

Love affairs of the Courts of Europe

Thornton Hall

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LOVE AFFAIRS
OF THE COURTS OF EUROPE

BY

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TO

MY COUSIN,

LENORE

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LOVE AFFAIRS OF THE COURTS OF EUROPE

CHAPTER I

A COMEDY QUEEN

"It was to a noise like thunder, and close clasped in a soldier's embrace, that Catherine I. made her first appearance in Russian history."

History, indeed, contains few chapters more strange, more seemingly impossible, than this which tells the story of the maid-of-all-work--the red-armed, illiterate peasant-girl who, without any dower of beauty or charm, won the idolatry of an Emperor and succeeded him on the greatest throne of Europe. So obscure was Catherine's origin that no records reveal either her true name or the year or place of her birth. All that we know is that she was cradled in some Livonian village, either in Sweden or Poland, about the year 1685, the reputed daughter of a serf-mother and a peasant-father; and that her numerous brothers and sisters were known in later years by the name Skovoroshtchenko or Skovronski. The very Christian name by which she is known to history was not hers until it was given to her by her Imperial lover.

It is not until the year 1702, when the future Empress of the Russias was a girl of seventeen, that she makes her first dramatic appearance on the stage on which she was to play so remarkable a part. Then we find her acting as maid-servant to the Lutheran pastor of Marienburg, scrubbing his floors, nursing his children, and waiting on his resident pupils, in the midst of all the perils of warfare. The Russian hosts had for weeks been laying siege to Marienburg; and the Commandant, unable to defend the town any longer against such overwhelming odds, had announced his intention to blow up the fortress, and had warned the inhabitants to leave the town.

Between the alternatives of death within the walls and the enemy without, Pastor Glueck chose the latter; and sallying forth with his family and maid-servant, threw himself on the mercy of the Russians who promptly packed him off to Moscow a prisoner. For Martha (as she seems to have been known in those days) a different fate was reserved. Her red lips, saucy eyes, and opulent figure were too seductive a spoil to part with, General Sheremetief decided, and she was left behind, a by no means reluctant hostage.

Peter's soldiers, now that victory was assured, were holding high revel of feasting and song and dancing. They received the new prisoner literally with open arms, and almost before she had wiped the tears from her eyes, at parting from her nurslings, she was capering gaily to the music of hautboy and fiddle, with the arm of a stalwart soldier round her waist.

"Suddenly," says Waliszewski, "a fearful explosion overthrew the dancers, cut the music short, and left the servant-maid, fainting with terror, in the arms of a dragoon."

Thus did Martha, the "Siren of the Kitchen," dance her way into Russian history, little dreaming, we may be sure, to what dizzy heights her nimble feet were to carry her. For a time she found her pleasure in the attentions of a non-commissioned officer, sharing the life of camp and barracks and making friends by the good-nature which bubbled in her, and which was always her chief charm. When her sergeant began to weary of her, she found a humble place as laundry-maid in the household of Menshikoff, the Tsar's favourite, whose shirts, we are told, it was her privilege to wash; and who, it seems, was by no means insensible to the buxom charms of this maid of the laundry. At any rate we find Menshikoff, when he was spending the Easter of 1706 at Witebsk, writing to his sister to send her to him.

But a greater than Menshikoff was soon to appear on the scene--none other than the Emperor Peter himself. One day the Tsar, calling on his favourite, was astonished to see the cleanliness of his surroundings and his person. "How do you contrive," he asked, "to have your house so well kept, and to wear such fresh and dainty linen?" Menshikoff's answer was "to open a door, through which the sovereign perceived a handsome girl, aproned, and sponge in hand, bustling from chair to chair, and going from window to window, scrubbing the window-panes"--a vision of industry which made such a powerful appeal to His Majesty that he begged an introduction on the spot to the lady of the sponge.

The most daring writer of fiction could scarcely devise a more romantic meeting than this between the autocrat of Russia and the red-armed, bustling cleaner of the window-panes, and he would certainly never have ventured to build on it the romance of which it was the prelude. What it was in the young peasant-woman that attracted the Emperor it is impossible to say. Of beauty she seems to have had none--save perhaps such as lies in youth and rude health.

We look at her portraits in vain to discover a trace of any charm that might appeal to man. Her pictures in the Romanof Gallery at St Petersburg show a singularly plain woman with a large, round peasant-face, the most conspicuous feature of which is a hideously turned-up nose. Large, protruding eyes and an opulent bust complete a presentment of the typical household drudge--"a servant-girl in a German inn." But Peter the Great, who was ever abnormal in all his tastes and appetites, was always more ready to make love to a woman of the people than to the most beautiful and refined of his Court ladies. His standard of taste, as of manners, has not inaptly been likened to that of a Dutch sailor.

But whatever it was in the low-born laundry-woman that attracted the Tsar of Russia, we know that this first unconventional meeting led to many others, and that before long Catherine (for we may now call her by the name she made so famous) was removed from his favourite's household

and installed in the Imperial harem where, for a time at least, she seems to have shared her favours indiscriminately between her old master and her new--"an obscure and complaisant mistress"--until Menshikoff finally resigned all rights in her to his sovereign.

When Catherine took up her residence in her new home, Waliszewski tells us, "her eye shortly fell on certain magnificent jewels. Forthwith, bursting into tears, she addressed her new protector: 'Who put these ornaments here? If they come from the other one, I will keep nothing but this little ring; but if they come from you, how could you think I needed them to make me love you?'"

If Catherine lacked physical graces, this and many another story prove that she had a rare gift of diplomacy. She had, moreover, an unfailing cheerfulness and goodness of heart which quickly endeared her to the moody and capricious Peter. In his frequent fits of nervous irritability which verged on madness, she alone had the power to soothe him and restore him to sanity. Her very voice had a magic to arrest him in his worst rages, and when the fit of madness (for such it undoubtedly was) was passing away she would "take his head and caress it tenderly, passing her fingers through his hair. Soon he grew drowsy and slept, leaning against her breast. For two or three hours she would sit motionless, waiting for the cure slumber always brought him, until at last he awoke cheerful and refreshed."

Thus each day the Livonian peasant-woman took deeper root in the heart of the Emperor, until she became indispensable to him. Wherever he went she was his constant companion--in camp or on visits to foreign Courts, where she was received with the honours due to a Queen. And not only were her presence and her ministrations infinitely pleasant to him; her prudent counsel saved him from many a blunder and mad excess, and on at least one occasion rescued his army from destruction.

So strong was the hold she soon won on his affection and gratitude that he is said to have married her secretly within three years of first setting eyes on her. Her future and that of the children she had borne to him became his chief concern; and as early as 1708, when he was leaving Moscow to join his army, he left behind him a note: "If, by God's will, anything should happen to me, let the 3000 roubles which will be found in Menshikoff's house be given to Catherine Vassilevska and her daughter."

But whatever the truth may be about the alleged secret marriage, we know that early in 1712, Peter, in his Admiral's uniform, stood at the altar with the Livonian maid-servant, in the presence of his Court officials, and with two of her own little daughters as bridesmaids. The wedding, we are told, was performed in a little chapel belonging to Prince Menshikoff, and was preceded by an interview with the Dowager-Empress and his Princess sisters, in which Peter declared his intention to make Catherine his wife and commanded them to pay her the respect due to her new rank. Then followed, in brilliant sequence, State dinners, receptions, and balls, at all of which the laundress-bride sat at her husband's right hand and received the homage of his subjects as his Queen.

Picture now the woman who but a few years earlier had scrubbed Pastor Glueck's floors and cleaned Menshikoff's window-panes, in all her new splendours as Empress of Russia. The portraits of her, in her unaccustomed glories, are far from flattering and by no means

consistent. "She showed no sign of ever having possessed beauty," says Baron von Poellnitz; "she was tall and strong and very dark, and would have seemed darker but for the rouge and whitening with which she plastered her face."

The picture drawn by the Margravine of Baireuth is still less attractive: "She was short and huddled up, much tanned, and utterly devoid of dignity or grace. Muffled up in her clothes, she looked like a German comedy-actress. Her old-fashioned gown, heavily embroidered with silver, and covered with dirt, had been bought in some old-clothes shop. The front of her skirt was adorned with jewels, and she had a dozen orders and as many portraits of saints fastened all along the facings of her dress, so that when she walked she jingled like a mule."

But in the eyes of one man at least--and he the greatest in all Russia--she was beautiful. His allegiance never wavered, nor indeed did that of his army, which idolised her to a man. She might have no boudoir graces, but at least she was the typical soldier's wife, and cut a brave figure, as she reviewed the troops or rode at their head in her uniform and grenadier cap. She shared all the hardships and dangers of campaigns with a smile on her lips, sleeping on the hard ground, and standing in the trenches with the bullets whistling about her ears, and men dropping to right and left of her.

Nor was there ever a trace of vanity in her. She was as proud of her humble origin as if she had been cradled in a palace. To princes and ambassadors she would talk freely of the days when she was a household drudge, and loved to remind her husband of the time when his Empress used to wash shirts for his favourite. "Though, no doubt, you have other laundresses about you," she wrote to him once, "the old one never forgets you."

The letters that passed between this oddly assorted couple, if couched in terms which could scarcely see print in our more restrained age, are eloquent of affection and devotion. To Peter his kitchen-Queen was "friend of my Heart," "dearest Heart," and "dear little Mother." He complains pathetically, when away with his army, "I am dull without you--and there is nobody to take care of my shirts." When Catherine once left him on a round of visits, he grew so impatient at her absence that he sent a yacht to bring her back, and with it a note: "When I go into my rooms and find them deserted, I feel as if I must rush away at once. It is all so empty without thee."

And each letter is accompanied by a present--now a watch, now some costly lace, and again a lock of his hair, or a simple bunch of dried flowers, while she returns some such homely gift as a little fruit or a fur-lined waistcoat. On both sides, too, a vein of jocularly runs through the letters, as when Catherine addresses him as "Your Excellency, the very illustrious and eminent Prince-General and Knight of the crowned Compass and Axe"; and when Peter, after the Peace of Nystadt, writes: "According to the Treaty I am obliged to return all Livonian prisoners to the King of Sweden. What is to become of thee, I don't know." To which she answers, with true wifely (if affected) humility: "I am your servant; do with me as you will; yet I venture to think you won't send _me_ back."

Quite idyllic, this post-nuptial love-making between the great Emperor and his low-born Queen, who has so possessed his heart that no other woman, however fair, could wrest it from her. And in her exalted

position of Empress she practised the same diplomatic arts by which she had won Peter's devotion. Politics she left severely alone; she turned a forbidding back on all attempts to involve her in State intrigues, but she was ever ready to protect those who appealed to her for help, and to use her influence with her husband to procure pardon or lighter punishment for those who had fallen under his displeasure.

Nor did she forget her poor relations in Livonia. One brother, a postillion, she openly acknowledged, introduced to her husband, and obtained a liberal pension for him; and to her other brothers and sisters she sent frequent presents and sums of money. More she could not well do during her husband's lifetime, but when she in turn came to the throne, she brought the whole family--postillion, shoemaker, farm-labourer and serf, their wives and families--to her capital, installed them in sumptuous apartments in her palaces, decked them in the finest Court feathers, and gave them large fortunes and titles of nobility.

When the Tsar's quarrel with his eldest son came to its tragic denouement in Alexis' death, her own son became heir presumptive to the throne of Russia. And thus the chain that bound Peter to his Empress received its completing link. It only remained now to place the crown formally on the head of the mother of the new heir, and this supreme honour was hers in the month of May, 1729.

Wonderful tales are told of the splendours of Catherine's coronation. No existing crown was good enough for the ex-maid-of-all-work, so one of special magnificence was made by the Court jewellers--a miracle of diamonds and pearls, crowned by a monster ruby--at a cost of a million and a half roubles. The Coronation gown, which cost four thousand roubles, was made at Paris; and from Paris, too, came the gorgeous coach with its blaze of gold and heraldry, in which the Tsarina made her triumphal progress through the streets of the capital from the Winter Palace. The culminating point of this remarkable ceremony came when, after Peter had placed the crown on his wife's head, she sank weeping at his feet and embraced his knees.

Catherine, however, had not worn her crown many months when she found herself in considerable danger of losing not only her dignities but even her liberty. For some time, it is said, she had been engaged in a liaison with William Mons, a handsome, gay young courtier, brother to a former mistress of the Tsar. The love affair had been common knowledge at the Court--to all but Peter himself, and it was accident that at last opened his eyes to his wife's dishonour. One moonlight night, so the story is told, he chanced to enter an arbour in the palace gardens, and there discovered her in the arms of her lover.

His vengeance was swift and terrible. Mons was arrested the same night in his rooms, and dragged fainting into the Tsar's presence, where he confessed his disloyalty. A few days later he was beheaded, at the very moment when the Empress was dancing a minuet with her ladies, a smile on her lips, whatever grief was in her heart. The following day she was driven by her husband past the scaffold where her lover's dead body was exposed to public view--so close, in fact, that her dress brushed against it; but, without turning her head, she kept up a smiling conversation with the perpetrator of this outrage on her feelings.

Still not content with his revenge, Peter next placed the dead man's head, enclosed in a bottle of spirits of wine, in a prominent place in

the Empress's apartments; and when she still smilingly ignored its horrible proximity, his anger, hitherto repressed, blazed forth fiercely. With a blow of his strong fist he shattered a priceless Venetian vase, shouting, "Thus will I treat thee and thine"--to which she calmly responded, "You have broken one of the chief ornaments of your palace; do you think you have increased its charm?"

For a time Peter refused to be propitiated; he would not speak to his wife, or share her meals or her room. But she had "tamed the tiger" many a time before, and she was able to do it again. Within two months she had won her way back into full favour, and was once more the Tsar's dearest _Katierinoushka._

A month later Peter was dead, carrying his love for his peasant-Empress to the grave, and Catherine was reigning in his stead, able at last to conduct her amours openly--spending her nights in shameless orgies with her lovers, and leaving the rascally Menshikoff to do the ruling, until death brought her amazing career to an end within sixteen months of mounting her throne.

CHAPTER II

THE "BONNIE PRINCE'S" BRIDE

In the pageant of our history there are few more attractive figures than that of "Bonnie Prince Charlie," the "yellow-haired laddie" whose blue eyes made a slave of every woman who came under their magic, and whose genial, unaffected manners turned the veriest coward into a hero, ready to follow him to the death in that year of ill-fated romance, "the forty-five."

The very name of the "Bonnie Prince," the hope of the fallen Stuarts, the idol of Scotland--leading a forlorn hope with laughter on his lips, now riding proudly at the head of his rabble army, now a fugitive Ishmael among the hills and caves of the Highlands, but ever the last to lose heart--has a magic still to quicken the pulses. That later years proved the idol's feet to be of clay, that he fell from his pedestal to end his days an object of contempt and derision, only served to those who knew him in the pride of his youth to mingle pity with the glamour of romance that still surrounds his name.

In the year 1772, when this story opens, Charles Edward, Count of Albany, had already travelled far on the downward road that led from the glory of Prestonpans to his drunkard's grave. A pitiful pensioner of France, who had known the ignominy of wearing fetters in a French prison, a social outcast whose Royal pretensions were at best the subject of an amused tolerance, the "laddie of the yellow hair" had fallen so low that the brandy bottle, which was his constant companion night and day, was his only solace.

Picture him at this period, and mark the pathetic change which less than thirty years had wrought in the Stuart "darling" of "the forty-five," when many a proud lady of Scotland would have given her life for a smile from his bonnie face. A middle-aged man with dropsy in his limbs, and with the bloated face of the drunkard; "dull, thick, silent-looking

lips, of purplish red scarce redder than the skin; pale blue eyes tending to a watery greyness, leaden, vague, sad, but with angry streakings of red; something inexpressibly sad, gloomy, helpless, vacant, and debased in the whole face."

Such was this "Young Chevalier" when France took it into her head to make a pawn of him in the political chess-game with England. As a man he was beneath contempt; as a "King"--well, he was a *_Roi pour rire_*; but at least the Royal House he represented might be made a useful weapon against the arrogant Hanoverian who sat on his father's throne. That rival stock must not be allowed to die out; his claims might weigh heavily some day in the scale between France and England. Charles Edward must marry, and provide a worthier successor to his empty honours.

And thus it was that France came to the exiled Prince with the seductive offer of a pretty bride and a pension of forty thousand crowns a year. The besotted Charles jumped at the offer; left his brandy bottle, and, with the alacrity of a youthful lover, rushed away to woo and win the bride who had been chosen for him.

And never surely was there such a grotesque wooing. Charles was a physical wreck of fifty-two; his bride-elect had only seen nineteen summers. The daughter of Prince Gustav Adolf of Stolberg and the Countess of Horn, Princess Louise was kin to many of the greatest houses in Europe, from the Colonnas and Orsinis to the Hohenzollerns and Bruces. In blood she was thus at least a match for her Stuart bridegroom.

She had spent some years in the seclusion of a monastery, and had emerged for her undesired trip to the altar a young woman of rare beauty and charm, with glorious brown eyes, the delicate tint of the wild rose in her dimpled cheeks, a wealth of golden hair, and a figure every line and movement of which was instinct with beauty and grace. She was a fresh, unspoilt child, bubbling with gaiety and the joy of life, and her dainty little head was full of the romance of sweet nineteen.

Such then was the singularly contrasted couple--"Beauty and the Beast" they were dubbed by many--who stood together at the altar at Macerata on Good Friday of the year 1772--the bridegroom, "looking hideous in his wedding suit of crimson silk," in flaming contrast to the virginal white of his pretty victim. It needed no such day of ill-omen as a Friday to inaugurate a union which could not have been otherwise than disastrous--the union of a beautiful, romantic girl eager to exploit the world of freedom and of pleasure, and a drink-sodden man old enough to be her father, for whom life had long lost all its illusions.

It is true that for a time Charles Edward was drawn from his bottle by the lure of a pretty and winsome wife, who should, if any power on earth could, have made a man again of him. She laughed, indeed, at his maudlin tales of past heroism and adventure in love and battle; to her he was a plaster hero, and she let him know it. She was "mated to a clown," and a drunken clown to boot--and, well, she would make the best of a bad bargain. If her husband was the sorriest lover who ever poured thick-voiced flatteries into a girl-wife's ears, there were others, plenty of them, who were eager to pay more acceptable homage to her; and these men--poets, courtiers, great men in art and letters--flocked to her *_salon_* to bask in her beauty and to be charmed by her wit.

After all, she was a Queen, although she wore no crown. She had a Court,

although no Royalties graced it. From the Pope to the King of France, no monarch in Europe would recognise her husband's kingship. But at such neglect, the offspring of jealousy, of course, she only smiled. She could indeed have been moderately happy in her girlish, light-hearted way, if her husband had not been such an impossible person.

As for Charles Edward, he soon wearied of a bride who did nothing but laugh at him, and who was so ready to escape from his obnoxious presence to the company of more congenial admirers. He returned to his brandy bottle, and alternated between a fuddled brain and moods of wild jealousy. He would not allow his wife to leave the door without his escort; if she refused to accompany him, he turned the key in her bedroom door, to which the only access was through his own room.

He took her occasionally to the theatre or opera, his brandy bottle always making a third for company. Before the performance was half through he was snoring stertorously on the couch which he insisted on having in his box; and, more often than not, was borne to his carriage for the journey home helplessly drunk. And this within the first year of his wedded life.

If any woman had excuse for seeking elsewhere the love she could not find in her husband it was Louise of Albany. There were dames in plenty in Rome (where they were now living) who, not content with devoted husbands, had their *_cisibeos_* to play the lover to them; but Louise sought no such questionable escape from her unhappiness. Her books and the clever men who thronged her *_salon_* were all the solace she asked; and under temptation such as few women of that country and day would have resisted, she carried the shield of a blameless life.

From Rome the Countess and her husband fared to Florence in 1774; and here matters went from bad to worse. Charles was now seldom sober day or night; and his jealousy often found expression in filthy abuse and cowardly assaults. Hitherto he had been simply disgusting; now he was a constant menace, even to her life. She lived in hourly fear of his brutality; but in her darkest hour sunshine came again into her life with the coming of Vittorio Alfieri, whose name was to be linked with hers for so many years.

At this time Alfieri was in the very prime of his splendid manhood, one of the handsomest and most fascinating men in all Europe. Some four years older than herself, he was a tall, stalwart, soldierly man, blue-eyed and auburn-haired, an aristocrat to his finger-tips, a daring horseman, a poet, and a man of rare culture--just the man to set any woman's heart a-flutter, as he had already done in most of the capitals of the Continent.

He was a spoilt child of fortune, this Italian poet and soldier, a man who had drunk deep of the cup of life, and to whom all conquests came with such fatal ease that already he had drained life dry of its pleasures.

Such was the man who one autumn day in the year 1777 came into the unhappy life of the Countess of Albany, still full of the passions and yearnings of youth. It was surely fate that thus brought together these two young people of kindred tastes and kindred disillusion; and we cannot wonder that, of that first meeting, Alfieri should write, "At last I had met the one woman whom I had sought so long, the woman who could inspire my ambition and my work. Recognising this, and prizing so

rare a treasure, I gave myself up wholly to her."

Those were happy days for the Countess that followed this fateful meeting--days of sweet communion of twin souls, hours of stolen bliss, when they could dwell apart in a region of high and ennobling thoughts, while the besotted husband was sleeping off the effects of his drunken orgies in the next room. To Alfieri, Louise was indeed "the anchor of his life," giving stability to his vacillating nature, and inspiring all that was best and noblest in him; while to her the association with this "splendid creature," who so thoroughly understood and sympathised with her, was the revelation of a new world.

Thus three happy years passed; and then the crisis came. One night the Prince, in a mood of drunken madness, inflamed by jealousy, attacked his wife, and, after severely beating her, flung her down on her bed and attempted to strangle her. This was the crowning outrage of years of brutality. She could not, dared not, spend another day with such a madman. At any cost she must leave him--and for ever.

When morning came, with Alfieri's assistance, the plan of escape was arranged. In the company of a lady friend--and also of her husband, now scared and penitent, but fearing to let her out of his sight--she drove to a neighbouring convent, ostensibly to inspect the nuns' needlework. On reaching her destination she ran up the convent steps, entered the building, and the door was slammed and bolted behind her in the very face of Charles Edward, who had followed as fast as his dropsical legs would carry him up the steps. The Prince, blazing at such an outrage, hammered fiercely at the door until at last the Lady Abbess herself showed her face at the grating, and told him in no ambiguous words that he would not be allowed to enter! His wife had come to her for protection; and if he had any grievance he had better appeal to the Duke of Tuscany.

Thus ended the tragic union of the "Bonnie Prince" and his Countess. Emancipation had come at last; and, while Louise was now free to devote her life to her beloved Alfieri, her brutal husband was left for eight years to the company of his bottle and the ministrations of his natural daughter, until a drunkard's grave at Frascati closed over his mis-spent life. The pity and the tragedy of it!

Louise of Albany and her poet-lover were now free to link their lives at the altar--but no such thought seems to have entered the head of either. They were perfectly happy without the bond of the wedding-ring, of which the Countess had such terrible memories; and together they walked through life, happy in each other and indifferent to the world's opinion.

Now in Florence, now in Rome; living together in Alsace, drifting to Paris; and, when the Revolution drove them from the French capital, seeking refuge in London, where we find the uncrowned Queen of England chatting amicably with the "usurper" George in the Royal box at the opera--always inseparable, and Louise always clinging to the shreds of her Royal dignity, with a throne in her ante-room, and "Your Majesty" on her servants' lips. Thus passed the careless, happy years for Countess and poet until, in 1803, Alfieri followed the "Bonnie Prince" behind the veil, and left a desolate Louise to moan amid her tears, "There is no more happiness for me."

But Louise was not left even now without the solace of a man's love,

which seemed as indispensable to her nature as the air she breathed. Before Alfieri had been many months in his Florence tomb his place by the Countess's side had been taken by Francois Xavier Fabre, a good-looking painter of only moderate gifts, whose handsome face, plausible tongue, and sunny disposition soon made a captive of her middle-aged heart. At the time when Fabre came thus into her life Madame la Comtesse had passed her fiftieth birthday--youth and beauty had taken wings; and passion (if ever she had any--for her relations with Alfieri seem to have been quite platonic) had died down to its embers.

But a man's companionship and homage were always necessary to her, and in Fabre she found her ideal cavalier. Her _salon_ now became more popular even than in the days of her young wifehood. It drew to it all the greatest men in Europe, men of world-wide fame in statesmanship, letters, and art, all anxious to do homage to a woman of such culture and with such rare gifts of conversation.

That she was now middle-aged, stout and dowdy--"like a cook with pretty hands," as Stendhal said of her--mattered nothing to her admirers, many of whom remembered her in the days of her lovely youth. She was, in their eyes, as much a Queen as if she wore a crown; and, moreover, she was a woman of magnetic charm and clever brain.

And thus, with her books and her _salon_ and her cavalier, she spent the rest of her chequered life until the end came one day in 1824; and her last resting-place was, as she wished it to be, by the side of her beloved Alfieri. In the Church of Santa Croce, in Florence, midway between the tombs of Michael Angelo and Machiavelli, the two lovers sleep together their last sleep, beneath a beautiful monument fashioned by Canova's hands--Louise, wife of the "Bonnie Prince" (as we still choose to remember him) and Vittorio Alfieri, to whom, to quote his own words, "she was beyond all things beloved."

CHAPTER III

THE PEASANT AND THE EMPRESS

Many an autocrat of Russia has shown a truly sovereign contempt for convention in the choice of his or her favourites, the "playthings of an hour"; and at least three of them have carried this contempt to the altar itself.

Peter, the first, as we have seen, offered a crown to Martha Skovronski, a Livonian scullery-maid, who succeeded him on the throne; the second Catherine gave her hand as well as her heart to Potemkin, the gigantic, ill-favoured ex-sergeant of cavalry; and Elizabeth, daughter of Peter and his kitchen-Queen, proved herself worthy of her parentage when she made Alexis Razoum, a peasant's son, husband of the Empress of Russia. You will search history in vain for a story so strange and romantic as this of the great Empress and the lowly shepherd's son, whom her love raised from a hovel to a palace, and on whom one of the most amorous and fickle of sovereign ladies lavished honours and riches and an unwavering devotion, until her eyes, speaking their love to the last, were closed in death.

It was in the humblest hovel of the village of Lemesh that Alexis Razoum drew his first breath one day in 1709. His father, Gregory Razoum, was a shepherd, who spent his pitiful earnings in drink--a man of violent temper who, in his drunken rages, was the terror not only of his home but of the entire village. His wife and children cowered at his approach; and on more than one occasion only accident (or Providence) saved him from the crime of murder. On one such occasion, we are told, the child Alexis, who from his earliest years had a passion for reading, was absorbed in a book, when his father, in ungovernable fury, seized a hatchet and hurled it at the boy's head. Luckily, the missile missed its mark, and Alexis escaped, to find refuge in the house of a friendly priest, who not only gave him shelter and protection, but taught him to write, and, above all, to sing--little dreaming that he was thus paving the way which was to lead the drunken shepherd's lad to the dizziest heights in Russia. For the boy had a beautiful voice. When he joined the choir of his village church, people flocked from far and near to listen to the sweet notes that soared, pure and liquid as a nightingale's song, above the rest. "It was," all declared, "the voice of an angel--and the face of an angel," for Alexis was as beautiful in those days as any child of picture or of dreams.

One day a splendidly dressed stranger chanced to enter the Lemesh church during Mass--none other than Colonel Vishnevsky, a great Court official, who was on his way back to Moscow from a diplomatic mission; and he listened entranced to a voice sweeter than any he had ever heard. The service over, he made the acquaintance of the young chorister, interviewed his guardian, the "good Samaritan" priest, and persuaded him to allow the boy to accompany him to the capital. Thus the shepherd's son took weeping farewell of the good priest, of his mother, and of his brothers and sisters; and a few weeks later the Empress and her ladies were listening enchanted to his voice in the Imperial choir at Moscow--but none with more delight than the Princess Elizabeth, daughter of Peter the Great, to whom Alexis' beauty appealed even more strongly than his sweet singing.

Elizabeth, true daughter of her father, had already, young as she was, counted her lovers by the score--lovers chosen indiscriminately, from Royal princes to grooms and common soldiers. She was already sated with the licence of the most dissolute Court of Europe, and to her the young Cossack of the beautiful face and voice, and rustic innocence, opened a new and seductive vista of pleasure. She lost her heart to him, had him transferred to her own Court as her favourite singer, and, within a few years, gave him charge of her purse and her properties.

The shepherd's son was now not only lover-elect, but principal "minister" to the daughter of an Emperor, who was herself to wear the Imperial crown. And while Alexis was thus luxuriating amid the splendour of a Court, he by no means forgot the humble relatives he had left behind in his native village. His father was dead; his mother was reduced for a time to such a depth of destitution that she had to beg her bread from door to door. His sisters had found husbands for themselves in their own rank; and the favourite of an Imperial Princess had for brothers-in-law a tailor, a weaver, and a shepherd. When news came to Alexis of his mother's destitution he had sent her a sum of money sufficient to install her in comfort as an innkeeper: the first of many kindnesses which were to work a startling transformation in the fortunes of the Razoum family.

Events now hurried quickly. The Empress Anna died, and was succeeded on

the throne by the infant Ivan, her grand-nephew, who had been Emperor but a few months when, in 1741, a _coup d'etat_ gave the crown to Elizabeth, mistress of the Lemesh peasant. Alexis was now husband in all but name of the Empress of all the Russias; honours and riches were showered on him; he was General, Grandmaster of the Hounds, Chief Gentleman of the Bedchamber, and lord of large estates yielding regal revenues.

But all his grandeur was powerless to spoil the man, who still remained the simple peasant who, so many years earlier, had left his low-born mother with streaming eyes. His great ambition now was to share his good-fortune with her. She must exchange her village inn for the luxuries and splendours of a palace. And thus it was that one day a splendid carriage, with gay-liveried postillions, dashed up to the door of the Lemesh inn and carried off the simple peasant woman, her youngest son, Cyril, and one of her daughters, to the open-mouthed amazement of the villagers. At the entrance to the capital she was received by a magnificently attired gentleman, in whom she failed to recognise her son Alexis, until he showed her a birthmark on his body.

Picture now the peasant-woman sumptuously lodged in the Moscow palace, decked in all the finery of silks and laces and jewels, receiving the respectful homage of high Court officials, caressed and petted by an Empress, while her splendid son looks smilingly on, as proud of his cottage-mother as if she were a Princess of the Blood Royal. That the innkeeper was not happy in her gilded cage, that her thoughts often wandered longingly to her cronies and the simple life of the village, is not to be wondered at.

It was all very well for such a fine gentleman as her son, Alexis; but for a poor, simple-minded woman like herself--well, she was too old for such a transplanting. And we can imagine her relief when, on the removal of the Court to St Petersburg, she was allowed to bring her visit to an end and to return to her inn with wonderful stories of all she had seen. Her son and daughter, however, elected to remain. As for Cyril, a handsome youth, almost young enough to be his brother's son, he was quick to win his way into the favour of the Empress. Before he had been many months at Court he was made a Count and Gentleman of the Bedchamber. He was given for bride a grand-niece of Elizabeth; and at twenty-two he was Viceroy of the Ukraine, virtual sovereign of a kingdom of his own, with his peasant-mother, who declined to share his palace, comfortably installed in a modest house near his gates.

Cyril, in fact, was to his last day as unspoiled by his unaccustomed grandeur as his brother Alexis. Each was ready at any moment to turn from the obsequious homage of nobles to hobnob with a peasant friend or relative. How utterly devoid of false pride Alexis was is proved by the following anecdote. One day when, in company with the Empress, he was paying a visit to Count Loewenwolde, he rushed from Elizabeth's side to fling his arms round the neck of one of his host's footmen. "Are you mad, Alexis?" exclaimed the Empress, in her astonishment. "What do you mean by such senseless behaviour?" "I am not mad at all," answered the favourite. "He is an old friend of mine."

But although no man ever deposed the shepherd from the first place in Elizabeth's favour, it must not be imagined that he was her only lover. The daughter of the hot-blooded Peter and the lusty scullery wench had always as great a passion for men as the second Catherine, who had almost as many favourites in her boudoir as gowns in her wardrobes. She

had her lovers before she was emancipated from the schoolroom; and not the least favoured of them, it is said, was her own nephew, Peter the Second, whom she would no doubt have married if it had been possible.

She turned her back on one great alliance after another, preferring her freedom to a wedding-ring that brought no love with it; and she found her pleasure alike among the gentlemen of the Court and among her own servants. In the long list of her favourites we find a General succeeded by a Sergeant; Boutourlin, the handsome courtier, giving place to Lialin, the sailor; and Count Shouvalov retiring in favour of Voytshinsky, the coachman. Thus one liaison succeeded another from girlhood to middle-age--indeed long after she had passed the altar. But through all these varying attachments her heart remained constant to her shepherd-lover, to whom she was ever the devoted wife, and, when he was ill, the tenderest of nurses. To please him, she even accompanied him on a visit to his native village, smiling graciously on his humble friends of other days, and partaking of the hospitality of the poorest cottagers; while on all who had befriended him in the days of his obscurity she lavished her favours.

Of one man who had been thus kind she made a General on the spot; the friendly priest was given a highly paid post at Court; high rank in the army was given to many of his humble relatives; and a husband was found for a favourite niece in Count Ryoumin, the Chancellor's son.

As for Alexis himself, nothing was too good for him. Although he had probably never handled a gun in his life she made him Field-Marshal and head of her army; and, at her request, Charles VII. dubbed him Count of the Holy Roman Empire, a distinction which Gregory Orloff in later years prized more than all the honours Catherine II. showered on him; while the estates of which she made him lord were a small kingdom in themselves. Alexis, the shepherd's son, was now, beyond any question, the most powerful man in Russia. If he would, he might easily have taken the sceptre from the yielding hands of the Empress and played the autocrat, as Patiomkin played it under similar circumstances in later years. But Alexis cared as little for power as for rank and wealth. He smiled at his honours. "Fancy," he said, with his hearty laugh, "a peasant's son, a Count; and a man who ought to be tending sheep, a Field-Marshal!"

When courtly genealogists spread before him an elaborate family-tree, proving that he sprang from the princely stock of Bogdan, with many a Grand Duke of Lithuania among his lineal ancestors, he laughed loud and long at them for their pains. "Don't be so ridiculous," he said. "You know as well as I that my parents were simple peasants, honest enough, but people of the soil and nothing else. If I am Count and Field-Marshal and Viceroy, I owe it all to the good heart of your Empress and mine, whose humble servant I am. Take it away, and let me hear no more of such foolery."

Such to the last was the unspoiled, child-like nature of the man who so soon was to be not merely the first favourite but husband of an Empress. Probably Alexis would have lived and died Elizabeth's unlicensed lover had it not been for the cunning of the cleverest of her Chancellors, Bestyouzhev, who saw in his mistress's infatuation for her peasant the means of making his own position more secure. Elizabeth was still a young and attractive woman, who might pick and choose among some of the most eligible suitors in Europe for a sharer of her throne; for there were many who would gladly have played consort to the good-looking

autocrat of Russia.

Such a husband, especially if he were a strong man, might seriously imperil the Chancellor's position; might even dispense with him altogether. On the other hand, he was high in the favour of the shepherd's son, who had such a contempt for power, and who thus would be a puppet in his hands. Why not make him husband in name as well as in fact? It was, after all, an easy task the Chancellor thus set himself. Elizabeth was by no means unwilling to wear a wedding-ring for the man who had loved her so loyally and so long; and any difficulties she might raise were quickly disposed of by her father-confessor, who was Bestyouzhev's tool. Thus it came to pass that one day Elizabeth and Alexis stood side by side before the village altar of Perovo; and the words were spoken which made the shepherd's son husband of the Empress. The secrecy with which the ceremony was performed was but a fiction. All the world knew that Alexis Gregorovitch was Emperor by right of wedlock, and flocked to pay homage to him in his new and exalted character.

He now had sumptuous apartments next to those of his wife; he sat at her right hand on all State occasions; he was her shadow everywhere; and during his frequent attacks of gout the Empress ministered to him night and day in his own rooms with the tender devotion of a mother to a child. Two children were born to them, a son and a daughter, the latter of whom, after a life of strange romance and vicissitude, ended her days in a loathsome dungeon of the fortress of Saints Peter and Paul, the victim of Catherine II.'s vengeance--miserably drowned, so one story goes, by an inundation of her cell.

On Elizabeth's death, in the year 1762, her husband was glad to retire from the Court in which he had for so long played so splendid a part. "None but myself," he said, "can know with what pleasure I leave a sphere to which I was not born, and to which only my love for my dear mistress made me resigned. I should have been happier far with her in some small cottage far removed from the gilded slavery of Court life." He was happy enough now leading the peaceful life of a country gentleman on one of his many estates.

Catherine II. had mounted the throne of Russia--the Empress who, according to Masson, had but two passions, which she carried to the grave--"her love of man, which degenerated into libertinage; and her love of glory, which degenerated into vanity." A woman with the brain of a man and the heart of a courtesan, Catherine's fickle affection had flitted from one lover to another, until now it had settled on Gregory Orloff, the handsomest man in her dominions, whom she was more than half disposed to make her husband.

This was a scheme which commended itself strongly to her Chancellor, Vorontsov. There was a most useful precedent to lend support to it--the alliance of the Empress Elizabeth with a man of immeasurably lower rank than Catherine's favourite; but it was important that this precedent should be established beyond dispute. Thus it was that one day, when Count Alexis was poring over his Bible by his country fireside, Chancellor Vorontsov made his appearance with ingratiating words and promises. Her Majesty, he informed the Count, was willing to confer Imperial rank on him in return for one small favour--the possession of the documents which proved his marriage to her predecessor, Elizabeth.

On hearing the request, the ex-shepherd rose, and, with words of quiet scorn, refused both the request and the proffered honour. "Am not I," he

said, "a Count, a Field-Marshal, a man of wealth? all of which I owe to the kindness of my dear, dead mistress. Are not such honours enough for the peasant's son whom she raised from the mire to sit by her side, that I should purchase another bauble by an act of treachery to her memory?"

"But wait one moment," he continued; and, leaving the room, he returned carrying a small bundle of papers, which he proceeded to examine one by one. Then, collecting them, he placed the bundle in the heart of the fire, to the horror of the onlooking Chancellor; and, as the flames were reducing the precious documents to ashes, he said, "Go now and tell those who sent you, that I never was more than the slave of my august benefactress, the Empress Elizabeth, who could never so far have forgotten her position as to marry a subject."

Thus with a lie on his lips--the last crowning evidence of loyalty to his beloved Queen and wife--Alexis Razoum makes his exit from the stage on which he played so strangely romantic a part. A few years later his days ended in peace at his St Petersburg palace, with the name he loved best, "Elizabeth," on his lips.

CHAPTER IV

A CROWN THAT FAILED

Henri of Navarre, hero of romance and probably the greatest King who ever sat on the throne of France, had a heart as weak in love as it was stout in war. To his last day he was a veritable coward before the battery of bright eyes; and before Ravailac's dagger brought his career to a tragic end one May day in the year 1610 he had counted his mistresses to as many as the years he had lived.

But of them all, fifty-seven of them--for the most part lightly coming and lightly going--only one ever really reached his heart, and was within measurable distance of a seat on his throne--the woman to whom he wrote in the hey-day of his passion, "Never has man loved as I love you. If any sacrifice of mine could purchase your happiness, how gladly I would make it, even to the last drop of my life's blood."

Gabrielle d'Estrees who thus enslaved the heart of the hero, which carried him to a throne through a hundred fights and inconceivable hardships, was cradled one day in the year 1573 in Touraine. From her mother, Francoise Babou, she inherited both beauty and frailness; for the Babou women were famous alike for their loveliness and for a virtue as facile even as that of Marie Gaudin, the pretty plaything of Francois I., who left Francois' arms to find a husband in Philip Babou and thus to transmit her charms and frailty to Gabrielle.

Her father, Antoine, son of Jean d'Estrees, a valiant soldier under five kings, was a man of pleasure, who drank and sang his way through life, preferring Cupid to Mars and the *_joie de vivre_* to the call of duty. It is perhaps little wonder that Antoine's wife, after bearing seven children to her husband, left him to find at least more loyalty in the Marquess of Tourel-Alegre, a lover twenty years younger than herself.

Thus it was that, deserted by her mother, and with a father too addicted

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