

Orczy Emmuska Orczy Baroness

Petticoat Rule



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Orczy Emmuska Orczy, Baroness Petticoat Rule

PART I THE GIRL

CHAPTER I A FAREWELL BANQUET

"D'Aumont!"

"Eh? d'Aumont!"

The voice, that of a man still in the prime of life, but already raucous in its tone, thickened through constant mirthless laughter, rendered querulous too from long vigils kept at the shrine of pleasure, rose above the incessant babel of women's chatter, the din of silver, china and glasses passing to and fro.

"Your commands, sire?"

M. le Duc d'Aumont, Marshal of France, prime and sole responsible Minister of Louis the Well-beloved, leant slightly forward, with elbows resting on the table, and delicate hands, with fingers interlaced, white and carefully tended as those of a pretty woman, supporting his round and somewhat fleshy chin.

A handsome man M. le Duc, still on the right side of fifty, courtly and pleasant-mannered to all. Has not Boucher immortalized the good-natured, rather weak face, with that perpetual smile of unruffled amiability forever lurking round the corners of the full-lipped mouth?

"Your commands, sire?"

His eyes – gray and prominent – roamed with a rapid movement of enquiry from the face of the king to that of a young man with fair, curly hair, worn free from powder, and eyes restless and blue, which stared moodily into a goblet full of wine.

There was a momentary silence in the vast and magnificent dining hall, that sudden hush which – so the superstitious aver – descends three times on every assembly, however gay, however brilliant or thoughtless: the hush which to the imaginative mind suggests the flutter of unseen wings.

Then the silence was broken by loud laughter from the King.

"They are mad, these English, my friend! What?" said Louis the Well-beloved with a knowing wink directed at the fair-haired young man who sat not far from him.

"Mad, indeed, sire?" replied the Duke. "But surely not more conspicuously so to-night than at any other time?"

"Of a truth, a hundred thousand times more so," here interposed a somewhat shrill feminine voice – "and that by the most rigid rules of brain-splitting arithmetic!"

Everyone listened. Conversations were interrupted; glasses were put down; eager, attentive faces turned toward the speaker; this was no less a personage than Jeanne Poisson now Marquise de Pompadour; and when she opened her pretty mouth Louis the Well-beloved, descendant of Saint Louis, King of France and of all her dominions beyond the seas, hung breathless upon those well-rouged lips, whilst France sat silent and listened, eager for a share of that smile which enslaved a King and ruined a nation.

"Let us have that rigid rule of arithmetic, fair one," said Louis gaily, "by which you can demonstrate to us that M. le Chevalier here is a hundred thousand times more mad than any of his accursed countrymen."

"Nay, sire, 'tis simple enough," rejoined the lady. "M. le Chevalier hath need of a hundred thousand others in order to make his insanity complete, a hundred thousand Englishmen as mad as April fishes, to help him conquer a kingdom of rain and fogs. Therefore I say he is a hundred thousand times more mad than most!"

Loud laughter greeted this sally. Mme. la Marquise de Pompadour, so little while ago simply Jeanne Poisson or Mme. d'Étioles, was not yet *blasée* to so much adulation and such fulsome flattery; she looked a veritable heaven of angelic smiles; her eyes blue – so her dithyrambic chroniclers aver – as the dark-toned myosotis, wandered from face to face along the length of that gorgeously spread supper table, round which was congregated the flower of the old aristocracy of France.

She gleaned an admiring glance here, an unspoken murmur of flattery there, even the women – and there were many – tried to look approvingly at her who ruled the King and France. One face alone remained inscrutable and almost severe, the face of a woman – a mere girl – with straight brow and low, square forehead, crowned with a wealth of soft brown hair, the rich tones of which peeped daringly through the conventional mist of powder.

Mme. de Pompadour's sunny smile disappeared momentarily when her eyes rested on this girl's face; a frown – oh! hardly that; but a shadow, shall we say? – marred the perfect purity of her brow. The next moment she had yielded her much-beringed hand to her royal worshipper's eager grasp and he was pressing a kiss on each rose-tipped finger, whilst she shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Brrr!" she said, with a mock shiver, "here is Mlle. d'Aumont frowning stern disapproval at me. Surely, Chevalier," she asked, turning to the young man beside her, "a comfortable armchair in your beautiful palace of St. Germain is worth a throne in mist-bound London?"

"Not when that throne is his by right," here interposed Mlle. d'Aumont quietly. "The palace of St. Germain is but a gift to the King of England, for which he owes gratitude to the King of France."

A quick blush now suffused the cheeks of the young man, who up to now had seemed quite unconscious of Mme. de Pompadour's sallies or of the hilarity directed against himself. He gave a rapid glance at Mlle. d'Aumont's haughty, somewhat imperious face and at the delicate mouth, round which an almost imperceptible curl of contempt seemed still to linger.

"La! Mademoiselle," rejoined the Marquise, with some acerbity, "do we not all hold gifts at the hands of the King of France?"

"We have no sovereignty of our own, Madame," replied the young girl drily.

"As for me," quoth King Louis, hastily interposing in this feminine passage of arms, "I drink to our gallant Chevalier de St. George, His Majesty King Charles Edward Stuart of England, Scotland, Wales, and of the whole of that fog-ridden kingdom. Success to your cause, Chevalier," he added, settling his fat body complacently in the cushions of his chair; and raising his glass, he nodded benignly toward the young Pretender.

"To King Charles Edward of England!" rejoined Mme. de Pompadour gaily.

And "To King Charles Edward of England!" went echoing all around the vast banqueting-hall.

"I thank you all," said the young man, whose sullen mood seemed in no way dissipated at these expressions of graciousness and friendship. "Success to my cause is assured if France will lend me the aid she promised."

"What right have you to doubt the word of France, Monseigneur?" retorted Mlle. d'Aumont earnestly.

"A truce! a truce! I entreat," here broke in King Louis with mock concern. "*Par Dieu*, this is a banquet and not a Council Chamber! Joy of my life," he added, turning eyes replete with admiration on the beautiful woman beside him, "do not allow politics to mar this pleasant entertainment. M. le Duc, you are our host, I pray you direct conversation into more pleasing channels."

Nothing loth, the brilliant company there present quickly resumed the irresponsible chatter which was far more to its liking than talk of thrones and doubtful causes. The flunkeys in gorgeous liveries made the round of the table, filling the crystal glasses with wine. The atmosphere was heavy with the fumes of past good cheer, and the scent of a thousand roses fading beneath the glare of innumerable wax-candles. An odour of perfume, of powder and cosmetics hovered in the air; the men's faces looked red and heated; on one or two heads the wig stood awry, whilst trembling fingers began fidgeting with the lace-cravats at the throat.

Charles Edward's restless blue eyes searched keenly and feverishly the faces around him; morose, gloomy, he was still reckoning in his mind how far he could trust these irresponsible pleasure-lovers, that descendant of the great Louis over there, fat of body and heavy of mind, lost to all sense of kingly dignity whilst squandering the nation's money on the whims and caprices of the ex-wife of a Parisian victualler, whom he had created Marquise de Pompadour.

These men who lived only for good cheer, for heady wines, games of dice and hazard, nights of debauch and illicit pleasures, what help would they be to him in the hour of need? What support in case of failure?

"What right have you to doubt the word of France?" was asked of him by one pair of proud lips – a woman's, only a girl's.

Charles Edward looked across the table at Mlle. d'Aumont. Like himself, she sat silent in the midst of the noisy throng, obviously lending a very inattentive ear to the whisperings of the handsome cavalier beside her.

Ah! if they were all like her, if she were a representative of the whole nation of France, the young adventurer would have gone to his hazardous expedition with a stauncher and a lighter heart. But, as matters stood, what could he expect? What had he got as a serious asset in this gamble for life and a throne? A few vague promises from that flabby, weak-kneed creature over there on whom the crown of Saint Louis sat so strangely and so ill; a few smiles from that frivolous and vain woman, who drained the very heart's blood of an impoverished nation to its last drop, in order to satisfy her costly whims or chase away the frowns of ennui from the brow of an effete monarch.

And what besides?

A farewell supper, ringing toasts, good wine, expensive food offered by M. le Duc d'Aumont, the Prime Minister of France – a thousand roses, now fading, which had cost a small fortune to coax into bloom; a handshake from his friends in France; a "God-speed" and "*Dieu vous garde*, Chevalier!" and a few words of stern encouragement from a girl.

With all that in hand, Chevalier St. George, go and conquer your kingdom beyond the sea!

CHAPTER II

THE RULERS OF FRANCE

Great activity reigned in the corridors and kitchens of the old château. M. le Chef – the only true rival the immortal Vatel ever had – in white cap and apron, calm and self-possessed as a field-marshal in the hour of victory, and surrounded by an army of scullions and wenches, was directing the operations of dishing-up – the crowning glory of his arduous labours. Pies and patties, haunches of venison, trout and carp from the Rhine were placed on gold and silver dishes and adorned with tasteful ornaments of truly architectural beauty and monumental proportions. These were then handed over to the footmen, who, resplendent in gorgeous liveries of scarlet and azure, hurried along the marble passages carrying the masterpieces of culinary art to the banqueting-hall beyond, whilst the butlers, more sedate and dignified in sober garb of puce or brown, stalked along in stately repose bearing the huge tankards and crystal jugs.

All of the best that the fine old Château d'Aumont could provide was being requisitioned to-night, since M. le Duc and Mlle. Lydie, his daughter, were giving a farewell banquet to Charles Edward Stuart by the grace of God – if not by the will of the people – King of Great Britain and Ireland and all her dependencies beyond the seas.

For him speeches were made, toasts drunk and glasses raised; for him the ducal veneries had been ransacked, the ducal cellars shorn of their most ancient possessions; for him M. le Chef had raged and stormed for five hours, had expended the sweat of his brow and the intricacies of his brain; for him the scullions' backs had smarted, the wenches' cheeks had glowed, all to do honour to the only rightful King of England about to quit the hospitable land of France in order to conquer that island kingdom which his grandfather had lost.

But in the noble *salle d'armes*, on the other hand, there reigned a pompous and dignified silence, in strange contrast to the bustle and agitation of the kitchens and the noise of loud voices and laughter that issued from the banqueting hall whenever a door was opened and quickly shut again.

Here perfumed candles flickered in massive candelabra, shedding dim circles of golden light on carved woodwork, marble floor, and dull-toned tapestries. The majestic lions of D'Aumont frowned stolidly from their high pedestals on this serene abode of peace and dignity, one foot resting on the gilded shield with the elaborate coat-of-arms blazoned thereon in scarlet and azure, the other poised aloft as if in solemn benediction.

M. Joseph, own body servant to M. le Duc, in magnificent D'Aumont livery, his cravat a marvel of costly simplicity, his elegant, well-turned calves – encased in fine silk stockings – stretched lazily before him, was sprawling on the brocade-covered divan in the centre of the room.

M. Bénédicte, equally resplendent in a garb of motley that recalled the heraldic colours of the Comte de Stainville, stood before him, not in an attitude of deference of course, but in one of easy friendship; whilst M. Achille – a blaze of scarlet and gold – was holding out an elegant silver snuff-box to M. Joseph, who, without any superfluous motion of his dignified person, condescended to take a pinch.

With arm and elbow held at a graceful angle, M. Joseph paused in the very act of conveying the snuff to his delicate nostrils. He seemed to think that the occasion called for a remark from himself, but evidently nothing very appropriate occurred to him for the moment, so after a few seconds of impressive silence he finally partook of the snuff, and then flicked off the grains of dust from his immaculate azure waistcoat with a lace-edged handkerchief.

"Where does your Marquis get his snuff?" he asked with an easy graciousness of manner.

"We get it direct from London," replied M. Achille sententiously. "I am personally acquainted with Mme. Véronique, who is cook to Mme. de la Beaume and the sweetheart of Jean Laurent, own

body-servant to General de Puisieux. The old General is Chief of Customs at Havre, so you see we pay no duty and get the best of snuff at a ridiculous price."

"Ah! that's lucky for you, my good Eglinton," said M. Bénédic, with a sigh. "Your Marquis is a good sort, and as he is not personally acquainted with Mme. Véronique, I doubt not but he pays full price for his snuff."

"One has to live, friend Stainville," quoth Achille solemnly – "and I am not a fool!"

"Exactly so; and with an English milor your life is an easy one, Monsieur."

"Comme-ci! comme-ça!" nodded Achille deprecatingly.

"Le petit Anglais is very rich?" suggested Bénédic.

"Boundlessly so!" quoth the other, with conscious pride.

"Now, if perchance you could see your way to introducing me to Mme. Véronique. Eh? I have to pay full price for my Count's snuff, and he will have none but the best; but if I could get Mme. Véronique's protection –"

Achille's manner immediately changed at this suggestion, made with becoming diffidence; he drew back a few steps as if to emphasize the distance which must of necessity lie between supplicant and patron. He took a pinch of snuff, he blew his nose with stately deliberation – all in order to keep the petitioner waiting on tenterhooks.

Finally he drew up his scarlet and gold shoulders until they almost touched his ears.

"It will be difficult, very, very difficult my good Stainville," he said at last, speaking in measured tones. "You see, Mme. Véronique is in a very delicate position; she has a great deal of influence of course, and it is not easy to obtain her protection. Still, I will see what I can do, and you can place your petition before her."

"Do not worry yourself, my good Eglinton," here interposed M. Bénédic with becoming hauteur. "I thought as you had asked me yesterday to use my influence with our Mlle. Mariette, the fiancée of Colonel Jauffroy's third footman, with regard to your nephew's advancement in his regiment, that perhaps – But no matter – no matter!" he added, with a deprecatory wave of the hand.

"You completely misunderstood me, my dear Stainville," broke in M. Achille, eagerly. "I said that the matter was difficult; I did not say that it was impossible. Mme. Véronique is beset with petitions, but you may rely on my friendship. I will obtain the necessary introduction for you if you, on the other hand, will bear my nephew's interests in mind."

"Say no more about it, my good Eglinton," said Bénédic, with easy condescension; "your nephew will get his promotion on the word of a Stainville."

Peace and amity being once more restored between the two friends, M. Joseph thought that he had now remained silent far longer than was compatible with his own importance.

"It is very difficult, of course, in our position," he said pompously, "to do justice to the many demands which are made on our influence and patronage. Take my own case, for instance – my Duke leaves all appointments in my hands. In the morning, whilst I shave him, I have but to mention a name to him in connection with any post under Government that happens to be vacant, and immediately the favoured one, thus named by me, receives attention, nearly always followed by a nomination."

"Hem! hem!" came very discreetly from the lips of M. Bénédic.

"You said?" queried Joseph, with a slight lifting of the right eyebrow.

"Oh! nothing – nothing! I pray you continue; the matter is vastly entertaining."

"At the present moment," continued M. Joseph, keeping a suspicious eye on the other man, "I am deeply worried by this proposal which comes from the Parliaments of Rennes and Paris."

"A new Ministry of Finance to be formed," quoth M. Achille. "We know all about it."

"With direct control of the nation's money and responsible to the Parliaments alone," assented Joseph. "The Parliaments! Bah!" he added in tones of supreme contempt, "*bourgeois* the lot of them!"

"Their demands are preposterous, so says my milor. 'Tis a marvel His Majesty has given his consent."

"I have advised my Duke not to listen to the rabble," said Joseph, as he readjusted the set of his cravat. "A Ministry responsible to the Parliaments! Ridiculous, I say!"

"I understand, though," here interposed M. Achille, "that the Parliaments, out of deference for His Majesty are willing that the King himself shall appoint this new Comptroller of Finance."

"The King, my good Eglinton," calmly retorted M. Joseph – "the King will leave this matter to us. You may take it from me that we shall appoint this new Minister, and an extremely pleasant post it will be. Comptroller of Finance! All the taxes to pass through the Minister's hands! Par Dieu! does it not open out a wide field for an ambitious man?"

"Hem! hem!" coughed M. Bénédicte again.

"You seem to be suffering from a cold, sir," said M. Joseph irritably.

"Not in the least," rejoined Bénédicte hastily – "a slight tickling in the throat. You were saying, M. Joseph, that you hoped this new appointment would fall within your sphere of influence."

"Nay! If you doubt me, my good Stainville – " And M. Joseph rose with slow and solemn majesty from the divan, where he had been reclining, and walking across the room with a measured step, he reached an *escritoire* whereon ink and pens, letters tied up in bundles, loose papers, and all the usual paraphernalia commonly found on the desk of a busy man. M. Joseph sat down at the table and rang a handbell.

The next moment a young footman entered, silent and deferential.

"Is any one in the ante-room, Paul?" asked Joseph.

"Yes, M. Joseph."

"How many?"

"About thirty persons."

"Go tell them, then, that M. Joseph is not receiving to-night. He is entertaining a circle of friends. Bring me all written petitions. I shall be visible in my dressing room to those who have a personal introduction at eleven o'clock to-morrow. You may go!"

Silently as he had entered, the young man bowed and withdrew.

M. Joseph wheeled round in his chair and turned to his friends with a look of becoming triumph.

"Thirty persons!" he remarked simply.

"All after this appointment?" queried Achille.

"Their representatives, you see," explained M. Joseph airily. "Oh! my ante-chamber is always full – You understand? I shave my Duke every morning; and every one, it seems to me, is wanting to control the finances of France."

"Might one inquire who is your special *protégé*?" asked the other.

"Time will show," came with cryptic vagueness from the lips of M. Joseph.

"Hem! hem!"

In addition to a slight tickling of the throat, M. Bénédicte seemed to be suffering from an affection of the left eye which caused him to wink with somewhat persistent emphasis:

"This is the third time you have made that remark, Stainville," said Joseph severely.

"I did not remark, my dear D'Aumont," rejoined Bénédicte pleasantly – "that is, I merely said 'Hem! hem!'"

"Even so, I heard you," said Joseph, with some acerbity; "and I would wish to know precisely what you meant when you said 'Hem! hem!' like that."

"I was thinking of Mlle. Lucienne," said Bénédicte, with a sentimental sigh.

"Indeed!"

"Yes! I am one of her sweethearts – the fourth in point of favour. Mlle. Lucienne has your young lady's ear, my good D'Aumont, and we all know that your Duke governs the whole of France exactly as his daughter wishes him to do."

"And you hope through Mlle. Lucienne's influence to obtain the new post of Comptroller for your own Count?" asked M. Joseph, with assumed carelessness, as he drummed a devil's tattoo on the table before him.

A slight expression of fatuity crept into the countenance of M. Bénédict. He did not wish to irritate the great man; at the same time he felt confident in his own powers of blandishments where Mlle. Lucienne was concerned, even though he only stood fourth in point of favour in that influential lady's heart.

"Mlle. Lucienne has promised us her support," he said, with a complacent smile.

"I fear me that will be of little avail," here interposed M. Achille. "We have on our side, the influence of Mme. Auguste Baillon, who is housekeeper to M. le Docteur Dubois, consulting physician to Mlle. d'Aumont. M. le Docteur is very fond of haricots cooked in lard – a dish in the preparation of which Mme. Baillon excels – whilst, on the other hand, that lady's son is perruquier to my Eglinton. I think there is no doubt that ours is the stronger influence, and that if this Ministry of Finance comes into being, we shall be the Chief Comptroller."

"Oh, it will come into being, without any doubt," said Bénédict. "I have it from my cousin François, who is one of the sweethearts of Mlle. Duprez, confidential maid to Mme. Aremborg, the jeweller's wife, that the merchants of Paris and Lyons are not at all pleased with the amount of money which the King and Mme. de Pompadour are spending."

"Exactly! People of that sort are a veritable pestilence. They want us to pay some of the taxes – the *corvée* or the *taille*. As if a Duke or a Minister is going to pay taxes! Ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, I say," assented Achille, "though my Marquis says that in England even noblemen pay taxes."

"Then we'll not go to England, friend Eglinton. Imagine shaving a Duke or a Marquis who had paid taxes like a shopkeeper!"

A chorus of indignation from the three gentleman rose at the suggestion.

"Preposterous indeed!"

"We all know that England is a nation of shopkeepers. M. de Voltaire, who has been there, said so to us on his return."

M. Achille, in view of the fact that he represented the Marquis of Eglinton, commonly styled "le petit Anglais," was not quite sure whether his dignity demanded that he should resent this remark of M. de Voltaire's or not.

Fortunately he was saved from having to decide this delicate question immediately by the reëntry of Paul into the room.

The young footman was carrying a bundle of papers, which he respectfully presented to M. Joseph on a silver tray. The great man looked at Paul somewhat puzzled, rubbed his chin, and contemplated the papers with a thoughtful eye.

"What are these?" he asked.

"The petitions, M. Joseph," replied the young man.

"Oh! Ah, yes!" quoth the other airily. "Quite so; but – I have no time to read them now. You may glance through them, Paul, and let me know if any are worthy of my consideration."

M. Joseph was born in an epoch when reading was not considered an indispensable factor in a gentleman's education. Whether the petitions of the thirty aspirants to the new post of Comptroller of Finance would subsequently be read by M. Paul or not it were impossible to say; for the present he merely took up the papers again, saying quite respectfully:

"Yes, M. Joseph."

"Stay! you may take cards, dice, and two flagons of Bordeaux into my boudoir."

"Yes, M. Joseph."

"Have you dismissed every one from the ante-chamber?"

"All except an old man, who refuses to go."

"Who is he?"

"I do not know; he – "

Further explanation was interrupted by a timid voice issuing from the open door.

"I only desire five minutes' conversation with M. le Duc d'Aumont."

And a wizened little figure dressed in seedy black, with lean shanks encased in coarse woollen stockings, shuffled into the room. He seemed to be carrying a great number of papers and books under both arms, and as he stepped timidly forward some of these tumbled in a heap at his feet.

"Only five minutes' conversation with M. le Duc."

His eyes were very pale, and very watery, and his hair was of a pale straw colour. He stooped to pick up his papers, and dropped others in the process.

"M. le Duc is not visible," said M. Joseph majestically.

"Perhaps a little later – " suggested the lean individual.

"The Duke will not be visible later either."

"Then to-morrow perhaps; I can wait – I have plenty of time on my hands."

"You may have, but the Duke hasn't."

In the meanwhile the wizened little man had succeeded in once more collecting his papers together. With trembling eager hands he now selected a folded note, which evidently had suffered somewhat through frequent falls on dusty floors; this he held out toward M. Joseph.

"I have a letter to Monsieur le valet de chambre of the Duke," he said humbly.

"A letter of introduction? – to me?" queried Joseph, with a distinct change in his manner and tone. "From whom?"

"My daughter Agathe, who brings Monsieur's chocolate in to him every morning."

"Ah, you are Mlle. Agathe's father!" exclaimed Joseph with pleasant condescension, as he took the letter of introduction, and, without glancing at it, slipped it into the pocket of his magnificent coat. Perhaps a thought subsequently crossed his mind that the timorous person before him was not quite so simple-minded as his watery blue eyes suggested, and that the dusty and crumpled little note might be a daring fraud practised on his own influential personality, for he added with stern emphasis: "I will see Mlle. Agathe to-morrow, and will discuss your affair with her."

Then, as the little man did not wince under the suggestion, M. Joseph said more urbanely:

"By the way, what is your affair? These gentlemen" – and with a graceful gesture he indicated his two friends – "these gentlemen will pardon the liberty you are taking in discussing it before them."

"Thank you, Monsieur; thank you, gentlemen," said the wizened individual humbly; "it is a matter of – er – figures."

"Figures!"

"Yes! This new Ministry of Finance – there will be an auditor of accounts wanted – several auditors, I presume – and – and I thought – "

"Yes?" nodded M. Joseph graciously.

"My daughter does bring you in your chocolate nice and hot, M. Joseph, does she not? – and – and I do know a lot about figures. I studied mathematics with the late M. Descartes; I audited the books of the Société des Comptables of Lyons for several years; and – and I have diplomas and testimonials – "

And, carried away by another wave of anxiety, he began to fumble among his papers and books, which with irritating perversity immediately tumbled pell-mell on to the floor.

"What in the devil's name is the good of testimonials and diplomas to us, my good man?" said M. Joseph haughtily. "If, on giving the matter my serious consideration, I come to the conclusion that you will be a suitable accountant in the new Ministerial Department, *ma foi!* my good man, your affair is settled. No thanks, I pray!" he added, with a gracious flourish of the arm; "I have been pleased with Mlle. Agathe, and I may mention your name whilst I shave M. le Duc to-morrow. Er – by the way, what is your name?"

"Durand, if you please, M. Joseph."

The meagre little person with the watery blue eyes tried to express his gratitude by word and gesture, but his books and papers encumbered his movements, and he was rendered doubly nervous by the presence of these gorgeous and stately gentlemen, and by the wave of voices and laughter which suddenly rose from the distance, suggesting that perhaps a brilliant company might be coming this way.

The very thought seemed to completely terrify him; with both arms he hugged his various written treasures, and with many sideways bows and murmurs of thanks he finally succeeded in shuffling his lean figure out of the room, closely followed by M. Paul.

CHAPTER III

POMPADOUR'S CHOICE

M. Durand's retreat had fortunately occurred just in time; men's voices and women's laughter sounded more and more distinct, as if approaching toward the *salle d'armes*.

In a moment, with the swiftness born of long usage, the demeanour of the three gentlemen underwent a quick and sudden change. They seemed to pull their gorgeous figures together; with practised fingers each readjusted the lace of his cravat, reestablished the correct set of his waistcoat, and flickered the last grain of dust or snuff from the satin-like surface of his coat.

Ten seconds later the great doors at the east end of the hall were thrown open, and through the embrasure and beyond the intervening marble corridor could be seen the brilliantly lighted supper-room, with its glittering company broken up into groups.

Silent, swift and deferential, MM. Joseph, Bénédic, and Achille glided on flat-heeled shoes along the slippery floors, making as little noise as possible, effacing their gorgeous persons in window recesses or carved ornaments whenever a knot of gentlemen or ladies happened to pass by.

Quite a different trio now, MM. Joseph, Bénédic, and Achille – just three automatons intent on their duties.

From the supper-room there came an incessant buzz of talk and laughter. M. Joseph sought his master's eye, but M. le Duc was busy with the King of England and wanted no service; M. Achille found his English milord, "le petit Anglais," engaged in conversation with his portly and somewhat overdressed mamma; whilst M. Bénédic's master was nowhere to be found.

The older ladies were beginning to look wearied and hot, smothering yawns behind their painted fans. Paniers assumed a tired and crumpled appearance, and feathered aigrettes nodded dismally above the high coiffures.

Not a few of the guests had taken the opportunity of bringing cards or dice from a silken pocket, whilst others in smaller groups, younger and not yet wearied of desultory talk, strolled toward the *salle d'armes* or the smaller boudoirs which opened out of the corridor.

One or two gentlemen had succumbed to M. le Duc's lavish hospitality; the many toasts had proved too exacting, the copious draughts altogether too heady, and they had, somewhat involuntarily, exchanged their chairs for the more reliable solidity of the floor, where their faithful attendants, stationed under the table for the purpose, deftly untied a cravat which might be too tight or administered such cooling antidotes as might be desirable.

The hot air vibrated with the constant babel of voices, the frou-frou of silk paniers, and brocaded skirts, mingled with the clink of swords and the rattle of dice in satinwood boxes.

The atmosphere, surcharged with perfumes, had become overpoweringly close.

His Majesty, flushed with wine, and with drowsy lids drooping over his dulled eyes, had pushed his chair away from the table and was lounging lazily toward Mme. de Pompadour, his idle fingers toying with the jewelled girdle of her fan. She amused him; she had quaint sayings which were sometimes witty, always daring, but which succeeded in dissipating momentarily that mortal ennui of which he suffered.

Even now her whispered conversation, interspersed with profuse giggles, brought an occasional smile to the lips of the sleepy monarch. She chatted and laughed, flirting her fan, humouring the effeminate creature beside her by yielding her hand and wrist to his flabby kisses. But her eyes did not rest on him for many seconds at a time; she talked to Louis, but her mind had gone a-wandering about the room trying to read thoughts, to search motives or divine hidden hatreds and envy as they concerned herself.

This glitter was still new to her; the power which she wielded seemed as yet a brittle toy which a hasty movement might suddenly break. It was but a very little while ago that she had been an

insignificant unit in a third-rate social circle of Paris – always beautiful, but lost in the midst of a drabby crowd, her charms, like those of a precious stone, unperceived for want of proper setting. Her ambition was smothered in her heart, which at times it almost threatened to consume. But it was always there, ever since she had learnt to understand the power which beauty gives.

An approving smile from the King of France, and the world wore a different aspect for Jeanne Poisson. Her whims and caprices became the reins with which she drove France and the King. Why place a limit to her own desires, since the mightiest monarch in Europe was ready to gratify them?

Money became her god.

Spend! spend! spend! Why not? The nation, the bourgeoisie – of which she had once been that little insignificant unit – was now the well-spring whence she drew the means of satisfying her ever-increasing lust for splendour.

Jewels, dresses, palaces, gardens – all and everything that was rich, beautiful, costly, she longed for it all!

Pictures and statuary; music, and of the best; constant noise around her, gaiety, festivities, laughter; the wit of France and the science of the world all had been her helpmeets these past two years in this wild chase after pleasure, this constant desire to kill her Royal patron's incurable ennui.

Two years, and already the nation grumbled! A check was to be put on her extravagance – hers and that of King Louis! The parliaments demanded that some control be exercised over Royal munificence. Fewer jewels for Madame! And that palace at Fontainebleau not yet completed, the Parc aux Cerfs so magnificently planned and not even begun! Would the new Comptroller put a check on that?

At first she marvelled that Louis should consent. It was a humiliation for him as well as for her. The weakness in him which had served her own ends seemed monstrous when it yielded to pressure from others.

He had assured her that she should not suffer; jewels, palaces, gardens, she should have all as heretofore. Let Parliament insist and grumble, but the Comptroller would be appointed by D'Aumont, and D'Aumont was her slave.

D'Aumont, yes! but not his daughter – that arrogant girl with the severe eyes, unwomanly and dictatorial, who ruled her father just as she herself, Pompadour, ruled the King.

An enemy, that Lydie d'Aumont! Mme. la Marquise, whilst framing a witticism at which the King smiled, frowned because in a distant alcove she spied the haughty figure of Lydie.

And there were others! The friends of the Queen and her clique, of course; they were not here to-night; at least not in great numbers; still, even the present brilliant company, though smiling and obsequious in the presence of the King, was not by any means a close phalanx of friends.

M. d'Argenson, for instance – he was an avowed enemy; and Marshal de Noailles, too – oh! and there were others.

One of them, fortunately, was going away; Charles Edward Stuart, aspiring King of England; he had been no friend of Pompadour. Even now, as he stood close by, lending an obviously inattentive ear to M. le Duc d'Aumont, she could see that he still looked gloomy and out of humour, and that whenever his eyes rested upon her and the King he frowned with wrathful impatience.

"You are distraite, ma mie!" said Louis, with a yawn.

"I was thinking, sire," she replied, smiling into his drowsy eyes.

"For God's sake, I entreat, do not think!" exclaimed the King, with mock alarm. "Thought produces wrinkles, and your perfect mouth was only fashioned for smiles."

"May I frame a suggestion?" she queried archly.

"No, only a command."

"This Comptroller of Finance, your future master, Louis, and mine – "

"Your slave," he interrupted lazily, "and he values his life."

"Why not milor Eglington?"

"Le petit Anglais?" and Louis's fat body was shaken with sudden immoderate laughter. "Par Dieu, ma mie! Of all your witty sallies this one hath pleased us most."

"Why?" she asked seriously.

"Le petit Anglais!" again laughed the King. "I'd as soon give the appointment to your lapdog, Marquise. Fido would have as much capacity for the post as the ornamental cypher that hangs on his mother's skirts."

"Milor Eglinton is very rich," she mused.

"Inordinately so, curse him! I could do with half his revenue and be a satisfied man."

"Being a cypher he would not trouble us much; being very rich he would need no bribe for doing as we wish."

"His lady mother would trouble us, ma mie."

"Bah! we would find him a wife."

"Nay! I entreat you do not worry your dainty head with these matters," said the King, somewhat irritably. "The appointment rests with D'Aumont; an you desire the post for your protégé, turn your bright eyes on the Duke."

Pompadour would have wished to pursue the subject, to get something of a promise from Louis, to turn his inveterate weakness then and there to her own account, but Louis the Well-beloved yawned, a calamity which the fair lady dared not risk again. Witty and brilliant, forever gay and unfatigued, she knew that her power over the monarch would only last whilst she could amuse him.

Therefore now with swift transition she turned the conversation to more piquant channels. An anecdote at the expense of the old Duchesse de Pontchartrain brought life once more into the eyes of the King. She was once more untiring in her efforts, her cheeks glowed even through the powder and the rouge, her lips smiled without intermission, but her thoughts drifted back to the root idea, the burden of that control to be imposed on her caprices.

She would not have minded Milor Eglinton, the courteous, amiable gentleman, who had no will save that expressed by any woman who happened to catch his ear. She felt that she could, with but very little trouble, twist him round her little finger. His dictatorial mamma would either have to be got out of the way, or won over to Mme. la Marquise's own views of life, whilst Milor could remain a bachelor, lest another feminine influence prove antagonistic.

Pompadour's bright eyes, whilst she chatted to the King, sought amidst the glittering throng the slim figure of "le petit Anglais."

Yes, he would suit her purpose admirably! She could see his handsome profile clearly outlined against the delicate tones of the wall; handsome, yes! clear-cut and firm, with straight nose and the low, square brow of the Anglo-Saxon race, but obviously weak and yielding; a perfect tool in the hands of a clever woman.

Elegant too, always immaculately, nay daintily dressed, he wore with that somewhat stiff grace peculiar to the English gentleman the showy and effeminate costume of the time. But there was weakness expressed in his very attitude as he stood now talking to Charles Edward Stuart: the kindly, pleasant expression of his good-looking face in strange contrast to the glowering moodiness of his princely friend.

One Lord Eglinton had followed the deposed James II into exile. His son had risked life and fortune for the restoration of the old Pretender, and having managed by sheer good luck to save both, he felt that he had done more than enough for a cause which he knew was doomed to disaster. But he hated the thought of a German monarch in England, and in his turn preferred exile to serving a foreigner for whom he had scant sympathy.

Immensely wealthy, a brilliant conversationalist, a perfect gentleman, he soon won the heart of one of the daughters of France. Mlle. de Maille brought him, in addition to her own elaborate trousseau and a dowry of three thousand francs yearly pin-money, the historic and gorgeous chateau of Beaufort which Lord Eglinton's fortune rescued from the hands of the bailiffs.

Vaguely he thought that some day he would return to his own ancestral home in Sussex, when England would have become English once again; in the meanwhile he was content to drift on the placid waters of life, his luxurious craft guided by the domineering hand of his wife. Independent owing to his nationality and his wealth, a friend alike of the King of France and the Stuart Pretender, he neither took up arms in any cause, nor sides in any political intrigue.

Lady Eglinton brought up her son in affluence and luxury, but detached from all partisanship. Her strong personality imposed something of her own national characteristics on the boy, but she could not break the friendship that existed between the royal Stuarts and her husband's family. Although Charles Edward was her son's playmate in the gardens and castle of Beaufort, she nevertheless succeeded in instilling into the latter a slight measure of disdain for the hazardous attempts at snatching the English crown which invariably resulted in the betrayal of friends, the wholesale slaughter of adherents, and the ignominious flight of the Pretender.

No doubt it was this dual nationality in the present Lord Eglinton, this detachment from political conflicts, that was the real cause of that inherent weakness of character which Mme. de Pompadour now wished to use for her own ends. She was glad, therefore, to note that whilst Charles Edward talked earnestly to him, the eyes of "le petit Anglais" roamed restlessly about the room, as if seeking for support in an argument, or help from a personality stronger than his own.

Lady Eglinton's voice, harsh and domineering, often rose above the general hum of talk. Just now she had succeeded in engaging the Prime Minister in serious conversation.

The King in the meanwhile had quietly dropped asleep, lulled by the even ripple of talk of the beautiful Marquise and the heavily scented atmosphere of the room. Pompadour rose from her chair as noiselessly as her stiff brocaded skirt would allow; she crossed the room and joined Lady Eglinton and M. le Duc d'Aumont.

She was going to take King Louis's advice and add the weighty influence of her own bright eyes to that of my lady's voluble talk in favour of the appointment of Lord Eglinton to the newly created Ministry of Finance.

CHAPTER IV

A WOMAN'S SURRENDER

In a small alcove, which was raised above the level of the rest of the floor by a couple of steps and divided from the main banqueting hall by a heavy damask curtain now partially drawn aside, Mlle. d'Aumont sat in close conversation with M. le Comte de Stainville.

From this secluded spot these two dominated the entire length and breadth of the room; the dazzling scene was displayed before them in a gorgeous kaleidoscope of moving figures, in an ever-developing panorama of vividly coloured groups, that came and went, divided and reunited; now forming soft harmonies of delicate tones that suggested the subtle blending on the palette of a master, anon throwing on to the canvas daring patches of rich magentas or deep purples, that set off with cunning artfulness the masses of pale primrose and gold.

Gaston de Stainville, however, did not seem impressed with the picturesqueness of the scene. He sat with his broad back turned toward the brilliant company, one elbow propped on a small table beside him, his hand shielding his face against the glare of the candles. But Lydie d'Aumont's searching eyes roamed ceaselessly over the gaily plumaged birds that fluttered uninterruptedly before her gaze.

With one delicate hand holding back the rich damask curtain, the other lying idly in her lap, her white brocaded gown standing out in stiff folds round her girlish figure, she was a picture well worth looking at.

Lydie was scarcely twenty-one then, but already there was a certain something in the poise of her head, in every movement of her graceful body, that suggested the woman accustomed to dominate, the woman of thought and action, rather than of sentiment and tender emotions.

Those of her own sex said at that time that in Lydie's haughty eyes there was the look of the girl who has been deprived early in life of a mother's gentle influence, and who has never felt the gentle yet firm curb of a mother's authority on her childish whims and caprices.

M. le Duc d'Aumont, who had lost his young wife after five years of an exceptionally happy married life, had lavished all the affection of his mature years on the girl, who was the sole representative of his name. The child had always been headstrong and self-willed from the cradle; her nurses could not cope with her babyish tempers; her governesses dreaded her domineering ways. M. le Duc was deaf to all complaints; he would not have the child thwarted, and as she grew up lovable in the main, she found her father's subordinates ready enough to bend to her yoke.

From the age of ten she had been the acknowledged queen of all her playmates, and the autocrat of her father's house. Little by little she obtained an extraordinary ascendancy over the fond parent, who admired almost as much as he loved her.

He was deeply touched when, scarce out of the school room, she tried to help him in the composition of his letters, and more than astonished to see how quick was her intelligence and how sharp her intuition. Instinctively, at first he took to explaining to her the various political questions of the day, listening with paternal good-humour, to her acute and sensitive remarks on several important questions.

Then gradually his confidence in her widened. Many chroniclers aver that it was Lydie d'Aumont who wrote her father's celebrated memoirs, and those who at that time had the privilege of knowing her intimately could easily trace her influence in most of her father's political moves. There is no doubt that the Duc himself, when he finally became Prime Minister of France, did very little without consulting his daughter, and even l'Abbé d'Alivet, in his "Chroniques de Louis XV," admits that the hot partisanship of France for the Young Pretender's ill-conceived expeditions was mainly due to Mlle. d'Aumont's influence.

When Vanloo painted her a little later on, he rendered with consummate and delicate skill the haughty look of command which many of Lydie's most ardent admirers felt to be a blemish on the exquisite purity and charm of her face.

The artist, too, emphasized the depth and earnestness of her dark eyes, and that somewhat too severe and self-reliant expression which marked the straight young brow.

Perhaps it was this same masterful trait in the dainty form before him that Gaston de Stainville studied so attentively just now; there had been silence for some time between the elegant cavalier and the idolized daughter of the Prime Minister of France. She seemed restless and anxious, even absent-minded, when he spoke. She was studying the various groups of men and women as they passed, frowning when she looked on some faces, smiling abstractedly when she encountered a pair of friendly eyes.

"I did not know that you were such a partisan of that young adventurer," said Gaston de Stainville at last, as if in answer to her thoughts, noting that her gaze now rested with stern intentness on Charles Edward Stuart.

"I must be on the side of a just cause," she rejoined quietly, as with a very characteristic movement of hers she turned her head slowly round and looked M. de Stainville full in the face.

She could not see him very well, for his head was silhouetted against the dazzling light beyond, and she frowned a little as she tried to distinguish his features more clearly in the shadow.

"You do believe, Gaston, that his cause is just?" she asked earnestly.

"Oh!" he replied lightly; "I'll believe in the justice of any cause to which you give your support."

She shrugged her shoulders, whilst a slightly contemptuous curl appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"How like a man!" she said impatiently.

"What is like a man?" he retorted. "To love – as I love you?"

He had whispered this, hardly above his breath lest he should be overheard by some one in that gay and giddy throng who passed laughingly by. The stern expression in her eyes softened a little as they met his eager gaze, but the good-humoured contempt was still apparent, even in her smile; she saw that as he spoke he looked through the outspread fingers of his hand to see if he was being watched, and noted that one pair of eyes, distant the whole length of the room, caught the movement, then was instantly averted.

"Mlle. de Saint Romans is watching you," she said quietly.

He seemed surprised and not a little vexed that she had noticed, and for a moment looked confused; then he said carelessly:

"Why should she not? Why should not the whole world look on, and see that I adore you?"

"Meseems you protest over-much, Gaston," she said, with a sigh.

"Impossible!"

"You talk of love too lightly."

"I am in earnest, Lydie. Why should you doubt? Are you not beautiful enough to satisfy any man's ardour?"

"Am I not influential enough, you mean," she said, with a slight tremor in her rich young voice, "to satisfy any man's ambition?"

"Is ambition a crime in your eyes, Lydie?"

"No; but –"

"I am ambitious; you cannot condemn me for that," he said, now speaking in more impressive tone. "When we were playmates together, years ago, you remember? in the gardens at Cluny, if other lads were there, was I not always eager to be first in the race, first in the field – first always, everywhere?"

"Even at the cost of sorrow and humiliation to the weaker ones."

He shrugged his shoulders with easy unconcern.

"There is no success in life for the strong," he said, "save at the cost of sorrow and humiliation for the weak. Lydie," he added more earnestly, "if I am ambitious it is because my love for you has made me humble. I do not feel that as I am, I am worthy of you; I want to be rich, to be influential, to be great. Is that wrong? I want your pride in me, almost as much as your love."

"You were rich once, Gaston," she said, a little coldly. "Your father was rich."

"Is it my fault if I am poor now?"

"They tell me it is; they say that you are over-fond of cards, and of other pleasures which are less avowable."

"And you believe them?"

"I hardly know," she whispered.

"You have ceased to love me, then?"

"Gaston!"

There was a tone of tender reproach there, which the young man was swift enough to note; the beautiful face before him was in full light; he could see well that a rosy blush had chased away the usual matt pallor of her cheeks, and that the full red lips trembled a little now, whilst the severe expression of the eyes was veiled in delicate moisture.

"Your face has betrayed you, Lydie!" he said, with sudden vehemence, though his voice even now hardly rose above a whisper. "If you have not forgotten your promises made to me at Cluny – in the shadow of those beech trees, do you remember? You were only thirteen – a mere child – yet already a woman, the soft breath of spring fanned your glowing cheeks, your loose hair blew about your face, framing your proud little head in a halo of gold – you remember, Lydie?"

"I have not forgotten," she said gently.

"Your hand was in mine – a child's hand, Lydie, but yours for all that – and you promised – you remember? And if you have not forgotten – if you do love me, not, Heaven help me! as I love you, but only just a little better than any one else in the world; well, then, Lydie, why these bickerings, why these reproaches? I am poor now, but soon I will be rich! I have no power, but soon I will rule France, with you to help me if you will!"

He had grown more and more vehement as he spoke, carried along by the torrent of his own eloquence. But he had not moved; he still sat with his back to the company, and his face shaded by his hand; his voice was still low, impressive in its ardour. Then, as the young girl's graceful head drooped beneath the passionate expression of his gaze, bending, as it were, to the intensity of his earnest will, his eyes flashed a look of triumph, a premonition of victory close at hand. Lydie's strong personality was momentarily weakened by the fatigue of a long and arduous evening, by the heavy atmosphere of the room; her senses were dulled by the penetrating odours of wine and perfumes which fought with those of cosmetics.

She seemed to be yielding to the softer emotions, less watchful of her own dignity, less jealous of her own power. The young man felt that at this moment he held her just as he wished; did he stretch out his hand she would place hers in it. The recollections of her childhood had smothered all thoughts of present conflicts and of political intrigues. Mlle. d'Aumont, the influential daughter of an all-powerful Minister, had momentarily disappeared, giving way to madcap little Lydie, with short skirts and flying chestnut curls, the comrade of the handsome boy in the old gardens at Cluny.

"Lydie, if you loved me!" whispered Stainville.

"If I loved you!" and there was a world of pathos in that girlish "if."

"You would help me instead of reproaching."

"What do you want me to do, Gaston?"

"Your word is law with your father," he said persuasively. "He denies you nothing. You said I was ambitious; one word from you – this new Ministry –"

He realized his danger, bit his lip lest he had been too precipitate. Lydie was headstrong, she was also very shrewd; the master-mind that guided the destinies of France through the weak indulgence

of a father was not likely to be caught in a snare like any love-sick maid. Her woman's instinct – he knew that – was keen to detect self-interest; and if he aroused the suspicions of the wealthy and influential woman before he had wholly subjugated her heart, he knew that he would lose the biggest stake of his life.

Lately she had held aloof from him, the playmates had become somewhat estranged; the echoes of his reckless life must, he thought, have reached her ears, and he himself had not been over-eager for the companionship of this woman, who seemed to have thrown off all the light-heartedness of her sex for the sake of a life of activity and domination.

She was known to be cold and unapproachable, rigidly conscientious in transacting the business of the State, which her father with easy carelessness gradually left on her young shoulders, since she seemed to find pleasure in it.

But her influence, of which she was fully conscious, had rendered her suspicious. Even now, when the call of her youth, of her beauty, of the happy and tender recollections of her childhood loudly demanded to be heard, she cast a swift, inquiring glance at Gaston.

He caught the glance, and, with an involuntary movement of impatience, his hand, which up to now had so carefully masked the expression of his face, came crashing down upon the table.

"Lydie," he said impetuously, "in the name of God throw aside your armour for one moment! Is life so long that you can afford to waste it? Have you learned the secret of perpetual youth that you deliberately fritter away its golden moments in order to rush after the Dead Sea fruit of domination and power? Lydie!" he whispered with passionate tenderness; "my little Lydie of the crisp chestnut hair, of the fragrant woods around Cluny, leave those giddy heights of ambition; come down to earth, where my arms await you! I will tell you of things, my little Lydie, which are far more beautiful, far more desirable, than the sceptre and kingdom of France; and when I press you close to my heart you will taste a joy far sweeter than that which a crown of glory can give. Will you not listen to me, Lydie? Will you not share with me that joy which renders men the equal of God?"

His hand had wandered up the damask curtain, gently drawing its heavy folds from out her clinging fingers. The rich brocade fell behind him with a soft and lingering sound like the murmured "Hush – sh – sh!" of angels' wings shutting out the noise and glare beyond, isolating them both from the world and its conflicts, its passions, and its ceaseless strife.

Secure from prying eyes, Gaston de Stainville threw all reserve from him with a laugh of pride and of joy. Half kneeling, wholly leaning toward her, his arms encircled her young figure, almost pathetic now in its sudden and complete abandonment. With his right hand he drew that imperious little head down until his lips had reached her ear.

"Would you have me otherwise, my beautiful proud queen?" he whispered softly. "Should I be worthy of the cleverest woman in France if my ambition and hopes were not at least as great as hers? Lydie," he added, looking straight into her eyes, "if you asked me for a kingdom in the moon, I swear to God that I would make a start in order to conquer it for you! Did you, from sheer caprice, ask to see my life's blood ebbing out of my body, I would thrust this dagger without hesitation into my heart."

"Hush! hush!" she said earnestly; "that is extravagant talk, Gaston. Do not desecrate love by such folly."

"'Tis not folly, Lydie. Give me your lips and you, too, will understand."

She closed her eyes. It was so strange to feel this great gladness in her heart, this abasement of all her being; she, who had so loved to dictate and to rule, she savoured the inexpressible delight of yielding.

He demanded a kiss and she gave it because he had asked it of her, shyly wondering in her own mind how she came to submit so easily, and why submission should be so sweet.

Up to now she had only tasted the delights of power; now she felt that if Gaston willed she would deem it joy to obey. There was infinite happiness, infinite peace in that kiss, the first her vestal lips had ever granted to any man. He was again whispering to her now with that same eager

impetuosity which had subjugated her. She was glad to listen, for he talked much of his love, of the beautiful days at Cluny, which she had feared that he had wholly forgotten.

It was sweet to think that he remembered them. During the past year or two when evil tongues spoke of him before her, of his recklessness, his dissipations, his servility to the growing influence of the Pompadour, she had not altogether believed, but her heart, faithful to the child-lover, had ached and rebelled against his growing neglect.

Now he was whispering explanations – not excuses, for he needed none, since he had always loved her and only jealousies and intrigues had kept him from her side. As he protested, she still did not altogether believe – oh, the folly of it all! the mad, glad folly! – but he said that with a kiss she would understand.

He was right. She did understand.

And he talked much of his ambitions. Was it not natural? Men were so different to women! He, proud of his love for her, was longing to show her his power, to rule and to command; she, half-shy of her love for him, felt her pride in submitting to his wish, in laying down at his feet the crown and sceptre of domination which she had wielded up to now with so proud and secure a hand.

Men were so different. That, too, she understood with the first touch of a man's kiss on her lips.

She chided herself for her mistrust of him; was it not natural that he should wish to rule? How proud was she now that her last act of absolute power should be the satisfaction of his desire.

That new Ministry? Well, he should have it as he wished. One word from her, and her father would grant it. Her husband must be the most powerful man in France; she would make him that, since she could: and then pillow her head on his breast and forget that she ever had other ambitions save to see him great.

Smiling through her tears, she begged his forgiveness for her mistrust of him, her doubts of the true worth of his love.

"It was because I knew so little," she said shyly as her trembling fingers toyed nervously with the lace of his cravat; "no man has ever loved me, Gaston – you understand? There were flatterers round me and sycophants – but love –"

She shook her head with a kind of joyous sadness for the past. It was so much better to be totally ignorant of love, and then to learn it – like this!

Then she became grave again.

"My father shall arrange everything this evening," she said, with a proud toss of her head. "To-morrow you may command, but to-night you shall remain a suppliant; grant me, I pray you, this fond little gratification of my overburdened vanity. Ask me again to grant your request, to be the means of satisfying your ambition. Put it into words, Gaston, tell me what it is you want!" she insisted, with a pretty touch of obstinacy; "it is my whim, and remember I am still the arbiter of your fate."

"On my knees, my queen," he said, curbing his impatience at her childish caprice; and, striving to hide the note of triumph in his voice, he put both knees to the ground and bent his head in supplication. "I crave of your bountiful graciousness to accord me the power to rule France by virtue of my office as Chief Comptroller of her revenues."

"Your desire is granted, sir," she said with a final assumption of pride; "the last favour I shall have the power to bestow I now confer on you. To-morrow I abdicate," she continued, with a strange little sigh, half-tearful, half-joyous, "to-morrow I shall own a master. M. le Comte de Stainville, Minister of the Exchequer of France, behold your slave, Lydie, bought this night with the priceless currency of your love! Oh, Gaston, my lord, my husband!" she said, with a sudden uncontrollable outburst of tears, "be a kind master to your slave – she gives up so much for your dear sake!"

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST TRICK

A shrill laugh suddenly broke on their ears. So absorbed had Lydie been in her dream that she had completely forgotten the other world, the one that laughed and talked, that fought and bickered on the other side of the damask curtain which was the boundary of her own universe.

Gaston de Stainville, we may assume, was not quite so unprepared for interruption as the young girl, for even before the shrill laugh had expended itself, he was already on his feet, and had drawn the damask curtain back again, interposing the while his broad figure between Lydie d'Aumont and the unwelcome intruder on their privacy.

"Ah! at last you are tracked to earth, *mauvais sujet*," said Mme. de Pompadour, as soon as the Comte de Stainville stood fully revealed before her. "Faith! I have had a severe task. His Majesty demanded your presence a while ago, sir, and hath gone to sleep in the interval of waiting. Nay! nay! you need make neither haste nor excuses. The King sleeps, Monsieur, else I were not here to remind you of duty."

She stood at the bottom of the steps looking up with keen, malicious eyes at Gaston's figure framed in the opening of the alcove, and peering inquisitively into the sombre recesses, wherein already she had caught a glimpse of a white satin skirt and the scintillation of many diamonds.

"What say you, milady?" she added, turning to the florid, somewhat over-dressed woman who stood by her side. "Shall we listen to the excuses M. de Stainville seems anxious to make; meseems they are clad in white satin and show a remarkably well-turned ankle."

But before Lady Eglinton could frame a reply, Lydie d'Aumont had risen, and placing her hand on Stainville's shoulder, she thrust him gently aside and now stood smiling beside him, perfectly self-possessed, a trifle haughty, looking down on Jeanne de Pompadour's pert face and on the older lady's obviously ill-humoured countenance.

"Nay, Mme. la Marquise," she said, in her own quiet way, "M. le Comte de Stainville's only excuse for his neglect of courtly duties stands before you now."

"*Ma foi*, Mademoiselle!" retorted the Marquise somewhat testily. "His Majesty, being over-gallant, would perhaps be ready enough to accept it, and so, no doubt, would the guests of M. le Duc, your father – always excepting Mlle. de St. Romans," she added, with more than a point of malice, "and she is not like to prove indulgent."

But Lydie was far too proud, far too conscious also of her own worth, to heed the petty pinpricks which the ladies of the Court of Louis XV were wont to deal so lavishly to one another. She knew quite well that Gaston's name had oft been coupled with that of Mlle. de St. Romans – "*la belle brune de Bordeaux*," as she was universally called – daughter of the gallant Maréchal just home from Flanders. This gossip was part and parcel of that multifarious scandal to which she had just assured her lover that she no longer would lend an ear.

Therefore she met Mme. de Pompadour's malicious look with one of complete indifference, and ignoring the remark altogether, she said calmly, without the slightest tremor in her voice or hint of annoyance in her face:

"Did I understand you to say, Madame, that His Majesty was tired and desired to leave?"

The Marquise looked vexed, conscious of the snub; she threw a quick look of intelligence to Lady Eglinton, which Lydie no doubt would have caught had she not at that moment turned to her lover in order to give him a smile of assurance and trust.

He, however, seemed self-absorbed just now, equally intent in avoiding her loving glance and Mme. de Pompadour's mocking gaze.

"The King certainly asked for M. de Stainville a while ago," here interposed Lady Eglinton, "and M. le Chevalier de Saint George has begun to make his adieux."

"We'll not detain Mlle. d'Aumont, then," said Mme. de Pompadour. "She will wish to bid our young Pretender an encouraging farewell! Come, M. de Stainville," she added authoritatively, "we'll to His Majesty, but only for two short minutes, then you shall be released man, have no fear, in order to make your peace with *la belle brune de Bordeaux*. Brrr! I vow I am quite frightened; the minx's black eyes anon shot daggers in this direction."

She beckoned imperiously to Gaston, who still seemed ill at ease, and ready enough to follow her. Lydie could not help noting with a slight tightening of her heartstrings with what alacrity he obeyed.

"Men are so different!" she sighed.

She would have allowed the whole world to look on and to sneer whilst she spent the rest of the evening beside her lover, talking foolish nonsense, planning out the future, or sitting in happy silence, heedless of sarcasm, mockery, or jests.

Her eyes followed him somewhat wistfully as he descended the two steps with easy grace, and with a flourishing bow and a "*Mille grâces*, Mlle. Lydie!" he turned away without another backward look, and became merged with the crowd.

Her master and future lord, the man whose lips had touched her own! How strange!

She herself could not thus have become one of the throng. Not just yet. She could not have detached herself from him so readily. For some few seconds – minutes perhaps – her earnest eyes tried to distinguish the pale mauve of his coat in the midst of that ever-changing kaleidoscope of dazzling colours. But the search made her eyes burn, and she closed them with the pain.

Men were so different!

And though she had learned much, understood much, with that first kiss, she was still very ignorant, very inexperienced, and quite at sea in those tortuous paths wherein Gaston and Mme. de Pompadour and all the others moved with such perfect ease.

In the meanwhile, M. de Stainville and the Marquise had reached the corridor. From where they now stood they could no longer see the alcove whence Lydie's aching eyes still searched for them in vain; with a merry little laugh Madame drew her dainty hand away from her cavalier's arm.

"There! am I not the beneficent fairy, you rogue?" she said, giving him a playful tap with her fan. "Fie! Will you drive in double harness? You'll come to grief, fair sir, and meseems 'twere not good to trifle with either filly."

"Madame, I entreat!" he protested feebly, wearied of the jest. But he tried not to scowl or to seem impatient, for he was loth to lose the good graces of a lady whose power and influence were unequalled even by Lydie d'Aumont.

Pompadour had favoured him from the very day of her first entry in the brilliant Court of Versailles. His handsome face, his elegant manners, and, above all, his reputation as a consummate *mauvais sujet* had pleased Mme. la Marquise. Gaston de Stainville was never so occupied with pleasures or amours, but he was ready to pay homage to one more beautiful woman who was willing to smile upon him.

But though she flirted with Gaston, the wily Marquise had no wish to see him at the head of affairs, the State-appointed controller of her caprices and of the King's munificence. He was pleasant enough as an admirer, unscrupulous and daring; but as a master? No.

The thought of a marriage between Mlle. d'Aumont and M. de Stainville, with its obvious consequences on her own future plans, was not to be tolerated for a moment; and Madame wondered greatly how far matters had gone between these two, prior to her own timely interference.

"There!" she said, pointing to an arched doorway close at hand; "go and make your peace whilst I endeavour to divert His Majesty's thoughts from your own wicked person; and remember," she added coquettishly as she bobbed him a short, mocking curtsy, "when you have reached the blissful stage of complete reconciliation, that you owe your happiness to Jeanne de Pompadour."

Etiquette demanded that he should kiss the hand which she now held extended toward him; this he did with as good a grace as he could muster. In his heart of hearts he was wishing the interfering lady back in the victualler's shop of Paris; he was not at all prepared at this moment to encounter the jealous wrath of "*la Belle brune de Bordeaux*."

Vaguely he thought of flight, but Mme. de Pompadour would not let him off quite so easily. With her own jewelled hand she pushed aside the curtain which masked the doorway, and with a nod of her dainty head she hinted to Gaston to walk into the boudoir.

There was nothing for it but to obey.

"Mlle. de Saint Romans," said the Marquise, peeping into the room in order to reassure herself that the lady was there and alone, "see, I bring the truant back to you. Do not be too severe on him; his indiscretion has been slight, and he will soon forget all about it, if you will allow him to make full confession and to do penance at your feet."

Then she dropped the curtain behind Gaston de Stainville, and, as an additional precaution, lest those two in there should be interrupted too soon, she closed the heavy folding doors which further divided the boudoir from the corridor.

"Now, if milady plays her cards cleverly," she murmured, "she and I will have done a useful evening's work."

CHAPTER VI

A FALSE POSITION

"Gaston!"

M. de Stainville shook off his moodiness. The vision of la belle Irène standing there in the satin-hung boudoir, the soft glow of well-shaded candles shedding an elusive, rosy light on the exquisite figure, with head thrown back and arms stretched out in a gesture of passionate appeal, was too captivating to permit of any other thought having sway over his brain, for the next second or two at any rate.

"I thought you had completely forgotten me to-night," she said as he came rapidly toward her, "and that I should not even get speech of you."

She took his hand and led him gently to a low divan; forcing him to sit down beside her, she studied his face intently for a moment or two.

"Was it necessary?" she asked abruptly.

"You know it was, Irène," he said, divining her thoughts, plunging readily enough now into the discussion which he knew was inevitable. His whole nature rebelled against this situation; he felt a distinct lowering of his manly pride; his masterful spirit chafed at the thought of an explanation which Irène claimed the right to demand.

"I told you, Irène," he continued impatiently, "that I would speak to Mlle. d'Aumont to-night, and if possible obtain a definite promise from her."

"And have you obtained that definite promise?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Lydie d'Aumont promised you that you should be the new State-appointed Minister of Finance?" she insisted.

"Yes! I have her word."

"And – what was the cost?"

"The cost?"

"Yes, the cost," she said, with what was obviously enforced calm. "Lydie d'Aumont did not give you that promise for nothing; you gave her or promised her something in return. What was it?"

Her lips were trembling, and she had some difficulty in preventing her nervous fingers from breaking into pieces the delicate mother-of-pearl fan which they held. But she was determined to appear perfectly calm, and that he should in no way suspect her of working up to a vulgar scene of jealousy.

"You are foolish, Irène!" he said, with his characteristic nonchalant shrug of the shoulders.

"Foolish?" she repeated, still keeping her temper well under control, though it was her voice which was shaking now. "Foolish? Ma foi! when my husband obtains –"

"Sh! 'sh! 'sh!" he said quickly, as with rough gesture he grasped her wrist, and gave it a warning pressure.

"Bah!" she retorted; "no one can hear."

"The walls have ears!"

"And if they have? I cannot keep up this deception for ever, Gaston."

"'Twere worse than foolish to founder within sight of port."

"You trust Lydie d'Aumont's word then?"

"If you will do nothing to spoil the situation!" he retorted grimly. "Another word such as you said just now, too long a prolongation of this charming *tête-à-tête*, and Mlle. d'Aumont will make a fresh promise to some one else."

"I was right, then?"

"Right in what?"

"Mlle. d'Aumont promised you the appointment because you made love to her."

"Irène!"

"Why don't you tell me?" she said with passionate vehemence. "Can't you see that I have been torturing myself with jealous fears? I am jealous – can I help it? I suffered martyrdom when I saw you there with her! I could not hear your words, but I could see the earnestness of your attitude. Do I not know every line of your figure, every gesture of your hand? Then the curtain fell at your touch, and I could no longer see – only divine – only tremble and fear. Mon Dieu! did I not love you as I do, were my love merely foolish passion, would I not then have screamed out the truth to all that jabbering crowd that stood between me and you, seeming to mock me with its prattle, and its irresponsible laughter? I am unnerved, Gaston," she added, with a sudden breakdown of her self-control, her voice trembling with sobs, the tears welling to her eyes, and her hands beating against one another with a movement of petulant nervousity. "I could bear it, you know, but for this secrecy, this false position; it is humiliating to me, and – Oh, be kind to me – be kind to me!" she sobbed, giving finally way to a fit of weeping. "I have spent such a miserable evening, all alone."

Stainville's expressive lips curled into a smile. "Be kind to me!" – the same pathetic prayer spoken to him by Lydie a very short while ago. Bah! how little women understood ambition! Even Lydie! Even Irène!

And these two women were nothing to him. Lydie herself was only a stepping-stone; the statuesque and headstrong girl made no appeal to the essentially masculine side of his nature, and he had little love left now for the beautiful passionate woman beside him, whom in a moment of unreasoning impulse he had bound irrevocably to him.

Gaston de Stainville aspired to military honours a couple of years ago; the Maréchal de Saint Romans, friend and mentor of the Dauphin, confidant of the Queen, seemed all-powerful then. Unable to win the father's consent to his union with Irène – for the Maréchal had more ambitious views for his only daughter and looked with ill-favour on the young gallant who had little to offer but his own handsome person, an ancient name, and a passionate desire for advancement – Gaston, who had succeeded in enchaining the young girl's affections, had no difficulty in persuading her to agree to a secret marriage.

But the wheel of fate proved as erratic in its movements as the flights of Stainville's ambition. With the appearance of Jeanne Poisson d'Étioles at the Court of Versailles, the Queen's gentle influence over Louis XV waned, and her friends fell into disfavour and obscurity. The Maréchal de Saint Romans was given an unimportant command in Flanders; there was nothing to be gained for the moment from an open alliance with his daughter. Gaston de Stainville, an avowed opportunist, paid his court to the newly risen star and was received with smiles, but he could not shake himself from the matrimonial fetters which he himself had forged.

The rapid rise of the Duc d'Aumont to power and the overwhelming ascendancy of Lydie in the affairs of State had made the young man chafe bitterly against the indestructible barrier which he himself had erected between his desires and their fulfilment. His passion for Irène did not yield to the early love of his childhood's days; it was drowned in the newly risen flood of more boundless ambition. It was merely the casting aside of one stepping-stone for another more firm and more prominent.

Just now in the secluded alcove, when the proud, reserved girl had laid bare before him the secrets of her virginal soul, when with pathetic abandonment she laid the sceptre of her influence and power at his feet, he had felt neither compunction nor remorse; now, when the woman who had trusted and blindly obeyed him asked for his help and support in a moral crisis, he was conscious only of a sense of irritation and even of contempt, which he tried vainly to disguise.

At the same time he knew well that it is never wise to tax a woman's submission too heavily. Irène had yielded to his wish that their marriage be kept a secret for the present only because she, too, was tainted with a touch of that unscrupulous ambition which was the chief characteristic of the epoch. She was shrewd enough to know that her husband would have but little chance in elbowing his

way up the ladder of power – "each rung of which was wrapped in a petticoat," as M. de Voltaire had pertinently put it – if he was known to be dragging a wife at his heels; Gaston had had no difficulty in making her understand that his personality as a gay and irresponsible butterfly, as a man of fashion, and a squire of dames, was the most important factor in the coming fight for the virtual dominion of France.

She had accepted the position at first with an easy grace; she knew her Gaston, and knew that he must not be handled with too tight a curb; moreover, her secret status pleased her, whilst he remained avowedly faithful to her she liked to see him court and smile, a *preux chevalier* with the ladies; she relished the thought of being the jailer to that gaily-plumaged bird, whom bright eyes and smiling lips tried to entice and enchain.

But to-night a crisis had come; something in Gaston's attitude toward Lydie had irritated her beyond what she was prepared to endure. His love for her had begun to wane long ago; she knew that, but she was not inclined to see it bestowed on another. Stainville feared that she was losing self-control, and that she might betray all and lose all if he did not succeed in laying her jealous wrath to rest. He was past master in the art of dealing with a woman's tears.

"Irène," he said earnestly, "I have far too much respect for you to look upon this childish outburst of tears as representing the true state of your feelings. You are unnerved – you own it yourself. Will you allow me to hold your hand?" he said with abrupt transition.

Then as she yielded her trembling hand to him he pressed a lingering kiss in the icy cold palm.

"Will you not accept with this kiss the assurance of my unswerving faith and loyalty?" he said, speaking in that low, deep-toned voice of his which he knew so well how to make tender and appealing to the heart of women. "Irène, if I have committed an indiscretion to-night, if I allowed my ambition to soar beyond the bounds of prudence, will you not believe that with my ambition my thoughts flew up to you and only came down to earth in order to rest at your feet?"

He had drawn her close to him, ready to whisper in her ear, as he had whispered half an hour ago in those of Lydie. He wanted this woman's trust and confidence just a very little while longer, and he found words readily enough with which to hoodwink and to cajole. Irène was an easier prey than Lydie. She was his wife and her ambitions were bound up with his; her mistrust only came from jealousy, and jealousy in a woman is so easily conquered momentarily, if she be beautiful and young and the man ardent and unscrupulous.

Gaston as yet had no difficult task; but every day would increase those difficulties, until he had finally grasped the aim of his ambitious desires and had rid himself of Lydie.

"Irène!" he whispered now, for he felt that she was consoled, and being consoled, she was ready to yield. "Irène, my wife, a little more patience, a little more trust. Two days – a week – what matter? Shut your eyes to all save this one moment to-night, when your husband is at your feet and when his soul goes out to yours in one long, and tender kiss. Your lips, ma mie!"

She bent her head to him. Womanlike, she could not resist. Memory came to his aid as he pleaded, the memory of those early days on the vine-clad hills near Bordeaux, when he had wooed and won her with the savour of his kiss.

CHAPTER VII

THE YOUNG PRETENDER

And Lydie d'Aumont's eyes had watched his disappearing figure through the crowd, until she could bear the sight no longer, and closed them with the pain.

An even, pleasant, very courteous voice roused her from her reverie.

"You are tired, Mlle. d'Aumont. May I – that is, I should be very proud if you would allow me to – er – "

She opened her eyes and saw the handsome face of "le petit Anglais" turned up to her with a look of humility, a deprecatory offer of service, and withal a strange mingling of compassion which somehow at this moment, in her sensitive and nervous state, seemed to wound and sting her.

"I'm not the least tired," she said coldly; "I thank you, milor. The colours and the light were so dazzling for the moment, my eyes closed involuntarily."

"I humbly beg your pardon," said Eglinton with nervous haste; "I thought that perhaps a glass of wine – "

"Tush child!" interposed Lady Eglinton in her harsh dry voice; "have you not heard that Mlle. d'Aumont is not fatigued. Offer her the support of your arm and take her to see the Chevalier de Saint George, who is waiting to bid her 'good-bye.'"

"Nay! I assure you I can walk alone," rejoined Lydie, taking no heed to the proffered arm which Lord Eglinton, in obedience to his mother's suggestion, was holding out toward her. "Where is His Majesty the King of England?" emphasizing the title with marked reproof, and looking with somewhat good-natured contempt at the young Englishman who, with a crestfallen air, had already dropped the arm which she had disdained and stepped quickly out of her way, whilst a sudden blush spread over his good-looking face.

He looked so confused and sheepish, so like a chidden child, that she was instantly seized with remorse, as if she had teased a defenseless animal, and though the touch of contempt was still apparent in her attitude, she said more kindly:

"I pray you forgive me, milor. I am loth to think that perhaps our gallant Chevalier will never bear his rightful title in his own country. I feel that it cheers him to hear us – who are in true sympathy with him – calling him by that name. Shall we go find the King of England and wish him 'God-speed'?"

She beckoned to Lord Eglinton, but he had probably not yet sufficiently recovered from the snub administered to him to realize that the encouraging glance was intended for him, and he hung back, not daring to follow, instinctively appealing to his mother for guidance as to what he should do.

"He is modest," said Lady Eglinton, with the air of a proud mother lauding her young offspring. "A heart of gold, my dear Mlle. d'Aumont!" she whispered behind her fan, "under a simple exterior."

Lydie shrugged her shoulders with impatience. She knew whither Lady Eglinton's praises of her son would drift presently. The pompous lady looked for all the world like a fussy hen, her stiff brocaded gown and voluminous paniers standing out in stiff folds each side of her portly figure like a pair of wings, and to Lydie d'Aumont's proud spirit it seemed more than humiliating for a man, rich, young, apparently in perfect health, to allow himself to be domineered over by so vapid a personality as was milady Eglinton.

Instinctively her thoughts flew back to Gaston; very different physically to "le petit Anglais;" undoubtedly not so attractive from the point of view of manly grace and bearing, but a man for all that! with a man's weaknesses and failings, and just that spice of devilry and uncertainty in him which was pleasing to a woman.

"So unreliable, my dear Mlle. d'Aumont," came in insinuating accents from Lady Eglinton. "Look at his lengthy entanglement with Mlle. de Saint Romans."

Lydie gave a start sudden; had she spoken her thoughts out loudly whilst her own mind was buried in happy retrospect? She must have been dreaming momentarily certainly, and must have been strangely absent-minded, for she was quite unconscious of having descended the alcove steps until she found herself walking between Lord Eglinton and his odious mother, in the direction of the corridors, whilst milady went prattling on with irritating monotony:

"You would find such support in my son. The Chevalier de Saint George – er – I mean the King of England – trusts him absolutely, you understand – they have been friends since boyhood. Harry would do more for him if he could, but he has not the power. Now as Comptroller of Finance – you understand? You have such sympathy with the Stuart pretensions, Mademoiselle, and a union of sympathies would do much towards furthering the success of so just a cause; and if my son – you understand – "

Lydie's ears were buzzing with the incessant chatter. Had she not been so absorbed in her thoughts she would have laughed at the absurdity of the whole thing. This insignificant nonentity beside her, with the strength and character of a chicken, pushed into a place of influence and power by that hen-like mother, and she – Lydie – lending a hand to this installation of a backboneless weakling to the highest position of France!

The situation would have been supremely ridiculous were it not for the element of pathos in it – the pathos of a young life which might have been so brilliant, so full of activity and interest, now tied to the apron-strings of an interfering mother.

Lydie herself, though accustomed to rule in one of the widest spheres that ever fell to woman's lot, wielded her sceptre with discretion and tact. In these days when the King was ruled by Pompadour, when Mme. du Châtelet swayed the mind of Voltaire, and Marie Thérèse subjugated the Hungarians, there was nothing of the blatant petticoat government in Lydie's influence over her father. The obtrusive domination of a woman like milady was obnoxious and abhorrent to her mind, proud of its femininity, gentle in the consciousness of its strength.

Now she feared that, forgetful of courtly manners, she might say or do something which would offend the redoubtable lady. There was still the whole length of the banqueting-hall to traverse, also the corridor, before she could hope to be released from so unwelcome a companionship.

Apparently unconscious of having roused Lydie's disapproval, milady continued to prattle. Her subject of conversation was still her son, and noting that his attention seemed to be wandering, she called to him in her imperious voice:

"Harry! Harry!" she said impatiently. "Am I to be your spokesman from first to last? Ah!" she added, with a sigh, "men are not what they were when I was wooed and won. What say you, my dear Mlle. Lydie? The age of chivalry, of doughty deeds and bold adventures, is indeed past and gone, else a young man of Lord Eglinton's advantages would not depute his own mother to do his courting for him."

A shriek of laughter which threatened to be hysterical rose to Lydie's throat. How gladly would she have beaten a precipitate retreat. Unfortunately the room was crowded with people, who unconsciously impeded progress. She turned and looked at "le petit Anglais," the sorry hero of this prosaic wooing, wondering what was his *rôle* in this silly, childish intrigue. She met his gentle eyes fixed upon hers with a look which somehow reminded her of a St. Bernard dog that she had once possessed; there was such a fund of self-deprecation, such abject apology in the look, that she felt quite unaccountably sorry for him, and the laughter died before it reached her lips.

Something prompted her to try and reassure him; the same feeling would have caused her to pat the head of her dog.

"I feel sure," she said kindly, "that Lord Eglinton will have no need of a proxy once he sets his mind on serious wooing."

"But this is serious!" retorted Lady Eglinton testily. Lydie shook her head:

"As little serious as his lordship's desire to control the finances of France."

"Oh! but who better fitted for the post than my son. He is so rich – the richest man in France, and in these days of bribery and corruption – you understand, and – and being partly English – not wholly, I am thankful to say – for I abominate the English myself; but we must own that they are very shrewd where money is concerned – and –"

"In the name of Heaven, milady," said Lydie irritably, "will you not allow your son to know his own mind? If he has a request to place before M. le Duc my father or before me, let him do so for himself."

"I think – er – perhaps Mlle. d'Aumont is right," here interposed Lord Eglinton gently. "You will – er – I hope, excuse my mother, Mademoiselle; she is so used to my consulting her in everything that perhaps – You see," he continued in his nervous halting way, "I – I am rather stupid and I am very lazy; she thinks I should understand finance, because I – but I don't believe I should; I –"

Her earnest eyes, fixed with good-humoured indulgence upon his anxious face, seemed to upset him altogether. His throat was dry, and his tongue felt as if it were several sizes too large for his parched mouth. For the moment it looked as if the small modicum of courage which he possessed would completely give out, but noting that just for the moment his mother was engaged in exchanging hasty greetings with a friend, he seemed to make a violent and sudden effort, and with the audacity which sometimes assails the preternaturally weak, he plunged wildly into his subject.

"I have no desire for positions which I am too stupid to fill," he said, speaking so rapidly that Lydie could hardly follow him; "but, Mademoiselle, I entreat you do not believe that my admiration for you is not serious. I know I am quite unworthy to be even your lacquey, though I wouldn't mind being that, since it would bring me sometimes near you. Please, please, don't look at me – I am such a clumsy fool, and I daresay I am putting things all wrong! My mother says," he added, with a pathetic little sigh, "that I shall spoil everything if I open my mouth, and now I have done it, and you are angry, and I wish to God somebody would come and give me a kick!"

He paused, flushed, panting and excited, having come to the end of his courage, whilst Lydie did not know if she should be angry or sorry. A smile hovered round her lips, yet she would gladly have seen some manlike creature administer chastisement to this foolish weakling. Her keenly analytical mind flew at once to comparisons.

Gaston de Stainville – and now this poor specimen of manhood! She had twice been wooed in this self-same room within half an hour; but how different had been the methods of courting. A look of indulgence for the weak, a flash of pride for the strong, quickly lit up her statuesque face. It was the strong who had won, though womanlike, she felt a kindly pity for him who did not even dare to ask for that which the other had so boldly claimed as his right – her love.

Fortunately, the *tête-à-tête*, which was rapidly becoming embarrassing – for she really did not know how to reply to this strange and halting profession of love – was at last drawing to a close. At the end of the corridor Charles Edward Stuart, surrounded by a group of friends, had caught sight of her, and with gracious courtesy he advanced to meet her.

"Ah! the gods do indeed favour us," he said gallantly in answer to her respectful salute, and nodding casually to Lady Eglinton, who had bobbed him a grudging curtsy, "We feared that our enemy, Time, treading hard on our heels, would force us to depart ere we had greeted our Muse."

"Your Majesty is leaving us?" she asked. "So soon?"

"Alas! the hour is late. We start to-morrow at daybreak."

"God speed you, Sire!" she said fervently.

"To my death," he rejoined gloomily.

"To victory, Sire, and your Majesty's own kingdom!" she retorted cheerily. "Nay! I, your humble, yet most faithful adherent, refuse to be cast down to-night. See," she added, pointing to the group of gentlemen who had remained discreetly in the distance, "you have brave hearts to cheer you, brave swords to help you!"

"Would I were sure of a brave ship to rescue me and them if I fail!" he murmured.

She tossed her head with a characteristic movement of impatience.

"Nay! I was determined not to speak of failure to-night, Sire."

"Yet must I think of it," he rejoined, "since the lives of my friends are dependent on me."

"They give their lives gladly for your cause."

"I would prefer to think that a good ship from France was ready to take them aboard if evil luck force us to flee."

"France has promised you that ship, Monseigneur," she said earnestly:

"If France meant you, Mademoiselle," he said firmly, "I would believe in her."

"She almost means Lydie d'Aumont!" retorted the young girl, with conscious pride.

"Only for a moment," broke in Lady Eglinton spitefully; "but girls marry," she added, "and every husband may not be willing to be held under the sway of satin petticoats."

"If France fails you, Monseigneur," here interposed a gentle voice, "I have already had the honour of assuring you that there is enough Eglinton money still in the country to fit out a ship for your safety; and – er – "

Then, as if ashamed of this outburst, the second of which he had been guilty to-night, "le petit Anglais" once more relapsed into silence. But Lydie threw him a look of encouragement.

"Well spoken, milor!" she said approvingly.

With her quick intuition she had already perceived that milady was displeased, and she took a malicious pleasure in dragging Lord Eglinton further into the conversation. She knew quite well that milady cared naught about the Stuarts or their fate. From the day of her marriage she had dissociated herself from the cause, for the furtherance of which her husband's father had given up home and country.

It was her influence which had detached the late Lord Eglinton from the fortunes of the two Pretenders; justly, perhaps, since the expeditions were foredoomed to failure, and Protestant England rightly or wrongly mistrusted all the Stuarts. But Lydie's romantic instincts could not imagine an Englishman in any other capacity save as the champion of the forlorn cause; one of the principal reasons why she had always disliked the Eglintons was because they held themselves aloof from the knot of friends who gathered round Charles Edward.

She was, therefore, not a little surprised to hear "le petit Anglais" promising at least loyal aid and succour in case of disaster, since he could not give active support to the proposed expedition. That he had made no idle boast when he spoke of Eglinton money she knew quite well, nor was it said in vain arrogance, merely as a statement of fact. Milady's vexation proved that it was true.

Delighted and eager, she threw herself with all the ardour of her romantic impulses into this new train of thought suggested by Lord Eglinton's halting speech.

"Ah, milor," she said joyously, and not heeding Lady Eglinton's scowl, "now that I have an ally in you my dream can become a reality. Nay, Sire, you shall start for England with every hope, every assurance of success, but if you fail, you and those you care for shall be safe. Will you listen to my plan?"

"Willingly."

"Lord Eglinton is your friend – at least, you trust him, do you not?"

"I trust absolutely in the loyalty of his house toward mine," replied Charles Edward unhesitatingly.

"Then do you agree with him, and with him alone, on a spot in England or Scotland where a ship would find you in case of failure."

"That has been done already," said Eglinton simply.

"And if ill-luck pursues us, we will make straight for that spot and await salvation from France."

Lydie said no more; she was conscious of a distinct feeling of disappointment that her own plan should have been forestalled. She had fondled the notion, born but a moment ago, that if her own influence were not sufficiently great in the near future to induce King Louis to send a rescue ship

for the Young Pretender if necessary, she could then, with Lord Eglinton's money, fit out a private expedition and snatch the last of the Stuarts from the vengeance of his enemies. The romantic idea had appealed to her, and she had been forestalled. She tried to read the thoughts of those around her. Lady Eglinton was evidently ignorant of the details of the plan; she seemed surprised and vastly disapproving. Charles Edward was whispering a few hasty words in the ear of his friend, whom obviously he trusted more than he did the word of France or the enthusiasm of Mlle. d'Aumont.

"Le petit Anglais" had relapsed into his usual state of nervousness, and his eyes wandered uneasily from Lydie's face to that of his royal companion, whilst with restless fingers he fidgeted the signet ring which adorned his left hand. Suddenly he slipped the ring off and Charles Edward Stuart examined it very attentively, then returned it to its owner with a keen look of intelligence and a nod of approval.

Lydie was indeed too late with her romantic plan; these two men had thought it all out before her in every detail – even to the ring. She, too, had thought of a token which would be an assurance to the fugitives that they might trust the bearer thereof. She felt quite childishly vexed at all this. It was an unusual thing in France these days to transact serious business without consulting Mlle. d'Aumont.

"You are taking it for granted, Sire, that France will fail you?" she said somewhat testily.

"Nay! why should you say that?" he asked.

"Oh! the ring – the obvious understanding between you and milor."

"Was it not your wish, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh! a mere suggestion – in case France failed you, and I were powerless to remind her of her promise."

"Pa ma foi," he rejoined gallantly, "and you'll command me, I'll believe that contingency to be impossible. The whole matter of the ring is a whim of Eglinton's, and I swear that I'll only trust to France and to you."

"No, no!" she said quickly, her own sound common sense coming to the rescue just in time to rout the unreasoning petulance of a while ago, which truly had been unworthy of her. "It was foolish of me to taunt, and I pray your Majesty's forgiveness. It would have been joy and pride to me to feel that the plans for your Majesty's safety had been devised by me, but I gladly recognize that milor Eglinton hath in this matter the prior claim."

Her little speech was delivered so simply and with such a noble air of self-effacement that it is small wonder that Charles Edward could but stand in speechless admiration before her. She looked such an exquisite picture of proud and self-reliant womanhood, as she stood there, tall and erect, the stiff folds of her white satin gown surrounding her like a frame of ivory round a dainty miniature. Tears of enthusiasm were in her eyes, her lips were parted with a smile of encouragement, her graceful head, thrown slightly back and crowned with the burnished gold of her hair, stood out in perfect relief against the soft-toned gold and veined marble of the walls.

"I entreat you, Mademoiselle," said the Young Pretender at last, "do not render my departure too difficult by showing me so plainly all that I relinquish when I quit the fair shores of France."

"Your Majesty leaves many faithful hearts in Versailles, none the less true because they cannot follow you. Nay! but methinks Lord Eglinton and I will have to make a pact of friendship, so that when your Majesty hath gone we might often speak of you."

"Speak of me often and to the King," rejoined Charles Edward, with a quick return to his former mood. "I have a premonition that I shall have need of his help."

Then he bowed before her, and she curtsied very low until her young head was almost down to the level of his knees. He took her hand and kissed it with the respect due to an equal.

"Farewell, Sire, and God speed you!" she murmured. He seemed quite reluctant to go. Gloom had once more completely settled over his spirits, and Lydie d'Aumont, clad all in white like some graceful statue carved in marble, seemed to him the figure of Hope on which a relentless fate forced him to turn his back.

His friends now approached and surrounded him. Some were leaving Versailles and France with him on the morrow, others accompanied him in spirit only with good wishes and anxious sighs. Charles Edward Stuart, the unfortunate descendant of an unfortunate race, turned with a final appealing look to the man he trusted most.

"Be not a broken reed to me, Eglinton," he said sadly. "Try and prevent France from altogether forgetting me."

Lydie averted her head in order to hide the tears of pity which had risen to her eyes.

"Oh, unfortunate Prince! if thine only prop is this poor weakling whose dog-like affection has no moral strength to give it support!"

When she turned once more toward him, ready to bid him a final adieu, he was walking rapidly away from her down the long narrow corridor, leaning on Eglinton's arm and closely surrounded by his friends. In the far distance King Louis the Well-beloved strolled leisurely toward his departing guest, leaning lightly on the arm of Mme. la Marquise de Pompadour.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAST TRICK

The noise of talk and laughter still filled the old château from end to end. Though the special guest of the evening had departed and royalty no longer graced the proceedings, since His Majesty had driven away to Versailles after having bidden adieu to the Chevalier de Saint George, M. le Duc d'Aumont's less important visitors showed no signs as yet of wishing to break up this convivial night.

The sound of dance music filled the air, and from the *salle d'armes* the merry strains of the gavotte, the tripping of innumerable feet, the incessant buzz of young voices, reached the more distant corridor like an echo from fairyland.

Lydie had remained quite a little while leaning against the cool marble wall, watching with eager intentness the group of gallant English and Scotch gentlemen congregated round their young Prince. Louis the Well-beloved, with that graciousness peculiar to all the Bourbons, had, severally and individually bidden "good-bye" to all. Each in turn had kissed the podgy white hand of the King of France, who had been so benignant a host to them all. None understood better than Louis XV, the art of leaving a pleasing impression on the mind of a departing friend. He had a smile, a jest, a word of encouragement for each whilst Jeanne de Pompadour, with one dainty hand on the King's shoulder, the other flirting her fan, emphasized each token of royal goodwill and of royal favour.

"Ah! milor Dunkeld, a pleasing journey to you. M. le Marquis de Perth, I pray you do not, amidst the fogs of England, forget the sunshine of France. Sir André Seafield, your absence will bring many tears to a pair of blue eyes I wot of."

She pronounced the foreign names with dainty affectation, and Louis had much ado to keep his eyes away from that bright, smiling face, and those ever-recurring dimples. Lydie felt a strange nausea at sight of these noble, high-born gentlemen paying such reverential homage to the low-born adventuress, and a deep frown appeared between her eyes when she saw Charles Edward Stuart bending as low before Jeanne Poisson as he had done just now before her – Lydie, daughter of the Duc d'Aumont.

Bah! what did it matter, after all? This world of irresponsible butterflies, of petty machinations and self-seeking intrigues: would she not quit it to-morrow for a land of poetry and romance, where women wield no sceptre save that of beauty, and where but one ruler is acknowledged and his name is Love?

She made a strenuous attempt to detach herself mentally from her surroundings; with a great effort of her will she succeeded in losing sight of the individuality of all these people round her. Lady Eglinton still talking at random beside her, Mme. de Pompadour yielding her hand to the kiss of a Stuart Prince, that fat and pompous man, whom duty bade her call "Your Majesty," all became mere puppets – dolls that laughed and chatted and danced, hanging on invisible strings, which the mighty hand of some grim giant was dangling for the amusement of his kind.

How paltry it seemed all at once! What did it matter if France was ruled by that vapid King or by that brainless, overdressed woman beside him? What did it matter if that young man with the shifty blue eyes and the fair, curly hair succeeded in ousting another man from the English throne?

What did matter was that Gaston was not faithless, that he loved her, and that she had felt the sweetness of a first kiss!

Happily back in dreamland now, she could once more afford to play her part amongst the marionettes. She was willing to yield the string which made her dance and talk and move into the hands of the fiercely humorous giant up aloft. No doubt it was he who pulled her along the corridor, made her join the group that congregated round departing royalty.

M. le Duc d'Aumont – the perfect courtier and gentleman – was already formulating his adieux. His Majesty the King of France would, by the rigid rule of etiquette, be the first to leave.

Accompanied by Mme. de Pompadour and followed by M. le Duc, he was commencing his progress down the monumental staircase which led to the great entrance hall below.

Lydie, still made to move no doubt by that invisible giant hand, found it quite simple and easy to mingle with the crowd, to take the King's arm, being his hostess, whilst M. le Duc her father and Mme. de Pompadour followed close behind.

With her spirit wandering in dreamland, she was naturally somewhat distraite – not too much so, only sufficiently to cause Louis XV to make comparisons betwixt his sprightly Jeanne and this animated statue, whose cold little hand rested so impassively on the satin of his coat.

At the foot of the perron the King's Flemish horses, as round of body and heavy of gait as himself, were impatiently pawing the ground. The opening of the great gates sent a wave of sweet-scented air into the overheated château. Lydie was glad that her duty demanded that she should accompany the King down the steps to the door of his coach. The cool night breeze fanned her cheeks most pleasingly, the scent of June roses and of clove carnations filled the air, and from below the terraced gardens there came the softly-murmuring ripple of the Seine, winding her graceful curves toward the mighty city of Paris beyond.

Far away to the east, beyond the grim outline of cedar and poplar trees, a fair crescent moon appeared, chaste and cold.

"An emblem of our fair hostess to-night," said Louis with clumsy gallantry and pointing up to the sky, as Lydie bent her tall figure and kissed the royal hand.

Then she stood aside, having made a cold bow to Mme. de Pompadour; the fair Marquise was accompanying His Majesty to Versailles; she stepped into the coach beside him, surrounded by murmurs of flattery and adulation. Even Charles Edward made her a final speech of somewhat forced gallantry; he was the last to kiss her hand, and Lydie could almost hear the softly whispered words of entreaty with which he bade her not to forget.

And Jeanne Poisson – daughter of a kitchen wench – was condescendingly gracious to a Stuart Prince; then she calmly waved him aside, whilst the King apparently was content to wait, and called Lady Eglinton to the door of the coach.

"You are wasting too much time," she whispered quickly; "an you don't hurry now, you will be too late."

At last the departure was effected; the crowd, with backbone bent and tricorues sweeping the ground, waited in that uncomfortable position until the gilded coach and the men in gorgeous blue and gold liveries were swallowed in the gloom of the chestnut avenue; then it broke up into isolated groups. Lydie had done her duty as hostess; she had taken such leave as etiquette demanded from Charles Edward Stuart and his friends. Coaches and chairs came up to the perron in quick succession now, bearing the adventurers away on this, the first stage of their hazardous expedition. When would they sup again in such luxury? when would the frou-frou of silk, the flutter of fans, the sound of dance music once more pleasantly tickle their ears? To-morrow, and for many a long day to come it would be hurried meals in out-of-the-way places, the call to horse, the clink of arms.

Puppets! puppets all! for what did it matter?

Lydie would have loved to have lingered out on the terrace awhile longer. The oak-leaved geraniums down at the foot of the terrace steps threw an intoxicating lemon-scented fragrance in the air, the row of stunted orange trees still bore a few tardy blossoms, and in the copse yonder, away from the din and the bustle made by the marionettes, it must be delicious to wander on the carpet of moss and perchance to hear the melancholy note of a nightingale.

"Do you think not, Mademoiselle, that this night air is treacherous?" said Lord Eglinton, with his accustomed diffidence. "You seem to be shivering; will you allow me the honour of bringing your cloak?"

She thanked him quite kindly. Somehow his gentle voice did not jar on her mood. Since Gaston was not there, she felt that she would sooner have this unobtrusive, pleasant man beside her than any

one else. He seemed to have something womanish and tender in his feeble nature which his mother lacked. Perhaps milady had divested herself of her natural attributes in order to grace her son with them, since she had been unable to instil more manly qualities into him.

But Lydie's heart ached for a sight of Gaston. The clock in the tower of the old château chimed the hour before midnight. It was but half an hour since she had parted from him on the steps of the alcove; she remembered quite distinctly hearing the bracket clock close by strike half-past ten, at the same moment as Pompadour's shrill laugh broke upon her ear.

Half an hour? Why, it seemed a lifetime since then; and while she had made her bow to the Stuart Prince and then to King Louis, while she had allowed the unseen giant to move her from place to place on a string, perhaps Gaston had been seeking for her, perhaps his heart had longed for her too, and a sting of jealousy of her multifarious social duties was even now marring the glory of happy memories.

Without another moment's hesitation she turned her back on the peaceful gloom of the night, on the silver crescent moon, the fragrance of carnations and orange-blossoms, and walked quickly up the perron steps with a hasty: "You are right, milor, the night air is somewhat chilling and my guests will be awaiting me," thrown over her shoulder at her bashful cavalier.

Beyond the noble entrance doors the vast hall was now practically deserted, save for a group of flunkeys, gorgeous and solemn, who stood awaiting the departure of their respective masters. At the farther end which led to the main corridor, Lydie, to her chagrin, caught sight of Lady Eglinton's brooding nagian back.

"What an obsession!" she sighed, and hoped that milady would fail to notice her. Already she was planning hasty flight along a narrow passage, when a question authoritatively put by her ladyship to a magnificent person clad in a purple livery with broad white facings arrested her attention.

"Is your master still in the boudoir, do you know?"

"I do not know, Mme. la Marquise," the man replied. "I have not seen M. le Comte since half an hour."

The purple livery with broad white facings was that of the Comte de Stainville.

"I have a message for M. le Comte from Mme. de Pompadour," said Lady Eglinton carelessly. "I'll find him, I daresay."

And she turned into the great corridor.

Lydie no longer thought of flight; an unexplainable impulse caught her to change her mind, and to follow in Lady Eglinton's wake. She could not then have said if "le petit Anglais" was still near her not. She had for the moment forgotten his insignificant existence.

There was an extraordinary feeling of unreality about herself and her movements, about the voluminous person ahead clad in large-flowered azure brocade and closely followed by a stiff automaton in purple and white; they seemed to be leading her along some strange and unexpected paths, at the end of which Lydie somehow felt sure that grinning apes would be awaiting her.

Anon Lady Eglinton paused, with her hand on the handle of a door; she caught sight of Mlle. d'Aumont and seemed much surprised to see her there. She called to her by name, in that harsh voice which Lydie detested, whilst the obsequious automaton came forward and relieved her from the trouble of turning that handle herself.

"Allow me, milady."

The door flew open, the flunkey at the same moment also drew a heavy curtain aside.

Lydie had just come up quite close, in answer to Lady Eglinton's call. She was standing facing the door when Bénédicte threw it open, announcing with mechanical correctness of attitude:

"Mme. la Marquise d'Eglinton, M. le Comte!"

At first Lydie only saw Gaston as he turned to face the intruders. His face was flushed, and he muttered a quickly-suppressed oath. But already she had guessed, even before Lady Eglinton's strident voice had set her every nerve a-tingling.

"Mlle. de Saint Romans!" said milady, with a shrill laugh, "a thousand pardons! I had a message from Mme. de Pompadour for M. le Comte de Stainville, and thought to find him alone. A thousand pardons, I beg – the intrusion was involuntary – and the message unimportant – I'll deliver it when Monsieur is less pleasantly engaged."

Lydie at that moment could not have stirred one limb, if her very life had depended on a movement from her. The feeling of unreality had gone. It was no longer that. It was a grim, hideous, awful reality. That beautiful woman there was reality, and real, too, were the glowing eyes that flashed defiance at milady, the lips parted for that last kiss which the flunkey's voice had interrupted, the stray black curls which had escaped from the trammels of the elaborate coiffure and lay matted on the damp forehead.

And those roses, too, which had adorned her corsage, now lying broken and trampled on the floor, the candles burning dimly in their sockets, and Gaston's look of wrath, quickly followed by one of fear – all – all that was real!

Real to the awful shame of it all – milady's sneer of triumph, the oath which had risen to Gaston's lips, the wooden figure of the lacquey standing impassive at the door!

Instinctively Lydie's hand flew to her lips; oh, that she could have wiped out the last, lingering memory of that kiss. She, the proud and reserved vestal, a Diana chaste and cold, with lips now for ever polluted by contact with those of a liar. A liar, a traitor, a sycophant! She lashed her haughty spirit into fury, the better to feel the utter degradation of her own abasement.

She did not speak. What could she say! One look at Gaston's face and she understood that her humiliation was complete; his eyes did not even seek her pardon, they expressed neither sorrow nor shame, only impotent wrath and fear of baffled ambition. Not before all these people would she betray herself, before that beautiful rival, or that vulgar *intrigante*, not before Gaston or his lacquey, and beyond that mechanical movement of hand to lips, beyond one short flash of unutterable pride and contempt, she remained silent and rigid, whilst her quick eyes took in a complete mental vision of that never-to-be-forgotten picture – the dimly-lighted boudoir, the defiant figure of Irène de Saint Romans, the crushed roses on the floor.

Then with a heart-broken sigh unheard by the other actors in this moving tableaux, and covering her face with her hands, she began to walk rapidly down the corridor.

CHAPTER IX

THE WINNING HAND

But Lydie d'Aumont had not gone five paces before she heard a quick, sharp call, followed by the rustle of silk on the marble floor.

The next moment she felt a firm, hot grip on her wrist, and her left hand was forcibly drawn away from her face, whilst an eager voice spoke quick, vehement words, the purport of which failed at first to reach her brain.

"You shall not go, Mlle. d'Aumont," were the first coherent words which she seemed to understand – "you cannot – it is not just, not fair until you have heard!"

"There is nothing which I need hear," interrupted Lydie coldly, the moment she realized that it was Irène de Saint Romans who was addressing her; "and I pray you to let me go."

"Nay! but you shall hear, you must!" rejoined the other without releasing her grasp on the young girl's wrist. Her hand was hot, and her fingers had the strength of intense excitement. Lydie could not free herself, strive how she might.

"Do you not see that this is most unfair?" continued Irène with great volubility. "Am I to be snubbed like some kitchen wench caught kissing behind doorways? Look at milady Eglinton and her ill-natured sneer. I'll not tolerate it, nor your looks of proud contempt! I'll not – I'll not! Gaston! Gaston!" she now exclaimed, turning to de Stainville, who was standing, silent and sullen, whilst he saw his wife gradually lashing herself into wrathful agitation at his own indifference and Lydie's cold disdain. "If you have a spark of courage left in you, tell that malicious *intrigante* and this scornful minx that if I were to spend the whole evening in the boudoir *en tête-à-tête* with you, aye! and behind closed doors if I chose who shall have a word to say, when I am in the company of my own husband?"

"Your husband!"

The ejaculation came from Lady Eglinton's astonished lips. Lydie had not stirred. She did not seem to have heard, and certainly Irène's triumphant announcement left her as cold, as impassive as before. What did it matter, after all, what special form Gaston's lies to her had assumed? Nothing that he or Irène said or did could add to his baseness and infamy.

"Aye, my husband, milady!" continued the other more calmly, as she finally released Lydie's wrist and cast it, laughing, from her. "I am called Mme. la Comtesse de Stainville, and will be called so in the future openly. Now you may rejoin your guests, Mlle. d'Aumont; my reputation stands as far beyond reproach as did your own before you spent a mysterious half hour with my husband behind the curtains of an alcove."

She turned to de Stainville, who, in spite of his wife's provocative attitude, had remained silent, cursing the evil fate which had played him this trick, cursing the three women who were both the cause and the witnesses of his discomfiture.

"Your arm, Gaston!" she said peremptorily; "and you, Benedict, call your master's coach and my chair. Mlle. d'Aumont, your servant. If I have been the means of dissipating a happy illusion, you may curse me now, but you will bless me to-morrow. Gaston has been false to you – he is not over true to me – but he is my husband, and as such I must claim him. For the sake of his schemes, of his ambitions, I kept our marriage a secret so that he might rise to higher places than I had the power to give him. When your disdainful looks classed me with a flirty kitchen-wench I rebelled at last. I trust that you are proud enough not to vent your disappointment on Gaston; but if you do, 'tis no matter; I'll find means of consoling him."

She made the young girl a low and sweeping curtesy in the most approved style demanded by the elaborate etiquette of the time. There was a gleam of mocking triumph in her eyes, which she did not attempt to conceal, and which suddenly stung Lydie's pride to the quick.

It is strange indeed that often at a moment when a woman's whole happiness is destroyed with one blow, when a gigantic cataclysm revolutionises with one fell swoop her entire mode of thought, dispels all her dreams and shatters her illusions, it is always the tiny final pin-prick which causes her the most acute pain and influences the whole of her subsequent conduct.

It was Irène's mocking curtsey which roused Lydie from her mental torpor, because it brought her – as it were – in actual physical contact with all that she would have to endure openly in the future, as apart from the hidden misery of her heart.

Gaston's shamed face was no longer the only image which seared her eyes and brain. The world, her own social world, seemed all at once to reawaken before her. That world would sneer even as Irène de Stainville sneered; it would laugh at and enjoy her own discomfiture. She – Lydie d'Aumont – the proud and influential daughter of the Prime Minister of France, whom flatterers and sycophants approached mentally on bended knees, for whom suitors hardly dared even to sigh, she had been tricked and fooled like any silly country mouse whose vanity had led to her own abasement.

Half an hour ago in the fullness of her newly-found happiness she had flaunted her pride and her love before those who hated and envied her. To-morrow – nay, within an hour – this humiliating scene would be the talk of Paris and Versailles. Lydie's burning ears seemed even now to hear the Pompadour retailing it with many embellishments, which would bring a coarse laugh to the lips of the King and an ill-natured jest to those of her admirers; she could hear the jabbering crowd, could feel the looks of compassion or sarcasm aimed at her as soon at this tit-bit of society scandal had been bruited abroad.

The scene itself had become real and vivid to her; the marble corridor, the flickering candles, the flunkey's impassive face; she understood that the beautiful woman before her was in fact and deed the wife of Gaston de Stainville. She even contrived to perceive the humour of Lady Eglinton's completely bewildered expression, the blank astonishment of her round, bulgy eyes, and close to her she saw "le petit Anglais," self-effaced as usual, and looking almost as guilty, as shamefaced as Gaston.

Lydie turned to him and placed a cool, steady hand upon his sleeve.

"Madame la Comtesse de Stainville," she then said with perfect calm, "I fear me I must beg of your courtesy to tarry awhile longer, whilst I offer you an explanation to which I feel you are entitled. Just now I was somewhat surprised because your news was sudden – and it is my turn to ask your pardon, although my fault – if fault there be – rests on a misapprehension. M. le Comte de Stainville's amours or his marriage are no concern of mine. True, he begged for my influence and fawned upon my favour just now, for his ambition soared to the post of High Controller of the Finances of France. That appointment rests with the Duc, my father, who no doubt will bestow it on him whom he thinks most worthy. But it were not fair to me, if you left me now thinking that the announcement of your union with a gentleman whose father was the friend of mine could give me aught but pleasure. Permit me to congratulate you, Madame, on the choice of a lord and master, a helpmeet no doubt. You are indeed well matched. I am all the more eager to offer you my good wishes as I have been honoured to-night with a proposal which has greatly flattered me. My lord the Marquis of Eglinton has asked me to be his wife!"

Once more she turned her head toward the young Englishman and challenged a straight look from his eyes. He did not waver and she was satisfied. Her instinct had not misled her, for he expressed no astonishment, only a sort of dog-like gratitude and joy as, having returned her gaze quite firmly, he now slowly raised his arm bringing her hand on a level with his lips.

Lady Eglinton also displayed sufficient presence of mind not to show any surprise. She perhaps alone of all those present fully realized that Lydie had been wounded to the innermost depths of her heart, and that she herself owed her own and her son's present triumph to the revolt of mortified pride.

What Gaston thought and felt exactly it were difficult to say. He held women in such slight esteem, and his own vanity was receiving so severe a blow, that, no doubt, he preferred to think

that Lydie, like himself, had no power of affection and merely bestowed her heart there where self-interest called.

Irène, on the other hand, heaved a sigh of relief; the jealous suspicions which had embittered the last few days were at last dispelled. Hers was a simple, shallow nature that did not care to look beyond the obvious. She certainly appeared quite pleased at Lydie's announcement, and if remorse at her precipitancy did for one brief second mar the fullness of her joy, she quickly cast it from her, not having yet had time to understand the future and more serious consequences of her impulsive avowal.

She wanted to go up to Lydie and to offer her vapid expressions of goodwill, but Gaston, heartily tired of the prolongation of this scene, dragged her somewhat roughly away.

From the far distance there came the cry of the flunkys.

"The chair of Mlle. de Saint Romans!"

"The coach of M. le Comte de Stainville!"

M. Bénédic, resplendent in purple and white, reappeared at the end of the corridor, with Irène's hood and cloak. Gaston, with his wife on his arm, turned on his heel and quickly walked down the corridor.

Milady, puzzled, bewildered, boundlessly overjoyed yet fearing to trust her luck too far, had just a sufficient modicum of tact left in her to retire discreetly within the boudoir.

Lydie suddenly found herself alone in this wide corridor with the man whom she had so impulsively dragged into her life. She looked round her somewhat helplessly, and her eyes encountered those of her future lord fixed upon hers with that same air of dog-like gentleness which she knew so well and which always irritated her.

"Milor," she said very coldly, "I must thank you for your kind coöperation just now. That you expressed neither surprise nor resentment does infinite credit to your chivalry."

"If I was a little surprised, Mademoiselle," he said, haltingly, "I was too overjoyed to show it, and – and I certainly felt no resentment."

He came a step nearer to her. But for this she was not prepared, and drew back with a quick movement and a sudden stiffening of her figure.

"I hope you quite understood milor, that there is no desire on my part to hold you to this bond," she said icily. "I am infinitely grateful to you for the kind way in which you humoured my impulse to-night, and if you will have patience with me but a very little while, I promise you that I will find an opportunity for breaking, without too great a loss of dignity, these bonds which already must be very irksome to you."

"Nay, Mademoiselle," he said gently, "you are under a misapprehension. Believe me, you would find it well-nigh impossible to – to – er – to alter your plans now without loss of dignity, and – er – er – I assure you that the bonds are not irksome to me."

"You would hold me to this bargain, then?"

"For your sake, Mademoiselle, as well as mine, we must now both be held to it."

"It seems unfair on you, milor."

"On me, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes, on you," she repeated, with a thought more gentleness in her voice; "you are young, milor; you are rich – soon you will regret the sense of honour which ties you to a woman who has only yielded her hand to you out of pique! Nay, I'll not deceive you," she added quickly, noting the sudden quiver of the kind little face at her stinging words. "I have no love for you, milor – all that was young and fresh, womanly and tender in my heart was buried just here to-night."

And with a mournful look she glanced round at the cold marble of the walls, the open door to that boudoir beyond, the gilded sconces which supported the dimly-burning candles. Then, smitten with sudden remorse, she said eagerly, with one of those girlish impulses which rendered her domineering nature so peculiarly attractive:

"But if I can give you no love, milor, Heaven and my father's indulgence have given me something which I know men hold far greater of importance than a woman's heart. I have influence, boundless influence, as you know – the State appointed Controller of Finance will be the virtual ruler of France, his position will give him power beyond the dreams of any man's ambition. My father will gladly give the post to my husband and – "

But here a somewhat trembling hand was held deprecatingly toward her.

"Mademoiselle, I entreat you," said Lord Eglinton softly, "for the sake of your own dignity and – and mine, do not allow your mind to dwell on such matters. Believe me, I am fully conscious of the honour which you did me just now in deigning to place your trust in me. That I have – have loved you, Mlle. Lydie," he added, with a nervous quiver in his young voice, "ever since I first saw you at this Court I – I cannot deny; but" – and here he spoke more firmly, seeing that once again she seemed to draw away from him, to stiffen at his approach, "but that simple and natural fact need not trouble you. I could not help loving you, for you are more beautiful than anything on earth, and you cannot deem my adoration an offence, though you are as cold and pure as the goddess of chastity herself. I have seen Catholics kneeling at the shrine of the Virgin Mary; their eyes were fixed up to her radiant image, their lips murmured an invocation or sometimes a hymn of praise. But their hands were clasped together; they never even raised them once toward that shrine which they had built for her, and from which she smiled whilst listening coldly to their prayers. Mlle. d'Aumont, you need have no mistrust of my deep respect for you; you are the Madonna and I the humblest of your worshippers. I am proud to think that the name I bear will be the shrine wherein your pride will remain enthroned. If you have need of me in the future you must command me, but though the law of France will call me your husband and your lord, I will be your bondsman and serve you on my knees; and though my very soul aches for the mere touch of your hand, my lips will never pollute even the hem of your gown." His trembling voice had sunk down to a whisper. If she heard or not he could not say. From far away there came to his ears the tender melancholy drone of the instruments playing the slow movement of the gavotte. His Madonna had not stirred, only her hand which he so longed to touch trembled a little as she toyed with her fan.

And, like the worshippers at the Virgin's shrine, he bent his knee and knelt at her feet.

PART II THE STATESMAN

CHAPTER X THE BEGGAR ON HORSEBACK

Monsieur le Marquis d'Eglinton, Comptroller-General of Finance, Chevalier of the Order of St. Louis, Peer of England and of France, occupied the west wing of the Château of Versailles. His Majesty the King had frequent and urgent need of him; Mme. de Pompadour could scarce exist a day without an interview behind closed doors with the most powerful man in France: with him, who at the bidding of the nation, was set up as a bar to the extravagances of her own caprice.

And *le petit lever* of M. le Contrôleur was certainly more largely attended than that of M. le Duc d'Aumont, or even – softly be it whispered – than that of His Majesty himself. For although every one knew that M. le Marquis was but a figurehead, and that all graces and favours emanated direct from the hand of Mme. la Marquise Lydie, yet every one waited upon his good pleasure, for very much the same reason that those who expected or hoped something from the King invariably kissed the hand of Mme. de Pompadour.

M. le Contrôleur very much enjoyed these *petits levers* of his, which were considered the most important social events in Versailles. He was very fond of chocolate in the morning, and M. Achille – that prince of valets – brought it to his bedside with such inimitable grace and withal the beverage itself so aromatic and so hot, that this hour between ten and eleven each day had become extremely pleasant.

He had no idea that being Comptroller-General of Finance was quite so easy and agreeable an occupation, else he had not been so diffident in accepting the post. But in reality it was very simple. He governed France from the depths of his extremely comfortable bed, draped all round with rich satin hangings of a soft azure colour, embroidered with *motifs*

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