

Le Queux William

The Great Court Scandal



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Содержание

Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	14
Chapter Three	19
Chapter Four	23
Chapter Five	27
Chapter Six	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

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Preface

William Le Queux

William Le Queux, one of the most popular of present-day authors, was born in London on July 2, 1864. He has followed many callings in his time. After studying art in Paris, he made a tour on foot through France and Germany. Then he drifted into journalism, attaching himself to the Paris "Morning News." Later, he crossed to London, where he joined the staff of the "Globe" in the Gallery of the House of Commons. This was in 1888, and he continued to report Parliament till 1891, when he was appointed a sub-editor on the "Globe." Along with his work as a journalist he developed his faculty for fiction, and in 1893 resigned his position on the press to take up novel-writing as a business. His first book was "Guilty Bonds" published in 1890. Since that date he has issued an average of three novels a year. One of Mr Le Queux's recreations is revolver practice, and that may account for the free use of the "shooting iron" which distinguishes some of his romances.

Prologue

"The Ladybird will refuse to have anything to do with the affair, my dear fellow. It touches a woman's honour, and I know her too well."

"Bah! We'll compel her to help us. She must."

"She wouldn't risk it," declared Harry Kinder, shaking his head.

"Risk it! Well, we'll have to risk something! We're in a nice hole just now! Our traps at the Grand, with a bill of two thousand seven hundred francs to pay, and 'the Ladybird' coolly sends us from London a postal order for twenty-seven shillings and sixpence – all she has!"

"She might have kept it and bought a new sunshade or a box of chocolates with it."

"The little fool! Fancy sending twenty-seven bob to three men stranded in Paris! I can't see why old Roddy thinks so much of her," remarked Guy Bourne to his companion.

"Because she's his daughter, and because after all you must admit that she's jolly clever with her fingers."

"Of course we know that. She's the smartest woman in London. But what makes you think that when the suggestion is made to her she will refuse?"

"Well, just this. She's uncommonly good-looking, dresses with exquisite taste, and when occasion demands can assume the manner of a high-born lady, which is, of course, just what we want; but of late I've noticed a very great change in her. She used to act heedless of risk, and entirely without pity or compunction. Nowadays, however, she seems becoming chicken-hearted."

"Perhaps she's in love," remarked the other with a sarcastic grin.

"That's just it. I honestly think that she really is in love," said the short, hard-faced, clean-shaven man of fifty, whose fair, rather scanty hair, reddish face, tightly-cut trousers, and check-tweed suit gave him a distinctly horsey appearance, as he seated himself upon the edge of the table in the shabby sitting-room *au troisième* above the noisy Rue Lafayette, in Paris.

"The Ladybird' in love! Whatever next!" ejaculated Guy Bourne, a man some ten years his junior, and extremely well, even rather foppishly, dressed. His features were handsome, his hair dark,

and outwardly he had all the appearance of a well-set-up Englishman. His gold sleeve-links bore a crest and cipher in blue enamel, and his dark moustache was carefully trained, for he was essentially a man of taste and refinement. "Well," he added, "I've got my own opinion, old chap, and you're quite welcome to yours. 'The Ladybird' may be in love, as you suspect, but she'll have to help us in this. It's a big thing, I know; but look what it means to us! If she's in love, who's the jay?" he asked, lighting a cigarette carelessly.

"Ah! now you ask me a question."

"Well," declared Bourne rather anxiously, "whoever he may be, the acquaintanceship must be broken off – and that very quickly, too. For us the very worst catastrophe would be for our little 'Ladybird' to fall in love. She might, in one of her moments of sentimentality, be indiscreet, as all women are apt to be; and if so – well, it would be all up with us. You quite recognise the danger?"

"I do, most certainly," the other replied, with a serious look, as he glanced around the poorly-furnished room, with its painted wood floor in lieu of carpet. "As soon as we're back we must keep our eyes upon her, and ascertain the identity of this secret lover."

"But she's never shown any spark of affection before," Bourne said, although he knew that the secret lover was actually himself. "We must ask Roddy all about it. Being her father, he may know something."

"I only wish we were back in London again, sonny," declared Kinder. "Paris has never been safe for us since that wretched affair in the Boulevard Magenta. Why Roddy brought us over I can't think."

"He had his eye on something big that unfortunately hasn't come off. Therefore we're now landed at the Grand with a big hotel bill and no money to pay it with. The Johnnie in the bureau presented it to me this morning, and asked for payment. I bluffed him that I was going down to the bank and would settle it this evening."

"With twenty-seven and sixpence!" remarked the clean-shaven man with sarcasm.

"Yes," responded his companion grimly. "I only wish we could get our traps away. I've got all my new rig-out in my trunk, and can't afford to lose it."

"We must get back to London somehow," Harry said decisively. "Every moment we remain here increases our peril. They have our photographs at the Prefecture, remember, and here the police are pretty quick at making an arrest. We're wanted, even now, for the Boulevard Magenta affair. A pity the Doctor hit the poor old chap so hard, wasn't it?"

"A thousand pities. But the Doctor was always erratic – always in fear of too much noise being made. He knocked the old fellow down when there was really no necessity: a towel twisted around his mouth would have been quite as effectual, and the affair would not have assumed so ugly a phase as it afterwards did. No; you're quite right, Harry, old chap; Paris is no place for us nowadays."

"Ah!" Kinder sighed regretfully. "And yet we've had jolly good times here, haven't we? And we've brought off some big things once or twice, until Latour and his cadaverous crowd became jealous of us, and gave us away that morning at the St. Lazare station, just when Roddy was working the confidence of those two American women. By Jove! we all had a narrow escape, and had to fly."

"I remember. Two agents pounced upon me, but I managed to give them the slip and get away that night to Amiens. A good job for us," the younger man added, "that Latour won't have a chance to betray his friends for another fifteen years."

"What! has he been lagged?" asked the horsey man as he bit the end off a cigar.

"Yes, for a nasty affair down at Marseilles. He was opening a banker's safe – that was his speciality, you know – and he blundered."

"Then I'm not sorry for him," Kinder declared, crossing the room and looking out of the window into the busy thoroughfare below.

It was noon, on a bright May day, and the traffic over the granite setts in the Rue Lafayette was deafening, the huge steam trams snorting and clanging as they ascended the hill to the Gare du Nord.

Guy Bourne was endeavouring to solve a very serious financial difficulty. The three shabbily-furnished rooms in which they were was a small apartment which Roddy Redmayne, alias “The Mute,” alias Ward, alias Scott-Martin, and alias a dozen other names beside, had taken for a month, and were, truth to tell, the temporary headquarters of “The Mute’s” clever and daring gang of international thieves, who moved from city to city plying their profession.

They had been unlucky – as they were sometimes. Harry Kinder had succeeded in getting some jewellery two days before, only to discover to his chagrin that the diamonds were paste. He had seen them in a bad light, otherwise, expert that he was, he would never have touched them. He always left pearls religiously alone. There were far too many imitations, he declared. For three weeks the men had done themselves well in Paris, and spent a considerable amount in ingratiating themselves with certain English and American visitors who were there for the season. Kinder and Bourne worked the big hotels – the Grand, the Continental, and the Chatham, generally frequenting the American bar at the latter place each afternoon about four o’clock, on the keen lookout for English pigeons to pluck. This season, however, ill-luck seemed to constantly follow them, with the result that they had spent their money all to no purpose, and now found themselves with a large hotel bill, and without the wherewithal to discharge it.

Guy Bourne’s life had been a veritable romance. The son of a wealthy country squire, he had been at Eton and at Balliol, and his father had intended him to enter the Church, for he had an uncle a bishop, and was sure of a decent preferment. A clerical career had, however, no attractions for Guy, who loved all kinds of sport, especially racing, a pastime which eventually proved his downfall. Like many other young men, he became mixed up with a very undesirable set – that unscrupulous company that frequents racecourses – and finding his father’s door shut to him, gradually sank lower until he became the friend of Kinder and one of the associates and accomplices of the notorious Roddy Redmayne – known as “The Mute” – a king among Continental thieves.

Like the elder man who stood beside him, he was an audacious, quick-witted, and ingenious thief, very merry and easy-going. He was a man who lived an adventurous life, and generally lived well, too; unscrupulous about annexing other people’s property, and therefore retaining nowadays few of the traits of the gentleman. At first he had not been altogether bad; at heart he hated and despised himself; yet he was a fatalist, and had long ago declared that the life of a thief was his destiny, and that it was no use kicking against the pricks.

An excellent linguist, a well-set-up figure, a handsome countenance, his hair slightly turning grey, he was always witty, debonair and cosmopolitan, and a great favourite with women. They voted him a charming fellow, never for one moment suspecting that his polished exterior and gentlemanly bearing concealed the fact that he had designs upon their jewellery.

His companion, Harry Kinder, was a man of entirely different stamp; rather coarse, muscular, well versed in all the trickery and subterfuge of the international criminal; a clever pickpocket, and perhaps one of the most ingenious sharpers in all Europe. He had followed the profession ever since a lad; had seen the interior of a dozen different prisons in as many countries; and invariably showed fight if detected. Indeed, Harry Kinder was a “tough customer,” as many agents of police had discovered to their cost.

“Then you really don’t think ‘the Ladybird’ will have anything to do with the affair?” Guy remarked at last, standing beside him and gazing aimlessly out of the window.

“I fear she won’t. If you can persuade her, then it’ll all be plain sailing. They’ll help us, and the risk won’t be very much. Yet after all it’s a dirty trick to play, isn’t it?”

His companion shrugged his shoulders, saying, “Roddy sees no harm in it, and we must live the same as other people. We simply give our services for a stated sum.”

“Well,” declared Kinder, “I’ve never drawn back from any open and straightforward bit of business where it was our wits against another’s, or where the victim is a fool or inexperienced; but I tell you that I draw a line at entrapping an innocent woman, and especially an English lady.”

“What!” cried Bourne. “You’ve become conscientious all at once! Do you intend to back out of it altogether?”

“I’ve not yet decided what I shall do. The only thing is that I shall not persuade ‘the Ladybird’ either way. I shall leave her entirely in Roddy’s hands.”

“Then you’d better tell Roddy plainly when he comes back. Perhaps you’re in love, just as you say ‘the Ladybird’ is!”

“Love! Why, my dear Guy – love at my age! I was only in love once – when I was seventeen. She sat in a kind of fowl-pen and sold stamps in a grocer’s shop at Hackney. Since then I can safely say that I’ve never made a fool of myself over a woman. They are charming all, from seventeen to seventy, but there is not one I’ve singled out as better than the rest.”

“Ah, Harry!” declared Guy with a smile, “you’re a queer fellow. You are essentially a lady’s man, and yet you never fall in love. We all thought once that you were fond of ‘the Ladybird.’”

“‘The Ladybird!’” laughed the elder man. “Well, what next? No. ‘The Ladybird’ has got a lover in secret somewhere, depend upon it. Perhaps it is yourself. We shall get at the truth when we return to town.”

“When? Do you contemplate leaving your things at the Grand, my dear fellow? We can’t. We must get money from somewhere – money, and to-day. Why not try some of the omnibuses, or the crowd at one of the railway stations? We might work together this afternoon and try our luck,” Guy suggested.

“Better the Café Américain, or Maxim’s to-night,” declared Kinder, who knew his Paris well. “There’s more money there, and we’re bound to pick up a jay or two.”

At that moment the sharp click of a key in the lock of the outer door caused them to pause, and a moment later they were joined by an elderly, grey-haired, gentlemanly-looking man in travelling-ulster and grey felt hat, who carried a small brown kit-bag which, by its hotel labels, showed sign of long travel.

“Hulloa, Roddy!” Kinder cried excitedly in his Cockney dialect. “Luck, I see! What have you got?”

“Don’t know yet,” was the newcomer’s reply, his intonation also that of a born Londoner. “I got it from a young woman who arrived by the *rapide* at the Gare de l’Est.” And throwing off his travelling get-up he placed the kit-bag upon the table. Then touching a spring in the lock he lifted it again, and there remained upon the table a lady’s dressing-bag with a black waterproof cover.

“Looks like something good,” declared Guy, watching eagerly.

The innocent-looking kit-bag was one of those specially constructed for the use of thieves. The bottom was hinged, with double flaps opening inward. The interior contained sharp iron grips, so that the bag, when placed upon any object smaller than it, would cover it entirely, the flaps forming the bottom opening inward, while the grips, descending, held the bag or other object tight. So the kit-bag, when removed, would also remove the object concealed within it.

Roddy, a grey-faced, cool, crafty old fellow of sixty, bore such a serious expression that one might readily have taken him for a dissenting minister or a respectable surgeon. He carefully took off the outer cover of the crocodile-skin dressing-case, examined its gilt lock, and then, taking from his pocket a piece of steel about six inches long, with a pointed end, almost a miniature of a burglar’s jemmy, he quickly prised it open.

The trio eagerly looked within, and saw that it was an elegantly-fitted bag, with gold-topped bottles, and below some miscellaneous articles and letters lay a small, cheap leather bag.

In a moment the wily old thief had it open, and next instant there was displayed a magnificent bodice ornament in diamonds, a pair of exquisite pearl earrings, several fine bracelets, a long rope of splendid pearls, a fine ruby brooch, and a quantity of other ornaments.

“Excellent!” exclaimed Guy. “We’re on our feet once more! Well done, Roddy, old man! We were just thinking that we’d have to pick the pockets of some poor wretches if things didn’t change, and I never like doing that.”

“No,” remarked the leader of the gang, critically examining one after another of the articles he had stolen. “I wonder to whom these belong?” he added. “They’re uncommonly good stuff, at any rate. Ascertain what those letters say.”

Guy took up the letters and glanced at the superscriptions upon the envelopes.

“By Heaven!” he gasped next instant, and crushing the letters in his hand stood staring at the open bag. “What infernal irony of Fate is this? What curse is there upon us now? Look! They are hers – hers! And we have taken them!”

The three men exchanged glances, but no word was uttered.

The startling truth held Guy Bourne speechless, staggered, stupefied.

Chapter One

Concerns a Court Intrigue

The bright moon shed a white light over the great, silent courtyards of the Imperial palace at Vienna.

A bugle had just sounded, the guards had changed with a sudden clang of arms that rang out in the clear night, followed by the sound of men marching back to the guardhouse. A sharp word of command, a second bugle note, and then all was quiet again, save for the slow, measured tread of the sentries at each angle of the ponderous palace.

From without all looked grim and gloomy, in keeping with that strange fate that follows the hapless Hapsbourgs; yet beyond those black walls, in the farther wing of the Imperial palace were life and gaiety and music; indeed there was presented perhaps the most magnificent scene in all Europe.

The first Court ball of the season was at its height, and the aged Emperor Francis-Joseph was himself present – a striking figure in his uniform and orders.

Filled with the most brilliant patrician crowd in all the world – the women in tiaras and blazing with jewels, and the men in Court dress or in gorgeous uniforms – the huge ballroom, with its enormous crystal electroliers and its gold – and – white Renaissance decorations, had never been the scene of a more dazzling display. Archdukes and archduchesses, princes and princesses, nobles and diplomatists, ministers of the empire and high functionaries of State danced or gossiped, intrigued or talked scandal; or those whose first ball it was worried themselves over points of etiquette that are always so puzzling to one not born in the Court atmosphere.

The music, the scent of the flowers, the glare and glitter, the beauty of the high-born women, the easy swagger of the bestarred and beribboned men, combined to produce a scene almost fairy-like.

Laughter rang from pretty lips, and men bent to whisper into the ears of their partners as they waltzed over the perfect floor, after having paid homage to their Emperor – that lonely, broken man whose good wife, alas! had fallen beneath the assassin's knife.

A sovereign's heart may be broken, but he must nevertheless keep up a brave show before his subjects.

So he stood at the end of the room with the Imperial circle about him, smiling upon them and receiving their homage, although he longed to be back in his own quiet room at the farther end of the palace, where their laughter and the strains of music could not reach his ears.

One pale, sweet-faced woman in that gay, irresponsible crowd glanced at him and read his heart.

Her fair beauty was extremely striking, and her neat-waisted figure perfect. Indeed, she had long ago been acknowledged to be the most lovely figure at the Austrian Court – the most brilliant Court of Europe – a countenance which even her wide circle of enemies could not criticise without showing their ill-nature; a perfect countenance, which, though it bore the hallmark of her imperial birth as an Archduchess, yet was sweet, dimpled, and innocent as a child's.

The Princess Claire – Cecille-Marie-Alexandrine was twenty-four. Born and bred at that Court, she had three years before been married to the Crown Prince of a German house, the royal house of Marburg, and had left it for the Court at Treysa, over which her husband would, by reason of his father's great age, very soon be sovereign.

At that moment she was back in Vienna on a brief visit to her father, the Archduke Charles, and had taken a turn around the room with a smart, well-set-up man in cavalry uniform – her cousin Prince George of Anhalt. She was dressed in ivory white, wearing in her fair hair a wonderful tiara; while in the edge of her low-cut bodice there showed the crosses and ribbons of the Orders of St. Elizabeth and Teresa – decorations bestowed only upon Imperial princesses.

Many eyes were turned upon her, and many of the friends of her girlhood days she saluted with that charming frankness of manner which was so characteristic of her open nature. Suddenly, while walking around the room, a clean-shaven, dark-haired, quick-eyed man of thirty in Court dress bowed low before her, and in an instant, recognising him, she left her cousin's side, and crossing spoke to him.

"I must see your Imperial Highness before she leaves Vienna," he whispered quickly to her in English, after she had greeted him in German and inquired after his wife. "I have something private and important to tell you."

The Crown Princess looked at him quickly, and recognised that the man was in earnest. Her curiosity became aroused; but she could ask no questions, for a hundred eyes were now upon her.

"Make an appointment – quickly, your Highness. I am here expressly to see you," he said, noticing that Prince George was approaching to carry her off to the upper end of the room, where the members of the Imperial family were assembled.

"Very well. In the Stadtpark, against the Caroline Bridge, at eight to-morrow night. It will be dark then."

"Be careful that you are not followed," he whispered; and then he bowed deeply as she left him.

When her cousin came up he said, —

"You are very foolish, Claire! You know how greatly such a breach of etiquette annoys the Emperor. Why do you speak with such people?"

"Because I like to," she answered defiantly. "If I have the misfortune to be born an Imperial Archduchess and am now Crown Princess, it need surely not preclude me from speaking to people who are my friends?"

"Oh, he is a friend, is he? Who is the fellow?" inquired the Prince, raising his eyebrows.

"Steinbach. He is in our Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

"You really possess some queer friends, Claire," the young man said, smiling. "They will suspect you of being a Socialist if you go on in this way. You always shock them each time you come back to Vienna because of your extraordinary unconventionality."

"Do I?" she laughed. "Well, I'm sure I don't care. When I lived here before I married they were for ever being scandalised by my conduct in speaking to people. But why shouldn't I? I learn so much from them. We are all too narrow-minded; we know very little of the world beyond the palace walls."

"I heard yesterday that you'd been seen walking in the Kamthnerstrasse with two women who were not of the nobility. You really oughtn't to do that. It isn't fair to us, you know," he said, twisting his moustache. "We all know how wilful you are, and how you love to scandalise us; but you should draw the line at displaying such socialistic tendencies openly and publicly."

"My dear old George," she laughed, turning her bright eyes to him, "you're only my cousin and not my husband. I shall do exactly what I like. If it amuses and interests me to see the life of the people, I shall do so; therefore it's no use talking. I have had lots of lectures from the Emperor long ago, and also from my stiff old father-in-law the King. But when they lecture me I only do it all the more," she declared, with a mischievous laugh upon her sweet face. "So they've given me up."

"You're incorrigible, Claire – absolutely incorrigible," her cousin declared as he swung along at her side. "I only *do* hope that your unconventionality will not be taken advantage of by your jealous enemies. Remember, you are the prettiest woman at our Court as well as at your own. Before long, too, you will be a reigning queen; therefore reflect well whether this disregard of the first rule of Court etiquette, which forbids a member of the Imperial family to converse with a commoner, is wise. For my own part, I don't think it is."

"Oh, don't lecture me any more for goodness' sake," exclaimed the Crown Princess with a little musical laugh. "Have this waltz with me."

And next moment the handsome pair were on their way down the great room with all eyes turned upon them.

When, ten minutes later, they returned to join the Imperial circle about the Emperor, the latter motioned his niece towards him.

“Come to me when this is ended,” he said in a serious voice. “I wish to talk to you. You will find me in the white room at two o’clock.”

The Crown Princess bowed, and returned to the side of her father, the Archduke Charles, a tall, thin, grey-haired man in a brilliant uniform glittering with orders.

She knew that his Majesty’s quick eye had detected that she had spoken with the commoner Steinbach, and anticipated that she was to receive another lecture. Why, she wondered, was Steinbach there? Truth to tell, Court life bored her. She was tired to death of all that intrigue and struggle for place, power, and precedence, and of that unhealthy atmosphere of recklessness wherein she had been born and bred. She longed for the free open life in the country around Wartenstein, the great old castle in the Tyrol that was her home, where she could tramp for miles in the mountains and be friendly with the honest country folk. After her marriage – a marriage of convenience to unite two royal houses – she had found that she had exchanged one stiff and brilliant Court for another, more dull, more stiff, and where the etiquette was even more rigid.

Those three years of married life had wrought a very great change in her.

She had left Vienna a bright, athletic girl, fond of all sports, a great walker, a splendid horsewoman, sweet, natural, and quite unaffected; yet now, after those three years of a Court, smaller yet far more severe than that of Austria, she had become rebellious, with one desire – to forsake it all and live the private life of an ordinary citizen.

Her own world, the little patrician but narrow world behind the throne, whispered and shrugged its shoulders. It was believed that her marriage was an unhappy one, but so clever was she that she never betrayed her bitterness of heart. Like all her Imperial family, she was a born diplomatist, and to those who sought to read her secret her face was always sphinx-like. Her own Court saw her as a merry, laughter-loving woman, witty, clever, a splendid dancer, and with a polished and charming manner that had already endeared her to the people over whom she was very shortly to reign. But at Court her enemies looked upon her with distrust. She exhibited no sign of displeasure on any occasion, however provoking. She was equally pleasant with enemies as with friends. For that reason they suspected her.

Her charming ingenuousness and her entire disregard of the traditional distinction between the Imperial house and the people had aroused the anger of her husband’s father, the aged King, a sovereign of the old school, who declared that she was fast breaking up all the traditions of the royal house, and that her actions were a direct incentive to Socialism and Anarchism within the kingdom.

But she only laughed. She had trained herself to laugh gleefully even when her young heart was filled with blackest sorrow; even though her husband neglected and despised her; even though she was estranged for ever from her own home and her own beloved family circle at the great mountain stronghold.

Next to the Emperor Francis-Joseph, her father, the Archduke Charles, was the greatest and wealthiest man in Austria. He had a Court of his own with all its appendages and functionaries, a great palace in the Parkring in Vienna, another in Buda-Pesth, the magnificent castle of Wartenstein, near Innsbruck, besides four other castles in various parts of Austria, and a beautiful villa at Tivoli, near Rome. From her birth the Princess Claire had always breathed the vitiated air of the courts of Europe; and yet ever since a girl, walking with her English governess at Wartenstein, she had longed and dreamed of freedom. Her marriage, however, was arranged for her, and she awakened from the glamour of it all to find herself the wife of a peevish prince who had not finished the sowing of his wild oats, and who, moreover, seemed to have no place for her in his heart.

Too late she realised the tragedy of it all. When alone she would sit for hours in tears. Yet to no living soul, not even to her father or to the dark-haired, middle-aged Countess de Trauttenberg, her lady-in-waiting and confidante, did she utter one single syllable. She kept her secret.

The world envied her her marvellous beauty, her exquisite figure, her wealth, her position, her grace and ineffable charm. Yet what would it have said had it known the ugly truth? Surely it would have pitied her; for even an Imperial archduchess, forbidden to speak with the common world, has a human heart, and is entitled to human sympathy.

The Crown Prince was not present. He was, alas I seldom with the Princess. As she stood there in the Imperial circle with folded hands, laughing merrily and chatting vivaciously with the small crowd of Imperial Highnesses, no one would have guessed that she was a woman whose young heart was already broken.

Ah yes! she made a brave show to conceal her bitterness and sorrow from the world, because she knew it was her duty to do so – her duty to her princely family and to the kingdom over which she was soon to be queen.

The Emperor at last made his exit through the great white-and-gold doors, the Imperial chamberlains bowing low as he passed out. Then at two o'clock the Crown Princess managed to slip away from the Imperial circle, and with her rich train sweeping behind her, made her way rapidly through the long, tortuous corridors to his Majesty's private workroom, known as the White Chamber, on the other side of the great palace.

She tapped upon the door with her fan, and obtained entrance at once, finding the Emperor alone, standing near the great wood fire, for it was a chilly evening, close to his big, littered writing-table. His heavy expression told her that he was both thoughtful and displeased. The chamber, in contrast to the luxury of the splendid palace, was plainly furnished, essentially the workroom of the ruler of a great empire – the room in which he gave audiences and transacted the affairs of the Austria-Hungarian nation.

"Claire," he said, in a low, hard voice, "be seated; I wish to speak to you."

"Ah, I know," exclaimed the brilliant woman, whose magnificent diamonds glittered beneath the electric light, "I know! I admit, sire, that I committed an unpardonable breach of etiquette in speaking with Steinbach. You are going to reprove me – I know you are," she pouted. "But do forgive me. I did not reflect. It was an indiscretion."

"You never reflect, Claire; you are too irresponsible," the Emperor said in a tone of distinct displeasure. "But it is not that. I have called you here to learn why the Crown Prince is not in Vienna with you."

He fixed his grey, deep-sunken eyes upon hers, and awaited her answer.

"Well –" she faltered. "There are some Court dinners, and – and I believe he has some military engagements – anniversaries or something."

The Emperor smiled dubiously.

"You are shielding him, Claire," he said slowly; "I see you are. I know that Ferdinand is estranged from you. Of late I have learnt things concerning you – more than you imagine. You are unloved by your husband, and unhappy, and yet you are bearing your burden in silence, though you are a young and beautiful woman. Now, Claire," he said in a changed voice, placing his hand tenderly upon his niece's shoulder, "tell me the truth. I wish to hear the truth from your own lips. Do you know what they say of you? They say," he added, lowering his voice – "they say that you have a lover!"

"A lover!" she gasped hoarsely, starting from her chair, her beautiful face as white as the dress she wore; "a lover! Who – who told you so?"

Chapter Two

Her Imperial Highness

Whatever passed between the Emperor and his niece, whether she confessed the truth or defied him, one fact was plain – she had been moved to bitter tears.

When, half an hour later, she went back through those long corridors, her rich train sweeping over the red carpets, her white-gloved hands were clenched, her teeth set hard, her eyes red, her countenance changed. Her face was changed; it was that of a woman heart-broken and desperate.

She did not return to the ballroom, but descended to the courtyard, where one of the Imperial servants called her carriage, and she returned alone to her father's splendid palace in the Parkring.

Ascending straight to her room, she dismissed the Countess de Trauttenberg, her lady-in-waiting, and Henriette, her French maid; and then locking the door, she tore off her tiara and her jewels and sank upon her knees upon the old carved prie-dieu before the ivory crucifix placed opposite her bed.

Her hands were clasped, her fair head bent, her sweet lips moved in fervent prayer, her eyes the while streaming with tears. Plunged in grief and unhappiness, she besought the Almighty to aid and counsel her in the difficult situation in which she now found herself.

"Help me, my Father!" she sobbed aloud. "Have mercy upon me – mercy upon a humble woman who craves Thy protection and direction." And her clasped hands trembled in the fervency of her appeal.

Those who had seen her an hour ago, the gay, laughing figure, blazing with jewels, the centre of the most brilliant Court of Europe, would have been astounded to see her at that moment prostrated before her Maker. In Austria, as in Germany, she was believed to be a rather giddy woman, perhaps by reason of her uncommon beauty, and perhaps because of her easy-going light-heartedness and disregard for all Court etiquette. Yet the truth was that the strong religious principles instilled into her by her mother, the deceased Archduchess Charles, had always remained, and that no day passed without one hour set apart for her devotions, in secret even from the Countess, from Henriette, and from the Crown Prince, her husband.

She was a Catholic, of course, like all her Imperial house, but upon one point she disagreed – that of confession.

Her husband, though he professed Catholicism, at heart scoffed at religion; and more than once when he had found her in the private chapel of the palace at Treysa had jeered at her. But she bore it all in patience. She was his wife, and she had a duty to perform towards his nation – to become its queen.

For nearly an hour she remained upon her knees before the crucifix, with the tiny oil-light flickering in its cup of crimson glass, kneeling in mute appeal, strong in her faith, yet humble as the humblest commoner in the land.

"My God!" she cried aloud at last. "Hear me! Answer my prayer! Give me strength and courage, and direct my footsteps in the right path. I am a weak woman, after all; a humble sinner who has repented. Help me, O God! I place all my trust in Thee! Amen."

And, crossing herself, she rose slowly with a deep-drawn breath that sounded weirdly through the fine room, and walking unsteadily towards the big cheval glass, gazed at her own reflection.

She saw how pale and haggard was her face, and looked at her trembling hands.

The ribbons and stars at the edge of her bodice caught her eye, and with a sudden movement she tore them off and cast them heedlessly upon the table as though the sight of them annoyed her. They had been conferred upon her on her marriage. She sighed as she looked back at them.

Ah, the hollow mockery of it all!

She glanced out of the window, and saw in the bright moonlight the sentry pacing up and down before the palace. Across the wide boulevard were the dark trees of the park. It recalled to her the appointment she had made there for the next evening.

"I wonder why Steinbach has followed me here?" she exclaimed to herself. "How did he obtain entrance to the Court ball? Probably he has some friend here. But surely his mission is urgent, or he would never have run this risk. I was, however, foolish to speak to him before them all – very foolish. Yet," she added slowly to herself, "I wonder what he has to tell me? I wonder –" And, without concluding her sentence, she stood gazing out upon the dark park, deep in thought, her mind full of grave apprehensions of the future.

She was a Hapsbourg – and evil fate follows a Hapsbourg always. She had prayed to God; for God alone could save her.

She, the most brilliant and the most envied woman in the Empire, was perhaps the most heart-broken, the most unhappy. Casting herself into an armchair before the log fire, she covered her drawn, white face with her hands and sobbed bitterly, until at last she sat immovable, staring straight into the embers watching the spark die out, until she fell asleep where she sat.

Next day her sweet, fresh face bore no traces of her desperation of the night. She was as gay and merry as ever, and only Henriette noticed in her eyes a slight redness, but discreetly said nothing.

The Countess, a rather pleasant-faced but stiff-mannered person, brought her her engagement-book, from which it appeared that she was due at a review by the Emperor at eleven o'clock; therefore, accompanied by her lady-in-waiting, she drove there, and was everywhere admired by the great crowds assembled. The Austrian people called her "our Claire," and the warm-hearted Viennese cheered when they recognised that she was back again among them.

It was a brilliant scene in the bright spring sunlight, for many of the Imperial Court were present, and the troops made a brave show as they marched past his Majesty and the assembled members of the Imperial house.

Then she had a luncheon engagement with the Archduchess Gisela, the wife of Prince Leopold of Bavaria, afterwards drove in the Ringstrasse and the Prater, dined early at her father's palace, after giving Henriette leave of absence for the evening, and also allowing the Countess de Trauttenberg her freedom, saying that she intended to remain at home. Then, shortly before eight o'clock, she ascended to her room, exchanged her turquoise-blue dinner-gown for a plain, stiff, tailor-made dress, put on a hat with a lace veil that concealed her features, and managed to slip across the courtyard of the domestic offices and out of the palace unseen.

The night was cloudy and dark, with threatening rain, as she crossed the broad Parkring, entering the park near the Kursalon, and traversing the deserted walks towards the River Wien. The chill wind whistled in the budding trees above, sweeping up the dust in her path, and the statuesque guard whom she passed in the shadow glanced inquisitively at her, of course not recognising her.

There was no one in the Stadtpark at that hour, and all was silent, gloomy, and dismal, well in keeping with her own sad thoughts. Behind her, the street lamps of the Parkring showed in a long, straight line, and before her were the lights on the Caroline Bridge, the spot appointed for the meeting.

Her heart beat quickly. It was always difficult for her to escape without the knowledge of De Trauttenberg or Henriette. The former was, as a good lady-in-waiting should be, ever at her side, made her engagements for her, and saw that she kept them. That night, however, the Countess desired to visit her sister who was in Vienna with her husband, therefore it had happened opportunely; and, freed of Henriette, she had now little to fear.

The dress she wore was one she used when in the country. She had thrown a short cape of Henriette's about her shoulders, and was thus sufficiently disguised to avoid recognition by people in the streets.

As she came around a sudden bend in the pathway to the foot of the bridge the dark figure of a man in a black overcoat emerged from the shadow, and was next instant at her side, holding his hat in his hand and bowing before her.

"I began to fear that your Imperial Highness would not come," he said breathlessly in German. "Or that you had been prevented."

"Is it so very late, then?" she inquired in her sweet, musical voice, as the man walked slowly at her side. "I had difficulty in getting away in secret."

"No one has followed you, Princess?" he said, glancing anxiously behind him. "Are you quite sure?"

"No one. I was very careful. But why have you asked me to come here? Why were you at the ball last night? How did you manage to get a card?"

"I came expressly to see you, Princess," answered the young man in a deep earnest voice. "It was difficult to get a command to the ball, but I managed it, as I could approach you by no other way. At your Highness's own Court you, as Crown Princess, are unapproachable for a commoner like myself, and I feared to write to you, as De Trautenberg often attends to your correspondence."

"But you are my friend, Steinbach," she said. "I am always to be seen by my friends."

"At your own risk, your Highness," he said quickly. "I know quite well that last night when you stopped and spoke to me it was a great breach of etiquette. Only it was imperative that I should see you to-night. To you, Princess, I owe everything. I do not forget your great kindness to me; how that I was a poor clerk out of work, with my dear wife ill and starving, and how, by your letter of recommendation, I was appointed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, first as French translator, and now as a secretary. Were it not for you, Princess, I and my family would have starved. You saved me from ruin, and I hope you are confident that in me, poor and humble though I am, you at least have a friend."

"I am sure of that, Steinbach," was her Highness's kindly reply. "We need not cross the bridge," she said. "It is quiet along here, by the river. We shall meet no one."

For a few moments a silence fell between them, and the Princess began to wonder why he had asked her there to meet him.

At last, when they were in a dark and narrower pathway, he turned suddenly to her and said, —

"Princess, I – I hardly know how to speak, for I fear that you may take what I have to say in a wrong sense. I mean," he faltered, "I mean that I fear you may think it impertinent of me to speak to you, considering the great difference in our stations."

"Why?" she asked calmly, turning to him with some surprise. "Have you not just told me that you are my friend?"

She noticed at that moment that he still held his hat in his hand, and motioned to him to reassume it.

"Yes. I am your Highness's friend," he declared quickly. "If I were not, I would not dare to approach you, or to warn you of what at this moment is in progress."

"What is in progress?" she exclaimed in surprise. "Tell me."

She realised that this man had something serious to say, or surely he would never have followed her to Vienna, and obtained entrance to the Imperial Court by subterfuge.

"Your Highness is in peril," he declared in a low voice, halting and standing before her. "You have enemies, fierce, bitter enemies, on every side; enemies who are doing their utmost to estrange you from your husband; relentless enemies who are conspiring might and main against you and the little Princess Ignatia. They –"

"Against my child?" cried the Princess, amazed. "Do you really mean that there is actually a conspiracy against me?"

"Alas! that is so, Highness," said the man, seriously and distinctly. "By mere chance I have learnt of it, and being unable to approach you at your own Court, I am here to give you timely warning

of what is intended.” She was silent, gazing straight into her companion’s face, which was, however, hardly distinguishable in the darkness. She could scarcely believe the truth of what this commoner told her. Could this man, whom she had benefited by her all-powerful influence, have any ulterior motive in lying to her?

“And what is intended?” she inquired in a strange, hard voice, still half dubious and half convinced.

“There is a plot, a dastardly, widespread conspiracy to cause your Highness’s downfall and part you from the Crown Prince before he comes to the throne,” was his answer.

“But why? For what motive?” she inquired, starting at the amazing revelation.

“Cannot your Highness discern that your jealous enemies are in fear of you?” he said. “They know that one day ere long our invalid King must die, and your husband will then ascend the throne. You will be Queen, and they feel convinced that the day of your accession will be their last day at Court – frankly, that having seen through their shams and intrigues, you will dismiss them all and change the entire entourage.”

“Ah! I see,” replied the Crown Princess Claire in a hoarse, bitter voice. “They fear me because they have realised their own shortcomings. So they are conspiring against me to part me from my husband, and drive me from Court! Yes,” she sighed heavily, “I know that I have enemies on every side. I am a Hapsbourg, and that in itself is sufficient to prejudice them against me. I have never been a favourite with their Majesties the King and Queen because of my Liberal tendencies. They look upon me as a Socialist; indeed, almost as a revolutionist. Their sycophants would be glad enough to see me banished from Court. And yet the Court bow to me with all that hateful obsequiousness.”

“Your Highness is, unfortunately, quite right,” declared the man Steinbach. “The Crown Prince is being enticed farther and farther from you, as part of the ingenious plot now afoot. The first I knew of it was by accident six months ago, when some letters from abroad fell into my hands at the Ministry. The conspiracy is one that permeates the whole Court. The daily talk of your enemies is the anticipation of your downfall.”

“My downfall! But how is that to be accomplished?” she demanded, her fine eyes flashing with indignation. “I surely have nothing to fear – have I? I beg of you to be quite candid with me, Steinbach. In this affair your information may be of greatest service, and I am deeply indebted to you. It staggers me. What have I done that these people should seek my ruin?” she cried in blank dismay.

“Will your Highness pardon me if I tell the truth?” asked the man at her side, speaking very seriously. “You have been too free, too frank, and too open-minded. Every well-meant action of yours is turned to account by those who seek to do you evil. Those whom you believe to be your friends are your worst antagonists. I have longed to approach you and tell you this for months, but I always feared. How could I reach you? They are aware that the secret correspondence passed through my hands, and therefore they suspect me of an intention of betraying them.”

“Then you are here at imminent risk to yourself, Steinbach,” she remarked very slowly, looking again straight into his dark face.

“I am here as your Highness’s friend,” replied the young man simply. “It is surely worth the risk to save my gracious benefactress from falling victim to their foul, dastardly conspiracy?”

“And who, pray, are my worst antagonists?” she asked hoarsely.

He gave her rapidly half a dozen names of Court officials and persons in the immediate entourage of their Majesties.

“And,” he added, “do not trust the Countess de Trauttenberg. She is playing you false. She acts as spy upon you and notes your every action.”

“The Countess – their spy!” she gasped, utterly taken aback, for if there was one person at Court in whom she had the utmost confidence it was the woman who had been in her personal service ever since her marriage.

“I have documentary proof of it,” the man said quietly. “I would beg of your Highness to make no sign whatever that the existence of the plot is known to you, but at the same time exercise the greatest caution, both for your own sake and that of the little Princess.”

“Surely they do not mean to kill me, Steinbach?” she exclaimed in alarm.

“No – worse. They intend to banish your Highness from Court in disgrace, as a woman unworthy to reign over us as Queen. They fear you because you have discovered their own intrigues, corruptions, and scandals, and they intend that, at all costs, you shall never ascend the throne.”

“But my husband! He should surely know this!”

“Princess,” exclaimed the clean-shaven young man, speaking very slowly and seriously, “I regret that it is I who am compelled to reveal this to you, but the Crown Prince already believes ill of you. He suspects; and therefore whatever lies they, now invent concerning you he accepts as truth. Princess,” he added in a low, hard voice, “you are in deadly peril. There, the truth is out, for I cannot keep it from you longer. I am poor, unknown, without influence. All I can do is to give you this warning in secret, because I hope that I may call myself your friend.”

The unhappy daughter of the Imperial house was silent. The revelation was startling and amazing. She had never realised that a plot was afoot against her in her husband’s kingdom. Words entirely failed her. She and her little daughter Ignatia were marked down as victims. She now for the first time realised her peril, yet she was powerless to stem the tide of misfortune that, sooner or later, must overwhelm her and crush her. She stood there a defenceless woman.

Chapter Three

The Revelations of a Commoner

Princess and commoner walked in silence, side by side. The rough night wind blew the dust in their faces, but they bent to it heedlessly, both too full of their own thoughts for words; the man half confused in the presence of the brilliant woman who ere long would be his sovereign; the woman stupefied at the dastardly intrigue that had not only estranged her husband from her, but had for its object the expulsion from the kingdom of herself and her child.

Open-hearted as she was, liberal-minded, pleasant, easy-going, and a delightful companion, she had never sufficiently realised that at that stiff, narrow-minded Court there were men and women who hated her. All of us are so very loth to believe that we have enemies, and more especially those who believe in the honesty and integrity of mankind.

She reflected upon her interview with the Emperor. She remembered his Majesty's hard words. Had those conspiring against her obtained his ear?

Even De Trauttenberg, the tall, patient, middle-aged woman in whom she had reposed such confidence, was their spy! Steinbach's story staggered belief. And yet – and yet was not the Emperor's anger plain proof that he knew something – that a foul plot was really in progress?

Along those dark winding paths they strolled slowly, meeting no one, for the place was utterly deserted. It was an exciting escapade, and dangerous withal.

The man at last broke the silence, saying, —

"I need not impress upon your Imperial Highness the necessity for discretion in this matter. To betray your knowledge of the affair would be to betray me."

"Trust me," was her answer. "I know how to keep a secret, and I am not likely to forget this important service you have rendered me."

"My only regret is that I was unable to approach you months ago, when I first made the discovery. Your Highness would have then been able to avoid the pitfalls constantly set for you," the man said meaningly.

The Princess Claire bit her lip. She knew to what he referred. She had been foolish, ah yes; very foolish. And he dare not be more explicit.

"Yes," she sighed. "I know – I know to what you refer. But surely we need not discuss it. Even though I am Crown Princess, I am a woman, after all."

"I beg your Highness's pardon," he exclaimed quickly, fearing that she was annoyed.

"There is nothing to pardon," was her reply. "You are my friend, and speak to me in my own interests. For that I thank you. Only – only –" she added, "all that you've just told me is such a startling revelation. My eyes are opened now. I see the dastardly ingenuity of it all. I know why my husband –"

But she checked herself instantly. No. However ill-treated she had been she would preserve her secret. She would not complain to a commoner at risk of her domestic infelicity going forth to her people.

It was true that within a year of marriage he had thrown her down in her room and kicked her in one of his paroxysms of temper. He had struck her blows innumerable; but she had borne all in patience, and De Trauttenberg had discovered dark marks upon her white shoulders which she had attributed to a fall upon the ice. She saw now the reason of his estrangement; how his sycophants had poisoned his mind against her because they feared her.

"Steinbach," she said at last, "tell me the truth. What do the people think of me? You are a commoner and live among them. I, imprisoned at Court, unfortunately, know nothing. The opinions of the people never reach us."

“The people, your Highness, love you. They call you ‘their Claire.’ You surely know how, when you drive out, they raise their hats and shout in acclamation.”

“Yes,” she said in a low, mechanical voice, “but is it real enthusiasm? Would they really love me if I were Queen?”

“Your Highness is at this moment the most popular woman in the whole kingdom of Marburg. If it were known that this plot was in progress there would in all probability be a revolution. Stuhlmann and his friends are hated everywhere, and their overthrow would cause universal satisfaction.”

“And the people do not really think ill of me?”

“Think ill of you, Princess?” he echoed. “Why, they literally worship you and the little Princess Ignatia.”

She was silent again, walking very slowly, and reflecting deeply. It was so seldom she had opportunity of speaking with one of the people unless he were a deputy or a diplomatist, who then put on all his Court manners, was unnatural, and feared to speak. From the man beside her, however, she saw she might learn the truth of a matter which was ever uppermost in her mind. And yet she hesitated to approach what was, after all, a very delicate subject.

Suddenly, with her mind made up, she halted, and turning to him, said, —

“Steinbach, I want you to answer me truthfully. Do not evade the question for fear of annoying me. Speak openly, as the friend you are to me. I wish to know one thing,” and she lowered her voice until it almost faltered. “Have you heard a – well, a scandal concerning myself?”

He made no answer.

She repeated her question; her veiled face turned to his.

“Your Highness only a few moments ago expressed a desire not to discuss the matter,” he replied in a low, distinct voice.

“But I want to know,” she urged. “I must know. Tell me the truth. If you are my friend you will at least be frank with me when I command.”

“If you command, Princess, then I must obey, even with reluctance,” was his response. “Yes. I have heard some gossip. It is spoken openly in Court by the *dames du palais*, and is now being whispered among the people.”

She held her breath. Fortunately, it was dark, for she knew that her countenance had gone crimson.

“Well?” she asked. “And what do they say of me?”

“They, unfortunately, couple your Highness’s name with that of Count Leitolf, the chief of the private cabinet of his Majesty,” was his low answer.

“Yes,” she said in a toneless voice. “And what more?”

“They say that Major Scheel, attaché at the Embassy in Paris, recognised you driving with the Count in the Avenue de l’Opéra, when you were supposed to be at Aix-les-Bains with the little Princess Ignatia.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“They say, too, that he follows you everywhere – and that your maid Henriette helps you to leave the palace in secret to meet him.”

She heard his words, and her white lips trembled.

“They also declare,” he went on in a low voice, “that your love of the country is only because you are able to meet him without any one knowing, that your journey here to Vienna is on account of him – that he has followed you here.”

She nodded, without uttering a word.

“The Count has, no doubt, followed your Highness, indiscreetly if I may say so, for I recognised him last night dining alone at Breying’s.”

“He did not see you?” she exclaimed anxiously.

“No. I took good care not to be seen. I had no desire that my journey here should be known, or I should be suspected. I return to-night at midnight.”

“And to be frank, Steinbach, you believe that all this has reached my husband’s ears?” she whispered in a hard, strained voice.

“All that is detrimental to your Highness reaches the Crown Prince,” was his reply to the breathless woman, “and certainly not without embellishments. That is why I implore of you to be circumspect – why I am here to tell you of the plot to disgrace you in the people’s eyes.”

“But the people themselves are now speaking of – of the Count?” she said in a low, uncertain voice, quite changed from her previous musical tones when first they met.

“A scandal – and especially a Court one – very soon spreads among the people. The royal servants gossip outside the palace, and moreover your Highness’s many enemies are only too delighted to assist in spreading such reports. It gives motive for the Crown Prince’s estrangement.”

Her head was bent, her hands were trembling. The iron had entered her soul.

The people – the people whom she so dearly loved, and who had waved their hands and shouted those glad welcomes to her as she drove out – were now whispering of Leitolf.

She bit her lip, and her countenance went pale as death as the truth arose before her in all its hideous ghastliness.

Even the man at her side, the humble man who had stood by her as her friend, knew that Leitolf was there – in Vienna – to be near her. Even Steinbach could have no further respect for her as a woman – only respect because she was one day to be his sovereign.

Her hands were clenched; she held her breath, and shivered as the chill wind cut through her. She longed to be back in her father’s palace; to be alone in her room to think.

“And nothing more?” she asked in that same blank voice which now caused her companion to wonder.

“Only that they say evil of you that is not worth repeating,” was his brief answer.

She sighed again, and then when she had sufficiently recovered from the effect of his words, she whispered in a low voice, —

“I – I can only thank you, Steinbach, for giving me this warning. Forgive me if – if I am somewhat upset by it – but I am a woman – and perhaps it is only natural. Trust me to say nothing. Leave Vienna to-night and return home. If you ever wish to communicate with me write guardedly, making an appointment, and address your letter to Madame Emond at the Poste Restante in Brussels. You will recollect the name?”

“Most certainly I shall, your Highness. I can only ask pardon for speaking so openly. But it was at your request.”

“Do not let us mention it further,” she urged, her white lips again compressed. “Leave me now. It is best that I should walk down yonder to the Parkring alone.”

He halted, and bowing low, his hat in his hand, said, —

“I would ask your Imperial Highness to still consider me your humble servant to command in any way whatsoever, and to believe that I am ever ready to serve you and to repay the great debt of gratitude I owe to you.”

And, bending, he took her gloved hand and raised it to his lips in obeisance to the princess who was to be his queen.

“Adieu, Steinbach,” she said in a broken voice. “And for the service you have rendered me to-night I can only return you the thanks of an unhappy woman.”

Then she turned from him quickly, and hurried down the path to the park entrance, where shone a single gas lamp, leaving him standing alone, bowing in silence.

He watched her graceful figure out of sight, then sighed, and turned away in the opposite direction.

A few seconds later the tall, dark figure of a man emerged noiselessly from the deep shadow of the tree where, unobserved, he had crept up and stood concealed. The stranger glanced quickly up and down at the two receding figures, and then at a leisurely pace strode in the direction the Princess had taken.

When at last she had turned and was out of sight he halted, took a cigarette from a silver case, lit it after some difficulty in the tearing wind, and muttered some words which, though inaudible, were sufficiently triumphant in tone to show that he was well pleased at his ingenious piece of espionage.

Chapter Four

His Majesty Cupid

As the twilight fell on the following afternoon a fiacre drew up before the Hotel Imperial, one of the best and most select hotels in the Kartner Ring, in Vienna, and from it descended a lady attired in the deep mourning of a widow.

Of the gold-laced concierge she inquired for Count Carl Leitolf, and was at once shown into the lift and conducted to a private sitting-room on the second floor, where a young, fair-moustached, good-looking man, with well-cut, regular features and dark brown eyes, rose quickly as the door opened and the waiter announced her.

The moment the door had closed and they were alone he took his visitor's hand and raised it reverently to his lips, bowing low, with the exquisite grace of the born courtier.

In an instant she drew it from him and threw back her veil, revealing her pale, beautiful face – the face of her Imperial Highness the Crown Princess Claire.

"Highness!" the man exclaimed, glancing anxiously at the door to reassure himself that it was closed, "I had your note this morning, but – but are you not running too great a risk by coming here? I could not reply, fearing that my letter might fall into other hands; otherwise I would on no account have allowed you to come. You may have been followed. There are, as you know, spies everywhere."

"I have come, Carl, because I wish to speak to you," she said, looking unflinchingly into his handsome face. "I wish to know by what right you have followed me here – to Vienna?"

He drew back in surprise, for her attitude was entirely unexpected.

"I came here upon my own private affairs," he answered.

"That is not the truth," she declared in quick resentment. "You are here because you believed that you might meet me at the reception after the State dinner to-night. You applied for a card for it in order that you could see me – and this, after what passed between us the other day! Do you consider that you are treating me fairly? Cannot you see that your constant attentions are compromising me and causing people to talk?"

"And what, pray, does your Imperial Highness care for this idle Court gossip?" asked the well-dressed, athletic-looking man, at the same time placing a chair for her and bowing her to it. "There has been enough of it already, and you have always expressed the utmost disregard of anything that might be said, or any stories that might be invented."

"I know," she answered. "But this injudicious action of yours in following me here is utter madness. It places me in peril. You are known in Vienna, remember."

"Then if that is your view, your Highness, I can only apologise," he said most humbly. "I will admit that I came here in order to be able to get a few minutes' conversation with you to-night. At our Court at home you know how very difficult it is for me to speak with you, for the sharp eye of the Trauttenberg is ever upon you."

The Princess's arched brows contracted slightly. She recollected what Steinbach had revealed to her regarding her lady-in-waiting.

"And it is surely best that you should have difficulty in approaching me," she said. "I have not forgotten your foolish journey to Paris, where I had gone incognito to see my old nurse, and how you compelled me to go out and see the sights in your company. We were recognised. Do you know that?" she exclaimed in a hard voice. "A man who knew us both sent word to Court that we were in Paris together."

"Recognised!" he gasped, the colour fading instantly from his face. "Who saw us?"

“Of his identity I’m not aware,” she answered, for she was a clever diplomatist, and could keep a secret well. She did not reveal Scheel’s name. “I only know that our meeting in Paris is no secret. They suspect me, and I have you to thank for whatever scandal may now be invented concerning us.”

The lithe, clean-limbed man was silent, his head bent before her. What could he reply? He knew, alas! too well, that in following her from Germany to Paris he had acted very injudiciously. She was believed to be taking the baths at Aix, but a sudden caprice had seized her to run up to Paris and see her old French nurse, to whom she was much attached. He had learnt her intention in confidence, and had met her in Paris and shown her the city. It had been an indiscretion, he admitted.

Yet the recollection of those few delightful days of freedom remained like a pleasant dream. He recollected her childish delight of it all. It was out of the season, and they believed that they could go hither and thither, like the crowds of tourists do, without fear of recognition. Yet Fate, it seemed, had been against them, and their secret meeting was actually known!

“Cannot you see the foolishness of it all?” she asked in a low, serious voice. “Cannot you see, Carl, that your presence here lends colour to their suspicions? I have enemies – fierce, bitter enemies – as you must know too well, and yet you imperil me like this!” she cried reproachfully.

“I can make no defence, Princess,” he said lamely. “I can only regret deeply having caused you any annoyance.”

“Annoyance!” she echoed in anger. “Your injudicious actions have placed me in the greatest peril. The people have coupled our names, and you are known to have followed me on here.”

Her companion was silent, his eyes downcast, as though not daring to meet her reproachful gaze.

“I have been foolish – very foolish, I know,” she cried. “In the old days, when we knew each other at Wartenstein, a boy-and-girl affection sprang up between us; and then, when you left the University, they sent you as attaché to the Embassy in London, and we gradually forgot each other. You grew tired of diplomacy, and returned to find me the wife of the Crown Prince; and in a thoughtless moment I promised, at your request, to recommend you to a post in the private cabinet of the King. Since that day I have always regretted. I ought never to have allowed you to return. I am as much to blame as you are, for it was an entirely false step. Yet how was I to know?”

“True, my Princess!” said the man in a low, choking voice. “How were you to know that I still loved you in silence, that I was aware of the secret of your domestic unhappiness, that I – ”

“Enough!” she cried, drawing herself up. “The word love surely need not be spoken between us. I know it all, alas! Yet I beg of you to remember that I am the wife of another, and a woman of honour.”

“Ah yes,” he exclaimed, his trembling hand resting on the back of the chair upon which she sat. “Honour – yes. I love you, Claire – you surely know that well. But we do not speak of it; it is a subject not to be discussed by us. Day after day, unable to speak to you, I watch you in silence. I know your bitterness in that gilded prison they call the Court, and long always to help you and rescue you from that – that man to whom you are, alas! wedded. It is all so horrible, so loathsome, that I recoil when I see him smiling upon you while at heart he hates you. For weeks, since last we spoke together, how I have lived I scarcely know – utter despair, insane hopes alternately possess me – but at last the day came, and I followed you here to speak with you, my Princess.”

She remained silent, somewhat embarrassed, as he took her gloved hand and again kissed it.

She was nervous, but next instant determined.

“Alas! I have not failed to notice your strong affection for me, Carl,” she said with a heavy sigh, her beautiful face slightly flushed. “You must therefore control this passion that seems to have been rekindled within your heart. For my sake go, and forget me,” she implored. “Resign your appointment, and re-enter the diplomatic service of the Emperor. I will speak to Lindenau, who will give you an appointment, say, in Rome or Paris. But you must not remain at Treysa. I – I will not allow it.”

“But, Princess,” he cried in dismay, “I cannot go and leave you there alone among your enemies. You – ”

“You must; for, unintentionally, because you have my interests at heart, you are my worst enemy. You are indiscreet, just as every man is who loves a woman truly.”

“Then you really believe I love you still, Claire,” he cried, bending towards her. “You remember those delightfully happy days at Wartenstein long ago, when – ”

She held up her hand to stop the flow of his words.

He looked at her. For an instant her glance wavered and shrank.

She was his idol, the beautiful idol with eyes like heaven.

Yes, she was very beautiful – beautiful with all the beauty of woman now, not with the beauty of the girl.

And she, with her sad gaze fixed upon him, remembered all the past – the great old castle in the far-off Tyrol, her laughter at his awkwardness; their chats in English when both were learning that language; the quarrel over the lilac blossom. At Arcachon – the shore and the pine forest; the boyish kiss stolen under the mistletoe; the declaration of their young love on that lonely mountain-side with the world lying at their feet; the long, sweet, silent kisses exchanged on their homeward walk; the roses she had given him as farewell pledge when he had left for London.

All had gone – gone for ever.

Nevertheless, though everything was past, she could not resist an impulse to recall it – oh, very briefly – in a few feeling words, as one may recall some sweet and rapturous dream.

“We were very foolish,” she said.

He was silent. His heart was too full for words. He knew that a woman who can look back on the past – on rapture, delight, the first thrilling kiss, the first fervent vow – and say, “We were very foolish,” is a woman changed beyond recall.

In other days, had he heard such sacrilegious words a cry of horror would have sprung from his lips. But now, though he shuddered with anguish, he simply said, —

“I shall always remember it, Princess;” adding, with a glance at her, “and you.”

Her wonderful eyes shrank once more and her lips quivered, as though for one second touched again by the light wing of love – as if, indeed, she felt she had done something unworthy of her, something which might bring her regret hereafter.

In the midst of his confusion, the man remained victorious. She would never be his, and yet she would be his for ever. No matter how she might strive, she would never entirely forget.

She sighed, and rising, walked unsteadily to the window, where, below, the street lamps were just being lit. Daylight had faded, and in the room it was almost dark.

“To-night, Carl, we meet for the last time,” she said with an effort, in a hard, strained voice. “Both for you and for me it is best that we should part and forget. I did wrong to recommend you to the post at Court, and I ought to have foreseen the grave peril of the situation. Fortunately, I have realised it in time, even though our enemies already believe ill and invent lies concerning us. You must not return to Court. Remember, I forbid you. To-night, at the State dinner, I will speak to Lindenau and ask him to send you as attaché to Rome or to Petersburg. It is the wisest course.”

“Then your Highness really intends to banish me?” he said hoarsely, in a low, broken voice of reproach.

“Yes,” she faltered. “I – I must – Carl – to – to save myself.”

“But you are cruel – very cruel – Princess,” he cried, his voice trembling with emotion.

“You must realise my peril,” she said seriously. “Your presence at Court increases my danger hourly, because” – and she hesitated – “because, Carl, I confess to you that I do not forget – I never shall forget,” she added as the tears sprang to her blue eyes. “Therefore, go! Let me bear my own burden as best I can alone, and let me remember you as what you have always been – chivalrous to an unhappy woman; a man of honour.”

Slowly she moved across the room towards the door, but he arrested her progress, and took her small hand quickly in his grasp.

For some moments, in the falling gloom, he looked into her sweet, tearful face without speaking; then crushing down the lump that arose in his throat, he raised to his hot, passionate lips the hand of the woman he loved, and, imprinting upon it a tender, lingering kiss, murmured, —

“Adieu, Claire – my Princess – my first, my only love!” She drew her hand away as his passionate words fell upon her ear, sighed heavily, and in silence opened the door and passed out from his presence.

And thus were two brave hearts torn asunder.

Chapter Five

Some Suspicions

State dinners, those long, tedious affairs at which the conversation is always stilted and the bearing of everybody is stiff and unnatural, always bored the Crown Princess Claire to death.

Whenever she could she escaped them; but as a Crown Princess she was compelled by Court etiquette to undergo ordeals which, to a woman not educated as an Imperial Archduchess, would have been impossible. She had trained herself to sit for hours smiling and good-humoured, although at heart she hated all that glittering formality and rich display. There were times when at her own Court at Treysa, at the military anniversary dinners that were so often held, she had been compelled to sit at table with her husband and the guests for four and five hours on end, without showing any sign of fatigue beyond taking her smelling-salts from the hand of her lady-in-waiting. Yet she never complained, though the eating, and more especially the drinking, disgusted her. It was a duty – one of the many wearisome, soul-killing duties which devolve upon a Crown Princess – of which the world at large is in utter ignorance. Therefore she accepted it in silence, yet bored always by meeting and speaking with the same circle of people day after day – a small circle which was ever intriguing, ever consumed by its own jealousies, ever striving for the favour of the aged king; the narrow-minded little world within the Palace who treated those outside as though of different flesh and blood to themselves.

Whether at a marriage, at a funeral, at the opera, at a review, or at a charity *fête* – everywhere where her Court duties called her – she met the same people, she heard the same interminable chatter and the same shameful scandals, until, unhappy in her own domestic life, she had grown to loathe it all, and to long for that liberty of which she had dreamed when a girl at her father's castle at Wartenstein, or at the great old Residenz-Schloss, or palace, at Pressburg.

Yet what liberty could she, heiress to a throne, obtain; what, indeed, within her husband's Court, a circle who dined at five o'clock and were iron-bound by etiquette?

The State dinner at the Imperial palace that night differed but little from any other State dinner – long, dull, and extremely uninteresting. Given in honour of a Swedish Prince who was at the moment the guest of the Emperor, there were present the usual circle of Imperial Archdukes and Archduchesses, who after dinner were joined in the great reception-room by the Ministers of State, the British, French, and Italian Ambassadors, the Swedish Minister and the whole staff of the Swedish Embassy in the Schwindgasse. Every one was in uniform and wore his orders, the Emperor himself standing at the end of the room, chatting with his young guest in French.

The Crown Princess Claire, a striking figure in turquoise chiffon, was standing near, discussing Leoncavallo's new opera with her cousin, the Princess Marie of Bourbon, who had arrived only a few days before from Madrid. Suddenly her eye caught the figure she had all the evening been in search of.

Count de Lindenau, Privy Councillor, Chamberlain, Minister of the Imperial Household, and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Austrian Empire – a short, rather stout, bald-headed man, with heavy white moustache, with the crimson ribbon of the Order of Saint Stephen of Hungary across his shirt-front and the Grand Cross in brilliants upon his coat – stopped to bow low before the Crown Princess, who in an instant seized the opportunity to leave her cousin and speak with him.

"It is really quite a long time since we met, Count," she exclaimed pleasantly. "I met the Countess at Cannes in January, and was delighted to see her so much better. Is she quite well again?"

"I thank your Imperial Highness," responded the Minister. "The Countess has completely recovered. At present she is at Como. And you? Here for a long stay in Vienna, I hope. We always regret that you have left us, you know," he added, smiling, for she had, ever since a girl, been friendly with him, and had often visited his wife at their castle at Mauthausen.

“No; I regret that I must return to Treysa in a few days,” she said as she moved along and he strolled at her side down the great gilded room where the little groups were standing gossiping. Then, when his Excellency had asked after the health of the Crown Prince and of the little Princess Ignatia, she drew him aside to a spot where they could not be overheard, and halting, said in a lower tone, —

“I have wished to meet you, Count, because I want you to do me a favour.”

“Your Imperial Highness knows quite well that if I can serve you in any way I am always only too delighted.” And he bowed.

More than once she had asked favour of Lindenau, the stern Foreign Minister and favourite of the Emperor, and he had always acted as she wished. She had known him ever since her birth. He had, indeed, been present at her baptism.

“Well, it is this,” she said. “I want to give my recommendation to you on behalf of Count Leitolf, who is at present chief of the King’s private cabinet at Treysa, and who is strongly desirous of returning to the Austrian diplomatic service, and is anxious for a post abroad.” Mention of Leitolf’s name caused the wily old Minister to glance at her quickly. The rumour had reached his ears, and in an instant he recognised the situation — the Crown Princess wished to rid herself of him. But the old fellow was diplomatic, and said, as though compelled to recall the name, —

“Leitolf? Let me see. That is Count Carl, whom I sent to London a few years ago? He resigned his post to take service under your father-in-law the King. Ah yes, I quite recollect. And he now wishes to be appointed abroad again, eh? And you wish to recommend him?”

“Exactly, Count,” she answered. “I think that Leitolf is tired of our Court; he finds it too dull. He would prefer Rome, he tells me.”

“Your Imperial Highness is well aware that any recommendation of yours always has the most earnest attention,” said the Minister, with a polite bow. His quick grey eyes were watching the beautiful woman sharply. He wondered what had occurred between her and Count Carl.

“Then you will send him to Rome?” she asked, unable to conceal her eagerness.

“If he will present himself at the Ministry, he will be at once appointed to the Embassy to the Quirinal,” responded his Excellency quietly.

“But he will not present himself, I am afraid.”

“Oh, why not?” inquired the great Austrian diplomatist, regarding her in surprise.

“Because — ” and she hesitated, as a slight flush crossed her features — “because he is rather ashamed to ask for a second appointment, having resigned from London.”

The old Minister smiled dubiously.

“Ah!” he exclaimed confidentially, “I quite understand. Your Imperial Highness wishes to get rid of him from your Court, eh?”

The Princess started, twisting her diamond bracelet nervously round her wrist.

“Why do you think that, Count?” she asked quickly, surprised that he should have thus divined her motive.

“Well, your Imperial Highness is rather unduly interested in the man — if you will permit me to say so,” was his answer. “Besides, if I may speak frankly, as I know I may, I have regarded his presence in your Court as distinctly dangerous — for you. There are, you know, evil tongues ever ready to invent scandal, even against a Crown Princess.”

“I know,” she said, in a low, changed voice. “But let us walk; otherwise they will all wonder why I am talking with you so long,” and the two moved slowly along side by side. “I know,” she went on — “I know that I have enemies; and, to confess the truth, I wish, in order to show them that they lie, to send him from me.”

“Then he shall go. To-morrow I will send him orders to rejoin the service, and to proceed to Rome immediately. And,” he added in a kindly voice, “I can only congratulate your Imperial Highness upon your forethought. Leitolf is entirely without discretion. Only this evening I was actually told that he had followed you to Vienna, and — ”

But he stopped abruptly, without concluding his sentence. "And what else?" she asked, turning pale. Even the Minister knew; therefore Leitolf had evidently allowed himself to be seen.

"Shall I tell you, Princess?"

"Certainly; you need not keep anything from me."

"I was also told that he is staying at the Hotel Imperial, and that you had called upon him this afternoon." She started, and looked him straight in the face.

"Who told you that?" she demanded.

"I learned it from the report of the secret agents of the Ministry."

"Then I am spied upon here!" she exclaimed, pale with anger. "Even in my own home watch is kept upon me."

"Not upon your Imperial Highness," was the great Minister's calm reply, "but upon the man we have recently been discussing. It was, I venture to think, rather indiscreet of you to go to the hotel; although, of course, the knowledge of your visit is confidential, and goes no further than myself. It is a secret of the Ministry."

"Indiscreet!" she echoed with a sigh. "In this polluted atmosphere, to breathe freely is to be indiscreet. Because I am an Archduchess I am fettered as a prisoner, and watched like a criminal under surveillance. My enemies, jealous of my position and power, have invented scandalous stories that have aroused suspicion, and for that reason you all believe ill of me."

"Pardon me, Princess," said the crafty old man, bowing, "I, for one, do not. Your anxiety to rid yourself of the fellow is proof to me that the scandal is a pure invention, and I am only too pleased to render you this service. Your real enemies are those around your husband, who have hinted and lied regarding you in order to estrange you from Court."

"Then you are really my friend, Count?" she asked anxiously. "You do not believe what they say regarding me?"

"I do not, Princess," he replied frankly; "and I trust you will still regard me, as I hope I have ever been, your Imperial Highness's friend. I know full well how Leitolf craved your favour for recommendation to your King; and you, with a woman's blindness to the grave eventualities of the future, secured him the appointment. Of late you have, I suppose, realised the fatal mistake?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice; "I have now foreseen my own peril. I have been very foolish; but I have halted, and Leitolf must go."

"Very wise – very wise indeed! Your Imperial Highness cannot afford to run any further risk. In a few months, or a couple of years at most, the poor King's disease must prove fatal, and you will find yourself Queen of a brilliant kingdom. Once Queen, your position will be assured, and you will make short work of all those who have conspired to secure your downfall. You will, perhaps, require assistance. If so, rely upon me to render you in secret whatever help lies in my power. With you, a Hapsbourg, as Queen, the influence of Austria must be paramount, remember. Therefore I beg of your Imperial Highness to exercise the greatest discretion not to imperil yourself. The Crown Prince must be allowed no loophole through which he can openly quarrel with you. Remain patient and forbearing until you are Queen."

They were in a corner of the great hall, standing behind one of the high marble columns and unobserved.

"I am always patient, Count," was her rather sad response, her chest heaving beneath her chiffon. "As you well know, my marriage has not been a happy one; but I strive to do my duty to both the Court and the people. I make no denial to you. You doubtless know the truth – that when a girl I loved Count Leitolf, and that it was an act prompted by foolish sentimentalism to have connived at his appointment at my husband's own Court. Betrayed, perhaps, by my own actions, my enemies have seized upon my embarrassing situation to lie about me. Ah," she added bitterly, "how little they know of my own dire unhappiness!"

“No, no,” urged the Minister, seemingly full of sympathy for her, knowing the truth as he did. “Bear up; put a brave countenance always towards the world. When Leitolf has gone your Imperial Highness will have less embarrassment, and people cannot then place any misconstructions upon your actions. You will not have the foolish young man following you wherever you go, as he now does. At noon to-morrow I will sign the decree for his immediate appointment to Rome, and he will receive but little leave of absence, I can assure you. He will be as much a prisoner in the Palazzo Chigi as is his Holiness in the Vatican,” he added.

“Thank you,” she answered simply, glancing gratefully into his grey, deeply-lined face; and as he bowed to her she left him and swept up the room to where the Emperor was engaged in conversation with Lord Powerstock, the British Ambassador.

The old Minister’s face had changed the instant he left her. The mask of the courtier had fallen from the wily old countenance, and glancing after her, he muttered some words that were inaudible.

If she had but seen the evil smile that played about the old diplomatist’s lips, she would have detected that his intention was to play her false, and she might then have saved herself.

But, alas! in her ignorance she went on light-heartedly, her long train sweeping behind her, believing in De Lindenau’s well-feigned sympathy, and congratulating herself that the all-powerful personage behind the Emperor was still her friend.

The Minister saw that she was satisfied; then turning on his heel, he gave vent to a short, hard laugh of triumph.

Chapter Six

The House of her Enemies

Two days later the Crown Princess Claire returned to Marburg.

In the twilight the express from Vienna came to a standstill in the big, echoing station at Treysa, the bright and wealthy capital, and descending from her private saloon, she walked over the red carpet laid for her, bowing pleasantly to the line of bare-headed officials waiting to receive her; then, mounting into her open landau, she drove up the fine, tree-lined Klosterstrasse to the royal palace.

De Trauttenberg was with her – the woman whom she now knew to be a spy. Around her, on every side, the crowd at her side shouted a glad welcome to “their Claire,” as they called her, and just before the royal carriage could move off, two or three of the less timorous ones managed to seize her hand and kiss it, though the police unceremoniously pushed them away.

She smiled upon the enthusiastic crowd; but, alas! she was heavy of heart. How little, she thought, did those people who welcomed her dream of her unhappiness! She loved the people, and, looking upon them, sighed to think that she was not free like them.

Behind her clattered the hoofs of her cavalry escort, and beside the carriage were two agents of police on bicycles. Wherever she moved in her husband’s kingdom she was always under escort, because of anarchist threats and socialistic rumours.

Marburg was one of the most beautiful and wealthiest of the kingdoms and duchies comprised in the German Empire. The fine capital of Treysa was one of the show cities of Germany, always bright, gay, and brilliant, with splendid streets, wide, tree-lined promenades, a great opera house, numerous theatres, gay restaurants, and an ever-increasing commerce. Frequented much by English and Americans, there were fine hotels, delightful public gardens, and pleasant suburbs. In no other part of the Empire were the nobility so wealthy or so exclusive, and certainly no Court in Europe was so difficult of access as that of Marburg.

The kingdom, which possessed an area of nearly seven thousand square miles and a population of over fifteen millions, was rich in manufactures and in minerals, besides being a smiling country in a high state of cultivation, with beautiful mountainous and wooded districts, where in the valleys were situated many delightful summer resorts.

Through its length and breadth, and far beyond the frontiers, the name of the Crown Princess Claire was synonymous of all that was good and affable, generous to the poor, and ever interested in the welfare of the people.

The big electric globes were already shining white in the streets as she drove back to the beautiful royal palace that was, alas! to her a prison. Her few days of liberty in Vienna were over, and when presently, after traversing many great thoroughfares full of life and movement, the carriage swung out into a broader tree-lined avenue, at the end of which were the great gates of the royal gardens, her brave heart fell within her.

Beyond was the house of her enemies, the house in which she was compelled to live friendless, yet surrounded by those who were daily whispering of her overthrow.

The great gates swung open to allow the cavalcade to pass, then closed again with a clang that, reaching her ear, caused her to shudder.

The Countess noticed it, and asked whether she felt cold. To this she gave a negative reply, and still remained silent, until the carriage, passing up through the beautiful park, at last drew up before the magnificent palace.

Descending, she allowed the gorgeously-dressed man in the royal livery to take her cloak from her shoulders; and then, without a word, hastened along the great marble hall, up the grand staircase

and along corridor after corridor – those richly-carpeted corridors of her prison that she knew so well – to her own splendid suite of apartments.

The servants she met at every turn bowed to her, until she opened the door of a large, airy, well-furnished room, where a middle-aged woman, in cap and apron, sat reading by a shaded lamp.

In an instant, on recognising the newcomer, she sprang to her feet. But at the same moment the Princess rushed to the dainty little cot in the corner and sank down beside the sleeping curly-haired child – her child – the little Princess Ignatia.

So passionately did she kiss the sweet chubby little face of the sleeping child that she awoke, and recognising who it was, put out her little hands around her mother's neck.

"Ah, my little pet!" cried the Princess. "And how are you? It seems so long, so very long, since we parted." And her voice trembled, for tears stood in her eyes. The child was all she had in the world to love and cherish. She was her first thought always. The glare and glitter of the brilliant Court were all hateful to her, and she spent all the time she dared in the nursery with little Ignatia.

The English nurse, Allen, standing at her side, said, with that formality which was bound to be observed within those walls, —

"The Princess is in most excellent health, your Imperial Highness. I have carried out your Highness's instructions, and taken her each day for a walk in the park."

"That's right, Allen," responded the mother, also in English. "Where is the Crown Prince?"

"I have not seen him, your Highness, since you left. He has not been in to see Ignatia."

Claire sighed within herself, but made no outward sign. "Ah, I expect he has been away – to Berlin, perhaps. Is there any function to-night, have you heard?"

"A State ball, your Highness. At least they said so in the servants' hall."

The Princess glanced at the little silver timepiece, for she feared that her presence was imperative, even though she detested all such functions, where she knew she would meet that brilliant crowd of men and women, all of them her sworn enemies. What Steinbach had told her in confidence had lifted the scales from her eyes. There was a wide and cleverly-contrived conspiracy against her.

She took her fair-haired child in her arms, while Allen, with deft fingers, took off her hat and veil. Her maids were awaiting her in her own room, but she preferred to see Ignatia before it was too late to disturb the little one's sleep. With the pretty, blue-eyed little thing clinging around her neck, she paced the room with it, speaking, in German, as every fond mother will speak to the one she adores.

Though born to the purple, an Imperial Princess, Claire was very human after all. She regretted always that she was not as other women were, allowed to be her own mistress, and to see and to tend to her child's wants instead of being compelled so often to leave her in the hands of others, who, though excellent servants, were never as a mother.

She sent Allen upon a message to the other end of the palace in order to be alone with the child, and when the door closed she kissed its soft little face fondly again and again, and then burst into tears. Those Court sycophants were conspiring, to drive her away – perhaps even to part her from the only one for whom she entertained a spark of affection. Many of her enemies were women. Could any of them really know all that was meant by a mother's heart?

Prince Ferdinand-Leopold-Joseph-Marie, her husband, seldom, if ever, saw the child. For weeks he never mentioned its existence, and when he did it was generally with an oath, in regret that it was not a son and an heir to the throne.

In his paroxysms of anger he had cursed her and his little daughter, and declared openly that he hated the sight of them both. But she was ever patient. Seldom she responded to his taunts or his sarcasm, or resented his brutal treatment. She was philosophic enough to know that she had a heavy burden to bear, and for the sake of her position as future Queen of Marburg she must bear it bravely.

Allen was absent fully a quarter of an hour, during which time she spoke continually to little Ignatia, pacing up and down the room with her.

The child, seeing her mother's tears, stared at her with her big, wide-open eyes.

“Why does mother cry?” she asked in her childish voice, stroking her cheek.

“Because mother is not happy, darling,” was the Princess’s sad answer. “But,” she added, brightening up, “you are happy, aren’t you? Allen has bought you such a beautiful doll, she tells me.”

“Yes, mother,” the child answered. “And to-morrow, Allen promises, if I am very good, that we will go to buy a perambulator for my dolly to ride in. Won’t that be nice?”

“Oh, it will! But you must be very, very good – and never cry, like mother, will you?”

“No,” answered the little one. “I’ll never cry, like mother does.”

And the unhappy woman, hearing the child’s lisping words, swallowed the great lump that arose in her throat. It was surely pathetic, that admission of a heart-broken mother to her child. It showed that even though an Imperial Princess, she was still a womanly woman, just as any good woman of the people.

A few moments later Allen returned with the reply to the message she had sent to the aged King.

“His Majesty says that, though regretting your Imperial Highness is tired after her journey, yet your presence with the Crown Prince at the ball is imperative.” Claire sighed with a heavy heart, saying, —

“Very well, Allen. Then we will put Ignatia to bed, for I must go at once and dress,” and she passed her hand across her hot, wearied brow.

Again and again she kissed the child, and then, having put her back into her cot, over which was the royal crown of Marburg in gold, she bade the infant Princess good-night, and went along to eat a hasty dinner – for she was hungry after her eighteen-hour journey – and afterwards to put herself in the charge of her quick-handed maids, to prepare her for the brilliant function of that evening.

Two hours later, when she swept into the magnificent Throne Room, a brilliant, beautiful figure in her Court gown of cream, and wearing her wonderful tiara, her face was as stern and haughty as any of those members of the royal family present. With her long train rustling behind her, and with her orders and ribbons giving the necessary touch of colour to her bodice, she took up her position beside her husband, a fair-headed, round-faced, slight-moustached man, in a dark-blue uniform, and wearing a number of orders. His face was flat and expressionless.

Though they had not met for a week, no word of greeting escaped him. They stood side by side, as though they were strangers. He eyed her quickly, and his countenance turned slightly pale, as though displeased at her presence.

Yet the whole assembly, even though hating her, could not but admire her neat waist, her splendid figure, and matchless beauty. In the whole of the Courts of Europe there was no prettier woman than the Crown Princess Claire; her figure was perfect, and her gait always free – the gait of a princess. Even when dressed in her maid’s dresses, as she had done on occasion, her walk betrayed her. Imperial blood can seldom be disguised.

The hundred women, those German princesses, duchesses, countesses, baronesses, to each of whom attached their own particular scandal – the brilliant little world that circled around the throne – looked at her standing there with her husband, her hands clasped before her, and envied her looks, figure, position – everything. She was a marked woman.

The proud, haughty expression upon her face as she regarded the assembly was only assumed. It was the mask she was compelled to wear at Court at the old King’s command. Her nature was the reverse of haughty, yet the artificiality of palace life made it necessary for the Crown Princess to be as unapproachable as the Queen herself.

The guests were filing before the white-haired King, the hide-bound old martyr to etiquette, when the Crown Prince spoke to his wife in an undertone, saying roughly, with bitter sarcasm, —

“So you are back? Couldn’t stay away from us longer, I suppose?”

“I remained in Vienna as long as I said I should,” was the sweet-faced woman’s calm reply.

“A pity you didn’t stay there altogether,” he muttered. “You are neither use nor ornament here.”

“You have told me that several times before. Much as I regret it, Ferdinand, my place is here.”

“Yes, at my side – to annoy me,” he said, frowning.

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