

CHAPTER XV

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

Mr. Heatherbloom stood as if stunned, his face very pale. For the instant all his suppressed emotion concentrated on this woman--his evil genius--who had betrayed him before and who would betray him again, now. He waited, breathing hard. Why did she not appear? Why did not the blow fall? He could not understand that interval--nothing happening. Was she but playing with him? The prince had abruptly turned; apparently he had not heard that very low laugh. Bored, no doubt, by the interview, he had started to walk away, almost at the same time Mr. Heatherbloom had caught sight of the face at the window. As in a dream Mr. Heatherbloom now heard his excellency's brusque voice addressing a command to the officer, listened to the latter a moment or two later, addressing him.

"Come along!" The officer's English was labored and guttural.

Mr. Heatherbloom's eyes swung swiftly from the near-by door through which he had momentarily expected the woman to emerge. Involuntarily he would have stepped after the vanishing figure of the prince--what to do, he knew not, when--

"Non, non," said the officer, intervening. "Hees excellenz dislikes to be--importuned." The last word cost the speaker an effort; to the

listener it was hardly intelligible, but the officer's manner indicated plainly his meaning. Mr. Heatherbloom managed to hold himself still; he seemed standing in the center of a vortex. The prince had by this time gone; the woman did not step forth. This lame and impotent conclusion was out of all proportion to the seemingly inevitable. He could scarcely realize it was he--actually he!--who, after another pause, followed the officer, with scant interest, hardly any at all, to some inferno where flames leaped and hissed.

He could not but be aware of them, although the voice telling him that he would remain here, make himself useful, and, incidentally, work his way among the stokers, sounded very far off. He could have exclaimed scoffingly after the disappearing officer, not anxious to linger any longer than necessary here. Work his way, indeed! How long would he be permitted to do so? When would he be again sent for, and dealt with--in what manner?

He shoveled coal feverishly though the irony of the task smote him, for in feeding the insatiable beds, he was with his own hand helping to furnish the energy that wafted her, he would have served, farther and farther from the home land. Every additional mile put between that shore and the boat, increased the prince's sense of power. He was working for his excellency and against her. In a revulsion of feeling he leaned on his shovel, whereupon a besooted giant of the lower regions tapped his shoulder. This person--foreman of the gang--pointed significantly to the inactive implement. His brow was low, brutish, and he had a fist like a

hammer. Mr. Heatherbloom lifted the shovel and looked at the low brow but, fortunately, he did not act on the impulse. It was as if some detaining angel reached down into those realms of Pluto and, at the critical moment, laid a white hand where the big paw had touched him.

The young man resumed his toil. After all, what did it matter?--some one would shovel the stuff. That brief revolt had been spasmodic, sentimental. Here where the heat was almost intolerable and the red tongues sprang like forked daggers before dulled eyes, brutality and hatred alone seemed to reign. The prince might be the prodigal, free-handed gentleman to his officers; he was the slave-driver, by proxy, to his stokers. He who dominated in that place of torment had been an overseer from one of the villages the prince owned; these men were the descendants of serfs.

Once or twice Heatherbloom rather incoherently tried to engage one or two of them in conversation, to learn where the yacht was going--to Southern seas, across the Atlantic?--but they only stared at him as if he were some strange being quite beyond their ken. So he desisted; of course they could not understand him, and, of course, they knew nothing he wished to know. In this prison a sense of motion and direction was as naught.

Fortunately Mr. Heatherbloom's muscles were in good condition and there was not a superfluous ounce on him, but he needed all his energies to escape the fist and the boot that day, to keep pace with the others. The

perspiration poured from his face in sooty rivulets; he knew if he gave way what kind of consideration to expect. He was being tested. The foreman's eyes, themselves, seemed full of sparks; there was something tentative, expectant in their curious gleam as they rested on him.

Heatherbloom now could hardly keep to his feet; his own eyes burned. The flames danced as if with a living hatred of him; in a semi-stupor he almost forgot the sword, without, that swung over him, held but by a thread that might be cut any instant.

He could not have lasted many minutes more when relief came; sodden sullen men took the places. Heatherbloom staggered out with his own herd; he felt the need of food as well as rest. He groped his way somewhere--into a dark close place; he found black-looking bread--or, was it handed to him? He ate, threw himself down, thought of her!--then ceased to think at all. The sword, his companions or specters no longer existed for him.

It may be some spiritual part of him during that physical coma, drew from a supermundane source beatific drafts, for he awoke refreshed, his mind clear, even alert. He gazed around; he, alone, moved. His companions resembled so many bags of rags cast here and there; only the snores, now diminuendo, then crescendo, dispelled the illusion. A smoking lamp threw a paucity of light and a good deal of odor around them. Was it night? The shadows played hide-and-seek in corners; there was no sound of the sea.

Mr. Heatherbloom moved toward a door. His pulses seemed to throb in rhythm with the engines whose strong pulsations shook those limp unconscious forms. He opened the iron door and looked out. Only blackness, relieved by a low-power electric light, met his gaze. He crept from the place.

Why did not some one rise up to detain him? Surely he was watched. He experienced an uncanny sense of being allowed to proceed just so far, when invisible fingers would pounce upon him, to hurl him back. The soot still lay on his face; he had seen no bucket and water. At the mouth of a tunnel-like aperture, he hesitated, but still no one sprang in front, or glided up from behind to interfere with his progress. He went on; a perpendicular iron ladder enabled him to reach an open space on the deserted lower deck. Another ladder led to the upper deck. Could he mount it and still escape detection? And in that case--to what end?

A bell struck the hour. Nine o'clock! He counted the strokes. Much time had, indeed, passed since leaving port. The yacht, he judged, should be capable of sixteen knots. Where were they now? And where was she--in what part of the boat had they confined the young girl? Come what might, he would try to ascertain. Creeping softly up the second ladder, he peered around. Still he saw no one. It was a dark night; a shadow lay like a blanket on the sea. He felt for his revolver--they had not taken it from him--- and started to make his way cautiously aft, when something he saw brought him to an abrupt halt.

A figure!--a woman's!--or a young girl's?--not far distant, looking over the side. The form was barely discernible; he could but make out the vague flutterings of a gown. Was it she whom he sought? How could he find out? He dared not speak. She moved, and he realized he could not let her go thus. It might be an opportunity--no doubt they would suffer the young girl the freedom of the deck. It would be along the line of a conciliatory policy on the prince's part to attempt to reassure her as much as possible after the indignities' she had suffered. The watcher's eyes strained. She was going. He half started forward--to risk all--to speak. His lips formed a name but did not breathe it, for at that moment the swaying of the boat had thrown a flicker of light on the face and Mr. Heatherbloom drew back, the edge of his ardor dulled.

The woman moved a few steps, this way and that; he heard the swish of her skirts. Now they almost touched him, standing motionless where the shadows were deepest, and at that near contact a blind anger swept over him, against her--who held him in her power to eliminate, when she would--When? What was her cue? But, of course, she must have spoken already--it was inconceivable otherwise. Then why had the prince not acted at once, summarily? His excellency was not one to hesitate about drastic measures. Mr. Heatherbloom could not solve the riddle at all. He could only crouch back farther now and wait.

Through the gloom he divined a new swiftness in her step, a certain sinuosity of movement that suddenly melted into immobility. A red spot had appeared close by, burned now on blackness; it was followed by

another's footstep. A man, cigar in hand, joined her.

"Ah, Prince!" she said.

He muttered something Heatherbloom did not catch.

"What?" she exclaimed lightly. "No better humored?"

His answer was eloquent. A flicker of light he had moved toward revealed his face, gallant, romantic enough in its happier moments, but now distinctly unpleasant, with the stamp of ancestral Sybarites of the Petersburg court shining through the cruelty and intolerance of semi-Tartar forbears.

The woman laughed. How the young man, listening, detested that musical gurgle! "Patience, your Highness!"

The red spark leaped in the air. "What have I been?"

"That depends on the standpoint--yours, or hers," she returned in the same tone.

"It is always the same. She is--" The spark described swift angry motions.

"What would you--at first?" she retorted laughingly. "After all that

has taken place? Mon Dieu! You remember I advised you against this madness--I told you in the beginning it might not all be like Watteau's masterpiece--the divine embarkation!"

"Bah!" he returned, as resenting her attitude. "You were ready enough for your part."

She shrugged. "Eh bien? Our little Moscow theatrical company had come to grief. New York--cruel monster!--did not want us. C'en est fait de nous! Your Excellency met and recognized me as one you had once been presented to at a merry party at the Hermitage in our beloved city of churches. Would I play the bon camarade in a little affair of the heart, or should I say une grande passion? The honorarium offered was enormous for a poor ill-treated player whose very soul was ready to sing De Profundis. Did it tempt her--forlorn, downhearted--"

She paused. Close by, the spark brightened, dimmed--brightened, dimmed! Mr. Heatherbloom bent nearer. "At any rate, she was honest enough to attempt to dissuade you--in vain! And then"--her voice changed--"since you willed it so, she yielded. It sounded wild, impossible, the plan you broached. Perhaps because it did seem so impossible it won over poor Sonia Turgeinov--she who had thrown her cap over the windmills. There would be excitement, fascination in playing such a thrilling part in real life. Were you ever hungry, Prince?" She broke off. "What an absurd question! What is more to the point, tell me it was all well done--the device, or excuse, of substituting another motor-car for her own, the

mad flight far into the night, down the coast where save for that mishap--But I met all difficulties, did I not? And, believe me, it was not easy--to keep your little American inamorata concealed until the Nevski could be repaired and meet us elsewhere than we had originally planned. Dieu merci! I exclaimed last night when the little spitfire was brought safely aboard." Mr. Heatherbloom breathed quickly. Betty Dalrymple, then, had been with the woman in the big automobile--

"Why don't you praise me?" the woman went on. "Tell me I well earned the *douceur*? Although"--her accents were faintly scoffing--"I never dreamed you would not afterward be able to--" Her words leaped into a new channel. "What can the child want? *Est-ce-qu'elle aime un autre?* That might explain--"

An expletive smacking more of Montmartre than of the Boulevard Capucines, fell from the nobleman's lips. He brushed the ash fiercely from his cigar. "It is not so--it won't explain anything," he returned violently. "Didn't I once have it from her own lips that, at least, she was not--" He stopped. "Mon Dieu! That contingency--"

Suddenly she again laughed. "Delicious!"

"What?"

"Nothing. My own thoughts. By the way, what has become of the man we picked up from the sail-boat?"

The prince made a gesture. "He's down below--among the stokers. Why do you ask?"

"It is natural, I suppose, to take a faint interest in a poor fisherman you've almost drowned."

"Not I!" Brutally.

"No?" A smile, enigmatical, played around her lips. "How droll!"

"Droll?"

"Heartless, then. But you great nobles are that, a little, eh, mon ami?"

He shrugged and returned quickly to that other more interesting subject.

"Elle va m'epouser!" he exclaimed violently. "I will stake my life on it. She will; she must!"

"Must!" The woman raised her hand. "You say that to an American girl?"

"We're not at the finis yet!" An ugly crispness was manifest in his tones. "There are ports and priests a-plenty, and this voyage is apt to be a long one, unless she consents--"

"Charming man!" She spoke almost absently now.

"Haven't I anything to offer? Diable! One would think I was a beggar, not--am I ill-looking, repugnant? Your sex," with a suspicion of a sneer, "have not always found me so. I have given my heart before, you will say! But never as now! For she is a witch, like those that come out of the reeds on the Volga--to steal, alike, the souls of fisherman and prince." He paused; then went on moodily. "I suppose I should have gone--allowed myself to be dismissed as a boy from school. 'I have played with you; you have amused me; you no longer do so. Adieu!' So she would have said to me, if not in words, by implication. No, merci," he broke off angrily. "Tant s'en faut! I, too, shall have something to say--and soon--to-night--!"

He made a swift gesture, threw his cigar into the sea and walked off.

"How tiresome!" But the words fell from the woman's lips uneasily. She stretched her lithe form and looked up into the night. Then she, too, disappeared. Mr. Heatherbloom stood motionless. She knew who he was and yet she had not revealed his secret to the prince. Because she deemed him but a pawn, paltry, inconsequential? Because she wished to save the hot-headed nobleman from committing a deed of violence--a crime, even--if he should learn?

The reason mattered little. In Mr. Heatherbloom's mind his excellency's

last words--all they portended--excluded now consideration of all else. He gazed uncertainly in the direction the nobleman had gone; suddenly started to follow, stealthily, cautiously, when another person approached. Mr. Heatherbloom would have drawn back, but it was too late--he was seen. His absence from the stokers' quarters had been discovered; after searching for him below and not finding him, the giant foreman had come up here to look around. He was swinging his long arms and muttering angrily when he caught sight of his delinquent helper. The man uttered a low hoarse sound that augured ill for Mr. Heatherbloom. The latter knew what he had to expect--that no mercy would be shown him. He stepped swiftly backward, at the same time looking about for something with which to defend himself.