

THE RED FOX'S SON

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A Romance of Bharbazonia

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RED FOX'S SON ***

Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

*"As often as we drove the front
rank back upon its fellows, a new
set of swords took its place"*
(See page 337)
From a Painting by John Goss

THE RED FOX'S SON

A Romance of Bharbazonia

By
Edgar M. Dilley

With a frontispiece in colour by
John Goss

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TO
MY MOTHER
THAT GENTLE LITTLE MENTOR OF MINE WHO HAS

GROWN MORE DEAR WITH ADVANCING YEARS,
 WHOSE UNSHAKEN FAITH AND UNSWERVING
 AFFECTION HAVE BEEN MY INSPIRATION
 THIS BOOK IS
 AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

FOREWORD

A word with you, who lift me from my place among the Books,
 Before you take or leave me, pleased or displeas'd with my looks;
 If you are seeking knowledge of a scientific kind,
 If you would delve in pages full of wisdom for the mind,
 Although I stand a Slave Girl upon the Public Mart,
 Leave me! Leave me! Oh, my Masters! I can never reach your heart!

But, if you love the glamour of the Palace of the King,
 And find your pulses quicken when intrigue is on the wing;
 If you would see the Lover and the Maiden he would wed,
 The flight, the fight upon the stair, the rich blood running red,
 The last despair, the rescue, hero acting well his part—
 Take me! Take me! Oh, my Masters! I can ever reach your heart!

EDGAR M. DILLEY

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THE RED FOX'S SON

CHAPTER I

DAVID AND JONATHAN

We still have slept together,
 Rose at an instant, learn'd, play'd together,
 And wheresoe'er we went, like Juno's swans,
 Still we went coupled and inseparable.

—*Shakespeare: As You Like It.*

As I write in my quiet library the history of those stirring events which began and ended while the bells of 19— were ringing in the New Year in the Kingdom of Bharbazonia, I am interrupted on my literary journey by the sound of a sweet voice singing, in the room below, the robust melody of "The King and the Pope," my favourite song.

The sweet music sets me dreaming of the day I first met Solonika in her quaint little Dalmatian summerhouse; of the time when she would have killed me in the Red Fox's Castle; of the night of suffering when I was lost in the Forest of Zin; of the race for life with Marbosa's men; of the sacrilege in the Cathedral of Nischon; of that last awful scene at the Turk's Head Inn, when friendship was put to the test—and I marvel, not so much that a man may be placed in danger of death in this, the Twentieth Century, from the religious superstitions of a mediæval race; but that I should owe my life to that fortunate occurrence, years before, when Dame Fortune's handmaiden, "Chance," made Nicholas Fremsted my friend.

I often wonder at that friendship which came to mean so much to me. It began when Nick and I were seventeen years old, and, although we are past thirty now, it has but grown stronger with advancing years. We were first attracted to each other as a result of a college prank. Like most youngsters whose parents make great sacrifices that their children may be permitted in a class-room, my whole ambition in life was to absent myself from lectures as much as possible. Nor was I alone in my folly, for most of my fellow students joined with me, knowing that the dread day of reckoning, examination day, was far distant. It is difficult to be a faithful student when the football season is gathering momentum!

Our professor was old and almost blind; and we young rascals unfeelingly took advantage of his infirmities. Before we were Freshmen a week, grown wise under the evil counsel of our elders, the Sophomores and Juniors, we had become adepts in dodging all his lectures. Because he could not see, it was easy for us to answer to our names at roll call and slip out the rear door, leaving the kind old

man to talk to empty chairs. Sometimes, when it was not convenient for us to leave the athletic field, growing bolder with success, we commissioned one "man" to answer "Here" for all of us. He was careful to use different tonal qualities for each name. When his mission was safely concluded he, too, would rejoin us, leaving a few of that despised set of boys known as "grinds" in the front seats to sustain the appearance of a full class. They, fearful of the wrath to come, diligently minded their own business.

It was on one of the occasions when I had been sent up to answer for the class, and was standing just inside the doorway impatient to be off, that I first heard Nick's name. The professor, his nose close to the sheet, lead pencil in hand, called it out and waited for the answer which did not come. I glanced hastily down the list I held, but Nick's name did not appear there. Again the professor called:

"Nicholas Fremsted."

"Here," I cried on the spur of the moment, and the roll call proceeded, keeping me in continual hot water running the scale of "Here, Here," until it was over. To this day I cannot tell why I befriended him then. He might have been a "grind" with a bona fide excuse for his absence which when presented later might lead to discovery. I hoped he would be one of the "good fellows" who were, I suppose, very bad fellows indeed.

The roll call over, I did not wait to see if he came late to lecture; but that same evening he visited me in my rooms. He was a tall, well made lad about my own height and build, with sleepy brown eyes and waving black hair. His skin was as dark as an Italian's, but when he spoke it was with a marked French accent mingled with something that smacked of a Russian or Slavonic flavour. There was the pride of ancestry in his easy bearing, and he spoke with the decision of one whom the habit of taking care of himself had rendered self-reliant.

"I am come to make my thanks to you, sir," he said, "for your kind offices this afternoon in replying to my name for the roll call."

"Do not mention it," I replied, bidding him be seated; "you came to class then after all?"

"Yes. Soon after the rest they are gone, I advance to the fine old professor to explain my lateness. He informs me I am not tardy."

"You didn't give the snap away?" I cried, realizing more fully the chances I had taken, for, if this foreigner were of the stripe of human beings who would rather be right than President, I should be made to suffer for my kindness. My classmates would never forgive me for breaking up the little deception which other classes had practised undetected for years.

"Snap?" he repeated, puzzled by the colloquialism.

"I mean you did not tell him some one answered to your name?"

"Oh, no, I did not; although it is peculiar to be told by inference that one lies. When the instructor he says you are here since the beginning of the hour, and shows me the mark on the roll beside my name I only thank him and say 'Ah.'"

"Good boy," I cried, knowing that our secret was safe in his hands; and I took him to my heart then and there.

In five minutes we were smoking our pipes in the easy chairs, engaged in the pleasant occupation of getting acquainted. I told him all about myself and learned that he was not a Frenchman nor yet a Russian. That much he told me, and a great deal more, but he did not volunteer any information as to his nationality. There was that about him, too, which discouraged familiarity and he remained a man of mystery, even to me with whom he came to dwell at the end of that week, and with whom he continued to live for eight years. After we passed through college, I persuaded him to study medicine, and we both graduated from the medical school at the age of twenty-five.

He was one of the most remarkable linguists I have ever met, and with good cause. From his own account, he was sent away from home by his father for political reasons, the import of which he himself did not know, when he was eleven years old. He spent two years in St. Petersburg at school, two in Berlin and one in Paris before he came to Philadelphia, and, as far as I could learn, had never been home in all that time. His ample quarterly remittances came through a Paris broker's office.

When first we knew him we called him "François Fremsted" because we believed him French. But, after he joined the football squad and finally won his place on the team, having developed into a great strong fellow, we nicknamed him "Lassie." because that was the most absurd name we could think of for a man who was as intensely masculine as he. Nicknames, like dreams, you know, usually go by contraries. Of course the appellation was derived from the last syllable of his first name. To unsympathetic ears it may at first have been misunderstood, but "Lassie" himself liked it best of all the names we gave him.

His knowledge of languages did not extend alone to Russian, German, French and English. I remember, on one occasion, when we were celebrating a football victory with the usual foolish college abandon and found ourselves among the docks on the Delaware River front, Nick spoke in a peculiar dialect to a Slav stevedore, who was much surprised to find an American so addressing him. For some reason Nick became angry, and hurled the jargon at him imperiously; whereupon the labouring man removed his cap and knelt on the Belgian blocks of the street. So great was his humility that he would have kissed Fremsted's hand had not Nick brushed him aside and walked away.

Again, I frequently accompanied him to the Italian and Russian quarter of

the town, when he wished to transact some mysterious business with certain residents there, and found that he got on equally well with them. It was also true that the Bulgarian consul was, next to me, Nick's most intimate friend and adviser.

What Nick's business might be I could never determine, owing to the fact that his negotiations were always conducted in different dialects, while French was the only language I found time to learn—thanks to Nick's assistance. Whatever he was doing, he did not permit it to interfere with his college work, except on two occasions; once he was absent for a week in New York and once he made a flying trip to San Francisco.

Beyond leaving a note for me saying he would not be home for a week or so, he never volunteered any information about these journeys and I never questioned him. Had it not been that he was such a handsome fellow, not averse to the society of the ladies, I might yet be in ignorance as to his destinations; but on both occasions letters with illuminating post marks followed his return and told me that Nick had found time to make social calls after business hours. There was never anything serious about this sporadic feminine correspondence, and it soon fell away, possibly because he presently forgot to answer—a most reprehensible, though not unusual, fault in young men.

So the years went by and we became inseparable. The boys on the campus, whom nothing ever escapes, remarked the friendship and dubbed us "David and Jonathan." They eagerly watched for the advent of the woman, for they desired to know what would happen if the eternal feminine should come between David and Jonathan. But she never materialized and our lives went peacefully on.

After graduation Nick and I hung out our shingles together in Philadelphia. I persuaded my widowed mother to take a larger residence on West Spruce Street where there was ample room for all. Some of his clothing is still hanging on the hooks in his room and I suppose the key to the front door is still on his key-chain. We were scarcely comfortably fixed in our new quarters when Nick went away on one of his sudden and mysterious journeys. At first I thought he would soon be back, but he did not return for four years.

During that time I received an occasional letter from him, each one mailed from a different part of the globe. In one of his missives he told me his father had died, necessitating a change in his attitude toward life. In a letter from Paris he said he had been home for a season, but the country life of a gentleman did not appeal to him. He assured me he would soon return, and one morning, when I awoke, I found him in his bed-room next to mine. He had crept in quietly, while the house slept, and retired as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for him to be home.

My joy at seeing him, as you can well believe, was great; but at the end

of one short month he was suddenly away again, and his letters began arriving. This time he had a commission in the Russian army of the Far East, and was in Vladivostok when the war with Japan was declared. It was his misfortune to be transferred to Port Arthur, where he was captured when the stronghold was surrendered.

At the conclusion of hostilities he resigned his commission, but remained in Japan because he was interested in the country and the language. Then he drifted over to the Philippines in search of that will-o'-wisp called "Something New," and thence to California. In his last letter he said that he was coming eastward by easy stages and that there was a chance that I would soon see him in Philadelphia. In this hope I was not disappointed, for Nicholas shortly made his appearance. And here is where the story begins.

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN OF NICHOLAS

Returning he proclaims by many a grace,
By shrugs and strange contortions of the face,
How such a dunce that has been sent to roam,
Excels the dunce that has been kept at home.

—*Cowper: Progress of Error.*

It was on the evening of November 17, 19—, that Nicholas returned. I recall the date distinctly because it was the opening night of the Philadelphia Opera House. I was standing against the wall in the red carpeted promenade, marvelling at the magnificent display of gowns and the wonderful beauty of the women, both of which were a revelation to me, native born though I am, when I saw Nick sauntering through the crowd.

Older, a trifle heavier and more matured, I thought, than when I last saw him, but in all else the same old Nicholas. He was attired in the perfection of evening dress, for perfection was usual with him, and, although I least expected to find him here, I knew I could not be mistaken. There was the same mass of dark waving hair, soft, sleepy brown eyes and smooth olive skin; the same well-built athletic figure—proud heritage of the American college man—the same generous full rounded mouth and even white teeth enhanced by contrast with the darkness

of his skin.

Waiting long enough to assure myself that he was alone, I made my way through the crowd, none too gently I fear, trampling on many beautiful, slow-moving trains in my eagerness to reach him.

"Lassie!" I called.

"Rude person," said the angry owner of a ruined dress; but I maintained my reputation for rudeness by ignoring the pouting beauty in my frantic effort to keep Nick in sight.

At the sound of the college name, which he had not heard for years, Nick turned and examined face after face within range of his vision until, over the undulating sea of the hair dresser's art—and artifice—our smiling eyes met and he recognized me. So effusive was our meeting, and so genuine the display of affection, that we became the centre of an interested circle of bare-shouldered observers who, mayhap, imagined that we were fighting. And not without reason, for we were alternately shaking hands and punching each other forcibly, but affectionately, upon our white shirt bosoms. As the lights were dimmed for the next act our audience scattered as silently as possible to recover their places in boxes and pit.

"Are you alone?" asked Nick.

"Yes."

"Good. Then you will spend the remainder of the evening with me, now that I have found you."

The blare of the orchestra drowned further talk until we emerged from the opera house, leaving the cigarette girl, Carmen, and her Spanish lovers to their fate.

A huge dark green automobile with some sort of a foreign monogram on the door, and a small Japanese boy enveloped in a great fur coat at the wheel, drew silently up at the curb. Nicholas pushed through the aisles of waiting carriages and the crowd of spectators that lined the street and sidewalk on that famous opening night.

"To the Bellevue?" I asked noting the direction.

"I would rather take you home. We can have more quiet in your back office, Dale. I want to hear you talk. The sound of your voice is the best music I have heard since I returned to old Philadelphia."

"Have you seen mother?"

"Yes; I got in just after you had gone to the opera. She told me where to find you."

When we arrived home the Jap boy put the car in a neighbouring garage and I got out my Scotch and seltzer in the back office. Nick fled upstairs and brought down a mandarin's coat of many colours which he had picked up in

Japan for me. It was indeed a beauty and I was proud of it as I strutted around viewing myself in the mirrors. Nick made himself comfortable in my old smoking jacket, and threw himself into a chair, his glance wandering about the room.

"Just to think of it," he said; "all these years have gone by and everything here is unchanged. Not a piece of furniture, not an ornament has been moved. In the midst of it you sit, the very personification of immovability, working away, doing the same thing yesterday, to-day and for ever. While I have looked upon a new scene with every changing hour, have seen cities rise and fall, have watched men die by the hundreds. Doesn't the *wanderlust* ever grip you, Dale; don't you ever want to get out and see something of the world?"

"Some persons have to earn their living, you young gadabout," I said, smiling; "and, after all, what have you accomplished with the fleeing years?"

"Humph," said he, "nothing worth talking about. What have you done?"

"I have been practising my profession, distributing with a free hand my pills and physic to the residents of Philadelphia; I have written a medical book or two and I have extended the lives of a few men and women, bringing joy into the homes of their loved ones. That is more than you can say, perhaps."

"True," said Nick, "I have done nothing. Are you married, Dale?"

"No."

"Going to be?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Nor I, either; but I never stayed long enough in one place. Why haven't you?"

"Been too busy with my work to think about it, I suppose. Besides, there's mother, you know. Nick, I wish you would write to me oftener; your letters were so few and far between that I sometimes felt you had forgotten me."

For answer he put his hand into the pocket of the mandarin coat I was wearing and handed me a leather case. I opened it and recognized the meerschaum pipe I had given him as a graduation present. Pure white it was then, but now it was stained a beautiful reddish black, showing the years of comfort it had given him since that time. Nicholas never wasted words and I knew by this silent action in handing me the relic of our old, happy days, that he was telling me in his characteristic way how often he had thought of me. I was much pleased.

He took back the meerschaum, filled and lit before he replied.

"I know you have never forgiven me, Dale, for giving up the practice of medicine. I wish I could make you understand that it was not entirely my fault, and that there is no place for the medical profession in my country."

"I never could understand that, Nick, for it always seemed to me that a young man could make his best start where he was known."

"It is difficult to make you Americans understand that *tout le monde*, as the

French say, is not American. In the first place there is no city, town or hamlet near my home place; and in the second the people—although I say it who love them well—are not progressive. They still live under the laws of the middle ages and the wonders of modern medicine would appear as witchcraft in their eyes.”

”Your country must be most peculiar,” I said. Such was the rapport between us that Nick took my reply as I meant it, a gentle suggestion that he tell me more about his mysterious native land. Deep down in my heart I always resented his secrecy in the matter, and could never understand his reason for keeping anything from one who loved him like a brother.

A frown gathered upon his brow as he studied the carpet.

”If you still want to make a mystery of yourself,” I said when he remained silent, ”you need tell me nothing and I shall not be offended.”

”When I first came to you, old friend,” he said, ”I kept my own counsel for various reasons. One was because I desired you, and all who knew me, to like me because I was just Nick Fremsted and not the descendant of an old and illustrious family. Another was because you Americans are inclined to smile at anything smaller than your own country and my Fatherland is not any larger than the state of Delaware.”

”Let it pass,” I replied, ”and instead tell me what you have done since last we met.”

”All right,” said he. ”Where shall I begin?”

”The last time you were here your father had died and you had arranged your estate and continued your travelling. You went to St. Petersburg on secret business for your government—the Turks were pressing you hard and you needed assistance from your guardian angel, the Bear of the North. After that you spent a month with me and then came the Russo-Japanese war. Tell me about that.”

He took up the account from the day he left Philadelphia and held me spell-bound with the tale of his experiences and the dangers he had escaped until I felt that my own quiet existence was a mean little life after all. The entrance of Teju Okio, returned from the garage, led the story in his direction.

”I found the Jap boy in front of Port Arthur,” said Nick. ”He was one of the little brown men who captured it. But, a month before they caused us to surrender, I captured him. It happened in this way. I was in command of one of the numerous defences which had to be taken before the city fell. The Japs, like little moles, burrowed in the ground, driving trenches toward us until they could win a position from which they could drive us out. We made frequent charges on their works, captured and put to death many of their soldiers pick and shovel in hand.

”One night, as I was accompanying an attacking party, the ground caved in beneath my feet and I fell on my back into a tunnel filled with Japanese within

a hundred feet of the foundations of our redoubt. Before I could arise they recovered from their surprise and attacked me. I put up the best fight I could for my life but they were too numerous.

"The only light in the hole was a smoking oil torch which was soon kicked over, giving me the advantage of darkness. They were afraid to strike in the dark for fear of hitting friends, but I had no such compunctions. I fought my way to my feet, using both fists and feet, and escaped the crowd, leaving them fighting together.

"I knew that the open end of the tunnel must be opposite from the fort, so I went in that direction only to encounter more Japanese, running with lights to learn the cause of the disturbance. The top of the tunnel was so low that I had to stoop and there was no room to use my sword. I dashed the leader of the relief party back upon his comrades; three or four of them fell and the rest blocked up the passageway. Before I could fight my way through, the first party came up in the rear and I was knocked down by a blow on the head with a shovel.

"They tied me hand and foot and held a council of war. Most of them were naked to the waist, and, as they gathered around the torch, with the sweat running from them in streams, they looked like little demons to me. Most of them were for killing me at once and be done with it, and I suppose I should have died then and there with a pick in my brain if one of their number, little Lieutenant Teju Okio, the only officer among them, had not interceded for me. He stood over me with a revolver in each hand and ordered them back to work. And they went reluctantly.

"In the meanwhile the Russian attacking party went on without noticing my absence. As luck would have it, they stumbled upon the very ditch which communicated with the tunnel, found the opening and came through it, cautiously firing in front of them and feeling their way. Okio heard them coming and knew that his men were caught in their own trap. At his command the Japs attacked the side walls with their picks and shovels and blocked up the passage with soil. Then he retreated with his men, leaving me alone and bound beside the barrier. He had forgotten to gag me and, when my companions came to what they imagined was the end of the works, I shouted my orders to them to dig through. Willing hands fell upon that hastily constructed barrier and in five minutes I saw a Russian hand come through, followed by the face of one of my own lieutenants, who paused in surprise when he saw me lying on the ground with a torch burning beside me.

"'Heaven help me, captain,' he cried, 'what does this mean?'

"'Cut me loose. Hurry. They are in the far end of the tunnel. Get your men through and capture them.'

"Man after man crawled through the hole until we were in sufficient force

to advance with assurance of success. I led the way at double quick, but, when we came to the end of the work, there was only one man there and that one was Teju Okio. He was squatting before his miner's lamp calmly lighting a cigarette, his uniform and hands covered with mud, as if an army had walked over him, his little chest heaving like a victorious runner's after a gruelling race, a smile of satisfaction upon his face. He knew it was not our habit to give or ask quarter, yet there the brave little fellow sat smiling into the eyes of death.

"But I had not forgotten what he had done for me and I repaid my debt of gratitude by interposing my body between his enemies, just as he, a short time before, had done for me.

"'Leave this man to me,' I cried; 'get the rest. They are not far away.'

"But, search as we would, we could not find them. Neither was there another tunnel and the one we were in ended right there. I was mystified and turned to my prisoner for the explanation. He was furtively watching the ceiling above his head. Looking in that direction I saw the starry sky twinkling down through the hole in the roof of the tunnel which I had made in falling. The heroism of Teju Okio was apparent. Obeying his instructions, every one of his unarmed companions had mounted Okio's shoulders and escaped through the opening, leaving him to face the fury of the Russians alone.

"But I saw to it that they did not harm him, making him my own personal prisoner. We retreated that night before the Japs finished their tunnel and blew up the fort and, when Port Arthur fell, Teju Okio got his freedom and I was taken with the rest of the survivors to Japan. Hostilities concluded, I resigned my commission and stayed in Japan to study the language. Teju Okio was only a poor farmer's boy and he gladly came with me as my servant.

"I wrote you from the Philippines and California," he concluded, "didn't you get my letters?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, "every one of them."

"Well, to bring it up to date, I arrived in New York last Saturday, a week ago to-day; I left there this morning and motored over here. So there, my friend, you have the record of my meagre years wherein you observe I have been seeking amusement all over the earth. Sometimes I found it and sometimes I was bored to death."

"Going to stay long, Nick?"

"As far as I now know I shall remain with you for some time."

My expressions of happiness were interrupted by the ringing of the front doorbell.

"Somebody requires a pill," said Nick, as I answered it in person. "My, what a practice we have built up!"

But the visitor was not one of my patients. He was a man of about five

and fifty with snow white hair which he wore rather long. His heavy moustache, also white, was tightly waxed and turned up at the ends after the manner of the German Emperor. His eyebrows, in contradistinction to his hair and moustache, were black. They were heavy and overhung a fine pair of alert, far-seeing black eyes, giving to his face a distinction which made it cling to the most casual memory. His skin, like that of Fremsted, was dark and showed the effect of an outdoor life. He seemed to be a bluff, hearty old gentleman with whom Nature had dealt kindly. On the whole there was something most pleasing about him.

"I wish to see Nicholas Fremsted," he said.

I hesitated, wondering who he might be and how he knew of Nick's presence in my house. It was then nearly two o'clock in the morning, an unseemly hour for a call whether of business or pleasure.

"Tell him General Palmora is here," he continued, and the ring of command in his voice left me no alternative but to obey.

With some misgivings I ushered him into the reception room and called Nick, feeling somehow that Nick's promised visit with me was at an end before it was begun.

The General was evidently an old friend of Nick's, for when the two men saw each other they embraced, kissing each other on the cheek like foreigners and mingling their cries of delight. When their effusive greeting was over, Nick led the old man to a chair and they began a spirited conversation in a strange tongue, while I for the moment was forgotten.

I wandered about the room making a pretence of examining my own pictures and keeping my eye on the proceedings, but I could make little out of them. The General did most of the talking. He handed Nick an official looking document engrossed with a red seal from which was suspended blue and gold ribbons. Nick held it under the hanging lamp, and the black and the gray hair mingled as the two bent their heads together over it. The General frequently tapped the paper with his slender fingers and talked rapidly, combating every argument which Nicholas seemed to advance. Finally he produced from his overcoat pocket a chamois bag which he deposited upon the table. Judging from the jingle I concluded that it contained gold coins. The argument ended when the General won some sort of a promise from Nicholas. Then, having effected his purpose, he rose abruptly, bowed low over Nick's hand and made his way to the door, which I opened for him. He bade me "good night" politely in English, and went down the steps.

When I returned to the reception room, Nick was deeply absorbed in re-reading the parchment with the red seal. His face wore a troubled look. As I went around to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder, he started like a man suddenly awakened from a deep sleep. The message before him was written in

a foreign language with peculiar characters the like of which I had never seen. They might have been Russian or Hebrew. From the arrangement of the seal I imagined the screeed was intended to be read from right to left.

"Can you make anything of it?" asked Nick, noting my glance.

"All Greek to me," I replied; "Has it something to do with your country?"

"Yes. It is an official command to Grand Duke—that is, I should say it is a summons to Nicholas Fremsted—to be present at the Cathedral in Nischon on New Year's Day, January 1, 19—, to bear witness and attest to the legality of the coronation of Prince Raoul as King of Bharbazonia," said Nick, reading the scroll. "It is signed by Oloff Gregory, the present king, who is eighty-two years old, and desires to abdicate."

At last the secret of Nick's nationality was out, but I was not concerned with that so much as I was with the fear that I was to lose him so soon.

"Of course you are going?" I asked.

"Yes; I gave my word to the General."

"I have never heard of this country of Bharbazonia; where is it, Nick?"

"No, of course not," said he. "It is one of the many small provinces of southeastern Europe which is generally summed up and dismissed with the expression—one of the Balkan states. My country threw off the yoke of the Turks about the same time Bulgaria obtained her freedom at the Battle of Shipka Pass, thanks to Russian intervention and their great fighting chief Grand Duke Alexoff. During that struggle Bharbazonia sent her best fighting men and all her money to Bulgaria's aid and many of the fiercest battles for the extermination of the red fez were waged in the mountains which surround the Fatherland. When the treaty was signed Bulgaria and Bharbazonia were free. Gregory was made king and the nobles, banished by the Turks, returned from exile in friendly Russia and resumed control of the land of their forefathers."

"Was the General's news the first you had of the proposed abdication?"

"No, I knew of it; but did not feel called upon to be present. He convinced me that it was my duty."

"Who is General Palmora?"

"He is one of the first men of Bharbazonia, commander-in-chief of her army. Upon his shoulders fell the brunt of the fighting which resulted in our freedom. My father and he were like brothers; a friendship like ours existed between them, Dale, and, now that father is dead, Palmora loves me like a son. All my affairs are in his hands at home. He was visiting America on business of state. Bharbazonia's interests are in charge of the Bulgarian consul in Philadelphia and, since I always leave my address with him, General Palmora experienced no difficulty in locating me."

"When do you sail?"

"I must return with the General on the *Koenig Albert* from Hoboken next Tuesday."

"Just one week from to-day?"

"Yes. We will be in Naples, if all goes well, a week from the following Tuesday. There the General's yacht will meet us."

"What a beautiful trip you will have," I exclaimed, something of the *wanderlust* engendered by Nick's story getting into my blood. "How I should like to go with you."

"I wish you would, Dale. We could be back in a month or so, and you will see one of the prettiest little countries in the world. The coronation services, too, are well worth the journey. Come now, make up your mind and say you will go."

The more I thought about it the more feasible it became. I had arranged to take a month in Florida, my first extended vacation in eight years, and it would not be a difficult matter to rearrange the trip and go with Nick.

And so it was agreed that he should book passage for me. Had I been able to look into the future and see what was to befall in the Kingdom of Bharbazonia, and that Nick would never come back with me, I might not have taken my decision so lightly, nor have looked forward to the trip with so much pleasure.

And here is where the story *really* begins.

CHAPTER III OFF FOR BHARBAZONIA!

See, what a ready tongue suspicion hath!
He that but fears the thing he would not know,
Hath, by instinct, knowledge from another's eyes,
That what he feared is chanced.

—*Shakespeare: Henry IV.*

When the big ocean liner swung clear of her dock the following Tuesday under the propelling influence of a pair of optimistic tugs which, undaunted by her huge bulk and their diminutive size, dragged her slowly into the current of the Hudson River, and set her face toward Europe, Nick and I were leaning over the guard rail watching the sea of upturned faces on the dock and the mass of waving handkerchiefs.

My preparations for the voyage had been quickly made. After expressing my steamer trunk to the boat, writing a few letters and turning my practice over to my hospital colleague, I was at liberty to accompany Nick in his swift trips about the city while he transacted the business which brought him to Philadelphia.

He first visited the Russian consul; then he held a long talk with a white-bearded black-robed priest of the Greek Church and an Armenian shoemaker in the Lombard Street district. Everywhere he was received with considerable show of respect, and I began to suspect that his early education in the languages had not been entirely a matter of taste or of chance.

During all this time I had no glimpse of General Palmora in Philadelphia, and he was not on board when we drove on the dock in Nicholas' automobile, having made the trip from home in it. Nick intended to take his car with him.

"It will be the first one they ever saw in Bharbazonia," he laughed, and, when I suggested that it might be cheaper to buy a car in Europe and so avoid the duties, he said that automobiles were unknown at the place where we would disembark from the General's yacht and that there would be no duties.

"Looks as if I had fallen in with a band of smugglers," I said banteringly.

"Worse, oh, much worse," he replied in the same spirit.

On the second night out General Palmora made his appearance on deck, and Nick introduced him. He paid me the compliment of saying that he had often heard Nicholas speak of his chum, Dale Wharton; and tried to communicate with me in several languages, much to Nick's amusement.

"Try English, General," he suggested. "Dale is an American and probably knows only one language.

"You mustn't forget my French," I reminded him.

"Why, of course," replied the General, resuming his beautiful London drawl, which revealed the source of his English education, "how stupid of me. I should have known as much."

But the probability that he was trying to determine what language to use with Nick in my presence, did not escape me.

"This is not the first time I have had the pleasure of seeing you, General," I reminded him, opening the conversation after we were comfortably seated in our steamer chairs, protected from the wind by our rugs, "I was present with Fremsted the night you called at my house to see him."

"Ah, indeed? I do not remember you. I must apologize for my seeming rudeness in thus interrupting you, but the meeting with Nicholas was of great importance. I could think of nothing else."

"I presume Nicholas would never have attended the coronation if you had not urged him. He tells me in that event his estates might have been confiscated."

"Although such is the law in Bharbazonia," said the General laughing, and regarding Nick with affection, "I do not believe it would have been enforced in his case. Nicholas has friends at court who are powerful."

"Then why drag me away from the work of the Order?" exclaimed Nick with so much sudden heat that even the General was astonished.

"Gently, gently, my son," he answered in a conciliating tone, "I wanted you in Bharbazonia because I fear that we will have need for you. The 'Red Fox of Dhalmatia' was never known to run straight, and all may not be right with the succession."

"You mean that you suspect some trick may be attempted in connection with Prince Raoul, who is to be king?" I asked, eager for news of this strange country.

"It is one of his hobbies, Dale," said Nick. "You will soon find that his suspicions have not a leg to stand upon."

"It is true, Dr. Wharton," said the old man sadly; "I have only the vaguest ideas on the subject, although I have been watching and waiting, and, I might add, hoping, these past twenty years. The boy Raoul I know to be a capable youth. Although he is but twenty-two, he takes an interest in the work of the Order, which his father the 'Red Fox' never did. For that I like the boy. It argues well for his independence of thought. But, because he is the son of his father, I—cordially dislike him."

"Yes, General," I said, "but what are your suspicions?"

"If you will bear with me, young man, I will tell you the story. It goes back to the time when the Prince was born. Nick was then a lad of eleven or twelve and he was not interested in affairs of state. It was the year I believe that his father, acting on my advice, sent him to school in St. Petersburg. We were then only nine years away from the consummation of the Treaty of Berlin by which Bulgaria, Eastern Roumelia, Thessaly and Bharbazonia achieved independence, protected by the Powers. Now in Bharbazonia, as in many Eastern countries, the succession to the throne falls only upon the first male child of the ruler. Oloff Gregory, the king, even then an old man, had no son, which grieved him much, for he feared the throne must go away from his immediate family. His only child was his daughter Teskla.

"On the other hand his younger brother, the Red Fox of Dhalmatia, was more than pleased with the condition of affairs. He knew that, if he should have a son, the boy would reign in Bharbazonia, not because of any rights of succession, but because there was no other. Although, he, too, was no longer young, the 'Red Fox' took unto himself a young wife and it was soon noised abroad that the stork was expected to visit his castle."

The point which the General made of the male succession in Bharbazonia

did not strike me as unusual, because I recalled that in England during Queen Victoria's reign, her uncle, the Duke of Cumberland, was made King of Hanover by virtue of the law which excluded females from that throne.

Before continuing his story Palmora lit his cigar with a wind match, and, turning to me, said:

"I trust you will pardon the length of my tale. I do not wish to bore you."

"Please go on, General, I am much interested," I hastened to assure him.

"In our country, Dr. Wharton, it is still the custom to notify the peasantry of the birth of a castle child by ringing the tower bell, and, in the event of a male, to proclaim the sex by five strokes of the tongue, and in the event of a female by seven. The news is then carried by word of mouth and so spreads over the country.

"On the night the stork brought its precious burden to Dhalmatia I was playing chess, if I remember correctly, with my great friend, Nicholas' father, in his library, when we heard the brass bell of Dhalmatia give voice. With the fate of even more than the future king in the balance, we forgot our game in our intense interest, counting the strokes.

"'One; two; three; four; five; six—'tis a girl,' said Nick's father, much relieved, for he shared my dislike for the 'Red Fox,' and was pleased that the succession would not go to Dhalmatia. There were other reasons why we were delighted with the failure of the 'Red Fox's' hopes, but they were locked in our breasts by the events which followed. Scarcely had the bell completed its toll of seven, when to our astonishment it began again.

"'One; two; three; four; *five*,' we both counted aloud, looking into each other's eyes over the table between.

"'Five,' we shouted, springing to our feet and scattering the chessmen broadcast.

"'A boy at Dhalmatia?' I cried, scarcely believing my ears.

"'Is he playing with us?' said my friend. 'By the first ring he tells us it is a girl, and then he changes his mind and it is a boy?'

"'Let us solve this mystery at once,' I suggested.

"We took our lantern from the hooks and saddled our horses. It was about nine of the clock when the bell began ringing and I warrant it was not more than fifteen minutes later when we drew rein in front of Dhalmatia. It was as dark as the pit and not a light was shining from the windows, which on such a festive occasion should have been illuminated. From the direction of the servants' quarters came the sound of sobbing which grated horribly upon our ears.

"We pounded upon the heavy oak door with the hilts of our swords but only the echoes answered us; the weeping continued. Presently the door swung back a little way, slowly and it seemed to me cautiously, and the 'Fox' himself

stood in the narrow opening, muffled to the eyes in his long black cloak. When he saw who his visitors were, he was not pleased and made as if to shut the door in our faces, but we placed our shoulders against it, defeating his purpose.

”Well?” he growled ungraciously.

”The bell; the bell!” cried Nicholas’ father with some anger, out of breath with hard riding, ’what means this curious ringing of the tower bell?’

”Curious?’ he sneered; ’curious? I like not your words, Framkor. There is nothing unusual about it that I can discover.’

”Did not you announce the birth of a daughter?’

”The bell rang seven times,’ returned the Fox.

”Then Bharbazonia is without an heir in your house?’

”Not so, my kind and most considerate neighbour,’ he replied sarcastically, ’you must still wait a little longer. Did you not hear the bell ring also five times?’

”The meaning! The meaning!’ we both exclaimed.

”It is perfectly clear, noble sirs,’ he said. ’The house of Dhalmatia has been honoured this night with the advent of both a daughter and a son.’

”Twins!’ we cried, looking at each other and wondering why we had not thought of it before. We saw that we had been hoping against hope, and our worst fears were realized. I suppose our chagrin showed in our faces for the ’Red Fox’ seemed to enjoy our discomfiture. It was not in our hearts to congratulate the old rogue. We could not lie for the sake of an empty courtesy. We mounted our horses and rode away with the discordant chuckle of the lord of Dhalmatia ringing in our ears.”

”Nothing very suspicious in all that,” drawled Nick, flicking his cigarette into the sea. He had probably heard the story so often that he had no interest in it.

”If I could only make you understand,” sighed the General.

”But why were the servants crying?” I asked.

”That came out the next day,” continued the old man, glad at least to find one willing listener; ”it seems that the old midwife, who was the only person with the mother when the children were born, had fallen from the tower in some strange way when she was tugging at the bell rope to announce the birth of the girl. Her neck was broken.”

”Who then rang the bell the second time?”

”The Red Fox.”

”How great was the interval between the ringing?”

”There was scarcely a pause; it was almost immediate.”

”Then the ’Red Fox’ must have been very near the nurse in the tower.”

”He must have been very near.”

Both Nick and I smoked in silence, while the General took a turn around

the deck to still his excitement caused by his narration. Below, the sea slipped swiftly, softly by as the liner throbbed her quiet course through a vacant ocean. Overhead, the wireless spit and sputtered as the operator talked to his fellow aboard an unseen ship possibly a hundred miles away. It was as if the mocking voice of modern times were laughing at the mysteries of the long dead past. If there was any hidden meaning in the General's story it was exceedingly vague at best. When he resumed his seat by our side I ventured to open the subject again.

"Have you ever seen the Twins of Dhalmatia, General?"

"Oh, yes; many times," he replied.

"They exist, then."

"Oh, yes," he said, and from his manner I judged he would have added "unfortunately" had he not hesitated to shock me.

"Well then, my dear General, be frank with us. What do you suspect?"

"My sentiments exactly," joined Nick lightly.

"I wish to Hercules I knew what I suspected," he answered with a sigh. "All I know is that I have the feeling that all was not as it should be the night we talked with Dhalmatia. It is with me still. Wait until you know the 'Red Fox' as I do and you will understand."

"Bah," exclaimed Nick, "you gossip like an old woman. Do not put much faith in what he says, Dale, about the master of Dhalmatia. Prejudice is like a disorder of the blood; it sometimes causes hallucinations."

"Wait and see," returned the General. "I still believe that murder will out."

"But even if your wild imaginings should prove true, why am I desired in Bharbazonia?"

"That," said the General, "is your father's secret. Some day you shall be told."

On different occasions during the voyage, I drew the General into a discussion concerning the birth of the heir to the Bharbazonian throne, but gleaned very little more information. The General described the various times he had met the Prince and Princess. He was present on both occasions when first one and then the other was christened at the Cathedral of Nischon. These two events happened a week apart. He entertained quite a friendship for the Prince, who was a great boar hunter and horseman. The Princess he scarcely knew.

"I have never seen them in each other's society," he said, "because when one was home on a vacation the other was usually away at school in England or France. Most nobles of our little kingdom believe in the boon of education for their children."

At Naples the General's yacht came alongside the liner at her dock and we were transferred to the cramped quarters of still smaller staterooms. Although it was midnight, and the passengers were not permitted to land, the General

seemed to possess sufficient authority to have the automobile hoisted from the hold of the vessel and lashed securely to the deck of his little craft. In the morning when I awoke I found that we were well on our way toward the toe of the Italian peninsula.

For several days we steamed quietly along, the blue Mediterranean beneath and the bluer sky above, until we entered the Dardanelles and passed in front of the Turk's capital, the city of Constantinople. When we came in sight of the white, flatroofed town, the captain hauled down the white flag with the blue diagonals of the Russian navy and hoisted the stars and stripes. What he meant by the deception I could not imagine and, when I ventured to ask him, he laughed and said:

"What a man dinna' see he canna' forget."

A sunny old Scotchman was Captain MacPherson, and he took a great liking to me because I knew his friend Thomas Anderson, who had charge of the dissecting room at the University.

"Tamas was e'er a gude hand with those as could na answer him back," said the Captain. "His first occupation at hame was as an undertaker's assistant. He comes by it honestly."

He pointed out the fortresses on both shores of the narrow channel, which was only a mile wide in front of the city, and told me that the Turks had mounted them with the most improved modern guns.

"They could e'en blow us out of the water," he said, "had they a mind to."

Constantinople was like an open book to him and he showed me the Sultan's Palace, standing white and high like an office building, the Mosque of St. Sophia, and various points of interest as the city, thrusting its myriad minarets to the sky, slipped swiftly by like a beautiful panorama. Somewhere along these shores both Leander and Byron swam the Hellespont, and Xerxes, the Persian king, smote the waves in a rage because they, troubled by a storm, forbade for a time the passage of his Greek conquering army. I was awakened from my historic reverie by hearing the voice of Nicholas. He and the General were leaning over the railing with their eyes fixed on the Palace of the Sultan. There was an expression of intense hatred on the faces of both.

"Oh, Thou, who holdest the destinies of nations in thy hand; Oh, Thou, who gavest the land of Canaan to thy chosen people; how long must we wait the coming of that glad day when thou wilt send a Joshua to us, that we may become the humble instruments of destiny to drive the Turk from Europe back to the sands of Bagdad whence he sprang?"

"Amen," came the deep bass of the General.

"Amen," said the voice of Captain MacPherson at my elbow.

They watched the city in silence until distance and darkness swallowed it

up as the yacht continued its way up the north coast of the Black Sea. So intent were the three in getting all the pleasure they could out of their mutual hate that they forgot my existence entirely.

"French became an accomplishment rather than a necessity in the English court in the fifteenth century," I said to Nick that evening at table.

"What do you mean?" he said with a frown.

"It is still the language of the Russian court. But why are you so interested in fighting Russia's battles, you a Bharbazonian?"

"Archaic though she may be, I love Russia, Dale," he said, "for without Russia there would have been no independent Bharbazonia to-day. Even now she is paying into our treasury 24,000 rubles a year, which we in turn must pay as tribute to the Turk."

"How soon shall we reach your little kingdom, Nick?"

"We should be there day after to-morrow."

Sure enough, on the day set the little yacht's engine came to a stop early in the morning while we were still in our berths. All the gloom had vanished and Nick was in high spirits when he came to get me up.

"All ashore for Bharbazonia. Change cars for the Belle of the Balkans. This train doesn't go any further. Come, come, out of bed, you lazy one. We are home at last!"

CHAPTER IV

AT THE TURK'S HEAD INN

Oh, Freedom! thou art not, as poets dream,
 A fair young girl, with light and delicate limbs,
 And wavy tresses gushing from the cap
 With which the Roman master crowned his slave
 When he took off the gyves. A bearded man,
 Armed to the teeth, art thou; one mailed hand
 Grasps the broad shield, and one the sword; thy brow,
 Glorious in beauty though it be, is scarred
 With tokens of old wars.

—*Bryant: Antiquity of Freedom.*

When I came on deck I found the Black Sea had disappeared and we were at rest in a deep, narrow river which ran swiftly and noiselessly through a sombre gorge between two high mountains that almost shut out the light of day and hid the ocean from our sight. The sudden change of scene from the hard white glare of the sea to the soft black sheen of the land was startling. The foliage was so close to the ship that it seemed one could almost reach out the hand and touch it, although the yacht was moored at the end of a long dock. I experienced a foolish fear that the high hills were about to fall upon the little vessel and crush it. That impression wore off in a short time as the motion of the ship left me.

At the other side of the dock, set down upon a narrow space of rocky level land between the mountains and the river, was the little fishing village of Bizzett. In the rear the houses rose on terraces along the edge of the mountain and in front the town extended into the river on piles. There were no windows in the houses looking upon the street. If windows existed at all, they opened upon an inner court.

All the women and children of the town were on the dock, curious to see the travellers, filling the air with the babel of strange voices. It was plain that the landing of the yacht was an event. A few of the fishermen, who had not gone seaward upon their daily toil, were watching us from their boats.

Some of the women, after the manner of Turkish women, wore veils over their faces, having nothing but the eyes exposed, but the girls went about uncovered, their long black hair braided and ornamented with coins. The few of the male peasantry in sight were dressed much alike, in brown sheepskin caps, jackets of undyed brown wool, which their women folk spin and make, white cloth trousers and sandals of raw leather.

The natives were lively and hospitable. They greeted General Palmora with loud cheers as soon as he stepped on the dock and several of the older men came forward to shake him by the hand. The General, in anticipation of his reception, had donned a splendid uniform richly embossed with sparkling shoulder epaulettes and much gold braid. Nick, on the other hand, stood beside me attired in a plain dark blue serge suit which he had purchased in America. The women, walking two by two with their arms around each other's waists, examined us curiously, but the men never glanced once in our direction. Two young girls, without the least timidity, stopped in front of us and examined us as if we were tailors' models. That is to say, our clothes appeared to interest them more than the men inside of them. They talked and laughed and even went so far as to feel the texture of the goods. Their remarks made Nicholas frown.

"What are they saying, Nick?" I asked.

"They are saying, 'The English dogs have well trained wives who weave such fine cloth,'" he replied.

"You seem to be a stranger in your own country. These people take you for a foreigner."

"They do not know me," he sighed. "The penalty one pays for being a nomad. How they love the General!"

But the General's popularity faded when the automobile was placed upon the dock, and Teju Okio became the centre of attraction. The townsfolk crowded around the Jap boy, honked the horn with all the delight of mischievous newsboys and watched each piece of baggage as it was stowed away in the tonneau. But they departed with much speed and many frightened cries when Okio started the engine, running in all directions as if a demon had fallen from the sky in their midst. In a twinkling the dock was vacant and the village apparently deserted. They only came to the doors of their houses to watch us leave the village in a cloud of dust. But our attention was brought to the front by an expression of surprise from Teju Okio.

"Very dam-fine," he said, referring to the hill which the machine had to climb. Teju's English vocabulary was limited to three words which he used to express every emotion. This time it was admiration and respect. And the road was worthy of both. It ran diagonally up the side of the mountain until it reached the top at a depression or gap caused by two mountains pressing their foreheads together. One could see the end from the beginning, for it was a singularly straight road laid out as if the builder had placed a schoolboy's ruler upon the mountain-side, drawn a line from the village to the gap and said, "Build ye here the way as I have drawn it," just as the Tzar is said to have laid out his eighteen-day railroad across Siberia.

A perfect arbour of tall trees lined both sides of the way, interlocking their branches overhead. The foliage on the lower side of the mountain was trimmed so as to give a view of the sea; the early morning sun streamed gratefully in, taking the chill from the air and casting long shadows across the road in front. As we ascended we looked back and saw part of the village still in sight. The peasants were standing in the streets, marking the progress of the strange vehicle which had within itself the power to conquer the hill of Bizzett without the aid of oxen.

At the top was a stone fortress, called Castle Comada. It came in sight suddenly as we reached level ground and turned our back to the sea. Castle Comada was a spacious building completely filling up the gap and extending across the road as far as the eye could reach among the trees. The roadway ran through the centre of it in a sort of tunnel of solid masonry and over this archway the main part of the castle rose higher than the rest, supported on the four corners by square watch towers. A fifth tower, even more lofty, sprang from the centre, and from this tower snapping gaily in the wind was the flag of Bharbazonia,

alternate stripes of light blue and gold.

Beneath the castle walls, lining both sides of the way, were five regiments of cavalry, their horses' heads forming a perfect line and each man sitting erect in the saddle. As we came in sight, the garrison band burst forth in the national air and, at the given order, hundreds of bared sabres flashed in the sun and came to rest in an upright position before each man's chin. The salute was for the General; the army of the kingdom was welcoming home its commander-in-chief, warned, possibly, the night before by the sharp-eyed watchman in the tower who had sighted the yacht.

It was sure that the defences of the government, ever watchful of the Turk, were in modern hands, and, if one noticed the look of pleasure on the old General's countenance at the visible signs of a well oiled system, one had not far to seek the master mind.

Nicholas preferred to remain in the car with me while the General paid his respects to Governor Noovgor of the Southern Province. I was very glad of that, because he was able to explain the country, whenever the band was stilled long enough to permit conversation.

"This road is known as the Highway of Bizzett," Nick said. "Sometimes it is called the 'King's Highway.' It traverses Bharbazonia from north to south almost in a straight line over several hundred miles of fertile, rolling country. The mountain range, running east and west as you see, gradually turns toward the north until both arms meet at the other end of the highway in a similar pass, guarded by a similar fortress. Thus Castle Comada, on the Black Sea, and Castle Novgorod, on the Russian border, are the Beersheba and Dan of Bharbazonia. No man may enter or leave the country unless he pass under the guns of one or the other; and let me tell you, Dale, there is no fortress in America, or in any other country, which is the peer of these for modern disappearing guns, garrison equipment, or perfection of discipline."

As the General seemed in no hurry, Nick and I killed time by strolling around the grounds and inspecting the castle from all sides. I found that its guns commanded not only the Black Sea and the harbour of Bizzett, but also the approaches from the inland side; for the mountain formed a precipitous wall at the castle foundations, which left us standing on a high promontory, viewing, like Moses, a land flowing with milk and honey. Below us lay a level country, which even in its winter garb showed evidences of being in an excellent state of cultivation. Here and there were villages clustered along the great limestone pike—the straight white way of Bharbazonia.

An army attacking the fortress from either side would be equally powerless. Nicholas had every reason to be proud of his country's war craft, but, in spite of the modern atmosphere of the cavalry, there was something about this

Bharbazonia that smacked to me of the fourteenth century, when men slept at night behind the barred gates of their walled cities.

The General was already in his seat beside Teju Okio when we returned. He was impatient to be off; but, before we were able to enter the Kingdom, ten soldiers put their shoulders to a pair of solid iron gates that blocked the road through the Castle, and swung them open. The guns fired their salute to the commander-in-chief, the band struck up a lively air, and the Jap boy threw in his high speed clutch.

As we raced through the tunnel and down the hill on the other side, I looked back and saw the men close the gates, those relics of the hundred years' war against the terrible Turk, and knew that we were locked in the Kingdom of Bharbazonia. The sun shone warmly down upon us, the peaceful valley lay invitingly below, but somehow I felt as a mouse must feel as he peers between the wire openings of his trap and realizes that he cannot get out.

Once free of the mountain, we sped along through a country as beautiful as any in America. Farmers, working in the fields, paused at their labour to watch us go by. Teju made the most of a fine road and lifted us along at the rate of sixty miles an hour, leaving many slain chickens behind to mark his swift passage.

Fortunately there was little travel along the highway that morning, for we frightened every human being and every animal we met. Patient plodding horses, dragging creaking carts in the same direction in which we were going, were too surprised to continue their journey. They stood still in their tracks unable to move until we disappeared over the crest of the next hill. The drivers, open-mouthed, were too startled to urge them. But the horses we met coming toward us had more time to watch our approach and thrill with fear. All of them lowered their heads, pricked up their ears and, like the cows, showed signs of confusion as to which side of the road they should take; then, as we came opposite, they bolted across the front of the speeding machine into the adjoining field. Their frightened owners, slowly gathering courage in a ditch, shook their fists and hurled Bharbazonian epithets after us.

It is amusing to play havoc in a country where there are no license tags, no mounted policemen and no fines to pay.

At noontide we made our first stop at a fine old road-house called the Turk's Head Inn. It was a queer little brick and red stone structure approaching the colonial style of architecture in its small, leaded glass windows and white paint, with the curious addition of Byzantine doors and windows, the result of Turkish influence. The main doorway, with its huge circular top, was in the centre of the building and formed an imposing entrance, reaching to the second floor. On an iron arm, extending from the top of this doorway, hung the signboard after which the inn was named.

It presented no written words; only a terrible life-sized painting of a Turk's head, dripping with blood and resting on a spear point. A red fez sat jauntily over one ear, giving the head a gala appearance; but the eyes, wide open, staring eyes, speedily dispelled any such thought. They were filled with a terrible expression of pain and horror, as if the head still breathed and felt the agony of the spear piercing its inmost brain, while its lips moved in the throes of cursing its tormentors, even in the face of death. The frightful signboard sent a shudder through me which the General noticed.

"What a grewsome thing," I said.

"It is the head of Helmut Bey," he replied, looking into the suffering eyes without a show of compassion; "he ruled over my sad country for forty years, the creature of the Sultan. So great was his ferocity that even now the peasantry tremble at the mention of his name. He was killed in this Inn thirty years ago by Oloff Gregory, the king. Clad in suits of French mail, they fought on horseback with sword and spear, while the Turkish and Bharbazonian army looked on, drawn up out there on opposite sides of the road.

"It was agreed that whichever champion won, his forces would be declared victorious without further fighting. It was the Turks' last stand after Shipka Pass and, had Gregory lost, Bharbazonia might not now be free. At the first shock Gregory unhorsed Helmut Bey and was himself thrown to the ground. Then the fighting was continued with heavy swords until the Turk, badly wounded, fled within the inn where Bharbazonia's champion killed him by cutting off his head.

"For a long time the head was displayed on the victor's pike before the roadhouse door. The Turks surrendered and the war was over. By this feat of arms Gregory became king, for, when Russia tried to rehabilitate the kingdom, she found that the Turks had killed or driven into exile every member of the royal house of Bharbazonia which was reigning in the fifteenth century before the time of the conquering Salaman the Magnificent. Gregory, you know, was only a soldier and a noble. His house never laid claim to royalty. And that is why his brother, the 'Red Fox,' is still a Duke although his children by special grant of the King are Prince and Princess of the land."

At the inn were the usual number of idlers. They gathered around the car at a respectful distance and watched us dismount. The innkeeper, in white apron and with bared head, appeared in the high doorway, scattering the crowd to make a passageway for us. He was a jolly old Frenchman.

"Back, ye hounds," he shouted in his native tongue, "cannot ye give the gentry room to alight?"

If the Bharbazonians understood they made no sign; neither did they give back a pace, standing their ground like stolid cattle. The reign of the invader had left the common people in a condition little above the brute. Gone was the

warlike spirit of their Slavonic ancestors who inhabited the banks of the Volga in the seventh century. I experienced a feeling of pity for them. Ignorance, poverty and suffering had been their birthright. I could scarcely bring myself to believe that Nick and the General were their countrymen.

"Welcome home, my General," exclaimed the Frenchman.

"Thank you, Marchaud," returned the General. "What news have you?"

"Ah, sir; such coming and going. The coronation is all the talk. The Grand Duke Marbosa was here yesterday with the young men. You know, General," he added, winking slyly.

"Yes, I understand," said Palmora. "What then?"

"He was impatient for your return. He has a plan which lacks only your approval."

"Humph. How goes the dinner?"

"You are just in time. Will you enter?"

Again he made a passageway through the peasants with angry shouting and waving of hands. They were all respect for the General; some bowed in the dust before him and others raised a feeble cheer. He paid no particular attention to them.

The innkeeper led the way to the interior of his hostelry. Once past the door, we were immediately in the large room of the inn. On one side was a broad stairway which communicated with a balcony which in turn had access to all the sleeping rooms on the second floor. Off from the main room were smaller rooms, like booths, where the dining tables, covered with snow white linen, were invitingly set. He placed us at one of these tables and, with the assistance of two of his waiters, soon had a splendid feast spread before us.

The General was the life of the party. He was hungry and, judging from the amount of native wine he indulged in, thirsty, too. The change in Nick was also remarkable. Ever since his eyes fell upon the flag of Bharbazonia, and the well set-up cavalymen at the castle, he seemed to grow in stature. Usually lazy and indolent, he became alert and active, as if the sleeping tiger within arose at the call of the setting sun to go forth to the water runs. Here, indeed, was a new Nicholas. The American youth whom I knew was becoming a Bharbazonian.

"Everything goes well for the great event," said the General, when we arrived at the coffee and cigarette stage of the repast. "Governor Noovgor tells me that he and Governor Hasson of the Northern Province will have 25,000 men before the Cathedral, both infantry and cavalry. The Tzar will be represented by a regiment of Cossacks from Moscow, and the Grand Duke Alexoff will come from St. Petersburg as the Emperor's personal representative. The first day of the new year will be a great day for Bharbazonia, my boy."

"You couldn't be more interested in the crowning of the Red Fox's son than

if it were I you were honouring," said Nick, a bit petulantly.

"My boy; my boy," said the old man, patting his favourite on the back with a show of affection, "little prejudices must fall before patriotism."

"I wish you knew how repulsive this incognito business is becoming to me," said Nick. "I could scarcely keep myself from swinging my hat in the air and shouting for the flag when I saw those splendid fellows drawn up in front of Comada."

"All in good time," purred the General, pleased at Nick's reference to the army; "for the present it is best that I should be entertaining two American travellers. I do not want the Red Fox or his following to know who you are. If they suspect you, your usefulness to Russia would come to an end. For what they know is soon talked of in Constantinople. You must not forget that you are more than a Bharbazonian. You are of the Order."

The General's words had their effect upon Nicholas.

"I shall be glad when the day arrives that I can fight in the open," he said, much mollified. "I never felt so weary of this secret work as I do to-day."

"Am I to understand, General," I said, "that Nick is supposed to be an American?"

"Such is the intention, Dr. Wharton," he replied. "Should occasion arise, we will appreciate it if you will tell your questioner that Nicholas is a countryman of yours."

"Come," said Nick, "let us get started."

"How much further do we have to go to-night?" I asked, as we arose from the table.

"We will not reach Framkor until to-morrow evening," put in the General, but Nick interrupted him with a laugh.

"Why, General, we are at the Turk's Head Inn now, and it is not yet two o'clock. We shall be home before nightfall."

"So it is," murmured the old man. "It is the machine. I cannot become used to it. We usually consume two days coming from Bizzett on horseback."

Leaving the inn, we struck off into the country roads to the right and the travelling was not as luxurious as on the smooth government pike. Nevertheless, Teju Okio made good time. Toward evening, when we were near enough to our journey's end for Nick to recognize the country and point out some of his childhood haunts, we met a horseman on the road. It was just after the Jap boy lighted his two gleaming headlights, for the day was almost done. It may have been the glare of the lamps or the suddenness of our approach around an unexpected corner that caused the accident; for, as soon as the horse caught sight of us, he reared on his hind feet, stood upright in the air a moment and toppled over backward, crushing his rider beneath him in the fall.

Teju Okio stopped the machine as soon as he saw the frightened horse and we all shouted directions to the horseman; when they fell, Nick and I leaped from the machine to render what aid we might. Before we could grasp his bridle the horse struggled to his feet and was off like the wind, the empty stirrups pounding his ribs at every jump; but the rider lay motionless.

He was a youth of about eighteen or twenty years. His wide riding breeches and neat fitting coat of black velvet were covered with dust; but they were not torn, neither did they show any evidence of blood which would have shown had the horse kicked and cut him. Although he lay crumpled in a heap, I was able to see that he was tall and slender and that one arm was either dislocated or broken. His eyes were closed and his face was exceedingly pale. His most distinguishing feature was the mass of red hair, which he wore as long as Nick's, and which was of a dark rich shade.

Nick tenderly raised the sufferer's head, while I tried to get some whiskey down his throat. But the boy showed no signs of returning consciousness.

"Better get him into the car, Nick, and take him to the nearest hospital," I advised.

"Hospital?" smiled Nick. "The nearest approach to one is at the Castle barracks. You are the best medico we have in Bharbazonia, Dale. Get busy yourself."

Teju Okio edged slowly up with the car until his white lights shone upon the scene in the road.

"Is he badly hurt?" called the General from his seat beside the driver.

"We do not know the extent of his injuries, General," I said, "he is unconscious."

"Who is he, Nick?"

"Haven't an idea."

The lamplight fell upon the boy's face.

"Good heavens," exclaimed the General, "get him into the machine as quickly as possible. We must procure medical assistance at once. On, on, to Dhalmatia Castle. This is the Red Fox's son, Prince Raoul, the future King of Bharbazonia. He must not die. Hurry! Hurry! for God's sake!"

CHAPTER V

THE RED FOX OF DHALMATIA

He entered in the house—his home no more;

For without hearts there is no home;—and felt
 The solitude of passing his own door
 Without a welcome.

—Byron: *Don Juan*.

Castle Dhalmatia proved to be but a short distance ahead. I held the unconscious Prince in my arms while Nick leaned forward and called road directions into the Japanese driver's ear. General Palmora remembered a byway which was a short cut across the Red Fox's estate and we saved several minutes thereby. The walls of the Prince's home loomed up black and sombre against the sky line on the top of a hill vacant of trees. Like Castle Comada it was a fortress built for defence rather than for comfort. Its battlements and watchtowers were stern and forbidding.

Rapid as were our movements, the news of the accident preceded us, borne no doubt by the returning horse with the empty saddle. Stable grooms were coming down the road toward us carrying lanterns; house servants were arousing the master. Some were weeping aloud, running wildly about; others were shouting orders and talking, like persons who desired to do something but did not know what to do. Lights began to show in different rooms of the castle and, when we drew up with a rush and a grinding of brakes under the *porte-cochère*, a crowd of retainers were there to meet us.

As soon as they caught sight of the limp figure in my arms they imagined the Prince dead and their wailings broke out afresh. In the midst of the excitement, which even the commanding voice of the General failed to quell, a little, bent, old man with a weazen, wrinkled face, but with a certain virility of manner which proclaimed him master, appeared in the doorway. His voice vibrated through the air and forced obedience. He called to his servants in the Bharbazonian dialect and a silence fell upon them, in which there was more of fear than of love. I knew at once that I was in the presence of the Red Fox of Dhalmatia, the father of the Prince.

Standing in the lantern light he made a curious picture. He was attired in black from head to foot. On his head was a black fez that only partially concealed a mass of hair which, though darker in shade and streaked with gray, was the same colour as his son's. The first part of the Red Fox's name was derived no doubt from the colour of his hair.

Around his neck was a broad lace collar of white, extending to his narrow shoulders. He wore a close fitting coat buttoned up the front with a row of large ornamental buttons. Knee breeches with buckles at the side, silk stockings, and buckled shoes made up the rest of his costume. Over his shoulders hung a long Spanish cloak which partially concealed the hilt of a jewelled sword suspended

from his left hip. There was that about him which suggested the stern, hard, old Pilgrim fathers who conquered the Massachusetts wilderness and burned witches three centuries ago.

If he felt any emotion at the condition of his son, he did not permit himself to show it, but, with a gesture in which was the majesty of command, he bade me enter with my burden.

I carried the Prince to the nearest couch in the spacious hallway, followed by Nick and the General. The Red Fox shut the door in the faces of his servants and dismissed them with a few terse words. The only one he permitted to remain was an aged man whom I recognized was the butler. The room was dark and this old fellow held a lantern close to the boy's face and fell into a fit of weeping. As soon as I placed the Prince on the divan, and before I could make an examination, I was rather rudely brushed aside by the boy's father and the old butler, both of whom seemed suddenly crazed by the accident.

They crowded me away and bent over the Prince, together making a rapid, superficial examination of the boy for broken bones, and finding none. There was a slight wound above the right ear and a cut on the left arm above the elbow. The right arm was dislocated. With the old servant's assistance, the father experienced little difficulty in slipping it back into place. I was rather impressed with the Red Fox's deftness and sureness of touch.

During the examination, General Palmora explained that I was a physician and that I could give the Prince the best of treatment. He made his explanations in French, which I think was for my benefit, and the Red Fox replied in the same tongue.

"A doctor," he queried, "what have we to do with doctors in Dhalmatia?"

"But, my dear Duke, the boy is seriously injured."

"So? So?" cried the Fox, "and is that any reason why I should permit strangers to intrude upon the privacy of my house, especially friends of yours, Palmora, to run things as they please?"

"I would have you understand, sir," replied the General with dignity, "that only such untoward circumstances as the present would have permitted me to enter your house, and to so far forget the respect I owe my friends as to allow them to cross your threshold."

"'Tis unfortunate," said the Duke, still working over the boy. "The General should remember that the House of Dhalmatia can take care of itself."

"The General did not forget," replied the soldier, hotly; "but in this case he begs the Duke to consider that the Prince is not the son of Dhalmatia—"

"What!" shouted the Duke, going suddenly pale with extreme agitation and advancing threateningly toward the General, who did not seem to mind the feelings the remarks were stirring up.

"Not the son of Dhalmatia, but the heir to the throne of Bharbazonia, and therefore he is my liege lord and master. As a patriot I must care for him. Beside, it was our automobile which caused his accident."

The Duke sank down on his knees beside the couch at his son's feet as if his strength had forsaken him. He offered no further objection to our presence and watched as the old servant attempted to revive the patient. When at last, under the effect of the restorative, the boy opened his eyes the first person he saw and smiled upon was his father. Then his eyes met mine.

They were the most beautiful I have ever seen in a boy's head, and they thrilled me with the look of quiet suffering in them. Large and expressive, they reminded me of Nicholas in his best mood, when he sang his Balkan love songs. From the colour of the Prince's hair I expected his eyes to be a pale blue, but, on the contrary, they were a deep rich brown, almost black. Shining in their mysterious depth was something akin to sorrow, which I could not understand but which became clearer later.

The old Duke did not seem greatly relieved when his son recovered consciousness; possibly he realized that the boy had been nearer death than he imagined; possibly there was another reason. At all events, he waved us all back from the couch and gathered the Prince in his arms.

"My son! My son!" he repeated again and again, sometimes in French and sometimes in his own language. But it did not seem to me to be the agonized cry of a broken-hearted father; there was a note of caution in it, as if he would say, "My son, be careful; the enemies of your father are present."

The Prince lay still, studying each face in the room over his father's shoulder. He recognized the General with a bright friendly smile. The General returned the salutation with a frigid ceremonial bow. Nick seemed to puzzle him. He looked at the handsome youth a long time as if trying to remember where they had met before, and yet not sure they had met at all.

"If you are satisfied, Dr. Wharton, that the patient is on a fair way to recovery," broke in the General, still chafing under the impoliteness of the Duke, "I suggest that we take our departure from this ungrateful house."

But his voice was gentle and caressing when he added to the Prince:

"I trust your Highness will experience no further evil results from your unfortunate fall."

"We also crave the Prince's pardon for causing his fall, and will do ourselves the honour of calling with the doctor in the morning to inquire after his health."

While Nicholas was speaking the Duke shifted his head so that he could see the young man's face over his shoulder without appearing to do so. All the time he seemed to be devoting his whole attention to his son. The movement was secretive and, I thought, uncalled for; but it revealed why those who knew

him called him "The Fox."

"Before we go," I said in my character of physician, "I would suggest that the Prince remain in bed for the next few days in order to rest the arm which was dislocated and to determine the presence, if any, of internal injuries. With your permission, Duke, I will take the liberty of calling again. I trust, if anything develops which you may not feel equal to coping with, that you will not hesitate to make use of my services."

With the Grand Duke's cry of "My son! My son!" as our only answer, we bowed our way through the doorway and entered the car which was still chugging away at the door, the tired Jap boy asleep at the wheel. It was very dark when we resumed our journey, which was quickly at an end. Two miles from Dhalmatia we turned through a high stone archway of a private estate and came to Castle Framkor.

It was too dark for me to see anything of the outside of the castle except the *porte-cochère*, under which we stopped, and the open front door from which the servants trooped with cries of welcome. If there was a similarity about the entrance there was none in the spirit of the two castles.

A tri-colour collie dog was the first to greet us. He ran wildly about the car barking at the engines and sniffing at the visitors. He recognized the General and tried to get into the seat with him.

"Down, Laddie; down, sir," commanded his master as he sprang to the ground, to be overwhelmed by the excited dog, which leaped against his shoulder and tried to caress his face.

Willing hands opened the tonneau door and Nick and I descended. The dog sniffed at our legs and growled at us. Smiling women servants gathered around the master while the men, in obedience to his commands, carried our trunks and hand luggage into the hall.

"Welcome home to Framkor, Nicholas," cried the General. It was the first word he had spoken since his farewell speech at Dhalmatia. But all his gloom had left him.

Nicholas made no reply. Not a single servant knew him and no one welcomed him back to his own home. While it was indeed a splendid homecoming for the General, I pitied Nick and realized what he had been sacrificing all his life for the sake of his country. It is one thing to choose a vocation for yourself and quite another to have some one choose it for you.

The hall room was comfortably warmed by an open grate fire which burned under the mantelpiece. Above hung a full length picture of a man about the General's age in scarlet regimentals. He bore a striking resemblance to Nick.

"That's dad," said the boy as we gathered round the fire to drive out the cold of the night. He looked long and earnestly upon his father's portrait. What

moody thoughts were passing in his mind I could not imagine. But the sternness of the pictured face was reflected in the living one beneath.

"What we need most of all is dinner," said the General.

"Hear, hear," I cried lightly.

The thought was scarcely expressed before a servant bade us enter the dining room. The meal that followed could not have been surpassed by the French chef at the Turk's Head Inn. Bharbazonia might be archaic, but Framkor Castle under the direction of Nick's father's executor was delightfully modern. I promised myself considerable gastronomic enjoyment during my vacation in Bharbazonia.

After the feast, which we all ate with a hunger born of our long ride in the bracing air, the General and I settled ourselves in the drawing room for a long, comfortable chat before bedtime. I was burning to learn more about the Red Fox, now that I had seen the Castle tower from which the old nurse fell the night the Prince was born. The General was still suffering from his injured feelings.

"Can you wonder, now, why I hate the Fox?" he said. "The ingrate, to return our kindness with such discourtesy. The low-bred hound, better we had left his son in the road to die. Never again will I find myself under his roof and you boys, too, would do well not to visit that castle again. He will insult you if you attempt it; now mark my words."

Nick, who did not share my interest in the Red Fox, had gone on an exploring trip through the house, recalling childhood memories. He came into the music room adjoining and began fingering the keys of the piano.

"I am glad, at all events," he called, "that the young fellow was not seriously hurt."

"Humph," grunted Palmora under his breath, "you would have more reason to be happy if the horse had made a good job of it."

At this remarkable outburst I stared at the regicidal old person, who, seeing my surprise, leaped to his feet and paced the floor, pulling on his long pipe to keep his temper down. No doubt he felt that he had overreached himself, for he came back with an apology.

"There are things in this Kingdom that are unknown even to Nicholas," he said mildly, lowering his voice. "I trust that the time will come when it will be given him to know. Then I would like to be the messenger."

"The Prince," I said, "is the handsomest boy I have ever seen."

But the General did not reply. He was listening with rapt attention to the fine whole-souled barytone voice of his Bharbazonian boy, singing a folksong in the language. The expression on his face partook of the look of a devout worshipper before his best loved shrine.

"*Volt nekem egy daru ssoru paripam,*" sang Nick.

The accompaniment he was playing was in that weird minor strain which always sends a shiver down one's back. The words of the song told of the sorrow of a nation in bondage. It was an old favourite with me, for Nick often sang it when the lights were low and the schoolroom problems were laid away for the night. I admired it so much that Nick gave me the music, written by Francis Korbay, and it was even now lying on my piano at home. In English the song runs:

"Had a horse, a finer no man ever saw;
But the sheriff sold him in the name of law.
E'en a stirrup cup the rascal would not yield.
But, no matter! more was lost at Mohacs' field.

"Had a farmhouse, but they burnt it to the ground;
Don't know even where the spot may now be found.
In the county roll 'tis safe inscribed and sealed;
But, no matter! more was lost at Mohacs' field.

"Had a sweetheart; mourned her loss for years and years;
Thought her dead and every day gave her my tears.
Now, I find her 'neath another's roof and shield;
But, no matter! more was lost at Mohacs' field."

As Nick poured his soul into the rendition of the war song of the Balkans, a song which he told me every native knew and revered as he loved his Bible, I could almost picture the little handful of 25,000 men who fell before the overwhelming force of 200,000 Turks on that fateful day, August 29, 1526, when "Mohacsnal" became to the Slavs what "Don't give up the ship" was to the Americans hundreds of years later. I was not surprised to hear the General's deep bass join in the single line refrain at the close of each verse:

"No, de se baj, tobb is veszett Mohacsnal!"

With such a spirit abroad in the land, I could understand how the defeated but unconquered Hungarian and Balkan warriors continued the struggle until there is little left of the dwindling empire of the "unspeakable Turk" in Europe to-day except the dissatisfied country around his capital city of Constantinople.

"Great song," panted the General when Nick concluded, but the light of

battle died out of his eyes when Nick, after a few preliminary chords, broke into the popular American songs of the day and cleared the atmosphere of its political heaviness. We were all in the best of spirits when we retired. Although there were many rooms in the castle, I found to my delight that Nick and I were to sleep together in his boyhood chamber. Possibly it was the association of ideas, but believe it who will, we romped about like children and did not get to sleep until the General came to the door to interrupt our pillow fight with the natural complaint that he was unable to sleep, and the dry suggestion that we repair to the lawn to finish it.

At sight of the bristling old warrior in his pink nightcap and pajamas to match, we scurried beneath the covers with such a perfect imitation of two naughty boys who expected to be spanked and put to bed, that even the General, forgetting his irritation, was forced to lose his gravity and join in the general merriment.

Long after the lights were out and we were quieted down, too tired to laugh any more, I heard Nick drawl sleepily in memory of our college days:

”Let’s go over to Woodland avenue and steal a lamp post.”

Outside a gentle wind rustled the ivy vines clinging patiently to the Castle wall. Not another sound disturbed the stillness of the country night. Overcome by the silence I drifted away in the arms of sleep well content with my first hours in the Kingdom of Bharbazonia.

The next day we met Solonika.

CHAPTER VI

SOLONIKA’S SUMMER-HOUSE

And when a lady’s in the case,
You know, all other things give place.

—*Gay: Fables.*

The General’s was one of those angelic, choleric dispositions that frequently blow up under pressure of sudden anger, but emerge smiling from the havoc of the explosion, bearing no malice. When we met him at the breakfast table the next morning, the only reference he made to the boyish escapade of the night before was concealed in his pleasant greeting.

"Good morning, children."

"Good morning, sir," we unisoned like a Greek chorus.

"What new deviltry are you two planning this morning?"

We assured him that we felt our age and the responsibilities of life, and that we intended henceforth to be very good boys indeed if he would cease reminding us of our youth.

The talk about the table was of the impending coronation. The General was impatient for news as to how the preparations for that great event were progressing. During his rapid journey to America, in search of Nicholas, much had been done, but he had no doubt much remained undone.

"How would you both like to run down to Nischon with me?" he asked.

"We will be back by nightfall if we take the machine."

To my surprise Nicholas did not immediately acquiesce. He usually found it agreeable to do what the General proposed, but for some reason he did not grow enthusiastic over the coronation. As for myself, it did not suit my purpose to go to the capital city, much as I desired to see it. I had other plans, but I could not tell the General for fear of risking his displeasure. For, notwithstanding his admonition to the contrary, I intended to go over to Castle Dhalmatia and see the Prince. Down in my heart I suppose was the hope that I might also make the acquaintance of his twin sister the Princess Solonika. Ever since I heard their romantic story from the General's lips, I experienced a great desire to get to the bottom of the mystery and prove the General right or wrong. The opportunity of seeing Nischon was mine any time, but the chance of visiting the inhospitable Castle in the guise of a physician was not to be lost.

"The king has set his heart upon making this occasion one long to be remembered in Bharbazonia, and we must stand ready to help him," continued the General. "He will be happy to see you, the heir of Framkor, Nicholas. He loves the young men of his country and was much interested in my trip to find you."

Still Nicholas remained silent.

"Don't you care to go?" asked Palmora.

"If my preference is to be considered, Godfather," said Nick, "I would rather stay at home. I will gladly accompany you another time. But to-day I am tired after our long journey."

"And you?" said the General turning to me.

"I would rather stay here with Nick."

"All right," he replied, "I will go alone, provided I may borrow your car, Nick."

"Gladly," said Nick, relieved at being let off so easily.

Teju Okio brought the big machine under the *porte-cochère*, and we were preparing to see the General off when a lone horseman cantered up the drive-

way among the trees, his long Spanish cloak waving in the breeze and his sword jangling at his side. He was a good looking black haired youth, and he rode his charger with the ease of a cavalryman. It took all his horsemanship to get his restive animal to face the running engines, but by dint of a liberal use of spurs and much coaxing he finally came within hailing distance.

The General seemed to recognize him and returned his salute graciously. Upon the rider's breast, under his wind-tossed cloak, was the same kind of a Greek cross, two parallel bars and one at an angle, which I had seen both the General and Nicholas wearing upon the yacht. Whatever his business was, it was speedily transacted. He shouted a question at the General, received a reply, waved a parting salute, and was off like the wind, his struggling steed showing a fine pair of heels to the demon in the *porte-cochère*.

"The Grand Duke Marbosa seems much concerned for my safe arrival," said Nick. "His messenger is here early."

"I suppose Marchaud, the innkeeper, has spread the news of our return," said the General.

"What have I to do with Marbosa?" said Nick.

"I'll tell you about that when I see you to-night," replied the General, waving his hand to Teju Okio. The Jap boy threw in his clutch, the General's head went back, and they were off for Nischon.

"There is some mystery here," said Nick, watching the car thoughtfully until it was gone from sight.

"Who is Marbosa?" I asked.

"He is the recognized leader of the nobles of Bharbazonia and a great friend of the General's. He is about Palmora's age, but as hot-headed and impetuous as a youth."

It was too fine a day to be indoors, and I suggested that we employ the morning by riding about the country on horseback. Nick forgot the weariness he had offered the General as an excuse for remaining behind and readily assented. The stables were in the rear of the castle and we found them full of the finest horses money could buy. Nick conversed with the stablemen by means of the sign language, remembering his American character, and we were soon upon the road astride the best travellers I have ever seen.

"Wither awa'," I cried gaily as we left the estate, coming into the public road by the porter's lodge and gates which I recognized from the evening before.

"Let us go to Dhalmatia and see how the Prince is this morning," said Nick.

I turned my head to hide the smile. So he, too, was interested in the Prince? I wondered if the General's suspicions had at last awakened in Nick's breast a desire similar to my own, or was it that he wished to improve his acquaintance with the future king?

"On to the lair of the Red Fox," I said.

Nick's estates, I found, were on one side of the road and the Red Fox's on the other. The entrances were at opposite ends and about two miles apart. I remembered that it must have been over this very highway that Nick's father and his friend the General had hurriedly galloped that memorable night twenty years ago drawn by the strange ringing of the natal bell. Our journey was made more decorously, but upon a strangely similar errand as far as I was concerned.

The castle on the hill was visible from the road. Although it stood bathed in sunlight in the clearing high above the woodland, it retained all its sombreness. And the General's remarks came back to me with renewed force. Had I been alone I might have turned back.

No one came forward to take our horses when we dismounted. The silent battlements grinned down upon us as though to warn us away. I held the bridle reins while Nick beat upon the oaken door with the handle of his riding crop.

The butler who answered was the old man who had held the lantern the night before. He resembled his master in grimness of manner and secrecy of method, opening the door slightly and blocking the aperture with his body, as if he suspected we had come to filch the bric-a-brac, or make way with the Prince. As soon as he laid eyes upon us he addressed himself to a task he appeared to relish.

"The master bids me thank you," he said in French, usual in Bharbazonian households because, as I afterward learned, it was the court language, "for the expression of good will which your presence implies; he is sorry that the custom of denying himself to visitors, which has been his for years, compels him to refrain from entertaining you. To Monsieur le Physician, he desires me to say that his son has so far recovered as to make any further calls unnecessary."

The insult took our breath away and we could manage no words to reply.

"I wish you a very good afternoon," said the doorman, gravely. Then he gently but firmly closed the door in our faces.

What little hold Nick retained upon his temper was lost when, in remounting, owing to the restiveness of his horse, he twice missed his stirrup. The animal was one of those high-spirited fellows that show much white around the eye and cannot stand the approach of a rider. Nick made matters worse by belabouring him both with his riding whip and the toe of his boot, so that I had to pull up on the road and wait for him.

I scarcely knew what to make of our unceremonious reception, and could attribute the Duke's action to one of two things. Either as an offspring of Bharbazonia he was mediæval and unused to the polite usages of the present day; or he had something to conceal.

"My respect for the General increases," I said as we rode off together.

"Why?" growled Nick.

"The General knew his man better than we did."

"What makes you say that?"

"He strongly advised me not to visit Dhalmatia, and said the Red Fox would insult us."

"Humph," said Nick, "I wish you had told me. I should not have given him the opportunity."

"Well, after all," I suggested, "the Fox has a right to exclude us if he is so minded. A man's castle is his home, I take it."

"Bharbazonians do not treat each other with such scant courtesy."

"You forget that we are two Americans to him. But even Bharbazonia is known to Baedeker, I suppose."

"Can you, the rejected physician, who yesterday stood ready to treat his son, forgive him so lightly?"

"Assuredly, when I remember that I was also one of the party which contributed to his son's fall."

"You are too good-natured, Dale. I could choke him with pleasure. One of these days when his son is king I shall compel an apology."

By common consent when we reached the highway we turned away from Framkor and rode past the Duke's estate, the length of which was plainly marked by an almost endless hedge. As we came opposite a pretty little summer-house, enclosed in glass and used as a winter conservatory, I caught sight of the prince's face behind the glass. His profile was toward us and, as he was sitting, only his head and shoulders were visible. Not hearing our hoof beats on the soft dirt road he did not look up as we passed. Here was an opportunity of accomplishing our purpose in spite of the Duke. Nothing loath I embraced it.

"If you are minded to talk to the Fox's son before he is king," I exclaimed, indicating the summer-house, "here is your chance."

Seeing the Prince, Nick put his horse to the hedge without a word and I followed. As we struck the ground on the other side, the Prince looked quickly up. He watched us tie our horses to a tree, but made no effort to rise when we burst open the door and unceremoniously entered.

On the threshold we both stopped in surprise, our hostility giving place to embarrassment and a natural consternation. We suddenly found ourselves not, as we expected, in the presence of the Prince, but standing stupidly before a surprised and beautiful young woman. She was about the Prince's age and bore a striking resemblance to him. She had the same sleepy brown eyes. Her hair was of the same titian shade, but it was long and gathered in a soft knot at the back of her head. It was her crowning glory and she wore it without a part after the manner of the French pompadour.

Her dress was one I had not expected to find in Bharbazonia. It was a tailor-made suit of the then fashionable "smoke" colour and beneath her short skirt peeped a pair of patent leather shoes with tops to match the colour of her dress. Could she have been transferred from her summer-house to the Rittenhouse square promenade, she would not have been out of the picture nor have caused comment except for her great beauty.

With well-bred composure she calmly looked from Nick to me without altering her position in her comfortable chair or even lowering her book. Although apparently unmoved, she was alert to our every move, questioning with her glance the reason for our intrusion. Many another girl under similar circumstance might have cried out, but she was neither overcome with feminine modesty nor afraid.

For my part I was conscious of feeling like a small boy caught with a pocketful of stolen apples. Nick must have been afflicted in a like manner, for our hats came off simultaneously, and we bowed as low as the difference in our training would permit.

"We beg your pardon," began Nick, recovering his composure. "We expected to find the Prince here—the resemblance is so wonderful—we beg your pardon."

There was another awkward pause as she waited for him to continue and then, seeing that he had lost his voice, she spoke. I shall never forget the feeling that went through me as I listened to her ringing contralto, full of Homeresque quality, clear as a bell.

"From the manner of your entrance, one would imagine you meant him harm," she said.

Nick's composure forsook him entirely and I came to the rescue. There was nothing timorous about this young woman. She looked me frankly in the face. The subtle charm of her femininity came to me with the odour of the surrounding flowers and took a firm grasp upon my heart.

"We are just come from the castle," I hastened to say, "where we sought to inquire after the health of the Prince. The Duke turned us from the door."

"And may I inquire who you are?"

"I am Dr. Dale Wharton and this is Mr. Nicholas Fremsted."

She returned the compliment.

"I am Solonika, the Prince's sister," she replied.

We both bowed again like two automatons controlled by the same string.

"I see that you are not English," she added.

"No," Nick replied quickly as if he were not sure of my answer, "we are both Americans."

"So?" she said, looking at Nick as if she were trying to place him in her

memory. Her quizzical expression reminded me of the Prince when he had watched Nick in the same manner.

"Now that we have been introduced most properly," she continued with the shadow of a smile, "perhaps you will sit down and have tea with me. Perhaps also I may make amends for my father's seeming lack of hospitality."

"Therese," she called to a French maid who promptly emerged from behind a Japanese screen in the rear of the room, "chairs for the gentlemen."

While Nick engaged the Princess in conversation I had opportunity to examine the summer-house. It has always been my belief that one reveals character in the arrangement and decoration of one's favourite rooms. The little den had the atmosphere of a college man's smoking room, except for the flowers that were banked high at the windows which formed the wall of the summer-house on the side toward the road. Here and there convenient openings were left for a view of the highway. If the Princess had fitted up this lounging place out of a feeling of monotony which remote living in the castle brought her, she succeeded admirably in arriving at privacy and at the same time avoiding loneliness.

The other three walls were done in dark red burlap richly hung with pictures. Drinking steins of every nation, together with valuable china and porcelain ware, adorned the plate rail around the sides. But what caught my eye was a life-size, full-length picture of Solonika herself dressed in the bright-coloured garb of a Bharbazonian peasant girl, poised upon the tips of her dainty toes in the midst of a native dance. Close beside it was another canvas of the Prince in the pure white finery of a most gorgeous court costume, covered with lace and furbelows sufficient to arouse the envy of a French king.

In one corner was an artist's easel on which stood a half finished landscape of the King's Highway, showing the Turk's Head Inn in the foreground. The room was neither masculine nor feminine and I was at a loss to find a reason for the presence of a large copy of Wehr-Schmidt's painting of "Down Among the Dead Men," which occupied the entire rear wall, unless it might be that the Prince also had a hand in the decorations. Else why should such prominence be given a scene in which a number of reckless swordsmen were forcing a frightened clergyman to drink an abhorred health, singing as they threatened him with their levelled points:

"And he who will this health deny,
Down among the dead men let him lie."

Therese, the maid, was serving the tea when I came back from my mental wandering and began to take an interest in the conversation.

"Brother is much better this morning," the Princess was saying. "Father has difficulty in keeping him in bed. Although his arm is still painful, he is a lively youth and hard to keep down."

"He will not suffer any further inconvenience from his fall?" asked Nick.

"None whatever. After all, it was his own fault. He sometimes is such a careless rider. When the colt reared at sight of your conveyance, Raoul says he made the mistake of pulling him back. The sight of your car was so unexpected; I suppose he was as much surprised as the horse. Think of it! An automobile in Bharbazonia!"

She threw back her head and laughed heartily at the thought, and we could do nothing else but laugh with her. The charm of the girl was contagious and we forgot the Duke's unpleasantness.

"Why, it was only a week ago they burned a witch at the stake for some offence against the Church. I was not a bit sorry when I heard it, for she was the one who prophesied that Raoul would never be King of Bharbazonia—and behold along comes this automobile, chug-chugging through the middle ages almost making that prophecy come true. We are growing modern."

"Dear old Bharbazonia," sighed Nick, off his guard for the moment.

The Princess heard the remark, and I saw her compare my own blond head with Nick's black curls, while the puzzled look returned.

"Dear old Bharbazonia," was all she said, but I fancied her interest in him increased from that moment. It was the call of the blood.

"Do you know Bharbazonia?" she asked him later.

He admitted that he had visited the country on different occasions, always as the guest of General Palmora.

"On one of my trips I had the pleasure of meeting the Prince at Nischon. He was visiting his uncle the King."

"Ah," she said, "I thought so."

She nodded her head several times as if his remark explained many things.

"But I never had the pleasure of meeting you before," he added.

"I have seen you," she hastened to say. "If I remember correctly that was four years ago. You and the General rode by these windows frequently on that occasion. That was the year the Grand Duke of Framkor died."

Nick made no reply at this mention of his father's name. And, if she were trying to discover his identity under directions from her suspicious father, she made nothing out of him.

"I suppose, if one could trace it back, I should be found to be a relation of his," he said. "My family is Russian. I was born in St. Petersburg and later became a world wanderer and finally an American. Dale and I were chums at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia."

"Friends," she mused. "I have always been interested in friendship. I never had a friend."

"You have had no opportunity, living here all your life."

"Oh, but I have been away to school. I have met those there whom I would have called friends, but father you know is a curious man, and I cannot have them visit me here."

"You have missed a great deal in life," said Nick.

"Have I?" she laughed. "I do not think so. Friendship between men is not lasting. I wonder if a woman could not loosen the bonds of affection between you two at any time she chose?"

"I doubt it," said Nick, staunchly.

"I have often wondered what would happen if a woman had come between David and Jonathan, or Damon and Pythias or any of the famous chums of history," she said.

"A woman is only a woman," said Nick with a smile, "but the world holds nothing so dear as the friends one makes in youth and cleaves to until the end. I do not think the woman lives who could part Dale and me."

"Don't be too sure," she smiled back between half closed eyes.

It was almost dark when we arose to take our leave after a most pleasant afternoon. Nick, true to his Bhabazonian instinct, made his leave-taking consist of a sweeping bow, but I put out my hand in American fashion.

"Good-bye, your Highness," I said, "I trust that we will see you soon again."

She hesitated for the fraction of a second before extending her hand. Perhaps she was not familiar with hand-shaking as a leave-taking habit. For the first time during the afternoon she seemed timid. When I released her hand the arm fell to her side. "Oh!" she exclaimed as if in pain, although I could have sworn that I had not used more strength in my leave-taking than one would with a Dresden doll.

But, when I reached the door and bowed myself across the threshold, she was standing by her chair smiling brightly.

"Good-bye," she said, "I have had such a pleasant afternoon. Please do not cherish resentment and come to the castle. The Prince and I will be glad to see you both. I shall tell father he must apologize."

She came to the door and watched us mount and put our horses over the hedge. We both waved our hands to her as the bend in the road shut her from view.

It wasn't until we turned in at Framkor gate that a possible explanation of the significance of Solonika's suppressed cry of pain came home to me and I exclaimed aloud:

"It was the right arm of the Prince that was dislocated!"

"Well," said Nick, "and what of that?"

CHAPTER VII

THE STORY OF THE SACRILEGE

The nimble lie
Is like the second hand upon a clock;
We see it fly; while the hour hand of truth
Seems to stand still, and yet it moves unseen,
And wins, at last, for the clock will not strike
Till it has reached the goal.

—*Longfellow: Michael Angelo.*

Nicholas and I were not good company for each other that evening. The General, we found, had not returned from Nischon and we ate our evening meal in silence. After dinner we repaired to the smoking room, there to follow out our musings each in his own way.

Nick, with his elbows on his armchair and his chin resting on his interlaced hands, watched the fire leaping and dancing among the burning chestnut logs until, moved by its magnetic influence, he drifted away on the wings of reverie, leaving "the world and all" far behind. Once he spoke aloud, oblivious of my presence.

"What a magnificent creature she has grown to be," he said.

My thoughts also were of the Princess Solonika, but they did not dwell upon her remarkable beauty. They had a totally different trend. I carefully went over the events of the afternoon and the poison of suspicion, implanted in my mind by the vague words of the General, gave colour to everything I had noticed in the summer-house. Nick's steady refusal to countenance the idea had lulled me into the belief that the General was visionary; but the incident of my leave-taking from Solonika brought me up with a sharp turn.

It seemed impossible to imagine that any such masquerade as the General implied could exist these twenty years undiscovered, and, for its successful fulfilment, go on existing thereafter for an indefinite period. I realized, of course, that this was an Anglo-Saxon point of view. In a civilized country with its freedom of intercourse, its newspapers and reporters in search of sensations,

its international social life moving always in the limelight of publicity, such an extremely grotesque secret would soon be dragged from hiding and held up to public ridicule. But this was not America. This was barbaric Bharbazonia. Here, shut up in a well protected castle, cut off from the world, hidden from prying eyes by the might of power, anything were possible.

Just what did I suspect? I scarcely knew and I experienced difficulty in making my mind contemplate a proposition so absurd. Why should I not continue to believe that the Prince was the Prince and that Solonika was Solonika? But two other hypotheses forced themselves upon me. Suppose, I said to myself, that on that eventful night, when the bell of Dhalmatia announced the birth of twins, only a daughter had been born. What would the Duke, controlled by an overmastering desire to wrest the succession of the throne from his heirless brother, have done in his despair and excitement?

I had seen the Red Fox and knew that the keynote of his character was craftiness. On the spur of the moment, given no time to consider what suffering his action might entail upon the newborn babe, he would have dashed upon the rope in a frenzy and tolled the bell a second time declaring the advent of a son. Perhaps during the long months of waiting he had planned some such deception should the fates go against him. The truthful nurse, unaware of his desire, had complicated matters and had paid the penalty for her lack of wisdom.

After his rash act, as the Fox sat down to think, gloating over King Gregory's chagrin when he heard the news, he would find two courses open to him. He must either adopt a boy to take the place of the Prince who was not, or he might bring up his daughter to assume the rôle of both Prince and Princess.

Well pleased with my theory I began to test it and found to my delight that it satisfactorily explained many things. If the girl and boy were one, the remarkable physical resemblance would be natural and the expression of pain on Solonika's face when I shook her hand would be explained. What would be more natural than the Duke's action in denying his castle to visitors? When Nick and I called that morning he could not let us in to see the Prince because Solonika was in the summer-house!

Then Doubt came knocking at my door. After all, the Red Fox might have been discourteous to us because we were the avowed friends of his enemy, General Palmora. Under the circumstances I could not blame him for what he did. And had he not explained everything when he declared the birth of twins? It is not unusual for twins to look alike.

"But," whispered Suspicion in my ear, "how about Solonika's half suppressed cry of pain?"

Here was I back to my starting point. It was too baffling a problem for one man to solve. I felt that I needed help; some one who might shed more light upon

the subject, and I turned to Nick. He had never taken any stock in the General's talk, and always ridiculed the efforts I made to point out that which I believed lent colour to Palmora's suspicions. That he had some reason for his faith was evident, and I determined to risk his displeasure to learn it.

"Nick," I said, startling him out of his dreams by sitting beside him on the arm of his chair and putting my elbow under his head, "have you ever been able to learn what the General suspects about the Red Fox and the succession?"

"Did you ever talk with a brighter woman in your life, Dale?" he replied.

"Solonika?"

He nodded. Here was the same old susceptible boy, who indiscriminately decorated our rooms at college with pictures of chorus girls, or leading women, who temporarily queened it over his fickle fancy and who faded away into the forgetful mist of passing years. Was he never going to grow up, I wondered.

"She's pretty enough," I replied, "but I wish you would answer my question."

"Pretty enough," he echoed. "Oh, you stone man. When a woman like Solonika cannot make your heart beat faster, I begin to despair for you."

I did not tell him how much the Princess had interested me, and that it was the light of sadness deep down in her eyes, which had escaped him, that made me wish to clear up the mystery and help her if I could. If she were a masquerader what a terrible life she had before her. I pitied her.

"Surely," I said, "the good General had some serious reason for bringing you back."

"Serious he may think it," said Nick, "but I see no reason for coupling my return with the General's suspicions of Dhalmatia. I think, from what I saw this morning, that Duke Marbosa had more to do with it."

"I suppose you would not entertain the thought for a moment that the Prince and the Princess were the same person?"

Nick looked at me as if I were suddenly become a madman. Then he threw back his head and laughed so loud and long that I, feeling uncomfortably small, shook him to make him stop. His answer I thought most curious.

"Great heavens, Dale, this is Bharbazonia."

"All the more reason for believing it possible," I retorted.

He laughed again.

"Oh, no," he said, "you have reckoned without the Church."

"Come now, Nick, answer me straight. Cease talking in riddles. What has the Church got to do with it?"

Nick suddenly became sober. He saw that I was serious, and addressed himself to the task of enlightening me.

"Listen, Dale," he began, like one entering into a long argument, "I will tell you all about it and when I am through you must accept what I say as final and

forget these romantic American notions of yours. The Greek church of Bharbazonia has everything to do with it. To begin with, for the sake of argument, we will admit that the General and you are right—the Prince and the Princess are one, and that one is a woman. I believe that is your theory?”

“Go on,” I said, nodding.

“Now, do you know what that would entail?”

“The woman’s life would be a hell on earth, I suppose.”

“It would mean death if she were ever detected,” said Nick, solemnly.

This was going farther than I expected. I looked at Nick, but his face was immovable. He was not joking.

“Yes, but how? Why?” I exclaimed.

“In the first place the clergy in this country, as in many other European lands, stand before the nobles in power. The king, the nobles and the peasantry are all subject to their will. Here, church and state are not divorced as they are in France and America.”

“But how would Solonika come within the power of the Church? Why should it wish to harm her?”

“Every coronation service, like marriage, is a deeply religious ceremony,” Nick continued steadily. “As you know, it takes place in the Cathedral at Nischon. It is conducted by the Patriarch, the front of the Greek Catholic Church of Bharbazonia. When this woman, who in your fancy is masquerading as the Prince, takes the oath of office, becoming at once the head of the Church and the ruler of the kingdom, she must ascend the altar and stand within the Holy of Holies, where it is a sacrilege for a woman to go!”

“Good heavens,” I exclaimed, rising to my feet in consternation. Nick smiled at the effect of his words and continued:

“Granting that the Red Fox of Dhalmatia would go to great lengths to procure the throne, do you think that any father would take such risks? Do you think that a woman like Solonika would affront her religion for the sake of being king? You may trifle with the superstitious beliefs of the highly civilized, if they have any, but you cannot play tricks with the primitive. The populace of Bharbazonia, if they ever found her out, though she be king, would rend her limb from limb, urged on by the religious frenzy of the outraged priesthood. Are you answered?”

“I am answered,” I replied.

But Nick was not satisfied that he had convinced me.

“I will tell you this, Dale,” he added, earnestly. “If Solonika committed such a sacrilege against my Church and her people, I, a Bharbazonian, might forget my Occidental cultivation, and, though I might love her, would strangle her to death with these two hands.”

He stretched his hands toward me and crushed his fingers together over an imaginary throat. I watched him fascinated; here was a new Nicholas and one that I did not like. I was not so sure that David knew the innermost secrets of Jonathan's heart.

"So, that is Bharbazonia," I said.

He detected the detraction in my voice, and came to the defence of his Fatherland.

"Yes, that is Bharbazonia," he replied. "And can you expect more of a people who have suffered as we have from the persecution of the merciless Turks? There is nothing gentle, nothing refining in the traditions behind us. Do you know what it means to come home and find the body of your wife, nude and desecrated, lying in its blood in the doorway of your once happy, happy home? Do you know what it means to the stunted mental growth of a community to have its little earnings taken for taxes for the support of luxurious Mohammedan harems, when its children are without schools? And can the religion of a country be more enlightened than its followers? Do not blame Bharbazonia for what she is. She is crushed, she is broken, she is bleeding; but she lives."

"With your education and training, Nick, why do you not take a leading part in helping your own country? You love your fellows, I know."

"Oh, if I had the power; if I were only king in Bharbazonia; what would I not do? I would ask nothing better for my life work, but, as it is, I am doing the next best thing, not alone for my country but also for the entire Balkans, in furthering the work of the Order of the Cross against the power of the Crescent."

The noise of the engine along the driveway announced the return of the General in the car. He came bounding into the room like a boy, full of his trip to the capital and the magnificent preparations for the coronation.

"I met a certain young woman who was much disappointed because you had not come, Nicholas," said he.

"Who was she?" asked Nick.

"The Princess Teskla."

"I trust you gave her my best regards."

"I did. And further, I promised not to return to the Palace until I brought you."

From the General's manner I judged that Nicholas and the king's daughter were very good friends, and that the General was more than pleased. He became so enthusiastic in recounting the charms of the young lady that I began to suspect him of being a matchmaker. Nick had spent much of his time at the palace after his father died four years ago, but had not seen the Princess since. He corresponded with her in his desultory fashion, and I smiled as I recalled how letter writing languished with him. The General, in his rôle of Cupid, let fly dart after

dart from his quiver.

"Do you know, my son," he insinuated, "I think Teskla is in love with you?"

"Think so, Godfather?" said Nick, shrugging his shoulders.

"A splendid girl, sir; a splendid girl I believe."

But Nick abruptly changed the subject.

"You promised to tell me why Grand Duke Marbosa was so interested in my return," he said.

"You are referring to his messenger of this morning?" replied Palmora, becoming again the diplomat and statesman.

Nick nodded.

"The Duke is anxious to enroll you with the rest of the nobles under his leadership in opposition to the Red Fox's son. He is planning something desperate, I feel sure. He will not be frank with me. But I know that he will strike before the coronation."

"What have I to do with Marbosa and the nobles of Bharbazonia?" said Nick. "The Order is not interested, is it?"

"He has not gone as far as to make our Bharbazonian succession an international affair. He would not dare."

The talk drifted aimlessly, I thought, upon the poverty of the people and their lack of education; Marbosa's stern patriotism and his willingness to shed blood for the good of his country; the General's opposition to Marbosa in favor of peace. I ceased to follow their discussion until I heard the General say:

"Nicholas, I desire to tell you a story."

"But you cannot convince me, General," said Nick. "I think Marbosa is right. He has the good of Bharbazonia at heart."

"I believe he has," said the General. "But listen. There once was a high minded man who was a descendant of a long line of kings. His ancestors, for centuries, had not lived in their Fatherland since it fell into the hands of a conquering host from another country. Many of them, leading ineffectual armies of restoration, were killed; and private assassins in the pay of the conquerors murdered any member of the royal family they could find even in exile. To prevent his enemies from killing him, this king, as his father and grandfather before him had done, assumed a fictitious name and went into a far country. There, like any other man, he worked, dreaming of the time when he should come into his own, hoping against hope.

"So completely did he hide himself, that he rarely received news of his home. But one day he learned that the land was free and that his countrymen, deeming the last of their kings dead, had placed a noble upon the throne and thus established another royal family.

"He came back to his Fatherland intent upon proclaiming himself. Through

all the years he had carefully preserved the proofs of his identity, and he had no difficulty in convincing a few of the nobles whom he took into his confidence that he was the king. They were intent upon a revolution; but the fame of the present ruler was great; he had been a wonderful soldier in the battles for freedom and the people loved him. The fight which would follow must disrupt the Fatherland, still suffering under the poverty and vice of the years of bondage. An internal quarrel would have destroyed it.

"The king was a great man, greater than the world knew. He restrained his friends in their efforts to win the throne for him. He refused to take it, holding that what his beloved country needed most of all was peace—peace to bind up its wounds and win prosperity and happiness. His friends urged him, but he remained firm. He went away and never pressed his claim. Love of country with him was greater than love for a throne.

"Later he married and a son was born to him. Then his heart misgave him. Had he done well to rob the boy of his birthright? The thought troubled him. Yet he remained true to his better impulses, and still held that his country needed peace. He sought out the oldest friend he had in the county, a man of considerable influence who was in sympathy with the great sacrifice his liege lord was making.

"'Although I have given up my throne,' he said, 'I want my boy some day to reign. The time may come after I am dead when you may see a way to give him his own again without injury to the Fatherland. When that time comes, old friend, will you do it?'

"'I will,' said the friend.

"'The youth is impetuous. He may not be able to see the right as I have seen it. He may not be able to control his selfish motives as I have done. Therefore do you keep my secret from him. But, if the boy wax strong and is able to follow the right course, you may tell him the truth. Until that time shall come keep the secret from him, for the love you bear me and our Fatherland.'"

In this world, where one sees so much of sordidness, it was refreshing to hear the General tell of an action so high-minded as to be almost beyond belief. I liked to feel that such things still existed.

"I have told this story often to Duke Marbosa. But he is not impressed," continued the General. "The Red Fox's leanings toward the Turk are, to Marbosa, like the red flag before the eyes of a bull. He does not like Prince Raoul's father and in that I cannot blame him. But I cannot make him see that Bharbazonia needs peace just now. What do you think, Nicholas?"

"I am rather in sympathy with Marbosa, Godfather," said Nick.

The General was watching Nick closely, his eyes half concealed beneath his bushy eyebrows. A look of disappointment passed over his face at the answer.

He said something half to himself, which I did not clearly catch. It sounded like "The time is not yet," but I could not be sure.

"You are very young, my son," he said aloud, "and the Duke of Marbosa is old enough to know better."

Both of them relapsed into the Bharbazonian speech and I went off to bed alone. I do not know what time Nick came in, but I was aroused a little by hearing the General calling across the hallway from his own room:

"Now, remember, son, we meet at the Turk's Head Inn. It is important that you be there, for I believe we will make history to-morrow. So, do not oversleep."

CHAPTER VIII

THE TWINS OF DHALMATIA

The flying rumours father'd as they rolled,
Scarce any tale was sooner heard than told;
And all who told it added something new,
And all who heard it made enlargements too;
In every ear it spread, on every tongue it grew.

—*Pope: Temple of Fame.*

When I awoke the next morning Nick's side of the bed was empty. In answer to my ring the butler served breakfast in my room. Mr. Nicholas and General Palmora he said had eaten before dawn and gone out in the wonderful machine, leaving word that they would return for dinner in the evening. He knew not where they had gone. For once in my life I was thankful I knew French, else I might have starved.

There was no reason why I should arise, so I lay in bed thinking of this curious country, trying to imagine what secret business would have caused Nick to leave me without explanation. The face of Solonika came repeatedly uppermost in my thoughts. Could one so beautiful, so gentle, so feminine, be a party to such a terrible deception as my fanciful suspicions made necessary for her? Those steadfast, honest eyes could not belong to one who carried within her breast a secret so grave.

Nicholas's talk of sacrilege opened a new line of conjecture. If the Red Fox were playing so huge a joke upon his countrymen, he was laughing in the face

of a danger most appalling. I had seen him once and I knew that he was crafty. If his ambition were equal to it, he might not hesitate even at sacrilege. The very danger might add zest.

Always there recurred to me the memory of Solonika's pain when I took her hand. Here I was travelling in my endless circle. If I could go over to Dhalmatia and see the Prince and Princess together all doubts would be at rest. This vain pursuit of garbled rumour, garnished and re-garnished in the telling, was worse than useless.

Time hung heavily on my hands during the morning. Castle Framkor seemed deserted without Nicholas and the General. By lunch time my loneliness became unbearable and I went for a walk. Subconsciously my feet carried me toward Dhalmatia, and I came out of my musings on the steps of the summer-house.

No one answered my knock and I could see through the glass partitions that the cosy den was vacant. Should I go to the castle? I took to the driveway, but, when I emerged from the trees and came in sight of the turrets, my resolution failed me. I remembered the Red Fox's discourteous treatment and did not care to brave the animal in his lair. I retreated to the steps of the summer-house and sat down to think.

To be sure Solonika had invited us to renew our visit. She had promised to have an interview with her father, and from her assurance she led us to believe that she could not fail. Doubtless if I knocked at the castle door I would be admitted, but I could not forget my pride. On the other hand, if I did not go to Dhalmatia, how was I to solve the mystery which was baffling me? How was I to see the Prince and Princess together?

"Please, sir," said a woman's voice at my elbow, "the mistress desires to see you at the castle."

It was Therese, the maid. Solonika had seen me a moment before standing in full view of the castle; had watched my retreat, and guessed the cause. Opportunity lay ready to my hand.

"Thank you; I will go," I said.

"To the *porte-cochère*, and knock upon the door," she said, as she vanished behind the summer-house.

Evidently the persuasive Solonika had been at work and won her expected victory, for the grim, old butler smiled graciously and bade me enter.

"Would Monsieur the physician desire to see the Prince?" he asked.

Somewhere in the castle the Princess was waiting, expecting my coming. Why not first see the Prince and then call upon her? Thus might I satisfy my great desire without arousing suspicion.

"Yes, I would see the Prince," I answered.

The old man bent his back in a half bow and smilingly led me with all the dignity and speed of a turtle to the Prince's quarters, which fortunately were but a short distance from the reception hall. If the ways of those who love the darkness are evil, the Red Fox's ways must certainly be evil, for the interior of his castle was very dark. The windows were screened with heavy curtains, permitting little daylight to enter. My eyes, fresh from the sunlight, had to become accustomed to the lack of light before I could see my way about. I hung close upon the heels of my slow guide until he paused in a doorway and announced in a stately manner:

"Monsieur le doctaire for the Prince."

There was the sound of a chair being moved back as if some one arose. I bowed upon the threshold, looking swiftly about. The Duke and the Prince were before me, but Solonika was nowhere to be seen. The Duke was standing beside a table acknowledging my bow. He was dressed in the same quaint manner as when I had seen him two days before.

His son, the Prince, remained seated on the opposite side of the table. His back was toward me, and he did not turn. He was attired in a long, full-skirted coat of black, black knee breeches with buckles at the knee, black silk stockings and silver-buckled, low black shoes. Leaning against the arm of his high-backed carved chair was his sword. It had evidently been uncomfortable, and was laid aside belt and all. The Prince's right arm was in a sling.

The two had been interested in a game of cards when I interrupted them. Judging from the formation of the pasteboards upon the green cloth, they were playing "double solitaire," that paradoxical game for one which two or three can play. It is also one of the few games of cards which can be played with one hand.

The Duke placed a chair at the table beside him and waved me into it with a gracious smile. When I was seated, the Prince ceased scanning the cards on the table and looked at me as one would at a stranger. He was so like Solonika, and yet acted so unlike her, that I was uncomfortable.

"Raoul, permit me to present Dr. Wharton who took such good care of you when you were thrown," said the Duke in London English.

The young man and I nodded coldly. Above all things I desired to hear his voice.

"Do not permit me to interrupt the game," I said, lightly, but it was the Duke who replied.

"I am more than pleased to see you, Dr. Wharton, if only to extend my apologies for the affair of yesterday. Servants make sad mistakes sometimes."

Servants and Grand Dukes were somewhat alike in that respect, I thought, but I ventured no remark.

"When you were gone, I gave orders to Dajerak, the butler, never to permit General Palmora to enter this house again. He understood it to apply to the

General's party. I did not know of his action until my daughter told me of it."

So Solonika had kept her promise to give the old gentleman a talking to. I was secretly amused at the hard work the Fox was making of it.

"I am pleased you overlooked my boorishness and returned," he concluded.

"It is nothing," I assured him.

"We have few visitors at Dhalmatia," he sighed, "and we would be most happy to entertain you and that other—American."

Was there just the shadow of a pause mere and a slight narrowing about the eyelids as he said this? Solonika's efforts were not confined alone to me. She desired to have the handsome Nicholas call upon her as well.

"Perhaps, in your professional capacity, you will look at the Prince's wounds," he said.

"If the Prince has no objections," I said.

He was idly toying with his cards, listening with a half smile to the conversation. When I pointedly addressed him he looked straight at me with Solonika's eyes. My heart thumped against my ribs, but, when he spoke in a voice like, yet unlike, his sister's, and in halting broken English where hers had run smoothly, the illusion was spoiled, and I was more than half convinced that my quest was a fool's errand.

"I have objections," he said, drawing away.

The Prince, I could see, still suffered considerable pain when he moved his right arm, which was to be expected. The slight contusions on the head were healing nicely; and the Duke said that no complications or internal injuries showed signs of developing.

"Your son will suffer no inconvenience at the coronation," I said in reply to the Duke's anxious question. "He will be entirely recovered by that time, I should think, if he remains perfectly quiet."

"You hear, Raoul, you must not run about so much," cried the father.

"I hear," said the boy, with one of Solonika's brightest smiles.

The Duke, seeing that the Prince replied only in monosyllables, became talkative. He could not do enough for me. He served his best wines and insisted that I accept several packages of his Turkish cigarettes, because I happened to praise them. The Prince so far unbent as to accept a light for his cigarette from my hand. As the blue rings ascended we became more sociable, and I ventured to ask why the Duke disliked the General, a character whom I thought all men should admire.

"Palmora," said the Duke, affably, "belongs to the Old Party of Bharbazonia. In fact he and the Duke of Marbosa are its leaders. They believe that the safety and future of the Balkans lie in the aid which Russia can give. Of course they are not blind to the fact that their benefactor is acting from a selfish motive; that, year

by year, Russia wrests principality after principality from the Turkish domain so that one day she may absorb the city of Constantinople and so gain control of the Bosphorus and a southern way to the sea. But they do not seem to understand that when that day comes Russia will also absorb the little kingdoms she has set up as her cats-paws to pull her chestnuts from the fire.

"That will be a sad day for Bharbazonia. I do not look to Russia for future peace and prosperity, but rather do I reach out toward a Germao-Austrian alliance. And there is where the Old Party and the New Party find their point of difference. In attempting to break down what little influence I had with the people they tell them I have 'Turkish tendencies,' but that is not true."

It flashed through my mind, as I compared the General's statements with the Duke's, that there were two sides to the shield. Perhaps there was something to admire in the Fox after all.

"But the rock upon which we split is the Church," continued the Duke. "Russia is of our religion—the Greek Church—while Germany and Hungary are Lutheran and Roman Catholic. I can assure you, Dr. Wharton, that the Church Patriarch of Bharbazonia does not look with favour upon the ascension of my son to the throne. Rest assured he would do anything in his power to prevent it. Hence you understand why I remain within my castle, seeing no one and being seen by few. But you, sir, are a foreigner, an American; it does me good to speak with you."

He led me on to talk of the United States, its wealth, resources and activities. Even the Prince showed signs of interest at my description of the Great American game of baseball. He said he was familiar with cricket, having seen it played in England when he was at school. Fox-hunting was not new; although boar-hunting was the Bharbazonian pastime. Would I care to go boar-hunting some time with him? I expressed my delight. He would be happy to have me and also my friend Fremsted join his party in the last hunt he would have before he was crowned.

I told him that I would broach the matter to Nicholas, but that I knew he would gladly accompany the expedition. Would the Princess be of the party?

"Oh, no," exclaimed the Prince, "women do not hunt the boar. It is much too dangerous."

During this conversation with the Duke and his son I had not forgotten the real purpose of my visit. If I did not permit myself to be put off with subterfuge, now was the time to have the laugh on the General. I remembered, too, that somewhere in the castle Solonika was waiting, expecting Therese to bring me to her. "Faint heart ne'er won fair lady," I thought and I boldly attacked the citadel.

"I should like very much to see your daughter, sir," I said as innocently as I could. I was watching them closely when I spoke. Not a movement escaped me.

But, if I expected any hesitation or other evidence that I had trapped them, I was disappointed. There was no quick look between them; not even the lifting of an eyebrow. Had my request been the most ordinary in the world they could not have acted more naturally.

"Raoul, where is your sister now?" said the Duke.

"In her apartment, I think," he replied.

"Do not disturb her," I said, to see if they would accept a loophole of escape.

"Not at all," returned the Red Fox, "Dajerak will escort you. She would be disappointed at not seeing you."

In the Bharbazonian dialect he gave the butler the necessary orders and I arose to follow him.

"We will await your return here," said the Duke.

At the Prince's doorway we turned from the main entrance and continued into the heart of the castle through darkened corridors. We were going to the other side of the building, as far as I could judge. From the number of rooms and archways we passed I fancied that the Princess lived a long way from the Prince.

Why she wished to seclude herself from the family I could not imagine. Perhaps my conception of distance was lengthened by the lack of haste on the part of my guide. Old Dajerak plodded along at his top speed, which would not have caused a competing snail the least inconvenience, and at last knocked upon a panelled door. Therese's voice bade us enter.

"Mistress is expecting you," she said as she took my card, and disappeared through a far door to announce me. Dajerak bowed and retired, and I listened to his footsteps dragging over the velvet carpets.

Solonika's reception parlor was totally different from her den in the summer-house. It was strictly a French room of the Empire period. Red satin, hand-painted chairs and rococo furniture, heavy and shining with gilt, gave the prevailing note of elegance. The high walls were decorated with priceless gobelin tapestries and overhead hung two glass pendent chandeliers.

I found myself trembling with suppressed excitement. Here was I upon the eve of a discovery. If there were only one child, that one was now seated at the far end of the castle playing cards with his father. But perhaps, after a show of searching for the other, Therese would reluctantly bring back word that Solonika was out, or indisposed. If, on the other hand, there were two children Solonika would see me.

The maid was scarcely gone a minute when she returned with my card still in her hand. The Princess was out, then?

"Mademoiselle bids you enter, monsieur," she said with a bow and a smile.

My heart leaped as I made ready to follow. She led me into a cosy little dressing room. There, quietly sewing on some fancy needlework beside the win-

dow, sat Solonika.

In her pale blue, loose-fitting house gown, lazily dangling one fairy-like slipper from one tiny foot crossed above the other, she looked more beautiful than ever. It takes laces and loose things to bring out a woman's femininity. She was looking up at me laughingly, mockingly I thought. My feelings overcame me for the moment and I found no words to greet her.

"Ah, Dr. Wharton," she cried gaily, "welcome to my little boudoir. You must pardon the informality. But I found myself too lazy to dress when Therese brought your card."

Her pure, perfect English fell upon my ear in marked contrast with the heavy halting phrases of the Prince's. Could this be the girl, so light hearted and happy, whom I accused in my thoughts of contemplating a terrible sacrilege against her church? No, no, no! I was content; aye even happy to find that I was mistaken. But a moment ago I had seen the Prince on the other side of the Castle, and now I saw her here before me calmly sewing. General Palmora was a fool. I could only stare at her, my joy shining from my eyes.

"Come, come, Dr. Wharton," she laughed, "have you lost your tongue? Sit down and tell me what you have been doing since last we met."

"I am so glad," I said, "so happy at finding you here."

"Why," she laughed, "where did you expect to find me?"

"No, no," I said, "it's not that. I didn't expect to find you anywhere—" I paused fearing that I was making a bungle.

"Perhaps I should not have let you come here," she said, the smile fading. "But somehow I cannot make a stranger of you. I seem to have known you a long time. But if you prefer that I entertain you in the drawing room—"

"Please do not," I hastened to say. "I like it very well here."

"You were a long time coming," she pouted.

"Yes," I said, "the butler took me into the Prince's apartments instead of yours, and your father talked me to death."

Even while the Princess laughed at my expression I fancied I heard the sound of a cough. Could it be that the Duke himself was listening behind one of the many doors? I must be more guarded in my conversation. Then again, a man's imagination will play him many tricks in a strange castle.

"He apologized, did he not?" asked the girl.

"Handsomely," I said.

"What did the Prince have to say?"

"Nothing much. He is so different from you."

"Is that so? Most people find us very much alike."

"In appearance, yes. But not in dispositions. I think I should know you were you even in his clothes."

"Do you?" said she. "Some day I shall put them on and try you."

"I wish you would," I said. "You will see that you cannot fool me."

"Where is your Jonathan to-day, David?" she asked.

"Nicholas? He went off somewhere with General Palmora. Perhaps to Nischon to see Princess Teskla. The General is quite a match-maker. I verily believe he would like to see Nick married to that young woman."

"You interest me. But since when did Americans hope to mate with Princesses of the blood?"

"But Nick—" I began—and checked myself just in time. Then another thought struck me and perhaps came to the surface in the look which I gave her. "Americans never hope to mate with Princesses of the blood. They mate with the woman they love. If she happens to be a princess, that is her misfortune, not his fault."

"The woman they love," she echoed, turning the phrase over in her mind. Then she flew away on a new tack. "Have you ever met Princess Teskla?"

"No, but I expect to, shortly."

"The Prince will be interested to hear this," she said. "Do you know, the king, her father, is most anxious to marry his daughter to Raoul?"

"Why, they are first cousins!"

"True, but that makes no difference in marriages of state. His object is to unite the two houses and keep the throne in his own. When he made Raoul and me Prince and Princess he had that in his mind, I do believe, for he did nothing for his own brother, my father. Does Teskla favour this friend of yours?"

"I cannot say as to that, never having seen them. But Nick has known her for a number of years."

"Raoul will be pleased, for he detests her."

Therese brought the tea and we chatted away with our small talk until I remembered that the Duke and the Prince were awaiting my return. I arose to go.

"When will you be in the summer-house again?" I asked.

"I will be there to-morrow afternoon," she replied. "Will you come?"

"Yes," I almost whispered, and she dropped her gaze before mine.

Therese acted as guide on the return trip and the way did not seem so long, following her light steps. The Prince and the Duke were still seated at the table engaged in their game of cards. While I made my adieu the young man, who looked so much like Solonika that I could not forbear staring at him, lit his cigarette with his uninjured hand and returned my stare coldly, almost insolently. His face was wreathed in smoke as it curled gently upward and vanished in the air.

"Do not forget my invitation to the hunt," he said in his bad English. Once

more I remarked the great contrast.

"We will be glad to see you soon again," said the Red Fox. His smile was positively warming. If he had been a victorious commander surveying the wreck his guns had wrought, he could not have appeared more genial.

I thanked them both and found my way to the open air with my illusions gone. How silently and swiftly had my house of cards come tumbling about my head. I thought of Solonika, and Nick's fingers coiling about an imaginary throat, and I was glad; oh, I was glad to find myself mistaken.

CHAPTER IX

THE KISS IN THE KING'S GARDEN

O, that a man might know
The end of this day's business, ere it come!
But it sufficeth that the day will end,
And then the end is known.

—*Shakespeare: Julius Cæsar.*

Nick and the General were not returned when I reached Frankor Castle, but they came puffing in for dinner on schedule time. Where they had been they did not divulge, nor did I question them, feeling that their rapid comings and goings had to do with the politics of Bharbazonia with which I was not concerned.

"Sorry to have run away from you, Dale," said Nick, "but needs must when the Devil drives." He jerked his head in the General's direction.

"Humph," grunted the General.

"What did you do with yourself all day?" asked Nick.

"I have had an enjoyable time. I've been over to Dhalmatia."

"What?" exclaimed the General.

After his warning to me, I suppose the old fellow imagined I would not care to visit the Red Fox. Neither Nick nor I had told him of the result of our first visit. Had he known that, the storm clouds gathering upon his brow would have been twice as dark.

"Yes," I continued, "and I have seen both the Prince and the Princess, General. The Red Fox was not tricking you when he announced the birth of twins."

Then I told the story of my afternoon as rapidly as possible. But the General

was not impressed. The aged, as the homely old expression has it, are frequently "sot in their ways" and I suppose the General had hugged this favourite delusion to his breast so long that he could not let it go. When I was through he remarked dryly:

"Then you did not see the Prince and the Princess together, after all?"

"I did not see them standing side by side," I admitted; "but it was practically the same thing."

"I always told you, General," chimed in Nicholas, "that you were wrong. I agree with Dale, and you might as well surrender as gracefully as possible."

But the General refused to surrender.

"'Tis some trick of the Red Fox," he stoutly maintained, and no amount of argument could move him. He met every advance and escaped every tight corner with the same reply. In his mind Ananias was a truth-teller compared with the Duke of Dhalmatia. We finally dropped the subject, and talked of other matters.

"We are going down to Nischon in the morning, Dale," said Nick. "Do you want to go along?"

"Indeed I do," I replied. I was anxious to see the capital of which I had heard so much and more especially the Cathedral in which the Prince was to be crowned.

Accordingly, when the General awakened us before daylight, I dressed with alacrity. The sun was just rising when we passed Solonika's summer-house, but, early as we were, others were abroad ahead of us. Drawn up on the side of the road, as if to permit us to pass, were six horsemen, muffled up to the eyes in long Spanish cloaks, their spirited horses backing, dancing and rearing as we passed. I could not be sure, but I received the impression that they were not riding forward upon the road, but waiting. One of their number recognized the General and saluted him with a familiar wave of the hand. But the General refused to return the salute. We passed swiftly on.

Although their action was military, the horsemen did not strike me as being soldiers; for one thing they were not dressed in uniform. Perhaps they were a party of young nobles out for a lark. They resembled Duke Marbosa's messenger who had inquired about Nicholas's return. But what could the gentry be doing on the road at such an unearthly hour in the morning?

It was a perfect automobiling day, one of those sunshiny mornings when one is glad to be alive. We passed many estates and small villages on the way, and the townsfolk had a smile and a hearty cheer for the General. As we whirled by a roadside tavern a bystander waved his hat in the air and shouted a greeting.

It sounded as if he said "Long live Palmora!" and the crowd joined in the general cheer that followed. But all was not love and good fellowship in this country. We received a rude shock on the outskirts of this very village.

There, beside a small chapel of the Greek Church, standing in the midst of a crowded graveyard, was a charred pyre of wood, from the center of which rose an iron post pointing to the sky. On the top of the post a gilded Greek cross glistened in the sunlight, unharmed by the smoke and flames which had raged below.

Tied to the post, blackened and burnt until the flesh had dropped off in places, exposing the bones beneath, was the naked body of a woman. Although the fire had been out for days, smoke still found its way upward, like a gentle blue vapor, fading quickly away. One or two villagers were leaning against the stone wall that surrounded the graveyard, but they were more interested in the automobile than in the terrible scene behind them.

"Look," I cried, pointing it out to Nick.

He touched Teju Okio on the shoulder and the machine was brought to a standstill as quickly as possible; but we had so far overrun the place that we had to back to bring it opposite. The General talked with the idlers and translated their story to me.

"It is the witch of Utrepect," he said. "The priests burnt her at the stake a week ago for blasphemy. She had considerable influence over the minds of the villagers, and was undermining their faith. The Patriarch at Nischon warned her to keep silent. The church excommunicated her and forbade her to come upon church property. She defied them and last Sunday cursed the priest of the chapel upon the spot where she now is. He seized her, aided by his congregation, raised the pyre and burnt her to death as an example for all men who refuse to listen to the church. No one is permitted to touch her on pain of death. So there she hangs until the dogs devour her."

Could it be possible that such barbarism existed in the name of religion in any European country in this the twentieth century? Had anyone told me this a few hours before, I would have laughed at him. But here was the concrete fact before my horrified eyes.

"Drive on, Okio," I cried, sick of the sight. The Jap obeyed.

"That must have been the witch Princess Solonika spoke of as having prophesied that Raoul would never be king," said Nick, smiling at my show of disgust. Neither he nor the General seemed to think the priest's action at all unusual. Cotton Mather had his following even among the Pilgrim Fathers.

Nischon was a matter of fifty miles from Castle Framkor, but Teju Okio manipulated his levers to such good purpose that, in spite of the stop at Utrepect, we came in sight of the ancient city before half past nine. Nischon in the sunlight was a beautiful city. It burst upon us as we reached the top of a high hill and we could thus look down upon its roof tops.

It lay in a valley on both sides of the river they call the Kneister, the only

waterway of importance in Bharbazonia, which flows away to the south and empties into the Black Sea, at Bizzett, by means of a subterranean passage through the mountain wall.

The two hills which formed the valley sloped gently down on both sides to the water edge, leaving no level land anywhere. On the tableland, on top of these hills, we could see the numerous castles of the nobles, thrusting their proud stone turrets above the trees like self-appointed watchdogs of the city.

In all the myriad hives of houses below, one building caught my eye before the rest and I did not need to be told that it was the Cathedral. It was a huge structure, standing alone upon a terraced green square on our side of the river. Four minarets, one on each corner, piercing the sky, first riveted the attention. They bore aloft great gilded Greek crosses that flashed the blinding rays of the reflected sun in our eyes as we moved along the road.

Four great domes made up the main body of the structure, three huddling together in a single row in front and the fourth rearing its huge bulk high above the rest in the rear. Like the crosses, the tops of the domes were gilded and the whole effect was that of a building of gold.

"The Cathedral," Nick informed me, "is one of the oldest buildings in the country. It is similar in architectural design to the mosque of St. Sophia which we saw from the yacht as we passed Constantinople. St. Sophia, considered the oldest Christian church in the world, was converted by the Mohammedans into a mosque in the sixteenth century."

The palace of the King was also a noticeable building. Like the Cathedral it was surrounded by its green terrace gardens which held it aloof from the rest of the houses. It was on the other side of the river close to the bank. In fact a wall of ancient masonry enclosed the grounds and rose sheer from the water on the river side. Turrets were built in this wall at regular intervals, as a protection for the castle itself, which stood alone in the centre of the grounds, built more for warfare than for beauty.

The progress of the General in the machine through the streets of Nischon was like the approach of a conquering hero. Everywhere carters drew respectfully aside to let us pass. Men stood with uncovered heads, and women at the windows held their children up to see the great man. Thirty years had but enhanced the glory of the General's achievements as the conqueror of the Turks at the head of the Bharbazonian army. Old men, who had seen service with him during that campaign, cheered and blessed their leader as he passed; and to these the General kissed his hand and shouted friendly greeting.

"I would give all I possess," whispered Nick, "to have the love and respect of the people as the General has."

"Do not despair," I replied; "one day the opportunity may arrive when you

will win their esteem. We are all children of chance.”

Green uniformed soldiers guarded the drawbridge which spanned the river and led to the King’s palace. They stood at attention as the heavy car rolled over the creaking planks. The iron doors in the castle wall swung back on their rusty hinges, and we passed over a driveway winding between green well-kept lawns until we came to the palace.

A lieutenant of the King’s Guard opened the tonneau door and assisted us to alight, and a uniformed courier ushered us into the presence of the King, the mighty hero of the battle at the Turk’s Head Inn. Gregory was seated at the council table with another old man who I learned was called Nokolovich, a prominent member of the king’s official family and his chief advisor. I suppose in any other country he would have had the title of Prime Minister.

Both greeted General Palmora effusively and were gravely attentive to Nicholas. From their manner toward him it was clear that he was known as a Bharbazonian among them and that he had their respect. I was formally presented to the King, in whose eyes, curious to say, I found favour because I was a countryman of General Grant.

”I take great pleasure even now,” said the King, ”in reading the history of his battles. His example inspired me in our own wars.”

In due time all four plunged into the mysterious business of state which brought them together, conversing in the Bharbazonian dialect and I had ample opportunity to observe the great warrior.

Gregory was indeed a commanding figure. Nature meant him to be a king, for she had given him a stature above his fellows and a lordly mien which even old age could not destroy. And he was very old. His great beard, long and white, fell almost to his waist; his snowy locks were brushed back from his forehead and curled in silvery ringlets upon his broad shoulders. Time had bent him but little, and had not taken from him that penetrating glance which suggested his shrewd brother, the Red Fox of Dhalmatia.

But the King looked like a man who ate and drank too well; in whose veins the red blood ran too full. And Mother Nature it seems had sent him her first warning, if one might judge from the lack of control existing along one side of the body, most plainly visible in the halting way he moved his left arm and leg. His determination to abdicate, and bring his life work to a happy conclusion after thirty years of ruling, showed that he intended to heed the warning and take a well-earned rest. It was just as well, for the hand that adjusted the glasses to his dim-visioned eyes shook with a great trembling; it was clear to my medical mind that he could not withstand a second stroke.

I was glad when Nick’s part in the proceedings came to an end, and he suggested that we take a walk in the gardens overlooking the river. But I was not

long in Nicholas's company. In the gardens we encountered Princess Teskla, the King's daughter. She came suddenly from the shrubbery at the side of the gravel walk and stood in our pathway smiling, her eyes on Nick.

Seldom have I seen a more handsome young woman, and handsome is the word, for "pretty" or "beautiful" would be too weak to picture her. Like her father she was cast in a generous mould. There was no denying the physical attraction of her voluptuous figure and finely chiselled face, wherein was the suggestion of Spanish beauty due no doubt to her swarthy skin and coal-black hair. Such beauty as this might Juno have possessed to dazzle the eyes of the gods on Mount Olympus.

"Nicholas," she cried as she extended her arms toward him, red roses mantling her cheeks and a smile of happiness parting her full lips.

"Teskla," cried he with equal warmth.

As I watched the friendly greeting it dawned upon me that all Nick's journeys in the automobile during our stay in Bharbazonia had not in the past, and would not in the future, be to meetings of the Order at the Turk's Head tavern.

Has it ever been forced upon you that the old saying is true, "Two is company and three is a crowd?" If you have ever been so unfortunate you will understand why I quietly stepped from the path and slipped into the bushes; and why it was that I continued my walk alone. When next they thought of me, if they remembered me at all, I had disappeared and I do not blame them if they were glad.

For my part I too was well content, for I found a comfortable seat on the low wall overlooking the river. Below me the water rippled over the pebble bottom, reflecting the flat-roofed houses on the further shore. It was pleasantly warm in the sun. A few more weeks, and Solonika, with the Prince and her father, might be walking in these gardens while I—I should be preparing for my journey back to America to resume my prosaic practice of medicine. My vacation in Bharbazonia so far had been pleasantly ideal. Somehow I did not view with joy the idea of leaving Framkor, the summer-house of Dhalmatia and, last of all, Solonika.

From my position on the wall I had a view of two walks in the garden which joined at right angles in front of me, one leading from the palace and the other coming from the depth of the garden. My reverie was interrupted by the sound of footsteps upon the gravel pavement. The King, General Palmora and the Prime Minister were approaching. Looking down the other walk I saw the Princess and Nicholas. Although I could see both parties, they could not see each other for the foliage.

Just as the King and his friends arrived at the junction, and turned to go down the walk toward Nicholas and the girl, Nick bent his head and kissed the Princess upon the mouth. They were totally unaware that they were observed.

She gave a little cry and struggled, not too vigorously, I thought, to free herself. The three old men stood as if transfixed, watching the love scene. Nicholas refused to release her, although she playfully boxed his ears, and in return he kissed her again. Then they stood apart, looked at each other and laughed aloud.

"Teskla!" shouted the King.

They jumped as if a bomb had been exploded between them, their happy smiles fading. The Princess acted as if she were about to faint, but she recovered herself. I could see that she was speaking quickly and in a low tone to her companion, and that he was heeding what she said. Then, instead of fronting the King, as I fully expected him to do, Nick slipped away into the shrubbery and disappeared, leaving the woman to face her father alone. Truly Nicholas in America and Nicholas in Bhabazonia were two entirely different fellows.

But there was method in the Princess's madness. That rosy young woman came timidly to her father's side. He was fumbling with his glasses but he did not get them adjusted until Nick was gone. But he held them to his eyes and looked coldly at his daughter. She, too happy to care, saucily returned his angry stare.

The King asked her one question, which, being in the dialect, I could not understand. She continued to face him bravely and spoke two words in reply. It sounded as if she said "Prince Raoul." Whatever her answer, it had a great effect upon the General and the Prime Minister. Those two worthies threw up their hands in astonishment, or remonstrance, but they were silenced by a look from the Princess.

The two words also had a remarkable influence upon the angry father. He dropped his glasses from his eyes and laughed, his former passion forgotten like an April shower. He nodded his old white head, rubbed his hands as if the news pleased him beyond expression, and kissed his daughter, not where Nick had kissed her, but upon the brow. Together they retraced their steps. It was all a mystery to me.

When they were at a distance I quietly slipped from my position on the wall and joined them. But I could not learn what had occurred to please the King so highly.

"Are we to congratulate Nick?" I whispered to the General, who had dropped behind with me.

"Shut up," said he, rudely, and then I saw that he was very angry.

On the palace steps we found Nick waiting for us. The Princess waved her hand to him as if to signal that all was well, and he came fearlessly forward and walked beside her. He met the General's scowl with a smile. The King seemed totally unaware that Nick had been the offender. It was plain that we had to thank a clever woman's quick wit for saving a difficult situation.

But at what terrible cost I was to learn later!

The King was in high spirits during the luncheon, but the General and the Prime Minister were inclined to be moody. Princess Teskla and Nicholas behaved scandalously, I thought, openly "making eyes" at each other across the table. But on the whole the meal went off as smoothly as a marriage bell.

It was not until we were homeward bound in the machine that I was able to get to the bottom of the garden mystery.

"What did the Princess tell the King?" I asked in a whisper, that the General might not start his lecture again. He had given his godson a piece of his mind in the home language for the first ten miles, and it is best to let sleeping dogs lie.

"She is a clever little rogue," whispered Nick, rather proud of the girl's achievement, "she told him it was Prince Raoul."

"But why was he so pleased?"

"He would like to see Teskla married to Raoul."

"So?" I replied, remembering what Solonika had said. "But does the King think Prince Raoul is in the habit of visiting her in the gardens clandestinely?"

"Yes; she has often used that excuse before."

"You are a lucky dog," I said.

But Teskla's little white lie was destined to grow big and bear unexpected fruit. We had not mastered the secret of the King's great joy. A little thing like a kiss, it is said, was the cause for one exodus from a garden; or was it a purloined apple?

CHAPTER X

THE DISCOVERY

Can this be true? an arch observer cries,—
 Yes, rather moved, I saw it with these eyes.
 Sir! I believe it on that ground alone;
 I could not had I seen it with my own.

—*Cowper: Conversation.*

In spite of his recent flirtation with Princess Teskla, being a roomy-hearted youth, Nick could not refrain from casting his eyes in the direction of Solonika's summer-house when we passed Dhalmatia that afternoon about four o'clock. She was seated at her accustomed place by the window, and smiled at us in recogni-

tion of our friendly bows.

I looked around for the strange horsemen of the morning, but they were nowhere to be seen. You may believe that I had not forgotten my promise to meet Solonika in her little den. And I flattered myself that she was there waiting for me.

"Stop the car, Nick," I said, "and I will find out when the Prince intends to go on his boar hunt. He will be glad to know that you also accept his invitation."

"Don't be late for dinner, young man," cautioned the General, whose worst fault, perhaps, was his worship of promptness. I promised to be on hand at seven o'clock and stepped into the road. A few yards brought me in sight of the summer-house, but, when I knocked for admittance, no one responded. Solonika's chair was empty and the den deserted. Seeing me pass in the automobile, she had imagined that I would not return and had evidently gone back to the castle.

I hurried along the driveway toward the castle, keeping a sharp lookout for the Princess, but she was not to be seen standing or walking on the lawn. I stopped at the clearing just before you reach the top of the hill, thinking I had missed her among the trees below and knowing that she must soon come in view on her way home, but, although I tarried there long enough to consume two cigarettes, Solonika did not appear. How she escaped me was a mystery, but, since my fancied excuse for the visit had to do with the Prince, I determined to go to the castle directly.

Dajerak, the old butler, greeted me with a smile and bowed me through the door. I dispensed with his willing but slow services, and made my way to the apartments of the Prince without standing on ceremony. Satisfied as to my destination, he went about his business and left me to my own devices. The Red Fox might not have been pleased had he known it.

The Prince was not in his apartments. Neither was he in the room beyond, whither I ventured to go, calling his name. I retraced my steps to the hallway, but Dajerak was nowhere in sight and I did not know where to find the Red Fox. Clearly, if I wanted to see the Prince, I would have to search for him myself. Perhaps the butler had gone to tell him? I returned to the reception room and sat down in his highback chair to wait. Then I heard a voice singing a little French love song. It came faintly to my ears as if the singer were in a room beyond the Prince's dressing chamber. Entering that apartment I heard the singing more distinctly and made sure that it was either the Prince or his sister—their voices as you know were much alike.

"Your Highness," I called, using the title which applied to both, but the singing went on uninterrupted.

Surely the youth was playing with me, and, for aught I knew, might even

now be laughing behind a curtain. I was positive that the voice came more particularly from behind a portière in front of me. Possibly it screened a door. I pulled it aside and came upon nothing but the panelled woodwork which formed the walls. The singer in the room beyond seemed now to be at my very elbow. I was not long in determining the cause—the centre panel of the wall was on a hinge; the automatic lock had failed to catch, and the perfectly fitting secret door was partly ajar.

I stood on the borderland of a great discovery, hesitating to continue my search. What right had I, a foreigner, to inquire into the secrets of these Bharbazonians? With Byron, I, too, "loathed that low vice, curiosity." Trouble walks hand in hand with those unfortunates who have not acquired the art of minding their own business. Besides, I owed something to the clear-eyed girl by whose favour I had been received as a friend within the castle. At the remembrance of her trust in me I formed my resolution. Dropping the curtain I retired to the outer room and again seated myself in the Prince's chair to wait until he found me.

Can you go back to the time when you were a child playing the game of hide and seek with other children of your age? Do you recall how difficult it was for you to refrain from "peeping" through your little fingers when you were "hiding your eyes," being that important individual known as "it?" How you blindly faced the wall, your ears alert to catch the direction of the sound when one of your playmates should shrilly pipe "all out?" So it was with me. With a recurrence of those childish feelings I sat holding the arms of the chair, listening to the voice as it came faintly to my ears. Truly men are but children of a larger growth. I found it difficult to maintain my place. Except for the singer the castle seemed deserted. My desire to know what lay behind that curtain grew and grew.

Like the mariners who steer their boat upon the hidden rocks, charmed into carelessness of their danger by a siren voice, I was irresistibly drawn again toward the secret door. It was so tantalizingly near; the singer surely was Solonika. An invisible power unloosed my grip upon the chair, I threw diffidence to the winds, crossed the room with swift strides, pulled the curtain aside, opened the inviting panel and stepped through.

But once inside I regretted my rashness and would have given all I possessed to be back in the Prince's chair. The unexpected sight that met my astonished eyes brought me to an abrupt standstill. One swift glance around the room was sufficient to tell me that I had come into Solonika's little boudoir, where the day before I found her engaged in fancy needlework. There were the familiar gobelin tapestries, the pendent chandeliers, the red satin hand-painted chairs. Beside the window was the same easy chair in which she sat while entertaining me, and in front of it on the window sill was the very piece of embroidery upon

which she had been working. I recognized it by the centre piece, held tightly as the head of a drum with the little wooden ring beneath.

On the couch against the wall in front of the portières lay Solonika's large French hat and red parasol; beside them was the long tailor-made coat she wore in the summer-house. In the centre of the floor was the skirt crumpled in a circular heap just as she had stepped out of it.

In front of the dressing table, close to the window, with her back toward me stood Solonika herself!

Or was it the Prince?

For a moment I was puzzled as to the identity of the figure before the mirror. There were the same black silk stockings and black satin knee breeches which I recognized as belonging to the Prince. Tucked into the trousers was the white shirt with cuffs attached which Solonika wore under her tailor-made coat. Her white collar and smoke-coloured four-in-hand necktie completed the nondescript costume.

Although she had only to slip on her black coat and buckle shoes and fasten her sword to her side to be dressed as the Prince, I knew that the person before me was not the Prince but Solonika. For the long red hair, gathered in the familiar psyche knot at the back, was still upon her head, making her look absurdly, but daintily, feminine, like a pretty woman upon the stage who is acting a boy's part without sacrificing her hair. But the Princess I suppose had long since cut off her beautiful locks, and had her luxuriant schoolgirl tresses made into a wig. The short hair of the Prince was all she had left.

So this was the secret of Dhalmatia? The General had been right after all. Only one child had been born to the Red Fox, and the old nurse had forfeited her life for telling the truth. This was why the Duke had attempted to exclude Nick and myself from the castle; this was why he appeared so anxious when I tried to examine his son upon the couch in the hallway after the accident, and why he strove to remind her of her sex by his prolonged cry of "My son! my son!" so that, recovering consciousness, she might not betray herself. This was why the Duke hated the General, knowing him to be suspicious.

A great pity welled up in my heart for this slip of a girl with the big, brown, loving eyes, who had been compelled to live such a life of deception through the long years of the past; a life in which every act must be studied and every moment filled with fear; a life in which the womanhood, in which I knew she gloried, must be put aside for the mock manhood of the boy.

But I would not do anything to render her burden heavier. My only hope was to retreat as silently as possible, so that she might not know she was discovered. And I would keep my own counsel. But even as my mind reverted to the secret panel, I saw Solonika bend forward and gaze deeply into the mirror. Her

face became reflected upon the glass and her eyes were wide open with horror. I saw that my presence in her room was known.

What must have been her feelings when she saw me? Naturally her first thought must have been that I was a spy sent by General Palmora to do the work which I had done. Her own doors were locked, as I soon found out, and she knew that I had come stealthily in through the panel door. If I should escape by the same means and carry the news of my discovery to my friends, Bharbazonia would be ringing with her shame in the morning. Was this to be the end of her years of work? Perhaps she thought of her father's sorrow at missing the great ambition of his life on the eve of its fulfilment. God knows what terrible pictures rushed before her mind in those few swift seconds. One thing only must have been clear to her. The intruder must not leave the palace. But how was she to stop me? If she came forward I had but to step backward one step to be in the other room, and then my way lay unobstructed to the castle door. Once on the lawn I would be able to escape before her father's servants could run me down.

She was quick-witted as she was clever, and she had much at stake. She withdrew her face from the mirror and steadied herself against the dressing-table while she rapidly thought out a plan to get between me and the secret door. She could not see me now, but I knew she was listening to the slightest sound which would indicate that I was retreating.

"Therese," she called to her maid, who no doubt was in one of the rooms beyond; the control she had over her voice was wonderful. But the maid did not reply. Solonika waited, and spoke aloud as if to herself, but it was for my benefit.

"Where is the girl? Why doesn't she come and dress me? I suppose I shall have to pick up my own skirt."

With her eyes turned toward the skirt, lying between us, she came toward me as if to pick it up; but, as she reached for it, she suddenly straightened up and sprang between me and the panel. There she stood defiantly at bay, guarding the passage like a magnificent young lioness defending her cubs. Her eyes gleamed with hatred as she faced me, and I saw that she held in her hand the long-bladed hunting knife which served as a letter opener upon her dressing-table.

I watched her fascinated, temporarily unable to lift hand or foot in my own defence. Her face was working with a passion so terrible that she no longer looked herself, but like some deeply moved insane person wrought up to such a pitch of excitement that murder becomes easy. Her lips were tightly compressed and her eyes blazed with an intensity of feeling.

With a half articulate cry of a wild beast she flung herself suddenly upon me, grasping her knife in both hands and raising it high above her head to give more power to her blow, aimed at my heart.

Had I not been warned by the expression upon her face when she saw me

in the mirror, and been thus partially prepared for her swift attack, I might have died there at her feet.

CHAPTER XI

THE HIDDEN PASSAGE

A crown! what is it?
 It is to bear the miseries of the people!
 To hear their murmurs, feel their discontents,
 And sink beneath a load of splendid care!
 To have your best success ascribed to fortune,
 And fortune's failures all ascribed to you!
 It is to sit upon a joyless height,
 To every blast of changing fate exposed!
 Too high for hope! Too great for happiness!

—*Hannah More: Daniel.*

When Solonika hurled herself upon my breast she found me ready for her. I was not overborne by the shock of the encounter, and my eye never lost track of the knife in its descent. Instinctively I protected my heart with my elbows and caught her wrists with both hands in a grip of iron.

She struggled like the mad woman she temporarily was, but her recently dislocated arm robbed her of much of her power and she finally, under the pressure of my fingers, released her hold upon her weapon. The knife fell to the carpet between us. I crushed her against my chest as tightly as I could without hurting her, just as a boxer will run into clinches with his nimble antagonist to keep from getting hurt. The pain in her arm, and the knowledge that she was powerless against my strength in a physical encounter, and weaponless, brought on a quick reaction. Her body relaxed in my arms and she broke into a torrent of tears, more hard to bear than her desperate anger.

"Solonika," I whispered, "will you listen to me?"

"No, no, no," she sobbed; "let me go! Let me go."

"If I let you go will you promise not to attempt my life again?"

Sobs were my only answer.

"Solonika," I said, "there is no need for all this show of feeling. I am not

here to harm you or yours. Your secret is safe with me.”

Her weeping continued, but I knew that she was listening.

”If I meant to escape, it is in my power to do so. I need but thrust you aside and leap through the panel. You could not stop me before I reached my friends. To prove to you that I mean you no ill, I will release you and permit you to do as you will with me.”

I set her upon her feet as I spoke, but I was careful to pick up the knife and put it in my pocket. Dazed, she stood looking at me through her tears.

”You know; oh, my God, you know!” she cried.

There was the same look in her eyes which I noticed when she first detected my presence. But, seeing that I made no move, her old courage returned. She ran to the wall and pressed an electric button that rang a bell somewhere in the castle out of hearing. Then she possessed herself of a silver-mounted revolver which she took from her wardrobe.

Although I knew that, never as long as I lived and she reigned upon her throne, could she feel that her secret was safe; that at the least I might be imprisoned for life in the family dungeon, and at the most condemned to death by her angry father, I made no move to stop her. I pinned my faith to the hope that I would be able to convince her, and if necessary, her father, that I would not betray them even to my friends.

”Stand in the centre of the room,” she ordered, and I promptly obeyed. She took up her position against the panel and we faced each other, waiting. My ready compliance with her curt commands aroused her suspicions instead of allaying them as I wished. She thought I must have good reason not to fear her.

”Your friend Nicholas no doubt is waiting you in the Prince’s room?” she flung out. ”He too has seen, and you wish to give him time to escape.”

My object was not to escape, else I might have lied to her.

”No,” I said, ”I came alone.”

She smiled pityingly upon me, but there was no mistaking the look of relief which passed over her face. The secret was still within the keeping of the battlements and there it would stay.

”You fool; oh, you fool,” she said. Her contempt was unbearable.

”Aye, fool indeed,” I rejoined bitterly, ”ever to hope that you would see and understand. It is true that my presence here indicates that I have been spying upon your movements. It is true that I suspected you. But have my subsequent actions been those of a spy? When you were powerless in my arms a moment ago, did I try to escape? Don’t you see that the show of supremacy you now have over me, I have willingly given you? Does not your better judgment tell you that I am speaking the truth?”

”I wish I could believe you,” she said; ”it would make things easier.”

"Do believe me, Solonika," I pleaded. "Palmora did not send me here. I came alone to see you in the summer-house as I promised, and, not finding you there, I followed you to the castle. In the Prince's room I heard you singing and came here without knowing what I was to see."

"I cannot understand you, Dr. Wharton," she said, and I could see that my words were taking effect; "it is not fear of the consequences that makes you say this."

"What consequences?" I asked, wishing to learn what she intended doing with me.

"Of course you know that you can never leave this castle again," she said. I nodded.

"I do not know what method my father will take to insure your silence. The future is in his hands."

"It is likely then that my fate may be similar to that of the old nurse whose neck was broken," I said. She was startled.

"You know that, too?" she said.

"Yes, I know."

"How do you a stranger in Bharbazonia know this?"

"General Palmora has always suspected something. He told me."

"When father learns of this I fear for your life, sir."

I bowed; there was nothing to say.

"Perhaps you will explain, Dr. Wharton, why you are willing to withhold from your friends that which they would give much to know," she asked.

"Why should I wish to tell?" I asked her in return. "I have no interest in Bharbazonian politics. Neither have I any friends in this country who would be benefited by my information. But I tell you frankly that, if there were any way by which I could prevent you from continuing this dreadful masquerade, I would gladly make use of it."

My answer staggered her. But I wished her to understand me thoroughly.

"Why?" she gasped.

"Because I pity you."

It was a tense moment for me. If I had read this girl aright she was a womanly woman and her heart had often rebelled against her lot. If I was to convince her of my sincerity, I must show her that I understood; that I knew how much she detested playing the part of a man; that I sympathized with her. Knowing that I felt this interest in her, she must appreciate that I would be the last man in the world to make the performance harder for her to bear.

She looked at me in wonder, while her assurance in herself vanished. Her knees became weak and she suddenly sat down. But it seemed as if fate were against me. Just when I needed her undivided attention most, there came a knock

upon the door that startled us both. Solonika recovered her composure instantly, remembering the business in hand.

"Who's there?" she called, watching me for any move to escape. But I made no sign.

"Your Highness rang,"—it was the voice of Therese, the maid.

"Tell my father to come here instantly," ordered the Princess. She was determined to carry out her original plan of submitting everything to her father. Therese ran upon her errand, for there was that in Solonika's voice which lent the maid the wings of fear. The Duke would soon be here; there was not much time left me.

"Your friends will miss you," smiled the Princess.

"Yes," I returned, although I knew that I was wasting time on the wrong track, "and they know that I came here. They will search for me in the right place."

"But with little success," she replied; "Dhalmatia knows how to keep its secrets."

"Nicholas will not rest until he has found me," I said.

"But David will never find his Jonathan. They left you in the roadway. No one saw you enter the castle and no one will see you leave. You mayhap were captured by highwaymen. Bharbazonia is full of them."

"You forget Dajerak. He let me in."

"He is incorruptible. He will say he never saw you."

"But my friends will not rest until they have found me."

"We will invite them to search the castle if they become insistent, but they will not find you."

"This is idle talk," I said, "beside the purpose. I knew when I placed myself in your power that I ran this risk. If it be necessary to pay such a price, I will pay it. But one of these days I will convince you that I mean it when I say that your secret is safe with me."

"You said a while back you pitied me," she suggested, and my heart jumped that she had not forgotten. "Perhaps you will tell me why."

The Duke would be here any moment. I had come to my last stand.

"You have asked for an explanation. I will give it to you," I said. "I pity you because you do not enter into this masquerade of your own free will, nor because you like it, but rather because you love your father and desire to further his ambition. So far, am I not right?"

"I love my father," she replied, soberly, "he is all I have in the world."

"And to that affection you have sacrificed everything in life that makes life worth the living. Where are the girl friends who should be yours? You dare not bring them here for fear of discovery. The young nobles of this country cannot

come to see you. Here you live in loneliness, you who were made for better things. You had a taste of happiness when you were away at the English schools, and you know what you are sacrificing. And for what? To gratify an old man's whim."

"No, no," she cried, as if she would not hear.

"Have you stopped to look at the future? To me that will be worse than the past. The time will come when you may no longer be a woman but must ever be a man. Once you have taken up the sceptre the door is shut behind you. You can never marry; you can never have a lover and a husband; you can never have children. All this to gratify an evil ambition."

A look of deep agony drove the light of battle from the poor girl's eyes. She followed each word until her pent-up feelings could no longer be restrained.

"Stop, stop! for God's sake!" she cried, beating upon her breast with her clenched fists. "Don't, don't talk so. I cannot bear it. Haven't I known all this? Oh, haven't I seen it often in the night? Sleep flees from me and these thoughts come and will not let me rest. The years that are past have been unhappy enough, but the years to come will be worse. To be always watchful lest I betray myself! to go on acting—acting—ever acting, never able to be just myself—"

"Never to love as other women love," I said, gently.

"Oh, you don't know," she cried, vehemently, "you don't know all the agony I have suffered. I have seen peasant women in the streets of Nischon suckling their dirty babes; I have seen the love in their eyes for the stalwart men at their sides, and I have hated them. Hated them, do you hear? I could have killed them for daring to be happy while I am so miserable—I, a princess of Bharbazonia. They point me out to their little ones and hold them up to see the great lady riding by—they envy me—me!—me! Oh, God, how little they know that I would give everything to change places with the humblest of them."

Sob upon sob seemed wrung from her soul by the grief that was deeper than I ever suspected. She was totally unconscious of my presence when I placed my hand upon her head in a gentle caress. She rested against me with a sigh.

"I have thought about it so much of late. I think my heart is breaking. I try to tell father, but he cannot understand. But you can, you do understand."

"Yes," I said, "I do understand. And I know that the worst is still before you."

"Oh, no, nothing can be worse," she cried, as if she would ward off a blow.

"Your father is old. He must some day leave you."

"Alone! I shall be alone?" she cried. "I cannot go on alone. I cannot do it, I tell you! When he is gone I shall die also. I shall be old then, and I shall welcome death when he tardily comes."

It was awful to hear a young woman with all of life before her talking like this. I permitted her to weep until her tears ceased to flow of their own accord.

When she became quieter she looked up in my face, and wonder was written on her countenance.

"You understand!" was all she said, but there was something like awe in her voice.

"It was because I understood that I would do all in my power to prevent you sacrificing yourself. It was because I understood that I would not escape, when I could, to give you additional cause for worry. It was because I understood that I will keep your secret forever. Now, do you understand at last?"

"But, how do you know all these things? You have read my very soul and made me say that which I never dreamed I should say to any one."

"It is because—I am your friend," I said.

In a voice full of excitement the Red Fox, pounding upon the outer door, demanded admittance. Like the knocking on the door in the play of Macbeth, the interruption brought us back to a realization of the things of the world without. We sprang to our feet and faced each other.

"Do you believe me, Solonika?" I whispered.

Noiselessly she pushed the curtains aside at the head of the couch upon which her large French hat and red parasol were lying. Behind the curtains a door stood open, revealing a pair of stone steps leading down into the darkness.

"Go, go!" she whispered in turn. I knew how much she was risking in thus giving me my freedom.

"Good-bye, Solonika," I said, pausing upon the top step.

She held out her hand and I pressed it reverently against my lips.

"Good-bye, my—friend," she said.

The curtain fell, shutting off the light, but I did not go down the steps. I waited behind the curtain and heard her open the door to the Red Fox.

"What is the matter?" he cried, rushing into the room. "Therese said something had happened to you."

"Nothing is wrong, father," said she. "I needed you because—I am afraid to be left alone."

"Now, daughter, control yourself. You will be in a nervous condition during the coronation if you permit yourself to go to pieces thus. Son of my soul, you will soon reign as King in Bharbazonia, then you will forget these womanly weaknesses!"

"Yes, I shall be King and forget my womanhood," she replied, listlessly.

I had heard enough and crept away. The stone steps were very dark and, for fear of making a noise, I removed my shoes. The Duke must not know. Presently, by feeling my way along the wall at the side, I came noiselessly to the end of the steps and found that I was in a narrow underground passage. Judging from the interminable number of steps, I was deep under the castle foundations. The

tunnel led away from the castle, if I was any judge of direction.

I followed it slowly, still feeling my way along the wall and watching for pitfalls under my feet. Subterranean passages I knew were always full of dangers. I might even now be in the dungeon with which Solonika threatened me, where my friend would never be able to find me. Not that I doubted her, but she might have sent me here to protect me from her father, and her father from me.

The passage kept continually dipping downward as if it were going far under the earth, but it also led me further and further from the castle. Of that I was sure. Its sides were beginning to drip with water, and I put on my shoes after stepping into a puddle. My progress was slow and, although I listened, I heard no sound from the castle. At last my outstretched hand came in contact with a wooden door. Softly I felt for the knob and cautiously turned it. What was I to find at the end of the passage? Was sudden death lurking there? The door was unlocked and yielded to the pressure of my hand. I opened it slowly outward and was greeted with a flood of light.

A tall Japanese screen was the first object that met my view. Beside it was a picture of Solonika standing on the tips of her dainty toes in the midst of a Bharbazonian dance. Close to it was another picture of Solonika in the costume of the Prince. There was her easy chair close to the flowers by the windows—I was standing in the summer-house—free!

Solonika was trusting me!

CHAPTER XII

THE RENUNCIATION

Oh, ever thus from childhood's hour,
I've seen my fondest hopes decay;
I never loved a tree or flower,
But 'twas the first to fade away!

—*Moore: Lalla Rookh.*

When I returned to Castle Framkor that evening and joined Nicholas and the General my difficulties began. No longer was I the care-free youth who had come to Bharbazonia in search of recreation. I shared another's secret now and it weighed heavily upon me. How it was to bear me down, and make my life

unhappy while I remained in this cursed country, I was soon to learn.

The General was delivering a lecture to Nick on the heedless folly of youth, referring to his "unseemly conduct" in the gardens of the palace of the King. Nick refused to take him seriously and the old man, who felt that the subject was full of grave possibilities, was very angry.

"What is Teskla to you," he said, "that you should kiss her before all the world? I could forgive you, my son, if you expressed any affection for the girl who truly loves you. But you are simply playing with her."

"What makes you think the Princess cares for me?" asked Nick.

"Good heavens, man! can't you see it? Does a woman lie for a man unless she loves him? Yes, sir, lie is the word. Don't you contradict me, sir; I will not stand it."

"Well, what if she did tell a little fib?" returned Nick. "She saved herself from her father's wrath. There is no occasion for so much heat, Godfather. Can't a fellow kiss a pretty girl in Bharbazonia without all this fuss?"

"But, the consequences! Have you figured them out?" said the General. "The King believes that he saw Prince Raoul embrace the Princess in public, before witnesses. And he was pleased. Hark you, pleased!"

"He certainly was. A blind man could have noticed it."

"A cloud no bigger than a man's hand; but the storm will break. You know the King's dearest wish is to see his daughter married to Prince Raoul. He is up to something. That scene in the garden meant more to him than appears on the surface. He has figured out some way to effect his purpose and, when the dénouement comes, and the Prince denies he was in the garden, where will you be, facing the royal wrath?"

"I hope it will not come to that," said Nick, gravely. He knew the General well enough to feel that the old man did not jump at conclusions, and that he was almost always right in his judgment. My entrance at that moment was grateful to Nick for it broke up the lecture.

"I am glad to see you back, Dale," said Nick, putting his arm around my neck in the old affectionate manner. Then came the shock of the feeling that something had happened to me. I resented Nick's friendliness!

"How about the boar hunt?" he continued, not appearing to notice how I avoided his arm and drew away from him. "When do we start?"

His question brought back the memory of my original purpose in visiting the castle. Was it only two hours ago that I had left them in the automobile to walk to the summer-house? So much to change my life had happened in such a short time that I could scarcely believe it possible. It seemed as if a month had elapsed. I had forgotten all about the boar hunt.

"I do not know," I replied, truthfully enough. "I saw the Princess but did

not see the Prince.”

The boar hunt did not materialize for many days and in the interim all three of us found plenty to occupy our attention. The General and Nick frequently left me alone now, when they went to meetings at the Turk’s Head Inn and to Nischon. Although they often invited me to accompany them I always refused. Most of my time was spent in the summer-house with Solonika.

How I worried when she did not appear for the next two days! I haunted the vicinity of the little den and even went as far as the clearing in the hope that she would again see me and send me word by her maid. I dared not go to the castle until I knew how it stood with the Red Fox. If she had reconsidered her action and told him, he might not view my escape in the same light as she did, and in that case I was safer out of his hands. But, on the third day, I found her sitting in her easy chair looking pale and ill. She seemed more than pleased to see me.

”I shall have to ask you to prescribe for me, Dr. Wharton,” she smiled. ”I never went to pieces like this before. I have been in bed for two days and I cry a great deal. What is wrong with me?”

”I cannot prescribe for Your Highness,” I replied, ”because you will not take my medicine.”

”You haven’t given me any yet.”

”Then here is my prescription. It will make you whole again; of that I am positive. Go this very hour to your father and tell him that you cannot continue this deception. Tell him that it is killing you and ask him, for the sake of the love he bears you, to permit you to go away out of this country at least for a year.”

”You are a good physician,”—she laughed a little and shook her head; ”but I cannot take your medicine. If, after all these years, I refused to go on, what would my father do? How the nobles would ridicule him! He would die of grief and shame. No, no, there is no escape; I must go on—forever!”

The light and the bright sunshine soon brought her spirits back, and she became the old happy Solonika. That morning she was like an April day, alternating between showers and sunshine with astonishing rapidity.

”Do not imagine, sir,” she said, ”that there is nothing but woe in the situation. Let us talk of something more pleasant. Do you recall the time when you were permitted to see both the Prince and the Princess in the castle?”

”Yes,” I said, ”and I have often wondered since how you deceived me so cleverly.”

”We all had a good laugh after you were gone. You see there are compensations. Shall I tell you how we did it?”

”If you will.”

”It began when you hurt me shaking my hand. I knew that you were study-

ing me and that you were suspicious. Your friend Nicholas did all the talking and you listened and watched. I had nothing to fear from him, but I knew I had from you. That evening I talked it over with father. He was positive that Palmora had poisoned your mind against us and that it was time we prepared an antidote. We waited for your expected visit, but you did not come. I was watching you when you appeared at the top of the hill and turned back, and I understood that your pride would not permit you to knock again at our door. I sent Therese and you fell into the trap."

"Will you come into my parlour said the Spider to the Fly," I said.

"Exactly. Dajerak brought you to the Prince's room where father and I were pretending to play cards. Oh, it was hard not to keep from laughing at you. You looked at the Prince so suspiciously, and how gently you hinted that you would like to see the Princess! Father enjoyed it immensely. It had been a long while since we had done anything of the kind. Not since King Gregory called to see the twins."

Her laughter was not easy to bear.

"Then Dajerak, the slow old Dajerak, took you all around the inner court in order to give me time to dress. I only had to put on this long hair—its my own anyhow—slip a loose dressing gown over my boy's clothes and I was ready for you. My, what a long time you were in coming. I was afraid you would shake hands with me again. That's why I did not lay down my sewing. You did not notice that my blue slippers and my black stockings—I had no time to change them—were not altogether in keeping, did you?"

"I did not notice."

"I was afraid you would."

"The tunnel to the summer-house was also part of the game?" I asked.

"Yes, that was to enable me to entertain visitors there and appear before them afterward in the guise of the Prince in the castle. You must not think that we allayed the suspicions of Bharbazonia without a struggle. It was by means of the underground passage that we won over the Grand Duke of Marbosa. Palmora poisoned his mind, too, and he paid us a visit. He saw me in the summer-house and asked for the Prince, then he rode off to the castle. I had to run with all my might to get there in time. You should have seen his face when he met the Prince. You see there is lots of fun and excitement in the life. I should die of *ennui* without it."

"I suppose it is full of innocent fun now, Solonika," I said, "but after you are king it will be serious. Did you ever think of the sacrilege your coronation in the Cathedral will entail?"

"I have thought of it," she replied, gravely.

"If you are found out now, people will laugh, after the first blush of excite-

ment is over; but if you are found out then—”

”They will put me to death,” she said, simply.

There was something sublime about her courage. Everything that I could suggest as a future possibility she had thought out before me. Nothing was left unconsidered. As I talked with her day after day, always upon the same fascinating subject, my respect for her loyalty to her father increased. So absorbing was her love for him that she was ready, aye, willing to lay down her life to further his ambitions.

She knew full well the meaning of the vengeance of the Church. I could not frighten her with the story of the fate of the Witch of Utrepect. While the fire was still alight around the body of that unfortunate woman, Solonika, as if impelled by a terrible fascination, had ridden over to the village on her black horse and watched the dying embers complete their fiendish work.

She could think; she could feel. And how dreadful must have been her thoughts if she permitted herself to believe that in case of discovery her fate might be similar. If the Church, backed by the peasantry, would punish blasphemy in such mediæval fashion, what would they not do to one who defiled the altar?

As frequently as we talked of these things, we always arrived at the same conclusion; but we always returned to the discussion, when we were alone. When Nick came along, which he did as often as he could, we hid our feelings, and Solonika shone at her best. I could see with some dismay that she enjoyed his society. He was bright, cheerful, smiling, while I was inclined to be gloomy.

”Something is the matter with Dale,” said Nick to her one afternoon. ”He is preoccupied and moody. Every night he goes to bed early, leaving the General and me to our arguments. What do you suppose is wrong with him?”

”You should know better than I,” she replied, banteringly; ”perhaps he is pining for the girl he left behind him.”

”How about it, Dale?” said Nick.

But on these occasions I found no ready answer. I was not as adept in the art of intrigue as the Princess. I could only leave the summer-house abruptly, with Nick watching my strange action in open-mouthed astonishment. Rebel against it as I would, I could see the breach widen between Nick and me day by day. We had never had a misunderstanding in our lives before.

As if the secret I was hiding were not enough for any man to bear in silence, Solonika insisted upon flirting outrageously with Nick, always in my presence. But I felt that she relied upon me for the true companionship which had always been denied her. Once or twice she unconsciously called me by my first name, and she clung to my arm in a tantalizing way at parting. Why she acted with Nicholas as she did I could not understand. But what man ever did fully fathom the heart of a woman? Never once did she reprove me when I called her Solonika.

She seemed to like it. So, one day I ventured to bare my inmost feelings to her. It was at the close of one of our most intimate talks, when I was urging again the necessity of throwing up the whole dangerous business.

"Solonika, why will you not go away from here and leave all your worries behind?" I said.

"Where shall I go?" she returned.

"Anywhere. Only go; surely you have friends in England where you went to school."

"I have no friends anywhere but here."

"Don't say that. You have me. I am your friend."

"Surely you do not urge that I fly with you?"

My feeling got the better of me. I determined to make an attempt to save her, even against herself. There was nothing to bind her to her country except the great love she bore her father. It was worth the try.

"Solonika, we must come to an understanding. You surely have guessed how I feel toward you. I do not want to give offence; neither do I care to appear absurd in your eyes. You are a Princess. You 'sit upon a joyless height, too high for hope; too great for happiness.' I am an American lacking title and position. But what I have is yours to command. If a love that shall live forever can do aught to make your life happier, and lead you away to a humble home full of peace and happiness, it stands ready at your bidding."

She understood as I knew she would. I could feel it in the light hand that rested on my arm; in the sad, gentle look within the depth of her brown eyes. She could not bear to face me and turned away, apparently to watch the setting sun of the dying December day as it sank amid the thousand colours of a glorious finality.

Even as I watched her I knew there was no hope and that she was forever removed from me. Her feet were set in the pathway she was destined to tread before she was born. She must go her way and I mine until the end. She would continue acting the boy before the world. She would be crowned and reign as King in Bharbazonia. In spite of all I could do she would live her unsexed life, guarding her secret carefully until death released her. I was powerless to save her even from herself. The love she had for her father was greater than any affection she might have even for me.

"We will not talk of it any more, my—friend," she said. And thus did she sacrifice me also upon the altar of her devotion.

It was Nick who brought about the boar hunt which was fraught with such important events, and which had not been spoken of since the day I stumbled upon the skeleton in Dhalmatia's closet.

"What has become of the Prince, Your Highness?" he asked Solonika when

one day we were taking our leave together.

"He does not look with favour upon you two young men," she replied. "You have not accepted his invitation to hunt with him."

"That was Dale's fault," Nick replied; "he forgot all about it. Tell the Prince we will be glad to hunt with him any time."

"He will be delighted," said she. "I do not believe he has left the house for ten days. After the coronation he will be very much occupied. The air in the woods will do him good."

"Four days more and he will be King. Tell him he had better make the most of his freedom," Nick said.

"Very well," said she, "be ready in the morning and he will come over to Framkor for you."

Thus easily did Solonika plan to appear in the Prince's clothes and forget her womanhood.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RIVALS

He is a fool who thinks by force or skill,
To turn the current of a woman's will.

—*Tuke: Five Hours.*

The winding of the hunting horn and the barking of dogs upon Castle Framkor's lawns the next morning told me that Solonika had kept her word. We were at breakfast. Looking through the long low windows of the dining room, I saw the Prince, in all the gaiety of a red hunting costume and high-top, varnished boots, dismount among his pack.

What argument Solonika had used with her father to procure his permission to go abroad in the character of the Prince four days before the coronation, I could not imagine. I had told her of the coming and going of the black-cloaked men; the Red Fox knew that some plot was in the wind and shrewdly suspected that it was directed against the Prince. For that reason Solonika had left off going abroad as the Prince for the past ten days. It was easy for her to pass the time with me in the summer-house. Once, while riding out in my company and Nick's, she met the cloaked men. They recognized Solonika and let us pass with

scarcely a glance in our direction.

All this, I say, the Red Fox knew; but I suppose he found it impossible to control the girl. He indeed is "a fool who thinks by force or skill to turn the current of a woman's will." When Solonika made up her mind to do a thing she generally did it. But the Duke had recorded his protest in the number of men he sent with her. Twenty-five well-mounted retainers from the Red Fox's retinue surrounded the Prince, holding the dogs in leashes of four, and twenty-five more, I soon learned, had preceded us to the hunting grounds.

Solonika turned her horse over to one of her men and entered the breakfast room. Both Nick and the General stood upon their feet to their Prince as he entered. They urged the Prince to join them at table, but the Prince insisted that he had already partaken of food and could eat nothing. He, however, took the chair which the General courteously drew up for him and accepted a cup of coffee.

I was glad that Solonika did not look in my direction for my agitation would have made it hard for her. It was the first time I was present when she was under the fire of the General's sharp eyes, and I trembled for her. I felt myself grow hot and cold by turns, overcome by the fear that she would betray herself. Although she was attired in the Prince's hunting raiment, how different she looked to me now. It seemed impossible that the astute General could not tell that Solonika and not the Prince sat before him.

But the daring girl had the confidence born of years of success. As I became accustomed to the novelty of the situation, I began to take pleasure in watching her superb acting. She carried it off with so much relish and in such a high-handed manner. Never once did she forget the quaint little burr in her English speech. Knowing how perfectly she could speak it, I marvelled she did not sometimes forget. But I also realized why she elected to make the Prince talk brokenly; it gave the Prince a difference in character which disarmed suspicion and kept the individuality of Solonika and the Prince apart, not only in the minds of her hearers, but also in her own mind; for the difference in dialect acted as a constant reminder that she was no longer a woman but a man.

"I am deeply sensible of the honour which you have bestowed upon Castle Framkor by your presence to-day," said the General, humbly. "Bharbazonia has seen but little of her future king."

"I have been taking my ease against the great day not far distant," replied the Prince. "It will be a long time before I may again enjoy the pleasure of a hunt."

"I wish to apologize, Your Highness, for my seeming discourtesy in not accepting your invitation two weeks ago," said Nick. "The truth of the matter is that I did accept with pleasure, but my messenger failed to mention the matter when he arrived at your castle. He is not usually forgetful, so I imagine he was

well entertained.”

Nick’s remark brought back the remembrance of the day when I left the automobile and discovered the secret of Dhalmatia. The Prince also remembered the occasion but did not betray the slightest emotion.

”You refer to Dr. Wharton as your messenger,” said the Prince. ”I have not seen him except on the single occasion when he visited my father and me. But I understand that he and my sister Solonika have become great friends.”

”Ah, ha,” laughed Nick, ”and so the cat is out of the bag. He and I are now rivals.”

The General permitted his fork to fall heavily upon his plate as he stared at Nick, remembering that young man’s flirtation with Princess Teskla, and something akin to a groan escaped him. But Nick only laughed.

”I know nothing of any cat,” said the Prince, gravely, with well acted simplicity.

”It is an idiom,” explained the General, ”which means that you have betrayed your sister’s secret.”

I straightened up in my chair at the old man’s solemn words. Had he purposely touched upon the thing which was making me miserable, or did he do it unconsciously? The Prince’s nerve was of iron. He sipped his coffee unmoved, but his eyes never wavered from the General’s face as he asked innocently:

”What secret, General Palmora?”

”The secret that Dale, here, is much interested in Solonika.”

”Is he?” he asked, sweeping me with his half closed eyes. I was forced to drop mine while I felt the colour rise to my cheeks.

”I do not know,” said the General. ”Nicholas has just said so.”

”A man is beginning to fall in love when he shows signs of forgetfulness,” said Nick. ”He is most forgetful of late.”

”I warn you, Dale,” he continued turning to me, ”that a woman will come between us yet. If I am not mistaken the Princess Solonika will be that woman.”

”The Princess can never be anything to me,” I replied.

”She is the brightest woman I have ever met,” said Nick to the Prince. ”Why don’t you travel, Your Highness, and acquire her gift of languages. Your English, for example, is not as good as hers.”

”No?” smiled the Prince through his nose, like a Frenchman’s ”*Non*.” ”Wherein is my English not perfect?”

”It is good enough for Bharbazonia, Your Highness,” said the General, pushing back his chair. ”After you become king you will never speak such a useless language. Your French is all you need at court and you speak that perfectly.”

”Thank you, General Palmora,” said he. Then, turning again to Nicholas, he added: ”Are you serious in saying you admire Solonika? Pray, what do you

find to admire in her? To me she seems like an ordinary girl."

Oh, Solonika, deliberately fishing for a compliment, the eternal feminine being ever present! I could scarcely believe my ears; but this was my first day under fire and I lacked her confidence.

"Ordinary girl?" echoed Nick. "She is in the first place extraordinarily handsome. I have travelled all over the world, and seen all kinds of women; some were beautiful and some were clever, but few were both handsome and bright, as she is. I mean to become better acquainted with her when you are king."

"But my sister thinks of going away after I am crowned," he said.

"Going away?" Nick returned. "Very good; the world is small; I can readily find her. I trust that you will speak well of me to her."

"But you haven't told me wherein lies her wonderful charm which seems to have captivated both you and Dale—Wharton, I think you said your friend's name was?"

"How about it, Dale?" cried Nick, "has she bound you to her chariot wheels, too?"

"To me she is the most wonderful woman in the world," I made answer, looking straight into her eyes. Solonika flushed a little and gave me a quick sign of *camaraderie* that made me very happy.

"A woman has come between David and Jonathan," said Nick.

"The woman has come," I replied, and for the first time I realized as I gazed in his face that Nick was not joking. I, who knew him, could read there plainly the intensity of his feeling, and I suppose he could read my heart as well. The spirit of contest was lit in our eyes. We looked at each other like two young animals meeting face to face in the spring-time. Yet there was a note of regret in Nick's voice when he slowly repeated:

"The woman has come."

"But, wherein is her charm? You have not told me," reiterated the Prince.

"Your Highness has never been in love, it is plain to see," said Nick, "else you would not ask such a question. Her particular charm is that she is she. A man goes through the world meeting many women. Although he may not know it, he carries an ideal within his heart. How his ideal is formed, who can tell? But it is there, nevertheless. Unconsciously, he measures all women by this ideal; one after another falls before it, until as time goes by he loses hope of ever finding her. But one day he meets the woman. He may not recognize her immediately, but after the meeting his thoughts follow her. They meet again and after her departure comes loneliness which is a part of him except when she is near. One cannot put it into words; it lies below, too deep for utterance. Why she is she I cannot tell. I only know the Princess Solonika affects me so."

"I cannot sit here and listen to his fool talk any longer," exclaimed the Gen-

eral, rising from the table in some heat. "If you boys are going to stir up the game it is time you were about it. Princess Teskla would be delighted to hear your definition of love, Nick."

"Life's fires burn low in the aged," smiled Nick, looking at me.

"So?" said the Prince, whom nothing escaped, "why should Teskla be interested?"

"We have reason to believe that the King's daughter is suffering from loneliness, such as young Nicholas describes," said the General grimly.

"Why should she?" said the Prince. "She is surrounded by the court at Nischon. If any one is lonely I should think it would be my sister. She has often complained of living in the country, seeing no one. How can one be lonely in the city? Teskla has all the gentlemen of the world's consulates to help her while away the time; she may travel at will; while my sister must always be by my father's side; she may not travel; she may not see any one."

The Prince either purposely refused, or actually failed, to see the import of the General's words and the General was too loyal to make them clearer. So, drifting from one subject to another, we followed the old man to the castle door where the hunters and their dogs were idling away their time.

While waiting for their young master, the large army of hunters had been amusing themselves at their own discretion. They were dark-eyed, handsome Bharbazonians, the finest horsemen in the world, riding with all the ease and abandon of their Cossack brethren. For the saying in Bharbazonia is, "Scratch a Russian and you will find a Cossack; scratch a Cossack and you will find a Bharbazonian." They were all dressed alike in the favourite green cloth of the country, and all carried clusters of long-handled spears or pikes, by which the wild boar was to be killed as he broke cover and charged the horse and rider.

The Prince, unaided, mounted the black which had thrown him at sight of our automobile. He waited for Nick and me to mount the animals which the groom had saddled while we breakfasted. Our horses were apart from the rest and Nick and I were out of ear-shot of the Prince when we met.

"What chance have you with Solonika?" he said, in a low voice. "She is a Princess and you are only an American."

"None whatever, Nick," I said. "You are right; Princesses of reigning houses do not wed Americans."

"But you have not given up hope?"

"I never had any."

"Dale, old chum," said Nick, "you have beaten me at chess; I have beaten you at billiards. It's a draw with the gloves. But, after every defeat or victory, we have always shaken hands. It was always a fair game. I know you, Dale. You never give up without a struggle. Therefore there will be a battle. We are older

now and we strike harder. But, here's my hand on it—that no matter which way this may end it will make no difference between us. As far as I am concerned a woman can never come between David and Jonathan.”

”As far as I am concerned she never can either, Nick,” I said.

The grip of friendship we exchanged was sincere. Whatever of disappointment the future has in store for me, Nick's place in my heart would always remain as fixed as Polaris. And I know that nothing could alter his feeling for me.

It was plain that his position in his own country was such as would enable him some day to aspire to the hand of a Princess, a privilege denied to me, a plain American. By the accident of birth, then, he had an advantage over me; but in one thing I had the advantage over him.

When we mounted to follow the pack, he rode after the Prince while I rode after the Princess.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ABDUCTION

He thought at heart, like courtly Chesterfield
Who, after a long chase o'er hills, dales, bushes,
And what not, though he rode beyond all price,
Asks next day, "if men ever hunted twice?"

—Byron: *Don Juan*.

Hunting foxes with a pack of hounds is an English and American pastime; hunting wolves with borzoi dogs is a Russian amusement; hunting the boar, the national entertainment of Bharbazonia. The alacrity with which the men started, when we were at last in the saddle, revealed their impatience at the delay.

”Keep an eye on the Prince, Nick,” called the General from the castle door. ”Remember Marbosa's oath. Only three days are left.”

”All right, Godfather,” Nick replied. But he did not offer any explanation to me as to what the Duke proposed to do, and deftly changed the subject. All he would say was that the General was talking politics and that one is wise who does not bother his head about what does not concern him.

Nevertheless, I secretly concluded that it would be just as well for me to keep as near the Prince as possible during the day. Some political plot was coming

to a head of which I knew nothing. What this danger was that seemed to threaten I could not imagine, but I connected it with the horsemen who rode in the early hours of the dawn, and who loitered around the summer-house in their long Spanish cloaks.

The Prince, riding at the head of the pack as perfectly erect as a cavalryman, was surrounded by his father's retainers, and close under the eye of the Master of the Hounds, when we joined him. Like the good-natured boy he seemed to be, he was enjoying the ride to the full. His cheeks were flushed with the healthy outdoor exercise and his eyes were bright with excitement. It was an ideal day with just enough of the brisk cut of winter in the air to keep the blood a-moving.

"It is good to be alive," he said, darting a quick look over his shoulder as we came up.

"Where have you planned to hunt, Prince?" asked Nicholas, ranging on one side of the black horse while I took the other.

"In the Forest of Zin."

"On the Framkor side of the river, or on Marbosa's?"

"My camp is pitched beside the Big Spring."

"Then we hunt on Marbosa's estate," said Nick, and I could see that he was not pleased at the prospect.

The Prince seemed highly amused at Nick's reply, and laughed as if he deemed he had made an important discovery.

"For an American, Mr. Fremsted," he smiled, "you know the Forest well."

Nick was nettled. He realized that he had almost committed himself. I saw him covertly glance at the Prince under his eyebrows as if he wondered how this slow-brained, broken-English-speaking youth had found the wit to trap him. But he was equal to the occasion.

"Oh," he replied, easily, "General Palmora during the past ten years has often had me hunting with him in this forest. I should know it well."

"So?" said the Prince, and the subject was dismissed for a time.

The Forest of Zin, as I soon found, was not far distant. In fact it began at the rear of the Framkor estate and extended, so they said, for some fifty miles to the north. All the nobles who owned the adjoining land had established a game preserve over the entire territory and the peasantry was not allowed within its sacred precincts. According to the Prince, many of them had broken the law and, when caught, were "bastinado'd"—severely beaten on the soles of the feet, a method of punishment inherited from the Turks.

So great was the density of the forest when we plunged into it along a narrow bridle path, and so magnificent the height of the trees, that the light of the sun filtered through with difficulty. The resulting gloom was like that of a cloudy day and had its necessary effect upon my spirits. Long narrow roads

opened vistas of wide clearings, beyond, which never materialized. All about was the mystery of silence as if the wild things watched in awe the human destroyer march by. Even the dogs, held firmly in leashes of four, lolled their red tongues from their mouths and ceased to give voice to their impatience.

The further we progressed the denser became the growth until at times we were compelled to bend over our horses' heads to avoid the wide arms of the giant oaks, gnarled and twisted, which hung low over our path. Speed at times was impossible and our progress was necessarily slow. The Forest of Zin was no place for a careless rider.

The Big Spring, of which the Prince had spoken, was the fountain head of a little brook that issued from the roots of the largest oak in the forest. We found a score of the Red Fox's men there, preparing a hunter's meal over many wood fires. The odour of the cooking was pleasant to the nostrils. When we dismounted I found that it was nearly eleven o'clock and that it had taken the forenoon to arrive at the hunting grounds.

Squirrels, rabbits and wild birds broiled on revolving spits before the fire, or baked in clay coverings in the heart of the embers, formed the body of the meal. We sat upon a bed of dry leaves and ate with good appetites. Nick and the Prince were in the best of spirits. They examined the spears and talked of the coming hunt with considerable enthusiasm. The black locks and the red curls were frequently commingled and my jealous heart again suffered many pangs at the sight. The Prince had not forgotten the episode of the morning, and it was not long before he again trapped Nick. This time the Prince asked him a quick question in the language, and Nick replied quite naturally before he realized what he had done. When he found himself caught he laughed at his own discomfiture as heartily as did the Prince.

"You are a most interesting man to me," the Prince said gayly. "You have been everywhere; you know so much. You speak so many languages. But why have you learned Bharbazonian? You speak it like a native."

"It is second nature to one who knows the Russian of the south," he replied. "After all, it is only a Slav dialect. I have been perfecting it during my visit here.

"Mysterious man," the Prince replied, "not to have permitted me to know before. Here I have been talking with difficulty in your tongue when I might have been using my own speech all the time."

Thus the Prince broke down Nick's reserve and they ran off into the dialect where I could not follow. To my disgust they seemed to be growing more interested in each other through the medium of the common language, and I was glad when the bush-beaters with their dogs left the party to commence the hunt. But it was a half hour after the hounds had gone that the Keeper of the Spears began his distribution of the weapons. After presenting one to the Prince and Nicholas,

he gave me one. The spear was about twelve feet long with a sort of bayonet at one end. It was exceedingly strong and well made, and I marvelled at its lightness. Where the steel met the stock there was a cluster of flowing ribbons, which lent a festive appearance to our band when the riders rested the stock in their stirrups and held their spears vertically in air. Each man seemed like a standard bearer.

Trained to precision of action by experience, the hunters rode to the appointed clearing in the forest whither the bush hunters were tending, and spread out in a long line. Nick and I, with the Prince between us, formed the centre of the line and the rest were placed so that each man could see his neighbour and thus both could watch the woods between for the fleeing quarry. I suppose our party thus covered a distance of two miles and each person in the line was practically alone.

We had not long to wait before the faint baying of the hounds reached our ears from the forest in front. The noise came gradually nearer and nearer. The horses became restive at the sound. The hunt was on in earnest. The first boar broke cover so far away that we had no part in it. We could only sit silent and listen to the chase and the squeal of the boar when the lance pierced him. Similar sounds drew our attention to other parts of the line and then our turn came.

The first wild pig I had ever seen in his native woods trotted swiftly out of the bushes in front of Nicholas and the Prince. It was a large black fellow with wicked-looking yellow tusks that curled up at the ends. When it saw the horsemen it was not afraid, but stopped with curiosity and grunted softly to itself in a familiarly domestic fashion. At sight of the boar, however, the horses began rearing and plunging, so that it was some moments before Nick, who was nearest, could urge his mount to the charge. The Prince's black was ill-behaved also, but the rider had no difficulty in keeping his seat.

Nick, I suppose, must have been an adept in the use of the spear at one time, but he was badly out of practice then. When he came on with his swift rush he missed the vital spot behind the foreleg, or in the centre of the chest, and succeeded only in inflicting a wound along the animal's spine, which let much blood but only angered the beast. His horse carried him some distance beyond before Nick could force him to turn, and in the meantime the Prince with lowered lance entered the fray.

With a sure hand he guided his terror-stricken black after the boar, which, squealing with pain and rage, was charging Nick. The hilt of the Prince's lance rested in the leather socket of the saddle under his knee; the sharp point raced over the ground, its ribbons whipping in the wind. Out of the corner of its wicked little eye the boar saw the approach of its new enemy and wheeled to the attack. If it could gore the horse and unseat the rider, it might easily dispose of the enemy

on foot.

But the Prince's stroke was swift and sure. Before the boar had gathered speed the point took him full in the centre of the broad chest. If the Prince's aim was to strike the little white spot there it could not have been more perfect. The force of the blow caused the horse to swerve suddenly in his course, nearly throwing the rider, but the boar stopped in its tracks. The lance came free as the horse leaped over the game, which reached up in a faint effort to strike. With his life blood following the lance, the victim sank slowly to its knees and filled the woods with its dying squeals.

"Well done, Your Highness," shouted Nick in high glee, "'twas a master stroke."

"I am ashamed of you," cried the Prince with an eye on the struggling quarry.

The bush-rangers had evidently done their work well. The game was plenty. Everywhere all along the line came the sound of the chase, the shouts of riding men, the squeals of dying pigs and the barking of dogs let loose to bring a fleeing animal to bay so that the horsemen following slowly might kill it. It seems that only the most intrepid horseman will take his life in his hands attempting to ride at full speed under the trees.

A wild-looking animal darted under the horse Nick was riding and set off at a rapid pace for the other side of the clearing. With a shout Nick started in hot pursuit. At the same moment my turn came. The boar showed in front of me so suddenly that I pulled my horse's head sharply to keep from stepping on it. The animal rushed by while I stupidly stared, making no motion to stop it.

"I am ashamed of you, too," cried the Prince at my elbow as he dug the spurs into his black's side and sped away like the wind.

"Solonika, be careful," I cried, but she was beyond the sound of my voice. As quickly as I could I followed to watch her in action. I had no desire to try my hand with the lance. It required a better training than I possessed.

The boar had a good start and was not long in reaching the sheltering trees on the far side of the clearing. Solonika bent low over her black's neck, and without hesitation followed the game where cooler riders would not dare go.

"Stop," I shouted, but I knew that she would not heed me even though she heard. The excitement of the chase had entered her blood.

There was nothing left for me to do but try to keep her in sight. When I reached the place where she rode in I could still see her going at the top of her speed through the trees. Her lance point pursued the fleeing pig whose speed was incredible. Do what she could the boar kept just a little ahead. Deeper and deeper we went into the forest. The sound of the hunters, the baying of the dogs and the squeals came fainter and fainter to our ears and finally ceased altogether.

We were alone.

My horsemanship was not as excellent as Solonika's, and she gradually outdistanced me. I almost despaired of keeping her in sight. Finally, when I was about to give up, when my horse was blowing hard and I was well-nigh spent, I saw her suddenly rein in, throw up her head and look to one side as if she heard someone calling.

While she stood thus intent, four horsemen in black Spanish cloaks, coming from behind the trees, rode up to her side. One wrenched the lance from her hands, another threw his cloak over her head and arms, rendering her powerless, while the third grasped her horse by the bridle and the three set off at a gallop with their prisoner. The fourth drew his sword and waited for me to come up.

I stared in amazement at this extraordinary scene; my heart stopped beating with fear as its full significance burst upon me. I convulsively pulled my horse to a standstill, not knowing what I did. Only my grip on the saddle horn kept me in my seat.

Oh, if Nick were only here; but he was far away with the hunters. It would be hours before they would miss us. What was I to do? Was it better that I should ride back and tell him, or follow the Princess? My brain was stunned. I could not think clearly.

But stay! these were not ordinary highwaymen. Of this I felt sure. I remembered seeing them, or men like them, on the road in front of the summer-house. Were they trying to kidnap the Prince then? Were they members of that mystic band, the Order of the Cross? Nick and the General belonged to that. What good would it do to ride back and tell Nick of something which he, perhaps, already knew, or at least expected? Deserted by both Nick and the General, I felt suddenly alone. My God, alone; with Solonika in the hands of her enemies. What would they not do to her? How could she keep her secret from them? I must save her. I must act quickly.

"Solonika," I shouted, hoping that she might hear and know that she was not deserted.

As I uttered the shout I spurred my horse furiously and he leaped forward to do my bidding. My boar lance was my only weapon; but surely I was better armed than the lone rear guard. He seemed to have only his short sword. Solonika and her captors were still in sight, although far ahead. I must ride fast and free if I would overtake her.

I rode high and recklessly watching the young noble put his horse in motion toward me so as to avoid my spear and make the attack more difficult. I bore down upon him with all speed, shouting as I came. He took hold of his weapon with both hands, preparing to cut my wooden shank with one bold stroke as I made to pierce him.

But, before I reached him, I received a violent blow on the forehead. The branches of the trees hung low about my upraised head. The heavens seemed to have fallen. My enemy vanished as if by magic amid a field of glowing shooting stars darting hither and yon in a field of purple night. A great weakness seized me. The saddle slipped from between my knees, the reins from my nerveless fingers.

I toppled over backwards—unconscious.

CHAPTER XV THE FOREST OF ZIN

Hear it not, ye stars!
And thou, pale moon, turn paler at the sound!
—*Young: Night Thoughts.*

It was still daylight when I recovered consciousness. The setting sun was just dipping below the western horizon, and the cathedral light of the forest of Zin was slowly changing with lengthening shadows to the darkness of the coming night. Save for the whirl of some heavy bird, flying to roost or the cry of a number of crows far overhead, there was no sound.

The gay coloured ribbons of the boar spear, lying among the dead leaves, brought me back to a slight realization of my position. I abruptly tried to rise. But, when I attempted to move, the trees began to glide around like giant feathers in a motionless atmosphere, and I became aware of an aching head and burning pain in the back. I lay quiet examining the branches overhead.

A little red squirrel, frightened by my sudden movement, leaped from the ground near by and clattered up the trunk of the nearest tree, being careful to put the tree between me and him in his flight. He reappeared high up among the branches, where he rested ready to run, watching me curiously. Was that the trunk of a fallen tree or a man? He concluded that I was an enemy and awoke the echoes with his chattering warning cry, in which there was something of rage. When I again struggled weakly to arise, he fell silent, hid behind a crotch and, from his safe retreat, watched with one little prick ear and one little round eye cautiously exposed.

This time I managed to get to my knees, although the world swayed before

my eyes. A spring bubbled coolly among the leaves near-by. I dragged myself to it and, like the rejected soldiers of Joshua, drank with my nose in the water. Greatly refreshed, I rolled over on my back and again tried to think. The little watchman in the tree shifted his position so as to bring his one little eye to bear again. My head was becoming clearer.

Let me see, what had happened to me? Somebody or something had struck me on the head. I put my hand to my aching brow and found my hair matted with dried blood. There was a bad cut just above my forehead. How had I been so injured? Had the swordsman reached me? The swordsman with the long black cloak and the Greek cross upon his breast—what had he done. Ah, yes, I knew. With a rush the whole picture came back.

Solonika had been stolen by the Order of the Cross!

It must have happened only a moment ago. My enemy still fronted me and might even now be waiting to continue, or rather begin, the fight. I came to a sudden sitting posture, but the woods were deserted. The rider had long since made good his escape. My own animal, too, was gone and I wondered if he could find his way back to Framkor stables and give warning of my predicament.

But of what use would that be to Solonika, if, as I strongly suspected, General Palmora and Nicholas were in the plot. True, they might rescue me from the dangers of the forest, but they would not help me rescue the Prince.

Not so fast. Perhaps I might be doing my two friends an injustice in thus accusing them. After all, the men I had seen might be highwaymen. A highwayman's calling in all Balkan countries, I knew, was an ancient and an honourable one, because he never robs his own countrymen but preys upon the inhabitants of border states; also because he is a well-trained rider and a valuable cavalryman in time of war—which in this section of eastern Europe is nearly all the time. But, if the Prince's captors were highwaymen after a rich bounty from the government for the return of the future king on the eve of the coronation, they were the most gentlemanly brigands that ever sat astride a horse. The highwaymen idea was not tenable. Even in Catholic countries, robbers do not go about with large Greek crosses of gold suspended from their necks. The words of the General came back to me.

"The oath of the Duke of Marbosa. Only three days are left."

Three days to the coronation, that was it. The oath of Marbosa? Perhaps the Duke had sworn that Prince Raoul should never be king. Oh, why had I not paid closer attention to the politics of this infernal country? I would know then what this meant; I would not be compelled to guess. Surely politics was behind the kidnapping of the Prince. It was evident, too, that the movement did not have the active support of my two friends, although the General and Nicholas might be forced by stress of circumstances passively to acquiesce. But what did the

Order of the Cross hope to gain thereby? It was possible that they were counting upon the feeling of resentment which the populace would naturally feel if the Prince failed to appear at the Cathedral. An insult like that might go far toward changing the succession at the last moment. If that were so, the Order of the Cross, or some of its members at least, were not pleased with the son of the Red Fox as the next ruler. It would necessarily follow that they had another favourite.

The General was not enthusiastic over the heir of Dhalmatia, but he did not seem to have an interest in this affair. If my conclusions were sound, Palmora would have led the men who did it. Evidently they were not sound. Besides, I had never heard him speak of a possible successor of the Prince and, if there had been one, I ought to have heard of it.

Whatever was in the wind, I felt much relieved. If, as I suspected, the Prince was in the hands of the nobles, he had nothing to fear from personal insult. But I trembled to think of his position if his captors learned the truth concerning his sex.

Growing darkness warned me that I must think of my own safety. My position in the wild forest of Zin was fraught with danger. With returning strength, I gathered up my useless boar spear, my only weapon of defence and, going forward, examined the ground where I had last seen the Prince. Here I found the hoof marks of the four horses, galloping side by side, plainly visible, leading off toward the west. It was an easy trail to follow. I recalled that the greatest length of the forest was from the north to the south. If one wished to leave the woods, the quickest course would be to the east or west.

A strong wind forced its way through the tree tops with a moaning sound. Its cold blast chilled me as it blew in my face; its voice was like the voice of a lost soul, wandering forever through the gloom around me. The sun dipped below the trees. If I would follow after the Princess I must hurry, for the light would soon be gone. Mile after mile I walked and ran, keeping my eyes on the ground, bending lower and lower as the darkness fell. Finally I could see the hoof marks no longer.

How I rebelled against my fate. How I cursed the night, and how it seemed to answer with its thousand voices, reiterating the one awful word "Lost." Oh, the wasted hours I had lain unconscious in the woods while Marbosa's men were carrying their prize farther and farther away. Crushed and hopeless though I was, I would not give up. There must be some way to follow the trail even in the dark. But how? How?

I raised my head and looked about. Interminable forest surrounded me on all sides. Nothing but giant oaks met my limited view on every side. To my heightened imagination they seemed to stretch their crooked arms as if to crush me in their bony embrace.

Again the wind went sweeping through the branches and one clear high voice of the night seemed to say "Behold, I am the way. Follow thou me." The wind it must have been, but how was it to help me? Then hope returned for I knew it was a west wind. The trail I longed to follow had never altered from its western course. The wind came from the same direction. There was the solution. If I followed the course of the wind, if I kept it always in my face, I would be able to hold to the trail even in the dark. I shouted aloud for joy at the discovery.

But my progress was distressingly slow. As I went on and on, it became so dark that I was forced to come down to a cautious walk, swinging my boar spear before me, like a blind man on a crowded thoroughfare, to keep from walking into the trunks of the silent trees.

Often through the night I lay down to rest and once I slept, but each time I took the trail I held my moistened finger to the breeze to get my bearings. During one of these enforced rests I built a small fire of dried leaves and ignited a torch of pine wood to help me on my way. After a little searching by means of its feeble light, I made out the fresh marks of the trail on the ground and knew that the west wind held to its course. My tread was as silent as the animals that glared at my camp-fire. I frightened them away with a shower of burning embers. My head ached and my limbs became heavy with a weariness that caused me to rest longer each time I halted.

Once I struck a match and found that it was only eleven o'clock. I had been vainly hoping for daylight and the time went so slowly. How far I had gone I had no means of knowing. But, shortly after I looked at my watch, the moon, great and round and white, came up and shed its soft light through the trees. The sight of it brought me up with a shiver.

The moon was in *front* of me!

A moon rising in the *west* I knew was an impossibility! If this were the moon, then by all the laws of nature I must now be facing the east. The *east!* Was it possible that I had been following the wrong trail? Had the wind, while I blindly yielded to its invisible touch, been veering gently to the south and finally to the east? In that case I had been walking in a half circle and must now be somewhere near my starting point. All my weary walking had gone for nothing. Solonika and Marbosa's men were as far away as ever.

My despair overcame me and my knees gave way beneath me. I sank gently to the ground with a half articulate moan, like a drowning swimmer who feels his strength deserting him.

What was that I heard? Was my mind leaving me under the fearful strain? Surely that sound was not the sound of voices? I listened distraught. There it was again, and this time there was no mistaking it. Close beside me somewhere men were talking and laughing! Then high above all I distinguished one voice

singing. And I knew that voice. It acted upon my tired body like the electric waves from a galvanic battery. There could be no mistake. Through the Forest of Zin, mingling with the tinkle of a piano, came the voice of Solonika singing the words of Mohacs' Field.

"Volt nekem egy daru szoru paripam,
De el adta a szegedi kapitany;
Ott sem voltam az aldo mas i vas nal;
No, de sa baj, tobb is veszett Mohacsnal!"

I listened spellbound to the entire verse and heard at the end a chorus of fifty or more male voices join boisterously in the refrain; "No, de sa baj, tobb is veszett Mohacsnal!"

There was no doubt about it; I had found her. Thanks to blind chance and my own perseverance I had stumbled upon the hiding place of the Secret Order of the Cross. It gave me new life to know that she was so near me. A few steps further forward, and another of my difficulties was solved. I found myself under a high stone wall which surrounded the hunting lodge of the Duke of Marbosa. The round white "moon" that had filled me with consternation was a circular window set in the end wall of the lodge. There must be lights in the lower casements, but the only one I had seen over the high wall was this single rose window.

I walked slowly around the wall, seeking an entrance. After a time I came to the main gate. It was made of iron grating and afforded a view of the interior. The lodge was a great stone house, standing in the middle of a clearing within an enclosure. In the rear were the stables. Not a soul was within sight and the gate was locked. Close beside it, however, was a smaller gate which was used as a foot passage. It yielded readily to my hand, opening inward. Fearing the silent presence of a guard I moved the door back slowly, and finally gave it a push as if it were disturbed by the wind. There was no movement. I crept noiselessly through the opening and closed the door so that my figure might not be outlined from the house.

Black shadows of men passed to and fro across the lighted windows, behind closed blinds, like shadowgraphs in a theatre. The singing continued and I frequently heard Solonika's voice. I crept close to the house and cautiously tried the front door; it was locked. Searching for some way to effect an entrance, I skirted the building, keeping close to the stones, and found a door in the rear. It also was locked. I examined each window as I passed; they were covered from top to bottom with heavy wrought-iron screens. The lodge was as tight as a prison house.

I turned my attention next to the roof. Perhaps there was a means of entrance in that direction. Close beside the lodge grew a great oak tree. All its forest neighbours had been cut down when the place was built. Its wide branches overhung the roof. Even though I failed to find a trap-door there, I would be safer in the branches than on the ground in case the Duke had his dogs in the stable. I quietly swung myself up by means of a low-hanging limb, and drew the telltale spear after me.

As my head came clear of the coping I saw the roof was somewhat flat and that a small watch-tower stood in the centre of it. It was composed of nothing but windows. One branch of the tree, which had threatened to grow through the tower, had been sawed off close to the windows. The limb made a natural strong bridge for me, and I could have shouted when I tried the nearest frame and found it slide quietly up under my hand. I was soon standing safely on the floor of the tower.

Feeling in the dark with my feet, I discovered a steep uncarpeted stairway leading down into the house below. The door at the other end was unlocked. As I opened this door the sound of singing and laughing came faintly to my ears. The Duke's men were enjoying themselves with the utmost abandon. Passing down another stairway I came to another door and found myself in a richly carpeted bed room. The bed was empty. I struck a match and saw two doors on the same side of the room. One communicated with another bed room and I tried the other. As I opened it, the noise of shouting and laughing was suddenly almost deafening. Heavy fumes of tobacco smoke and hot much-breathed air filled my nostrils, almost choking me.

I stepped softly out on to a dimly lighted balcony upon which twenty or thirty bed rooms, similar to the one I had just left, found exit. One swift step to the railing and I was looking down upon the Duke's men.

The main room of the lodge was a hunter's paradise. All around the balcony railing over which I leaned hung at regular intervals handsomely mounted heads of bears, wolves, boars, deer and other animals from the forest of Zin. At the end of the room where there was no balcony, under the circular window which had been my "moon," was a mounted lion about to attack two crouching tigers, trophies of the Duke's expeditions to India and Africa. Lying at full length on the lion's back, with his arms loosely around the neck of the animal, was a young trooper fast asleep.

The head and antlers of a large deer, suspended from the balcony in front of me, obscured my vision of the centre of the room below. But it also protected me from any one who might look my way. As I moved cautiously aside for a better view, I saw a long table spread with a white cloth, upon which were the remains of a feast. Standing in the centre of the table among the scattered dishes was the

Prince with a sword upraised in his hand. He was singing at the top of his sweet voice that seventeenth century profanation "Down among the Dead Men."

The Duke's men, evidently in the "heigh-li heigh-lo" stage of a merry evening, were giving the Prince their undivided attention. They entered into the spirit of the song and were doing their best to reproduce the pose of the picture I had seen in Solonika's summer-house. One of their number, with his black coat collar turned up, was flattened against a pillar which supported the balcony. An expression of mock fright was upon his face. The rest of the ribald jesters were threatening him with drawn swords. A goodly number were lying on the floor, as if they had refused the toast and had suffered the consequences. But they were in excess of the number required for a faithful reproduction of the picture and I suspected that many of them were there because of the empty bottles.

As I looked around the room I understood why the Duke of Marbosa had not stationed guards at his gates to see that the Prince did not escape. The main door which I had found locked was under the balcony opposite the wall in which was the circular window. If the Prince attempted to flee that way, he would have to do it in full view of every one in the room. Two broad stairways, one on each side of the hall, led up to the balcony and to the bed rooms beyond. Escape in this direction was impossible on account of the wrought-iron screens. But I knew if I could communicate with the Prince, he would be able to leave the lodge with me in the same manner I had entered it.

Once outside, unless we were tracked with dogs, the forest would hide us while we made our way back on foot to Dhalmatia. We could travel by night and hide, like the Babes in the Woods, under a covering of leaves in the daytime if necessary. I remembered that, while I had heard the horses pawing in their stalls, no dog barked and the recollection cheered me. If only I could attract the Prince's attention.

But, even if I did make him see me, how was I to let him know how to escape? I must write him a note and get it into his hands somehow. Searching my pockets I found a small piece of paper and a lead pencil. I rested the paper on the top of the railing and indited my first letter to Solonika. It read:

"Ninth room on south side; stairway to attic; stairway to watch tower on roof. Come.

"DALE."

I knew if I permitted the sheet to flutter to the room below, it would be seen and read by unfriendly eyes. I must have some way of weighting it so that I could throw it where I willed. I examined every pocket carefully and went through the search three times but failed to find anything which would answer the purpose. The only thing I considered was my penknife. I might roll the note up and slip it

beneath one of the blades. But my better judgment told me it would not do. The noise of the knife's fall would attract attention.

I was almost in despair when my hand came in contact with the diamond ring which I wore upon my little finger. It was the very thing. I could roll the note up into a small wad and insert it in the ring. That would give it the required bulk and weight, and my message would not be seen as it flew through the air. Then too the tinkle of a ring upon the stone pavement would not be heard above all the noise of the revellers. Quickly I drew the cirlet from my finger and fastened the wad of paper securely within. Then with some impatience I awaited my opportunity.

A loud knocking upon the main entrance created the diversion I craved. So loud and unexpected was the call from the outside world that the noise within was instantly stilled and every man arose and drew his sword. All eyes were turned toward the door but no one moved to open it. Who could have found the lonely lodge in the forest at this time of night? Could the Red Fox of Dhalmatia, already apprised of his son's capture, be here with his retainers seeking vengeance?

One of the men nearest the door shouted a question and a voice outside replied demanding admission. A busy hum of conversation began to fly about the hall and the Duke's followers crowded around the door. The Prince alone remained in his place. He stood apart in the centre of the room almost directly below me.

Now was the moment to act. I stood upright and leaned far out over the railing in full view of any who might be watching. Taking careful aim, I tossed the message toward him. The glistening gold circled gently to its fall and struck fairly in the centre of the empty cup which he held upright in his hand. The Prince gave a little cry of astonishment and looked over the rim of the goblet. The ring, with its note attached, lay within. Knowing from which direction it must have come, and realizing that it fell from the hand of a friend, he looked quickly up into the balcony. Our eyes met.

Solonika recognized me as I leaned out into the light. The smile which illuminated her face more than recompensed me for the night of terror I had passed through for her sake. No one else in the room saw the incident. So far we were safe.

I was just congratulating myself on my cleverness when I heard a bed room door open close behind me somewhere on the balcony. I dropped to my knees for shelter and crouched in the dim light. An elderly man stepped from a front room over the main entrance. Something in his dignified manner told me that it was the Duke of Marbosa. He had heard the knocking and had come forth to inquire into the cause.

If he descended by means of the stairway on my side, he could scarcely fail to discover me. Either stairway was open to him. I lay flat on my stomach and waited with a beating heart. A fight was useless, for, even though I escaped, I must leave the Prince behind.

The noise in the room below increased in volume. The visitors without were impatient at the delay.

CHAPTER XVI

MARBOSA'S HUNTING LODGE—THE FLIGHT

There was an ancient philosopher
That had read Alexander Ross over
And swore the world, as he could prove,
Was made of fighting and of love.

—*Butler: Hudibras, Part I.*

"Marbosa! Marbosa!" shouted several voices at once. A score of young men ascended both stairways to summon the Grand Duke. As I glanced along the carpet I could see the heads of the leaders appear above the level of the floor and I gave myself up for lost. There was no time now to hide myself in the nearest bed room without being seen. The danger, coming so suddenly, found me unprepared. My only chance of safety lay in remaining quiet. Perhaps in the dim light, if they did not stumble over me, they might pass by, too occupied with their errand to notice a recumbent figure on the floor. There was also the chance that they might mistake me for a tired reveller.

But, just when the tension was at the breaking point, I heard the Duke's voice. Judging from the sound, for I could not see him, he had stepped to the edge of the balcony, where the light fell upon his face, for the men paused on the stairs and stood looking at one particular spot. They shouted their message across the intervening space and, receiving a satisfactory reply, turned back, retracing their steps to the common room. I still heard the Grand Duke talking to some one who had reached the balcony by the other stairway. I followed the sound and was overjoyed to find that Marbosa was walking toward his companion and that the two would descend by the other stair. The danger of my immediate discovery was over, and I breathed a prayer of thankfulness to the lucky chance which had

protected me.

As the Duke joined his men, I arose to my feet to steal another look below. The Prince had not moved far from the spot where I last saw him. The empty goblet was standing on the table and he was busy reading the note concealed in his hands. Would he understand it and be able to find a way to reach the watchtower unnoticed? I watched him read and re-read my message, and saw him tear the paper to fragments and carelessly throw them into the fire. Then he glanced at the excited company to see if he were observed. Finding he was not, he looked quickly up into my glowing face, nodded his head to signify that all was clear and smilingly slipped my ring on his finger.

While this episode was going forward, the Duke had reached the front entrance and given orders to unbar the door. The heavy irons rattled loudly against the stone floor while the nobles made way for the visitors to enter. The door was immediately closed with a bang and the bars reset. Following the Grand Duke, with whom they were earnestly talking, two men stepped into the light and I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw them. They were the General and Nicholas.

What they hoped to accomplish by their visit I could not imagine. But it was evident that they were regarded in the light of friends. Several young men slapped Nicholas on the shoulder, greeting him with affection. The rest gathered around the General and the black-bearded Grand Duke, and listened with great respect to their conversation.

The General was tired and worn. He was not pleased with the turn of events and I judged he was not hesitating in expressing his opinion. The Bharbazonian jargon ran back and forth, for the General had met his match in the Duke. That distinguished personage was not moved by the hot words of his fiery friend. He gave as good as he received, and remained firm in his intention. The argument bade fair to consume the rest of the night. As soon as Nick saw how it was going, he quietly disengaged himself from the circle and sought out the Prince. That brought him close under the balcony where I was hiding and I was pleased to hear him speak English that the company might not readily understand.

"I am glad to see that no harm has been done Your Highness," he said.

But the Prince pretended to ignore him.

"I wish to assure you, Prince, that the General and I are in no way responsible for this high-handed affair," he continued.

I felt like hugging him for his good news, but the Prince was not so generous.

"Your friends," he said pointedly, "were most happy to see you."

Nicholas bowed, accepting the situation.

"The majority must rule," he replied.

"The Grand Duke Marbosa seems to be in command here."

"He has carried out his plan against the wish of the General."

"What does he hope to win thereby? What does he intend to do with me?" asked the Prince. I listened eagerly so as not to miss a word.

"He hopes to keep you hidden until after the coronation. He feels that your absence from the Cathedral will be taken as an insult by the people. Thus would he set public opinion against you."

"To what end? Is there another he would have reign in my stead?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Grand Duke Novgorod."

"Novgorod? Who is he? I have never heard of him before."

"Nor I, either," said Nick; "but Marbosa has been secretly working in the interest of this man for years. The nobles are with Marbosa to a man. He seems to be sure of his grounds. From what I can learn this proposed new ruler is the only living descendant of the royal house of Bharbazonia which was thought to have been exterminated by the Turks. Oloff Gregory is only a soldier and your house, as you know, is not royal. Many influential persons in the kingdom believe that this Novgorod should be restored to power. Had you not been born he would have come back to his throne without this revolution which is threatened."

"Strange," said the Prince, thoughtfully, "my father never knew of the existence of this man."

"All the old men of the country seem to know it," said Nick.

"He seemed to think that Bharbazonia would be without a king if I did not continue," as if thinking aloud.

"Dhalmatia knows," said Nick positively. He did not notice the troubled frown on the Prince's face; neither did he guess, as I did, the feelings of distrust he was stirring up. Here was an added burden to carry; the throne by right of heredity belonged to another. The Red Fox, fearful for his son's peace of mind, had kept this important piece of information to himself.

"We just left him," said Nick.

"Who, father?"

"Yes. For the first time in his life he visited Framkor Castle and, almost on his knees, begged the General to tell him what we had done with you. I never saw a man so moved. He actually wept."

"Poor father."

"He was well-nigh distracted. His visit was the first intimation the General had that Marbosa had carried out his intention. I imagined that Dr. Wharton and you had ridden home to Dhalmatia after you became separated from us at the hunt, and rode home after you. I arrived there just as the Red Fox came to the door. He became like a crazy man when we told him we could not help him. I had to forcibly restrain him to prevent him from doing the General harm. He

seemed very much afraid of me. When he left, alternately pleading with us and cursing at us, we set out for the lodge, knowing you must be here."

"What will father do? Will he not think of the lodge also?"

"No; he fancies the Order has stolen you. He is more likely to go first to its headquarters at the Turk's Head Inn. He is in touch with the underground and said he had been expecting this."

"He did. He refused to permit me to hunt yesterday. Begged me not to go, when I would not submit. How I wish he had been more frank and told me why. But he was ever afraid of frightening me."

Yesterday? The Prince referred to the hunt as if it were long past. Surely he meant to say "to-day." I looked at my watch. The hands pointed to ten minutes of four. It would soon be growing daylight and the coronation was now only one day distant. The Prince was right; it was Wednesday, December 30. The New Year fell on Friday. There was no time to be lost.

"If the General's arguments with Marbosa prevail, we may take you back with us," said Nick. "In that case you will not object to spreading the rumour that you were lost in the Forest of Zin all night. But I have little hope." He shook his head doubtfully as he listened to the high voices of the two elders deep in their discussion.

"Can nothing be done?" suggested the Prince.

"There will be the devil to pay in Nischon to-day. Your father will inform the King and his friends. The entire Alliance party will arm themselves and take the road. There will be bloodshed and civil war."

"That disaster may be prevented," said the Prince.

"How?"

"If I should escape."

Nick's eager expression of interest altered itself into a smile. He detected a hint in the Prince's words. I alone caught the meaning.

"Believe me, Your Highness, I can do nothing. I admit that I dislike this method of fighting, but I cannot be traitor to my comrades. As an illustrious patriot once said, 'We must hang together now, or we shall hang separately later.' In fact, sir, if I should see you making off, I would feel it my duty to stop you though it cost me my life."

"I admire your loyalty," said the Prince. "How does my sister bear up under this trial?"

"I have not seen her," Nick replied. "But I shall take the liberty of calling upon her when I return and assure her of your safety."

"Do so. I wish you would."

I found myself smiling at the difficulties which would prevent Nick from keeping his word. Then I heard my name mentioned.

"What have they done with Dale? I don't see him anywhere."

"They may have killed him," said the Prince, smiling into my eyes over Nick's shoulder. "I last saw him following me through the trees. He saw your friends carry me off, for I heard him shout. But they did not bring him in with me. I infer that he is either dead or lost out there in the jungle."

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed. "I must find out about this. They would not harm him, I know. He is only lost. I must make up a party to find him."

He moved away toward the group.

"Good night," the Prince called after him. "If they ask for me say that I have retired."

While Nick hurried to the General to tell him of my supposed plight, Solonika, leisurely and boldly, came up the stairway to my side. She trailed her hand idly along the railing as she mounted the steps, but I knew that she was watching for some sign of disapproval from the company. They heeded her not and in a moment she stood beside me and placed her hand trustingly in mine.

The time for action had arrived. Neither she nor I spoke a word until we had ascended the two flights of steps and come to the tower on the roof. The first blush of the new day was showing itself behind the trees of the Forest of Zin. The early morning birds were still silent in their nests. It was dark enough for our purpose.

"Can you do it?" I asked as I crept into the branches and helped her up. It was a dizzy height over the sloping roof to the ground and I knew that few girls would dare attempt such a perilous climb.

It seemed easy for Solonika. Unhampered by skirts, she moved quickly and silently. No matter how rapidly I descended, she was always close behind urging me forward. Once on the ground, I lifted her tenderly out of the branches because I wished to avoid the noise she might make jumping without knowing the distance and—well, because.

The never-ceasing murmur of voices in the lodge room told us that the Prince had not been missed. We ran swiftly over the grass and had gained the protection of the wall on our way to the little gate, when the door of the lodge opened, sending a broad stream of light down the pathway. By that cruel fate which runs through the lives of all of us when Mother Nature uses even love to encompass our destruction, we were in danger of losing our new-found freedom before it was fairly won.

Nicholas, bent on rescuing me from the forest, rushed out of the open door, followed by a number of Marbosa's men. By that time he must have learned from the lone horseman of the blow I had received and the subsequent fall from my horse. As far as his knowledge went, I was lying dead in the forest; or, if the blow had not killed me, I was wandering about dazed and bleeding, lost. Although I

appreciated his kindly motive, I would have loved him none the less if he had delayed one moment longer.

We crouched against the wall fearing to move. While the men, laughing and talking, rolled around the corner of the lodge in the direction of the stables, Nicholas stood in the light on the steps, looking so steadily at me that I thought he must see. But his eyes were not yet used to the gloom and he was turning something over in his mind. He was aroused from his deliberations by the bang of the door as it was shut behind him, the iron bars rattling into place. Following his friends he, too, disappeared around the lodge corner.

"Quick," I whispered to Solonika, "now is our chance. The little portal is unlocked."

We slipped quickly through and came face to face with another but far more agreeable surprise than the last. Before us, tied to a ring in the wall, were the two horses Nick and the General had ridden. With a body of men ranging the woods in friendly search, I realized that our escape on foot in that direction was difficult, if not impossible, but here was an easy way open to our hand. I suppose Solonika to this day thinks I planned it. She took our good fortune as a matter of course and was soon in the saddle. I leaped on the back of the General's big roan and we were off.

For the first few rods we walked our horses over the leaves. Nick and his band would naturally take an eastward course, back into the heart of the forest toward the boar-hunting grounds. We therefore turned toward the west and placed the lodge between us and the main entrance to prevent possible discovery when he issued from the gate. I wondered if he would notice the disappearance of the horses, but concluded that, if he did, he would imagine a groom had stabled them. At all events, when he did come forth, he did not stop, for we heard his party noisily gallop away into the woods.

"One fortunate thing; there will be fewer men to pursue us when they discover my escape," whispered Solonika.

"Ride," I commanded curtly, "we will talk later."

If she was surprised at my manner, she showed it by driving the spurs into her horse's flanks, which put her in the lead. It was getting light enough now for us to see the road, if the half-outlined path we were following could be termed a road. Solonika never hesitated; she seemed to know the forest well, for she found a sort of bridlepath between the trees and kept to it unerringly; whereas, had I been left to myself, I must have missed the way frequently.

For an hour we rode steadily without speaking, although I would have given much to have heard her voice again. But, when the sun came up, driving away, as I fondly imagined, plots and fear of sudden death, I could no longer resist the temptation. I knew that we were not out of danger by any means,

for the horses were plainly tired, having covered the journey once that evening. Now I understood why Nick deliberated upon the steps. He was making up his mind not to use his own horse, but to take a fresh mount from the Duke's stable. When we emerged at last from the forest, and found ourselves in a pleasant country road, lined at intervals with farmers' houses, I signalled to Solonika and drew down to a walk.

"How far to Dhalmatia?" I panted.

"Thirty miles."

Thirty miles on tired horses! I was aghast. Our only hope now was that our escape had not been discovered. I recalled that it had taken only three hours to ride to the hunting grounds, but Solonika explained that I had walked sixteen miles in the night. If my calculation was correct the poor beasts we rode would have to cover some eighty miles from Framkor to the lodge and back.

"And furthermore," she added, "if your friend Nicholas takes the back track in search of you, he will come out on the Framkor lawns and we may meet him on the road ahead."

"He will have to pass Dhalmatia to do that," I said.

"Well, he promised to assure my sister of my safety."

She threw back her head and laughed, while I forgot my weariness, my aching head, my empty stomach, and laughed with her for the pure joy of laughing. To rest our horses we dismounted, walking hand in hand down the middle of the dusty road like two school children coming from school. We stopped occasionally at farmhouses where Solonika begged milk and bread for me, saying, as she fed me with her own hands, that the good things of this world were not equally divided, since she had had too much to eat and I too little.

I told her of America, my own United States, and described it to her as a land where there were no kings or queens but where every man was a king and every woman a queen. My description was so glowing that she promised to visit the States, after she was crowned and grew tired of being always a man. One day, she said, she would run away incognito, put on her loved woman's finery, which she could not forsake altogether, and send me her card from her hotel. Would I have forgotten her by that time? Would I be pleased to see her?

Ah, would I indeed? As well ask an aquatic fowl if he can navigate in water. How could I ever forget her? She would always be in my thoughts waking or sleeping until "the leaves of the Judgment book unfold." She was pretty, witty and full of airy fancies; a witch of the road, she interested me with her graceful charm. How was I to know that she exerted herself and talked so much in order to keep me from remembering how tired and ill I was? Twice, she said afterward, I would have fallen had she not held me up in her strong young arms.

But all dreams come to an end, and our awakening was rude enough. The

General's roan, which I was leading with the bridle rein tucked under my elbow, was the first to give the alarm. He stopped deliberately and looked behind with a friendly whinny, nearly dragging me over backward. In plain view over the rise of a hill our pursuers came thundering along, not a mile in the rear. The tread of their horses shook the earth. Had we not been so interested in our conversation, we would have heard them long ago.

"Solonika!" I shouted, but she was already in the saddle, waiting as usual for me.

"There are only twenty of them," she said. "Your friend Nicholas is not among them."

"Can you make out the General?"

"No, he is not there. Duke Marbosa is leading."

Only twenty; small comfort in that, for, if our horses could not stand the strain, unarmed as we were, five would have been too many. But the long rest seemed to have done them a world of good. Both were carrying lighter weights than they were accustomed to, and for the next five miles we increased our lead considerably. It was only momentarily. The tide slowly turned against us and yard by yard the Duke's men gained, until it seemed we must fall into their hands almost in sight of home.

Peasants stopped their carts as we galloped past and, after a hasty glance at the cavalcade blackening the road behind, drove quickly into the neighbouring fields, regardless of ditches to avoid the trampling hoofs.

I reeled in the saddle twice for some unknown reason, but, ride as we would, we could not hold our lead. My poor old roan was dripping with blood where I drove the spurs into his heaving sides, and his face was white with the foam that dripped from his mouth.

Solonika kept ever close to my side, reporting the progress of the enemy and calling out words of encouragement to me and my wavering animal when her own beast was staggering as well.

"Ride! ride!" she shouted, her voice drowned by the noise behind. "They can never catch us. We are almost home. Do not lose courage, Dale. Oh, my brave Dale, do not give up."

Once, when I thought that human strength could stand no more, I looked around me. Our pursuers were not a hundred yards behind. Their angry voices came plainly to our ears, ordering us to stop. The Duke of Marbosa, still far in the lead, was within three horse lengths of the Prince, eagerly reaching forward to grasp his rein.

"Faster," I cried, turning my stumbling beast in behind so that the Duke would have to pass me before he reached his quarry.

We turned into a road which I recognized as leading to Dhalmatia. The

castle and safety were only two miles away. Could we hold out? After the long journey, it seemed such a trivial distance. The Duke's horse commenced to lap mine. I could see the red eye, the straining neck, the foam-flecked mouth. I must soon throw my poor animal across his path and prepare for the terrible shock of collision, if I would save the Prince.

"Look! Oh, look!" It was a shout from Solonika.

I looked ahead, and there, drawn up in our pathway, completely blocking the road, was another body of horsemen, more numerous than the pursuing host. Hope fled out of my finger tips, but by a supreme effort I kept my seat.

"We are lost!" I cried in despair. These could be none other than Nick's men and he would have no mercy.

"On! on!" cried the brave girl. "Do not give up!"

I could see the Duke's horse no longer out of the corner of my eye. For some unaccountable reason he was slackening his pace. What need to ride so hard when his men headed us? What hope was there in riding on?

"Ride! ride!" still rang in my ears. Solonika had not given up. Yes, my good girl, I would ride! But to what purpose? Do not give up! Aye, that was the spirit. But oh, how bitter was this defeat. Blind, splitting headache, but the deadly ache at the heart was worse.

In sight of home, and yet to fail! God, what suffering! What agony of soul! Ride! Yes, I would ride into the very mouth of Hell. God pity the poor brute and the worse brute of a rider who stood in my path. If their bullets did not find my heart, or the heart of the faithful old roan, I would strike that mass, that solid mass of men and animals ahead.

Ride! Aye, Solonika, I was riding like a madman, not thinking or seeing clearly. Oh, if only I had brought my automatic Colt's revolver along, some of them would go with me before I was down in the dust beneath their feet. As it was, only one would remember the impact as long as he lived, if he did live afterward.

"Stop," I called to her, feeling dimly that there was no need for her to die among kicking, struggling hoofs.

"Ride!" was all I heard as answer.

She was still beside me. She was not slackening her pace. Our pursuers seemed far away and the solid phalanx in front deadly near. They shouted to us. What were they trying to say? It sounded like a cheer. But why should they not cheer? Had they not trapped us within sight of safety. Oh, for five minutes more. Had they been only five minutes later we would have gained the hedge that surrounded the Red Fox's estate and been able to beat them to the castle.

It was all a horrible dream. Yes, it must be that. Else why did it seem to me that the ranks in front of us wavered as if to let us through. Cowards! They

dare not face a naked horse and an empty-handed rider. I held my breath for the shock, but it did not come. Could I be mistaken? The ranks in front *did* give way. We were passing between them. Not a hand was stretched out to detain us. That was surely a cheer. A cheer of conquerors!

Then came the sound of musketry. Oh, my head; my poor head! It was blinding me with its aching. But I was not hit. No! no! they were trying to save me alive for future torture, these Bharbazonians. But my horse was done. Surely they had riddled him with bullets. He wavered under me. His noble head went suddenly down between his forelegs. He had stopped and all my efforts to pull him to his feet were vain. I felt myself slipping downward as if in a dream. I did not feel that I struck the hard earth. I did not know that I was rolling in the dust.

"Ride! ride! we will run through them!" I dimly heard myself shout. Was that my voice, or was another soul crying like a lost, blind thing in Hell?

"Father, dear darling old father," it seemed to be saying, "is it you? Yes, I knew it must be you."

Then the noise of battle ceased and I drifted down into the blackness of the pit and suffered the pain of it.

CHAPTER XVII BEFORE THE STORM

Farewell! God knows when we shall meet again.
I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins,
That almost freezes up the heat of life.

—*Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet.*

By degrees I became conscious that friendly hands were lifting me into the saddle and holding me there while the journey continued. Even though I suffered a physical collapse on account of weakness, my brain refused to die and I knew what was passing. Out of the confusion of battle and the thud of horses' feet I was aware that somehow Marbosa's men had been put to flight and that I was on my way to Dhalmatia.

How this miracle had been wrought I knew not, neither did I care. It was pleasant to know that I was in the hands of the Red Fox's men and that Solonika had slipped from Marbosa's outstretched hands. When at last I got a grip on

myself, I found that I was in the precious little summer-house and that Solonika, safe and uninjured, was on her knees beside me, watching me. Oh, the anxiety in her face, and the happy smile she gave me when I opened my eyes and reached out my hand.

"You are better," she said, gripping me hard.

The Red Fox, himself, stood over us. He was dividing his attention between giving me a drink from the brandy bottle he held, and taking one himself. The nervous old man was also sadly in need of a stimulant. Tears of joy were running down his cheeks.

During our ride home, Solonika had evidently told him of her capture by the Duke of Marbosa and our escape. He was profuse in his thanks to me. But my eyes were for Solonika and I paid little heed to what he said.

"Solonika, Solonika, you are safe," I repeated, as if it were too good to be true. Knowing her to be safe, I threw caution to the winds.

If the look of intimate understanding that passed between us was not sufficient to arouse his suspicion, the manner in which I addressed the Prince left no room for doubt. The Duke lost his graciousness, and spoke in tones of icy coldness. Thus easily does gratitude take wing.

"He knows?" he demanded, ever mindful in spite of everything that she was in the dress of the Prince.

"Hush," said Solonika softly, laying a restraining finger upon her lips, and indicating with a sweep of her hand the group of retainers at the door. They appeared to be watching the road, but she knew they were drinking in every word of the conversation. The Duke waved them aside and shut the door. When he again faced me I saw that the look of rage had changed to cunning. In my mental vision as I watched him an old woman fell with a shriek from the top of the battlements and lay mangled on the rocks below, silent for ever.

"Yes, he knows," admitted Solonika. "He has known for a long time, but he has kept the secret. He is one of us now, father. I swear that you have nothing to fear from him."

"Nothing to fear from Palmora's guest and that mysterious Fremsted's friend? Daughter, have you gone mad?"

"No, father, I have not gone mad," she replied. "I know Dale Wharton. After what he did for the House of Dhalmatia to-day you should know him too. Think, for a moment, how many opportunities he has had to play us false if he so intended. Think, father, how easily he could have betrayed my sex among all those drunken nobles in Marbosa's lodge. How they would have gloried in it. But did he do it? No; instead he sent me his message of escape with this ring."

As she pointed to it she remembered that she had failed to return it. It fitted the third finger of her left hand perfectly. She tugged to take it off, but I

restrained her.

"Keep it to remember me by," I said feebly. "After the coronation I expect to leave Bharbazonia for ever."

On the third finger of her right hand was the only other ring she wore that day. It was in reality three rings welded together on the inside of the finger. Each ring contained four rubies, four diamonds, and four sapphires. She slipped this circlet off and placed it gravely upon my little finger.

"It lacks only the stars to be the flag of your country," she said. "Think of me and our ride from the forest of Zin whenever you look at it. And I will think of you."

In the meanwhile the Duke walked to and fro with his hands clenched upon his breast, in great agitation. If one considers the fact that this old man had been consumed with one idea for twenty years until it had a stronger hold upon his affections than even his only child could ever claim, one can understand his struggle. He must have felt that his little world was tumbling about his ears. But there could be no doubt about my loyalty. I had proved that unmistakably. Only one day remained and then he would see his child upon the throne of his brother. How long had he waited for that happy day! Call it madness if you will. All men are somewhat mad who harp for years upon one string. He was forced to trust me, and he finally accepted the inevitable.

"Again I thank you for what you have done," he brought himself to say, almost graciously. "In the years to come, you will always keep the secret?"

"After to-morrow, more than ever," I said. And he was satisfied.

"Father," interrupted Solonika with sudden feeling, "who is the Grand Duke of Novgorod?"

The old man straightened as if he had received an unexpected blow from which he needed time to recover. He smiled cunningly at his daughter to conceal his lack of pleasure.

"The Grand Duke of Novgorod?" he echoed, thinking hard. "Who spoke of him?"

"Ah," said she, "then there is a royal house in Bharbazonia. Nicholas Fremsted was right."

"Fremsted, the American?"

"He is not an American. I have done as you wished. I made him speak in the language. I think he is Bharbazonian."

"As I suspected," murmured the Duke. He resumed his walk thoughtfully, stopping now and then to exclaim: "Ah, I see! I see! That would explain it."

But what he saw, or what had been explained, he kept to himself, and came out of his reverie only when Solonika repeated her former question.

"Oh," said he, "Novgorod? 'Way back in the fifteenth century there was

such a royal house in Bharbazonia. But it has been long since extinct.”

”But it is said one of them still lives. The nobles have a plot to place him upon the throne.”

”I know what they hope to do, my daughter. But they will not rob me of my own. There is no such man alive. I have sent my envoys all over the world for him, but they cannot find him.”

I had the feeling that it would not have been well for the unlucky heir if the Red Fox had found him, but I may have wronged the old zealot.

”You are speaking the truth, father?” She gripped my hand unconsciously, and watched him almost breathlessly as he replied:

”Yes, yes, daughter. As far as I am able to learn it is the truth.”

”It is bad enough, this deception,” she said, ”but I do not wish to rob another of his rights.”

”Let me suggest again, Solonika,” he replied, ”that you leave matters of state entirely in my hands. You are too soft-hearted. When the House of Dhalmatia rules in Bharbazonia you will find yourself surrounded by more serious complications. Always remember you have a father who loves you and stands ready to lend his aid.”

”I must be going now, before my friends return to find me out,” I said, feeling my desire for sleep overcoming me.

As he realized that I must carry his secret back into the presence of General Palmora, the Duke renewed his suspicions.

”A word before you go, sir,” he said. ”I am willing to accept you at my daughter’s valuation—I can do no less—and I want to thank you for what you have done. You must now share for life the burden which we have borne so long alone. I shall feel that I can trust you with more assurance if you will swear upon this cross to remember your promise.”

It was not a Greek cross that he held before my eyes.

”I have given my word to Her Highness,” I said, rising, ”but, if it would give you greater peace of mind, I will swear.”

”Swear,” he repeated solemnly.

And I did so.

”Thank you,” he said. ”Now I shall give you safe escort to the gates of Framkor Castle.”

I found, when I arose, that I could walk quite well, much to my surprise. Solonika insisted that I stay for luncheon, it being near the noon hour, but I held to my determination. I felt sure that neither the General nor Nick yet knew of the part I played in the rescue and they could not know until Marbosa returned to the lodge. In order that the presence in his stable of the horses we had stolen might not betray me, I asked the Duke if he would keep them hidden until after I

had left the country. When the old man caught the drift of my thoughts his eyes twinkled with merriment and he readily consented.

He offered to send his men with me for safety, but I refused for fear I might be seen on the road. It was only a short walk across the fields, and, much against Solonika's earnest protestations, I set out on foot alone. Her father forbade her to ride even to the gates with me. He had had his lesson and would not permit her again out of his sight.

"Good-bye, my proven friend," was all she said as I held her hand long at parting. Parting! aye, this we both knew was our final parting. I would see her again as she rode through the streets of Nischon, but never again, perhaps, would I speak with her, or hold her hand as I did at this moment. The palace of the King would swallow her up on the morrow.

"Good-bye, Your Highness," was all I dared trust myself to utter. But I know she was reading my inmost thoughts.

"Not 'Your Highness,'" she said, "but always 'Solonika' to you, Dale. I shall visit that America of yours some day."

She came through the hedge in front of the summer-house with me, her hand resting upon my shoulder, and my last view of her was the glimpse I received as I turned at the bend and looked back. There she stood in her little torn riding breeches, covered with dust and dirt. The picture will never fade from my memory while life shall last.

When I arrived at the castle, as I expected, neither the General nor Nick was home. The butler served me with food and I ate with the abandon of a half-starved dog. Hunger appeased, sleep overtook me in my chair.

My dreams were not restful. For a time I fought wild boars, my only weapon being an absurd little toothpick. Fortunately for me the animals appeared much afraid of my little pike and I chased them over the forest of Zin with joyful shouts. But my joy turned to sudden rage when an unseen enemy took me in the rear in its enfolding arms from which there was no escape. It bore me swiftly to the edge of a terrible precipice, tore my clothing from me and hurled me violently into space. I fell down and ever down, my invisible enemy chuckling horribly as if my fall were a jest. But somehow I never reached the bottom and gradually ceased to fall. Instead, I floated away peacefully upon a cushion of down, lying full length upon the restful bosom of the atmosphere in a dreamless sleep, where only Solonika walked. She held a stilling finger to her lips; there was an expression in her eyes that is found only in those of a watchful mother who bids the whole world walk quietly that her cradled babe be not disturbed.

Once I awoke to find it night and I closed my eyes again. But when next I opened them sunlight was streaming into the room and Nick's curly black head

was on the pillow beside me. He was watching me intently.

"Happy New Year," he cried quickly with all the pleasure of a schoolboy who "says it first."

I looked and said nothing. I feared that this would be a most unhappy new year for me and that none of the succeeding years would be any happier.

"How do you like the forest of Zin?" he continued gaily.

"'Tis an extensive place," I replied. "Happy New Year to you, Nick."

"Footsore and weary he treads the wild way through," carolled he. "At least you will have something to tell when you get back to America. I spent a devil of a night in the forest looking for you."

"Did you?" I asked, innocently enough. "What did they do with the Prince, those highwaymen?"

"Highwaymen? Humph, do not give yourself any concern about the Prince. I happen to know that he is in safe hands. They will not harm him; only, he will be unavoidably detained and not be able to attend the ceremonies to-day. Do you realize, old pal, that I killed a horse looking for you and all the time you were sitting in the dining room peacefully asleep in your chair. Most inconsiderate of you."

"I'm sorry," I said, but I was not.

"How did you get home?"

I told him I had walked a great part of the way, which was true as far as it went. He said he knew that, from the condition of my shoes and clothes which he took off when he carried me to bed at three in the afternoon. Also, he had found my horse wandering in the woods.

"Where's the General?" I asked. It was evident that Nick had not returned to the lodge and did not know the latest news.

"In his room, I suppose. I heard him come in early last evening. But like you I needed the sleep. So I guess I did not greet him very cordially and he went away."

Even as Nick spoke the General, dressed in his finest green uniform, emblazoned with much gold braid over the shoulders and broad chest, strode into the room, his long sword dragging over the carpet behind him.

"Get up, you boys," he commanded; "there isn't much time. Nick, Nick, I have brought your uniform. It was your father's court dress. I want you to look your best this day of all days."

"Happy New Year," we both shouted, neither ahead of the other.

"Thank you," he returned gravely.

"Then you succeeded? You have made Marbosa relent? There will be a coronation?" cried Nick.

"I did not succeed. But there will be a coronation at Nischon to-day, never

fear. But whether it be the Prince of Dhalmatia or—some one else who is made king, I am not certain. The Prince gave Marbosa quite a scare shortly after you left the lodge. He escaped.”

”Yes, yes?” I cried, eager to hear the end of the tale.

”Hurrah for the Prince. There is good stuff in that lad,” cried Nick. ”Tell me all about it.”

”There is nothing to tell, except that the rascal made off with my roan that I wanted to ride in the parade to-day—also with your mare.”

”What did he want with two horses? Was there any one with him?”

”No one knows. We had arrived at that stage in the discussion when it was necessary to have a word with the Prince as to his policy with the Turkish problem. If he would consent to continue the present cabinet, and keep his father at home, he had a chance of going free.”

”You got that far with Marbosa?”

”Yes; we sent for the lad, but could not find him. Some one said he had probably retired. We searched all the bed rooms. The Prince was not in the lodge. It is a great mystery how he escaped. At first the absence of my horse at the gate did not disturb me. I thought your party had taken it in their haste—”

”Not I,” said Nick; ”they were too tired.”

”But when the grooms assured us that you had mounted your friends from the stable and we counted the horses, we knew there was little use searching around the premises. Marbosa was furious, as you may well imagine. He swore that he’d kill the Prince when he overtook him. Marbosa is a man of his word, as we all know. My roan is a good horse, but he is not equal to eighty miles in a day.”

”He was caught then?” said Nick.

”Probably,” said the General. ”At all events I would not be surprised if some one else were made king of Bharbazonia to-day.”

”Novgorod?” asked Nick.

”Novgorod,” said the General, with a look I did not understand. ”Now get dressed, you two, as quickly as possible.”

”A pretty stew Marbosa is getting us into,” growled Nick, but the General went away without replying. I longed to tell dear old Nick that the Duke had failed in his effort to capture the Prince, but I felt that the time was not yet. Silently I thanked God for our lucky escape from Marbosa’s awful temper. It had been more serious than we thought.

When he finally struggled into it, Nick looked every inch a king himself in his father’s court dress. It was a Grand Duke’s uniform, he told me, of scarlet with green facings. The double-breasted coat reached to the knees and fitted him splendidly, although to my modest American taste there was too much

gold braid and "ginger-bread" about it. Close-fitting knee boots with wide fluted tops joined the coat at the knee and almost hid the tight trousers beneath; they had green stripes down the side. A military helmet of green with scarlet and gold trimmings, a lengthy sword that trailed like the General's upon the ground, numerous medals and insignia of ancient orders pinned upon his breast, made Nicholas of Framkor look as if he had come into his own.

My own neat-fitting dress suit and silk hat were very republican compared with Nick's kingly costume, but Nick said it was perfectly correct to wear it to the coronation; that he had often ridden through the streets of Berlin so attired at eleven o'clock in the morning to make a formal call.

"Oh, king," I cried mockingly, "have mercy upon thine humble subject. Deign to cast one kingly, kindly eye upon his plebeian, tear-stained countenance, before thou shalt send him to his deserved doom."

"What ho, varlets," he shouted, catching the spirit of the play, "bind yonder rascal and cast him from the castle wall."

"What," I cried, "hast no pity? Then listen, varlets, while I insult him who once was my dearest friend. Wouldst know what he looks like? Wouldst? He looks to me like one of those paper soldiers I used to shoot spit-balls at in my nursery."

"I do, do I?" shouted Nick. "For that thou diest."

But I refused to die easily, and he chased me all around the room until his long sword got ignominiously between his legs and sent him face downward to the floor. The noise brought the General upon us in a rage.

"Stop that, you—children!" he hurled at us. "Will you never grow up? Come to breakfast."

In the main hall of the castle the General stopped before the great picture of Nick's father in the scarlet uniform. I was struck with the likeness. There were the same large dreamy eyes that could become so terrible when the owner was angry. Except for the snow-white hair and the other usual signs of age, the man in the picture might be standing by my side. Every old person in the kingdom who was acquainted with the elder Fremsted would be sure to recognize Nicholas in that uniform to-day. The General beamed with happiness. He tarried in front of the picture after we entered the dining-room and I heard him say:

"I will do the best I can for you this day, old friend. But I shall also remember my oath."

The sun shone hot and the air was balmy as a spring day when, with Teju Okio at the wheel, we three friends set out for Nischon and the coronation. But, instead of beating high with pleasure at the thought of seeing a bit of barbaric royalty for which I had crossed the ocean, my heart was heavy in my bosom. Although I had no doubt as to who would be crowned king that day, knowing

Solonika safe, I dreaded the ordeal she must pass through.

Marbosa would not give up without a struggle and some further attempt might be made in the interest of this mysterious scion of royalty, who permitted his friends to fight his battles for him, while he enjoyed himself elsewhere.

I remembered, too, the sight of Nicholas's face when he spoke of the sacrilege; the witch of Utrepect haunted me and I was afraid—afraid!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CORONATION

Knights, with long retinue of their squires,
 In gaudy liveries march and quaint attires;
 One laced the helm, another held the lance,
 A third a shining buckler did advance.
 The courser paw'd the ground with restless feet,
 And snorting, foam'd and champ'd the golden bit.
 The smiths and armourers on palfreys ride,
 Files in their hands and hammers at their side;
 And nails for loosen'd spears and thongs for shields provide.
 The yeomen guard the streets in seemly bands;
 The clowns come crowding on, with cudgels in their hands.
 —*Palawan and Arcite.*

Nischon was in holiday attire. Hundreds of blue and gold flags were suspended across the streets and every house was draped with bunting. The largest of the flags was fifty feet wide at the top; they were triangular in shape and came to a point so close to the ground that they brushed our faces as we passed swiftly under them.

Every shop was closed; the peasantry, not only of Nischon but also from the surrounding towns and villages, were upon the street dressed in their best gay colours, waiting for the grand parade, hungering for a sight of the Prince and the nobles. The parade was all the populace would see of the ceremonies, for only the nobles of the land, the personal representatives of the kings and queens of Europe, and the foreign attachés of the court of Bharbazonia were to be permitted within the Cathedral.

On the façades of several houses I saw the same emblem of sinister meaning—a red fez with a dagger run through it, draped in black—and beneath, the motto which Nick translated from the dialect, "Down with the Osmanli;" the national hatred for the Turk must protrude itself even when Bharbazonia tried to be happy.

The two ancient fortresses on the opposite hills fired blank charges from their heaviest guns and from every noisy street came the sputtering reply of small arms in the hands of the peasantry. For only the lower classes were permitted to carry firearms that day. They took keen delight in displaying these weapons before the nobles, who found equal pleasure in carrying swords, a privilege denied to peasants.

Although the General took us toward the Palace by the quieter streets, he was greeted with cheers from all sides. The wave of sound followed our flight like a wall of water, ready to topple over, but never quite able to overtake us.

The roadways were full of richly attired nobles on horseback, riding rapidly toward the Palace where the pageant was to start. There were hundreds of victorias and open carriages coming and going. Within were seated beautifully gowned women, some attired in modern Paris gowns and others in Bharbazonian gaudy finery. Our conveyance played sad havoc with the equilibrium of these noble dames when horse after horse caught sight of us and tried to break away from the attending grooms.

The courtly General, forgetful of the use he had made of the machine during the past three weeks, cursed Teju Okio every time such an accident was threatened, but the boy, ever smiling, replied:

"Very dam fine."

Although the General made several attempts to get out, his martial dignity forbade him going on foot and he subsided. Matters were adjusted to his satisfaction when he caught sight of a gay young colonel of his regiment and ordered him to bring two horses as quickly as possible. When they came, the General and Nicholas rode away to the Palace, ordering Teju Okio to take me to the Cathedral where I might procure a position near the great door before the crowd of vehicles blocked the way.

The green grass under the minarets and shining domes of the high church were black with people. They gathered around the car when we took our position before the entrance, feeling the hard tires and caressing the shining paint of the tonneau, making me feel as if I were part of the parade placed there for their amusement.

Hour after hour crept slowly by and I began to regret that I had not accepted the General's offer to ride with him, although I should have felt out of place in the procession and lost the position for the automobile, which, as it af-

terward transpired, was of value to me and made easy that which might have been otherwise impossible.

I amused myself by idly smoking endless cigarettes and buying cakes and sweets from the street venders. About two o'clock the blare of a powerful band somewhere near the Palace told me that the procession was moving at last. In order to give the common people their full share of the festivities, the pageant wended its way through all the principal streets of the city, beginning with that part which lay on the opposite side of the river.

From our elevated position, half-way up the hill on the Cathedral side, we were able to follow the line of march until it reached the bridge and began the circuit on our side. Shouting, confetti-throwing and detonating fireworks marked the progress of the entourage. The forts high overhead seemed to go mad with joy. It was four o'clock when the head of the procession turned into the street which led to the Cathedral grounds.

First came an army of mounted troops—five thousand in number—with General Palmora riding proudly at their head. This was only the vanguard intended to clear the way around the entrance. As it came on it formed into two solid lines of horsemen from the massive doorway of the Greek Church extending back along the avenue as far as the eye could reach. The soldiers wheeled their horses, the two lines facing each other, and backed their animals into the crowd behind, leaving a wide pathway vacant for the procession. Everything had to move back before them, but the General saw to it personally that the automobile was permitted within the enclosure.

I thus had an unobstructed view of the proceedings. The regimental band again scattered the crowd and took up its position on the plaza before the Cathedral and the King's Own Guard in scarlet uniforms, which distinguished them from the General's fighting men in their green cloth, followed. These red soldiers were about two thousand strong. They lined up in front of the cavalrymen, thus making a double barricade of horses around the entrance and lending their brilliant colour to the entrancing military picture.

Close behind his Guard, riding a quiet black charger covered from head to foot with a black riding cloth emblazoned with gold so that only his pointed ears and flashing eyes were exposed, peeping from small apertures in the head-dress, came old King Gregory. At sight of him the populace shouted with joy and the legion of mounted men flashed their thousand swords in the air held at salute.

For all his eighty-two years and flowing white beard, the King was magnificent. One could readily believe him capable of winning his encounter thirty years before in front of the Turk's Head Inn. He sat his horse firmly and carried his head erect, looking neither to the right nor left. His face was gravely serious. Only when he came opposite the General did he show that he saw or heard.

He acknowledged Palmora's military salute, dismounted and walked with great dignity up the Cathedral steps.

Behind him were his Prime Minister and cabinet, followed by the Grand Dukes of the realm and the nobles. Nicholas in his scarlet uniform was among them, but he did not notice me. Beside him rode Marbosa. There was a scowl upon the Duke's face and I knew he had learned that the Prince had not disappointed the people. He looked none the worse for his hard ride. Around him I recognized many of the young nobles who had been with him in the lodge. They were sober now, but the look of determination on their faces brooded ill for the Prince. Oh, if I only knew what they intended to do in the Cathedral!

The foreign attachés and representatives of the European potentates came next. They were headed by a band of long-skirted Cossacks. Riding before them was a stern gentleman in a brilliant Russian uniform whom I took to be Grand Duke Alexoff, the personal representative of the Tzar of all the Russias. Among the crowd of attachés I had no difficulty in picking out the blond head and red uniform of the Englishman, the court dress of the Frenchman and the modest dress suit of the American consul.

As each detachment dismounted before the Cathedral, under the admirable system of the General, their horses were taken to the rear by the soldiers, so that there was no congestion about the entrance.

The women of the court, and the wives and daughters of the nobles and foreign dignitaries, followed in their open carriages, and it was upon these that the populace showered confetti and flowers. At any other time this fine display of magnificent gowns might have interested me, but I was anxious to see Solonika. I chafed under the delay occasioned by the long line of carriages from which the women leisurely disembarked and ascended the steps with many glances behind at their long trains.

As it happened, Solonika brought up the rear of the procession. Surrounded by her father's retainers in such number that even Marbosa's men might hesitate to attack them, she came, mounted on a snow-white, prancing horse, whose pink muzzle and dainty pricked ears pronounced him an Arab. Her waving red hair reflected the departing kiss of the setting sun and her eyes were bright with excitement at the murmur of admiration which the peasantry could not suppress.

Like the King's horse, her magnificent animal was covered with a similar riding cloth. Except for the absence of the red cross and shield, she might have been a Crusader about to set out for the Holy Land, or Sir Lancelot of King Arthur's time. Nothing but the eyes and ears of her steed was visible; and the white cloth was stiff with heavy golden embroidery worked, I thought, by her own hands, during the long years of waiting. Over her shoulders, fastened with a golden buckle under her chin, hung a long flowing white cloak similarly em-

bossed; it melted into the riding cloth and gave the impression that horse and rider had been carved out of one piece of white marble. White satin knee breeches and white buckled shoes and silk stockings completed the most magnificent picture of Solonika my memory treasures.

The Red Fox, in the crimson uniform of a Grand Duke, rode nearest her; but I knew that the smile of satisfaction on his face concealed his apprehension of the outcome of the day and the strain under which he was labouring. For the present there was nothing to fear from Marbosa. The Red Fox's strong retinue was followed by the entire garrison of Castle Novgorod of the province of the North, the other half of the army of Bharbazonia. Governor Hassan led them, and they were fully ten thousand strong, filling up the entire avenue with horses. General Palmora, I know, controlled them and, until he joined with Marbosa, the nobles would be powerless.

The Red Fox had good cause to be uneasy, not so much because of his secret, but because of the sullen attitude of the peasantry. For, while they had greeted King Gregory with rapturous applause and cheered the General and every dignitary in the long line, they were ominously silent as Solonika passed. Some it is true did attempt a greeting, but they were promptly put down by rival cries of "Down with the Osmanli." Duke Marbosa's sympathizers seemed to be everywhere in the crowd. The years he had spent in educating the people to believe in the Red Fox's Turkish tendencies were bearing fruit. It was only too plain that, had not the Prince appeared to-day at the Cathedral, the wily Duke of Marbosa would have easily had his way in proclaiming his favourite, Prince Novgorod.

I did not envy Solonika her reign in Bharbazonia.

As she came in sight of the automobile standing in front of the steps ahead of the line of horsemen, she looked straight at me as I leaned forward in the seat and removed my hat. Although she made no sign, I knew that she saw me and was glad that I was there. Poor little Solonika, you were going to the life you abhorred with a smile on your face. How sweet you looked upon your splendid palfrey, and how I longed to pick you up in these strong arms and bear you far, far away, out of all this meaningless pomp and ceremony! How great a sacrifice you were making I alone of all that crowd knew.

She passed without a further glance in my direction and entered the Cathedral. Was she thus to go out of my life for ever? As she ascended the steps, and lingered for a moment under the gloomy arch of the portal, the sun went down behind the western hill and the dark promise of approaching night fell upon the thousand upturned faces below. I shivered as if I saw an evil omen in the trivial incident. Set, you golden sun over yonder hill, for what cared I? Without the woman I loved, without the companionship of that glorious creature who was to sit upon a throne as far above me as the stars, the world would be for ever dark.

Within the sombre entrance of the Cathedral I saw her again. She was buckling her sword to her side and waiting for her father to come up. Again she looked me full in the face, and I fancied her lips moved and a voice whispered "Good-bye, Dale." But I could not be sure she had spoken and I dared not address her in the midst of her retainers. She would need her undivided attention and all her fine courage to carry her through the coming ordeal.

"Any news of Marbosa?" the Red Fox whispered in my ear.

"None," I answered, "except that he and his men are in the Cathedral. They mean business. Keep your retainers close at hand."

The Cathedral was crowded, and, since the entrance of King Gregory, the entire assemblage was standing. The only vacant space was the wide aisle which led from the single door to the altar. The best positions for sight-seeing were the places lining this aisle. Without exception these were filled with women. The nobles were against the side walls, and the Grand Dukes and foreigners were standing on the right and left of the open spaces before the altar. I was glad to note this disposition of the audience for it left the aisle free to any one who wished to leave the church. The men would have to thrust the women aside before they could reach the door.

A gorgeously attired attendant, with one glance at my plain dress suit, led me to a place among the foreigners and I found myself between the American consul and the French diplomat. After the trying ordeal of walking up the aisle with the eyes of the court ladies upon me came to an end, I was well pleased with my position for I would be within ten feet of Solonika when she was crowned.

I looked around the Cathedral. The interior was entirely of stone; it echoed and re-echoed with the slightest movement of the crowd. There were no nave or side aisles. Overhead, arching domes rested on pillars and sprang anew from them to other pillars in an almost endless succession. The result was row upon row of heavy stone pillars extending both lengthwise and crosswise through the body of the church dividing it up into a giant checker-board. But, up near the altar where I stood, the pillars ceased and the high roof reared itself into a single massive dome. I judged that I was under the tallest of the domes which from the outside I had seen at the rear of the edifice.

Under this dome every sound was intensely magnified and the voices of an invisible male choir thundered and reverberated above my head in the solemn movement of an endless Greek chant; the replies were sung by a surpliced boy choir within the sacred altar. The Cathedral was ablaze with lights which came from groups of long candles along the walls and clustered about the heads of the pillars. The altar was one brilliant flame of fire glistening against solid walls of serried candles placed one against the other, outlining the arches, niches and the high altar itself, until to my mind it looked like a miniature exposition building

at night. The air was heavy with the smoke of burning candles and the choking odour of Oriental incense.

Moving about through the body of the church, swinging the incense burners of beaten brass and lending their voices to the chant, were scores of lectors, hypo-deacons, deacons and arch-priests. They were dressed in white and from their raiment had received the name of the "white clergy;" these were the priests who were permitted to marry. Gathered around the altar were the priests, bishops, archbishops and metropolitans. They were attired in black and were called the "black clergy;" they were not permitted to marry. The monks from whom they were chosen were not in evidence, but I supposed it was their voices that were raised in the chant.

High above all, dignified, solemn, majestic, his sable robes wrapped closely about him, his tall mitred hat set firmly upon his gray head, stood the Patriarch, the "pope" of the Bharbazonian church. As I soon had cause to learn, he was equal if not greater in power than the King himself, having not only a spiritual but also a temporal jurisdiction over the people, who paid him an annual tribute in proportion to their incomes. He stood motionless, like a man of stone, within that sacred space known as the "Holy of Holies" where, thanks to our pagan ancestry of phallic worship, no woman may come and live.

"They couldn't do better at the Hippodrome," drawled the unimpressed American consul in my ear, but I pretended not to hear him.

My thoughts were upon this Patriarch with his hard, superstitious face. The Greek Church is not, like the Catholic Church, under one single pope. It has a patriarch in every one of its countries and the moral tone of each division of the church depends upon the education and enlightenment of this leader. What the Greek church was in Russia, Turkey, or the other Balkan states was of no interest to me. This was Bharbazonia. And one of this Patriarch's priests had burned a woman at the stake, unrebuked. I prayed that Solonika might not be discovered, for I felt sure she would suffer the same terrible punishment as befell the witch of Utrepect.

A murmur of women's voices and the sound of rustling skirts, such as one hears in a fashionable church when the bride appears at the foot of the aisle, told me that the Prince was coming. The priests and choir boys, regardless of the ancient chant, broke into a spirited litany, and the Prince, with head erect and eyes fixed upon the High Patriarch, walked slowly up the aisle.

He had thrown aside his cloak and looked slender and weak in contrast with all the strength and power of the kingdom assembled to see him made ruler. How pale his face under the red hair brushed neatly back from his forehead. How like a sacrifice his white garments made him appear. The women hung over the ropes that guarded the aisle, with admiration for the beautiful boy written upon

their countenances. The young girls were entranced. To them he no doubt was a little prince out of a story book.

On, on he came until he stood in front of the stone railing facing King Gregory, who had taken up the position of honour at the feet of the Patriarch. The Duke of Dhalmatia followed his son at a respectful distance, and halted behind him when he reached the altar. The King fixed his glance upon his brother, but the Red Fox did not notice him. Dhalmatia was watching the Duke of Marbosa on the right among the crowd of scarlet Grand Dukes. Nicholas was beside Marbosa and, when the Red Fox saw him, I knew by his sudden start that he recognized the Grand Duke of Framkor's son. But whether his knowledge went further and told him where to expect Marbosa's blow, I could not say. The Red Fox cast a look over his shoulder as if to measure the distance to the door where he had left his own men.

Every sound in the vast Cathedral was hushed. The stolid Patriarch had raised his hand for silence. The choir boys were dumb and the invisible monks ceased their dismal chant. The audience stood breathless. Two black-robed metropolitans ascended to a position just below the pope. They faced each other and bent low over the feet of the Patriarch, who stood with one hand raised toward heaven. The black clergy began a chant in Greek and went through a mysterious service during which the candles were put out and lighted again. The Patriarch faced the north, south, east and west. Then the bent metropolitans arose and descended to the side of the Prince. They unbuckled his sword belt and gave the weapon into the keeping of the Red Fox, and solemnly led the Prince past the King, up the steps to kneel at the feet of the Patriarch.

The Prince was within the Holy of Holies! The sacrilege was complete! Up to this time, perhaps, the masquerade had been an amusing play. Now, discovery meant death!

The Patriarch then took an active part in the ceremony. In a strident voice he intoned the leads in the service, the black clergy and the choirs replying; the babel of sounds became deafening; it was apparent that the festival was approaching its climax. With his own hands the "pope" baptized the kneeling Prince with oil and vinegar, and blessed his future reign by touching his head and shoulders with the sacred wand of Moses, taken from its resting-place within the arch in the Holy of Holies. He laid his own black robe upon the shoulders of the kneeling figure in token that the Prince now shared the leadership of the Church with the Patriarch, and lifted a golden crown from the altar to place it upon the Prince's brow, the insignia of his kingship.

All sounds were hushed; the chanting again ceased; the audience stood spell-bound, awaiting the final act which would make Prince Raoul, son of the Grand Duke of Dhalmatia, King of Bharbazonia.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, came the interruption. From somewhere in the Cathedral, I knew not where, a voice, not the voice of any priest, cried:

"Stop!"

I dropped my hand to my side pocket, and felt my fingers close over the handle of my revolver, and looked toward Grand Duke Marbosa. He was standing among the scarlet uniforms, his hand upon his sword hilt, looking with startled attention at the Patriarch. He did not move, and I knew that the interruption had not come from him. The Red Fox, his eyes starting from their sockets, his thin lips moving as if in prayer, his bloodless hands grasping his son's sword, was staring at King Gregory.

Then I realized that it was the old King who had spoken. He was facing the multitude with upraised hand, his red face growing redder under the stress of excitement.

"Teskla, my daughter, come hither," he said.

The strain was too great for the Red Fox's shattered nerves. He unconsciously released his hold upon the Prince's sword, and it fell with a loud clatter to the floor. An audible sigh of broken suspense went wavering through the entire length of the huge Cathedral at this second interruption. The High Priest paused, holding the crown suspended above the Prince's bowed head. The two might have been turned to stone.

"Holy Patriarch," began the King, addressing the altar, "I crave your pardon most humbly for this intrusion. But, before you place the crown upon the Prince Raoul's head, before I cease to be King in Bharbazonia, there is one last act which I wish to perform. I will not long detain you."

While he spoke, Princess Teskla, surprise and dread written upon every lineament of her handsome face, walked haltingly toward the King. He placed one arm affectionately over her shoulder and faced the nobles.

"You men of Bharbazonia, Grand Dukes and nobles assembled," he said, "have not forgotten the ancient law of the Virgin. You are aware that he who salutes one such publicly upon the lips, under the reading of that law defiles her. For such an act there is but one reparation."

"We know," thundered the nobles in chorus.

"Holy Father," continued the King, facing the Patriarch, "will you tell us what that reparation is."

"The offending man must wed the maid if he be a fit mate for her. If not he may choose between exile or death," pronounced the "pope" in chanting tones.

"Such defilement has been thrust upon my daughter," shouted the King so loudly that his voice reached every ear within the vast Cathedral.

The Prince within the altar turned his head slightly, as if to catch the eye of his father. The Duke had been watching, and returned the look as if to say, "Fear

not, my child, this has naught to do with us.”

”There must be witnesses,” droned the Patriarch.

”Speak, Nokolovitch,” commanded the King of his Prime Minister.

”I am witness,” said the Prime Minister.

”There must be another,” said the Church.

”Speak, Palmora,” cried the King.

”I am witness,” said the General as if the words were being dragged from him. He cast a despairing look at his beloved Nicholas, who stood with bowed head. The scene in the Garden of the Palace came vividly back to us all. How serious are jests when viewed through sober eyes. What a scurvy trick the King was playing upon Nicholas and his daughter in thus publicly disgracing them. The law which he had invoked must have been one of the old forgotten ”blue laws” of the country which even the General had not remembered when he searched for some explanation for the King’s show of delight in the Garden. But it still seemed in force if the King chose to wield it.

”Another! There must be a third,” said the Patriarch.

”I am witness,” the King promptly replied.

”Enough! The law is fulfilled,” intoned the Church. ”Name thou the man!”

”Name thou the man, Teskla,” adjured the King.

But the Princess was crying bitterly and wringing her hands. She fell upon her knees at her father’s feet.

”I cannot! Oh, my father, I cannot! I cannot!” she wept.

The King shook her roughly by the arm and reiterated his command. Seeing no way out of her dilemma, the Princess brushed away her tears and stood upon her feet. She looked imploringly at Nicholas, who bit his lip and frowned. He could not, or would not, help her and, when she realized that she stood alone, her look of fear returned. Then she turned toward the kneeling Prince behind the altar and seemed to make up her mind. She lacked the courage to tell her father the truth. She determined to travel along the line of least resistance, trusting to the future to come to her aid. Her little white ”lie” had assumed Brobdingnagian proportions.

”Speak, I command thee!” called the Patriarch, wearying of the delay.

”Teskla!” warned her father in a voice that made her tremble.

She straightened herself with an effort to her full handsome height and, pointing an accusing finger at the Prince, cried:

"Thou art the man!"

CHAPTER XIX THE SACRILEGE

I hold it true, whate'er befall,
I feel it when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.
—Tennyson: *In Memoriam*.

"Thou art the man!"

Could I believe the evidence of my senses? The Princess Teskla was pointing at the Prince!

General Palmora, Nicholas and I knew that the Prince had nothing to do with the affair in the garden. The King's intention was clear. He was only pushing to a happy conclusion his cherished scheme to wed his daughter to the head of the new reigning house, and thus keep the succession in his own family. His daughter had caused him to believe that the Prince was a favoured suitor. That knowledge may have led him to abdicate in favour of his hated brother's son. His plot had been deep laid, and it seemed that, aided by his unscrupulous daughter, it must succeed. But why had she, loving Nicholas as I thought, denied that affection? Was it for fear of her father's wrath? The truth would make a fool of him before all the kingdom. Or did she think that her outraged father, when he learned the truth, would consider Nicholas unfit to mate with a princess and urge his exile or death in blind rage?

I grew weak at the terrible shock and breathed a prayer for the safety of the poor, little, kneeling woman in white at the feet of the Patriarch. What would she do? How make answer to the unjust accusation?

Then the enormity of the situation burst upon me. If she submitted to the law and married the Princess, discovery of her sex by Teskla and death at the hands of the outraged Church were sure. If she dragged her skirts from the detaining grip of the law, and admitted her womanhood to escape this marriage, death sure and swift lurked there. Incited by the Patriarch and the black and white clergy, the mob without the Cathedral and the nobles within would rend

her limb from limb.

But could I do nothing to save her? I, too, was a witness; an unseen one it is true, but nevertheless a witness. If I told the truth, would my word be believed against the statements of the King and his Prime Minister? How would I be able to prove that I was present, sitting upon the wall of the Palace garden when the event took place?

If I came forward with my story, Nicholas, I felt sure, would tell the truth. But Nick was my friend, the one man in all the world I loved and would die for. Surely something was due him from me. If he chose to keep silent would I be acting the part of a friend if I forced him to speak?

There was also General Palmora. He had declared himself a witness to the "defilement" of Princess Teskla, under Nick's caress. Now that events had taken such an unexpected turn, would he hold to his position or tell the truth? There might be reasons of state which would influence him to remain silent or even deny my statement. He was pure Bharbazonian, and I could not trust him to act where the interests of his country were involved.

I felt that I stood alone. Clearly, this was neither the time nor the place for me, a foreigner, to interfere in an affair which the nobles would consider did not concern me. There was a way of escape for Solonika. She had but to accept the issue temporarily. If the King demanded an immediate marriage, she could stand upon her right to request a reasonable delay. He could not deny her that. As soon as the coronation ceremony was over, I could easily have her prove that she was not present in Nischon at the time the King and his witnesses would set. Palmora would then be forced to speak, and Nicholas would have time to get out of the jurisdiction. I could best serve Solonika and my friend Nicholas by inaction at this time. The way was not so dark. There was one avenue of escape.

The church was thrown into confusion by the dénouement. Everybody talked at once and no voice was raised to restore order. The women were more wildly excited than the men. Grand Duke Marbosa was whispering to the nobles behind him. Was he, too, preparing to strike? The Prince had been discredited, but, if this proposed alliance of the two houses were effected, the Prince would grow too strong for him.

The General had his hand on Nick's shoulder. He was tugging nervously at his heavy moustache, but was not speaking. Both he and Nick were looking at Princess Teskla who was facing Nick with her arms at her side; only the presence of the people seemed to keep her from running to him for protection. She had done all that love could do for him. The King was as highly pleased at the result of his plan, as he had appeared in the garden when Teskla lied to him. The Red Fox's face was a study. He stood with one arm covering his eyes, as if to shut out the sight of his brother's face, and the other extended to the high altar toward

his child.

"My son! my son!" he kept calling, just as he did in his library when he strove to remind her of her rôle of Prince.

But, even before I decided upon my course of action, events were going forward which took the solution out of my hands for ever. I can now see that the situation appeared in a totally different light to Solonika, ignorant as she was of the truth. She must have felt that she was being trapped; that discovery was sure; that there was no solution.

When the full import of Princess Teskla's words came home to her, Solonika crumpled up at the feet of the Patriarch. Her courage left her. She clutched his sandalled ankles in abject terror. She did not seem to notice her father's cry of "My son." I feared that she had given up in despair.

"Courage, Solonika!" I shouted, loud enough for her to hear, knowing that the import of my words would not be understood in the babel around us.

She *did* hear me. Almost before the cry left my throat she raised her head and looked straight into my eyes. Oh, the suffering and appeal in them. I have never seen and hope never to see again a look like that in eyes of any one I love. I smiled with encouragement and tried to telegraph the hope that was in me. I fancied she understood and I mistook the expression that passed over her face as one of resolve.

Her old courage seemed to return and, with it, full control of herself. She arose and stared down at me in her old dignified, regal manner. She was once more the brave Solonika who had sung "Down among the Dead Men" in Marbosa's lodge. I no longer feared for her, for I thought her able to meet this, the greatest crisis of her life. She came down from the high altar, unrestrained by the motionless Patriarch. I watched her drawing near to Princess Teskla who shrank away in fear.

"I could not help it, Cousin Raoul," cried Teskla, cowering before her.

"Thou art a liar," said Solonika without a look in her direction. She came through the railing, passed her father who tried to clutch her arm, and stood before Nicholas. Could it be possible that she knew? That she intended to force Nicholas to speak in her defence? If so, I could help her with my pleading. I crossed the intervening space and joined them.

"Nicholas Fremsted," she was saying solemnly in English. I was appalled at her colourless voice. It was as if she believed she had been sentenced to death. "You told me once you loved my sister Solonika. I, her brother, ask now that you do something for me. It is as though Solonika asked it of you, herself. Will you do it?"

"He will, Your Highness. I will answer for him," I said.

"Then, listen. At this moment your automobile stands at the Cathedral

door. Go, order your man to start his engines and be ready to move at a moment's notice."

"Go, Nick, go!" I urged.

Feeling perhaps that he was making some slight amends for the unintentional injury, Nick went swiftly down the aisle to do as he was bid.

"Dale, oh, my faithful friend. There is something you can do. Go to the door of the Cathedral—the only door—and place the key upon the outside—and wait."

Although it was not clear what she intended doing, this was no time to argue. Without a word I flew to obey her orders. Because of her use of English not a word of her intention filtered through to the court. Only her father who was nearest understood her words, and gathered some inkling of the meaning. As I hurried down the aisle, unimpeded, I heard him cry in an agony of suspense:

"My daughter—my son—my only child—what would you do? Speak, speak to me I implore you. Tell me what is your purpose."

"It is the end," she replied without spirit. "The end! *The end!* We are trapped and undone. We cannot go on. We are lost—lost—lost! As God is my Judge, I will not live this horrible lie another moment. I did not foresee this mockery. Oh, God, my heart is breaking!"

"Aye," he replied, "but the sacrilege! Think of the sacrilege! You cannot go back. The only safe way is to go on! There must be a way out of this difficulty. There must be; trust me, your father; I will find it for you."

"Let them kill me if they wish. I know, now, what the life means which you have doomed me to. If there is a God and He is Love He will take care of me."

"But, think, child. They will kill you. They will torture me, your father, who has always loved you. Surely you do not purpose to tell! Oh, my God, do not do that! Do not do that!"

Both the King and the Patriarch, impatient of the delay, put an end to the pleadings of the Duke of Dhalmatia.

"Make answer to this charge. Confess that you are guilty," they exclaimed, and the nobles took up the cry.

Solonika bent over and lifted her sword from the stone floor. Drawing herself up to her full height, she made a sign that she would speak. Silence fell upon the assemblage and every eye was fixed upon her face as they waited for the words to come.

But Solonika did not utter a sound. With her upraised hand she stood listening. Listening for what?

From my position beside the door I had an unobstructed view of her. The Red Fox's retainers were all about me. They were absorbed in watching the proceedings, and did not notice me when I placed the huge brass key on the outside.

Neither did they seem to hear the sharp report of the explosions as Teju Okio, acting under his master's orders, turned the sixty horsepower engines over with a loud whir. The sound rang through the Cathedral in strange contrast with the mediæval scene. It was the voice of the twentieth century making itself heard where for unnumbered ages only the chants of the hooded priests had echoed. It sounded like sweet music to my ears. It seemed to be what Solonika had been waiting for.

"Gentlemen of Bharbazonia," she began, in the court language, "with such an array of formidable witnesses against me it were useless to deny that I am the man who affronted this woman. It would avail me nothing to say that she does not tell the truth; but that which I now tell you will avail, although it bring with it surer retribution."

"No, no!" cried the Red Fox, distraught with fear, "she—he, my child is not himself. His excitement has overtopped his mind. You must not heed his raving. He will marry the Princess. I swear it to you, nobles of Bharbazonia. All will yet be well. But do not let him speak that which is not true. Go on with the ceremony. I would yet see him king before I die—I, his poor father, who have suffered so much against the glories of this day."

"Cease your wild words and permit us to hear this boy's reply," thundered the Patriarch from his high altar. The Church spoke and all men trembled at the sound.

"I will be brief, O, Most High Patriarch," continued Solonika, without a glance in her father's direction. "Your ancient law declares that a *man* must wed the maid he salutes with a kiss before witnesses. I have not broken that law. For I am *not a man, but a woman!*"

"It is not true!" cried Dhalmatia. "I, her father, ought to know!"

"It is true!" cried Solonika.

"Thou art a woman?" thundered the Patriarch above.

"A woman?" exclaimed King Gregory.

"I swear it," replied Solonika, but, even as she spoke, she turned and sped swiftly down the wide aisle toward the door, where I waited. Before the company had fully grasped the meaning of her words, the great voice of the Patriarch thundered and rose above the wild babel of sounds with the one clear word of dread significance:

"SACRILEGE!"

I saw the King with a scream of agony fall forward on his face, while the Red Fox, beaten and undone, dropped to his knees upon the railing in an attitude of prayer. Fortunately for Solonika the armed men, who might have stopped her, were behind the women. No one appeared in the aisle. The court ladies were overcome with terror. On, on, she came running swiftly and lightly toward the

door which I prepared to shut behind her as she passed.

One of the white clergy stood beside me with a brass incense burner in his hand. He dropped the burner to the floor as the Patriarch's cry came to him, and prepared to stop the fleeing Prince. Just as Solonika was within his grasp I struck him a heavy blow and felled him in the aisle. She dashed by and I sprang through the great doorway with her. Both put our shoulders to the heavy oaken portal and swung it shut with a loud bang. I grasped the ponderous key in both hands and the rusty bolt found its iron socket. Even through the door I could hear the bellow of the high priest.

"Sacrilege! A woman hath defiled the altar."

We ran down the steps hand in hand and found Nick, all unconscious of the tragedy which had been enacted within, standing beside the tonneau door, waiting. The black cloth of the Church which hung from Solonika's shoulders served to disguise her in the growing dusk from the soldiers who were still drawn up in front of the Cathedral, ready to conduct the new-made King to the Palace. The engine was playing havoc with their equilibrium.

"Is the ceremony over?" asked Nick, entirely ignorant of the true situation.

"It is over now, thank God," Solonika replied, but her real meaning escaped him.

The noise in the Cathedral became pronounced. Added to the bull-like tones of the Patriarch were women's voices high and shrill, calling upon the empty air to "Stop her."

"What's the trouble in there?" asked Nick. The cavalymen nearest the steps looked anxiously toward the building.

"The audience is preparing to come out, Nick," I said as quietly as I could. "Please get under way as rapidly as possible."

I helped the trembling girl into the machine and leaped in beside her. Nick took his place beside Teju Okio.

"Let her go," he commanded.

"Very dam fine," returned the boy, and we started like the wind.

We passed through the wide pathway held open by the wall of mounted men and were well up the hill before we heard a sound from the Cathedral. From our elevated position we had a dim view of the plaza in front of the church, and saw that the excitement had been communicated to the street. All became confusion among the soldiers and the waiting crowd. They ran about and looked to me like little black ants that have been disturbed in their hill by the careless foot of man. As long as we remained in sight no one emerged from the Cathedral to take command and order a pursuit. Evidently the door was holding well. But I did not take much comfort at our easy escape for I knew that before morning the entire army and every man, woman and child in Bharbazonia would be seeking

Solonika.

"Where would you go, Sire?" said Nick. "Dhalmatia?"

"No! no!" she cried, and I felt her shudder. "Any place but there."

"His Majesty," said I, thinking it best to keep Nick in ignorance for a while at least, "is much over-wrought after the strain of the ceremony. It would be well to ride for a time. The night air will do him good."

"Let's make it the Turk's Head Inn, then," suggested Nick. "We may get something to eat there. I have not had anything since breakfast."

"Neither have I. Make it the Turk's Head," I replied.

Nick turned his attention to directing Teju Okio toward the King's Highway which led to the inn, and Solonika settled against my shoulder with a satisfied sigh. I stole one arm under her head to make her more comfortable. We rode silently on into the growing darkness. In an hour it would be as dark as that terrible morning when we rode through the forest of Zin.

"What are your plans, Solonika?" I whispered.

"Do not speak. Do not move," she said. "I am so happy."

Happy? This was no time to give way to happiness. I realized the supreme danger she was in and felt that we lost time by aimlessness of action. I, too, feeling her soft cheek against my arm, was strangely happy. But fear would not let me enjoy the pleasure her proximity gave me. Of course, being possessed of the only automobile in Bharbazonia, we were safe from pursuit for the moment. But there was Nicholas to be reckoned with. He must be told the truth. When he knew that the Prince was Solonika, how would he act? I remembered his curving fingers around an imaginary throat when he told me of the sacrilege. Would he still be of the same opinion when he knew Solonika had committed that great crime against his church? And then my heart stopped beating, and I sat up with a gasp.

The gates! there at the end of the highway stood Castle Comada with its battlements and its closed, barred doors! What good was our flight at all if we were to be stopped by the guard at the end of our run? The government had wires to all its outposts and by this time, perhaps, the two castles. Novgorod on the north and Comada on the south, would be on the look-out for the automobile.

"Solonika, you must tell me what you propose doing. You must realize the castles will know of our coming and will not let us through. How are we to get out of this cursed country?"

"It is so plebeian to be happy," she murmured, like one in a dream. "I never knew, I never dreamed it would be like this. It is so good."

I began to fear for her reason. This obliviousness to fear, when she knew that death inevitable was hanging over her head, like the sword of Damocles, was not entirely natural. But I did not disturb her again until we drew up in front of

the tavern about nine o'clock. We had met no one on the road who disputed our progress.

Nick ordered the meal and I followed Solonika to a comfortable chair by the fire. She clung to my hand with all the appearance of a frightened child and would not let me go. I stayed to comfort her while Nick and Teju Okio examined the car which had brought us safely thus far on our journey.

The French landlord was overjoyed. Business he said was very bad. Everybody was at the coronation. There was not a single soul about the inn but his wife and the servants. I arranged for a room at the head of the stairs for Solonika, and urged her to lie down a while before supper. She consented, and I led her to the foot of the stairs. We were alone for the moment. On the first step she stopped and held out her arms to me.

"Oh, Dale Wharton," she whispered, "it is so beautiful. I wonder that I never knew it before. It came so suddenly, when you looked at me in the Cathedral. There seemed to be a stone wall ahead. I could not go forward and I could not go back. Then, somehow, you came to me and I realized what a lonely life I should lead thereafter. Without you I did not want to live. You made me tell. And now I am free to die."

"Hush, sweetheart, you must not talk of dying. I will save you if I can. There must be a way."

"No hope. No hope. Though I turn to the east, west, north, south, there is no hope. The Greek church—my church—is hedging me about. I have given up. I will fight no more. For my sacrilege I must die. In the sight of God I am accursed. I must die. I must."

"No, my own, you must not die."

"But, before they come, Dale, I want you to know that I love you. I want you to kiss me once upon the lips, and I shall be content."

I tried to rouse her; to make her see that we could escape if she would only help me, and that, when we were free, there was a life for us together in America where, undisturbed by kings or creeds, we might be happy. She listened patiently, but without interest. Much against my will I was forced to realize that she felt the enormity of her offence and that she had condemned herself to death.

"Will you not kiss me, Dale?" she pleaded.

"Listen, dearest," I said, hoping to force her to help me through the love she bore me, "you must not give up in despair. For, if you die, I must die also. You will not condemn me to death, will you?"

"Oh, no," she replied, "they will not hurt you. You have not harmed them, as I have."

She put her arms around my neck and kissed me long and passionately. Our lips met in their first kiss and possibly their last. Then she walked weakly

up the steps, entered her room and closed the door.

I stood at the foot of the stairs and watched her until she was gone from sight. Then I turned and came face to face with Nicholas. From his expression I knew that he had seen the Prince's caress. So bitterly did he look at me that I scarcely recognized my old friend in him. And I needed his friendship now so much. Plainly he suspected the truth.

"Well, Dale," he said coldly, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain."

CHAPTER XX

THE FAILURE OF FRIENDSHIP

There was a laughing devil in his sneer,
That raised emotions both of rage and fear;
And where his frown of hatred darkly fell,
Hope withering, fled, and mercy sighed farewell.

—Byron: *Corsair*.

The supreme moment in the lives of both Nicholas and myself had arrived. But Solonika's strange behaviour had unnerved me, and I felt unequal to it. The presence of the landlord in the room, directing his servants as they placed the steaming dinner upon the table, gave me an opportunity for delay.

With Solonika obdurate and my own ignorance of the country, escape was impossible, unless Nicholas would help. He was my only hope. If I could win his sympathy and cause him to place his knowledge, power and influence at my disposal, for the sake of our friendship, there was a chance that we might win our way out of this terrible country in safety.

While we had been riding toward the inn, I had mapped out a plan of escape. There was the General's yacht lying at Bizzett with steam up, ready to take Nicholas and me to Naples in the morning. If we motored as near the gates as possible and bought or stole horses from a neighbouring farmer; if we disguised Solonika in a peasant girl's costume, changing the description of the party, we might ride under Castle Comada to freedom. Attired as he was in his Grand Duke's uniform, Nicholas's orders to the officer in charge would be promptly obeyed. This officer would have instructions to stop an automobile party, but he would not stop us.

Once out to sea on the yacht we were safe. No Bharbazonian would ask a Turk a favour; consequently our passage through the Bosphorus past the fortresses of Scutari and Constantinople would not be interfered with. Nick could go with us, hastening his departure one day, thus escaping any retribution his countrymen might desire to wreak upon him for lending us aid.

If we had been in any other country under the sun, I had no doubt but that Nicholas would stand shoulder to shoulder with me and gladly fight it out to the bitter end. But this was Bharbazonia, and Nicholas was a Bharbazonian. Would he be a friend first and a patriot second? Politically, the dénouement in the Cathedral and the flight of Solonika might be a great aid to the Secret Order of the Cross. The lack of an heir played into their hands. It might serve the purpose of Nicholas and his countrymen to get Solonika out of the country.

Again, the love he professed to bear Solonika should urge him to save her from the infuriated mob which, he would shortly know, was even now riding furiously after us clamouring for her innocent life. How much stress this love would stand I could not guess. He had seen the Prince's affectionate parting with me at the foot of the stairs and, when the full import of that scene burst upon him, as it surely would when I told him of the truth, how would he be able to control his jealousy?

Above all, the sacrilege! A woman had defiled his altar. Nick as I knew and loved him in America, was not deeply religious. But what was he in Bharbazonia? How deeply engrained in his nature, through centuries of ancestry, was his respect for the Greek church, the protected creed of his loved country? I seemed to see again as I looked at his frowning face, turning these things over in my mind, a pair of strong hands clutching an imaginary throat.

As against all these deep-rooted motives, of patriotism, jealousy, religion, the only faintly shining star of hope to which I might look was the weak little star of friendship. Friendship, the most beautiful love in the world, the most disinterested, was to be put to the test.

Nicholas! he alone could save Solonika; he alone could get us through the gates to the yacht. He had never failed me before, would he fail me now? I faced him, determined to make one supreme effort to save the life of the woman I loved.

"*Dîner est préparé,*" announced the landlord.

I was glad of the interruption. In the struggle which was to follow there was little in my favour. Better take advantage of everything chance afforded. A man well fed is a man half convinced.

"I will explain while we are eating, Nick," I said, taking my place at the table and waving him into the opposite chair. The third seat remained vacant. "Landlord, we will wait upon ourselves. You and your servants may retire."

"*Très bien,*" he murmured as he drove his hirelings from the room like a

woman shoeing chickens, and closed the door.

Nick ate with the appetite of a hungry, healthy boy.

"Hadn't we better call the King?" said he, indicating the vacant chair. "He must be very nearly starved, also."

I knew that the "king" could not eat, and assured Nick that something would be sent to his room. At last I hit upon a way to begin my explanation. For the sake of policy I chose to start it by putting Nick on the defensive.

"Nick," I said, "why did you not tell Gregory and his half-blind Prime Minister that they were mistaken; that you were the principal actor in that little scene in the Palace Garden, and not the Prince?"

He flushed to the eyes with shame, just as he did when caught by a policeman, in the old days, appropriating a Woodland avenue sign for purposes of room decoration.

"It came too suddenly," he replied. "I had no time to think. I admit I acted like a cad, Dale, but I shall do my part like a man to-morrow. How would you like to be placed in such a position before such an audience and have to own up that you had been behaving like a naughty little schoolboy?"

"What do you propose doing? Confessing to the new King?"

"That is my intention now; but I must see the General before I act. This is a matter which concerns Bharbazonia, and there may be good and sufficient reasons why the Secret Order may desire things to take their course."

"And in that event your love for your country would render you passive in the face of such an injustice?"

"Yes; but do not misunderstand me, Dale. I have been trained all my life, as you know, in the diplomatic service of both Russia and Bharbazonia. I have lived long enough to see that the man who "would rather be right than be President" is frequently right, but never President. Of course deep down in our hearts we all desire to be right; it is the only safe, sure foundation; as a matter of policy it is best. But, there is such a thing in this world as power. I have noticed that the idealist who desires to be right all the time, who makes no concession to the wrong, is frequently crushed under the wheels of power. Thus has the army of Right lost the services of many valiant soldiers. A better policy, I have learned, is to temporize; to shut one's eyes sometimes. By so doing one gains in strength until one becomes a power and is in a position to order lines of right action—"

"A dangerous policy, Nick," I interrupted. "By that time you will have connived so often with wrong that you are able no longer to combat it. Your moral fibre will have deteriorated and there will be nothing left of you but that which you have sacrificed all for—power."

"It is the difference between the ideal and the practical; the ideal fails; the practical succeeds. When the world becomes ideal this order will be reversed.

But, until that time, I for one will endeavour to be practical. Therefore, if my brothers deem it best for me to marry Princess Teskla, I shall abide by their decision. If not, so be it."

Here was a side of Nick's character with which I had not reckoned. Before such devotion to organization, simple friendship might be thrown overboard to struggle in the depth with the other idealistic stripling Truth.

"How did the new King take it?" asked Nick. "From what I could see he did not lose his presence of mind. What did he do?"

Nothing was to be gained by further evasion. If I had to depend upon the stability of his affection for me, I might as well put it to the test now as at any other time. I plunged in boldly.

"You are mistaken, Nick," I said. "The Prince did lose his nerve and made a terrible mess of the whole affair. Instead of accepting the inevitable—of standing pat as it were—he revealed a secret which he should have kept, and to-day his father and he stand in the shadow of the valley of death."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember the vague suspicions of General Palmora which we talked of coming over on the boat and which you scoffed at as absurd?"

"Something concerning the remarkable likeness existing between Solonika and her twin brother, coupled with the suggestion that the two had never been seen together? But, you, yourself, told me you exploded that theory."

"The more I see of General Palmora the greater grows my respect for him and his opinions. We laughed at him when he told us that King Gregory was planning to make capital out of your flirtation with Princess Teskla. But we now know he was right. We also laughed at him when he told us he suspected there was only one child born to the House of Dhalmatia the night he and your father rode. But again he is right."

"Speak plainly, Dale," said Nick with contracting brows, "you mean—"

"That the midwife who died announced *the truth when she tolled the bell seven times!*"

Nick's hands gripped the edge of the white cloth; his eyes stared into mine with a look I could not fathom. Slowly he arose, his overturned chair falling with a crash to the floor. I, too, came reluctantly to my feet, not knowing what to expect, but desiring to be ready for any emergency.

"A daughter!" he cried, as if he could not believe it. "A daughter and no son! Then the person who was made King of Bharbazonia to-day is a—woman?"

Amazement deepened upon his face as the full significance of my words came home to him. It was a condition of affairs which he had always refused to countenance, and his brain worked slowly. But it was too absurd.

"Surely, Dale," he cried, "you do not mean this? You are joking?"

"I would to God that it were not true. But it is no joke, Nick. The Prince is a woman."

"Bosh!" he exclaimed. "I refuse to believe it."

I saw that I must convince him. His attitude showed me how safe Solonika's secret had been. Oh, if she had but listened to the advice of her father and kept her own counsel!

"Listen, Nick," I said. "I am not the only one who knows this. General Palmora knows it now. In fact all Bharbazonia knows. They had it from the lips of the Prince in the Cathedral. After you went out he denied that he had kissed the Princess and said that, even if he had, he could not have broken the law because he was not a man, but a woman. Then we fled to you and came here."

"Good God," cried he aghast. "That explains the cries in the Cathedral. The Patriarch's voice! What was he saying?"

Slowly he arrived at the inevitable conclusion. I felt the crisis coming, and nerved myself for the shock. Violently he struck the table a heavy blow with his clenched fist and shouted the one word uttered by the High Priest, in a voice startlingly like the bull-like bellow of the Patriarch:

"Sacrilige!"

I watched him tensely as his glance left my face and travelled swiftly up the stair until it rested on Solonika's door. His soul was in the grip of a hatred so deadly that I feared it would get beyond his control. He wore a more fearful expression than when he told me in the library that, if such an outrage were committed against the church, he would be the first to strangle the offender to death with his own hands. The vengeance of Bharbazonia was at hand. But, quick as was his sudden spring toward her room, I was quicker, and stood ready for him, blocking the way on the bottom step. We faced each other like young tigers over fallen prey.

I must not lose my temper. I needed my coolest judgment and my calmest presence of mind. But, as I stood there with clenched fists, I could feel the powerful magnetic waves of his deep passion surging through me with all the force of an electric current. I seemed to hear the sound of rushing wind through tense wires. I clenched my teeth and felt that the cords of friendship were snapping one by one.

But there was one more brand to be hurled among the burning. Depending upon the way Nicholas would take it, it would either add to the fire or help to put it out.

"Would you harm *Solonika*?" I said.

Just as the glow of the flame leaves the darkened sky when new wood is added, so died down the burning light of hate in Nick's eye when I mentioned Solonika's name. Here was something upon which he had not counted. Up to

now in his mind, the woman who had affronted the trust of the Kingdom, who had put insult upon the church, had been only a woman. I had given her a name and, in so doing, had brought him suddenly face to face with the appalling fact that the guilty one was the woman he loved.

Skeptical as I had been of the depth of his affection in view of his conduct in the Palace garden, I soon found that I was mistaken. Where a woman is concerned men do not wear their hearts upon their sleeves. True, Nick had smilingly told me that we were rivals long ago in the summer-house. He had always been unnaturally diffident in Solonika's presence, and treated her with unusual consideration. Every moment which had not been occupied with business of state had been devoted to her during our stay in Bharbazonia, and he had been with her almost as much as I.

There could be no doubt that my words had a wonderful effect. His former passion left him weak and trembling. Staring at me like one convinced against his will, he backed away from the steps and sank into a chair.

"Solonika," he whispered. "Oh, God, do not tell me it is Solonika."

So firm had been his faith that even now he did not connect the Prince and Solonika in this tragedy. To him they were separate persons. It had not occurred to him that the Prince who had committed this sacrilege could possibly be Solonika.

"It cannot be true. There must be some mistake," he said. The suffering in his voice touched my heart. Could it be possible that he, too, loved this woman as deeply and truly as I did?

"There is no mistake. She who is in yonder room is Solonika," I said.

"How could she do it, Dale? How could she do it?" he repeated.

"She had no alternative, Nick. The Red Fox, her father, was as ambitious as Brutus said Cæsar was."

Thank God, he *did* love Solonika. He would help her to escape. Surely his love for her would urge him to do what I, without hope of reward, had done in Marbosa's lodge. I risked my life for her and he could do no less. Now was the time to strike.

"Nicholas," I said, speaking quickly, "Solonika is pursued by the peasantry, the nobles, the army and the church. Even as we talk they are coming down that road from Nischon searching for her. You know what they will do if they find her. They will rend her limb from limb, before our eyes. There is only one man in Bharbazonia can help her to-night. The gates of Comada are shut against us. Beyond them is the General's yacht. It is ready to sail with us in the morning. I am powerless to win the way to the vessel. The captain would not sail without orders from you or the General. I am unable to save her. You and you alone can do it!"

"I understand," said Nicholas.

"For God's sake, do not fail me now. If you love her as I do you cannot stand idle and see her die in this horrible manner. Will you do it, Lassie? For the sake of the love you bear me, of the friendship that is ever ours, help me to save her. She is so little; she is so weak; she is so innocent. Her father is the guilty one. He drove her to commit this awful sacrilege against your church. Nick, oh my friend, you have never refused me anything. You will not refuse me this!"

"It's true," he cried, leaping to his feet. "She may yet escape. I can save her. They are still a long way behind."

He ran to the door and called into the night air:

"Okio! Okio! We leave here in two minutes."

The victory of friendship was complete. Nick's love for Solonika had overcome his Bharbazonian respect for the Greek church; he seemed to have forgotten the sacrilege. He was eager to help her in her time of dire distress. Good old Nick, I knew that he would not fail me! Already I saw the dread gates of the trap swing open, and felt the kick of the screw under me as the little yacht rapidly left the shores of this horrible land behind. My face was radiant. I rushed forward to thank him, full of gratitude and affection.

But, even as Nick closed the door after directing Teju Okio, a change came over him. He walked back into the room slowly, thoughtfully. There was coldness in his manner. The gates again swung shut, the yacht no longer held to her swift course. I stopped with my unexpressed thanks upon my lips.

"What is the matter?" I cried, my joy turned to fear. Nick had become a Bharbazonian.

"I must have time to think," he said coldly.

"Think?" I cried. "What is there to think about? Surely you have not changed your mind?"

"No, I have not changed my mind. I have not fully made it up. You took me off my feet a moment ago. I must consider this from all sides. I have a duty to perform to my country and to my church. Solonika has committed a great sacrilege for which she merits death."

"Nevertheless, Nick, you cannot stand still and see her die. You love her, do you not?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "and so do you."

I felt it coming and stood still, awaiting the blow.

"I saw her kiss you as she went up the stair," he said.

Jealousy, impure, merciless jealousy had claimed its own. Nick had guessed the import of Solonika's last act and knew that she loved me. So strange is the human heart that in the midst of the pure and the noble it can still harbour the most sordid of feelings. I had never dreamed this of Nicholas.

Should I lie to him and permit him to learn the truth after we were far out to sea? I must save her, no matter what the cost. But, try as I would to frame my reply at variance with the truth, I could not.

"She kissed me," I admitted. "Furthermore, Nick, she has told me that she loves me. There was no need for her to have thrown away the right to rule in Bharbazonia. Had she kept silent she might now be King. For weeks I pleaded with her to leave it all before she went too far, but she did not love me then. It came to her suddenly as she knelt at the feet of the Patriarch; she condemned her father to exile; she sentenced herself to death; she told the truth—because she loved me."

Nick glowered upon me and the old look which I dreaded returned. He fingered his long sword nervously and glanced repeatedly toward the stairs. I feared his old rage was coming back and that he meditated harm to Solonika.

"Not that, Nick," giving up all hope of his assistance. "If you have not forgotten the old days, if there yet remains some vestige of the affection you used to feel for me, let it have weight with you now. I love you, Nick. I do not want to raise my hand against you. But I will, if you threaten her life."

"Dale," he cried, "you do not mean this!"

"Your course is plain. If you will not help us, you have only to wait. Your countrymen will soon be here seeking vengeance. For God's sake, Nick, let them take it! Not you! Now that you have deserted us, we have no hope. There is no way out. She will die before sunrise. All I ask of you, Nick, and the friendship which seems dead, is that you permit another hand to wield the sword. Do not make it harder for me to bear."

Nick walked up and down the room in great agitation. But he did not again have recourse to his sword hilt. I held my position at the foot of the stairs until he should arrive at some decision.

"I will do as you ask," he said, stopping before me. "I will wait."

The die was cast. The trap had closed around us. A woman had come between Jonathan and David. It was the old story over again. But I was glad even for the little crumb of kindness which the hand of friendship had given me.

"Thank you, Lassie," I said, and we shook hands as near tears as two strong men permit themselves to get. The waiters brought our coffee and we sat at table together sipping the hot beverage and smoking our last cigars. I sent food to Solonika by a maid, but I do not know whether she tasted it.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nick, after an hour of silence.

"I shall die with her," I said dully. This suspense was worse than the tortures of hell. I prayed that they would soon come and end it.

"Nonsense," said Nick, "they will not hurt you; you have not harmed them as she has."

He was using the words of Solonika. She could not understand and neither could Nick. How little both knew me.

We did not again refer to the events of the evening. I do not think Nick spoke. He only watched me curiously. Toward midnight the landlord closed up his hotel and retired with his servants for the night. They little dreamed how soon and with what fright they would be awakened from their peaceful slumbers. The innkeeper placed candles on the table between us before ascending the stairs. With what assurance men go to their slumbers knowing that they will wake up in this world in the morning. I would not be here when he again opened his little hotel.

About one o'clock Nick and I raised our heads at the same moment and listened. We heard the beat of horses' feet on the hard stone highway, coming steadily nearer and nearer. As the sound increased in volume, it became evident that more than a thousand cavalymen and others, detailed to search the main road, were upon us.

"They are here," said Nicholas.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIGHT ON THE STAIRS

Like pilgrims to th' appointed place we tend;
The world's an Inn and death the journey's end.

—*Dryden: Palamon and Arcite.*

The agony I suffered during the long hours of waiting left me without feeling. If I experienced any sensation as I heard the approaching sounds of pursuit, it was not of excitement, but rather of elation. The terrible hours of waiting were at an end; here at last was the opportunity for action. To sit and think on approaching death is more difficult than to fight it.

Nick's decision to wait for the priests and soldiers; his refusal to help, when the automobile was ready at our call and the road deserted, had rendered me callous to the future. I remained seated at the table until the frantic yells of the approaching mob told me they had sighted the inn and expected to get news of the hated woman.

"Good-bye, Nicholas," I said, extending my hand.

He took it hesitatingly, but did not speak. Wonder and doubt as to what I intended to do were written on his face. He could not bring himself to believe that I really meant to defend Solonika against such overwhelming odds.

"Do not be foolish," he said when I turned at the foot of the stairs and put my hand in my pocket to feel the revolver there. There was no reply on my lips. Nick continued to watch me with the same curious expression. Men may have looked with pity upon the French nobles as they mounted the guillotine to surrender their heads upon the block without a murmur.

The soldiers drew rein before the inn. The car standing at the door told them they had run their quarry to earth. They shouted aloud as if they knew the victory was theirs. I heard the officers give their orders; the tavern was speedily surrounded. Then came an awful knock upon the door and a loud voice in bull-like tones demanding entrance. With a last look at me, Nick arose from his chair and opened the door, permitting the soldiers to pour into the room.

As I expected, the first man to enter was the outraged Patriarch. He was still uttering at intervals his Bharbazonian cry of "Sacrilege." His black robe was torn by hard riding and covered with dust. He was like a madman—his eyes glaring, his fingers clutching—as he sprang into the light. Pressing close behind were most of the black clergy who officiated within the chancel. They were loud in their cries and horrible in their expression of mediæval hatred. Within their souls was one thought and that was kill—kill—kill! How much like those who erected the cross on Calvary, nineteen hundred years ago, were these deluded men. How little had they learned of the spirit of their Master, the Prince of Peace.

It was small wonder, under the influence of such teaching, that the soldiers, who pressed into the inn, were wrought up into a similar religious frenzy. There was no pity even in the face of the colonel in charge. The innkeeper and his serving men and women, aroused by the fearful din, appeared upon the landing above in night robes. They lent their excited voices to the uproar. As soon as the Patriarch saw the landlord he called to him in French:

"Where is she—this woman?"

"What woman, your Reverence?" cried the bewildered Marchaud.

"She who fled hither in that devil car?"

"No woman came with that party. They were only three men."

"Who were they?"

"Oh, Your Holiness have mercy upon me! What is it you intend to do? You will ruin the fair reputation of my house. No one is here but these two gentlemen you see before you and the King, the new King."

"Bah!" cried the Patriarch and his priests. "Where is she hiding?"

"*Mon dieu! She?* The King is in yonder room."

He pointed to the door at the head of the stairs and they made a rush toward

me, but halted when I drew my revolver and held it in their faces.

"Do not do that!" cried Nick, when my intention of holding the steps even against such odds became clear. After opening the door to the pursuers he had not taken part in the search of the ground floor and had refused to answer all questions. By my act he knew that I was dooming myself to Solonika's fate.

The Patriarch and his followers drew back at the first show of resistance. They were afraid to mount the steps while I faced them. I might have held them at bay much longer, had not Solonika appeared beside her doorway. The first intimation I had that she was there came from the crowd. The Patriarch and his priests went mad with rage and pressed me hard. They seemed to have lost their fear of me and every one shouted at once, pointing behind me. Before their frenzied rush I was compelled to fall back a little to avoid being struck by swords from the side toward the bannisters. I glanced over my shoulder and saw her. She had discarded the black robe of the Patriarch and was pale and white in her coronation costume.

"Go back! go back!" I called, but instead she came down the steps until she touched my shoulder. "Give over, my friend. They will only kill you. You cannot save me," she said.

"Go back, Solonika. You are making them mad. I cannot hold them."

"Please let them come and end it, then."

One priest, braver than the rest, crept up the stair with his eyes gloating over Solonika, his religious fanaticism having overpowered his judgment. Something of the spirit of the Mohammedan urged him to the attack with no weapon but his empty hands. He sprang toward the woman he hated; he almost clutched her. But I was watching. I brought the butt of my revolver down upon his tounded head and, as he crumpled up under the heavy blow, I kicked him with all my force so that he fell back into the arms of his brethren, unconscious.

In the sight of all Bharbazonia I had raised my hand against the Church. There was no mistaking my intention now. I had announced my position and chosen my fate. Solonika realized it.

"They will kill you, Dale," she said.

"They will have to before they reach you," I replied.

The old fire came back to her. She lost her listlessness.

"We shall die together," she said, and I think the thought made her happier.

"It is better so. Perhaps God will forgive me and permit us to meet in the other world."

She drew her sword, which I knew she could use with all the vigour of a well-trained swordsman, and faced her enemies, ready for the impending battle. If, by my action, I had convinced Solonika of my intention to die with her, I also made it clear to Nicholas. Perhaps it was the sight of two against such unequal

odds that moved him—the heart of man demands fair play—perhaps it was his love for a fight; give him what motives you will, my reader, I know that it was his friendship for me and his desire to save me that was his moving passion. The fact remains that he acted almost before the priest's body fell.

Belabouring the Patriarch's followers at the foot of the stairs with the flat of his broadsword, he forced a passage for himself and stood in the clearing in front of me. I appreciated the generous spirit his foolish act showed. He had kept the faith and preserved my idols unbroken. Here was a friendship which even the love of woman could not kill. But, oh, but how useless was his sacrifice! One hour ago, had he listened to my plea, his service had not been in vain. One hour ago he might have led us through the gates. But, now, we were surrounded. The automobile was in the enemy's hands. The pleading voice of friendship had made itself heard—too late!

Nick's scarlet uniform of a Grand Duke had its effect upon the soldiers. They fell silent when he lifted his hand. But the priests, working themselves momentarily into a greater frenzy, continued their cries of "Kill! kill, the woman!" What was the power of a Grand Duke to them who were more powerful than the nobles?

Nicholas raised his voice above their howling; he spoke in the mother tongue and seemed to be exhorting the soldiers not to kill me or the woman, but to take us alive. The Patriarch frequently interrupted, urging the fighting men to finish the work he had brought them to do. Between the two the ignorant cavalrymen stood irresolute until the frantic High Priest threw himself upon Nicholas and, assisted by his men, bore him down the steps and surrounded him. The hesitating soldiers, seeing the Grand Duke attacked by the priests, obeyed the Patriarch and sprang up the stairs swords in hand. The crisis was upon us.

As they crowded up the incline I took careful aim and pressed the trigger of my automatic gun. Like the sputter of an alarm clock eleven reports followed in rapid succession. The steel-jacketed projectiles went forward upon their deadly mission. Every bullet found its mark and, boring through the first rank, wounded many in the rear.

In these days of smokeless powder there was nothing to obscure my view and I saw the front rank fall down upon its face and the less severely wounded struggle backward to escape another volley. The havoc I had wrought was terrible. The soldiers broke in a panic, leaving their dead and dying where they had fallen.

For a moment the attack was over, but I had shot my bolt. I had no more ammunition. My revolver was empty! There was not even a bullet left for Solonika

and myself!

CHAPTER XXII

THE KING IS DEAD—LONG LIVE THE KING!

This, and in this, my soul I give,
Lodged where I know 'twill ever live.
For never could myself or mine,
Fall into kinder hands than thine.

—*Bohn: Mss.*

Solonika stood with her hand upon my shoulder, looking down at the retreating men with fascinated eyes. I threw the useless weapon to the floor and turned to her.

"I have done the best I could," I said, "but I am powerless now."

"Empty?" she said.

Quickly she sped down the steps to where the body of the nearest man lay. She took the long sword from his nerveless grasp and came back.

"Can you use it?" she cried as she thrust it into my hands.

"A little," I said. Broadsword work was one of Nick's favourite pastimes at college, and I had become interested in it on his account.

"Look!" cried Solonika, pointing toward the foot of the stairs. Were they about to renew the attack so soon? I looked in the direction indicated and saw Nicholas backing slowly toward us step by step. At my first fire the frightened priests had run to cover, leaving Nicholas free. His sword was in his hand and he was watchful. My heart beat with renewed hope. With three defenders we might hold the stairs for an indefinite period.

But Nick was not to arrive at our side without a struggle. To the soldiers, now recovered from their first shock, his method of joining us looked like a retreat. They recognized that he was going over to the other side, and sought to attack him while he was yet alone. Before he had gone two steps upward, feeling for a foothold among the bodies under his feet, they were upon him. Nick's flashing sword flew from stair-rail to wall with blinding rapidity, holding them at bay. He continued backing. Although their weapons clashed against his, I thought their strokes lacking the force which, had their attack not been directed

against a Grand Duke's uniform, they might have had.

I stood ready to help him if I thought he needed it. My chief concern was that they might attack him from the side over the railing. But the men gathered there seemed to be too much interested in the battle to take any part. He won to my side unhurt. But with him came the enemy, and I could not tell him how much I appreciated his foolishly generous act.

The stair was about twelve feet wide; consequently there was room for the three of us to stand abreast and wield our swords without interference. Nick fought on the outside against the railing; Solonika was in the middle and I near the wall. The soldiers crowded up the stairs five at a time. They hampered each other and were interfered with by their eager comrades pushing up behind. Nick and I readily took care of two of these, leaving the middle one to Solonika. But she did not require any assistance from me, easily handling her own man and one of mine.

I could see that she was taking care of me and exposing herself to great risk in the hope of saving my life as long as possible. Although she fought with spirit I knew it was without hope. After I had made the last great sacrifice she would hold to her original intention of delivering herself into the Patriarch's hands.

The first rush of battle over, our work became almost routine. As often as we drove the front rank back upon its fellows, a new set of swords took its place. It soon became apparent to the colonel in command that he could not take us without resort to strategy. In spite of the entreaties of the priests he gave the order to cease the attack. When our enemies withdrew all three of us showed the effects of the desperate battle. Solonika had been wounded in several places. There were blood stains upon her trousers and stockings. From a cut on her right shoulder the blood had run down her arm and dyed the grip of her sword hilt. She was pale and weak from her long fast and loss of blood, and sank upon the steps with her weapon watchfully ready. Thanks to her excellent care I was not much hurt. But I was tired from my exertion, and glad of the opportunity to rest. I sank down beside her.

If Nick had been struck, it did not show on his scarlet coat. Panting heavily, he leaned upon his father's sword and watched the soldiers clear the stairs of the wounded, preparing the way, perhaps, for another attack.

"Thank you, Lassie," I called to express my gratitude. Without his strong arm where would we be now?

"You are a fool, Dale," he replied gruffly. He did not look at Solonika.

We were too tired to talk more and, beside, we needed our strength for the future. I turned my attention to the room below. Over the railing I saw the Patriarch, surrounded by his priests, in close consultation with the colonel in command. Between them they had Marchaud, the innkeeper. Attired in his

nightcap and scanty *robe de nuit*, he was the picture of abject terror. The last time I had seen him he was on the balcony behind. His wife and servants were still there. How he had reached the ground floor without passing us I did not know.

"Oh, my beautiful hotel," he shrieked. "Who will pay me for the damage? Look at the blood upon the walls. Oh, I am ruined."

The colonel slapped him over the mouth to still his noise and motioned two soldiers to drag him from the room. The Patriarch and the commanding officer followed Marchaud out. The Patriarch had admitted himself beaten and the rest of the fight would be conducted upon military lines. I watched the door until the colonel reappeared. He evidently had formed a plan of action. A captain took charge of the men at the foot of the stairs, while the priests looked on in silence. A bugler with his horn in his hand, stepped to the centre of the floor. No doubt he would give the signal for the renewal of the battle. The captain's men prepared to leap up at us again. What did they intend to do? Surely they did not hope to wear us out until, overpowered by numbers, we were at last forced to surrender? It might be costly, but it could not fail.

"Here they come," I cried as the young bugler raised his shining instrument to his lips.

Weary, but undaunted, we sprang to our positions to await the expected attack. Outside, on the road toward Nischon, there was the sound of galloping horses. Reinforcements were coming to the enemy, as if there were not sufficient men to wear twice our number down.

At the silvery call of the bugle, sounding the advance, the green uniforms surged up the stairs with a happy shout. They came with so much confidence of success that we feared we could not stop their mad rush. But, when our swords met, we discovered that the charge strangely enough lacked spirit. As steel clashed against steel, I heard the clear note of the bugle again. Was he sounding another advance? Did the attacking force need further encouragement?

We were not long in ignorance of the meaning of the second signal. Scarcely was the note begun when the serving women on the landing behind us began shrieking in terror. Their high voices mingled with the hoarse cry of men coming to the attack. Those below pressed us hard, with renewed vigour. The colonel, guided by the landlord, had sent a second attacking squad to the balcony by means of a back way. They were even now running toward us with shouts of victory. Had we been twice our number our case had been hopeless. We were surrounded and undone. We were lost.

Slipping my sword hilt through my hand, I grasped Solonika about the waist and ran swiftly up the few remaining steps in the face of the oncoming enemy. I reached the door and thrust her safely inside before the flanking party arrived, leaving Nick to fight it out alone on the steps. By this move I placed

myself on a level with my enemies and forced them to come through a narrow doorway, one at a time to get me. I awaited the final attack—which never came.

Instead a loud voice reverberated through the inn and brought every man to a pause. The soldiers dropped their swords to their sides. Those in front of me moved to the edge of the balcony and looked over. In the sudden silence that followed I heard the tread of horses' feet outside the tavern. There were horses inside as well. Their iron hoofs rang loudly upon the stone floor. I came to the edge of the stairs and looked anxiously down. The room below was thick with horses and red-coated men. The nobles had come at last. Without dismounting, they had ridden into the inn. Among them I saw the Duke of Marbosa with his long black beard and the members of the Secret Order of the Cross. And in their lead stood General Palmora.

"Stand back!" he was crying, and every man obeyed the commander-in-chief.

He saw Nicholas in the spot he had cleared for himself against the railing. The General was amazed.

"What are you doing, sir?" he called.

"These fools were trying to kill Dale," Nick replied.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

The General's face was shining with a look of happiness that lifted the weight of years from his shoulders. Something had happened. He turned to the soldiers and began an address in their language. I could not follow him, but what he said acted with magical effect. As he spoke, Solonika stole to my side and watched the proceedings. She translated his every word.

"Men of Bharbazonia," said the General, "the King is dead."

He removed his helmet in honour of the dead and every man stood at attention with bared head.

"Under the unusual stress of excitement, he was stricken with apoplexy in the Cathedral. The Kingdom of Bharbazonia was without a ruler. At that moment the nobles and Grand Dukes assembled proclaimed another king in Gregory's stead. That other is Grand Duke Novgorod, the only living descendant of the ancient royal house which was banished by the Turks. I, representing the army, have taken the oath of allegiance to the new King. And I urge you to accept him."

"Long live the new King," shouted the men in a deep chorus.

"Long live King Novgorod," shouted Marbosa and the nobles.

Both the General and Marbosa dismounted from their horses and advanced toward the stairs where Nicholas stood watching the scene with interest. They knelt upon the floor and presented the hilts of their swords to him, in token of fealty.

"Sire," said Marbosa, humbly, "herewith I pledge to you my loyalty and that of all the nobles of Bharbazonia."

"Nicholas Fremsted, Grand Duke of Framkor, Novgorod the Tenth, I pledge to you the loyalty of the army of Bharbazonia."

Nick clutched the railing in front of him and straightened up in amazement. Following their two leaders, every man present dropped to his knees in the presence of his King. Nick, Solonika and I alone were left standing, except for the Patriarch and his priests.

"No! no!" shouted Nick in English. "My God, General, there is some mistake here!"

The effect upon me was equally great. Could this be possible? I ran over in my mind the story which Palmora had told of the king who had relinquished his throne for the sake of his country's peace, who had kept the secret of his kingship from his only son. Solonika put her hand in mine.

"It is so," she whispered. "I have always felt it."

"No, Sire,"—the General was speaking—"there is no mistake. Thou art thy father's son. I have this day kept my oath to him and given you your own without bloodshed."

"There is no mistake, Sire," said Marbosa. "We have seen the proofs in the Cathedral and we *know*."

"We *know*," said the Grand Dukes and the nobles.

I was overjoyed. If this were true, and there seemed no doubt of it, the future loomed bright for me. With Nicholas King in Bharbazonia, what had I to fear? To think that I had lived all these years with him without knowing. But how could I know when the General had kept the secret even from Nick? His father's plan in sending him to various countries to educate him had been to prepare him for this very day.

Nick walked down the steps and bade his two kneeling subjects rise. They gathered around him and explained everything until he was convinced of the truth. The Patriarch also entered the discussion, and I could see that he did not accept Nicholas as readily as had the army. Even with the army and the nobles on his side, his throne was not safe without the cooperation of the all-powerful Church.

"The Patriarch is urging him to deliver us into the hands of the church," whispered Solonika.

"He'll never do it," I replied confidently.

Whatever was the outcome of the conversation it was Nicholas that spoke to me.

"I trust, Dale, that you and—this woman will submit to arrest," he said with a dignity that was new, but which was rightly a part of his kingship.

"We will surrender to you, Sire," I replied.

"General Palmora, take charge of your prisoners," said Nick.

Before sunrise I was under lock and key in one of the dungeons beneath the Palace of Nischon, having been conveyed thither by a strong guard which even the church would not dare assail. We rode to Nischon in the automobile alone with Teju Okio. Nick and the General used horses.

"Teju," I said, in high good humour, "your master Mr. Fremsted is King of Bharbazonia."

"Very dam fine," he smiled.

And I agreed with him.

But, when we arrived at the Palace, Solonika was taken from me and placed in a dungeon in another part of the huge building. I did not know when I should see her again or what disposition they would make of her. The King, Marbosa, and the General were diplomats used to playing the politics of a nation. They had felt the scourge of power and feared it.

The Patriarch, I knew, still demanded her life. What would happen if he made it the price of the church's submission to the new ruler?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE KING'S OFFERING

I praise thee while my days go on;
 I love thee while my days go on;
 Through dark and dertth, through fire and frost,
 With empty arms and treasure lost,
 I thank thee while my days go on.

—*Mrs. Browning: De Profundis.*

For two long weary days I languished in my cell without word from the King. Three times a day food was given me by an old turnkey who knew neither English nor French. Although I questioned him by signs, I could get nothing from him.

What were they doing with Solonika? Oh, the torture of those sleepless nights! I paced my cage like a restless lion in a circus. The Kingdom of Bharbazonia was burying the old King and greeting the new. There were a thousand duties demanding Nick's attention. I could scarcely blame him for having appar-

ently forgotten me. And yet, I did blame him. Even now, as I lay helpless behind my bars, they might have tricked or forced him into giving his consent to her death. What was the life of one woman compared to the peace and prosperity of a state?

Perhaps already she had been given over to the Patriarch to suffer the last pangs in whatever manner the barbaric religion of the country demanded. If the Church's vengeance had fallen hers had been a terrible end. I was indeed a madman, locked in with my fears.

I cursed her inhuman father for trading on his child's love to bring her to her death. I railed against Nicholas for his faithlessness in yielding to the church. I railed against the General for keeping Nick away from me. The General, with his state business, must have done it, else Nick would have come. I railed against the day when first I set foot in this fearful country. But I softened my words when I remembered that I would not then have met Solonika. I was in a frightful state of rage and mental anguish when the jailor opened the door and ushered in the General.

I sprang at him like a wild animal and shook him with a torrent of wrath for greeting. He warded me off as best he could, and even the old turnkey had to come to his assistance.

"Where is she? What have you done with her?" I raved.

But he waited patiently until I stopped from exhaustion. I could see that he sympathized with me.

"Calm yourself, my boy," he said in the tone a mother uses to still a squalling infant. "There is no need of all this."

"Solonika! For God's sake, tell me, does she live?"

In my terrible frame of mind I know I should have leaped upon him and borne him to earth, had his news been bad.

"She is safe, as yet," he replied.

"Thank God," I cried, and became calmer.

"But the situation is serious," he continued, as if to drown my rising hope.

"How serious?"

"It threatens the foundation of the government. Nicholas is not firmly seated yet."

"But hurry, General, tell me what to expect for Solonika."

"Concerning her there is yet no decision. The Patriarch is firm in his demands. He has consented to imprisonment for life for the Red Fox, together with the confiscation of all his property in Bharbazonia."

"Yes."

"At Nicholas's request the Holy Father will permit you to leave the country unharmed, provided you promise never to return—"

"Tell him with my compliments that he need have no fear on that score," I interrupted.

"But he will not yield one hair's breadth concerning the woman."

"Death?"

"Death," he repeated solemnly, "in any manner the church elects. It may be by the stake, publicly, as was the fate of the Witch of Utrepect; or the slower and more painful death on the rack. I do not see how we can save her."

"Oh, my God, General, do not say that. I shall go mad. You must save her!" I cried in anguish.

"The King is fighting hard for you, Dr. Wharton—for you and your Solonika. He has surprised me at the concessions already won. You must appreciate this. The odds are great. Our Patriarch has been in communication with the Patriarch of all the Russias, the man who stands next to the Tzar. Nicholas had him wire this man, after sending his own representative in the Secret Order to state the case and plead for you. What little concessions he won came from this more enlightened Patriarch. But he, too, demands that the woman be given to the church she has wronged."

Solonika's fate seemed sealed. After our bitter fight upon the stairs, and all the heartburnings, she was lost.

"Tell Nick how much I thank him," I faltered.

"I will bear your message to the King," replied the General. "Acting under his instructions, I am here to ask you to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. Your steamer trunk and suit case at Castle Framkor have been packed, and are now aboard my yacht at Bizzett. In a few hours it will be dark. We can smuggle you out very easily without being seen."

"Why all this secrecy?" I asked, aghast at the thought of leaving Solonika to her fate.

"The peasantry will tear you limb from limb if they see you."

"The priests have that much hold over them?"

"Aye. Do not underrate the power of the Church. It is the one thing I fear."

"They are taking you away from her," was all I heard my heart say.

"Once safe on the yacht nothing can harm you. You will reach Naples and take passage to your home."

"Is that the best the King can offer?" I asked, my resolve taking form.

"Absolutely."

"Then this is my answer. Tell that King that I cannot live without Solonika. Tell him, though he banish me from Bharbazonia, I shall return when she is dead and betray myself to the populace. If the church must take her life they can have mine also. Tell him that I thank him for all he has done for me and that I do not hold him guilty for that wherein he has failed."

Palmora looked at me in amazement. "Was this man sane?" He shook his head sadly.

"I will tell him," he said.

"Furthermore, General, I give you fair warning I shall not leave this country willingly. If the King insists that I shall go, send your strongest men to the task."

"Is this woman then so much to you? Do you really mean to do what you say?" he asked.

"As sure as there is a God in heaven, I do."

"I cannot understand it," he murmured, as he departed to bear my threat to the King.

He left me alone with my bitter thoughts. Then my worst fears were realized. Solonika could not escape the outstretched hands of the Church. I fell upon the floor and wept bitterly.

But the General did not come back that day as he promised. Something may have happened to change his plans. I grasped at a straw. But I was doomed to disappointment. On the following day four stalwart Bharbazonians fell upon me suddenly as I lay asleep. They bound me securely hand and foot, placed a gag in my mouth, wrapped me in a blanket and carried me out like a log. Evidently the General had taken my advice.

They threw me none too gently into the bottom of the automobile, which was waiting with revolving engines at the Palace door. It must have been night, for I heard no sound of carts upon the road. I knew we crossed the wooden bridge that spanned the river and felt us ascend the hill on the other side. I was leaving Solonika behind in the city of Nischon.

Hour after hour we sped along the highway. At last we stopped before the gates of the fortress. My captors exchanged a few words with the guard and I heard the doors clang open. Oh, if only Nicholas had come to my aid at the tavern when I implored him to save Solonika! If I could have made him believe that I meant to risk my life to get her out of the country, how easily would the gates have swung back for us. How happy would I have been. But now—

We descended the Hill of Bizzett and thundered out on the wooden planking of the little pier where a few short weeks before we had landed full of care-free happiness. How great the change in such a short time!

They lifted me out of the car and carried me aboard the yacht. Down the companionway they lifted me and placed me on my back in one of the staterooms. Then I heard them go out and shut the door. Almost before they had time to leap ashore, I heard the grinding of the engines. The yacht was under way. The General's plans were working well. Against my will, I was leaving Bharbazonia behind. Solonika was abandoned to her fate. The vessel ground its way through the sea. Two hours later some one entered the room.

"I love a lassie, a bonnie hie-lan' lassie," sang Captain MacPherson in a hearty bass voice. He grated horribly upon my nerves.

"Weel, weel," he said, laughing till the cabin shook, "look at the lad. Is it a mummy I have for cargo?"

I had rolled the blanket from my face and lay there trying to tell him with my eyes to take the gag out of my mouth and release me. He took a huge knife from his pocket and cut my bonds. My hands and arms were numb and my tongue was so swollen that I could not speak.

"My eyes," said the Captain, looking at my blood-covered, disarrayed dress suit, "they've been showing him the country, and he's been singing 'I won't go home until morning.'"

I held out my hands in mute appeal and he understood. He rubbed me with alcohol and gave me brandy to drink. When I found my tongue I rewarded him by berating him soundly.

"Take me back to Bizzett this moment, you scoundrel," I cried.

The Captain was astonished.

"Listen to the ijit," he said. "Young fellow, you're cargo; and cargo don't gie orders. When ye land ye land at Naples."

I pleaded with him, but he laughed at me.

"Better take a bath and ye'll feel more like a mon," he said. "I know there be na bath tubs in that one horse country, but that is na excuse. They ha' water."

He drew the water in the tub for me and helped me into it. Then he got out his medicine chest and patched me up where I had been wounded. He opened my trunk and helped me dress.

"There, my lad," he observed after I was shaved and ready, "the best gal won't know ye now."

"May I go on deck?" I asked.

"Go anywhere ye please," he smiled. "Oh, I forgot. Here's a letter for ye. It came by our rural free delivery over the automobile route."

It was in Nick's familiar handwriting. I broke the seal eagerly. Perhaps there was news of Solonika.

"Dear Dale," it read, "I am sorry I cannot keep my promise to return with you, but, as you know, fate has otherwise ordained it. My place is here in Bharbazonia. My life work is cut out for me. How I shall work for the good of my people, you know full well. The time will come when it will be more like your own United States in prosperity and freedom of education.

"I have done the best I could for you. Forgive me for not coming to see you. If you ever are a king, you will know why I could not find time. Wishing you happiness in your new-found joy I am as ever,

"Your friend, "LASSIE."

Dear old Nick. I knew that his heart bled for me. I knew that he had long since conquered that bitter jealousy which had been our undoing. I sat down upon the bed and re-read the letter several times.

"I wish you happiness in your new-found joy." What could he mean by that? What happiness did the future hold for me? When the yacht touched Naples I would come back as surely as there was a sun in the sky. Happiness! The word had a mocking sound. Nick would not do that. Surely he would not make a jest of such a matter.

"Going on deck?" asked the Captain with a curious smile.

"Yes," I answered.

"All right," he replied, "but first ye must promise me not to spoil that brand new shirt by jumping overboard."

We went up the steps and came to the railing. There was nothing but the black night overhead and the deep-running sea beneath. In the east, over the darkening waters the first rosy flush of the coming day was beginning to appear. Twenty miles away were the high hills of Bharbazonia, their tops faintly visible. Behind those hills I pictured the long white highway, the ancient city of Nischon, the Palace of the King, and Solonika, my poor, doomed Solonika, lying forsaken in her dungeon.

The Captain was no longer at my elbow. He had softly crept away. I heard him chuckling as he went forward in the darkness. I walked moodily to the stern where the busy propeller was cutting the water into swirling eddies. I could not swim that distance. There was nothing left to do but watch the hated country fade from sight.

As I came to the end of the deck cabins a woman arose from her chair and threw herself into my arms.

"Dale," she cried, "Dale, my beloved!"

It was Solonika!

CHAPTER XXIV

L'ENVOI

But Friendship, like a noble river,
Rolls its stately waters by,
Tempest tossed and troubled never,

Gliding to eternity.

—*Bohn: Mss.*

There is little left to tell. When we arrived at Naples, the Captain "stood up" with us at the nearest church and kissed the bride even before the "meenister." Our honeymoon we spent on board the ocean liner that brought us back to the United States. And what a warm reception Solonika received when she arrived at Spruce street to find my mother awaiting us at the door. How the poor girl wept upon that good lady's broad bosom, Solonika, who had never known a mother's gentle caress before.

Our first news from Bharbazonia came by letter from General Palmora. The affairs of that little Kingdom are going smoothly and well. For reasons of state it has been decided to unite the two reigning houses and very shortly the wedding bells will ring for King Novgorod and Princess Teskla, an arrangement, the General slyly adds, "which is not at all disagreeable to Nicholas, who, as you may have guessed, always fancied the girl."

The King has made his peace with the Patriarch by paying a considerable sum of money to the Church. Every contending faction has been united and every one looks forward to a prosperous reign for the young ruler.

"You would be surprised to see how steady and earnest Nicholas has become," continues the General. "He will be the best king Bharbazonia has ever had. He is taking the advice of his elders now, and never once has he broken away as he did the night I brought him your message from the dungeon.

"Are you sure, godfather,' he said to me, 'that Dale used those words—as sure as there is a God in heaven I'll come back?'"

"I assured him that you had spoken thus.

"Then,' said he, 'something has to be done.'

"Something was done that very night. The King himself put Solonika aboard the yacht, getting her out of the palace by stealth. No one but that rascally profane Japanese boy knew anything about it. The next night, following his instructions, I had you taken aboard, and you know the rest."

When Solonika read this part of the General's letter she was very much surprised. During that entire ride to Bizzett Nick had never made his identity known to her. They had bound her hand and foot and chained her to the car while he rode forward with Okio.

Another piece of news which makes Solonika very happy is that plans are under way to procure the release of the Duke of Dhalmatia. We hope to have the old man with us in the near future.

"I am sorry to say," adds the General in concluding, "that Nicholas is not as

good a member of the Secret Order of the Cross as he used to be, and the Turks are still in possession of Constantinople.”

Heigh-ho! how quickly time flies when one is supremely happy! Since we were married the autumn leaves have turned to yellow and gold and the summer birds are making their southern flight. But the roses are coming back to Solonika’s cheeks.

As I write in my quiet library it is her sweet voice I hear singing in the room below my favourite song, ”The King and the Pope.” How well the words fit the adventure I have been through. It would almost seem that the poet who wrote them must have had a similar experience. I little thought, when my friend Megarge gave me his adaption of the original from the German, that one day it would have such meaning for me.

Listen and you may hear her singing. How clearly she pronounces each word,—

”The King and the Pope together,
 Have sent a message to me;
 It is signed with the Royal Signet;
 It is sealed with the Papal Key.
 The King wants me out of his eyesight
 And the Pope wants me out of his See.

”The King and the Pope together,
 Own thousands of acres of land;
 While I do not own the foot of ground,
 On which my two feet stand.
 But the prettiest girl in the Kingdom
 Walks with me—hand in hand.

”The King must marry a lady,
 Of exceeding high degree;
 The Pope can never a true love have,
 So a cardinal pours his tea.
 Very few stand ’round me at table.
 But my sweetheart sits by me.

”The King hath scores of soldiers,
 Who will fight for him any day,

The Pope hath Priests and Bishops,
 Who for his soul will pray.
I have one little sweetheart,
 But she'll kiss me when I say.

”And the King with his Golden Sceptre,
 And the Pope with Saint Peter's Key,
Can never unlock the one little heart,
 That is open alone to me.
For I am the King of a Realm!
 And I am the Pope of a See!
In fact I'm supreme in the Kingdom
 That frequently sits on my knee.”

THE END.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RED FOX'S SON ***

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