

CHAPTER XVI

THE DESPOT

Prince Boris, upon leaving Sonia Turgeinov, ascended to the officers' deck. For some moments he paced the narrow confines between the life-boats, then stepped into the wheel-house.

"How is she headed?"

An officer standing near the man at the helm, answered in French.

"This should bring us to"--the nobleman mentioned a group of islands--"by to-morrow night?"

"Hardly, Excellency."

The prince stared moodily. "Have you sighted any other vessels?"

"One or two sailing-craft that have paid no attention to us. The only boat that seemed interested since we left port was the little naphtha."

The nobleman stood as if he had not heard this last remark. About to move away, he suddenly lifted his head and listened. "What was that?" he said sharply.

"What, your Highness?"

"I thought I heard a sound like a cry."

"I heard nothing, Excellency. No doubt it was but the wind--it is loud here."

"No doubt." A moment the nobleman continued to listen, then his attention relaxed.

"Shall I come to your excellency later for orders?" said the officer as the prince made as if to turn away.

"It will not be necessary. If I have any I can 'phone from the cabin--I do not wish to be disturbed," he added and left.

"His excellency seems in rather an odd mood to-night," the officer, gazing after, muttered. "Nothing would surprise me--even if he commanded us to head for the pole next. Eh, Fedor?" The man at the helm made answer, moving the spokes mechanically. Nor' west, or sou' east--it was all one to him.

Prince Boris walked back; before a little cabin that stood out like an afterthought, he again paused.

Click! click! The wireless! His excellency, stepping nearer, peered through a window in upon the operator, a slender young man--French. A message was being received. Who were they that thus dared span space to reach out toward him? Ei! ei! "The devil has long arms." He recalled this saying of the Siberian priests and the mad Cossack answer: "Therefore let us ride fast!" The swaying of the yacht was like the rhythmic motion of his Arab through the long grass beyond the Dnieper, in that wild land where conventionality and laws were as naught.

He saw the operator now lean forward to write. The apparatus, which had become silent again, spoke; the words came now fast, then slow. Flame of flames! What an instrument that harnessed the sparks, chased destiny itself with them! They crackled like whips. The operator threw down his pen.

"Excellency!" He almost ran into the tall motionless figure. "Pardon! A message--they want to establish communication with the Nevski--to learn if we picked up a man from--"

"Have I not told you to receive all messages but to establish communication with no one? Mon Dieu! If I thought--"

"Your excellency, can depend upon me," Francois protested. "Did not my father serve your illustrious mother, the Princess Alix, all his life at her palace at Biarritz? Did not--"

The prince made a gesture. "I can depend upon you because it is to your advantage to serve me well," he said dryly. "Also, because if you didn't--" He left the sentence unfinished but Francois understood; in that part of the Czar's kingdom where the prince came from, life was held cheap. Besides, the lad had heard tales from his father--a garrulous Gascon--of his excellency's temper--those mad outbursts even when a child. There was a trace of the fierce, or half-insane temperament of the great Ivan in the uncontrollable Strogareff line, so the story went. Francois returned to his instrument; his excellency's look swept beyond. He heard now only the sound of the sea--restless, in unending tumult. The wind blew colder and he went below.

But not to rest! He was in no mood for that. What then? He hesitated, at war with himself. "Patience! patience!" What fool advice from Sonia Turgeinov! He helped himself liberally from a decanter on a Louis Quinze sideboard in the beautiful *salle à manger*. The soft lights revealed him, and him only, a solitary figure in that luxurious place--master of all he surveyed but not master of his own thoughts. He could order his men, but he could not order that invisible host. They made him their servant. He took a few steps back and forth; then suddenly encountered his own image reflected in a mirror.

"Boris, the superb"; "a tartar toreador of hearts"; "Prince of roubles and kopecs"! So they had jestingly called him in his own warm-cold capital of the north, or in that merry-holy city of four hundred churches. His glance now swept toward a distant door. "Faint heart ne'er

won--"

Had he a faint heart? In the past--no! Why, then, now? The passionate lines of the poets sang in his ears--rhythms to the "little dove", the "peerless white flower"! He passed a big hand across his brow. His heart-beats were like the galloping hoofs of a horse, bearing him whither? Gold of her hair, violet of her eyes! Whither? The raving mad poets! Wine seemed running in his blood; he moved toward the distant door.

It was locked--of course! For the moment he had forgotten. Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he drew out a key and unsteadily fitted it. But before turning it he stood an instant listening. No sound! Should he wait until the morrow? Prudence dictated that course; precipitancy, however, drove him on. Now, as well as ever! Better have an understanding! She would have to accede to his plans, anyway--and the sooner, the better. He had burned his bridges; there was no drawing back now--

He turned slowly the knob, applied a sudden pressure to the door and entered.

A girl looked up and saw him. It was a superbly decorated salon he had invaded. Soft-hued rugs were on the floor and draperies of cloth of gold veiled the shadows. Betty Dalrymple had been standing at a window, gazing out at night--only night--or the white glimmer from an electric

light that frosting the rail, made the dark darker. She appeared neither surprised nor perturbed at the appearance of the nobleman--doubtlessly she had been expecting that intrusion. He stopped short, his dark eyes gleaming. It was enough for the moment just to look at her. Place and circumstance seemed forgotten; the spirit of an old ancestor--one of the great khans--looked out in his gaze. Passion and anger alternated on his features; when she regarded him like that he longed to crush her to him; instead, now, he continued to stand motionless.

"Pardon me," he could say it with a faint smile. Then threw out a hand. "Ah, you are beautiful!" All that was oriental in him seemed to vibrate in the words.

Betty Dalrymple's answer was calculated to dispel illusion and glamour. "Don't you think we can dispense with superfluous words?" Her voice was as ice. "Under the circumstances," she added, full mistress of herself.

His glance wavered, again concentrated on her, slender, warm-hued as an houri in the ivory and gold palace of one of the old khans--but an houri with disconcerting straightness of gaze, and crisp matter-of-fact directness of utterance. "You are cruel; you have always been," he said. "I offer you all--everything--my life, and you--"

"More superfluous words," said Betty Dalrymple in the same tone, the flash of her eyes meeting the darkening gleam of his. "Put me ashore, and as soon as may be. This farce has gone far enough."

"Farce?" he repeated.

"You have only succeeded in making yourself absurd and in placing me in a ridiculous position. Put me ashore and--"

"Ask of me the possible--the humanly possible--" He moved slightly nearer; her figure swayed from him.

"You are mad--mad--"

"Granted!" he said. "A Russian in love is always a madman. But it was you who--"

"Don't!" she returned. "It is like a play--" The red lips curved.

He looked at them and breathed harder. Her words kindled anew the flame in his breast. "A play? That is what it has been for you. A mild comedy of flirtation!" The girl flushed hotly. "Deny it if you can--that you didn't flirt, as you Americans call it, outrageously."

An instant Betty Dalrymple bit her lip but she returned his gaze steadily enough. "The adjective is somewhat strong. Perhaps I might have done what you say, a little bit--for which," with an accent of self-scorn, "I am sorry, as I have already told you."

He brought together his hands. "Was it just a 'little bit' when at Homburg you danced with me nearly every time at the grand duchess' ball? Sapristi! I have not forgotten. Was it only a 'little bit' when you let me ride with you at Pau--those wild steeplechases!--or permitted me to follow you to Madrid, Nice, elsewhere?--wherever caprice took you?"

"I asked you not to--"

"But with a sparkle in your eyes--a challenge--"

"I knew you for a nobleman; I thought you a gentleman," said Betty Dalrymple spiritedly.

Prince Boris made a savage gesture. "You thought--" He broke off. "I will tell you what you thought: That after amusing yourself with me you could say, 'Va-t-en!' with a wave of the hand. As if I were a clod like those we once had under us! American girls would make serfs of their admirers. Their men," contemptuously, "are fools where their women are concerned. You dismiss them; they walk away meekly. Another comes. Voila!" He snapped his fingers. "The game goes on."

A spark appeared in her eyes. "Don't you think you are slightly insulting?" she asked in a low tense tone.

"Is it not the truth? And more"--with a harsh laugh--"I am even told

that in your wonderful country the rejected suitor--mon Dieu!--often acts as best man at the wedding--that the body-guard on the holy occasion may be composed of a sad but sentimental phalanx from the army of the refused. But with us Russians these matters are different. We can not thus lightly control affairs of the heart; they control us, and--those who flirt, as you call it, must pay. The code of our honor demands it--"

"Your honor?" It was Betty Dalrymple who laughed now.

"You find that--me--very diverting?" slowly. "But you will learn this is no jest."

She disdained to answer and started toward a side door.

"No," he said, stepping between her and the threshold.

"Be good enough!" Miss Dalrymple's voice sounded imperiously; her eyes flashed.

"One moment!" He was fast losing self-control. "You hold yourself from me--refuse to listen to me. Why? Do you know what I think?" Vehemently. The words of Sonia Turgeinov--"Est ce qu'elle aime un autre?"--flamed through his mind. "That there is some one else; that there always was. And that is the reason you were so gay--so very gay. You sought to forget--"

A change came over Betty Dalrymple's face; she seemed to grow whiter--to become like ice--

"You let me think there wasn't any one; but there was. That story of some one out west?--you laughed it away as idle gossip. And I believed you then--but not now. Who is he--this American?" With a half-sneer.

"There is no one!--there never has been!" said the girl with sudden passion, almost wildly. "I told you the truth."

"Ah," said Prince Boris. "You speak with feeling. When a woman denies in a voice like that--"

"Let me by!" The violet eyes were black now.

"Not yet!" He studied her--the cheeks aflame like roses. "He shall never have you, that some one--I will meet him and kill him first--I swear it--"

"Let me by!"

"Carissima! Your eyes are like stars--the stars that look down on one alone on the wild steppe. Your lips are red flowers--poppies to lure to destruction. They are cruel, but the more beautiful--"

He suddenly reached out, took her in his arms.

The cry on her lips was stifled as his sought and almost touched them.

At the same moment the door of the cabin, by which the prince had entered, was abruptly thrown open.