's sword, your grandfather's sword. I have kept it bright for you."

Alec squirmed. He knew the weapon, a curved simitar inlaid with gold, and reposing in a scabbard of gilt metal and purple velvet. In its wrapping of brown paper and twine it suspiciously resembled a child's toy, and Prince Michael's grandiloquent manner added a touch of buffoonery to a farewell scene made poignant by a woman's tears.

"I shall use it only on the skulls of eminent personages," said Alec gravely. In truth, this Parisian kingship was rapidly becoming farcical. What a line, what a situation, for that review!

But there was worse to come. Checked in his outburst of family pride, Monseigneur became practical. "What of Dumont?" said he.

"He was touched; but he knocked off five hundred francs."

"Ah, bah! I rather hoped--well, I must return to the salon and play my part. Remember, you will see no one except a servant at the Gare de l'Est. Julius has arranged passports, everything."

"He is taking an extraordinary interest in me. Of course, if I pull through, he becomes heir presumptive."

"Parbleu! That is so. But--you will marry. Bide your time, though. Choose a Queen who--" his shifty eyes fell on the trembling form of his wife, who had remained strangely silent during this somewhat strained interview,--"who will be as good a wife to you as your mother has been to me. Farewell! may God guard you!"

Twice in one day had the pompous little man been betrayed into an avowal of honest sentiment. But he soon recovered. Once reestablished on the hearthrug, with his eyeglass properly adjusted, his hands tucked under his coattails when they were not emphasizing some well turned phrase, Prince Michael enjoyed himself hugely.

And then Alec clasped his mother in his arms. She was almost incoherent with terror. Bid him remain she dare not; she lacked the force of character that such a step demanded. She had given too many years to this chimera of royalty now suddenly grown into a monster to be sated only by the sacrifice of her son! But she mourned as if he was already dead, and a lump rose in Alec's throat. He had always loved his mother; his father had ever been remote, a dignified trifler, a poser. The three held nothing in common. It could hardly be doubted that every good quality of mind and body the boy possessed was a debt to the brokenhearted woman now clinging to him in a very frenzy of lamentation. Small wonder if his eyes were misty and his voice choked. Ah! if Joan but knew of this sorrowing mother's plight, surely she would come to her!

At last he tore himself away. Grasping that ridiculous parcel, he hurriedly descended a back staircase. Owing to the paternal watchfulness that the French Government exercises over its subjects, he was obliged to pass the concierge; but none paid heed to him. If it came to that, all Paris would guffaw at the notion of dear Alec becoming a filibuster.

He hailed a passing cab. If he would catch his train, they must drive furiously, which is nothing new in Paris. Climbing the Rue La Fayette, he passed Count Julius Marulitch and Constantine Beliani coming the other way in an open victoria. They were so deeply engaged in conversation that they did not see him. Julius was talking and the Greek listening. It flashed into Alec's mind that the presence in Paris of the Greek on the very day of the Delgratz regicide offered a most remarkable coincidence. Beliani was no stranger to him, since he and General Stampoff, the one as Finance Minister and the other as Commander in Chief, were exiled from Kosnovia after an abortive revolution ten years ago.

But Beliani usually lived in Vienna, indeed, he was sometimes regarded as an active agent in Austria's steady advance on Salonica,—whereas dear old Paul Stampoff hated Austria, was a frequent visitor to the Delgrado receptions, and it was largely to his constant urging and tuition that Alec owed his familiarity with the Slav language. The Greek, it was evident, heard of the murders at the earliest possible moment; Julius too was singularly well informed, though his interest in Kosnovian affairs had long seemed dormant; even the fiery Stampoff was no laggard once the news was bruited. Alec went so far as to fix the exact time at which Julius appeared in the Rue Boissiere. He knew something of the ways of newspapers, and was well aware that no private person could hope to obtain such important intelligence before the press. He himself had unwittingly heard the first public announcement of the tragedy, and the three men had certainly lost no time in hurrying to greet their new sovereign.

What a madly inconsequent jumble it all was! Little more than two hours ago he was driving through the Bois with no other notion in his brain than to seek a means of earning a livelihood; yet here he was at the Gare de l'Est carrying a sword as a symbol of kingship. A sword, wrapped in brown paper, tied with string! Suppose, by some lucky chance, Joan met him now, would she sympathize, or laugh?

He found his father's valet waiting with his luggage near the ticket office. The man gave him an envelop. It contained a passport, vised by the Turkish Embassy, and a few scribbled words:

Note the name. It is the nearest to your initials B. could procure. I shall come to you on the train.
Destroy this. S.

The name was that on the passport, "Alexandre George Delyanni; nationality, Greek; business, carpet merchant; destination, Constantinople."

Alec smiled. The humor of it was steeling him against the canker of Joan's untimely disappearance. "I don't look much like a Greek," he said to himself; "but the 'Alexandre' sounds well as an omen. I'm not so sorry now. This business would tickle Joan to death."

So, on the whole, it was a resigned if not light-hearted adventurer who disposed himself and his belongings in the Orient Express, after experiencing the singular good luck of securing a section in the sleeping car returned by a Vennese banker at the last moment. He went about the business of buying his ticket and passing the barrier with a careless ease that would have excited the envy of a Russian Terrorist. Sharp eyes attend the departure of every international train from Paris; but never a spy gave more than casual scrutiny to this broad shouldered youth strolling down the platform, the latest passenger to arrive, and the least flurried.

He neither saw nor looked for Stampoff. Having a minute to spare, he obtained a newspaper, took a seat voucher for the first dinner, lighted a cigarette, entered his reserved compartment, arranged his luggage, and burnt General Stampoff's scrawl just as the train moved out of the station.

Then he read an account of the Delgratz crime,—for it was only a crime, a brutal and callous murder, not worthy to be dignified by the mantle of political hate. The unhappy King and Queen of Kosnovia were dining in company with the Queen's brother and the Minister of Ways and Communications when the regiment on duty in the palace burst in on them. King Theodore was shot down while endeavoring to protect the Queen. She too fell riddled with bullets, and both corpses were flung into a courtyard. The unhappy guests were wounded, and still remained prisoners in the hands of the regicides, who vaunted that they had "saved" the country, and meant to restore the ancient sovereignty.

Beliani's summary of subsequent events was accurate; but it struck Alec at once that he had said nothing of the minister nor of Sergius Vöttisch, Queen Helena's brother, who was mainly instrumental in defeating Beliani's half-forgotten revolt. Did he know of their presence? How peculiar that he should utter no word of triumph concerning Vöttisch!

Alec threw aside the paper. He was sick at heart. He loathed the thought that the first step toward his throne lay across the body of a woman.

"Nice guards, the noble Seventh Regiment!" he muttered. "Now, when I am King----"

Then he realized that during the few minutes that had elapsed since the train started, the whole aspect of the adventure had changed completely. It was no longer a snatch of opera bouffe, a fantastic conceit engendered in the brain of that elderly beau whom he had left in the Rue Boissiere, a bit of stage trifling happily typified by the property sword. It had become real, grim, menacing. It reeked of blood. Its first battle was there, recorded in the newspaper. He pictured those brutal soldiers mauling the warm bodies, thrusting them through an open window and proclaiming their loyalty--to him!

The train was rushing through an estate noted for its game, and he had been one of a party of guns in its coverts last October. He remembered shooting a pheasant of glorious plumage, and saying: "Ah! What a pity! I ought to have spared him, if only on account of his coat of many colors."

"When birds are flying fast, even you, Alec, have to shoot *passim*," said a witty Hebrew, and Delgrado did not appreciate the *mot* until some one told him that *passeem* in Hebrew meant "patchwork," and that Jacob's offense to Joseph's brethren lay in the gift of a Prince's robe to his favorite son.

The quip came to mind now with sinister significance; he wished most heartily he had missed that pheasant. It was quite a relief when dinner was announced, and he made his way to the dining car, where a polyglot gathering showed that although the Orient Express had not quitted Paris fifteen minutes it had already crossed many frontiers. There were few French or English on board, and not one American. A couple of Turks, a Bulgarian, a sprinkling of Russians and Levantines, and a crowd of Teutons, either German or Austrian, made up the company. Stampoff remained invisible, and Alec shared a table with an Armenian, who insisted on speaking execrable English, though he understood French far better.

Then this newest of all Kings felt very lonely, and he began to understand something of the isolation that would surround him in that Black Castle of his daydream, where, if all went well with him, he alone would be the "foreigner." A longing for companionship came upon him. He wanted some one who would laugh and talk airy nonsense, some one whose mind would not be running everlastingly in the political groove, and an irresistible impulse urged him to ask for a telegraph form and write:

BEAUMANOIR, Villa Turquoise, Chantilly.
Come and join in the revel.
Alec.

He gave the message to an attendant, bidding him despatch it from Chalons. He reasoned that Beaumanoir would be puzzled, would call at the Rue Boissiere, see his father, and solve the mystery. In all likelihood, Lord Adalbert, who cheerfully answered to the obvious nickname--would accept the invitation, and by the time he reached Delgratz the succession to the throne of Kosnovia would be in a fair way toward settlement. Moreover, by depriving the Chantilly team of their crack Number One, Alec would equalize matters for the Wanderers, and the love of sport is ever the ruling passion in healthy and vigorous youth.

"By gad!" he said to himself, "I'm showing craft already. That is a Machiavellian wire!"

It was, as it happened, a stroke worthy of the wily Florentine himself; but neither he nor his latest pupil could possibly have estimated its true bearing on events.

After dinner Stampoff found him. Delgrado was astounded at first. Stampoff, shorn of his immense mustache, ceased to be a General. In fact, the wizened, keen faced old man bore a striking resemblance to a certain famous actor of the Comedie Francaise; but he was not seated in Alec's compartment ten seconds with the door closed ere he showed that the loss of his warrior aspect had in no way tamed his heart.

"Yes," he said, passing a lean hand over his blue-black upper lip, "it was necessary to disguise myself. Ten years are not so long, and I am known on the Danube. You see, we must get through to Delgratz and the Schwarzburg. Once there, with three thousand bayonets behind us, we can do things. Leave the fighting to me, your----"

He stopped, and glanced at a fat Turk lumbering along the corridor.

"Exactly, my dear old friend," said Alec. "Drop titles, please, until we have a right to use them. Even then they can be left to gentlemen ushers and court chamberlains. Alec and Paul sound better, anyhow. But you were outlining a scheme. I go with you as far as Delgratz; but those bayonets in the Schwarzburg will not be behind me, I hope. Some of them may come within measurable distance of my manly chest; but even that is improbable, for I have always noticed

that vulgar assassins are cowards."

Stampoff's bushy eyebrows had been spared, and they formed a hairy seam now straight across eyes and nose. "You forget, perhaps you do not know, that these men alone have actually declared for you--for a Delgrado," he growled.

"And a pretty gang of cutthroats they must be! I read the details after leaving Paris. That poor woman, Paul! She was pretty and vivacious, I have been told. Just picture the scene in the dining hall. One woman, three unarmed men, the King leaping up and endeavoring to shield her--and the gallant Seventh firing volleys at them. Then, when the last sob is uttered, the last groan stilled, husband and wife are pitched to the dogs. Oh, it makes my blood boil! By the Lord! when I am King I shall hang the whole crew!"

He spoke very quietly. Any one looking through the window in the upper half of the door would have seen a young man seemingly telling an older one something of ordinary import. But the words were crisp and hot. They came like drops of molten steel from the furnace of his heart.

Stampoff's thin face grew swarthier. He bent forward, his hands on his knees. "Will you tell me why you are going to Delgratz?" he asked with a curious huskiness in his voice.

"To occupy a throne--or a tomb. In either event, I am only copying the example of the vast majority of my revered ancestors."

"The throne is yours by right. Theodore has fallen almost precisely as your grandfather fell. Ferdinand was shot, and escaped with his life only because there was a struggle and a few faithful followers carried him into safety."

"If I depended on the fealty of the Seventh Regiment, I should not expect to find even the faithful few. Poor Theodore may have looked for them; but they did not exist."

"Then we had better leave the train at Chalons and return to Paris."

"Certainly, if the butchers of the Schwarzburg are to form my cohort."

"God's bones! never have I been so mistaken in a man! Your father, now--one feared he might have lost his nerve--but you, Alec! The devil take it! I thought better of you. I suppose then, it will have to be Marulitch."

"Julius! Is he a candidate--or a rival?"

Stampoff paused, irresolute. He was deeply troubled, and his fierce eyes searched Delgrado's face. "I had real hope of you," he muttered. "You would appeal to the women, and they are ever half the battle. Why are you so squeamish? You needn't embrace the men of the Seventh. You can use them, and kick them aside. That is the fate of ladders that lead to thrones. I know it. I am old enough not to care."

"I am not thinking of ladders as yet, Paul. Sufficient for the day is the foundation thereof, and I refuse to build my Kingdom on the broken vows of traitors."

"Ha! Stupid words! The ravings of cheap philosophers! By your own showing, I am a traitor."

"Yes, but an honest one. You fought fairly and were beaten. Were it otherwise, Theodore would never have tried so often to tempt you to his service."

The General flung himself back in the carriage and folded his arms. The steel spring was relaxed. He was baffled, and the weariness of life had suddenly enveloped him in its chilling fog. "Very well, then. We descend at Chalons," he said, with a sigh that was a tribute to adverse fate.

"Having paid for your ticket, you may as well come on to Vienna," said Alec with irritating composure.

"Curse Vienna! Why should I take that long journey for nothing?"

"To oblige me."

"You'll drive me crazy. How will it oblige you?"

"Because I am going to Delgratz, General, and there is a whole lot of things I want to ask you."

Stampoff bounced up again. "Will you be so kind as to explain what you mean?" he cried indignantly.

"Oh, yes. We are going to talk far into the night, and it is only fair that you should know my intentions. Otherwise, the valuable counsel you will give me might be misdirected, as it is, for instance, at the present moment, when you are heatedly advising me to throw in my lot with a set of rascals who, when I fail to satisfy their demands, would turn and

rend me just as they have rended Theodore. Be sure that their object was selfish, Stampoff. Not one of these men has ever seen Prince Michael or myself. Even their leaders must have been mere boys when Ferdinand VII. was attacked--probably by their fathers. Well, I shall have none of them. They and their like are the curse of Kosnovia. Who will pay taxes to keep me in the state that becomes a King? Not they. Who will benefit by good government and honest administration of the laws? Assuredly not they, for they batten on corruption; they are the maggots not the bees of industry. Over whom, then, shall I reign?

"I am young, Paul; but I have read and thought,--not very deeply, perhaps, but I have looked at things in that strong, clear light of Paris, which is heady at times, like its good wine, but which enables men to view art and politics and social needs in their nakedness. And I am half an American, too, which accounts for certain elements in my composition that detract from French ideals. A Frenchman cannot understand, Paul, why some of my excellent kith and kin across the Atlantic should condemn studies of the nude. But somehow I have a glimmering sense of the moral purpose that teaches us to avoid that which is not wholly decent. So I am a blend of French realism and American level headedness, and both sides of my nature warn me that a King should trust his people. Sometimes the people are slow to learn that vital fact. Well, they must be taught, and the first lesson in a State like Kosnovia might well be given by trying those felons of the Schwarzburg before a duly constituted court of law."

"Fine talk, Alec. Fine talk! You do not know our Serbs," yet Stampoff was moved, and his Slavonic sympathies were touched.

"Well, 'A King should die standing,' said one poor monarch, who thought he did know Frenchmen. I ask only for a few hours in my boots once I reach Delgratz. I shall say things that will not be forgotten for a day or two. Come, now, my old war-horse, join me in this new campaign! It may well prove your last as it is my first; but we shall fall honorably, you and I."

There were tears in Stampoff's eyes when Alec made an end. "Perhaps you are right," he said. "I have always given my mind to the military element. It seemed to me that the common folk require to be driven, not led, into the path they should tread. I am growing old, Alec; yours is a new creed to me. I never thought to hear it from a Delgrado, and it will make a rare stir in more places than Kosnovia; but by Heaven it is worth a trial!"

So Alec had won a convert, and that is the first essential of a reformer. Long and earnestly did they discuss the men and manners of Kosnovia and its chief city, and ever the Danube drew nearer; but not a word did Alec say of his telegram to Beaumanoir until a man met him in the Western Station at Vienna, wrung his hand, and rushed away again with the words:

"Beaumanoir leaves Paris to-night. He understands. So do I. Good luck, old chap! If you have to hit, hit hard and quickly."

Stampoff did not speak English. He was greatly distressed that Alec should have been recognized the instant he alighted from the train, though Paris was then twenty-two hours distant. "Who is that?" he asked anxiously.

"A friend from the British Embassy."

"From an Embassy! Then we are lost."

"It seemed to me that I was found, rather."

"But if the Embassies know----"

"They are invariably the worst informed centers in any country. The facts of which they profess total ignorance would fill many interesting volumes. Have no fear, General. I said 'a friend.' He gave me a pleasant message."

"Ah, from a woman, of course?"

"No. But----"

Delgrado wheeled round to face a tall burly man standing stiffly at his side as though awaiting orders. Stampoff, who had been following the vanishing figure of Beaumanoir's emissary with suspicious eyes, turned and looked at the newcomer.

"Oh, that is Bosko," he said, "my servant--yours, too, for that matter. You can trust Bosko with your life. Can't he, you dog?"

"*Oui, m'sieur!*" said Bosko.

CHAPTER IV

THE WHITE CITY

Alec was sound asleep when the Orient Express rumbled over the Danube for the last time during its slow run to the Near East. He was aroused by an official examining passports, which he was informed would be restored in the railway station at Delgratz. He disliked the implied subterfuge; but it could not be helped. Austria, gracious to travelers within her bounds, excepts those who mean to cross her southeastern frontier. There she frowns and inquires. If it was known that a Delgrado was in the train, he would have been stopped for days, pestered by officialdom; and possibly deported.

A curious element of safety was, however, revealed by newspapers purchased at Budapest. The various factions in Delgratz had declared a truce. The Delgrado partisans had telegraphed an invitation to Prince Michael to come and occupy the throne, and the Prince, or some wiser person, had sent a gracious reply stating that his matured decision would reach Kosnovia in due course. The National Assembly was still coquetting with the republican idea; but, in the same breath, avowed its patriotic impartiality. In a word, Delgratz wanted peace. Toward that end, the Seventh Regiment continued to occupy the Black Castle, the remainder of the troops stood fast, and the citizens pulled down their barricades.

Oddly enough, the Paris correspondent of "The Budapest Gazette" pointed out that Prince Michael's son was playing polo in the Bois during the afternoon of Tuesday. The journalist little dreamed that Alec was reading his sarcastic comments on the Delgrado lack of initiative at Budapest at midnight on Wednesday.

The train was about to cross the River Tave (Delgratz stands on the junction of that stream and the Danube) when Stampoff appeared. The Albanian servant accompanied him.

"Leave everything to Bosko," said the General. "We must display no haste, and he will smooth the way through the customs."

"I suppose you don't want me to ask any questions?" laughed Alec.

"Better not. Do you still adhere to your program of last night?"

"Absolutely."

Stampoff took off his hat, pointed through the window, and said quietly, "There, then, God willing, is your Majesty's future capital. I wish to congratulate your Majesty on your first sight of it."

Beyond a level stretch of meadowland rose the spires and domes and minarets of a white city. The sun, not long risen, gilded its graceful contours and threw the rest of a wondrous picture into shadow so sharp that the whole exquisite vista might have been an intaglio cut in the sapphire of the sky. The Danube, a broad streak of silver, blended with the blue Tave to frame a glimpse of fairyland. For one thrilling moment Alec forgot its bloodstained history and looked only on the fair domain spread before his eyes. Then the black girders and crude latticework of a bridge shut out the entrancing spectacle, and he was conscious that Stampoff had caught his hand and was pressing it to his lips.

The gallant old Serb meant well, for he was a patriot to the core; but his impulsive action grated. Perhaps it was better so. Alec, bred in a society that treated such demonstrations with scant respect, was suddenly recalled to earth, and the business that lay before him seemed to be more in keeping with the modern directness of the railway bridge than with daydreams founded on a picturesque vision of Delgratz.

The city, too, lost its glamour when seen from those backdoor suburbs that every railway in every land appears to regard as the only natural avenue of approach to busy communities. The line turned sharply along the right bank of the Tave and ran past tobacco factories, breweries, powder mills, scattered hovels, and unkempt streets. Here was no sun, but plenty of bare whitewash. Even Alec, accustomed to the singularly ugly etchings of Paris viewed from its chief railways, was completely disillusioned by these drab adumbrations of commerce and squalor. The Tave was no longer blue, but dull brown with the mud of recent rain. Not even the inhabitants were attractive. They were not garbed as Serbs, but wore ungainly costumes that might have passed unnoticed in the Bowery. He was irresistibly reminded of the stage, with its sharp contrasts between the two sides of the footlights, and in the luggage net near his head reposed that melodramatic sword, still wrapped in brown paper.

The train slowed, and Stampoff went into the corridor. He came back instantly. "The station is guarded by troops," he muttered. "Some of the officers may recognize me. Perhaps we ought to separate."

"No, no," said Alec. "Let us stick to the other passengers. I am the real stranger here, and they can look at me as much as they like."

It was, indeed, easy to concede that Alexis III. was a man apart from his people. Swarthy old Stampoff, Prince Michael Delgrado, the pink and white Julius Marulitch, even the olive skinned, oval faced Beliani, might have mingled with the throng on the platform and found each his racial kith and kin; not so Alec. His stature, his carriage, his fair complexion tanned brown with an open air life, picked him out among these Balkan folk almost as distinctly as a Polar bear would show among the denizens of an Indian jungle. Moreover, every man of importance wore some sort of uniform, whereas Alec was quietly dressed in tweeds.

Thus, he drew many eyes, and evoked many a whispered comment; but never a man or woman in that crowded terminus harbored the remotest notion that he was a Delgrado. There were guesses in plenty, wherein he ranged from an English newspaper correspondent to a Greek Prince, the latter wild theory originating in the discovery of his name on the passport. Stampoff was ignored, and all went well till Bosko, laden with portmanteaus, led the way to the exit.

Alec, swayed by a desire to please his father, carried under his arm the sword of Ferdinand VII. The customs officials at the barrier allowed the party to pass; but a shrewd visaged officer standing just outside eyed Alec's package.

"What have you there?" he asked, probably more anxious to exchange a word with this distinguished looking stranger than really inquisitive.

"A sword," said Alec.

"And why are you carrying a sword?" said the other, who seemed hardly to expect this prompt reply in the vernacular.

"It is a curiosity, a veritable antique."

"Ha! I must see it."

"Come with me to Monsieur Nesimir's house and I will show it to you."

The suspicious one became apologetic, since Monsieur Nesimir was President of the National Assembly.

"I pray your pardon," he said. "Any friend of the President passes unchallenged. But these are troublous times in Kosnovia, so you understand----"

"Exactly. Brains are far more useful than swords in Delgratz to-day, and this, at the best, is but a gilded toy."

Stampoff was already inside a closed carriage, and Bosko was holding the door open for Alec, who gave the driver clear instructions before he entered. The vehicle rattled off, and Stampoff swore bluntly.

"Gods! I thought there would be a row," he growled. "That fellow is Captain Drakovitch, I remember him well; he is all nose."

"I shall appoint him sanitary inspector," said Alec, sniffing.

Stampoff laughed. Now that they were fairly committed to Alec's scheme, he was in excellent spirits. "By the patriarch! you certainly believe in yourself, and I am beginning to believe in you!" he vowed.

But his faith was rudely shaken when Alec insisted on sending his own card to Nesimir. "That is a mad thing," he protested. "He will refuse to receive you and hand you over to the guard."

"On the contrary, he will hasten to meet us. Curiosity is the most potent of human attributes. Even Presidents yield to it. At this moment, in all likelihood, he is struggling into a frock coat."

Alec was right. A portly person, wearing, indeed, a frock coat, a sash, and peg top trousers, appeared in the doorway of the presidential mansion. He also wore an expression of deep amazement. He glanced from the tall smiling youth to the diminutive General, on whom his eyes dwelt searchingly.

"Yes," said Stampoff abruptly, speaking in French, "I am Paul Stampoff, shorn of his fleece. This is the King," and he nodded to Alec.

"The King!"

"Alexis III., grandson of Ferdinand VII., and son of Michael V."

Nesimir hastily ordered a servant to close the outer door. As it happened, the President's military guard was stationed at a gate on the other side of the main courtyard, and no one could be aware of the visitor's identity, except the man

who had taken Alec's card, while he, probably, was unable to read Roman script.

"Your Excellency will doubtless permit our baggage to be placed in the hall?" said Alec, using the most musical of all the Slavonic tongues with fluency.

The President, in that state of trepidation best described by the homely phrase, "You could have knocked him down with a feather," seemed to collapse utterly when he heard the stranger talking like a native.

"Certainly, your--certainly. I don't understand, of course; but I shall give directions..." he stuttered. "You have come by train, from--er--from the west? You have not breakfasted? A cup of chocolate? Ah, yes, a cup of chocolate. Then we can discuss matters. The Assembly meets at ten, and I am very busy; but I can give you half an hour, Monsieur----" he looked at the card in his hand,--"Monsieur----"

Then he gave it up. He simply dared not pronounce the name; so, with hospitable flourish, he ushered the two up a broad staircase and into a room.

While climbing the stairs he recovered sufficiently to tell the doorkeeper that the gentlemen's portmanteaus were to be brought within and no one admitted without specific permission. Once in the room he closed the door, stood with his back to it, and gasped at Stampoff with one word:

"Now!"

"As soon as you like. I am famished. I ate but little en route, because I detest German cooking," said Stampoff, on whom Alec's methods were taking effect.

"But----"

"Ah, you wonder why his Majesty should appear without ceremony? Well, he quitted Paris on Tuesday night, an hour after Prince Michael had abdicated in his favor."

"Abdicated!" wheezed the President.

"Our friend takes too much for granted," broke in Alec, smiling and unembarrassed. "My father could not vacate a throne he did not occupy. He merely resigned his claims in my favor. Kosnovia should be governed by a constitutional King, and the power to choose him now rests solely with the honorable house of which you are chief. If that is your view, I share it to the uttermost. It is reported in the press that the men who murdered King Theodore and Queen Helena have declared their allegiance to the Delgrado line. My reply is that I refuse their nomination. If I am elected King by the representatives of the people, I shall have much pleasure in hanging every officer who took part in the infamy of the Black Castle. But--it is an early hour for politics. You mentioned breakfast, Monsieur le President?"

Fat and asthmatic Sergius Nesimir was not the man to deal with a candid adventurer of this type. It occurred to him that he ought to summon help and clap the soi-disant King and his henchman into prison. But on what charge? Could any royal pretender put forth more reasonable plea? And Kosnovia is near enough to the East to render sacred the claims of hospitality.

"One moment, I beg," he stammered. "Why has your--why have you come to me? What am I to do? The Assembly----"

"The Assembly seems to favor a Republic," said Alec. "Be it so. There are certain arguments against such a course which I would be glad of an opportunity to place before members. If you introduce me, they will give me a fair hearing. Let a vote be taken at once. If it is opposed to a monarchy, I am ready to be conducted to either the railway station or the scaffold, whichever the Assembly in its wisdom may deem best fitted to national needs. If it is in my favor, I am King. What more is there to be said?"

"What, indeed?" growled Stampoff. "Why so much talk? Let us eat!"

Poor Nesimir! He had the unhappy history of his country at his fingers' ends, and never before had Delgrado or Obrenovitch striven for kingship in this kid-glove fashion.

"Breakfast shall be served instantly," he said, trying vainly to imitate the cool demeanor of his guests. "But--you will appreciate the difficulties of my position. I must consult with the ministers."

"I hope I may call your Excellency a friend," said Alec, "and I shall be ever ready to accept your Excellency's counsel; but on this exceptional occasion I venture to advise you. Let none know I am here. In the present disturbed condition of affairs there must be almost as many hidden forces existing in Delgratz as there are men in the Cabinet. Why permit them to fret and fume when you alone have power to control them? I promise faithfully to abide by the decision of the Assembly. Should it favor me, your position is consolidated; should it prove adverse to my cause, you still remain the

chief man in the State, since the world will realize that it was to you, and you only, I submitted in the first instance."

"By all the saints, that is well put!" cried Stampoff. "Now, Sergius, my lamb, a really good omelet, something grilled, and a bottle of sound Karlowitz--none of your Danube water for me!"

The President surrendered at discretion. Alec's appeal to his self importance was irresistible. He was excited, elated, frightened; but happily he was strong enough to perceive that a chance of obtaining distinction was within his grasp, and he clutched at it, though with palsied hands.

So it came to pass that when the hundred and fifty members of the National Assembly gathered in the great hall of the convention, none there knew why a tall, pleasant faced young man should be sitting in the President's private room, and apparently not caring a jot who came or went during the half-hour's lobbying and retailing of political gossip that preceded the formal opening of the sitting.

But there was an awkward moment when Nesimir, pale and shaken, entered the chamber through the folding doors at the back of the presidential dais.

"Silence for his Excellency the President!" shouted a loud voiced usher, and all men looked up in wonder when they discovered that the youthful stranger was standing by the President's side. The session was to be a secret one. Press and public were excluded. Who, then--

"Gentleman," said Sergius Nesimir, and he spoke with the slowness of ill repressed agitation, "I have a momentous announcement to make. This honorable house has almost committed itself to the republican form of Government----"



"Gentlemen, here stands Alexis Delgrado"

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"Definitely!" cried a voice.

"No, no!" this from a Senator.

The President lifted a hand. In other circumstances, the interruptions would have provoked rival storms of agreement and dissent from the many groups into which the Assembly was split up; but now there was an electric feeling in the air that their trusted chief would not broach this grave question so suddenly without good cause. And—who was his companion? Why did he occupy the dais?

"I ask for silence," said Nesimir. "The fortunes of Kosnovia tremble in the balance. You will be given ample time for discussion; but hear me first. I have said that the republican idea has been mooted in all seriousness. We, in common with the rest of humanity, have been horror stricken by recent events in our beloved land. Our reigning dynasty has been blotted out of existence. There is no heir of the Obrenovitch line. Were we, the representatives of the people, to declare in favor of a King, we should naturally turn to the other royal house of our own blood. We should send for a Delgrado. Gentlemen, here stands Alexis Delgrado----"

He could go no further. A yell of sheer amazement came from all parts of the crowded chamber. Ministers, Senators, Representatives, joined in that bewildered roar. Those who were sitting rose; those in the back benches stood on the seats in order to gaze over the heads in front. Men shouted and glared and turned to shout again at one another; but through all the turmoil Alec faced them, smiling and imperturbable, and, at what he judged to be the right moment—for that volcanic outburst must be given time to exhaust itself—he placed his one hand on the President's shoulder and with the other signaled his desire to be heard.

Again he placed implicit confidence in the all powerful element of curiosity. He knew full well that these emotional Serbs could not hear his name unmoved, while the extraordinary racial difference between himself and every other man in the Assembly must have made a strong appeal to their dramatic instincts. And again was he justified; for the mere expression of his wish to address them was obeyed by an instant hushing of the storm.

"My fellow countrymen," he began, "you whom I expect to count among my friends ere this day is out----"

Another wave of sound ran through the hall. Men still wondered; but their hearts were beating high, and a new note had come into their voices. He was speaking their own language, speaking it as one to the manner born, speaking it as no Austrian could ever speak it, since harsh, dominant German can never reproduce the full Slavonic resonance. Alec, but yesterday Joan's typical idler, had fathomed some uncharted deep in the mysterious art of swaying his fellow men. He realized at once that this rumble of astonishment was the very best thing that could have happened. He waited just long enough for the sympathetic murmur to merge into nods and whisperings, then he continued:

"It is true that I am here as a Delgrado. I come as a candidate, not a claimant. It rests with you whether I shall remain among you as Alexis III., King of Kosnovia, or go back to my father and tell him that our people are anxious to try a new form of Government. Of course," and here Alec beamed on them most affably, "there are other alternatives. You may elect to put me in jail, or throw me into the Danube, or swing me from a gibbet as a warning to all would-be monarchs and other malefactors. But there is one thing you cannot do. You can never persuade me to wade to a throne through the blood of innocent people! And that is why I am here, and not in the company of the wretched conspirators now skulking behind the walls of the Schwarzburg."

Then a hurricane of cheers made the windows rattle, and a deputy from the Shumadia, "the heart of Kosnovia," a bigchested, deep voiced forester, sent forth a trumpet shout that reached every ear:

"Hola! That's a King! Look at him!"

From that instant Alec was as surely King of Kosnovia as the German Emperor is King of Prussia. Of course, he had to talk till he was hoarse, and wring strong hands till he was weary, and Stampoff had to make more than one gruff speech, and eloquent Senators and Deputies had to proclaim the inviolate nature of the new constitution, and Alec had to sign it amid a scene of riotous enthusiasm. But these things were the aftermath of a harvest reaped by half a dozen sentences. The Shumadia man's simple phrases became a formula. Men laughed and said:

"Hola! That's a King! Look at him!"

In time it reached the streets. The people took it up as a popular catchword. It whirled through all Kosnovia. Those who had never seen Alec, nor heard of him before they were told he was King, adopted it as a token of their belief that the nation had at last obtained a ruler who surpassed all other Kings.

But that was to come later. While Alec was listening to the plaudits that proclaimed his triumph, Stampoff growled at him from behind the half-closed door:

"Gods! You've done it! And without a blow! Never was Kingdom won so easily. God bless your Majesty! May you live long and reign worthily!"

Good wishes these; but in them was the germ of an abiding canker. What would Joan say? He had taken a sleeping car ticket from Paris and had stepped into his patrimony with as little anxiety or delay as would herald a royal succession in the oldest and most firmly established monarchy in Europe. What of the goddess with the great gray eyes, clear and piercing, who knew all the thoughts of men's hearts and the secrets of their souls? What of her warning that she would drive her chosen ones by strange paths through doubt and need and danger and battle? Which of these had he encountered, beyond the vanished phantoms of idle hours passed in the cozy comfort of the Orient Express? "Never was kingdom won so easily!"

Well meant; but it rankled. That ominous line of Vergil's came to his mind. *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes* (I fear the Greeks even bringing gifts). Truly the Greeks were come speedily, carrying in full measure the gifts of loyalty and dominion. Yet he feared them. A whiff of peril, pitfalls to be leaped, some days or weeks of dire uncertainty, men to be won, and factions placated, any or all of these might have appeased the jealous gods. But this instant success would shock Olympus. It cried for contrast by its very flight to the pinnacle.

None suspected this mood in the chosen King. He charmed these volatile and romantic Serbs by his naturalness. He seemed to take it so thoroughly for granted that he was the one man living who could rule them according to their aspirations, that they adopted the notion without reserve. The morning passed in a blaze of enthusiasm. Alec, outwardly calm and hale fellow with all who came in contact with him, was really in a state of waking trance. His brain throbbed with ideas, words that he had never conned flowed from his lips. Thus, when asked to sign the constitution, he wrote "Alexis, Rex," with a firm hand, and then looked round on the circle of intent faces.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I hereby pledge myself to our land. When I am dead, if my successor shows signs of faltering, make my skin into a drumhead for the cause of Kosnovia!"

At the moment he really did not know that this was borrowed thunder, and assuredly the Kosnovians did not care. Already his utterances were being retailed with gusto. Before night, every adult inhabitant of Delgratz was likening their marvelous King, fallen from the skies, to a drum that should summon the Serbs to found the Empire of their dreams.

He was asked if he would not order the Seventh Regiment to evacuate the Black Castle so that he might take up his quarters there.

"There is no hurry," he said. "The place needs cleaning."

A review of the troops stationed in other parts of the capital was arranged for the afternoon in the beautiful park that crowns the promontory formed by the two rivers, and it was suggested that he should drive thither in the President's carriage.

"I would prefer to ride," said he. "Then the people and I can see one another."

A number of horses were brought from the late King's stables and Alec selected a white Arab stallion that seemed to have mettle and be up to weight. Soldiers and civilians exchanged underlooks at the choice. Selim was the last horse ridden by the ill fated Theodore, and, after the manner of Arabs, he had stumbled on the level roadway and the royal equestrian was thrown.

During the procession, while passing through the densely packed Wassina-st., Selim stumbled again and was promptly pulled back almost on his haunches. At that very instant a revolver was fired from the crowd and a bullet flattened itself on the opposite wall. The would-be assassin was seized instantly, a hundred hands were ready to tear him to shreds, when the King's white horse suddenly pranced into the midst of the press. Grasping the man by the neck, Alec drew him free by main force.

"Kill him!" yelled the mob.

"No," cried Alec, "we will put him in the recruits' squad and teach him how to shoot!"

Throughout a long day he displayed a whole hearted abandonment to the joy of finding himself accepted by the people as their ruler that did more than a year's session of the Assembly to endear him to them; but the seal of national approval was conferred by his action next day, when news came that Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir was a prisoner at Semlin!

Naturally, the telegraph wires had thrilled Europe during every hour after ten o'clock on Thursday morning, but the thrills felt in Germany, Russia, and Turkey were supplemented by agonized squirming on the part of official Austria. That an upstart, a masquerader, a mountebank of a King, should actually have traversed Austria from west to east, without ever a soul cased in uniform knowing anything about him, was ill to endure, and the minions of Kosnovia's

truculent neighbor swore mighty oaths that no bottle holder from Paris or elsewhere should be allowed to follow. So Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir was watched from Passau to Maria Theresiopel, and telegrams flew over the face of the land, and Alec's British ally was hauled from the train at Semlin soon after dawn Friday.

Captain Drakovitch, anxious to atone for his prying of the previous day, brought circumstantial details to his Majesty Alexis III., who was breakfasting with Nesimir, Stampoff, and Ministers of State. There could be no doubting Beaumanoir's identity, since his baggage was on the train, and Drakovitch had made sure of his facts before hurrying to the President's house.

"Has Austria any right to arrest a British subject merely because he wishes to enter Kosnovia?" asked Alec, looking round at the assembled gray-heads.

"None whatever," said Nesimir.

"It is an outrage," puffed the War Minister.

"She would not dare act in that way on any other frontier!" cried he of the Interior.

"What, then, is to be done?" demanded the King.

"Make the most emphatic protest to Vienna," came the chorus.

"Through the usual diplomatic channels?"

"Yes--of course."

"But that means leaving my friend in prison for an indefinite period."

Eloquent shrugs expressed complete agreement.

"Has it been the habit of Kosnovia to accept tamely such treatment at the hands of Austria?" inquired Alec, looking at the President.

"I fear so, your Majesty. We are small and feeble; she is mighty in size and armament."

"So was Goliath, yet David slew him with a pebble," said Alec, rising. "Come, Captain Drakovitch, you and I will call on the Austrian Ambassador. Stampoff, will you kindly arrange that a regiment of cavalry and six guns shall parade outside the station in half an hour's time? You might also ask the railway people to provide the necessary transport, though I hardly expect it will be needed. Still, we ought to make a show, just for practice."

Several faces at the table blanched.

"What does your Majesty mean by these preparations?" asked Nesimir.

"Preparations--for what? Surely we can inspect our own troops and test our own railway accommodation," laughed Alec. "As for the Austrian Ambassador, I intend to make an emphatic protest through the usual diplomatic channel. Isn't that what you all agreed to?"

He went out, followed by Drakovitch. In five minutes they were clattering through the streets accompanied by a small escort, which Alec would have dispensed with if it was not absolutely needed to clear a passage when once Delgratz knew that the King was abroad.

Neither the Austrian nor Russian representative had recognized the new regime as yet. Each was waiting to see how the other would act; so Baron von Rothstein viewed with mixed feelings the arrival of his royal visitor. But he met him with all ceremony, and began to say that instructions might reach him from Vienna at any moment to pay an official call.

"Quite correct, Herr Baron," said Alec cheerfully. "I am a novice at this game; but I fully understand that you act for your Government and not for yourself. That fact renders easy the favor I have to ask."

"Anything that lies in my power, your Majesty----"

"Oh, this is a simple matter. A friend of mine, Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir, who was coming here from Paris to visit me, was arrested at Semlin this morning. There is, or can be, no charge against him. Some of your zealous agents have blundered, that is all. Now, I want you to go to Semlin in a special train I will provide and bring his Lordship here before----" Alec looked at his watch--"It is now nine--shall we say?--by eleven o'clock sharp."

Von Rothstein was startled, and he showed it. "But this is the first I have heard of it," he said.

"Exactly. That is why I came in person to tell you."

"I fear I cannot interfere, your Majesty."

"Is that so? Why, then, Herr Baron, are you Minister for Austria at Delgratz?"

"I mean that this matter is not within my province."

"Surely it must be. I cannot allow my friends to be collared by Austrian police for no reason whatsoever. This passport question concerns Kosnovia, not Austria. The action of the Semlin authorities is one of brigandage. It can be adjusted amicably by you, Herr von Rothstein. Do you refuse?"

"I fear I cannot do what you desire, your Majesty."

"Ah! That is a pity! In that event, I must go to Semlin myself and liberate Lord Adalbert."

"I don't quite understand----"

"Is my German so poor, then?" laughed Alec.

"I mean, of course----"

"You think I am bluffing. Do you know the word? It is American for a pretense that is not backed by action. I intend nothing of the kind. Either you or I must start for Semlin forthwith. If I go, I take with me a bodyguard sufficiently strong to insure my friend's freedom. I am not declaring war against Austria. If any jack in office in Kosnovia acts like these Semlin policemen, and a Kosnovian official refuses to put matters straight, by all means let Austria teach the offenders a sharp lesson. She will have my complete approval, as I hope I have yours on the present occasion."

"But, your Majesty, such action on your part does really amount to a declaration of war!"

"Ridiculous! Austria seizes an inoffensive British gentleman merely because he travels from Paris to Delgratz, I appeal to you, the Austrian minister, to go and release him, and you refuse; yet you tell me I am making war on your country if I rescue him. The notion is preposterous! At any rate, it can be argued later. I have sufficient cavalry and guns assembled near the station, and I hope to be in Semlin in twenty minutes. Good morning, Baron."

"Your Majesty, I implore you to forego this rash enterprise."

"It is you or I for it!"

"Let me telegraph."

"Useless. That spells delay. You or I must go to Semlin--now! Which is it to be?"

The Austrian diplomat, pallid and bewildered, yet had the wit to believe that this quiet voiced young man meant every word he said. He reasoned quickly that the freeing of a pestiferous Englishman at Semlin could have no possible effect on Austria's subsequent action. She might please herself whether or not the threatened invasion of her territory should be deemed a cause of war, while to yield for the hour robbed this extraordinary adventurer of the prestige that would accrue from his bold act.

"I will go, your Majesty," said he, after a fateful pause.

"Good! Permit me to congratulate you on a wise decision," said Alec. "I shall wait your return in patience until eleven."

"And then?"

"Oh, then--I follow you, of course."

Baron von Rothstein thought silence was best. He drove to the station, and did not fail to note the military preparations. His special quitted Delgratz at nine-twenty A.M. At ten-forty A.M. it came back and Alec met him and Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir on the platform.

"Sorry you were held up, old chap," was the King's greeting. "Some of these frontier police are fearful asses; but Herr von Rothstein rushed off the instant he heard of your predicament, and here you are, only five hours late after all."

"Wouldn't have missed it for a pony, dear boy," grinned Beaumanoir. "There was a deuce of a shindy when three fat johnnies tried to pull me out of my compartment. I told 'em I didn't give a tinker's continental for their bally frontier, and then the band played. I slung one joker through the window. Good job it was open, or he might have been guillotined, eh, what?"

"No one was injured, I hope."

"Another fellow said I bent his ribs; but they sprang all right under the vet's thumb. Tell me, why does our baronial friend look so vinegary? He chattered like a magpie in the police bureau, or whatever it is called, at Semlin."

"Lord Adalbert wishes me to explain that a disagreeable incident had ended happily," said Alec to von Rothstein.

"I am not sure that it has ended, your Majesty," was the grim reply.

"Well, then, shall we say that it has taken a satisfactory turn? You see, my dear Baron, I am quite a young King, and I shall commit many blunders before I learn the usages of diplomacy. But I mean well, and that goes a long way,—much farther than Semlin, even beyond Vienna."



CHAPTER V

FELIX SURMOUNTS A DIFFICULTY

Count Julius Marulitch and his friend Constantine Beliani, the one savagely impatient, the other moody and preoccupied, sprawled listlessly in Marulitch's flat in the Avenue Victor Hugo, and, though it was evening, each was reading "The Matin." That is to say, each was pretending to read; but their thoughts did not follow the printed words. Alexis III. had reigned only ten days, yet the most enterprising of the Paris newspapers was already making a feature of a column headed: "Our dear Alec, day by day." It ought to be an interesting record to these two men, yet it evidently was not one-tenth so humorous as "The Matin" believed, since there was a deep frown on both faces.

At last Marulitch flung the paper aside with an angry snarl.

"Ah, bah!" he growled. "May the devil fly away with our dear Alec and his doings day by day! A nice pair of fools we made of ourselves when we pitchforked him into power!"

"Patience, my friend, patience!" said the Greek. "Everything comes to him who waits, and Alec will fall far when his luck changes. It may be to-morrow, or next week; but he must experience a reverse. He is like a gambler at Monte Carlo who stakes maximums just because the table is running favorably."

"Fish!" snorted Marulitch. "What else would a gambler do?"

"What indeed?" agreed Beliani, though a far less alert intelligence than Marulitch's might have known that he was annoyed. The pink and white Julius, whom his friends had nicknamed "le beau Comte," did not fail to catch the contemptuous note of that purred answer; he sprang up from his chair, ransacked a cupboard, and threw on the table a box of those priceless cigarettes, the produce of a single southwesterly hillside at Salonica, that are manufactured solely for the Sultan of Turkey.

"There, smoke, my Constantine," he laughed harshly. "Why should we quarrel? We were idiots. Let us, then, admit it."

"Were we?"

"Can you deny it? We arranged the first move beautifully. With Theodore out of the way----"

The Greek turned his head swiftly and looked at the door. Marulitch lowered his voice.

"No need to refer to Theodore, you will say? How can one avoid it? His death was the cornerstone of the edifice. If only that senile uncle of mine had become King the path would be clear for the final coup before the year was out. And now where are we? What purpose do we serve by self delusion? Each day's newspaper bears witness to our folly. Alec carries the Assembly by storm; Alec captures a would-be assassin; Alec flouts Austria; Alec disbands the Seventh Regiment and hands its officers to the police; Alec attends the funeral of Theodore and Helena, and takes over their servants and debts; Alec tells the Sultan that he exists in Europe only on sufferance; Alec draws a map of Kosnovia and decorates it with railways; Alec bathes in the Danube at six, breakfasts at seven, attends a christening at eight, a wedding at nine, a review at ten, a memorial service in the cathedral at eleven, lunches at twelve, receives provincial deputations at one, inaugurates the Delgratz Polo Club at two and the Danubian Rowing Club at three,--Alec round the clock, and all Europe agape to know what next he will be up to--and you and I here, unknown, unrecorded,--you and I, the brains, the eyes, the organizers of the whole affair! Oh, it makes me sick when I remember how I stood like a stuck pig in old Delgrado's flat and let the son jump in and snatch from the father's hands the scepter I had purchased so dearly!"

The Greek rose languidly, strolled to the door, and threw it open. A page boy was in the lobby, and it was easy to see by his innocent face that his presence there was inspired by no more sinister motive than to deliver a newspaper.

Beliani took it, closed the door, listened a moment, and unfolded the damp sheet. He glanced at its foreign news.

"'Le Soir' gives prominence to a rumor that King Alexis will marry a Montenegrin Princess," he murmured composedly.

"Mirabel, of course?"

"She is unnamed."

"That's it. I know, I know! He will marry Mirabel. By Heaven! if he does, I'll shoot him myself!"

"The trial of the regicides is fixed for June," went on Beliani, wholly unmoved by Marulitch's vehemence. "Now, the vital question is, How far can Stampoff be relied on?"

"How does our reliance on Stampoff concern Mirabel?"

"I am not thinking of Mirabel, but of Julius and Constantine. If Stampoff tells our young Bayard everything, Delgratz is no place for you and me, my veteran."

Marulitch, though trembling with passion, could not fail to see that the Greek was remarkably nonchalant for one who had witnessed the utter collapse of ten years of work and expenditure.

"Are we going there?" he managed to ask without a curse.

"Soon, quite soon, provided Stampoff keeps a still tongue."

"But why? To grace the coronation by our presence?"

"It may be. Remember, if you please, that we are Alec's best friends. We gave him his chance. I offered to finance him; did finance Stampoff in fact. We are unknown personally to the officers of the Seventh. That was wise, Julius, far-seeing, on my part. Oh, yes, we must go to Delgratz. Delgratz is the nerve center now."

"You are keeping something from me."

"On my honor, no. But you sneered at my parable of the successful gambler, whereas I believe in it implicitly. I have seen that type of fool backing the red, staking his six thousand francs on every coup, and have watched a run of twelve, thirteen, seventeen, twenty-one; but the smash came at last."

"What matter? A man who wins twenty times can well afford to lose once."

"I said a gambler, not a financier," smiled Beliani. "But let it pass. I thought you told me there was a girl here in Paris----"

"So there is, a beauty too; but Alec has meanwhile become a King."

"A somewhat peculiar King. He has borrowed his regal notions from America rather than Kosnovia, Julius. He would laugh at any claim of divine right. One of these days you will find him chaffing the Hohenzollerns, and that is dangerous jesting in the Balkans. If he loves a girl in Paris, he will not marry your Mirabel. I fancy I have taken his measure. If I am right, he is far too honest to occupy the throne of Kosnovia."

"*Grand Dieu!* the country is pining for honest government. Even you will grant that."

"Even I, as you say; but I should be wrong. If I have an ax to grind, so has the other fellow. Kosnovia is in the East, and the East loves deceit. Alec has dazzled the people for a few days. Wait till he begins to sweep the bureaus free of well paid sinecurists. Wait till he finds out how the money is spent that the Assembly votes for railways, education, forestry, and the like. Wait till he reduces the staff of the army and the secretaries. I know Delgratz and Kosnovia, and he does not. He will win the people, it is true; but he will alienate the men who can twist the people this way and that to suit their own purposes. Before a month is out he will be wrangling with the Assembly. See if I am not a prophet. Oh, yes, Julius, you and I must go to Delgratz. No hurry; slow but sure. I'll break the journey at Vienna. We must sound Stampoff too. But before I go, I should like to be sure that the girl has gone there."

"The artist girl to Delgratz!"

Julius was bitter and skeptical; but he reposed such confidence in Beliani's judgment that he choked his doubts. "Yes. Can it be managed?"

Le beau Comte leered, and the satyr grin was highly expressive. It seemed to show the man's real nature. In repose his face was insipid; now for an instant he resembled the god Pan.

"You called Alec a Bayard just now. Not a bad title for him. He has that kind of repute among his friends. Perhaps the girl is built on the same lines, and we don't want to send a pretty saint to Delgratz merely to inspire him to fresh efforts."

The Greek inhaled a deep breath of the aromatic smoke. "You'll be an average sort of King, Julius; but you are not a philosopher," said he thoughtfully. "I tell you we are safer than ever if we can bring him and the girl together. He will marry her, you short sighted one--marry her, and thus alienate every Slav in the Balkans. I have turned this thing in my mind constantly since I recovered from the first shock of his achievement, and I am fairly certain of my ground. Mark you, Princess Mirabel of Montenegro will be reported to-morrow as out of the running. If that is so, you will begin to believe me and stop clawing your hair and injuring your fine complexion by scowling."

Next morning's "Matin" announced that King Alexis was greatly annoyed by the mischievous and utterly unfounded canard that bracketed his name with that of a woman he had never seen. Count Julius read, and made a hasty toilet. Beliani and he had laid their plans overnight, and he lost no time in opening the new campaign.

It was a difficult and delicate task he had undertaken. Paris, big in many respects, is small in its society, which, because of its well marked limits, makes a noise in the world quite incommensurate with its importance; whereas London, close neighbor and rival, contains a dozen definite circles that seldom overlap. The woman Julius had seen with Alec in the Louvre was not on Princess Michael's visiting list, of that he had no manner of doubt. Therefore, from his point of view, the only possible solution of their apparent friendship would prove to be something underhanded and clandestine, an affair of secret meetings, and letters signed in initials, and a tacit agreement to move unhindered in different orbits.

Being of the nature of dogs and aboriginal trackers, Marulitch made straight for the Louvre. There he had quitted the trail, and there must he pick it up again. But the hunt demanded the utmost wariness. If he startled the quarry, he might fail at the outset, and, supposing his talking was successful, both he and Beliani must still beware of a King's vengeance if their project miscarried.

Neither man had the slightest belief in Alec's innate nobility of character. Beliani likened him to Bayard, it is true, and Marulitch had scoffingly adopted the simile; but that was because each thought Bayard not admirable, but a fool. The somber history of the Kosnovian monarchy, a record of crass stupidity made lurid at times by a lightning gleam of passion, justified the belief that Alexis would follow the path that led Theodore, and Ferdinand, and Ivan, and Milosch to their ruin. Each of these rulers began to reign under favorable auspices, yet each succumbed to the siren's spell, and there was no reason at all, according to such reckoning, why the handsome and impulsive Alexis should escape. That a pretty Parisienne who was also an artist should fail to offer herself as a willing bait did not enter at all into the calculation.

"Be suave, spend money, and keep in the background," said the Greek.

Julius entered the Grande Galerie prepared to apply these instructions through the medium of his own subtle wit. At the outset, luck favored him. Somehow, it is always easier to do evil than good, and the longevity of evil is notorious, whereas the short lived existence of good would horrify an insurance agent.

Joan was not present; but Felix Poluski was preparing a canvas for his twenty-seventh copy of the famous Murillo. Two of his "Immaculate Conceptions" were in private collections; one had been sold to a South American millionaire as the Spanish artist's own duplicate of the picture, though Poluski was unaware of the fraud; and twenty-three adorned the high altars of various continental churches, where they edified multitudes happily ignorant of the irreverent conditions under which the cheery souled anarchist hunchback droned his snatches of song and extracted from a few tubes of paint some glimpse of heaven, and rays of sunlight, and hints of divine love and divine maternity.

The crooked little Pole's genius and character were alike unknown to Count Julius. He saw only a quaintly artistic personage who might possibly be acquainted with such a remarkable looking habitue of the gallery as Joan. Instead, therefore, of appealing to one of the officials, he approached Poluski, and the two exchanged greetings with the politeness that Paris quickly teaches to those who dwell within her gates.

"You work in this gallery most days, monsieur?" said Julius.

"But yes, monsieur," said Felix.

"About a fortnight ago, monsieur," explained Marulitch, "I happened to be here at this hour, and I noticed a young lady copying one of the pictures on the opposite wall. Can you tell me who she was?"

"Can you tell me which picture she was copying?" said Poluski.

"I am not sure; this one, I think," and Julius pointed to "The Fortune Teller."

"Ah! Describe her, monsieur."

"She was tall, elegant, charming in manner and appearance."

Poluski appeared to reflect. "The vision sounds entrancing, monsieur," he said; "but that sort of girl doesn't usually earn her crusts by daubing canvas in the Louvre at so much a square foot."

"Yet I saw her, without a doubt. She was not alone that morning. In fact, a friend of mine was with her."

Poluski turned to his easel. He was in no mind to discuss Joan with this inquiring dandy.

"That simplifies your search, monsieur," said he carelessly. "All that is necessary is to go to your friend."

"I cannot. He is not in Paris."

"Where is he?"

"Far enough away to render it impossible that he should solve my dilemma to-day. And the thing is urgent. I have a commission to offer, a good one. If you help, you will be doing the young lady a turn--and yourself, too, perhaps."

"Kindly explain, monsieur."

"I mean that I will gladly pay for any information."

"How much? Five, ten francs, a louis?"

The Pole's sarcasm was not to be mistaken. Julius was warned and drew back hurriedly.

"I really beg your pardon," he said; "but I am so anxious to carry out my undertaking that I have expressed myself awkwardly, and I see now that you are misinterpreting my motives. Let me speak quite candidly. I have no desire to meet the lady in person. An art connoisseur, who admires her work, wishes to send her to a cathedral in a distant city to copy a painting. He will pay well. He offers traveling expenses, hotel bill, and five thousand francs. The picture is not a large one, and the work easy, a Byzantine study of Saint Peter, I believe. If you tell me, monsieur, that you can arrange the matter, I shall be pleased to leave it entirely in your hands."

"Since when did Alec become a connoisseur?" demanded Poluski, grinning.

Marulitch was startled; but he smiled with a ready self-possession that did him credit. "It was in Monsieur Delgrado's company I saw the fair unknown," he admitted; "but this affair does not rest with him. It is genuine, absolutely."

"Nevertheless, this Byzantine Saint Peter hangs in Delgratz, I suppose?"

"I--I think so."

"Five thousand francs, you said, and expenses. Not bad. I'm a pretty good hand myself. Will I do?"

The Pole was enjoying the stupid little plot; for it could wear no other guise to him, and Count Julius was mortified by the knowledge that he had blundered egregiously at the first step in the negotiation. What would Beliani say? This wizened elf of a man had seen clear through their precious scheme in an instant, and, worst of all, it had not advanced an inch. Julius made a virtue of necessity, and placed all his cards on the table.

"I want you to credit my statements," he said emphatically. "This proposal is quite straightforward. My principal is prepared to pay half the money down before the lady leaves Paris, and the balance when the picture is delivered. Further, he will bear the expenses of any one who accompanies her--a relative, or a friend, such as yourself, for instance. I don't figure in the matter at all. I am a mere go-between, and if you think otherwise you are utterly mistaken."

Felix began to whistle softly between his teeth, and the action annoyed Julius so greatly that he decided to try a new line.

"I seem to have amused you by my sincerity, monsieur!" he snapped. "Pray forget that I have troubled you----"

"But why, my paragon? *Que diable!* one does not spurn five thousand francs like that! I hum or whistle when I am thinking, and just now I am wondering how this business can be arranged. Who is your client?"

"Who is yours?" retorted Julius.

"She exists, at any rate."

"So does the other."

"Well, then, let us meet to-morrow----"

"But time is all important."

"There can't be such a mortal hurry, seeing that Saint Peter has hung so long undisturbed in Delgratz," said Felix dryly. "Moreover, it will clear the air if I tell you that the lady is not in Paris, so I cannot possibly give you her answer before to-morrow morning."

"How can I be sure that she is the person actually intended for this commission?"

"There won't be the least doubt about it when King Alexis III. sets eyes on her."

Julius was certainly not himself that day. His pink face grew crimson with amazement. "If you tell her that you will defeat my friend's object in sending her to Delgratz!" he blurted out.

"Eh, what are you saying? What, then, becomes of that poor Saint Peter?"

"Exactly. She is going there to copy it, not to philander with Alec."

Poluski screwed his eyes up until he was peering at Julius's excited features as if endeavoring to catch some transient color effect. "Frankly, you puzzle me," he said after a pause; "but come again to-morrow. And no tricks, no spying or that sort of thing! I am the wrong man for it. If you doubt me, ask some one who has heard of Felix Poluski. You see, Count Julius Marulitch, I am far more open than you. I knew you all the time, and as to your motives, I can guess a good deal that I don't actually know. Still, there is nothing positively dishonest about a Byzantine Saint Peter. It is not art, but five thousand francs sounds like business. Half the cash down, you said; anything by way of preliminary expenses?"

"Meaning?"

"Say, one per cent., fifty francs. Otherwise, I must paint all day and trust to the post--the least eloquent of ambassadors."

"Oh, as to that," and Julius produced a hundred-franc note from his pocketbook.

The Pole accepted it gravely. "I go instantly, monsieur," he said. He began to fold his easel and put away his brushes and colors. Once he glanced up at the rapt Madonna.

"*Au 'voir; ma belle,*" he murmured. "This affair of Saint Peter must be arranged. It presses. They change Kings speedily in Delgratz nowadays, and their taste in saints may follow suit. But, courage! I shall return, and who knows what will come of this excursion into the forgotten realm of Byzantium?"

Count Marulitch, of course, had not counted on one who was a complete stranger not only recognizing him but stripping the pretense so thoroughly of the artistic commission offered to Alec's fair companion of that memorable morning. He must put the best face on his blunder when discussing it with Beliani, and he promised himself a quite definite understanding with Poluski ere another sou left his pocket.

Meanwhile, who was Poluski? That question, at least, could be answered easily. One clue might lead to another. To-morrow, when they met, it might be his turn to astonish the warped little Pole.

Felix, feeling that he had spoiled the Egyptians excellently well, hobbled off to his favorite café. Early as the hour was, various cronies were there already, sipping their morning refreshments; but he passed them with a nod and made for the fat proprietress throned behind a high desk. When she caught sight of him, a certain air of firmness seemed to struggle with sympathy for possession of her bulging features, and she hastily thumbed a small account book taken from beneath a pile of waiter's dockets.

"How much, madame?" asked Felix, who had missed none of this.

"Twenty-seven seventy-five," she said severely.

"Can one make it thirty, *mignonne*?"

"Thirty! Tell me, then, how market bills are to be met when one is owed these thirties?"

"Dear angel, Providence has decided that you shall deal with such problems."

"Well, well, no more, not a centime beyond the thirty!"

"Monstrous, yet all heart!" murmured Felix. He struck an attitude, and sang with exquisite feeling the opening bars of the Jewel Song from "Faust." As applied to the earthly tabernacle of madame's generous soul, the effect of that impassioned address was ludicrous. But Felix recked little of that. He threw the hundred-franc note on the counter.

"There, *ma petite*, be rewarded for your trust," he cried. "Now give me the railway timetable; for I have far to go ere I return, when you and I shall crack a bottle of Clos Vosgeot with our dinner."

Madame, who had not betrayed the least embarrassment when she and her café were apostrophized in Gounod's impassioned strains, was utterly bewildered by Poluski's wealth. Not once in many years had he owned so much at one time, since he always drew small sums on account of his pictures and kept himself going hand-to-mouth fashion. But here was Felix intent on the timetable and sweeping seventy-two francs twenty-five centimes of change into his pocket without troubling to count a coin.

"You have found a mad Englishman, I suppose?" tittered madame.

"Better, far better, *ma cherie*; I have met a man who would be a King!" He hurried out, climbed into a passing omnibus, and descended at the Gare de Lyon.

Joan was just leaving the pretty hotel at Barbizon, meaning to put in some hours of work after a distracted morning, when Felix emerged from the interior of a ramshackle cab that had carried him from Melun to the edge of the forest. Now, a cab drive of several miles, plus a journey from Paris, was a sufficiently rare event in Poluski's life to make Joan stare. His unexpected appearance chimed so oddly with her own disturbed thoughts that she paled.

"Felix," she cried, "have you brought ill news?"

"Of whom, *chere mademoiselle*?" he demanded.

"Of--of any one?"

"Alec still reigns, if that is what you mean."

"But he has sent you?"

"What, do I look like an envoy?" He laughed. "Well, well, *ma belle*, there is some truth in that. I come in behalf of one before whom even Kings must bow; I represent Saint Peter! But even an apostolic dynamitard must eat. I am starving, having sacrificed my luncheon to my love of you. Commend me, then, to some deft handed waiter, and let hunger and curiosity be sated at the same time."

Joan knew that Poluski would choose his own way of explaining his presence. The hour for luncheon was long past; but she hurried to the empty dining room and was able to secure some soup and a cold chicken. Felix eyed the bird distrustfully.

"Although I am here in behalf of Saint Peter, there is no sense in asking me to chew the wretched fowl that proclaimed his downfall," he muttered.

"Oh, Felix dear, please do tell me what has happened!" said Joan, clasping her hands in real distress. "I received a letter from Alec this morning. It was sent to me from my lodgings, and, what between that and the extraordinary things in the newspapers, I think I am bewitched. Now I am sure that you too have heard from him. Is it a telegram?"

"Yes," he said, "a message sent without wires; it came by one of those underground currents that convulse an unconscious world, sometimes agonizing mountains, at others perplexing a simple maid like yourself. You see, Joan, all things conspire to draw you to Delgratz."

"I am not going!" she vowed, thereby giving Poluski the exact information he needed; for his nimble brain was beginning to see the connection between Alec's letter and Count Julius Marulitch's intense desire to avail himself of Joan's skill as a copyist.

"You are, my dear," he said, dropping his bantering tone and looking her straight in the eyes.

"How can such an absurdity be dreamed of?" she demanded breathlessly.

"Because it is a dream that will come true. Listen, now, and don't be afraid, for these gray old trees of Barbizon have heard madder whisperings than that you should become a Queen. It is in the natural order of things that I, who gave my best years to devising the ruin of Kings, should be chosen in my dotage to help in fixing a King firmly on his throne. It is some sport of the gods, I suppose, a superhuman jest, perhaps the touch of farce that makes tragedy more vivid, since even that colossal Shakespeare of yours thought fit to lighten Hamlet by introducing a comic gravedigger. Be that as it may, Joan, you are Alec's Queen, and, as he cannot come for you it follows that you must go to him. Shall I tell you why? You are necessary to him. It is decreed, and you cannot shirk your lot. He knows it, and he has written to bid you come. His enemies know it; but there is a kind of knowledge that leads its votaries blindfold to the pit, and Alec's enemies are blindly plotting now to send you to Delgratz and thus compass his ruin."

"Felix! What are you saying?"

"The truth, the simple truth. Not a whiff of metaphor or extravagance about that statement, Joan. This morning a man came to me in the Louvre. He was seeking you. He wants to pay you five thousand francs for a copy of some blazoned daub that hangs in the cathedral at Delgratz. He will pay double, four times, the money if only you will consent to go there. Why? Because he believes that Alec is infatuated about you, and that the mere hint of marriage with one who is not a Slav princess will shatter the throne of Kosnovia about the ears of its present occupant. My anxious visitor is mistaken, of course. He is trying to do good that evil may come of it; but while there is justice in Heaven any such

perversion of an eternal principle is foredoomed to failure.

"But just think of that man coming to me, Felix Poluski, who has an ear for every sob that rises from the unhappy people who dwell in the borderland between Teuton and Tartar! Isn't that the cream of comedy? When I make everything clear to you, when I show you how and by whom the killing of Theodore and his wife was engineered, you will begin to understand the fantastic trick that Fate played when she sent her emissary to the hunchback artist in the Louvre. But it is a long story, and it will beguile the journey across Austria, while there are many things you must attend to ere you leave Paris in the Orient Express to-morrow night."

"Felix, it is impossible!"

"Ah! Then you don't love our Alec."

"I--I have not heard a word from his lips--well, hardly a syllable----"

"Not in the letter?"

"That is different. Felix, I can trust you. Perhaps, under other conditions, I might marry Alec; but now I cannot."

"Why?"

"Because he is a King."

"The best of reasons, if he was bred in a palace. But he has lived long enough to become a man first. Frankly, Joan, I like Alec, and I think he ought to be given a chance. At any rate, I don't see why you are afraid of him."

"I am not. Indeed, I am not!" Joan's voice was tremulous. She was on the verge of tears; for the little Pole's persistence was breaking down the barrier that she had striven to erect against her lover's pleading. Alec had not said much in his letter; but what he did say was wholly to the point.

"Come to me, Joan," he wrote. "Don't wait. Don't stop and worry about what the world will say, since it will surely be something bitter and untrue. The people here are all right, and I think they are beginning to like me; but I can see quite plainly that they will not be content until I am married, and hints are being thrown out already that there are several eligible young ladies in neighboring States. But if these Kosnovians take me they must take you too, and it will be far easier for me when they have seen you."

"Now, no hesitation, no doubts, no weighing of pros and cons. Just set your teeth and toss your head up, and tell Pauline to sling your belongings into your boxes, and before you start send me one word in a telegram. I am horribly busy, of course (for details see daily papers), and this must be the most extraordinary love letter ever written; but what does that matter when you and I understand each other? It was you who sent me here. Don't forget that, dear teller of fortunes, and I want you to be standing by my side when the storm breaks that must surely be brewing for me after an incredible success."

There was more in the same vein. Alexis the King seemed to differ in no essential from the Alec Delgrado who used to wait for her every day in the neighborhood of the Pont Neuf. Dare she risk it? The question had tortured her ever since the early morning. It was not that the prospect of being a Queen was dazzling or even dismaying in itself; she really dreaded the result of such a marriage on the fortunes of the man she loved.

But against that self sacrificing attitude she was forced to admit the plea of Alec's own bewildering lack of conventionality. If half the stories in the newspapers were true, he was the most original minded monarch that ever reigned. She was quite sure that his answer to any evasive reply on her part would be a public announcement of the fact that his promised bride was a young lady in Paris, Joan Vernon by name. And that would be worse almost than going quietly to Delgratz and being married there.

What was she to do? She found Felix Poluski's gray eyes looking at her steadfastly. In this dilemma he was her only trusted counselor, and he had already advised her to yield.

"If I even knew his relatives," she faltered. "His parents live in Paris. We have never met. How can I say to his mother, 'Your son wants me to marry him. What do you think of me?' She, a Princess, would scoff at the idea."

"Alec is well aware of that; hence he has written direct to you, and said nothing to any other person. Let me assure you that if Prince Michael Delgrado had gone to Delgratz he would have died a sudden and violent death. Prince Michael knew it, and declined the distinction. Believe me, too, Alec has the very best of reasons for consulting no one in his choice of a wife. Now, Joan, be brave! When all is said and done, it should be far more pleasant to marry a King than fling a bomb at him, and I have met several young ladies almost as pretty as you who were ready enough to adopt the

latter alternative. At any rate you will take no harm by crossing the Danube. It is not the Rubicon, you know, and you have Saint Peter to lean on in case of difficulty."

So Felix did not return to Paris alone, and when he met Count Julius Marulitch next morning in the Louvre he was able to announce that Miss Joan Vernon had accepted the commission to copy the Delgratz Saint Peter and was ready to start for Kosnovia by the night mail.

CHAPTER VI

JOAN GOES INTO SOCIETY

Joan did not telegraph to Alec. She destroyed each of half a dozen attempts, and ended by taking refuge in silence. It was impossible to say what she had to say in the bald language of a telegram. Merely to announce her departure from Paris would put her in the false position of having accepted Alec's proposal apparently without reserve, which was exactly what she meant not to do, and any other explanation of the journey would bewilder him.

Her friend Leontine, housemaid at the Choje de la Sorbonne, did not fail to tell her of Alec's call the day she left Paris for Barbizon. There was no mistaking Leontine's description, which was impressionist to a degree. It was evident, then, that he not only possessed her address, as shown by the letter, but knew of her absence. So she reasoned that if he did not hear from her within forty-eight hours he would assume that she was still away from home. By that time she would be in Delgratz, and, although she felt some uneasiness at the prospect, she was brave enough not to shirk meeting him.

They were not children that they should be afraid of speaking their thoughts, nor lovesick romanticists, apt to be swayed wholly by sentiment, and she could trust Alec to see the folly of rushing into a union that might imperil his career. In the depths of her heart she confessed herself proud and happy at the prospect of becoming his wife; but she would never consent to a marriage that was not commended by prudence. Better, far better, they should part forever than that the lapse of a few months should prove how irretrievably she had ruined him.

This might be sound commonsense, but it was not love, yet all this, and more, Joan said to Felix Poluski, and the little man had nodded his head with grins of approval. Meanwhile, he sang and was busy.

Count Julius, posted now in the Pole's mottled history, had demanded absolute anonymity before he carried the negotiations for the picture any further. Felix gave the pledge readily, since Joan could not be in Delgratz a day ere she suspected the truth. At any rate, Marulitch was satisfied; he introduced Felix to a well-known dealer in the Rue St. Honore, and thenceforth disappeared from the transaction. Joan herself entered into the necessary business arrangements, about which there was nothing hidden or contraband. The terms proposed were liberal, considering her poor status in the art world; but they were quite straightforward. She was given return tickets to Delgratz for herself and her maid; Felix was similarly provided for; five hundred dollars was paid in advance, and a written guaranty was handed to her that a similar sum, together with hotel expenses, would be forthcoming in exchange for a copy of the Byzantine Saint Peter.

Of course, reviewing matters calmly in the train, she hardly expected that the second portion of the contract would be fulfilled. She knew quite well that the conspirators hoped to turn her presence in the Kosnovian capital to their own account, and when their scheme was balked they would devise some means of wriggling out of the bargain. But she laughed at the notion that she, an unknown student, should have suddenly become a pawn in the game of empire. There was an element of daring, almost of peril, in the adventure that fascinated her. It savored of those outlandish incidents recorded in novels of a sensational type, wherein fur coated, sallow faced, cigarette smoking scoundrels plotted the destruction of dynasties, and used fair maidens as decoys for susceptible Kings. Certainly, Felix Poluski, judged by his past, was no bad prototype of a character in that class of fiction; regarded in his present guise, as he sat opposite her in the dining car of the Orient Express, he looked the most harmless desperado that ever preyed on a quivering world.

His face seemed to be smaller and more wrinkled than usual. From Joan's superior height his hump was accentuated till it showed above the top of his head, and the girl was conscious, though she resolutely closed her eyes to the fact, that the admiring glances with which she was favored by some of her fellow passengers were somewhat modified by the humorous incongruity of Poluski's appearance.

At first, they tacitly avoided any reference to Alec or Delgratz. Their talk dealt with art and artists, and Joan had a good deal to say about the delights of painting in the open air.

Felix blinked at her sagely. "Behold, then, the beginning of the end!" he cackled.

"The end of what?" she asked, with some kindling of suspicion, since her queer little friend's tricks of conversation were not new to her.

"Of your career as an artist. Barbizon is fatal to true emotion. It induces a fine sense of the beauty of sunsets, of diffused light in sylvan solitudes, of blues that are greens and browns that are reds. In a word, the study of nature inclines one toward truth, whereas art is essentially a gracious lie. That is why the Greeks were the greatest artists: because they were most pleasing liars. They understood the crassness of humanity. Long before Browning wrote *Fra*

Lippo Lippi they realized that

"We're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times, nor cared to see;
And so they are better painted--better to us,
Which is the same thing."

Joan laughed, and the cheery sound of her mirth seemed to startle the staid folk in the car.

At a neighboring table a middle aged couple were dining, the woman dignified and matronly, the man small, slight, with a curiously bloated aspect which, on analysis, seemed to arise from puffy cheeks and thick, sensual lips. He said something that caused his companion to turn and look at Joan; for the woman is yet unborn who will hear another woman described as pretty and not want to decide for herself how far the statement is justified.

So the eyes of the two met, and Joan saw a worn, kindly face, endowed with a quiet charm of expression and delicacy of contour that offered a marked contrast to the man's unprepossessing features. Both women were too well bred to stare, and Joan instantly brought her wits to bear on Poluski's quip; but that fleeting glimpse had thrilled her with subtle recognition of something grasped yet elusive, of a knowledge that trembled on the lip of discovery, like a half remembered word murmuring in the brain but unable to make itself heard.

"Do you ever say what you really mean, Felix?" she asked.

"Far too often, my belle. That is why I am only a copyist.

"I am a painter who cannot paint;
In my life, a devil rather than saint.

"Believe me, we artists err ridiculously when we depart from the Greek standard. Your Whistler never achieved fame until he stopped reproducing bits of nature and devoted his superb talent to caricature."

"Caricature! Whistler!" she repeated.

"Name of a good little gray man! what else? Not portraits, surely? Wise that he was, he left those to the snapshot photographer; for even the camera can be given the artistic kink by the touch-up. Have you forgotten, then, the rage of a stolid Englishman when he saw his wife as Whistler painted her? Oh, yes, art lies outrageously and lives long, like other fables."

"But Whistler might have been bluntly accurate, a thing that is not always pleasing. For instance," and here her voice sank a little, "it might not be altogether gratifying to my pride if some one was to analyze mercilessly the precise reasons of my present journey."

"*Tiens!* Let us do it. It will serve to pass the time."

She laughed and blushed. "Wait a little. We have many hours before us."

"You will never have a more appreciative audience, if only you could make your voice heard above this din."

"What are you driving at? Please tell me."

"You have seen the two people sitting over there?" and he twisted eyebrows and mouth awry, with a whimsical leer of caution.

"Yes; what of them?"

"Do you know them?"

"No."

"Not even the lady?"

"She reminds me of some one--why do you ask?"

"I am surprised at you, Joan. Those charming eyes of yours should be keener. True, there is nothing feminine about Alec, and he has not suffered, like his mother. Still, there is a resemblance."

"Felix, are you in earnest?"

"Absolutely. I, at least, have not the Greek temperament. Our friends across the gangway are none other than Prince and Princess Michael Delgrado. You will discover no prophecy of Alec in his father; but he is his mother's own son, despite her weak chin and air of resignation."

Joan was dismayed, utterly astonished; the color ebbed from her cheeks. "Are they going to Delgratz?" she almost whispered.

"I suppose so. It is one of the oddest things about our lives how they run in grooves. Just now all the tiny furrows of our separate existences are converging on the Danube. We are like ships foredoomed to collision, that hurry remorselessly from the ends of the earth to the preordained crash."

"Oh, Felix, if you knew of this why did you bring me here?"

"Who am I to resist when the gods beckon? I love you, Joan, and I hate Kings; but it is decreed that you shall be a Queen, so I fold my arms and bow my head like the meekest of mortals."

"I shall quit the train at the next stopping place."

"But why? If Alec and you are to wed, it is only fit and proper that his parents should grace the ceremony."

"You harp on marriage when there may be no marriage. If Alec was not a King, it might be different; but the world will scoff when it hears that his chosen bride came to him from lodgings in the Place de la Sorbonne. What will Princess Delgrado think, now that she has seen me here, rushing off to Delgratz the instant I was summoned? Felix, I must return to Paris. Happily, I have some two thousand francs due within a week, and I can then refund the cost of our tickets, and perhaps the railway people will allow something for the incompleting journey."

"Calm yourself, *ma petite!* You count like the proprietress of my favorite cafe! And to what purpose? It would be a pity to act in that foolish way. There is no compulsion on you to marry Alec, and the Byzantine Saint Peter still hangs in the cathedral. Let any one so much as hint that you are throwing yourself at Alec's head, and I shall have the hinter dynamited. No, no, my Joan, we may yield to higher powers; but we do not abandon our pilgrimage because it is shared by an old scamp of a father whose sole anxiety is to fleece his son. Come, now, finish your dinner in peace, and let me explain to you why it is that Alexis III. and not Michael V. reigns in Delgratz. You don't glean many facts about monarchs from newspapers. If I brought you to a certain wineshop in the Rue Taitbout any evening after dinner you would hear more truth about royalty in half an hour than you will read in half a year."

Joan, conscious of a telltale pallor, was leaning forward with an elbow on the table and shielding her face with widespread fingers propped against cheek and forehead. In the noise and flurry of the train it was easy to tune the voice to such a note that it must be inaudible to those at the adjacent tables; but Poluski seemed to be careless whether or not he was overheard, and the girl fancied that Princess Delgrado had caught the words "Alexis," "Michael," "Delgratz." Certainly the Princess turned again and looked at her, while she did not fail to glance swiftly at the misshapen figure visible only in profile.

"Not so loud, Felix," murmured Joan. "Come to my compartment when you have smoked a cigarette. By that time I shall have recovered my wits, and I may be able to decide what to do for the best."

"Wrong again!" he laughed. "Obey your heart, not your brain, *mignonne.*" (He bent nearer, and his extraordinarily bright gray eyes peered up into hers.) "That is how Alec won his throne. He is all heart. Those who paved the way for him were all brain. They plotted, and contrived, and spun their web with the murderous zeal of a spider; but, poof! in buzzes bluebottle Alec, and where are the schemers? Ah, my angel, if you knew everything you would be cheery as I and marry your King with a light conscience."

The two persons who were the unwitting cause of Joan's sudden misgivings rose and quitted the dining car. No one seemed to be aware of their identity. Even the brown-liveried attendants did not give them any more attention than was bestowed on the other passengers, and the girl realized that the parents of a King, even such a newly fledged King as Alec, did not usually travel with this pronounced lack of state.

"Are you quite sure they are the Prince and Princess?" she asked, scanning Poluski's wrinkled face to learn if he had not been playing some sorry jest.

"Quite sure," said he.

"But----"

"You wonder why they condescend to mix with the common horde? Learn then, my Joan, that a French booking clerk is a skeptic who can be convinced only by the sight of money. Consider the number of brokendown royalties in Paris, and

picture, if you can, the scowl of disbelief that would cloud the official features of the Gare de l'Est if Prince Michael asked for a special train to Delgratz; booked it on the nod, so to speak. It could not be done, Joan, not if one substituted 'Archangel' for 'Prince.' As it is, the senior Delgrado has probably touched a friend for the money to buy the tickets."

"Yet their names would be recognized."

Felix called an attendant. "The lady and gentleman who sat at the opposite table were the Count and Countess Polina?"

"I cannot say, monsieur. Shall I inquire?"

"No need, thank you. To be precise, since you demand it," went on Poluski when the man had gone, "I asked who they were the moment we left Paris. I saw them on the platform, and the absence of any display showed that they were traveling incognito. I doubt very much if Alec knows of their journey. Can you guess why I think that?"

Joan shook her head wearily. "I am living in a land of dreams," she sighed. "I do not understand the why or wherefore of anything?"

"Listen, then, and you will see that your dreamland is a prosaic place, after all. There is a man in Paris who receives letters daily from Kosnovia, and they tell of events that are not printed for the multitude. Last night, when I was certain we should go to Delgratz, I sought him and heard the latest news. Your Alec means to economize. He has promulgated the absurd theory that the people's taxes should be spent for the people's benefit, and he says that no King is worth more than five thousand pounds a year, while many of his contemporaries would be dear at the price. He has also set up this ridiculous maximum as a standard, and intends to reduce the official salary list to about half its present dimensions.

"This fantasy has reached his father's ears, and the old gentleman is hurrying to Delgratz to check the madness ere it is too late. It is a simple bit of arithmetic: if a King, who works like a horse, is to receive only five thousand a year, what is the annual value of his father, who does nothing but lounge about the boulevards? No wonder old Michael is off hotfoot to the White City!"

Despite her perplexities, Joan had to laugh, and Felix bent nearer to clinch his argument.

"You and I must stand by Alec, my dear. I too am breathing a new atmosphere. I fought against Kings because they were tyrants; but I am ready to fight for one who is a deliverer. What do you fear, you? The world? Has the world ever done anything for you that its opinion should be considered? It will fawn or snarl as it thinks best fitted to its own ends; but help or pity? Never! Its votaries in Delgratz will strive to rend Alec when they realize that their interests are threatened. We must be there, you and I, you to aid him in winning the fickle mob, and I to watch those secret burrowings more dangerous to thrones than open revolt. It is a sacred mission, my Joan! They who named you were wiser than they knew. You were christened a King's helpmate, while I, Felix Poluski, am fated to be the most amazing product of modern civilization,—an anarchist devoted to a monarchy.

"It came on me yesterday morning in the Louvre. I saw my principles crucified for the good of humanity. Through the eyes of the Virgin I looked into a heaven of achievement, and I care not what the means so long as good results. One honest King is worth a million revolutionaries, and God, who made Alec a King, also made him honest."

Excited, exuberant, bubbling over with that very emotionalism at which he had scoffed a few minutes earlier, Felix leaned back in his chair and sang a quatrain in his singularly sweet and penetrating tenor.

Instantly every head was turned and necks were craned. A waiter, serving coffee, was so electrified that he poured no small quantity into the lap of an indignant German. Joan, too wrathful for mere words, dared not rush away instantly to her compartment, though she would have given a good deal at that moment to be safe in its kindly obscurity. And the worst thing was that she saw the coffeepot incident, and was forced to laugh till the tears came.

Cries of "Bravo!" "Again!" mingled with the iron-clamped syllables of Teutonic protest, and she distinctly heard a well bred English voice say:

"Foreign music hall artists! I told you so, though the girl looks an American. But, by gad! can't that humpbacked johnny sing!"

"Felix, how could you?" she managed to gasp at last.

"I'm sorry. I forgot we were not in Paris. But there are some here who appreciate good music. If you don't mind, I'll give them Beranger's 'Adieu to Mary Stuart.' You remember, it goes this way—"

Joan fled, making play with her handkerchief. The fast speeding train threw her from side to side of the corridor during a hurried transit; but the exquisite lines followed her clearly.

Felix sang like a robin till the mood exhausted itself. Then, deaf to enthusiastic plaudits and cries for "More!" he lit a long thin cigar and smoked furiously. Passing Joan's berth later, he knocked.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"I, the Humming Bee."

"Leave me to-night, Felix. I must think."

"Better sleep. Thinking creates wrinkles. Look on me as a horrible example."

He went away, bassooning some lively melody, but grinning the while, and if his thoughts took shape they would run:

"The struggle has ended ere it began, sweet maid. You are in love; but have not yet waked up to that astonishing fact. Now, why did the good God give me a big heart and a small head and a twisted spine? Why not have made me either a man or an imp?"

Joan could not face strangers in the dining car after Poluski's strange outburst. She remained in her own cramped quarters all next day, ate some meals there as best she could, and kept Felix at arm's length so far as confidence or counsel was concerned. On the platform at Vienna, where the train was made up afresh, she encountered Princess Delgrado. To her consternation, the older woman stopped and spoke.

"I am sorry I missed the delightful little concert your friend provided in the dining car last night," she said in French, and her voice had that touch of condescension with which a society leader knows how to dilute her friendliness when addressing a singer or musician. "My husband and I retired early, to our great loss, I hear. Are you traveling beyond Vienna? If so, and you give us another musical this evening----"

"There is some mistake," faltered Joan, unconsciously answering in English. "People who do not know Monsieur Poluski often take him for an operatic artiste. He is a painter. He sings only to amuse himself, and seldom waits to consider whether the time and place are well chosen."

"But, gracious me!" cried the Princess, amazed to find that Joan spoke English as to the manner born. "Some one said you were Polish. I doubted my eyes when I looked at you; but your companion--well, he might be anything."

"Both he and I earn our bread by painting pictures," said Joan. "Indeed, we are now bound for Delgratz to carry out a commission."

"Delgratz! How extraordinary! I too am going there. It is so disturbed at present that it is the last place in the world I should have suspected of artistic longings. May I ask who has sent for you?"

Luckily, in the bustle and semiobscurity of the station, Princess Delgrado did not pay much heed to the furious blushing of the pretty girl who had aroused her interest. It was impossible to regard one whom she now believed to be an American like herself as being in any way concerned with the intrigues that centered in the capital of Kosnovia, and she attributed Joan's confusion to the pardonable error that arose from the talk Prince Michael brought from the smoking car.

But what was Joan to answer? She could not blurt out to Alec's mother the contents of that exceedingly plainspoken epistle now reposing in her pocket. For one mad instant she wondered what would happen if she said:

"I am being sent to Delgratz by people who wish to drive Alec out of the kingdom, and I am really considering whether or not I ought to marry him."

Then she lifted her head valiantly, with just that wood-nymph flinging back of rebellious hair that Alec was thinking of while riding to his Castle of Care after a long day in the saddle.

"There is nothing unusual in my being chosen to copy a picture," she said. "Art connoisseurs care little for politics. To them a new Giotto is vastly more important than a new King, and I am told that both are to be found in Delgratz nowadays."

Prince Michael strolled up. He was pleased that his wife had made the acquaintance of the charming unknown, whom he had looked for in vain during the day.

"Ah," he said, with polite hat flourish, "I feared we had lost the pleasant company of which I heard----"

"You were misinformed," broke in his wife hastily in English. "This young lady is visiting Delgratz for art purposes. The gentleman who sang last night is the celebrated painter, Monsieur--Monsieur----"

"Felix Poluski," said Joan.

Prince Michael started as though a scorpion had found a crack in his patent boots.

"Poluski--Felix Poluski!" he cried. "I know that name; but he was fond of using strange colors on his palette if I remember rightly."

Felix, owing to his small stature, was compelled to dodge among the crowd on the platform like a child. He appeared now unexpectedly, and Michael's exclamation was not lost on him.

"Excellent, Monseigneur!" he said. "You always had a turn for epigram. I am glad to find that you have not forgotten the brave days of old when you and I used to spout treason together, you because you hungered after a dynasty, and I because I preferred dynamite. Odd thing, both words mean power, strength, sovereignty; the difference lies only in the method of application. But that was in our hot youth, Michael----"

"Imbecile!" hissed the Prince, his red face blanching, as once before when a man spoke of the perils that hedge a throne in the Balkans. "This is Vienna. I shall be recognized!"

Felix snapped his fingers. "They don't care that for you, Monseigneur--never did! You could have come and gone as you pleased any time during these thirty years. If any one is feared here, it is I. But, my veteran, why this display of wrath? You know me well enough. Didn't you see me last night?"

"No--that is, I did not recollect. Your face was hidden."

"Ah, you had something better to look at. Well, who goes to Delgratz? Get aboard, all!"

During this brief but illuminating conversation the Princess and Joan could do nothing else but gaze from one man to the other in mute surprise, and Joan was grieved beyond measure that Felix should treat Alec's father with such scant courtesy. Even while they were making for the steps of the sleeping cars, she managed to whisper tremulously to the Princess:

"Please don't be angry with Monsieur Poluski. His brusque manner often gets him into trouble. Forgive me for saying it, but your son knows him well, and is very fond of him, and I am sure Felix would do anything that lay in his power to help--to help King Alexis III."

"My son! Do you also know him?"

"Yes."

"Have you met him in Paris?"

"Yes."

"But I have never seen you at the Rue Boissiere."

"No. We met at Rudin's, and sometimes in the Louvre."

"And does he know that you are coming to Delgratz?"

"No. I assure you----"

The Princess hesitated. It was not in her kind heart to think evil of this singularly frank looking and attractive girl. "Will you tell me your name?" she said, turning with one foot on the step; for they were about to enter separate carriages.

"Joan Vernon."

"I suppose it is idle to ask, but you are not married?"

"No, nor likely to be for a very long time."

"Aboard!" cried a guard, marveling that women could find so much to say at the very last moment.

"Well," said the Princess, "I hope to see you at dinner. If not, in Delgratz."

Joan took good care that no one except her maid and an attendant saw her again that evening. She felt bruised and buffeted as though she had been carried among rocks by some irresistible current. Even her mind refused to act. The

why and the wherefore of events were dim and not to be grasped. Over and over again she regretted the impulse that led her to take this journey. Felix, as friend and artistic tutor, was invaluable; but in the guise of mentor for a young woman who had her own way to make in the world, and nothing more to depend on than her artistic faculties and a small income from a trust fund, he was a distinct failure. What would Alec think of it all? And what would Alec's mother say when her son told her that Joan Vernon was the woman he meant to marry?

So Joan grew miserable, and developed a headache, and wept a little over perplexities that were very real though she could not define them. And Felix dined alone, and smoked in dumb reverie, and when Prince Michael, warmed with wine and cheered by the knowledge that a wearisome journey was drawing to a close, unbent so far as to ask him to sing, the little man shook his head.

"You'll hear me singing in Delgratz, Monseigneur," he said. "I shall have something to think about then, and I sing to think, just as you live to eat. At present, there isn't a note in the box. Now, if madame can spare you, just sit down there, and you and I will talk of old times. For instance, poor Amelie Constant--she died the other day----"

"Ah, bah!" growled Michael. "That is not interesting. Old times of that sort generally mean times one would rather forget. *Au 'voir*, M'sieur Poluski. We shall meet across the Danube. If your principles permit, come and see me at court."

"My principles carry me into strange company, Monseigneur," said Felix gravely.

CHAPTER VII

JOAN BECOMES THE VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCES

On arriving at Delgratz, Joan still avoided her distinguished traveling companions. Indeed, no one paid any heed to her, since Prince Michael's vanity could not resist the temptation of making himself known, and when the word went round that the King's father was in the station, there was such a press around him and the Princess that ordinary passengers were of little account.

Monseigneur was flattered by the excitement caused by his unexpected appearance, and he momentarily regretted the lack of display that resulted from his decision to travel incognito. It would have been so much more effective if he had been greeted by the King and a glittering staff the moment he descended from the train. It was undignified, too, to pass through the streets of the capital in a disheveled hired vehicle, when a royal carriage, surrounded by a cavalry escort, might have brought him to the palace in style. It was somewhat late in the day, however, to rectify the mistake now. He could not hang round the station while a messenger went to his son, and if he meant to effect a surprise he had succeeded admirably.

Leaving a valet and maid to bring the luggage, which an obsequious customs officer cleared at once, he ushered his wife into a ramshackle victoria and told the man to drive to the Schwarzburg.

Every Serb is a born gossip; but a policeman had whispered the names of the eminent pair, and awe kept the driver's tongue from wagging, else Prince Michael would have received a greater shock than the welcoming bump of a singularly bad pavement. Luckily the Black Castle lay no great distance from the railway, since Delgratz was but a small place when the palace was built, and the town had long ago closed around it on every hand.

During the short drive Michael tried to be cheery, though he had slept little during two nights. "These old streets have really changed very little," he said. "When I was a boy I remember thinking how magnificent they were. What an eye opener it must have been for Alec when he realized that he had given up Paris--for this!" and he waved a deprecating hand toward the unkempt houses, yellow washed and dingy; for the White City, though white when seen from a distance, turns out to be an unhealthy looking saffron at close quarters. The Princess cared nothing for the squalor of the town. She was thinking of her son.

"I wish we had told Alec we were coming, Michael," she said. "Now that we are here, the reasons you urged for secrecy seem to be less convincing than ever."

"Alec would have telegraphed his prompt advice to remain where we were."

"Perhaps----"

"Perhaps you will allow me to decide what is best to be done, Marie. Our affairs had reached a crisis. So long as there was a chance of my becoming King I was able to finance myself. Now that Alec is firmly established, and filling empty heads with all this nonsense as to retrenchment and economical administration, every creditor I had in the world is pestering me. You cannot realize the annoyance to which I have been subjected during the last fortnight. Life was becoming intolerable, just because Alec was talking galimatias to a number of irresponsible journalists."

"Why not write and tell him our troubles? He would have helped us, I am sure. And that which you call rubbish seems to have caught the ear of all Europe. Even 'The Journal des Debats' published a most eulogistic article about him last week."

"Poof!" snorted Monseigneur. "Those Paris rags pander to republicanism. Every word, every act, of an impetuous youngster like Alec is twisted into an argument against the older monarchies. Give an eye to the mean looking building on the right. That is the Chamber of Deputies. Alec made the speech there that won him a throne. Who would have believed it? Just a few words, and he became King!"

Something in Prince Michael's tone caused his wife to look at him sharply. "You are not growing envious, Michael?" she asked.

"No; but I was a fool."

"Because I shall keep you to our compact," she said, with a firmness of manner that surprised the pompous little man by her side. He had been answered in that way so seldom during their married life that the novelty was displeasing.

"Ah, bah! what are you saying?" he cried. He stifled the next words on his lips; for the horse passed under an arch,

and not even the studied repose of a princely boulevardier could conceal his new amazement.

An industrial army was busy in and around the famous residence of the Kings of Kosnovia. They were tearing it to pieces. The roof was off, one wing was wholly dismantled, and the beautiful gardens were strewn with debris.

"In the name of Providence, what is going on?" demanded Monseigneur of the driver.

"It is the King's order, your Highness," said the man, glorying in the fact that the muzzle was off--by request. "The castle is to be demolished, and a new National Assembly built on the site."

"Our ancient house pulled down and made a sty for those hogs! The King must be mad!"

"We esteem him highly in Delgratz," said the man stoutly. "He thinks more of the people than of palaces, and they say that he means to convert some of the gold lace into white bread."

The bewildered and infuriated Michael now remembered that the few officers encountered in the railway station or the streets seemed to be far less gaudily attired than in former years. In a passing thought he attributed the alteration to the wearing of undress uniform during the early hours; but the cab driver's words seemed to hint at some fresh wave of reform. His bulging eyes continued to glare at the ruined palace; but native caution warned him against being too outspoken in the presence of one of the lower order.

"When was this work begun?" he asked.

"Three days ago, your Highness. The King decided that the banqueting hall should be destroyed as quickly as possible. He says it taints the air. As for the Assembly, it must wait. Money is not so plentiful."

"What is it, Michael?" cried the Princess, aware that something unforeseen had happened; but unable to grasp its significance, owing to her ignorance of the language.

Monseigneur, who had stood up in the carriage, subsided again. He raised both hands in a gesture of bewilderment. "Alexis III. has signalized the first month of his reign by destroying the historic home of our race--that is all, madame!" he muttered bitterly.

"But why are we remaining here? Where does Alec live? He must inhabit a house of some sort. Tell the man to drive there at once!"

The Prince affected not to hear. "What could Stampoff be thinking of to permit this outrage?" he murmured. "Why was not I consulted? Idiot that I am, and coward too! I see now the mistake I made. Can it be rectified? Is it too late?"

A second carriage, laden with luggage, drove in through the gateway. The valet and a French maid gazed in discreet wonder at their master and mistress seated disconsolately in front of a tumbledown building.

"Michael, I insist that you give the driver directions!" cried his wife vehemently. "We cannot remain here. The least shred of commonsense should warn you that we are making ourselves ridiculous."

"Ah, yes, one must act," agreed the Prince. He glanced up at the enthusiastic supporter of the new regime.

"We have traveled here from Paris, and his Majesty's recent letters have missed us," he said, with a perceptible return of the grand air that had served him in good stead for many years. "Take us to his Majesty's present residence. The error is mine. I should have told you that in the first instance."

"The King is living in the President's house, Excellency. It is not far; but you will not find his Majesty there this morning. At four o'clock he rode to Grotzka with the mad Englishman----"

"Ha! and who may that be?"

"An English milord, who laughs always, even when his Majesty and he are trying to break their necks at a game they play on horseback, hitting a white ball with long sticks. I have seen them. They make the young officers play it, and there are three in hospital already. This is hot weather for such an infernal amusement!"

Prince Michael nodded. Like every other person watching affairs on the Danube, he had read of Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir's adventure with the Austrian authorities,--indeed, Europe had almost expected a declaration of war over the incident,--but he did not know that Beaumanoir was still an inhabitant of Delgratz.

"To Monsieur Nesimir's!" he said sullenly, and left it to the Princess to give instructions to the servants to follow, though the poor woman did not yet know whither she was being taken. She was very angry with her husband, and she blamed herself for not having telegraphed to her son before leaving Paris. But she had yielded to Michael Delgrado

during so many years that it was difficult to abandon the habit now; yet she promised herself a full explanation with Alec when they met, and that must be soon, since here she was in Delgratz, where, judging by the newspapers, the King was in evidence every hour of the day.

The President's house was distant only a stone's throw, and, though obviously mystified, stout Nesimir met his unexpected guests cordially. He was disconsolate because of the King's probable absence till late in the afternoon.

"What a pity his Majesty chose to-day for a visit to the artillery camp!" he cried. "But I shall send a courier; he can return by noon. How is it nothing was said as to your Highnesses' visit. I dined with the King last night----"

"We wished to surprise his Majesty," explained Prince Michael. "You know how outspoken he is, and how easily these things get into the newspaper; so we started from Paris without a word to a soul. Send no courier after him, I beg. A rest of a few hours will be most acceptable to the Princess and myself. Madame is fatigued after a long journey, while I would ask nothing better than an armchair, a cup of coffee, a cigarette, and a chat; that is, if you can spare the time, Monsieur le President."

Nesimir would be charmed to comply with Monseigneur's desires in every respect. Really, the elder Delgrado seemed to be even more approachable than his son; for the President was unable to fathom many of the social views propounded by Alexis III. This unheralded advent of the King's parents, too, betokened some secret move. He was sure of that, and, being a man to whom political intrigue was the breath of life, he saw that a gossip with Prince Michael might convey information of much possible value in the near future. So the Princess Delgrado was ushered to a room by Madame Nesimir with all possible ceremony, and the two men established themselves on a cool veranda.

By this time, Joan and Felix were seated at breakfast in the hotel. Joan had wisely left the bargaining with the landlord to her companion, and he, knowing something of Serbian ways, which reck little of politeness when curiosity can be sated, chose a sitting room on the first floor with three bedrooms adjoining. The sitting room was a huge place, big enough to serve as a studio if necessary. Three large windows commanded a view of the main street, and the solid oak door opened into the corridor behind, which also gave access to the bedrooms.

Poluski's only motive in selecting this particular suite was to secure the maximum of privacy. Joan's appearance was far too striking that she should be subjected to the scrutiny of every lounge in the restaurant beneath. In this primitive community she would probably receive several offers of marriage the first time she sat at table in the public dining room.

It was he, too, who advised her never to go out unless she was deeply veiled. Joan laughed at the reason--but followed his counsel. During their first stroll in the open air she said she felt like a Mohammedan woman; yet she soon realized that a double motor veil not only shielded her from impertinent eyes but kept her face free from dust and insects.

Naturally, they made straight for the cathedral and examined the quaint picture that had provided an excuse for their visit to the Near East. They were much impressed. They gazed at its brilliant coloring and stiff pose for fully a minute. Then Joan broke a silence that was becoming irksome.

"If it is really a Giotto," she whispered, "it was painted before he broke away from the Byzantine tradition."

"Yes," murmured Poluski, "here we have both Giotto and Saint Peter at their worst."

"Felix, how can I copy that?"

"Impossible, my belle. You must improvise, using it as a theme. When all is said and done, you know far more than Giotto about Saint Peter. Holy blue! if you bring that back to Paris as a veritable likeness of the Chief Apostle you will be placed on the Index Expurgatorius. Moreover, it would not be fair to him, after all these years."

"It needed only this to prove how farcical is the whole scheme. I am beginning to dread the idea of meeting Alec. He will laugh at me."

"That will do him good. I am told he is becoming most serious."

"Told--by whom? Surely you have not sent any message?"

"Not a word. I leave that to you--or Princess Delgrado."

"How snappy you are! It was not my fault that the Princess spoke to me. She would never have known I was on the train if you hadn't sung."

"Ah, by the way, we ought to hear some decent Gregorian music in this old place. See, where they have put the choir, nearly under the dome. Yes, we must attend a service. The bass should roll like thunder yonder----"

"Felix, who told you about Alec?"

"A waiter in the hotel, a waiter rejoicing in the noble name of John Sobieski, a Pole, therefore, like myself. I said to him 'What of the King?' He answered, 'Everything that is good, if one listens to the people; but the officers who come here to drink and play cards do not like him.' I explained that I wished to know the King's whereabouts, and he said that if I was anxious to see the gracious youth I should have a splendid opportunity at four o'clock this afternoon, as his Majesty will pass the hotel at that hour on his way to the University, where he has promised to attend a prize giving."

"At four o'clock! What shall we do meanwhile?" asked Joan innocently.

Felix winked brazenly at the picture. "Delgratz is a picturesque city," he said. "Let us inspect it."

"You do not think Alec will learn of our presence and visit us before going to the University?"

"Very improbable. He is out in the country, watching artillery at field exercise. Of course, he knows nothing about artillery; but Kings have to pretend a good deal. Now, if I were a young lady who had been traveling for a day and two nights, especially if I had slept badly during the second night, I should stroll about the principal streets till I was tired, eat a light luncheon, sleep for an hour afterward, dress myself in some muslin confection, and be ready to dine with the King at seven-thirty or thereabouts."

"I shall do nothing of the kind!" cried Joan, blushing behind her motor veil.

"Very well. Behold in me your slave of the lamp. What shall we do?"

"I don't object to looking at the shops and the people for a little while," she admitted, and this time Felix did not wink at the picture, but contented himself with an expressive raising of his bushy eyebrows.

The program he mapped out was adhered to faithfully. Joan was really tired, and the midday heat of Delgratz was not only novel but highly disagreeable. She retired to her room at one o'clock, and Felix heard her telling her maid to call her at three.

The elderly Frenchwoman whom Joan employed as a compendium of all the domestic virtues was scandalized by the pestering she had already undergone at the hands of the hotel employees. They wanted to know everything about her mistress as soon as they were told that she was not Poluski's wife, and the staid Pauline was at her wit's end to parry the questions showered on her in bad French. Felix advised her not to understand when spoken to, and relieved her manifest distress by the statement that the hotel would see the last of them in a day or two.

Then, anxious himself to be rid of Pauline, he strolled out into Furst Michaelstrasse, entered the hotel's public restaurant by another door, and sat there, musing and alone.

Thus far, Joan and he had passed through the simple vicissitudes that might beset any other strangers in the capital of Kosnovia. Though the little man expected developments when Alec heard of Joan's presence, he certainly did not look for squalls forthwith; yet he had not been smoking and humming and sipping a cup of excellent coffee more than a minute before he became aware that the sunlit street was curiously alive.

The hottest hours of a hot day might well have driven the citizens of Delgratz indoors; but some powerful inducement was drawing loiterers to Furst Michaelstrasse. It was evident that the attraction, whatsoever it might be, was not supplied by the thoroughfare itself. Men lounged along the pavements or gathered in groups, and Poluski noted that few women were present. Soon a regiment of soldiers marched up, formed into two ranks, and lined the street on both sides.

Felix betook himself to the door, where his compatriot was dusting marble topped tables with an apron that, under other conditions, would have soiled them.

"Does the King arrive earlier than four o'clock?" he asked.

John Sobieski looked around furtively before he answered. "No," said he in a low tone, "the crowd is gathering to see the regicides. Their trial ended to-day, and they are being taken to the Old Fort to await sentence."

"Found guilty?"

"I should think so, indeed, monsieur! They gloried in their crime. They claim that they cleared the way for Alexis III. by removing Ferdinand. Some people say the King cannot really be severe on them, though it was he who brought them to justice."

"Have they many sympathizers?"

The waiter, a pallid creature, flicked a table loudly to cover his reply. "Some of our customers talk big; but it is a strange thing that the authorities allow the men of the disbanded Seventh Regiment to remain in Delgratz. There are hundreds of them in the street at this moment."

"It reminds one of Warsaw."

A sudden moisture glistened in John Sobieski's eyes. "Ah, Warsaw!" he muttered. "Shall I ever see my beautiful city again? But it is different here, monsieur. Even though they quarrel among themselves, they have at least got rid of their conquerors."

A quickening of interest on the part of the mob, a general craning of necks, and a sharp command to the soldiers showed that the criminals were en route from the law courts. A squad of cavalry trotted into sight, followed by eight closed carriages. An armed policeman sat near every driver, and another stood on the step outside each door. Mounted soldiers in single file surrounded the dismal procession, and a second strong detachment guarded the rear.

It was a doleful spectacle, and Felix was puzzled by the absence of anything in the nature of a popular demonstration. He had been led to believe that Delgratz abhorred these murders committed in the name of progress, and he naturally expected an emotional people to betray their feelings. He listened in vain for a yell of execration. A queer murmur ran through the crowd, that was all, a murmur that was ominous, almost sinister. He scanned the faces of the crowd, trying to pierce their stolid aspect. Some of the bystanders obviously belonged to the mutinous regiment; but he looked in vain for any sign of anger or regret.

Skilled conspirator that he was, Poluski seemed rather to discern a deep laid purpose behind their unnatural phlegm, yet his suspicions died away when the street began to empty as soon as the prisoners' vehicles and the escort had clattered past. The foot regiment marched off, and within ten minutes Felix was back in his nook, smoking and coffee drinking, and thanking the chance that left Joan unconscious of this grim episode, since her bedroom windows looked out on the garden in rear of the hotel.

He sat there quietly, sternly repressing his musical instincts when he caught himself humming some favorite melody; nor would he have budged until Alec appeared had not his keen eyes noted another curious movement in the street. About half-past three several men strolled past the cafe, men whom he distinctly remembered having seen in the earlier crowd. In twos and threes they came, and he fancied that the complete disregard each set paid the others was rather overdone.

At any rate, he ordered a fresh supply of coffee and sought enlightenment from Sobieski. "Just peep at some of those fellows in the street and tell me if they are not soldiers of the Seventh Regiment," he said.

The waiter obeyed. He determined the point quickly. "I recognize a few, monsieur," he muttered, "and I believe there are scores of them. I wish they would patronize some other street. Our patrons will not care to mix with such rascals."

Poluski rose wearily; for his energetic soul was housed in a frail body, and the long journey from Paris had exhausted him.

"I have read in the newspapers that King Alexis dispenses with a bodyguard?" he said, lighting a fresh cigar.

"He hates ceremony, that young man," was the ready answer. "At first the people mobbed him. Now he rides through Delgratz like a courier, sometimes alone, at others with a friend or two, and perhaps an orderly."

Felix laughed. "He is a fine fellow," said he. "Do the King a good turn, John, and you will be able to buy a cafe in Warsaw one of these days."

"Me, monsieur! How can a poor waiter hope to serve a King?"

"*Que diable!* You never know your luck. Life is a lottery, and some day you may draw the great prize."

Felix sauntered into the street and took a keen interest in its architecture. In front of the hotel and down a slight gradient to the right it was a wide and straight thoroughfare; but to the left and uphill it narrowed rapidly and took a sharp left turn. In the angle stood a popular restaurant, and the rooms on the first and second stories were full of customers. No one, apparently, was looking out; but small parties of men sat near each open window, and they were not playing cards or dominoes, though the greater part of the male inhabitants of Delgratz seem to do little else when not eating or sleeping. Moreover, an empty bullock cart was halted in front of the ground floor entrance.

"There's thunder in the air," said Poluski to himself; but he continued to admire the irregular outlines of Furst Michaelstrasse. Thus, he could not fail to notice that the upper rooms of three cafes exactly similar to that at the corner were untenanted, while there was a disposition on the part of the late Seventh Regiment to group itself either at the

turning or a good deal lower down the street, perhaps a hundred yards beyond the hotel.

"Yes," said he, eyeing the glittering expanse of unclouded blue overhead, "a storm is certainly brewing. I can feel it in my bones. It reminds me of the afternoon we removed the Governor of Silesia. He was fused by a thunderbolt, from just such a summer sky. Obviously, what he lacked was a lightning conductor. Now, the question is, even if he had owned one, whereabouts would he have put it?"

The reply was given by the appearance of two men on horseback advancing at a fast trot up the easy slope of the hill. They were notable because they wore the ordinary costume adopted by riders in the Bois or the Row, and in Delgratz, where rank was marked by uniform, this fact conferred distinction. A few yards behind them cantered a couple of soldiers.

"You are ten minutes before time, my dear Alec," murmured Felix. "Joan will never forgive me if she is still asleep; but what is one to do? *Saperlotte!* One must act."

A hasty glance over his shoulder showed that the gentry in the corner cafe were stirred by some common impulse that led them to the windows, while the bullock cart was now drawn awkwardly across the narrow way. As the horsemen came near, the loungers in the lower part of the street displayed a singularly unanimous desire to close in and follow them. There were hundreds of townspeople gathered on the pavements, and not a few vehicles occupied the roadway; so these concerted movements were not discernible to any one who was not a past master in the revolutionary art like Poluski, and to him only because his suspicions were already active.

The King and Beaumanoir were coming on at such a pace that Felix, owing to his low stature, would be quite invisible to them if he stood among the crowd now hovering on the curb; so he pushed boldly out into the middle of the street, took off his hat with a flourish, and sang lustily:

"O, Alec! *O, mon roi!*"

The thunderbolt that removed the Governor of Silesia, had it struck the paving stones in front of the King's horse, could hardly have startled Alec more than the sight of Felix, standing there, bare headed and grinning, and chanting an improvised version of a famous song at the top of his voice.

"You, Felix!" he cried. "You here?"

"It is far more to the point that Joan is there," said Poluski, with expressive pantomime.

"In the hotel?"

"Yes, up the stairs, first door on the right, across the landing. You have a few minutes to spare. Go quickly!"

Alec required no second bidding. Leaping from the saddle, he threw the reins to one of the orderlies. "Give me a few seconds, Berty," he cried to Beaumanoir, and before the onlookers could grasp the motive of this sudden halt, he had vanished through the doorway.

"You come, too; you are wanted," said Felix, addressing Beaumanoir in English.

"Sure?" asked his Lordship, gazing at the quaint figure with some degree of astonishment.

"Yes, it is a matter of life or death. Come!"

Beaumanoir dismounted leisurely. "Who's going to die?" he demanded, drawing the reins over his charger's head ere he handed them to the second soldier.

Felix quivered, yet he realized that the Englishman's cool demeanor was wholly in accord with the plan outlined in his own alert brain.

"Everybody of any consequence in this bally menagerie if you don't hurry up," said Felix.

The use of British slang at that crisis was a touch of real genius. It appealed to Beaumanoir. "Gad! it's a treat to hear you talk," he grinned; but he thrust through the gapers in his turn.

Felix rushed into the restaurant and clutched Sobieski. "Here's your chance!" he growled in Polish. "The King's life is in danger. Run to the President and tell him to despatch a strong body of troops on whom he can rely. If he refuses to listen, say that Felix Poluski sent you, and bid him ask Prince Michael what that signifies. Remember the names--Poluski, Michael--now run! Delay, and your throat will be cut!"

John Sobieski was trained to obey. He made off without a word. Felix entered the hotel by a side door. He darted up the

stairs, breathless and almost spent. He was in time to see Beaumanoir open the door of the sitting room and close it again hastily.

"Oh, dash it all!" began his Lordship; for Alec, not to be denied, had just clasped Joan in his arms.

"In, in! Not a second to lose! Barricade the door!" gasped Felix.

"But, man alive, where is the fire?"

"In, I tell you! *Sacre nom!* Act first and talk afterward!"

Felix himself flung wide the door, and Alec, at this second interruption, was compelled to free the scarlet faced Joan from his eager embrace.

"Too bad!" he laughed. "You promised me a minute, Felix!"

Beaumanoir came in, diffident for once in his life, since none knew so well as he how dear to his friend was the blushing and embarrassed girl whom he now met for the first time.

"Sorry, old chap," he said; "but this other johnny will have it that somebody is thirsting for your gore."

Poluski, all trembling with excitement, slammed and locked the door and pointed to a heavy sideboard. "Drag it here!" he shrieked in a high falsetto. "The street is crammed with men belonging to the Seventh Regiment, and they have a short way with Kings they don't like. The instant they see how they have been tricked they will be after you like a pack of wolves. I have sent a messenger for help. I dared not use one of your orderlies, because that would have given the game away. While the men sit their horses out there the mutineers may believe you will soon reappear. Nevertheless, block the doorway with all the furniture. We must gain ten minutes at least, or it may be twenty."



Beaumanoir and Felix fortified the position

Joan was the first to credit him. She ran to the window. "Oh, Alec, it is true!" she cried. "I was watching the crowd before you came, and it looks quite different now. Hundreds of men have gathered, and they are armed with knives and pistols. Something has made them angry, and the two soldiers are becoming alarmed. Oh, my dear, my dear! misfortune and I have come to you hand in hand!"

"It seems to me that you and Felix have saved my life," said Alec quietly. "Now, Beaumanoir, you and I must fortify the position. Joan, stand with your back to the wall between the windows. Felix, watch the houses opposite, and don't let the enemy take us in flank without warning. Thank goodness for an oak sideboard and a heavy table! Are you ready, Bertie? Heave away, then! We shall occupy a box in the front row when Stampoff arrives with his hussars! By Jove! what a day! Twelve hours in that scorching sun and Joan waiting here all the time! Well, wonders will never cease! I wish we had one of those live shells we were experimenting with this morning. It would come in handy when the first panel gives way."

CHAPTER VIII

SHOWING HOW THE KING KEPT HIS APPOINTMENT

Joan's eyes could not leave Alec. She followed each movement of his lithe, strongly knit frame as he and Beaumanoir hauled the heavy pieces of furniture into position behind the door. She was not fully alive as yet to the real menace of the gesticulating mob surging in the street beneath, and her thoughts ran riot in the newly discovered paradise of being loved and in love.

For Alec had asked no questions, listened to no explanations. When he entered the room, he found her, half turned from the window, conscious that he was near, though trying to persuade her throbbing heart that Felix would not depart from an implied promise by sending him to her without warning. She strove to utter some words of greeting. Before she could speak, Alec's arms were around her, and he was kissing her lips, her forehead, her hair. She saw him as through a mist. Her first fleeting impression was that he had become older, sterner, more commanding. Kingship had set its seal on him. A short month of power had stamped lines on his face that would never vanish. But that sense of imperiousness was quickly dispelled by the enchantment of her presence.

Somehow, almost without spoken word, he brought the thrilling conviction that he was hungering for her. The light in his eyes, the overwhelming ardor of his embrace, the magnetic force that leaped the intervening space while yet they were separated by half the length of the room,—these things bewildered, charmed, subdued her wholly, and she kindled under them ere her brain could summon to aid the feeblest of remonstrances.

She abandoned the nebulous idea of protest when she found that she in turn was clinging to him, giving kiss for kiss with a delirious intensity that refused to be denied. Nevertheless, the sheer joy of her emotions frightened her, and she was endeavoring to subdue its too sensuous expression when Beaumanoir opened the door, to close it again hurriedly. She recovered her faculties slowly. She was still quivering under the stress of that moment of ineffable delight, and her brown eyes sparkled with the glow of a soul on fire, and she was brought back to earth only by the knowledge that Felix, standing at his post near a window, was on the verge of collapse.

The sideboard contained a flask of brandy, which Pauline had insisted on stowing in a dressing bag in case of illness. Joan, glad of the pretext to do some commonplace thing, thankful for the mere utterance of commonplace words, called for help.

"Please remove the table for an instant," she cried. "Felix is ill, and I want to get at some cognac that is in the cellarette."

"Ill! He was lively enough in the street a minute ago, singing like a thrush," said Alec cheerily, though he did not fail to pull the table clear of the cupboard. "What is it, my Humming Bee?" he demanded, turning to Poluski. "Is it a surfeit of excitement, or late hours, or what?"

"I am yielding to the unusual, my King," crackled the Pole's voice thinly. "During three whole days I have done naught but think, and that would incommode an elephant, leave alone a rat like me."

"Rat, indeed! When we are all out of this trap, Felix, you must tell me what caused your alarming exercise of brain power. Already you have bothered me to guess how you fathomed the pretty scheme you are now upsetting."

"There, dear Felix, drink that, and you will soon feel strong again," put in Joan.

"Ha, dear Felix, am I? I expected to be called anything but that after breaking my word so disgracefully!"

"You are forgiven," said she with a tender smile at Alec.

Beaumanoir, discreetly peeping through the window over Poluski's shoulder, saw something that perplexed him.

"I say, Alec," he exclaimed, "I thought you told me that Stampoff's man Bosko was a thoroughly reliable sort of chap."

"I have always found him so."

"Well, just at present he looks jolly like a deserter. He is making a speech to the mob and tearing off his uniform obligato. The other joker is scared to death."

"Bosko making a speech! Why, he never says anything but '*Oui, monsieur*,' or '*Non, monsieur*,' which is all the French he knows. Well, this is a day of wonders, anyhow."

Neglecting the precautions he had insisted on a minute earlier, Alec himself went to the window and drew Joan with him. There were two other windows in the room; but the four clustered in the one deep recess, for the thick walls of this old building were meant to defy extremes of heat and cold. By this time one of the two orderlies had dismounted and was stamping on his smart cavalry jacket and plumed shako, thus announcing by eloquent pantomime, that he was discarding forever the livery of a tyrant.

The mob in the street was now swollen to unrecognizable dimensions, and Alec's charger, which Bosko was holding, resented the uproar by lashing out viciously with his heels. A man who had narrowly escaped being kicked drew a revolver, fired, and the spirited Arab fell with a bullet in its brain. The dastardly act was cheered; for the Seventh Regiment remembered that this same white horse had stumbled and thrown King Theodore on the day of his murder.

"Oh, the coward, the hateful coward!" wailed Joan, and two of the men muttered expressions of opinion that must be passed over in silence.

But Felix happened to be watching Bosko, and noted the black rage that convulsed his face when the Arab dropped dead at his feet. The Albanian's feelings mastered him only for an instant.

He began at once to harangue the crowd again, evidently offering to lead his own horse out of harm's way, and loudly bidding his frightened comrade to do likewise.

A path was being cleared when some one looked up at the window, and a fierce yell proclaimed the King's presence. Bosko was forgotten. Sight of their quarry had frenzied the pack.

"Down everyone!" cried Alec, bending double and dragging Joan with him.

Several panes of glass were starred with little round holes, mortar fell from the ceiling, and the crackle of shots below showed that revolvers were popular in Delgratz. But Felix had seen enough to set his shrewd wits working.

"That man of yours--is Bosko his name?--is no fool," said he, when they had crept from the glass strewn area into the shelter of the stout wall. "He is gulling your beloved subjects, Alec. He realizes that trouble is brewing, and he means to steal off and bring help. Fortunately, my brave Sobieski will be at the President's house by this time, and your guards may arrive before those cutthroats in the street decide to storm the hotel."

"Sobieski--who is he?" asked Alec.

"A waiter in the restaurant. I have pledged you to buy him a cafe in Warsaw if the troops come speedily."

"Make it a brewery, Alec," said Beaumanoir; "these bounders mean business."

A constant fusillade of bullets was now tearing the windows to atoms, and shattering the ceiling on the other side of the room. Lord Adalbert was justified in offering liberal terms for relief.

The King, standing with one arm thrown round Joan's shoulders, felt the tremors she strove vainly to repress. "Don't be afraid, sweetheart. They cannot reach us here," he said. "I have one unknown protector, it seems, and I feel sure that Felix is right about Bosko. The only drawback is that our friendly waiter may find some difficulty in persuading the officers on duty at Monsieur Nesimir's house that we are in danger. We must risk that."

"Oh, to safeguard against delay, I told him to ask for the Prince," said Felix.

"What Prince?"

"Your father, of course. Ha! Name of a good little gray man! You don't know that Prince Michael and your mother are in Delgratz."

"Mark cock!" cried Beaumanoir, as a bullet flew breast high across the room and imbedded itself in the inner wall. The heroes of the Seventh Regiment were firing from the upper floors of the houses opposite.

Alec did not seem to heed. The look of blank amazement on his face proved that he had ridden straight from the review ground to the university, whereas a call at the President's house would have enlightened him.

"It is true, dear," whispered Joan. "They came with us from Paris; in the same train, that is. We all arrived at Delgratz this morning. Your mother spoke to me on the platform at Vienna."

He smiled with something of the old careless humor of Paris days. "I suppose everything is for the best," he said. "Nothing surprises me now, not even this," and he nodded cheerfully toward the landing and stairs, whence a rush of footsteps and clamor of voices were audible.

The handle of the door was wrenched violently, and shots were fired into the lock and at the panels; but the wood was seasoned and stanch, and nothing short of a rifle would drive a bullet through. The door creaked and strained under the pressure of the mutineers' shoulders. Had it not been reinforced by the solid sideboard and equally heavy table, it must have given way. As it was, no four men in Delgratz could hope to force an entrance, and no more than four could attack it simultaneously.

It was noteworthy that no one called on the King to come out. These hirelings, enraged against a ruler who had brought to the Danube a new evangel of justice and uprightness, of honest government and clean handed service to the State, made no pretense of requesting a hearing for their grievances. They had planned to shoot him in cold blood while he and his three companions were momentarily delayed by the barrier of the bullock cart in front of the corner cafe. Balked of this easy means of attaining their end, they were still sure of success. But their cries and curses were intended only for self encouragement. Not even the bloodstained Seventh Regiment had the effrontery to ask their victim to admit them.

There was a momentary quieting of their wild beast fury when the door resisted their utmost efforts. Joan tried to persuade her tortured mind that the conspiracy had failed.

"They will not dare to remain," she whispered. "They know that assistance may arrive at any moment. Listen, they are going now!"

"Are you gentlemen armed?" asked Felix, grimly.

"Yes, with riding whips," said Alec. "For my part, I have refused to carry any more dangerous weapon; though it is true that I entered Delgratz with a sword in my hand," he added, remembering with a twinge his imagining of Joan's ready laugh when she heard of Prince Michael's brown paper parcel.

"Pity you don't possess a revolver apiece. They would prove useful when the panels are broken, which will happen just as soon as these high spirited politicians on the landing secure axes," went on Felix remorselessly.

He wanted Joan to realize the certain fate that awaited her once the door gave way. Concealment was useless, and he hoped she would faint before the end came.

"What price the leg of a chair?" asked Beaumanoir.

The Pole bent his gleaming gray eyes on the Briton with a curious underlook of inquiry. "No, no. We can do better than that. You would be shot before you could strike a blow. Joan, please crawl past the window and stand upright in the corner close to the wall. You follow, Alec. I go next, and this young gentleman, who must be Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir, since he has all the outward signs of the British aristocracy, will place himself near the door. If he does exactly what I tell him, we still have a fighting chance."

The change of position advised by Poluski rendered them safe from their assailants' bullets until the door was actually off its hinges and the furniture thrust aside. In the last resort, Alec meant to show himself at a window and offer a fair target to the men in the houses across the street. When he felt the shooting from that quarter would cease. Then, acting on his precise instructions, Beaumanoir and Felix must lift Joan through another window and allow her to drop to the pavement. It was not far. She might escape uninjured, and there was a possibility that the mob would spare a woman who was an utter stranger, one in no way mixed up in Kosnovian affairs.

Time enough to take this final step when their defense was forced, and that would be soon. In all likelihood, he had not much more than a minute to live, and he devoted that minute to Joan.

"Sweetheart," he murmured tenderly, "you saw the beginning of my career as a King, and it seems that you are fated to see its end. Have you forgotten what Pallas Athene said to Perseus? It is not so long ago, that morning in the Louvre. But why did you run away from Paris? Why have you not written? If you knew how I hoped for a word from you! My heart told me you loved me; but even one's heart likes to be assured that it is not mistaken."

He was looking into her eyes. The fantasy seized her that he was able to read her secret soul, and she swept aside any thought of concealment. "Alec," she said, "tell me truly, are we in danger of death?"

"I am," he replied simply. It was better so, he thought.

"Then I thank God that I am here to die with you."

He dared not hint that she might escape. "We still have a remote chance," he went on. "Let us talk of ourselves, not of death."

"But I don't want to die, Alec," she whispered brokenly. "I want to live, dear. I want to live and be your wife. Oh, Alec, let us ask Heaven for one year of happiness, one short year----" She choked, and the tears so bravely repressed hitherto dimmed her glorious eyes. Her piteous appeal increased the torment of his impotence. His face grew marble white beneath the bronze, and he bent in mute agony over her bowed head.

Felix, crouching behind Beaumanoir, assured himself that the King and his chosen lady were momentarily deaf to all else than the one supreme fact that each loved the other. He sighed, and touched the stalwart Beaumanoir's shoulder, which he was just able to reach with uplifted hand.

"Drop on your knees," he said. "I want to tell you something."

"You think it is high time I said my prayers--eh, what?"

Yet the younger man obeyed, since there was a calm authority in the pinched and wrinkled face raised to his that seemed to despise the uproar of the mob. Felix was singularly unmoved by the bestial din. He evidently cared naught for the continuous shooting from street and houses, or the renewed outburst on the stairs that welcomed the arrival of axes and sledge hammers rifled from a neighboring shop.

"Pay heed to what I am going to say," he muttered, bringing his mouth close to Beaumanoir's ear, "I don't wish Joan or the King to know what we are doing. They will be wise after the event, not before, which is often the better part of wisdom. Have you a steady hand? Will you flinch if I ask you to destroy every man on the other side of that door?"

Beaumanoir twisted his head round and grinned. "If asking will do the trick, try me!" said he.

Felix took from an inner pocket of his coat a gunmetal cigarcase. He pressed a spring, and the lid flew open. Inside were four cigar shaped cylinders, each studded with a number of tiny knobs. He withdrew a cylinder, and from a small cup in its base obtained six percussion caps, which he proceeded to adjust on the iron nipples.

"My own patent!" he exclaimed, with an air of pride that was grotesque under the conditions. "Each cigar is a bomb, warranted to clear any ordinary room of its occupants. It does not discriminate. It will dismember the most exalted personages."

"By gad!" ejaculated Beaumanoir, shrinking away slightly.

Felix pressed closer in his enthusiasm. "The point carrying the detonators is loaded with lead. If properly handled, it is sure to fly with that end in front. You take it between your thumb and second finger, thus, and poise it by placing the tip of the first finger behind it, thus; but you must throw hard, and wait until the upper part of the door is smashed, and you can fling it clear, or three ounces of dynamite will explode in front of your nose, with disastrous effect. I will have a second bomb ready if the first one fails; but it will not."

"By gad!" said Beaumanoir again, gazing at the deadly contrivance as if fascinated by it. He could retreat no farther, being jammed against the sideboard.

"Do you understand?" demanded Felix coolly.

"Perfectly. Is it--er--Russian or Spanish?"

"Neither. I call it the International. Are you ready?"

A thunderous blow shook the door. Another and another fell on lock and hinges.

"Felix!" said Alec, turning from Joan and stooping over the hunchback.

"Don't bother me, I am busy," growled the Pole.

"But we must act. We are done for now, and Joan must be saved. I mean to draw the enemy's fire. When I am hit, you and Beaumanoir must take Joan to the third window over there--take her by force if necessary----"

"My good Alec, at present you are a King without power. Please don't talk nonsense. Keep in your corner, pacify Joan, and leave the rest to me."

"Felix," and Alec's tone grew curt and sharp, "this is no time for jest! Look, you madman, the door is splitting! Is Joan to die, then, to please your whim? Either attend to me or stand aside!"

Poluski groaned. He was such an amalgam of contrarities that he hated the notion of explaining to a monarch the subtle means he had devised for ridding the world of its unpopular rulers. Where Alec was concerned, the bomb ought to remain a trade secret, so to speak. He would not have trusted even Beaumanoir with its properties had he not known

that his own nerve would fail at the critical moment. For that was Felix Poluski's weakness. He could not use his diabolical invention--an anarchist in theory, in practice he would not harm a fly.

"I think just as much of Joan as you!" he blazed back at the pallid man whose next step promised to lead to the grave. "I am King here, not you! Keep yourself and Joan out of harm's way, and don't interfere! Stand flat against the wall, both of you! Back, I say! There is the first axhead! Now you, who were born a lord, be ready to lord it over these groundlings!"

He whirled round on Beaumanoir, and Alec saw in his friend's hand some object, what he could not guess, while Felix carried a similar article in reserve, as it were. The little man's earnestness was so convincing that the King could not choose but believe that some scheme that offered salvation was in train. But it might fail! The door might be forced before his own desperate alternative could be adopted, and the consequences to Joan of failure were too horrible to be risked. A panel shivered into splinters and the muzzles of two revolvers frowned through the aperture.

"Wait!" bellowed Poluski; for Beaumanoir's hand was raised.

Lord Adalbert did more than wait. With the quickness born of many a hard won victory on the polo ground, his free left hand flew out and grasped the wrist behind one of the pistols. He pulled fiercely and irresistibly. An arm appeared, and a yell of pain signalized a dislocated shoulder.

The weapon exploded harmlessly and fell to the floor. A living stop gap now plugged the first hole made by the ax wielders, while the writhing body of their comrade interfered with further operations.

Beaumanoir gave an extra wrench, and his victim howled most dolorously. He slipped the bomb into his coat pocket.

"Pick up that revolver, Alec," he cried. "If it is still loaded it will help us to hold the fort."

The King rushed forward, and butted against Beaumanoir in his haste. Felix, whose skin was always sallow, became livid; but nothing happened, and he snatched the bomb from its dangerous resting place. Then he burst into a paroxysm of hysterical laughter which drowned for an instant a new hubbub in the street.

Alec, hastily examining his prize, found that three chambers were loaded. He was about to search for a crack in the door through which he could fire at least one telling shot, when his ear caught the prancing of horses on the paving stones.

Joan, thoroughly enlightened now as to their common peril, had behaved with admirable coolness since Alec implored her not to stir from the corner between door and window. She was sure they would all be killed, and her lips moved in fervent prayer that death might be merciful in its haste; but she was not afraid; that storm of tears had been succeeded by a spiritual exaltation that rescued her from any ignoble panic. Yet her senses were strained to a tension far more exhausting than the display of emotion natural to one plunged without warning into the most horrible of the many horrors of civil war, and she had heard, long before the others, the onrush of cavalry and the stampede of the mob.

So, when her eyes met Alec's, and she saw that questioning look in his face, she smiled at him with a radiant confidence that was astounding at such a moment.

"Heaven has been good to us, dear," she said. "Your soldiers are here. Your enemies are running away. Listen! they are fighting now on the stairs. The unhappy men who raved for our lives will lose their own. Can nothing be done to save them?"

He ran to the window. Those leaden blasts that had swept the room from the first floors of the opposite houses had ceased, and not one potvaliant marksman of them all was to be seen; but the street was full of hussars, and directly beneath, mounted on an excited horse, Stampoff was giving furious orders which evidently demanded an energetic storming of the hotel entrance.

Alec threw open the window and leaned out. "Just in time, old friend!" he cried.

Stampoff heard him and looked up. "God's bones!" he roared. "Here is the King safe and sound. At them, my children! Dig them out with your sabers! Don't leave a man alive!"

"Stop!" shouted Alec. "No more slaughter! I forbid it!"

Stampoff wheeled round on his charger and addressed the press of soldiers who had been unable to take any part in the street clearing, since the mob broke and fled when the first rank of plumed caps and flashing swords became visible.

"You hear, my children," he vociferated. "Don't harm anybody who does not resist. The King's commands must be obeyed."

Joan, of course, could only guess what was being said; but she could not fail to recognize the sounds of conflict on the stairs. Men are strangely akin to tigers when they see red, and the tiger's roar when he pounces on a victim differs greatly from his own death scream. Alec, powerless to move Stampoff, who believed, rightly, as it transpired, that the ringleaders were foremost in the attack, turned to Beaumanoir.

"Release that fellow," he said. "If I am able to make my voice heard through the racket, I can put an end to this butchery."

Beaumanoir let go the arm, and a body fell on the other side of the door.

"You are too late, I hope," he said quietly. "My prisoner took the knock just before you spoke. I felt it run through him. He shook like a pony under the spur. And you're wrong, you know. This gang must be cleared out." He peered through the broken panel. "It's all over," he added. "No flowers, by request."

Felix was peering up at them with his bright crafty eyes. "Queer thing!" he growled. "In my first honest fight I have been on the side of tyranny. If you young gentlemen will be good enough to remove the barricade and give orders to have the passage cleared, I can go back to the cup of coffee I left in the restaurant. Meanwhile, Joan must be taken to her room. She is going to faint, and the Lord only knows what has become of her maid!"

Alec was at Joan's side before Felix had made an end. "You will not break down now, sweetheart," he cried. "All danger is over, and, with God's help, you will never witness such a scene in Delgratz again!"

"I feel tired," she sighed. "I know quite well I am safe, Alec. Somehow, I hardly thought you and I should die to-day. We have things to do in the world, you and I; but those horrid men frightened me by their shrieks. It must be awful to pass into the unknown--like that!"

She sighed again. To her strained vision Alec suddenly assumed the aspect of Henri Quatre's gilded statue on the Pont Neuf. It did not seem to be in the least remarkable that the statue should leap from his horse and take her in his arms. She was absolutely happy and content. She felt she could rest there awhile in safety.

So, when the door was opened, the King experienced no difficulty in carrying Joan through a scene of bloodshed that would certainly never have been blotted from her mind had she remained conscious. Stampoff's commands had been obeyed, and the place reeked of the shambles; but the girl was happily as heedless of its nightmare horrors as the thirty-one men who lay there dead or dying.

Alec bore her out into the street. The sight of him was greeted by a sustained cheer from the troops and the loyal citizens who were now threatening a riot of curiosity and alarm, since the news had gone round that the King was being done to death by a rebellious soldiery in the Furst Michaelstrasse, and Delgratz was hurrying to the rescue.

Joan, revived a little by the fresh air and bewildered by the shouting throng that pressed around the King, opened her eyes. "Where am I?" she whispered, delightfully ignorant of the fact that she was nestling in Alec's arms under the gaze of many hundreds of his subjects.

"I am sending you to my mother, dear," he replied. "Felix and your maid will be here in a moment, and they will take you to her in a carriage. You cannot remain at the hotel, and you will be well cared for in Monsieur Nesimir's house."

"Are you coming, Alec?" she asked, scanning his face like a timid child.

"Soon, quite soon."

"Then I am content," she said, and the cloud descended again for a brief space.

Pauline, unfortunately, happened to be in the kitchen when the fray began. She was nearly incoherent with fright; but Felix managed to reassure her, and piloted her skilfully out of the hotel by an exit that concealed the gruesome staircase.

The glittering escort of soldiers surrounding the carriage pressed into the King's service served to complete the illusion insisted on by Poluski, and Pauline rejoined her mistress, firm in the conviction that the tumult was an outlandish Serbian method of merrymaking.

Alec, having seen the carriage started on its short journey, approached Stampoff and wrung his hand. "It was a near thing, General," he said. "Five minutes later and we should have been in another world."

He spoke in French, and Beaumanoir heard him.

"Not a bit of it," said he. "That anarchist johnny carries about with him the finest assortment of bombs.--By the way,

where is the bally thing? I'll swear I put it in my pocket when I grabbed that joker through the door."

His hurried search was not rewarded, and Alec, scarcely understanding him, asked Stampoff who had given the alarm.

"Bosko, of course. He came tearing up to the War Office like a madman. Had any other brought the same message I really should not have believed it."

"Then you heard nothing of a waiter from this hotel, a waiter named Sobieski?"

"Nothing, your Majesty. Bosko was undoubtedly the first to arrive with the news, and all was quiet at the President's as I rode past. I noted that especially. By the way, Prince Michael is here; came this morning, I am told. The Princess accompanied him. Does your Majesty intend going to them at once? I have already sent an orderly to announce your safety."

Alec looked at his watch. "Five minutes past four," he said. "No, General, I am due at the university. I like to be punctual; but this slight delay was unavoidable. I shall see you at dinner to-night, and I suppose you will clear the city of these idiots of the Seventh Regiment before sunset. By the way, a word before we part. You saw the lady whom I brought from the hotel and placed in the carriage?"

"Saw her, your Majesty? Judas! Thirty years ago I should have striven to rescue her myself."

"It was she who rescued me, General, she and the little humpbacked man. Exactly how they managed it I do not know as yet; but to-night you shall hear the whole story. At present, it is enough that you should be told the one really important fact. She is my promised wife."

With a smile and a farewell hand-wave, Alec mounted a troop horse and rode away with Beaumanoir in the direction of the university.

Stampoff looked after him with an expression of utmost dismay on his weatherbeaten face. "Gods!" he muttered. "A wife, and a pretty foreigner too, that is a bird of another color! What will Prince and Princess Delgrado say now, I wonder? What will Kosnovia say, when it is in every man's mind that you should marry a Serb? And what mad prank of fortune sent her here to-day? By thunder! I thought things were quieting down in Delgratz; but I was wrong--they are just beginning to wake up!"



CHAPTER IX

MUTTERINGS OF STORM

Before Joan's carriage had traveled a hundred yards it was halted by a loud command. An officer, galloping at the head of a detachment of cavalry, sought news of the King, and an escorted vehicle coming from the upper end of Furst Michaelstrasse promised developments. Joan was startled back into consciousness by the sudden stoppage. The excited babble going on without was incomprehensible and therefore alarming, nor did the polite assurances of the officer, as he bent in the saddle and peered in at the window while he aired his best French, serve to still this fresh tumult in her veins.

"What is he saying?" she asked Felix, turning her frightened eyes from the urbane personage on horseback to Poluski's intent face.

"He was sent to rescue the King," was the explanation. "He says the bodyguard received warning less than two minutes ago."

"Tell him the King is safe now."

"Oh, he knows that already. What puzzled him is the fact that the troops at the War Ministry, which lies beyond the President's house, should have reached there before him."

"What does it matter, since help came in time? Please bid the coachman go on. I--I would like to be the first to let Princess Delgrado know that her son has escaped from those horrid men. Who were they? Why should they want to kill Alec?"

Felix did not obey her bequest instantly. He exchanged some hasty words with the strange officer, who chanced to be Drakovitch, and answered Joan's questions only when the cab resumed its journey. "Have you forgotten the part played by the Seventh Regiment in the recent history of Delgratz?" he cried.

"I remember something about them. Alec disbanded them. Oh--they were the soldiers who revolted and murdered the late King and Queen."

"Exactly. Do women ever read the newspapers intelligently, I wonder? You state a most remarkable fact, considering that this is Delgratz and your future capital, as coolly as if it had happened in Kamchatka."

"But still I do not understand why they should turn against Alec. I have at least sufficient intelligence to recall the avowed object of their crime,--the restoration of the Delgrado line."

Felix smiled. If Joan was able to defend herself, she was certainly making a rapid recovery. "That is a mere hazy recollection of their afterthought. Of all despotisms, save me from a military one, and soldiers who slay Kings are the worst of despots. If there were no Kings, there would be few soldiers, Joan. Put that valuable truism away among the other wise saws that govern your life. You will appreciate its truth, and the even greater truth of its converse, when you are a Queen. But soldiers are stupid creatures, obviously so, since killing is no argument, or the word philosopher would mean a man armed with a bludgeon. If they do away with a tyrant and elect his successor, they are apt to acquire the habit. Soldiers are meant to obey, not to rule, and these Kosnovian Kingmakers were not patriots but cutthroats."

Joan buried her face in her hands. The thought came unbidden that in some inexplicable way she shared with the infamous Seventh Regiment a large measure of responsibility for Alec's dangerous kingship.

"Mademoiselle is ill. Why trouble her with your silly chatter?" demanded Pauline angrily.

"Eh, what the deuce? My name isn't Balaam," retorted Felix.

"Nor am I a donkey, monsieur. If it wasn't for you, miladi would now be happy in her little apartment in the Place de la Sorbonne. I keep my ears open, me!"

"I said nothing about your ears, Madame Pauline," tittered Felix.

The Frenchwoman's homely features reddened, and a vitriolic reply was only half averted by the lurching of the carriage through a gateway. Joan looked out, and her eyes were moist.

"I possess two good friends in Delgratz, and I hope they will not quarrel on my account," she said, with a piteous smile that silenced the woman. Poluski's mouth twisted.

"We are not quarreling, my belle," he cried. "Pauline thinks I brought you here, whereas your presence is clearly an act of Providence. Being a modest person, I naturally protested."

If Joan was not utterly bewildered by the whirligig of events, and more than ever unnerved now at the near prospect of meeting Prince and Princess Delgrado in the perhaps unwelcome guise of their son's affianced wife, she would certainly have discovered that Felix was saying the first thing that came uppermost in his mind. The outcome must have been a quick mental review of the day's incidents in order to hit upon the special item he was trying to conceal, though it is probable that no girl of Joan's candid nature would ever guess the suspicion rapidly maturing to a settled belief in the Pole's acute brain.

For Captain Drakovitch, the officer who led the bodyguard in their belated ride to the King's aid, had told him that a waiter, John Sobieski by name, had arrived breathless at the President's house many minutes before the actual alarm was given. Sobieski had sobbed out some incoherent words about the King, and the Seventh Regiment; but Prince Michael, who was in the courtyard, snapped up the man immediately, bidding him hold his tongue, and hurrying him inside the building. Once there, Sobieski became more confused than ever. Prince Michael obviously regarded him as a crazy rumor-monger until Nesimir appeared. The latter, by reason of his local knowledge, instantly appreciated the true significance of an attack on the King in a crowded thoroughfare by a gang whom Sobieski was sure he had identified correctly.

Nevertheless, precious time had been consumed by the elder Delgrado's interference. The President acted with promptitude; but the outcome was clear. If it had not been for Bosko, the King must have fallen.

"Gods!" vowed Drakovitch in his emphatic story to Felix, "there were we lounging about smoking cigarettes while his Majesty was in a fair way to be cut in pieces! A nice state of affairs! If some one had not warned Stampoff, we might have been too late!"

"Better not mention it in public," was Poluski's advice. "The mere notion of the resultant disaster would make Prince Michael seriously ill. Moreover, such things grow in the telling, and the story will be traced back to you."

The other had agreed, and Felix followed his own counsel by withholding from Joan all knowledge of the unpleasant mischance that had nearly cost the lives of the King and his companions in the besieged hotel. But his thoughts were busy, and, when he found Sobieski detained in the entrance hall, he consigned Joan and her maid to the care of a servant, briefly explaining that they were to be taken to Princess Delgrado, and forthwith questioned his fellow countryman.

Sobieski was quaking with fear. The scornful disbelief expressed by Prince Michael had discomfited him at the beginning, and now he was practically under arrest until his connection with the outrage was investigated officially. One of Stampoff's messengers had already announced the King's safety, or by this time Sobieski must have become the lunatic Prince Michael took him to be.

"What then, my friend, they did not credit your tale, I hear?" said Felix genially, and the sound of his voice drove some of the misery from the waiter's pallid cheeks.

"It was my fault, monsieur. I ran so fast that I lost my breath and the gentleman could not understand me."

"Ah, is that it? Did you speak Polish?"

"No, no, monsieur. I always speak Serbian here."

"And what did you say?"

"Just what you told me to say,—that the King was in danger and that the President was to send troops instantly to the Furst Michaelstrasse. Then the old gentleman, he whom they call Prince Michael, came up and said he did not believe a word of it."

"Mon Dieu! He understood you, it appears?"

"Perhaps not, monsieur. I made a hash of it, especially when I told him Monsieur Poluski sent me."

"Sure you mentioned that?"

"Quite sure, monsieur. It was then he ordered me inside the house. The mention of your name seemed to annoy him. For a little while he could say nothing but 'Poluski, Poluski! Is he in it?' I swore you had nothing to do with the plot, monsieur, but had acted throughout as the King's friend; then he stormed at me again, and called me a blockhead for coming to the palace with such a mad story. He asked me what I thought would have been the consequence if the

Princess heard me, and I said I knew nothing about any Princess; I was only quite sure the King would be slain if some one did not hasten to his rescue."

"But some one had more sense, some one listened?" said Felix dryly.

"Ah, yes. When the President came down the stairs, Prince Michael went to meet him, laughing all the time at my romancing, as he called it. But I shouted out, being quite desperate then, and Monsieur Nesimir heard me. Of course, by that time, I was in such a state that my knees shook. I was certain the King would be found dead, and perhaps you, monsieur, and then would there be no one to prove that I was not mixed up in the affair, so people would think I ran to the palace in order to save my own skin. I nearly dropped with fear, feeling that so many minutes were being lost, and that made me more nervous than ever when I was answering Monsieur Nesimir's questions."

Poluski's worn face exhibited no more emotion than if he was a graven image, but his voice was sympathetic. "At any rate, everything has ended happily, friend John," said he. "The King is alive, you did your duty, and you will find him not unmindful of your services. By whose order are you detained here?"

The excited waiter began to snivel. "I don't know, monsieur. Pray intercede for me and have me set at liberty, or I shall lose my situation if it gets about that I have been arrested. My patron will have nothing to do with politics. He says his business is to sell beer and coffee, and all parties are equally fond of his goods."

Felix, who was already being eyed askance by the presidential hangers-on in the entrance lobby, returned to the courtyard and appealed to the officer in charge of the escort. A brief conversation with an official elicited the fact that Sobieski awaited Prince Michael's commands.

"Then bring Prince Michael here," said Poluski.

"Monsieur!" An astounded flunky could say no more; but this impudent hunchback was in no wise abashed.

"Exactly, Monsieur Felix Poluski wishes to see his Excellency at once. Tell him that, and it will suffice."

The lackey was forced to yield, and, much to his surprise, Prince Michael did not hesitate an instant in obeying that imperative summons. An expression of annoyance flitted across his florid features when he found Poluski standing near the trembling waiter; but he tackled the situation with nonchalance.

"Have you been here long, Felix?" he inquired. "No one told me you had arrived. Your young lady friend has been taken to the Princess--at her own request, I am given to understand. Dreadful business, this unforeseen attack on my son, isn't it? I must confess that I didn't credit a word of it when this poor fellow rushed in with his broken tale. Ah, by the way, I gave some orders in my alarm that may have been misinterpreted." He dug a hand into a pocket; but withdrew it, empty.

"His Majesty will see to it that you are suitably rewarded," he said to Sobieski. "Meanwhile, you have my hearty thanks, and I regret that any hasty words of mine should have caused you inconvenience. You can go at once, of course."

Sobieski made off, well pleased that his stormy career in the whirlpool of state affairs was ended. But Felix shook hands with him and said quietly:

"I will not forget."

Prince Michael seized Poluski's arm with a fine assumption of dignified cordiality. "So it was really you who sent that stammering youth with such an astounding message? Come, then. Tell me all about it. Was Alec actually in peril?"

He drew Felix up the stairs, out of earshot of the servants and orderlies in the wide hall. Felix sniffed.

"Odd thing," he grinned. "You are a Prince and I am an anarchist, yet both of us need a nip of brandy when we are disturbed. But I have the better of you in one respect, my dear Michael. My hand doesn't shake. Now, yours----"

The clasp on his arm loosened, lost some of its friendliness, and Prince Delgrado stood for an instant on the stairs.

"I tried to show a calm front before the others; but the predicament my son was in found the weak place in my armor," he said.

"My case exactly," said Felix. "Joan diagnosed the symptoms, and dosed me with cognac. You, I imagine, were your own physician."

"Ah, since you mention the lady, who is she?"

"Joan? A female divinity, one of the few charming women left in the world."

"Admirable! One can associate those qualities with residence in Paris; but in Delgratz, Felix, one finds them unusual--shall I say out of place?"

"If I were you, Monseigneur, I would learn to regard her in a totally different light. Joan ought to be at home here, because she is your prospective daughter in law."

Michael Delgrado could govern his nervous system with some measure of success when words were the only weapons that threatened. He did not flinch now; but threw open the door of the nearest room on the upper floor. It chanced to be the apartment in which President Nesimir had received Alec and Stampoff on that memorable morning, barely a month ago, when the young King came to Delgratz to claim his patrimony. Neither man was aware of the coincidence that led Michael to slam the door, place his back against it, and gurgled a question:

"Are you jesting, Felix?"

"Quarter of an hour ago I was on the point of being introduced to a grim personage who would have squeezed the last joke out of me," said Poluski. "His name was Death, Pallida Mors, who steps with even stride from the huts of the poor to the palace of the King, and he gave me such a fright that I shall be in no mood all day for any display of humor. Why, man, don't you realize that I have been under this roof fully five minutes without experiencing the slightest desire to sing?"

"But, Felix, do be in earnest for once. What is this you tell me? How can Alexis III. marry this woman, this adventuress?"

Poluski's big gray eyes narrowed into slits, and the hump on his shoulders became more pronounced as his head drooped forward a little; but his smooth tones did not falter, and his uneasy hearer thought he found a note of friendly commiseration in them.

"A hard word, Michael, hard and unjust. Joan is no adventuress," he said. "We old birds are too ready to condemn a young and pretty woman who falls in love with a King; but in the present instance criticism is disarmed, since Joan was in love with Alec when he had no more worldly wealth than the endowment of your princely name, and when his chance of becoming King of Kosnovia was as remote as--what shall I say?--well, as your own."

Michael came away from the door and stood looking out at the window. It afforded a partial view of the courtyard and the fairly wide street beyond the gate. "I know, of course, that your ideas and mine on these subjects differ very greatly," he said after a pause, and with a perceptible return to his grandiose manner; "but as you say rightly, both of us are old enough to realize that a reigning King can marry none but a Princess of some royal house. Again, the King of Kosnovia must marry a Serb. There you have two fixed principles, so to speak, each of which renders it impossible for a lady who rejoices apparently in no other name than Joan----"

"Joan Vernon," put in Felix, producing a cigarcase, an exact replica of that containing the bombs, and selecting one of the long thin cigars he favored.

"Ah, certainly. The Princess spoke to her in Vienna, and ascertained her name then. Well, Miss Joan Vernon cannot, by the very nature of things, become Queen of Kosnovia. It is not that I disapprove of the notion, Felix; it is simply impossible."

Poluski struck a match and began to smoke furiously. Delgrado probably expected him to say something; but he waited in vain, since Felix seemed to be far more perturbed by the suspected existence of a hole in the outer wrapping of the cigar, and futile efforts to close it with the tip of a finger, than by the princely hinting at amorganatic marriage.

Perforce, Prince Michael resumed the discussion. "I am stating the facts calmly and without prejudice," he said. "I assume that you are not misleading me or that some sort of lovers' vows exists between these young people?"

He paused again. Poluski was triumphant. He had found the hole, applied the surgical method of a tourniquet by pressure, and the cigar was drawing perfectly.

"Having said so much, Felix, you might be sufficiently communicative in other respects," growled Delgrado, turning angrily from the window.

"*Parbleu!* I left you to do the talking, Monseigneur. This devil of a cigar has been bored by a weevil, and was broken winded till I stopped the leak. You were saying?"

"That Alec Delgrado might have married your young friend; but King Alexis III. cannot."

"He will," said Felix, grinning complacently.

"If he does, it will cost him his throne."

"Poof! For a man of the world, Michael, you utter opinions that are singularly inept. I think you were driving just now at the accepted theory of royal alliances? If it holds good for Alec, it affects you, his father. You didn't marry a Princess, but happily secured a good, honest American lady, sufficiently endowed with good, honest American dollars to keep you in luxury throughout your useless life. If there is some law which says that Alec cannot make Joan a Queen, the same law would prevent him from being a King. But it doesn't. King he is, and King he will remain as long as it pleases God to keep him in good health and save him from the miserable rascals who tried to assassinate him to-day--and their like. What you want, Michael, is a friend who is not afraid to warn you. Now, for the hour, kindly regard me as filling that useful capacity. After twenty-five years of extravagance you have managed, I suppose, to exhaust your excellent wife's fortune. You came to Delgratz this morning for the express purpose of drawing fresh supplies from the Kosnovian treasury. Well, you haven't met your son yet; but when you suggest that he should begin to impoverish his people to maintain you in idle pomp in Paris, I fancy you will find him adamant. That is not his theory of governing. If it was, he would neither marry Joan nor be alive at this moment, since Heaven saw fit to intrust me with the control of both his bride and his life.

"One thing more I have to say, Michael, and then I have finished, unless you press me too hardy. Let us suppose Alec had fallen in to-day's attempt. Whom do you think would succeed him? Michael V. Not for five minutes! You know now, and I have known all along, that the real instigator of the May outbreak was Julius Marulitch and his Greek bear leader, Constantine Beliani. You were inspired, Michael, when you resigned your claims in favor of your son. Those two meant to put you forward as their puppet and shove you to the wall as soon as the Delgrado line was restored and they were able to pull the strings here in safety. They never dreamed that Alec, the careless, happy-go-lucky boy, the polo player and haunter of studios, would prove a stumbling block in the path of royal progress. You were a mere pawn, Michael. They counted on pushing you out of the way as easily as if you were a baby in a perambulator. What was true a month ago is more true now. Go down on your knees and thank Heaven that it saw fit to preserve your son's life this afternoon; for his life alone stands between you and the abyss!

"Now, I have spoken, and--name of a good little gray man!--you don't seem to like the hearing. But do not forget what I have said, Michael. I have poured forth a stream of golden words. It will be well for you if you are never called on to apply other test to their value than your own judgment; for as sure as the day dawns that you dream of reigning in Delgratz, so surely will you dig your own grave with a shovel lent by the devil."

Poluski ceased, and apparently expected no answer. He, too, went to a window and gazed out at the sunlit vista of graveled courtyard and yellow buildings.

Already there were long patches of shade; for the day was closing. A foot regiment marched past the palace gates, and Prince Michael might have remembered that in Delgratz a sentry with a loaded rifle guards each street after sunset. But his bloated face was curiously haggard, and his prominent eyes looked at the soldiers with the unconscious aspect of a man whose castle in Spain had suddenly proved itself the most deceptive of mirages. Perhaps, for a brief space, he saw himself as Felix saw him, and a species of horror may have fallen on him at the mere conceit that another man was able to peep into his heart and surprise there the foul notion that had seized him when John Sobieski brought the tidings of his son's desperate plight.

Be that as it may, Prince Michael Delgrado offered no reply to the decrepit, poverty stricken artist who had dared to unmask him in such exceedingly plain terms. Not a word passed between them during many minutes. The shuffling tramp and dust of the regiment died away, and the thoroughfare beyond the gates had resumed its normal condition when a new animation was given to the courtyard by a loud order and the hurried assembly of the guard.

"Good!" said Felix contentedly. "Here comes the King! Your Excellency will now receive confirmation of some of my statements. As for the rest, if I am proved right in some respects, it will be a first rate idea to accept the remainder without proof."

Delgrado shot a baleful glance at the hunchback; but ignored his comment. "If it is not indiscreet of a parent to betray some interest in a son's prospective happiness, may I venture again to inquire who Miss Joan Vernon is?"

"I think I answered you."

"In general terms. Feminine divinity and charm should be the characteristics of all brides; but these delectable beings do not enter the world fully formed, like Venus Aphrodite newly risen from the sea of Cyprus."

"Oh, to me it suffices that she exists, and is Joan. I have known her a whole year, during her student life in Paris, in fact.

Your smile was well chosen, Monseigneur. Aphrodite came with the spring, and so came Joan."

"And before Paris?"

"The New England section of America, I believe. Her mother died when Joan was a child; her father was in the navy and was drowned."

"An artist, you say?"

"Artistic would be the better description. She is too rich ever to paint well."

"Rich!"

"As artists go. She has an income of two hundred pounds a year."

"Ah, bah!"

"Don't be so contemptuous of five thousand francs. They go a long way--with care. I believe that my dear Joan spends all her money on dress, and keeps soup in the pot by copying pictures. But she will make a lovely Queen. *Saperlotte!* I must paint her in purple and ermine."

Yielding to the spell of the vision thus conjured up, Felix forgot his racked nerves and sang lustily a stanza from "Masaniello." Prince Michael flung out of the room to meet his son; but the strains followed him down the stairs.

Yet Poluski was thinking while he sang, and the burden of his thought was that this anxious father had asked him no word as to the scene in that bullet swept room, nor the means whereby Alec and his friends were snatched from death.

Very different was the meeting between Joan and Princess Delgrado. The panic stricken mother, scarce crediting the assurance given her by the President's family that there were no grounds for the disquieting rumors that arose from Sobieski's appeal for help, was in an agony of dread when the first undoubted version of the true occurrence was brought by Stampoff's courier.

The arrival of Joan, of one who had actually been in her son's company until the danger was passed, though helping to dispel her terror, aroused a consuming desire to learn exactly what had happened. Joan, of course, could only describe the siege and their state of suspense until the soldiers cleared the street of the would-be assassins. As to the motive of the outrage or the manner in which it reached its sudden crisis, she had no more knowledge than the Princess, and a quite natural question occurred to the older woman when Joan told how Felix Poluski had startled the King and herself by his warning cry.

"My son had gone to visit you, then?" she said, not without a shadow of resentment at the fact that he had discovered this girl's whereabouts readily enough, though seemingly there was none to tell him that his father and mother were in the city and longing to see him.

Joan flushed at the words; but her answer carried conviction. "I do not yet understand just how or when Felix discovered that the King's life was threatened," she said; "but there can be no doubt it was a ruse on his part to distract the attention of the mob when he told his Majesty that I was in the hotel.--I chanced to be looking out--and I was very angry with Felix when I saw that he had stopped the King and was evidently informing him of my presence."

"Then my son did not know you were in Delgratz?"

"He had no notion I was any nearer than Paris."

"What an amazing chapter of accidents that you should be in Delgratz to-day, and, under Providence, become the means of saving Alec's life; for it is quite clear to me now that had he gone a few yards farther he would have been shot down without mercy!"

Joan colored even more deeply. Her pride demanded that she should no longer sail under a false flag, yet it was a seeming breach of maidenly reserve that she should announce her own betrothal. It would have come easier if she could claim more consideration from this kind faced, pleasant voiced woman than was warranted by the casual acquaintance of a railway journey. But Alec had sent her to his mother, and Joan's nature would not permit her to carry on the deception, though it might be capable of the most plausible explanation afterward.

"I feel I ought to tell you," she said, and the blood suddenly ebbed away from her face to her throbbing heart. "Alec and I were friends in Paris. We were fond of each other; but gave not much heed to it, since I was poor and he told me he had his way to make in the world. He wrote to me a few days ago, asking me to marry him. I did not know what to say, when chance threw in my way a commission to copy a picture in this very city. Put in such words, it all sounds

very mad and unconvincing; but it is true, and it is equally true that I should never have acknowledged to-day that I returned his love if--if I did not think--for a few awful minutes--that we should both be killed. And--and--I wanted to die in his arms!"

Joan began to cry, and Princess Delgado cried too, and it was in tears that King Alexis III. found them when he had returned Prince Michael's stately greeting and was told that the young American lady who had come from the shattered hotel was in his mother's room.



CHAPTER X

WHEREIN THE SHADOWS DEEPEN

Joan was standing on the first floor veranda of the President's house early next morning, when her errant thoughts were brought back to earth from wonderland by a stir and clatter of hoofs in the courtyard. She knew, because Alec had told her the previous evening, that he was bound for an experimental farm certain local magnates had established in the rich alluvial plain that forms the right bank of the Danube some few miles from the capital city.

"At present our country exports pigs and little else," he had said. "I mean to change all that. Austria shuts and bolts her doors by hostile tariffs; but Turkey is open to trade with all the world, and who so favorably situated as we, once the barriers of race prejudice are broken down? So, behold in me a patron of agriculture and its allied arts!"

"The Turk is our hereditary enemy," snarled Prince Michael, who was much annoyed by the poor quality of the wine at the royal repast. "Fancy me drinking Carlowitz at my age!" he had growled to Stampoff when he discovered that champagne was not supplied, by the King's order.

"My dear Dad, I am trying hard to erase that word 'hereditary' from the Serbian language," laughed Alec. "It opposes me at every turn; it mocks at my best efforts; it swathes me like the bandages of a mummy,--and I am growing weary of its restraint. This is a question of self interest, too. Perhaps, if I can persuade our good Kosnovians to adopt some more up-to-date fetish, they may drop the hereditary habit of carving their chosen rulers into mincemeat whenever a change of Government seems good to them."

"The King of Kosnovia should never forget that the time may come when he will be crowned Emperor at Constantinople," said Prince Michael with a regal flourish of his plump hand.

"Precisely. The ceremony should provide a picturesque spectacle for the cinematograph. Meanwhile, I want to enter the enemy's territory, and at present my skirmishers are pigs which are difficult to drive. We need stronger forces, such as hardware, agricultural implements, horses, cereals, even textile manufactures."

"In sending your pigs, I hope you also get rid of your bores, Alec," put in Felix, and Nesimir, who knew no English, wondered why so many of his guests laughed.

As for the elder Delgrado, he sulked until the President produced a bottle of imperial tokay, a luxury which the stout Sergius explained away by the statement that his house had never before been honored by so distinguished and brilliant a company.

So Joan was prepared for her lover's departure from Delgratz soon after daybreak. The heat of the noon hours was so excessive that early rising became more of a necessity than a virtue; hence her appearance on the veranda.

Alec had definitely promised his mother before retiring to rest that he would not dispense with an escort until the city was thoroughly quieted down after the day's excitement. The troopers paraded at six o'clock, and he did not keep them waiting a minute. Joan, delighting in the military display, watched him mount and ride off with that half-maternal solicitude which is the true expression of a woman's love. She hoped he would look up ere he quitted the courtyard--and she must have telegraphed her wish; for Alec at once turned in the saddle, almost as though some one had told him she was there.

He waved a hand in gay greeting, and it would appear that a whim seized him at the sight of her, since he gave some instructions to an aid de camp, who came clanking back to the porch, dismounted, and entered the building.

Soon the officer was bowing low to Joan. "The King presents his compliments, Excellency," he said in careful French, "and wishes to know if you will accompany him for an hour's ride before sunset."



Joan laughed at Alec's masterful methods

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"Please convey my regrets to his Majesty; but I do not possess a riding habit," said Joan.

"The King told me to say that if your Excellency offers no objection, a habit will be brought to the palace at four o'clock."

Joan laughed whole heartedly; for Alec's masterful methods came as a distinct surprise. Yet, despite her independent spirit, she rejoiced in his dominance.

"Tell his Majesty that I have the utmost confidence in his judgment," she said, and her face was still rippling with merriment at the hidden meaning Alec would surely extract from her message when Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir joined her.

"Ah, that is better, Miss Vernon," he cried. "Glad to find you in good spirits,--'Hail, smiling morn,' and that sort of thing, eh, what?"

"Why are you deserting Alec--the King--to-day?" she asked. "I thought you two were inseparable. And please enlighten me, Lord Adalbert, as to the correct way of alluding to royalty. Alec is every inch a King, of course; but I find my tongue tripping every time I use his title."

Beaumanoir seemed to weigh the point. "You are experiencing the same difficulty as the sailor who acted as billiard marker in the naval mess at Portsmouth," he said. "One evening the Prince of Wales came in to play pool, and Jack whispered to the mess president, 'Beg pardon, sir, but am I to call 'im Yer R'yal 'Ighness or Spot Yaller?'"

Joan shrieked at that, and the sound of her mirth brought Princess Delgrado to them.

"You are cheerful this morning, Joan," she said.

Her ready use of the girl's Christian name would have told Felix, if he had been present, that Alec's mother did not by

any means share her husband's views as to the impossibility of a marriage between her son and this bright faced American. At any rate, Joan's cheeks glowed, and there was more than convention in the kiss the two women exchanged, each moved, as it were, by a spontaneous liking for the other.

"It is impossible to be other than cheerful in Lord Adalbert's company," said Joan. "Even yesterday, when bullets were showering in through the windows of that wretched hotel, he made game of them."

"So I did,--shouted 'Mark cock' when the first low one flew across. By gad! that's rather clever of you, Miss Vernon," he grinned.

"I don't know how either of you can find it in your heart to jest about that dreadful adventure," said the Princess. "I lay awake for hours last night thinking of what might have happened if that man Bosko had not managed to get away and warn General Stampoff."

"By the way, what became of the waiter Felix sent here from the hotel?" mused Joan aloud. "I forgot to ask him. Surely the man came and spoke to some one?"

"Oh, yes, Prince Michael met him and questioned him. Then Monsieur Nesimir took him in hand; but long before either of them could make up their minds that he was speaking the truth Bosko was clear of the mob and Stampoff was bringing his hussars from the War Ministry."

The Princess spoke hurriedly, and the younger people were quick to perceive a slight restraint in her words. It was quite natural. A mother, weighing the actions of others in a matter touching the safety of her son, would hardly make allowance for the incredulity such a messenger as Sobieski would inspire, and Beaumanoir tactfully led the talk to a less serious topic.

"You charged me, a little while ago, Miss Vernon, with deserting our sovereign lord the King, whereas the exact opposite is true," he said. "I am here on duty. 'Berty,' said my liege, 'stop at home to-day and amuse my mother and Joan,' his very words. Am I amusing you? No! Then I must go and find that funny little Pole and beseech him to tell us his best before breakfast story. Gad! He has some rippin' after dinner ones. He had us all roaring last night, and the funniest thing was to hear him spinning the same yarn in the local lingo, so that Nesimir and the other Serbs could share in the festivities. Prince Michael and Alec had the pull of me there, because they could laugh twice. By the way, Princess, Monsieur Poluski was well acquainted with your husband a good many years ago. They first met in New York, it seems. Poluski coolly informed us that he was obliged to leave Warsaw about that time because he had invented a new explosive specially adapted for removing crowned heads. Fancy him saying that when a real live King was sitting next to him."

"Alec is very fond of Felix," said Joan. "He knows quite well that our friend talks about things he has never done and never means to do. Why, Felix is the most tender hearted man living. His generosity is proverbial, and he would give away the last franc in his pocket if a starving woman begged of him. His anarchist notions are all nonsense. He has cared little about political affairs during the last ten years, and his only real happiness now is to paint the portrait of a pretty woman and sing at his work. If it was not for the belief that he is mixed up with dynamitards and other weird creatures, he would be one of the best known artists in Paris."

Beaumanoir called to mind the quiet confidence in Poluski's voice when describing the potency of that curious cigar-shaped bomb which so narrowly escaped being hurled at the mutineers during the fight.

"There is a lot more in Poluski's make-up than one would give him credit for at a glance," said he.

"I understand he was really a firebrand in his youth," remarked the Princess. "My husband and he disagreed so strongly at one period that their acquaintance ceased during many years. Indeed, I met him yesterday practically for the first time."

She sighed. Joan realized that Princess Delgrado was perplexed to find her son with so many new interests in life, interests of which she had no cognizance. He might have dwelt in some city a thousand miles removed from Paris, for all she knew of his associates or habits, and this one fact was eloquent of the gulf that yawned between his home and his pursuits.

After breakfast, Joan insisted on beginning work in the Cathedral. Felix and Beaumanoir accompanied her there in a closed carriage, and the cool interior of the heavy, ugly structure was not ungrateful in the midday heat.

At four o'clock Joan was ready to don a riding-habit that fitted marvelously well considering that the maker had never set eyes on the wearer till he brought the costume to the palace. At five she and Alec and Beaumanoir went for a ride on the outskirts of the town. The men took her to a very fine turfed avenue that wound through three miles of

woodland. At the close of a glorious canter a turn in the path revealed a rather pretty chateau situated on a gentle slope of lawns and gardens rising from the northern shore of a large lake.

"Do you like it?" asked Alec.

"It is a perfectly charming place," she said enthusiastically.

"I am glad you think so," said he. "It is called the New Konak, in contradistinction to the old one, the Schwarzburg. It will be our summer residence. I propose to occupy it as soon as it is properly furnished."

He spoke lightly; but a quiet glance conveyed far more than the words. This, then, was their destined nest, their very own house, and for their first ramble he had brought her there. Its seclusion gave a sense of secure peace that was absent from the President's gloomy palace. The lovely park and its belt of forest shut out the noise and glare of the streets. Joan sat on her horse and surveyed the scene with glistening eyes. Her future home lay there, and the belief thrilled her strangely. If she could have peered into the future, how much more deeply would she have been stirred; for if ever she was fated to be happy in the companionship of the gallant youth by her side, assuredly that happiness was not so near or so easily attained as it seemed to be in that sylvan hour.

Beaumanoir broke in on her reverie in his usual happy-go-lucky style. "Not a bad looking crib, is it, Miss Joan?" said he. "I have promised Alec to remain in Delgratz until you are all settled down in it, nice and comfy. Then I wend my lonely way back to Paris. By Jove! I shall be something of a hero there--shine with reflected glory--eh, what?"

"I can't spare you for many a day yet, Berty," said Alec. "You can hardly realize how good he has been, Joan," he continued. "I had a fearfully hard time during the first week. More than once I wanted to cut and run; but he kept me to it, chaffing me out of the dumps when everything seemed to be going wrong."

Beaumanoir winked brazenly at her. "He talks that way now," he grinned. "It's the kingly habit, I understand. Alec has got it down to a fine point. Make every fellow believe that he is It, and there you are, you know."

There was some substratum of sense in Beaumanoir's chaffing. Alec was taking his kingship very seriously, and Joan was hard pressed to bridge the gulf that lay between Paris and Delgratz.

At first she found it almost impossible to realize that Alec had been in harness little more than a month. His talk was replete with local knowledge; he seemed to understand the people and their ways so thoroughly. He was versed even in the peculiarities of their methods of tillage, was able to explain distinctions of costume and racial appearance, and might have spent his life in studying all their customs and folklore.

Fortunately, Joan herself was gifted with quick perception and a retentive memory. After a few days' residence in the White City she began to assimilate the rills of information that trickled in upon her from so many sources, and the feeling of bewildered surprise with which she regarded her lover's attainments during the first hours of real intimacy was soon replaced by an active sympathy and fuller understanding. She was helped in this by the King's mother, since there could be no doubt that Princess Delgrado took her absolutely to her heart.

Prince Michael, who was completely eclipsed not only by his son's extraordinary versatility in all public affairs but by lack of that opulent setting for his peculiar qualities which Paris alone could supply, seemed to accept the inevitable. He tolerated Joan, openly praised her beauty, and became resigned in a more or less patronizing way to the minor distractions of local life.

Felix and Joan gave up their mornings to art. The Pole discovered some quaint old frescoes in the cathedral which attracted him by their remarkable freedom of design and simplicity of color. He valiantly essayed their reproduction; but Joan suspected in her deepest heart that Poluski's sudden conversion to Byzantine ideals was due far more to the fact that the lofty dome of the building produced musical effects of the most gratifying nature than to any real appreciation of the quaint contours and glaring tints of a series of wall pictures that set forth some long forgotten Bulgar artist's conception of the life and history of John the Baptist.

There was naturally a good deal of inquiry and speculation as to the identity of the unknown connoisseur who had commissioned Joan to copy the Saint Peter. Felix resolutely declined to satisfy any one's questioning on that topic. He had given his word, he said, not to betray the confidence reposed in him; but he allayed Alec's professed jealousy by declaring that to the best of his knowledge the man who had sent Joan on this mysterious quest had never even seen her. Still, it was impossible to avoid a certain amount of interested speculation among members of the small circle which was aware of the reason that lay behind Joan's visit to Delgratz. Both Alec and Joan believed that Count Julius Marulitch was in some way responsible, and their chief difficulty was to analyze the motive of such unlooked-for generosity on his part.

The slight mystery underlying the incident was not cleared up until Beliani reached the capital two or three days after Julius himself. The latter cleared the air by expressing his unbounded amazement at finding his cousin engaged to a young American woman of whose existence he had not even heard before he was introduced to her. Under the conditions it seemed to savor of the ridiculous to ask if he was the hidden agent in the matter of the picture. But Beliani was candor itself; not for a moment did he endeavor to conceal his responsibility. When Alec welcomed him on the evening of his arrival, he drew the King aside and said, with all the friendliness of one apparently devoted to the Kosnovian cause:

"I am glad to see that my little scheme has worked well. Of course you guessed who it was that despatched Miss Vernon from Paris?"

"No," said Alec, scanning the Greek's smiling yet subtle face with those frank eyes of his that had so quickly learned the secret of looking beneath the veneer of men's words to discover their motives. "No, I never associated you with her appearance here. What inspired you to it? I may say at once that I regard it as the most friendly act you could possibly have performed so far as I am concerned; but I know you well enough to be a little dubious."

Beliani smiled and spread wide his hands with the deprecatory gesture of the Levantine. Long years of residence in the capitals of Europe had not wholly effaced the servile mannerisms of the Eastern money-lender.

"That is because you know I am a Greek, your Majesty," he said. "It is the misfortune of my countrymen that we are seldom given credit for disinterested motives. Well, I will be honest, quite frank in this, for the excellent reason that if I was to endeavor to hoodwink you I think I should fail. I make it my business to know everything--I repeat, everything--about Kosnovian affairs, and when the rumor reached Paris that you were to marry a Montenegrin Princess----"

Alec laughed so cheerily that Prince Michael, who happened to be in the room, turned and looked at the two, wondering what Beliani could have said that so amused his son.

"My dear fellow," he broke in, "I have never set eyes on the lady. My time has been far too occupied in learning my business to permit of visits to neighboring States. Moreover, as it happened, I had chosen my wife some days before I hit upon a career."

"Exactly, your Majesty. I knew that also."

"But how could you know?"

"I mean that I learned it afterward. An art student of the type of Miss Vernon, and a young gentleman so popular in Parisian society as Alexis Delgrado, could not meet day after day in the Louvre to conduct a class composed solely of two members without exciting a certain amount of comment."

"But that doesn't explain why you should have decided upon the extraordinary step of sending her to Delgratz."

"No, it shows only how readily I availed myself of existing circumstances. You see, sitting there in Paris and reading of your phenomenal progress, I pictured to myself the isolation, the lack of sympathetic companionship, that you must be suffering here despite all the brave fireworks of your achievements. We Greeks are poets and philosophers as well as financiers, and I gratified those higher instincts of my race by rendering possible a visit to Delgratz of the lady whom you had chosen as a bride, while at the same time I hope to do myself a good turn in winning your favor; for I have money at stake on your success. Please do not forget that, your Majesty. I supported the Delgrado cause when it was at the lowest ebb of failure, and I naturally look forward now to recoup myself."

"All this is new to me," said Alec, "new and somewhat puzzling. In what way are you bound up with the fortunes of my house, Monsieur Beliani?"

The Greek shrugged his shoulders expressively. "There are so many ways in which interest in a fallen monarchy can be kept alive," he said. "Monseigneur your father is well acquainted with the turns and twists of events ever since he was driven forth from Kosnovia as a young man. For many years I remained here, working steadily and hopefully in his behalf, and you yourself are aware that when you were a boy of fourteen, Stampoff and I escaped death only by the skin of our teeth because of an abortive attempt to place your father on the throne."

"Of course," said Alec thoughtfully, "you must be repaid with interest the sums you have expended in our behalf; but I warn you that a new era of economy has been established here. My father and I have already agreed to differ on that point. He seemed to think that the chief business of a King was to exploit his subjects, whereas my theory is that the King should set an example of quiet living and industry. Don't forget that I have seen some of my brother potentates stranded in Paris, mostly because they were so ready to gratify their own appetites at the expense of their people. I need hardly tell you, Beliani, that Kosnovia is a poverty stricken State. We have suffered from three generations of self

seeking and rapacious rulers. That is all ended. I mean to render my people happy and contented. It shall be the one care of my life to make them so, and if it is the will of Providence that a Delgrado should reign in the next generation, my legacy to him will be, not millions of pounds invested in foreign securities, but a nation strong, self contained, and prosperous."

Beliani listened with a rapt attention. "I agree most fully with every word that has fallen from your lips," he said; "but your Majesty cannot achieve these splendid aims single handed. You must be surrounded by able men; you need officials of ripe experience in every department. Now, the first consideration of a small State like this, hemmed in as it is by powerful Kingdoms which the least change in the political barometer may convert into active enemies, is a strong and progressive system of finance. I am vain enough to think that you may find my services useful in that direction. There is no man in Delgratz who has had my training, and so assured am I of the success that will attend your Majesty's reign that I purposely delayed my arrival here so that I might not come empty handed. I passed a week in Vienna, working and thinking twenty hours out of each twenty-four. I felt my way cautiously with the leading financial houses there. Of course, I could not say much, because I was unauthorized; but I have obtained guarantees that will command the certain issue of a loan sufficient to give a start to some, at least, of the many projects you have already foreshadowed in your public speeches. Without a shadow of doubt I declare that as soon as I am able to open negotiations with your approval, a loan of several millions will be at your service."

Though the Greek was putting forward an obvious bait, it was evident that the King was astonished by his outspoken declaration. "Do I understand that you are applying for the post of Minister of Finance?" he said in his straightforward way.

"Yes, your Majesty," replied Beliani.

"You appreciate, of course, that I occupy a somewhat peculiar position here," said Alec. "I am a constitutional monarch backed by a constitution that is little more than a name. This country really demands an autocracy, whereas I have sworn to govern only by the will of the people. In those circumstances I do not feel myself at liberty to appoint or dismiss Ministers at my own sweet will. I assure you that I am grateful for the offer of help you bring; but I cannot give you the appointment you seek until, in the first place, I have consulted my council and obtained its sanction."

Beliani bowed. "I will leave the matter entirely in your Majesty's hands," he said, and by no sign did his well governed face betray his satisfaction; for, with the King on his side, the astute Greek well knew that he could pull the strings of the puppets in the Assembly to suit his own ends.

"May I venture to suggest to your Majesty," he went on, "that there is one thing that demands immediate attention? Your position cannot be regarded as assured until you have received the recognition of the chief European States. Has Austria made any move in that direction? Have you been approached by Russia? One of those two will take the initiative, and the others will follow."

"So far," said Alec, smiling, "I have been favored with a telegram from the German Emperor, which his charge d'affaires tried to explain away next day. It was followed by a protest from Turkey on account of an alleged disrespectful remark of mine about her position in the cosmogony of Europe, and I have drawn a polite refusal from Austria to modify passport regulations, which, by the way, I suggested should be altogether done away with. Other Kings and Principalities have left me severely alone."

"But it would be a grave error to drop the passport system," said Beliani earnestly. "It is most important that your Majesty's police should be acquainted with the identity of all strangers; otherwise you would never know what secret agents of your enemies you might be harboring here."

"I trouble my head very little about the secret agents of enemies that do not exist," said Alec lightly. "You are probably thinking of the revolt of the Seventh Regiment; but that is a domestic quarrel, a local phase of the war waged by all criminals against representatives of law and order. To be sure, I shall devote every effort to keeping Kosnovia free of external troubles; yet passports are useless there. I find that a stupid dream of a Slav Empire has drugged the best intellects of Kosnovia for half a century. That sort of political hashish must cease to control our actions. It has served only to cripple our commercial expansion, and I have declined resolutely to countenance its continuance either in public or private. Let us first develop the land we own. Believe me, Monsieur Beliani, if our people are worthy of extending their sway, no power on earth can stop them; but they must first learn to till the field with implements other than swords or bayonets, which are quite out of date, either as plows or as reaping-hooks."

Prince Michael, watching them furtively, and wondering much what topic was engaging them so deeply, could no longer restrain his impatience. He joined them, saying with his jaunty, self confident air: "What new surprise are you two plotting? You ought to make a rare combination,—Alec with his democratic pose of taking the wide world into his confidence, and you, Beliani, burrowing underground like a mole whose existence is suspected only when one sees the

outcome of his labors."

"Just what I was suggesting to his Majesty," laughed Beliani, cursing Prince Michael under his breath for interfering at that moment. "I will say, though, from what I have managed to glean of his projects, that the humble role you have been good enough to assign to me will be utterly out of place in his nobler schemes. Nevertheless, I hope to make myself useful."

"Something to do with money, of course?" guffawed the Prince.

"It is the only commodity I really understand," was the suave answer.

"That is why you refused me a loan a fortnight ago in Paris, I suppose?"

"A loan!" interposed Alec. "Were you hard up, father?"

"I have been telling you so without avail ever since I arrived in Delgratz," said the Prince brusquely.

"Ah, you have been asking me to impose on an empty exchequer an annual payment that Kosnovia certainly cannot afford; but I certainly was not under the impression that you had found it necessary to apply to Monsieur Beliani for help. Why should such a step be necessary? I have always understood----"

"Oh, we need not discuss the thing now," said Prince Michael offhandedly; for he dreaded a too close inquiry into his wife's financial resources in the presence of the Greek. Princess Delgrado was reputedly a rich woman, and her husband had explained his shortness of cash during recent years by the convenient theory of monetary tightness in America, whence, it was well understood, her income was derived.

"Have you seen your mother recently?" he went on, striving to appear at his ease. "I was looking for her half an hour ago. Some letters that reached me from Paris to-day ought to be answered by to-night's post, and I wish to consult her before dealing with them."

"Joan will know where she is, I expect," said Alec; but, seeing that Prince Michael did not avail himself of Joan's presence to seek the desired information, he strolled over to the corner of the room where Joan was chatting with Beaumanoir and one of the Serbian officers attached to the royal suite.

"Do you know where my mother is?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "General Stampoff took her for a drive nearly an hour ago. I offered to go with them; but the General explained that his victoria would hold only two."

"Stampoff driving with my mother!" cried Alec with a laugh, "I must look into this. Stampoff is no lady's man as a rule. Now, what in the world does he want my mother to do for him?"

Certainly there must have been some quality in the air of Delgratz that produced strange happenings. Stampoff could scarcely speak civilly to a woman, ever since a faithless member of the fair sex brought about his downfall in Delgratz a decade earlier. Small wonder, then, that Alec should express surprise at such display of gallantry on his part!

And, indeed, the unprecedented action of the gruff old Serbian General in taking Princess Delgrado for a drive that evening was destined to have consequences not to be foreseen by any person, least of all the young couple whose contemplated marriage was then in the mouths of all men. It was the first step in the new march of events. Stampoff meant to prove to the King's mother that her son would be ruined in the eyes of his people if he married a foreigner, ruined instantly and irretrievably, no matter how gracious and pleasing Joan might seem to be in their eyes, and, true to his military caste, he wasted no time in making the Princess aware of his motive in seeking this tete-a-tete conversation.

"I think I am right in assuming that you approve of the young American lady as your son's wife," said he when the carriage was clear of the paved streets and bowling smoothly along the south bank of the Danube on the only good driving road outside the city.

"The notion startled me at first," confessed the Princess; "but the more I see of Joan the more I like her. Alec and she are devoted to each other, and I am sure she will be popular, for she is the type of woman who will take her position as Queen seriously."

"She is admirable in every respect," interrupted Stampoff; "but she suffers from one defect that outweighs all her virtues,--she is not a Serb."

"Nor am I," said the Princess quickly; "yet no one seems to find fault with the King on that ground."

"One cannot judge the conditions that hold good to-day by those which existed twenty-five years ago," said Stampoff

gravely. "When Prince Michael married you, madame, he was an exile; but Alexis is the reigning King, and he will offend his people mortally if he brings in a foreigner to share his throne."

Princess Delgrado was bewildered by this sudden attack. She turned and scanned the old man's impressive features with feverish anxiety. "What do you mean?" she asked quickly. "Are you trying to enlist my aid in a campaign against my son's chosen wife? If so, you will fail, General. I am weary to death of political intrigues and the never ceasing tactics of wirepullers. I have been surrounded by them all my life, and I thanked Providence in my heart when I saw that my son began his reign by sweeping aside the whole network of lies and artifice. He has not imposed himself on his people. He is here by their own free will, and if they are ready to accept him so thoroughly they will surely not think of interfering in such a personal matter as his marriage."

"But they are thinking of it," said Stampoff doggedly. "That is why you are here now with me. I felt that I must warn you of the trouble ahead. Alec, I admit, would be an ideal King in an ideal State; but he has failed absolutely to appreciate the racial prejudices that exist here. They are the growth of centuries; they cannot be uprooted merely because a King is in love with an eminently desirable young woman. Among the ten millions of our people, Princess, there are hardly ten thousand who have any settled notions of government, whether good or bad, and those ten thousand think they have a prior right to control the destinies of the remainder of the nation. With the exception of a few of the younger officers, there is not a man among the governing class who doesn't harbor more or less resentment against your son. He is putting down with a ruthless hand the petty corruption on which they thrived, and at the same time reducing their recognized salaries. In season and out of season he preaches the duties of good citizenship, but these men have too long been considering self to yield without a struggle the positions attained under a less scrupulous regime.

"I speak of what I know when I tell you that, placid and contented as Delgratz looks, it is really a seething volcano of hate and discontent. Repressed for the hour, kept in check, perhaps, by the undoubted loyalty of the masses, it is ready to spout devastating fire and ashes at the least provocation, and that will be found in a marriage which seems to shut out all hope of realizing the long looked-for joining of Montenegro and Kosnovia. I have a bitter acquaintance with our history, madame, and am persuaded that if Alec is to remain King he must abandon forever this notion of marrying an alien. The Greek church would oppose it tooth and nail, and the people would soon follow the lead of their Popes. This young lady's appearance in Delgratz has come at a singularly inopportune moment. She was brought here by some one hostile to your son. If she came in obedience to Alec's wishes, he is his own worst enemy."

The distressed Princess could hardly falter a question in response to Stampoff's vehement outburst. "Why do you tell me these things?" she said brokenly. "I--I dare not interfere, even though I approved of what you say, which I do not."

"Some one must act, and speedily too, or the resultant mischief cannot be undone. I appeal to you because you are a woman, and we men are prone to bungle in these matters."

"But what do you want of me?" wailed the tortured Princess. "Michael protested against the marriage----"

"I am thinking of Alec's welfare now," said Stampoff gruffly. "You are his mother, and you and I can save him. In a word, that girl must go, to-night if possible, to-morrow without fail. The talk of marriage must be dropped, and revived only when a Serb is the prospective bride."

"You say she must go. What does that imply? It is not in my power to send her away, even if I would."

"It is, Princess," was the grim answer. "If she loves Alec, she will save him by leaving him. I am told women do these things occasionally. Perhaps she is one of the self sacrificing sort. At any rate, she must be given the chance, and by you. She must go away, and, in going, tell the King she will never marry him. It is hard. Both will suffer; but, in the long run Alec will come to see that by no other means can he retain his Kingdom."

CHAPTER XI

JOAN DECIDES

An odd element of fatality seemed to attach itself to the Byzantine Saint Peter in the cathedral of Delgratz. Joan nearly lost her life within a few hours of the time when first she saw that remarkable work of art, and it was ordained that one of the last clear memories of the checkered life in Kosnovia should be its round staring eyes, its stiffly modeled right hand, uplifted, it might be, in reproof or exhortation, the ornate pastoral staff, and the emblem of the crossed keys that labeled the artist's intent to portray the chief apostle. Poor Joan had already conceived a violent dislike of the reputed Giotto. It was no longing to complete her work that drove her, at the end, to the solemn cathedral, but the compelling need of confiding in Felix. For it had come to this: she must fly from Delgratz at once and forever.

It chanced that morning that Alec had taken a holiday. He appeared unexpectedly at breakfast and sat by Joan's side, and his lover's eyes had detected a pallor, a certain strained and wistful tension of the lips, signs of mental storm and stress that she hoped would not be noticeable.

"Sweetheart," he whispered in quick alarm, "you are not well. You are feeling this wretched climate. I am minded to throw sentiment aside and send my mother and you to the New Konak to-day."

"I am quite well," she said, with a forced composure that she felt did not deceive him. It was necessary to invent some explanation, and she continued hurriedly, "I did not sleep soundly last night. Some wandering night bird flew in through my open window and startled me with its frantic efforts to escape from the room. That is all. After a little rest I shall be myself again."

"That gloomy old cathedral is not a healthy place, I am inclined to think," he said, scanning her face again with the anxious gaze of one who could not endure even a momentary eclipse of its bright vivacity. "You go there too often, and now that we know from whom your commission was received it is straining a point of etiquette to continue your work. It will relieve any scruples you may have on that head if I tell you that I paid Monsieur Beliani yesterday every farthing of the money advanced to you by his agent in Paris."

"I am glad of that," she said simply. "I did not like the idea of being indebted to him. Though he is a very clever man, I regard him as a good deal of a rogue."

Alec was not to be switched off personal issues because Joan expressed her opinions in this matter of fact manner. "I am quite sure you are ill, or at any rate run down," he persisted. "What you need is a change of air. I think I can allow myself a few hours' respite from affairs of state to-day. What say you if the two of us drive to our country house this morning and find out for ourselves the progress made by the workmen? I seem to remember that the contractor named a date, not far distant now, when the place would be habitable."

"There is nothing in the world that I should like better," said Joan.

Again Alec detected a strange undercurrent of emotion in her voice; but he attributed it to the lack of sleep she had complained of, and with his customary tact forbore from pressing her for any further explanation.

They took their drive, and to all outward semblance Joan enjoyed it thoroughly. Her drooping spirits revived long before the last straggling houses of Delgratz were left behind. She exhibited the keenest interest in the house and gardens. Although their inspection did not end until the sun was high in the heavens, she insisted upon entering every room and traversing many of the paths in the spacious grounds. She talked, too, with a fluency that in any other woman would have aroused a suspicion of effort; but Alec was too glad that the marked depression of the morning had passed to give heed to her half-hysterical mood. He entered with zest into her eager scrutiny of their future home, sought her advice on every little detail, and grew enthusiastic himself at the prospect of a speedy removal from the barnlike presidential palace to that leafy paradise. He remembered afterward how Joan's eyes dwelt longingly on an Italian garden that had always attracted her; but it was impossible that he should read the farewell in them.

They returned to the city in time for luncheon; then the King had to hurry away to try and overtake the day's engagements.

His parting words were an injunction to Joan that she should not go out again during the hot hours, but endeavor to obtain the rest of which she had been deprived during the night.

"Good-by, dear," she said. "You may feel quite certain that when next we meet I shall be a different person altogether to the pallid creature whom you met at breakfast this morning."

Alec was still conscious of some strange detachment in her words. His earlier feeling that she was acting a part came back with renewed force; but he again attributed it to the reaction that comes to highly strung natures after a surfeit of excitement in the midst of a new and difficult environment.

He kissed her tenderly, and Joan seemed to be on the verge of tears. He was puzzled; but thought it best to refrain from comment. "Poor girl!" he said to himself. "She feels it hard to be surrounded by people who are all strangers, and mostly shut off by the barrier of language."

But he was in no sense alarmed. He left the palace convinced that a few hours of repose would bring back the color to her cheeks and the natural buoyancy to her manner. Then he meant to chaff her about her distracted air; for Joan was no neurotic subject, and she herself would be the first to laugh at the nervous fit of the morning.

Poluski, hard at work at his frescoes since an early hour, and grudgingly snatching a hasty meal at midday, was surprised when Joan came to him after the King's departure and told him that she meant to finish her picture that afternoon. He made no comment, however, indeed he was glad of her company, and the two drove away together in the capacious closed carriage that brought them to and fro between cathedral and palace. During their working hours, they refused to be hampered by the presence of servants. An old Greek, who acted as caretaker, took charge of canvases, easels, paintboxes, and other utensils of the painter's craft, and he came out gleefully from his lodge as soon as their vehicle rumbled under the deep arch of the outer porch.

Usually, Joan had a word and a smile for him, though the extent of her Greek conversation was a phrase or two learned from Felix; but to-day she hardly seemed to see him, and lost not a moment in settling down to work. She had not much to do; in fact, so far as Felix took note of her action, after adjusting the canvas and mixing some colors on the palette, she sat idle for a long time, and even then occupied herself with an unnecessary deepening of tints in the picture, which already displayed an amazing resemblance to its stilted and highly colored prototype.

At last she spoke, and Felix, perched on a platform above her head, was almost startled by the sorrow laden cadence of her voice.

"I did not really come here to-day to paint," she said. "The picture is finished; my work in Delgratz is ended. You and Pauline are the only two people in the world whom I can trust, and I have brought you here, Felix, to tell you that I am leaving Delgratz to-night."

The hunchback slid down from the little scaffolding he had constructed to enable him to survey the large area covered by the frescoes. "I suppose I have understood what you said," he cried. "It is impossible to focus one's thoughts properly on the spoken word when a huge dome adds vibrations of its own, and I admit that I am invariably irritated myself when I state a remarkable fact with the utmost plainness and people pretend to be either deaf or dull of comprehension."

That was Poluski's way. He never would take one seriously; but Joan merely sighed and bent her head.

"You say you are leaving Delgratz to-night! May one ask why?" he went on, dropping his bantering manner at once.

"No," she said.

Felix bassooned a few deep notes between his lips. "You have some good reason for telling me that, I presume?" he muttered, uttering the first words that occurred to his perplexed brain.

"Yes, the very best of reasons, or at least the most convincing. I cannot remain here unless I marry Alec, and as I have absolutely determined not to marry him, it follows that I must go."

"Ah, you are willing to give some sort of reason, then," he said. "At present I am muddled. One grasps that unless you marry Alec you must go; but why not marry Alec? It sounds like a proposition of Euclid with the main clauses omitted."

"I am sorry, Felix, but I cannot explain myself further. You came to Delgratz with me; will you return with me to Paris? If not, will you at least promise to help me to get away and keep secret the fact that I am going?"

Felix grew round eyed with amazement; but he managed to control his tongue. "You are asking a good deal, dear," he said. "Do you know what you are doing? Do you realize what your action will mean to Alec? What has happened? Some lover's tiff. That is unlike you, Joan. If you run off in this fashion, you will be trying most deliberately to break poor Alec's heart."

Joan uttered a queer little choking sob, yet recovered her self control with a rapidity that disconcerted Felix far more than she imagined at the moment.

"He will suffer, I know," she murmured, "and it does not console me to feel that in the end I shall suffer far more; but I am going, Felix, whatsoever the cost, no matter whose heart may be broken. Heaven help me! I must go, and I look to you for assistance. Oh, my friend, my friend! I have only you in all the world. Do not desert me in my need!"

She had never before seen Felix really angry; but even in the extremity of her distress she could not fail to note a strange glitter in the gray eyes now fixed on her in a fiery underlook. The little man was deeply moved; for once in his life he did not care how much he showed his resentment.

"*Saperlotte!*" he growled. "What has come to you? Is it you who speak, or the devil? You are possessed of a fiend, Joan, a fiend that is tempting you to do this wrong!"

Joan rose, pale faced and resolute. Despite the flood of rage and despair that surged in Poluski's quivering frame, she reminded him of a glimpse he caught of her in that last desperate moment when the door of the hotel was battered open by the insurgents and her mind was already fixed on death as a blessed relief from the horror of life.

"I only ask you to believe in my unalterable purpose," she said with a calmness that stupefied him. "If no other means presents itself, I should wander out of the palace in the darkness and endeavor to reach Austria by the ferry across the Danube. I believe there are difficulties for the stranger if one goes that way; but again I throw myself on your mercy, Felix, and appeal to you for guidance and help. This is my worst hour. If you fail me now, I shall indeed be wretched."

Felix leaned against an upright of the scaffolding and passed a trembling hand over his forehead. "Forgive me, Joan, if I have spoken harshly!" he muttered in the dubious voice of a man who hardly knows what he is saying.

"There is nothing to forgive. It is I, rather, who should seek forgiveness from you for imposing this cruel test of friendship. But what can I do, Felix? I am a woman and alone, and, when I think of what lies before me, I am afraid."

With a great effort he steadied himself. Placing both hands on the girl's shoulders, he turned her face to the light that fell from a small rose window in a side aisle. In silence he looked at her, seeking to wring the secret of this madness from her steadfast eyes.

"*Ma belle,*" he cried suddenly, "I am beginning to believe that you are in earnest."

"No matter how many years it may please God to leave me on earth, I shall never be more resolved on anything than on my departure from Delgratz to-night."

"You place trust in me, you say in one breath, yet you deny it in another. Tell me then, Joan, what is the obstacle that has arisen to prevent you from marrying Alec? It all hinges on that. Who has been lying to you?"

She could not continue to meet his accusing eyes. It seemed to her that if he urged her more her heart would burst. Yielding to the impulse of the hunted animal, she wrenched herself free and turned to run somewhere, anywhere, so that she might avoid his merciless inquisition. A harsh laugh fell on her ears, and nothing more effective to put a stop to her flight could have been devised.

"Name of a name!" he roared, "shall we not take our pictures? If we are false to all else, let us at least be true to our harmless daubs!"

The taunt was undeserved and glanced unheeded from the shield of the girl's utter misery. Perhaps because that was so, the Pole's next words were tender and soothing.

"Come, then, my Joan," he growled, "never shall it be said against me that I deserted a comrade in distress. I hoped to see you happily wedded. It was my fantasy that Alec and you would inaugurate a new line of monarchs and thus bring about the social revolution from an unexpected quarter. But I was mistaken. Holy blue! never was man so led astray since Eve strolled into the wrong orchard and brought Adam with her!"

By this time he had caught her. He held her arm, and began to stroke one of her hands softly as if she had shown symptoms of falling in a faint. "We will go, *mignonne,*" he soothed her, "you and I, and none here shall know till we have crossed the frontier. Not even then will they guess what has become of us, unless you find it in your heart to leave some little word for Alec. You will do that? You will save him from despair, from the torture of doubt----"

"Oh, Felix, spare me!" she sobbed convulsively.

"But one must look squarely at the facts, *mignonne.* If you run away and give no sign, it can only be supposed that you have met with some evil fate. There are others than Alec who will think that disaster has befallen you, and they will have uneasy souls, and Alec will look into their guilty faces with the eyes of a wrathful lover, which at such times can be superhuman, terrible, heart piercing. There is no knowing whose blood will stain his hands then; for he will accept

from no one but yourself the assurance that you have left him of your own free will."

"That, at least, is true," she said wearily. "I shall write a letter which must be given to him when I am gone."

"*Grand Dieu!* what a resolute will is yours, Joan! Have you counted the cost? Leave Alec out of it; but do you think his hog of a father, his easily swayed mother, Stampoff, the short sighted and patriotic, or that scheming Greek and his puppet Marulitch, will gain the ends for which, between them, they have contrived your flight? Do you know Alec so little as to believe that he will leave the field clear to that crew? Why, dear heart, he will sweep them aside like an angry god! They have bewitched your brain with some tale of the evil that will accrue to the King if he weds the woman he loves. If that is all, it is a fiction fit only to frighten a child. Hear me, Joan! You are not helping Alec by tearing yourself away from Delgratz; but condemning to the deepest hell not him alone but some millions of people who have done no wrong. They gave their honest affections to this boy, because he strikes their imagination as a King sent straight from Heaven. It is a vile plot, dear heart, to drive Alec from Kosnovia. How can you, of all women, lend yourself to it?"

Felix could not guess how his words lacerated the unhappy girl's soul; but she did not falter in her purpose, and again endeavored to rush from the church. Poluski uttered a queer click with his tongue. It testified that he had done his uttermost and failed.

"Be it so, then!" he muttered. "Help me to pack up these masterpieces. I can plan and scheme with any man living; but I cannot cope with heavy parcels of holiness."

Joan, distraught though she was, felt that he had given way. Without another word she assisted in packing the carriage with their canvases and other belongings. The old Greek caretaker hobbled after them when he saw that they were going without depositing their paraphernalia in the lodge as usual.

"You will come back some day and copy another picture, I hope, Excellency," he cried, doffing his cap to Joan.

She opened her purse, since she did not understand what the old man was saying.

"No, no, Excellency," he protested. "The King himself told me you were not to be pestered by beggars. I have threatened to crack the skulls of one or two who persisted in annoying you, and it would ill become me to take a reward for doing what the King ordered."

"He will not accept anything," said Felix. "I may not tell you what else he said, since he only put my arguments in simpler words."

He shot a quick look at her, hoping to find some slight sign of weakening; but her marble face wore the expression of one who has suffered so greatly that the capacity for suffering is exhausted. From that instant Felix urged her no more. He obeyed her without question or protest, contriving matters so that when she quitted the palace, deeply veiled, to walk to the station, the soldiers on guard imagined she was a serving maid going into the town.

Pauline, though prepared to be faithful at any hazard, wept when she was told that she must stay in Delgratz and face the storm that would rage when she delivered into the King's own hand the letter Joan intrusted to her care. But even Pauline herself realized that if her mistress was to escape from Delgratz unnoticed, she, the maid, must remain there till the following day. By that time there would be no reason why Joan's maid should not leave openly for the west, and the Frenchwoman was only too thankful at the prospect of a speedy exit from "this city of brigands" to protest too strenuously against the role thrust upon her by Felix.

As events unrolled themselves, the two travelers encountered no difficulty in leaving Delgratz. It will be remembered that Beliani's foresight had provided them with return tickets to Paris, and this circumstance aided them greatly. In those closely guarded lands where keen eyed scrutineers keep watch and ward over a frontier, the production of the return half of a ticket issued in the same city as a passport at once lulls any doubt that might arise otherwise.

Moreover, Joan and Felix occupied separate carriages, and the Belgrade officials, concerned only with the examination of tickets, gave no heed to them, though one man seemed to recognize Felix and grinned in a friendly way. Passport formalities did not trouble them till the train had crossed the Tave River and was already in Austrian territory. The frontier officers could not possibly know them. Their papers were in order, and received only a passing glance. Even Joan, adrift in a sea of trouble, saw that it was a far easier matter to leave the Balkan area than to enter it.

They arranged to meet in the dining saloon, when all necessity for further precaution would have disappeared. Felix was astounded at the self possession Joan now displayed. She was pale but quite calm. Her eyes were clear and showed no traces of grief. Even her very manner was reverting to that good humored tone of frank camaraderie that the unavoidable ceremoniousness of the last fortnight had kept in subjection. Felix was secretly amazed at these things; but in the depths of his own complex nature were hidden away, wholly unknown to the little hunchback himself, certain

feminine characteristics which enabled him dimly to understand that the woman who suffers most is she who has the strength and the courage to carry her head most proudly before the storm.

"Well," said he when the mail train had left Semlin far behind and they were speeding northward through the night to Budapest,—"well, Joan, now that the severance is complete, do you still refuse me your confidence?"

Her luminous eyes dwelt on his with a sad smile. She had closed the gates of her paradise, and there was to be no faint hearted looking backward.

"No," she said, "I have attained my end. It is due to you, my friend, that I should tell you why I have abandoned the only man I shall ever love. It lay with me to choose between his success or failure; perhaps there rested on my frail shoulders the more dreadful issues of life and death. If I had married Alec, I should have pulled him down to ruin, even to the grave. What else would you have me do but save him, no matter what the cost to myself?"

He propped his chin on his hands and surveyed her quizzically. Felix, despite his protests, was not enamoured of Delgratz, and his mercurial temperament rejoiced in the near approach of his beloved Paris.

"All this sounds heroic and therefore unconvincing," he said. "I do not want to condemn your motives before I know them, Joan; but I hope you will allow me to criticize false sentiment," he added, seeing the expression of pain that for an instant mastered her stoicism and threw its dull shadow across her face.

"Say what pleases you, Felix," she replied gently. "I shall not suffer more than I have already endured. I think I am benumbed now; but at least I am sure that I have acted right. There were influences at work in Delgratz of which even you had no cognizance. Popular as Alec seemed to be, every prejudice of the Serb was arrayed against him. He appealed to the imagination of the people as a brave and gallant figure; but he is and will ever remain a foreigner among them. They are a race apart, and Alec is not of them, and it would have been a fatal error to give them as a Queen another foreigner like himself.

"Alone, he will win his way. In the course of years he cannot fail to identify himself more and more with their interests; he will—some day—marry a Princess of the blood to which he belongs. That will help Kosnovia to forget that he was neither born nor bred in the country, and the presence of a Serbian consort will tend to consolidate his reign. It would have been quite different if he and I were married within a few weeks. Those who are opposed to him—and they are far more numerous than you may guess at this moment—would have been given a most powerful argument by the refusal of the Greek archimandrite to perform the ceremony. You see, Alec himself is not a member of the national church, nor am I, and a drawback that may be overlooked when a Slav Princess becomes Queen of Kosnovia would have been a fatal thing for me."

Poluski could not but admire Joan's splendid detachment in speaking of Alec's hypothetical wife. His thin lips creased in a satirical grin. "Is that it," said he, "the everlasting religious difficulty? No, my belle, tell that to the marines, or, at any rate, to some guileless person not versed in Kosnovian history! There never yet was bloodstained conqueror or evil living Prince in that unhappy city of Delgratz who failed to obtain the sanction of orthodoxy for his worst deeds, whether in beheading a rival or divorcing a wife."

Joan hesitated. She was obviously choosing her words; but the burden laid upon her was too great for the hour to prevent her from adopting a subterfuge that would surely be detected by her shrewd companion. "I do not wish to lay too much stress upon that particular phase of the matter," she said at last. "It was only one of many. In itself it might have been surmounted; but when the church, a large section of the army, and nearly all the higher officials of the State are ready to combine against Alec's uncompromising sincerity of purpose, it was asking too much of me knowingly to provide the special excuse for his downfall."

There was silence for a little while, and Poluski's keen gray eyes still dwelt searchingly on the girl's sorrow laden though resigned features. She did not flinch from the scrutiny, and there was a certain sadness in the Pole's next comment.

"What you say, *ma petite*, sounds very like the dry-as-dust utterances of some podgy Minister of State; they are far from being the words of a woman who loves, and so they are not yours."

"Perhaps you are right, Felix," she said wearily. "Perhaps, had I told Alec these things, he might have silenced my doubts and persuaded me to dare everything for his sake."

"Yet, knowing this, you are here!" he cried, his conscience stinging him at the memory of that forsaken King mourning his lost bride.

"Yes, and no consideration would induce me to return."

"Ah, then there is something that you have not yet told me."

"Yes, and it can never be told, Felix. Be content, my friend, with that assurance. There is nothing that can happen which has the power to change my decision. Heaven help me, I can never marry Alec!"

"The true cause must remain a secret!"

"Yes."

"A woman's secret?"

"Yes, my secret."

His eyes sparkled. He bent nearer and sank his voice to a deep whisper, for there were others in the carriage, and that which he had to say must reach her ears only.

"Not yours, Joan. Oh, no! Not yours. Another woman's. Ha! Blind that I was--now I have it! So that is why you are running away. They threatened to drag Alec headlong from the throne unless you agreed. My poor girl, you might have told me sooner. The knowledge has been here, lurking in the back of my head for years; but I never gave a thought to it. Why should I? Who would have dreamed of such a tragicomedy? Joan, to-day in the cathedral I could have bound you with ropes if that would have served to keep you in Delgratz; but now I kiss the hem of your dress. My poor girl, my own dear Joan, how you must have suffered! Yet I envy you--I do, on my soul! Life becomes ennobled by actions such as yours. And Alec must never know what you have done for him. That is both the grandeur and the pathos of it. Joan, my precious, your namesake was burnt on the pyre for a King's cause, yet her deed would rank no higher than yours if the world might be allowed to judge between you. But do not dream that your romance is ended. *Saperlotte!* Old Dame Nature is a better dramatist than that. If she has contrived so much for you in a little month, what can she not accomplish in a year?"

And, in a perfect frenzy of excitement, he threw himself back in his chair and amazed another group of cosmopolitan diners by singing.

But this time Joan did not care who stared or whispered. She sat there, a beautiful statue, sorely stricken, and not daring to believe that the hour of blessedness promised in Poluski's song would be vouchsafed after many years of pain.



CHAPTER XII

THE STORM BREAKS

The King reached his temporary residence hot and tired after an exhausting day. It chanced that at a meeting of the Ministry, which he attended late in the afternoon, the question of Beliani's appointment as Minister of Finance came up for settlement. It was not determined without some bickering, and an undercurrent of dislike if not of positive hatred of the man quickly made itself apparent.

The Serb and the Greek differ in most essentials. The one is by habit and training a good soldier, a proverbial idler, an easygoing optimist endowed with genial temper and a happy-go-lucky nature, capable indeed of extremes, yet mostly inclined to the tolerant indifference that leaves things as they are; the other, whose martial qualities have vanished in the melting pot of time, has developed the defensive traits that come to the aid of all races who can no longer maintain their cause in the tented field. The Greek is the usurer of the East. He wins his way by using his subtle wits, and the less adroit people on whom he preys soon learn to regard him with distrust that often culminates in personal violence in those half-civilized communities where law and order are not maintained with a heavy hand.

The Kosnovian Ministry, of course, consisted of men of a much higher type than the rude peasantry that made up the bulk of the nation. But at heart they were anti-Greek, and some among them retained lively memories of Beliani's methods when he was in power a decade earlier. No one disputed his ability, yet none, save the King, had a good word for him. It was recognized, however, that under the new dominion his opportunities for speculation at the expense of the public would be few and far between.

Alexis III. had already made his influence felt in each department of State. He was ready to listen to every man's grievances, and to adjust them if possible; he held the scales evenly between the bureaucracy and the people. The official element knew full well that it had nothing to fear from the King's anger if a disputed action could be justified, while those traders and others who had occasion to deal with any of the great departments were beginning to understand that they need not dread the vengeance of an executive against whose exactions they had cause to complain.

After some discussion, therefore, a guarded sanction was given to Beliani's appointment. It was probable that each man in the Council had already been approached in the Greek's behalf, and that the protests uttered were rather by way of safety valves in view of possible criticism in the future than intended to exclude this dreaded candidate from office.

The matter might have ended there for the moment had not the President of the Assembly given a somewhat maladroit twist to the discussion when the King mentioned Beliani's efforts with regard to an Austrian loan.

"That, at least, we should oppose most bitterly," said Nesimir. "We of the Balkans should never accept favors from the hand of Austria. Our true ally is Russia, and any outside aid received by Kosnovia should come from Russia alone."

Alec had learned the value of patience with mediocrities such as Sergius Nesimir. He never argued with them. He contented himself with pointing out the facts, and left the rest to time; for he had soon discovered that the weak man talks himself into agreement with the strong one.

"I would remind you that in this matter we are merely entering into an ordinary business arrangement," he said. "I have heard of no concessions attached to the loan. We are merely going into the money market like any other borrower, and will undertake to pay such reasonable interest as the lenders deem compatible with the security we offer."

"I think your Majesty will find that Austria will impose her own terms," persisted the President.

"Why do you harp on Austria in this connection?" asked the King. "Monsieur Beliani spoke of Viennese bankers. They are not Austria. This loan is not so much a matter of State as of sound finance."

"I hope your Majesty is right in that assumption," was the stubborn answer; "but I have reason to believe that, under certain contingencies, not only would Russia assist us in this respect, but she would at once take steps toward recognizing your Majesty's accession to the throne."

"Contingencies!" cried Alec, forced for the nonce to maintain the discussion. "What are they? What is the difference between your suspected Austrian terms and your Russian contingencies?"

"In the first place, your Majesty, Russia is anxious to consolidate the good feeling that exists among the Slav nations by following a settled policy in the matter of railway communication. Your Majesty's own projects favor the Russian proposals, whereas Austria will surely stipulate that any money of hers expended on railways shall be devoted to her

rival plans. In the second----"

The President paused and looked round among his colleagues as though to seek their encouragement. He knew he was about to utter words of daring significance, and his nerve failed. An appreciative murmur ran through the room. It seemed to give the stout President a degree of confidence.

"Well?" said the King, who noted the glance and the hum of approval, and wondered what lay behind it all.

"The really vital question before us to-day is your Majesty's marriage," exclaimed the other, paling somewhat, now that the fateful topic was broached.

"I agree with you," said Alec, smiling. "Its importance to myself is self evident; but I fail utterly to see how the appearance of a Queen in Delgratz will affect our political relations with our neighbors. I do not propose to borrow money from Austria to pay for my wife's wedding presents."

Nesimir was long in answering. He seemed to be waiting for some other member of the Council to take part in the discussion; but each man sat silent and embarrassed, and it was incumbent on their leader to declare himself anew.

"It is far from my thoughts to wish to give any offense to your Majesty; but I am constrained to tell you," he said, "that there is a growing sentiment among all classes of your subjects that when you look for a consort you should seek her among our kith and kin."

"Am I to understand, then, that the lady whom I am about to marry has not found favor among you?"

Alec spoke quietly; but there was a ring of steel in his voice that might have warned a bolder man than the President. His stern glance traveled round the Council table; but he saw only downcast and somber faces. One thing was abundantly clear--this attack on Joan was premeditated. He wondered who had contrived it.

"It is not that the lady does not command our favor," declared the spokesman, very pale now and drumming nervously with his fingers on the edge of a blotting pad. "Those of us who have met her are charmed with her manners and appearance, and our only regret is that Providence did not ordain that her birthplace should be on the right side of the Danube."

"Oddly enough, I was born in New York," interrupted Alec, with a touch of sarcasm that was not lost on his hearers.

"Your Majesty was born a Delgrado," said the President, "and if Miss Joan Vernon could claim even the remotest family connection with one of the leading houses of Kosnovia, Montenegro, or even Bulgaria, every man here would hail your Majesty's choice in a chorus of approval."

"Since when has the supposed drawback of my intended wife's nationality come into such prominence?" demanded the King sharply.

"Since it became known that your Majesty meant to marry a lady whose avowed object in coming to Delgratz was to follow her occupation as an artist."

Stampoff's harsh accents broke in roughly on a discussion which had hitherto been marked by polite deference on the part of its originator.

"What! are you too against me, General?" cried Alec, wheeling round and meeting the fierce eyes of the old patriot who sat glaring at him across the Council table.

"Yes, in that matter," was the uncompromising answer. "We feel that our King must be one of ourselves, and he can never be that if his wife differs from us in race, in language, in religion, in everything that knits a ruler to his subjects."

Alec arose with a good natured laugh. "Monsieur Nesimir spoke of contingencies," he said, "and the word seems to imply that counter proposals to those of Monsieur Beliani have already been put forward. Has the Russian Ambassador been conducting negotiations with my Ministers without my knowledge--behind my back, as it were?"

"There is no taint of Muscovite intrigue about my attitude!" exclaimed Stampoff with a vehemence that showed how deeply he was moved. "I have given the best years of my life to my country, and I am too old now to be forced to act against my principles. Every man in this room is a Slav, and we Slavs must pull together or we are lost. I, at any rate, am not afraid to register an emphatic protest against my King's marriage with a lady, no matter how estimable personally, whose presence in Delgratz as our Queen would be a national calamity. If I speak strongly, it is because I feel so strongly in this matter. The rulers of States such as ours cannot afford to be swayed by sentiment. When your Majesty weds, you ought to choose your wife among the Princesses of Montenegro. Had I the slightest inkling of any other design on your part, I should have stipulated this before we left Paris."

"Ah," said Alec thoughtfully, "it is too late now, General, to talk of stipulations that were not made. And, indeed, one might reasonably ask who empowered you to make them?"

"God's bones! who should speak for Kosnovia if not I?"

"Your patriotism has never been questioned, General," said Alec with a friendly smile; but Stampoff was not to be placated, being of the fiery type of reformer who refuses to listen to any opinion that runs counter to his own.

He too rose and faced the Council. "What has palsied your tongues?" he cried. "You were all ready enough to declare your convictions before the King arrived. He is here now. Tell him, then, do you approve of his proposed marriage--yes or no!"

Heads were shaken. A few cried "No." Alec saw clearly that he could not count on the support of one among those present. He did not shirk the issue. He determined that it should be dealt with at once if possible. If not, he had already decided on his own line of action.

"I am sorry that in such a matter, affecting, as it does, the whole of my future life," he said, "I should be so completely at variance with what is evidently the common view of my trusted friends in this Council; but I cannot forget that, for good or ill, I am King of Kosnovia, while you may rest assured, gentlemen, that no consideration you can urge will prevent me from marrying the lady of my choice. Of course, it is conceivable that my kingship and my marriage may clash. In that event I shall take the consequences of my action; I must even justify myself to the Assembly, if need be. It is well that the President should have made me acquainted with the views you all hold with such apparent unanimity. It is also well that you should be aware of my decision. Very often, when men think they have reached absolute disagreement, a way opens itself unexpectedly whereby the difficulties vanish. In this instance, certainly, it is hard to see how any solution of our dispute can be attained that shall satisfy both you and me.

"I shall marry Miss Vernon, probably within a fortnight. I shall marry her, gentlemen, even though it costs me my throne; but I would remind you that we in this room are not Kosnovia. Let us keep our heads and guard our tempers. If an appeal is to be made to the nation, let it be by votes rather than by swords. I have never deviated from my fixed principle that I would sooner pass the remainder of my life poor and unknown than obtain an hour's extension of my rule by spilling the blood of an unoffending people. But I ask from you the same concession that I am willing to make myself. Until deposed, I retain the privilege of a King. Is this matter to be regarded as a test of ministerial confidence? Do all you gentlemen resign your portfolios?"

The President, agitated and stuttering, sprang to his feet. "For my part," he declared, "I expressed my views in an informal manner."

"Yes, yes," agreed several voices. The turn given to the discussion by Alec was quite unforeseen and far from their liking.

"It has ever been your Majesty's wish that we should state our opinions fully and freely," continued the agitated Nesimir. "I, for one, was only anxious to make known to you the sentiments that obtain currency in my own circle. I may be wrong. Delgratz is not Kosnovia----"

"Rubbish!" shouted Stampoff, hammering the table with a clenched fist. "That which has been said here to-day will be heard openly in the streets of the capital to-night. To-morrow it will be preached far and wide throughout the confines of the country by every man who has its welfare at heart. This marriage must not take place, I say! I came here from exile with the King and was prepared to give my life to establish him on the throne. I am prepared now to offer the same poor sacrifice if it will save my beloved land from a catastrophe--and this proposed mesalliance is nothing less!"

A curious thrill convulsed the Council. Every Serb there was stirred by the General's bold avowal; but Alec stilled the rising storm by a calm announcement:

"I suggest that we defer this discussion till to-morrow morning," he said. "It has found me unprepared, and, if I am not very much mistaken, many of the gentlemen here did not anticipate that the question would be raised to-day in its present acute form."

It was evident that the majority of ministers favored the adoption of the King's proposal; but Stampoff scowled at them angrily and drowned their timorous agreement by his resentful cry:

"God's bones! Why wait till to-morrow?"

Then, indeed, Alec was stung beyond endurance. "Perhaps, in the circumstances, General," he said, "it would be advisable that you should absent yourself from to-morrow's Council."

"Not while I am Minister for War!" came the fiery response.

"That is for you to decide," said the King.

"Then I decide now! I resign!"

"Excellent! By that means you save your conscience; whereas I hope still to retain the friendship of Kosnovia's most faithful son by refusing to accept your resignation."

A shout of applause drowned Stampoff's vehement protest, and Alec seized the opportunity to hurry from the Council chamber. He did not try to conceal from himself the serious nature of this unexpected crisis, though he was far from acknowledging that the people at large attached such significance to his wife's nationality as Stampoff and the others professed to believe. Puzzle his wits as he might, and did, he failed utterly to account for Stampoff's uncompromising tone. The old Serb and he were the best of friends. He had taken no single step without first consulting the man who had been his political tutor since his boyhood. Even when he ran counter to Stampoff's advice, he had always listened to it eagerly, and he invariably took the utmost pains to show why he had adopted another course.

Till that day there had never been the shadow of a breach between them. How, then, was the War Minister's irreconcilable attitude to be explained? Was Cousin Julius pulling the strings in some unrecognized manner? Was Beliani a party to the scheme? These questions must be answered, and speedily. Meanwhile, by hook or by crook, he must keep all knowledge of the dispute from Joan's ears until after the wedding.

In the palace courtyard a man standing near the gates tried to pass the sentries when the King arrived. He was instantly collared. Undersized, poorly clad, and poverty stricken in appearance, he was hustled unmercifully by a stalwart Albanian policeman until Alec's attention was drawn to the scuffle.

A white despairing face became visible for a moment, and a choking voice cried, "Save me, your Majesty! I am John Sobieski!"

"Sobieski!" thought Alec, ordering his carriage to stop and alighting quickly. "That is the Polish hotel waiter of whom Felix spoke to me some few days ago. He said the man had done his best to bring assistance; but his efforts were frustrated by some stupid blunder here, and he thought something ought to be done for him. I promised to attend to it; but the thing slipped my mind."

By this time he had reached the policeman, who, assisted by a soldier, was dragging the protesting waiter to the guardroom.

"Release that man!" he said.

The man saluted, and the trembling Sobieski fell on his knees on the pavement.

"Oh, get up," said the King, who felt a special aversion to such a display of abasement. "Recover your wits, man, and tell me what you want!"

"I ask protection, your Majesty," murmured the desperate Sobieski. "My life is in danger. I came here to see Monsieur Poluski; but they told me he was not at home. I have been turned out of my situation; so I have nowhere to go. If I am found wandering in the streets to-night, I shall be killed."

"At any rate, you seem to be thoroughly frightened," cried Alec with a reassuring smile. "Take charge of him," he said to the pandur, "and have him sent to my bureau in five minutes!"

The bureau in question was that apartment on the first floor overlooking the courtyard, in which Alec had preferred his claim to the throne of Kosnovia to the perplexed President of the embryo Republic. It was there, too, that Felix Poluski had spoken those plain words to Prince Michael Delgrado, and its situation was so convenient for the King's daily comings and goings that he had utilized it temporarily as an office and private audience chamber.

At the top of the stairs he happened to catch sight of Pauline, Joan's staid looking maid. Though he obtained only a casual glimpse of her, he fancied that she was distressed about something, and it occurred to him after he was in the room and the door was closed that perhaps she wished to give him a message. Bosko, the taciturn Albanian whom he had now definitely appointed as his confidential attendant, was standing near the table with a bundle of documents that demanded the King's signature.

Realizing that the Frenchwoman would meet Bosko in a minute or two when he went out with the signed papers, and could then make known her wish to speak to the King if such was her intention, Alec bent over the table and began to peruse several departmental decrees hurriedly. He made it a rule never to append his name to any State paper without

mastering its contents, and one of the palace guards brought in Sobieski before Alec had concluded his self imposed task. As it happened, the various items were mere formalities, and when he wrote "Alexis R." for the last time, Bosko and the soldier left the room, and the frightened little Pole found himself alone with the King.

"Now," said Alec kindly, "tell me what you want and why you are so afraid?"

Sobieski at once plunged into a rambling statement. He spoke the Kosnovian language with the fluent inaccuracy of his class; but Alec's alert ears had no difficulty in following his meaning. His story was that several customers of the cafe had denounced him to the proprietor as a spy in the King's service, while some of them went so far as to charge him with responsibility for the deaths of those thirty-one heroes of the Seventh Regiment whose bodies had been found on the stairs and first floor landing of the hotel. His master had no option but to discharge him, and Sobieski felt that he had good reason to fear that his life was in danger. Alec pooh-poohed the notion; but the timid little waiter was so woebegone that the King pitied him.

"Tell me exactly what you did on the day of the revolt," he said. "You came here, I understand. How was it that no one listened to you?"

"Oh, they did, your Majesty," protested Sobieski. "Your Majesty's own father brought me into the hall and kept me there nearly five minutes. He did not believe a word I said, and was very angry with me for bringing such an alarming story to the palace. At last, by good fortune, Monsieur Nesimir appeared; but even then I should have been taken away in custody if Monsieur Poluski had not caused me to be released."

Despite its sinister significance, Alec could not choose but credit this amazing statement. He wondered why Felix had not told him the facts in detail afterward; but he knew that the hunchback's mind worked in strange grooves, and it was probable that his silence was dictated by some powerful motive. In any event, the incident was an unpleasant reminder of certain nebulous doubts that he had striven to crush, and it was better that this scared rabbit of a man should not remain in Delgratz and become the victim of some vendetta which might bring the whole odd story into prominence.

"You want to leave the city, I take it?" said he after a thoughtful pause, in which he took a slow turn up and down the room.

"I dare not remain here any longer, your Majesty. I came to-night to ask Monsieur Poluski to be good enough to give me money to take me to Warsaw."

"I think," said Alec, smiling, "he promised you, in my name, the wherewithal to buy a cafe."

"I fear I did not earn my reward, your Majesty," stammered the other.

"Are cafes dear in Warsaw?" said the King, unlocking a drawer and producing roubles to the equivalent of five hundred dollars. "Here, this sum should give you a fresh start in life. All I ask in return is that you shall keep a still tongue about your recent share in local events."

Poor Sobieski's gratitude grew incoherent, especially when the King handed him over to the care of the attendant who had brought him to the bureau, with instructions that he was to be taken to the railway station and safeguarded there till the departure of the next train that crossed the frontier.

By that time the dinner hour was long past. Alec was disinclined for a heavy meal; so he went to his private suite, where he changed his clothes, contenting himself with some sandwiches, which he ate in a hurry and washed down with a glass of red wine.

Coming down stairs about an hour later, he passed the smoking-room. The door was open, and he saw that the men had already ended dinner. He was about to enter the music salon, to which his mother and Joan usually retired with the President's wife and daughter, when he met Pauline for the second time, and the Frenchwoman now approached him with the same marked nervousness in her demeanor that he had noticed when he saw her standing in the lobby.

"May I have a word with your Majesty in private?" she asked.

He was surprised; but again he believed she was probably bringing a message from Joan. He threw open the door of his office. "Come in here," he said. "What is it?"

She held out a letter, and he saw that her hand shook. "Mademoiselle asked me to give you this, your Majesty," she said. "I was to take care that you were alone when you received it."

"Something important then," he said with a laugh.

Crossing the room to the table on which stood the lamp by whose light he had scribbled "Alexis R." on the papers

intrusted to Bosko, he opened the envelop, which bore in Joan's handwriting the simple superscription, "Alec," and began to read:

MY DEAR ONE:--When Pauline gives you this, I shall have left you forever. I am going from Delgratz, and I shall never see you again. I cannot marry you--but oh, my dear, my dear, I shall love you all my life! Try and forget me. I am acting for the best. Do not write to Paris or endeavor to find me. If it is God's will, we shall never meet again. I can scarcely see what I am writing for my tears. So good-by, my Alec! Be brave! Forgive me, and, in the years to come, try to forget our few days of happiness together.

Yours ever,

JOAN.

He stood there stricken, almost paralyzed with the suddenness of the blow, wondering dumbly why Joan's hand should have inflicted it. The frightened Frenchwoman dared not speak or move. She watched him with that impersonal fear so readily aroused in one of her class by the terrifying spectacle of a strong man in his agony. At last he moved listlessly, as though his limbs had just been released from the rack. He held the letter under the lamp again and read it a second time, word for word. He seemed to be forcing himself to accept it as truth. This young King, so valiant, so resourceful, so prompt in action and judgment, could devise no plan, no means of rescue from the abyss. After an interval that neither the man nor the woman could measure, he turned his strained, staring eyes on the shrinking Pauline.

"Have I ever done you any harm?" he said in the low voice of utmost despair.

"Me, monsieur?" she gasped. "You harm me? No, indeed, I was only too proud to think my dear mistress should have won such a husband."

"Then you will answer my questions truly," he went on, his eyes devouring the woman's homely features as though he would fain seek some comfort therein.

"Oh yes, indeed, monsieur. Ask me anything. It is not that I have much to tell. Mademoiselle said, 'Give this letter to the King himself. Let it touch no other hand.' That is all, monsieur. She was weeping when she wrote it. Monsieur Poluski told me what to do to-morrow about my own journey. See, here are my tickets."

"Poluski!" said Alec, and the words came dully. "Has he too betrayed me?"

"He has gone with my mistress," sobbed Pauline. "It is not that they have betrayed you, monsieur; for mademoiselle looked like to die, and I have never seen any one more disturbed than Monsieur Poluski. He raved like a maniac when I asked him for one word of explanation."

"But what does it mean, woman? Do you understand what has happened? My promised wife has fled, bidding me not to dream of seeing her again, and with her has gone one of the few men alive in whom I had confidence. What is that but betrayal?"

"I do not profess to understand the ways of courts, monsieur," said Pauline, gathering a little courage, since the King appealed to her as a fellow mortal. "But in your case I do not think I should blame Mademoiselle Joan. She did not go because she had ceased to love you, monsieur. Sometimes a woman can love a man so well that she will leave him if she thinks it is for his good."

A light broke in on the darkness. Was Joan the victim of some deadly intrigue such as had sullied too often the records of the Kosnovian monarchy? How strange it was that he should come from that eventful meeting of the Cabinet and receive within the hour Joan's pathetic message of farewell! He stood and thought deeply again for many minutes, striving to conquer his laboring heart and throbbing brain, exerting manfully all his splendid resources of mind and body. Then he turned to the trembling Frenchwoman and said with almost uncanny gentleness:

"You have done what your mistress asked, Pauline. Come to me to-morrow before you go, and I will reward you for your faithful service. Leave me now; but tell none what has happened. I must have time to think, and it would help me if no other person in this house but you shares with me the knowledge of mademoiselle's departure."

Pauline went out, glad of her dismissal, yet sobbing with sympathy. Alec began to pace the length of the long dimly lighted room. Back and forth he went, thinking, knitting his brows in fierce effort to subdue his stunned faculties. By degrees the sad significance of Joan's words and actions during their visit that morning to the New Konak began to establish itself. He saw now that she was bidding farewell to her dream of happiness, deliberately torturing herself with a burden of memories. Even their parting kiss must have given her a twinge of direst agony; for the one thing he would

never believe of Joan was that she had sacrificed him to some feminine whim, made him the sport of a woman's caprice.

She had been driven from him! By whom? He must discover that, and he gloated with almost insensate rage at the thought of strangling with his hands the wretch who had done this callous deed. Physical passion mastered him again, and it was not until he realized the folly of merely dreaming of vengeance that he forced himself anew into a semblance of calm. He knew that a man blinded with rage could not deal sanely with this problem of love and statecraft. At first he thought of questioning individually each person who, by the remotest chance, might be responsible for Joan's flight. But not only did his impatient heart spurn that slower method of inquisition; but he realized that he was more likely to discover the truth by gathering instantly in one room all those persons whose self interest pointed to his undoing. Somehow, Sobieski's disjointed narrative aroused a dreadful suspicion that was not to be quelled.

He summoned an attendant. "Ask Prince and Princess Delgrado to come here," he said. "Send to General Stampoff and tell him that the King urgently desires his presence. I believe that Monsieur Beliani and Count Julius Marulitch are in the smoking-room with Monsieur Nesimir. Ask those three gentlemen also to join me."

The attendant saluted and withdrew. Alec examined the door to make sure that the key was in the lock. Hardly conscious of his own purpose, he looked about for a weapon. In the place of honor, above the fireplace, hung the sword given him by his father in the Rue Boissiere. It evoked bitter memories, and he swung on his heel with a curse, going to the window and staring out into the night. His brain seethed with strange imaginings, and his breast was on fire. The sight of that ridiculous sword lying in its sheath of velvet and gold seemed to reveal the hollowness of life, its mock tragedies, its real agony of tears. All at once the impulse seized him to look at the bright steel. With a savage laugh he sprang back across the room and took down the sword. The blade leaped forth at his clutch, and he kissed it in a frenzy.

"You weep, my Joan," he cried. "I know that you weep; but your tempter's lying heart shall shed drop for drop!"

CHAPTER XIII

WHEREIN A REASON IS GIVEN FOR JOAN'S FLIGHT

A knock sounded on the door. "Their Excellencies the Prince and Princess Delgrado," announced Bosko, whose jaws underwent strange contortions at being compelled to utter so many syllables consecutively.

Alec thrust the sword into its scabbard. He did not put the weapon in its accustomed place; but hid it behind a fold of one of the heavy curtains that shrouded the windows.

"On the arrival of the others whom I have summoned you can usher them in without warning," he said to Bosko. "As soon as General Stampoff comes let no other person enter, and remain near the door until I call you."

"*Oui, monsieur*," said Bosko. King or no King, he was faithful to his scanty stock of French.

Prince Michael had dined well, having induced his host to depart from the King's injunctions as to the wine supplied at meals. His puffed face shone redly. It looked so gross and fat, perched on such a slender frame, that he resembled one of those diminutive yet monstrous caricatures of humanity seen on the pantomime stage.

"What is the trouble now, Alec?" he asked, glancing quickly round the spacious ill lighted apartment. "Your man came to me most mysteriously. His manner suggested treasons, spoils, and stratagems. I met your mother on the stairs. She too, it seems, is in demand."

Alec looked at the strange little creature whom he called father, and from the Prince's gargoyle head his gaze dwelt on his mother. She had uttered no word. Her eyes met his furtively for a second and then dropped. She was disturbed, obviously alarmed, and, with a curiously detached feeling of surprise, he guessed that she knew of Joan's departure. Well, he would bide his time until all possible conspirators were present. Then, by fair means or foul, he would wring the truth from them.

"I want to consult my mother and you as to a certain matter," he said, answering Prince Michael with apparent nonchalance. "I shall not detain you very long. Beliani, Julius, and Monsieur Nesimir are in the building, and then we only await Stampoff--with whom, by the way, I almost succeeded in quarreling to-day."

"A quarrel with Stampoff!" exclaimed the elder Delgrado, preening his chest and sticking out his chin in the exaggerated manner that warned those who knew him best of the imminent expression of a weighty opinion. "That will never do. Stampoff is the backbone of your administration. Were it not for our dear Paul, nothing would have been heard of a Delgrado in Kosnovia during the last quarter of a century. My dear boy, he has kept us alive politically. On no account can you afford to quarrel with Stampoff!"

Michael's big head wagged wisely; for champagne invariably made him talkative. Nesimir entered; with him came Count Julius and the Greek.

"Nice thing his Majesty has just told me!" cried Prince Michael, with owl-like gravity. "He says that Stampoff and he have disagreed. What has gone wrong? Have you heard of this most unfortunate estrangement, Monsieur Nesimir?"

The President, of course, assumed that some allusion had been made already to the scene in the Council chamber.

"A serious position has undoubtedly arisen," he said blandly. "His Majesty did not see his way clear to adopt certain recommendations put forward by his Ministers to-day,--by myself, I may say, acting on behalf of my colleagues," and he coughed deferentially,--"and General Stampoff took an active part in the debate. He set forth his views with--er--what I considered to be--er--unnecessary vehemence. But there," and a flourish of his hand indicated the nebulous nature of the dispute, "nothing was said that cannot be mended. His Majesty himself had the tact to adjourn the discussion till to-morrow, and I have little doubt that we shall all be prepared to consider the matter then like reasonable men."

"But what was it about?" broke in the Prince testily. "Was it with reference to Monsieur Beliani? I understood that his appointment to the Ministry of Finance was agreed to unanimously."

Beliani coughed, with the modesty of a man who might not discuss his own merits. The President hesitated before he answered this direct question. He cast a doubtful glance on the King, who had turned to the window again and seemed to give little heed to the conversation. But Alec wheeled round. He had heard every word, and, oddly enough in his own estimation, was already drawing conclusions that were not wholly unfavorable to Prince Michael.

"I have sent for Stampoff," he said, exercising amazing self control in concealing his fierce desire to have done with

subterfuge, "and my message was couched in such terms that he will hardly refuse to honor us with his presence. Meanwhile, let me rescue you, Monsieur Nesimir, from the embarrassment of explaining away the difficulty you yourself brought about at to-day's meeting of the Cabinet. Monsieur Beliani had no rival; no one doubted his ability as a financier.

"The dispute arose in connection with my forthcoming marriage. It was suggested that I should contract an alliance with a Princess of some reigning house in the Balkans. The obvious corollary of that view was that Miss Joan Vernon could not be regarded as a suitable bride for the King of Kosnovia. I declined to accept the recommendation put forward by Monsieur Nesimir,--to whom, by the way, I attribute the utmost good faith,--and Stampoff, whose patriotic ardor halts at nothing, practically threatened me with the loss of my Kingdom as the penalty of disobedience. I said that I was quite willing to leave the whole matter to the arbitrament of the people. If they decide against my choice of a wife, it follows that there will be a vacancy in the Delgrado succession."

Princess Delgrado uttered a sigh that was almost a groan. She sank into the chair that her son had offered her when she entered the room, but rose to her feet again in manifest anxiety when her husband thrust himself in front of Alec.

"Are we to credit," he broke in furiously, "that you have actually placed your marriage with this girl before every tie of family and patrimony?"

"That is hardly a fair statement of the facts," said Alec coldly, though it cost him a violent effort to sustain this unnatural calm when he was aflame with desire to ascertain Joan's motive; "but it will serve. At any rate, we can defer discussion of that point for the present. We are gathered here to deal with quite another phase of the dispute, and, with your permission, I shall leave any further explanation until General Stampoff has arrived."

Although his utterance was measured and seemingly devoid of any excess of feeling, three, at least, of those in the room were not deceived by his attitude. Princess Delgrado seemed to be profoundly disquieted, while Beliani and Marulitch strove, not altogether with success, to carry themselves with the indifference that cloaks uneasiness. Alec turned again to the window and looked out.

A carriage drove into the courtyard and, though its occupant was invisible, he guessed rightly that Stampoff had not failed him. Some low conversation went on behind his back, and, although he was now marshaling his forces for the impending struggle, he became aware that the President was giving in greater detail an account of the afternoon's proceedings. But he listened only for the opening of the door. From that instant war should be declared, ruthless war on each and every person present who had reft him of his promised bride.

Stampoff entered. His keen old eyes instantly took in the significance of the gathering; but he saluted the King in silence, bowed to Princess Delgrado, and stood stockstill, not a yard from the door, in the attitude of one who awaits an order, or, it might be, a denunciation.

Alec approached, and the others, including Stampoff himself, thought that he meant to make some private communication to the newcomer before beginning a debate in which all might share. But he walked past Stampoff, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.



Stampoff saluted the King in silence

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"Now," he said, "I am free to explain why we seven are gathered here to-night. Joan Vernon, who was to have become my wife within a few days, left Delgratz two hours ago by the mail train for Paris. She was accompanied by Felix Poluski, and the only reason for this clandestine journey is contained in a few lines of farewell addressed to me by the lady herself. In that letter she speaks of a barrier that renders impossible a marriage between her and me. I want to know what that barrier is and who erected it, and I shall discover both those things here and now, if I have to tear the knowledge from the heart of each man present!"

"A strange threat, Alec," panted Prince Michael, whose prominent eyes were bulging in semi-intoxication, though indeed he seemed suddenly to have realized the tremendous import of the King's statement,--"a strange threat to be uttered before your mother!"

"My mother loved Joan," came the impassioned cry. "She took her to her heart from the first hour, and she will bear with me now in my agony. Yet it may be that even my mother has deceived me. I cannot tell. Some of you here know, perhaps all; but I vow to Heaven I shall not flinch from my resolve to extract the truth, no matter with whom the responsibility rests!"

Princess Delgrado, trembling and ghastly pale, tottered to the chair again and gripped its back to prevent herself from falling. Under less strained conditions, it must have seemed bizarre in a company of men for whom polite attentions to the opposite sex were a fixed convention, that she should seek such support when her husband was standing by her side; but in that startled gathering small heed was given to aught else than the King's thrilling statement.

Though aware of his mother's distress, Alec did not move from the position he had taken up, facing all of them, and with that hidden sword within easy reach. Ever a dutiful and devoted son, he continued now to glower at the half-fainting woman as though she alone held the key of the mystery that resulted in Joan's disappearance. His impassioned eyes sought to peer into her very soul, and his nostrils quivered with the frenzied eagerness of one who awaited an answer to the implied question. In some indefinable way he had already begun to suspect the truth; for when the poor

woman made no reply, though more than once her terror laden eyes met his in mute appeal, he whirled round on Marulitch.

"Perhaps this is an occasion when it is a woman's privilege to remain silent," he said bitterly. "So I begin with you, Julius. Save myself, you are the youngest here, and it would be fitting that you and I should determine this business. I warn you there will be no half measures! My life, at least, goes into the scale, and I care not who else adjusts the balance."

The pink and white tints had long fled from the Parisian dandy's complexion. In the dim light he looked livid, and his forehead bore bright beads of perspiration. But even Alec's fiery eyes discerned that he was not only afraid, but bewildered, and his voice cracked with excitement when he spoke.

"I declare by everything I hold sacred that I had no hand in this affair!" he said shrilly. "It is natural perhaps that you should suspect me, since I seem to have most to gain by any ill that befalls you; but, even in your anger, Alec, you should be just. No matter how fierce your emotions, you ought to realize that Miss Vernon's departure from Delgratz retards rather than helps any possible scheming on my part to succeed you on the throne."

"Now you, Beliani!" said Alec, striving to penetrate the mask that covered the one impassive face in the room. "It was you who contrived that my promised wife should come here from Paris. I can see your purpose now. At to-day's meeting of the Cabinet, while I was urging your advancement to power and dignity in the State, your hand was revealed in the opposition manifested to my marriage. Your cunning brain conceived the notion that I would not abandon the woman I loved for the sake of fifty Kingdoms. You read my mind aright; but, if it was you who brought about her flight, for what devilish reason did you depart from the subtle plot that might well have achieved your ends by means which you, at least, would consider fair?"

The Greek spread wide his hands in that characteristic gesture of his. As it happened, for once in his life he could afford to be sincere. "I can only assure your Majesty in the plainest possible terms," he said, "that until I heard the news from your own lips, I had no knowledge whatsoever of Miss Vernon's journey. Were I asked outside that locked door to state to the best of my belief where she might be found, I should have said that the slight illness of which she complained this morning had probably confined her to her room."

For an instant Alec scowled at the President; but Sergius Nesimir's vacuous features so obviously revealed his condition of speechless surprise and distress that there remained only Stampoff, Prince Michael--and his mother.

Adhering rigidly to his scheme of narrowing the field of inquiry by putting the same straight question to each individual in turn, Alec next appealed to the man who had helped him to gain a throne.

"Paul," he said, "you who were my friend and have become my enemy, you, at least, will speak the truth. Tell me, then, who has done this thing!"

Stampoff strode forward. He feared no one, this determined advocate of his country's cause, and he alone knew the real menace of the impending tornado. "Your mother ought not to be here, Alec," he muttered. "A little more of this and she will faint. Look at her! Have you no pity in your heart? This is no place for a woman. Unlock the door and let her be taken away!"

Alec moistened his dry lips with his tongue. He felt that he was finally touching sure ground in the morass through which he was floundering. "She and all of you must remain!" was his grim reply. "Answer my question! Was it you who drove Joan from Delgratz?"

"I counseled it," said Stampoff, folding his arms defiantly, and apparently careless whether or not the King sprang at his throat the next instant.

"Ah! At last! Thank God for one man who is honest, though he seems to have acted like a fiend! To whom did you counsel it? To Joan herself?"

"No."

"Tell me, then, to whom?"

"I refuse."

"Stampoff, I shall draw a confession from you even though you die under my hands."

"I have faced death many times for the King of Kosnovia," said the harsh Serbian voice, "and I shall not shrink from it now, whether at the hands of the King or his foes. Send your mother away; then, perhaps, I may tell you what you want

to know. The thing is done, and I, for one, shall not shirk the consequences."

"My mother again! Must she be spared though you have sacrificed her son?"

With a quick movement that sent tremors through Julius and the Greek, since he was compelled to pass close to both, he strode to the quaking Princess and caught her almost roughly by the shoulder.

"I feared this from the outset," he cried. "Did Stampoff make you the agent of his hellish work? Joan would trust you. Speak to me, mother! Was it you who wrought this evil?"

Her head was bent low, and she gasped something that sounded like an excuse. Alec recoiled from her in sudden horror. His hands were pressed feverishly to his forehead, and a hoarse cry of anguish came from his panting breast.

"I think I shall go mad!" he almost sobbed. "My own mother enter into this league against me! My mother---Oh, it cannot be! Stampoff, you, I know, would not scruple to sacrifice my dearest hopes to further your designs. Could you find none but my mother to aid you?"

He reeled as under a blow from an unseen hand, and at that unfortunate moment Prince Michael Delgrado thought fit to assert his authority.

"This ridiculous scene has gone far enough," he cried. "I was not aware that your pretty artist had quitted Delgratz; but it is quite evident that her departure is the best thing that could possibly happen for the good of the Kingdom. If Stampoff advised it, and your mother saw fit to point out to the girl the danger she was bringing to you and the monarchy, such action on their part has my complete approval."

Alec gazed blankly at the pompous little man. It needed but Prince Michael's outburst to stamp the whole episode with the seal of ineffable meanness and double dealing. He recalled the cowardice displayed by the Prince when Stampoff urged him to seize the vacant throne, and his gorge rose at the thought that Joan had been driven from his arms in order that this pygmy might secure the annual pittance that would supply his lusts in Paris. At that moment Alec was Berserk with impotent rage. His mother's complicity in the banishing of Joan denied him a victim on whom to wreak his wrath.

But there still remained a vengeance, dire and far reaching, which would teach a bitter lesson to those who had entered into so unworthy a conspiracy.

Leaping to the curtain which concealed the sword, he snatched it up and smashed it across his knee. "See, then, how I treat the symbol of my monarchy," he cried with a terrible laugh. "I shall soon demonstrate to you what a pricked balloon is this Kingship of which you prate. I believe that you, my own father, are ready to supplant me, I know that Julius, my cousin, is straining every nerve to procure my downfall; but you shall learn how a man who despises the pinchbeck honors of a throne can defeat your petty malice and miserable scheming. Monsieur Nesimir, I proclaim Kosnovia a Republic from this hour! Here and now I abdicate! Summon a meeting of the Assembly to-morrow, and I shall give its members the best of reasons why the State will prosper more under the people's rule than under that of either of the men who are so anxious to succeed me."

"Abdicate! Republic! What monstrous folly!" cried Prince Michael, his plethoric face convulsed with anger at this unexpected counterstroke.

"I am saying that which, with God's help, I shall perform!" cried Alec, despair falling from him like a discarded garment as he realized what his project would mean to Joan and himself.

"You may abdicate, of course, if you choose," came the scornful retort; "but you have no power to break the Delgrado line."

"My power will be put to the test to-morrow," said Alec. "I am not afraid to measure my strength against the pitiful cowards who struck at me through a woman's love."

"Pay no heed to him, Monsieur Nesimir!" piped Prince Michael, whose voice rose to a thin falsetto. "He is beside himself. If he chooses to vacate the throne, it reverts to me."

"A Republic in Kosnovia!" snarled Stampoff. "That, indeed, will mark the beginning of the end for the Slav race. A single year would wipe us out of existence. What say you, Beliani, and you, Marulitch? Why are you dumb? Was it for this that we have striven through so many years? Shall our country be wrecked now because a hot headed youth puts his vows to a woman before every consideration of national welfare?"

"The notion is preposterous!" growled Julius, gaining courage from Stampoff's bold denunciation; but Beliani tried to

temporize.

"We are far too excited to deal with this vexed affair to-night," he said. "The King is naturally aggrieved by a trying experience, and is hardly in a fit state of mind to consider the grave issues raised by his words. Let us forget what we have just heard. To-morrow we shall all be calmer and saner."

"Monsieur Nesimir," said Alec sternly, fixing the hapless President with his masterful eye, "while I remain King you must obey my orders. See to it that notices are despatched to-night to the members of the National Assembly summoning a special meeting for an early hour to-morrow."

"Monsieur Nesimir will do nothing of the kind!" shrieked the infuriated Prince Michael. "I forbid it!"

"And I command it," cried Alec. "If he refuses, I shall take other steps to insure my wishes being fulfilled."

"Then I will tell you why your Joan has gone!" bellowed the Prince. "No, Marie, I will not be restrained!" he shouted to his wife, who had rushed to him in a very frenzy of alarm. She clutched at his shoulder; but he shook himself free brutally.

"It is full time you knew what I have done for you," he hissed venomously at Alec. "Stampoff and your mother and I, alone of those in this room, are aware of the fraud that has been perpetrated on the people of this country. You are not King of Kosnovia. You are not my son. Your father was a Colorado gold miner to whom your mother was married before I met her, and who died before you were born. For the sake of his widow's money I gave her my name, and was fool enough to fall in with her whim of pride that you should be brought up as a Prince Delgrado. I suppose Stampoff urged your mother to reveal the facts to that chit of a girl who has addled your brain, and she, fortunately, had sense enough to see that you can not continue to occupy the throne five seconds after it becomes known that you are a mere alien, that your name is Alexander Talbot, and that I, Michael Delgrado, who married a foreigner in order that I might live, and permitted an American child to be reared as a lawful Prince of my house, am the lawful King."

The little man strutted up and down the room in a fume of indignation, and evidently felt fully justified in his own esteem. Ever selfish and vain, he fancied that he had been the victim of a cruel fate, and he read the sheer bewilderment in Alec's face as a tribute to the master stroke he had just delivered.

But his self conceit wilted under the contemptuous scorn of his wife's gaze, which he chanced to meet when his posturing ceased.

Alec looked to his mother for some confirmation or denial of the astounding statement blurted forth by her husband. But she had no eyes for her son then. The wrongs and sufferings of a lifetime were welling up from her heart to her lips. The agonized suspense of the last few minutes had given way to the frenzy of a woman outraged in her deepest sentiments.

She relinquished the chair to which she had been clinging, and faced the diminutive Prince with a quiet dignity that overawed him.

"So that is how you keep your oath, Michael!" she said. "When I forgave your infidelities, when I pandered to your extravagance, when I allowed you to fritter away the wealth bequeathed to me by a man whose fine nature was so far removed from yours that I have often wondered why God created two such opposite types of humanity, time and again you vowed that the idle folly of my youth would never be revealed by you. Twice you swore it on your knees when I was stung beyond endurance by your baseness. No, Michael," and her voice rose almost to a scream when her husband tried to silence her with a curse, "you shall hear the truth now, if I have to ask my son as a last favor to his unhappy mother to still that foul tongue of yours by force!"

For an instant, she made a wild appeal to Alec. "Your father was an honorable man," she cried. "For his sake, if not for mine, since I have forfeited all claim to your love, compel this man to be silent!"

The belief was slowly establishing itself in her son's mind that the incredible thing he was hearing was actually true. Nevertheless, he was temporarily bereft of the poise and balance of judgment that might have enabled him to adjust the warring elements in his bewildered brain. It was a new and horrible experience to be asked by his mother to use physical violence against the man he had been taught to regard as his father.

He had never respected Michael Delgrado,—he could acknowledge that now without the twinge of conscience that had always accompanied the unpleasing thought in the past,—yet, despite the gulf already yawning wide between them, his soul revolted against the notion of laying a hand on him in anger.

But he did stoop over the spluttering little Prince and said sternly, "You must not interrupt my mother again! You must not, I tell you!"

Such was the chilling emphasis of his words that Delgrado's loud objurgations died away in his throat, and the distraught Princess, with one last look of unutterable contempt at her royal spouse, faced the other occupants of the room.

"I did harm to none by my innocent deception," she pleaded. "I was very young when I married Alec's father, who was nearly twenty years older than I. We were not rich, and we were compelled to live in a rude mining camp, where my husband owned some claims that seemed to be of little value. But from the day of our wedding our fortunes began to improve, and, in the year before my son was born, money poured in on us. That small collection of wooden shanties has now become a great city. The land my husband owned is worth ten thousand times its original value; but, unfortunately, when wealth came, I grew dissatisfied with my surroundings. I wanted to travel, to mix in society, to become one of the fashionable throng that flocks to Paris and London and the Riviera in their seasons. My husband refused to desert the State in which his interests were bound up.

"We quarreled--it was all my fault--and then one day he was killed in a mine accident, and I, scarce knowing what I was doing, fled to New York for distraction from my grief and self condemnation. My son was born there, and in that same year I met Prince Michael Delgrado in a friend's house. To me in those days a Prince was a wonderful creature. He quickly saw that I was a prize worth capturing, and not many months elapsed before we were married. I had all the foolish vanity of a young woman, unused to the world, who was entitled to call herself a Princess, and it seemed to my flighty mind that the fact of my son bearing a different name to my own would always advertise my plebeian origin; for I was quite a woman of the people, the daughter of a storekeeper in Pueblo. I cast aside my old and tried acquaintances, placed my affairs in trustworthy hands, and, when we set up an establishment in Paris, my infant son came to be known as a Prince of the Delgrado family.

"Once such a blunder is made it is not easily rectified; but during many a sad hour have I regretted it, for Michael Delgrado did not scruple to use it as a threat whenever I resented his ill conduct. At first a trivial thing, in time it became a millstone round my neck. As Alec grew up, it became more and more difficult to announce that he was not Prince Alexis Delgrado, but a simple commoner, Alexander Talbot by name.

"There, then, you have the measure of my transgression. It was the knowledge of the truth that drove that dear girl, Joan Vernon, from Delgratz this evening, because General Stampoff would not scruple to reveal the imposture if he failed to secure the King's adherence to his projects."

"God's bones!" broke in Stampoff. "I made him King, though I was aware from the day of your wedding that he was not Michael's son. King he is, and King he will remain if he agrees to my terms."

"Go on with your story, mother," said Alec softly. "I think I am beginning to understand now."

"What more need I say?" wailed the Princess in a sudden access of grief. "I have squandered your love, Alec, I have ruined my own life, I have devoted all these wretched years to a man who is the worst sort of blackmailer--a husband who trades on his wife's weakness."

She turned on Prince Michael with a last cry. "I am done with you now forever!" she sobbed. "I have borne with you for my son's sake; but now you and I must dwell apart, for my very soul loathes you!"

She sank into a chair in a passion of tears, and Alec bent over her. He spoke no word to her; but his hand rested gently around her neck while his eyes traveled from Michael's gray-green face to Julius Marulitch's white one.

"I think we have all heard sufficient of the Delgrado history to render unnecessary any further comment on my decision to relinquish an honor that, it would appear, I had no right to accept," he said. "I have gained my end, though by a strange path. Will you please leave me with my mother?"

The one man present who felt completely out of his depth in this sea of discord took it upon himself to cry pathetically:

"The door is locked, your--your Majesty!"

"Ah, forgive me, Monsieur Nesimir," said Alec, with a friendly smile. "I had forgotten that. And, now that I come to think of it, I still have something to say; but we need not detain my mother to hear an uninteresting conversation. Pardon me one moment, while I attend to her."

CHAPTER XIV

THE BROKEN TREATY

Alec unlocked the door. The laconic Bosko returned his all-sufficing "*Oui, monsieur*," to the request that he would bring Mademoiselle Joan's French maid to Princess Delgrado, since it was in Alec's mind that Pauline might be discreet.

Prince Michael, Beliani, Marulitch, and Nesimir had already formed themselves into a whispering group. Stampoff was seated apart, morose and thoughtful. The old man's elbows rested on his knees and his chin was propped between his bony fists. Princess Delgrado had flung herself forward on the table. Her face was hidden by her outstretched arms. This attitude of abandonment, the clenched hands, the convulsive heaving of her shoulders, were eloquent of tempest-tossed emotions. She looked so forlorn that her son was tempted to return to her side without delay; but instead he walked quietly toward the four men clustered in the center of the room. They started apart and faced him nervously. It seemed that even yet they feared lest some uncontrolled gust of anger might lead Alec to fling himself blindly upon them. Had they but known it, he despised them too greatly to think of mauling them.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have one small request to make. Give me your word of honor--I will take it for what it is worth--that to-night's happenings shall remain unknown to the outer world, and that there will be no interference with my mother or myself before we leave Delgratz."

Prince Michael, who had recovered some of his jauntiness, looked at Alec with the crafty eye of a cowed hyena; but he said coolly, "There is nothing to be gained by publishing our blunders to all the world."

"Have I your promise?" insisted Alec.

"Yes."

"And yours?" he said to Marulitch.

"Of course I agree," came the ready answer. "I, like Prince Michael, feel that it would be folly----"

"Prince Michael!" snarled the royal Delgrado. "You must learn to school your tongue, Julius! From this moment I am King of Kosnovia. Let there be no manner of doubt about that!"

Alec might not have heard the blusterer. His calm glance fell on Beliani. "And what say you?" he asked.

"I agree most fully and unreservedly," murmured the Greek, conveying, with a deep bow, his respectful regret that such an assurance should be necessary. The greatly perturbed President had already quitted the room; so Alec turned to Stampoff. His manner was quite friendly. Well he knew that this fiery soul was not to be judged by the Delgrado standard.

"I will not inflict on you, my trusty comrade," he said, "the indignity of a demand that I felt was imperative in the case of some others present. Let us shake hands and think rather of what we have gone through together when I was King and you were my most loyal supporter, than of the poor climax to my brief reign that reveals me as an impostor."

Those keen eyes were raised in a half-formed resolution. "Is it too late, Alec?" he growled sullenly.

"For what?"

Alec's smile of surprise was the only bit of affectation he had indulged in that night. The fantasy flitting through Stampoff's brain was not hidden from him; but he wanted to dismiss it lightly.

"God's bones! Need you ask? Say but the word, and you will be more firmly established on the throne than ever. Trust me to find means to still those babbling tongues!" and Stampoff flung out an arm in the direction of the uncle and nephew, each manifestly anxious to hurry away, yet each so distrustful of the other that he dared not go.

"Paul, you are incorrigible," said Alec. "You ought to have been a marshal under Napoleon, who would have had no scruples. No, you will not see civil war in the streets of Delgratz as to whether a Delgrado or an American adventurer shall reign in Kosnovia. Yet, I thank you for the thought. It shows that you, at least, do not rate me poorly, and it is not in my heart to be vexed with you, though I owe this night's amazement to your striving."

"Be just, Alec!" whispered the Serb hoarsely. "Condemn me if you will; but be just! While Michael Delgrado lived, your reign would never have been secure. I knew that all along. You will go away now and marry the girl of your choice, and

soon the memories of this downtrodden country will be dim in your soul; but think what would have happened to you, to your wife, and perhaps to your children, if Michael one day blurted out the truth in some fit of drunken rage, or if Beliani and that other white faced hound obtained evidence of your birth. That is why I was resolved to force you, if possible, to wed a Serbian Princess. Your marriage to a woman of our own race would have borne down opposition. And now what will happen? The future is black. Michael is unworthy to be a King; Marulitch, at the best, is a poor-spirited wretch; and after them there is no Delgrado."

"Well, I am sorry, too, in a way," said Alec. "I was beginning to love these Kosnovian folk, and I think I could have made something of them. Good-by, Paul. If we never meet again, at least we part good friends."

Stampoff rose and silently wrung Alec's hand. He walked straight out of the room with bent head and slow uncertain steps. For the hour his fierce spirit was chastened. He had done that which he thought would make for good, and it had turned out ill. His single minded scheming had gone awry. Another man in his position might have sought to curry favor with the new regime, whether of Michael or Julius; but Stampoff was not of that mettle; he wanted Alec to be King, because he believed in him, and now the edifice for which he had labored so ardently had tumbled in pieces about his ears.

Pauline came, and Alec went to his mother. He took her tenderly in his arms.

"Come, dear!" he said. "Joan's maid will help you to reach your room. Our train leaves at midnight, and Bosko and Pauline will give your maid any help she needs in collecting your belongings."

The Princess raised her grief stricken face to his, and it wrung his heart anew to see how that night of misery had aged her.

"Oh, my son, my son!" she murmured. "Will you ever forgive me?"

He kissed her with a hearty and reassuring hug. "Forgive you, mother!" he cried. "It is not I, but you, who have suffered through all these years. Have no fear for the future! Joan and I will make you happy."

"But she, Alec! What will she say when she learns the wrong I have done you?"

"What! Afraid of Joan?" cried he cheerfully. "Why, you dear old mother, Joan is taking all the blame on her own shoulders. You will find she agrees with me that you are the one to be pitied. You made a mistake for which you have paid very dearly; but in no possible way can it affect the remainder of our lives. There now, cheer up and prepare for your journey!"

The Princess left the room leaning on Pauline's arm, nor, in passing, did she bestow a glance on her husband. Prince Michael indulged in an ostentatious shrug, and might have said something had not Alec's gaze dwelt on him steadily. It is to be presumed that, not for the first time, discretion conquered Michael's valor.

"A word with you, Beliani," said Alec, going to the table and unlocking the drawer from which he had taken the money given to Sobieski. "You are now in charge of the State's finances, I presume. I have here a sum, roughly speaking, of one thousand pounds. To some extent, it is my own money; but the greater part consists of instalments of the salary of five thousand dollars a year I allowed myself as King. Do you think I have earned it?"

The Greek could only mutter a surprised, "Yes. Who would deny your right to a far larger amount?"

"Having your sanction, then, I take it," said Alec coolly. "Here too is my passport, issued in Paris, for which I believe I am indebted to you. It will now come in handy. May I ask in whose charge I leave the books and papers on this table? Some of them may be of use to the State."

"I am afraid I cannot answer that question," muttered the Greek, with a stealthy glance in the direction of the rival candidates.

"Well, settle it among yourselves," said Alec dryly. "Now I must be off."

Without another word he passed from the room that had witnessed his triumph and his fall. Yet his face was remarkably cheerful when he asked an attendant if Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir's whereabouts was known. The quiet elation in his manner led the man to believe that some specially pleasing news had transpired during the conclave in the royal bureau.

It appeared that his Excellency, the English milord, had gone to the music hall in the Konigstrasse with a friend.

"Then send some one to say that he is wanted here at once," said Alec.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Your Majesty!" How incongruous the two words sounded now in Alec's ears! By a trick of memory his thoughts flew back to the Montmartre review wherein the stage prototypes of the Parisian band of exiled monarchs addressed each other by high sounding titles and incidentally sought to borrow five-franc pieces.

"If I possessed some literary skill, I could write a review that would set the world talking," he mused, smiling to himself as he ascended the stairs to his own suite.

"What is the matter, old chap?" demanded Beaumanoir, strolling into his friend's dressing room a few minutes later. Lord Adalbert never hurried unless he was on horseback. He was in evening dress, and an opera hat was set rakishly on the back of his head. He was smoking, his hands were thrust into his pockets, and the mere sight of him served again to remind Alec of the larger world in whose daily round Kosnovia and its troubles filled so insignificant a part.

In an oddly jubilant mood, Alec took a pencil and wrote in large characters on Beaumanoir's immaculate shirt front, "Paris--with care."

His chum read. "The answer is?" he asked.

"We are leaving Delgratz to-night, Berty. That is all."

"You don't say!" He glanced down at the label. "Is this the address?"

"Yes."

Beaumanoir screwed his cigar firmly into the corner of his mouth. "I am pretty rapid myself, Alec," he grinned; "but you are too sudden altogether. Tell me just what you mean, there's a dear fellow."

"I take it you don't want to remain here without me, Berty," said Alec cheerily, "and I am off. I chucked up my job half an hour ago. Joan and Felix started by the mail train that left here at half-past five. We follow at midnight. My mother goes with us. As Bosko is giving her maid a hand in the packing, I must look after my own traps. Nesimir's servants would talk, which is just what I want to avoid. The two days in the train will give you plenty of time to learn the harrowing details. I have a pretty story for you; but it must wait. I am not cracked, nor sprung, nor trying to be funny; so you need not look at me in that way. I am out of business as a King, for good and all, and the sooner I cross the frontier, the better it will be for my health."

"Honor bright, Alec?"

"Every syllable. Now, get a hustle on!"

There was a tap at the door, and a servant entered with a note for the King. It was from Constantine Beliani, and written in French.

Prince Michael and Count Julius Marulitch have decided that, in the interests of the State, you ought to make a formal abdication of the throne, appointing the former as your successor, with special remainder to Count Julius.

I agree with them that this offers the best way out of an unfortunate situation, and I would respectfully point out the urgency that is attached to the proposal if you still contemplate leaving Delgratz to-night.

Alec bent his brows over this curt missive, which was not couched precisely in the suave words that might be expected from the Greek. Read between the lines, its meaning was significant. Michael and his nephew, hungering for the spoils, had patched up a truce. They were already contemplating another military pronouncement, and Beliani, having made his own terms, was lending his influence.

If their demands were refused, Alec might find himself a prisoner, and the country would be plunged into a revolution. Under different conditions, he would gladly have measured his wits and his popularity against the triumvirate. A call to arms would win him the support of the great majority of the troops and of nearly all the younger officers. But a fight for a throne to which he had no claim was not to be thought of; yet he was adamant in his resolve not to advance the schemes of these rogues by any written statement.

He handed the note to Beaumanoir with a quiet laugh. "There you have the story in a nutshell," he said. "A few minutes ago I became aware that I am not Prince Michael's son. Although I strove to act fairly, my worthy stepfather is not content. He thinks to force my hand, because he fears the republican idea; but I may best him yet."

"Where is Monsieur Nesimir?" he said to the servant, to whom the English conversation was a sealed book.

"In his apartments, I believe, your Majesty."

"Have instructions been given for mounted orderlies to be in readiness?"

"I heard his Excellency Prince Michael say something of the sort to the officer of the guard, your Majesty."

The random shot had told. Alec felt that he was spinning a coin with fortune.

"That is right," he said coolly. "Give my compliments to Monsieur Beliani, and ask him to oblige me by coming here for a moment; Prince Michael and Count Marulitch, too. Tell all three that I am ready to attend at once to the matter mentioned in Monsieur Beliani's note."

The servant disappeared. Beaumanoir, who, of course, did not understand the instructions given to the man, was fumigating Beliani's letter with rapid puffs of smoke, and incidentally scratching the back of his right ear.

"Rum go this, Alec!" he began.

"Not a word now. You'll stand by me, Berty, I know. Go to my mother's suite and tell Bosko I want him instantly. Bid him bring a brace of revolvers, and see that they are loaded. Come here yourself with some ropes, leather straps, anything that will serve to truss a man securely, as soon as you are sure that Michael, Julius, and the Greek are safely in the room."

Beaumanoir scented a row. Lest any words of his might stop it, he vanished. He must have hurried, too, since Bosko had joined his master before Beliani's messenger reached the anxious conspirators with Alec's answer. There was no need to ask if the Albanian had brought the weapons. They were tucked ostentatiously in his belt. Alec looked him squarely in the eyes.

"I think I can depend on you, Bosko," said he.

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Understand, then, that I am no longer King of Kosnovia. I am not Prince Michael's son. I mean to leave Delgratz to-night, and there is a plot on foot to prevent my departure except on terms to which I shall not agree. Will you help me to defeat it?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Within the next minute I shall probably have visitors. They may show fight, though I doubt it, I want you to place those two pistols among the clothes in that portmanteau, and be busy, apparently, in arranging its contents. When I close the door, you must spring up and cover them with both revolvers. Do not shoot without my command; but make it clear by your manner that their lives are at your mercy. Will you do this?"

"*Oui, monsieur,*" said Bosko.

"Here they are, then. Be ready!"

The door was ajar, and footsteps sounded on the stairs. Some one knocked.

"Come in," said Alec cordially.

Beliani was the first to enter. He pushed the door wide open to assure himself that he was not walking into a trap. He saw Bosko on his knees, rummaging in a trunk, and Alec standing in the middle of the room, lighting a cigarette.

"Come in," said Alec again. "My departure is rather hurried, as you know, and I have not a minute to spare. Have you brought the necessary documents?"

"It is a simple matter," said the Greek, advancing confidently. "Half a sheet of notepaper with your signature and our indorsement as witnesses will suffice."

Prince Michael and Julius, reassured by Alec's manner, and thanking the propitious stars that had rendered unnecessary the dangerous step they were contemplating, entered the room with as businesslike an air as they could assume at a crisis so fraught with import to their own future.

"We ought to be alone," said Beliani in English, with a wary glance at Bosko.

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't disturb my man! I have so little time and so much to do! Tell me exactly what you want

me to sign," and he strode to the door and closed it behind Marulitch.

The eyes of the three were on him and not on the harmless looking attendant. During those few seconds they were completely deceived.

Prince Michael, finding the path so easy, took the lead. "Just a formal renunciation of the crown," he said. "Give as your reason, if you choose, your inability to fall in with the expressed desire of the Cabinet that you should marry a Serbian lady. It is essential that you should name me----"

The door opened and Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir came in leisurely. He carried an assortment of straps, rifled from leather trunks and hatboxes. He saw the three men facing Alec, and behind them Bosko's leveled revolvers.

"Not a bally rope to be had, dear boy; but here's leather enough to go round," he grinned. "By gad! what a tableau! I suppose you mean to gag 'em and then tie 'em back to back, eh, what?"

Alec picked up a chair. "Yes," he said. "Begin with his Excellency Prince Michael."

Julius Marulitch's right hand sought the pocket of the dinner jacket he was wearing.

"No, Julius," said Alec pleasantly, "move an inch and you are a dead man. Bosko has my orders, and he will obey them. You may look at him if you doubt my word."

Marulitch's well poised head had never before turned so quickly; but he shrank from a wicked looking muzzle pointed straight between his eyes. In such circumstances, the caliber of a revolver seems to become magnified to absurdly large proportions, and behind the fearsome weapon Bosko's immovable face was that of an automaton.

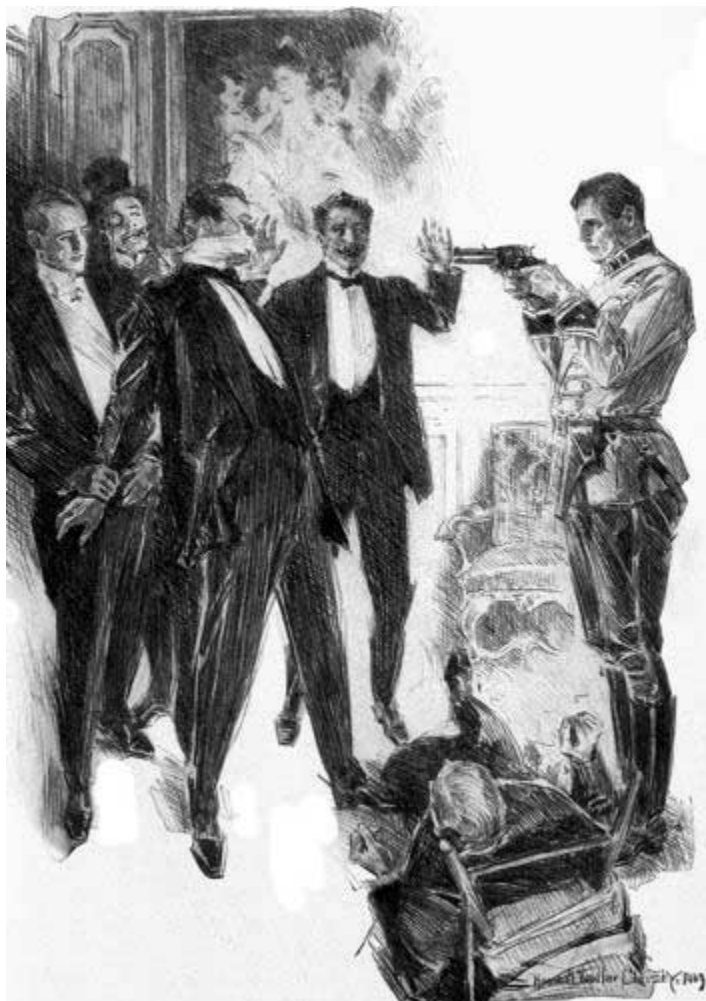
Beliani's olive complexion assumed a sickly green tint for the second time that evening. "I was right," he muttered; "but you would not listen."

"It is a common delusion of the thief that an honest man has no brains," said Alec coolly. "Now, Beaumanoir, get busy. Time is flying, and we have little more than an hour to spare."

Prince Michael, never noted for his courage, began to whimper some words of expostulation; but Beaumanoir's strong hands soon silenced him with an improvised gag, for the effeminate little rascal realized that his jaw might be broken if he resisted the stuffing of a towel into his mouth. In a few minutes the three were seated on the floor, securely bound, and unable to utter more than a gurgling cry, which would certainly not be heard by any one passing along the outer corridor.

Alec's cheerful explanation of his action must have been particularly galling. "You will remain here until such time as Stampoff decides that you may safely be set at liberty," he said. "Not you, but he, must provide for the future good government in Kosnovia."

"Thanks, Beaumanoir," he added, turning from the discomfited trio with a carelessness that showed they gave him no further concern. "Better be off now and get ready. Bosko, mount guard outside the door! Allow no one to enter on any pretext whatsoever!"



In a few minutes the three were securely bound

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Then he busied himself about the room, followed by vengeful eyes. He had brought little into Kosnovia, and he took little away. The extraordinary simplicity of his life had rendered unnecessary the usual trappings of a King. He had worn no uniform save the plainest of field service garments. He possessed no State attire. His clothes were mostly those which came from Paris, and it amused him now to change rapidly into the very suit in which he had entered Delgratz, an unknown claimant of the Kosnovian throne. Bundling his trunks out into the corridor, he closed and locked the door, and the click of the moving bolt must have sent a tremor through the stiff limbs of the three worthies who lay huddled together inside.

Bidding Bosko hurry over his own preparations, he descended to the courtyard. A number of troopers, standing by their horses' heads, sprang to attention when he appeared.

"You can dismiss your men," he said to the officer in charge. "They will not be needed to-night."

Then he told an attendant to order a couple of carriages for half-past eleven. In the reception room he wrote a hasty note to Stampoff:

MY DEAR PAUL:--The legitimate King of Kosnovia and his heir apparent, not contented with the arrangement entered into in your presence, planned with Beliani a *coup d'etat*. I defeated it. You will find all three in my bedroom, the key of which I inclose. They are alive and well, and will stop there until it pleases you to release them. Perhaps you would like to consult with Sergius Nesimir, who by the time you receive this may have recovered the composure so rudely disturbed to-night. At any rate, the next move rests with you. Farewell and good luck.

Yours,

ALEC.

Outside his mother's apartments he came upon Prince Michael's valet in whispered consultation with Pauline and

Princess Delgrado's maid. In the rush of events he had forgotten the two domestics from the Rue Boissiere.

"His Excellency will not need your services to-night," he said to the man, "and it will meet his wishes in every respect if nothing is said to the other servants as to the departure of the Princess for Paris."

"Precisely, your Majesty," smirked the Frenchman.

"You, of course," he went on, addressing the maid, "will accompany your mistress."

"Yes, your Majesty," she said, quite reassured by Alec's matter of fact manner.

A glance at Pauline's honest face showed that nothing had been said of the curious scene witnessed in the bureau. To a certain extent, Joan's humble friend shared his confidence, and it was evident that she had not betrayed it.

The departure of such a large party probably created some speculation among the palace servants; but Nesimir did not put in an appearance, and no one dared to question the King's movements. Alec had purposely allowed the barest time for the drive to the station. The midnight train, not being an important express, carried few passengers, mostly traders returning to neighboring towns in Austria after conducting the day's business in Delgratz. The King and his companions, of course, were recognized; but again it was not to be expected that any official would trouble them with inquiries.

Having secured a compartment for his mother and Beaumanoir, Alec made for the station master's office, meaning to obtain a messenger who might be trusted to deliver Stampoff's letter, and he happened to notice a policeman standing near a carriage door.

A white face peered out through the window. It was Sobieski. The King and the waiter were quitting Delgratz by the same train!

Alec laughed, and the policeman saluted. "When the train has gone," said Alec, "I want you to deliver this letter to General Stampoff."

"Yes, your Majesty," replied the man.

"It is important, remember. Here are ten rubles, and ask General Stampoff, with my compliments, for the like amount. Take no denial from his servants. If he is in bed, he must be awaked. Say that I sent you, and there should be no difficulty."

Precisely at midnight the train started. Quickly gathering speed, it ran through the tumbledown suburbs of the city and rumbled across the iron bridge that spans the Tave River. In twenty minutes it was at Semlin, and Austrian officials were examining passports. It was almost ludicrous to find that they gave Alec and his mother a perfunctory glance; but Lord Adalbert Beaumanoir excited their lively suspicion. One man, in particular, mounted guard outside the carriage, and did not budge till the train moved on again.

"That chap remembers me," said Beaumanoir. "Did you notice how he glared? He was the johnny I slung through the window."

At an early hour in the morning Joan was peering disconsolately through the window of a railway carriage at the life and bustle of Budapest station. Felix had gone to purchase some newspapers, and the girl was absorbed in gray thought when an official thrust head and shoulders into the compartment and asked if the Fraulein Vernon, passenger from Delgratz to Paris, was within.

"Yes," gasped Joan, all the slight color flying from her cheeks and leaving her wan indeed.

"Here is a telegram for you, fraulein," said the man politely, and his civil tone, at least, assured her that she was not to be dragged from the train and subjected to some mysterious inquisition by Austrian police. "Sent care of the station master," he explained, "and we were urgently requested to find you. Kindly sign this receipt."

She scribbled her name on a form, and the man carefully compared it with the superscription on the telegram.

"Yes, that is right," he said, and at last the agitated girl was free to open this message from the skies. It was written in German, probably to insure accurate transmission, and it read:

My mother and I, together with Beaumanoir, left Delgratz seven hours later than you. Pauline accompanies us. We are returning to Paris after having settled affairs satisfactorily in Kosnovia. Please await our arrival in Budapest, and accept the statement without any qualification that there is no reason whatever why you should not do this.

ALEC.

The amazing words were still dancing before her eyes when Felix came running along the platform. He too had been identified by an official, and in his hand was another telegraphic slip.

"We need have no secrets between us now, my belle," he cried excitedly. "You guess what has happened."

"Alec has left Delgratz--he and his mother--Oh, Felix! if he really sent this telegram, why did he not explain things?"

"The explanation would be rather ticklish, when you come to think of it," said Felix dryly. "The Austrian Government might take too keen an interest in it. Don't you understand, girl? He has wrung the truth from some one. He is no longer a King, but a very devoted lover. Come, we can pass the day pleasantly in Budapest. There is nothing else to be done. No sense in running away merely for the fun of the thing. If Alec is not a King, there is no immediate probability of your becoming a Queen. You will be plain Mrs. Somebody or other. Now I wonder what in the world his new name is. The son of an American father would hardly be called Alexis. Horrible thought! You may have to learn to love him all over again as Chauncey, or Hiram, or Phineas. Tell me, mignonne, could you take him back to your heart as Phineas?"

Joan rose and stepped out on the platform. Poluski's chaffing outburst failed in its intent, though, to his great relief, she did not break down as he feared. "Perhaps he will not want me now, Felix," she said, and her eyes were shining.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" cried the hunchback. "Why did he telegraph from the first wayside station after leaving Semlin? Alec not want you! At this moment he is more proud that he is a free born American than if a miracle almost beyond the powers of Heaven had made him a Delgrado."

Felix, cynic that he was, was secretly delighted when Joan discovered after breakfast that a blouse which caught her eye in one of the Budapest shops was much more suitable for traveling than that which she happened to be wearing. It was also significant that the dust which had gathered in her hair during the long journey from Delgratz required a visit to a coiffeur. These straws showed how the wind blew, he fancied.

And it was good to see the way Joan's face kindled when Alec clasped her in his arms. They said little then. The why and the wherefore of events they left to another hour; but when Joan extricated herself from her lover's embrace she turned to Princess Delgrado. The two women exchanged an affectionate kiss; each looked at the other through a mist of tears. Words were not needed. They understood, and that sufficed.

In a calmer moment Alec told Joan what had happened. He laid special stress on the fact that his mother was quite determined to renounce her title and revert to the name she bore during her first marriage.

"I never realized the tenth part of her suffering in Paris," he said, "though I knew far more about Prince Michael's conduct than he guessed. We must make it our business, Joan, to bring some brightness into her declining years. I have been planning our future all day in the train. Shall I become the fortune teller this time?"

"Yes," she murmured, "and perhaps I may forget that I have cost you a Kingdom."

He laughed gayly, just as he used to laugh on those bright May mornings when he waited on the Pont Neuf in the hope that he might be permitted to escort her to the Louvre.

"Never dream that I shall bring that up against you, dear heart," he said. "Delgratz ought to advertise itself as a sure cure for ambition. I liked the people; but I hated the job, and Kosnovia is already becoming a myth in my mind. I am rejoicing in my new name, Alexander Talbot. I hope you like it. My mother tells me that my father was one of the strong men of the West. I am called after him, it seems, and although my own name sounds strange to me I like the purposeful ring in it."

Joan laughed merrily. "Felix was teasing me this morning by suggesting that you might have been christened Phineas," she said.

"The wretch! And what if I was?"

She looked at him with a delightful shyness. "No matter what name you bore, you would always be my Alec," she whispered.

They were leaning over the balcony of an open air restaurant at the moment; so Alec perforce contented himself with clasping her hand.

"And now for my scheme, little girl," he said. "We will get married at once, of course."

She made no reply; but he felt the thrill that ran through her veins.

"Then," he went on, so gravely that she raised her eyes to his, seeking to catch his slightest shade of meaning; for her heart was still troubled by the fear that she had wrought him evil, "I will take you to America, my home. There is surely a nest for us out there. I have never understood it before; but often, as a boy, I felt the call of the West. It was natural, I suppose. We had many American friends in Paris, and my blood tingled when they spoke of the great rivers, the prairies, the ocean lakes, the giant mountain ranges, and the far flung plains of that wondrous continent which they describe with a reverent humor as God's own country. I feel that I shall win a place for myself in the land of my birth, and my poor mother is aching to go back there again."

He paused, and perhaps he hardly realized why Joan sighed with happiness; for she could believe, at last, that he had never a pang for his lost kingship.

"It is my home, too, Alec," she cooed. "I was born in Vermont. We are going home together."



He felt the thrill that ran through her veins

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"Yes, dear, no more partings. We shall not be wealthy, Joan. It seems that the miserable little humbug whom I have regarded as my father has wasted the whole of my mother's fortune by his extravagance. The only scrap left is a small farm near Denver, and even that would have been sold had not the crisis in Delgratz offered a wider scope for Michael's plundering instincts. It is a strange thing, sweetheart, but on the day we parted in Paris--the day the news came of the murder of Theodore and his wife--Prince Michael quarreled with my mother because she refused to sanction the sale of that last shred of her inheritance. In order to vent his spite, he had actually decided to tell me the secret of my birth in the very hour that Julius Marulitch announced the disappearance of the Obrenovitch dynasty."

"And the goddess sent you east instead of west," she said softly.

"Yes, my trial has been short and sharp; but she must have found me worthy, since she has given me--you."

They reached Paris next evening; but by that time the newspapers were hot on the scent of the missing King. So far as

could be judged from the reports telegraphed by French correspondents in Delgratz, Stampoff had remained true to his dream of a monarchy. For lack of a better, Michael was King. Some one, Beliani probably, had issued a statement that the infatuation of Alexis III. for a pretty Parisian artist had led him to abdicate, and as soon as it was discovered that the Delgrado flat in the Rue Boissiere was again occupied by Alec and his mother, they were besieged by reporters anxious to glean details of a royal romance.

They decided, therefore, to leave Paris for London, where, under the name of Talbot, they might hope to escape such unwelcome attentions. It was no easy matter to shake off the horde of eager pressmen; but they succeeded at last, and when Alec and Joan were quietly married in a West End church, no one, except the officiating minister, had the least knowledge of their identity.

After a brief honeymoon in Devon they rejoined Mrs. Talbot, and the three sailed from Southampton, whither came Felix and Beaumanoir to bid them farewell. Bosko and Pauline were on the same ship. The taciturn Serb had positively refused to leave his master, though Alec pointed out that his fallen fortunes hardly warranted him in retaining a valet, while Pauline, whom recent circumstances had thrown a good deal in Bosko's company, declared that Paris no longer had any attractions for her. Without consulting any one the two got married, and astounded Mrs. Talbot one fine morning by announcing the fact.

At the last moment Joan almost persuaded Felix to go with her and her husband; but he tore himself away.

"I peeped into the Grande Galerie the other morning," he said, with a real sob in his voice, "and my poor Madonna looked so lonely! There was no one with her; just a few painted angels and a couple of gaping tourists. I must go back. Some day you will come to the Louvre, and you will find me there, *le pauvre* Bourdon, still singing and painting."

He began to hum furiously. When the gangway was lowered, and the great ship sidled slowly but relentlessly away from the quay, he struck the tremendous opening note of "Ernani."

Beaumanoir grabbed him by the collar. "Shut up, you idiot!" he said, not smiling at all, for he loved Alec. "This is England. If you sing here, a bobby will run you in. An', anyhow, blank it! why do you want to sing? This isn't a smoking concert. It's more like a bally funeral!"



CHAPTER XV

THE ENVOY

In the autumn of the following year, Joan was seated one day in the garden of her pretty suburban house at Denver. Not far away glittered a silvery lake; beyond a densely wooded plain rose the blue amphitheater of the Rocky Mountains; the distant clang of a gong told of street cars and the busy life of one of America's most thriving and picturesque cities.

She was somewhat more fragile than when she crossed the Pont Neuf on that fine morning in May eighteen months ago; but she looked and felt supremely happy, for Alec would soon be home from his office, where already he was proving that the qualities which made him a good King were now in a fair way toward establishing his position as a leading citizen of his native State. By her side in a dainty cot reposed another Alec, whose age might not yet be measured by many weeks, but whose size and lustiness proclaimed him--in his own special circle, at any rate--the most remarkable baby that ever "occurred" in Colorado.

Mrs. Talbot, Senior, tired of reading, was now dozing peacefully in an easy chair on the other side of the cot. The day had been warm; but the evening air brought with it the crisp touch of autumn, and Joan was about to summon Pauline, who--with honorable mention of the unchanging Bosko--had solved for the young couple the most perplexing problem of American life,--when the click of the garden gate caught her ear and she heard her husband's firm step. He stooped and kissed her.

"I hope you have passed the whole day in the garden, sweetheart," he said.

"Yes," she replied, "I was just going to send baby indoors. Will you tell Pauline it is time he was in bed; but do not disturb your mother. She's asleep."

"Baby can wait one minute," he said. "He looks quite contented where he is. There is news from Delgratz," he added in a lower voice. "King Michael is dead."

An expression of real sympathy swept across Joan's beautiful face. "I am sorry to hear that," she said. Then, with the innate desire of every high-minded woman to find good where there seems to be naught but evil, she added, "Perhaps, when he reached the throne, he may have mended his ways and striven to be a better man. Did he die suddenly?"

"Yes," and a curious inflection in Alec's voice caused his wife to glance anxiously toward the sleeping woman.

"Was there a tragedy?" she whispered.

"Something of the sort. The details are hardly known yet, and the telegrams published in our Denver newspapers are not quite explicit. There is an allusion to a disturbance in a local theater, during which the heir apparent, Count Julius Marulitch, was fatally stabbed."

"Oh!" gasped Joan.

"It would seem that this incident took place several days ago, but escaped notice in the American press at the time. Attention is drawn to it now by the fact that King Michael was found dead in his apartments at an early hour yesterday morning, and it is rumored that he was poisoned."

"How dreadful!" she gasped. "It will shock your mother terribly when she hears of it."

"It is an odd feature of the affair," went on Alec, "that the telegram describes the King as residing in the New Konak. I suppose he passed the summer months there, and had not yet returned to Delgratz. Delightful as the place was, I am glad now we never lived there, Joan."

She rose and caught him by the arm. "Alec," she murmured, "Heaven was very good to us in sending us away from that Inferno! You never regret those days, do you? You never think, deep down in your heart, that if it had not been for me you would still be a King?"

He laughed so cheerfully that the sound of his mirth woke both his mother and the baby.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Talbot, scanning the faces of her son and his wife with a whole world of affection in her kindly eyes.

"Well, nothing to laugh about, mother," said he, "since I was just telling Joan that the end has come for some one in

Kosnovia; but----"

"Is Michael dead?" interrupted his mother, paling a little.

"Yes, mother, he is."

She bent her head in brief reverie, and when she looked up again she seemed to be gazing at the smiling landscape. But they knew better. Her thoughts had flown many a mile from Colorado.

"May Heaven be more merciful to him than he was to me!" she said at last, and that was her requiem for the man to whom she had given her best days. She forgave him; but she could not find it in her heart to regret his loss.

When the New York papers reached Denver, the small household--whose interest in the affairs of far off Kosnovia was little dreamed of by their neighbors--gleaned fuller details of the tragedy that had again overwhelmed the Delgrados. Many times did the conversation turn to the tiny Kingdom with which their own lives had been so intimately bound up. So far as the American press was concerned, the topic was soon forgotten; but Alec, having obtained a Budapest journal, found that Stampoff, Beliani, and Sergius Nesimir were taking steps to form a Republic.

"Sometimes," said Alec during their talk that evening, "it is the expected that happens."

"I suppose," said Joan musingly, "that the unlucky little Principality ought to prosper under a popular Government--unless----" She paused, and her husband was quick to interpret her thought.

"Unless they obtain the right sort of King," he cried.

"Perhaps that is impossible since you are here, dear," she said softly.

"Is that bee still buzzing in your bonnet?" he laughed. "I agree with you, Joan; it was a pity I let go so promptly."

She lifted her startled eyes to his. "Oh, Alec!" she cried, "you don't mean it!"

"I do, sweetheart," he said with a marked seriousness that puzzled her. "It was sheer selfishness that drove me from Kosnovia. I honestly believe I should have cracked up under the weight of empire; but just fancy what a wonderful Queen you would have made!"

"Oh, don't be stupid," she cried. "You almost frightened me."

Alec's mother put in a gentle word. "If ever either of you is tempted to regret the loss of a throne, you ought to devote half an hour to reading the history of Kosnovia," she said. "You are happy, and that is what you would never have been in the Balkans. A curse rests on that unlucky land. Never a Delgrado or Obrenovitch has reigned a decade in peace and security. It was a red letter day for Alec when you brought him away from Delgratz, my dear," she continued, with a fond pressure of her hand on Joan's brown hair. "None of us knew it at the time; but there are events in life that, like certain short and sharp diseases, leave us all the better when they have passed, though their severity may try us cruelly at the time."

The Indian summer day was drawing to a close, and Bosko entered to close the windows and pull down the blinds. The sight of him moved Alec to speak in that sonorous Serbian tongue which was already foreign to his own ears.

"Do you like America, Bosko?" he said.

The imperturbable one almost started; for it was long since he had heard any words in his own language.

"*Oui, monsieur*," he said.

"And would you go back to Delgratz if you had the opportunity?"

"*Non, monsieur*." For a wonder, he broke into an explanation. "I can go out here without expecting to be fired at from some hedge or ditch around the next corner, monsieur. You did not know those rascals as I knew them. They nearly got you once; but they tried a dozen times, and would have succeeded too, if Stampoff had not been too sharp for them."

"Good gracious, Bosko!" said his master. "This is news, indeed. Why was I not told?"

"There was no need, monsieur. Each time we discovered a plot we put every man in jail who might be suspected of the least connection with it. Moreover, had you heard of these things you would have interfered."

"Then, in the name of goodness, why didn't my protectors find out about the attack made by the Seventh Regiment? Surely there were enough concerned in that to supply at least one spy?"

Bosko hesitated. He glanced surreptitiously at Alec's mother. "Things went wrong that day, monsieur," he said. "Information that ought to have reached the General was withheld."

And Alec left it at that; for the man who might reasonably be suspected of offsetting Stampoff's vigilance was dead, and no good purpose could be served by adding one more to his mother's host of bitter memories.

A bell sounded, and Bosko went to the front door. He returned, his stolid features exhibiting the closest approach to excitement that they were capable of. Evidently he meant to announce a visitor; but before he could open his mouth a high and singularly musical voice came from the entrance hall in the exquisite opening bars of the "Salve Dimora."

With one amazed cry of "Felix!" Joan and Alec rushed to the door. Yes, there stood Felix, thinner, more wizened, more shrunken, than when last they saw him on the quay at Southampton. Joan, impulsive as ever, welcomed him with a hearty kiss.

"You dear creature!" she said. "Why did you not tell us you were in America?"

"An envoy always delivers his message in person, my belle. I am here on affairs of state. The telegraph is but a crude herald, and I was forbidden to write."

Alec dragged him into the room. "Business first, Felix," he said. "That is the motto of strenuous America. Now, what is it?"

"Beliani came to me in Paris," said the hunchback, affecting the weighty delivery of one charged with matters of imperial import. "He brought with him letters from Stampoff and Nesimir, which I shall deliver. He also intrusted me with a copy of a unanimous resolution of the Kosnovian Assembly, passed in secret session."

Joan's face suddenly paled, Mrs. Talbot's hands clenched the arms of the chair in which she was sitting, and the two women exchanged glances. None of this escaped Alec, who was seemingly unmoved.

"Behold in me, then," continued Poluski, "the Ambassador of Kosnovia. Delgratz wants again to see its Alexis, who is invited to reoccupy the throne on his own terms,--wife, infant, mother, Bosko, Pauline, even myself and the domestic cat, all are welcome. There are no restrictions. At a word from the King even the Assembly itself will dissolve."

Somehow, Poluski's manner conveyed that this was no elaborate jest, and Joan's lips trembled pitifully when, after one look at the youthful Alec, who was lying on a cushion and saying "Coo-coo" to a rattle, she awaited her husband's reply. He too looked at her in silence, and even Joan became dematerialized for one fateful moment. In his mind's eye he saw the sunlit domes and minarets of the White City. The blue Danube sparkled as of yore beneath its ancient walls. Through the peaceful air of that quiet Denver suburb he caught the sound of cheering crowds, the crashing of bells, the booming of cannon, that would welcome his return.

But he thought, too, of the fret and fume of Kingship, of the brave men and gracious women who had occupied an unstable throne and were now crumbling to dust in the vaults of that gloomy cathedral. He smiled tenderly at his wife, and his hand stole out to meet hers.

"I refuse, Felix!" he said quietly.

Poluski's piercing gray eyes peered at him under the shaggy eyebrows. "Is that final?"

"Absolutely final!"

Felix broke into a hearty laugh. "I warned Beliani," he chuckled. "No one could have written to me as Joan has done and yet want to return to that whited sepulcher down there in the Balkans. Well, here are my credentials," and he threw a bundle of papers on the table. "I have done what I was asked to do, and thus earned my passage money; and now, when I have kissed the baby and shaken hands all round, I will bring in my wedding present."

A minute later he danced out into the hall and returned with a huge roll of canvas. "I unpacked it at the station," he said; "so it is ready for inspection," and he spread out on the table a replica of the famous Murillo. "There," he cried, "since Joan would not come to the Louvre, I am bringing the Louvre's chief treasure to her. As it is the last, so is it the best of my copies. My hand was losing its cunning, I felt myself growing old, so I prayed to that sweet Madonna to give me one last flicker of the immortal fire ere it left me a dry cinder. Well, she listened, I think. *Ave Maria!* the great Spaniard himself would rub his eyes if he could see this. Now, I shall go back contented, and dream of the days that are gone."

His voice broke. He was gazing at Joan, at the glory of maternity in her face.

"You are not going back, Felix," said Alec. "Kosnovia has now lost both its King and its Ambassador. You are here,

and here you shall stay."

"Yes, dear Felix," whispered Joan, "we have found our Kingdom. Our court is small; but there is always room in it for you."

So Denver heard wild snatches of song, and listened, and marveled, and a baby cultivated a strange taste in lullabies, and Pallas Athene forgot that one of her chosen sons dwelt in Colorado, or, if she remembered, her heart was softened and she forbore.

THE END